

THE UNCREATED LIGHT

THE SERVANTS AND THE MASTER

August 6, 2008
The Transfiguration
Revision C

GOSPEL: Matthew 17:1-9

EPISTLE: 2 Peter 1:10-19

In the West, Transfiguration Sunday is celebrated just before Lent rather than in August as is the custom of the Orthodox Church. The Gospel and Epistle readings are identical in the Western lectionaries, except that only verses 16-21 are used from 2 Peter. In the Orthodox lectionary, the account of the transfiguration from Luke 9:28-36 is also read at Matins.

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Gospel: Matthew 16:28-17:9, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-36

The Transfiguration took place in mid-late summer 29 AD somewhat prior¹ to the Feast of Tabernacles. Thus, Orthodox tradition celebrates the Transfiguration at about the time of year when it occurred to connect it with the Old Testament Feast of Tabernacles. Western tradition celebrates the Transfiguration at a different time to introduce Lent. One of the themes associated with the Transfiguration in Eastern tradition is fasting in order to draw near to God. This comes from the experience of Moses and Elijah on and around Mt. Sinai.

The Light of God

This light of God is something God possesses by nature as part of His essence. To see the Light of God requires a revelation from God, which Peter, James and John were granted to see at the Transfiguration.

Prior to the events of the Transfiguration, Jesus had stated that some of His disciples would not taste death until they had seen the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (Matthew 16:28, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:27). Peter, James and John had this experience on the mountain of Transfiguration. There has been some disagreement as to whether this mountain was Mt. Tabor or Mt. Herman². Mt. Tabor is the traditional site of the Transfiguration, but some point out that

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¹ At this time, Jesus was staying away from Judea because the Jewish leaders sought to kill Him (John 7:1). This was just before the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:2) and also just before the Transfiguration when Jesus visited Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13).

² Mt. Tabor is Southwest of the Sea of Galilee while Mt. Herman is Northeast of the Sea of Galilee.

Tabor is not really a high mountain as the text says (Matthew 17:1), being only 1900 feet whereas Mt. Herman is quite a bit higher (9200 ft.). Also Mt. Herman is much closer to where Jesus was teaching at that time (Caesarea Philippi, Matthew 16:13). Both Tabor and Herman are associated with the Lord's Right Hand and the Light of His Countenance (Psalm 89:11-15).

As Jesus was transfigured, He took on an appearance similar to what He had when others saw Him after His Ascension. For example, the same Apostle John, who witnessed the Transfiguration, later saw the Lord in a vision on the Island of Patmos. The Lord's appearance then, as at the Transfiguration, was an extraordinary brightness (Revelation 1:9, 16). He did not change His nature; and He did not abandon His human body for a while. He was merely revealed as He really is and His disciples' eyes were opened. His human body remained intact, but "As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered and His robe became white and like lightning" (Luke 9:29). "His face shone like the sun and His clothes became white as the light" (Matthew 17:2). The emphasis seems to be a case of not just brightness, but extraordinary brightness like lightning.

The angels at the tomb are also described as having clothing like lightning (Luke 24:4), and the Lord's appearance at the Second Coming will be "as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven and shines to the other part under heaven, so also the Son of Man will be in His Day" (Luke 17:24). All these references to "lightning" are translations of the Greek word *astrapto* and its derivatives. Cyril of Alexandria noted³ this:

"He was transformed to so surpassing and godlike a brightness that His garments even glittered with rays of fire, and seemed to flash like lightning".

The Lord had mentioned a few months earlier that all the righteous would also appear this way in the resurrection: "Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:43, see also Daniel 12:3). The Transfiguration was then a demonstration of what that would be like.

According to some of the Church Fathers, Adam and Eve were clothed in light prior to the Fall. Their appearance may have been similar to that of the righteous shining forth as the sun after the resurrection. This would make sense: after they disobeyed God and the lights went out, then they noticed that they were naked!

This light is something God possesses, not something He takes on. For example, when the New Jerusalem comes, "The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the Glory of God illumined it. The Lamb is its light" (Revelation 21:23). If everyone shines like the sun, it is easy to see why there is no for the sun and moon.

Jerome stated⁴ that the Lord did not change shape when He was transfigured. He did not become aerial like a ghost. Similarly Moses and Elijah retained their bodily members, as inhabitants of Paradise, and achieved what we aim at when we fast.

"Accordingly, our Lord was not so transfigured on the mountain that He lost His hands and feet and other members, and suddenly began to roll along in a round shape like that of the sun or a ball. But the same members glowed with the

³ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, Homily 51, Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983.

