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The Glory of God: Echoes of Exodus in the Gospels

Mark A. Matson

Given the centrality of the Exodus narrative in the formation of Israel's self-consciousness, it is somewhat surprising that relatively few *direct* references to the book of Exodus are found in the gospels.¹ However, "traces" of certain passages in Exodus do appear at critical points in the gospel accounts. These traces are found more as intertextual uses—that is, as echoes and allusions, rather than explicit citations.² Such echoes, though, are a powerful means of evoking previous texts often in very creative ways. As a result, we can affirm that the Exodus narratives remained central for the Jesus community, but in ways which emphasize Jesus' unique relationship with God. That is to say, the gospels echo certain aspects of the Exodus accounts, but refract them through a decidedly Christological lens. In this essay, I focus on a cluster of striking allusions to Exodus in the gospels, particularly Luke's Transfiguration account and a possible echo of that in John's prologue.

Echoes of Exodus in the Transfiguration Accounts

The various synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration (Mark 9.2–10; Matt 17.1–9; Luke 9.28–36) provide a strong echo to the book of Exodus by alluding to the image of Moses ascending Mount Sinai in Exodus—in Exodus 19.16–25 and 24.12–18, but especially in Exodus 33.17–34.8 and 34.29–35.³ Jesus is thus brought into relation with Moses and Elijah (especially with Moses) and the story of Jesus is linked to the story of Israel's journey to the promised land.⁴

Turning first to the Markan version of the Transfiguration, the following strong indications of intertextual linkage present themselves:⁵

1. In contrast with the far more explicit references Stephen makes in Acts 7.

2. The literature on intertextuality now is large and growing. I follow here a fairly restrictive use of allusion and echo as suggested in Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), especially 1–33. Cf. also Stefan Alkier, "Intertextuality and the Semiotics of Biblical Texts," in *Reading the Bible Intertextually*, edited by Richard B. Hays, Stefan Alkier and Leroy Andrew Huizenga (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 3–22; Steve Moyise, "Intertextuality and Historical Approaches to the Use of Scripture in the New Testament," (*ibid.*, 23–34); Patricia Tull Willey, *Remember the Former Things*, (SBLDS 161; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), especially 57–104.

3. Adella Yarboro Collins, *Mark* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2007), 417.

4. Note that in the Sinai account in Exodus 34, Moses brings Joshua up with him. Since *Joshua* and *Jesus* are alternate translations of the same name in Hebrew (*Yeshua*), in the synoptic accounts, Jesus/Joshua meets Moses and, in the Exodus accounts, Moses brings Joshua/Jesus.

5. Most of what follows is cited in various commentaries. See, for instance, Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (The Anchor Bible, Volume 27A; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 1114.

Mark	Exodus
1. Jesus goes up on “high mountain” (9.2)	1. Moses ascends Sinai (34.4; 19.20; 24.13)
2. Jesus takes only Peter, James and John (9.2)	2. Moses takes only Joshua (24.13)
3. Jesus was “transfigured” (changed) 9.2)	3. Moses’ face shining (34.29–30)
4. A cloud comes over the mountain (9.7)	4. Cloud comes on mountain (34.5, 19.18, 24.15–16)
5. God speaks from the cloud (9.7)	5. God speaks in thunder (19.19); God descends in cloud and speaks (34.5)

A key issue, of course, is the nature of the “transfiguration” of Jesus’ appearance. In Mark, Jesus’ appearance is changed (*metamorphāō*) and at the same time his clothing becomes an intense radiant white (*stilbonta leuka lian*). This change in appearance and clothing, together with the appearance of Moses and Elijah, clearly involves some aspect of a theophany even before God descends to the mountain in the cloud.⁶ But exactly what the change in appearance denotes is not clear.

The strong connection with the cluster of Exodus-Sinai theophanies is enhanced by the desire of Peter to make three booths—one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. The command to celebrate the key festivals, including Booths, is closely linked to Moses’ reception of the law on Sinai (Exod 23.16–17 and 34.22). Moreover, the command to keep the festival in Leviticus connects it explicitly with the Exodus and the period of time in the wilderness. “You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens of Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt...” (Lev 23.42–43). In our narrative account in Mark, Peter seems to have made the immediate connection between a theophany on a mountain and the Exodus tradition—without any explanation—which suggests this connection would have been understandable. Joel Marcus has noted that tents or booths were connected in Jewish literature with the righteous dead, with the pillar of cloud in Exodus (and by implication, the cloud that overshadowed the mountain at the Transfiguration) and also with the expectation for the world to come.⁷ While a clear explanation of Peter’s proposed construction of booths may not be available, such is the nature of echoes and allusions, which often resound with multiple scriptures and on multiple levels.

