

Matthew 15-17; Mark 7-9 – Ep 197: CFM

Matt. 15.1-20; Mark 7.1-23; John 7.1: Scribes and Pharisees Contend with Jesus over Cleanliness Traditions

In both Matthew 15:1-20 and Mark 7:1-23, the scribes and Pharisees contend with Jesus about cleanliness traditions. These religious leaders were questioning Jesus because they noticed that his disciples were not following the traditional Jewish practice of washing their hands before eating.

The scribes and Pharisees were known for their strict adherence to the laws and traditions of Judaism, which included the ritual washing of hands and utensils. They believed that failing to follow these practices made a person unclean and unworthy to approach God. They were therefore concerned that Jesus and his disciples were not observing these traditions and were thus violating the sacred laws of Judaism.

Jesus, on the other hand, was more concerned with the spiritual cleanliness of a person's heart rather than their external rituals. He saw that the scribes and Pharisees were more focused on external appearances and legalistic observances than on inner purity and righteousness.

In response to their questioning, Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees, accusing them of being hypocrites and following human traditions instead of God's commands. He pointed out that they were neglecting the weightier matters of the law, such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness, while focusing on minor details like the washing of hands.

Jesus also emphasized that it is not what enters a person's mouth that defiles them, but what comes out of their mouth. He taught that evil thoughts, words, and actions are what truly make a person unclean and defile him, not whether or not they wash their hands or utensils before eating (although I must add that hand washing is so important from an infection reduction standpoint! I cannot help my upbringing, my mother was an infection control director at a hospital and I heard stories of the dangers of infection growing up that still stick with me from my youth!)

The scribes and Pharisees' contention with Jesus over cleanliness traditions reveals a fundamental disagreement about the nature of religious observance. For the Jewish authorities, strict adherence to ritual purity laws was an essential aspect of pleasing God and ensuring holiness. However, Jesus challenged this approach and emphasized the importance of inward righteousness and a heart that is devoted to God. This conflict ultimately contributed to Jesus' crucifixion, as the religious authorities saw him as a threat to their traditional understanding of the law and religious practice.

Matt. 15.21-28; Mark 7.24-30: Jesus Heals a Phoenician Woman's Daughter

Tyre and Sidon (Matt. 15.21)

Tyre and Sidon were traditionally pagan territory; Sidon had been the home of Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31). But in the same generation a woman from that region had miraculously received food and healing for her child from the prophet Elijah and so became a full believer in Israel's God (1 Kings 17:8-24). Some argue that in Jesus' period, their territory stretched inland, so that one had to pass through territory

belonging to Syrophenicia, as here, even to get from Galilee to Caesarea Philippi. Many Jewish people still lived here, however.¹

“A woman of Canaan” (Matt. 15.22)

Canaanites, many of whose survivors had been driven northward into Phoenicia during the Israelite conquest, were the most morally despised of Israel’s enemies in the Old Testament; Matthew’s characterizing this woman with this term may have set Jewish hearers on edge. But by acknowledging Jesus as “Son of David”—Messiah—she also acknowledges the right of the kingdom of David (who had also embraced many non-Jews as allies) over the land. How could a Jewish person remain prejudiced against a Canaanite woman such as this one?²

Why does Jesus refer these people as “dogs”? (Matt. 15.26)

In Matthew 15.21-28, a Canaanite woman comes to Jesus asking for her daughter to be healed. Jesus initially responds by saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 15.24, NIV). When the woman persists in asking for help, Jesus says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs" (Matthew 15.26, NIV).

This statement has been interpreted in different ways. Some scholars argue that Jesus was using a common Jewish insult at the time, referring to Gentiles (non-Jews) as "dogs."³ Others suggest that Jesus was using the word "dog" in a more affectionate way, as a term of endearment. Still, others argue that Jesus was testing the woman's faith, challenging her to demonstrate her persistence and trust in him.

Regardless of the interpretation, it is clear that Jesus ultimately grants the woman's request, commending her for her faith: "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted" (Matthew 15.28, NIV). This suggests that Jesus' statement was not intended to demean or dismiss the woman, but rather could be seen as a teaching moment both for the woman as well as Jesus' own disciples, many of which may have had a prejudiced view of Gentiles, due to their cultural upbringing and the statements regarding Gentiles contained in their scripture.

James E. Talmage gave this commentary:

Many have queried as to why Jesus delayed the blessing. We may not be able to fathom His purposes; but we see that, by the course He adopted, the woman's faith was demonstrated and the disciples were instructed. Jesus impressed upon her that she was not of the chosen people, to whom He had been sent; but His words prefigured the giving of the gospel to all, both Jew and Gentile: "Let the children first be filled" He had said. The resurrected Christ was to be made known to every nation, but His personal ministry as a mortal, as also that of the apostles while He was with them in the flesh, was directed to the house of Israel.⁴

Mark 7.31-37: Jesus heals the multitudes in Decapolis

¹ Craig S. Keener, [The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament](#), IVP Academic, p. 85.

² Ibid.

³ “Dog” was one of the harshest insults in antiquity. Keener, p. 85.

⁴ James Talmage, [Jesus the Christ](#), p. 172.



Decapolis, league of 10 ancient Greek cities in eastern Palestine that was formed after the Roman conquest of Palestine in 63 BC, when Pompey the Great reorganized the Middle East to Rome's advantage and to his own. The name Decapolis also denotes the roughly contiguous territory formed by these cities, all but one of which lay east of the Jordan River. According to Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 5.74), in the mid-1st century AD the 10 cities of the league were Scythopolis (modern Bet She'an, Israel), Hippos, Gadara, Raphana, Dion (or Dium), Pella, Gerasa, Philadelphia (modern Amman, Jordan), Canatha, and Damascus (capital of modern Syria). The exact number varied over time, and at one stage 14 cities are reported to have been members. **Damascus lay the farthest north, while Philadelphia lay the farthest south.** Gadara was the original capital of the league, but it was replaced by Damascus. The cities participated in the Decapolis as a means of mutual protection and security against their Semitic neighbors. The league was subject to the Roman governor of Syria, though his authority was somewhat

tenuous in eastern Palestine.⁵

It is significant that the first thing that Jesus does after his encounter with the gentile woman is to go into the heart of gentile territory; it suggests that she has shifted the course of his ministry by making it more inclusive of Gentiles. The route is difficult to understand... Jesus leaves Tyre to walk to the Lake of Galilee (which is southeast of Tyre) by way of Sidon (which is 22 miles north of Tyre) and through the middle of the Decapolis (which is east of Sidon and north of the Sea of Galilee). Why would he take a route like this?

1. Mark was confused about geography (a likely possibility in a world without accurate maps).
2. Efficiency was not Jesus' goal; rather, his route is the result of some purpose not explained in the text. Perhaps he was avoiding Herod or the religious authorities or had a particular reason to visit Sidon that Mark does not mention.
3. Mark is using the geography to make a theological point: one impact of Jesus' conversation with the Syrophenician woman is that a visit to the gentile region of Decapolis is appropriate for this moment in his ministry.⁶

"An impediment in his speech" (Mark 7.32)

And they bring to him a **deaf man**, and had **an impediment in his speech**; and they petitioned him in order that **he would put his hand upon him**. (Mark 7.32, my translation).

