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February 2003

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Sybrowsky, Rebecca L. "The Mount of Transfiguration." *Studia Antiqua* 2, no. 2 (2003).  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol2/iss2/9>

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This is the earliest surviving figural representation of the Transfiguration, A.D. 565–66. Its preservation is due to its remote location at Saint Catherine’s monastery at Mount Sinai. Christ raises his right hand in the usual benediction while seven shafts of light radiate out to the world. The intense cerulean blue of the *mandorla*, or oval halo, around Christ is the artist’s representation of the literary image in Exodus 24:10: “Under his feet . . . lapis lazuli clear as the sky,” thus connecting the two sacred mountains where prophets saw God.

# The Mount of Transfiguration

Rebecca Lynne Sybrowsky

*The sacred events on the Mount of Transfiguration solidified Simon Peter's authority to lead the nascent Church. By examining, the scriptural account of the Transfiguration, with Old Testament parallels and modern revelation, this article demonstrates that Peter received the authority and the governing keys requisite to lead the kingdom of God on the earth.*

*This article is a chapter of a thesis entitled "The Leadership of Peter in the Early Christian Church."*

We made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed. (2 Pet. 1:16–19)

Although each of the synoptic gospels recorded an account of the events on the Mount of Transfiguration, the details included in the New Testament accounts are cursory (Matt. 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–13; Luke 9:28–36). The command that Christ gave Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone of the events until after his resurrection can explain some of this: "And as they came down from

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the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead” (Matt. 17:9; Mark 9:9). Although they discussed the transfiguration among themselves (Mark 9:10), Luke added that, “they kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen” (Luke 9:36). However, in addition to the synoptic gospels, Peter and John elsewhere refer to the witness of the glory of Christ they received on the mount (John 1:14; 2 Pet. 1:16–19; 1 John 1:1–3). Speaking of the experience upon the Mount of Transfiguration, Joseph Smith explained that we do not yet have a record of the full account of the apostles’ experiences on the mount.<sup>1</sup>

While the limited records imply that there is much we do not know about what occurred on the Mount of Transfiguration, this experience, following the events a week earlier at Caesarea Philippi, was foundational in Peter’s preparation to succeed Christ in becoming the leader of the Church. It is significant that the synoptic authors placed the transfiguration passage immediately following Peter’s declaration of Christ, thus linking Peter’s promised keys to guide the church with his presence on the Mount of Transfiguration. Terence Smith asserts, “The transfiguration is often interpreted as a divine confirmation of Peter’s confession of Jesus’ Messiahship.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the events at Caesarea Philippi and at the mount legitimized Peter’s administrative and ministerial authority of leadership.<sup>3</sup> Peter’s declaration of Christ and the

<sup>1</sup> Concerning the account, Joseph said: “of which account the fulness ye have not yet received.” Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, vol. 1, comp. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 208.

<sup>2</sup> Terence V. Smith, *Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity: Attitudes towards Peter in Christian Writings of the First Two Centuries* (Tübingen, Germany: Gulde-Druck GmbH, 1985), 170.

<sup>3</sup> See Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, and John Reumann, eds., *Peter in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars*, 155; T. Smith, 139–40; Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Anchor Bible: 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37c (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 171–72.

Mount of Transfiguration are related events in which Peter received the authority over the kingdom of God on the earth, or keys of the kingdom. These keys were the directing power of the Church. The basis of Peter's authority centered on the fact that he received both the governing keys and the requisite divine revelation to direct the young Church.

### **Literary Context**

One week after Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Christ at Caesarea Philippi, Peter, James, and John accompanied Jesus up a high mountain where the keys to the kingdom Christ promised to Peter were conferred upon all three of them (Matt. 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28). Both Matthew and Mark placed the ascension of the Mount of Transfiguration six days after the events at Caesarea Philippi, while Luke recorded that these events were eight days apart. Presumably, Luke included the terminal days while Matthew and Mark only counted the days between the two events.

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had taught his disciples about his impending death and resurrection. His teachings, undoubtedly, were fresh on the minds of all involved in the transfiguration, which partially explains why there were other references to Jesus' death and resurrection at the transfiguration. It is significant to note that both Peter's confession of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi and the transfiguration occurred as Jesus was preparing to leave Galilee and begin his Judean ministry, six months before Jesus' crucifixion. Thus, these experiences transpired at a pivotal time in the ministry of Jesus and in the preparation of Peter and the apostles to lead the church after his death.

### **Historical Context**

Exodus 24 records an account of Moses on Mount Sinai which parallels the New Testament account of Christ, Peter,

James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration. Moses selected three worshipers, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, to confirm the covenant as well as seventy Elders.<sup>4</sup> They were to worship from a distance while Moses alone would go near to the Lord (Ex. 24:1–2). As they went up Mount Sinai, “they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness” (Ex. 24:10). Moses then ascended Mt. Sinai alone and as a cloud overshadowed him he heard the voice of the Lord:

And Moses went up into the mount, and a cloud covered the mount. And the glory of the Lord abode upon mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days: and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. And Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and gat him up into the mount: and Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights. (Ex. 24:15–18)

This passage and the transfiguration account described similar circumstances surrounding sacred experiences. Most significantly, both included the ascent up a mountain to remove the participants from the people in order to participate in a sacred experience in which a covenant was given and the glory of the Lord was manifested by his presence there. Both biblical accounts emphasize that a cloud accompanied the glory of the Lord (see Matt. 17:2, 5; Mark 9:2, 7; Luke 9:29, 34–35). Just as the transfiguration was six days apart from Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah and his receiving the promised of governing keys of the kingdom, there was also a six-day time period between Moses’ initial ascent up into the mount and his second entry into the cloud

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Chilton, “Transfiguration,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 640–42.

when he received the law. Thus, the parallels between the Mount of Transfiguration and Moses' experiences on Mount Sinai indicate that the sacred events on the mountains were similar in significance. Just as Moses was the receiver of sacred revelation on Sinai which included the divine dispensation of the law, covenants, and commandments which governed Israel, so also would Peter, James, and John receive sacred covenants and teachings which would enable them, with Peter at their head, to lead the Church after the death of Christ.

