

“Selected Gospel Sections”

Spring Series 1

Lesson 8

“The Transfiguration”

Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36; John 12:28-30.

Objective: To understand the message of the Gospel accounts in their context within each work independently and then to compare the accounts to each other to seek understanding of emphasis and focus. The goal is then to apply this message to our time and context in order to understand the message’s call on our lives.

Materials: To use the Greek, Syriac, and other ancient translations in order to help us understand the message of these Gospels. We will also examine the writings about these passages in journal articles, commentaries and other sources.

Procedures

1. To first translate each text from Greek and then compare it to other ancient translations.
2. To identify issues of importance within the texts and to explore possible meanings as they applied to the original audience.
3. To take the meaning for the original audience of the Gospels and to understand it how applies to our modern context and cultural situation.
4. To explore ways that these text call the disciples of Jesus to live their lives as faithful followers.

Matthew 17:1-9 ¹ And after six days Jesus took Peter and Jacob and John his brother and He brought them unto a high mountain by themselves. ² And his form was transformed before them, and His face shone as the sun, and His clothes became white like light. ³ And behold there appeared to them Moses and Elias, speaking with Him. ⁴ Then Peter replied to Jesus, "Lord, It is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make here three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elias." ⁵ While He was still speaking behold a cloud full of light overshadowed them, and behold a voice out of the cloud was saying, "This is my Son the Beloved, in Whom I am well pleased, listen to Him." ⁶ And

Mark 9:2-10 ² And after six days Jesus took Peter, Jacob and John, He brought them unto a high mountain by themselves. And He was transformed before them. ³ And His clothes became exceedingly gleaming white, such as a cloth refiner upon the earth is unable thus to whiten. ⁴ And there appeared to them Elias with Moses and they were speaking with Jesus. ⁵ And Peter replied, saying to Jesus, "It is good for us to be here and we will make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elias." ⁶ For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud came overshadowing them and a voice came from the cloud, "This is my Son, my Beloved, listen to Him." ⁸ And suddenly looking around they saw no one

Luke 9:28-36 ²⁸ Now it took place about eight days after these things He went unto the mountain to pray taking Peter and John and Jacob. ²⁹ And He prayed, and in the midst of Him praying the appearance of His face altered and His clothes began flashing like white lightning. ³⁰ And behold two men were talking to Him who were Moses and Elias; ³¹ who appeared in glory speaking of His exodus, which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. ³² And Peter and those with him were weighed down with sleep, but after being awake, they saw His glory and the two men having stood with Him. ³³ And when they began to depart from Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here, and we will make three tents,

John 12:28-30 ²⁸ "Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came out of heaven, "I have glorified [it] and I will glorify [it] again." ²⁹ Therefore, the crowd standing [there] also heard it and said, "There was thunder." Others were saying, "An angel has spoken to Him." ³⁰ Jesus replied, and said, "This voice has come for your sake not for mine."

after hearing, the disciples fell upon their faces and they were very much afraid. ⁷ And Jesus came and touching them said, "Rise up and do not be afraid." ⁸ And after lifting up their eyes they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. ⁹ And as they were descending from the mountain, Jesus ordered them saying, "Tell no one the vision until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

but Jesus only by Himself. ⁹ And coming down from the mountain He ordered them to tell no one what they had seen until when the Son of Man has risen from the dead. ¹⁰ And they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what to rise from the dead is?

one for you and one for Moses and one for Elias," not knowing what to say. ³⁴ And while saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them; they were terrified as they entered into the cloud. ³⁵ And a voice came out of the cloud saying, "This is my Son, the chosen one, listen to Him." ³⁶ And when the voice was passed, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silence and they told no one in those days any of what they had seen.

In this story we will examine three accounts of what is known as the “Transfiguration,” while in the fourth account (that of John) there is an account from a different time, but in some ways similar in nature, in that there is a voice from heaven. Though the account of the Transfiguration is brief it is extremely significant for our understanding of the nature of Jesus and it is filled with a huge number of connections to Old Testament passages and events which have significant implications for our understanding of Jesus and His mission. There are some extremely interesting aspects to this account that may not immediately be apparent to us as we read this account today, but would have likely been understood by a first century audience. One of these is the expression found in the account of Matthew and Mark, “after six days” (μεθ’ ἡμέρας ἕξ). For us this is just something that we lightly skip over and then move on, but in it there is perhaps a clue that connects it deeply to Israel’s history of interaction with God. McCurley believes this to be a Semitism that actually means “on the seventh day.”¹ This is thought by him, and others, to possibly be intended to connect the transfiguration of Jesus in the minds of the readers of Mark and Matthew with

¹ Foster R. McCurley, “‘And After Six Days’ (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81.

