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The Transfiguration Narrative in Matthew's Gospel:
Matthew 17:1-9

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I. Introduction

The transfiguration event in the Synoptic Gospels is clouded in obscurity and uncertainty because of the divine mystery which is associated with the transfiguration of Jesus. Attempts to understand this event in the pre-Gospel traditions have not been easy. Some have tried to remove the mystery out of it by interpreting it as a misplaced resurrection story. Others see it as reflecting the Hellenistic concept of the *theios anēr*, the divine man. These two interpretations will not be considered in this paper for their lack of support in the transfiguration narrative itself.¹

More likely interpretations of the transfiguration event see a Jewish background. An interpreter comes face-to-face with a multitude of allusions, images, echoes, and associations to the OT as well as to Second Temple literature. From the perspective of a Jewish background, the transfiguration can be seen as 1) a revelation, including apocalyptic, 2) corresponding to Moses/Sinai tradition, 3) a messianic enthronement, 4) alluding to the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah, 5) related to the Feast of Tabernacles and its eschatological association, 6) reflecting Elijah on Mount Carmel, and 7) an Epiphany/Christophany/theophany.² Some of these are used as interpretive keys to understanding the narrative. The allusions are so myriad that a common approach for understanding the transfiguration is to see it as a “polyvalent” story that permits several possibilities of association.”³

In this paper, we will exegete the transfiguration narrative in Matthew 17:1-9. We will attempt to show that verse 5 is the center of the narrative and provides the interpretive key to understanding Jesus’ transfiguration in verse 2. We will show through exegesis that Jesus’ transfiguration is to be understood two-fold. First, it is the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God who is the Messiah and who takes on the role of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh in his mission to bring salvation to Israel and the world. This identity is clothed in the “Son of Man” language that Jesus appropriates for himself. Second, Jesus’ transfiguration, as interpreted by the heavenly voice, is a

¹ See Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus On the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 8, ed. Bruce D. Chilton (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 138-141.

² For various possible interpretations, see Walter L. Liefeld, “Theological Motifs in the Transfiguration Narrative,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney, 162-79 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 168-169; Terence L. Donaldson, *Mountain*, 141-147; W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary On the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, in *Three Volumes*, Vol. 2, *Commentary on Matthew VIII-XVIII* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 687-689, 695; Simon S. Lee, *Jesus’ Transfiguration and the Believers’ Transformation: A Study of the Transfiguration and Its Development in Early Christian Writings*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe, 265, ed. Jörg Frey (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 10; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester, *Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 395-397; A.D.A. Moses, *Matthew’s Transfiguration Story and Jewish-Christian Controversy*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 122, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 20-48.

³ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 397.

call to discipleship and obedience to Jesus in the way of the cross. Jesus' transfiguration in Matthew is presented in apocalyptic/eschatological imagery.

II. Immediate Context

Matthew 17:1-9 may be placed in the context that starts at Mt 16:13 and ends at 17:23. The surrounding context of the transfiguration is framed in terms of who the Son of Man is. Peter's answer that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, finds affirmation from Jesus, who states that it is Father who has revealed this to Peter (Mt 16:17). Thus, from the start, we find a close identification of Jesus as the Son of Man, the Messiah, and the Son of the Living God.

Several themes may be observed in the immediate context. The most important one involves the revelation by Jesus to the disciples that the Son of Man, who is the Messiah and the Son of the Living God, must suffer, die and then be resurrected. Jesus reiterates this three times in the context surrounding the transfiguration (Mt 16:21; Mt 17:12, 22-23). Another noteworthy theme is that of discipleship, particularly in connection with suffering and eschatological judgment. Following Jesus' rebuke of Peter's insistence that the Son of Man not suffer, Jesus teaches the disciples that those who follow him must deny themselves and take up their cross, with the admonition that the Son of Man will come for judgment: suffering is inevitable in following Jesus, but there is great reward for following him and judgment for not following him (Mt 16:24-27). A third theme in the immediate context involves apocalyptic/eschatological imagery and judgment. Jesus uses the title "Son of Man," most likely taken from Daniel 7 where the apocalyptic son of man appears. Jesus also refers to himself as coming with the angels for judgment (Mt 16:27) and in his kingdom (Mt 16: 28).

The meaning of Matthew 16:28 is disputed. A full discussion of its meaning is beyond the scope of this paper. We accept the interpretation that it most likely points to the transfiguration that follows for the following reasons: 1) unlike Mt 16:27, there is no mention of the Son of Man coming with his angels, and therefore, it probably does not refer to the parousia; 2) In the literary context, the "some" most likely refers to the three disciples whom Jesus takes with him up the mountain; 3) Jesus seems to know for certain that some will indeed see the Son of Man coming in his coming (his use of ἀμήν), but in Mt 24:36, he denies that the Son knows the hour of the parousia.⁴ Given these factors, however, it is still possible that the transfiguration is a preview of the exalted state in which Jesus will later appear, such as at the resurrection and the parousia.⁵

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, ed. R. Alan Culpepper (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, Publishing Inc., 2006), 322.

⁵ Witherington, *Matthew*, 322; David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 413;

III. Outline and Structure of the Transfiguration Narrative Passage

The limit of the passage on the transfiguration narrative is usually defined to start at Mt 17:1 and end at verse 8, 9, or 13.⁶ We propose the following outline:

1. The Setting (17:1)
2. The Transfiguration Event (17:2-3)
3. Peter's Response (17:4)
4. The Cloud and Voice (17:5)
5. Disciples Respond in Fear (17:6)
6. Jesus Responds with Comfort (17:7-8)
7. Conclusion (17: 9)

Verse 9 may be considered to be the introduction to verses 10-13, serving as a link between the transfiguration event and the discussion that follows.⁷ Because verse 9 forms an *inclusio* with verse 1, framing the narrative with Jesus' and the disciples' ascent and descent from the mountain,⁸ we include verse 9 as part of the transfiguration narrative. Verses 10-13, though not included as part of the pericope, nevertheless, provide interpretive context.

It is possible that Matthew's transfiguration has a chiasmic structure. Davies and Allison, as well as Luz, offer their analysis of the chiasm:

Davies and Allison ⁹	Ulrich Luz ¹⁰
a. Narrative introduction (1)	a. Ascent up the mountain (1)
b. Jesus is transfigured (2-3)	b. Transfigured Jesus with Moses and Elijah (2-3)
c. Peter's response (4)	c. The voice of God (5-6)
d. The divine voice (5)	b. Jesus alone (7-8)
c. The disciples' response (6)	a. Descent from the mountain (9)
b. Jesus speaks (7)	
a. Narrative conclusion (8)	

David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 181.

⁶ For example, Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33B, ed. David Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1995), 490, 491, (verses 1-8); John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I.H. Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 696, (verses 1-9); Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series, New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010), 644, 645, (verses 1-13).

⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 491; Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 394.

⁸ Nolland, *Matthew*, 698, also sees the transfiguration account to be framed by verses 1 and 9.

⁹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 684.

¹⁰ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 394. Luz states that the transfiguration story shows traces of a chiasmic structure.

If the analysis of the pericope as a chiasmic structure is correct,¹¹ then the voice of God, and not the transfiguration itself, is the center of the narrative.¹²

We propose a slightly modified and more detailed chiasmic arrangement for the pericope:

- a. Ascent up the mountain (1)
- b. Disciples see Jesus' transfiguration (2)
- c. Jesus with Moses and Elijah speaking to him (3)
- d. Peter's response (4)
- e. The cloud and the voice from the cloud (5)
- d. The disciple's response (6)
- c. Jesus speaking to the disciples (7)
- b. Disciples see Jesus alone (8)
- a. Descent from the mountain (9)

In our exegesis of the passage, we will use our proposed outline, keeping the chiasmic structure in mind.

IV. Exegesis of Matthew 17:1-9

1. The Setting (Mt 17:1): Καὶ μεθ' ἡμέρας ἕξ παραλαμβάνει ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὸν Πέτρον καὶ Ἰάκωβον καὶ Ἰωάννην τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀναφέρει αὐτοὺς εἰς ὄρος ὑψηλὸν κατ' ἰδίαν. [And after six days, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother and led them up to a high mountain by themselves.]

