

Reading the Markan Transfiguration (Mark 9:1-9) in the Light of Jesus' Scattering of the Tyrian Baal Coins

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Abstract

The transfiguration is found in all three Synoptic Gospels yet remains one of the more puzzling incidents in the life of Jesus. At the level of narrative, the event forms the bridge between the Galilean ministry of Jesus and his coming passion and the occasion is bracketed by warnings of his imminent death. Focusing on the Gospel of Mark, I suggest that there are elements of dramatic irony present, when we read the account of the transfiguration in the light of Jesus' intervention in the temple. The tone is already set by Jesus' ironical comment on 'taking up one's cross'. The location on the mountain, and the mention of Elijah and Moses, in that order, point back to Carmel (Elijah and the worship of the Tyrian Baal) and to Sinai (Moses and the second commandment, the prohibition of graven images). The transfiguration points forward to Jesus' encounter in the temple and his scattering of the Tyrian Baal-Melkart coins. The radical transformation of Jesus and the responses of Peter and the other disciples in the ensuing debates, as they struggle to make sense of what is happening, furthers the ironical intent of the narrative. Reading the transfiguration through the lens of the temple events, allows us to

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glimpse the penumbra of the cross, which like a shadow enshrouds the mountain top.

We can only read texts ironically, seeing the tensions and relations between what is said and not-said, if we commit ourselves to a sense and truth towards which speech and language strive (Coleman 2004:189).

1. Introduction: A Moment in the Life of Christ

The transfiguration is found in all three Synoptic Gospels, occurring just after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 9:1–9; Matt 17:1–9; Luke 9:28–36) and just before Jesus commences his final journey to Jerusalem. The event stands as a crisis moment in the life of the historical Jesus (Cranfield 1959:294–294; Leifeld 1992:835), marking the end of the Galilean ministry and heralding the beginning of his suffering (cf. Luke 9:51). While the actual pericope is only nine verses long, the secondary literature is extensive,² yet fairly constrained in the diversity of its discussion.³

Luz (2001:397) describes the transfiguration as a 'polyvalent' story that integrates various layers of meaning, so lending itself to further elaboration. If the Markan version of the transfiguration is the oldest form,⁴ we may suggest that the interpretation begins already with the Gospels of Matthew and Luke,⁵ as a process of giving voice to the silences in Mark's text and substance to what is only hinted at. For example, we note Matthew's use of the Greek term *ὄραμα* or vision (v.9), which gives to the transfiguration a sense of an otherworldly⁶ reality, reminiscent of the theophanies found in the Hebrew Bible (Lee 2004). While Mark is silent, Luke supplies the content of the conversation between Jesus, Elijah and Moses (Luke 9:32). Mark's description of Jesus' garments (Mark 9:3) is enhanced by reference to Jesus' face, so Luke (9:29) notes that the appearance of Jesus' face was changed and Matthew (17:2) adds that his face 'shone as the sun' (see Leifeld 1992:839). While Mark names Elijah first and Moses second (Mark 9:4), Matthew (Matt 17:3) and Luke (Luke 9:30) give the priority position to Moses—a difference noted, rarely discussed,⁷ but vital to this article.

Luz writing of the difficulty of interpreting the transfiguration, concluded that 'there is no key in the tradition that completely unlocks it' (2001:395), but there has been no lack of suggestions. Both modern and ancient commentators have described the meaning of the transfiguration as the revelation (epiphany) of Christ's divine glory (Marshall 1978:383; Moses 1996:89–113);

2 See the extensive bibliographies in the following studies (McGuckin 1986; Moses 1996 and Lee 2004).

3 The only controversial idea was that the transfiguration was a misplaced resurrection-account, a view that was popular in the sixties and seventies and has been thoroughly refuted by Stein (1976) and others.

4 Manson suggested an original Q tradition, on the basis of the agreements between Matthew and Luke (1935:32), but the earlier opinion of Streeter (1925:315-316), who argued convincingly against the notion of an independent tradition apart from that recorded in Mark, has remained the scholarly consensus.

5 For a list of the verbal agreements between Matthew and Luke, independent of Mark, see Stein 1976:95, who postulates another source, like Q.

6 We note Cranfield's caution not to press the visionary dimension of the noun too far since it is also used in other contexts (1959:294).

