

THE GLORY OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE CONTEXT OF THE TRANSFIGURATION ON MOUNT TABOR – BIBLICAL, PATRISTIC, AND ARTISTIC APPROACH

Abstract

This study examines the glory of Jesus Christ in the Transfiguration episode on Mount Tabor through an integrated exegetical, patristic, and art-historical lens. Beginning with close readings of the Synoptic accounts (Mt 17; Mk 9; Lk 9), it considers the narrative elements – Christ’s radiant face and garments, the luminous cloud, the voice of the Father, and the presence of Moses and Elijah – as theological signs that disclose Christ’s divinity, fulfilment of Law and Prophets, and anticipation of paschal and eschatological glory. The work traces reception in the patristic tradition, contrasting Eastern hesychastic and Palamite emphases on experiential access to uncreated light with Western medieval and scholastic readings that stress pedagogical and eschatological functions of the vision (Aquinas, Bonaventure, Hugh of Saint-Cher). An extended iconographic survey explores how Byzantine and Western visual vocabularies – mandorla forms, compositional schemes, and the depiction of Taboric light – mediate theological claims and shape liturgical imagination. Methodologically, the study combines literary-philological interpretation, reception history, and semiotic analysis of images, aiming to show how textual, doctrinal, and visual registers interact. Its principal contribution is a systematic integration of these three dimensions, demonstrating that the Transfiguration functions simultaneously as a doctrinal revelation, a model of mystical participation in divine light, and a formative visual grammar within the Christian tradition. The study points toward further interdisciplinary research on the visual reception of *dóxa*, the theology of uncreated light, and the liturgical-performative role of Transfiguration imagery in East and West.



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Introduction

The Transfiguration of the Lord occupies an essential place in Christian theology and spirituality, representing an exceptional manifestation of divine glory and communion between God and man. The event on Mount Tabor is recorded by all three synoptic Evangelists and serves as a fundamental reference for understanding Christ's divine nature and humanity's restorative destiny. The radiance of His face and garments, the voice of the Father in the luminous cloud, and the presence of Moses and Elijah form a setting in which the theological dimension of light and glory becomes accessible to human experience, making this epiphany a paradigm of divine revelation in history.

Throughout the centuries, this episode has been reflected upon and explored in depth in the writings of the Church Fathers, who emphasized both the Christological dimension of the Transfiguration and its soteriological and eschatological value. The importance of the Transfiguration extends beyond dogmatics and biblical interpretation, decisively influencing liturgical life and artistic creation. Christian iconography has found in this episode an inexhaustible source of inspiration, developing a specific visual language for representing divine glory. In Byzantine and Eastern art, as well as in Western interpretations, the Transfiguration has remained one of the most theologically rich themes of sacred painting, shaping how light and glory may be expressed both visually and theologically.

The following analysis seeks to reveal the multiple dimensions of this moment, investigating how the Transfiguration was understood, embraced, and represented in the life of the Church and in Christian art. Thus, the Transfiguration on Tabor is situated at the confluence of revelation, tradition, and artistic expression, illustrating an inner journey of faith and a communitarian dimension of the experience of glory. Through this perspective, the Transfiguration becomes a continual point of reference for theological reflection, liturgical experience, and artistic creation, inviting a dynamic understanding of the relationship between humanity and God in history.

The current state of research reveals both convergences and interpretive tensions. Contemporary exegetical studies frequently situate the Transfiguration within paschal and Christological frameworks (notably in the writings of Ratzinger / Benedict XVI), while Eastern patristic scholarship and recent Palamite theology accentuate experiential

access to the uncreated light (St. Gregory of Sinai, St. Gregory Palamas). Art-historical scholarship has thoroughly documented iconographic types – mandorla variants, compositional schemes, and liturgical functions – but comprehensive interdisciplinary syntheses that bring together exegetical, patristic, and aesthetic analyses remain comparatively scarce. The present study draws on a broad corpus: critical readings of the Synoptic texts; primary patristic witnesses from Origen and St. John Chrysostom to St. Gregory of Sinai and St. Gregory Palamas; medieval and scholastic commentaries (Aquinas, Bonaventure, Hugh of Saint-Cher); modern theological interpreters (e.g., Ratzinger); and an extensive body of iconographic evidence, including Byzantine mosaics, manuscript miniatures, and major Western paintings. Supplementary secondary literature in hermeneutics, the history of the icon, and visual studies supplies the historical-liturgical context for these representations.

Methodologically, the study combines literary and philological interpretation of the Gospel accounts with reception-historical reconstruction and iconographic-semiotic analysis. The approach is deliberately inter- and multidisciplinary: textual interpretation establishes theological parameters; reception history traces doctrinal and spiritual appropriations; art-historical methods decode visual conventions and theological signification; and comparative theology evaluates East–West divergences. The study’s structure follows this integrative logic: an introductory interpretation of the Gospel narratives; a chapter on patristic reception and theological development; a section on medieval and modern reflections; an extended iconographic survey of Byzantine and Western types; a synthesis addressing liturgical and soteriological implications; and concluding proposals.

The novelty of the research lies in its systematic integration of exegetical, patristic, and artistic perspectives, showing how the Transfiguration’s theme of glory functions concurrently as doctrinal revelation, spiritual praxis (the teaching and experience of uncreated light), and a formative visual grammar within Christian liturgical-artistic tradition. This unified reading invites further interdisciplinary inquiry into the visual reception of *dóxa* in relation to the paschal mission and the theology of deification.

The Theological Dimension of Glory and Light in the Biblical Account of the Transfiguration

The scene of the Transfiguration of the Saviour is significant in the New Testament, being described by the Synoptic Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This moment

highlights both the divine nature of Christ and His central role in the restoration of the entire creation. At the same time, divine glory is visibly manifested, and the disciples enter deep contemplation and awe-filled veneration.

In Matthew 17:1–9, the Transfiguration occurs after a time of spiritual preparation. The setting on a ‘high mountain’ symbolises elevation and divine encounter. Jesus takes with Him Peter, James, and John, forming a select group who are granted the privilege of witnessing this manifestation of divinity, experiencing a profoundly intimate event meant to convey a spiritual lesson “and He was transfigured before them; His face shone like the sun^[1], and His clothes became white as the light”. Through these words, Matthew introduces the concept of *dóxa* as radiance that emanates from within Christ. This is not a superficial process (Hagner 1995, 489); it is a testimony to the hidden divinity of Jesus, who becomes incarnate. The comparison of the light on Christ’s face to the sun’s indicates both His grandeur and the spiritual depth He imparts to the lives of those who have faith (Blomberg 1992, 262).

Another notable detail is the transformation of His garments into those ‘white as light.’ This symbol suggests purity and simultaneously reflects divine nature, pointing to the reality that Christ is revealed in a form that exceeds human perception. From this angle, one may draw a connection with the Temple of the Old Testament, where God’s glory was manifest. In this way, Christ becomes the locus of divine presence, supplanting the Temple. The Evangelist Mark draws a comparison to snow (Mk 9:3), evoking a splendour that surpasses natural standards. This reflects the unique typology of the Transfiguration, which admits no earthly repetition, as it speaks of a cosmic and divine reality.

The participation of Moses and Elijah in the vision is highly significant. They represent the Law and the Prophets, encompassing both the past and future of the people of Israel. The dialogue between Christ, Moses, and Elijah highlights Jesus as the centre of the Law and the Prophets, underscoring His role as the fulfilment of Old Testament revelation and the meeting point of prophetic and legal traditions. The messianic foundation of Christ is affirmed by the profound significance of the Transfiguration, which places Jesus within the historical and spiritual continuum of the prophets. The appearance of Moses and Elijah alongside Christ during the Transfiguration is no mere coincidence. Moses, representing the Law, and Elijah, symbolizing the Prophets, are central figures of the Old Testament. Their presence underscores the continuity between the old and new covenants, demonstrating that Jesus is the fulfilment of the divine

promises made to the chosen people. This extraordinary encounter emphasizes that in Christ, all past prophecies are brought to completion. The divine glory manifested in the Transfiguration confirms Jesus' status as the promised Messiah and Saviour. Moreover, this event ensures the permanence and validity of God's covenant with His people, now extended to all humanity through Christ's mission.

