

17:1–13 THE TRANSFIGURATION

OVERVIEW: Peter, James and John accompany Jesus up the mount of transfiguration because of their close and loving relation to him (CHRYSOSTOM). In his transfiguration Jesus is beheld as truly in the form of God while remaining no less truly human (ORIGEN). His body had become spiritual, so that even his garments were transformed (JEROME). Jesus shone as the sun, indicating that he is the light that illuminates everyone who comes into this world (AUGUSTINE), that he may be manifested to the children of light, who have put off the works of darkness and become the sons of day (ORIGEN). By seeking three tabernacles Peter appeared to be comparing incommensurably the two servants with the one Lord (JEROME). The Lord did not reply, for Peter's comparison was inappropriate, not wicked (LEO THE GREAT). The shining cloud gives shade to the righteous and at the same time protects them and gives them light (ORIGEN). The Son is distinguished from his servants, Moses and Elijah. They, along with you, are to prepare a tabernacle for the Lord in the inner sanctum of their heart (JEROME). The Father reveals the Son when the ringing voice from heaven bursts forth loudly, and yet one must not think that the voice of God is necessarily audible (APOLLINARIS). It says, "Listen to him. By his preaching I am manifest. By his humility I am glorified" (LEO THE GREAT). Why did they fall on their faces in awe? Because there was solitude, the height of the mountain, great quietness, a transfiguration full of awe, a pure light and a cloud stretched out (CHRYSOSTOM, CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA). Human weakness is not strong enough to bear the sight of such great glory but trembles with its whole heart and body and falls to earth (JEROME).

John the Baptist was forerunner of the first advent. He is called by the name Elijah, not because he was Elijah but because he was fulfilling Elijah's ministry. For just as Elijah will be the forerunner of the second advent, so John was of the first (CHRYSOSTOM, THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA). The Savior too would suffer what the scribes did to Elijah (ORIGEN).

17:1 Jesus Takes Peter, James and John to a High Mountain

AFTER SIX DAYS. HILARY OF POITIERS: Indeed, in this type of event, reason, harmony and example are served. For after six days the appearance of the Lord's glory is revealed. No doubt, with the cycles of six thousand years having unfolded, the glory of the heavenly kingdom is prefigured. And the three were taken up in analogy to the descent of the three, Shem, Ham and Japheth. By this the coming election to divine favor of the people is shown. ON MATTHEW 17.2.¹

¹ SC 258:62.

THE COUNTING OF DAYS. JEROME: Now it is asked how after six days he took them and led them separately onto a high mountain, whereas the Evangelist Luke established the number at eight. The answer is easy because in Matthew the days in the middle are counted, but in Luke the first and last are added.² For Luke does not say after eight days Jesus took Peter and James and John but “now about eight days after.”³ COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 3.17.1.⁴

WHY ONLY THREE? CHRYSOSTOM: Why does he take only these three with him? Because each one of these three was elevated above the rest. Peter showed his preeminence by exceedingly loving him; John by being exceedingly loved by him. James showed his superiority by his ready response to his brother: we are able to drink the cup⁵ and by his works and by doing what he said. For so earnest was James, and grievous to the Jews, that Herod himself imagined that he had bestowed a great favor on the Jews by killing him.⁶ THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, HOMILY 56.2.⁷

17:2 Jesus Transfigured Before Them

THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS. ORIGEN: But some may ask, when he was transfigured before those who were led up by him into the lofty mountain, did he appear to them in the form of God or in the preincarnate form that he earlier had? Did he appear to those left below in the form of a servant, but to those who had followed him after the six days to the lofty mountain, did he have not the form of a servant but the form of God? Listen carefully, if you can, and at the same time be attentive spiritually. It is not simply said that he was transfigured, but with a certain necessary addition. Both Matthew and Mark have recorded this: he was transfigured before them. Is it therefore possible for Jesus to be transfigured before some but not before others?⁸

Do you wish to see the transfiguration of Jesus? Behold with me the Jesus of the Gospels. Let him be simply apprehended. There he is beheld both “according to the flesh” and at the same time in his true divinity. He is beheld in the form of God according

² ² To make the six-day interval in Matthew 17:1 fit with the eight days in Luke 9:28, Jerome holds that Matthew indicates only the whole days, whereas Luke, applying the criterion of the *synecdoche*, includes the incomplete portions of the day before and the day after the six.

³ ³ Lk 9:28.

⁴ ⁴ CCL 77:147.

