

The Six Mountains of Jesus

Part 4 – The Mountain of Transfiguration

I. Matthew 17: 1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 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.’ 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!’ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, ‘Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’

- a. The Transfiguration has links with the Baptism, the Temptation, Peter’s Confession, Gethsemane (the Mount of Olives), and the Mountain of Commissioning.
- b. Matthew took the mountain setting directly from Mark’s account.
- c. The theme of the Messianic secret in Matthew 17:9 can be found in Second-Temple passages such as found in 2 Maccabees

4 It was also in the same document that the prophet, having received an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God. ⁵Jeremiah came and found a cave-dwelling, and he brought there the tent and the ark and the altar of incense; then he sealed up the entrance. ⁶Some of those who followed him came up intending to mark the way, but could not find it. ⁷When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: ‘The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. ⁸Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated.’ (focus is on Mt. Zion)

II. The Oral period of early Christianity (pre-Gospel) and the Mountain Setting of the Transfiguration

A. Scholars have focused on 7 possibilities of how the mountain setting of the Transfiguration story originated:

1. As a misplaced resurrection narrative.

- a. A mountain is a site for several post-Easter appearances.

b. The Transfiguration was known in independent traditions as a resurrection experience:

2 Peter 1: 16-18

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 had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

2. Hellenistic Christology in regard to the phrase “The Son of God” as part of a Hellenistic divine epiphany.

3. An apocalyptic mountain of revelation

a. The changed appearance:

Daniel 12:3

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

b. The heavenly voice

c. The mountain itself. Apocalyptic revelations combined a divine appearance with a cosmic point of entry into the heavenly realm.

4. Mt. Sinai

a. Jesus is presented as a “new Moses” or a “prophet like Moses,” and the Transfiguration mountain is presented as the new Sinai.

1. God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and Moses took three companions with him:

Exodus 24

Then he said to Moses, ‘Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab...Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up,

2. Elijah had an encounter with God on Mt. Sinai.

3. A cloud covered the Mt. Sinai for 6 days

b. At a minimum, Mt. Sinai has an archetypal role in the Transfiguration.

5. The binding of Isaac (Genesis 22)

1. A popular story in contemporary Jewish preaching and teaching at that time.

6. The Feast of the Tabernacles

1. Since the Feast of the Tabernacles at the time was associated with the return of Israel to Mt. Zion, there is a possible connection between the Transfiguration story and the festival. The fact that Peter proposes only three tents (or booths) is likely connected to the Moses, Elijah, and Jesus rather than anything else.

7. The Jewish concept of Messianic Enthronement

2 Samuel

Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

Psalm 2:7

‘I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.’

I will tell of the decree of the Lord:

**He said to me, ‘You are my son;
today I have begotten you.**

**Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.**

**You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.’**

1. “Son-messiahship” and the term “Son of God” were concepts in pre-gospel Palestine.
2. Both in Hellenistic and Jewish traditions the image of enthronement had a threefold presentation – deification, presentation, and enthronement, which seem to be modelled in the Transfiguration story
3. Both in Old Testament Zion theology and in post-exilic Judaism, a mountain is the seat of God’s throne and the place from which the Messiah will rule over the nations.
4. The mountain of Transfiguration takes on the characteristics of a mountain of enthronement.
5. The climax of the Transfiguration story is the heavenly proclamation.

Conclusion: In the pre-gospel oral tradition the story of the Transfiguration emerges as a movement from Mosaic imagery to Sonship – christology.

III. The Mountain Setting in Matthew’s Gospel

A. The three aspects of the oral account – apocalypticism, Mosaic imagery, and enthronement, have been included and strengthened by Matthew.

1. Apocalyptic

Daniel 10: 7-12

So I was left alone to see this great vision. My strength left me, and my complexion grew deathly pale, and I retained no strength. Then I heard the sound of his words; and when I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a trance, face to the ground.

But then a hand touched me and roused me to my hands and knees. He said to me, ‘Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet, for I have now been sent to you.’ So while he was speaking this word to me, I stood up trembling. He said to me, ‘Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words.

- a. The divine proclamation is the high point of Matthews story.
- b. Peter’s speech is broken off by the heavenly explanation of the event, which emphasizes the superiority of Jesus over Elijah and Moses.
- c. The fear of the witnesses in **Mark** is due to the appearance of Elijah and Moses. The fear of the witnesses in **Luke** is due to the cloud. In **Matthew**, the fear of the witnesses is the result of the declaration: “**This is my Son, the Beloved...**”
- d. The primary significance of the mountain setting in Matthew for the Transfiguration is the role it plays as a part of Matthew’s themes in his gospel – most importantly, the **Sonship of Jesus** as an identity for the Messiah.
- e. Jesus identity as the Messiah is a two-sided role for Matthew. The baptism story has the image of the triumphant king from Psalm 2. For Matthew that path to triumph led to the Cross, which is resisted in his gospel by Satan, Peter, and the onlookers at the crucifixion. Jesus, mindful of the failure of God’s first Son (Israel) is determined to remain obedient to his calling, even to the point of death.
- f. In Matthew, the mountain of Transfiguration is an **anticipatory vindication** in the rightness of the path chosen by Jesus and a foretaste of the glory bestowed upon him as the risen Christ. The Transfiguration falls squarely in the path of Sonship initiated at Jesus’s baptism and temptation. In the Transfiguration because Jesus’s obedience was pleasing to the Father, he is declared to be the royal Son of God.
- g. Peter’s confession and Christ’s revelation of a suffering Messiah are both linked to the Transfiguration, where any questions about Christ’s path to Sonship are set aside by God’s declaration.
- h. The enthronement of the Son, which is glimpsed as a vision in Matthew’s Transfiguration story, is brought to fulfillment on Matthew’s final mountain, where the vindication of the path of Sonship (suffering and death) is fully and finally affirmed.
- i. On the Mountain of Temptation, Jesus chooses obedience to the Father rather than the Messianic Lordship over the earth. On the **Mountain of Temptation**, it is affirmed to the

disciples that the path of obedience to the Father leads to the Cross. At the **Mountain of Transfiguration** the disciples receive a glimpse at the true authority of Jesus. At the **Mountain of Commissioning**, Jesus is fully enthroned as the Lord of heaven and earth, having all authority. This progressive theme of the mountains only appears in the gospel of Matthew.

Luke 9: 28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’— not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Mark 9: 2-13

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.