Exodus 24:12-18 where Moses ascends the mountain and God speaks to him.² If this is indeed correct, there are a great many implications for what the incident with the cloud and Jesus on the mountain has for our understanding of the question of “Who Jesus is” and “What is His mission?”

The account of Moses going up to the mountain to receive the “ten words” from God is recorded in Exodus 24:15-18 - **Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.** ¹⁶ **The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.** ¹⁷ **Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.** ¹⁸ **Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.**³ McCurley sees the Markan and Matthean accounts as being related directly to this Exodus account and he believes one of the indicators of this fact is the usage of the phrase “and after six days.” He says that this phrase (And after six days - *Καὶ μετὰ ἡμέρας ἕξ - Kai meta hemeras hex*) derives from a common Semitic literary pattern, which,

² Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 33B (Dallas TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1995), p.492. Foster R. McCurley, “‘And After Six Days’ (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81. Walter A. Maier III, “The Divine Presence within the Cloud,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 79:1-2 (2015), pp. 79-102.

³ NRSV.

if we understand it, sheds light on the interpretation of the Transfiguration story as a whole. This phrase is found in Ugaritic (this is a cognate language to Hebrew), and Akkadian (*Epic of Gilgamesh* fame). Without going into all of the detail here it seems highly probable that the phrase “and after six days,” should be understood basically as “on the seventh day.”⁴

If then this phrase is indeed intended to connect the Transfiguration of Jesus and the experience on Mount Sinai when Moses receives the Law, then this will impact how we interpret the Transfiguration. There are indeed some things that are common to both stories: 1. The divine voice speaks out of the midst of the overshadowing cloud. 2. Moses appears in both accounts. 3. A transforming glory appears in both accounts, Moses’ face shines while Jesus is transformed. 4. The entourage in the Sinai story mentions Nadab, Abihu, and Aaron while Jesus takes Peter, Jacob⁵, and John with Him. 5. Of particular interest is the mention of “Jesus” (Ἰησοῦς) in the Old Greek Text at Exodus 24:15 (the Septuagint - Μωυσῆς καὶ Ἰησοῦς - *Mouses kai Iesous* - *Moses and Jesus*) as ascending the mountain with Moses. This is also mentioned in the

⁴ Foster R. McCurley, “‘And After Six Days’ (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81.

⁵ James is a corrupted form of the name Jacob. The Greek and Syriac Text both clearly have “Jacob” (Ἰάκωβον - *Iakob* - ܝܚܘܒܐܢ - *Iakob*).

Hebrew text at Exodus 24:13 (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ - *vi-yeshua* - Joshua) and in the Old Greek text (Μωσῆς καὶ Ἰησοῦς - *Mouses kai Iesous* - Moses and Jesus).⁶ So Moses and Jesus (Joshua) are actually in both accounts.

There are also significant differences between the two accounts: 1. At Exodus 24:17 the multitude of people were aware of, and observed, the theophany on the mountain, although from a safe distance, while only Jesus and the three disciples are aware of the Transfiguration. 2. The content of the voice from the cloud in Exodus is first, a summons to Moses, and then very detailed instructions for the conduct of the cult and the people are given to him. The voice at the Transfiguration account delivers a very concise announcement regarding the identity of Jesus with an exhortation to “listen to Him.” McCurley believes that the phrase “Son of God” is critical particularly to the Gospel of Mark and he cites the superscription at Mark 1:1 (“Son of God”) as related to the account here.⁷ McCurley would go onto indicate that the use of this title is crucial to Mark throughout his Gospel account (Mark 1:1; 1:11; 7:11, 15:39). 3. There are also no parallels with the desire expressed by Peter to build three tents. Some see this as just the expression of a terrified

⁶ Foster R. McCurley, “‘And After Six Days’ (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81.

