



MATTHEW 16–17 MARK 9; LUKE 9

SIGN SEEKERS AND SIGN RECEIVERS

Introduction

In these chapters, Jesus is still in Galilee, primarily north of the Lake or Sea of Galilee. Remember the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke—arrange everything geographically. After Jesus’ baptism, they tell all the stories of Jesus’ Galilean ministry, and then include one trip south to Jerusalem for the last week of His life. The Synoptic Gospels have no mention of a three-year ministry, so we do not know exactly when these events happened.¹ Only John includes Jesus traveling back and forth several times to Jerusalem for three Passovers, and other feasts including Tabernacles, Dedication (Hanukah), and possibly Pentecost.² We assume these events happened sometime in the second or third year of Jesus’ ministry as they come after the feeding of the 5,000 (which falls at the second Passover in John 6:4).

Pharisees Seek another Sign

Matthew 16:1-4; 12:38-39; Mark 8:11-13; Luke 12:54-56

Matthew 16:1 (Matthew 12:38; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16) “Pharisees and Sadducees” The Synoptic Gospels repeat a similar request for Jesus to show “a sign from heaven” four times—each ending with “the sign of Jonah.” Each time, the account has a slightly different audience (“scribes and Pharisees” in Matthew 12:38; “Pharisees” in Mark 8:11; and “others testing him” in Luke 11:16), suggesting that people repeatedly asked Jesus for a sign of his Messiahship. Their testing sounds similar to Satan’s temptations as they ask “him to show them a sign from heaven” (Matthew 16:1, NIV).

Pharisees were one of the four popular divisions within Judaism at the time of the New Testament (NT). Their name means, “separatists.” According to Josephus, there were 6,000 Pharisees, and they were “the most accurate interpreters of the laws.”³ They emphasized purity, supported the oral laws, tithed money and food, believed in the resurrection, and strictly observed the Sabbath.⁴ They were the longest lasting group, and even survived the destruction of the Second Temple (AD 68–70). Their records and rabbinic interpretation of the Law are recorded in the Mishnah.

Sadducees were a smaller group within the four divisions of Judaism. They filled the seats of the chief priests’ and high priest in this late Second Temple era. Sadducees usually stayed close to the Temple. Matthew 16 is the only place in the NT that we find Sadducees traveling from Jerusalem up to Galilee. They came to inquire after the amazing things they heard about Jesus (we also read of them traveling to hear John the Baptist in Bethabara,

The Pharisees Question Jesus by James Tissot.



but that was closer to Jerusalem). They focused their belief on the Temple and in the Torah (the first five books of Moses). They did not believe in a resurrection.⁵

Matthew 16:2–3; Luke 12:54–56; “ye cannot tell the signs of the times” (JST) Jesus basically asked his questioners, “If you are observant enough to forecast the weather, why not be aware of what’s going on around you?”⁶ Jews immersed themselves in studying their Laws. Jesus asserts that this should have prepared them to recognize their Messiah, but they were blinded by false traditions and misunderstood expectations.

Matthew 16:4; Matthew 12:39; Mark 8:12 JST; Luke 11:29 “sign of Jonah” Jesus’ audience included verbal sign seekers. The Lord had already offered many signs of his divine nature, but the unbelievers continued to ask for more. He repeated the answer he gave earlier in Matthew 12:39, offering the “sign of Jonah”:

MATT 12:39

An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but **the sign of the prophet Jonas:**

MATT 16:4

A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but **the sign of the prophet Jonas.**

MATT 8:12 JST

There shall be no sign be given unto this generation, save **the sign of the prophet Jonah;** for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly, so likewise shall the Son of Man be buried in the bowels of the earth.⁷

LUKE 11:29

This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but **the sign of Jonas the prophet**

This “sign of Jonah” was fulfilled after Jesus’ crucifixion. While his body lay in the tomb for three days and nights, his spirit went to the Spirit World to organize missionary work (D&C 138:30–36). I wonder if Jonah knew that his miserable experience had a far higher purpose than merely teaching him a lesson. Jesus’ typological interpretation of Jonah’s experience is mentioned 700 years after it happened. The Prophet Hosea taught that God used the ministry of the prophets as symbols to testify of Him (Hosea 12:10).

Other scripture explain that *heavenly signs* will follow those that believe: “I will show miracles, signs, and wonders, unto all those who believe on my name” (D&C 35:8; also see D&C 45:16, 39–40). This includes the signs associated with gifts of the Spirit (healings, faith, discernment, etc.); “[They] are given for the benefit of those

who love me and keep all my commandments, and him that seeketh so to do; that all may be benefited that seek or that ask of me, that ask and not for a sign that they may consume it upon their lusts” (D&C 46:9). 1 Corinthians 14:22 adds that some signs, like the gift of tongues, are for missionary work. Later in this section of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we find how those who believe were given grand heavenly signs on the Mount of Transfiguration.

The Leaven of the Pharisees

Matthew 16:5-12; Mark 8:14-21

“beware of the leaven of the Pharisees” The disciples traveled in a boat to a secluded place.⁸ It appears that they were again in an area without a place to buy food—or at least sanctioned or “clean” food. The law of Moses outlined which foods were “clean” for human use. By the time of the NT, hundreds of oral laws were added to that list (including not being able to eat food prepared or grown on gentile lands).



Photo of pita bread by jeffreyw via Flickr.

Jesus must have been a wordsmith as he used a play on words. (We saw it in John 3:8, when he talked with Nicodemus about the wind and spirit which share the same word, *pneuma*. In Matthew 16:18, plays with the words “Peter” and “rock.”) Jesus used “leaven” to describe an emotional puffing up, not the process of fermentation in bread from a sour dough starter. In the Old Testament (OT), over ten references to leaven discuss the domestic practice of cleaning out all leaven in a home in preparation for the Passover Feast and accompanying “Week of Unleavened Bread” (Exodus 13:7; Deuteronomy 16:3). The ancient children of Israel removed leaven as a symbol of corruption or evil. This was a common image during NT times.