These attributes of veneration and justification are accentuated in Christ's encounters with the disciples, who would later become the martyrs of divine glory. Thus, the event becomes a landmark moment, bringing clarity and light through which spiritual leaders and the faithful can appreciate the meaning of divine inheritance.

A particularly notable moment of the event is the voice heard from the luminous cloud, proclaiming: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." This testimony acknowledges the divine identity of Jesus and His messianic role. It is a direct call to listen and to live according to the will of God. The divine voice amplifies the present glory, inviting the faithful to recognize and join God's plan. This declaration transforms the moments of revelation into spiritual commitments for all those touched by the *kabod* of God.

Christ's entry into 'glory' is not merely a personal triumphal moment but part of God's salvific plan for humanity. Within this vision, *kabod* serves as a lasting reference point for anticipating the future divine glory. As Christ approaches the Cross, He presents this identification with divine glory as an ongoing process. Even His mission of atonement carries within it the notion of 'glory'. All the deeds of Christ, including His sacrifices, are imbued with divine glory, transforming the entire experience of salvation into a revelation of the *kabod*, which serves as a source of inspiration for faith and devotion. The theme of 'glory' plays an essential role in the eschatological context, as evidenced in the New Testament (Nolland 2005, 699)^[2]. In this regard, the promise of Christ's return is regarded as the ultimate revelation of glory. *Dóxa* thus becomes the foundation of supreme hope for believers, who await the restoration of all things under the reign of a glorious King, as is Christ.

St. Luke the Evangelist recounts in detail the luminous episode of Christ's Transfiguration, a pivotal event in the New Testament that reveals both Christ's divine nature and the complex relationship between divine glory and humanity. His account highlights essential features pertinent to the theological understanding of this phenomenon, with profound implications for explaining the doctrine of divine glory, which runs throughout the entire Holy Scripture. The first part of the narrative leads

us into a solemn moment. Luke 9:28 informs us that Christ ‘went up the mountain to pray’^[3]. In this context, the ascent of the mountain is symbolic. The mountain represents a sacred place where God’s presence is revealed; here, we see a prefiguration of a profound encounter with God, one that will lead to a partial yet powerful unveiling of divine glory. Prayer becomes a decisive element for what is to follow. Luke recounts a promise of communion between Christ and the Father, a divine conversation culminating in the manifestation of God’s glory. This detail underscores that the encounter with God – His seeking in prayer – is crucial to attaining profound visions and mystical revelations.

Luke proceeds to state that “the appearance of His face changed, and His clothing became dazzling white”. This verbal depiction of the physical transformation undergone by Jesus is profoundly significant, as the phrase ‘the appearance of His face changed’ indicates a manifestation of the divine nature hidden in the incarnate Jesus while simultaneously externalizing it. This underscores a core value in Christian theology: Christ is true God and true man. The radiant garment symbolizes divine holiness, akin to the vestments worn by the priests in the Temple of Jerusalem. This emanation of light from Christ becomes a symbol of divine glory (Strauss 1972, 535), reflecting the proximity of holiness. The association with ‘light’ has its origin in biblical tradition, which, over the centuries, has linked light to divine revelation.

Another deeply meaningful component is the appearance of Moses and Elijah – the coryphaei of the Law and the prophets – conversing with Jesus. This suggests a symbolic dialogue between the Old and New Testaments, between the ancestors and the fulfilment of divine promises in Christ. Moses, an exponent of the Law, and Elijah, as a representative of the prophets, come to affirm Jesus’ mission, thus emphasizing his status. Witnessing this scene, the disciples are profoundly moved. The discussion between Moses and Elijah with Christ is a sacred moment in which all the elements converge toward the revelation of divine glory. This suggests that God’s glory is not abstract but is realized through Jesus’ presence and discourse with the two prophets. Thus, the entire experience of this encounter becomes sacred, bearing deep spiritual meaning.

Peter’s reaction to this revelation shows us that he is very surprised. Peter’s exclamation: “Master, it is good for us to be here” (Lk 9:33) reveals his desire to remain in that holy place and build huts for each of them – even if his commendable calculation simultaneously shows that he could not fully comprehend the meaning of the divine reality they were experiencing. Peter expresses a wish to remain within that unfamiliar

yet overwhelming existence, thereby demonstrating humanity's need for security in encountering the sacred. When the luminous cloud appears, the disciples are struck with fear and respond with deep reverence. We see from this that the encounter with God's glory is overwhelming and contact with divine holiness fills them with emotional power. This is a profound manifestation of divine glorification, foretold long beforehand.

A crucial moment occurs when a voice is heard from the cloud: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; listen to Him". This statement affirms Jesus' divine identity and makes the disciples responsible for obeying Him (France 2011, 647). The divine voice proclaims Christ and extends an invitation to the disciples – and indeed to all – to enter a personal relationship with Him. This call to listen is a summons to all humanity to enter communion and to give itself to God's plan for the restoration of creation. This unique divine utterance constitutes a culminating episode, once again affirming the intimate bond between the Father and the Son while highlighting the worship and *kabod* that envelop Christ. Here, the divine ordinances form an integral part of the believer's spiritual life, calling them to embrace divine worthiness and standards, regardless of the trials they may face.

The transformation experienced by the disciples represents another crucial aspect of this event. When they hear the voice of God and behold divine glory, they fall face down to the ground, marking a moment of deep reverence. This experience transforms them, enabling them to comprehend more fully the identity of Christ. Following this event, the disciples perceive their Saviour differently; they come to realise that He is indeed the Redeemer and the Son of God. This revelation has implications for all humanity in its search to understand the characteristics of divine nature. Throughout their time, the disciples would go on to form others both through their preaching and through the witness of their lives and the way they lived their faith. The episode on Mount Tabor forms the spiritual foundation of their formation, culminating in their mission to bring the Holy Gospel to all.

The Lord's Transfiguration on Mount Tabor is a moment of paramount importance for understanding Christian theology, especially for Peter the Apostle. This profound experience compels Peter to open his eyes to the mysteries of the Incarnation and provides him with the means necessary to disseminate the divine truth to as many as possible. Peter thus understands that God is not distant, nor does He deny us access to Himself, but is close and active within human experience, allowing people to know Him

and even to touch Him. This proves to be a fundamental manifestation: God allows Himself to be touched, assuring people of His existence.

In 2 Peter 1:16–18, the Apostle refers to the ‘light’ that was unleashed at the Transfiguration, showing that its source is the eternal Being of God. Peter retains in his memory the image of the Saviour full of radiance and His garments which were white as light. This phenomenon of illumination is expressed as a manifestation of divine glory, revealed to humankind to offer them the possibility of participation in the divine glory (Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul 1996, 15)^[4]. This ‘light’ becomes a symbol of the holiness of Christ and transforms into an essential element in the struggle against the darkness generated by sin and human ignorance. It represents the divinity of Christ and His power to enlighten and transform human existence. This divine light offers a decisive advantage in the confrontation with the negative forces of sin and ignorance, thus becoming a beacon of hope and spiritual guidance for humanity. A similar episode can be found in the writings of Saint John the Evangelist, in the prologue to his First Epistle, 1 John 1:1–7, in which he refers to the Lord’s Transfiguration. John reports that he experienced a special moment, and bears witness to the divine radiance of Christ, recalling the theology of light that occupies a central position in his writings. He identifies and proclaims Christ as the ‘Light’ that illumines the darkness, bringing deliverance and enlightening all those who believe in Him. In John’s conception, this light becomes a source of brilliance and a sign of divine truth, possessing the power to transform the existence of those who believe in Him. John reveals that those who claim to partake in Christ but do not lead lives that reflect the light are deceiving themselves. In this case, ‘light’ confers the true value of an unadulterated faith. From this light arises the responsibility to reflect divine glory in their actions. Thus, the concept of *kabod* is transformed into a dynamic reality in the lives of believers, calling them to moral and spiritual transformation according to divine grace. For John, the relationship between *kabod* and ‘light’ constitutes an important aspect of salvation. Through His work, the Son of God transforms darkness into light, urging those who believe to live a life that reflects the divine character.