⁵ "Decapolis," [Britannica](#). Accessed 2.14.23.

⁶ Julie Smith, [The Gospel According to Mark, Brigham Young University New Testament Commentary](#), BYU Studies, 2018, p. 462.

αὶ φέρουσιν αὐτῷ **κωφὸν μογιλάλον** καὶ παρακαλοῦσιν αὐτὸν ἵνα **ἐπιθῆ αὐτῷ τὴν χεῖρα**

The word μογιλάλος (mogilalos) is used only once in the New Testament, in Mark 7.32, where it describes the man who is brought to Jesus for healing. It is derived from the Greek words μόγις (*mogis*), meaning "with difficulty," and λαλέω (*laleo*), meaning "to speak." Thus, the word μογιλάλος (*mogilalos*) refers to someone who speaks with difficulty, perhaps because of a speech impediment or deafness.

The *exact word* μογιλάλος (*mogilalos*) is not found in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. However, the fact that the word is a compound of μόγις (with difficulty) and λαλέω (to speak) may suggest a broader thematic connection to other passages in the Bible where speaking or communication is a key theme.

For example, in Exodus 4:10-12, Moses complains to God that he is not a good speaker, (he says that he is ἰσχνόφωνος καὶ βραδύγλωσσος – see Exodus 4.10. Moses states that he is "Bradyglōssos" (βραδύγλωσσος) is a Greek word that means "slow-tongued" or "slow to speak." It is derived from the words βραδύς (*bradus*), meaning "slow," and γλῶσσα (*glōssa*), meaning "tongue," and that he is "Iscnophōnos" (ἰσχνόφωνος) is a Greek word that means "weak-voiced" or "having a feeble voice." It is derived from the words ἰσχνός (*iscnos*), meaning "weak" or "feeble," and φωνή (*phōnē*), meaning "voice.") but God reassures him that he will give him the words to speak.

Similarly, in [Isaiah 35:5-6](#), the prophet describes a time when the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, and the tongue of the mute will be mighty. (τότε **ἀλειῖται** ὡς ἔλαφος ὁ χλωός καὶ **τρανή** ἔσται γλῶσσα μογιλάλων "Then the lame will **leap** like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will be **mighty!**" [Isaiah 35.6] my translation).

These passages, and others like them, emphasize the importance of speech and communication, and the ways in which God is able to overcome barriers to communication.

It is very likely that Mark is inviting his readers to make a connection between the healing of the man who is μογιλάλος (mogilalos) and these other passages in the Bible where communication is a key theme, specifically the Isaiah passage. The healing of the man's speech impediment could be seen as a symbolic restoration of the ability to communicate and to be heard. Julie Smith asserts that "this suggests that Jesus' ministry is a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy and that this healing has a symbolic meaning as well as a literal one. It is significant that Isaiah is describing a future day when Israel comes back to Zion, which makes the gentile setting of this healing miracle all the more intriguing: in Isaiah 35, God takes vengeance against Israel's enemies, but in this story, Jesus heals a Gentile, inverting expectations. Through this link to the Isaiah passage, Mark shows that Jesus' ministry extends to all people the ability to truly hear his message and to speak to all the world."⁷

"And put his finger into his ears, and he spit" (Mark 7.33)

Where Jesus spits (on his finger? On the man? On the ground?) is not explained (see also Mark 8.23).

In the ancient world, healers operated in a variety of ways. One such method was the use of saliva or spittle. While it may seem strange to modern readers, there is historical evidence to suggest that the use

⁷ Smith, p. 464.

of saliva as a healing agent was not uncommon. In fact, the ancient Greeks believed that saliva had healing properties, and physicians would sometimes use it to treat wounds and other ailments.

As a healer in the ancient world, Jesus may have used spittle for similar reasons. There are several accounts in the New Testament where Jesus is recorded as using his saliva to heal individuals. In one instance, a man who was deaf and had difficulty speaking was brought to Jesus for healing. The text says that Jesus "put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue" (Mark 7:33). In another instance, a blind man was brought to Jesus, and he "spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him" (Mark 8:23).

While the use of spittle may seem strange to us today, it is important to understand that in the ancient world, healers often used a variety of methods to heal people.⁸ It is likely that Jesus used spittle as a way to demonstrate his power as a healer and to show that he was able to heal people in ways that went beyond traditional methods. Additionally, it is possible that the use of spittle had symbolic significance for Jesus and his followers. In the Bible, spittle is often associated with the idea of purity. For example, in the Old Testament, a person with a skin disease was considered unclean, and if they spat on someone, that person would become unclean as well. ***By using his own spittle to heal people, Jesus may have been making a statement about his own purity and holiness.***

Matt. 15.29-39; Mark 7.31-37, 8.1-10: Jesus heals Multitudes and Feeds 4,000

We must remember that Jesus also feeds 5,000 in another place in the narrative of the Gospel writers (see Matt. 14.13-21; Mark 6.30-4; Luke 9.10-17; John 6). While the feeding of the 4,000 and the feeding of the 5,000 share some similarities, there are also some significant differences:

1. Location: The feeding of the 5,000 takes place near Bethsaida (Luke 9.10-14)⁹, on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, while the feeding of the 4,000 takes place in the region of the Decapolis, on the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee.
2. Number of people fed: The two miracles differ in the number of people fed. The feeding of the 5,000 involves five loaves and two fish and feeds 5,000 men (plus women and children), while the feeding of the 4,000 involves seven loaves and a few small fish and feeds 4,000 men (plus women and children).
3. Time of year: The feeding of the 5,000 takes place in the spring, as indicated by the mention of green grass (Mark 6:39), while the feeding of the 4,000 takes place later in the year, as indicated by the mention of the lack of food in the wilderness (Mark 8:1).
4. Duration of the miracle: In the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus tells the disciples to have the people sit down in the grass, then he blesses and breaks the loaves and fish, and the disciples distribute

⁸ These methods could include the use of herbs, massage, and even bloodletting.

⁹ And the apostles, when they were returned, told him all that they had done. And he took them, and went aside privately into a desert place belonging to the city called Bethsaida. And the people, when they knew it, followed him: and he received them, and spake unto them of the kingdom of God, and healed them that had need of healing. And when the day began to wear away, then came the twelve, and said unto him, Send the multitude away, that they may go into the towns and country round about, and lodge, and get victuals: for we are here in a desert place. But he said unto them, Give ye them to eat. And they said, We have no more but five loaves and two fishes; except we should go and buy meat for all this people. For they were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, Make them sit down by fifties in a company. (Luke 9.10-14).

the food. In the feeding of the 4,000, Jesus first has compassion on the people, and then he blesses and breaks the loaves and fish, but it is not explicitly stated who distributes the food.

5. Number of baskets left over: In the feeding of the 5,000, the disciples collect 12 baskets of leftovers, while in the feeding of the 4,000, they collect seven baskets of leftovers.

These differences suggest that the two miracles were distinct events, rather than different versions of the same story. Nonetheless, both miracles demonstrate Jesus' compassion and miraculous power, and they both emphasize the importance of faith and trust in God's provision.