Leavened bread does not last as long as unleavened crackers. Something in the leavening agent made the bread grow mildew or become inedible faster. Symbolically, the leaven of the Pharisees is whatever puffed them up with pride, and made them corrupt. In our dispensation the Lord warned Joseph Smith that when people have positions of power, or periods of fame, they often tend to become corrupt (D&C 121:36–39).

Only Mark 8:15 adds, “the leaven of Herod.” This is an unusual addition, yet most biblical scholars assume it is original. Perhaps it fits into the same meaning as an explanation of Esther 3:8 in the Jewish Targum: “Just as we remove leaven, so may the evil ruler be removed from us and may we be freed from this foolish king.”⁹ Just as

there were corrupt rulers at the time of Esther, at the time of Jesus, the evil and corrupt ruler was the tetrarch Herod. He was used as the example of puffed up corruption. We can imagine Herod would have been on the disciples' minds with the recent news that he just killed John the Baptist.

Matthew 16:7–10; Mark 8:16, 21 “Do ye not yet understand?” Jesus is exasperated to find that even his disciples cannot see the spiritual innuendos in his message. They do not trust that he can provide for them. He recalled both miracles of the feeding groups of 4,000 and 5,000. This is the third time the Gospel of Matthew brings our attention to the miraculous feedings tucked into Messianic Meals. I presume it's cited again to reinforce the prophetic fulfillment of the return of manna/bread. We know it was very important because it is the only miracle that all four gospels include. Matthew's three references makes sure we do not miss the sign!

Matthew 16:10; Mark 8:19–20 “remember the five . . . [and] seven loaves” Some have questioned whether there were actually two miraculous feedings, or if the disciples remembered the stories differently. However, this summary by Jesus gives evidence that two miraculous feedings occurred at different occasions. Furthermore, Mark is careful in his record to write it in a chiastic form, emphasizing the miraculous nature of the event.¹⁰

- 8:1a Large crowd present
- 8:2b–3 Nothing to eat
- 8:4 Disciples question how to feed the multitudes
- 8:5–6a Multiplication of the loaves
- 8:6b Disciples distribute the bread
- 8:7 Multitude fed the loaves
- 8:8 After eating the crowd is satisfied
- 8:9 Quantity of left overs noted
- 8:9 4,000 in crowd

The Gospel of Mark also repeats the numbers five, seven, and twelve for emphasis. Five is the number of the Torah, the five books of Moses, the Law or Pentateuch. In the miracle of feeding 4,000 the Lord started with seven loaves, and in the 5,000, two fishes were added to the five loaves making a total of seven. Symbolically, seven represented complete or even perfect in the sense of being whole. This symbolism stems from the creation is found throughout the Bible.¹¹ The number twelve referenced the twelve left over baskets. It is significant as a number used in the order and organization of God's kingdom—both in the universe with twelve moons, and on earth with the twelve tribes, twelve apostles, and twelve as a key age for priesthood service. The repetition of these numbers appears to have the greatest symbolic importance in the OT, especially in temple rituals.

Matthew 16:11–12 “then they understood” The Gospels of Matthew and Mark share the text until these verses when Matthew deviated from Mark’s record to include Jesus’ explanation of the leaven.¹² Jesus warned them not to follow the false “teachings” (RSV, NIV, ASV, etc.) or “doctrine” (KJV) of the Pharisees or any other puffed-up and corruptible intellect or leader. One of the major objections that Jesus has against the Pharisees is that they were so caught up in the details of their traditions (Oral Laws) that they could not appreciate the higher law or even the original Law of Moses.



The Primacy of Saint Peter by James Tissot.

Peter Testifies

Matthew 16:13–20; Mark 8:27–30; Luke 9:18–21

Matthew 16:13; Mark 8:27 “Caesarea Philippi” Matthew’s and Mark’s setting changes to 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee to a beautiful fertile area at the foot of Mount Herman (the tallest mountain, and most massive formation in the country). No one other than the disciples are mentioned. The JST Luke tells us that Jesus “went alone with his disciples to pray,” and then asked their private group. By Jesus asking this question, it first adds a whole different dimension to the second:

MATT 16:13

Whom do men say that I the
Son of man am?

MARK 8:27

Whom do men say that I am?

LUKE 9:18

Whom say the people that I am?

Jesus initially called himself “Son of man” only in Matthew 16:13, (but a few verses later that switches, when Mark 8:31 and Luke 9:22 use it, but Matthew does not). Jesus used this title more than any other to refer to himself in the Gospels. As discussed last week, “Son of man” refers to a sacred name for God the Father that Enoch shared in Moses 6:57, “in the language of Adam, Man of Holiness is his name, and the name of his Only Begotten is the Son of Man.” The title is not understood the same way by other Christians, who see it as a confession of Jesus’ mortality and future death.

“SON OF MAN”

Matthew = 31

Mark = 15

Luke = 26

John = 12

Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20 “But whom say ye that I am?” This is far more powerful as the second question. It causes more personal reflection. It is the same question we are asked each Sunday during the sacrament, and at each temple recommend interview. We Christians can answer Jesus’ question with every word, thought, and deed. I like to answer it as part of my private prayers—witnessing my faith and seeking for more.

Matthew 16:16 Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20 “Thou art the Christ” I can just imagine Peter jumping to answer Jesus with a burning testimony—You are the Promised Messiah—the Son of God! (Although, Jesus’ apostles would have probably been speaking in Aramaic—the colloquial language brought back from Babylon—*Msheekha*, or in Hebrew—the ancient language of Abraham—*Messiah*. The Greek translation Christ, was not used as a title for Jesus until years after His resurrection.) We see Peter’s same enthusiasm as the first to jump out of the boat to try to walk on the water and the first to run into the empty tomb. His example encourages all disciples to likewise defend and testify of our Lord in any language. It meant enough to him that in his first epistle, he encourages disciples to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15, NIV), Keeping your witness burning takes daily flaming of the fire by the Spirit.

