

The Time and Place of the Transfiguration

ABSTRACT: This speculative article proposes that the Transfiguration of Jesus occurred on Mt. Nebo, Sunday, April 20, six days after Passover April 14, A.D. 32, about three weeks following the feeding of the 5000. Jesus fed the five thousand when Passover was “near.” Standard chronologies place the transfiguration around the feast of Tabernacles six-months later, on or near Mt. Hermon. Peter’s confession identified the Messiah on Passover. It prefigured His crucifixion, and the transfiguration prefigured His resurrection.

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See <http://www.scripturescholar.com/ChronologyJesus.pdf> for the chronological context.

Overview

One can discern the approximate time of the transfiguration from the following information—In John 6:4, we are told, ‘the Jewish Passover feast was near.’ This Passover was one year before Jesus’ final Passover. The author understands, “Passover was near” to mean that the month of Nisan/Abib was starting. Jesus that day fed 5000 men. That night Jesus spent in prayer then before dawn, he walked across the Sea of Galilee in a storm. The next day in Capernaum, Jesus declared that we must eat his body and drink his blood. Most who heard this message rejected it.

After this rejection, Jesus appears to turn his ministry to the gentiles for a time, rather than preparing to go down to Jerusalem for the Passover¹ journeyed northwest (20-50 miles) to the region of Tyre and Sidon and healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman of great faith.² Jesus then journeyed back to the Sea of Galilee and onto the Decapolis region (Mark 7:31). There he spent three days (Mark 8: 2) with and fed 4000 men (probably gentiles)(Mark 8:9) and then sent them away. Jesus then crossed the Sea of Galilee to Magadan or Dalmanutha (Matt 15:39, Mark 8:10), where he encounters Pharisees and Sadducees looking for a sign. They again journeyed to the other side, where Jesus healed a blind man in Bethsaida (Mark 8:22) (near the northern end of the Sea of Galilee). These events and travel took nearly two weeks.

Then Jesus and the apostles journeyed 25 miles north to the region of Caesarea Philippi, where Peter declared that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God (Matt. 16:13-23). Then Jesus started to predict his crucifixion directly (Mark 8:27-9:1). Jesus had been doing this bit of traveling so that he came under that clause that permitted one to miss the Passover in Nisan and instead go in the second month if he was on a journey (Num. 9:10-13). Jesus, by this time, was well recognized, and there was a constant threat to his life by the religious leaders. To have gone to Jerusalem for this feast would have precipitated his crucifixion a year early. They went in the second month when they could go secretly.

The transfiguration occurs six days after Peter’s confession. Now Elijah was likely taken up from the same mountain that Moses died on, Mt. Nebo, also known as Pisgah. Mt. Nebo is about a hundred miles south of Caesarea Philippi and 20 miles east of Jericho near the Dead Sea.

Peter’s Confession

About two weeks had passed since Jesus fed the 5000. Peter’s confession was on Monday, Nisan 14 Passover A.D. 32 at Caesarea Philippi. Taken together with the identification of Jesus as the Messiah or the Christ on the day of Passover prefigured Jesus’ dying as the Messiah on Passover a year later. The transfiguration on Sunday during the night prefigured the resurrection on Easter Sunday one-year later. Jesus did not talk plainly about his crucifixion, death, or resurrection until after Peter’s confession. Over a year earlier, when Jesus accepted his first disciples, Andrew told Peter that he had found the Messiah

¹ It would take most of a week to get to Jerusalem and pilgrims normally arrived up to a week early to purify themselves and select a lamb.

² It is assumed that the Apostles could travel at least 25 miles per day.

(John 1:41), and Nathaniel had confessed that Jesus was the Son of God (John 1:49). Peter's confession was highlighted not because of what he said—I believe all the disciples had the same opinion by this point—it was who prompted him to say it and when he said it. Here also, Jesus first directly predicted his rejection & crucifixion.³

Jesus and the Apostles traveled 90 miles south, Tuesday through Friday to near Jericho. They spent the Sabbath resting, and the next day Jesus, Peter, James, and John journeyed about 20 miles to the top of Mt. Nebo/Pisgah, where they spent the night in prayer. While Jesus was in prayer maybe at midnight on Sunday, Nisan 20, the sixth day after Peter's confession, Jesus' three disciples were very sleepy when Jesus was transfigured before their eyes.

If the transfiguration spanned midnight, it might explain Luke's estimate of about eight days. The quartet rested up from their night in prayer, and in the afternoon Monday, Nisan 21⁴ journeyed back to rendezvous with the rest of the apostles near Jericho. Here they encountered a large crowd, which were the pilgrims from Galilee returning from the Passover week in Jerusalem.

Jesus and the disciples then accompanied the people back to Galilee and Capernaum. Then Peter was asked about the Temple tax—This tax was normally paid before the feast of Passover. Since they were not in Jerusalem, they had not paid the tax. Sunday of Passover week was the Omer or wave offering when the first fruits of the harvest were offered to God in the Temple, allowing the barley harvest to begin (Leviticus. 23:10-14).

Could it be that two different ways of calculating the Passover had to do with a misconception that the day started in the evening on the part of the Jews while those in Galilee took the proper view that the day started at midnight? Maybe this was necessary to have the proper time for Passover and the official time for Passover.