The Reception of the Divine Glory from Mount Tabor in Church Tradition

The episode of the Lord’s Transfiguration on Mount Tabor is a firm revelation of divine glory, and the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, especially those of St. John Chrysostom (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1994) and St. Gregory of Sinai (Balfour 1981),

offer us a broad vision concerning this mystical event. They highlight the opportunity that presents itself before every person: to contemplate Christ in His unapproachable and pure light, just as the apostles present at the Transfiguration experienced. However, they also affirm that this experience transcends human perception and requires a desire for intimate communion with the divine from the one who experiences it. This divine light is also a sign of spiritual enlightenment. The patristic tradition emphasised that only those with an open heart can understand the authentic nature of Christ's glory. The fact that the apostles fell asleep denotes a fleeting inability to deeply comprehend the significance of the experience. In the absence of a spiritual perspective, understanding the revelation of divine glory remains merely an abstract notion. Simultaneously, this notion of spiritual enlightenment is also found in the lives of other saints, such as St. Simeon^[5], who partook of the divine light and experienced union with God. This underlines that enlightenment represents a dynamic experience, characterized by unceasing action throughout the life of faith.

While the Eastern patristic tradition emphasizes the possibility of real mystical participation in the divine light of Tabor – understood as an uncreated energy that believers can experience even in this lifetime – medieval Western theology proposes a distinct interpretation of this theological reality. Thus, Thomas Aquinas treats the light of the transfiguration as a visible, temporary, and pedagogical manifestation of Christ's glory, meant to strengthen the apostles' faith, without suggesting the possibility of direct participation in this light in current spiritual experience. Aquinas emphasizes that the divine radiance of Christ was not usually manifested, being hidden beneath the appearance of His assumed body, but during the Transfiguration, this light was made visible to the apostles, as a sign of His divinity. Light is thus an external epiphany, reserved for a didactic purpose, and not a reality accessible to prayer or mystical contemplation in the present life.

In addition, Aquinas sees this event as an eschatological anticipation of the state of glory to which the righteous are called, not as an experience of deification in the present, as Eastern theology maintains. Unlike hesychastic spirituality, in which the light of divine glory is offered as a lived reality (being the expression of uncreated divine energies, accessible to man by grace), for Aquinas this glory remains a future reality that will be fully manifested only after the communal resurrection, the clarity of glory being the prerogative of the state of eternal happiness and not of the present life (Torrel 2003, 168–72).

The differences between the Eastern and Western approaches to the manifestation of divine glory on Tabor are also significantly reflected in the contemporary interpretation proposed by Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI). If the patristic tradition insists on the possibility of real and mystical participation in the uncreated light of Christ's glory – accessible to those who live a life of purification and contemplation in the Spirit – Ratzinger proposes a different theological perspective: The light that envelops Christ and the apostles is defined as the light of the Resurrection, representing an anticipation of the glorious state that will be fully revealed only after the Passion and Resurrection of Christ (Ratzinger 2007, 312). In this interpretation, direct participation in the light of Tabor's glory is not treated as a mystical possibility for the believer who is still living, but as a reality about the eschatological mystery of Christ and the final fulfilment of the kingdom of God.

St. John Chrysostom uses texts referring to the Transfiguration to speak of the person of Christ in His relationship with God the Father. He emphasises that the glory revealed to the disciples is a visible phenomenon, a rediscovery of divine identity as an integral part of Creation. Christ, the beloved Son endowed with glory, is identified as a constitutive part of the divine plan for man's salvation. Moreover, this revelation of divine glory is rich in profound meanings for the entire Christian world, constituting an opening towards a fuller understanding of Christ's messianic nature and role as King of Glory. The manifestation of this divine presence during the Transfiguration enriches believers with an example of self-giving and calls each one of them to live their lives in harmony with divine glory.

The event of great significance on Mount Sinai^[6] is decisive in the religious history of the people of Israel, and its prefigurative character is admirably highlighted by St. Gregory of Sinai. He analyses – from a symbolic and mystical point of view – the connections between this theophany and the manifestation of God on Mount Tabor, where Christ is transfigured. This way of interpreting the theophany of Sinai encourages a deeper interpretation of the way in which God manifests himself to people, offering a paradigm of exalted experiences in which the divinity displays its glory and power. In the Old Testament, God is often portrayed as having overwhelming and frightening character traits. On Mount Sinai, God appears through phenomena of imposing nature – lightning, thunder, dense cloud – which highlight His majesty and holiness. St. Gregory also states that this way of associating God with the Light – and implicitly as the source of light – is a central theme in the biblical tradition. Thus, divine glory cannot be limited

to one characteristic aspect, because it is also a point of spiritual connection, expressing human yearning to be closer to divinity and to understand it better.

The manifestation of glory on Mount Tabor, in which Christ displays His radiance through an overwhelming light, similar to that of the sun, intertwining qualities of light and forgiveness, is the stage at which Christ's divinity is revealed to the disciples – transformed from a theoretical theological concept into a personal and evident revelation. St. Gregory of Sinai declares that Moses^[7] recognised in the Face of Christ all the signs seen on Sinai, which, though veiled by divine darkness then, were now clearly and resplendently visible. Concerning God's manifestation in the theophany involving Elijah, its spiritual benefit is emphasised from a mystical perspective. When Elijah sees God in the wind and fire, St. Gregory of Sinai reiterates that divine existence is not confined to large-scale natural phenomena; it can also be encountered in the 'gentle breezes' that emit a delicate light capable of stirring emotion. This shows that divinity does not necessarily act as a volcano or something that causes trembling, but can act with gentleness, inviting people to encounter His glory through a profound personal connection.

This illumination was also the consequence of the declaration of the Father heard from heaven. The Father's words help us understand that the light that comes from God cannot be separated from the person of the Saviour, who testified that He is the Light of the world (Jn 14:8). St. Gregory of Sinai further elaborates and interprets the heavenly Father's testimony in Trinitarian terms:

This is My beloved Son, the Only-Begotten (Jn 1:14–18), who today was transfigured on Tabor according to His humanity; this is the impress of My hypostasis (Heb 1:3), the radiance of My glory, the unchanging identical icon of My superessential being; This is [...] the One through whom I have saved you, through whom I have revealed Myself and in whom I have shone and re-created the world [...] He has glorified Me and I have glorified Him today and I shall glorify Him with the unapproachable light (1 Tm 6:16); He is in Me unconfusedly, and I am in Him unchanged, flashing in a manner proper to God and to the Trinity; [...] He is the Begotten Light, I am the Unbegotten Light; [...] He is the Light (Jn 1:4–9), I am the Source of Light (Jas 1:17); [...] He is the Sun of Righteousness (Mal 4:2) who shines in Me, I am known as the Superessential Radiance in three suns who is in Him and who makes to shine in Him all the fullness of divinity (Col 2:9); [...] In Him I shine, I appear, I govern providentially, I purify, I enlighten,

and I sanctify you; in the light of His glory you shall see Me, the unapproachable Light (1Tim 6:16); [...] In the Spirit you shall see the Son and in the Son you shall recognise the Father; in the light of the Spirit you shall see the brilliance of My glory, in the image of God within you shall see the Archetype, from yourselves the superessential... (Sf. Grigorie Sinaitul 2007, 21–2)

The iconographic representation of glory in the episode of the Transfiguration

The episode of the Transfiguration of the Saviour, fulfilled on Mount Tabor, is a profound theological lived experience and a fundamental element in Christian iconography, shaping how the term *kabod* or *dóxa* is understood and depicted. Steven Bigham highlights that the icon of the Transfiguration is painted with Taboric light (Bigham 1998, 226–7) and further discusses two essential aspects of *kabod* and iconographic art: the use of light as an artistic element and the necessity for the iconographer to experience the uncreated light personally^[8].

The study will analyse these themes, emphasizing the spiritual significance and theological tradition behind the icon (Trif 2009, 401; Ghenescu 2009, 470). The rendering of divine glory in art is a theme that intertwines theology with aesthetics. When discussing the Transfiguration and the way divine glory is rendered in images, emphasis is placed on the light that originates from Christ. This is a light of divine origin, which manifests beyond the limits of human experience and transcends any material source. The *dóxa* of Christ is perceived as a light that envelops and transforms. In this vision, icons are more than artistic representations; they serve to convey divine grace and to facilitate the communion of the faithful with the divine light. The light of Tabor becomes a sign of our complicity with divinity, and the iconographer, inspired by the Holy Spirit, embarks on the path of rendering this spiritual experience on wall, canvas, or wood.

