

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 60, Chapter 17

We opened Matthew chapter 17 last week, which begins with one of the landmark occurrences within Yeshua's short ministry on earth: The Transfiguration. I promised that we'd try to untangle the meaning of it and we'll do that shortly. This is going to get a little long-winded because there is so much disagreement and variation in what are the most common Church doctrines about The Transfiguration, so we have to recalibrate our minds a bit to get a better understanding. First, however, let's re-read the narrative about it. Open your Bibles to Matthew 17.

RE-READ MATTHEW 17:1 - 13

In order to get as much information as is available about this mysterious event, we need to know what the other Gospel accounts said about it. First, Mark's:

READ MARK 9:2 - 13

And now Luke's Gospel account as written from his perspective:

READ LUKE 9:28 - 36

Even though we find some differences between the 3 Synoptic Gospels accounts, I think we can owe those differences to essentially 2 things: first, none of these Gospel writers were eyewitnesses so they had to get their information either from one of the three eyewitnesses (Peter or James or James' brother John) or more likely it came from the written accounts of unnamed others. It also may be that the written accounts or even the verbal accounts from one or another

of the 3 eyewitnesses were slightly different. Second, each of the Gospel writers has constructed this Transfiguration story based on their personal perspective of its meaning according to their 1st-century minds, and therefore what details to include (and also what not to include) that would resonate best with their particular intended audience.

Mark and Matthew agree, for instance, that The Transfiguration happened 6 days after the previous events that concluded in chapter 16; while Luke says that it was "about" 8 days later. So whatever the sources these Gospel writers were using, Luke's seems to have been different from Mark's and Matthew's, and so Luke's source even contained a little uncertainty about how many days. The CJB deals with this uncertainty by saying "about a week", but the Greek specifically says **okto**, which is 8. What we must notice in all of these accounts is that there is no recorded comment made by Yeshua or by any of the 3 disciples who were present that explains the meaning behind this breathtaking event, nor do any of the Gospel writers attempt to arrive at a conclusion of their own about it. The story is, in all 3 accounts, simply told and left hanging, leaving us all to scratch our heads about just what we are to take from it; and clearly, there had to have been an intended meaning in it.

Yet, there is one thing embedded in the story that might have something to do with the explanation for The Transfiguration. It is when The Father speaks from the cloud that enveloped the 3 men and He says: "This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Where have we heard similar words before?

^{CJB} **Matthew 3:13-17** ¹³ *Then Yeshua came from the Galil to the Yarden to be immersed by Yochanan.* ¹⁴ *But Yochanan tried to stop him. "You are coming to me? I ought to be immersed by you!"* ¹⁵ *However, Yeshua answered him, "Let it be this way now, because we should do everything righteousness requires."* *Then Yochanan let him.* ¹⁶ *As soon as Yeshua had been immersed, he came up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, he saw the Spirit of God coming down upon him like a dove,* ¹⁷ *and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; I am well pleased with him."*

So one has to ask what the point might be of God making this pronouncement again; one He had already made to John the Baptist and to Yeshua and very probably to several onlookers? The predominant thought among Bible

commentators is that for some reason The Father wanted those 3 disciples to personally witness a sort of reenactment of this important pronouncement that was originally made in the Jordan River several months earlier. However, for me, that just doesn't satisfy because the disciples already knew of John the Immerser and all that had happened with him, including especially his reluctant immersing of Jesus, and therefore no doubt they also knew those words that Yeshua was God's Son (even if the significance of those words seemed to keep eluding them). So if that's not what this pronouncement was about, what's the alternative explanation? And besides, if it was only to repeat it in front of those 3 disciples, why only 3 and not all 12? But even more, if once again pronouncing Jesus as God's Son was the point, why did Elijah and Moses have to be there? Could it be that perhaps it was not so much meant as a pronouncement for the disciples to witness as it was for the benefit of the 2 men that appeared with Yeshua: Moses and Elijah. Here's why I think this might make more sense.

In Ephesians 4:8-10 we read Paul saying this in his interpretation of a special act of Messiah Yeshua not long after His resurrection:

^{CJB} **Ephesians 4:8-10** ⁸ *This is why it says, "After he went up into the heights, he led captivity captive and he gave gifts to mankind."* ⁹ *Now this phrase, "he went up," what can it mean if not that he first went down into the lower parts, that is, the earth?* ¹⁰ *The one who went down is himself the one who also went up, far above all of heaven, in order to fill all things.*

A passage from the Book of Acts is usually added to the one I just quoted that has created the prevalent Church doctrine that Jesus descended into Hell or Hades for a time. I'll quote this passage from the NAS Bible version because it is the most literal translation of the Greek.

