

Background of Jesus' Transfiguration

The transfiguration of Christ is one of the most (if not *the* most) glorious manifestations in history. This essay will examine the background to Jesus' transfiguration as described in Matthew 17:1-13.

This will be done by noting the authorship, date, location and audience of the text, placed in context of first century Palestine. It will incorporate a superficial view of the historical, cultural, and social background of the passage.

Authorship, Date, Location and Audience

Most modern scholars believe the *Gospel According to Matthew* is not written by Matthew at all, but a later compilation of sources (possibly collated from the hypothetical "Q" or "M" materials)¹. Most ancient theologians and many modern scholars still maintain the opinion that Matthew did write the Gospel bearing his name².

The date of the transfiguration event is generally considered to be about six months prior to Christ's passion in the Jewish month of Tishrei³ תִּשְׁרִי, specifically during the Sukkot סוכות [Festival of Tabernacles]⁴.

This date is deduced from a couple of Scripture references. John specifically mentions the *Festiva*⁵. This includes the discourse returning from the transfiguration, in conjunction with the synoptic Gospels. It is also alluded to in the 'excited' reaction by Peter during the transfiguration to make three *tabernacles*⁶.

There is no definite means of identifying which "high mountain" the transfiguration occurred. Traditionally, it is usually considered Mt Tabor (588m)⁷. Although it is 90km south-south-west of Caesarea Philippi⁸, it is within six days by foot⁹. It is also in the region of Galilee¹⁰ and Capernaum¹¹. Tabor also has significant OT history¹².

¹ Powell, Mark Allan. *Introducing the New Testament*. 2018. 109-116, 122-128;

Isbouts, Jean-Pierre. *The Biblical World - An Illustrated Atlas*. 2007. 269-271

² Beeke, Joel R [Gen Ed]. *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*. 2014. 1353;

Williamson, G.I. *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*. 2004. 8-15;

The 37 authors compiled by Carson, D.A. [Ed.]. *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*. 2016.

³ Gore, Bruce W. *Historical and Chronological Context of the Bible*. 2010. 11:23

MacArthur, John. *The Unveiled Son (Mark 9:2-8)* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3b-AvQT3ZqM>>. 2010. Time index 34m 37s

Sproul, R.C. *Transfiguration* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLgt0UjICE>>. 2010. Time index 14m 23s

⁴ Bimson, John J., Kane, John P., Paterson, John H., Wiseman, Donald J. [Eds]. *New Bible Atlas*. 1990. 64

⁵ Jn 7:2, 7, 8, 10.

⁶ Mt 17:4, Mk 9:5, Lk 9:33.

⁷ Isbouts, Jean-Pierre. *The Biblical World - An Illustrated Atlas*. 2007. 277

⁸ Mt 16:13, Mk 8:27, Lk 9:18

⁹ Mt 17:1, Mk 9:2, Lk 9:28 [about eight days after these sayings is not inconsistent with the other references]

¹⁰ Mt 17:22, Mk 9:30

¹¹ Mt 17:24, Mk 9:33

¹² Josh 19:22 - border of tribes; Judg 4:6 - Deborah defeats Sisera; Jer 46:18, Hos 5:1 - prophecy;

Detracting from this being the site for the transfiguration was the possible presence of a Roman fortification¹³ on the peak, and the lower elevation.

Modern scholars favour Mt Hermon (2814m)¹⁴ based on proximity to Caesarea Philippi (~26km), higher elevation, and OT significance¹⁵. The main objection to this location is the distance from the Lower Galilee region and Capernaum where Jesus later ministered, however this concern is debatable. Both these peaks are possible, especially in light of the favourable comment of Psalm 89:12¹⁶.

Matthew (Levi) is considered to have specifically written his account to Jewish Christians.¹⁷ His work outlines the OT scripture, very familiar to Jews in that period, from his background (as a Jewish tax collector) . He bridges OT to the later NT scriptures (including prophecies fulfilled in Jesus Christ) during the Apostolic period. He demonstrates redemptive history as a process of the covenant of grace.

Context of the passage

Chronologically, Jesus travels through the region of Caesarea Philippi¹⁸. Peter confesses Him “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”¹⁹ Matthew then records the prophecies Jesus provides about His death²⁰.

At this point, Matthew records the transfiguration of Christ, of which the feature passage revolves. Peter, James and John join Jesus exclusively on a mountain where they beheld Christ in some of His glory. This is accompanied by the witness of Moses, Elijah and later, God the Father.

Peter mentions building booths / tabernacles for the three divine people (Jesus, Moses and Elijah). The presence of God the Father humbles the disciples, whereby they have the typical reaction to His encounter - falling on their faces in fear!