Matthew 16:17 “revealed it unto thee” Only Matthew continues with the Lord’s directions to Peter. The theme here is revelation and it is carried on through the next few verses. The phrase “flesh and blood” is found frequently in Rabbinic writings of the time. It can mean, “human agency,” or represent mortality as in the contrast, “a king of flesh and blood” in contrast with the heavenly King.¹³



Matthew 16:18 “I will build my church” Jesus calls Simon, “Cephas/Peter,” which was not used as a name at this time. It was as if Jesus said, “I’m going to call you ‘little rock.’” Note the footnote to 18a, Christ is the Rock or Stone of Israel. He was also a builder (Mark 6:3)—which in that area probably meant that Joseph and Jesus were stone masons (not carpenters as KJV translates).

There are different levels of meanings to this verse. First, that Christ’s church is built upon revelation. Second, the powers of evil cannot hold the new community and the Kingdom of God. Third, the plan of Redemption will destroy Satan’s hold on people eternally.

Matthew 16:19 “I will give unto thee the keys” The chief apostle is the agent to hold the keys and exercise the power of God. These verses combine the definitions of the priesthood: 1) the power of God, and 2) those that hold keys as God’s servants. It also brings the knowledge and authority for salvation through the ordinances. We believe that the binding Jesus refers to here is the sealing power that he will give one week later as described in Matthew 17:3.

Jesus Foretells His Death

Matthew 16:21–23; Mark 8:31–33; Luke 9:22

Matthew 16:21; Mark 18:31; Luke 9:22 “From that time forth . . .” As Jesus’ Galilean mission comes to an end, He focuses His teaching to prepare His apostles for the trauma that will occur. The Gospel of Matthew includes four specific prophecies of Jesus’ passion. 1) go to Jerusalem, 2) suffer many things, 3) be killed, 4) be raised on the third day (Mark and Luke repeat the last three). Jesus already knew of his future passion—suffering and death—as well as his resurrection, but his disciples did not understand.

The suffering aspect of a Messiah was not expected by the Jews, nor Jesus' disciples. Even the apostle Peter who had just testified that Jesus is their promised Messiah, denounced the very thought of Jesus' traitorous death. The Jews did not understand that Messiahship included the four "suffering Servant" passages in Isaiah 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–7; and 52:13–53:12. In the Jewish collection of Messianic *Psalms of Solomon*, written sometime in the 1st or 2nd century BC, we see the word "king" mentioned 24 times, but never the word "suffering." We find attributes that their Messiah will have, such as "Anointed of the Lord . . . goodness . . . mercy . . . judgement . . . peace . . . reign . . . thy love toward the seed of Abraham," but nothings about His rejection, pain and torturous death.¹⁴ This is why even Peter, the chief apostle, refuses to accept this new piece of information. It went against everything they expected.

Matthew 16:22–23; Mark 8:32–33 "He rebuked Peter saying . . . thou savourest not the things that be of God"

Peter is not ready to hear the Lord's prophecies that contradict the common understanding on what the Messiah will do. He bravely speaks out as if to defend the Lord. But Peter is wrong. We too, are misinformed and wrong when we do not accept God's plan for our lives.

- *Do we ever unwittingly rebuke the Lord?*
- *Do we do the same in our thoughts?*
- *Do we think like a man or like God?*
- *Are we pliable after the Lord's rebuke?*

Note that Luke does not include Peter's overzealousness and *rarely* portrays Jesus or his apostles in a weakened human light. Occasionally, when he does, he softens his statements compared to the other Gospels.

Cost of Discipleship

Matthew 16:24–28; Mark 8:34–9:1; Luke 9: 23–27; John 12:25

Matthew 16:24; Mark 34; Luke 9:23 "If any man will come after me . . . deny himself . . . take up his cross daily" Jesus admonishes his disciples, both in ancient times and today, to follow him by placing his direction above their personal perspective. Disciples must become less motivated by selfish interests, and more directed by God. Sometimes that includes drinking the cup that God has for each to drink. Often that is staying on the *strait* path (meaning difficult, only route through a narrow opening¹⁵), without becoming distracted. He also asks us to make the sacrifices that God requires.

To take up one's "cross" had a specific meaning in the Roman Empire. A "cross" referred specifically to the wooden beams used in crucifixion. The word "cross" is found 27 times in the NT, all of them refer to "an upright stake, a cross, the Roman instrument of crucifixion."¹⁶ By the 19th century, it also was defined in English as "any severe affliction or trial." The JST builds on this 19th century definition as it adds: "And now for a man to take

up his cross, is to deny himself all ungodliness, and every worldly lust, and keep my commandments” (Matthew 16:25). The process of carrying what God gives us, can transform us to become holy or sanctified.

Matthew 16:25–26; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24 “Whosoever will save his life, must be willing to lose it for my sake” (JST, Luke 9:24). The Prophet Joseph Smith felt inspired to augment each of the Synoptic Gospels in this section.

MATT 16:25b–26

Break not my commandments for to save your lives; For whosoever will save his life in this world shall lose it in the world to come. And whosoever will lose his life in this world, for my sake shall find it in the world to come. Therefore, forsake the world, and save your souls; For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his soul?

MARK 8:35–36

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; *or whosoever will save his life, shall be willing to lay it down for my sake; and if he is not willing to lay it down for my sake, he shall lose it.* But whosoever shall be willing to lose his life for my sake and the gospel, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

LUKE 9:24–25

For whosoever will save his life, *must be willing to lose it for my sake: and whosoever will be willing to lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.* For what doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and yet he receive him not whom God hath ordained, and he lose his own soul, and he himself be a castaway.

It is all about turning our will over to God. He gave us agency, so that we could choose to follow, without compulsion or force. How do you forsake the world in your daily choices?

