

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Last Sunday after Epiphany, Transfiguration – Year B

RCL Readings – II Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; II Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

ACNA Readings – I Kings 19:9-19; Psalm 27; II Peter 1:13-21; Mark 9:2-9

Seasonal Introduction. Epiphany of the Lord is celebrated on the 6th of January in the Western Christian calendar and the season continues until Ash Wednesday and Lent. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning 'showing forth, appearance, or manifestation'. During this season, the church celebrates the manifestation of the Messiah on earth between the time of His birth and preparation for His death and ascension. The Baptism of Jesus, His presentation at the Temple, and His transfiguration—all events with deep connections to Jewish life and history.

Introduction. The season of Epiphany ends with the transfiguration of Jesus, which is such an important event that it occurs twice in the liturgical year: once in the season after Pentecost (where it appears chronologically), and at the end of Epiphany to match the beginning of Epiphany—the baptism of Jesus. The story of the transfiguration is so familiar to us, occurring in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (and hinted at in the Gospel of John) that we must be careful not to miss the significance of the details.

Common Theme. There are many themes to consider in the texts this week, themes of light, glory, majesty and transformation—not only of Jesus but also of the disciples and of ourselves. But, perhaps, most important is the theme of hearing the voice of God and the effect that voice should have on our lives.

Hebraic Context. Jesus heard the voice from heaven at both his baptism and his transfiguration, which comprise the bookends of the season of Epiphany. The rabbinic world calls a voice from heaven the *bat kol* (literally “daughter of the voice”), and it refers to the supernatural way in which God sometimes chooses to communicate with His creation. The Lord spoke directly to a few and, in His mercy, even spoke to those who didn't want to hear His voice, usually through His prophets. After the destruction of the Temple[s], the voice of God was not heard as often, nor with such clarity.¹

Early rabbinic Judaism taught that God continued to participate in his creation through the *shekhinah* and that the *bat kol* would go forth from Mount Sinai every day (Pirke Avot 6:2).² God

¹ Although, there were still those who heard the voice of God in the time of Jesus, such as Simeon, as well as prophets and prophetesses such as John and Anna.

² The tradition, stated in Pirkei Avot 6:2, “Every day, a *bat kol* goes out from the Mountain of Horeb to announce and say...”, extends the belief, espoused by Rabbi Yochanan, that God sent the Torah to all the nations of the world in tongues of fire. Even though it isn't always written how in the Bible, our heroes of Scripture often come across Gentiles who already believe in God—Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab, Ebed-Melech, etc, some of whom have heard directly from God while others saw God's power and might through Israel's testimony. When Elijah returned to the mountain of God, he heard a voice that was silent. Nonetheless, the silent voice communicated in perfect clarity. The *bat kol* is often related to matters where

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was not aloof nor removed from His creation. The point is, that in the background of the New Testament, there was a strong tradition and belief that God still spoke to His people.

II Kings 2:1-12.³ Elijah, one of the two great prophets that Jesus would meet on the mountain of transfiguration, was about to depart the world in a whirlwind and flaming chariot. His impending departure seems to have been common knowledge as the passage itself begins by stating, 'When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven.'⁴

At first, Elijah attempted to distance himself from Elisha. But Elisha refused to leave his master's side.⁵ So they traveled together to Bethel to encounter a company of prophets who were residing there.⁶ With so many prophets in Israel, and even schools of prophets, God chose Elisha, who seems to be neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet.⁷ But as Elijah traveled to his death, many prophets knew what would happen but only one man crossed the Jordan into the enemy lands of Moab to accompany Elijah to his supposed death.⁸ Only after Elijah was taken

God makes a judgment, whether in Pirkei Avot 6:2 or in Eliezer ben Hurcanus' dispute found in Bava Metzia 59a-b.

³ See also I Kings 19:9-19 from the ACNA as the two passages are closely related.

