

BY GLEN MCCOY

JESUS' TRANSFIGURATION was one of the most significant incidents in His life. All three Synoptic Gospels record the event (Matt. 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36) and Peter referred to it in his second letter (2 Peter 1:16-18). Yet we are not certain of the location of the transfiguration other than it occurred on a high (unnamed) mountain (Matt. 17:1; Mark 9:2).

Two sites lay claim to the transfiguration, Mount Tabor and Mount Hermon. Those who choose Tabor rely heavily on tradition (but not necessarily to the neglect of Scripture) and those who choose Hermon place reliance almost totally on Scripture to a neglect of tradition.

Without question, Mount Tabor is the traditional site of the transfiguration. As early as A. D. 326, Helena, the mother of Constantine (Roman emperor, about 274-337 A.D.) had a church built on top of Mount Tabor. By the 7th century there were three shrines built, dedicated to Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. In the late 19th century a church and monastery were constructed by the Greek Orthodox Church. Also a basilica was built on Tabor by the Roman Catholic Church. These structures commemorated the transfiguration.

Mount Tabor is an isolated hill about 10 miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee and about 6 miles east of Nazareth. It rises abruptly from the floor of the Jezreel Valley in its northeast corner and looks like a volcanic cone from a distance. Though the top of Tabor is slightly less than 2,000 feet above sea level, its isolation and steepness make it appear to be taller than it actually is. From the top of the mountain the viewer has an excellent panorama of the Jezreel Valley.

Many other scholars argue for the suitability of Mount Hermon as the site of the transfiguration. This choice is usually based on three arguments: the geographic location of events that preceded and followed the transfiguration; key terms in Scripture; and problems with accepting Tabor as the correct site.

The incident in Jesus' life that immediately preceded the transfiguration was located at Caesarea Philippi (see Matt. 16:13 and Mark 8:27). Caesarea Philippi was only some 20 miles from Mount Hermon. On the other hand,

# The Mount of Transfiguration

Looking east at Mount Tabor located in the Galilee region of Israel about six miles east of Nazareth. Mount Tabor is the traditional site of the transfiguration.  
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Tabor was over twice that distance from Caesarea Philippi. The incidents following the transfiguration were in Galilee (Matt. 17:22) and at Capernaum in particular (v. 24).

Assuming Matthew recorded these incidents in order, had the transfiguration occurred on Tabor, it would have required Jesus leaving Caesarea Philippi, going 40 miles to the south, then returning to Capernaum, a distance of some

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**Lesson Reference:**  
**FBS: Matthew 17:1-13**





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15 to 20 miles. Admittedly this journey would not have been impossible in the time frame, but it would have been a lot of wasted energy.

The second part of the argument for Hermon concerns a description of the mount of transfiguration. Both Matthew (17:1) and Mark (9:2) describe it as a “high” mountain. The adjective Matthew and Mark used occurs elsewhere in the New Testament to describe the vantage point from which Satan had Jesus view the kingdoms of this world (Matt. 4:8; Luke 4:5). John used the term to describe the holy city of Jerusalem (Rev. 21:10) and its walls (v. 12). The writer of Hebrews used the word in reference to the high position God occupies (Heb. 1:3) and applied it to the exaltation of Jesus as the great High Priest (7:26). These uses seem to suggest something unusually high, not just an ordinary mountain.

Mount Hermon certainly fits this description of a high mountain better than Mount Tabor does. Mount Tabor, as noted previously, was less than 2,000 feet above sea level. Several mountains in Israel, including Mount Gerazim (2,849 feet above sea level) and Mount Ebal (3,077 feet above sea level) were taller than Tabor. On the other hand, Mount Hermon is over 9,000 feet tall, by far the highest mountain in the area.

A problem in accepting Tabor as the site of the trans-

**Above:** Mt. Hermon in northern Israel is the choice of many Bible scholars for the site of Jesus’ transfiguration.

**Right:** A view of the top of Mt. Tabor looking south.

figuration involves the probability that it was fortified during the first century A. D.<sup>1</sup> Would the mountain under these conditions have afforded the privacy that Jesus desired for His meeting with His disciples? The top of Tabor is somewhat rectangular and is about one half mile (east to west) by one quarter mile (north to south) in size. I was on Tabor a couple of years ago and was able to walk around on most of the summit in a short time.

Admittedly, as previously stated, Tabor lays claim to being associated quite early with Jesus’ transfiguration. In that sense it has the distinction of being the traditional site of the transfiguration. However, those of us who have visited Israel have learned that all kinds of traditional sites are associated with important events in Jesus’ life. Some of these traditional sites come nearer to being correct than others. Traditional sites are pointed out for Jesus turning water into wine at Cana (John 2), the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5—7), the feeding of the five thousand (Matt. 14:13-21; and parallels), and others. There is no way for us to know that these sites are authentic. On the other hand, some traditional sites have a greater chance of being correct, such as the place of Jesus’ birth (marked by the Church

of the Nativity in Bethlehem) and the place of His death (marked by the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem).

My point is twofold. First, convenience and accessibility sometimes played a role in selecting a spot to commemorate an event in Jesus’ life. Second, traditional sites marking events in Jesus’ life are not always reliable. These facts should be kept in mind concerning the selection of Tabor, especially in light of the fact that the location is so convenient and accessible for pilgrims to visit. This is not the only factor in suggesting an alternative to Tabor, but it is part of the total picture.

Assuming Hermon to be the site of the transfiguration, I will add a fourth factor that does not demand Hermon over Tabor but is consistent with that being the case. Both Scripture and archaeology suggest that Hermon was a sacred mountain to ancient peoples. In the Old Testament period (about 1350 B.C.) the Hittites and Amorites (both were neighbors of the Israelites) made a treaty with each other that alluded to Hermon as a sacred mountain. A Greek inscription from later times confirms that Hermon was used as a cult (worship) center.<sup>2</sup>

The root word from which Hermon derives (*hrm*) means something like “consecrated” or “dedicated” in many Semitic languages. Also ancient Near Eastern cultures considered high places or mountains as abodes of the gods or where the gods were to be worshiped (see for example 1

Kings 14:23 and 2 Kings 17:10). Specifically, Hermon is mentioned in the Old Testament in connection with the worship of Baal (Judg. 3:3; 1 Chron. 5:23). So just as Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi was a challenge to the gods worshiped there, so Jesus’ transfiguration on Mount Hermon was a challenge to the gods worshiped there.

Hermon is actually a cluster of mountains rather than a single peak. From a distance it appears as a single long mountain, which is not exactly the case. It has three summits that are almost equal in height and distance from each other. It extends from 16 to 20 miles from north to south.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, we are uncertain about the exact location of the transfiguration. At the same time we need to remember that the important thing was not the mountain on which the transfiguration occurred but the transfiguration that occurred on the mountain.

<sup>1</sup>Holman Bible Dictionary, Trent C. Butler, ed. (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1362.

<sup>2</sup>Rami Arav, “Hermon, Mount” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:158-160.

<sup>3</sup>*The Zondervan Pictorial Dictionary of the Bible*, Merrill C. Tenney, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), III:126.

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