### **Synoptic Accounts**

Each of the Synoptic gospels included an account of the experiences upon the Mount of Transfiguration. While the synoptic writers agreed on the general events that transpired on the mount, each writer presented unique details. For example, while each noted that Peter, James, and John were afraid while on the mount, each offered a different reason as to why. Mark recorded their fear as the reason why Peter suggested the building of the tabernacles for Christ, Moses, and Elias (Mark 9:5-6); Luke stated "they feared as they entered into the cloud" which overshadowed them (Luke 9:34); while Matthew said they were afraid after hearing the voice of the Father from the cloud declaring the divinity of Jesus (Matt. 17:5-7). Both Matthew and Mark included a conversation between the three apostles and Christ regarding the meaning of the rising from the dead and Elias (Mark 9:10-13). Matthew recorded that when the Father witnessed that Jesus was his beloved son, he stated: "in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 17:5). Luke added the greatest number of unique details to his account of the transfiguration. He opened his account by noting that Christ ascended the mount to pray (Luke 9:29). The Lucan account also includes that while Moses and Elias spoke with Jesus about his upcoming death, Peter, James, and John "were heavy with sleep" (Luke 9:31-32).

Terence Smith points out that in the Matthean account, in connection with Matt. 16:17–19, “the transfiguration appears to have been interpreted as an additional assurance of Peter’s authority, granted on this occasion by means of a vision of the transfigured, heavenly Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> Of the transfiguration accounts, Matthew’s appears to contain the most common elements of the three gospel accounts, as Mark’s and Luke’s both include several verses unique to their records.

And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him. Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. And when the disciples heard [it], they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid. And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only. And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead. (Matt. 17:1–9).

## The Mountain of Transfiguration

The New Testament accounts of the transfiguration record, as the setting for the event, that Jesus took Peter, James, and John to a high mountain apart from others by themselves (Matt. 17:1; Mark 9:2; see also Luke 9:28). The JST Mark account adds that Peter, James, and John “asked [Jesus] many questions concerning

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<sup>5</sup> T. Smith, 203.



his sayings” before he led them up into the mountain (JST Mark 9:1). Luke includes that one of Jesus’ purposes for ascending the mountain was to pray (Luke 9:28–29), lending itself to the interpretation that the transfiguration was to take place in a sacred, set apart place. Jesus’ injunction to Peter, James, and John emphasized the sacredness of the experience: “Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead” (Matt. 17:9; see also Mark 9:9; Luke 9:36).

“After six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart” (Matt. 17:1). Here, Matthew emphasized Christ’s removal of Peter, James, and John to a sacred space in a secret setting. Jesus took παραλαμβάνει Peter, James, and John unto himself. This removal has the connotation of being taken to oneself, being taken with, or being received with favor.<sup>6</sup> Matthew stressed this taking of Peter, James, and John as Jesus “bringeth (ἀναφέρει) them up into a high mountain.” This emphatic repetition of being taken or led up is reminiscent of religious, sacrificial rituals and could also be translated as “to bring up,” “to uphold,” “to offer” (in sacrifice), or “to restore.”<sup>7</sup> The fact that Jesus took them “into a high mountain apart” emphasizes the secrecy of this removal to a sacred location. The phrase κατ’ ἰδίαν literally means “privately, by oneself.”<sup>8</sup> Mark emphasized that Jesus took them “apart by themselves,” illustrating the desire for solitude during these events.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 619. See also F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 149.

<sup>7</sup> Henry George Liddell, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon: Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 64. See also Bauer 1979, 63.

<sup>8</sup> Liddell, 375. See also Bauer 1979, 371.

<sup>9</sup> C. S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible: Mark* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), 361.

experiences on the mount were limited to only Jesus, Peter, James, and John. Thus, as Jesus conferred authority upon Peter to lead the Church, the presence of James and John with Peter indicated that they would jointly hold the keys and use them to direct the church under Peter's leadership.

From Moses' experiences upon Mount Sinai to Peter, James, and John's experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, mountains have always been symbolic of temples or the house of the Lord.<sup>10</sup> "And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it" (Is. 2:2; see also Ps. 48:2). This mountain imagery illustrated the successive ascent toward deity that the temple enables. In ancient Near Eastern cultures, high mountains as temples expressed the idea of a successive ascent toward heaven. Stephen Ricks asserts that "Jesus and his earliest followers, unable to perform their sacred ceremonies in temples, were obliged, as the Prophet Joseph Smith said, to resort 'to the mountain top as did Moses,' which itself was a type of temple."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in the temple context, their ascension up the Mount of Transfiguration was a progressive ascent into sacred space. Sacred space is a place where the divine has been manifested. The following points have characterized it: a set apart place, a restricted entrance with guards, a meeting point between heaven and earth, a dwelling place for deity on earth, a performing of sacred rituals, an observatory or place of learning, and ascending degrees of

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of what constitutes a temple and its ritual in the ancient Near East, see John M. Lundquist, "What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology," *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 83–117.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen D. Ricks, "Christ and the Temple," unpublished article in possession of author, 9. See also Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, vol. 4 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 608; hereafter cited as J. Smith 1980a.

sacredness.<sup>12</sup> Joseph Smith taught that one reason why Christ removed Peter, James, and John to the high mountain was so they could receive the fulness of the priesthood,<sup>13</sup> often described as receiving the temple endowment.<sup>14</sup>

Although the location of the mountain does not determine the occurrence of sacred events upon it, traditions of a mountain location for sacred events are significant in establishing a strong precedent for future sacred events on the same mountain. New Testament accounts do not name the mountain upon which the transfiguration occurred; however, tradition holds to two possible sites: Mount Tabor and Mount Hermon. Although the Old Testament texts associated both mountains with holy and sacred locations of righteousness, the arguments for Mount Hermon as the location of the transfiguration are more convincing.

*Mount Tabor.* Moses identified Tabor as a place of worship for the tribes of Zebulun and Issachar. “And of Zebulun he said, Rejoice, Zebulun, in thy going out; and, Issachar, in thy tents. They shall call the people unto the mountain; there they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness: for they shall suck of the

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<sup>12</sup> Donald W. Parry, “Sacred Space and Profane Space,” *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 415–16.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on Christ also receiving the fulness of the priesthood on the mount, see Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, comp. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 246, 307, n. 38; hereafter cited as J. Smith 1980b.

