

Exegetical Paper: Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration

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Introduction

Several months before His death and resurrection (perhaps near or during Succoth), the master disciple-maker offered a glimpse of that fate and fulfillment after modeling empowerment by the Spirit. Jesus prepared his disciples for His upcoming crucifixion and trained them to *count the cost*,¹ all the while bringing to light His identity. Peter, James, and John were about to discover an illuminating light, figurative in its revelatory properties and prophetic in its metamorphic² hint of the body to come and a time when God will tabernacle with humankind.³

Matthew's Message: The Transfiguration

Sandwiched between miracles such as the feeding of the 5,000 and a trial run of the seventy-two disciples is Jesus' transfiguration, which occurred soon after Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah.⁴ God confirmed this during His metamorphic state by announcing, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" We've seen this endorsement before.⁵ But, why was the change necessary?

Matthew reports that Jesus was talking to Moses and Elijah while transformed. The conversation, according to Luke, addressed Jesus' soon departure from earth – something for which Jesus had been preparing His disciples and what seemed to be on His mind from then on. Therefore, I believe the writers' (e.g., Matthew and Luke) purpose for the passage was to serve

¹ Matthew Chapter Sixteen, NASB (New American Standard Bible).

² Moulton, J. H., & Milligan, G. (1930). *The vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (p. 403). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

³ Revelation 21:1-4, NASB, for instance.

⁴ Matthew Chapter Fourteen; Luke Chapter Ten, NASB.

⁵ Matthew 3:17, NASB.

as a bridge in an overarching ideological and chronological progression.⁶ But, while the observation explains a possible motive, several unanswered questions remain.

All three disciples had a concurrent vision, perhaps while sleeping as the context suggests.⁷ Were the disciples placed into an altered conscious state to see and hear Jesus, Moses, and Elijah converse? How did they *know* those present were Elijah and Moses? Peter didn't know what to say because he was terrified. Why? Did he or the others believe the end of the age had come? After all, Elijah was to return at the time of redemption according to Scripture and tradition and as rehearsed during the annual Seder.⁸ With the transformation, it's easy to see how profound this event could be. Finally, and perhaps most puzzling: Why did John not write of the transfiguration? The three gospel authors who *did* write of it weren't present, yet the eyewitness did not. Why? Regardless, the text serves its faith-building purpose – especially when viewed in the light of all three gospels.

⁶ We find a sequential progression that also moves along Jesus' ontological mission from the preparation of His disciples leading up to Matthew Chapter Sixteen and post-Chapter Seventeen when we observe Him moving toward, and then in, Jerusalem.

⁷ ὄραμα; Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., pp. 639–640). Chicago: University of Chicago Press; “The disciples’ experience is described in v. 9 as a vision, *horama*, a noun used elsewhere in the New Testament (all in Acts) only for apparently ‘inward’ experiences.”, France, R. T. (1985). *Matthew: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 265). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁸ e.g. Matthew 17:10-11 and Revelation 21:1-4, New American Standard Bible (NASB); <http://www.jewishanswers.org/ask-the-rabbi-category/the-jewish-calendar-and-holidays/passover/page/4/?p=1178>; “The vision of Elijah has raised the question of how his expected return relates to Jesus’ Messianic role. Then may also suggest a closer connection with v. 9; if Elijah has now come (as we have just witnessed), why may we not now proclaim your Messiahship? Possibly also the mention of resurrection (and therefore death) seems to them inconsistent with Elijah’s role in ‘restoring all things’ (v. 11). Altogether, their eschatological time-table is confused!”, France, R. T. (1985). *Matthew: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 267–268). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Substantive Comparison (to Mark 9:2-10 and Luke 9:28-36)

When comparing Matthew 17:1-9 to Mark 9:2-10 and Luke 9:28-36, we find a general agreement on location, transfiguration, and Peter's suggestion that he build booths.⁹ However, Luke offers additional information about Jesus' appearance in glory and conversation focus: His coming departure.¹⁰ Mark adds that the disciples were afraid, and that fear affected Peter's ability to respond to what he saw.

Conclusion & Contemporary Application

This pericope, which appears to chronicle Jesus' progression and transformation from Master Disciple-maker to prophecy fulfiller, offers contemporary application. The transfiguration event reminds us that we, as followers, are *being* transformed into the likeness of Christ.¹¹ Through the lens of metamorphosis, we may also get a brief glimpse of the new body we will inherit in the resurrection and new age to come. Importantly, they lend confidence to the fulfillment of prophecy in our death/resurrection ... *hope* built up by my confidence in what God has done is doing and will do.¹²

⁹ See my earlier comment regarding Succoth; Leviticus 23:38-43 and Nehemiah Chapter Eighteen, New American Standard (NASB); σκηνή – lodging, dwelling, Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 928). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ Δόξα – splendor, radiance, Moulton, J. H., & Milligan, G. (1930). The vocabulary of the Greek Testament (pp. 168–169). London: Hodder and Stoughton.

¹¹ 2Corinthians 3:18, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

¹² Titus 2:11-14, NASB, for instance.

Bibliography

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<http://www.jewishanswers.org> (one example citing the Elijah tradition in the Passover Seder).

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