The relevance of the ‘uncreated light’ is essential in the discourse on divine glory. Bigham argues that the light of Tabor serves as a model for this concept. Even though Moses and Elijah experienced theophanies in the Old Testament, they did not experience God’s *dóxa* in its absolute form. On the other hand, the disciples were participants in a complete but limited revelation, which grants this vision an exceptional character. At this point, the notion of *dóxa* emerges in the theology of St. John Chrysostom (Bigham 2011, 117; Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1994, 539; Sf. Grigorie Palama 1993, 84). He argues that *doxa*, closely associated with light, emphasises the fundamental

characteristic of God's holiness, which is impenetrable and transcendent. This allows us to gain a broader perspective on absurdity: in a world so often drawn to darkness and immorality, the divine light is the sole source of clarity and purity.

In Dionysius of Fournas's interpretation, the Icon of the Transfiguration is a meaningful scene, rich in depth and bearing a sacramental character. Beyond this, however, it does not appear to enjoy the importance it rightfully deserves, particularly in relation to the depiction of the uncreated light (Rousseau 2004, 179–80). This light, deeply connected to the divine nature, forms the foundation of the theological understanding of the event and reflects the iconographer's skill in capturing the scene's sacred essence (Larchet 2012, 13).

The uncreated light, the one whose depiction is particularly important to include in sacred painting, is a central idea we encounter in the sacred scriptures, highlighting the sacramental character of encounters with the divine. In the Transfiguration episode, Christ is wrapped in light that mirrors both His divine glory and His essential nature (Cavarnos 2005, 88). For this reason, the iconographer's ability to reproduce this light is fundamental; without it, the sacred representation lacks depth and the theological power of its message.

Dionysius of Fournas notes the specific visual details that help shape this iconographic vision. For example, he records that the Savior, situated at the top of the mountain, is depicted at the centre of a 'radiant glory' (Dionisie din Furna 2000, 159). This visual reproduction transforms the divine encounter into an artisanal experience, in which light becomes a symbol of presence. Dionysius emphasises that Christ should be viewed in the light, suggesting an uncreated dimension of divine glory. The resemblance of this glory to the sun's brilliance indicates that *kabod* is a transcendent reality. This light symbolises revelation, which cannot be captured merely through material expressions.

The artistic representation becomes even richer through the presence of Moses and Elijah, who, through their appearance, bring the tradition of the Law and the Prophets. This conjunction of Christ with the two great prophets deepens the discourse and establishes the framework of an ongoing promise. Moses, on Mount Sinai, received divine glory as a reward, and now Elijah, who represents prophecy, stands beside Christ, affirming that He is the one who brings fulfilment. The placement of these historical figures on Mount Tabor underscores the idea that the Jewish tradition is interwoven with Christian revelation, connecting the faithful more closely with the divine mission. This connection is also important for understanding how tradition influences our

present-day reading of the Old Testament, and how it is reinterpreted considering the new consecrations brought by Christ. Gregory Palamas offers an interpretation of the event of the Transfiguration within the framework of the theology of light, emphasising its significance as a manifestation of uncreated light and of communion between God and humanity (Sf. Grigorie Palama 1993, 38)^[9]. The prophets of the Old Testament, when encountering the glory of God, were often overwhelmed by such revelations, but now, in Christ, the light becomes a tangible and accessible reality. This grants a theological understanding and provides a reference point for prayer, meditation, and contemplation. Thus, the *kabod* of God gains a transformative power over the spiritual life of believers. It calls for deep personal reflection on divine revelation and, at the same time, initiates continuous transformation.

This episode on Tabor shows us that ‘glory’ is not merely a theoretical concept but a truth that can influence life. The theology of light holds a primary place in the teachings of the Church Fathers, who speak of the sacred and transcendent nature of divine illumination. This portrayal calls believers to recognise that a life enlightened by Christ is not separated from the necessities and challenges of daily life. On the contrary, this light urges us to be continually engaged in the realisation of divine values, which herald transformation at both the personal and communal levels.

Another meaningful detail is the association between Christ’s Transfiguration and prayer. The three figures on Mount Tabor become witnesses to a sacred action that connects prayer with divine revelation. This idea highlights that through prayer, people can access divine glory and enter communion with God (Evdochimov 1993, 209). Therefore, prayer becomes the foundation for experiencing the *dóxa* of God. Faced with divine grandeur, prayer presents itself as a means of seeking out and reflecting glory, thus incorporating the spiritual characteristics of existence.

The biblical episode of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ includes a Trinitarian dimension and raises several Christological issues, including the relationship between Christ’s divinity and humanity, as well as the nature of His body before and after His resurrection.

The narrative placement of this event before Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection invites reflection on soteriology and eschatology. The relationship between the Old and New Testaments is significant not only because the Old Testament figures Moses, Elijah, and three of Jesus’s closest disciples are present, but also because the iconographic representations of the event have evident parallels with several

Old Testament passages. The presence of the representatives of the Law, the Prophets, and the Church, and the significance of the event taking place on a mountain, have implications regarding the nature of the Church in history and Christian discipleship in general. In short, the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ unites a series of closely interrelated themes into a concise, dense, and profoundly rich narrative (Canty 2010, 4).



School of Andrei Rublev, *Transfiguration*, icon on wood, 1425, Moscow

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration_of_Jesus_Christ_\(15th_c.,_Novgorod_museum\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration_of_Jesus_Christ_(15th_c.,_Novgorod_museum).jpg)

The Transfiguration is recorded in all three synoptic gospels, and several common elements unite these Gospel narratives. The first common theme is that Jesus took Peter, James, and John to a mountain, where they witnessed his transformation: His clothes became exceedingly white and radiant. Then Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Jesus. In all three Gospel accounts, Peter addressed Jesus, saying, “It is good (καλόν) for us to be here” (Mt 17:4; Mk 9:5; Lk 9:33), and proposed building three tents: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. A cloud overshadowed the disciples,

and a voice from the cloud proclaimed: “This is My Son, listen to Him!” (Mt 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:35). However, there are also differences in the evangelists’ descriptions of the Transfiguration. Although all three writers describe how Christ’s garments became white, Matthew and Luke specifically recount how Christ’s face was transformed. The metamorphosis of Christ – His transfigured appearance – astonished and frightened the disciples. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, the evangelists attribute Peter’s suggestion – made under the influence of fear – to build three tents for Christ, Moses, and Elijah, to his confusion about what to say. However, in Matthew, fear plays a less prominent role in Peter’s proposal. The conclusions of each Gospel narrative are also slightly different. The Gospels of Mark and Luke record that the disciples realized Jesus Christ was alone only after the voice from the cloud had spoken. Matthew adds that the disciples had fallen with their faces to the ground, and that Christ came to them, touched them, and encouraged them (Canty 2010, 8).



**Church of St. Apollinarius, *The Transfiguration*, mosaic, 6th century
Ravenna, Italy**

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mosaico_-_Basilica_di_Sant%27Apollinare_in_Classe_-_Ravenna_-_jpg



Church of St. Apollinarius, *The Transfiguration* (detail), mosaic, 6th century, Ravenna, Italy

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cross_and_Hand_of_God_-_Sant%27Apollinare_in_Classe_-_Ravenna_2016.jpg

In all three Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration, Peter is overwhelmed by the vision and asks Jesus if he should erect three tents and remain on Mount Tabor. The Gospels of Mark and Luke add a comment after this question, which can be translated as “for he did not know what to say” or “he did not know what he was saying”. Peter’s question receives no answer from Christ in the Gospel text and is simply passed over. Nevertheless, early Christian writers commenting on this biblical passage provide an interesting explanation for Christ’s attitude. They write that Peter, John, and James were so overwhelmed by the ecstatic vision – which to their eyes was nothing less than the opening of heaven – that they desired to remain permanently in this state of bliss. This is an understandable temptation, but the ecstatic vision of divine light is not given for its own sake.