President McKay spoke on these verses: “May we realize as never before that mastery of one’s personal inclinations is the heart of the Christian religion and of all religions. By nature, the individual is selfish and inclined to follow his immediate impulses. It requires religion or something higher than an individual or even a society of individuals, to overcome the selfish impulses of the natural man, which will lead him to a more successful, fuller life. Self-mastery comes through self-denial of little things. Christ in these singular words said: ‘whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it’” (Matthew 16:25).

Matthew 16:27–28 “The Son of Man shall come in the glory of his Father” Jesus prophesied of His Second Coming. He will come in His glory to act as King and Judge of all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. The timing of this was very confusing and difficult for the early Christians to appreciate. In part, because they expected it in their lifetimes. Jesus did not even know at that time when it would come, but said that some in the

group would still be alive when he comes in glory (Matthew 24:36). This perhaps is why John the Beloved asked for this gift later (John 21:22). We believe that the apostle John is still building God’s kingdom on earth (D&C 7:1).

The Transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10, Luke 9:28-36



Transfiguration by Raphael, ca. 1518-1520. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

The transfiguration becomes one of the most important events in Jesus’ mission between his baptism and Gethsemane. It set in motion the establishment of Jesus’ church.¹⁷ When humans are transfigured, they are changed temporarily in a way that allows them to behold God’s glory (Moses 1:10–11; D&C 76:11–12, 113–119; 110:1–4). It is described in D&C 67:11, as being “quickened by the Spirit of God” (If the change is long-lasting rather than temporary, it is called *translated*, as in Moses 7:18–23, 27). The Synoptic Gospels describe Jesus’ transfiguration as appearing with his glorified body in the presence of angels and apostles Peter, James, and his brother John. The Prophet Joseph explained that the three apostles, were also transfigured in order to remain in Jesus’ glorified presence.¹⁸ Peter referred back to the transfiguration in 2 Peter 1:16–18. We also learn more about this event in D&C 63:21 (which we will discuss).

Matthew 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28 “after six days” One week before in Matthew 16:19, Jesus promised Peter, James and John, that they would receive “keys” to bind on earth what can be bound in heaven. This experience fulfilled this prophecy. The first two Gospels, Matthew and Mark record it happened “after 6 days.” However, the Gospel of Luke records, “about eight days.” Perhaps they all refer to about a week away. Possibly it was used for symbolic meaning (especially because they do not count their days as regularly as the Gospel of John does). In the OT and NT, the number seven represents complete, whole, perfect, or finished—stemming from the seventh period/day of Creation. The experience of transfiguration was also a finishing touch for the three apostles who received priesthood keys (and their endowment according to Joseph Fielding Smith¹⁹).



Jesus is Transfigured before Three Disciples by William Hole, 1905.

MATT 17:1

And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart

MARK 9:2 JST

And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, and James, and John, *who asked him many questions concerning his saying*; and Jesus leadeth them up into a high mountain apart by themselves: and he was transfigured before them.

LUKE 9:28

And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray.

“taketh Peter, James, and John his brother” In preparation for their special missions, the three leading apostles Peter, James, and John,²⁰ experienced a transfiguration to see Jesus and the two angels in their glorified state (which pattern we see in 3 Nephi 28:15, 17; D&C 138:45; Moses 1:14). The Prophet Joseph Smith spoke of this experience, “When he [Jesus] was transfigured on the mount, what could be more sure to them?”²¹

“high mountain apart” Although we do not know where in Galilee the Transfiguration occurred, the highest mountain in the greater region is Mount Hermon. Jesus was just at the foothills of Mount Hermon in Caesarea Philippi just a few verses before, so I assume it happened there (Matthew 16:13; Mark 8:27). Wherever it happened, symbolically, “mountains are sanctuaries designed and fashioned by Jehovah (Ex. 15:17). They are the temples of nature, where the prophets receive theophany experiences, where God descends from heaven to reveal His will unto His people. Mount Sinai, Mount Moriah, the Mount of Transfiguration, the mountains associated with Nephi, the brother of Jared, Ezekiel, and others.”²²

Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29 “his face did shine as the sun” Each Gospel describes Jesus’ countenance beaming and his clothing glistening and “dazzling” (NIV).

MATT 17:2

And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.

MARK 9:3 JST

And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so *white* as no fuller on earth *could whiten* them.

LUKE 9:29

And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was *changed*, and his raiment *became* white and *glittering*.

Matthew 17:3; Mark 9:3; Luke 30 “**there appeared unto them Moses and Elias**” In the NT, “Elias” is the Greek spelling for name for Elijah.²³ Joseph Smith taught, “The Savior, Moses, and Elias, gave the keys to Peter, James, and John, on the mount, when they were transfigured” or “into the cloud.”²⁴ The word Elias is also a title for one who prepares the way—like John the Baptist, and the name of another scriptural person according to the Bible Dictionary.²⁵

This visitation of Moses and Elijah is significant because of all the OT prophets, these two were taken into heaven without death. They also came to the Prophet Joseph and Sidney Rigdon in the Kirtland Temple (D&C 110:11–16). Moses held the keys the of the gathering Israel, and Elijah held the sealing powers.

Luke 9:31–32 “**were heavy with sleep**” Luke alone adds two verses about the apostles being asleep for part of the vision, and then awakening to see the glorified beings. Luke also suggests that Moses and Elias talked to Jesus about his upcoming death “and resurrection” (JST) in Jerusalem. I ask myself how could they have fallen asleep at such a time. Yes, they were fatigued from their climb up the mountain, but more likely, I presume God had them sleep so as to not hear those parts of the vision (For other examples of the Lord using a deep sleep see Genesis 20:21; and Mosiah 24:19).



Transfiguration of Jesus by Carl Bloch, 1872. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Matthew 17:4; Mark 9:5–6; Luke 9:33 “**let us make three tabernacles**” Mark’s and Luke’s accounts sound like it was frightening. Yet, even without comprehending how important it was, Peter realized this was now sacred ground and wanted to honor the place with a new or pure tabernacle/temple. Their holy tabernacle was sanctified by the pillar of fire and cloud. The temple in Jerusalem was repeatedly defiled, but here they could start again in this holy space.