Matt. 16.1-4; Mark 8.11-13: Jesus' Discourse on Signs

It is a bit humorous that the Pharisees would ask Jesus for a sign after he just miraculously fed 4,000 people.

Signs are given for a purpose:

1. To help those who desire to follow Christ to believe: (Hel. 14.12, 28-29; 16.5).
2. To leave the wicked without an excuse, so that a "righteous judgment" might come upon them: (Hel. 14.29; Hel. 15.17; D&C 88.82).¹⁰

Matt. 16.5-12; Mark 8.14-21: The Leaven of the Pharisees

In the Bible, Jesus warned his followers about the "leaven" or "yeast" of the Pharisees, which referred to their teachings and practices that were hypocritical and spiritually corrupt. Jesus cautioned his listeners to avoid being influenced by their false teachings and instead to seek genuine spiritual truth and righteousness.

Jesus may have used the metaphor of yeast to teach about the corrupt teachings of the Pharisees because, in Jewish culture, yeast was often associated with corruption and impurity. In the Bible, yeast is often used as a symbol of sin and evil that spreads and contaminates everything it touches. By warning his followers about the "leaven" or "yeast" of the Pharisees, Jesus was emphasizing the importance of being aware of and avoiding false teachings that can corrupt one's spiritual life.

Mark 8.22-26: A Blind Man of Bethsaida is Healed... "Men as Trees, Walking"

While there are many miracles in the Hebrew Bible, including raisings from the dead, there is no record of sight being restored to the blind. Perhaps precisely because there were no instances of healing the blind in the Hebrew Bible, the tradition developed that only the Messiah or the Lord would be able to do this. Thus, when Jesus heals the blind man, he is doing something that many people believed only the Messiah could do. For many audience members, this story would reveal Jesus as the Messiah.¹¹

"When he had spit on his eyes" (Mark 8.23)

Here, the typical word for "eyes" (Greek *ophthalmos*, which is used in Mark 8.25) is not used but a different Greek word (*omma*), a "more poetic term... [that is] frequently employed in philosophical contexts in which physical sight becomes an image for spiritual insight." This unusual term encourages

¹⁰ See: Day and Dunford, Ep 194, "Matthew 11-12; Luke 11."

¹¹ Smith, p. 492.

the symbolic reading of this miracle, pointing to the blindness of the disciples that Jesus must overcome.¹²

“I see men as trees, walking” (Mark 8.24)

The man’s statement is virtually impossible to translate precisely due to the strange syntax.¹³ Options for understanding include:

1. It is meant to be opaque and confusing in order to convey the man’s confusion.¹⁴
2. It is factual and represents what the man sees, with no symbolic level.¹⁵
3. **The statement has symbolic meaning**, which is to be expected, and used to describe how the disciples in the Gospel of Mark learn to really “see” who mankind are and more specifically, who Jesus is. Some options include:
 - a. **Trees are often symbolic of people**. Trees have been used as a metaphor in the scriptures to represent the stability, longevity, and fruitfulness of those who are rooted in God and his word. By contrast, those who turn away from God are often compared to withered trees or dead branches that are cut off and burned. The following examples help to see this:
 - i. In Alma 32:28-30, there is an extended metaphor comparing faith to a seed that is planted in the heart, and that, if nourished, grows into a mighty tree that bears fruit. This metaphor suggests that people, like trees, can grow and mature in their faith.
 - ii. Psalm 1.3 - "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper." In this passage, trees are used as a metaphor for the righteous, who are firmly rooted in God's word and bear fruit in due season.
 - iii. Jeremiah 17.7-8 - "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit." Here again, trees are used as a metaphor for the faithful, who are sustained by their trust in God and remain fruitful even in difficult times.
 - iv. Isaiah 61.3 - "To provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. That they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified." In this passage, trees (oaks - אֵילִם) are used as a

¹² Julie Smith, p. 486. See also: Joel Marcus, [Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 27A of the Anchor Yale Bible, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 593.

¹³ Smith, p. 486.

¹⁴ The blind man had a partial restoration of sight: Others believe that the blind man's statement indicated that he had only partially regained his sight. He could see the shapes of people, but they were still indistinct and blurred, like walking trees.

¹⁵ The blind man's sight was gradually being restored: Some scholars believe that the blind man's statement was a reflection of the gradual restoration of his sight. Initially, he saw only blurry figures, which he likened to trees walking. As his vision continued to improve, he was able to see clearly.

metaphor for those who have been restored and renewed by God's grace, and who display God's glory through their lives.

- v. The King is the custodian and caretaker of the primordial Tree of Life in the Ancient Near East.¹⁶
- vi. The metaphor for the children of God as springing from "their mother tree" is found in the Allegory of the Olive Tree in [Jacob 5](#). Three times this metaphor is used in the text (Jacob 5.54, 56, 60).
- b. **The Tree can be a symbol of Jesus and his cross.** Jesus is said to have "died on the tree" (see Acts 5.30, 10.39; 1 Peter 2.24; Deuteronomy 21.23).
- c. We must remember that the tree is a symbol of the divine king.¹⁷ Jesus stated that he is the vine and we are the branches (John 15.5).¹⁸
- d. The king anciently held the scepter, which was the branch which came from the Tree of Life, and was a symbol of bringing the dead back to life.¹⁹

"Tell no man!" (Mark 8.30)

See also: Matt. 8.4, 12.16-19, 16.20; Mark 7.36, 9.9; Luke 5.14, 8.56, 9.21.

There have been various interpretations of why Jesus instructed those he had healed not to tell anyone about their miraculous healing. There are many ways to read this instruction, and I like many of them. The following may be useful:

1. Messianic secret: Some have suggested²⁰ that Jesus' command to "tell no man" is part of what's called the "Messianic secret" motif in the Gospel of Mark. According to this interpretation, Jesus didn't want people to publicly declare that he was the Messiah because he wanted to avoid political and religious conflict that could disrupt his ministry.²¹

¹⁶ Geo Widengren, [The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion](#), Uppsala, 1951, p. 19.

¹⁷ Widengren, 19-21.

¹⁸ When Jesus said "I am the vine and you are the branches" (John 15:5), he was using a metaphor to describe the relationship between himself and his followers. In this metaphor, Jesus is the vine and his followers are the branches that grow out of the vine. Just as branches cannot survive without the vine, Jesus is saying that his followers cannot survive without him.

The metaphor of the vine and branches is used to emphasize the idea of unity and dependence. The vine provides the branches with the nutrients and water they need to grow and bear fruit, just as Jesus provides his followers with the spiritual sustenance they need to live a fruitful life. Apart from the vine, the branches wither and die, just as Jesus is saying that apart from him, his followers can do nothing (John 15:5).

The metaphor also emphasizes the importance of staying connected to Jesus. Just as branches need to stay attached to the vine in order to grow and produce fruit, Jesus is saying that his followers need to stay connected to him in order to live a life that is spiritually fruitful. This connection is maintained through faith in Jesus and obedience to his teachings. This powerful metaphor of the vine and branches is a powerful image of the unity and dependence between Jesus and his followers. By staying connected to Jesus, his followers can experience spiritual growth and bear fruit in their lives.