The purpose is not simply to behold an impressive light and to acquire an overwhelming feeling of well-being. Christ's response to Peter, as it appears in the Gospel narratives, was that this is by no means the end of the struggle. After the brilliance of the Transfiguration, Christ must return to the world and undergo the Passion and Crucifixion. Those who follow Him must do the same and be willing to sacrifice themselves for His name. The visionary experience of the light points towards the difficult path that leads to the Cross (Andreopoulos 2012, 104).



Monastery of St. Mark, Fra Angelico, *The Transfiguration*, 1440-1442, Florence

Source: https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Transfiguration_by_fra_Angelico_%28San_Marco_Cell_6%29.jpg

Thus, the Transfiguration reveals something significant about salvation: salvation is not a state of perpetual happiness, a garden of pleasure – even if we make sure to describe it as ‘spiritual pleasure,’ whatever that may mean – but rather an active participation in the presence, being, and work of Christ. Salvation means that the ecstatic experience, when it occurs, is no more than a step towards the goal of the salvation of the whole world. In this context, the desire for individual salvation is meaningless.

The saints understand this. Monasticism understands this, even if at first glance the monk appears to be a solitary ascetic who flees the city to save his own soul. The point is that although we ask for forgiveness personally and seek to take responsibility for our own sins, if we think as God does and share in God's love for the world, we will weep for those who have excluded themselves from salvation. We cannot remain happily, yet ignorantly, atop Mount Tabor, bathed in divine light and wishing to remain there, while the rest of the world needs Christ. Something is incomplete. Although a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven was granted on the summit of Tabor, the actual path passes through the Cross (Andreopoulos 2012, 105).

In the biblical narrative of the Transfiguration, Jesus instructs the three disciples – who had seen what their eyes could scarcely believe – to remain silent until after His crucifixion and resurrection, when the full mystery would be revealed to the entire world. This is one of the many connections between Tabor and the Passion, between the Transfiguration and the Cross. The message here is compelling: we cannot understand the glory of the Transfiguration or the Resurrection if we have not made the Cross a part of our lives. Likewise, Jesus' command to the disciples to keep this matter secret until they know Him as the crucified and risen God implies that the mystery of the Transfiguration cannot be approached as a static object of worldly study, without due reverence, without fear and trembling. 'Such things' are not spoken of lightly (Andreopoulos 2012, 105).

The Apostle Paul mentions this aspect of the knowledge of the Cross, its assumption and its power, when he writes to the Corinthians: "For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1 Cor 1:17). This biblical passage warns us that there may be something deceptive about eloquent 'wisdom of words' and a 'systematic' or academic theology based too heavily on human strength. This, as St. Paul testifies, may stand in contradiction to the power of the Cross of Christ and – I dare say – also to His Transfiguration. 'Eloquent' wisdom is a trap, a professional distortion into which theologians often fall, perhaps more often than anyone else.

The Transfiguration reveals how salvation comes into the world through Christ. This event stands at the center of His ministry – Mark places it precisely at the midpoint of his Gospel – because it sheds light on all the major events in Christ's life. For this reason, it reflects the connection between heaven and earth in a way consistent with what Christ's life and ministry reveal. As a self-revelation that speaks of both Christ's divine character and humanity, the Transfiguration is a manifestation of the Incarnation

of God (Andreopoulos 2012, 106). As a revelation of His glory, it speaks to His power over death and His Resurrection. As a reflection of His deliberate choice to descend from Mount Tabor into the world, it anticipates His Passion.



**The Floreffe Bible, *The Transfiguration.*
The Last Supper, miniature – Vol. II,
 folio 4r, ca. 1155, British Library**

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
 File:Floreffe_Bible_02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Floreffe_Bible_02.jpg)

Ultimately, this revelation of the inner life of the Holy Trinity demonstrates the convergence of the entire Godhead in the person of Christ for the purpose of the salvation of humanity. Thus, our participation in Christ is not limited to partaking of His radiance but also involves our engagement at all stages of the divine plan of salvation. This holistic participation connects us to the entire process of the divine economy, from the Incarnation to glorification, reflecting the complexity of our relationship with God

through Christ. To shine with Christ, we must experience His birth in the flesh, His baptism in the Jordan, His Passion and Resurrection, and recognize what all of this means in our lives. The Transfiguration constitutes an event that brings light and clarity to the entirety of spiritual existence, revealing the meaning of the other Christological moments as lived personally (Andreopoulos 2012, 107).

The Church Fathers speak of spiritual senses, or rather of the way in which the Holy Spirit awakens a different level of perception. The first such model is found in the narrative of the Transfiguration (Mk 9, Mt 17 and Lk 9), where the eyes of Peter, John, and James were opened by the Holy Spirit, and they saw Jesus Christ for the first time in His divinity. The various visions of the uncreated light found in a long tradition of the saints, as well as other theophanic visions, are also understood as visions granted by the power of the Holy Spirit (Andreopoulos 2013, 56).

In Western theology, an interesting interpretation of the Transfiguration is found in the Dominican theologian Hugh of Saint-Cher (c. 1200–1263). He states that Peter, James, and John represent faith, hope, and charity on the one hand, and the married, the ascetics (guardians of virginity and bodily purity), and leaders of the Church, on the other. There are, however, some interpretations unique to Hugh. One such interpretation concerns Moses and Elijah.

A connection to the Law and the Prophets is unsurprising, but Hugh also links Moses and Elijah to baptism and penance. Moses, he says, represents those who are baptized, because he was drawn from the waters of the Nile, while Elijah represents those who repent, due to his austerity. Their appearance – one alive (Elijah) and the other deceased (Moses) – teaches Christ's disciples that He 'has power over death and life.' Hugh argues that Christ uses their presence to show the disciples how to be meek like Moses and zealous like Elijah. Moreover, their lives of prayer serve as examples for the disciples, who are soon to become leaders of Christ's Church (with James later becoming the first bishop of the Church in Jerusalem) (Canty 2010, 39).

Alexander of Hales, another Dominican theologian, highlights the pedagogical aspect of the Transfiguration for the apostles present. Beginning from the premise that Christ's Transfiguration is a prefiguration of the Resurrection, pedagogically oriented for the benefit of Peter, James, and John, the question posed is why Christ revealed the glory of the Resurrection only through transparency (the 'diaphanous' nature of Dumitru Stăniloae's theology) and not through other possibly more effective qualities. Alexander of Hales provides the example of Moses: when Moses descended from

Mount Sinai for the second time, after receiving the Law of God again from the Lord, his face shone with such brilliance (albeit temporarily) that the Israelites could not look upon it (Canty 2010, 60).



**Cathedral of the Holy Transfiguration,
 School of Theophanes the Greek, *The
 Transfiguration*, icon on wood, 1403,
 Pereslavl**

Source: [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/
 File:Annunciation_ystuj.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Annunciation_ystuj.jpg)

Also, within the sphere of Western Catholic patristics, the theologian Jean de la Rochelle (1200–1245) proposes a categorization of the witnesses to the Transfiguration. He states that the glory of Christ is confirmed and communicated by three types of witnesses: the apostles (Peter, James, and John); Moses and Elijah (representing the Law and the Prophets); and the Father, who participates as a divine witness. Each of these categories plays a distinct role: the apostolic witnesses testify to the glory of Christ's humanity; the prophetic and legal witnesses affirm the dignity and mystery of

redemption; and the divine witness demonstrates the glory of the Godhead in Christ (Canty 2010, 125).

The same author refers to Peter's exclamation concerning the three tents, in which he discerns three effects of contemplating the glory: love, wonder, and fear deriving from love. Peter's request to build three tents is interpreted thus: he did not realise that the Prophets, the Law, and the Gospel (understood as 'natural law,' 'written law,' and 'the law of grace') cannot be separated. All three share a single tent, or tabernacle – the Church (Canty 2010, 129). Another Western interpreter, Bonaventure (b. Giovanni di Fidanza, 1221-1274), offers an ecclesiological interpretation of the event of the Transfiguration, attributing to each disciple a different facet of Christian life, in a threefold organisation, the three ranks of the Fighting Church: the priests, the actives, and the contemplatives.



