

Mark – The First Gospel

021 – The Transfiguration – Mark 9:2-13

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First Thoughts

Just a verse earlier Jesus had said to the disciples and the assembled crowd, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”¹

It was noted previously that this is found in all three Synoptic gospels² and that it is immediately followed by the narrative of Jesus’ transfiguration. Based on the placement of the saying and the stories, the conclusion is that the transfiguration account is at the very least a partial fulfillment of Jesus’ statement that some would see the kingdom of God in its glory and power before their deaths. Mark’s treatment is no different, and for this session I think it best to begin with a reading of the passage in question:

9:2 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³ and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. ⁵ And Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁶ For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” ⁸ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

⁹ And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. ¹¹ And they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” ¹² And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? ¹³ But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.” (ESV)

The first half is the event of the transfiguration. The second half provides an interpretation. But this interpretation appears enigmatic and veiled. The question that the disciples pose of Jesus seems non-sequitur, and Jesus’ response doesn’t seem to offer much clarity. So what are we to make of all this? As

¹ Mark 9:1 (partial), ESV.

² Matthew 16:28; Luke 9:27.

this event appears in all three Synoptics, it must contain vital truths about the gospel and the meaning of the Christ. So what might those be?

The Transfiguration Event

Before going on, it should be mentioned that there is a theory that the transfiguration event is the resurrection event that has been misplaced. However, there is little evidence to support this theory.

So what does the transfiguration event reveal, and what is the framework in which to interpret it?

The description of the event is studded with allusions to OT passages and themes, and it is necessary to see these to appreciate what Mark wanted this story to convey to his readers.³

The episode provides a personal and preliminary revelation that he whom the disciples follow on a way marked by suffering and humiliation is the Son of Man whose total ministry has cosmic implications. Ch. 9:2–8 serves as a prelude to Chs. 14:1–16:8 and corresponds in function to Isa. 52:13–15 in relationship to Ch. 53:1–12: it offers assurance that despite apparent abandonment by God, Jesus is the Lord's Servant who prospers in the task he has been sent to accomplish.⁴

While the language used to describe the event was supplied from the vocabulary of theophany in the OT and in Jewish apocalyptic, the actual content of the revelation finds its closest parallel in the witness of the heavenly voice at Jesus' baptism with its attendant cosmic overtones (Ch. 1:9–11). There is room for discussion concerning the form of the event (i. e. it is possible that the disciples saw a vision of Elijah and Moses and heard the heavenly voice within the scope of that vision) but the transfiguration as an entity must be regarded as an act of revelation for which God was responsible.⁵

“After six days.” In a gospel text that is filled with “immediately”s and where chronology typically doesn’t matter much, it is odd and surprising to find this detail here. What is its significance?

The mention of six days is, however, also very likely an allusion to Exodus 24:15, where after six days, Moses is summoned to a mountaintop and is given a revelation of God.⁶

The transfiguration is presented in the terminology of a theophany which reveals the powerful coming of the Kingdom of God. Understood in this light, the precise time reference in verse 2 recalls Ex. 24:16f. where six days designates a time of preparation for the reception of revelation. Mark evidently regarded Jesus' announcement of his approaching suffering as the preparation required for witnessing the disclosure of Christ's true character.⁷

“Jesus..., Peter and James and John... by themselves.” Why these and no other?

Jesus selects only Peter, James, and John to accompany him, not because they are his favorites, but because in this Gospel they are singled out as having special difficulty understanding the point he has just made in 8:31- 9:1 about the necessity of suffering.⁸

³ UBC: Mark, 9:2-13.

⁴ NICNT: Mark, 9:2-8.

⁵ NICNT: Mark, 9:2-8.

⁶ UBC: Mark, 9:2-13.

⁷ NICNT: Mark, 9:2-3.

⁸ Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.

“His clothes became radiant, intensely white...” When the biblical texts mention God’s glory, it is often in the context of extremely bright light. What does this transfiguration signify in this event?

The reference to the dazzling white clothes (v. 3) is an allusion to Daniel 7:9, which is a description of a vision of God. This allusion suggests that the experience of the disciples in 9:2–13 is a divine manifestation like the visions of OT prophets (in addition to Dan. 7:9–14, see also Isa. 6:1–13; Ezek. 1:4–28; 8:1–4). But this means that the "transfiguration" of Jesus shows him in a form like God, meaning that he is not just the Messiah, an especially godly human chosen to rule in God's name, he is himself "clothed" in divine glory.⁹

But what about the observation from the previous time that the disciples wouldn’t have recognized the Daniel reference? (See “And how is written of the Son of Man that he should suffer...” below.)