Matthew follows Mark's Καὶ μεθ' ἡμέρας ἕξ, ("after six days"), though Matthew uses μεθ' instead of μετά, while Luke uses μετὰ ... ὥσει ἡμέραι ὀκτῶ ("about eight days later"). The difference in the number of days between Matthew/Mark and Luke may not be significant. Luke's "about eight days" may be based on a Greek way of speaking to mean "about a week later,"¹³ such that "after six days" and "about eight days" indicate about a week.¹⁴

Since a precise time reference is rare in the Synoptic traditions,¹⁵ the "after six

¹¹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 684, stresses the conditional *if*.

¹² Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 874; Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 394.

¹³ D.A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David Garland, Vol. 9, *Matthew-Mark*, 23-670 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 436.

¹⁴ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, Vol. 22, ed. David Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 262.

¹⁵ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 694; Carson, "Matthew," 436; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 2007), 641.

days” may have some significance. However, the meaning of the six days is debated. One argument is that it may allude to the six day interval between the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles, with Jesus going up the mountain on the first day of the Feast.¹⁶ A variation of this is that the six days refers to the six day period of the Feast of Tabernacles, with Jesus going up the mountain on the final seventh day.¹⁷ These suggestions seem to be based on Peter’s proposal in Mt 17:4 to build σκηναί (“tent, hut”¹⁸) for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.¹⁹ These proposals seem unlikely since Jews would not have traveled during the Feast.²⁰ Moreover, the reference to the six days does not necessarily relate to the Feast of Tabernacles.²¹

Another argument is that the “after six days” alludes to Ex 24:16, where after six days during which the cloud covered Mount Sinai, God spoke to Moses from out of the cloud.²² Similarities between Ex 24:15-18 and its immediate context with Mt 17:1-9, such as the cloud, the voice, and the presence of Moses, make a Moses/Sinai parallel with the transfiguration event attractive. However, there are also dissimilarities between Ex 24:15-18 and Mt 17:1-9. These similarities and dissimilarities will be discussed further below.

The simplest interpretation of the “six days” is that it refers to the amount of time it took to travel from Caesarea-Philippi (16:13) to the mountain (17:1).²³ There may also be an allusion to Ex 24:16, since Matthew in one instance invests a number with OT allusions (Mt 4:2) and in another refers directly to the significance of a number in the OT (Mt 12:40). Nevertheless, the clearest meaning of the “six days” is to link it chronologically to Mt 16:13-28.

Jesus takes the three disciples with him and leads them up to the mountain.²⁴ Matthew places the article τόν only before Πέτρον, whereas Mark uses the article before all the disciples’ names and Luke does not use the article at all. It is possible that the article in Matthew highlights Peter.²⁵ However, it is more probable that the article governs all three names, identifying them as the inner circle of disciples.²⁶

¹⁶ Moses, *Transfiguration*, 44, referring to P. Bonnard, *L’Evangile selon saint Matthieu* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1963), 254, and H. Riesenfeld, *Jésus transfigure: L’arrière-plan du récit évangélique de la transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1947), 267-277.

¹⁷ Moses, *Transfiguration*, 44-45, referring to H. Baltensweiler, *Die Verklärung Jesu* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1959), 46-51.

¹⁸ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., trans. W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, ed. and rev. F. W. Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 928.

¹⁹ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 397.

²⁰ Leifeld, “Motifs,” 166; Carson, “Matthew,” 436.

²¹ Armand Puig i Tàrrach, “The Glory on the Mountain: The Episode of the Transfiguration of Jesus,” *New Testament Studies*, 58, no. 2 (Apr 2012): 157.

²² Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 694, states that this allusion is probable.

²³ Carson, “Matthew,” 436, favors this interpretation.

²⁴ The two verbs παραλαμβάνει and ἀναφέρει are historic presents.

²⁵ Nolland, *Matthew*, 698.

²⁶ Sharp’s Rule does not apply because of the proper nouns. Stanley Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New*

Elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus also takes only Peter, James, and John with him when he goes alone to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 27:37). A comparison of Mt 17:1-9 and 27:36-46 shows that Jesus takes these three disciples to be with him when Jesus' nature as a divine, heavenly being (Mt 17:1-9) and as a human being in weakness (Mt 27:36-46) is revealed.

The use of *κατ' ἰδίαν* ("by oneself, privately"²⁷) indicates that the transfiguration that the disciples are to witness is to be kept secret.²⁸ This is confirmed in Mt 17:9, where Jesus tells them that they are not to tell of the vision they have seen until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.

The location of the mountain (*ὄρος*) is uncertain. Mount Tabor and Mount Hermon have been proposed. However, Mount Tabor at 1900 feet high with a Roman garrison at the top and Mount Hermon at 9232 feet high in Gentile territory seem unlikely.²⁹ Another plausible suggestion is Mount Meron, which at 3926 feet high is the highest mountain in Israel and is on the way from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum, to where Jesus travels after the transfiguration.³⁰

In Matthew, there are five important events that occur on a mountain (Mt 4:8-10; Mt 5:1-7:29; Mt 15:29-39; Mt 17:1-9; Mt 24:3ff; Mt 28:16-20). Of these, only Mt 4:8-10, one of Jesus' temptation, and Mt 17:1-9 are located on a "high mountain" (*ὄρος ὑψηλόν*). The two pericopes can be compared and contrasted.³¹ After Jesus is baptized and his Sonship is publicly proclaimed, Jesus' obedience to God as his Son is tested through a series of temptations. In the last of the temptations, the motifs of mountain, kingdom, glory, and Sonship appear together as Satan tests Jesus' will against the Father's will by offering him the kingdoms of the world without suffering and death. Jesus rejects Satan's way, choosing instead to follow God's way of suffering and the cross (cf. Mt 16:21-23).

In the immediate context of Mt 17:1-9, God reveals to Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Mt 16:13-17). After Jesus teaches the disciples that he must suffer, Peter takes on the role of Satan and tests Jesus' intention to obey God's will that he suffer. Jesus rebukes Peter and determines to go the way of the cross. Thereafter, he leads the three disciples up the mountain, where through the transfiguration God confirms Jesus' Sonship before the disciples. From this viewpoint, the transfiguration is a "positive image to the Temptation."³²

Testament, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 110; Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 272, 277.

²⁷ BDAG, 467.

²⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 492.

²⁹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 645; Carson, "Matthew," 436.

³⁰ Liefeld, "Motifs," 167, fn 27.

³¹ See Lee, *Transfiguration*, 98, 100, and Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 188.

³² Lee, *Transfiguration*, 98.

This comparison and contrast correctly correlates the temptation and the transfiguration, through the motifs of the high mountain, Sonship, kingdom, and glory, with the idea of suffering. Three important points related to the transfiguration narrative should be noted from this analysis. First, in terms of the Sonship motif, the exact phrase οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα in Mt 3:17, which provides the context for the temptation in Mt 4:8-10, is repeated and has significance in Mt 17:5. The second point is the theme of obedience associated with Sonship, kingdom, and glory. This idea also occurs in Mt 17:5, where Matthew adds ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ to the Sonship declaration of Mt 3:17. The third point, suffering, is tied to both Sonship and obedience. We will elaborate on these points in our analysis of that verse.

2. The Transfiguration Event (17:2-3): 2 καὶ μετεμορφώθη ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῶν, καὶ ἔλαμψεν τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος, τὰ δὲ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο λευκὰ ὡς τὸ φῶς. 3 καὶ ἰδοὺ ὤφθη αὐτοῖς Μωϋσῆς καὶ Ἡλίας συλλαλοῦντες μετ' αὐτοῦ. [2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone as the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah were seen by them, speaking together with him.]

Jesus was transfigured before the disciples. The transfiguration may be for the benefit of Jesus, who was determined to follow God's will in the path of suffering and the cross, but it was primarily for the disciples (ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῶν), to whom Jesus is revealed in a new way.³³ The verb μεταμορφόω means either “to change in a manner visible to others, *be transfigured*” or “to change inwardly in fundamental character or condition, *be changed, be transformed*.”³⁴ Since God has revealed to Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God (Mt 16:16-17), and Jesus refers to himself as the eschatological Son of Man who will come in glory and judgment (Mt 13:41; 16:27; 24:30; 25:31), the transfiguration does not seem to involve an inward change as to Jesus' fundamental character. The first definition is thus more likely. The passive form of the verb is a divine passive, indicating that God changes Jesus' appearance such that his nature is made visible to the disciples. Jesus is the passive recipient of this transfiguration. The character of Jesus' transfiguration is specified in terms of a bright light: his face shines like the sun and his clothes become as white as light.³⁵

The motif of light appears elsewhere in Matthew. In Mt 28:3, an angel who

³³ Carson, “Matthew,” 437.

³⁴ BDAG, 639.

