

The Transfiguration of Jesus

Recounted in three gospels and later cited by Peter, the Transfiguration of Jesus is a significant event. Yet its meaning and implications to eschatology are debated. One method of study is to compare all of the accounts side by side so that one could get the most complete picture of what is happening.

Matthew 17:1-13	Mark 9:2-13	Luke 9:28-36
1) Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves.	2a) Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves.	28) Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.

Observations:

Matthew and Mark introduce the event as occurring six days after Jesus speaks about the way of discipleship (Matt 16:21-28; Mark 8:31-9:1); however, Luke indicates the same period of time as eight days. Whereas Matthew and Mark indicated intervening days, Luke's discrepancy may be explained by the following:

1) The English translation of "some" for the Greek adverb "hōsei" can be translated as "nearly" or "about;" thus, Luke 9:28 would read, "Nearly eight days after these sayings,..."

2) Luke used the Jewish reckoning of a day where a new day begins at 6 pm. To get Luke's count of 8 days, Jesus would have spoken to the disciples in the late afternoon of day 1, days 2 through 7 would be the intervening days as Matthew and Mark counted, and the transfiguration would have taken place just shortly after 6 pm to qualify as day 8. Early evening is very plausible because a) the disciples were sleepy (Luke 9:32), yet b) there had to be enough daylight to see a cloud form (Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34), and c) they were on the mountain top which would be the latest time for sunset.

Jesus took three disciples with Him: Peter and the brothers James and John. When the twelve disciples are listed (Matt 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13), these three would be in the first group of four mentioned.

The mountain that they go up is unnamed. Mount Miron (3,926 feet) is perhaps the most likely location, because it is on the way from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum. Mount Tabor (1,900 feet) is unlikely, because it is south of Galilee, had a walled fortress at its summit during the first century, and is a roundabout way of traveling from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum. Mount Hermon (9,232 feet) is also unlikely, because it is very high, cold at its summit, and in Gentile territory.

Matthew 17:1-13	Mark 9:1-13	Luke 9:28-37
2) And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3) And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him.	2b) And He was transfigured before them; 3) and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. 4) Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus.	29) And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. 30) And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, 31) who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32) Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him.

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Observations:

The Greek verb “metamorphoō,” translated as “transfigured,” can also be translated as “transformed” or “to change into another form.”

Jesus’ face became different and shone like the sun. His clothes became white as light as no launderer on earth can wash them. Jesus appears in His radiant glory.

The disciples somehow recognized two prophets of Israel’s past speaking to the transformed Jesus: Moses and Elijah. Moses preceded the disciples by some 1450 years, and his death was well known and mourned nationally for thirty days (Deut 34:8). Elijah preceded the disciples roughly 900 years; however, his death and burial was never recorded (2 Ki 2:11, 15-17).

Because Moses and Elijah appeared in a “vision” (Matt 17:9), it does not mean that they were resurrected beings.

Moses and Elijah were speaking to the transfigured Jesus about what He was going to accomplish through His sacrifice in Jerusalem. Despite being of the past, Moses and Elijah had knowledge about the Messiah and His role of fulfilling the Law.

Matthew 17:1-13	Mark 9:1-13	Luke 9:28-37
4) Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”	5) Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 6) For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified.	33) And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not realizing what he was saying.

Observations:

Seeing Jesus in His glory and the major Old Testament prophets Moses, and Elijah, the disciples were confused and terrified. Peter, unsure of himself, offers to build three shelters for each person.

Matthew 17:1-13	Mark 9:1-13	Luke 9:28-37
5) While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!” 6) When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified.	7) Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!”	34) While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35) Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!”

Observations:

A bright cloud forms very close to them on the mountain top.

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God speaks to the disciples from within the cloud and makes three points about the transfigured Jesus: 1) This is My beloved Son, 2) He is My Chosen One, and 3) Listen to Him! Upon hearing and recognizing God's voice, the disciples are terrified and prostrate themselves.