⁵ ⁵ Mt 20:22.

⁶ ⁶ Cf. Acts 12:1–3: “Herod ... killed James the brother of John with the sword; and when he saw that it pleased the Jews ...”

⁷ ⁷ PG 58:549–50; NPNF 1 10:345.

⁸ ⁸ Origen holds that the Logos has an individual relation to every rational being, which varies according to the moral progress or regress of each being. Thus the Logos always presents itself to each being in a new way, so that the being can derive from this ever differing contact the maximum spiritual benefit.

to our capacity for knowledge. This is how he was beheld by those who went up upon the lofty mountain to be apart with him. Meanwhile those who do not go up the mountain can still behold his works and hear his words, which are uplifting. It is before those who go up that Jesus is transfigured, and not to those below. When he is transfigured, his face shines as the sun, that he may be manifested to the children of light, who have put off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.⁹ They are no longer the children of darkness or night but have become the children of day. They walk honestly as in the day. Being manifested, he will shine to them not simply as the sun but as he is demonstrated to be, the sun of righteousness. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 12.37.¹⁰

HIS GARMENTS BECAME WHITE AS LIGHT. JEROME: Certainly the Lord was transformed into that glory with which he would afterwards come in his own kingdom. The change accentuated in splendor. It did not diminish his outward appearance. Let it be that his body had become spiritual. Even his garments were changed, which were white to such a high degree that as another Evangelist would say, “And his clothes became dazzling white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them.”¹¹ What the mortal bleacher on earth is able to make is material and subject to touch, not supernatural and heavenly, which mocks the eyes and is only seen in a vision. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 3.17.2.¹²

HIS FACE SHONE LIKE THE SUN. AUGUSTINE: Indeed, Jesus himself shone as the sun, indicating that he is the light which illuminates every one who comes into this world.¹³ And this is the sun to the eyes of the flesh, that is the sun to the eyes of the heart. His garments are a type of his church. For garments, unless held up by the one having donned them, fall. Paul was like the lowest hem of these garments. For he himself says, “For I am the least of the apostles,”¹⁴ and in another passage, “I am the last of the apostles.” On a garment, the hem is the last thing and the least. Just as that woman who touched the Lord’s hem was made well, so the church which came out of the Gentiles was saved by means of Paul’s preaching. SERMON 78.2.¹⁵

17:3 Moses and Elijah Appear

READINESS TO DIE. CHRYSOSTOM: He is transfigured to manifest the glory of the cross, to console Peter and the others in their dread of the Passion and to bring their minds to elevated understanding. Those who went up with him did not hold their peace but were destined to speak of the glory which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem—of his Passion and the glory of the cross.

⁹ Rom 13:12.

¹⁰ GCS 40:152–53; ANF 9:470.

¹¹ Mk 9:3

¹² CCL 77:147.

¹³ Jn 1:9.

¹⁴ 1 Cor 15:9.

¹⁵ PL 38:490–91; NPNF 1 6:347 (Sermon 28).

And not only did Jesus elevate their understanding, but also he brought their virtues to a higher level, so that they could meet the requirements expected of them. He had just said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”¹⁶ He then set before them Moses and Elijah, who were ready to die ten thousand times for God’s decrees and for the people entrusted to them. Each of them, having lost his life, found it. For each of them both spoke boldly to tyrants, the one to the Egyptian, the other to Ahab. They spoke on behalf of heartless and disobedient people. They were brought into extreme danger by the very persons who were saved by them. Both desired to lead people away from idolatry. These were not eloquent men. Moses was slow of tongue and dull of speech.¹⁷ Elijah had the crudest sort of appearance.¹⁸ Both were strict observers of voluntary poverty. Moses did not work for worldly gain. Elijah did not possess anything more than his sheepskin. THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, HOMILY 56.3.¹⁹

THERE APPEARED MOSES AND ELIJAH. JEROME: While the scribes and Pharisees were testing him, he was unwilling to give signs from heaven to those demanding them; however, he silenced their perverse demand with a prudent response. Here, indeed, so that he might increase the faith of the apostles, he gave a sign from heaven. Thereupon Elijah descended from the place to which he had ascended. Moses rose from the lower regions. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 3.17.3.²⁰

17:4 Offering to Make Three Booths

I WILL MAKE THREE BOOTHS. JEROME: You go astray, Peter, just as the other Evangelist attests: you do not know what you are saying. Do not seek three tabernacles. Seek only the tabernacle of the gospel in which the law and the prophets are to be recapitulated.²¹ By seeking three tabernacles you appear to be comparing incommensurably the two servants with the one Lord. Seek only the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, for in these there is one God, who is to be worshiped in the tabernacle of your heart. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 3.17.4.²²

PETER SAID TO JESUS. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA: Peter didn’t know what he was saying, for before the Savior’s Passion, resurrection and victory over death and corruption, it was impossible for Peter to be with Christ and to be permitted into the tents which are in

¹⁶ Mt 16:24.