Matthew 17:5–6; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34–35 “**they feared as they entered into the cloud**” The experience that occurred in the cloud was overwhelming. The apostles’ reaction to the voice of God is the same seen throughout scripture—fear and falling to the earth. This is another great verse for understanding the separate nature of the

Father and Son within the Godhead. Peter, James, and John are now eyewitnesses of the Father's testimony of Jesus as His Son (just as John the Baptist was in the Jordan River). We see the same pattern in the restoration too—when Heavenly Father came to earth to introduce or testify of His Son (JS-H 1:17).

Matthew 17:7 “Jesus came and touched them . . . be not afraid” The Lord calmed the apostles' fears and set an example for us of reaching out to comfort and touch those in need.

Matthew 17:8–9; Mark 9:9; Luke 9:36 “tell no man until the Son of man be risen” At the close of the transfiguration, Jesus asks His three apostles to keep their witnesses silent until after Christ's resurrection. Mark also mentions that they discussed within themselves what the “rising from the dead” meant. According to D&C 63:21, we do not have the full account of what occurred during Jesus' transfiguration. One of those details was that the apostles saw the earth in its glorified state: “When the earth shall be transfigured, even according to the pattern which was shown unto mine apostles upon the mount” (D&C 63:21).

The Coming of Elijah

Matthew 17:10–13; Mark 9:11–13

Matthew 17:11–12; Mark 9:12–13 “Elias truly shall first come” This verse can be read as a future prophecy: Elias SHALL “restore” or “prepare” all things (JST). Yet in the context of the next verse, the Lord explained that this “Elias” refers to the Prophet John the Baptist. The JST helps with this understanding by changing the verb from “is” to “has” and adds another clarifying phrase to further emphasize its fulfillment: “Elias *has* come already, *concerning whom it is written, Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me*” (Matthew 17:12, JST). Jesus used different definitions of “Elias” for two different people. Care is needed every time we come across “Elias.” The next verse adds another level of complicating figures with the same name.

Matthew 17:13 “another who should come and restore” (JST) While the KJV describes only one person who will “come, and restore all things” (Matthew 17:11), now in Matthew 17:13, the JST augments this to represent two people: 1) to prepare, and 2) one to restore (JST changes are in *italics*):

But I say unto you, Who is Elias? Behold, this is Elias, whom I send to prepare the way before me. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist, and also of another who should come and restore all things, as it is written by the prophets.”

This may refer to Jesus Himself as He is the one who restores all things. The JST includes John the Baptist teaching, “He it is *of whom I bear record. He is that prophet, even Elias*, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose” (JST John 1:27).

Below and Opposite: *Jesus Casts out a Devil from a Boy* by William Hole, 1905.



In other places, we read more of this restorer Elias: “this is Elias which was to come to gather together the tribes of Israel and *restore all things*” (D&C 77:9). An Elias who is a restorer, is also identified as the Prophet Joseph Smith in D&C 132:40, “I am the Lord thy God, and I gave unto thee, my servant Joseph, an appointment and restore all things” (also see 132:44).

Anytime we discuss Elias, it can be confusing. We also find a *Prophet Elias* coming on the second day of Passover, Sunday, April 3, 1836, to the Kirtland Temple along with the transfigured beings, Moses and Elijah. All these Eliases are included in the LDS Bible Dictionary.

Jesus Heals Epileptic / “Lunatic”

Matthew 17:14-21; Mark 9:14-29;

Luke 9:37-43

Matthew 17:14; Mark 9:14-15; Luke 9:37 “. . . the next day, when they were come down . . .”

Once off the mountain, Jesus found the rest of his disciples and a crowd gathered. The disciples were not able to heal an epileptic boy (or as Mark 9:25 says, a “foul spirit”).

Matthew 17:15; Mark 9:16-18a; Luke 9:38-39

“**Lord, have mercy on my son,**” this phrase speaks of the father’s heart’s desire. It is touching to note that the father does not ask the Lord to help him, but seeks help for his boy. Mark 9:16 opens the possibility for the afflicted boy to be the son of a scribe/lawyer. Luke 9:38 adds that it is “mine only child.”

Matthew 17:16b–17; Mark 9:18b–22; Luke 9:40–42 “I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him” Jesus assumed the burden of the dispute and healing when he arrived. All three Synoptic Gospels include Jesus’ verbal criticism of their faithlessness. His attack may have been directed to the lack of faith in the “perverse generation,” not the apostles. Both sides of a healing need faith—the faith to be healed, and the faith to heal (D&C 46). The criticism of the multitude may have affected the spirit of the situation as well.

Mark 9:24 “. . . with tears, Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief” The main message of this scene is that all need greater faith and reliance on God. This is a miracle of compassion. Of the 36 miracles recorded that Jesus performed, 27 were healings. Many required an expression of faith before the healing, some not.

Matthew 17:18; Mark 9:25–27; Luke 9:42. “I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him” Most of Jesus’ healings are also immediate, but many times, we need to learn through the process and the Lord, as our Great Teacher or Gardener, allowed us to grow as He healed. It takes faith to see the Lord taking us by “the hand and lift[ing us] up” (Mark 9:27).

Matthew 17:19–20; Mark 9:28; Luke 9:42b–43a “His disciples asked him privately, Why could not we . . .” Again Matthew 17:19 and Mark 9:28, record the conversation between Jesus and his disciples in private. The Lord answered with the same idea he introduced in a parable earlier (see Matthew 13). Jesus equated faith to a mustard seed—it has great



potential. I trust this example gave the disciples greater hope—like a beginning violinist who goes to the symphony and is motivated to practice harder. Seeing the potential should not be discouraging, but with applied faith it can be encouraging. I think Jesus was using exaggerated symbols to emphasize his point. Even though we only have a little faith, with more trust in our Savior, our faith will be strengthened to perform great things.

Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29 “this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting” Prayer and fasting are synergistic—in healing, overcoming sin and temptation, and drawing closer to our Savior and God and their Spirit. As we liken this to ourselves, Elder James E. Talmage suggested, “Have you some besetting weakness, some sinful indulgence that you have vainly tried to overcome? Like the malignant demon that Christ rebuked in the boy, your sin may be of a kind that goeth out only through prayer and fasting.”²⁶ Fasting is not as much about the physical effects that come from lack of food, but more about our focus and reliance on God’s mercy.

Jesus’ Foretells of Death Again

Matthew 17:22–23; Mark 9:30–32; Luke 9:43b–45

Matthew 17:22–23; Mark 9:30–31; Luke 9:43b–43 “Let these saying sink down into your ears [hearts, JST]” The group stayed in Galilee, but privately (according to JST Mark 9:30). Jesus realized that the disciples do not understand yet that he *must* die, so he have them another clear prophecy of his suffering or *passion*.²⁷ The disciples misunderstood (or at least did not fully understand) the Lord’s direction. His prophecy can be seen as a warning to them to be cautious about their expectations, to prepare them, and to help them have faith to carry them through until his resurrection (We likewise should be careful when *interpreting* our promptings from the Spirit. We don’t want to incorrectly judge what God does. There is a difference between going forward in faith and thinking we know *why* we must go forward as instructed.).

As mentioned above, ancient Jewish literature is filled with anticipation for their Promised Messiah—but it does not include suffering pain or death. Hence, even with Jesus’ multiple warnings, the disciples did not understand that for Jesus to redeem his people, he also needed to become the slaughtered Lamb of God, the Suffering Servant, and the First Fruits of them that slept.²⁸

Jesus Paid Taxes

Matthew 17:24–27

Matthew’s Gospel is the only one to record this discussion about taxes and the miraculous way Jesus pays for them. It seems appropriate that the author would not want to forget it if the historical assumption is correct that he is the Apostle Matthew, the publican or *tax collector*.

Matthew 17:24 “. . . your master pay tribute?” The group made their way back to their “home base” of Capernaum on the north shores of the Sea of Galilee where Peter and his fishing partners lived.

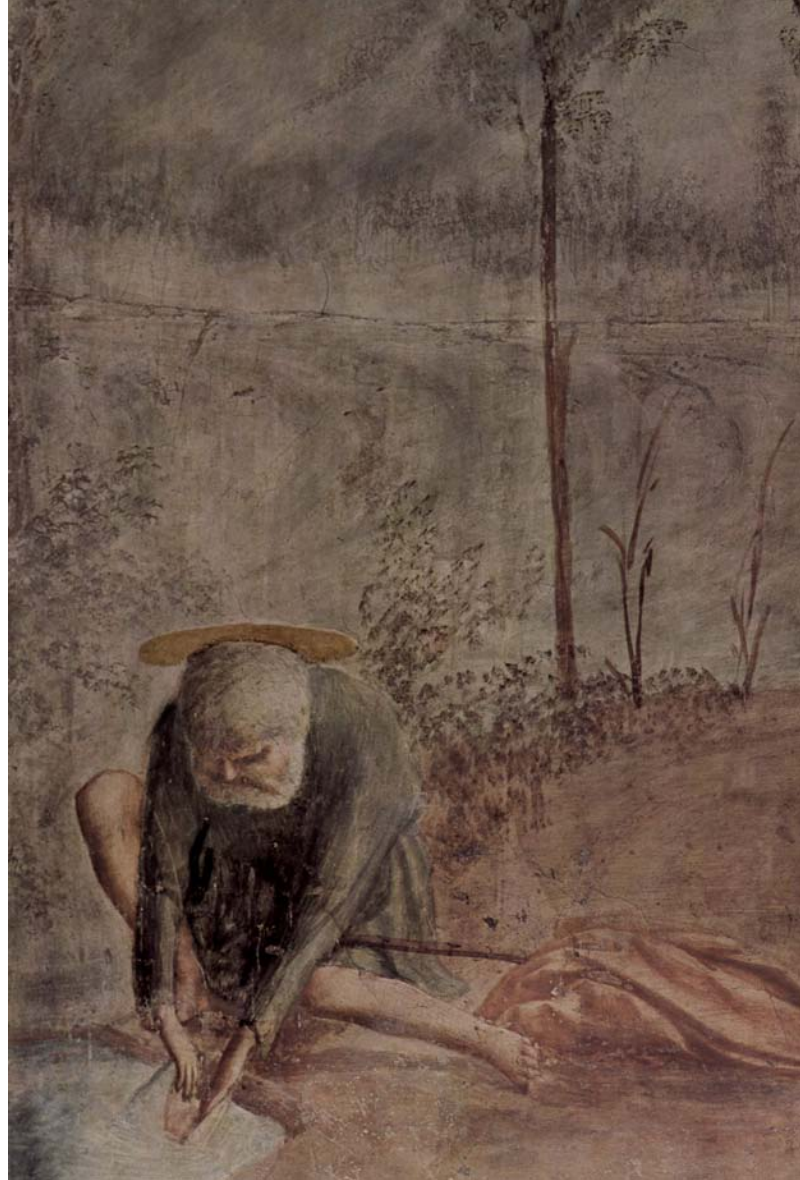
Taxes. Roman citizens were not required to pay Roman taxes, but the people of the places they conquered were required to pay taxes—lots of them. As Capernaum was on a major Roman road, as well as having a large port, it was a natural place where tax collectors could collect tribute from travelers and merchants.²⁹ In addition to the Roman taxes, Jews also paid an annual temple tax. Many commentaries speculate that the requested “tribute/didrachmon” money in Matthew 17:24, was not for a Roman tax, but rather the annual temple tax. Jews all over the Roman world were required to pay this. “In the rabbinic period the tax was payable by all who had attained twenty years, but slaves and women were explicitly excluded.”³⁰

The didrachma was the equivalent to the half shekel coin³¹ that was the tribute or temple tax to cover the temple building, sacrifices, and priesthood needs. It was required each year for every male twenty years and older. The collectors may have wondered if Jesus were going to pay or not, because priests and rabbis claimed exemption.