Up until now, Jesus' display of supernatural ability (i.e. physical healing, exorcism, etc.) validated His deity. Now for the first time, the disciples heard testimony from no other than God Himself that Jesus is His Son.

Matthew 17:1-13	Mark 9:1-13	Luke 9:28-37
7) And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." 8) And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. 9) As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead."	8) All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. 9) As they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead.	36) And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen. 37) On the next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met Him.

Observations:

Jesus reassures the disciples, and they discover that Moses, Elijah, and the cloud are gone. When they descend from the mountain on the next day, Jesus forbids them from sharing any aspect of their vision until after He "has risen from the dead."

While God calls Jesus His Son, Jesus calls Himself "the Son of Man." This was a common title that Jesus used of Himself up to this point (Matt 8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8, 32, 40; 13:37, 41, 16:13, 27-28; Mark 2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; Luke 5:24; 6:5, 22; 7:34), and it associated Him with Daniel's eschatological prophecy (Dan 7:13).

For the Jews, Daniel's prophecies (Dan 7:1-28; 8:1-27), together with Isaiah's (Isa 11:1-5) and Jeremiah's (Jer 23:5-6), shaped their view of the Messiah as a great military and political leader who restores the nation of Israel.

Matthew 17:1-13	Mark 9:1-13	
10) And His disciples asked Him, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" 11) And He answered and said, "Elijah is coming and will restore all things; 12) but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." 13) Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist.	10) They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant. 11) They asked Him, saying, "Why is it that the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" 12) And He said to them, "Elijah does first come and restore all things. And yet how is it written of the Son of Man that He will suffer many things and be treated with contempt? 13) But I say to you that Elijah has indeed come, and they did to him whatever they wished, just as it is written of him."	

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Observations:

The disciples are puzzled by the statement “risen from the dead.” Jewish thought at that time did not have a systematic understanding of “rising from the dead,” because of the scarcity of any scriptural references and its association with the enigma of eschatology (Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2).

Seeing Moses presumably informs the disciples what “rising from the dead” means; however, in this context, the presence of Elijah is confusing, because the Bible does not record him as dead.

Uncertain, the disciples associate the presence of Elijah with Malachi’s prophecy, which prompts the disciples to ask about the meaning behind Malachi’s prophecy (Mal 4:5-6). For the Jews, the return of Elijah signals the eschatological “Day of the Lord” – the Day of Judgment.

Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse. (Mal 4:5-6)

Jesus’ answer to the disciples posits a paradox.

While not explicitly naming John the Baptist, Jesus teaches that Malachi’s prophecy was partially fulfilled, because Elijah has already come to “restore all things.” That John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah was precisely what the angel informed the priest Zacharias about the impending birth of his son John and his role in God’s plan (Luke 1:17) before Jesus Himself was born.

It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:17)

Mark records the paradox with clarity. While Malachi prophesizes a day of that the Lord will judge evil (Mal 4:1), Mark records Jesus’ response, “yet how is it written of the Son of Man that He will suffer many things and be treated with contempt?”

Jesus alludes to Isaiah’s prophecy of the suffering servant (Isa 53:1-12). John the Baptist did come in the spirit of Elijah to bring back and restore the nation of Israel to their covenant relationship to God by preparing the way for Jesus (Luke 1:17). But the restoration isn’t complete until Jesus accomplishes what He must do in Jerusalem which He discussed with Moses and Elijah.

What was the purpose of the Transfiguration?

1. The transfiguration event was God’s testimony to the disciples that Jesus was the Son of God. Peter used his experience of this validation to explain the divine source of the Scriptures.

For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased” — and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Pet 1:16-21)

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2. To teach the disciples that the Messiah is the suffering servant prophesized by Isaiah not the military political leader of the Jews.

References:

1. Gaeblein FE ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House (1992).
2. Walvoord JF, Zuck RB eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, Wheaton: Victor Books, (1983).