

Sermon Notes from the Church’s Ministry Among Jewish People
Transfiguration – Year A

RCL Readings – Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9.

ACNA Readings – Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99; Philippians 3:7-14; Matthew 17:1-9.

Introduction. The Sundays after Epiphany – six this year – finish with the Transfiguration. Epiphany comes to full expression in the Transfiguration of the Son. And, as with the Baptism of Jesus, there is a unique manifestation of the Spirit and the Father’s divine voice in Jesus’ transfiguration.

Common Theme. This week’s readings focus our attention on the transforming impact of the Presence of God. Trans-figuration is another way of saying metamorphosis! This happens whenever a person turns to the Lord and meets him face-to-face! Moses met with God on Mount Sinai in the cloud of glory, where God appeared as a consuming fire in full view of all Israel. The Lord Jesus, on another mountain, talked with his Father and was transfigured in front of his disciples. Later, and right up till today, Jesus’ disciples are transformed when they pay attention to God’s prophetic word in the scriptures and to knowing Christ Jesus their Lord personally.

Exodus 24:12–18. This is the first time in the narrative that the stone tablets are actually mentioned. The commandments had been orally spoken to Moses first and then he proclaimed them orally to the people, and they were agreed. They are now to be written on stone by God for a lasting covenant. Moses was given the law and commandments so he could teach them to the people. “This duty to teach the Law will be passed especially to parents (Deut 6:6–9, 20–25) and to the tribe of Levi as a whole (Deut 33:9–10; Mal 2:1–9)” (NET, n. 35). The rabbis took the phrase “the teachings and the commandments” to include the rest of the written Torah plus the Oral Torah, given to Moses at Sinai (b. *Ber. 5a; Lekah Tov; Midrash HaGadol*) (JSB).

Moses went up the mountain, and the cloud covered it. This is the same description used of Jesus at the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1, 5). The verb for the glory dwelling is *vay-yish-kon* (וַיֵּשְׁבֵן), and it is the origin of the term *Shekinah* – the abiding or dwelling glory of the LORD. Moses was on the top of the mountain, but he was still on earth. The LORD came down in the cloud and enveloped him, so heaven and earth were overlapping on the mountain. The verb is also the same root for the tabernacle, the Lord’s dwelling place, the *mishkan* (מִשְׁכָּן) which is revealed to Moses next. “The Tabernacle, in other words, is essentially a portable Mount Sinai, the locus of God’s presence” (JSB).

NET gives an extended comment which is worth considering, as it covers our Exodus and Transfiguration readings: “The ‘glory of YHWH’ was a display visible at a distance, clearly in view of the Israelites. To them (lit: to their eyes), it was like a consuming fire in the midst of the cloud that covered the mountain. That fire indicated that Yahweh wished to accept their sacrifice, as if it were a pleasant aroma to him, as Leviticus would say. The vision of the glory of Yahweh confirmed the authority of the revelation of the Law given to Israel. This chapter is the climax of God’s bringing people into covenant with himself, the completion of his revelation to them, a completion that is

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authenticated with the miraculous. It ends with the mediator going up in the clouds to be with God and the people down below eagerly awaiting his return. The message of the whole chapter could be worded this way: Those whom God sanctifies by the blood of the covenant and instructs by the book of the covenant may enjoy fellowship with him and anticipate a far more glorious fellowship. So too in the NT the commandments and teachings of Jesus are confirmed by his miraculous deeds and by his glorious manifestation on the Mount of the Transfiguration, where a few who represented the disciples would see his glory and be able to teach others. The people of the new covenant have been brought into fellowship with God through the blood of the covenant; they wait eagerly for his return from heaven in the clouds” (NET, n. 41, 43).