⁷ About which I have written in a previous lesson in this series.

man who did not know what to say but felt compelled to say something.⁸ However, I believe that the words of Peter are critical in the story that Mark conveys. I will address this further later on. The climax of the story of the Transfiguration is the assumed question: “Who does God say that Jesus is?” The answer to this question comes after six days, on the seventh day when God announces, “This is my son, the Beloved, listen to Him!” This could then be seen as a connection between these two events and is so regarded by many scholars.

To move on to what some refer to as the adoption formula found at Psalm 2:7⁹ is most often cited as the Old Testament background for the Transfiguration announcement, and if this is the case it would emphasize the enthronement motif in the story. I think that there are multiple allusions from the Old Testament that will have come to the minds of the readers of Mark and Matthew in particular. One of these is the phrase, “You are my son” at Psalm 2:7, which is the only appearance of “son” as a title of the Davidic king in all of the psalms.¹⁰ McCurley indicates, “That such a relationship with Ps 2:7 exists is difficult to deny, not

⁸ Foster R. McCurley, “‘And After Six Days’ (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81.

⁹ **I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have begotten you.** NRSV.

¹⁰ James Luther May, *Psalms*, in the Interpretation Commentary series (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 47.

only because of a basic similarity in the two announcements but also because elsewhere in the NT Psalm 2 is applied to Jesus (Acts 4:25-26;¹¹ 13:33;¹² Heb 5:5;¹³ and especially 1:5¹⁴) where several other “royal” passages are quoted and applied to Jesus.”¹⁵ This would emphasize the fact that Jesus as Son is also King.

There is however, another aspect, beyond the “royal” imagery that is to be found in the announcement given on the Mount of Transfiguration. Attention should also be given to the oft-cited, but seldom used, story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 on the top of Mount Moriah. I believe that this account is of critical importance in understanding both who Jesus is and what His mission is intended to be. In Genesis 22:2,¹⁶

¹¹ **it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? ²⁶ The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.’** NRSV.

¹² **he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you.’** NRSV.

¹³ **So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”;** NRSV.

¹⁴ **For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be his Father, and he will be my Son”?** NRSV.

¹⁵ Footnotes with actual Scriptures were added by me to this quote for the convenience of the teacher. Foster R. McCurley, “‘And After Six Days’ (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81.

¹⁶ **He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”** NRSV. In the Septuagint text this becomes: **And he said, “Take your beloved son (τὸν υἱόν σου τὸν ἀγαπητόν - ton uion sou ton agapeton) Isaac, whom you love, and go into the high land, and offer him as a whole burnt offering on one of the mountains, whichever I mention to you.”** NET.

22:12,¹⁷ and 22:16¹⁸ there occur the only instances in the entire Old Testament where ἀγαπητός (*agapetos*) occurs defining someone's son (the beloved son). Isaac, of course, is the promised son (the beloved son), the one through whom the promises made to Abraham depend (descendants, land, and blessing). In this account, Abraham is commanded to sacrifice Isaac and to seemingly endanger the fulfillment of these promises.¹⁹ We are told in the book of Hebrews Abraham met this test of faith because he reasoned that God had the power to raise Isaac from the dead.²⁰ This connection would then make the incident with Isaac a foreshadowing of what God Himself would do in order to initiate covenant relationship with His people. He would sacrifice His beloved son, something that was too much for Him to ask Abraham to actually do.

Let us move on to what the subject of the discussion on the mountain between Moses and Elias (Elijah) is about? It is, according to Luke, about His “exodus” (ἐξοδον - *exodon*) which many have been seen as a

¹⁷ Once again in the Septuagint: **And he said, “Do not lay your hand on the youngster nor do anything to him. For now I know that you do fear God, and for my sake you have not spared your beloved son (τοῦ υἱοῦ σου τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ - *tu wiu sou tou agapatou*).”** NET.

¹⁸ And again in the Septuagint: **“By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Inasmuch as you have carried out this matter and for my sake have not spared your beloved son, (τοῦ υἱοῦ σου τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ - *tu wiu sou tou agapatou*)** NET.

¹⁹ Foster R. McCurley, “‘And After Six Days’ (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81.