^{NAS} **Acts 2:27** *Because Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, Nor allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.*

I have stated in other Bible book studies that these 2 perplexing passages are not trying to say that Yeshua descended into Hades. It is not possible because Hades was the mythological Greco-Roman underworld of the dead. Such a concept as Hades had no place in Jewish culture or in the Bible or therefore in Christ's thoughts. But, what did exist in the Jewish culture was the concept of Abraham's Bosom. Abraham's Bosom was said to be a chamber beneath the earth where the souls of the righteous Hebrew dead went and were held safely in

a waiting room (so to speak) until Yeshua the Messiah came, died on the cross to atone for their sins, and then they could be released from their captivity to go to Heaven. This captivity within the Bosom of Abraham was a more or less pleasant captivity because it was meant for the safekeeping of their souls. meaning Satan and his demons had no access to them. Therefore when Yeshua descended it was to Abraham's Bosom (not Hades) where He appeared in person to announce Himself and as a result to also announce the end of these captives' captivity. This, by the way, is not some original idea of mine. There are even paintings of this event created centuries ago to depict it.

Therefore I wonder if perhaps Yeshua's appearance with Moses and Elijah was for a similar reason. Elijah for certain had not been living in Abraham's Bosom, and the death of Moses was very mysterious because Deuteronomy 34 seems to say that God buried Moses so that no one knows where his grave is. So Moses's death, burial, and what happened afterward is unique. No matter, both Elijah and Moses had to have their sins atoned for just as with all humans. Therefore even though they died under a certain kind of righteousness, they too had to wait for Messiah to come and die in order for the complete atonement of their sins to happen. And although Yeshua has yet to die in the order of things, He has made it known that His death is imminent and so the 3 men appear together whereby Yeshua makes Himself known to them as their Messiah and Savior, and probably also explains to Moses and Elijah what is about to transpire. After all, Moses and Elijah were NOT divine and despite wherever they had been residing or in whatever form they had assumed over all these centuries, they would not have had the knowledge of the future that God alone holds.

I think there is also another element to this appearance of Moses and Elijah with Yeshua (and I want to emphasize that since the Bible makes no effort to explain the reason for it, my conclusion must fall within the realm of opinion or speculation). Over and against what Davies and Allison conclude about it (which is that it is to show that Jesus replaced Moses, and all the ramifications that comes with it), I see it as nearly the opposite. The common expression used among Jews (and Yeshua as well) in that day to mean the entire Hebrew Bible was "The Torah and the Prophets". This was because the 3rd section of the 3 Hebrew-defined divisions of the Old Testament called The Writings was viewed as somewhat secondary to the Torah and the Prophets. Moses is the epitome and primary author of the Torah, while Elijah is the chief of the Prophets (even though, oddly enough, there is no mention of him having written Scripture as did other prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah). But of course, what sets Elijah apart is

that Elijah went to God's holy mountain (Mt. Sinai) and had direct conversation with God who was present there just as He was with Moses. And, just as famously, God brought Elijah to Heaven without him experiencing death.

So in pulling this all together, Moses and Elijah can be said to represent the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) and all that it meant, and Yeshua is the fulfillment of what the Old Testament portended and all that His advent as God on Earth meant. The only sliver of an implication of a hierarchy among the 3 within the story of The Transfiguration is of Yeshua's glowing face and clothing, but nothing and no one in the event or its aftermath says that. For certain, there is no implication of the new replacing the old in the narrative of The Transfiguration. The 3 men simply appeared together and talked, but the topic or what they said isn't recorded. Therefore because of our 21st-century vantage point of hindsight, the appearance of the 3 together can only mean that these 3 represent the various stages of God's plan of redemption and that they each have played the most prominent of roles in its progress and realization. From God's perspective, these 3 are intimately connected. Elijah represents the Prophets, Moses the Torah, and Yeshua their fulfillment. They have worked together in various eras to come to this glorious moment when all that the Torah and Prophets pointed towards... redemption of mankind through God's Son... is about to happen by means of Yeshua's sacrifice on the cross.

Verse 4 has more to it than a casual reading might suggest. In it the always excitable Peter upon viewing this scene says: I have a great idea! Let's build 3 shelters, one for each of you! The CJB uses the term shelters (which I think is misleading) while other English Bibles say tabernacles or booths (this is better). Yet, this is another statement in this story of The Transfiguration in which there is no explanation for why Peter would suggest such a thing. The nearly universal take of Christian Bible commentators is that Peter expected that the 3 would stay there for a time and so erecting temporary shelters for them to stay in sounded like a good idea. However, that conclusion seems most improbable to me. Rather I think this points to something else entirely.

