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Moses, Elijah, and Jesus' Divine Glory (Mark 9.2–8)

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Abstract

Scholars generally agree that Moses and Elijah appear at the Transfiguration because they are connected to each other in some way, and that this connection informs the significance of the story as a whole. However, there is no consensus regarding how Moses and Elijah are related, and consequently there is significant disagreement about how their presence contributes to the Transfiguration. The present study, which focuses on Mark's account (Mark 9.2–8), argues that Moses and Elijah appear together because they received similar theophanies at Mount Sinai and, as a result, the Transfiguration should be read as a mountaintop theophany in which Jesus constitutes the personal presence of Israel's God.

Keywords: Transfiguration; Moses; Elijah; Mount Sinai; theophany; divine Christology

1. Introduction

One of the foremost questions that confronts interpreters of the Transfiguration is why Matthew, Mark and Luke mention the presence of Moses and Elijah. Scholars generally agree that Moses and Elijah appear because they are connected to each other in some way and that this connection informs the significance of the story as a whole.¹ However, there is no consensus regarding how Moses and Elijah are related, and consequently, there is significant disagreement about how their presence contributes to the Transfiguration. In this article, I argue that Moses and Elijah appear together because they received similar theophanies at Mount Sinai and, as a result, the Transfiguration should be read as a mountaintop theophany. I begin by surveying the main ways that scholars have interpreted Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration.² I then go on to present fresh evidence for interpreting Moses and Elijah primarily as recipients of Sinai theophanies. Finally, I provide a reading of the Transfiguration as a mountaintop theophany, in

¹ Margaret E. Thrall, 'Elijah and Moses in Mark's Account of the Transfiguration', *NTS* 16 (1970) 305–17, here 305, states that Elijah and Moses 'are absolutely essential to Mark's presentation of the Transfiguration. They are not merely part of the symbolic background scenery. They do not simply reinforce the meaning the evangelist intends us to attach to the revelation of Jesus in glory. In some sense they are the figures upon whom the whole story turns.'

² Interpreters have, of course, proposed other reasons for connecting Moses and Elijah besides the ones noted below, such as the fact that both suffered, were prophets, were miracle-workers, etc. For a lengthy rabbinic list of such connections, see Pesiq. Rab. 4.2. However, none of these connections are unique enough to explain why the Synoptic Evangelists mention these two figures and not others.

which Jesus constitutes the personal presence of Israel's God. Due to space constraints, I will focus on the Gospel of Mark and note connections with Matthew and Luke as necessary.

2. Interpretations of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration

2.1 Representatives of the Law and the Prophets

The view that Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets enjoys numerous adherents including Origen, Augustine and many modern interpreters.³ The argument for this interpretation may be summarised as follows: (1) 'The Law and the Prophets' functioned as a shorthand for Israel's Scriptures, both in early Judaism and in early Christianity.⁴ (2) Moses is an apt representative of the Law because of his reputation as having received and recorded it. (3) Elijah is a natural representative of the Prophets because he is mentioned at the end of Malachi, the last book of the Prophets (Mal 4.5), and because he was remembered as one of the foremost Old Testament prophets (e.g., Sir 48.1–11). (4) Moses and Elijah, then, function as representatives of Israel's Scriptures. Interpreting Moses and Elijah in this way might lead one to underscore the continuity of Jesus and his teaching to the Old Testament and/or his superiority to the Law and the Prophets (note Mark 9.7: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to *him!*').⁵

However, this view is open to a number of critiques. First, while Moses is a clear choice to represent the Law, he is also depicted as a prophet in the Old Testament, early Jewish literature and the New Testament.⁶ If both Moses and Elijah are prophets, then this makes it more difficult to see Elijah and not Moses as representing the Prophets.⁷ Second, it is not self-evident that Elijah is a natural representative of the Prophets in the first place. To be sure, he is a significant Old Testament prophet, but he was not a writing prophet. Would not Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel, all of whom have lengthy prophetic books that bear their names, be a more obvious choice to represent the Prophets? Third, Moses and Elijah do not seem to be portrayed as representatives of the Law and Prophets elsewhere in early Judaism or the New Testament. Finally, Mark mentions Elijah before Moses (Mark 9.4), which seems to suggest that his primary point in mentioning them is not to point to the Law and the Prophets (in which case they would be out of order).⁸

³ Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 12.38; Augustine, *Serm.* 78.2, 4–5; 79; 79A.3; John A. McGuckin, 'Patristic Exegesis of the Transfiguration', *StPatr* 18 (1985) 335–41, here 338; Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (London: Macmillan, 1952) 390.

⁴ Sir proem 1, 5; 2 Macc 15.9; 4 Macc 18.10; Matt 5.17; 7.12; 11.13; 22.40; Luke 16.16, 29, 31; John 1.45; Acts 13.15; 24.14; 28.23; Rom 3.21. Luke 24.44 seems to use 'the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms' to sum up the Old Testament.

⁵ Emphasis added. Scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless noted otherwise.