¹⁹ Widengren, p. 21.

²⁰ See: [Day, "The Messianic Secret," March 8, 2019](#).

²¹ This idea is often (in my opinion) portrayed in the popular show [The Chosen](#).

2. Humility: Others suggest that Jesus was trying to promote humility among his followers. By asking those he had healed to keep their healing private, Jesus may have been trying to discourage them from seeking public praise and attention.
3. Divine Timing: Some believe that Jesus wanted to time his public ministry and the proclamation of his Messiahship. Jesus may have wanted to ensure that his message was fully developed and that he had gathered enough followers before publicly proclaiming his role as the Messiah.
4. The private nature of the miracle. Perhaps these things are “just for them,” so to speak. It could also simply be a test of obedience. Both views seem to have been held by Frederic Farrar as he approached these things.²²
5. To fulfill prophecy: In some cases, Jesus instructed those he had healed not to tell anyone to fulfill certain prophetic statements from the Old Testament. For example, in Matthew 12.16-19, Jesus healed many people and "ordered them not to make him known," so that the prophecy of Isaiah might be fulfilled²³: "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets."

To remain balanced here, it is important to note that while Jesus instructed some of those he healed not to tell anyone, he also told others to share their testimony of what happened (see for example John 9.25). His reasons for instructing people not to share their healing may have varied depending on the context and the individuals involved. It is good to have a balanced approach when reading these texts, while acknowledging that there are simply some things that we just do not know!

Matt. 16.5-12; Mark 8.13-21: How is it that you do not understand?

Do ye not yet understand, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? How is it that ye do not understand that I spake it not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. (Matt. 16.9-12)

²² “There are some who have admired their disobedience, and have attributed it to the enthusiasm of gratitude and admiration. But was it not rather the enthusiasm of a blatant wonder, the vulgarity of a chattering boast? Did not the holy fire of devotion which a hallowed silence must have kept alive upon the altar of their hearts die away in the mere blaze of empty rumour? Did not He know best? Would not obedience have been better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams? Yes. It is possible to deceive ourselves; it is possible to offer to Christ a seeming service which disobeys His inmost precepts—to grieve Him, under the guise of honouring Him, by vain repetitions, and empty genuflections, and bitter intolerance, and irreverent familiarity, and the hollow simulacrum of a dead devotion. Better, far better, to serve Him by doing the things He said than by a seeming zeal, often false in exact proportion to its obtrusiveness, for the glory of His name. These disobedient babblers, who talked so much of Him, did but offer Him the dishonouring service of a double heart; their violation of His commandment served only to hinder His usefulness, to trouble His spirit, and to precipitate His death.” Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, p. 225. Regarding a separate incident, he wrote, “And so the day dawned on Hermon, and they descended the hill; and as they descended, He bade them tell no man until He had risen from the dead. The vision was for them; it was to be pondered over by them in the depths of their own hearts in self-denying reticence.” Ibid, p. 308.

²³ See Isaiah 42.1-4.

The feeding of the 5,000 and the 4,000 may have symbolic significance, based on their numbers. This is one possible interpretation of the feeding miracles. Some scholars²⁴ have suggested that the feeding of the 5,000, which took place in a Jewish area, may represent Jesus' ministry to the Jewish people, who were seen as the covenant people of God.²⁵ In contrast, the feeding of the 4,000, which took place in the predominantly Gentile region of the Decapolis, may represent Jesus' ministry to the Gentiles, who were seen as being outside the covenant.

This interpretation is supported by other passages in the Gospels that suggest that Jesus' ministry was focused on the Jewish people, but also extended to Gentiles. For example, in Matthew 15.21-28, Jesus heals the daughter of a Canaanite woman, who is not of the House of Israel, after she demonstrates her great faith in the Savior Jesus Christ (see also Mark 7.24-30).

However, it is important to note that Jesus' ministry was not limited to one group of people. Jesus' teachings and miracles were intended for all people, regardless of their ethnic background or religious belief. He spoke with, healed, and ate with all kinds of people. His message of salvation was an invitation to all.

Matt. 16.13-20; Mark 8.27-30; Luke 9.18-20: Peter's Testimony and the Keys of the Kingdom

Every person will one day have to answer the question: Who is Jesus?

Elder Hales emphasized this when he said:

"Every person in the world at some point in his eternal progression is one day going to have to come to the moment of truth when he must answer the question, 'What think ye of Christ?' (Matt 22:42) Think of that. At one point in our eternal progression, each one of us is going to have to answer the question, Who is Jesus Christ? We are told that every eye shall see, every ear shall hear, and every knee shall bow, every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (see Philip. 2:10-11); 'When all men shall stand to be judged of him, then shall they confess that he is God' (Mosiah 27:31) ... What think ye of Christ and whom say ye that he is? Many Christians profess to follow Jesus Christ but do not know him: 'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent' (John 17:3). Many profess to be Christians and yet do not believe that Jesus Christ is the literal Son of God, indeed, the eldest son of God the Father. Men are willing to follow some of his teachings but do not recognize the divine, eternal purpose and the significance of his life to all mankind. 'What think ye of Christ?' and 'Whom say ye that I am?' These were questions asked by Jesus to make men think, so that he might teach them who he was, that they might use their own free agency, come to their own conclusions and commitments, follow him, and gain a testimony that he is the Son of God, our Redeemer. Using the sacred scriptures we can know Jesus Christ. He is more than a great

²⁴ St. Augustine is one of these interpreters. He wrote, "Wherefore nothing is without meaning; everything is significant, but requires one that understands: for even this number of the people fed, signified the people that were under the law. For why were there five thousand, but because they were under the law, which is unfolded in the five books of Moses?" Augustine, [Tractate 24](#).

²⁵ Origen, a third-century Christian theologian, believed that the number 12 in the feeding of the 5,000 represented the 12 apostles, and that the 12 baskets of leftovers represented the completeness of the Gospel message. See: Origen, [Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew \(Book XI\)](#).

teacher; he is the Messiah. He was willing to lay down his life for us; he is the only one who could, as these scriptures testify."²⁶

“Flesh and blood have not revealed it unto thee...” (Matt. 16.17)

The Temple of Pan (in modern day [Banias](#)) is where Jesus is having this conversation with his disciples in the text of Matthew 16. The purpose of the Temple of Pan, located in what is now modern-day Banias, was to worship the Greek god Pan. The temple was built during the Hellenistic period and was considered a major center of worship for the god Pan, who was associated with nature, fertility, and rustic music. The site was also believed to be the location of the grotto where Pan was born, which added to its religious significance. Behind this temple was a cave, known as “The Cave of Pan,” and in this cave there was much water.