Mt. Nebo

Why Mt. Nebo for the Transfiguration? Moses died on Mt Nebo (Deut. 34:1,7). Elijah was headed in the direction of Mt. Nebo when he was taken, and Jeremiah hid the tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant on Mt. Nebo (2 Macc 2:4-5).

Elijah starts from Gilgal in the hill country of Ephraim (2 Kings 2:1). He went about eight miles south to Bethel. From there, he journeyed thirteen miles east-southeast (ESE) to Jericho. From there, he continued to the Jordan, if he continued ESE, he came to the Jordan at 7 miles. He crossed the Jordan on dry land and continued. If he continued ESE in 14 miles, he would reach the summit of Mt. Nebo, also known as Pisgah. This scenario is speculative, but likely.

Jeremiah hid the tabernacle, the altar of incense, and the Ark of the Covenant on Mt. Nebo (2 Macc 2:4-5). If Moses and Elijah both departed from Mt. Nebo how appropriate, that Jesus' departure discussed there. Peter called the mount of transfiguration a holy mountain (2 Pet. 1:18)—and Maccabees states Mt. Nebo was sanctified to God or made holy (2 Macc 2:8). It stated the majesty of the LORD shall appear, and there shall be a cloud as it was also shown to Moses. These events fit the transfiguration—the disciples saw Jesus' majesty and the cloud.

Jesus and the apostles then journeyed four days, about 90 miles south, then they rested near the Jericho on the Sabbath. The next day the transfiguration occurred—Sunday **Omer/Easter** Nisan 20.⁵ Went to a high mountain to pray—could they have prayed all night. Transfiguration occurred “as he was praying” (Luke 9:32).—Peter and his companions were very sleepy—an indication that the transfiguration occurred during the night—when they came fully awake, they saw.

The request to build shelters could imply a place to sleep as opposed to a tabernacle for the feast of

³ Matt.16:21, Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22-25. Only Matthew mentions us daily carrying our cross before Peter's confession.

⁴ It appears here and other places that the pilgrims from Galilee celebrated the feast of Passover / Unleavened bread one day earlier than the Jews of Judea. This is also shown in both Thursday and Friday of Passion Week being called Passover.

⁵ Matt 17:1, Mark 9:1; Luke 9:28 has *about* 8 days.

Booths. Peter's mention of booths has caused commentators to place this event near the feast of Booths or Tabernacles in the fall. The feast of Tabernacles must be celebrated in Jerusalem, not on some high mountain, six days, or less journey from Caesarea Philippi. This mountain is normally taken to be on or near Mt. Hermon, which dominated the area around that town. Peter's mention of booths has no connection with the feast of booths. In the gospel of John, the feast of Tabernacles follows the feeding of the 5000. But we know from Matthew's gospel that Jesus returned to Capernaum immediately following the Transfiguration incident because there was an attempt to collect the two-drachma tax (Matt 17:24). This tax was normally paid before Passover. Therefore, this cannot be occurring just before the feast of Tabernacles because they leave from here and go to Capernaum rather than Jerusalem. It cannot be occurring after the feast because they are up in Caesarea Philippi and have spent at least two weeks traveling.

The Holy Mountain

Several Scripture references would lead us to connect the transfiguration with a holy mountain. Peter says We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain (2 Peter 1:18). Jeremiah said this place [where the Ark was hidden] shall remain unknown until God gather together the congregation of the people and receive them to mercy. And then the Lord shall show these things, and the majesty of the Lord shall appear, and there shall be a cloud as it was also shown to Moses, and he showed it when Solomon prayed that the place might be sanctified to the great God (2 Maccabees 2:7-8).

Other Links

Luke 9:37 the next day, when they came down from the mountain, they were met by a large crowd. Now was this on the Monday Nisan 21 the last day of unleavened bread? Or was it rather the first day after unleavened bread when the crowds of people would be returning to Galilee via the Jordan? I propose the latter. So Peter's confession, travel, and transfiguration occurred during the week of Unleavened Bread.

A Psalm Jesus may have prayed at this time Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation; rescue me from deceitful and wicked men. You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God (Psalm 43:1-5).

The Father indicated to Jesus, who his successor was to be—Peter. Peter succeeded Jesus as the head of the Church as now Jesus announced that he would die—once the successor was chosen. The Jewish leadership was very much oppressing Jesus at this time, and after he came to the holy mountain, he went to the altar of God, where he sacrificed himself on the cross.

The crowds at Tabernacles in A.D. 32 and Passover in A.D. 33 asked, “will Jesus show up?” is one of the indications that he did not show the previous Passover. John 11:56 What do you think, is he coming to the feast at all? John 11:57 If Jesus was seen, he was to be reported.

Sunday following the Sabbath of Passover week was the Lag B'Omer. The day the first fruit of the barley harvest was offered to God in the Temple. Once this was done, the people were allowed to harvest and eat the new harvest (Leviticus 23:10-14). This feast also called the firstfruits; Jesus was resurrected as firstfruits to God. His ascension to the Father had to wait for the grain to be waved in the Temple.