⁶ Deut 18.15, 18; 34.10; LAB 35.6; Acts 3.22; 7.37. Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (NovTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 125, states, 'One of the most common titles by which Philo refers to Moses is "the prophet"' (citing *Her.* 4; *Fug.* 140; *Mut.* 11; *Somm.* 2.277; *Mos.* 1.156; 2.213, 229, 257, 275; *Virt.* 51; *Gig.* 49; *Contempl.* 64, 87; *Praem.* 1; QG 4.245; QE 1.11; 2.44; *Leg.* 2.1). Meeks also notes, 'There are of course other prophets—such as Abraham, Samuel, and Isaac—but Moses is *the* prophet, without further identification, the "chief prophet" (ἀρχιπροφήτης), the "primary prophet" (πρωτοπροφήτης [sic; πρωτοπροφήτης])' (125–6, citing *Mut.* 103, 125, *Somm.* 2.189, and QG 4.8 for the first title and QG 1.86 for the second). Similarly, Meeks mentions that Josephus describes Moses as a prophet without equal (137, citing *Ant.* 4.329 as well as *Ant.* 4.165, 320; 2.327; *Ag. Ap.* 1.40).

⁷ J. A. Ziesler, 'The Transfiguration Story and the Markan Soteriology', *ExpTim* 81 (1970) 263–8, here 266; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (PiNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 265; Angela Standhartinger, 'Jesus, Elia und Mose auf dem Berg: Traditionsgeschichtliche Überlegungen zur Verklärungsgeschichte (Mk 9,2–8)', *Biblische Zeitschrift* 47 (2003) 66–85, here 67.

⁸ Standhartinger, 'Jesus, Elia und Mose', 67. Matthew and Luke interestingly reverse Mark's order (Matt 17.3; Luke 9.30), but they do not necessarily do so to present Moses and Elijah as canonical representatives. For example, both evangelists might have reversed the order to correspond to the historical sequence of the two figures.

2.2 Eschatological Figures

Interpreters have also suggested that Moses and Elijah appear together because both are eschatological figures.⁹ Deuteronomy, of course, predicts a future 'prophet like Moses' (Deut 18.15-22; 34.10), and it seems that the expectation of this figure was alive and well in the first century.¹⁰ As noted above, Malachi looks forward to the return of Elijah (Mal 4.5-6), and this expectation persisted in early Judaism.¹¹ One rabbinic tradition even mentions Moses and Elijah appearing together in the eschaton (Deut. Rab. 3.17). On this view, Moses and Elijah might be seen as indicating the arrival of God's future.

The main problem with this view is that, according to Deuteronomy, it is not Moses himself who is supposed to return, but a prophet *like* Moses. And Mark goes on to identify Jesus as the prophet like Moses when he has God declare, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him [ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ]!' (Mark 9.7, emphasis added). This recalls Deut 18.15, where Israel is instructed to listen to the prophet like Moses (LXX: αὐτοῦ ἀκούσαθε) when he appears. The primary impetus for viewing Moses himself as an eschatological figure, therefore, seems to come from Deut. Rab. 3.17. However, this midrash likely dates to the eighth to ninth centuries CE, so in isolation, it does not seem like a reliable basis for reconstructing first-century views of Moses.¹²

2.3 Unusual Endings of Life

Another possibility is to connect Moses and Elijah because of the unusual way in which each figure ended his earthly life.¹³ According to Deuteronomy, Moses died and 'was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day' (Deut 34.5-6). Elijah did not die but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2.11-12). The two figures might, therefore, represent two different endings to life that provide counterpoints to Jesus' resurrection. On the other hand, some Jews believed that Moses did not die but, like Enoch and Elijah, was translated into heaven.¹⁴ From this perspective, Moses and Elijah would have similar endings of life that provide a single counterpoint to Jesus' resurrection. On either view, Moses and Elijah would be heavenly figures (perhaps implying Jesus' heavenly origin) who are chosen above other such figures because of their unusual endings of life, which might emphasise the uniqueness of Jesus' coming resurrection.

The weakness of this interpretation is that Moses and Elijah are not the only Old Testament figures who had unusual endings of life. Enoch was also translated into heaven (Gen 5.24). Why then does he not appear at the Transfiguration as well? The problem of Enoch's absence deepens when we recognise that (1) Elijah and Enoch appear together in Jewish literature without Moses;¹⁵ (2) the Jewish traditions that connect Moses and Elijah

⁹ E.g., Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 632-3; David E. Garland, *Mark* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 344-5.

¹⁰ 4Q175 I, 5-8; 1QS IX, 11; John 1.21, 25; 6.14; 7.40; Acts 3.22; 7.37.

¹¹ Sir 48.10; Mark 6.15; Luke 9.8; Mark 8.28 par.

¹² Cf. Standhartinger, 'Jesus, Elia und Mose', 69. Moshe D. Herr, 'Midrash', *EncJud* 14:184, dates Deuteronomy Rabbah to 775-900 CE. Str-B 1:756 dates Deuteronomy Rabbah tentatively to around 900 CE and notes that this is the first time that Moses is connected with Elijah as a forerunner of the Messiah.