Ritual activities that may have taken place within the Cave of Pan can be assumed from reading ancient sources that described such activity. We can again compare the testimony of Menander’s [Dyskolos](#), where Menander describes a family’s visit to the Cave of Pan at Phyle on Mount Parnes, where a ritual celebration ensues that lasts all day and night and includes the sacrifice of a goat or sheep as well as bloodless food offerings, followed by a symposium, music and dancing. This picture compares well with the visual evidence of the aforementioned Attic marble votive reliefs dedicated to Pan and the Nymphs, which similarly attest to various rituals performed in or at the entrance of a sacred cave. The human worshippers are often depicted leading sacrificial animals toward the gods or pouring libations in their presence, and in some instances a small altar is depicted.²⁷

The patrons of the Temple of Pan in Banias likely placed the carcasses of sacrificial animals in the water behind the temple as a form of offering to the god Pan. Pan was associated with nature and was often depicted as a protector of flocks and herds, so offerings of animals would have been considered particularly appropriate. Additionally, water was considered a sacred element in many ancient religions, and offerings made into water were believed to have a special spiritual significance.

The argument that the location of the Temple of Pan may be connected to Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ (χριστός) and Jesus' response that "flesh and blood" did not reveal it to him, is based on the theory that the patrons of the temple would put a sacrifice in water to determine the will of their god. Some scholars suggest that this ritual may have influenced Jesus' statement, as it highlights the idea that divine revelation is necessary for true knowledge and understanding. In this context, Jesus' response to Peter may be seen as a rejection of the idea that human beings can rely on their own intellect or understanding to know the truth about God. It can also be seen as a rejection of the notion of pagan

²⁶ Elder Robert D. Hales, *Ensign*, May 1979, 77.

²⁷ Stella Katsarou and Alexander Nagel (editors), [Cave and Worship in Ancient Greece: New Approaches to Landscape and Ritual](#), Routledge, 2021, p. 158. Bravo and Mari continue, “Other natural qualities of the Cave of Pan, particularly its pervasive darkness, would have further contributed to the worshippers’ experience. Scholars have explored how the natural properties of cave sanctuaries could elicit specific psychological and mental responses from those who entered them... these silent, underground damp spaces, which due to absolute lack of light are often restored in the human mind as places concealed by a veil of mystery and secrecy. Such effects help to explain why the ancient Greeks regarded many other caves as entrances to the Underworld, a point of contact between the world of the living and the world of the dead. By a similar line of reasoning, we can see the caves where Pan and the Nymphs were worshipped as points of contact between the world of humans and the world of the divine.” (p. 159-160).

sacrifice, as the worshippers at this temple may have approached it with the notion that if their sacrifice sank into the water, their offering was accepted and their petition would be granted. Hence, “flesh and blood” (the sacrificial offering to Pan) would answer them. Instead, Jesus asserts that true knowledge and understanding come from revelation from our Heavenly Father, and that Peter's understanding of Jesus as the Christ was a result of divine revelation rather than human reasoning or observation.

“Upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16.18)

There have many interpretations over the years as to the meaning of this passage.

1. The “rock” is Revelation. Joseph Smith taught, "Jesus in His teaching says, 'Upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' What rock? Revelation."²⁸

²⁸ *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 274. * It should be noted that Gregor McHardy disagrees with this interpretation. He states, “Peter is not the rock. Joseph Smith said, ‘the rock of revelation.’ Yes, I have heard it too—even taught it to many an investigator on my mission. B.H. Roberts is insistent that if Jesus meant that Peter was the intended foundation stone, he would have said, “upon thee” and not “upon this rock.” (See Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, p. 160) He claims by saying “rock” Jesus was referring to the principle of revelation. There, are, however, a couple of prickly problems with the idea. The first is that Joseph never said it. He was talking about John baptizing Jesus and, in a sidebar, quotes the second half of Matthew 16.18 and says “What rock? Revelation.” (Smith Jr. et al., 5:258). Then he goes back to the subject of baptism. The phrase “rock of revelation” was not coined until thirty years later when George Q. Cannon was talking about Catholics versus Protestants and their claims about the papacy and said, “What rock? The rock of revelation- the principle upon which he was talking.” (George Q. Cannon, “Persecution- First Principles – Priesthood,” June 11, 1871.) It was Cannon, not Joseph Smith, who developed this concept... The point I’m trying to make is that, contrary to the argument that we and our Protestant friends have been making for more than five centuries, Jesus was referring to Peter when he said “upon this rock.” The Catholic Church believes that Peter was given the keys to the kingdom, and, further, that the keys have been passed on through an unbroken line to leaders to today’s pope... When we interpret Matthew 16 as referring to the rock of revelation, rather than to Peter, we unwittingly follow an early Protestant doctrine they projected back to Jesus’ time in order to make their arguments against the current papacy. And by parroting these Protestant claims, we are actually denying one of our LDS beliefs, namely, that Peter was indeed given the keys to the kingdom, and that he and James and John constituted the first First Presidency. The primitive church was meant to be built upon the foundation of Peter’s presidency every bit as much as the restored LDS Church was meant to be built upon the foundation of Joseph Smith’s presidency.” Gregor McHardy, [8 Myths of the Great Apostasy](#), Signature Books, 2022, p. 35-37.

David O. McKay seems to have taken this position as well (and perhaps also the position that the “rock” is also revelation) when he said, “By that He meant that as Simon's name 'Peter' means rock, so this testimony that comes by revelation shall be the rock upon which Christ's Church shall be built. Because when one receives such divine assurance in his soul that the gospel is true, no views of men, nor waves of temptation nor 'the power of hell' can deprive him of it. You remember when Jesus first met Simon, He said He should be called 'the Rock.' Ever since then it would seem that Jesus has been waiting for the time when Peter's testimony would be like his character-expressive and firm. That time has come; and Peter is now prepared to receive a greater responsibility.” David O. McKay, [Ancient Apostles](#), 48.

2. Jesus Christ is the Rock.²⁹ Joseph F. Smith combines this idea with the concept of revelation to support this view.³⁰
3. Peter is the rock.³¹ The Roman Catholic Church teaches that Peter is the rock upon which the Church is built. This interpretation is based on the idea of apostolic succession, which holds that Peter was the first bishop of Rome and that his authority was passed down to his successors, the popes. The pope, as the bishop of Rome and the successor of Peter, is seen as the spiritual leader of the Church and the keeper of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The Eastern Orthodox Church also recognizes Peter as the leader of the apostles and acknowledges the primacy of the bishop of Rome, but does not accept the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility. Many Latter-day Saint apostles have disagreed with this assertion.³²
4. The rock is a confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Many Protestant denominations do not interpret the passage in Matthew as referring specifically to Peter as the rock upon which the church is built, but rather see the "rock" as a confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah. In this view, the "rock" is the faith of Peter and the other apostles in Jesus as the Son of God, which forms the foundation of the Church.³³
5. The rock is the gospel message. This seems to be the idea conveyed in some passages of the Doctrine and Covenants. For example, in D&C 33 we read: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for a remission of sins, yea, be baptized even by water, and then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost. Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, this is my gospel; and remember that they shall have faith in me or they can in nowise be saved; and upon this rock I will build my church; yea, upon this rock ye are built, and if ye continue, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you" (D&C 33.11-13).³⁴
6. A combination of these ideas. This is one approach of the biblical scholar Michael Heiser. He explains, "Many scholars have wrestled with the choice to link "the rock" on which Jesus will build his church to either Peter or the rock face at the foot of Mount Hermon. But it appears to be a double entendre. Both (1) Peter who confessed that Jesus is the king sent by God and (2)

²⁹ "Some believe the rock to be Jesus himself. This was the interpretation of St. Jerome (A.D. 347-419), and his views were adopted eventually by St. Augustine (A.D. 354-387). Keep in mind that these two men are considered among the greatest doctors of the Roman Church." Sidney Sperry, *The Meaning of Peter's Confession, Improvement Era*, 1949.