Mark 9:6 indicates that Peter's comment had it all wrong. And yet, as you see in the CJB, this verse is given to us in parentheses as an indicator that this statement is doubted as authentic by many Bible scholars because it seems to be more in the form of a gloss added by some later Christian editor rather than an actual opinion of Mark. This is a little technical but it is important for our understanding of the Gospels. We must notice that anytime in any of the Gospels

we run across words that seek to interpret what a recorded scene meant (as opposed to just explaining what happened, or adding some background facts, or quoting those who were involved), those words are the Gospel writer's personal conclusion about it... or in some cases likely some later editor's conclusion. That is, when we read the New Testament carefully we find that the Gospel writers were normally very economical and cautious when it came to offering their own opinions (which is what verse 6 amounts to... an opinion from someone that wasn't present at the event). So when we see a statement in a Gospel account that comes not from one of the Bible characters but rather it is self-evident that it represents a conclusion from the author, and when at times that statement rises to the level of creating a doctrine, we must proceed with caution. Even when we assign a level of inspiration to the Gospel writers themselves, nonetheless they were writing as historians and journalists; they were not spiritual leaders in the business of creating new doctrines. Therefore we must not take it that way.

Luke puts forth a similar opinion about the matter of building the shelters as does Mark. Luke says it this way: ***As the men were leaving Yeshua, Kefa said to him, not knowing what he was saying, "It's good that we're here, Rabbi! Let's put up three shelters- one for you, one for Moshe and one for Eliyahu."***

Notice that in response to the building of 3 shelters the statement of "not knowing what he (Peter) was saying" is Luke's opinion on the matter. Peter isn't rebuked or corrected by the other disciples or by Jesus; it is Luke that questions Peter's understanding. Matthew's Gospel, on the other hand, simply lets Peter's suggestion stand, without Matthew's personal comment, conclusion, or opinion about it. I'm calling your attention to this because as I said in our last lesson, we absolutely must consider the beliefs of the Jewish culture of the 1st century, and what the Tanakh (the Old Testament) teaches, in order for us to properly understand what is going on in these New Testament books and how the Jewish people of that era would have understood it.

The Hebrew Bible strongly hints, and the Jewish culture believed, that the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot, whereby the building of temporary shelters, Sukkahs, is commanded by God) is directly connected to the End Times. And as I've already explained in past lessons on Matthew, it was taken for granted that Elijah would return in the End Times when the Messiah appeared, and among some substantial segment of Jewish society, it was believed that Moses would return as well. So according to what Peter, as part of that Jewish culture, thought this

astounding appearance of Moses and Elijah along with Yeshua as the Messiah meant, for him it verified that this was indeed the End Times that was (as expected) connected with the Feast of Tabernacles. I think Peter was right; it's only that his understanding of the timing was wrong.

This might be a good opportunity to do a teaching on the prophetic instruction contained within the 7 Biblical Feasts. However, I'll resist and only explain briefly as it pertains to The Transfiguration. The 7 Biblical Feasts of the Torah (in Leviticus) are ordained by God; these are said to be perpetual, and they are not Traditions of men. And when we look at them, and the order in which they occur, we find something amazing. Yeshua died on the feast of Passover, was put into the tomb on the feast of Matza (the Feast of Unleavened Bread), and arose on the feast of Bikkurim (the Feast of Firstfruits). Even more amazing, the Holy Spirit came to indwell humans on the feast of Shavuot, which has become translated into English as Pentecost. These are not 4 coincidences; rather each feast is prophetic of a milestone of God's plan for redemption.

The next series of these prophetic feasts are Yom Teruah (the feast of trumpets), then Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), and then the final feast is Sukkot. All these are prophetic of the End Times and the return of Messiah Yeshua to rule over His Kingdom on earth. So the first 4 feasts have already been fulfilled and what remains is for the final 3 to be fulfilled; those 3 are ahead of us and concern the End Times. However since all of Jewish society believed that they were already in the End Times, then it made sense to Peter that the fulfillment of the Feast of Sukkot was happening right before his eyes, so quite logically he offered to build a required Sukkah for each of the figures of The Transfiguration.