¹³ Thrall, 'Elijah and Moses', 305-17, esp. 314-17. Armand Puig i Tàrrach, 'The Glory on the Mountain: The Episode of the Transfiguration of Jesus', *NTS* 58 (2012) 151-72, esp. 164, interprets Moses and Elijah as heavenly figures who are distinct from other heavenly figures because of their unusual endings of life and prominence as prophets.

¹⁴ Philo, *QG* 1.86; *Mos.* 2.288-91; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.323, 326 (cf. *Ant.* 9.28); Sifre Deut 357; b. Sotah 13b. See Joachim Jeremias, 'Μωϋσῆς', *TDNT* 4:854-5 for further discussion.

¹⁵ Apoc. El. 4.7; 5.32; Hell. Syn. Pr. 16.8.

because of their translation into heaven also mention Enoch;¹⁶ and (3) there does not seem to be any text that links only Moses and Elijah because of their endings of life.¹⁷ It, therefore, seems unlikely that this constitutes Mark's primary reason for mentioning Elijah and Moses.

2.4 Recipients of Sinai Theophanies

Other interpreters have argued that Moses and Elijah appear at the Transfiguration because both were recipients of Sinai theophanies. Irenaeus, for example, connects Moses' and Elijah's presence at the Transfiguration with the mountaintop theophanies that each figure received.¹⁸ Among modern exegetes, Angela Standhartinger has presented the most substantive exposition of this view.¹⁹ Standhartinger demonstrates that Jewish tradition connected Moses and Elijah because of similarities in their life experiences, especially their encounters with God at Mount Sinai (e.g., Sir 45.5; 48.7). Particularly interesting is her study of Josephus, who (she argues) patterns his account of Elijah at Horeb (*Ant.* 8.349; cf. 1 Kings 19.8–18) on Moses' encounters with God in Exodus 3 and 19–24. She then presents a reading of the Transfiguration as 'a retelling of Moses and Elijah's encounter with God on Sinai.'²⁰ According to Standhartinger, 'The voice of the cloud ... places Jesus next to Moses and Elijah as a mediator between God and man and profiles him among those who were honoured to have an encounter with God on Sinai.'²¹ Jesus' transformed appearance, therefore, indicates his nearness to the presence of God (similar to Moses in Exod 34.29).²²

The idea that Moses and Elijah appear together at the Transfiguration because both experienced Sinai theophanies is initially compelling for two reasons. First, whereas all the other views have little or no basis in the Old Testament or early Jewish literature,²³

¹⁶ Philo, *QG* 1.86; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.323, 326 (cf. *Ant.* 9.28).

¹⁷ See similarly Standhartinger, 'Jesus, Elija und Mose', 70–1.

¹⁸ *Haer.* 4.20.9–10, citing Exod 33.20–2; 1 Kings 19.11–12.

¹⁹ Standhartinger, 'Jesus, Elija und Mose.' See also Denis Baly, 'The Transfiguration Story', *ExpTim* 82 (1970) 83; Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (BNTC; London: Black, 1991) 216; Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 41; A. D. A. Moses, *Matthew's Transfiguration Story and Jewish-Christian Controversy* (JSNTSup 122; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996) 129; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 352; David M. Miller, 'Seeing the Glory, Hearing the Son: The Function of the Wilderness Theophany Narratives in Luke 9:28–36', *CBQ* 72 (2010) 498–517, here 501; Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019) 147. Ulrike Mittmann affirms the link between Moses and Elijah via 1 Kings 19 ('Sie sprachen von seinem Exodus, den er in Jerusalem erfüllen sollte (Lk 9.31)' in *Exodus: Rezeptionen in deuterokanonischer und frühjüdischer Literatur*, ed. Judith Gärtner and Barbara Schmitz, DCLS 321–70 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016) 329–52). However, Mittmann argues that both in 1 Kings 19 and at the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear not as recipients of Sinai theophanies but as mediators of revelation. (She acknowledges that this is a variation on the 'representatives of the law and the prophets' view, 341–2.) Mittmann contends that the Transfiguration reveals Jesus to be a greater mediator than Moses and Elijah—namely, the incarnate word of God (citing John 1.14 as a conceptual parallel, 346). In my view, Mittmann is correct that the Transfiguration evinces a divine Christology, but her focus on Moses and Elijah as mediators of revelation makes her Christological conclusion difficult to sustain. Jesus could be a greater mediator than Moses or Elijah without necessarily being God incarnate. I will argue below that viewing Moses and Elijah as recipients of Sinai theophanies provides a more reliable basis for finding a divine Christology in the transfiguration.

²⁰ Standhartinger, 'Jesus, Elija und Mose', 74: 'Neuerzählung von Moses und Elias Begegnung mit Gott am Sinai'. Translations of Standhartinger here and below are my own.

²¹ Standhartinger, 'Jesus, Elija und Mose', 80: 'Die Wolkenstimme stellt ... Jesus neben Mose und Elija als Mittler zwischen Gott und den Menschen und profiliert ihn im Kreis derer, die einer Begegnung mit Gott am Sinai gewürdigt wurden.'

²² Standhartinger, 'Jesus, Elija und Mose', 78–79.