³⁵ Matthew adds καὶ ἔλαμψεν τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος to Mark's account and omits Mark's description that no fuller on earth could bleach Jesus' garment so white.

descended from heaven and rolled away the stone covering Jesus' tomb had the appearance of lightning and his clothes were white as snow. The origin of the angel was heaven. The similarity of Jesus' and the angel's appearance in light thus suggests that the transfiguration of Jesus was to reveal him as a heavenly being. That heavenly beings radiate light is supported in Biblical and Second Temple Jewish literature. Heavenly beings, such as angels, wear garments that are white or have faces that shine (Dan 10:6; Rev 10:1; 1 Enoch 71:1; 2 Enoch 1:5, 8; 19:1). God himself is said to be covered in light as with a cloak (Psalm 104:2; 1 Enoch 14:20). In a sense, at the transfiguration, God reveals Jesus' true majestic nature to the disciples, who come in contact with the glory of the divine presence.³⁶ Jesus' true nature will become more apparent when the bright cloud appears (Mt 17:5). In 2 Pet 1:16-18, Peter describes witnessing Jesus' majesty and receiving honor and glory from God, whom he calls the "Majestic Glory," at the transfiguration.

A cluster of features apparent in Jewish apocalyptic literature is present in the transfiguration narrative. The motif of light, as well as a heavenly voice (see Mt 17:5; cf. Dan 8:16; 1 Enoch 13:8; T. Levi 18:6; Rev 11:12), appear as elements of Jewish apocalyptic literature.³⁷ Another characteristic of apocalyptic literature is the changed appearance of the righteous (Dan 12:3; 2 Bar 51:1-3).³⁸ This parallelism of the transfiguration appearance of Jesus with Jewish apocalyptic literature suggests that there is an apocalyptic element in Jesus' transfiguration. Furthermore, in Mt 13:43, in an eschatological context, the righteous are said to shine as the sun in the kingdom of their father. This suggests that the transfiguration also has eschatological undertones (cf. 2 Bar 51:1-3).³⁹ Thus, it seems likely that the transfiguration event is viewed from an apocalyptic/eschatological perspective.⁴⁰ In effect, the images given in the transfiguration seem to put Jesus in the apocalyptic and eschatological clothes of heaven in which he not only shares in, but displays, God's glory.⁴¹

Further support that the transfiguration may be seen to have an apocalyptic, as well as, an eschatological undertone is given in Mt 17:9, where Jesus calls what the disciples have seen ὄραμα ("something that is viewed with one's eye, *something seen, sight, vision*"⁴²). Visions are another feature of Jewish apocalyptic literature.⁴³

³⁶ France, *Matthew*, 647; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 493; Nolland, *Matthew*, 701.

³⁷ Donaldson, *Mountain*, 141.

³⁸ Donaldson, *Mountain*, 141.

³⁹ Nolland, *Matthew*, 700; Lee, *Transfiguration*, 96.

⁴⁰ Donaldson, *Mountain*, 142, states that "apocalyptic mountains of revelation combined the biblical pattern of divine theophany with the cosmic notion of the mountain as a point of entry into the heavenly realm." Lee, *Transfiguration*, 95, also sees apocalyptic/eschatological associations in the transfiguration, though with different emphasis and degree than Donaldson.

⁴¹ Joel Green, "Transfiguration," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., ed. Joel Green (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2013), 967.

⁴² BDAG, 718.

⁴³ See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm Eerdmans

We will discuss this word further in our analysis of that verse below.

Several commentators see a parallel between the shining of Jesus' face and of Moses' face in Ex 34:29, 30, and 35.⁴⁴ This is one of the factors by which the transfiguration is interpreted in light of the Moses/Mount Sinai typology, making Jesus a new Moses, yet one greater than Moses.⁴⁵ There are two reasons given for seeing this parallel. First, it is argued that Matthew emphasizes Moses by placing Moses ahead of Elijah in Mt 17:3, rather than following Mark 9:4, where Elijah comes before Moses.⁴⁶ Second, Matthew's redaction of Mark's account to include ἔλαμψεν τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος, which is absent in Mark, signals Matthew's comparison of Jesus and Moses.⁴⁷

However, these two arguments are not completely persuasive. First, in Mark 9:4, "Elijah with (σύν) Moses" does not necessarily emphasize the importance of Elijah over Moses. Heil has examined all instances where Mark uses σύν in his Gospel and concludes that "the object of the preposition σύν in every instance denotes the more notable party."⁴⁸ Thus, Mark 9:4 says basically the same thing as Mt 17:3, and even with a slightly more emphasis on Moses than in Mt 17:3.⁴⁹ Second, given that the parallel Luke 9:29 includes a reference to the appearance of Jesus' face, (ἐγένετο ... εἶδος τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ ἕτερον), it is possible that neither Matthew nor Luke followed Mark completely and may have used a different source or sources that do not put special emphasis on Moses.⁵⁰ Thus, Matthew's version may not necessarily attempt to emphasize Moses in order to bring out a comparison between Jesus and Moses.

Nevertheless, it is true that the shining of Jesus' face in the transfiguration naturally recalls the shining of Moses' face. However, there are several factors that mitigate against the parallel and seeing Jesus as a new Moses. Exodus 34:29, 30, and 35 state that the "skin of Moses' face shone" whereas Mt 17:5 states that the "face" of Jesus shone. Jesus' face shone only temporarily, whereas Moses' face persisted in shining whenever he spoke with God.⁵¹ These last two differences suggest that the shining of Moses' face was superficial, depended on his speaking with God, and was

Publishing Co., 2003), 476.

⁴⁴ For example, Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 696; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 437; Nolland, *Matthew*, 700; Moses, *Transfiguration*, 121, 122.

⁴⁵ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 687; Keener, *Matthew*, 437; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 696; Moses, *Transfiguration*, 80, 122.

⁴⁶ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 685; Moses, *Transfiguration*, 46, 48, 49.

⁴⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 685; Moses, *Transfiguration*, 43, 46, 48, 49.

⁴⁸ J.P. Heil, "A Note on 'Elijah with Moses' in Mark 9,4," in *Biblica*, 80, no.1 (1999): 115.

⁴⁹ Heil, "Note," 115.

⁵⁰ For a brief argument that Matthew and Luke may have used sources independently of Mark, see D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 100, 101.

⁵¹ Tàrrech, "Glory," 155, fn. 13.

not a part of his being, whereas the shining of Jesus' face came from his heavenly and preincarnate glory.⁵² Furthermore, there are data that make the comparison of Moses and the disciples more likely. The voice out of the cloud was directed to Moses and to the disciples, not to Jesus (Ex 24:16; Mt 17:5), and Moses and the disciples, not Jesus, received the revelation, that is a theophany/Christophany, on the mountain.⁵³ These similarities between Moses and the disciples call into question the validity of the comparison between Moses and Jesus and the argument that Jesus is a new Moses.

In Mt 17:3, since Moses is now explicitly named in the transfiguration narrative in this verse, it would be appropriate here to list the similarities and other dissimilarities not yet given and evaluate the Moses/Mount Sinai motif that is used by some as an interpretive key to understand the transfiguration story.⁵⁴

The similarities are as follows, with what was discussed above included: 1) both are set on a mountain; 2) there is a reference to the "six days" (Ex 24:16; Mt 17:1); 3) Moses takes with him three other people who are named up to Mount Sinai, just as Jesus does (Ex 24:9; Mt 17:1); 4) there is the appearance of the cloud from which the voice of God spoke (Ex 24:16; Mt 17:5); and 5) Moses' face shines, just as Jesus' does when he was transfigured (Ex 34:29, 30; Mt 17:2).⁵⁵

However, there are also dissimilarities, some of which have been discussed above. Those that have not yet been mentioned include the following: 1) in addition to the three named companions, Moses also took with him the seventy elders (Ex 24:9), and 2) though there is the appearance of the cloud, the cloud covers Mount Sinai for six days while the cloud does not seem to remain long in the transfiguration narrative (Ex 24:16; Mt 17:5). These dissimilarities, including those mentioned above, do not necessarily preclude Mount Sinai as a parallel to the mountain setting in Mt 17:1-9, since the similarities, though inexact, are sufficient to allude to the Mount Sinai event, specifically in terms of the cloud and the voice. However, the similarities between Moses and the disciples in the transfiguration narrative do call into question the interpretation that would see Jesus as a new Moses in the transfiguration pericope.⁵⁶

The word ἰδοῦ⁵⁷ prompts attention to what is to come⁵⁸: Moses and Elijah are seen (ᾠφθη, passive voice, though it is commonly translated "appear" for better English style, e.g. ESV) by the disciples, conversing with Jesus. In Matthew, ἰδοῦ is

⁵² France, *Matthew*, 647; Osborne, *Matthew*, 646.