While Mark’s account offers tangible connections to the Exodus accounts of Moses’s ascent on Sinai, the subsequent expansions by Matthew and Luke make it even clearer. Matthew adds to, and interprets, the “transfiguration” with a comment that Jesus’ “face shone like the sun.” (Matt 17.2). In a very similar way, Luke interprets the metamorphosis in terms of Jesus’ face: “the appearance of his countenance was altered...” (Luke 9.29). Both of these gospels also intensify, though in very different ways, the color of Jesus’ clothing. Matthew says that his clothing became “white as light,” while Luke says his clothing became “dazzling white” (or perhaps better, “white like lightning”). This last term may not, at first glance, seem like a great intensification. But the term (*exastraptō*) is closely related to the description of the clothes on the two angelic figures at Jesus’ tomb—they are clothed in lightning-like clothes (*astraptō*) (cf. Luke 9.29 and 24.4). This cosmic-like apparel links Jesus’ appearance at the Transfiguration with heavenly beings at the empty grave upon his resurrection. The linkage in Matthew of “light” is perhaps further developed when the cloud in which God descends is described as a “bright cloud” (“filled with light”—*phōteinē*). And the linkage in Luke is further intensified by “glory” language. In other words, both Matthew and Luke have intensified the description of Jesus’ face and clothing to suggest an “otherworldly” connection—a manifestation of God’s appearance.

Luke, however, makes the connections between the Transfiguration scene and Exodus much clearer and more compelling. By describing Jesus’ face as having an altered countenance and then a few verses later describing Moses and Elijah as appearing in “glory,” and further describing Jesus himself as being seen having

⁶ Wilhelm Bousset argues that the combination of “he was transformed” and “white clothing” points to a “super-earthly being.” See discussion in Collins, 414.

⁷ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 1116. Note, for instance, that it is the Festival of Booths that is celebrated in the eschatological vision of Zechariah 14.16.

the character of “glory,” Luke makes a strong connection to the Exodus-Sinai theophany stories. In Exodus 33, just before Moses ascends Sinai, he asks God to “show me your glory” (Exod 33.18). In a notable exchange, God says no one can look upon him and live, but that he will allow Moses to see the backside of God as he passes by “in glory.” Thus, God’s very nature is said to be one of “glory.”⁸ This connection to God showing his glory (even the backside of it) is then reflected in Moses’ descent from the mountain. His face shone because he had been talking with God (Exod 34.29). Clearly Luke’s “altered countenance” and Matthew’s “face shone like the sun” are intertextual engagements with Exodus 34, revealing an understanding of the transfiguration of Jesus’ appearance in terms of Moses’ own altered countenance.

In addition, Luke engages intertextually with the larger narrative of Exodus. In the Transfiguration scene, Moses and Elijah were seen in “glory” speaking about Jesus’ *departure*—literally his *exodus*—which he was to fulfill in Jerusalem (Luke 9.31).⁹ The reference to a journey to Jerusalem and its integral relationship to the death-burial-resurrection of Jesus is seen a few verses later, at the beginning of the travel narrative portion of Luke’s gospel. In Luke 9.51, the movement towards Jerusalem begins with the words, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up (*analēmpseōs*), he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This passage surely echoes the previous words about Jesus’ exodus in 9.31, as well as earlier words following Peter’s confession where Jesus predicts the Son of Man will undergo suffering and rejection, be killed and on the third day be raised (Luke 9.22); it also anticipates the later references to Jesus’ being taken up into heaven (cf. Acts 1.2, 11, 22; using the related word *analēmphthē*). This whole complex of intertextual and intratextual references suggests that Jesus’ exodus is his passion. Many have seen in this explicit use of the word *exodus* a reference to the narrative of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt. And yet in what way does Jesus’ departure in Jerusalem fit the typology of Israel’s narrative? If the exodus in Luke is linked primarily to Jesus’ death, there is little in the Moses-Exodus tradition that fits that in any direct way: Moses’ own death has no salvific effect in Israel’s move from Egypt to wilderness to Canaan.

One solution to this enigmatic connection between Jesus’ exodus and the Moses-Exodus tradition is a mediating role of New Exodus imagery in Second Isaiah. The idea that the latter books of Isaiah seem to develop an Exodus typology has been frequently suggested. The main theme in Second Isaiah of an anticipated return from Babylonian captivity, in which God will lead the Judean captives back to Canaan, certainly evokes the Exodus and uses that motif to develop themes of God’s care and freedom.¹⁰ Susan Garrett sees in Luke’s gospel a strong linkage to a New Exodus theme in Isaiah 40–66, and others have noted the intertextual linkages as well.¹¹ As a result, the Exodus imagery in Luke’s Transfiguration scene is interpreted through various later traditions about the Exodus (Second Isaiah, Zechariah, etc.), with the strong overtones of redemption and healing that Luke’s use of Isaiah 61 in his programmatic passage in Luke 4.18–19 provides.

