

## Divergence on the Lectionary, Feast of the Transfiguration

### First Reading

Exodus 34:29–35

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him. (ESV)

### Second Reading

2 Peter 1:13–21

I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

### Luke 9:28–36

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen. (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

Some of you may know already that the translation of the words concerning Moses’ face after his encounter with God aren’t totally clear. The ambiguity revolves around the translation of the Hebrew word *qaran* that refers to the skin of Moses’ face. This word may mean “was glorified” which can then be understood to mean “shone” as we have in most translations, but for a long time there was a second translation that means “horned.” That is, his skin had horns. This is how Jerome translated it for the Vulgate, and it is the reason for the anti-semitic painting of Moses by Michelangelo which depicts him with horns.

While this second translation has persisted over the years and remains a minority opinion, it still merits discussion in the realms of academia. *Qaran* is not as clearly a reference to “shining” as we might like it to be, so getting that sorted remains an academic problem. I won’t go into the details, mostly because I can’t read any Semitic languages and a lot of it goes over my head, but I did gather some interesting tidbits along the way in my studies.

First would be that the notion of Moses’ skin bearing horns when he came down from the mountain the second time is also attested in some recently published Midrashic documents. In an anthology of legends about the Ten Commandments it says that “a

crown appeared on Moses' head and horns were born in his face, as Scripture says, 'And Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was horned.'" So this reading of our text did exist within Jewish circles at some point.

I have read two papers which offer plausible ways of reading this text, and I'll try to thumbnail them for you.

First, as one author suggested, in the days in which this text was written, light was understood to be a material, to have material properties. (Photons!) Given this, it is possible that the writer of our text understood the light that came from Moses' face as "radiating horns." (I think of the comic book way of illustrating something shining, with lines radiating from the object.) In this way, we aren't forced to choose between one or the other reading. "Horns" just gives a visual shape to the radiance of Moses' face.

In the other article, the author suggested a third reading, rejecting both flawed attempts at "radiance" or "horns." His approach was to understand the change in Moses' skin as one that is caused by prolonged exposure to intense light or fire. The mountain was covered in fire and smoke. God's presence burns. To shorten this up, he reads this as the skin of Moses' face coming back hardened like horns. He spoke of the hardening of skin as in keratosis, I have seen the effects of burn scars. This would also speak to the horror felt by the Israelites when they saw him.

In the end, what matters is that Moses' was changed by his encounter with the Lord. Somehow it changed his appearance in a way that was startling to his people. Some commentators suggest that Moses had had some measure of divinity conferred on him at Sinai, and that this is what frightened people. One thing is certain, whatever happened to Moses did not draw people to him, but made them afraid of him, just the sight of him.

"Holiness" is, or can be, frightening. It was to the Israelites at that time. We find a different reaction on the Mount of Transfiguration. I wonder what changed?

## Second Reading

I was surprised this week to learn that there are different manuscripts of 2 Peter that reflect different views of the relationship between Jesus and God. Some identify Him with God, others see Him as distinct from God. While this doesn't affect our reading for this week, I did find it interesting to learn that as early as these first manuscripts, people wrestled with the question of Jesus' divinity.

In our reading though, we have Peter's recounting of his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, this as evidence that he and the other Apostles had not made up the things they preached, but preached the One who had been revealed to them as the Beloved Son, in majesty, atop the mountain.

He then goes on to link this to the prophecies of "Scripture." Keeping in mind that there were no "Scriptures" then apart from the books they knew as the Law and the Prophets, Peter has grounded his understanding of the identity of Jesus (hey, it did touch on the manuscripts a little, after all!) in the words of the prophecies found therein. Then he goes on to say that these prophecies did not proceed from the will of any human, but from God. I think here he intends to create a parallel between his own proclamation of Jesus and that of the prophets. As the prophecies came not from human will, but from God, so also does Peter's proclamation. God's words, heard clearly at the Transfiguration, carry the same weight as those found in the Scriptures. Peter is as one of the prophets, merely speaking what has already been said.

This brought to mind Jesus' saying that He says only what He's been commanded to say. Is there a connection? I'm not sure.

#### Gospel Text

I think that it's important for us to read this story of the Transfiguration of Jesus in context, not as an event that isn't intimately related to what that comes immediately before it. In all three of the Synoptic Gospels the Transfiguration comes immediately after 1) Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ (and his rebuke by Jesus), and 2) Jesus' first teaching that He must be crucified, followed by the teaching that His followers must take up their own crosses.

That is why our reading begins with "Eight days after these sayings," because Luke and Mark and Matthew all want you too connect them all. The Transfiguration is God's imprimatur on the path that Jesus is about to follow. It is unintelligible to the three who are with Him at the time, because until Jesus is raised and the Holy Spirit given, it will make no sense. It would be much too easy to run yelling from the mountain top what they'd seen and heard and try all the harder to conform Jesus' ministry into one that meets their expectations. So Jesus silences them.

There is a beautiful and terrible consubstantiality between Jesus' crucifixion and His glory. In this way, the "light" of Jesus' Transfiguration and the change in Moses' face may be more closely related, especially if we read Exodus 34 the way that the last commentator did. After all, Isaiah said of the Servant, "his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind." And

the author of Exodus may well have intended that we see Moses' face marred by his experience of glory as well.

We read the story of the Transfiguration as one over which looms the Cross, but also one that takes the Cross as its foundation, it only happened when it did because it was "after these sayings." Any celebration of the Transfiguration that omits this truth empties it of its meaning.