⁴ Jerome, "To Pammachius Against John of Jerusalem", 29, Treatises

brightness of the sun and blinded the eyes of the Apostles. Hence, also, His garments were changed, but so as to become white and glistening, not aerial, for I suppose you do not intend to maintain that His clothes also were spiritual. The Evangelist adds that His face shone like the sun (Matthew 17:2); but when mention is made of His face, I reckon that His other members were beheld as well. Enoch was translated in the flesh (Genesis 5:24); Elijah was carried up to heaven in the flesh (2 Kings 2:12-14). They are not dead, they are inhabitants of Paradise, and even there retain the members, with which they were carried away and translated. What we aim at in fasting, they have through fellowship with God. They feed on heavenly bread, and are satisfied with every word of God, having Him as their food, who is also their Lord. Listen to the Savior saying, 'And my flesh rests in hope' (Psalm 16:9). And elsewhere, 'His flesh saw not corruption' (Acts 2:31, Psalm 16:10). And again, 'All flesh shall see the salvation of God' (Isaiah 40:5). Do you always have to make the body a twofold thing (i.e. flesh as opposed to spirit)? Rather quote the vision of Ezekiel, who joins bones to bones and brings them forth from their sepulchers, and then, making them to stand on their feet binds them together with flesh and sinews and clothes them with skin" (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

The Servants and the Master

As He was transfigured, Moses and Elijah appeared also in glory, talking with Jesus of His exodus (i.e. His crucifixion), which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31) at Passover (March-April) the following year. Since Jesus is the culmination of the Law and the Prophets, it is significant that Moses, the Law-giver, and Elijah, representing the Prophets, appeared with Him. The Lord had said earlier (Matthew 5:17-19), "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For till heaven and earth pass away (that is, the Kingdom comes in glory as we get a glimpse at the Transfiguration), one yod (smallest Hebrew letter) or one portion of a Hebrew letter will by no means pass from the Law till all is fulfilled."

John Chrysostom asked⁵ why Christ would bring forward Moses and Elijah. He then responded with four reasons.

1. He brought the leaders of His choir so that His disciples might see the difference between the servants and the Lord, and so that Peter might be rightly commended (Matthew 16:17) for confessing Him to be the Son of God.
2. He intended to expose the blasphemy of the Jewish leaders who had been saying that Jesus was not from God because He did not keep the Sabbath (Matthew 12:2, John 9:16). He brought forward Moses, because he gave the Law that the Jews quoted, and would not have overlooked the Law being trampled on. He brought forward Elijah, who was zealous for the glory of God. Were any man an adversary of God and falsely made himself equal to the Father, Elijah was not the person to stand by and listen to him".
3. He informed them that He has power over both death and life and is Ruler of both above and beneath (i.e. Heaven and Hades). For this reason, He brought

⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVI, 3.

forward both him that died (i.e. Moses, Deuteronomy 34:5-6) and him that didn't (i.e. Elijah 2 Kings 2:11)".

4. In discussing His Crucifixion, He showed them the glory of the Cross to console Peter and the others in their dread of the Crucifixion and to raise up their minds.

Cyril of Alexandria added⁶ to this saying that "the standing of Moses and Elijah before Him and their talking with one another was a sort of representation, excellently displaying our Lord Jesus Christ as having the Law and the Prophets for His bodyguard. He is the Lord of the Law and the Prophets as foreshown in them by those things, which in mutual agreement they proclaimed. For the words of the Prophets are not at variance with the teachings of the Law".

Moses and Elijah on Sinai

Moses and Elijah both had experiences with the Lord in glory previously. Moses met the Lord at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-4) at Mt. Horeb. The bush burned with uncreated fire and was not consumed - and Moses marveled at this. When Moses led Israel out of Egypt, they came back to Mt. Horeb (Exodus 3:12, 17:6)) and it was there that Moses struck the rock (compare 1 Corinthians 10:4, where the rock was Christ). Mt. Horeb was actually a series of mountain peaks of which Mt. Sinai was one of the tallest peaks. This is why the name Horeb is used instead of Sinai on many occasions later on as the location of the giving of the Law (Deuteronomy 1:6, 4:10, 4:15, 5:2, 9:8, 18:16, 29:1, Psalms 106:19, Malachi 4:4).

At the time Moses went up Mt. Sinai and stayed for forty days to receive the Law, there was thunder, lightning, a very loud trumpet sound and a thick cloud on the mountain (Exodus 19:16). This is the subject of the first of the readings for Vespers preceding the Transfiguration (Exodus 24:12-17). To the eyes of the people at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop (Exodus 24:17) and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace (Exodus 19:18). When Moses went up the mountain, he went into the middle of this. According to tradition, the thunder, lightning and trumpet sound was the activity of angels⁷ surrounding the Presence of God.