⁵³ France, *Matthew*, 644, who says that "it is the disciples rather than Jesus who are in the position of Moses."

⁵⁴ For example, Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 694.

⁵⁵ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:685-687; France, *Matthew*, 644-645; Craig Evans, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 320; Moses, *Transfiguration*, 43-44,

⁵⁶ For example, Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 685-687, 693, 694;

⁵⁷ Mark omits ἰδοῦ. Both Matthew and Luke have it.

⁵⁸ BDAG, 468.

often used in the context of the appearance of angels appearing or speaking (Mt 1:20; 2:13, 19; 4:11; 28:2), the heavens opening (3:16), and a heavenly voice speaking (3:17 and in this verse). It thus appears that ἰδοὺ may be used to call attention to heavenly beings or events. In the transfiguration narrative, the word occurs first in verse 3 to introduce Moses and Elijah, and then again twice in quick succession in verse 5 to emphasize the appearance of the bright cloud and the voice out of the cloud. Thus, ἰδοὺ in verse 3 may have been used to introduce Moses and Elijah as heavenly beings, and to add to the theophanic character of the transfiguration event⁵⁹ and, possibly, to the apocalyptic imagery present in the narrative.

There have been several reasons given for the appearance of Moses and Elijah together with Jesus, and there may be “several levels of significance or symbolism” suggested by their appearance.⁶⁰ However, some may not be convincing, whether taken individually or included as one among several possibilities. One common interpretation is to think that Moses and Elijah are representatives, respectively, of the Law and the Prophets, and that their appearance and then disappearance signal that Jesus the Messiah and Son of God has fulfilled the OT scriptures.⁶¹ However, the difficulty with this interpretation is that Elijah is not the typical prophet nor included among the Writing Prophets.⁶² Another explanation is that Moses and Elijah reached heaven without dying: Elijah was taken up (2 Kgs 2:11-12), and Moses was also thought by some in the Second Temple period (*Assumption of Moses*) to have been translated by God,⁶³ despite Deut 34:6 explicitly stating that Moses died. Such beliefs contrast them with Jesus, who must first die and then be resurrected to reach heaven.⁶⁴ However, it is possible that neither Matthew nor the other disciples shared this view since Jude 9 speaks of the devil contending for the “body” of Moses, implying that he did indeed die. Another possibility given is that both Moses and Elijah suffered and were rejected by their people. But since many other prophets in the OT period shared the same experience, this does not satisfactorily explain their presence with Jesus at the transfiguration, even if it is to be included as one among other possible reasons.⁶⁵

The more likely reasons for the appearance of Moses and Elijah are as follows: 1)

⁵⁹ Moses, *Transfiguration*, 128.

⁶⁰ France, *Matthew*, 648.

⁶¹ As explained by Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-2:34*, Concordia Commentary, ed. Dean O. Wenthe (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 856, who refutes this view.

⁶² Gibbs, *Matthew*, 856; Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 398; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 697.

⁶³ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 493; Craig Evans, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 321, referring to Josephus, Ant. 4.326.

⁶⁴ See France, *Matthew*, 648, and Nolland, *Matthew*, 701, fn. 54, both of whom give several explanations for the presence of Moses and Elijah together.

⁶⁵ Carson, “Matthew,” 437, and France, *Matthew*, 648, list several possibilities, including those recounted above, and then state that all or some of them were probable. But this scattered approach seems too inclusive without distinction.

Both experienced a theophany on a mountain, Mount Sinai/Horeb, where they saw physical signs of the presence of God and heard his voice (Ex 24:19; 1 Kgs 19:18). In the transfiguration narrative, the disciples experience a Christophany, similar to the theophany that Moses and Elijah experienced. The appearance of Moses and Elijah may have been to attest to the divine origin of Jesus, just as they witnessed the glory of God on Mount Sinai/Horeb. 2) Both have eschatological significance and are forerunners of the Messiah, Elijah appearing in the Day of the Lord, and Moses being the forerunner of the Prophet to come in the last days (Deut 18:15, 18). Matthew 17:10 refers to Mal 4:5 in connection with Elijah's restorative work in the Day of the Lord, but Moses ("My Servant") is also mentioned in this context of the Day of the Lord (Mal 4:4). Nolland states that "the juxtaposition of Moses and Elijah in Mal 3:23-24 (ET 4:4-5) points to the role of Moses and Elijah as, most likely, respectively predecessor and precursor of Jesus."⁶⁶ Similarly, Liefeld believes that Moses functions primarily as a typological figure, with Jesus as the fulfillment, and Elijah as primarily an eschatological figure, appearing before the Messiah in the last days. 3) Both were God's servants in critical times in Israel's history: Moses with the giving of the covenant and Elijah with restoring it. In the context of the transfiguration, Jesus is going to Jerusalem to effect a new covenant, a critical element in God's plan for the salvation of Israel and ultimately for the world. 4) Finally, both are heavenly beings in the transfiguration narrative, just as Jesus is shown to be from the heavenly realm as the Son of God. In the transfiguration setting, an aura of the heavens is apparent.⁶⁷

All of these reasons find some support in the transfiguration narrative and its immediate context. However, while Moses and Elijah are unquestionably heavenly beings at the transfiguration, a comparison between Matthew and Luke's redaction shows that Matthew downplays the heavenly aspect of Moses and Elijah. Luke characterizes them as appearing in glory (Lk 9:31), while Matthew does not mention this at all, apparently wanting to keep Jesus and his radiance the center of attention. Luke also specifies that Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about the departure to Jerusalem, which Matthew omits, perhaps again, wanting to picture Jesus in his glory as primary.

It is uncertain what the disciples' thoughts were regarding Moses and Elijah when

⁶⁶ Nolland, *Matthew*, 702.

⁶⁷ A number of scholars mention these various reasons: Most commentators state that Moses and Elijah met with God on a mountain. Liefeld, "Motifs," 173; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 493; Garland, *Matthew*, 182; Carson, "Matthew," 437; France, *Matthew*, 648; and Nolland, *Matthew*, 701, all note the eschatological importance of Moses and Elijah. France, *Matthew*, 648, states that Moses and Elijah "are in their personal and symbolic capacities as figures in Jewish eschatological expectation and as prefiguring aspects of the Messiah's role." Osborne, *Matthew*, 646, also sees them as forerunners of the Messiah; Carson, "Matthew," 437 and Nolland, *Matthew*, 701 refer to the work of Moses and Elijah related to the covenant; Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew*; Interpretation, ed. James L. Mays (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 199, and Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 398, see the importance of Moses and Elijah as heavenly beings.

they saw them speaking together with Jesus.⁶⁸ This is conveyed in the next verse, which demonstrates Peter’s confusion when he sees Jesus’ transfiguration and Moses and Elijah speaking with him.

3. Peter’s Response (17:4): ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν τῷ Ἰησοῦ· κύριε, καλὸν ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς ὧδε εἶναι· εἰ θέλεις, ποιήσω ὧδε τρεῖς σκηνάς, σοὶ μίαν καὶ Μωϋσῆϊ μίαν καὶ Ἠλίας μίαν. [And Peter spoke⁶⁹ and said to Jesus, “Lord, for us to be here is good. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.]

The verb ἀποκρίνομαι can mean “to answer, to reply” in the sense of responding to a question⁷⁰ or “to speak, to declare, to say” in the sense of introducing or continuing a somewhat formal discourse and occurring regularly with λέγω.⁷¹ Since Jesus did not ask Peter any questions, Peter is instead speaking out of the situation in which he finds himself, seeing Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus.⁷² Peter sees Jesus radiating light and Moses and Elijah conversing with him, but he interrupts them, perhaps demonstrating again his impetuosity.⁷³

Peter addresses Jesus as κύριε (“Lord”) in Matthew. In Mark’s Gospel Peter uses ῥαββί (“teacher,” “rabbi”), and in Luke’s Gospel, ἐπιστάτα (“master”). Though Peter recognizes Jesus as “Lord,” and shows him deference above Moses and Elijah, it is uncertain whether Peter understands at this point the full significance of this title as it applies to Jesus. He is respectful and asks Jesus’ permission (εἰ θέλεις) to build tents for him, Moses, and Elijah.⁷⁴

It is unclear what Peter means by καλὸν ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς ὧδε εἶναι.⁷⁵ Does he mean that it is good that the disciples are privileged to experience this event there, or does he mean that it is good that they are there so they can be of some assistance to Jesus, Moses and Elijah?⁷⁶ Judging by his interruption, Peter does not seem to be in

⁶⁸ Luke mentions that Moses and Elijah were speaking with Jesus about his departure to Jerusalem. Matthew does not mention this in his Gospel.