Peter is singled out again in the story, as if Jesus hopes to teach him more during this short time before his death. President. David O. McKay, spoke on this experience,

Between the Transfiguration and the last eventful week of the Savior’s life on earth, there are only a few recorded instances in scripture with which Peter is personally mentioned. It is significant, however, that nearly every one of these, bears either directly or indirectly upon the molding of Peter’s character as an Apostolic leader. Peter knows that Jesus is the Christ that should come, but has he strength to defend him in word and deed? Does he comprehend the divine principles of the Gospel sufficiently to manifest them in his daily life and conversation and in all his associations with his fellowmen?³²

Matthew 17:26 “Then are the children free” Jesus’ explanation about the king’s son makes more sense if the tribute were for the Temple Tax, not the monthly Roman Tribute. Since the time of Moses’ tabernacle and forty-



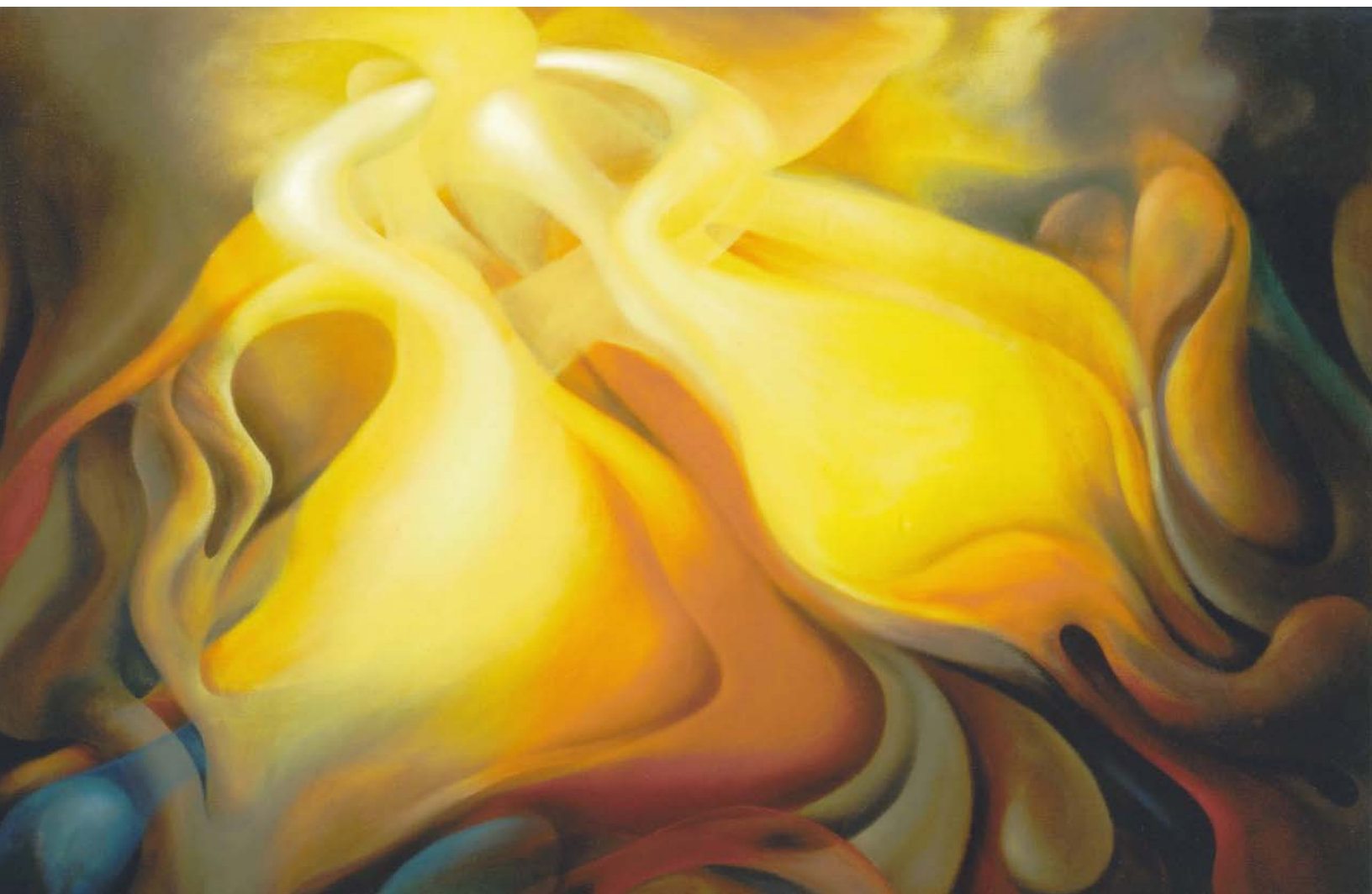
Peter and fish. Scenes from the life of Peter in the Brancacci chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, Italy. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

year exodus through the wilderness, the children of Israel were asked to pay “atonement money” (Exodus 30:16). Jesus knew this was inconsistent for him to pay for what he alone will give. Perhaps Peter understood that the Messiah should not be expected to pay for the House of God, as the Son of God, it was *his* house. But as royal princes were not required to pay taxes in the Roman world, so too in the Jewish world, the temple tax was to cover the priests’ costs—and Jesus is the Great High Priest. He alone should be exempt from the “atonement tax” considering his role in the ultimate Atonement. From all sides, it was ironic that Jesus was asked to pay this.