7 Painter (1997:165), for example downplays the order of names by pointing out that they are both said to be 'with Jesus'.

what Schnackenburg has called ‘dazzling glory’ (2002:165). In the second letter of Peter, the writer comments, ‘For he received honour and glory from God the Father when these words from the Majestic Glory were spoken about him: “This is my Son, whom I love. I am pleased with him.”’ (2 Peter 1:17). The writer goes on to say, ‘We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain’. So, already, Second Peter discerns a theological connection between the transfiguration and the themes of honour and glory.

The Gospel of Luke envisages an explicit connection between the transfiguration and Jesus’ death, found in Luke’s description of the conversation between Jesus, Elijah and Moses (Luke 9:32). The three men were speaking of the death of Jesus, which, as the Greek makes clear, he would initiate (Leifeld 1992:838).⁸ The presence of Moses and the location on a high mountain, remind us of Sinai (Cranfield 1959:292; Painter 1997:167; Carmody 2010:81),⁹ an idea implicit in Luke’s use of the unusual term *ἐξόδος* for Jesus’ death (Luke 9:32).

8 Luke 9:32 mentions that Moses and Elijah saw Jesus’ glory and departure/exodus. Leifeld (1992:838) notes that Jesus is not described here as an involuntary victim but as the one who himself brings about the departure.

9 Notably Exod 24:16; 34:5 (Painter 1997:167).

10 Moses (1996:28) describes some of the connections as tenuous but concurs with the general trend of Kenny’s argument (1957).

In one of the most striking of the transfiguration studies, Kenny (1957) has compared and contrasted the transfiguration (the epiphany of Jesus’ glory) with the Garden of Gethsemane (the humiliation of the Son of Man). On the basis of the Greek, he considers that the verbal similarities¹⁰ are a deliberate Markan touch (1957:445–52). I suggest that within Mark’s recounting of the transfiguration there is a sense of anticipation pointing not just to his death but towards the pathway to that point – for this we need to pause for a moment and consider a controversial coin.

2. The Tyrian Baal Coin

Leifeld (1992:835) makes the point that ‘the Transfiguration takes place at a crucial time in Jesus’ ministry. From this point on he faces his city of ultimate destination, Jerusalem, with its climatic events’. For the Markan Evangelist, from the moment of the transfiguration, his single concern is to trace Jesus’ journey up to Jerusalem and to its crowning glory, the temple. If there is a missing key (so Luz 2001:395), I suggest it will be found in the events which take place there (Mark 11:15–16).

Mark, alone, makes the point that Jesus, on his arrival in Jerusalem looks inside¹¹ the temple, but takes no action, for evening has come (Mark 11:11; Herzog 1992:817). The next morning, Jesus interrupted the temple economy in no uncertain measure. Mark writes, ‘Jesus entered into the temple and began to cast out those that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew

11 The verb is distinctively Markan (6 of 7 occurrences)—so Herzog (1992:817).

the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of those that sold the doves (Mark 11:15).¹² Buyers and sellers of sacrifices (of doves v.15) and perhaps other merchandise (only in Mark 11:16) are jointly targeted, but the actions against the money-changers are particularly interesting. Their tables, which in Greek are *τράπεζα*—meaning both table and bank (Amemiya 2007:104) – are overthrown (Mark 11:15).¹³ Naturally, all these actions had their consequences. In terms of the escalating tension between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, Sanders regards Jesus’ actions as the proverbial straw (1995 n.p.), but what was the issue regarding the money-changers? Why did Jesus choose to target these officials? To answer this question, we need to consider the Jewish Temple tax.

By Jewish law, in the time of Jesus, every Jewish man over the age of twenty was expected to pay an annual half-shekel tax (Neusner 1989). According to the Mishna, *Sheqalim*, where the regulations for the temple tax are recorded, various collection points were set up across the regions of Galilee and Judaea and, annually, in the actual temple (m Sheq 1:3). The degree to which payment of this tax was compulsory, is uncertain, with the members of Qumran insisting that it was only required once in a man’s lifetime (Qumran 4Q159 2:6–7).¹⁴ The precise connection with the Laws of Moses is also uncertain.¹⁵ Horsley (1987:279–284) describes the half-shekel tax as ‘controversial in Jesus’ time’ (1987:280), referring to Josephus (JW 6.335 and Antiq 18.312) and Philo (Spec Leg 1:77–78). With reference to the annual collection in the temple, there is no indication that the money-changers abused their positions or cheated the people (Neusner 1989). The Mishna makes clear that the interest charged was not exorbitant, being between 4% and 8% (m Sheq 1:3). Yet, for some reason, Jesus overturned the tables and scattered the coins, which means that Jesus’ actions were motivated by something other than the actual process of exchanging money. I suggest, following Richardson (2004) and O’Connor (2012) that the key to Jesus’ actions was the actual imagery on the Tyrian shekel and half-shekel coins.