Karanlik Goreme Church, *The Transfiguration*, fresco, 12th-13th centuries, Turkey

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkey-1862_\(2216686930\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkey-1862_(2216686930).jpg)

Peter signifies the prelates, James represents the active, and John corresponds to the contemplatives. Christ called (or 'assumed') all three disciples from one way of life and bestowed upon them new identities; their correspondence with one of the three

ecclesiastical ranks is tied to the respective missions they received. These three ranks also serve as a framework through which the evolution of the spiritual life may be discerned, symbolised by the ascent of the disciples from the base of the mountain. Peter, who represents the clergy, bears a particular responsibility, being the first to receive divine illumination. Bonaventure illustrates this with the following analogy: the sun first shines upon the mountains and then illumines the valleys; in like manner, priests – as high mountains – should be the first to receive within themselves the illuminations of divine light and then transmit the example of a good life to those in their pastoral care, likened to valleys (Canty 2010, 190).

Thomas Aquinas, in his interpretation of the Transfiguration, emphasises the following ideas: at the Transfiguration, the glory of Christ is revealed in its fullest power. Although Christ revealed this initially only to Peter, James, and John, the three would later relate the ‘sublime mysteries’ revealed there. While the discussion of the Transfiguration ends with reflections on the eschatological significance of this revelatory event, Thomas maintains his focus on the exhortative function of the transfiguration. Once the disciples had witnessed the Transfiguration, had heard Moses and Elijah conversing with Christ about His departure from the world, and had heard the terrifying voice of the Father, Jesus Christ strengthened the souls of His disciples with words of comfort, so that they might endure His forthcoming Passion and Death (Canty 2010, 242).

A more recent approach to the theme of the glory of God is found in the work of Suzy Dufrenne, in an article published in 1987 (Dufrenne 1987, 185-206). She revisits the principal themes of the icon of the Transfiguration: the light of Christ’s face, the radiance of His garments, the brilliance of divine glory, the voice of God the Father, and the luminous cloud – mentioning their appearance in the writings of Origen, Andrew of Crete, and St. John of Damascus. The luminous cloud is interpreted as the presence or manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s grace. This cloud and the depiction of the voice of God the Father are visually presented with certainty in a Byzantine manuscript – folio 75 of St Gregory of Nazianzus – from the National Library of Paris (cod. Gr. 510). The hand of God, interpreted as signifying the presence and voice of God the Father, emerges from a fragment of the sky marked by various clouds.

Related to the way the glory of God is represented iconographically, the biblical episode of Christ’s Transfiguration inherently entails its representation using the mandorla. The almond-shaped halo, derived from the symbol of the *vesica piscis* (‘fish bladder’) – the mandorla – has encircled Christ in representations of the

Transfiguration, the Resurrection, and the Ascension since early Christian art. Initially, the mandorla represented the cloud into which Christ ascended and gradually assumed the characteristics of a halo (Hall 2018, 103).



Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Byzantine manuscript, *The Transfiguration*, miniature – Cod. Gr. 510, page 75, 9th century, National Library of Paris

Source: <https://ru.wikipedia.org/>

The mandorla visually expresses the Hebrew concept of *kabod*, which connoted a more concrete, physical presence than the more abstract sense of the Greek *dóxa* (δόξα). Some scholars distinguish two principal meanings of *kabod*: *shekinah* (from *shakan*, ‘to dwell in a tent’ or simply ‘to dwell’) and *yeqara* (from *yqr*, the sensory splendour of light), to articulate this visual manifestation of the two natures of Christ. Thus, the oval mandorla corresponds to the luminous characteristics of *kabod* as *yeqara*. Here, the three concentrically darker oval layers represent the description of excessive divine light as the darkness of God’s unknowability – even in revelation. The round mandorla,

on the other hand, represents the manifestation of God's glory as *shekinah*/ tabernacle. In this reading, the emphasis on the spatial rather than the luminous nature of the mandorla served to depict the Trinity, as opposed to a less historicized interpretation that emphasized the continuous majesty/splendor of Christ (Tănase 2017, 325–6).

All iconographic representations of the Transfiguration of the Lord are based on the New Testament texts that describe this episode: Matthew 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–8; and Luke 9:28–36. However, the miracle of Christ's Transfiguration, as a theophany of the Holy Trinity, represents the highest mystical experience of the Saints and of the Church itself. Like the Apostles on Mount Tabor, numerous saints have borne witness to this manifestation of God in light, and the light, for them, is the very deifying grace that enables them to 'see' God, according to the word of the Psalmist David: 'in Thy light shall we see light' (Ps 36:9) (Pintilie 2009, 4).



St. Catherine's Monastery, *The Transfiguration*, mosaic, 6th century, Sinai

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saint_Catherine%27s_Transfiguration.jpg

The Church Fathers, from Origen to St. John of Damascus, refer to Christ as the visible image and consubstantial icon of the Father. Icons were more than mere vessels of God's grace; they suggested the real presence of the grace of the person depicted.

In the Old Testament, God denied the request of anyone who wished to see Him directly. The desire to behold God was impossible before the Incarnation of Christ. The mosaic of the Transfiguration at Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai presents Christ in perfect glory, with eight rays emanating from His body, thereby introducing the luminous mandorla – a symbol that iconographically expresses the glory of God. The mandorla in the mosaic at Saint Catherine's is oval, whereas in other instances, it may be rendered as a circle. These two types of mandorlas express the glory of God differently, illustrating the correspondence between theological concepts and visual language (Tănase 2017, 325).

With the iconoclastic controversy of the 8th–9th centuries, two types of representations of the Transfiguration emerge: Christ within a circular mandorla, with Moses and Elijah included (either entirely or partially), and a second type in which Christ is depicted alone within the mandorla. An example of the latter can be seen at the Church of Saints Nereus and Achilleus in Rome, which was adorned with several valuable mosaics in the sanctuary area in the 9th century.

Referring to these two examples of mandorlas, Strezova asserts that they represent two distinct stages in the development of the iconography of the Transfiguration (Strezova 2014, 87). The circular mandorla also appears in a series of manuscript miniatures. For instance, in the Chludov Psalter (9th century), Mount Tabor is prominently featured, and a round mandorla encircles Christ alongside Moses and Elijah. This detail may also reflect the interpretations of the Church Fathers. For example, Origen and Anastasius of Sinai claim that both Elijah and Moses were transfigured in glory (Tănase 2017, 325).

Another example is found in the Feodorovskaya Psalter, in the representation of the Transfiguration on page 118r. What we see in the icon of the Transfiguration can be interpreted as an image of the Church. Christ, in the middle, seems almost 'made' of light.

But this is key to understanding the entire event through the icon: the body of Christ is light, and it extends beyond the physical boundaries of His human form. In more theological terms, what defines Christ is the union between the created and the uncreated, the human and the divine, the visible and the invisible. This union extends to Moses, Elijah, Peter, John, and James, as noted above, but they become part of Christ's

body in a different manner. The union of the created with the uncreated can also be perceived in them, but they must receive the light of union from Christ, who sends them the light of the Father (Andreopoulos 2013, 93).



Chludov Manuscript, *The Transfiguration*, miniature, 9th century, Moscow

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Miniature_of_the_Khludov_Psalter._Around_the_middle_of_the_9th_century._State_Historical_Museum,_Moscow._Transfiguration.jpg

The oval mandorla corresponds to the luminous characteristics of glory, *kabod*. Drawn around Christ's body in a way that signifies light rather than space, this mandorla

is consistent with the understanding of *kabod* as *yeqara*, and with the Johannine and patristic identification of Christ as light – or, more specifically, in the Transfiguration, as the glory of the Father.

Although the Transfiguration is primarily an event associated with Christ, we can see that the entire Trinity was revealed through it. The Transfiguration was a Trinitarian revelation, dynamically disclosed to those who witnessed it in varying degrees of participation. These levels of participation become apparent when one considers the Transfiguration scene as portrayed in Eastern iconography. Christ, flanked by Moses and Elijah – sometimes included within the luminous halo emanating from Him – corresponds to the Kingdom of Heaven. There, the dead are no longer dead, but serene participants in the divinity of Christ. Moses and Elijah converse with Christ, indicating that the Kingdom of God is to be understood as a continuous communion between Christ and the saints. Furthermore, the Church Fathers describe a different degree of communion between Christ and the two righteous prophets, as opposed to the three terrified and prostrate apostles. We can see this clearly in the schematic iconography of the Transfiguration as depicted in the Orthodox tradition (Andreopoulos 2013, 90).