Matthew 17:27 “. . . when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money . . .” The money was enough to pay for both Peter and Jesus’ temple tax. Why did Jesus use this means to miraculously supply the money? I think the fact that it dealt with Peter and fish, suggesting that he tailor made this miracle. Certainly, Peter could have “simply gone fishing and sold a few for the same price. We find no miracle of Jesus [for] his personal gain.”³³ Instead Jesus taught Peter about the temple as the House of God and what that really meant. He taught Peter about his resources, that Jesus did not need money, but if he wanted it, he could get it. He taught about his omniscience, his role as the Creator, and his kingship. What else do you think it teaches?

Header Image: The Transfiguration of Christ by Peter Paul Rubens. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Below: The Transfiguration of Jesus by Armando Alemdar Ara, 2004. Image via Wikimedia Commons.



ENDNOTES

1. Luke 3:1, gives the one clear historical date in the Gospels: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.” Other than that grounding reference, we have little chronological details in the Synoptic Gospels. They only reference one Passover. The Gospel of John, on the other hand, is organized chronologically, following Jesus’ many trips from Galilee to Jerusalem, including three Passovers. From my earlier *Come Follow Me* handout of John 1, here is a chart of showing the shared information between the four Gospels.
2. Feasts of Jews found in John’s Gospel: **Passover**—John 2:13; 6:4; 12:1; **Other feast**—John 5:1; **Feast of the Tabernacles**—John 7:2; and **Feast of Dedication** (Hanukah)—John 10:22.
3. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XIII. 297–298.
4. Paul J. Achtemeier, *Harper Collins’ Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1996), 842
5. David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5.892. When the temple was destroyed, few of their sect and writings survived. One Sadducean author’s writings were preserved in the Apocrypha as: Ecclesiasticus or Sirach 14:16–19. They did not believe in life after death, instead they believed that “one is survived by one’s good reputation and by one’s children.” Judith R. Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin, *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture* (New York City, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 45.
6. The phrase in Matthew 16:3, “O ye hypocrites” is not included in the oldest Greek manuscripts of Matthew or other modern English translations. But it is included in the parallel account in Luke 12:56.
7. The sign includes three days and nights. Three days is understandable with the way Jews counted even part of a day in the total. But three nights in the tomb as well is problematic if we use “Good Friday” as the day of His crucifixion and burial. In order for the Lord to spend three nights in the tomb, Jesus had to die and be placed in a tomb on Thursday, not the traditional “Good Friday.” The scriptures refer to getting Jesus off the cross before the Sabbath, but that may have been a Holy Day, as well as Friday night to Saturday night. Certainly, the Passover feast fell into that category. On the years that Passover falls on a Thursday, the Jews celebrate two Sabbaths back to back. However, if you count your nights Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights as he was risen when the women came before sunrise on Sunday morning.
8. Luke 12:11 includes a similar phrase, but in different setting.
9. Joel Marcus, *The Anchor Yale Bible: Mark 1–8, vol. 27* (New Haven, CT: Yale and Doubleday, 2000), 507.
10. *Ibid.*, 492.
11. For example, Noah’s account uses seven (Genesis 7:10; 8:10, 12), Every seventh day was sanctified (Exodus 20:8–11). Seven is used regularly in the temple ritual (i.e., “And the priest shall ... sprinkle of the blood seven times before the LORD” Leviticus 4:6, 16; 16:14, 19; etc.). Also see Genesis 29; 41; Leviticus 25:8; Deuteronomy 15:1; 16:9; 31:10; 1 Kings 6:38; and 2 Kings 8:1.
12. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 859. The majority of biblical textual scholars assume that Mark is the oldest Gospel of the four.
13. W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible: Matthew* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 195.

14. The *Psalms of Solomon* has been made available on line by Wesley University. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/sermons-essays-books/noncanonical-literature/noncanonical-literature-ot-pseudepigrapha/the-psalms-of-solomon/>
15. I have investigated the use of different spellings for “strait” and “straight” in modern revelation. It appears that the scribes and editors were not careful about their usage, even though the two words have very different meanings.
16. Strong’s Concordance, *stauros*.
17. Kent Jackson, and Robert Millet, eds., *Studies in Scriptures vol. 5: The Gospels* (SLC, UT: Deseret Book, 1986), 305.
18. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 158.
19. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary: The Gospels (SLC, UT: Deseret Book, 1965)*, 1.400.
20. Peter, James and John are referred to as “the pillars” and are given repeatedly given special opportunities by the Lord (i.e. at the raising of Jairus’ daughter, at the Matthew of Transfiguration, and in Gethsemane).
21. Joseph Smith, *TPJS*, 303. The Prophet Joseph answer to his question was to receive the personal revelation that one is sealed up unto eternal life.
22. Joseph Fielding McConkie, Donald W. Parry, *Guide to Scriptural Symbols* (SLC, UT: Deseret Bk, 1990) 84.
23. In addition to the name for Elijah, there are other reference to Elias in other scripture. Elias is also a title and name for another person
24. Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:387.
25. See Bible Dictionary, Topical Guide, and the JST of Mark 9:4, “Elias with Moses, or in other words, John the Baptist and Moses.” Most commentaries that include this as fact, suggest there were three angelic beings present. It is were so, this must have been such a joyous reunion for Jesus and John the Baptist !
26. James Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 395
27. Jesus’ PASSION is used for His sufferings from the Last Supper to His Resurrection—specifically, in Gethsemane, through the accusation and trials, scourging, and on the cross.
28. John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Isaiah 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–7; 52:13–53:12; 1 Corinthians 15:20.
29. As mentioned in Come Follow Me for Matthew 8–9, Rome tax collectors included income tax, ground, and poll-tax (or head-money).
30. Albright, *Matthew*, 212. Also, “Gentiles and Samaritans were not allowed to contribute.”
31. Josephus, *Antiquities*, III. 194.
32. David O. McKay, *Ancient Apostles* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1921), 55. “With the probable exception of the tribute money incident, which emphasized for Peter the divine Sonship of his Master, all the lessons following bear directly upon strength of character and principles of conduct.”
33. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 385.