Gregory of Nazianzen stated⁸ that few people could do what Moses did. It took an ability to bear the glory of God and to accept the tables of the Law in the spirit.

"For it is not everyone who may draw near to God, but only one who, like Moses, can bear the glory of God. Moreover, before this, when the Law was first given, the trumpet-blasts, lightning, thunder, darkness, and the smoke of the whole mountain, and the threats that if even a beast touched the mountain it should be stoned, kept back the rest of the people. It was a great privilege for the people, after careful purification, merely to hear the voice of God. But Moses actually went up and entered into the cloud, and was charged with the Law. He received the tables, which belong, for the multitude, to the letter; but for those who are above the multitude, the tables belong to the spirit".

⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, Homily 51, Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983.

⁷ For more details, see the Feast Day of the Archangels, November 8.

⁸ Gregory Nazianzen, In Defense of His Flight to Pontus, Oration 2, 92.

After the golden calf incident, Moses went up Mt. Sinai again. Prior to that, Moses asked the Lord to show him His glory (Exodus 33:18). This is the subject of the second reading for Vespers preceding the Transfiguration (Exodus 33:11-23; 34:4-6, 8). This was not a small matter, since Moses was already accustomed to having the Lord speak to him face to face as a man speaks to his friend (Exodus 33:10-11). Moses had found favor with the Lord and the Lord had said, “My presence shall go with you and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14). Since no man could see the Lord’s face and live (Exodus 33:20), the Lord put Moses in the “cleft of the rock” and covered him with His hand while the Lord’s goodness and glory passed by Moses (Exodus 33:21-23). It was after this that Moses went up Mt. Sinai again to meet the Lord in the cloud (Exodus 34:4-5). Thus Moses had considerable experience with the Glory of the Lord.

Elijah also visited Mt. Horeb. This is the subject of the third reading for Vespers preceding the Transfiguration (1 Kings 19:3-16). After Elijah had raised the widow’s young son, where tradition ascribes this son⁹ to be the Prophet Jonah (1 Kings 17:9-24), and had his duel with the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:22-40), he fled from the rage of Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-3). At the place he holed up in Beersheba, an angel brought him food to strengthen him, and sent him to Mt. Horeb (1 Kings 19:5-9). Elijah traveled for 40 days to Mt. Horeb on the strength of the food brought by the angel (1 Kings 19:8). At Mt. Horeb, Elijah stayed in a cave while he had more encounters with the Lord as the Lord passed by (1 Kings 19:9-18). Finally Elijah was taken directly to heaven in a chariot of fire without seeing death (2 Kings 2:11-15). This occurred on the East side of the Jordan opposite Jericho¹⁰.

Tertullian stated¹¹ that Moses and Elijah both prepared for meeting God by fasting. They learned by experience that man lives upon every word of God.

“He whose ‘heart’ was habitually found ‘lifted up’ (Psalm 86:4, Lamentations 3:41) rather than fattened up, in forty days and nights maintained a fast above the power of human nature, while spiritual faith gave strength to his body (Exodus 24:18, 34:28, Deuteronomy 9:11, 25). He both saw with his eyes God’s glory, and heard with his ears God’s voice, and understood with his heart God’s Law. God taught him even then, by experience, that man lives not upon bread alone, but upon every word of God (Deuteronomy 8:3). The People, though fatter than he, could not constantly contemplate even Moses himself (Exodus 34:33-35, 2 Corinthians 3:13-15), fed as he had been upon God, nor his leanness, sated as it had been with His glory! (Exodus 33:18, 34:4-9, 29-35) Deservedly, therefore, even while in the flesh, did the Lord show Himself to him”.

“The colleague of His own fasts (Matthew 17:3), Elijah, had by the fact that he called down a famine (James 5:17), already devoted himself to fasts. Subsequently, fleeing from threatening Jezebel, after one single meal of food and drink, which he had found after being awakened by an angel, he too, in a space of forty days and nights, his belly empty, his mouth dry, arrived at Mount Horeb. When he had made a cave his inn, how familiar a meeting with God he received! ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ (1 Kings 19:1-13) Much more friendly was this voice than, ‘Adam, where are you?’ (Genesis 3:10 LXX) For the latter voice was uttering a threat to a fed man, the former was soothing a fasting man. Such is the control of one’s food, that it makes God tent-fellow (Matthew 17:4) with man,

⁹ Nickolai Velimirovic, *Prologue From Ochrid*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, September 22.

¹⁰ For more details on Elijah, see the Feast Day of Elijah.