“Elijah with Moses...” Why these two?

The presence of Elijah with Moses thus has eschatological significance in the specific sense that they proclaim the coming of the end.¹⁰

The evangelist continues to follow Isaiah's lead by giving an eschatological interpretation to motives associated with the exodus, and particularly with the figure of Moses. He does this by combining the expectation of a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15) with the expectation of Elijah as forerunner to the Messiah (Mal 4:5-6, LXX 3:22-23). Following the order of LXX Mal 3:22-24, he mentions Elijah first, then Moses (9:4, with Gundry 1993, 458). But the application of the two eschatological expectations is developed in chiastically reversed order: Jesus as Moses (9:2-10), then John as Elijah (9:11-13).¹¹

Joel Marcus has demonstrated that in Mark the entire transfiguration scene depends upon motifs derived from a conflation of two accounts of Moses' ascent of Mt. Sinai in Exodus 24 and 34 (Marcus 1992b, 80-93)... Marcus points to three developments in the interpretation of the Moses story in Hellenistic Judaism that seem to contribute to the Markan portrayal of Jesus in the transfiguration scene: Moses' enthronement, Moses' translation, and Moses' divinization... Ezekiel the Tragedian (2nd century BCE) and Philo of Alexandria (1st century CE) both interpret Moses' ascent of Sinai as an enthronement in ways that imply that Moses participates in the kingship of God... Philo (*Questions on Genesis* 1.86) takes the absence of a known burial place for Moses to mean that he had been translated into heaven... This pattern, which Talbert has called "the myth of the immortals," would have been quite familiar to a Greco-Roman audience: a wise, powerful, and/or virtuous person is exalted to heaven as a reward for a life of obedience to the gods and as a result is able to offer assistance to devotees still living on earth (Talbert 1977, 25-43). Since the Markan arrangement makes explicit mention of the resurrection of Jesus in connection with the transfiguration (9:9-10), a connection between the two is implied.¹²

“Peter [says]..., ‘Let us make three tents...’” Why might Peter have suggested this particular action? What does it say about Jesus, his message, and his work?

⁹ UBC: Mark, 9:2-13.

¹⁰ NICNT: Mark, 9:4.

¹¹ Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.

¹² Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.

Peter, as spokesman for the others, responds both in awe and confusion (9:5–6), suggesting that they erect tents for Jesus and the heavenly visitors, no doubt with the intention of prolonging the glorious experience. Peter's suggestion could imply that he thought that the experience meant that the kingdom had fully arrived, that the end had come, and that God was about to bring fully to pass all the hopes for a new reign of righteousness upon the earth.¹³

The desire to find the Feast of Tabernacles implicitly in the background of the transfiguration account is based on details within the text, especially the reference to the "booths" in verse 5. The Feast of Tabernacles, like the Passover, had come to have significant reference to the final deliverance promised by God. The several elements in the account, however, can be traced back to the reports of Moses' ascent to Sinai and his vision of the glory of God (Ex. 24:12–18); a more decisive influence seems to have been exerted upon the narrative from this tradition rather than from any other. The transfiguration scene develops as a new "Sinai" theophany with Jesus as the central figure.¹⁴

His proposal to build three tabernacles evidently rests upon a misunderstanding of the significance of the situation. The desire to erect new tents of meeting where God can again communicate with men implies that Peter regards the time of the second exodus as fulfilled and the goal of the sabbath rest achieved. He is anxious to find the fulfilment of the promised glory now, prior to the sufferings Jesus had announced as necessary.¹⁵

Would Peter find it easier to erect booths than to follow the man who is headed to Jerusalem and a cross? [Note 1: The irony is that if you go to the mountain identified as the place where this happened, there is a very beautiful church where the main altar is dedicated to Jesus Christ and the two side chapels are dedicated, one to Moses and the other to Elijah. Peter got his booths after all!] ¹⁶

“A cloud overshadowed them... a voice came out of the cloud...” This is likely an allusion to some earlier events found in Jesus’ life and in the Old Testament. What do the allusions reveal about this event?