⁴ Elijah, in I Kings 19:4 was tired, depressed, and ready to finish his ministry (and life). However, before God provided him the rest he desired, Elijah was given three jobs: anoint Hazael to be king over Syria, anoint Jehu to be king over Israel, and anoint Elisha "to be prophet in your place." II Kings 2 is about the transition of the prophetic role from Elijah to Elisha. Now that Elijah had finished all the work God had called him to, the prophets of Israel were able to recognize (whether through prophetic means or an understanding of the accession of Elisha to replace Elijah) that this was the moment Elisha would replace Elijah.

⁵ The sign of a true disciple is never to leave the master's side or abandon him in an hour of need. This is precisely the opposite of what the disciples of Jesus do at the garden of Gethsemane. Elisha proved himself to be a true and loyal disciple of Elijah and worthy to be his successor. Had Elisha not followed Elijah from Bethel to Jericho and from Jericho across the Jordan, he would not have seen Elijah be taken away from him and, thus, not received his request.

⁶ The journey of Elijah and Elisha started in Gilgal before they walked to Bethel. Both of these locations had very strong religious significance. While there are several Gilgals throughout Israel and it is hard to say precisely where Gilgal is (or which Gilgal is spoken of), we read that Samuel traveled a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal and Mizpah. There, where the ladder to and from heaven stood in the time of Jacob and where Samuel judged and prophesied, it would seem a school of prophets had been established.

⁷ We know that Bethel was also co-opted by Jeroboam I to be a place of worship (in order to replace Jerusalem). And so Bethel became a major centre of Israelite idolatry. It is of interest that there is no mention of whether the school of prophets were among those God had promised Elijah to be true or if they were false prophets. If they served God in such a difficult place, what an encouragement for us. But we do not know if they challenged the false temple, if they did not, what a warning to us.

⁸ The prophets told Elisha, "Do you know that today the LORD will take away your master from you?" Despite being prophets and understanding, rightly, that Elijah would no longer be present, they seem to have assumed that Elijah would die as, after Elisha returned, they insisted on searching for Elijah's body.

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away did the prophets dare cross the Jordan, and that to search for a body that would never be found.

An obvious question that comes out of the reading of II Kings is, why did Elijah go across the Jordan? Elijah's mission was complete and yet he traveled some distance to a country that had just rebelled against Israel (II Kings 1:1). Elijah, the Tishbite, was likely from a small Israelite village from Transjordan, but Moab is far south of Tishbi. One reason may have been to test Elisha to see if he would follow and receive the blessing of a double portion of Elijah's spirit. This was also the land where Moses died.⁹ It was here, where the successor of Elijah would follow in the footsteps of Moses' successor, Joshua, in the miracle of the parting of the Jordan river.¹⁰

Psalm 50:1-6.¹¹ The opening lines remind us that God speaks—He is not silent. Verse 3 says that, when “God comes, He does not keep silence and before Him is a devouring fire”. The Psalmist reminds us of Mt Sinai, where God came from heaven and spoke. As He spoke His words were seen as fire.¹² And again, “around Him a mighty tempest” which is seen in I Kings 19:11-12 in the mighty wind that tore at the mountain and the earthquake and fire. Whether from the might and power at Mt. Sinai when God's voice thundered and the Israelites were afraid or at Mt. Sinai when His voice was whispered to Elijah, God spoke and His people heard.¹³

As the creator, God has the right to expect that His creation will pay attention to His voice and come to the Lord. The psalmist does not provide any hint of rebellion at the beginning of the Psalm and so it is given that the “faithful ones” (verse 5) will actually come and appear before

⁹ Of interest is that the two prophets who met Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration both left this earth from Transjordan. This was not part of God's promised land (else God would have lied when He said Moses would not enter the promised land) and yet the land of Israel's enemy was still a place where God's power could clearly be seen.

¹⁰ As Elijah ascended, his coat fell to the ground and Elisha picked it up. When Elisha hit the water, the water separated to the right and to the left and Elisha crossed the river.

¹¹ This psalm is attributed to Asaph and is traditionally part of *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles) liturgy as it reminds the hearer of Mount Sinai.

¹² In a Hebraic mystery, the Word of God is something that can be seen. Following the giving of the Torah and the 10 Commandments at Sinai it is expressed in Exodus 20:18 that the people “saw the voices and the fires and the voice of the shofar” (literal reading). Psalm 18:8 notes that a “consuming fire came from his mouth”. In Acts 2, following a now long developed and established Jewish tradition, during *Shavuot*, languages are accompanied with visible tongues of fire.