The first part of verse 5 speaks of Yeshua, Moses, and Elijah becoming engulfed in a cloud. There can be little doubt that this cloud represents the Shekinah; the glory of God. Notice that although the cloud surrounds the 3 figures, there are really 4 figures involved; the 4th one is God the Father. And the only one of the 4 figures to speak is God. Whenever God The Father is interacting in a close way with humans, on earth, it is within some sort of shrouding element. The term cloud may simply be a means to communicate a mysterious shrouding element that is sort of like a cloud, but isn't quite a typical cloud that floats about in the sky. What I'm saying is that we have to be careful with some of these terms because they are more descriptive and figurative based upon known objects that humans are familiar with, rather than upon what the actual substance of it might be. We should also keep in mind that this cloud not only shrouds God from view

but also acts as a sort of vehicle that carries Him in the same way that Daniel explains about the one like the son of man riding upon a cloud.

These sorts of vivid God experiences involving clouds are few and far between in the Bible. Key for us is that it almost always involves Moses and Israel's exodus from Egypt.

CJB Exodus 16:10-12 ¹⁰ As Aharon spoke to the whole community of the people of Isra'el, they looked toward the desert; and there before them the glory of ADONAI appeared in the cloud; ¹¹ and ADONAI said to Moshe, ¹² "I have heard the grumbings of the people of Isra'el. Say to them: 'At dusk you will be eating meat, and in the morning you will have your fill of bread. Then you will realize that I am ADONAI your God.'"

CJB Exodus 19:9 ⁹ ADONAI said to Moshe, "See, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, so that the people will be able to hear when I speak with you and also to trust in you forever." Moshe had told ADONAI what the people had said;

CJB Exodus 24:15-16. ¹⁵ Moshe went up onto the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of ADONAI stayed on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day he called to Moshe out of the cloud.

We find such a relationship between God, the cloud, the Shekinah (the glory), and Moses in the Apocrypha as well, such as in the Book of Maccabees.

2 Maccabees 2:7-8 ⁷ When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: "The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. ⁸ Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated."

The point is that in addition to God coming down to sort of consecrate what is happening (such as consecrating the Temple that Solomon built), we find that once again the Jesus-as-a-second-Moses connection is validated and this simply cannot be emphasized enough. And further, when recalling the Mt. Sinai incidents (both the burning bush and the giving of The Law) we see that those

who heard God's voice did, like Moses, fall flat on the ground in fear. And still as in the Moses/Mt. Sinai incidents Christ uses the words "Don't be afraid". So we see some interesting nuances among the 3 Gospels of how The Transfiguration played out... provided we do it within the understanding of the Jewish culture of that day.

After the 3 disciples falling on their faces in fright and then daring to look up again, Mark reports that Elijah and Moses were gone, and apparently so was the cloud. Matthew reports the same. Luke is the most brief of them all, and says that once Moses and Elijah were gone the disciples left and didn't say a word about this strange appearance to anyone.

Mark adds an intriguing tidbit in Mark 9:9 that Yeshua told the disciples not to say anything about what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. However, verse 10 says that they didn't understand what Yeshua meant about this rising from the dead.

Back to Matthew's Gospel. In verse 10 the disciples ask their Master why it is that their scribes say that Elijah must come first. In other words, why do their Synagogue teachers teach a doctrine that has Elijah preceding the coming of the Messiah and the restoration of all things? That is, Jesus' teaching seems to contradict that. How can it be that Yeshua is saying He must first die and then be resurrected **before** the restoration (and therefore the coming of Elijah) will occur? For the disciples, Christ's teaching puts the 2 events of the appearance of Elijah and the appearance of their Messiah out of order. And their Synagogue scribes aren't necessarily wrong.

CJB Malachi 3:23-24 ²³ Look, I will send to you Eliyahu the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible Day of ADONAI. ²⁴ He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to their fathers; otherwise I will come and strike the land with complete destruction." [Look, I will send to you Eliyahu the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible Day of ADONAI.]

The great and terrible Day of the Lord (Judgment Day) is concurrent with the restoration of Israel. And the restoration of Israel is concurrent with the coming of Messiah. So when we see that essentially Malachi says the same thing the Synagogue scribes are teaching, one can only imagine the confusion of the disciples when Yeshua says He must die and be resurrected first before the

restoration occurs.

To explain why what He is telling them about Elijah and about His own resurrection is so, He says to the disciples in verses 11 and 12:

CJB Matthew 17:11-12 ¹¹ He answered, "On the one hand, Eliyahu is coming and will restore all things; ¹² on the other hand, I tell you that Eliyahu has come already, and people did not recognize him but did whatever they pleased to him. In the same way, the Son of Man too is about to suffer at their hands."

