

Jesus, the Place of God's Presence and Glory: The Transfiguration

Matthew 17:1-8; Jerry Truex; February 26, 2017

Introduction

Today we focus on the transfiguration of Jesus as the lectionary text. The transfiguration of Jesus is a climactic moment in the Gospel of Matthew, because it reveals that Jesus is the place of God's glory on earth.

Within Matthew's narrative, the transfiguration functions as a *dénouement*, a dramatic revelation about the identity and purpose of Jesus.

The Transfiguration (17:1-8)

¹ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. (NRSV)

1. Transfigured (metamorphosis)

In verse 2, we read that Jesus was transfigured. The original Greek word is *μεταμορφόω*, which means "to be changed in form" or "transformed," and from it we get the English word, metamorphosis. Jesus' outer appearance is transformed or changed. Jesus' face shines like *the sun* and his clothes become *white as light*. Three of his disciples witness the transformation.

2. Brilliant shining glory

a. Jesus and Moses

Jesus' transfiguration recalls a similar event in the O.T. The description of Jesus has some striking parallels with the description of Moses on Mount Sinai. If you recalled, Moses ascended Mount Sinai to meet God and receive Law (Exod. 24:9-18; 34:29-35).

Like Jesus, Moses ascended the mountain with three people¹ and, after six days, he heard the divine voice speaking to him from a cloud of glory. Then, when Moses came down from the Mountain, his face was shining because of his encounter with God.

b. Jesus and the Shekinah

In the transfiguration scene, Jesus face was like the sun and his clothes were brilliant white. This overpowering bright shining glory may be alluding to the radiant glory of God, which is called the Shekinah (שכינה),² which filled the Tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-38) and later filled the Temple (1 Kgs. 8:9-11; Ezek. 43:1-12).

The transfiguration scene draws Jesus and the Shekinah (שכינה) together; the brilliant radiant glory of God that was once thought to reside in the Temple is now present in Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew was written about five to ten years after the Temple was destroyed (70 CE) and, in the aftermath of that destruction, Jews and Christians were asking where can God be worshipped if there is no Temple.

The transfiguration story answers that. The glory of God—the visible majesty of the Divine Presence—has come down on Jesus.

Matthew is saying that *God's glory has come down, not to the Temple in Jerusalem, not to Mount Sinai where God met Moses, but onto and into Jesus, who himself now radiates the divine splendor.*

c. Jesus and the Resurrection

Shining faces are associated with the future resurrection. In the future resurrection, the dead will be raised and the faces of the righteous will shine like the sun (Matt. 13:43; Dan. 12:3; 2 Bar. 51:3).

In the Book of Revelation, the risen Christ is described as the one whose "face was like the sun shining in its strength" (NIV Rev. 1:16).

¹ Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu (Exod. 24:1).

² Hagner, *Matthew* (1995) 493; shē khee' nah.

3. Jesus, Moses, and Elijah

Next in the transfiguration story, we read about the appearance of Moses and Elijah, both of whom have long since been deceased. Why are they now appearing?

What Moses and Elijah signify is unclear. Some believe that Moses represents the Law and Elijah represents the prophets.² Is Jesus replacing the Law and the Prophets? Or is he fulfilling them? The symbolism is uncertain.

Others point out that both Moses and Elijah had "mountain top experiences with God," Moses at Sinai (Exod. 19:20) and Elijah at Horeb (1 Kgs. 19:8-14). It is fitting that they appear with Jesus when he has a similar experience.

In other Jewish traditions, Moses was to accompany Elijah's return at the end of the ages (Deut. Rab. 3:17). So, the appearance of Moses and Elijah signals the end of the ages has happened and now the kingdom of God has been inaugurated.

It could also be typology.³ That is, Jesus is "the prophet like Moses" spoken of in Deut. 18:15 and John the Baptist is like Elijah, who are explicitly linked in v. 13.

4. Three Shelters?

Meanwhile, Peter seems to be at a loss for what is happening, so he makes a rather bizarre offer to build three tents. In middle eastern custom, offering hospitality to the guests is extremely important, so perhaps Peter, in a state of shock, falls back on what his mother taught him—always welcome guests, even if they seem like aliens from another planet or ancient ancestors raised from the dead.

However, most commentators believe that Peter wants to assert some control over the otherwise confusing situation. For Peter, the situation is breaking all the rules about what is real and not real. Peter is overwhelmed and he is trying to cope by assert control. He wants Jesus and his guests to stay on the mountain. Maybe he thinks this is the time and place when heaven will come down to earth as the prophets foretold (cf. Zech. 8:3)."⁴

³ David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 417.

⁴ Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew*, BCBC (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 1991) 263.

5. Cloud and a Voice

But, just as Peter tries take control, shouting “tents, tents, we need tents,” a terrifying cloud comes in fast, cutting Peter off.

It’s another epiphany. This is a second divine manifestation within the first. First there was bright radiant light, and now a voice from a terrifying cloud. The voice that lifts the hair of your neck.

What is the voice saying? It is saying the same thing the reader heard at Jesus’ baptism, “This is my beloved Son.” But, what does that mean?

6. God’s Son

In the ancient world, human kings and emperors were very often called “son of god” or even “god”. For example,

- The king of Babylon was called the “son of Marduk,”
- Alexander the Great was called “god,”
- The Seleucid King, Antiochus Epiphanes (d. 164 BCE), meant “Antiochus, god manifest.”
- Almost all the Roman Emperors, from Julius Caesar (d. 42 BCE) to Septimius Severus (193-211), were given the title, “god” or “son of god.”