²³ Regarding the Old Testament, see Mittmann, 'Sie sprachen von seinem Exodus', 329.

Standhartinger demonstrates that this interpretation has at least some precedent in the Old Testament as interpreted by both Sirach and Josephus. Second, the mountaintop setting of the Transfiguration, which exhibits no points of resonance with the other views, fits well with this position. However, this view does not seem to have gained a widespread following in scholarship.²⁴ In my view, there are two potential reasons for this. First, it is possible that more explicit evidence from Jewish literature is needed since the connections that Standhartinger makes are sometimes subtle. Second, Standhartinger's conclusion that Mark simply places Jesus alongside Moses and Elijah as a recipient of a theophany does not sit well with God's declaration, 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him!' (Mark 9.8) and the abrupt exit of Moses and Elijah.²⁵

In what follows, I attempt to strengthen and reconfigure the view that Elijah and Moses appear together at the Transfiguration primarily because of their Sinai theophanies. I will first present additional evidence for viewing Elijah and Moses as recipients of Sinai theophanies and then offer what I regard as a more compelling reading of the Transfiguration as a theophany.

3. Moses and Elijah as Recipients of Sinai Theophanies

3.1 Old Testament

One point that has not received sufficient attention in scholarship on Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration is that Moses's theophany in Exodus 33-4, and Elijah's theophany in 1 Kings 19, exhibit a number of similarities that suggest that one account has been modelled on the other. Beyond the shared location of Sinai/Horeb (Exod 34.2; 1 Kings 19.8), four parallels stand out as significant.²⁶ First, in each account God 'passes by' (עבר) the prophet (Exod 33.19, 22; 34.6; 1 Kings 19.11).²⁷ Second, the prophet receives the theophany while in a cleft/cave in the rock.²⁸ God promises to place Moses 'in a cleft of the rock' when he passes by (Exod 33.22). Elijah spends the night in a cave at Horeb and receives his theophany while standing at the entrance to this cave (1 Kings 19.9, 13). Third, the prophet is shielded from God's presence.²⁹ God promises to cover Moses with his hand until he has passed by (Exod 33.22-3). Elijah wraps his face in his cloak when he goes to the entrance of the cave to meet God (1 Kings 19.13). Fourth, the prophet fasts for forty days and forty nights in connection with the theophany.³⁰ Moses fasts while with YHWH on Sinai (Exod 34.28; cf. Deut 9.18, 25; 10.10). Elijah fasts while on the way to Horeb (1 Kings 19.8).

²⁴ David M. Miller affirms Standhartinger's thesis that Moses and Elijah appear as recipients of Sinai theophanies ('Seeing the Glory, Hearing the Son: The Function of the Wilderness Theophany Narratives in Luke 9:28-36', *CBQ* 72 (2010) 498-517, here 501 n. 15). I am not aware of other scholars who have cited Standhartinger positively on this point.

²⁵ Mittmann also critiques Standhartinger's overarching Christological conclusion ('Sie sprachen von seinem Exodus', 341 n. 68).

²⁶ See further Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East* (SOTBT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 245-9; Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 10; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 456.

²⁷ John Gray, *1 and 2 Kings: A Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 410; Gwilym H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 332; Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, (WBC; Waco: Word, 1985) 236; Cogan, *1 Kings*, 456; Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001) 433.

²⁸ James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1951; repr. 1976) 313; Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 331; Hamilton, *Handbook*, 433; Donald J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993) 172; Cogan, *1 Kings*, 456 (however, cf. 452).

²⁹ Niehaus, *God at Sinai*, 247; Cogan, *1 Kings*, 456.

³⁰ Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 330; Volkmar Fritz, *1 and 2 Kings*, trans. Anselm C. Hagedorn (CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 197; Cogan, *1 Kings*, 456.

Commentators frequently note the parallels between these two theophanies. J. P. Hyatt, for example, comments on Exodus 33.21–3, ‘The closest parallel to this theophany is to be found in the account of Elijah’s experience on Horeb, 1 Kg. 19.9–13.’³¹ Such similarities have led many interpreters to suggest that one of these accounts is modelled on the other. Mordechai Cogan, for instance, says of 1 Kings 19, ‘Throughout, the narrator has creatively used motifs associated with Moses, enriching his tale with literary allusions that, at times, attain verbal resemblance to the earlier tradition.’³² While Cogan does not assert that the author of 1 Kings 19 drew directly on a written account of Exodus, he seems to imply that the author of 1 Kings 19 depended at least on oral traditions about Moses that bear a strong resemblance to what we find in Exodus. Others go a step further to posit direct dependence on Exodus. Gwilym H. Jones, for example, comments that ‘the reference to “the entrance of the cave” (1 Kings 19.13) ‘echoes deliberately ... the hiding of Moses in a cleft rock’ (Exod 33.22), and he argues that the mention of YHWH passing by (1 Kings 19.11) ‘is obviously based’ on Exodus 33.19.’³³ For our purposes, it is not necessary to determine whether 1 Kings 19 depends on Exodus 33–4 or oral traditions that preceded it; the salient point is that the similarities between the two accounts are significant enough for many interpreters to posit some sort of dependence (oral or literary).