⁶⁹ Participle of attendant circumstance.

⁷⁰ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 409.

⁷¹ Louw and Nida, 393.

⁷² Carson, “Matthew,” 437.

⁷³ Gibbs, *Matthew*, 857, writes that “Matthew narrates that the apostle then *interrupts!*” (italics and exclamation point his), emphasizing the incomprehensibility that Peter would do such a thing when he sees Jesus in glory and Moses and Elijah speaking with him. Examples of his impetuosity include Mt 16:22 and 26:33.

⁷⁴ Nolland, *Matthew*, 702; France, *Matthew*, 649

⁷⁵ καλὸν is placed in front for emphasis. We understand ἡμᾶς to refer to the disciples and Peter speaking on behalf of the other two, since in the next sentence, he offers to make tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

⁷⁶ France, *Matthew*, 649.

awe of what he is witnessing at the moment, particularly of the fact that Jesus is bathed in light. His offer to make them tents perhaps reflects this lack of awareness, and perhaps shows either his desire to be hospitable to them⁷⁷ or to prolong their stay on the mountain.⁷⁸ It is uncertain how Peter recognizes Moses and Elijah.

There has been some discussion regarding the σκηναί (“a place of shelter, freq. of temporary quarters in contrast to fixed abodes of solid construction, *tent, hut*” or “transcendent celestial tent, *tent, dwelling*”⁷⁹) that Peter proposes to build for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, since its use in several OT contexts points to different meanings. In Ex 25:9, σκηνή is used to denote the tabernacle of God used in the wilderness. In Ex 33:7-11, it is also used of the tabernacle where Moses spoke with God face to face. However, allusion to this tabernacle of God fails because Peter proposes to build three, not one, tents.⁸⁰ The suggestion that Peter wants to build the tents to commemorate the communion between heaven and earth, in the fashion similar to Moses speaking with God in the tabernacle, is unpersuasive for the same reason.⁸¹ Likewise, the proposal that Peter wants to build the tents after seeing the Christophany, similar to Israel building the tabernacle after Moses saw the Theophany on Mount Sinai, is not convincing.⁸²

One noteworthy argument is that Peter’s proposal alludes to the Feast of Tabernacles,⁸³ when people built σκηναί. The Feast of Tabernacles had eschatological connotations. Thus, it is argued that Peter’s proposal emphasized the eschatological aspect of the transfiguration, either in recognition of the imminent dawning of the messianic age⁸⁴ or in thinking of the partial fulfillment of the Feast.⁸⁵ However, this is unlikely because of Peter’s lack of full awareness of the transfiguration event and his impetuosity, as discussed above. Since a σκηνή was a dwelling place that was moved from place to place,⁸⁶ Peter’s proposal may merely be to build a temporary dwelling place on the mountain for the heavenly guests, motivated by hospitality or to prolong their stay.

Commentators have suggested that, by wishing to build a tent each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, Peter perhaps places Jesus on the same level as Moses and

⁷⁷ Turner, *Matthew*, 417; Nolland, *Matthew*, 703.

⁷⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 263-264.

⁷⁹ BDAG, 928; Louw and Nida define σκηνή as either a portable dwelling (p. 82) or the tabernacle tent as a place of worship (p. 83).

⁸⁰ This is noted by Osborne, *Matthew*, 647; Nolland, *Matthew*, 702.

⁸¹ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 493; see Nolland, *Matthew*, 702, and Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 700, who refute this view.

⁸² Moses, *Transfiguration*, 132.

⁸³ Donaldson, *Mountain*, 144-146, discusses this interpretation and its origin in some detail.

⁸⁴ Carson, “Matthew,” 438

⁸⁵ Nolland, *Matthew*, 703.

⁸⁶ Louw and Nida, 82.

Elijah.⁸⁷ This is possible, though unlikely, since Peter addresses him as “Lord.” However, given that Peter did not seem to be awed by Jesus’ transfiguration and is a constant companion of Jesus, it may be more likely that the presence of Moses and Elijah as heavenly visitors prompted Peter’s proposal. This finds some support in Mt 17:5, where the heavenly voice directs Peter and the disciples’ attention back to Jesus.

4. The Cloud and Voice (17:5): ἔτι αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος ἰδοὺ νεφέλη φωτεινὴ ἐπεσκίασεν αὐτούς, καὶ ἰδοὺ φωνὴ ἐκ τῆς νεφέλης λέγουσα· οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα· ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ. [While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud covered them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud saying, “This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am pleased⁸⁸. Listen to him.”]

While Peter is still speaking (ἔτι αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος), the bright cloud comes and interrupts him. Apparently, what Peter is saying is not important enough to allow him to finish what he is saying. Matthew does not record that Peter does not know what he is saying, as Mark and Luke do, leading some commentators to think that Matthew wishes to portray Peter in a better light.⁸⁹ However, the heavenly interruption while Peter is still speaking points to the same idea as in Mark and Luke – that Peter’s proposal was not to be taken seriously. It may be that Peter’s proposal resulted from viewing this event from a human perspective, requiring immediate heavenly intervention.⁹⁰ Peter and the disciples need divine interpretation and help to understand the transfiguration.⁹¹ Just as in Mt 16:17 God revealed to Peter that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of the living God, so now God the Father needs to direct the disciple’s attention fully to Jesus and identify him to the disciples.

The word ἰδοὺ comes in quick succession twice, drawing attention to the bright cloud and then to the voice coming out of the cloud. Only Matthew has the word “bright” to describe the cloud. The words ἰδοὺ and “bright” add an apocalyptic flavor to the event. The bright cloud recalls the cloud that covered Mount Sinai and the theophany Moses experienced, as well as the Shekinah glory of the cloud that covered the tent of meeting. In effect, God’s presence is represented by the cloud.⁹² It may be that the effect of the bright cloud covering Jesus while he is in the transfigured, shining state, with the voice directing attention to Jesus, is to reveal a Christophany

⁸⁷ Gibbs, *Matthew*, 857; Turner, *Matthew*, 417, notes that Peter’s plan blurred the uniqueness of Jesus as Son of God; France, *Matthew*, 649; Liefeld, “Motifs,” 174, 175.

⁸⁸ The aorist verb εὐδόκησα is most likely a timeless aorist. See Porter, *Idioms*, 39.

⁸⁹ Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 399, who implies that Mark is blaming Peter; Witherington, *Matthew*, 326; Lee, *Transfiguration*, 93.

⁹⁰ Garland, *Matthew*, 182

⁹¹ Hare, *Matthew*, 199.

⁹² Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 1, ed. Daniel Harrington (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 254. Ref. Ex 16:10; 19:9; 24:15-16; 33:9.

and Jesus' divinity, equating the brightness of the cloud, symbolizing God's presence, with the shining state of Jesus.

The verb ἐπισκιάζω may mean "to cast a shadow upon," but in this case, it probably means "to cover" rather than to overshadow.⁹³ The cloud covers Jesus, Moses, and Elijah (αὐτούς) rather than the disciples since the voice comes out of the cloud (ἐκ τῆς νεφέλης) and is directed to the disciples.⁹⁴

The voice out of the cloud is the voice of God, and it identifies Jesus as the Son of God. Matthew 17:5 points to a number of similarities between Jesus' transfiguration and his baptism. It is notable that what the voice says at Jesus' transfiguration exactly matches what the voice says at Jesus' baptism (Mt 3:17), with the exception of ἐκ τῆς νεφέλης and ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν. The use of ἰδοὺ in Matthew 17:5, absent in Mark and Luke, to introduce the voice occurs also in Mt 3:17. In addition, at both Jesus' transfiguration and his baptism, Jesus is the passive participant, and after his transfiguration and baptism, the voice speaks. Thus, it would seem that Mt 17:5 is to be understood in light of Mt 3:17. We will therefore need to briefly discuss Mt 3:15-17 in the context of Jesus' baptism before exploring the meaning of Mt 17:5.