²⁰ Hebrews 11:17-19 **By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, ¹⁸ of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” ¹⁹ He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.** NRSVS.

reference to the “death” of Jesus. This is the majority view. It is not hard to imagine that talk of the “beloved son” will have reminded many of the account of Abraham and Isaac, and yet through God’s own act the promises to Abraham are indeed fulfilled by the offering of His own “beloved Son.”²¹ God does not withhold His own son and indeed as He supplied a sacrifice to replace Isaac in the form of the ram caught in the thicket, Jesus is that ram in a sense as the sacrifice offered in place of the son of Abraham. Paul allegorically relates Isaac with Christ at Galatians 3:16 - **The promises were made to Abraham and to his descendant. It doesn’t say, “and to the descendants,” as if referring to many rather than just one. It says, “and to your descendant,” who is Christ.**²² Christ is indeed a descendant of Abraham but also the beloved Son of God.

If this is the case then, the Transfiguration announcement would identify Jesus as the promised son who will then be sacrificed and delivered, because in the story of Isaac being sacrificed there is also a message of deliverance. “If this interpretation of the announcement at the Transfiguration is correct — if *both* Ps 2:7 and Gen 22:2, 12, 16 are intended as background — then the combination of the two ideas is

²¹ Foster R. McCurley, “And After Six Days’ (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81.

²² CEB.

particularly striking. Jesus is the Christ/Messiah, and Jesus is about to be sacrificed. Such an unprecedented combination would confirm Peter's confession (Mark 8:29) and at the same time would confirm Jesus' teaching about suffering and death which Peter rejected (Mark 8:31-32)."²³ This then would bring the answer to the question of Who God is? He is to be seen in Jesus and in the nature of sacrifice and the pursuit of reconciliation of covenant even if it means the death of that which is most precious and beloved to Him, His beloved Son. This then would set a new standard for understanding the nature of God and the call of God upon those that bear His image in the world. We too are called to bear the image of God into the world, to proclaim the nature and love of God, who and what God is to the cosmos.

The structure of the Transfiguration as in some way paralleling the accounts of Exodus 24:15b and Exodus 34, where Moses experienced a theophany would indicate that the Transfiguration is in some sense also a reinterpretation of the Old Testament Sinai tradition. The mountain of Transfiguration in some sense becomes Sinai, not in a geographical sense, but in a theological sense. The Old Testament Sinai theophany (the revealing of God) is re-interpreted as an epiphany of Christ (who is a revealing of God). This is one explanation of why it is the case that Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain to speak with Jesus. In the

²³ Foster R. McCurley, "And After Six Days' (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81.

traditions of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah are the only individuals who *YHWH* had spoken to directly on Mount Sinai/Horeb²⁴ (Exodus 19, 24, 33-34; 1 Kings 19). Mark chose to focus on how this story proclaimed Jesus as the “Son of God.” “In the NT no story about either a resurrection appearance or Jesus’ ascension contains a divine proclamation about Jesus identity.” However, many believe that the Transfiguration is just such a story proclaiming the divine identity of Jesus.²⁵ This has important implications for how Jesus is portrayed as God’s Son.

Margaret Thrall indicates that in her view the significance of Moses and Elijah in this account has been neglected. She believes that the prominence, in the narrative of Mark, of these two individuals has not always been sufficiently recognized, and even where it has been recognized it has not been correctly analyzed. She would point out that the whole account of the Transfiguration occupies only seven verses (Mark 9:2-8). Three of these seven verses are explicitly concerned with Elijah and Moses (9:4-6) as the two figures that appear on the mountain to talk with Jesus. There also appears to be an additional reference to them in the two following verses with the voice from the cloud telling them to listen to the only figure still

²⁴ Jerome T. Walsh, “Elijah,” in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (New York NY: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 463-465.