Psalm 2. This is a royal psalm which warns the nation's rulers to recognise “the LORD and his anointed one” (v. 2). The opening question is rhetorical, expressing the psalmist's surprise that earthly nations and rulers would take this stance. The one interrogative term at the beginning of verse 1, “Why?” is followed by four verbs of resistance (gather, plot vainly, take a stand, and conspire together) and finishes with “against the LORD and against his anointed one,” at the end of verse 2. The first verse is about the nations, and the second verse is about their rulers, and the verbs suggest the actions are in process. The word for anointed is *meshiach* and, as Alter says, “is used here in its political sense as the designation of the legitimate current heir to the Davidic dynasty.” He adds “without eschatological implications,” but clearly the NT writers thought otherwise!

The term *meshiach* is never used in the Bible as a title but is picked up in post-biblical literature to refer to the ideal future Davidic king and is the origin of the term “Messiah.” “The attack is against the LORD and also his anointed, suggesting that the Davidic king was viewed as God's earthly representative” (JSB).

The words of the rebellious people and rulers are quoted: “Let's throw off their shackles ... their ropes.” Shockingly, the nations and their kings “compare the rule of the Lord and his vice-regent to being imprisoned” (NET, n. 12). Then comes the response of God. He is called “The one sitting in the heavens” which is in contrast to the tumultuous words of the nations and rulers who are “taking their stand” against him. He laughs and mocks at their pitiful uprising. “The Hebrew imperfect verbal forms in vv. 4–5 describe the action from the perspective of an eyewitness who is watching the divine response as it unfolds before his eyes” (NET, n.15). The Lord declares his position emphatically: “*I myself* have set my king on Zion.” The verb here is the one used of “pouring out” a drink offering, a libation and suggests the LORD has consecrated his king as Messiah with joy.

Alter alerts us to perspective here: “Zion is a modest mountain on the crest of which sits a modest fortified town, the capital of a rather small kingdom, surrounded by vast empires. Yet the poet boldly imagines it as God's chosen city, divinely endorsed to be queen of nations and the splendour of humankind.” He calls this a “geo-theological paradox”!

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God is here envisaged as enthroned both in heaven (v. 4) and in Jerusalem (v. 6; see 1 Kings 8:13), perhaps (hyperbolically) where this mountain and heaven meet (JSB).

So then the king responds with the LORD's decree: "You are my son, today I have become your father." NET says: "The idiom reflects ancient Near Eastern adoption language associated with covenants of grant, by which a lord would reward a faithful subject by elevating him to special status, referred to as 'sonship.' Like a son, the faithful subject received an 'inheritance,' viewed as an unconditional, eternal gift. Such gifts usually took the form of land and/or an enduring dynasty" (NET, n. 23). Here the Davidic king is being viewed as YHWH's son and the background is seen also in other passages (see 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 89:26–27). The NT writers however saw beyond the political emphasis in the context here to a theological fulfilment in the resurrection and ascension of the Messiah Yeshua (Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5).

The promise to give the Davidic king "the nations ... and the ends of the earth" contrasts with the opening of the psalm, referring to "the kings of the earth" standing up against God.

Verse 9 is a neat example of the challenge for ancient Hebrew readers. The ancient text was written with just consonants, which is fine for native readers most of the time, but occasionally, without vowels, there can be more than one possible reading. Usually, the context can distinguish which of the possible readings was intended by the writer. Here the consonants are t-r-ay-m (תִּרְעֵם), but the root of this word could come from the verb "break" (r-ay-ay, רָעַע) or the verb "shepherd" (r-ay-ah, רָעָה). The Jewish rabbis who did the Greek translation (LXX), which was usually used in the NT period, translated it as "shepherd them" (Rev 2:27; 12:5; 19:15) but the MT vocalisation added the vowels for "break them" (תִּרְעֵם). It could be translated either way, but the parallel line uses the verb "smash" (*nafats*, נִפֵּץ) so "break them" is the more likely. Either way, the sense given by "iron sceptre" indicates the sovereign rule of the Davidic king.