At Jesus' baptism, Jesus comes to John the Baptist and exhorts John to baptize him, to "fulfill all righteousness." Though there are different interpretations of this phrase, perhaps it is best understood as obedience to God's will.⁹⁵ This will of God includes that he be baptized to identify with the people in his work of salvation and that he carry out this task given to him as the Suffering Servant of God, one who suffers and dies on the cross.⁹⁶ In obedience to God, and to fulfill all righteousness, Jesus is baptized.

After the Spirit comes down upon Jesus (3:16), a voice out of the heavens says, "οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα," which is repeated exactly in Mt 17:5. The "voice from heaven" may be linked with the Hebrew idea of *bath qol* ("daughter of a voice") in the Second Temple Judaism period, which was in common use and was thought to be the only means of divine revelation once the prophetic gifts had ceased, a cessation which was associated with the decline of OT prophecy.⁹⁷ An important distinction between *bath qol* and the voice from heaven in the NT, however, is that the *bath qol* was conceived to be an echo of God's voice,

⁹³ Louw and Nida, 177.

⁹⁴ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 701; Tàrrech, "Glory," 168.

⁹⁵ Carson, *Matthew*, 136; Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 178; France, *Matthew*, 119; Turner, *Matthew*, 119.

⁹⁶ Carson, *Matthew*, 136; Witherington, *Matthew*, 85-86; France, *Matthew*, 120; Osborne, *Matthew*, 123-123.

⁹⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 82; J.R. Van Pelt, "Bath Kol," in *International Standard Biblical Encyclopedia, Volume One, A-D*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 439.

whereas in the NT, the voice from heaven is the direct voice of God.⁹⁸ From a NT Jewish perspective, the voice from heaven revealed two things: that God had broken his silence and was again actively speaking to his people, and that, in the context of Jesus' baptism, He was announcing the coming of the messianic age in Jesus his Son.⁹⁹

The voice gives approval of Jesus with words which scholars have identified as a combination of Isa 42:1, and possibly Ps 2:7, Gen 22:2, or Ex 4:22-23. Matthew does not present the words as a direct quote from these possible OT verses,¹⁰⁰ so care must be taken in seeking specific textual support for every word.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, it is likely that the words ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα reflects Isa 42:1. This is confirmed in Mt 3:16, where the Spirit descends on Jesus.¹⁰² In this case, the words from Isa 42:1 identify Jesus as the Servant of God, particularly the Suffering Servant, since Isa 42:1-4 is one of the four passages in Isaiah, the others being 49:1-6, 50:4-9, and 52:13-53:12, that are designated the "Servant Songs," which together give the vision of the "Servant of Yahweh," or the "Suffering Servant."¹⁰³

Though there is some similarity in the language between Mt 3:17 and Gen 22:2, the use of "son," which does not appear in Isa 42:1-4, is unlikely due to any allusion to Gen 22:2 and the binding of Isaac (the Aqedah) for several reasons. Matthew does not seem to relate ἀγαπητός to the binding of Isaac elsewhere in the Gospel.¹⁰⁴ The link to Gen 22:2 is difficult to sustain since the Aqedah seems to be a later Jewish doctrine developed after AD 70.¹⁰⁵ France himself, who supports this proposal, admits that it is unlikely that Matthew's readers would notice the Genesis echo and then think that God was offering up his son as Abraham did.¹⁰⁶ In any case, it is unlikely that there is any allusion to Gen 22:2 at the baptism, since Jesus' baptism is the setting for the commissioning of Jesus at the start of his ministry rather than for his death on the cross. The allusion to Ex 4:22-23 is even less likely since the verbal parallels are not impressive (where πρωτότοκος is used instead of ἀγαπητός), even if one accepts Jesus as taking on the status of Israel as "God's firstborn son."¹⁰⁷

⁹⁸ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 335-336; Turner, *Matthew*, 120; Van Pelt, "Bath Kol," 439.

⁹⁹ Carson, *Matthew*, 137; Turner, *Matthew*, 120;

¹⁰⁰ The question of which Greek OT texts Matthew may have used, in comparison with the MT, will not be discussed here. Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary On the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, in Three Volumes*, Vol. 1, *Commentary on Matthew I-XVII* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 336-339, discuss it in some detail.

¹⁰¹ France, *Matthew*, 123.

¹⁰² France, *Matthew*, 123;

¹⁰³ R.T. France, "Servant of Yahweh," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 744-745.

¹⁰⁴ Donaldson, *Mountain*, 144, in relation to Mt 17:5.

¹⁰⁵ See Carson, "Matthew," 439, citing P.R. Davies and B.D. Chilton, "The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History," in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978): 514-546.

¹⁰⁶ France, *Matthew*, 123.

¹⁰⁷ France, *Matthew*, 123, fn. 27.

Thus, it is most likely that the “son” in 3:17 alludes to Ps 2:7. However, though some commentators see an allusion to the coronation of the Davidic Messianic king in Jesus’ baptism – since Ps 2:7 is a coronation psalm, and thus the baptism and voice points to Jesus as a Davidic Messiah¹⁰⁸ – there are reasons to think otherwise, at least if one conceives of the Davidic Messiah here as a political Messiah. First, Matthew does not quote all of Ps 2:7. The full verse, “You are my son, today I have begotten you” would have been more suitable to indicate an installation into the messianic office.¹⁰⁹ Second, it is uncertain whether Ps 2 had any messianic connotation in pre-Christian Second Temple Judaism,¹¹⁰ though it is clear that Matthew does associate Jesus as the son of David (Mt 1:1). More importantly, however, is that a Davidic messiah of the political kind is not the type of messiah that Jesus claimed to be. Indeed, in his ministry, he avoided the use of the title “Messiah” to prevent any misunderstanding that he was a political Messiah, which was the expectation of the people.

That this is so can be seen in at least two passages in Matthew. In Mt 16:16, in reply to Jesus’ question of who the people say that the Son of Man is (16:13), Peter replies that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. In 16:17, Jesus answers by saying that Peter is blessed because the Father has revealed this to him. Jesus’ reply affirms that Peter answered his question by identifying the Messiah in terms of the Son of God and not of King David. Through revelation from God, Peter in some sense knows that Jesus fulfills the OT messianic hope, “*even though it is not in terms of a conquering king* (italics original). Peter does not yet understand what Jesus’ Messiahship means, but he has caught a glimmering of it.”¹¹¹

In Mt 26:64, when the high priest charged Jesus to answer whether he was the Messiah, the Son of God (Mt 26:63, par Mk 14:61), it is unlikely that the title meant the same to him as it did to Peter. Perhaps, the high priest was thinking in terms of political power corresponding to the understanding of the term “Messiah” prevalent in Jewish thought at that time.¹¹² In any case, whatever the high priest meant by the titles Messiah and Son of God, Jesus answers in Mt 26:64 with a qualified affirmative, and unambiguously refers to Ps 110:1 and Daniel 7:13 to identify himself as the Messiah, but redefining the concept of Messiah in terms of a glorious, exalted Son of Man, a title which he prefers over “Messiah.”¹¹³ Thus, Jesus reinterprets the Messiah

¹⁰⁸ For example, Carson, “Matthew,” 138; Witherington, *Matthew*, 85, who states that the baptism can be argued to be a coronation scene, implying Jesus is the Davidic and kingly Messiah; Osborne, *Matthew*, 125.

¹⁰⁹ George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, Pub., 1993), 162.

¹¹⁰ Carson, “Matthew,” 138; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 339.

¹¹¹ Ladd, *Theology*, 140.

¹¹² France, *Matthew*, 1026, 1027.