Hundreds of shekel coins have been found, throughout biblical Judaea and Galilee, including both a fine and a cruder minting (Kadman 1962; Marian and Sermarini 2013). The silver coins, both shekel and half-shekel, were minted in Tyre¹⁶ and carried the head of Baal Melkart in the guise of the Greek hero Heracles (MFA 2008), with the inscription ‘Tyre the holy and the inviolate’ (Murphy-O’Connor 2012:63). The quality of the silver was extremely high (about 97%) making it one of the purest coins available, weighing in at 13 ounces (368.5 grams) for the larger

12 Cf. Matt 21:12; John 2:14-16.

13 John’s gospel adds that Jesus poured out the money and overthrew the tables (John 2:15).

14 The scroll is very fragmentary, refers to a different coin and speaks of ransom not of tax.

15 Schmidt 1992:806. One third of a shekel following Nehemiah 10:32-33 (cf. Exod 30:11-16 and 2 Chron 24:6).

16 Apparently, there was also a Jerusalem minting of the same coin, for a short time (Kadman 1962).

denomination (MFA 2008). The coins appear to have been used in Jerusalem from about 126 BC to about AD 66 (MFA 2008).

One of the most cogent articles on the temple coins comes from the pen of Murphy-O'Connor (2012). He argues that, as a result of the pagan imagery, the coins would have been divisive. Richardson, the first scholar to draw attention to the imagery, reasons that Jesus did not want the tax abolished or replaced nor was he concerned about temple purity, rather he was motivated by 'a reformer's anger at the recognition of other gods' (2004:251). From the perspective of the priestly aristocracy, Murphy-O'Connor (2012:63) reasons that their high silver content, their consistent quality and the fact that Tyre was an autonomous mint would have outweighed the problem with the imagery on the coins and the superscription. On the other hand, for the pious Jews, who had no say in the matter, these coins would have been a problem. Murphy-O'Connor concludes that 'Jesus did what at least some Jews in the first century would have wanted to do' (2012:63). I have argued elsewhere that like Jeremiah, whose temple sermon (Jer 7:1–12) is quoted by Jesus,¹⁷ Jesus was demonstrating his disquiet with the presence of the image of a pagan deity in the House of God (Domeris 2015).

Various studies of Jewish coins (Meshorer 2001:76; Hendin 2010:477) have argued the contrary—namely, that Jesus and the Jews of Jesus' time would not have had an issue with the imagery on the coin.¹⁸ Meshorer (2001), on the basis of his reading of the Mishna, states unequivocally that coins would not be considered impure regardless of their imagery.¹⁹ This raises the question of why the leaders of the first revolt immediately replaced these coins with their own minting of acceptable²⁰ coins (Richardson 2004:247). Did the Jewish aristocracy of the first century hold a more liberal view than these revolutionaries? Such is certainly the view held by Bohak (2002), who has done a thorough study of coin imagery in the rabbinic writings, leading him to conclude, 'As has often been noted, the Jewish perception of plastic art has shifted enormously in the first few centuries CE, from an almost total prohibition in the second temple period to the very liberal attitude we find in Rabbinic literature' (2002:13).²¹ This means that we cannot take the silence of the rabbinic writings on the imagery of the Tyrian shekel as indicative of the views of the ordinary people in Jesus' time. Jesus scattered the coins because of their pagan imagery—a symbolic action in the spirit of the Hebrew Prophets (cf. Jer 7:9–11; Domeris 2015). This point brings us to Jesus' mountain meeting with two famous prophets, and the underpinning irony of that moment.

17 Freyne (2014:180) links the action of Jesus to the sermon of Jeremiah, arguing that Jesus is reacting to the paganisation of the temple and the implicit breaking of the Decalogue.

18 This is also the view found in Chilton (1994:172-176) and Klawans (2006:231-232). But see my critique of their positions in Domeris 2015.