¹³ I Kings 19:9-18 states that God spoke to Elijah in a voice of thinnest silence (or smallest stillness—it is not a whispered voice but something even quieter, yet still heard. See also Job 4:16). How can a silent voice be heard? God can call out in the thunder and miracles, and yet ears will not hear. However, sometimes God calls out in this silence and those God calls hear and obey. Nonetheless, whether we choose to listen and obey or not, God continues to call out. This belief in God's continuous interaction with His creation developed into the concept of the *Bat Kol* (see Hebraic Context).

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the Lord. Asaph notes that God is not the only character in the psalm to have a voice; the heavens also speak. They declare His righteousness and His redemptive saving activity, noting that the Lord is indeed the ruler. Instead of silence, God's speech goes out to all the world to summon His people—but He will also be judge over them.¹⁴

Hebraic Perspective. The Hebrew word שְׁמָע, *Sh'ma*, means listen or hear in the imperative form. Listening is an important feature of Jewish tradition, for, despite being known as the people of the Book, early Israelite culture was predominantly an oral culture before being a literary one. In antiquity, one did not read the Bible as the Bible did not exist in its present form. Nor did people possess individual copies of the Scriptures—instead, one heard the Bible. But to listen to the Scriptures and not act accordingly to what is heard is dangerous. שְׁמָע 'Sh'ma' is also the Biblical Hebrew word for obey.¹⁵ The implication being that if you hear God's voice and listen to Him then you should also follow through on what He says and obey Him. Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, sums this up nicely by saying, blessed is he who hears my words and obeys them (Luke 11:28). Every time we encounter the word 'hear' in the Scriptures we should note the Hebraic background that obedience is also implied.

II Corinthians 4:3-6. Paul speaks of the light, the glory, and the gospel, "The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ". The power and authority of God is shown through his creation. Light and glory became intertwined in the Scriptures.¹⁶ ¹⁷ The gospel, not just generic good news, but the verification that God is king and is victorious, is also found in conjunction with light—particularly in Isaiah.¹⁸ Obviously not everyone responds positively to the 'light' or the good news of Jesus. Many people actually reject the gospel and, in some cases, can do so in a very hostile fashion. But, for Paul in this passage, this is not the fault of the messenger and by no means the message itself.¹⁹ There is an enemy to the light of truth commonly known as Satan, whom Paul calls "the god of this age".²⁰ Satan works to blind the people of this world to the truth, but we are

¹⁴ While Psalm 50:7-15 appears to give accusation against God's people, God turns around, in verse 16, and speaks to the wicked, thus delineating that the wicked are not the same people as He is talking to in Psalm 50:7-15—the faithful. The faithful can, and often are, rebuked by God. But they also call upon God.

¹⁵ Modern Hebrew has created a new word 'obey' which is לציית *Litziyet*.

¹⁶ As seen in II Corinthians 3:12-4:6.

¹⁷ Light and glory, which seem unrelated to many Christians, are commonly found in the same passages, such as Exodus 24:15-18, Ezekiel 1:28, etc.

¹⁸ See Hebraic Perspective, ACNA

¹⁹ Here, at the end of Epiphany—the manifestation of God to man—God puts a burden on us. The message of the Gospel is a light to the world. But now, we are to follow through and manifest the life of Jesus to those around us.

²⁰ The term "god of this age" does not occur anywhere else in scripture. Rather, Satan (and the principalities of this world) are given various descriptive titles throughout Scripture: "ruler of this world", "prince of the power of the air", and "the evil one" (which is sometimes used instead of "evil" when praying the Lord's prayer, "deliver us from the evil one"). However, the "god of this age" is not to be paired with the

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not innocent victims whose defence is to claim that “the devil made me do it!” John 3:19 says that, “light has come into the world but men loved darkness rather than light.” Unfortunately, we so often choose to not listen to the voice of God, and instead fall victim to the multiple voices of our culture that offer no future, security, salvation or hope.