¹⁷ Ex 4:10.

¹⁸ 2 Kings 1:8.

¹⁹ PG 58:551; NPNF 1 10:346.

²⁰ CCL 77:148.

²¹ Jerome’s observation is meant to reveal the tight unity between the Old Testament (law and prophets) and the New Testament.

²² CCL 77:148.

heaven. These things would happen only after the Savior's resurrection and ascent into heaven. FRAGMENT 200.²³

IT IS WELL THAT WE ARE HERE. LEO THE GREAT: Excited therefore by these revelations of secret realities, the apostle Peter, spurning the mundane and loathing earthly things, was seized by a certain excess of passion toward a yearning for eternal things. Filled up with the joy of the whole vision, he wished to dwell there with Jesus where he was delighting in Christ's manifested glory. Thus Peter said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." But the Lord did not reply to this suggestion, for it was not wicked but inappropriate, since the world could not be saved except by Christ's death. And in the Lord's warning the faith of those who believe is called to account. Among the temptations of this life we should understand that we are to ask for endurance before glory. Good fortune in ruling cannot come before a time of enduring. SERMON 38.5.²⁴

17:5 Hear My Beloved Son

A BRIGHT CLOUD OVERSHADOWED THEM. ORIGEN: I think that God, wishing to dissuade Peter from making three tabernacles, under which so far as it depended on his choice he was going to dwell, shows him a better tabernacle, so to speak, and far superior: the cloud. It is the function of a tabernacle to give shade to one who is in it and to shelter him, and the bright cloud overshadowed them. So God made, as it were, a more divine tabernacle, inasmuch as it was bright, that it might be to them a pattern of the resurrection to come. For the shining cloud gives shade to the righteous and at the same time protects them, gives them light and illuminates them. What would the shining cloud that gives shade to the righteous be? Is it perhaps the Father's power, from which comes the Father's voice saying that this is his Son in whom he is well pleased, urging those that are shaded by it to listen to him and to no one else? He speaks—just as of old so also for all times—through those whom he wishes. Perhaps the shining cloud is the Holy Spirit, giving shade to the righteous and announcing the words of God at work within it and saying, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." I would even venture to say that the shining cloud is our Savior. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 12.42.²⁵

THIS IS MY BELOVED SON. JEROME: Because Peter had asked imprudently, he does not merit the Lord's answer. But the Father answered for the Son so that the word of the Lord might be fulfilled: "I do not bear witness for myself, but the Father who sent me, he bears witness for me."²⁶ The cloud appears bright and shades them, so that those who were looking for a material booth made from boughs or tents might be protected with the shade of a shining cloud. The voice of the Father speaking from heaven is also heard. It provides testimony and teaches Peter the truth with error removed, and in fact through

23 ²³ MKGK 218.

24 ²⁴ SC 74:18–19; NPNF 2 12:163–64.

25 ²⁵ ANF 9:472–73; GCS 40:165–66.

26 ²⁶ Jn 8:18.

Peter teaches all the apostles: “This is my beloved Son.” It is for him that you must build the tabernacle, him you must obey. “My Son” is distinguished from his servants, Moses and Elijah. They, along with you, are to prepare a tabernacle for the Lord in the inner sanctum of their heart. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 3.17.5.²⁷

FROM PROMISE TO FULFILLMENT. APOLLINARIS: The Father is evidently revealing the Son when the ringing voice from heaven bursts forth so loudly. Through it he reveals to everyone the testimony coming from above. One must not think that the voice of God is audible. Nor can one perceive a bodiless being. Just as no one has ever seen God,²⁸ so no one has ever heard God. The words “listen to him” have the power of making a necessary distinction. For he says listen to him, rather than to Moses or the prophet who had been introduced, because it was now time to go forward and advance from the introduction to the fulfillment, from the prefiguration to the true reality.²⁹ FRAGMENT 85.³⁰