<sup>14</sup> See Ricks, 10. To the significance of Peter, James, and John receiving their temple endowment on the mount, he quotes Heber C. Kimball,

Jesus took Peter, James, and John into a high mountain, and there gave them their [temple] endowment. . . . For the same purpose has the Lord called us up into these high mountains, that we may become kings and priests unto God, which we never can be lawfully until we are ordained and sealed to that power, for the kingdom of God is a kingdom of kings and priests, and will rise in mighty power in the last days.

Heber C. Kimball, “Proclamation of the Gospel to the Dead,” *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 9 (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 327.

abundance of the seas, and of treasures hid in the sand” (Deut. 33:18–19). While this reference does not specifically mention Tabor as a mountain where the people were to offer sacrifices, the boundaries of Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali met at Mount Tabor, and, consequently, Tabor is likely the sacred mountain mentioned in this passage.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps this Old Testament tradition combined with Tabor’s location near Galilee gave rise to the Christian tradition, dating to the fourth century A.D., which cited Tabor as the location of the transfiguration.<sup>16</sup> Although this tradition identified Tabor as the Mount of Transfiguration, the arguments for Hermon as the location are more convincing than those for Tabor. Edersheim explains the reasons for choosing Mount Hermon over Mount Tabor as the transfiguration site:

There can scarcely be a reasonable doubt that Christ and His disciples had not left the neighborhood of Caesarea,<sup>1</sup> and hence, that 'the mountain' must have been one of the slopes of gigantic, snowy Hermon. In that quiet semi-Gentile retreat of Caesarea Philippi could He best teach them, and they best learn, without interruption or temptation from Pharisees and Scribes, that terrible mystery of His Suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> According to an old tradition, Christ had left Caesarea Philippi, and the scene of the Transfiguration was Mount Tabor. But (1) there is no notice of His departure, such as in generally made by St. Mark; (2) on the contrary, it is mentioned by St. Mark as after the Transfiguration (ix. 30); (3) Mount Tabor was at that time crowned by a fortified city, which would render it unsuitable for the scene of the Transfiguration. <sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See also Rafael Frankel, “Tabor, Mount,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 305.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 2, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 92.

Thus, the arguments for Mount Hermon as the site of the transfiguration seem to be more compelling largely because the Hermon range is in the region of Caesarea Philippi, where Christ and his disciples had been the week prior, and its remote location was more likely to provide a sacred retreat than Tabor with a fortified city on its summit.

*Mount Hermon.* Most Old Testament references to Hermon described the range as one of the northern borders of the lands which the Israelites possessed (see Deut. 3:8–9; 4:48; Josh. 11:3, 17; 12:1, 5). However, one passage associated Mount Hermon with the location where the Lord pronounced the blessing of eternal life: “As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore” (Ps. 133:3).<sup>18</sup> This passage is significant because it referred to Hermon not only as a sacred location of worship, but also as a location where recipients receive blessings which give them the promise of eternal life.

Jewish tradition associates Mount Hermon with “a place of cursing and vowing.”<sup>19</sup> Both 1 and 2 *Enoch* identify Mount Hermon as the location where two hundred “watchers,” or fallen angels, made mutually-binding vows. Upon deciding to choose wives from among the children on men, the leader of these angels feared that all would not follow him and he alone would pay the penalty of this sin. They all answered, “Let us all swear an oath, and bind ourselves by mutual imprecations not to abandon this plan but to do this thing.’ Then sware they all together and bound themselves by mutual imprecations upon it. And they were in all two hundred; who descended in the days of Jared on the summit of Mount Hermon, and they called it Mount Hermon, because

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<sup>18</sup> This reference is one of only two Old Testament references to eternal life: “life for evermore” (Ps. 133:3) and “life everlasting” (Dan. 12:2).

<sup>19</sup> R. H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, rev. ed., vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 440.

they had sworn and bound themselves by mutual imprecations upon it" (1 *Enoch* 6:3–6).

2 *Enoch* presents a similar scenario of fallen angels upon the mount; however, it differs from the 1 *Enoch* account in that only three break their vows on Mount Hermon and are faced with great punishment from God. "Three of them went down on to earth from the Lord's throne, to the place Ermon [Mount Hermon], and broke through their vows on the shoulder of the hill Ermon and saw the daughters of men how good they are, and took to themselves wives, and befouled the earth with their deeds. . . . And therefore God judged them with great judgement, and they weep for their brethren and they will be punished on the Lord's great day" (2 *Enoch* 18:4–6). These pseudepigraphal Enoch accounts establish Mt. Hermon as a location upon which sacred events—or their reversal—took place, including the taking of sacred vows associated with mutual imprecations.

Jewish legends also associate Mount Hermon as a spot worthy of revelation, one of the four mountains contending for the Shekinah of God to rest upon it (as also was Mount Tabor), and a possible location upon which the heavenly Jerusalem would descend.<sup>20</sup> Archaeological evidence supports Mount Hermon as a location for sacred temple experiences. Ritual centers, Baal-gad and Baal-hermon, were located at the base of Hermon. The highest of Hermon's three peaks houses the remains of a temple dating from the first to fourth century A.D., Qasr ash-Shabib. Additionally, archaeological excavations have uncovered more than twenty temple sites on Mount Hermon and its surrounding areas, which, when compared with other regions of the Phoenician coast, is an unprecedented number.<sup>21</sup> Not only do these traditions lend

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<sup>20</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1937), 83; vol. 6, 31–32.

<sup>21</sup> Rami Arav, "Hermon, Mount," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 158–59.

themselves to the interpretation that it was Mt. Hermon, not Tabor which was the site of the transfiguration, but they also establish a precedent for sacred experiences, including obtaining divine revelation, making sacred vows, and receiving the blessings of eternal life.

## The Transfiguration

Upon their arrival on the Mount, Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John. “The fashion of his countenance was altered” (Luke 9:29) “and his face did shine as the sun” (Matt. 17:2). The word ‘transfiguration’ (μεταμορφώθη) literally refers to a change in form.<sup>22</sup> As a part of the transfiguration, his clothing shone brightly. The synoptic gospels recorded: “And his raiment was white as the light” (Matt. 17:2); “And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them” (Mark 9:3); “And his raiment was white and glistening” (Luke 9:29).