³⁰ "Some have held that revelation alone was the 'Rock' referred to. This could not be, because without Christ, revelation would not avail. Some have held it was 'Christ alone' that was meant as the 'Rock'; but this could not be, because without revelation, not even Simon Bar-jona could know that Jesus was 'The Christ, the Son of the Living God.' See: Joseph F. Smith, *From Prophet to Son: Advice of Joseph F. Smith to His Missionary Sons*, compiled by Hyrum M. Smith III and Scott G. Kenney, 87-88.

³¹ See the above points from Gregor McHardy. It is noteworthy also that Origen, the early church father (born about A.D. 185), held that **the rock upon which the Christ would build his Church was truly Peter**, but—and this is important—**not Peter alone. It was Peter, and, besides, all who should join in his ardent confession.** "But if you suppose that upon one Peter only the whole Church is built by God, what would you say about John, the son of thunder, or each one of the Apostles?" Sidney Sperry, *The Meaning of Peter's Confession, Improvement Era*, 1949.

³² See: Harold B. Lee, *Decisions for Successful Living*, 64-65. See also: James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy* as well as *Jesus the Christ*, p. 356-362.

³³ Sperry, "Confession."

³⁴ Sperry quotes several other passages in the Doctrine and Covenants to support this view that the gospel message of salvation is indeed the rock that is discussed here in this context. He cites D&C 10.69, 11.6, 18.4-5, 50.44. He also cites 3 Nephi 11.39 and 3 Nephi 18.12-13.

the rock cave whose watery abyss represents death itself are foundational to what Jesus is building. Jesus is going to use his resurrection from the dead and those who testify to it as the foundation of the church's growth. As Ephesians 2:19-20 says, "the household of God [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." ***Peter, and all the other apostles after him who proclaimed that Jesus is the real King*** ("Messiah" = God's anointed king), ***are the solid foundation on which the church was built.*** The foundation, or solid rock, is greater than the great rock, Hermon, that Jesus and his disciples are looking at in Caesarea-Philippi. Many other great kings had supposedly come from rock Hermon, and other divine councils had assembled at its peaks. But Jesus is the greatest king to assemble his team at the mountain. Remember, the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, means assembly. So Jesus is countering the age-old stories about the significant assembly of gods that gathered "upon this rock." He has assembled his council on rock Hermon that will now redirect human history.³⁵

"The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16.18)

Jesus is proclaiming war on the forces of Hades. In the New Testament context, from my reading of the Enoch literature, Jesus is claiming his right to take possession of the earth against the forces of the rebellious Watchers who departed God's presence. See [Enoch 6-8](#)³⁶ and Michael Heiser's book [The Unseen Realm](#).³⁷

"I give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16.19)

This statement can be seen as being symbolic of the church's foundation: Some see the "keys of the kingdom" as symbolic of the role Peter played in establishing the church. Jesus' statement in Matthew 16.18, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," is interpreted to mean that Peter was the foundation upon which the church was built, and that the "keys of the kingdom" represent his leadership in this role.

"These keys, as we are aware, are the right and power to preside over the kingdom which is the Church. They enable the legal administrators who hold them to perform the ordinances of salvation so they will be binding on earth and sealed in heaven. Unless, for instance, a baptism performed on earth has

³⁵ Heiser, [Gates of Hades" Didn't Stop Jesus from Building His Movement on this Rock](#), accessed 2.14.23.

³⁶ The fallen angels swear an oath (Enoch 6.4-5), and do so, binding themselves with curses on this oath upon Mount Hermon (Enoch 6.6). They teach the sons of Adam the art of war (Enoch 8.1), and how to make jewelry (Enoch 8.1), as well as "to commit fornication" (Enoch 8.2), how to "cast spells and cut roots... and release spells" (Enoch 8.3).

³⁷ For a shortened explanation of Heiser's views see: [Gates of Hades" Didn't Stop Jesus from Building His Movement on this Rock](#), accessed 2.14.23. The author explains, "Ancient Canaanite literature calls Mount Hermon and other high mountains in Lebanon (such as Zaphon and Lulu) the meeting place of the gods. The council of ancient Canaanite gods assembled on top of these mountains. As a late Old Babylonian fragment of the Epic of Gilgamesh (ANET 504, 5:C:13) states, "the dwelling-place of the Anunnaki" ("Anunaki" is a group of gods) is in "the Lebanon ranges." Mount Hermon's sheer heights and its deep watery abyss made it a natural connection point for heaven, earth, and the underworld.

Judges 3:3 and 1 Chronicles 5:23 both mention "Baal Hermon"—a Canaanite deity who lived on Mount Hermon. Baal was the most powerful god among the gods in the region. He could gather the divine council there. As a result, Hermon contended with Zion to be the true "mountain of God." But the kings of that mountain in the north, Mount Hermon, failed to win the fight, according to the Psalms (see Ps. 68)."

efficacy and force in heaven, it will not admit the penitent person into the eternal heaven, which his soul desires. These sealing keys were, in fact, given to Peter, James, and John about a week later, when they climbed nearby Mount Hermon to meet with Moses and Elijah and to participate in the glory of the Transfiguration. Later they were given to all of the Twelve, so that all had the power to bind and loose both on earth and in heaven. (Matt. 18:18.)³⁸

Boyd K. Packer shared the following experience:

In 1976 following a conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, President Spencer W. Kimball invited us to a small church to see the statues of Christ and the Twelve Apostles by Bertel Thorvaldsen. The "Christus" stands in an alcove beyond the altar. Standing in order along the sides of the chapel are the statues of the Twelve, with Paul replacing Judas Iscariot. President Kimball told the elderly caretaker that at the very time Thorvaldsen was creating those beautiful statues in Denmark, a restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ was taking place in America with apostles and prophets receiving authority from those who held it anciently. Gathering those present closer to him, he said to the caretaker, "We are living Apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ," and pointing to Elder Pinegar he said, "Here is a Seventy like those spoken of in the New Testament." We were standing near the statue of Peter, whom the sculptor depicted holding keys in his hand, symbolic of the keys of the kingdom. President Kimball said, "We hold the real keys, as Peter did, and we use them every day." Then came an experience I will never forget. President Kimball, this gentle prophet, turned to President Johan H. Benthin, of the Copenhagen Stake, and in a commanding voice said, "I want you to tell every prelate in Denmark that they do not hold the keys! I HOLD THE KEYS!" There came to me that witness known to Latter-day Saints but difficult to describe to one who has not experienced it—a light, a power coursing through one's very soul—and I knew that, in very fact, here stood the living prophet who held the keys.³⁹