Mark 9:2-9. The context of the transfiguration of Jesus occurs at a time in His ministry when He was becoming popular. Jesus had been teaching the people concepts about the kingdom of heaven, he had engaged in all manner of healing, defeating demons, performing miracles, and challenging the status quo. The people loved him—so things seem to be going well. Then all of a sudden Jesus took a small group of His disciples privately up a tall mountain.²¹ Moses and Elijah also appeared in this event in discussion with the transfigured Christ.²² The presence of Moses and Elijah corroborate Jesus’ messianic identity.²³ But Luke adds that they discussed Jesus’ impending *exodus* or His death in Jerusalem.²⁴ Why are only three disciples given the honour of witnessing the transfiguration? One of the immediate things we can learn from this is that not everyone gets to see a miracle. Jesus has many disciples, most of whom remained at the base of the mountain. Only Peter, James, and John witnessed the miracle of the transfiguration. Despite Jesus, Moses, and Elijah speaking of Jesus’ *exodus*, the disciples continued to prepare for the messianic king. But when the time came for Jesus to depart, they too betrayed, abandoned, and denied Jesus just like the other disciples who did not witness the

God of Heaven—this is not code for dualism. Satan (which means “adversary”) is not an equal deity to the God of Abraham. The Lord and Satan might be opponents, but they are not equals. Satan’s only strength is a lie, which is the opposite of God, who is truth. While truth and lies are opposites, they are not equals. Satan’s power rests only on those who do not believe and do not hear the voice of heaven.

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²² The word transfigured is μεταμορφόω, *metamorphoo*, and implies an outward change from a process that begins from within.

²³ Origen, who loved allegory, said that Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. Since Origen, that is the way the majority of commentators relate to this event. However, Elijah did not write a prophetic book nor was he the greatest of the prophets—Isaiah is actually the largest prophetic book and contains the most messianic promises while Elisha gains a double portion of Elijah’s power and performs twice as many miracles. Interestingly, Moses was also a prophet (arguably the greatest until John and then Jesus) and it may be that God brought him to the mountain to meet Jesus in his role as prophet. I suggest that Origen’s allegory is perhaps flawed. Moses and Elijah both have roles to play in the messianic kingdom. One like Moses is coming (Deut 18), and Elijah is the forerunner of the Messiah (Malachi 4). Something eschatological is occurring on the mountain.

²⁴ *Exodus* was often used regarding an upcoming departure—or death. Peter, in his second letter, speaks of his fast approaching *exodus* (II Peter 1:15). Wisdom 3:1-3 uses several synonyms for death, including *exodus*. Josephus uses the term regarding Moses’ departure from the children of Israel before they cross over the Jordan (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 4.189).

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transfiguration. Miracles are great, but they do not force people to listen, nor do they save people.

Another feature of the transfiguration is the cloud, reminiscent of the cloud at Mt Sinai during the giving of the 10 Commandments.²⁵ From the cloud comes the voice of God. Jesus is confirmed again that He is the Son and He is loved by the Father. God then commands the disciples to 'listen to Him'. The imperative to listen concludes the message of heaven with definitive action which was absent from the voice at the baptism of Jesus. At the transfiguration there is a response required of the disciples.²⁶ For the Jewish disciples of Jesus listening was never a passive activity. The command to listen is the command for obedience.²⁷

ACNA Readings

I Kings 19:9-19.²⁸ Despite the miraculous defeat of the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel, which demonstrated clearly that the Lord was the true God of heaven, Elijah fled the wrath of Jezebel. After leaving Beersheva he traveled a 40 day journey to arrive at a cave in Horeb, the mountain of God, also known as Mt Sinai.²⁹ The cave itself may be a reference to the 'cleft in the rock' that Moses was in when the Lord passed by, revealing his back to the prophet. From the text it appears that Elijah knew the location of Mt Sinai.³⁰

²⁵ The cloud symbolized God's presence throughout Israel's time in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21-22, 16:10). At Mount Sinai God promises Moses, "Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever" (Exodus 19:9). God's presence from a cloud isn't limited to Moses and the Exodus. Isaiah (4:5 and 19:1) and Ezekiel (10:3-4) speak of God's presence in a cloud. Daniel (7:13-14) speaks of the Son of Man (Jesus' often refers to Himself with this phrase) coming with the clouds. And, in his rebellion, the adversary wished to ascend above the heights of the clouds to become the most high (Isaiah 14:14).