Later in his narrative, Luke identified this transfiguration as “glory” which had come upon Christ (Luke 9:32). The symbolism of Christ’s glory and the transformed countenance and clothing reflects both the divinity of Christ and the sacredness of the event.<sup>23</sup> In biblical usage, the word “glory” is a symbolic description of “splendor, beauty, magnificence, radiance, and rapture, . . . primarily a quality ascribed to God and places of his presence, including places of worship and heaven. The glory of God is an image of his greatness and transcendence.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>22</sup> Bauer 1979, 511.

<sup>23</sup> Ricks describes how the transfiguration of Christ itself was a type of a sacred garment used in rituals and temple settings. “The white linen clothing that the priests wore while performing their ceremonies and the white linens of the Dead Sea Scrolls covenants were but a pale reflection of the blinding brightness of the raiment of Christ’s clothing,” Ricks, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 330.

transfiguration was a literal, visible change in which a manifestation of his divinity descended upon Jesus.

Other biblical and apocryphal accounts use similar language to describe this divine glory. In Enoch's vision, as he approached the throne of God, he states: "And the Great Glory was sitting upon [the throne]—as for his gown, which was shining more brightly than the sun, it was whiter than any snow" (*1 Enoch* 14:20). *2 Enoch* uses the phrases "their faces were like the shining sun" and "their faces were more radiant than the radiance of the sun" to describe heavenly messengers (*2 Enoch* 1:5; 19:1). Furthermore, Albright and Mann point out that the book of Revelation employs similar language sixteen times in conjunction with both heavenly beings and heavenly things.<sup>25</sup>

Peter and John would later refer to this experience as a time when they witnessed Jesus' glory. John opened his gospel account by witnessing of the glory of Christ, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (John 1:14; see also 1 John 1:1–3). In his second epistle, Peter stated, "[we] were eyewitnesses of [Christ's] majesty. For he received from God the father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him. . . . And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount" (2 Pet. 1:16–19).

There is a precedence for the idea that all those who were present on the mount received this divine glory so that they could withstand being in its presence. The JST Genesis account of Moses' vision explains that "Moses was caught into an exceedingly high mountain. And he saw God face to face, and he talked with him, and the glory of God was upon Moses; therefore Moses could endure his presence" (Moses 1:1–2). Moses described the glory of God descending upon him as a transfiguration: "But now

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<sup>25</sup> W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible: Matthew*, vol. 26 (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 220. See also Esdras 7:97; and Rev. 1:14–16.



mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes, for my natural eyes could not have beheld; for I should have withered and died in his presence; but his glory was upon me; and I beheld his face, for I was transfigured before him” (Moses 1:11). As Moses descended Mount Sinai with the covenant, he “wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with [God]”; however, Aaron and all the children of Israel witnessed that his face shone after being in the presence of the Lord (Ex. 34:29–35). Joseph Smith taught that Peter, James, and John were also transfigured on the mount.<sup>26</sup> In both cases, the transfiguration before the presence of the Lord was likely a result of divine glory being extended to mortals in a divine presence so that they could withstand his glory.

### Moses and Elias

During the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah<sup>27</sup> appeared in glory and talked with Christ “of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31; see also Matt. 17:3; Mark 9:4). Moses and Elijah, and their presence at the transfiguration, are symbolic of the Jewish Law and Prophets, respectively.<sup>28</sup> The Old Testament describes the significant role Moses and Elijah held in history and, consequently, the keys which they held: Moses as the ancient gatherer of Israel, and Elijah as holding the power to seal the heavens (see Ex. 3:7–17; 1 Kings 17:1–7; 18:1). Significantly, the translations of both Moses and Elijah at the end of their mortal

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<sup>26</sup> J. Smith 1980a, vol. 3, 387.

<sup>27</sup> While Elias is also used as a title of one who is sent to prepare the way for the coming of Christ, in this context, it is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Elijah. Elijah would be known as an Elias, As was John the Baptist, both of whom had roles in preparing for the mission of Jesus Christ. See Bauer 1979, 345. See also JST Mark 9:3 which states that John the Baptist also appeared during the transfiguration.

<sup>28</sup> Ryken, 859. Albright, 220. See Rebecca L. Sybrowsky, “The Leadership of Peter in the Early Christian Church” (master’s thesis, BYU, 2002), ch. 4, for the historical context of the Jewish respect for the Law and Prophets.

lives enabled their presence on the Mount of Transfiguration so that they could physically give to Peter, James, and John some of the keys which govern the kingdom of God.

As we have seen, keys are biblical symbols of power and authority held by prophets for governing the kingdom of God. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman discuss the meaning of keys in biblical texts: "Keys symbolize power because they are given to those who are judged trustworthy. . . . In the Old Testament keys belong to the steward of the house, the trusted servant, the one that the master has chosen for the household affairs." Thus, in the biblical context, keys are dual images of trust and responsibility. "For the one who gives the keys, they are symbols of trust and belief in the character of the steward. For the one who receives the keys, they are symbols of responsibility." While Jesus taught the Jewish leaders that keys control access to revelation (see Luke 11:52), his statement implied that, because the Jewish leaders did not fulfill their responsibility in accessing and teaching the truth, they had lost the keys which they had once held.<sup>29</sup> The biblical references to keys (Is. 22:22; Matt. 16:13–20; Luke 11:52; Rev. 1:18; 3:7) imply that there are several keys associated with the kingdom of God.<sup>30</sup>

As two of the foremost prophets in the Old Testament with roles that embodied trust and responsibility, both Moses and Elijah held keys for the governing of the kingdom. Joseph Smith recorded that it was on the Mount of Transfiguration that Peter, James, and John received some of these governing keys of the kingdom. "The Savior, Moses, and Elias, gave the keys to Peter, James, and John, on the mount when they were transfigured before him."<sup>31</sup> These keys were presumably the "keys of the kingdom" which Christ had previously promised to Peter with which he would lead the kingdom of God (Matt. 16:19). The Old

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<sup>29</sup> See also Ginzberg 1937, vol. 4, 286, 303.

<sup>30</sup> Ryken, 859. See ch. 4, "Upon this Rock," for a discussion of keys, specifically those which were promised to Peter.

<sup>31</sup> J. Smith 1980a, vol. 3, 387.

Testament accounts reveal that Moses held the keys to the law and to the gathering of Israel while Elijah held the keys to the sealing of the heavens (see Ex. 3:7–10, 16–17; 1 Kings 17:1–7; 18:1). As Peter, James, and John received the governing keys of the kingdom, Moses and Elijah's presence on the mount suggested that it was at this time that they conferred their keys upon the apostles.