The glory of the Spirit that is beheld in ecstasy is also the glory of the Lord, for it is the glory of the Trinity. Whenever Symeon the New Theologian attributes glory to one divine person, he does not do so to claim it exclusively for that person. He ascribes the possession of divine light alternately to one or another of the hypostases, knowing that the light is shared among the persons of the Trinity (Picioruş 2009, 34).

The oval mandorla that encircles the transfigured Sinaitic image of Christ – the prototype for the general type of oval mandorla – consists of three concentric oval layers that grow darker toward the centre. Metaphorical darkness or blindness is caused by excessive brightness ('darkness as an overabundance of light' – as described in the writings of Symeon the New Theologian) (Sf. Simeon Noul Teolog 1999, 232).

With the advent of hesychasm and the Palamite controversy, other, more complex types of mandorlas also emerged, referred to specifically as hesychastic mandorlas. These served as visual expressions of the theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, who advanced the idea of hierarchical participation – that not all are able to participate equally in God's energies. Different stages of illumination were established, reflecting the tripartite stages of purification, illumination, and deification set forth by Saint Gregory Palamas and Gregory of Sinai (Shackelford 2019, 7). Strezova identifies a mandorla with an overlapping rhomboid or star shape as strictly hesychastic, since the

resulting octagon or six-pointed star symbolises both the eternity of the eighth day after the Parousia and the six days of creation. The shared representation of anticipated Parousia and creation aligns with the theological views discussed above concerning hesychasm, which emphasise the unity of body and soul and the material participation in the divine energies of God.

The mandorla has a similar usage across Bulgarian, Serbian, Macedonian, and Russian traditions and reflects changes in the theology of divine light that occurred in the Slavic realms. In addition to the complex mandorla, the tripartite representation of Mount Tabor links the experiences of God encountered by Elijah and Moses on Mount Sinai (Shackelford 2019, 8).



Parisinus Graecus, The Transfiguration, miniature - Code. Paris Gr. 1242, page 92v, 13th century

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transformation.png>

The miniature above, a full page from the Parisinus Graecus manuscript, depicts the Transfiguration. It is an image of exceptional artistic quality. Christ, clad in white, is shown standing at the summit of Mount Tabor, holding a *rotulus* in His left hand and making a gesture of blessing with His right. The figure is surrounded by a mandorla rendered as a complex geometric configuration, composed of two superimposed shapes – a concave square and a rhombus – inscribed within two concentric circles from whose centre radiate beams of light. Positioned on rocky peaks above cave-like openings, the two prophets flank Christ's figure – Elijah on the left and Moses, holding the Tablets of the Law, on the right. Below, in the lower section of the composition, the three disciples are shown overwhelmed by fear. John, in the centre, and James, on the right, both fall with their faces to the ground, while Peter, on the left, is seated on the ground, gesturing towards Christ; unable to look upon the radiant body of the transfigured Lord, he shields his eyes with his left hand (Drpić 2008, 225).

The disorder manifested in the apostles' postures and garments indicates the dramatic impact of beholding the glory. The rays of light radiate in different directions, linking the apostles to Christ through a triangular composition (Christ, situated above, forms the apex, and the apostles below form the lower corners of the triangle). The octagonal mandorla provides a complex rendering of the vision of God's uncreated light. Moses and Elijah are not entirely integrated within the mandorla; rather, they stand at the edge of the circle. This element of the iconography directs the viewer's attention to the divine energies revealed by Christ during the Transfiguration (Strezova 2014, 92).

It is possible to interpret the three geometric forms as symbols of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, although associating the three shapes (two rectangles and a circle) with concrete hypostases remains problematic. The circle is a symbol of the Father; the two rectangles are symbols of the Persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit, signifying their relationship with the Father. Andreopoulos asserts that the Holy Spirit assumes the form of a vertical square, while the Son is represented by a horizontal rhombus (Andreopoulos 2005, 209–245).

As a cosmogram, the mandorla represents the world reduced to an essential model; it was a sign of the entire universe in its essential plan, in its process of emanation and reabsorption. The octagonal mandorla symbolically presents not only the sharing of the one into many, but also the reintegration of the many into one. The central part of the mandorla represented the unity, peace, and stability of divine and human nature in Christ. The centre also functioned as a point of revelation between the material-mental

world of space and time, and the calm, peace, and stability of heavenly reality – an *axis mundi* for both macrocosm and microcosm (Strezova 2014, 102).

The contrast between Sinai and Tabor also provided an opportunity to consider the interaction between the doctrines of apophaticism and deification, darkness and light, the ambiguity of silence, and the clarity of articulation. Sinai symbolised the aniconic quality of the divine being, where Moses encountered God in the darkness of the unknowable. Sinai also served as a symbol reminding humanity of God's freedom and complete inaccessibility. It demonstrated that no permanent guarantee of divine presence could be ascribed. In contrast, Tabor incorporated uncreated light, allowing the light of divine presence to be experienced by humankind. In turn, while participating in the Transfiguration, the disciples not only received a vision of uncreated light but also saw themselves illuminated and renewed (Strezova 2014, 102).

Constantine Cavarinos provides a detailed description of the Byzantine composition of the icon of the Transfiguration:

a mountain with three peaks (Tabor), on the highest of the peaks is Christ, rendered frontally, surrounded by an oval-pointed mandorla of light emanating from Him in all directions. Sometimes a geometric figure with four, six, or eight angles is inscribed in the mandorla. His garments are white, with his right hand he blesses, and in his left hand, he holds a phylacter, a symbol of the Gospel. Although He shows Himself in divine glory, the attitude and expression of His face manifest calm and humility. On the peak to the right of Jesus is the Holy Prophet Elijah, and on the left stands Moses. Both are easily inclined to the Lord, with humility. [our translation] (Cavarinos 2005, 88)

Cavarinos notes the apostles in the foreground – beneath Christ and the two holy prophets – lying on the ground, blinded by the bright light of Christ's glory and astonished by the voice of the Father in heaven. In this icon, only Christ, Moses, and Elijah have haloes, as only they are saints at that moment. Moses and Elijah had attained holiness and thus were able to behold the divine glory without being blinded by it or falling to the ground. They stand in an attitude filled with peace, grace, and reverence (Cavarinos 2005, 88).

The apostles' positioning in the icon remains traditional and canonical, even though, over the centuries, certain exceptions to the rule have been recorded. Peter is shown on the right, John is placed centrally, and James is on the left. Their limited

number – only three – is also required by the Law of Moses for the public validation of a testimony. If Moses and Elijah symbolise the Realm of the Dead and Heaven, respectively, the disciples called by the Lord represent the living on earth, under divine providence (Muntean 2024).

As previously mentioned, the entire Trinity is revealed at the Transfiguration. While at the Baptism of the Lord the Holy Spirit appears as a dove, at the Transfiguration He is manifested as a luminous cloud (*nephele photine*). This cloud is not represented naturalistically, as a physical cloud, but as a geometric figure, bearing a variable number of angles: four, six, or eight. God the Father did not appear visibly, but was heard as a voice from heaven, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’ The voice cannot be depicted in the art of the icon, but in some icons of the Baptism (as well as in the previously mentioned Byzantine illustration from the Homilies of St Gregory of Nazianzus, dedicated to Emperor Basil the Macedonian, held in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, cod. Gr. 510, fol. 75)^[10], the voice is represented as a blessing hand emerging from the heavenly vault (Cavarnos 2005, 90).

Raphael’s 1520 painting, ‘The Transfiguration,’ was considered the most famous painting until it was eclipsed by the Mona Lisa. Possibly the most renowned Western representation of the Transfiguration, the painting was commissioned by Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici in 1516 to adorn the cathedral in Narbonne. The painting proved to be a masterpiece and never reached its originally intended location, as it was retained by the Vatican, where it remains to this day. The painting combines the moment of the Transfiguration with the subsequent episode from the Gospel of Matthew: the healing of the lunatic boy.