Excursus: Coins tell the story of Divine Caesars

1. **Julius Caesar as Divine.** Here is a denarius minted circa 18 BC. Front: **CAESAR AVGVSTVS** [Caesar Augustus]. Back: **DIVinVS** (nom) IVLIV = Divine Julius.



2. **Octavian as Son of God.** Roman Silver Denarius minted between 31 BCE – 14 CE. The front has Venus. The back has **CAESAR DIVIni Filius** (= “Caesar, Son of the Divine”) with Octavian in military dress.



3. **Tiberius as Son of God.** Roman Denarius mined between 14-37 CE. The front has Tiberius Caesar with the inscription **T**iberius **CAESAR DIVI**ni (gen) **AUG**usti **F**ilius **AUGUSTUS** (= "Tiberius, Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Augustus"). The back has the goddess Livia with the inscription, **PONTIF**ex **MAXIM**us (high priest).



In ancient Judaism, great angels were sometimes called sons of god, the nation of Israel was called God's son (Exod. 4:23), and when a king of Israel was coroneted, he was anointed with oil and declared to be God's son—Anointed, Christ, and Messiah mean the same thing.

Psalm 2:6-8. ⁶ "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." ⁷ I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you. (NRS)

So, when we hear that Jesus being called God's son, we should understand that Jesus is being identified as God's Messiah, God's viceroy, God's representative or king on planet earth over against Emperors or earthy kings. The voice from heaven was commissioning Jesus to launch and lead the kingdom movement.

7. "Listen" (*shema*)

Notice that the voice does not say, "Listen to me," but rather, "Listen to him" (v. 5). The word, "Listen," is critical. The word "listen/hear" in Hebrew is Shema, the first word of the basic confession of faith:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone (NRSV Deut. 6:4).

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

Shema Yisrael, YHWH/adonai elohainu, YHWH/adonai echad.

So, when the Voice says, "Listen to him," it suggests that Jesus alone must be obeyed.

8. A surreal event, yet we hear, "Arise! Do not be afraid" (v. 7).

The transfiguration story presents a dream-like or surreal painting, with incongruous imagery of an event or experience that shook the foundations of the three disciples.

- Jesus' face becomes the sun.
- His clothes are painfully bright.
- Famous people come back from the dead.
- Peter cries out, "Let's make tents."
- A terrifying cloud.
- A Voice from heaven.
- Jesus is declared Israel's king.
- The Shema is re-written.
- They fall to the ground, dead.

But as soon as they fall to the ground, Jesus commands to arise (v. 7).

- Just as Jesus commanded the paralyzed man: "Stand up (ἐγερθεῖς), take you bed and go to your home" (Matt. 9:6), now he tells the three disciples, "Arise (ἐγέρθητε), and do not be afraid" (17:9). The same word, "arise" is used.
- It is resurrection language. We see this when Jesus grabs the hand of a girl, who was thought to be dead, the text says, "She was raised" (ἠγέρθη) (9:25). The same word. It is resurrection language.

So, we might surmise that when Jesus tells the three disciples to "arise," he is inviting them to resurrection life. To live resurrection lives, is to live by the values of the kingdom movement of Jesus and not by the values of the dominant culture or a certain political system.

Why, then, does Jesus then add, "Do not be afraid," right after he says, "Arise!" Because living the resurrection life involves courage. Living the resurrection life requires "guts" (faith and trust in God). Which is easier, to live according to the dominant cultural values or to live out Kingdom values? Of course, living according to dominant cultural values is much easier. So, when Jesus says, "Arise, live the way of the Kingdom," he immediately adds, "Do not be afraid."

C. Reflection

1. The significance

On the one hand, the significance of the transfiguration story could be stated this way: *In the transfiguration, heaven and earth meet in the person of Jesus. God's glory comes down on Jesus as it once did on Mount Sinai and later in the Temple.*

God's glory comes down, not to the Temple in Jerusalem, not to Mount Sinai where God met Moses, but to Jesus, who then radiates the divine splendor.

Jesus is the place where God's glory materializes to the world. Jesus is the location where God's world intersects our world.

2. The mystery

On the other hand, Jesus' transfiguration remains mysterious. The disciples in the story were dumbfounded (astonished, confused). The event overwhelmed what they thought they knew. When they left the cloud their certainties about themselves and their world had been shattered. The cloud of transfiguration had become a *cloud of unknowing*.

Many probably think that if we were to encounter God in an epiphany like the transfiguration, we would emerge from the cloud with more certainty than ever before. But I don't think that is necessarily true. Perhaps encountering God leaves us disorientated, at least for some time.

So, when Jesus tells the disciples "to tell no one about the vision" (v. 9), I think the disciples may have been relieved. After all, what could they say about an ineffable experience? What categories could they use to talk about it? And who would understand it, especially if they themselves didn't fully grasp it? They are left with a surreal, dream-like painting of the experience, an incongruous set of images.

Perhaps the point of entering the cloud of transfiguration was not to walk away with theological certainties or neat summary statements about its meaning, but rather to enter an encounter with God and allow God to rearrange what we think we know and yet, as Jesus commands, "Arise and not be afraid" (v. 7).