*The Law and the Prophets.* As the receiver of the law, Moses typified the commandments of the Lord and adherence to the Jewish customs that distinguished Israel from other nations. The Law of Moses was so significant that Jesus taught several times that he would not destroy the law but that he would fulfill it. "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matt. 5:17–18; see also Luke 16:16–17; 24:44). John later testified that Jesus fulfilled the law: "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). As the leader who received the law, Moses also held the responsibility to gather Israel to their promised land (Ex. 3:7–10, 16–17). While this commission was physical, it also typified a spiritual gathering through obedience to the law, commandments, and covenants. Thus, Moses not only was symbolic of the Law, but he also represented the physical and spiritual gathering of Israel to the Savior.

Like Moses, Elijah stands out among the Old Testament prophets of Israel, being "traditionally held to be the greatest Hebrew prophet" whose return would be a necessary prelude to the deliverance and restoration of Israel.<sup>32</sup> Malachi spoke of both Moses and Elijah as he prophesied of the destruction of the wicked before the coming of Christ in the final days of the earth's

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<sup>32</sup> F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2d edition, rev. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 451–52.

history. “Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:4–6). This prophecy of an appearance of Elijah before the coming of the Lord led to a Jewish tradition that Elijah would return as a forerunner before the coming of the Messiah, a tradition to which the New Testament also strongly attests (see Matt. 16:13–14; Mark 6:14–15; 8:27–28; Luke 9:7–8, 18–19; John 1:21–23).<sup>33</sup> Discussing this prophecy, Joseph Smith explained that “Elijah was the last Prophet that held the keys of the Priesthood.” Consequently, Elijah would return before the great and dreadful day of the Lord “because he holds the keys of authority to administer in all the ordinances of the Priesthood; and without the authority is given [*sic*], the ordinances could not be administered in righteousness.”<sup>34</sup> Elijah was to restore these keys so that the hearts of the fathers could be turned to the children and the children to the fathers or, in other words, so that what was bound (or sealed) in the heavens might also be sealed on earth.

Elijah was renowned for the miracles he performed, specifically that of sealing the heavens for over three years (1 Kings 17:1–7; 18:1). This key, or power and authority, of sealing the heavens which Elijah held is perhaps what Jewish tradition referred to as Elijah’s “keys of rain.”<sup>35</sup> Tradition also holds that, at the time of the Babylonian captivity, the keys were taken from the Jewish leaders and returned to Jehovah, whose hand appeared in a cloud to remove them because of the unworthiness of the servants who held those keys.<sup>36</sup> This tradition implies that the keys could return

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<sup>33</sup> Jerome T. Walsh, “Elijah,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 465. See also Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956), 600–01.

<sup>34</sup> J. Smith 1980a, vol. 4, 211.

<sup>35</sup> Ginzberg 1937, vol. 6, 318–19.

to a worthy servant from the hand of the Lord in a cloud. The dialogue in Matthew 16:13–20 and Peter’s presence on the Mount of Transfiguration reveals that Jesus had judged Simon Peter to be such a servant who was worthy to hold the keys of the kingdom of God (see Matt. 16:13–20). Thus, these keys are likely the keys of the binding and loosening of the heavens which Jesus had promised Peter that he would receive for the governing of the Church (Matt. 16:18–19).

*The Translation of Moses and Elijah.* The traditions of their translations partially explain Moses and Elijah’s physical presence on the mount. While the Old Testament text attested to the translation of Elijah, it recorded that Moses died, but left some uncertainty because no one knew where his sepulcher was: “So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day. And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated” (Deut. 34:5–7).

Although Deuteronomy offered a vague account of Moses’ death, Josephus repeated a tradition that Moses “disappeared” or was translated:

Now as soon as they [Moses, Eleazar, and Joshua] were come to the mountain called Abarim, (which is a very high mountain, situated over against Jericho, and one that affords, to such as are upon it, a prospect of the greatest part of the excellent land of Canaan,) he dismissed the senate; and as he was going to embrace Eleazar and Joshua, and was still discoursing with them, a cloud stood over him on the sudden, and he disappeared in a certain valley, although he wrote in the holy books that he died, which was done out of fear, lest they should venture to say that, because of his extraordinary virtue, he went to God. (Ant. 4.8.48 §326)

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, 286, 303.

Josephus' description of the transfiguration of Moses offers a likely explanation for his disappearance, as the inability to locate the tomb of a revered prophet is unusual in biblical culture.<sup>37</sup>

Both the Old Testament text and Josephus' history attest to Elijah's translation. 2 Kings records that Elijah and Elisha journeyed together prior to Elijah's translation. "There appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11). Josephus also speaks of Elijah's translation: "Now at this time it was that Elijah disappeared from among men, and no one knows of his death to this very day; but he left behind him his disciple Elisha, as we have formerly declared. And indeed, as to Elijah, . . . it is written in the sacred books that [he] disappeared, but so that nobody knew that [he] died" (Ant. 9.2.2 §28). It is significant that both Moses and Elijah were translated because their translations made possible their appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration with physical bodies which enabled them to confer the keys which they held upon the three apostles.

### **Peter, James, and John**

Of the twelve apostles, only Peter, James, and John witnessed the transfiguration. Scholars often refer to their inclusion at

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<sup>37</sup> Speaking of the Alma the Younger's translation, The Book of Mormon records: "And it came to pass that he [Alma] was never heard of more; as to his death or burial we know not of. Behold, this we know, that he was a righteous man; and the saying went abroad in the church that he was taken up by the spirit, or buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses. But behold, the scriptures saith the Lord took Moses unto himself; and we suppose that he has also received Alma in the spirit, unto himself; therefore, for this cause we know nothing concerning his death and burial" (Alma 45:18–19). Referring to both this passage and Deut. 34:5–7, Bruce R. McConkie concludes that Moses and Alma the Younger were both translated. McConkie suggests that the phrase "buried by the hand of the Lord" was a figure of speech which meant that the individual was translated. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d edition (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 805.

several sacred, closed-door events as an inner circle among the twelve apostles.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the presence of the three on the Mount of Transfiguration leads to the idea that it was a very sacred event, exclusively for the training of those who would hold all of the keys necessary to lead the church.<sup>39</sup> The synoptic accounts illustrate that the apostles did not have a full understanding of the significance of the events which transpired during the transfiguration (Mark 9:6, 10; Luke 9:33). However, they provided an explanation for the apostles' incomplete understanding of the transfiguration by describing the reactions of Peter, James, and John on the mount, including their falling asleep for a time, Peter's comment on the building of tabernacles, and their fear.