The upshot of this discussion is that the Old Testament itself provides good reasons to relate Moses and Elijah as recipients of Sinai theophanies. The verbal and thematic parallels between Exodus 33–4 and 1 Kings 19 encourage the reader to relate Moses and Elijah because of their similar encounters with God at Sinai.

3.2 Jewish Exegetical Traditions

The idea that Moses and Elijah might be related by their similar Sinai theophanies becomes even more likely when we recognise that Jewish interpreters did in fact connect Moses and Elijah for this very reason.

Rabbinic literature repeatedly enumerates ten things created on the eve of the Sabbath during the creation week. According to S. Singer, ‘All phenomena that seemed to partake at once of the natural and the supernatural, were conceived as having had their origin in the interval between the close of the work of creation and the commencement of the Sabbath.’³⁴ Anthony J. Saldarini notes thirteen different sources for this list, and while a few of the versions are identical, there is considerable diversity between them.³⁵ One item that appears frequently in these lists is ‘the cave in which Moses and Elijah stood’ or ‘the cave of Moses and Elijah’. Below are the sources that include this item with their approximate dates.³⁶

Sifre Deuteronomy 355	third century CE
Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael Way. 6.53–8	late third century CE

³¹ J. P. Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus* (NCB; Greenwood: Attic, 1971) 317.

³² Cogan, *1 Kings*, 456.

³³ Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 331–2.

³⁴ S. Singer, *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire*, 6th ed. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1900) 200. I owe this reference to J. Israelstam in Isidore Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud*, 35 vols. (London: Soncino, 1935–1948), 30:64 n. 5.

³⁵ Anthony J. Saldarini, *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan (Abot de Rabbi Nathan) Version B: A Translation and Commentary* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 11; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 306–10.

³⁶ The sources that do not include this cave are: b. Avot 5.6; Pirqē R. El. 19; Tg. Ps-J. Num 22.28; Ma’aseh Torah; Pirke Rabbenu Kadosh; Lekah Tov to Exod 16.33. See Saldarini, *Fathers*, 306–10. Saldarini cites Jellinek, *Bet Ha-Midrash*, 2:100, Eisenstein, *Otsar Midrashim*, 2:513, and the Wilna edition (1884) 114 for the latter three sources respectively.

Midrash Tannaim	late third century CE ³⁷
Mekhilta of Rabbi Simeon 42.9	fourth to fifth century CE
Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 54a	late sixth century CE
Seder Rabba di Bereshit	seventh century CE (?) ³⁸

In addition, Avot of Rabbi Nathan B 37 (third to seventh century CE) simply mentions 'the cave'.³⁹ Since all the other texts just noted associate this cave with Moses and Elijah, it seems likely that this is the case here as well. Indeed, the fact that the author could refer to 'the cave' without further specification seems to suggest that the idea of 'the cave of Moses and Elijah' was commonplace enough that more information was not necessary.

The idea that Moses and Elijah received their Sinai theophanies in the same cave also occurs elsewhere in rabbinic literature. In b. Meg. 19b (late sixth century CE), R. Hiyya b. Abba is recorded as saying to R. Johanan, 'Had there been in the cave in which Moses and Elijah stood a chink no bigger than the eye of a fine needle, they would not have been able to endure the light, as it says, *for man shall not see me and live*.'⁴⁰ Similarly, the eleventh-century rabbi Rashi identifies Elijah's cave as Moses' cleft of the rock in his commentary on 1 Kings 19.9.⁴¹

The texts noted above clearly identify the cleft of the rock where God hides Moses as he passes by (Exod 33.22) as the same place as the cave where Elijah stands as God passes by (1 Kings 19.13). Modern interpreters may question the validity of this interpretation. However, for our purposes the point is not that these rabbinic authors were correct, but simply that they did connect Moses and Elijah because of their Sinai theophanies in Exodus 33-4 and 1 Kings 19.

Pesiqta Rabbati 4.2 (sixth to seventh century CE) also connects Moses and Elijah because of the similar theophanies that they received at Mount Sinai. The passage contains a lengthy catalogue of similarities between Moses and Elijah, and a number of these come from Exodus 33-4 and 1 Kings 19. I quote the relevant portions below in the order they occur in the text:⁴²

Of Moses: *And the Lord passed by before him* (Exod. 34.6); and of Elijah: *And, behold, the Lord passed by* (1 Kings 19.11).

³⁷ The text can be found in D. Hoffmann, *Midrash Tannaim zum Deuteronomium*, 2 parts (Berlin, 1908-1909) 1:219, paragraph 21 (סד), line 8. At present there is no English translation of Midrash Tannaim. On the date, see H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. and ed. Markus Bockmuehl; 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 275, cf. 251; Eyal Ben-Eliyahu, Yehudah Cohn, and Fergus Millar, *Handbook of Jewish Literature from Late Antiquity, 135-700 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 75.

