

before that of James, and this may indicate John's high reputation in the church by the time Luke was writing his gospel (James was executed much earlier by Herod Agrippa, soon after 41AD (Acts 12).



On the mountain Jesus is transfigured, his face and clothes shining like the sun, and he was joined by two of the greatest OT personalities, Moses and Elijah, who began to talk with Jesus. Only Luke mentions that they were talking about 'his passing' that was to take place in Jerusalem. This is in accord with Luke's Gospel plan where Jesus' whole ministry is centred on his final journey to Jerusalem.

Why is Jesus portrayed with Moses and Elijah? Why not Adam or Noah, or Abraham, the greatest Patriarch, or Jacob or, above all, David, so that Jesus' Messianic credentials would be made absolutely clear? It is not a coincidence that Jesus has gone up a mountain to be transfigured in glory. A mountain location signifies closeness to God and parallels Mount Sinai/ Horeb. Moses and Elijah were the greatest prophetic figures of the OT, both receiving visions of God. Before his death, Moses foretold that a great prophet like him would return (Deut.18). Elijah is reported not to have died but to have been taken up to Heaven (2 K.2) His return was understood by the Jews to be the fulfilment of Moses' prophecy and to be the signal for the coming of the Messiah. By seeing Jesus with them, this would have reinforced the declaration of faith already made, that Jesus was truly the Messiah.

Peter is shown as initiator in wanting to set up tabernacles for the three. The cloud that then comes replicates the cloud on Sinai and the cloud that led the Israelites in the desert. It signifies God and God's words parallel the words at Jesus' baptism 'this is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him'. Jesus is shown not only as Messiah, but as Son of God.

By linking the profession of faith, prophecy of the Passion and Transfiguration the Gospel authors wished to emphasise the special nature of Jesus' mission, one that had its fulfilment in his resurrection.

## Jesus in the Gospels

### 13. The Significance of the Transfiguration



#### Questions

1. Is it significant that the giving of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven to Peter is only recorded in Matthew's Gospel?
2. What is so important about Moses and Elijah being present at the Transfiguration?
3. What does the Transfiguration tell about Jesus?

#### For Reflection

The full significance of the Transfiguration can only be understood in terms of what went immediately before it, namely Peter's profession of faith and the first prophecy of the Passion.

## Peter's Profession of Faith

The three synoptic Gospels all portray Peter's profession of faith at Caesarea Philippi (Mtt.16 // Mk.8 // Lk.9). John's Gospel does not record this specific incident but he has his version of the profession of faith when Peter proclaims 'we have come to know you as the Holy One of God', after the contentious discourse about Jesus as the bread of life (Jn.6), when many of his followers deserted him.

It is significant that in the narrative given of this incident, only in Matthew's Gospel is Peter called Simon Peter, only there does Peter describe Jesus as 'the Son of the living God', only there does Jesus address Peter as Simon son of Jonah and rename him Cephas and, finally, only there is Peter attributed with the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven with the power to bind and loose (although that power is also given to all the disciples, and through them to the church itself Mtt.18). It is clear that Matthew has a specific agenda or purpose here, one that wishes to emphasise the supreme role of Peter within the developing church community. Given that his Gospel addresses primarily a Jewish audience, perhaps there is a clue here to a power struggle for control of the Jerusalem church, with Matthew supporting Peter against the claims of the person we know (Acts 15) came to be its leader, James, the brother or cousin of Jesus.

In all three Gospels Peter professes Jesus to be 'the anointed one', the Messiah, but the disciples are sworn to secrecy about this revelation. This is because the people were expecting a different type of Messiah, an earthly warrior saviour and king, whereas Jesus' Messiah was inaugurating a spiritual kingdom. This theme is repeated after the Transfiguration and occurs elsewhere in the Gospels (e.g. Jn.6).



## The 'Son of Man'

Peter's profession is in answer to Jesus' question about who the people say he is. In Matthew's Gospel the question is put in the third person using the expression 'Son of Man', but Mark and Luke put it directly 'who do people say I am?' Matthew and Mark both use the 'Son of Man' title in the discussion in the immediate aftermath of the Transfiguration.

The expression 'Son of Man' was originally just another way of saying 'man' (very frequent in Ezekiel) but in the book of Daniel (ch.7) it came to represent a Saviour figure sent by God. This interpretation was also adopted in the Jewish inter-testamental apocalyptic Book of Enoch. In the Gospels it is used over 70 times but is only applied by Jesus to himself. This is very strong evidence that it is an original expression of Jesus and alludes to his role as the Messianic messenger of God.

## The Prophecy of the Passion

After agreeing with the profession of him as Messiah, Jesus is presented as warning the disciples of his future Passion, but that he would also rise again on the third day. This was to educate them about the true nature of his Messianic role and to provide future comfort to them that his death would not be the calamity it would seem. Matthew and Mark provide the additional information that Peter, in particular, found it difficult to accept this and was rebuked by Jesus in no uncertain terms 'get behind me Satan, you are an obstacle. You think not as God does but as humans do'. Mark, as always providing little pieces of intriguing detail, adds that Jesus 'turned and seeing his disciples' rebuked Peter. The implication is clear, Jesus was making an example of Peter. But, indirectly, the incident also serves to show Peter's devotion to Jesus.

## The Transfiguration

After the profession of faith, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a high mountain (Mtt.17 // Mk.9 // Lk.9). In Luke, John's name is given