¹¹ Tertullian, *On Fasting in Opposition to the Psychics*, IV, viii, 6.

peer with peer! For if ‘the eternal God will not hunger’ (Isaiah 40:28 LXX), this will be the time for man to be made equal with God, when he lives without food”.

Tertullian also stated¹² that the fasting of Moses and Elijah was an example of living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God

“For forty days Moses and Elijah both fasted, and lived upon God alone. Thus the principle was established very early: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’”.

Ambrose broke¹³ our existence up into three categories: shadow, likeness and reality. The shadow was through man, the likeness was through the Law, the reality through Jesus.

“Christ is not the shadow but the likeness of God; not an empty likeness but the reality. For reality cannot proceed from any other source than from reality. If anyone desires to see this Image of God, he must love God, that he may be loved by God. He must no longer be a servant but a friend, because he has kept the commandments of God, that he may enter into the cloud where God is”.

Irenaeus stated¹⁴ that Moses and Elijah didn’t actually see God until the Transfiguration; the Transfiguration was, for them, the fulfillment of an ancient promise.

“The Word spoke to Moses, appearing before him, ‘just as anyone might speak to his friend’ (Numbers 12:8). But Moses desired to see Him openly who was speaking with him, and He thus addressed him: ‘Stand in the deep place of the rock, and with My hand I will cover you. But when My splendor shall pass by, then you shall see My back parts, but My face you shall not see; for no man sees My face, and lives’ (Exodus 33:20-22). Two facts are thus signified. (1) It is impossible for man to see God; and (2) through the wisdom of God, man shall see Him in the last times, in the depth of a rock, that is, in His coming as a man. And for this reason the Lord conferred with him face to face on the top of the Mountain of Transfiguration, Elijah being also present, as the Gospel relates (Matthew 17:3); He thus made good in the end on the ancient promise”.

“The prophets, therefore, did not openly behold the actual face of God, but they saw the dispensations and the mysteries through which man should afterwards see God. As was also said to Elijah: ‘You shall go forth tomorrow, and stand in the presence of the Lord. And, behold, a wind great and strong, which shall rend the mountains, and break the rocks in pieces before the Lord. And the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a scarcely audible voice’ (1 Kings 19:11-12). For by such means was the prophet taught to act in a gentler manner, even though he was very indignant, because of the transgression of the people and the slaughter of the prophets. And the Lord’s advent as a man was pointed out, that it should be subsequent to that Law, which was given by Moses, in which He would neither break the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax (Isaiah 42:3 LXX). This indicates the peaceful nature of His kingdom”.

¹² Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, II, vi, 61.

¹³ Ambrose, “On the Belief in the Resurrection”, *Two Books on the Decease of His Brother Saytrus*, II, 109-110.

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV, xx, 9-10.

Moses had a similar experience to Elijah's translation at the end of his life at about the same location. Moses died on Mt. Nebo opposite Jericho and was buried in the Plains of Moab (Deuteronomy 34:1-6) very close to the spot Elijah was taken. According to tradition, Moses' body was taken to heaven following his death (see also Jude 1:9) and his gravesite was never found (Deuteronomy 34:6).

Over the centuries, there have been a number of monasteries built in the neighborhood of Mt. Sinai¹⁵. St. Catherine's Monastery, which grew from a chapel erected by Helena (the Mother of Emperor Constantine) in the 4th Century, is located at the foot of Mt. Sinai at the spot traditionally associated with the burning bush. At the peak of Mt. Sinai overlooking the cliff is a small chapel that was rebuilt from a sixth century church built by Justinian. Nearby the chapel is a cave that may be the "cleft of the rock" where God placed Moses. Other caves exist on Mt. Sinai, also.

Constructing Tabernacles

When the Lord was transfigured, Peter's first reaction was to make three tabernacles: one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. This is not just a inane gesture; Peter had some understanding of what was happening that we might easily miss. First of all, to have recognized Moses and Elijah at all required some knowledge, since they lived 1500 and 800 years earlier. Tertullian stated¹⁶ that Peter had to have been "in the Spirit" just to have recognized Moses and Elijah. Secondly, the Transfiguration occurred just before the Old Testament Feast of Tabernacles which foretold the establishment of the Kingdom of God in Glory (compare Haggai 2:1-9). Six days earlier, Jesus had said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the Kingdom of God present with power" (Mark 9:1, Matthew 16:28). When they saw the Lord transfigured, then they knew what He meant.

