
The story of Jesus’ transfiguration appears in all three synoptic gospels. Although the three accounts are similar, and it is widely assumed that Luke follows Mark’s gospel, there are several significant differences in the description of this event that deserve further analysis.

All three synoptic gospels connect the transfiguration of Jesus to the preceding events at Caesarea Philippi by giving a time reference. Like Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus’ discourse on the conditions of discipleship, the passage of the transfiguration is an affirmation of Jesus as the Messiah, a prediction of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection, and a statement about the importance of following Jesus.

Luke places the transfiguration “about eight days” after the previous event, while Mark and Matthew give a more precise “six days later”. This is interesting insofar as the previous events are not dated in any particular way and therefore the giving of an elapsed time span does not immediately appear useful. However, we know that the gospel writers would not draw our attention to an elapsed time if there were no significance in it. The fact that at the end of this chapter Peter suggests the erection of booths may point us to the weeklong Sukkoth, the Festival of Booths (Lv 23:34, Nm 29:12, Dt 16:13), which could also explain the difference in Luke’s timing. In the diaspora, where Luke grew up, the Feast of Booths takes a day longer than in Jerusalem, and Luke may be allowing for this difference to avoid confusing his readership. Secondly, the Feast of Booths commemorates the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, and as we will see, the passage on the transfiguration is very closely linked to the exodus, especially in the gospel according to Luke.
Only Luke writes that the purpose of the journey onto the mountain was to pray, compared to Mark who says that Jesus took Peter, James and John with him to be alone. To add further emphasis to the importance of prayer, Luke reports that Jesus’ appearance changed while he was praying, whereas in Mark it simply happened once they were by themselves. Luke omits the description of Jesus’ clothes as whiter than anyone can bleach them, presumably because he does not see a need to convince his readership that we are before an extraordinary event that could not have been staged. The fact that the change in Jesus’ appearance occurs while he is praying suffices to describe the extraordinary nature of the event. Luke expects his readers to remember Jesus’ baptism, where the Holy Spirit descended on him while he was praying and the voice from heaven proclaimed Jesus as the beloved son (Lk 3:21-22).

Luke explains that the transfiguration involved a change in Jesus’ face, not only in his clothes. He does so to connect Jesus’ transfiguration with the change of Moses’ appearance in Ex 34:29:

As Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the commandments in his hands, he did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant while he conversed with the Lord.

However, a critical distinction is that Moses’ face became radiant as a result of speaking with the Lord, and he was unaware of it happening. By contrast, Jesus’ face changed while he was praying, as a result of the prayer, not as a result of his conversation with Moses and Elijah. Thus, Luke represents Jesus himself as the source of the light; he is the Lord who creates light.

Neither Mark nor Luke is specific about which mountain Jesus and the apostles ascended. We only know from Peter’s recounting of the event that the transfiguration took place on the “holy mountain” (2 Pt 1:17-18). Commonly assumed locations are Mount Tabor,
on the way from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem, or Mount Hermon, which is closer to Caesarea Philippi, but further north. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus frequently seeks solitude to pray, for which he often ascends a mountain, as in Lk 6:12, before choosing his apostles, and Lk 22:39, when he went to the Mount of Olives the night before his death.

The translation in the Gospel Parallels states that Moses and Elijah appeared suddenly (Lk 9:30). However, this is not consistent across translations. Some describe this event as sudden while others do not. The Latin Vulgate, itself a translation, uses ecce (behold, see), and so do the NAB and RSV versions of the New Testament. The NJB and the German unified translation say “suddenly” (plötzlich), while Martin Luther’s translation and the Patmos Synopse do not. There is little doubt, though, that the three apostles were surprised to see Moses and Elijah conversing with Jesus.

In his most significant addition, Luke provides details about Jesus’ conversation with Moses and Elijah and reports that the apostles were weighed down with sleep (Lk 9:31-32):

They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophet, and their dialogue, is the turning point in Luke’s account of Jesus’ mission. From this point forward, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem to accomplish his mission. This in an example of how Luke anchors his gospel in Hebrew Scripture by making frequent references to it, and it is consistent with the emphasis of Luke’s gospel that Christ has come to bring salvation by fulfilling Mosaic law and the promises revealed by the prophets.

The conversation between Moses and Elijah about Jesus’ departure describes a journey; it refers not only to his death but also to the glory of his resurrection. The Greek term exodus describes a going forth; the leaving of a place, heading towards a new
destination. The dialogue between the Moses and Elijah recalls the Israelites’ departure from Egypt towards the Promised Land in fulfillment of God’s promise. Jesus’ departure towards Jerusalem is the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise of salvation. Moses’ and Elijah’s words that Jesus is “about to accomplish” this departure indicate that Jesus is bringing the exodus about by himself; it is not something that he does at someone else’s (God’s) command, as Moses did, but rather he is acting on his own authority.

Luke further underlines the importance of this event by connecting it with the scene in the garden of Gethsemane (Lk 22:45). The apostles were weighed down with sleep and saw Moses and Elijah only as they woke up. Translations differ widely. In some, the apostles were merely weighed down with sleep but stayed awake; in others they were sleeping and woke up. An interesting detail, however, is that Luke does not report that the apostles were praying with Jesus. If Luke had wanted to say that the apostles were praying with Jesus, he certainly could have done so. Thus, this omission, in conjunction with the apostle’s tiredness, appears to be significant and points us forward to the same human weakness the apostles succumb to when they are called to pray with Jesus in his final hours, and by extension to the Passion of Christ, the most important part of his exodus.