*Sleeping Disciples.* One of Luke's unique additions to the Mount of Transfiguration narrative is in regards to the disciples sleeping during the visit of Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elias conversed with the Lord "of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him" (Luke 9:31–32). Hengel suggests that Peter's sleeping at the transfiguration scene "has probably been drawn from the Marcan Gethsemane scene" in an attempt to place Peter in a softer light by removing mention that he slept while Christ suffered at Gethsemane.<sup>40</sup> However, the exhaustion of Peter may be more significant to an understanding of the events on the Mount of Transfiguration and, in light of Luke's concern for historical accuracy, deserves more examination than merely excusing it as drawn from another scene.

There is a strong modern-day and scriptural precedent for recipients of heavenly visions to experience physical weakness and

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<sup>38</sup> PHEME PERKINS, *Peter: Apostle for the Whole Church* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 60.

<sup>39</sup> See J. SMITH, vol. 1, 36; vol. 5, 152.

<sup>40</sup> MARTIN HENGEL, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 62.

exhaustion as Peter, James, and John did at both the Mount of Transfiguration and the Garden of Gethsemane. In February 1832, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, in a room with twelve others, received the vision of the three degrees of glory in which the heavens were opened to them (D&C 76). Philo Dibble, who was present, recorded, “Joseph sat firmly and calmly all the time in the midst of a magnificent glory, but Sidney sat limp and pale, apparently as limber as a rag, observing which Joseph remarked smilingly, ‘Sidney is not used to it as I am.’”<sup>41</sup>

Several prophets have recorded similar weakness following a vision. Joseph Smith, in his account of the First Vision, remarked, “when the light had departed, I had no strength.”<sup>42</sup> After his vision of the glory of the Lord, Daniel recounted, “I was left alone, and saw this great vision, and there remained no strength in me: for my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength. Yet heard I the voice of his words: and when I heard the voice of his words, then was I in a deep sleep on my face, and my face toward the ground” (Daniel 10:8–9). Lehi, following a vision, returned home and “cast himself upon his bed, being overcome with the Spirit and the things which he had seen” (1 Nephi 1:7). Moses also records similar weakness following his experience when he ascended the high mountain to converse with God face to face. “As he was left unto himself, he fell unto the earth. And it came to pass that it was for the space of many hours before Moses did again receive his natural strength like unto man” (Moses 1:9–10). Therefore, Luke’s addition that Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep during the transfiguration scene attests to a divine presence during the vision, and implies that the apostles received a significant vision, effectively declaring the prophetic stature of Peter, James, and John as ones worthy to receive such a vision.

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<sup>41</sup> Philo Dibble, “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27, no. 10 (15 May 1892): 303–4.

<sup>42</sup> J. Smith 1980a, vol. 1, 6.



*Tabernacles.* As Moses and Elias departed, Peter declared that “it is good for us to be here” and suggested building three tabernacles on the mount for Jesus, Moses, and Elias (Matt. 17:4; Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33).<sup>43</sup> Both Mark and Luke recorded that Peter did not know what to say when he put forth the idea of building tabernacles; however, Mark added the detail that “he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid” (Mark 9:6; see also Luke 9:33).

Peter’s comment on the building of three tabernacles links the experiences on the mount with the celebrations of a sacred Jewish festival. Three times a year all Israelite males were to “appear before the Lord God” and keep feasts unto him, one of which was the feast of the tabernacles (Ex. 23:14–17; see also Deut. 16:16), which Josephus described as “the most sacred and greatest feast among the Hebrews” (Ant., 8.4.1 §100). The feast of tabernacles was also called the “feast of the ingathering” or the “feast of the harvest” (Ex. 23:16). The feast began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month with its celebrations lasting for seven days, beginning on the Sabbath (Lev. 23:34, 39).<sup>44</sup> It commemorated the dwelling of the children of Israel in booths or tents (σκήνη) during the exodus (Lev. 23:43); the feast also celebrated the gathering in of all their “labours out of the field,” or the harvest (see Ex. 23:16). The Mount of Transfiguration occurred at the time of the feast of the tabernacles. As the feast was celebrated at the time of the harvest, one of its characteristic rituals was the building of and dwelling in huts or booths constructed from boughs of trees. Thus, Peter’s suggestion at the building of tabernacles may have

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<sup>43</sup> Fitzmyer discusses Luke’s word choice in the phrase “gradually withdrew from him” (vs. 33). He identifies it as literally meaning “‘in their withdrawing from him.’ Luke uses *en to* + [infinitive]. . . . The [infinitive] is present, suggesting gradual withdrawal.” Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Anchor Bible: Luke*, vol. 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 801.

<sup>44</sup> There are references to an eighth day of the festival celebrations, which may explain why Luke placed the transfiguration eight days after Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi while Matthew and Mark place the events six days apart. See Lev. 23:37, 39; Num. 29:35.

indicated his confusion over the purpose of Moses and Elijah's appearance and the current festival.

Terrence Smith discusses the significance of Peter's comment in Mark 9:5–6, as these verses, like Mark 8:29–33, “single Peter out for special mention. His proposal to build tabernacles for the three heavenly figures (v.5) elicits the Markan comment ‘for he did not know what to say, for they were afraid’ (v. 6) which would seem to indicate that the writer thought the proposal was inappropriate for the occasion.” Smith goes on to propose some possible interpretations of Peter's suggestion to build three tabernacles. He argues that “it does seem clear that Peter wished to construct more permanent dwelling-places for the heavenly figures;” however, what is unclear are Peter's motives behind the suggestion. Perhaps Peter merely wished to observe the rituals of the festival, or maybe he was expressing hope that the building of tabernacles would “ensure that the presence of the transfigured Jesus would not be temporary.” A final reason suggested by Smith is that Peter was showing an incorrect assumption in looking at the transfiguration as the parousia, or the coming of Christ, instead of recognizing it as a preview of the parousia.<sup>45</sup> While there are several possible meanings of and motives behind Peter's suggestion to build tabernacles on the mount, the only explanation the New Testament offers is simply that which Mark proposed: “he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid” (Mark 9:6).