Rabbinic expectation in the 1st Century was that the Feast of Tabernacles prophesied of the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Harvest was complete; grapes had been picked and crushed to make wine. (Compare Isaiah 63:3-6, Revelation 14:19, 19:15) It was a time when "God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you shall be altogether joyful (Deuteronomy 16:13-15). During the Feast of Tabernacles, all Israelis were to dwell in tents, booths or tabernacles to remind them that they dwelt in tents, booths or tabernacles for 40 years in the desert (Leviticus 23:42-43). King Solomon chose this occasion (i.e. the Feast of Tabernacles) to bring the Ark of the Covenant to its permanent resting place in the Holy of Holies of his newly constructed temple (1 Kings 8; 2 Chronicles 5).

A few weeks after the Transfiguration, at the Feast of Tabernacles, on the last day (i.e. the 8th day), the "Great Day" Jesus stood up and said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his being will flow rivers of living water. But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:37-39). Thus Jesus, Himself, proclaimed the Feast of Tabernacles as describing a time when the

¹⁵ See Biblical Archaeology Review, July/August 1985, pp 27-41

¹⁶ Tertullian, Five Books Against Marcion, IV, 22.

Kingdom of God has arrived in all its fullness and everyone has the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Peter, like everyone else in Israel, desired to obey the Mosaic Law and asked the Lord if he should make three tabernacles, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. But Peter's thinking had gotten out of focus; he forgot that the tabernacles are for the servants and not for the Master. His state of mind is described as not very clear. "He did not know what to say for they were greatly afraid" (Mark 9:6, Luke 9:33). John Chrysostom commented¹⁷,

"What are you saying, Peter? Didn't you a little while ago distinguish Him from the servants, that is, calling Him 'the Christ, the Son of the Living God' (Matthew 16:16)? Are you again numbering Him with the servants? Do you see how exceedingly imperfect they were before the Crucifixion? For although the Father had revealed it to him, yet he did not always retain the revelation".

Chrysostom continued¹⁸ to say that after Peter suggested making three tabernacles, God the Father showed a tabernacle not made with hands, light unspeakable and a voice.

"Why then did not the cloud likewise receive Christ alone, but all of them together? If it had received Christ alone, He would have been thought to have Himself uttered the voice. Wherefore also the evangelist, making sure this same point, said that the voice was from the cloud, that is, from God".

Ambrose stated¹⁹ that Peter had no difficulty distinguishing the Master from the servants; he inquired of Christ, not of Moses or Elijah. In ignorance, however, he thought that the Master needed a tabernacle like the servants.

"Peter, when he saw Moses and Elijah on the mountain with the Son of God, was not deceived as to their nature and glory. For he inquired, not of them, but of Christ what he ought to do, and he waited for the command of the One. But since he ignorantly thought that for three persons three tabernacles should be set up, he was corrected by the sovereign voice of God the Father, saying, 'This is My dearly beloved Son: listen to Him' (Matthew 17:5). That is to say, 'Why do you imply that your fellow servants are equal with your Lord? He said, 'This is My Son', not 'Moses is My Son', or 'Elijah is My Son'. Peter understood the rebuke; he fell on his face, brought low by the Father's voice. But he was raised up by the Son, Who raises up those that are fallen. After the vision was over, he saw only the Son of God, for the servants had withdrawn, that Christ might be seen to be Lord alone".

The Father Speaks

While Peter was still speaking, "behold a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying: 'This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him' " (Matthew 17:5). Peter, James and John were very fearful as they entered the cloud (Luke 9:34, Matthew 17:6); but after the Father spoke, they found themselves alone with Jesus (Luke 9:36, Mark 9:8). Jesus then instructed them to "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead" (Matthew 17:9).

¹⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVI, 4.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVI, 5.

¹⁹ Ambrose, Exposition of the Christian Faith, I, xiii, 81

Ambrose stated²⁰ that Peter “was corrected by the sovereign voice of God the Father. The Apostle was not dull to understand the rebuke; he fell on his face, brought low by the Father’s voice, but he was raised up by the Son. The purpose of that vision, which signified that Christ and His servants were not equals, and suggested a mystery. It should be made plain to us that the Law and the Prophets, in agreement with the Gospel, revealed as eternal, the Son of God Whom they had heralded”.

John Chrysostom pointed out²¹ a number of places where God is associated with clouds. In each of these cases, it is the Son of God that is associated with the clouds. For example:

- “Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne” (Psalm 97:2).
- “Behold the Lord is riding on a swift cloud, and is about to come to Egypt” (Isaiah 19:1).
- “He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters; He makes the clouds His chariot; He walks upon the wings of the wind; He makes the winds His angels, flaming fire His ministers” (Psalm 104:3-4, Hebrews 1:6-7).
- “He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9).
- “I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, one like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom” (Daniel 7:13, 14).