19 Meshorer (2001:76) on the basis of the Mishna, states unequivocally, 'It is known that a coin does not become defiled ("unclean", Mishna, *Kelim* 12, 6), and the pagan symbols on it are obviously invalid'. He is followed by Hendin (2010:477). However, Neusner's translation of the passage in question makes no mention of coins (Neusner 1988:916 on Mishna *Kelim* 12:6). Hendon refers to Mishna *Kelim* 12:7, which does mention coins, to argue that only when a coin was defective did it become unclean. Therefore, the debate in the Mishna is not about the imagery on the coins (cf. Neusner 1988:916 for his translation of that passage).

20 Jensen writes that Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee, issued five series of coins, 'none of them has any figural images, showing his respectful observance of the Jewish ban against graven images' (2012:46). He limited his coins to floral motifs like palm branches and lulavs as did the revolutionaries of the first and second revolt.

21 Bohak (2002:11-12) comments on the rabbinic traditions which exist about coins supposedly minted by various biblical protagonists like Genesis Rabbah on Gen 12:2; Abraham is said to have minted coins depicting an old man and woman (one side) and a young man and woman (reverse); Joshua's coins had a wild ox and David's coins had a staff and bag on the face and a tower on the other side (Bohak 2002:11). Since there were no coins at that earlier time, the stories are obviously fictitious (Bohak 2002:12) and actually reflect coins in existence at the time of the composition of the Talmud (Bohak 2002:12). These stories may well be intended to legitimate the use of questionable coins by the writers of the Talmud.

3. Markan Irony

Quite correctly, Sharp warns that ‘No hermeneutics of sacred texts can proceed effectively without taking account of the dynamics of resistance and misdirection enacted by irony’ (2009:8).²² Mark’s gospel is well-known for its use of irony (Duke 1985; Fowler 1991; Camery-Hoggatt 1992; Edwards 2002). Mark employs irony, *inter alia*, to convey a sense of the enigmatic revelation of Jesus and his Messianic secret (Duke 1985; Camery-Hoggatt 1992). Beyond that idea, Edwards writes, ‘The medium of irony is important for the Second Evangelist, who throughout the Gospel portrays Jesus as one who challenges, confounds and sometimes breaks conventional stereotypes, whether religious, social or political’ (2002:12). Finally, Edwards (2002:12) explains that Mark plays up the strengths of some, like the faith of a Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:29); and the weaknesses of others, like the twelve disciples in their seeming inability to recognise the truth about Jesus (e.g. Mark 10:32–41). Caird (1997:104) says ‘Dramatic irony is a form of speech which assumes a double audience, the first understanding nothing but the face value of the words, the second seeing both the deeper meaning and the incomprehension of the first’. Dramatic irony, in the Gospel of Mark, occurs at two levels, namely at the level of the plot and at the level of the dialogue. Indeed, there is irony in the very details of the stories told, and the actors involved. For our purposes, we suggest that such dramatic irony is found in Mark both in the recounting of the temple intervention and in the transfiguration.

Irony pervades the temple intervention as recorded in Mark’s gospel. As Jeremiah challenged the priests of his time in the Jerusalem temple for their worship of Baal (cf. Jer 7:1–12), so Jesus, by repeating a critical part of that sermon, the reference to a ‘den of bandits’ (Mark 11:17),²³ carried forward the judgment of God on another temple, in another time (so Freyne 2014:180). The irony continues, in Mathew’s account. The same silver shekels were apparently used to pay Judas for betraying Jesus (Matt 26:15). Judas, in seeking redemption, then, scattered these coins on the floor of the temple, as Jesus did (Matt 27:5). The only discussion around the temple-tax is found in the Gospel of Matthew and curiously, in close proximity (the same chapter) to the transfiguration (Matt 17:24–27). There too we may discern a level of irony in Jesus’ words (v.26) and in Peters’ strange fishing expedition (v.27). While Mark makes mention of the image on the tribute coin (Mark 12:16), there is no mention of the imagery on the half-shekel coin, leading one scholar (Sheeley 2000: 916) to suggest it was ‘bearing more acceptable images’, but in fact it was not, as I have already indicated.

22 Baldick (2001:130) describes irony as ‘a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance’. While the issue of author’s intention remains a challenging question (Sharp 2009:26–27; Holland 2000:1–19), sufficient consensus around the idea of irony allows for its application to a range of literary works (Booth 1974; Baldick 2001), from the Greek tragedies (Holland 2000) to the Bible, both Old Testament (Sharp 2009; Domeris 2016) and New (Caird 1980; Duke 1985; O’Day 1986).

