

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

“Oh Wondrous Type! O Vision Fair” (*Lutheran Service Book*, #413)

The four Gospels reveal how important Moses and Elijah were to Jesus. Altogether the Gospel writers mention Moses thirty-seven times and Elijah twenty-seven times. You might recall that in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Abraham tells the Rich Man, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” (Luke 16:31) These words are of eternal import and therefore true even today.

One day towards the end of his ministry, Jesus went up to the top of a mountain to have a conversation with Moses and Elijah. It would certainly have been interesting to listen in. This story is told by the writers of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) who tell us that Jesus “was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.” (Matthew 17:2). Peter, James, and John witnessed this amazing event. The story is recounted in the great and ancient hymn “Oh Wondrous Type! O Vision Fair.”

Originally the Latin hymn “O nata lux,” it was translated into English by the Rev. John Neale (1818-66) as the Oxford Movement of the mid-1800s advocated the value of older expressions of the faith. The translation was first published in 1851 in *Hymnal Noted*¹ with the original plainsong melody. Only a decade later the text was published in a significantly revised form in *Hymns, Ancient and Modern*² where it was paired with the tune FESTAL

I have found it interesting to compare Neale’s original version with the revised version that has come down to us.

A type of those bright rays on high
For which the Church hopes longingly,
Christ on the holy mountain shows
Where brighter than the Sun He glows:

O wondrous type! O vision fair
Of glory that the Church may share
Which Christ upon the mountain shows,
Where bright than the sun he glows!

Tale for all ages to declare:
For with the three disciples there,
Where Moses and Elias meet,
The Lord holds converse, high and sweet.

The chosen witnesses stand nigh,
Of Grace, the Law, and Prophecy:
And from the cloud the Holy One
Bears record to the Only Son.

With face more bright than noontide
ray,
Christ deigns to manifest today
What Glory shall be theirs above,

With Moses and Elijah nigh
The incarnate Lord holds converse
high;
And from the cloud the Holy One
Bears record to the only Son.
With shining face and bright array
Christ deigns to manifest today
What glory shall be theirs above,
Who joy in God with perfect love.

Who joy in God with perfect love.

And faithful hearts are raised on high
By this great vision's mystery;
For which, in yearly course, we raise
The voice of pray'r and hymn of praise.

Thou, Father, Thou, Eternal Son,
Thou, Holy Spirit, Three in One,
To this same Glory bring us nigh,
That we may see Thee eye to eye.
Amen.

And faithful hearts are raised on high
By this great vision's mystery,
For which in joyful strains we raise
The voice of prayer, the hymn of praise.

O Father, with the eternal Son
And Holy Spirit ever one,
We pray Thee, bring us by Thy grace
To see Thy glory face to face.

Shortly after this event, Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51) Considering what transpired in Jerusalem, the martial tune DEO GRACIAS fits this text quite well. After His death and resurrection, Jesus explained it all to two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." (Luke 24:27).

The Apostle Peter gives direct witness to the Transfiguration in one of his letters:

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:16-21.

May the witness of Moses and the Prophets, of the Apostle Peter, and of Jesus Christ Himself keep us strong in the faith until He returns. In that regard, the Bible passage quoted in *Hymnal Noted* at the first appearance of this hymn reminds us:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, *who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body*, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.³

Philippians 3:20-21

Martin Dicke, Cantor
Trinity Lutheran Church
Peoria, Illinois

<photo of Martin>

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¹ See No. 98 in *Hymnal Noted* (London & New York: Novello, Ewer and Co., 1851), 191.

² See No. 202 in *Hymns, Ancient and Modern* (London: J. Alfred Novello, 1861).

³ The text quoted in *Hymnal Noted* is italicized.