The same thing occurred when the Son of God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai at the giving of the Law. “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Behold I shall come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe in you forever’” (Exodus 19:9). “Then it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there was thundering and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people that were in the camp trembled” (Exodus 19:16). “When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder” (Exodus 19:19).

In all the above references, it is not often easy to distinguish whether the reference refers to the Father, the Son or the Trinity. However, the Son’s role in dealing with man is clarified by Hebrews: “To the Son, He (the Father) says, ‘Your Throne, O God, is forever and ever’ (Hebrews 1:8, Psalm 45:6). And, ‘You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands’ (Hebrews 1:10, Psalm 102:25). And, ‘Sit at My Right Hand till I make Your enemies Your footstool’” (Hebrews 1:13, Psalm 110:1). If the Son created the heavens and the earth, it is quite reasonable that many of these lesser activities such as riding a swift cloud to Egypt, making clouds His chariot, etc., refer to the Son’s activities also. After the Incarnation, the Son no longer needed a cloud to make His Presence visible to man. But the Father did.

John Chrysostom also noted²² that the Father spoke from a bright cloud (Matthew 17:5) and not from a dark cloud. The dark clouds at Mt. Sinai at the giving of the Law (Exodus 19:19-

²⁰ Ambrose, Exposition of the Christian Faith, I, xiii, 81-83.

²¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVI, 5.

²² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LVI, 5.

20) and in delivering David in battle (Psalm 18:6-13) spoke of His threatening. At the Transfiguration, it was a bright cloud because His desire was not to alarm but to teach.

The Father's voice from heaven occurred on two other occasions also. At Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, the Father said the same things He did at the Transfiguration: "This is My beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). At that time, the entire Trinity was apparent as the Father spoke concerning the Son and the Spirit descended like a dove (Matthew 3:16).

Another occasion occurred at the beginning of Holy Week. Jesus was approaching the hour of His Crucifixion and said, "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father save Me from this hour?' But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father glorify Your Name" (John 12:27). "Then a voice came from heaven saying, 'I have both glorified it and will glorify it again'" (John 12:28). Some people thought it had thundered; others thought an angel had spoken to Him. Jesus simply said that the Father's voice came for their sake (John 12:29-30).

Occasions When the Father Spoke

Occasion	Date	Reference
Jesus' Baptism	Early 27 AD	Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22
Transfiguration	August 29 AD	Matthew 17:5, Mark 9:7, Luke 9:35
Before Crucifixion	Monday of Holy Week 30 AD	John 12:27-28

Cyril of Alexandria noted²³ that when the Father spoke at the Transfiguration, Jesus was found alone. The Father did not command them to listen to Moses (the Law) or to Elijah (the Prophets), but to His Son.

"Moses is there and does the Father command the Holy Apostles to hear him? Had it been His will that they should follow the commandments of Moses, I suppose He would have said, 'Obey Moses; keep the Law'. But this is not what God the Father here said; but in the presence of Moses and Elijah, He commands them rather to hear Him."

"For He is the end of the Law and the Prophets, for which reason He cried aloud to the multitudes: 'If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?' (John 5:46-47). But as they persevered even to the end in despising the commandment given by the most wise Moses, and in rejecting the word of the holy Prophets, they have justly been alienated and expelled from those blessings that were promised to their fathers".

The Transfiguration Prefigures Tabernacles

As Peter, James and John were coming down the mountain with Jesus, "He commanded them that they should tell no one the things they had seen till the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept this word to themselves, questioning what 'the rising from the dead' meant" (Mark 9:9-10). The reason He told them not to reveal this "vision" (Matthew 17:9) is so that men would not stumble at having heard such glorious things about Him, and then seeing Him crucified.

²³ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, Homily xx, chapter 9, Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983.

The Uncreated Light of Divinity exhibited at the Transfiguration speaks of eternity when we all will be transfigured. This is the meaning of the 8th day of the Feast of Tabernacles. This is why the Lord spoke up a few days later on the 8th day of the Feast of Tabernacles that followed the Transfiguration. “On the last day, that Great Day of the feast (i.e. of Tabernacles), Jesus stood and cried, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:37-39). For more discussion on this see the study for Pentecost.

In the Orthodox Church, Pascha is also referred to as “the 8th day”, coming on the Sunday after the Sabbath (i.e. Saturday), which was the 7th day of the week. We now live in the Light of His Resurrection, and therefore we have a foretaste of the prophetic meaning of the 8th day of the Feast of Tabernacles.