LISTEN TO HIM. LEO THE GREAT: A voice from the cloud said, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him. I am manifested through his preaching. I am glorified through his humility. So listen to him without hesitation. He is the truth and the life.³¹ He is my strength and wisdom. “Listen to him” whom the mysteries of the law foreshadowed, of whom the mouths of the prophets sang. “Listen to him” who by his blood redeemed the world, who binds the devil³² and seizes his vessels, who breaks the debt of sin and the bondage of iniquity. “Listen to him” who opens the way to heaven and by the pain of the cross prepares for you the steps of ascent into his kingdom. SERMON 38.7.³³

17:6 *The Disciples Filled with Awe*

FILLED WITH AWE. CHRYSOSTOM: Why was it that when they heard these words they were dismayed? For previously a similar voice had spoken in Jordan and a crowd was present, but no one felt anything like this; and afterwards, again, when they said that it thundered, they did not feel anything like this.³⁴ Why then did they fall on their faces on the mountain? Because there was solitude, and the height of the mountain, and great quietness, and a transfiguration full of awe, and a pure light and a cloud stretched out; all of these threw them into great alarm. Amazement arose on every side, and they fell on

²⁷ ²⁷ CCL 77:148–49.

²⁸ ²⁸ Jn 1:18; 1 Jn 4:12.

²⁹ ²⁹ The Old Testament prefigured, both symbolically and prophetically, the New Testament; hence the progress from one to the other is defined as progress from the *typos* to the truth.

³⁰ ³⁰ MKGK 26–27.

³¹ ³¹ Jn 14:6.

³² ³² Rev 20:2.

³³ ³³ SC 74:20; NPNF 2 12:164.

³⁴ ³⁴ Jn 12:28–29.

their faces in both fear and adoration at the same time. THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, HOMILY 56.6.³⁵

THEY FELL ON THEIR FACES. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA: Through their speaking together it shows that the old prophets also spoke the same things as Jesus, even if enigmatically. In great awe the disciples fell on their faces, and the Savior raised them up. This shows that if Jesus had not been incarnate and had not been Mediator between God and humanity and strengthened his own nature, he would not have endured to hear the voice of God. FRAGMENT 199.³⁶

17:7 Rise, and Have No Fear

JESUS CAME AND TOUCHED THEM. JEROME: For three possible reasons they were petrified with fear: either because they knew they had sinned or because the bright cloud covered them or because they had heard the voice of God the Father speaking. Human weakness is not strong enough to bear the sight of such great glory but trembles with its whole heart and body and falls to earth “And Jesus came up and touched them.” Because they were lying down and could not rise, he mercifully came up and touched them so that through his touch he might put to flight their fear and strengthen their weakened limbs. “And he said to them, ‘Rise, and don’t be afraid.’ ” Those whom he had healed with his hand, he heals with his command, “Have no fear.” First fear is expelled so that afterwards doctrine may be imparted. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 3.17.6-7.³⁷

17:8 When They Lifted Their Eyes

THEY SAW JESUS ONLY. ORIGEN: Consider the details of this passage. See if you can also say this: The disciples understood that the Son of God had been speaking with Moses. It was Moses who had said of God, “No one shall see my face and live.”³⁸ The disciples understood the testimony of Moses about God. They were not able to endure the radiance of the Word. They humbled themselves under the mighty hand of God.

But after the touch of the Word, they lifted up their eyes. They saw Jesus only and no other. Moses, the law and Elijah the prophet had become one with the gospel of Jesus. They did not abide as they formerly were as three, but they became one. Think of these things in a spiritual sense. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 12.43.³⁹

³⁵ PG 58:554; NPNF 1 10:348.

³⁶ MKGK 218.

³⁷ CCL 77:149.

³⁸ Ex 33:20.

³⁹ ANF 9:473; GCS 40:167–68.

17:9 Tell No One the Vision

UNTIL JESUS IS RAISED FROM THE DEAD. CHRYSOSTOM: For the greater the things said about him, the harder it was for the many at that time to accept them. And the offense of the cross increased all the more thereby. Therefore he told them to be silent about the transfiguration. He again reminded them of the Passion, and he almost mentioned the reason why he told them to be silent. For he did not command them never to tell anyone but “[to wait] until he is raised from the dead.” Saying nothing about the painful part, he told them only of the good. What then? Were they not going to be offended after this? Not at all. For the silence that was being demanded was only for the time before the crucifixion. After this they were thought better prepared to receive the Spirit. They had the voice of the miracles advocating for them, and everything that they said from then on was easier to receive. For the course of events announced his power more clearly than a trumpet, and no stumbling block interrupted these events. THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, HOMILY 56.6.⁴⁰