²⁵ Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), pp. 47-50.

present on the mountain with the disciples, Jesus. This would suggest that Moses and Elijah are somehow essential to Mark's presentation of the transfiguration. They are in some sense figures upon whom the whole story turns. Many have not regarded them as essential to the Transfiguration account.²⁶

There are a multitude of ideas put forward regarding the significance of Moses and Elijah. One idea put forward by scholars is that these two figures (Moses and Elijah) are symbolic of suffering. This would then emphasize the fact that suffering is the destiny of Jesus Himself and also of His followers. The Gospel of Mark is written in a situation of persecution and suffering, and in that way the Transfiguration is thought to serve as an anticipation of martyrdom and suffering for Jesus and His disciples. There are a number of ways that this understanding does not fit well within the account as an interpretation. Some have said that this vision was granted to three disciples that would suffer martyrdom. There are a number of problems with that interpretation which Thrall points out, one of which is that John, according to tradition was not actually martyred. Another view that has proven quite popular is that Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets respectively. Certainly there is a distinction being made between Jesus and these Old Testament

²⁶ Margaret E. Thrall, "Elijah and Moses in Mark's Account of the Transfiguration," *New Testament Studies* 16:4 (1970) pp. 305-317.

characters, but it seems highly questionable that this view, put forward first by Nineham, is the right one.²⁷ Needless to say, Thrall finds this view as untenable also.²⁸ It is the one that I have heard put forward more than any other, but I agree that it is incorrect. Why would Elijah represent the written prophets, we have no book of Elijah, nothing that he actually wrote? Another thing is that Moses was also called a prophet.²⁹ This view appears untenable to me.

Thrall proposes four questions to aid in our exploration to discover why Elijah and Moses are the people that appear with Jesus on the mountaintop: 1. “How is the distinction drawn between Elijah and Moses on the one hand and Jesus on the other?” 2. “What is the general setting within which it is to be understood?” 3. “What precisely is the distinction?” 4. “What was the situation that made such a distinction necessary?”³⁰ As we begin with question one, one of the things that is often perhaps overlooked in the question of distinguishing the perception of Peter is to be found in his question given in a state of panic. He asks to build a tent, or dwelling for all three as if they are all three in some sense equals. Despite not

²⁷ D. E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark*, The Pelican New Testament Commentary series (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1963), 234-235.

²⁸ Margaret E. Thrall, “Elijah and Moses in Mark’s Account of the Transfiguration,” *New Testament Studies* 16:4 (1970) pp. 305-317.

²⁹ Deuteronomy 18:15-19.

³⁰ Margaret E. Thrall, “Elijah and Moses in Mark’s Account of the Transfiguration,” *New Testament Studies* 16:4 (1970) pp. 305-317.

knowing what to say it is perhaps the case that his question is important in the context in expounding a misperception that not only Peter has, but one that would be shared by many others and perhaps still is shared by many today. Moses and Elijah are not represented in the Transfiguration as displaying veneration to Jesus, or respectfully listening to Him. This along with Peter's question could perhaps leave the impression that Jesus is somehow on a par with these two giants from within Judaism, that they are all equals.

This stands at the crux of the question of Peter regarding building the tents or shelters. He is wrong because he fails to distinguish between Jesus, Moses and Elijah, the other two inhabitants of heaven on the top of the mountain. Verse 6 represents the turning point of the story with the evangelist recounting the voice coming from the cloud and setting him straight; Jesus is superior to Moses and Elijah, He is the "beloved son" of God. We hear of a "beloved son" (υἷὸν ἀγαπητόν - *huios agapeton*) and His death at Mark 12:6-8 in the parable of Jesus too.³¹ At Genesis 22: 2, 12, 16 of the Old Greek text, as we have mentioned earlier, Isaac is referred to as the "beloved son" of Abraham. McCurley says, "It is not difficult to imagine that the author and hearers of the Transfiguration announcement *huios mou ho agapētos* recalled Isaac, the only

³¹ Margaret E. Thrall, "Elijah and Moses in Mark's Account of the Transfiguration," *New Testament Studies* 16:4 (1970) pp. 305-317.

other *huios agapētos*, in the story about the patriarch's sacrifice and deliverance."³² Whereas God spared the son of Abraham He would in fact not spare His own Son, but sacrifice Him. This also speaks to the fact that Jesus had come to earth from heaven to fulfill this mission.