*Fear.* Although they noted the apostle's fear at different times during the course of events on the mount, each of the Synoptics recorded that the disciples were afraid during at least some of the events. Luke tells us that they were within the cloud which overshadowed them, and “and they feared as they entered into the cloud” (Luke 9:34). Mark described their fear at the time of Moses and Elias' appearance. Matthew recorded their fear after they heard the voice of God the Father: “And when the disciples heard

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<sup>45</sup> T. Smith, 171–72.

it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid” (Mark 17:6–7). Mann suggests that a better translation of Mark’s word for fear, *εκφοβοι*, would be “religious awe.”<sup>46</sup> This is significant because it indicates that the events on the mount were of so sacred a nature that they inspired religious awe from Peter, James, and John. Because such an emotion would likely not be a momentary sensation, it is probable that their “religious awe” continued during several of the forthcoming events on the mount.

### God the Father

As Peter spoke, a cloud overshadowed them. The appearance of a cloud in sacred settings is a sign of the presence of God.<sup>47</sup> Mann argues that Matthew’s description of a “bright cloud” was referring to the Shekinah (literally, the dwelling place of Jehovah) which was a visible manifestation of divine presence identified by a bright shining cloud and signifying the glory of the Lord.<sup>48</sup> As on the Mount of Transfiguration, the appearance of the Shekinah, or cloud marked the presence of the Lord when Moses received the Law on Sinai (see Ex. 14:19; 16:10). When Moses was preparing the people to receive the covenants that would make them a kingdom of priests and an holy nation, the Lord told Moses that he would come in a thick cloud so that the people could hear as he spoke to Moses and so that they would believe Moses forever (Ex. 19:9). On Sinai, “the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with [Moses] there” (Ex. 34:5). And as Moses set up the tabernacle for Israel to worship the Lord, a cloud covered the tent and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

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<sup>46</sup> Mann, 360.

<sup>47</sup> Albright, 220.

<sup>48</sup> Mann, 361.

Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And when the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the children of Israel went onward in all their journeys: But if the cloud were not taken up, then they journeyed not till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel, throughout all their journeys. (Ex. 40:34–38; see also Ex. 13:21–22)

Thus, the cloud covering over the tabernacle as they journeyed was a symbol of the presence of the Lord with Israel. 2 Maccabees recorded a prophecy that the glory of the Lord would return with the appearance of a cloud when God would show his mercy and gather his people again as he did in the time of Moses (2 Macc. 2:7–8). Therefore, as it did on Sinai, the appearance of the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration signified the presence of God.

As the cloud came upon them, Peter, James, and John heard God the Father as he declared, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him” (Matt. 17:5; see also Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34–35). Peter later described the voice as “a voice from heaven” (2 Pet. 1:18), adding detail to Luke’s description of it as “out of the cloud” (Luke 9:35). The voice of God the Father gave the same declaration of Jesus as at the time of his baptism (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). Fitzmyer notes that, in the transfiguration narrative, the voice is addressing Peter, James, and John rather than addressing Jesus as it did at his baptism.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the voice of God the Father witnessed to Peter, James, and John of both the divine Sonship of Jesus and of his approval of the life and works of his son. After attesting to the divinity of Jesus, the Father gave the disciples a simple command: “hear ye him” (Matt. 17:5; see also Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). This injunction of the Father to

the disciples implies that Jesus likely gave instruction to the apostles in that sacred setting; however, while some gnostic texts purport to contain the Savior's revelation to the disciples on the mount,<sup>50</sup> the New Testament accounts did not record the instructions the Savior gave his disciples on that occasion. The cloud left suddenly, enabling them to see. As they looked around, they found themselves alone with Jesus on the mount who enjoined them not to be afraid (Matt. 17:8; Mark 9:8; Luke 9:36).

Although there is no biblical record of Jesus' instructions to his disciples at that time, it is clear that on the mount, "the three disciples are represented as witnessing an event with eschatological significance."<sup>51</sup> Joseph Smith recorded that those who endure in faith and obey God's will, "the same shall overcome, and shall receive an inheritance upon the earth when the day of transfiguration shall come; When the earth shall be transfigured, even according to the pattern which was shown unto mine apostles upon the mount; of which account the fulness ye have not yet received."<sup>52</sup>

## The Commission

"And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead" (Matt. 17:9; Mark 9:9). "And they kept

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<sup>49</sup> Fitzmyer, 802.

<sup>50</sup> Gnostic sources identify the transfiguration as the source of Peter's authority, when he received the gnosis, or knowledge, from Christ. "Then a great light appeared so that the mountain shone from the light of him who had appeared. And a voice called out to them saying, 'Listen to my words that I may speak to you. . . . I am Jesus Christ who am with you forever.'" "The Letter of Peter to Philip" 8.134.9-18 in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, rev. ed., ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 434.

<sup>51</sup> T. Smith, 171.

<sup>52</sup> J. Smith 1980a, vol. 1, 208.

it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen” (Luke 9:36). After they descended the mountain, the disciples kept the charge the Savior gave them to keep the events both sacred and secret. While Peter, James, and John questioned among themselves the meaning of the phrase “the rising from the dead,” they asked the Savior “Why say the scribes that Elias must first come?” Jesus replied, “Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.” Thus, Jesus, in teaching of his coming crucifixion, testified that just as Elias suffered at the hand of the scribes and the leaders of the Jews, the Son of Man also “must suffer many things, and be set at nought.” The disciples then understood that Jesus was identifying the Elias which the scribes referred to as John the Baptist (Matt. 17:10–13; Mark 9:10–13).

### **Peter’s Account of the Transfiguration**

In his second epistle, Peter referred to his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration as an event at which he obtained not only a more sure word of prophecy, but he also obtained the authority to interpret scripture. Peter opened the discussion of the transfiguration by exhorting the people to work to make their calling and election sure so that they may receive an inheritance in the kingdom of God (2 Pet. 1:10–11). He taught that he wished the people to retain in their memories his witness of the glory of Jesus and of his calling and election made sure as he expected his own death shortly (2 Pet. 1:13–15). Thus, as Peter looked toward martyrdom, he declared the truthfulness of his witness of Jesus Christ by offering his testimony as an eyewitness of Jesus’ majesty and glory on the Mount of Transfiguration.

