

The Transfiguration

Mark 9.2-9; Matt 17.1-9; Luke 9.28-36

The transfiguration comes at the same point in the overall narrative in all three Synoptic Gospels. It is directly preceded by Jesus' statement that some of those standing beside him would live see God's Kingdom (Mark 9.1; Matt 16.28; Luke 9.27; the exact wording of the saying varies). The placement of this saying just before the transfiguration suggests that the latter is at least a partial fulfilment of the former. In Mark and Matthew, the transfiguration is followed by the discussion as to why Elijah must come first (Mark 9.11-13; Matt 17.10-13), which Luke omits, proceeding directly to the healing of a possessed boy (Luke 9.37-43; cf. Mark 9.14-29; Matt 17.14-21).

The Shared Story

Across the Synoptics, the transfiguration accounts give a common story.

- Jesus takes Peter, James and John to a high mountain;
- he is transfigured before their eyes;
- his garment becomes white;
- Moses and Elijah appear and talk with him;
- Peter offers to make three booths, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah;
- a cloud overshadows them;
- a voice from the clouds identifies Jesus as God's Son and tells those present to 'listen to him';
- Jesus is seen alone.

The shared story recalls the ascent of Moses to meet with God in Exodus 24. Like the heavenly declaration at Jesus' baptism, the words uttered by the voice from the cloud recalls Ps 2.7. The phrase, *listen to him*, brings to mind Deut 18.15, referring to the prophet like Moses. The allusion identifies Jesus as that figure.

John does not record the transfiguration probably because for him Jesus' glory is evident throughout his earthly ministry (1.14) and revealed especially in his death (7.39; 12.16). Yet, John has a partial parallel to the story in John 12.27-33, where in response to Jesus' prayer, *Father, glorify your name*, a voice calls out from heaven, *I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again*.

The story is told in all three Synoptic Gospels with relatively little variation. What follows picks up small distinguishing features.



Mark

Mark's comment, such as no one on earth could bleach them (v. 3), is a vivid detail typical of this Gospel writer. The comment brings out the heavenly quality of Jesus' bright white clothing.

Mark mentions Elijah before Moses (v. 4); both Matthew and Luke refer to Moses and Elijah in their chronological order. The prioritising of Elijah by Mark may be due to the fact that Elijah is the subject of the conversation that follows the transfiguration.

In Mark, Jesus' forbidding of Peter, James and John to disclose what they have witnessed until after his resurrection from the dead leaves the disciples questioning what this rising from the dead could mean (v. 10). The misapprehension of the disciples is a recurring theme in Mark's Gospel.

Matthew

Matthew's remark, his face shone like the sun (v. 2), recalls Exod 34.29, which says that Moses' face *shone because he had been talking with God*. A Jewish tradition, known in the first century, compares Moses' glowing face to the sun. Matthew is keen to present Jesus as a Moses, and often draws parallels between the two (see further, *Parallel Lives*, p. 73). Matthew's reference to the sun-like shining face of Jesus also recalls the statement earlier in his Gospel that *the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father*, a saying found only in Matthew (13.43).

Peter's offer to build three dwellings (or booths) is prefaced in Matthew by if you wish (v. 4), a note of deference that slightly compensates for the foolishness of his proposition. In Matthew, Peter speaks for himself, I will make (v. 4).

Only in Matthew do the disciples fall to the ground (v. 6). Likewise, only in Matthew does Jesus approach to the disciples and say, "Get up and do not be afraid" (v. 7).

Luke

Luke has about eight days after (v. 28), which is less precise than the time reference in the other two accounts. This evangelist often has 'about' when giving a number (e.g. 3.23; 8.42). Luke alone indicates that Jesus and the three disciples go to the mountain specifically to pray (v. 28), reflecting the writer's special interest in prayer.

Whereas the other two Gospel writers speak of Jesus being transfigured, Luke says that the appearance of his face changed (v. 29), which fits with his pattern of portraying the supernatural in objective terms.

Luke alone mentions the subject of the conversation between Jesus and the patriarchs: the departure (v. 31), which Jesus is soon to accomplish at Jerusalem. Luke's word for



departure (v. 31) is *exodus*. This was as an established idiom for death, but the word plainly evokes the Exodus from Egypt. Luke thus implicitly draws a parallel between the redemptive deliverance of Israel and the deliverance wrought by Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension (all three Christological events are probably in view).

Only Luke tells us that Peter and the others *weighed down with sleep* (v. 32). Peter's sleepiness helps to accounts for his foolish proposal. Luke also indicates that it is just as Moses and Elijah are leaving that Peter makes his proposal (v. 33), which might suggest that it is motivated by a desire to prolong the event.

In Luke, the voice from the cloud refers to Jesus as *my chosen* (v. 35). This is an allusion to Isa 42.1 (*Here is my servant...my chosen*); it distinguishes Jesus as the Servant of the Lord.

Summary

Relatively small details distinguish the three accounts of the transfiguration from each other, but the differences reflect special interests of the evangelists: Mark's stress on the disciples' lack of understanding; Matthew's interest in Jesus' Moses-like qualities; Luke's portrayal of Jesus as a man of prayer.

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