³⁸ This document lists 'the cave of Moses and Elijah' as one option for the tenth item in the list. For the other options, see Saldarini, *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan*, 308. Peter Schäfer suggests a date in the 'post-talmudic/early geonic period' ('In Heaven as It Is in Hell: The Cosmology of *Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit*', *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 233-74, 233). For the text, see S. A. Wertheimer and A. J. Wertheimer, eds., *Batei Midrashot*, 2nd ed. (2 vols.; Jerusalem, 1950-1953) 1:26, paragraph 14 (ט), line 7. There does not seem to be any English translation available, but there is a French translation: Nicholas Sed, *La mystique cosmologique juive*, Études juives 16 (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études, 1981) 80-106; Nicholas Sed, 'Une cosmologie juive du haut moyen age: La Bēraytā dī Ma'aseh Bērēšit', *REJ* 123 (1964) 259-305; 124 (1965) 23-123. I owe the Sed references to Schäfer, 'In Heaven', 233.

³⁹ On the date of Avot of Rabbi Nathan B, see Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 226-7.

⁴⁰ Translation by M. Simon in Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud*, 14.119, emphasis original.

⁴¹ Rashi's commentary on 1 Kings is available online at <https://www.sefaria.org/>.

⁴² Translation from William G. Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati: Discourses for Feasts, Fasts, and Special Sabbaths* (2 vols.; Yale Judaica Series 18; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) 86-7, emphasis original.

Moses hid in a cave: *I will put thee in a cleft of the rock* (Exod. 33.22); and Elijah hid in a cave, spending a night there: *And he came unto a cave, and lodged there* (1 Kings 19.9).

Moses went to Horeb, and Elijah went to Horeb.

Moses spent forty days and forty nights, during which he did not eat and did not drink; so, too, Elijah *went in the strength of that meal forty days* (1 Kings 19.8).

Pesiqta Rabbati does not identify the caves of Moses and Elijah as one and the same as the rabbinic documents above do. Yet this text is important because it shows that at least one Jewish interpreter observed the sorts of similarities between the theophanies of Moses and Elijah in Exodus 33–4 and 1 Kings 19 that modern Old Testament interpreters have seen. Indeed, one suspects that such similarities are what led other Jewish interpreters to equate the caves of Moses and Elijah.

The texts above demonstrate that numerous Jewish interpreters connected Moses and Elijah because of their theophanies in Exodus 33–4 and 1 Kings 19. Yet all these texts were composed substantially later than the Synoptic Gospels. How then are they relevant for understanding the significance of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration? I do not wish to argue that these texts directly bear witness to first-century views of Moses and Elijah or that the Synoptic Evangelists were aware of such traditions (though this may be true). Rather, the logic of my argument is as follows: (1) the Old Testament itself provides good reasons to link Moses and Elijah due to the similar theophanies they received in Exodus 33–4 and 1 Kings 19. (2) Jewish interpreters did in fact connect Moses and Elijah for precisely this reason. (3) Therefore, it is likely that Mark and the other Synoptic Evangelists connected Moses and Elijah for similar reasons, whether or not they knew of these Jewish exegetical traditions. Such a conclusion becomes even more compelling when we recall that all the other reasons that scholars have given for the presence of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration have little to no support in Jewish literature. By contrast, we have just observed that a significant strand of Jewish interpretation reaching back at least to the third century CE connected Moses and Elijah because of their similar theophanies in Exodus 33–4 and 1 Kings 19. Thus, the idea that Moses and Elijah appear together at the Transfiguration because of their similar theophanies has far better precedent in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature than any of the other interpretations.

4. Reading the Transfiguration as a Theophany

If Moses and Elijah appear together at the Transfiguration because of the similar theophanies they received at Sinai in Exodus 33–4 and 1 Kings 19, this would imply that the Transfiguration should be read as a theophany that evokes Moses and Elijah's earlier theophanies in some way. In fact, Mark's Transfiguration story itself contains features that would support such an interpretation. In the first place, the Transfiguration—like Moses and Elijah's theophanies—takes place on a mountain (Mark 9.2). At first glance, this detail might seem inconsequential, but recall that none of the other interpretations of Moses and Elijah (as representatives of the Law and the Prophets, eschatological figures, or individuals who had unusual endings of life) are able to connect both figures with this setting. By contrast, the mountaintop location fits well with the background of Moses and Elijah's Sinai theophanies. Second, interpreters have noted numerous parallels between the Transfiguration and Moses' experiences at Sinai: the mention of 'six days' (Mark 9.2; cf. Exod 24.16), Jesus' three named companions (Mark 9.2; cf. Exod 24.1, 9), Jesus' transformed, radiant appearance (Mark 9.2–3; cf. Exod 34.29–35) and the

disciples' fear at seeing Jesus transfigured (Mark 9.6; cf. Exod 34.30). These connections are typically seen as presenting Jesus as the prophet like Moses, and Mark's allusion to Deut 18.15 seems to confirm this (ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ, Mark 9.7; cf. αὐτοῦ ἀκούεσθε, Deut 18.15). Yet the Sinai experiences of Moses that Mark alludes to are also theophanies, so it seems probable that he intends the Transfiguration, too, to be read as a theophany.