¹¹³ Turner, *Matthew*, 640; France, *Matthew*, 1027.

in terms of the Son of Man, not in terms of the Davidic king.¹¹⁴

In Mt 3:17, therefore, the words “my son,” taken from Ps 2:7, does not connote the political, Davidic Messiah. Rather, by conflating the first part of Ps 2:7 with Isa 42:1, with the “Servant” of Isa 42:1 paralleling the “Son” of Ps 2:7,¹¹⁵ the voice from heaven is identifying Jesus as the Son of God who is the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. It would therefore seem that any hint of a Davidic Messiah would be in terms of a suffering Messiah. Thus, the reference to Isa 42:1 suggests that the Messianic office is to be carried out in terms of the Servant of Yahweh.¹¹⁶ In the context of Jesus’ fulfilling “all righteousness,” his baptism, his reception of the Spirit, and the words uttered by the voice from heaven all identify Jesus as the Son of God who is obedient to God’s will and who accepts his mission of the Suffering Servant of God. His baptism signals his desire to identify with (Is 53:12) and to suffer for (Is 53:11) his people to bring salvation to them.¹¹⁷ The importance of the obedience of Jesus as God’s Son to God’s will and his chosen path of suffering and death is then tested in the temptation narrative that follows immediately after his baptism.¹¹⁸

Because of the exact words used in Mt 3:17 and Mt 17:5, the identification of Jesus in Mt 3:17 applies to Jesus just as well in Mt 17:5. At the transfiguration, the voice out of the cloud confirms Jesus as the obedient Son of God who will continue on the path of suffering and death on the cross as the Servant of Yahweh, demonstrated in 16:21 (δεῖ) and in his rebuke in 16:23 of Peter, who becomes a tool of Satan.¹¹⁹ The transfiguration and the voice then reveal and reconfirm what God revealed to Peter in Mt 16:13, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

A line of argument based on the words οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱός μου sees the transfiguration narrative as a messianic enthronement, using 2 Sam 7:14 and Ps 2:7 as support.¹²⁰ If the Messianic enthronement is seen as the enthronement of a political Messiah from the line of King David, then this does not find support in the context. Rather, as discussed above, Jesus redefines the Messiah in terms of the Son of Man and as the Servant of Yahweh. The transfiguration is framed within the context of the Messiah as the suffering Son of Man (Mt 16:13; 17:12), not that of a political, Davidic Messiah.¹²¹ Matthew only explicitly connects a throne with God (Mt 5:34;

¹¹⁴ Ladd, *Theology*, 141.

¹¹⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 123, who says that the “Servant” of Isa 42:1 dovetails with the “Son” of Ps 2:7.

¹¹⁶ Ladd, *Theology*, 164.

¹¹⁷ France, *Matthew*, 120-121.

¹¹⁸ Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 180.

¹¹⁹ Lee, *Transfiguration*, 101.

¹²⁰ See the argument in Donaldson, *Mountain*, 147, who favors this interpretation among three and interprets the transfiguration in terms of Ps 2 and the Zion motif. For another view of enthronement, see Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 396.

¹²¹ Lee, *Transfiguration*, 98, and Moses, *Transfiguration*, 145, are correct to deny any idea of Jesus’ enthronement in the transfiguration narrative, though they do so on different grounds.

23:22) and with the Son of Man (Mt 19:28; 25:31).

In Mt 17:5, there are the additional words ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ which are not uttered in Mt 3:17. Most scholars see this as an allusion to Deuteronomy 18:15, 18 and the prophet who is like Moses and who would come in the last days.¹²² Appearing here in Mt 17:5 and with reference to Jesus, the words ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ thus point to Jesus as the eschatological prophet spoken of by Moses.¹²³ In the context of Deut 18:15, 18, Moses commands the Israelites not to listen to spiritists and diviners (Deut 18:9-14). The Lord would raise up for Israel a prophet like Moses whom they were to listen to and who would speak the words of God to them, so that they would not have to hear directly from God, as they requested (Deut 18:15-18). Thus, at the transfiguration, the voice tells the disciples that they are to listen to Jesus as the one who speaks the words of God. Jesus is the mediator between man and God (Mt 11:27). With these words, God brings the disciples' focus on Jesus who, as the Son of God and Servant of Yahweh, is the one whom the disciples are to listen to and obey.

Some commentators again note that the words ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ show the superiority of Jesus over Moses and Elijah (cf. v. 4).¹²⁴ While this is true in and of itself, there does not seem to be that kind of comparison being made between Jesus on the one hand, and Moses and Elijah on the other, in the context. The words point to Jesus' authority. Had there been an intent to emphasize Jesus' superiority over Moses and Elijah, the order of the words would likely have been αὐτοῦ ἀκούετε, with the emphasis on αὐτοῦ (Jesus), rather than the given ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ.

The words ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ point to Jesus as one having unique authority or confirm his role as teacher.¹²⁵ There is the question of what the words ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ refer to. It may refer to Jesus' general teachings, such as the ethical teachings on the Sermon Mount (esp. Mt 7:24, 29). However, given the immediate context of the transfiguration and the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the command probably refers to Mt 16:24-27. Two reasons can be given. First, the presence of Moses and Elijah gives an eschatological context to the command. The words allude to the Moses-like prophet who would come in the last days, who is Jesus. In addition, Elijah is the one who would come to restore all things before the Day of the Lord. This is also fulfilled in Jesus, interpreting Elijah typologically (cf. Mal 4:5; Mt 17:11-12). Thus, the command to obey Jesus is given in the eschatological context of Jesus' coming as the end-time prophet and as the Lord who comes in the Day of the Lord. This eschatological orientation can be seen in Jesus' teaching in Mt 16:24-27, where he exhorts the disciples to follow him at the cost of suffering because of the judgment

¹²² For example, Turner, *Matthew*, 418; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 264; Carson, *Matthew*, 438.

¹²³ Carson, "Matthew," 438; Turner, *Matthew*, 418.

¹²⁴ Carson, "Matthew," 438; Hare, *Matthew*, 200.

¹²⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 494; Hare, *Matthew*, 200.

that would come when the Son of Man comes at the parousia.

Second, the command to listen to Jesus is a call to follow him, demonstrated by obeying him. The transfiguration reveals Jesus as the Son of God taking up the task of the Suffering Servant in obedience to God at the cost of his life. He will obey God's will all the way to the cross. In Mt 16:21-24, Jesus calls on those who would follow him to do likewise and take up the cross. In other words, just as Jesus obeyed God and followed him to the cross for the salvation of the world, so the voice commands the disciples to listen to Jesus in obedience to him and to follow him for the salvation of the soul. Thus, the command ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ is a call to discipleship, reflecting Mt 16:24-27.

5. The Disciples Respond in Fear (17:6): καὶ ἀκούσαντες οἱ μαθηταὶ ἔπεσαν ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτῶν καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα. [And when the disciples heard, they fell down on their faces and were greatly afraid.]

Only Matthew includes verses 6 and 7 and connects the disciples' fear to the voice and its message. In Mark the fear is attributed to the transfiguration (Mk 9:6), and in Luke, to the presence of the cloud (Lk 9:34).

There is a stark contrast in the disciples' reactions to Jesus' transfiguration and to the voice. Whereas they do not seem to react with any fear in seeing Jesus' transfiguration at first, only when they hear the voice and what it says do they become greatly afraid. The voice was necessary to explain to the disciples the meaning of the transfiguration and to reveal Jesus as the Son of God, confirming what God revealed to Peter in Mt 16: 16. Thus, verse 5 is rightly seen to be the center of the transfiguration narrative, since it interprets the transfiguration to reveal Jesus as the Son of God.¹²⁶ In addition to this, the voice, its message, and its function show that the divine word is important in Matthew.¹²⁷

Though the verb φοβέομαι may have the meaning of "worship,"¹²⁸ and there may be an indication that the disciples worshipped with their faces to the ground, the adjective σφόδρα and verse 7 seem to emphasize that the disciples were greatly afraid rather than that they were worshipping when they fell on the ground (cf. Mt 14:21).¹²⁹ The phrase ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα is also used in Mt 27:54, where there is an emphasis on fear rather than worship because of the supernatural events.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 874; Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 394.

¹²⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 703, states that the divine word is "awesome," that is, full of awe.

¹²⁸ Louw and Nida, 540.

¹²⁹ Nolland, *Matthew*, 704; Osborne, *Matthew*, 648; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 494, thinks the disciples reacted partly in fear and partly in worship. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 264, though recognizing the presence of terror, sees the disciples' posture as suggesting worship.

¹³⁰ Nolland, *Matthew*, 704-705.

Fear is a fundamental reaction to the presence of God. The disciples' fear may link to Mt 17:5 and its allusion to Deut 18:15, 18, which itself refers to the fear experienced by Israel at hearing God's voice in Ex 20:18-21.¹³¹ The disciples are thus pictured as experiencing the presence of God, symbolized by the bright cloud and expressed in the voice they heard. The cloud, which has enveloped Jesus, and the voice together relate the Father closely with the Son: the Son, who himself shines with light, is at the same time covered in the glory of the Father (cf. Mt 16:27). The disciples thus rightly express the fear that is due the Father and the Son.

6. Jesus Responds with Comfort (17:7-8): 7 καὶ προσῆλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἀψάμενος αὐτῶν εἶπεν· ἐγέρθητε καὶ μὴ φοβεῖσθε. 8 ἐπάραντες δὲ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν οὐδένα εἶδον εἰ μὴ αὐτὸν Ἰησοῦν μόνον. [And Jesus went to them and touched¹³² them and said, "Get up and do not be afraid. When they opened their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself, alone.]