Just as the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism identified him as God's Son who would exercise the power of the Holy Spirit to heal and deliver from bondage to the demonic, so in this scene the voice from heaven identifies Jesus as God's Son whose predictions of the passion and resurrection will be vindicated and whose insistence on the implications of the passion for the life of faithful discipleship are correct (Myers 1988, 251).¹⁷

The cloud (9:7), recalling OT accounts in which the presence and glory of God are indicated by a cloud covering the spot where God manifests himself to someone (cf., e. g., Exod. 16:10; 19:9; 24:15–18; 34:5; 40:34–38), means that the unnamed voice from the cloud is the very voice of God.¹⁸

Meditating on the image of the cloud can open the door to a conversation about how, even though we long for visual stimulation, living the life of faith is more like traveling in a cloud. For many sitting in the

¹³ UBC: Mark, 9:2-13.

¹⁴ NICNT: Mark, 9:2-8.

¹⁵ NICNT: Mark, 9:5-6.

¹⁶ Feasting: Mark, location 9046 and 9072.

¹⁷ Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.

¹⁸ UBC: Mark, 9:2-13.

pews, this image of the cloud will help them to name how there is significantly less clarity in their own lives of faith than one might like.¹⁹

“Listen to him.” What does this mean?

In Moses we have the great founder of Israel's religion, the one to whom God gave the law, and the greatest of all the great figures of the OT. Very importantly, Moses' promise of a prophet whom God would send when he was gone (Deut. 18:15) was understood by some ancient Jews and by early Christians to mean that God would send a great prophet of Moses-like stature in the final period before the appearance of the kingdom of God. Among early Christians, Moses' statement was interpreted as a prophetic promise of Jesus (e. g., Acts 3:22–26; 7:35–37). Moses' appearance in the vision of the disciples meant that he was endorsing Jesus as the one he had promised, the one who now bore all the authority of Moses in speaking for God. In support of this, there is the direct allusion to Deuteronomy 18:15 in 9:7, listen to him, a quote of the final part of Moses' statement.²⁰

The exhortation has bearing upon all of Jesus' words, but has particular relevance to the new instruction Jesus had been giving to his followers concerning the necessity of his sufferings and of their participation in his humiliation. There can be no doubt that Mark intended his congregation in Rome to take this word to heart.²¹

While this could be reduced to the simple and good advice that we should listen before we speak (“God gave us two ears and one mouth,” as the old cliché goes), such moralizing would avoid the deeper implication. This is an invitation to examine how we fundamentally relate to God: not primarily by speaking but by listening. Furthermore, it can serve as a chastening to Christians who speak too easily for God, who assume they know what God wants for our neighbors, and who fail to recognize how much they do not know.²²

What does this event signify?

When the cloud lifted, Moses and Elijah had vanished. Jesus alone remained as the sole bearer of God's new revelation to be disclosed in the cross and resurrection... The way to the cross demanded the submission of the Son and Jesus must set out upon it alone. The transfiguration, however, has disclosed a new aspect of God's truth: Jesus is himself the new Tabernacle of divine glory. His word and deed transcend all past revelation.²³

Coming Down the Mountain

“He charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”

Why did Jesus command his disciples to not say anything? What is it about the resurrection that unlocks the injunction?

Peter is deeply impressed with Jesus' stature as the Messiah and the transfigured Son of God, but he and the other disciples find the necessity of the passion completely incomprehensible (Chs. 8:32 f.; 9:5 f., 30,

¹⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 9000.

²⁰ *UBC: Mark*, 9:2-13.

²¹ *NICNT: Mark*, 9:7.

²² *Feasting: Mark*, location 9010.

²³ *NICNT: Mark*, 9:8.

32). Jesus prohibits the telling of what they had seen and perceived because their enthusiasm was based on a superficial preconception of what messiahship and sonship signifies. Jesus' injunction in verse 9 is actually a challenge to perceive and proclaim the exalted Son of Man within the context of his historical ministry marked by suffering and rejection, culminated by death on the cross.²⁴

“So they kept the matter to themselves...” They did seem to understand the command to remain silent about the event. What did the three disciples think about what happened? Who did they think Jesus was?

“Questioning what this rising from the dead might mean.” Were the disciples unfamiliar with the concept of resurrection, or not believe it could happen? What were they questioning? What were they troubled about?

It can be assumed that they were thoroughly familiar with the concept of the resurrection of the dead as the climactic event of the last day (cf. Chs. 6:14, 16; 12:18–27). What perplexed them was what this rising from the dead of the Son of Man could mean... The disciples' real question is, What have death and resurrection to do with the Son of Man? They possessed no categories by which they could distinguish between Jesus' statements concerning his resurrection and those concerning his parousia, and the relationship between these two distinct events remained obscure... The place of Jesus' passion and death, together with his resurrection, was the unexpected and incomprehensible middle term between the present and the magnificent future assured by the transfiguration. What bothered the disciples specifically, then, was the phrase "from among the dead," together with the implication that time would yet remain before the consummation for the proclamation of what they had seen.²⁵

“Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” What prompted the disciples to ask this particular question?