23 The Hebrew word פְּרִיץ carries a sense of violence, which is commensurate with the Greek ληστής used in the crucifixion account (Mark 15:27) (Domeris 1997).

As scholars have proposed links between the transfiguration and other historical events in the life of Jesus (Trites 1979), like the pathos of the Garden of Gethsemane (Kenny 1957), the resurrection of Jesus and Parousia of Jesus (Blomberg 1992:317), I suggest a series of connections with Jesus' intervention in the temple. By reading the pericope against the temple narrative, the sense of irony is heightened, and we begin to identify the elements which hold the picture together. Four principal details make up the transfiguration account; the location on a mountain, the transformation of Jesus, the presence of Elijah and Moses and the role of Peter. In addition, there are the two parts of the frame, namely the prelude (including 'taking up one's cross'), and the aftermath (involving the disciple's failure to comprehend who Jesus is). Concealed within the obvious material details of these elements, like the unseen mass of an iceberg, we find a whole world of meaning and implication.

4. Prelude

In the Gospel of Mark the transfiguration of Jesus follows on the feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1–9). Jesus came to the villages of the region of Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27) in upper Galilee (today's Baniyas)—a peaceful location, among wooded hills and near a strong spring. Here, in response to Jesus' questions about his identity (Mark 8:27–29a), Peter made his confession of faith (v.29b), which in Mark is simply 'You are the Christ'. Jesus responded by warning of his coming suffering and death at the hands of 'the elders and chief priests' (v.31). In the context of Mark's narrative, bridging the gap between Peter's confession and the transfiguration, Jesus offered a challenge about following him. The call included the well-known words about denying oneself and taking up one's cross to follow Jesus (Mark 8:34; cf. Matt 16:24; Luke 9:23). The reference to the cross is not a later (post-crucifixion) insertion but an ironical warning from Jesus, which fits the context of the historical Jesus. Painter writes, 'Mark intended readers to take the threat of crucifixion seriously' (1997:163). We might paraphrase the Greek: following Jesus into Jerusalem will have *grave consequences*.

The invitation to follow Jesus includes those who are already disciples (Mark 8:34), and so forms a second calling because this particular journey into Jerusalem will not be for the faint-hearted. Jesus needs to warn the disciples that from here on, the consequences and dangers of following him are about to be taken to another level. The plan of action, upon which Jesus is about to embark, will be perceived by the authorities as sedition against the

rulers, both Jewish and Roman (Saunders 1995, np; Herzog 1992:820). In terms of post-colonial or empire studies (Horsley 2016), Jesus is set to push back against the power of the empire. In the context of the Markan plot, the reader is invited to take up their own cross and to face whatever challenge God presents, knowing ultimately that they may, in time, be called to suffer for the Gospel.

5. Up a High Mountain

Six days later (Mark 9:2),²⁴ Jesus took three disciples, Peter, James and John up an unnamed high mountain. It would make sense (albeit ironical) to locate the transfiguration on a mountain, where Jesus experiences a critical moment in his ministry. Liefeld (1992:839) notes the textual links with Sinai, including the location on a mountain, and the cloud which overshadowed it (cf. the LXX of Exod 40:34). The name of the mountain is not given, but there have been several suggestions made, the traditional site being Mount Tabor (Cranfield 1959:289)—a mountain long associated with one of the Baal cults (cf. Hos 5:1). Notably, several of the mountains in Galilee had associations with pagan deities (Hermon—Judg 3:3 and Carmel—1 Kgs 18), so that simply the location on a ‘high mountain’, would already conjure up images of false worship (cf. Ps 121:1–2).

When we read the transfiguration in the light of the Baal-coins, the irony shines through. For Elijah, his destiny took him to Mount Carmel, where he fought against the prophets of the Tyrian Baal. For Moses, his destiny took him to Mount Sinai, where he received the ten commandments. For Jesus, too, his destiny would take him to the mountain of the transfiguration, where he would meet with Elijah and Moses and receive from them the prophetic mantle of the struggle against false religions and ungodly empires.