For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts. (2 Pet. 1:16–19)

Peter declared that they were eyewitnesses to Christ's majesty as the Father gave honor and glory to him on the mount when he proclaimed, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Peter added that the disciples received a more sure word of prophecy and authority there: καὶ ἔχομεν βεβαιότερον τὸν προφητικὸν λόγον. The literal rendition of this phrase is "and we have the more sure prophetic word." The root adverb, βεβαιος, refers to a sure, certain, dependable confirmation.<sup>53</sup> With the adverb's comparative ending, Peter is describing a prophetic assurance which is more certain than prior prophetic blessings the disciples had received.

Although Peter identified the voice of God as accompanying their more sure word of prophecy, Joseph Smith taught that this sure word of prophecy required more than hearing the voice of God; a second witness was also necessary.

"Now, there is some grand secret here, and keys to unlock the subject. . . . And though they had heard an audible voice from heaven bearing testimony that Jesus was the Son of God, yet he says we have a more sure word of prophecy, whereunto ye do well that ye take heed as unto a light shining in a dark place.

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<sup>53</sup> Bauer, 1979, 138.

Now, wherein could they have a more sure word of prophecy than to hear the voice of God saying, This is my beloved Son.

“Now for the secret and grand key. Though they might hear the voice of God and know that Jesus was the Son of God, this would be no evidence that their election and calling was made sure, that they had part with Christ, and were joint heirs with him. They then would want that more sure word of prophecy, that they were sealed in the heavens and had the promise of eternal life in the kingdom of God. Then, having this promise sealed unto them, it was an anchor to the soul, sure and steadfast. Though the thunders might roll and lightnings flash, and earthquakes bellow, and war gather thick around, yet this hope and knowledge would support the soul in every hour of trial, trouble and tribulation. Then knowledge through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the grand key that unlocks the glories and mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>54</sup>

Thus, a more sure word of prophecy is the assurance that one will be sealed up to eternal life with the Savior, a promise which is bound both on earth and in heaven. In addition to the Father’s voice declaring the divinity of his Son, the more sure word of prophecy was an extra assurance, a promise of eternal life, ratified and sealed in the heavens.<sup>55</sup>

This more sure word of prophecy which Peter received on the Mount of Transfiguration also indicates his authority to receive revelation pertinent to the governing of the Church. Brown, Donfried, and Reumann make a connection between Peter’s more

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<sup>54</sup> J. Smith 1980a, vol. 5, 388–89.

<sup>55</sup> Several discourses in *The Journal of Discourses* associate the “more sure word of prophecy” with divine revelation, direct communication between God and humans, and living oracles. See Joseph F. Smith, “The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper,” *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 15, (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 327–28; Charles W. Penrose, “The Church of Christ,” *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 24, (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 86–87; Brigham Young, “How Divisions Were Introduced into the Christian World,” *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 12, (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 65.



sure word of prophecy received on the mount (2 Pet. 1:19) and his “authority to interpret the words of Scripture, especially the prophecies (1:20–21).”<sup>56</sup> Terence Smith also discusses Peter’s experiences at the transfiguration as the source of his authority. “In 2 Peter, Peter’s authority rests upon his vision of the Lord’s majesty at the Transfiguration (1:16–18), an experience which legitimizes his role as a sure foundation against the ‘myths’ and ‘false words’ of the opponents.” Smith goes on to discuss how in the Apocalypse of Peter, the transfiguration is used to emphasize Peter’s position as the founder of the gnostic community. This portrayal of Peter includes his capacity to convey authoritative interpretations not only because he was the ruler of the community but also because the Savior explained to him the meanings of key religious events.<sup>57</sup> “And [Christ] said unto [Peter], ‘Be strong for you are the one to whom these mysteries have been given, to know them through revelation.’”<sup>58</sup> Thus, both 2 Pet. and some extra-biblical sources asserted that the revelation which Peter received on the mountain, in part, provided a basis for his authority.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

The Mount of Transfiguration was a decisive event in Peter’s training to become the leader of the Church, for it was

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<sup>56</sup> Brown, 155.

<sup>57</sup> T. Smith, 139–40.

<sup>58</sup> “Apocalypse of Peter,” 7.3 in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, rev. ed., ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 377.

<sup>59</sup> While some gnostic texts attest to the leadership of Peter, they base Peter’s leadership on the gnosis he received from Christ. In the tradition of Matthew 16:13–20, Peter was described as the one who received revelation; however, the gnostic interpretation replaced the leadership keys and authority Peter received with the gnosis or understanding of the mysteries. For a more in-depth discussion of the gnostic interpretation of the Matthew 16 and 17 passages to solidify their claim for pre-eminence by declaring that Peter was given the “gnosis” rather than revelation see T. Smith, 131–33.

upon the mount that Peter received the governing authority over the church. In addition to the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the transfiguration of Jesus, and the voice of the Father witnessing the divinity of the Son, it was there that Old Testament prophets endowed the keys of the kingdom upon Peter, James, and John.<sup>60</sup> Besides receiving the governing keys, Peter, James, and John were witnesses to an eschatological vision and recipients of revelation pertaining to the governing of the kingdom, including temple experiences. Peter would later testify that upon the mount, they received the more sure word of prophecy, an assurance that they would be joint heirs with Jesus Christ, being sealed up to eternal life (2 Pet. 1:16–19).<sup>61</sup>

The experiences on the Mount of Transfiguration were a preparation for the coming crucifixion of Jesus—not only for Jesus who conversed about his death with Moses and Elijah (Luke 9:28, 31), but likely also for the disciples. Although they did not fully understand the significance of the events on the mount (Mark 9:6, 10; Luke 9:33), Christ taught them of his impending crucifixion and endowed them with all the keys and knowledge necessary for the governing of the Church. Thus, while Peter, James, and John did not receive a full understanding of the events to come, the transfiguration experience led the disciples to a clearer knowledge and understanding of the mission of Jesus Christ, the saving ordinances, and the ruling of the kingdom of God on the earth. This event was so significant for Peter's development as the leader of the early Christian Church that later, when testifying of his authority, he referred to his experience on the mount as a witness to his right to testify of Christ and to lead his Church.

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<sup>60</sup> J. Smith 1980a, vol. 3, 387; see also vol. 5, 152.

<sup>61</sup> J. Smith 1980b, 201–02, 204–08.