TELL NO ONE. JEROME: The preview of the future kingdom and the glory of his triumph had been shown on the mountain. So he does not want this to be told to the people in case it should be deemed incredible because of its greatness and also so that after such great glory the event of the cross that follows should not cause untaught minds to stumble. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 3.17.9.⁴¹

17:10 First Elijah Must Come

THE SCRIBES’ TEACHING. JEROME: Unless we know the reasons why the disciples asked about the name of Elijah, their questioning seems foolish and extraordinary. For what does asking about Elijah’s arrival have to do with what was written above? The Pharisees’ tradition, following the prophet Malachi of the twelve minor prophets, is that Elijah comes before the end.⁴² He turns the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers and restores everything to its ancient state. So the disciples think that the transfiguration of glory is the one that they have seen on the mountain and say, “If you now have come in glory, why does your precursor not appear?” especially since they had seen Elijah disappear. But when they say, “The scribes say that Elijah must first come,” by the word *first* they are saying that unless Elijah comes, it is not the advent of the Savior according to the Scriptures. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 3.17.10.⁴³

17:11 Restoring All Things

⁴⁰ PG 58:554; NPNF 1 10:348–49.

⁴¹ CCL 77:150.

⁴² Mal 4:5–6.

⁴³ CCL 77:150–51.

HE IS TO RESTORE ALL THINGS. THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA: Therefore there will be a forerunner of his second coming about the time of the consummation. Also this time he is to restore all to true knowledge, restoring everyone who obeys him. The scribes deceived the people when they said that Elijah comes before the advent of the Christ. And this word was reported also among the ignorant crowd; that is what the disciples now ask. How then does he resolve it? FRAGMENT 94.⁴⁴

17:12 Elijah Has Already Come

THEY DID NOT KNOW HIM. ORIGEN: The disciples who went up with Jesus remembered the traditions of the scribes concerning Elijah, that before the advent of Christ, Elijah would come and prepare for him the souls of those who would receive him. But the vision on the mountain, in which Elijah appeared, did not seem to be harmonized with what had been said, since Elijah seemed to them to have come with him rather than before him. So they say this thinking that the scribes were wrong. To this the Savior replies, not denying what was handed down about Elijah but saying that there was another coming of Elijah before that of Christ unknown to the scribes. In [this coming] “they did not know him but did to him whatever they pleased,” as though they too were accomplices in his imprisonment by Herod and execution by him. Then he says that he too will suffer what they did to Elijah. The disciples asked these questions as though about Elijah and the Savior replied. But hearing the Savior’s words, “Elijah has already come,” and what followed, they took it as a reference to John the Baptist. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 13.1.⁴⁵

FULFILLING ELIJAH’S MINISTRY. CHRYSOSTOM: They did not know this from the Scriptures, but the scribes used to tell them, and this saying was reported among the ignorant crowd, as also about Christ. Therefore the Samaritan woman also said, “The Messiah is coming; when he comes, he will show us all things.”⁴⁶ And they themselves asked John, “Are you Elijah or the prophet?”⁴⁷ For this opinion was strong, as I said, both the one about Christ and the one about Elijah, but they did not interpret it as it should have been. For the Scriptures speak of two comings of Christ, both this one that has taken place and the future one. Paul spoke of these when he said, “For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright and godly lives in this world.”⁴⁸ Behold the first advent, and listen to how he declares the coming advent: “Awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”⁴⁹ The prophets also mention both advents; of the one that is second they say that Elijah will be the forerunner; John was forerunner of the first, John whom Christ also called by the name Elijah, not

44 ⁴⁴ MKGK 130.

45 ⁴⁵ GCS 40:171–72; ANF 9:474.

46 ⁴⁶ Jn 4:25.

47 ⁴⁷ Jn 1:21. Cf. p. 2 n. 3.

48 ⁴⁸ Tit 2:11–12.

49 ⁴⁹ Tit 2:13.

because he was Elijah but because he was fulfilling Elijah's ministry. For just as Elijah will be the forerunner of the second advent, so John was of the first. But the scribes, confusing these things and perverting the people, mentioned that coming alone, the second one, to the people, and said, "If this is the Christ, Elijah ought to have come first." That is why the disciples also say, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, HOMILY 57.1.⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ PG 58:557–59; NPNF 1 10:352.

¹Simonetti, M. 2002. *Matthew 14-28*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 1b. InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Ill.