This then would seem to make the Transfiguration announcement a means of identifying Jesus as the promised son who will be sacrificed and then be delivered, not with a ram caught in a thicket as in the Genesis account, but through resurrection from the dead, in a way that was what Abraham believed was possible.³³ Peter's question regarding the building of the three shelters, or tents betrayed an attitude that emphasized a certain democratization; as if Moses, Elijah and Jesus were somehow equals.³⁴ The voice from the cloud shatters any such misconception. Jesus is the "Son of God" and it is He who should be listened to and not Moses, or Elijah. Jesus is unique and different from these two great righteous men who now clearly abide in the midst of heavenly glory. To take nothing away from these two Old Testament giants Jesus is greater still, as God's beloved Son, and is to be listened to as a priority over the other two.

³² Foster R. McCurley, "And After Six Days' (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81.

³³ cf. Galatians 3:16; Hebrews 11:17-19. Foster R. McCurley, "And After Six Days' (Mark 9:2): A Semitic Literary Device," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974), pp. 67-81.

³⁴ Margaret E. Thrall, "Elijah and Moses in Mark's Account of the Transfiguration," *New Testament Studies* 16:4 (1970) pp. 305-317.

The Transfiguration story is also generally seen as in some manner prefiguring some future event, as we move onto our second question. Jesus is changed into His radiant glory, a form that He will indeed possess at His final coming. It is with the second coming of Christ that Mark, in particular associates the term “glory” (*δόξα - doxa*). This can be seen in Mark’s Gospel at 8:38; 9:37; 13:26; though it is not simply with the second coming that the “glory” of Christ can be related, but also, as the early church believed Jesus is invested with “glory” after the resurrection. He appears to have revealed Himself to Paul in a form that in some sense resembled the Transfiguration (Acts 9:3-4; 22:6-9; 26:13-16). The third question is precisely, “What is the distinction?” Jesus is declared as being the divine Son of God by the voice emanating from cloud. Jesus is the beloved Son from the Parable of the Vineyard (Mark 12:6-8), God’s final emissary. At the moment of His death the centurion confesses “Truly this man was God’s Son!”³⁵ Jesus as the Son of God is the one who suffers and dies.³⁶

The thing that made the distinction necessary for the three disciples, along with the disciples that would hear about Jesus later and read about Him in the Gospel accounts is that some, many in fact, would

³⁵ Mark 15:39 NRSVS.

³⁶ Margaret E. Thrall, “Elijah and Moses in Mark’s Account of the Transfiguration,” *New Testament Studies* 16:4 (1970) pp. 305-317.

simply come to relate to Jesus as one of the great righteous men like Moses and Elijah, perhaps as a hero of the faith, but not as totally distinct, different, and vastly superior to all others. The purpose of the action of God in transfiguring Him on the mountain in the way that He did was to show the disciples what is actually the case, namely that Jesus is the divine Son of God.³⁷ Certainly there is a great deal more that could be explored in these passages of the Synoptics, as well as the different circumstances in John's Gospel, but the point throughout is the distinctive place of Jesus as the Divine Preexistent Son. What God only prefigured in the calling of Abraham to offer Isaac and in the appearance to Moses and Elijah in the past is fulfilled in Jesus as the divine agent of reconciliation and revelation of the true nature of Almighty God. There is no one, or nothing like Him, He is unique and at the same time He fully reveals the nature and heart of God as the image-bearer, the true Adam. He not only fully fulfills the mission of God, but also demonstrates for all humanity the calling of God for them as His image-bearers in the universe. In His resurrection all those things that had been hinted at would ultimately come together and the new age would dawn.

The account in John's Gospel indicates that heaven itself, the Father, answering Jesus, to demonstrate the nature and close relationship of Jesus to God the Father. Who can speak to God and have Him answer in

³⁷ Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son*, p. 50.

this way? Jesus, God's beloved Son. The focus here is upon the things that Jesus does and says bringing glory to God. This message came to those who heard it and those who would read it in order to challenge them. The challenge is to see the things that Jesus does and says as designed to bring glory to God. If we are to be His disciples this same goal is the challenge set for us too. We are to seek to glorify God. This is a simple message to say, but an extraordinarily difficult thing to accomplish. It is a message that calls for focus, commitment, creativity and perseverance.