In particular, then, a reader who knows the biblical stories can sense the Exodus imagery alluded to here in the Transfiguration scene, which has one foundation in Moses but is modified as well by (a) the way of the Lord passage from Isaiah 40.3–5 found in Luke 3.4–6, seeming to refer to Jesus as this Lord; (b) the delivery of captives passage from Isaiah 61.1–2 and 58.6, in which the agent of this liberation (*exodus*) is one on whom the Spirit anoints, in Luke 4.18–19; and (c) the overarching influence of the servant songs (Isa 42.1–4, 49.1–6, 50.4–11, and 52.13–53.12) on understanding Jesus’ role in this New Exodus. Luke, then, is reflecting critical themes from Exodus, but interpreting them through the extensive use of New Exodus imagery found in Isaiah.

8. This use of *doxa* (glory) is particularly notable in the LXX. While *glory*, in regular Greek usage, often meant *reputation* or *renown*, the meaning of *brightness* or *splendor* (as the shining of Moses’ face suggests) developed primarily in the Jewish literature. Furthermore, in the New Testament it has also come to describe both “a divine and heavenly radiance” as well as “the loftiness and majesty of God”—undoubtedly under influence from the Hebrew *kabod*. See G. Kittel, “*doxa*” in *TDNT* 2.232–253.

9. Interestingly, this is the only use of the word *exodus* in the gospels.

10. See, for instance, Bernard W. Anderson, “Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 177–195; and Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 21–22, where he uses the term “second exodus.”

11. Susan R. Garrett, “Exodus from Bondage: Luke 9.31 and Acts 12.1–24,” *CBQ* 52 (1990), 656–680; and “The Meaning of Jesus’ Death in Luke,” *Word & World* 12 (1992), 11–16. See also Peter Mallen, *The Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008).

Echoes of Exodus in the Gospel of John

Perhaps the clearest indications of John's engagement of the Exodus traditions are found in the opening prologue (John 1.1–18) and the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6). In an exchange subsequent to the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus interprets that feeding in terms of the manna which Moses gave the ancestors in the wilderness (John 6.31). Manna is understood to be “bread from heaven.” That John is drawing upon the story from Exodus 16 is fairly clear. Peder Borgen demonstrated that John employs fairly common midrashic patterns of the Exodus account, subject to his own homiletic interests.¹² In the Gospel of John, this manna/bread from heaven is understood, however, to be Jesus himself: “I am the bread of life...” (John 6.35). In John's gospel, the feeding miracle is interpreted initially as life-giving bread (John 6.35–51), an interpretation that might link the manna with the giving of the Torah on Sinai. As Borgen notes, Jesus claims that this bread gives life, and Jewish interpretive tradition often suggested that it is Torah that gives life.¹³ But this “living bread” subsequently is interpreted as Jesus' own flesh and blood (John 6.52–65), a radical shift in the metaphors. Yet the metaphor of bread in the wilderness still recurs in the dialogue that follows. “This is the bread that comes down from heaven, not like that which our ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever” (John 6.58). This clash of competing metaphors demonstrates how John re-appropriates the Exodus-wilderness tradition and reinterprets it in a uniquely Christological way—one that focuses on Jesus, the Son en-fleshed, as the one that comes down from heaven.

Not only is the interpretive motif one of manna from heaven, which is clearly an Exodus-wilderness motif, but the larger narrative unit of John 6 also connects the feeding and subsequent interpretation specifically with the Passover tradition. John 6.4 specifically notes that the feeding miracle took place near the festival of Passover. Moreover, the feeding itself seems to have taken place in a wilderness location on “the other side” of the Sea of Galilee. This is perhaps part of the core tradition; in Matthew and Mark also, the feeding miracle occurs in a “wilderness place” where food is not readily available. So John at least has emphasized certain Exodus-wilderness connections in his feeding miracle story.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John has no narrative that recounts the Transfiguration. The strongest connection we found between the Synoptic Gospels and the Exodus-Sinai tradition would thus seem to be missing from the Fourth Gospel. But perhaps not: John's prologue contains echoes of precisely the “glory” language we heard in Luke's Transfiguration scene. It seems possible that John is reflecting similar connections in his prologue.