Next follows Peter’s offer to build dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. English translations are not particularly helpful here. The Latin term *tabernacula* is translated as dwellings, tents, or tabernacles. The term used in German is *Hütten* (huts), as in *Laubhüttenfest*, the Feast of Booths or Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Booths, Sukkoth, is a harvest festival of joy, and Peter’s suggestion to build booths (tabernacles, huts) may have been an expression of his joy over what he just experienced. A small but potentially significant difference in the wording is that while Mark’s account sounds almost like an excuse for Peter (“he did not know what to say, because they were terrified”), Luke’s statement (“But he did not know what he was saying”) suggests that Peter still did not comprehend what an attentive
reader of Luke’s gospel would know at this point, namely that this event was not the end of a journey (as the erection of booths would suggest), but the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem and the exodus Jesus was about to undertake.

While Peter was speaking, the apostles were overshadowed by the cloud and entered into it. Here, again, we find a reference to Hebrew scripture that is unique to Luke. The cloud is a sign of God’s presence, as in Ex 40:34-35 when it settled on the meeting tent, and 1Kgs 8:10-11 when the cloud filled the temple with the Lord’s glory. Unlike Moses, who could not enter the meeting tent while it was covered by the cloud, or the priests who could not minister, the apostles are able to enter into the cloud with Jesus. Once inside the cloud, in God’s presence, Jesus’ divine sonship is revealed and they are instructed to listen to him.

There is a striking difference in the synoptic gospels in a key word that the voice says. Mark reports that Jesus is called the “(most) beloved” son (carissimus, Mk 9:6, cf. dilectus, Mt 17:5), whereas in Luke he is referred to as the “chosen” son (electus, Lk 9:35). What makes this difference so surprising is that one would expect such an important proclamation to be reported verbatim. Why would Luke, whose gospel normally follows Mark’s rather closely, change the words? We must assume that this change is deliberate; the difference is not likely to be solely due to errors in translation. Mark and Matthew are more consistent with each other, and Peter, who was an eyewitness, also recounts the words as “this is my son, my beloved (dilectus), with whom I am well pleased” (2 Pt 1:17-18). So why is Luke different? One possible conclusion is that, once again, Luke wanted to build a bridge between this critical event and Hebrew scripture. In one of Isaiah’s prophecies, the Servant of the Lord is described as “my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen (electus) one with whom I am well pleased” (Is 42:1). Through this reference, Luke points to Isaiah and his predictions about the Servant of the Lord’s role in salvation. The affirmation of Jesus’ divine sonship can also be found in several other places in Luke, e.g., by the Holy Spirit at the baptism in the

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Jordan (Lk 3:22), by the possessed person being healed in Gerasenes (Lk 8:28), and even by demons (Lk 4:41), and, after the resurrection, by two men in dazzling white clothes who are later identified as angels (Lk 24:7, Lk 24:23).

All three synoptic gospels report that the apostles were instructed by the voice to listen to Jesus. This instruction was foreseen in Moses’ words to the Israelites before they would cross the Jordan (Dt 18:15):

A prophet like me will the Lord, your God raise up from among your own kinsmen; to him you shall listen.

However, in contrast to Moses, who delivered the words of God’s law to the Israelites when he descended from the mountain after speaking with God, Jesus is affirmed as the Word Incarnate. Jesus himself is the law of the new covenant. Jesus, the person, is given authority here. He is the one who must be followed and obeyed in order to receive the promise of salvation, as Jesus himself affirms in other passages (Lk 9:24, Lk 17:16).

The account of the transfiguration ends with the apostles finding Jesus alone. Omitting Mark’s details on Jesus instructing the apostles to tell no one what they had seen until the son of man would rise from the dead, Luke simply reports that the apostles did not “at that time” tell anyone what they had seen. Luke’s gospel continues with the next day, when they came down from the mountain and were met by a large crowd, and he proceeds with the healing of the boy who was possessed with a demon. In Mark and Matthew, there is a short passage in which the apostles ask about Elijah’s return preceding the Messiah, which is understood to be a reference to John the Baptist (Mk 9:11-13, Mt 17:10-13, Mal 3:23). Luke had already covered this in an earlier passage, in which Jesus reveals John the Baptist as the one scripture spoke of when it promised a messenger who would precede the Messiah (Lk 7:27, Mal 3:1, Is 40:3), so he does not repeat Mark’s text here. After this, all three gospels continue with the healing of the boy.
References:

2. The New American Bible (NAB), Catholic World Press, 2000
4. New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), 1985
5. Franz Joseph Schierse, “Patmos-Synopse”, 1970
6. Die Bibel, Einheitsübersetzung (unified German translation), 1980
7. Die Bibel, Martin Luther, 1904
8. Biblia Vulgata

Notes on the German translations:

The Patmos-Synopse presents the parallels in the synoptic gospels in tabular form, and provides additional parallels from the gospel according to John, apocryphal scriptures and early Christian literature. It is written in a very particular German translation that attempts to follow the grammar and wording of the originals as closely as possible to allow a better discernment of differences between the gospels.

The Einheitsübersetzung is the official German translation that is used in Catholic liturgy. It balances closeness to the original texts with readability. Its intent was to provide a common translation that was agreeable to both Catholics and Protestants in all German-speaking countries and regions.

The 1904 edition of the Luther bible was updated for current spelling, but had not yet undergone the major revisions to Martin Luther’s text that occurred in later editions in the second half of the 20th century.