²⁶ Just as the command was originally given regarding the Prophet that would follow Moses, "It is to him you shall listen." (Deuteronomy 18:15-19)

²⁷ See Hebraic Perspective.

²⁸ See also II Kings 2:1-12 from the RCL as the two passages are closely related.

²⁹ Forty days (and years) is a common phrase in the Bible. In light of the transfiguration, it is interesting to note that Moses was thought to have fasted for forty days on Mount Sinai, Elijah was given food prior to his travel to Mount Sinai, presumably as he would fast for the entirety of the journey, and Jesus also fasted forty days in the wilderness. All three fasts were directly related to meeting God (Moses and Elijah hearing the voice of God on the mountain and Jesus being sent out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit before God called out to Him at His baptism).

³⁰ Today, the location of the mountain of God is disputed by archeologists and scholars. The first time we encounter the term 'mountain of God' הַר הָאֱלֹהִים is in Exodus 3:1 where Moses is tending flocks for his father in law in Midian. The exact extent of the territory of Midian is also disputed so that doesn't help in locating the place (particularly as Horeb was at the edge, or even just beyond Midian). With our current evidence, to state the definitive location of the Biblical Mount Sinai is likely hubris.

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The passage describes an appearance of the Lord to the prophet. The appearance of the divine to humans is not unknown in the Hebrew Bible and certainly sets the backdrop for the divine encounters in the New Testament. The Scriptures often speak of God's intimate involvement in His creation—beginning with His visits to Adam in the garden. His involvement, of course, includes His voice. The passage describes how Elijah hears the voice of God as a gentle whisper.³¹ The voice of God gave Elijah instructions; there was something to do. The task at hand was to anoint Jehu as king and respond militarily to the evil rule of Ahab and Jezebel, as well as prepare his own replacement in the person of Elisha. Elisha means 'God is salvation' and is closely related to the name Joshua, who was the successor to Moses. The prophetic voice would not disappear and God would continue to speak to His people.

Psalm 27.³² The psalm opens with light being paired with salvation.³³ The psalm does not portray a hint of despair, instead there is confidence in the strength and power of God reflected in His light and so David asks the question: "whom shall I fear?" Other psalms of David request victory over his enemies or mercy for his transgressions, this psalm simply requests to be in the presence of the Lord.

In verse 4 David desires to meet God in His temple. Unfortunately, David's request was not fully granted by God as there was no temple in Jerusalem when David composed this Psalm—it would be Solomon that built the temple.³⁴ God does not always grant our requests in the way we wish, and yet, despite his many sins the Scriptures call him, "A man after God's own heart". Perhaps one of his redeeming characteristics is that David sought the presence of God and for the Lord to 'teach me Your ways' verse 11. One of David's desires was to learn from God. This is an acknowledgment that the way of the Lord—His goodness—is superior to our ways. Discipleship, walking according to the teachings of God, is the path through which we learn the

The mountain is known by two names, Horeb and Sinai and the meaning of those names is unclear. One tradition suggests that Horeb (the dry place) is related to a sun god while Sinai relates to a moon deity (similar to the wilderness of Sin—not related to the English word). There is also a Jewish tradition that says one side of the mountain was called Horeb and the other was called Sinai. Interestingly, the New Testament never uses the name Horeb, preferring to always reference the mountain as Sinai.

³¹ See Footnote 13

³² The psalm is attributed to David. In Psalm 27, David speaks of his many enemies. but as David's life was beset continually with enemies it makes placing the psalm chronologically in David's life next to impossible.

³³ See Hebraic Perspective, ACNA

³⁴ The word used is הֵיכָל *heykhal* and generally refers to the section of the Temple called the Holy of Holies. However, the same word is used to describe the area where Eli watched Hannah praying in the Tabernacle at Shiloh in 1 Samuel 1:9.