As we do so, we live in a tent or temporary residence just as the faithful believers did during the Feast of Tabernacles. Paul referred to our human body as being a tent or temporary residence (2 Corinthians 5:1-5). While we are in the tent, booth, tabernacle or temporary residence, we look forward to our dwelling place that comes out of heaven (2 Corinthians 5:2, Revelation 21:2).

When that occurs, it will not be just the Lord who shines like the sun; we will do so also as will all the righteous (Matthew 13:43). The Prophet Daniel, in his vision of the end times, referred to this (Daniel 12:3). As we get closer to God, we take on His characteristics. Thus, Moses’ face shone as he came down Mt. Sinai with the Law after meeting with God (Exodus 34:29-35, 2 Corinthians 3:7, 13). We have light within us also. Our faces may not glow physically like Moses’, but we are still instructed to let our light shine that men may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). The light that we will one day exhibit is already here.

Tertullian stated²⁴ that something can undergo a complete change, yet remain the same. Moses’ hand became leprous and his face became radiant, but both were restored to their prior state. Stephen looked like an angel and the Lord put on a robe of light; but they didn’t change and Peter could still recognize Him.

“A thing may undergo a complete change, and yet remain the same thing. In like manner, a man also may be quite himself in substance even in the present life, and undergo various changes — in habit, in bodily bulk, in health, in condition, in dignity, and in age — and still lose nothing of his human nature, nor to be made another man. This form of change the Holy Scriptures give us instances of. The hand of Moses is changed, and it becomes like a dead one, bloodless, colorless, and stiff with cold (Exodus 4:6-7). But on the recovery of heat, and on the restoration of its natural color, it is again the same flesh and blood. Afterwards the face of Moses is changed, with a brightness which eye could not bear (Exodus 34:29-35). But he was Moses still, even when he was not visibly glowing. So also Stephen had already put on the appearance of an angel

²⁴ Tertullian, On the Resurrection of the Flesh, II, vi, 55.

(Acts 6:15), although they were none other than his human knees (Acts 7:59-60), which bent beneath the stoning. The Lord, again, in the retirement of the mount of transfiguration, had changed His clothing for a robe of light; but He still retained features, which Peter could recognize (Matthew 17:1-4). In that same scene Moses and Elijah gave proof that the same condition of bodily existence continues even in glory. Moses appeared in the likeness of a flesh, which he had not yet recovered (i.e. the glorified body he will receive at the Second Coming). Elijah appeared in the reality of a flesh, which he had not yet put off. Being aware of this splendid example, Paul said: ‘Christ will transform our lowly body, that it may be fashioned like His glorious body’” (Philippians 3:21)

Tertullian also stated²⁵ that the Son, in His Deity, is invisible. When He appeared to Moses, the Prophets and the Patriarchs – and it was always the Son who did so -- he did so in a vision, in an image or enigmatically. He reserved to a future time – at the Transfiguration -- to appear to Moses face to face. Since His flesh veiled His Deity at the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John could see Him and not die.

“We declare that the Son, considered in Himself, is invisible, in that He is God, and the Word and Spirit of God. But He was visible before the days of His flesh, in the way that He says to Aaron and Miriam, ‘And if there shall be a prophet among you, I will make myself known to him in a vision, and will speak to him in a dream. Not so with Moses; with him I shall speak mouth to mouth, that is to say, in truth, and not enigmatically’ (Numbers 12:6-8); that is, in image. The apostle also expressed it, ‘Now we see through a glass, darkly or enigmatically, but then face to face’ (1 Corinthians 13:12). Therefore, He reserved to some future time for His presence and speech face to face with Moses — a promise, which was afterwards fulfilled in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:3, Mark 9:4). It is evident that in early times it was always in a glass and an enigma, in vision and dream that the Son of God, appeared — to the prophets and the patriarchs, and also to Moses indeed himself. And even if the Lord did possibly speak with him face to face, yet it was not as man that he could behold His face, unless indeed it was in a glass and by enigma. Besides, if the Lord so spoke with Moses, that Moses actually discerned His face, eye to eye, why immediately afterwards, on the same occasion, did Moses desire to see His face, when he had already seen it? And how, in like manner, does the Lord also say that His face cannot be seen, because He had shown it, if indeed He really had. Or what is that face of God, the sight of which is refused, if there was one, which was visible to man? ‘I have seen God’, says Jacob, ‘face to face, and my life is preserved’ (Genesis 32:30). There ought to be some other face, which kills if it were only seen. Well, then, was the Son visible? Certainly not, although He was the face of God, except only in vision and dream, and in a glass and enigma, because the Word and Spirit (of God) cannot be seen except in an imaginary form”.