Jesus comes to the disciples only twice in Matthew's Gospel, here in Mt 17:7 and after his resurrection in Mt 28:18, at the commissioning. In the contexts of both verses, Jesus is in an exalted state,¹³³ the disciples are in contact with him in that state,¹³⁴ Jesus has been given authority, and the disciples are called to obey him. This parallel probably makes Jesus' transfiguration a foreshadow of his resurrection.¹³⁵

Jesus' touch elsewhere in Matthew is uniquely associated with healing (Mt 8:3, 15; 9:20, 21, 29; 14:36; 20:34). In Mt 17:7, Jesus touches the disciples to relieve their fear, thereby showing his compassion and gentleness. Jesus' touch and show of compassion are likely to demonstrate his role as the Servant of Yahweh. Isaiah 42:1-4, alluded to by the voice, and which Matthew quotes in full in Mt 12:18, says of the Servant that he will not break a battered reed nor extinguish a smoldering wick. Matthew also quotes Isa 53:4 to describe Jesus in the context of his many healings (Mt 8:17). Thus, Jesus as Son of God in the role of the Servant of Yahweh is reiterated in verse 7.

An element of apocalyptic imagery is also present in verses 6-7. The presentation of the disciples on the ground in fear and Jesus' coming to them and touching them recalls Dan 8:17-18 and 10:9-12.¹³⁶ This adds to the apocalyptic features of the narrative already discussed.

Nevertheless, there is still an element of reality to Jesus' touch and words.

¹³¹ Nolland, *Matthew*, 704.

¹³² Participle of attendant circumstance.

¹³³ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 703; Osborne, *Matthew*, 648.

¹³⁴ France, *Matthew*, 651.

¹³⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 265.

¹³⁶ Harrington, *Matthew*, 255;

Hagner observes that the touch of Jesus may have the purpose of showing the disciples that they did indeed see Jesus transfigured and talking with Moses and Elijah.¹³⁷ However, it is actually the words, particularly *μὴ φοβεῖσθε*, that show the disciples that their vision of the transfigured Jesus was not an illusion.

The words *αὐτὸν Ἰησοῦν μόνον* describe what the disciples see when they looked up. The word *αὐτόν* stresses that it was Jesus that the disciples saw, not Moses nor Elijah, and the word *μόνον* points out that Jesus is alone. Moses and Elijah are gone; Jesus remains as one who is the Son of God, whom they are to pay attention to and listen to.

7. Conclusion (17: 9): *Καὶ καταβαινόντων αὐτῶν ἐκ τοῦ ὄρους ἐνετείλατο αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγων· μηδενὶ εἴπητε τὸ ὄραμα ἕως οὗ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγερθῆ.* [And while they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.]

Matthew uses *ὄραμα* in a direct quote by Jesus, instead of Mark’s *ἃ εἶδον* in an indirect discourse, to describe what the disciples saw. There is some question as to whether what the disciples saw was real, imagined, or an apocalyptic vision.¹³⁸ The word *ὄραμα* can mean either “that which is seen – something seen, sight”¹³⁹ or “an event in which something appears vividly and credibly to the mind, although not actually present, but implying the influence of some divine or supernatural power or agency”¹⁴⁰

In the Synoptic Gospels, the word only appears once, in Matthew. It appears elsewhere in the rest of the NT only in Acts, where it occurs multiple times (Acts 7:13; 9:10, 12; 10:3, 17, 19; 12:9; 16:9, 10; 18:9) and where the vision may appear to be an unreal event even though it is actually real (Acts 7:31), but also where it acts as guidance requiring obedience even though it may occur in a trance (Acts 11:5) or in a dream (Acts 16:9). In Mt 17:9, the vision which Jesus speaks of seems to be real and not imagined, since Jesus acknowledged the disciples’ fear, as discussed above. There may be also an actual physical manifestation of Jesus’ transfiguration and the appearance of Moses and Elijah. The wording of verses 2 and 3 suggest this. Thus, Matthew’s choice to use *ὄραμα* in a direct quote instead of Mark’s *ἃ εἶδον* suggests a motivation.

¹³⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 495.

¹³⁸ This question is raised by Osborne, *Matthew*, 649; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 498; and Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 713.

¹³⁹ Louw and Nida, 277.

¹⁴⁰ Louw and Nida, 445.

The word ὄραμα also occurs in the LXX, most often in Daniel. Noteworthy is that the word ὄραμα and its synonym ὄρασις occurs in Dan 8:17-18 and 10:9-12, a passage which Mt 17:6-7 recalls, as mentioned. This suggests that there was a probably a conscious choice to link Mt 17:6-7 to Dan 8:17-18 and 10:9-12, thereby, giving the transfiguration an element of apocalyptic imagery.¹⁴¹

Jesus' command for secrecy is the fifth one in Matthew, the others occurring in Mt 8:4, 9:30, 12:16, and 16:20. The first three commands are given within the context of healing, while the last is related to Jesus' identity as the Messiah. The secrecy enjoined in Mt 17:9 is thus associated with the one given in 16:20, which occurs as the immediate context for 17:9.

Two primary reasons may be given for the command to secrecy. First, since people conceived of the Messiah as a political king, Jesus may have wanted to prevent that misunderstanding of the transfiguration. A report of Jesus in an exalted state would have fueled that misconception, and impeded his attempt to teach the disciples and others that he as the Messiah is one who must suffer and die before being raised and exalted.¹⁴² The second reason is that the significance of the transfiguration would only be completely understood after the resurrection.¹⁴³ Once the three disciples see Jesus in his resurrection body, they would be reminded of the transfiguration and then be able to tell the other disciples about the transfiguration with understanding. Thus, in the immediate context, the transfiguration is a preview or foreshadow of Jesus' resurrection.¹⁴⁴ They would also finally understand that the Messiah is one who had to suffer and die first before being resurrected (16:21), just as Jesus had taught them. However, the glory Jesus gave as a preview to the three disciples shows that it is his even before the resurrection.¹⁴⁵

V. Summary

The transfiguration reveals Jesus as the Son of God who is the Messiah, who is obedient to the will of God, and who takes on the role of the Suffering Servant to accomplish redemption for Israel and the world. Jesus is transfigured, shining forth light fitting for one who is a heavenly being and who is divine: Moses and Elijah appear in this Christophany, as they did in the theophany on Mount Sinai, attesting to Jesus' divinity. Their appearance also adds eschatological significance to the transfiguration at a time when Jesus has determined to go on to Jerusalem to effect a new covenant with Israel and with the world.

¹⁴¹ Harrington, *Matthew*, 255; Nolland, *Matthew*, 705.

¹⁴² Carson, "Matthew," 440; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 498; France, *Matthew*, 652.

¹⁴³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 265; Carson, "Matthew," 440; France, *Matthew*, 652.

¹⁴⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 498.

¹⁴⁵ Carson, "Matthew," 440.

Peter's reaction and words to Jesus' transfiguration and the appearance of Moses and Elijah are wholly inadequate. The bright cloud, indicating the presence of God, appears in order to interrupt what he is saying and to bring his attention to Jesus. The voice identifies Jesus as the Son of the Living God in words identical to those spoken at Jesus' baptism: He is the Messiah, not of the political sort, but as the Suffering Servant of God. These words reconfirm what God revealed to Peter when Jesus asked him who the Son of Man is – the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. The command to listen to Jesus after this reconfirmation calls for the disciples to obey Jesus in discipleship, just as after God's revelation to Peter, Jesus calls them to discipleship.

When the voice speaks, the disciples become greatly terrified, befitting the reaction due to an encounter with God. Jesus' touch and words of comfort to them reveal him in the role of the Servant of Yahweh, implied in the words spoken by the voice from the cloud. When the disciples look up, they see only Jesus himself, indicating that Jesus is the one whom they are to pay attention to. Jesus' admonition that they tell no one what they have seen until his resurrection is to prevent misunderstanding of the character of the Messiah, and because only after the resurrection can the disciples understand the transfiguration more fully.

The transfiguration narrative is filled with apocalyptic/eschatological allusions. This links Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, and the Suffering Servant of God with the Son of Man, presenting him in heavenly glory as well as one who will bring salvation and judgment. The call to discipleship is given in this context. Christology, soteriology, eschatology, and discipleship are thus brought together in the transfiguration narrative and its immediate context.

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