Matt. 16.21-23; Mark 8.31-33; Luke 9.21-22: Jesus Foretells his Death

Even most of the Old Testament prophets sought to avoid martyrdom insofar as possible and complained about their sufferings (1 Kings 19:3-4; Jer 20:7-18). Although martyrdom was associated with the prophets, it was not their goal; but it seems to be Jesus' goal here (cf. especially 20:28). Jesus could foreknow his death as a prophet, but he also orchestrated it in a sense: no one could stir a commotion in the temple and defy its officials as Jesus did, then remain in the city unarmed, without expecting martyrdom. Jewish tradition in this period emphasized a triumphant Messiah; apparently only a century after Jesus' teaching did Jewish teachers begin to accept the tradition of a suffering Messiah in addition to a triumphant one. One of the first rules of ancient discipleship (with noticeably rare exceptions) was: Never criticize the teacher, especially publicly. Here Peter breaks that rule, even on standard cultural grounds. Disciples sometimes walked behind their teachers to signify submission. The term stumbling block, referring to something over which people tripped, had come to be used figuratively for things that led people to sin or stumble in their faith. Peter here offers the same temptation as Satan: the kingdom without the cross (4:9-10). Rabbis sometimes punned on the names of disciples; here the "rock" (16:18) becomes a "stumbling stone."⁴⁰

³⁸ Bruce R. McConkie, [The Millennial Messiah: The Second Coming of the Son of Man](#), 125.

³⁹ Boyd K. Packer, "The Shield of Faith," *Ensign*, May 1995, 8.

⁴⁰ Keener, p. 87.

Matt. 17.1-13, Mark 9.2-13; Luke 9.28-36: The Transfiguration

Location

Eusebius (d. A.D. 320) believed that either Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon were possible sites. The Pilgrim of Bordeaux (A.D. 333), on the other hand, associated the Mount of Olives with the event. Following Cyril of Jerusalem's identification of Mount Tabor as the site in A.D. 348, most pilgrims and tourists made the journey to this site to commemorate the Transfiguration... Scholars and commentators have provided another alternative. Many believe that Mount Hermon, or a spur of that mountain, fits the context much better for two reasons: first, because it is closer to Caesarea Philippi—the vicinity of the last scene—and second, because it is higher (more than nine thousand feet) than Tabor.

As noted, Hermon is located just north of Caesarea Philippi. Additionally, as Mark noted, Jesus led the disciples “into an high mountain” (Mark 9:2; emphasis added), which certainly conforms to Hermon's 9,200-foot height. It dominates the landscape of northern Galilee and is covered with snow virtually year round, naturally drawing our attention to Mark's comment, “And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow” (Mark 9:3).⁴¹

An Endowment

Joseph Fielding Smith stated that these men received their endowment at this time:

“I am convinced in my own mind that when the Savior took the three disciples up on the mount, which is spoken of as the ‘Mount of Transfiguration,’ he there gave unto them the ordinances that pertain to the house of the Lord and that they were endowed. That was the only place they could go. That place became holy and sacred for the rites of salvation which were performed on that occasion.”⁴²

Peter, James and John protected

Spencer W. Kimball said: “The glory of the contact was more than they could bear and they collapsed, falling on their faces. While in this state unprintable, unspeakable, unutterable things were said and done. The three mortals thus protected survived even this withering fiery experience.”⁴³

Who were the messengers that appeared at the Mount of Transfiguration?

From the records that we now have, we can ascertain that the following were present at the Mount:

1. Heavenly Father – Matthew 17:5.
2. Jesus, in a glorified state – Matthew 17:2.
3. Moses – Matthew 17:3.
4. Elijah – Matthew 17:3b.
5. The Holy Ghost

⁴¹ Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, [*The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*](#), volume 2, “The Transfiguration.” Deseret Book, 2011.

⁴² Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:169.

⁴³ Spencer W. Kimball, *Conference Report*, April 1964, Afternoon Meeting 97.

6. John the Baptist – Matthew 17:3, Joseph Smith Translation – Matthew 17:14. 5
7. Another Elias who should come and restore all things – Joseph Smith Translation – Matthew 17:14.

There is much we simply do not know about this event

“In the providence of the Lord the saints know some things that the world does not know about the spiritual outpouring of divine grace that fell on the Mount of Transfiguration. ***But even latter-day revelation does not set forth the full account, and until men attain a higher state of spiritual understanding than they now enjoy, they will continue to see through a glass darkly*** and to know only in part the visionary experiences of the presiding officers of the meridian Church. That which is known, however, singles out this night as one of the most important and glorious in the lives of those who saw within the veil and who heard the voices of the heavenly participants.”⁴⁴

Matt. 17.14-21; Mark 9.14-29; Luke 9.37-42: Jesus heals the child with the demon

It might be relevant that, like Moses, Jesus must deal with the failure of those he left in charge once he comes down from the mountain (Ex 24:14; 32:1-8, 21-25, 35), though Jesus has not been absent as long. In some cases of spirit possession noted by anthropologists, persons become violently out of control and risk injury to themselves, as here. Although some compare symptoms here with epilepsy, Matthew does not always associate that affliction with demons (Mt 4:24).⁴⁵

Why could we not cast him out? (Matt. 17.19) Because of your unbelief... If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place, and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you! (Matt. 17.20)

Luke 8.26-40; Matt. 8.28-34; Mark 5.1-20: Jesus Casts out Legion into the Gadarene Swine (see also Luke 9.37-43; Matt. 17.14-21; Mark 9.14-29, where a boy who has a demon is healed).

“I am Legion!” (Luke 8.32; Mark 5.9)

Brigham Young taught that unclean spirits are here on the earth and they desire to enter into mortal bodies:

"The Lord Almighty will not let anything endure that offers hospitality to the devil and his imps... they are trying all the time to get into our dwellings, because they have none of their own. Did you ever desire to take possession of another person's tabernacle, and leave your own? No rational person owning a tabernacle would wish to do so. The devils have no tabernacles, which is the reason of their wanting to possess human bodies. If any of you have suffered any of these houseless spirits to enter you, turn them out... Do you think the legion we read of, that entered the swine, in the days of Christ, had bodies of their own? No; they have no meeting houses but in ball rooms, gaming houses, brothels, gin palaces, parlors, bed rooms, and other places which they frequent in the bodies of those they lead captive; otherwise they are wandering to and fro in the earth, seeking to possess tabernacles that other spirits, not of their order, already occupy. ***They are in our midst watching for an opportunity to enter where they may.*** What will be the doom of those who give way to them, and yield to them the possession of

⁴⁴ Bruce R. McConkie, [The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary](#), 3: 54, emphasis added.

⁴⁵ Keener, p. 88.

their tabernacles? ***They will wander to and fro, happiness will be hid from them***, they will weep, and wail, and suffer, ***until their bodies return to their mother earth, and their spirits to judgment***.⁴⁶

The Adversary has no body of his own

Joseph Smith taught:

"The great principle of happiness consists in having a body. The Devil has no body, and herein is his punishment. He is pleased when he can obtain the tabernacle of [a] man, and when cast out by the Savior, he asked to go into the herd of swine, showing that he would prefer a swine's body to having none. All beings who have bodies have power over those who have not. ***The Devil has no power over us, only as we permit him***; the moment we revolt at anything which comes from God, the Devil takes power."⁴⁷

And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. (Mark 9.24)

Elder Holland taught:

"With this tender scriptural record as a backdrop, I wish to speak directly to the young people of the Church—young in years of age or young in years of membership or young in years of faith. One way or another, that should include just about all of us.