Jesus comforts the disciples and they recover. On the way down, Jesus exhorts them to keep these events secret until after His resurrection. They also discuss verification regarding the prophecies of Elijah. Jesus and the disciples then continue in the ministry making their way to Capernaum.

55BC Hasmonean Rebellion (Price, Randall, House H.Wayne. *Zondervan Handbook of Biblical Archaeology*. 2017. 203)

¹³ There is no archaeological or historical evidence recording a Roman presence, however it was always used as a strategic lookout and beacon for communication (Cline, Eric H. *The Battles of Armageddon*. 2002. 101-113; Wishton, William [Transl]. *The Works of Josephus*. 1999. The Wars of the Jews. IV:1. 664-667).

¹⁴ Isbouts, Jean-Pierre. *The Biblical World - An Illustrated Atlas*. 2007. 277.

¹⁵ Dt 3:8 - Northern border of conquest of Canaan; Judg. 3:3 - inhabitants God used to test Israel; Ps 133:3 - dew description of God's anointing unity; Song 4:8 - description of ardour of the spouse by king

¹⁶ “The north and the south, you have created them; *Tabor* and *Hermon* joyously praise your name.” Ps 89:12
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¹⁷ Webb, Barry G. *Biblical Authority and Diverse Literary Genres* in Carson, D.A. [Ed.]. *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*. 2016. 599-600

¹⁸ Mt 16:13, Mk 8:27

¹⁹ Mt 16:16-32, Mk 8:29, Lk 9:20

²⁰ Mt16:21-28

Historical, cultural, social background

The experience of the *μετεμορφώθη* is a magnificent attestation of Christ's deity, comparable with all the OT theophanies and visions²¹. The transfiguration itself, with the *Shekinah* of Christ as God ("metamorphosis" has an exegetical connotation of a 'change from within'), is juxtaposed with, for example, Moses' face glowing from beholding God's Glory (which luminesced as a 'reflection' of God's glory).

The three disciples Peter, James and John, satisfy the OT legal requirement for three witnesses²² to testify to this magnificent event (declaring Jesus' deity).

The appearance of Moses and Elijah is extremely significant to the Israelites, representing the totality of understanding Jewish theology and worship. To the Jews, Moses represented the *Law* (as the Law-giver) and Elijah represented the *Prophets*. Coupled with the veiled presence of God the Father Himself, they constitute three affirming Divine witnesses of Christ's divinity²².

It is conjectured that they both appeared corporeally (not spiritually) at the transfiguration. This is derived from the concept that God personally buried Moses' body²³ and that Elijah was taken to heaven directly without death²⁴.

Jesus is revealed as the new Moses - the prophet sent by God, explaining the new covenant in relation to the Mosaic law, declaring the curses and blessings. Particularly in the transfiguration, there is a recall of Moses' words of the raising of the great prophet like himself²⁵.

In addition to these concepts, Malachi prophesied *circa* 500 years²⁶ earlier to remember Moses and look for Elijah before the Day of the Lord²⁷. The *spirit and power* of Elijah²⁸ did indeed come (as John the Baptist²⁹), but both were here manifested together.

Of course, there is the fundamental eschatological ramification presented in this event. Moses and Elijah represent the evidence of the life-hereafter in the glorious presence and service of the Almighty. This would be a great endorsement for the Pharisees (who believed in the resurrection), although the Sadducees would be dismayed.

²¹ Ex. 3:3-6 - Moses and the burning bush, Ex 33:17-23 - Moses beholds God's glory, Is 6:1-8 - Isaiah's commission, etc.

²² Dt. 19:15

²³ Dt. 34:6, and the dispute about Moses body in Jude 9.

²⁴ 2 Ki. 2:11

²⁵ Dt. 18:15

²⁶ Beeke, Joel R [Gen Ed]. *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*. 2014. 1339; Gore, Bruce W. *Historical and Chronological Context of the Bible*. 2010. 4: 14; Price, Randall, House H.Wayne. 2017. 190.

²⁷ Mal. 4:4,5

²⁸ Lk. 1:17

²⁹ Mt. 17:13

Also, the Words of God reiterated from Jesus' baptism (resonating Psalm 2:7) are significant. The third and most potent witness, is linked with this very familiar reference in the *Tehillim*, coupled with the baptism which would be fresh in the minds of many.

Summary

The transfiguration is an outstanding Christological event, second only to his passion in the views of many Christians. Pregnant with theological insights and doctrines, it provides a veiled description of Jesus Christ's *Shekinah* and mercy to the attending disciples Peter, James and John.

There are many more references to Old Testament and abundant theology that sadly exceeds the scope of this tome. This background provides a foundation for such a magnificent event as the Transfiguration.

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Soli Deo gloria. Amen.