So the idea is that Yeshua is telling the disciples a paradox about Elijah. It is that although Elijah is indeed coming and it will be in concert with the restoration of all things (primarily meaning the restoration of Israel as a righteous and great power), yet in another sense, says Yeshua, Elijah has already come. Jesus adds that the Son of Man is going to suffer at the hands of people in the same way that the Elijah that has already come did. And then verse 13 says that the disciples got it that, according to Christ, the Elijah that has already come and suffered at the hands of the people is John the Baptist.

Now, please follow me carefully. Even though the disciples got it about John the Immerser, clearly they didn't grasp it all. They accepted that Yeshua associated Elijah with John the Baptist. But in what sense would the disciples have understood that association? It was this: John the Baptist, as Elijah, would indeed precede the Messiah (just as the prophecies and the Synagogue scribes said). As we saw earlier in Matthew 16:14, the Jews had no problem in believing that in some undefined way the spirit or essence of a deceased person could live within another. So it wasn't a major leap for them to accept that the spirit of Elijah could have returned from Heaven and taken up residence within the body of John the Baptist in a very real way, even if they couldn't explain it. And they were starting to accept that Yeshua was the Messiah (the Restorer), but they were struggling terribly with the possibility that the restoration of Israel that they hoped was imminent was not going to happen just yet. Clearly, they didn't get it (and how could they have?) that the restoration would be a centuries-long process that had only begun in the last few months since Yeshua's immersion. The restoration process (which is the establishing of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth) was only in its infancy.

What they also could not see or fathom was that the Elijah paradox automatically

meant there must be 2 re-appearances of Elijah as the precursor to the restoration of Israel. But then that also meant that there would necessarily have to be 2 appearances of the Restorer (the Restorer is the Messiah). And if there were to be 2 appearances of Elijah and the Restorer, then there also had to be 2 Latter Days. And yet, the End Times (something which the Jewish community believed to their core that they were already living in) that was associated with the Latter Days could only come at the second appearance of Elijah and the Restorer because if the End Times happened at the first Latter Days (which was the first appearance of Elijah and the Restorer) it would logically eliminate the need for a second appearance of the two. Confusing? Challenging to digest? You bet. But we all have the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight. We know all about Jesus's 2 appearances. We have the Book of Revelation that provides more details. But can you imagine the difficulties for these disciples trying to make heads or tails out of this newest revelation? We have tons of facts and Bible history that they didn't have because so much was in the future for them and so it hadn't happened yet.

This is why I advise Believers to not be terribly anxious about what is in the future, ahead of us, that hasn't happened yet. Almost obsessing over trying to figure out the timing and details about the End of Days that is coming. We have relatively little information in the Bible about the End Times and so much of what we do have seems paradoxical (like Yeshua's Elijah teaching) or it is simply so full of implications and generalities that are not fleshed out, that it is not fully comprehensible. But just like any average Believer can, with proper instruction, understand how the Old Testament prophecies came to pass in Jesus, so you can understand **some** of what will happen in the End Times... from the 30,000-foot view... but only so far as the information that is given to us in the Bible will carry us. Speculation about the terrifying, catastrophic, worldwide events of the End Times that are foretold in the Bible might be fun and exciting to talk about, and even make writing and selling books about it profitable. But the likelihood is slim that much of what we conclude, or what is said in those books, will turn out to be correct. And like for the Jews of Yeshua's day, speculation and turning to manmade opinions and doctrines for answers when the Bible offers little or none, is more likely to cause harm than to do good for God's congregation.

I'll close out this narrative about The Transfiguration with a couple of thoughts. First: despite long-held Christian tradition, the location of Mount Tabor as the place of The Transfiguration is all but impossible. During Yeshua's lifetime,

Mount Tabor was a fortified Roman military outpost. The Sanhedrin also was allowed to use this high mountain of Tabor as part of a matrix of hills upon which they would light signal fires to announce the sighting of the new moon (that is, this would announce the change to a new month). So Mount Tabor was not remotely a suitable place for the private, mystical revelation that Christian tradition calls The Transfiguration. Second; we need to be aware that from this point forward, Peter and the brothers James and John must be considered as the best authorities and so likely the spiritual leaders (outside of Yeshua, Himself) of the Jesus movement as well as the experts concerning Christ's life and His teachings. It also means that immediately after Yeshua is executed they will become the best and most trusted sources about His life and His teachings, and so they will represent the first elders of the Jesus movement whose job it is to keep the tradition about His life alive and safeguarded.

With that, we'll leave the story of The Transfiguration and the next time we meet we'll move on to another scene in Matthew chapter 17.