We are led from the narrative of the clear and definitive culmination of the Law and the Prophets in the person of Jesus, to a scene of chaos and frustration in the story of the possessed child. Raphael links these two episodes in a remarkable manner. The lunatic boy (in the lower right of the painting) appears to see the risen, glorified Christ, unifying the composition through his gesture and through the gestures of the surrounding crowd. Amidst the chaos below, we are directed toward the eschatological hope we have in Christ^[11].

Unlike the gestures of the three disciples on Tabor – as depicted in Byzantine representations – Raphael’s gestures become dynamic, precipitate: their joy turns into fear, a consequence of man’s fall into sin. From the 14th century onwards, however,

humanist influence becomes increasingly evident within Byzantine culture, leaving its mark on Eastern Christian iconography.



Raphael, *The Transfiguration*, oil on canvas, 1516-1520, Pinacoteca Vaticana

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration_Raphael.jpg)

File:Transfiguration_Raphael.jpg

In the case of the icon of the Transfiguration, several secondary elements were gradually added, and a series of modifications reconfigured the original balance of the icon, in some cases leading to reinterpretations of the event represented.

The focus is shifted – anthropocentrically – towards the representation of psychological reactions, particularly the terror and fear that overwhelm the disciples. The approach to the theme of the Transfiguration is altered, reducing the profound significance of this biblical moment to the level of appearances. In this interpretation, the three Apostles are depicted with increasingly tense expressions, collapsing in fright on a slope, their faces covered by the divine light they are unable to endure. In this

context, the icon comes to be interpreted as a depiction of the apostles' emotional responses, with an emphasis on fear and confusion, thereby leading to a loss of focus on the spiritual dimension and the deep theological meanings it is meant to convey. This redirection of attention underscores a superficial visualization of an event imbued with glory, resulting in the loss of the richness and depth of the original message.



Ludovico Carracci, *The Transfiguration*, oil on canvas, 1595-1596, Bologna

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration_by_Lodovico_Carracci.jpg)

File:Transfiguration_by_Lodovico_Carracci.jpg

The human figure is portrayed in this variant in the guise of the fallen condition, devoid of spiritual transfiguration. The distance between Christ and the Apostles who fall at the foot of the mountain increases ever more. The two Prophets are placed on

pedestals that are increasingly remote and distinct from that of the Saviour. Thus, a considerable distance is introduced between God and man.

In conclusion, the meanings of the miracle of the Lord's Transfiguration are inexhaustible theological depths: the theophany of the Holy Trinity, the deification of human nature in Christ, the revelation of Christ's glory as uncreated divine energy, the prefiguration of His Resurrection from the dead, the foretaste of human deification, and the anticipation of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, according to the tradition of Eastern Christianity, the realisation of the icon of the Lord's Transfiguration represents, for each iconographer, both the beginning and the measure of his spiritual and artistic perfection^[12].

Conclusion

This study has shown that the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor functions as a multifaceted theological and cultural node: exegetically it articulates Christ's identity as the visible locus of divine glory; patristically it becomes a primary locus for competing yet complementary readings of participation in uncreated light; and artistically it generates a sustained visual grammar (mandorla, Taboric light, prophetic witnesses) that shapes liturgical imagination and devotional practice.

Key conclusions are threefold. First, *kabod* / *dóxa* in the Transfiguration operates performatively: the visible radiance both discloses ontological truth (the Son's divinity and fulfilment of Law and Prophets) and issues a soteriological summons – linking revelation to vocation, the Cross, and the promise of deification. Second, reception history reveals a productive tension between Eastern experiential theology (hesychasm / Palamism), which affirms present participatory access to divine energies, and Western medieval and modern readings that emphasize pedagogical and eschatological anticipations of glory. Rather than mutually exclusive, these perspectives illuminate different theological registers – immediacy of experience versus teleology of consummation. Third, iconography is not merely illustrative but hermeneutical: image-types codify doctrinal claims, embody devotional pedagogy, and mediate communal participation in the mystery of glory.

Methodologically, the integrated exegetical–patristic–art-historical approach proved fruitful for tracing how textual motifs migrate into visual practice and how visual forms in turn shape theological reception. Limitations include the study's primary focus on canonical and major patristic witnesses and emblematic iconographic corpora;

regional and vernacular variations, as well as non-elite visual cultures, merit further attention.

Suggested directions for research: (1) comparative studies of vernacular and local Transfiguration imagery across Eastern and Western contexts; (2) reception-oriented work on liturgical enactments of Taboric motifs (processions, hymns, rites); (3) theological-anthropological inquiry into how uncreated-light language informs contemporary spiritual practice; and (4) digital mapping of iconographic variants to trace transmission networks. Altogether, the study argues that the Transfiguration remains an essential bridge between doctrine, mysticism, and visual culture – vital for understanding Christian conceptions of glory and participation in the divine life.

Notes

[1] In the opinion of Maximus the Confessor, the transfigured face of the Saviour, who shone brighter than the sun, indicates the inaccessibility that characterizes the Divine Being (Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul 2009, 139. See Blowers 2016, 81–2).

[2] We also take this opportunity to recall an Isaiah prophecy concerning the last times, which announces that the Lord will be a light for His chosen ones. (Is 60:19) (Chirilă 2018, 166–85).

[3] Jesus' prayer is "the giver of divine illumination, for Christ is the true light, and He gives His grace and brightness to those who call upon Him." (Sf. Simeon Noul Teolog, PG 155,541-549).

[4] For when the mind is swallowed up by that unspeakable light, and reaches outside of what is, it abolishes the feeling of all relations, and darkens the senses themselves with the light of that power; or, conversely, it separates through light the mind from the senses and senses of relationships and makes it possessed by the divine eros, removing all the attachment that the mind has through the senses to the sensible. (Grigorie Sinaitul 2007, 21)

[5] St. Nikita Stethatos recounts one of his spiritual father's experiences, which closely resembles what happened on Tabor:

...overcome by a light coming from somewhere above, which envelops him with a radiance like the sun. [This light] penetrates his mind, subdues it, and causes him to feel boundless joy. [...] Then, while lying on the ground and shedding tears, an unprecedented miracle occurred: just at the moment when he was worshipping the Lord, behold, a luminous cloud appeared descending towards him, making him

feel his soul filled with joy, peace, and divine love, as the earthly burden of thoughts tied to bodily pleasures began to vanish (Nichita Stithatul 2003, 34–3).

[6] There [at Horeb, our emphasis] darkness was a symbol of light, and here [on Tabor, our emphasis] the cloud is a symbol of the Spirit's cloud; there fire was a symbol of purification; the trumpet was the loud voice of the Divine Word; and the thunder was a symbol of preaching; there were lightning bolts, here a divine radiance beyond the sun; the Law a foreshadowing of the Gospel. (Grigorie Sinaitul 2007, 20)

[7] St. Maximus the Confessor believes that Moses can be a model for Christians who want to see him by God (Louth 2004, 94–5).

[8] Icon painters use various methods to depict the uncreated light of divinity. The most common way to describe it is the halo surrounding Christ's body, with three concentric circles pierced by sharp golden or white rays. What, in fact, was seen by the three witnesses cannot be represented in the icon. Any artistic attempt to depict the event realistically or photographically will only serve to obscure it further.

[9] See details also in Chirilă 2019, 221–230.

[10] See Byzantine Manuscript, *Transfiguration*, Miniature – Cod. Gr. 510, page 75, ninth century, National Library of Paris, p. 149.

[11] Billy KANGAS, Raphael's Transfiguration: The Kingdom of God as Both now and not yet in Patheos, https://www.academia.edu/38954904/Raphaels_Transfiguration_The_Kingdom_of_God_as_Both_now_and_not_yet, 19 October 2014, accessed on 20 May 2025.

[12] Gina-Maria Pintilie, Mihail Stanciu, *Mărturiile Icoanei – Schimbarea La Față*, 12–4, <https://www.academia.edu/35056382/M%C4%82RTURIILE_ICOANEI_SCHIMBAREA_LA_FA%C8%9A%C4%82>, accessed on April 8, 2025.

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