This combination of a reference to the resurrection with the vision of Elijah they have just experienced causes the disciples to realize the eschatological significance of the transfiguration... This has to mean that the Markan disciples attribute to Jewish tradition a belief that Elijah would appear as a forerunner to the Messiah... The narrative logic is plain: Jesus has been recognized as the Messiah (8:29); he has predicted his suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31); and he has been seen in his eschatological glory by Peter, James, and John and identified by the heavenly voice as God's Son, the prophet-like Moses whose words are to be taken seriously. In short, the Messiah has appeared in glory. The disciples now want to know why the Messiah was not preceded by the coming of the forerunner promised in Malachi 4:5-6 (LXX 3:22-23).²⁶

It is probable that this question actually masks an objection to Jesus' announcement of his suffering and death, for the restoration Elijah is to effect just prior to the end makes messianic suffering unnecessary... The appearance of Elijah with Jesus upon the mountain of transfiguration could only be the anticipated return. What room for sufferings remains?²⁷

²⁴ NICNT: Mark, 9:9.

²⁵ NICNT: Mark, 9:10.

²⁶ Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.

²⁷ NICNT: Mark, 9:11.

“Elijah does come first to restore all things... But I tell you that Elijah has come...” To whom does Jesus refer when he says that Elijah has come? And what exactly is the restoration that “Elijah” did?

Jesus acknowledged that the affirmation that Elijah must come first and restore all things was certainly correct (cf. Mal. 3:23 LXX =4:5f. M. T.). The fact that the Scripture also affirms that the Son of Man must experience suffering and rejection, however, indicates that Elijah's task as the restorer cannot signify what the disciples apparently believe it to mean.²⁸

Jesus' veiled affirmation implicitly identifies John the Baptist as the eschatological messenger promised in Mal. 4:5f. John is the Elijah sent by God because he fulfilled the function expected of Elijah, leading the people to renewal through repentance and forgiveness.²⁹

“And how is written of the Son of Man that he should suffer...” The disciples didn't understand earlier. Why should they understand now, especially with what they had seen during the transfiguration? What might Jesus be referring to when he refers to writings about suffering?

Of course, there is no place in the Old Testament where "it is written" that the Son of Man must suffer and be rejected. However, Marcus has shown that "it is written" can indicate a Christian exegetical conclusion rather than a specific Scriptural citation...³⁰

Basic to Jesus' understanding of Elijah's function is the restoration through repentance promised in Mal. 4:6, and fulfilled in the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist. Verse 12b serves as a warning that the sufferings of John and his shameful rejection do not disqualify him from fulfilling the role of Elijah nor do Jesus' sufferings discredit him as the transcendent Son of Man.³¹

The only “son of man” in the Bible who suffers abuse and contempt is one whose name in Hebrew would be *abel ben adam*: Abel, son of Man, the first martyr, or at least the first to die amid bitterness over who enjoyed God's favor and who did not (Gen. 4:1–16). By juxtaposing Elijah and the Son of Man as figures destined for suffering and contempt, Mark's Gospel offers a hint about a piece of Scripture the church might see occurring again, not only in Jesus' life, but also in their own.³²

“And they did to [Elijah] whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.” Where and what precisely is Jesus speaking here? What is this about a suffering Elijah?

The further claim that "it has been written" about Elijah that he, too, must suffer at the hands of his enemies whatever they wished to do to him seems to have been arrived at by logic something like this:

Major premise- The forerunner of the Messiah must foreshadow the Messiah's own mission.

Minor premise- The mission of the Messiah includes suffering and death (8:29- 33; 9:12).

Conclusion- The forerunner must also have undergone suffering and death. John the baptizer fits this description (9:13).

²⁸ NICNT: Mark, 9:12.

²⁹ NICNT: Mark, 9:13

³⁰ Reading Mark, 8:31-9:29.

³¹ NICNT: Mark, 9:12.

³² Feasting: Mark, location 9166.