What, then, would it mean to read the Transfiguration as a mountaintop theophany reminiscent of Moses and Elijah's Sinai theophanies? As noted above, Standhartinger interprets the voice that speaks from the cloud (presumably that of God; Mark 9.7) as the theophany in view. Such a reading emphasises the continuity between Moses, Elijah and Jesus: Jesus, like Moses and Elijah before him, is the recipient of a mountaintop theophany. However, the Transfiguration resists such a reading in several ways. First, the divine speech from the cloud pales in comparison to the powerful and personal theophanies that Moses and Elijah experience in Exodus 33–4 and 1 Kings 19. It would make little sense for Mark to prepare the reader for a mountaintop theophany in the vein of Moses and Elijah and then to deliver a far less profound experience of God's presence. Second, Mark presents the intended audience of the divine speech not as Jesus (as one might expect if he were the recipient of the theophany) but as the disciples. The voice, which responds to Peter's suggestion of building three tents for Moses, Elijah and Jesus, does not say, 'You are my Son, the Beloved' as at the baptism (Mark 1.11, emphasis added) but 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen [ἀκούετε] to him!' (9.7, emphasis added). The second person plural ἀκούετε implies that the audience is not Peter alone but the other disciples as well. Third, the divine speech makes clear that Jesus is superior to Moses and Elijah. Whereas Peter implies that Moses, Elijah and Jesus are on equal footing, God stresses that Jesus (unlike Moses and Elijah) is his Son, and when the disciples look up, they see only Jesus (9.8).

But if God's speech from the cloud is not the theophany in view, then what is? I suggest that Mark presents Jesus as the personal presence of Israel's God. As noted above, Jesus' transfigured appearance seems to recall the shining of Moses' face after he sees God (Exod 34.29–35). Interpreters generally agree that Moses' radiant face is an afterglow from his encounter with God. He has seen God in a particularly intimate way, and the divine glory has rubbed off on him, so to speak.⁴³ Yet it is precisely at this point that we find a difference between Moses' theophany and the Transfiguration, for whereas Moses is transfigured as a result of his encounter with God, Jesus is transfigured before God the Father ever appears or speaks. One might argue that Jesus is transfigured because of his exposure to Moses and Elijah (i.e., heavenly figures), but this does not make sense, for Mark describes Jesus as being transfigured before Moses and Elijah appear (Mark 9.2–4; cf. Matt 17.2–3; Luke 9.29).⁴⁴ In addition, the fact that Moses is transfigured by a particularly intimate encounter with God himself suggests that a mere meeting with a heavenly figure, such as Moses or Elijah, would be insufficient to achieve the Transfiguration that Jesus experiences. Thus, the divine glory that radiates from Jesus at the Transfiguration seems to be not a borrowed glory like that of Moses, but a glory that Jesus himself possesses.⁴⁵

⁴³ 2 Cor 3.7–18; R. Alan Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973) 232; John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987) 467; Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991) 221; Peter E. Enns, *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 587.

⁴⁴ Adela Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 417, rightly notes, 'The text ... seems to imply that Jesus' transfigured state is part of the revelation, rather than a result of it.'

⁴⁵ Luke may emphasise this when he describes Jesus' radiant appearance as 'his glory' (τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ; Luke 9.32). Second Peter 1.16 similarly refers to '[Jesus'] majesty' (τῆς ἐκείνου μεγαλειότητος) at the Transfiguration.

Mark therefore seems to present Jesus not as the recipient of a theophany like Moses and Elijah, but as one who himself constitutes the theophany.⁴⁶ Jesus, in other words, is the personal presence of Israel's God. Moses and Elijah retain their function as recipients of a theophany, but they experience God's presence on this mountain in a way that far surpasses their earlier experiences at Sinai. Whereas Moses and Elijah were formerly able to see God only with faces shielded, they now see God face to face in the person of Jesus. Against this backdrop, it is easy to see why Peter's proposal to make three dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah is inappropriate: Peter is placing Jesus—the personal presence of Israel's God—on the same level as the prophets who perceive him. As noted above, the divine voice that speaks from the cloud does acknowledge that Jesus is the promised prophet like Moses. However, if Jesus were merely a prophet like Moses, then Peter would not be wrong to place him alongside Moses and Elijah. Similarly, if Jesus were God's Son merely in the sense of being the Messiah, it is doubtful that Peter's suggestion would merit the divine rejoinder that it receives. But if Jesus constitutes the personal presence of Israel's God, then it makes perfect sense why God the Father rejects Peter's suggestion so summarily, and the disciples are left with Jesus alone.