“If Peter, James and John would have seen the Father at the Transfiguration, they would have died then and there: ‘For no man shall see God, and live’ (Exodus 33:20). The One who was always seen from the beginning, became visible in the end. It was the Son, therefore, who was always seen, and

²⁵ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, II, vii, 14-15.

the Son who always conversed with men, and the Son who has always worked by the authority and will of the Father. Because ‘the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do’ (John 5:19) — that is, in His mind and thought. For the Father acts by mind and thought; while the Son, who is in the Father’s mind and thought, gives effect and form to what He sees. Thus the Son made all things, and without Him was not anything made”.

Maximos the Confessor observed²⁶, “The Lord does not appear in glory to all who stand before Him. He appears to some in one way and to others in another way according to the measure of each person’s faith. When the Logos of God becomes radiant in us, then the words of the Gospel will be clear and distinct with nothing concealed”.

²⁶ Maximos the Confessor, Second Century on Theology, 13.

THE SERVANTS AND THE MASTER

August 6, 2008
The Transfiguration
Revision C

Epistle: 2 Peter 1:10-19

Peter wrote his second Epistle just prior to his own death by crucifixion (2 Peter 1:14-15), and he referred to his exodus using the same words Moses and Elijah used about Jesus at the Transfiguration. [Exodus is a Greek word that was taken directly into English with the same meaning.] Peter had recently returned to Rome because of a vision from the Lord to return to Rome, where he would suffer and be martyred. Emperor Nero imprisoned Peter because of the spectacular way he debunked the magician and illusionist Simon Magus. Peter had run into Simon Magus earlier (about 32 AD) in conjunction with Deacon Philip's evangelism (Acts 8:9-13, 18-23). Later Simon Magus had become good friends with Nero and had been proclaiming himself to be the Christ in Rome, supporting his claims with his magic and illusions (see Acts 8:9-11). Peter's debunking of the illusions resulted in Simon's death from a fall as he claimed to be ascending back to his father in heaven. Earlier Simon Magus had so impressed Emperor Claudius and the Roman Senate, that the emperor had erected a statue of Simon with the words inscribed, "To Simon, the Holy God".

Perhaps making an allusion to the "cleverly devised fables" (2 Peter 1:16) spread by Simon Magus, Peter stated that this was not his method. He was an eyewitness of the Lord's majesty on the Mountain of Transfiguration. And Peter recalled how he heard God the Father speaking to Jesus from the cloud, "This is My Beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased!" (2 Peter 1:17, 18; Matthew 17:5). Peter's method was simply to proclaim to everyone what he saw and heard.

Referring also to the Feast of Tabernacles, Peter stated that he was currently living in the tent that was his body (2 Peter 1:13-14). While he is in this tent, he will stir up the people to whom he is writing to be diligent to make sure of their calling and their choice (2 Peter 1:10) in the face of false teachers bringing in destructive heresies (2 Peter 2:1). Following his exodus (2 Peter 1:15), there will be his entrance into the Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:11).

Leo the Great stated²⁷ that the "foremost object of the Transfiguration was to remove the offense of the cross from the disciples' heart, and to prevent the Apostles' faith from being disturbed by the humiliation of His voluntary Passion by revealing to them the excellence of His hidden dignity.

The Epistle lesson concludes with Peter's linking of three things: the Transfiguration, the Prophetic Word confirmed, and a light that shines in a dark place (2 Peter 1:19). The dark place is the world and the Transfiguration illustrates the focus of the Prophets: God becoming

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²⁷ Leo the Great, Sermons, LI, 3.

incarnate. Jesus is referred to on several occasions as the morning star²⁸ or day-star - one that is so bright that it can be seen in the daytime (Revelation 2:28, 22:16). The prophet David spoke of Christ's eternal generation from the Father using the illustration of the Morning Star: "From the womb before the Morning Star have I begotten You" (Psalm 110:3 LXX). David went on to link Christ's eternal generation to the Melchizedek priesthood (Psalm 110:4), and to His judgment of the world at the Last Day (Psalm 110:1-2, 5-7). John of Kronstadt comments²⁹ on this:

"It shines even in the darkness of sin, but sinful human darkness, or rather, the men living in the darkness of sin, do not understand it, 'comprehend it not' (John 1:5); they do not guess that the light which is in their souls is from Christ and think that it is their own natural light, that they themselves, by means of their natural intellect, their own sagacity and judgment, have attained to a certain truth, have accomplished certain work; they do not think that it is only by the light of Christ that they see every light (Psalm 36:9), the light of every noble science, of every noble art and of everything."

²⁸ Another phrase used in this vein is the "Dayspring" or Dawn from on High (Luke 1:78).

²⁹ John of Kronstadt, My Life in Christ.