The origin of John's prologue is bitterly contested. It is variously conceived as coming from John and being integrally related to the narrative of the gospel, to a pre-existing hymn that was used by John, to a later hymn that was tacked onto the gospel.¹⁴ Many have argued—persuasively, I think—that the prologue offers a mini-narrative that helps anticipate and interpret the gospel.¹⁵

We should, then, see in the various movements of the prologue key elements in the life of Jesus that the author wants to use to direct the reading process. In this model of the narrative function of John's prologue, the scene shifts from a primordial time (1.1–5), to the anticipation of Jesus in Judaism, perhaps through the Torah (1.10–13), and finally to the incarnation of Jesus (1.14–18). The arrival of Jesus (v. 14), the announcement of Jesus by John the Baptist (v. 15) and Jesus' display of his own glory (v. 16–18) are the summary points that the reader is to keep in mind.

12. So Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven*, SuppNovT 10 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 28–98.

13. Borgen, p. 148. For instance, one reference cited by Borgen (Mek. Exod 15.26) says that God told Moses, “Say to Israel, ‘The words of the Torah which I have given to you are life unto you.’”

14. For a more complete discussion of the various positions on the prologue, see Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 333–363.

15. For instance, Francis J. Maloney, *Belief in the Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 45. “The real author [of John] creates a poetic narrative introduction to the story of Jesus.” Also Matson, *John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 9–12.

In the display of Jesus' glory referenced in v. 14 as well as vv. 16–18, many scholars have seen an allusion to the Transfiguration of Jesus.¹⁶ If so, we may have an indication of one of the ways John has appropriated certain aspects of the synoptic or pre-synoptic story.¹⁷ But even if there is no direct connection between Luke's Transfiguration story and John's prologue, the same connections we see between Luke and Exodus 33–34 occur here as well.

The declaration in John that “we have seen his glory, the glory as of the father's only son” (John 1.14) seems to frame the entire final unit of the prologue. Jesus has glory, and this glory is a special reflection of God (Jesus is his unique son). In John 1.17, then, we have a cluster of connections to Exodus 33–34, connections that may also point to a connection between John 1 and Luke 9:¹⁸

- a) First, the passage opens with a reference to Moses and the giving of the Law, which is the primary focus of the Sinai narrative in Exodus. Jesus is explicitly compared to Moses, and in this comparison Jesus is superior even to Moses. Jesus' revelation of grace and truth are superior to the law that was given by Moses.
- b) Jesus is said to exhibit “glory.” In John *glory* and the related verb *glorify* are linked over and over again to the special nature that Jesus had God share (or will share). So Jesus shows his glory through his signs (2.14, 11.4, 40), his glory only comes from God (8.54) and reflects God's glory (17.5). And God will glorify Jesus, and Jesus will similarly glorify God, through the passion and resurrection.
- c) This glory is related closely to seeing some action or reflection of God (Exod 16.7, Num 14.22–23). So the term “no one has ever seen God, it is the only son who has made him known” (John 1.18) seems to refer back to this glory. Jesus shows God's glory, and in doing so makes Him known.
- d) John's reference to glory refers, just as Luke did, to the account in Exodus 33, where Moses sought to see God's glory and was denied that privilege. He only could see the back side of God, and even that made his face shine. But Jesus, alone, has seen God.
- e) Not only does he show forth God's glory, but he also “tabernacles” with humanity (*skenaw* in v. 14), providing another link both to the Transfiguration scene where the disciples build “tabernacles,” and also to the tabernacle in Exodus 33 where the Lord would speak with Moses.

The Fourth Gospel, then, asserts a strong interest and reflection of the Exodus-Sinai narrative. We find them in John's version of the miraculous feeding, which relies very heavily on connections to the wilderness feeding with manna, and in the allusion to Moses' close encounter with God on the mountain of Sinai. In each case, John has used the Exodus narrative to highlight Jesus' unique character as being superior to Moses, his revelation superior to the law and his own being providing a spiritual food that is superior to that which gave (temporary) life to the Israelites in the wilderness wandering.

In both the Synoptic Gospels and in John, the Exodus narrative plays a significant role. But it is a role that is developed more by allusion than citation. And it is a role that does not underscore the importance of the Exodus so much as to use it to amplify Jesus' own role as greater than Moses, greater than the Torah. In doing so, the gospels make the point that following Jesus leads to a salvation greater than that which Israel experienced in fleeing Egypt to settle in Canaan.

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16. This connection was relatively common in earlier scholarship. More recently we might note Jacques Dupont, *Essais sur la christologie de S. Jean* (Bruges: Editions de l'Abbaye de Saint-Andre, 1951), 12, 279; and M. E. Boismard, *St. John's Prologue* (London: Blackfriars Publications, 1957), 51, 139.

17. This point was made by Dale Alison, in a very carefully argued (as yet unpublished) paper, “‘Jesus did not say to him that he would not die’: John 21.20–23 and Mark 9.1,” presented at the SBL for the *John, Jesus and History* section in 2012.

18. See also Boismard, *Moses or Jesus*, 94–98 for more on the relationship between the prologue of John and Exod 33–34.