6. The Transformation

On the mountain, Jesus was ‘transfigured before them’ (Mark 9:2c). The Greek word here is μεταμορφώω²⁵ with the literal sense of ‘being greatly changed’ and so best rendered as ‘transformed’ (Liefeld 1978).²⁶ The following verse (Mark 9:3) describes the visual effects of the metamorphosis, as the outer-garments of Jesus were changed to become exceedingly white and radiant (cf. Exod 34:30).²⁷ For Mark, there is something unusual about the whiteness, since ‘no launderer on earth’ could achieve such brightness. The inclusion of the words ‘on earth’ makes this

24 Luke has eight days (Luke 9:28).

25 Luke simply says that Jesus’ appearance became different (Gk. ἕτερος), while describing his apparel as white and gleaming (Luke 9:29).

26 Luke avoids the verb, perhaps because of its Hellenistic connotations (so Cranfield 1959:290)

27 Matthew seals the connection in his version (Matt 17:2) where the face of Jesus ‘shone like the sun’.

an otherworldly connection. Many scholars interpret the visual appearance as an indication of God's glory shining out through Jesus (e.g. Painter 1997:165; Schnackenburg 2002:165) and is said to be reminiscent of Moses (Exod 34:29; cf. Matt17:2) and of heavenly beings (as in Daniel 7:9); in the case of the latter, pointing to the deity of Jesus (Moses 1996:89–113).

In the light of the path which Jesus will take, towards the temple mount, I suggest that the whiteness of his garments needs to be understood, also, in that context. The theme of white or radiating garments is not uncommon in scripture, being associated with righteousness and purity (Ps 51:7; Isa 1:18; Rev 1:14). We are reminded of the words of Malachi, regarding the cleansing of the temple priests (Mal 3:1–3) and of the Psalms of Solomon, which speaks of the Messiah purifying Jerusalem, 'as of old', to reveal the glory of God (Ps Sol 17:30–31). The irony is that, here at the transfiguration, Jesus is purified by God in preparation for his 'purification' of the temple, through his casting out of the traders and the money-changers. The irony of the allusion to the temple event is that it will turn out to be, not a cleansing of the priests, but an exposure of their sin.

7. Elijah and Moses

Jesus was joined on the mountain by two men, whom Mark identifies as Elijah and Moses, in that order (Mark 9:4), and who are seen to be conversing with Jesus, but the details of their conversation are absent. The presence of the two icons of Jewish faith, provides a valuable insight into the meaning of the transfiguration. What brought Elijah and Moses, in particular, to that lonely mountain in Galilee? Since the time of Victor of Antioch, Moses and Elijah were understood as the representatives of the Law and the Prophets – an idea that was common across the centuries and continues to find favour among scholars (Cranfield 1959:295; Leifeld 1992:839; Murphy-O'Connor 1987). However, this does not explain the order of the names. Mark should have introduced them in the reverse order—Moses and Elijah, not Elijah and Moses. Even Peter, mentioned in Mark, defaults to the Moses then Elijah pattern when he makes his suggestion about temporary shelters, although he places Jesus first (Mark 9:5). Were these two introduced because of their unusual life conclusions (Painter 1997:165) or is this a reference to Elijah as the precursor of the Messiah (cf. Mark 8:40; Mal 3:1; 4:5–6; Carmody 2010:81)? I suggest the presence of the two men and the name order should likewise be viewed through the lens of Jesus' temple interaction.

Ryken says ‘Dramatic irony consists of discrepancy between what we as readers know and the ignorance of characters in the story’ (1992:19). As the narrator of Mark’s Gospel brings together Elijah, Moses and Jesus on a mountain, the discerning reader sees the irony. It is hardly a coincidence that the two men who spent so much of their lives challenging false worship, specifically the worship of Baal, should meet with Jesus at this point. Elijah is first because of his epic struggle against the Tyrian Baal. The book of Kings (1 Kings 16:29–33) paints a dramatic portrait of the prophet Elijah in his conflict with the monarch Ahab, his consort Jezebel and her choice of the deity Baal. Her championing of the Baal cult is not just of any Baal cult, but specifically of the cult of the Baal of Phoenicia, the home of Jezebel – the city of Tyre (Kagmatché 2007). On Mount Carmel, Elijah challenged the might of the Tyrian Baal (Kagmatché 2007) and emerged victorious (see Bronner 1968:8–11). On Mount Sinai (Horeb), through the agency of Moses, God makes his will clear in the Decalogue: the first commandment elevates the worship of the Lord God above all other gods: the second commandment contains the prohibition on images (Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8). In our imagination, we hear Elijah and Moses warning Jesus that the path chosen by God will involve acting out the judgement of God on the priestly aristocracy, for allowing Baal a place in the House of God.