Observation number one regarding this account is that when facing the challenge of faith, the father asserts his strength first and only then acknowledges his limitation. His initial declaration is affirmative and without hesitation: "Lord, I believe." I would say to all who wish for more faith, remember this man! In moments of fear or doubt or troubling times, ***hold the ground you have already won, even if that ground is limited***. In the growth we all have to experience in mortality, the spiritual equivalent of this boy's affliction or this parent's desperation is going to come to all of us. When those moments come and issues surface, the resolution of which is not immediately forthcoming, ***hold fast to what you already know and stand strong until additional knowledge comes***. It was of this very incident, this specific miracle, that Jesus said, "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you."⁶ The size of your faith or the degree of your knowledge is not the issue—it is the integrity you demonstrate toward the faith you do have and the truth you already know.

The second observation is a variation of the first. When problems come and questions arise, do not start your quest for faith by saying how much you do not have, leading as it were with your "unbelief." That is

⁴⁶ Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 2:129. At another time President Young taught "There are millions and millions of spirits in these valleys, both good and evil. We are surrounded with more evil spirits than good ones, because more wicked than good men have died here; for instance, thousands and thousands of wicked Lamanites have laid their bodies in these valleys. The spirits of the just and unjust are here. The spirits that were cast out of heaven, which you know are recorded to have been one-third part, were thrust down to this earth, and have been here all the time, with Lucifer, the Son of the Morning, at their head." See: Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. [London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854-1886], 4:133-34. Funeral sermon by Brigham Young on the death of President Jedediah M. Grant. December 4, 1856.

⁴⁷ Kent P. Jackson, compiler and editor, [Joseph Smith's Commentary on the Bible](#), Deseret Book, 1994, 85, emphasis added.

like trying to stuff a turkey through the beak! Let me be clear on this point: I am not asking you to pretend to faith you do not have. I am asking you to be true to the faith you do have. Sometimes we act as if an honest declaration of doubt is a higher manifestation of moral courage than is an honest declaration of faith. It is not! So let us all remember the clear message of this scriptural account: Be as candid about your questions as you need to be; life is full of them on one subject or another. But if you and your family want to be healed, don't let those questions stand in the way of faith working its miracle."⁴⁸

Matt. 17.22-23; Mark 9.30-32; Luke 9.44-45: Death and Resurrection Foretold (again)

"This account (Mark 9:31-32) suggests that the disciples heard the doctrine but chose not to inquire into it, while Matthew's version suggests there was at least limited understanding: 'Jesus said unto them, The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men:

"And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again. And *they were exceeding sorry*' (Matt. 17:22-23; emphasis added; see also Matt. 16:21-22).

"The Gospel narratives agree that before the Lord's resurrection, ***the disciples did not comprehend the doctrine. They understood that he would go to Jerusalem and there die, but they do not seem to have grasped what would happen after that.*** Yet after they had received an outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, the Apostles were able to view the Resurrection with new eyes."⁴⁹

Matt. 17.24-27: The Tribute Money and the Fish

Although Capernaum apparently had a customs post,⁵⁰ the tax at issue here was paid by free adult Jewish males throughout the world. They showed their solidarity with the temple and the Holy Land by paying a half-shekel tax (Ex 30:13-16). Though the literal Greek double drachma seems no longer to have been in circulation, scholars argue that "two drachmas" was now an expression for the payment of the halfshekel tax (Ex 30:13-16). So much was gathered that the keepers of the temple eventually began using the excess to construct a massive, golden vine. ***After 70, in Matthew's time, the Romans confiscated this tax for the upkeep of a pagan temple, and some Jews may have refused to pay it on principle.*** In Jesus' day, most Jews loyal to Judaism would have paid it, but Sadducees disapproved and Essenes believed they need pay only once in a lifetime. The local collectors of the tax may have wondered about Jesus' position on the matter if he had already hinted God's judgment on the temple (as later in 21:12-14; 23:38-24:15); moreover, collectors did not force those living off charity (as they could

⁴⁸ Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, "[Lord I believe,](#)" April 2013.

⁴⁹ Richard D. Draper, "[The Reality of the Resurrection,](#)" *Ensign*, Apr. 1994.

⁵⁰ I am often asked why this tax was being collected so far north, away from Jerusalem. The temple tax referred to in the story was a tax that was collected annually from Jewish men over the age of 20 for the upkeep of the temple in Jerusalem. The temple tax was required of all Jews, regardless of where they lived, and it was collected by authorized officials who would travel throughout the country to collect it. In Matthew's account, the tax collectors who approached Peter and asked him about the temple tax were likely authorized officials who had traveled to Galilee from Jerusalem to collect the tax. Galilee was a region in the northern part of Israel, and it was the home region of Jesus and several of his disciples. It is possible that these tax collectors were traveling through the region of Galilee as part of their duties to collect the temple tax from Jews living in the area. It is also worth noting that the temple tax was not the only tax that was collected in ancient Israel. There were other taxes and tributes that were collected by the Roman authorities who occupied the region at that time. So it is possible that the tax collectors who approached Peter were also collecting other types of taxes as well.

assume Jesus to be—27:55; Lk 8:3) or beggars to pay. Or they may have simply been wondering if he would pay it in this locality or elsewhere, because the disciples were moving about. (At the least, they know that Jesus sometimes disagrees with mainstream views.)... ***In tax contexts, “free” normally means “free from obligation” concerning tax or tribute*** (e.g., 1 Esdras 4:49-50). ***Since a royal family did not tax itself, Jesus’ point is that the Son of God should not be taxed for the upkeep of his Father’s house.*** (The principle of an exemption was known: Roman provincial taxes often exempted Romans or high-class Greeks from payment. The principle was also known in Judaism: the temple’s attendants, the priests, applied it to themselves, to the chagrin of some of their Pharisaic contemporaries—Mishnah *Sheqalim* 1:3-4.) For Matthew’s readers this saying might mean: It is not because Jesus is not in solidarity with Judaism (for he is), but rather because he is the hope of Judaism, that he is not obligated to pay.⁵¹

Mark 9.42-50; Matt. 18.6-9; Luke 1-2: Whosoever Shall Offend Little Ones

"There appears to be a plague of child abuse spreading across the world. Perhaps it has always been with us but has not received the attention it presently receives. I am glad there is a hue and cry going up against this terrible evil, too much of which is found among our own. ***Fathers, you cannot abuse your little ones without offending God.*** Any man involved in an incestuous relationship is unworthy to hold the priesthood. He is unworthy to hold membership in the Church and should be dealt with accordingly. ***Any man who beats or in other ways abuses his children will be held accountable before the great judge of us all.*** If there be any within the sound of my voice who are guilty of such practices, let them repent forthwith, make amends where possible, develop within themselves that discipline which can curb such evil practices, plead with the Lord for forgiveness, and resolve within their hearts henceforth to walk with clean hands."⁵²

⁵¹ Keener, p. 89.

⁵² President Gordon B. Hinckley, "[To Please Our Heavenly Father,](#)" *Ensign*, May 1985.