... This very same kind of argumentation appears in Hellenistic rhetoric in the form of the enthymeme, a syllogism in which one of the components is implied rather than explicit. Anyone who had listened to rhetors arguing on the street corners could have been exposed to this device.³³

His sufferings at the hands of Herod and Herodias (Ch. 6:14–29), which are indicated by an idiomatic expression denoting absolute and arbitrary power (cf. 2 Macc. 7:16), strengthen the identity of John with Elijah, who in his own ministry was harassed by a wicked woman and a weak king (1 Kings 19:2, 10)... Paradoxically, the vindication of John's ministry comes through his death and the violation of every human right. He participates in God's sovereign purpose which triumphs in apparent defeat. John's obscurity and ignominious death express all the ambiguity and suffering of Christian existence in the interval before the parousia. In this sense, John provides an example for the persecuted Christians in Rome. What they (Antipas and Herodias) did to him, they (men hostile to God) will do to men whose allegiance to Jesus and the gospel is unwavering (Ch. 13:9–13). The significant point, however, is that he suffered as Elijah and his ministry demonstrated that the fulfilment of "all things" was at hand. The ambiguity between his true dignity and his hiddenness in the world will be resolved only at the parousia when the people of God will be vindicated by the Son of Man who shared their sufferings and rejection. The reference to Elijah's sufferings thus underscores the point made in verse 9: glory comes only after humiliation.³⁴

Summary

A few excerpts from this passage's section in *Feasting on the Gospels--Mark: A Feasting on the Word Commentary*.

Each Gospel in its own way teaches readers how to answer the questions, "Where is this risen Jesus you Christians proclaim? What is he doing? Can we see him?" One way Mark answers is to have readers recall Jesus' instructions about the transfiguration scene, and at the end of the Gospel recall and rehearse it. We have seen Jesus among those who have gone to be with God— with Moses, the great teacher, and with Elijah, the prophet upon whom folks in Jesus' day still called for help in times of need.³⁵

The voice from the cloud does not invite the church to listen in general, but to listen to the Son, without giving a recipe for how that is to be done.³⁶

When the Son of Man is raised from the dead, questions will arise that the story of the transfiguration will help answer. As if in response, the young man at the tomb in Mark 16: 1–8 speaks for the whole community that declares, "Jesus has been raised. You will not find him in the tomb. If you want to see him, go to Galilee, even as he told you." ¶Mark's readers have no way to "go to Galilee" except to return to the beginning of the story, which begins in Galilee, and then follow Jesus through his journey. This trek takes readers through his baptism into a world where Jesus lives and behaves already as a resurrected one amid all the ills and threats that only those who already have death behind them need not fear. Jesus touches the unclean, but instead of becoming unclean, everything around him becomes clean (e.g., 5: 1–43). He walks on water, and just as in Luke's and John's postresurrection appearance stories, disciples can

³³ *Reading Mark*, 8:31-9:29.

³⁴ *NICNT: Mark*, 9:13.

³⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, location 8964.

³⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 9023.

look right at Jesus and not recognize him (6: 47–56). Where is the risen Jesus? He remains unrecognized and at large, loose with his healing powers in a world overrun with threats against life and wholeness.³⁷

Jesus, like Abel, seems to have lived only to die. The same fate has befallen Mark's first readers, presuming they are Christians of Nero's Rome after the debacle of 64 CE. In the chaos of that time, their lives made no sense— unless, of course, they could find the meaning somehow in the ancient patterns of God's dealings with humankind. They would go the way of the Son of Man, to the cross, where they would, like their Lord, hang as silent judges of the world that treats kindness and inclusion with contempt. As we witness one day on the holy mountain, however, that will not be the end of the story.³⁸

Mark's report of the disciples questioning among themselves also gives preachers and teachers permission not to "answer" the deep questions at the heart of the Christian mystery. Rather, they may make room for perplexity and assure people that questions need not be asked on the fringes of church life. In fact, questions sometimes belong at the center of our faith... ¶ Why do people ask the questions they do of Scripture? What questions are they allowed to ask, and what questions are they encouraged to dare? As preachers and teachers we would do well to ask ourselves: Do our sermons and lessons open possibilities for genuine questions to be asked in the face of the Christian mystery? Do we preach and teach in ways that drive inquiry out to the margins of church life, signaling that certain questions do not belong? Are we personally willing to ask the questions at the heart of the Christian mystery that shapes our Christian existence? Do we avoid those more threatening questions in favor of safe questions? The types of questions permitted in the life of a congregation are a pastoral concern.³⁹

³⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, location 9137.

³⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 9173.

³⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 9194 and 9205.