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ways of God. It is in this sure knowledge that David can, in front of all his enemies, wait for the Lord.³⁵

II Peter 1:13-21. Depending on your dating of the gospels, this passage in Peter's epistle could be the earliest literary reference to the transfiguration of Jesus. The apostle describes his eyewitness experience on the mountain as an apology (defence) for the truth of the Gospel. The accusation that the Christian faith is simply a collection of invented stories and legends is by no means new. Peter used the word *mythos* μῦθος, or myths, to describe how some antagonists of his day thought the gospel narratives were only fables. His rebuttal to their claim was the transfiguration and the voice from heaven. As an eyewitness of the transfiguration, Peter was assured (later Peter would die in his faith) that the rest of Jesus' teachings and, indeed, all of Scriptures comes from God.

Peter encouraged his community that the prophetic message that came to them from sacred history is a reliable source of truth. The metaphors of light and darkness are included here reflecting the contrast of truth (of the gospel) and myth (of fables and legends)—if we are going to pay attention to one, it should be to the light. The reference to the 'morning star' in verse 19 φωσφόρος *phosphorus* also called the 'day star' might be an early messianic reference.³⁶ In this reading the images and concepts of transfiguration, light, the messianic morning star, and the prophetic voice all work together to provide evidence that the message of Peter is indeed the truth.

Hebraic Perspective, ACNA. Light and darkness are powerful metaphors used in many cultures around the world. But there are some unusual nuances within the Hebraic metaphor of light not seen in most cultures. Light appears at the first command of creation. Yet this light is different to the light we see today. When we see the word 'light' in the Scriptures we should not automatically think of the light that comes from the sun, reflected by the moon, or from some other device in our homes. God's light is special, the sun and moon were created on the fourth day of creation, yet God's light existed from day one.

All through the Scriptures we see that God's Light continues to play a role in human history. The sun spreads its light on both the righteous and the unrighteous—it provides both light for our families and for the thief who comes to steal; it provides light for the doctor to heal, the liar to lie and for the killer to kill. But God's light is different—God's light can distinguish between good and

³⁵ Waiting isn't sitting around doing nothing, it is active. In Job 6:19, for instance, "to wait" is poetically linked with "to look" while in Isaiah 40:31, as here, it strengthens and helps those who wait on the Lord to endure as they run what is often a long and difficult race.

³⁶ Numbers 24:17 in which a star will come out of Jacob was used of Shimon bar Kochva (son of the star) to proclaim his messiahship.

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evil.³⁷ In Exodus 10:22, God caused darkness to cover all the land of Egypt. However, “all the people of Israel had light where they lived.”³⁸ During the Exodus itself, God guided His people through the wilderness in the form of light. A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The light once again moved with God's people. It acted as a guide for Israel in the desert, but also as a fiery shield to wall off the advancing Egyptian army. The light of God was enduring, a guide in an unknown world, protection against the adversary, a comfort in the midst of danger, and overall part of the redemption from bondage into freedom. Light became synonymous with the redemptive activity of God.

The prophet Isaiah used this image when he declared that the lands living in darkness would see a great light. Often the psalms pair light and salvation together in revealing that the ‘Lord is my light and my salvation’ (Psalm 27). John uses the metaphor of light to describe the Messiah, introducing Him as Lord and Saviour. And Peter declares that God's prophetic word is like a lamp, shining in the darkness. One of our callings is to be lights to the Nations. As we bring the light of God, we bring Salvation. Hence light is paired with Salvation. As we move, even among our adversaries, the light of God should move with us.

³⁷ The sun and the moon as motifs for light and darkness paired with good and evil appear in many 2nd Temple period Jewish literature such as 2 Esdras and 2 Baruch.

³⁸ There is a Midrash (a teaching that isn't necessarily true but teaches a truth) regarding God's light. After Pharaoh caused Israel to gather their own straw “the people were scattered throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw.” And so, when God provided light for all the people of Israel, there would be places throughout Egypt that would have light. The midrash takes a step further in stating that Israelites could not wander into darkness as the light of God would move with them wherever they went. If an Israelite visited an Egyptian, even though it was so dark the Egyptian could not move, the light would also come to the Egyptian.