8. Peter’s Role

Peter’s role in the Gospel of Mark is ambiguous, with both high points and low points, making him an ideal candidate for the Markan dramatic irony. Caird (1997:134) writes, ‘Dramatic irony differs from simple irony in that the contrast between what is said and what is meant is intended by the writer of the story, but there is always some character within the story, whether the speaker or another, who does not understand’. In a misdirected response to the wonder of the scene, Peter suggested (Mark 9:5) that he and his fellow disciples build three temporary shelters (tabernacles). The narrator is quick to point out the irony that ‘he did not know what to answer; for they had become terrified’ (Mark 9:6). Peter’s use of ‘Rabbi’ simply confirms his failure to understand the significance of the moment²⁸ and its relevance for the person of Jesus (Painter 1997:167). In addition, he adds, ‘It is good for us [the disciples] to be here’ (Mark 9:5), thus entirely missing the point – a further instance of dramatic irony. Painter stresses ‘It is as if Peter had groped for a position which at least admits Jesus to the same level as Moses and Elijah. But this was mistaken. Even

28 Matthew 17:4 has ‘Lord’ and Luke 9:33 ‘Master’ demonstrating what Brooks (1991:175) understands as ‘greater reverence’.

after a special revelation to the three, they had made no progress' (1997:167).

As at Sinai, there is a heavenly voice, which on this occasion announces, 'This is my beloved Son, listen to him' (Mark 9:7b; cf. Deut 18:15) and as at Sinai, the onlookers are left fearful (ἐκκροβος cf. Exod 20:18). The voice, as also the event, is for the benefit of the three disciples—the very disciples who struggle to understand what they have seen and heard (Painter 1997:168). When the cloud disappeared, Jesus was found alone with the frightened disciples (Mark 9:8)—a parody of Moses and the children of Israel on Mount Sinai.

9. The Aftermath

On the way down the mountain, Jesus, for the second time, referred to his death and suffering (Mark 9:12). The two predictions, of Jesus' suffering (Mark 8:31; 9:12), frame the transfiguration account; a pattern which is repeated in Matthew (Matt 16:21; 17:22–23) and Luke (Luke 9:22; 9:44). In spite of the divine instruction (Mark 9:7b) 'Listen to him', in a passage full of irony, Peter, James and John fail to comprehend the meaning of Jesus' teaching (Mark 9:10), leading Painter (1997:168) to comment, 'They remained as lacking in understanding and *insight* as the crowds' (see 4:20–12; 6:52; 8:16–21) [italics in original]. The discussions on both the role of Elijah and the resurrection (Mark 9:9–13) are filled with ambiguity, heightening the sense of irony. Blomberg sums up the situation, adding his own ironical comment. 'Peter's confusion is now followed by general perplexity concerning Elijah. The logic of the disciple's question is uncertain, perhaps because they are again portrayed as somewhat dense' (on Matt 17:10).

10. Conclusion

The transfiguration is a moment of decision—closely following Jesus' ironic challenge to his disciples to join him on the journey to Golgotha, carrying their crosses, and framed by two predictions of his suffering and death. The Markan passion of Jesus begins here on this unnamed Galilean mountain, where Jesus stands with the two champions of monotheism, Elijah and Moses. There is a tragic, indeed ironical twist, in what should have been a glorious occasion—and one to be enjoyed at leisure, as Peter's tabernacles suggested. That is not to be, as the narrative makes clear with its introduction of a note of urgency. Jesus, from this moment on, will take the road up to Jerusalem, to the temple, and to the enacted

parable of his confrontation with the money-changers, and ultimately to a trial before a vengeful High Priest, determined to preserve his stronghold of power and wealth.

In true Markan irony, the disciples will abandon Jesus to die alone on the cross (Mark 14:50). In conclusion, Mark speaks of the fearful silence of the women after their angelic encounter at the garden tomb and the Gospel ends on a hanging *gar* (Mark 16:8). But because this is irony, there is always another side to the story. The silence of the women conceals a form of unspoken irony, because this particular silence is pregnant with a deeper meaning and a greater truth, which spills over into the emerging resurrection faith of the first Christians. There the deeper purpose of the Markan irony finds its ultimate fulfilment.

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