Jesus is not simply another prophet, not simply another king like David, not simply a son adopted by God, He is the unique, the Divine Son, the true image-bearer of God, the revelation of the nature and reality of who and what God is. Jesus is God become flesh, stepping out of eternity into the world of men to deliver the divine verdict of God. That verdict is, God loves His children and is willing to die for them. In this verdict He calls them home and He calls them to fulfill the destiny for which He created them, to bear His image to the world. He calls them to be like Jesus, as He always intended humans to be. He called them to be loving, selfless, and self-sacrificing. This is still the call of the Gospel today.

Synopsis

Scholars have found a great number of connections in the Transfiguration account to Old Testament Scriptures. It is highly likely that the original audience of the Gospel accounts will have made these connections in ways that modern audiences often miss. Moses and Elijah appearing on the mountain with Jesus is an event of extraordinary significance since these were two of the most revered and important characters in Judaism. With the voice coming from the cloud indicating that Jesus is superior to them and to be listened to over them an incredible message is delivered to the disciples regarding who Jesus is and what He represents. This is not simply another righteous man, or another great prophet, He is God's Beloved Son. It is highly likely that many people will have struggled to understand this about Jesus as they still do today.

Understanding who Jesus is challenges us to understand God in ways that are far different than the way so many understood God and still understand God. He is more loving, more committed to relationship, more merciful than people understood then and still understand today. With the voice of God challenging the disciples to listen to Jesus this is still the challenge issued to the disciples of Jesus. We are to listen to

Jesus and we are called to “glorify” God as Jesus glorified God. We are called to reveal God to the world as disciples of Jesus Christ, to fulfill the destiny for which human beings were created. We are called to love till it kills us and to never give up pursuing God’s children and challenging them to turn to Him and come home.

Questions

1. When you think of the Transfiguration account, what are some of the images that this story brings to your mind?
2. When you think of the Transfiguration account, what are some of the questions that this story brings to your mind?
3. Why do you think the two figures that Moses speaks to on the mountain are Moses and Elijah?
4. What is the significance of going up on the mountain for God's people?
5. Why might connecting the Transfiguration with the Sinai/Horeb experiences be significant?
6. When you hear the phrase, "Son of God," what are some images that come to your mind? Why?
7. Why do you think the voice from the cloud challenges Peter, Jacob and John to listen to Jesus?
8. In what ways is Jesus different from Moses and Elijah?
9. Why do you think Peter wants to build three tents?
10. How is connecting Jesus with David significant?
11. What is the significance of connecting Jesus with Isaac?
12. Why do you think Jesus is talking with Moses and Elijah about His "exodus?"



13.How does the Transfiguration relate to the future for Jesus?

14.How does the Transfiguration relate to the resurrection?

15.How does the Transfiguration relate to the second coming of Jesus?

16.In what ways does the Transfiguration reveal the divine nature of Jesus?

17.In what ways does the Transfiguration challenge you to live differently?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that Jesus is not simply another prophet, simply a good man, or even a son adopted by God simply because of the life He devoted to God and His people on earth. Jesus came from the midst of eternity, from heaven, in order to convey to us as human beings the true nature and calling of God. He fulfills that call of God by His suffering and death to save that which was lost and to renew the calling of God to bear His image into the world. What are some ways that you see yourself as an image-bearer of God?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words calling His children to understand who He is and what living for His glory means. So often we have a preconceived notion of what that is, as did the disciples of Jesus on the mountain, and as did those that first read the Gospel accounts. It is hard to teach someone something when they believe they already know everything. No more can be put into a full container. Only an empty container can be filled further and only a willing learner can learn new things. God calls for us to listen to Jesus. What are some ways that you seek each week to listen to Jesus?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

The calling of God for how I live my life is powerful in this story. It is a calling that draws me back to all the words of Jesus Himself. I am to listen to Jesus above all others. Often times it is far easier for us to listen to what others say about Jesus, such as, preachers, teachers and other disciples. All of that is important and good, but none of it replaces the actual words of Jesus that we find recorded by the Gospel writers. These should be our constant companions. What are some ways that you have found that listening to Jesus has changed your life?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling us to “listen” to Jesus above all others and above all else. He is the one who came from heaven to reveal God in ways that only a Son could do. His calling on our lives should change us more and more into His image. How might you allow your life changed to be like Jesus?