One potential objection to such a reading is that the disciples do not seem to perceive Jesus as God at the Transfiguration (or, for that matter, at any point before the end of Mark). Yet this objection loses its force when we recall that the Second Gospel is notorious for its secrecy about Jesus' identity (the so-called 'Messianic secret').⁴⁷ Mark actually includes a notice of this secrecy just after the Transfiguration when Jesus commands Peter, James and John 'to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead' (Mark 9.9). A phenomenon closely related to this secrecy is that the disciples repeatedly fail to comprehend Jesus' teaching and identity (e.g., 4.10–13, 41; 6.52; 8.17, 21; 9.32). Indeed, in several of these instances of incomprehension, Jesus' divinity arguably constitutes the datum that the disciples fail to perceive. Richard Hays, for example, argues that Jesus' calming of the storm (4.35–41) implies a divine Christology, for the ability to control the wind and waves is 'a power that the Old Testament consistently assigns to the LORD God alone'.⁴⁸ In particular, in Jonah 1.4–16, which Mark seems to have patterned this story upon, it is YHWH himself who calms the storm.⁴⁹ Thus, the disciples' question, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' seems to imply that they have not comprehended Jesus' divinity. Similarly, Hays argues compellingly that Mark's story of Jesus walking on water (Mark 6.47–52), where Jesus intends to 'pass by' (παρέρχομαι) the disciples (6.48), alludes to

⁴⁶ The idea that the Transfiguration constitutes a revelation of Jesus' divinity finds support in numerous patristic exegetes, though they do not necessarily reach this conclusion by interpreting Moses and Elijah in the way suggested here. John A. McGuckin notes that 'the major tenet of the Patristic exegesis of the Transfiguration is the interpretation of the epiphany as a manifestation by Jesus to the disciples of his own divine status' (*The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1986) 110). Cf. McGuckin, 'The Patristic Exegesis of the Transfiguration', 336; Andrew Louth, 'Holiness and the Vision of God in the Eastern Fathers', *Holiness Past and Present*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T&T Clark, 2003) 217–38, esp. 228–34.

Collins, *Mark*, 418–19, reaches a conclusion similar to the one presented above, but argues that Mark 'appears to have drawn upon the Hellenistic and Roman genres of epiphany and metamorphosis, but in a way that adapts them to the biblical tradition, especially to that of the theophany on Sinai' (419). It is possible that Mark here intentionally engages with Greco-Roman accounts of the gods appearing on earth. However, the parallels with the Old Testament are much stronger, so it seems best to regard the Old Testament background as primary and any Greco-Roman background as secondary.

⁴⁷ For the classic treatment of this issue, see William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (London: James Clarke, 1971), esp. 34–8.

⁴⁸ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016) 69. See pages 66–68 for discussion of Ps 107.23–32, Job 38.8–11, Ps 89.9, and Ps 106.8–12.

⁴⁹ On the parallels to Jonah, see Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 332–8.

Job 9 LXX, which describes YHWH as walking on the sea (9.8) and passing by (παρέρχομαι, 9.11) unknown.⁵⁰ Mark concludes the story by noting the disciples' amazement and hard-heartedness, implying that they fail to perceive Jesus' divinity.⁵¹ Mark, therefore, provides ample precedent for the idea that Jesus is divine and that the disciples fail to perceive him as such. Against this backdrop, it would not be surprising if Jesus were to reveal his divine glory, and the disciples were to miss the point.

Thus, when we interpret the Transfiguration as a theophany (as the presence of Moses and Elijah suggests that we should), it becomes apparent that Jesus himself constitutes the theophany; the Transfiguration is a revelation of Jesus' own divine glory. Moses and Elijah, who had earlier encountered God on a mountain in an intimate-but-shielded way, now meet him face to face in the person of Jesus.

5. Conclusion

The present study has explored why Moses and Elijah appear together at the Transfiguration. I have argued, based on both the Old Testament and Jewish exegetical traditions, that the most likely reason for the appearance of Moses and Elijah is that these two prophets received similar theophanies at Mount Sinai, which suggests that the Transfiguration should be read as a theophany. I went on to provide a reading of the Transfiguration as a theophany, arguing that Jesus himself constitutes the divine presence.

Such an interpretation, if correct, is significant because it would accrue to the growing body of evidence that Mark affirms a divine Christology (i.e., presents Jesus as the personal presence of Israel's God). And if Mark exhibits a divine Christology at the Transfiguration, then it seems likely that Matthew and Luke, which are generally thought to be dependent on Mark and retain the relevant features of his Transfiguration story, might have a divine Christology as well.

Competing interest. The author declares none.

⁵⁰ Hays notes that in Mark 6.48 'the verb *παρελθεῖν* almost surely alludes to Exodus 33:17–23 and 34:6, where God is said to "pass by" Moses in order to reveal his glory indirectly, for "no one shall see me and live." . . . Mark's mysterious statement in Mark 6:48, read as an allusion to the Exodus theophany, suggests simultaneously that Jesus' walking on the water is a manifestation of divine glory and that it remains beyond full comprehension—as the disciples' uncomprehending response amply demonstrates (Mark 6:51–2)' (*Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 72). I am less certain than Hays about the allusion to Exodus 33–4 here, mainly because the Job 9 allusion that Hays notes can also explain the use of *παρέρχομαι*. However, if Hays is correct, this would create precedent in Mark's narrative for alluding to Exodus 33–4 with Jesus as the divine Lord who 'passes by' the disciples.

⁵¹ Mark relates the disciples' incomprehension and hardheartedness to the loaves in the feeding of the four thousand: 'And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened' (6.51–2; cf. 6.30–44). It is possible that this alludes to YHWH's feeding of his people in the wilderness (e.g., Exodus 16), which would further suggest that Jesus' divinity constitutes the point of incomprehension.