The next verse then seems to switch back to the psalmist – given the future reign of the Davidic king, the rebellious kings need to be wise and submit to instruction! "The poem began by asking the nations and their kings why they were so stirred up. It closes by enjoining them to keep in mind the Lord's overwhelming power, which is the guarantee of Zion's continuing dominion" (Alter).

The word (*b-r*) in verse 12 translated in many English versions as "son" assumes the Aramaic is being used here for the word son. The consonants (*b-r*) could mean "pure" (see Pss 24:4; 73:1 and BDB 141 s.v. 3 בֵּר), and the translation would then be "Kiss purely/sincerely," referring to the kings showing homage to the Davidic king (see 1 Sam 10:1; Hos 13:2) but warning of the danger of not doing so with a sincere heart. NET gives interesting background on this: "The so-called 'Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon'

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also warn against such an attitude. In this treaty the vassal is told: ‘If you, as you stand on the soil where this oath [is sworn], swear the oath with your words and lips [only], do not swear with your entire heart, do not transmit it to your sons who will live after this treaty, if you take this *curse* upon yourselves but do not plan to keep the treaty of Esarhaddon...may your sons and grandsons because of this fear in the future’” (NET, n. 32).

Interestingly, the blessedness of Psalm 2:12 here is illustrated in Ruth 2:12. The blessedness refers to the happiness of God-given security and prosperity as when Ruth came to shelter under the wings of YHWH.

2 Peter 1:16-21. In this reading, we move from Moses on the mountain (Exodus), and our Lord Jesus on the mountain (Matthew), and now to the *Parousia*, the term used of the second coming of our Lord Jesus in power and glory. Peter connects these events because the glory they witnessed on the Mount of Transfiguration was a glimpse of the same glory that will be revealed at the *Parousia*.

Peter uses an indirect demonstrative when talking of Jesus: “We became eyewitnesses of *that one's* majesty.” Maybe NET is right in saying: “It is interesting to note that ‘the Pythagoreans called their master after his death simply ἐκεῖνος’ as a term of reverence and endearment (BDAG 302 s.v. ἐκεῖνος a.γ)” (NET n. 52), and maybe Peter has the same reverence and endearment here, as he recalls the revelation of the majesty on that remarkable occasion. And, in the 1st century, the word “grandeur” or “majesty” was occasionally used of the divine majesty of the emperor. 1 Peter already includes hints of a polemic against emperor worship (in that the terms “God and Savior” in 1:1 and “Lord and Savior” in 1:11 were also used of the emperor) (NET n. 53). Peter calls it “the holy mountain” because they heard God there, the Majestic Glory, and this also reflects the “holy ground” experienced by Moses and Joshua (Exod 3:5; Josh 5:15). It is interesting to know that the word “eyewitnesses” here was used in Hellenistic literature for “initiates” in the mystery religions (cf. Plutarch, *Alc.* 22) (JANT). Peter is asserting this was not a mystical experience but a flesh-and-blood experience in the presence of witnesses!

The verse says the prophetic word is altogether certain, and this is something we all now have. The meaning is that the Hebrew Scriptures (“the prophetic word”) were also a completely reliable witness to Christ’s return. NET expands on this: “The introductory καί (*kai*) suggests that the author is adding to his argument. He makes the statement that Christ will return, and backs it up with two points: (1) Peter himself (as well as the other [2] apostles) was an eyewitness to the Transfiguration, which is a precursor to the Parousia; and (2) the Gentile believers, who were not on the Mount of Transfiguration, nevertheless have the Old Testament, a wholly reliable authority that also promises the return of Christ” (NET, n.60).

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NET continues: “Most commentators see an allusion to Num 24:17 (‘a star shall rise out of Jacob’¹) in Peter’s words. Early Christian exegesis saw in that passage a prophecy about Christ’s coming. Hence, in this verse Peter tells his audience to heed the OT scriptures which predict the return of Christ, then alludes to one of the passages that does this very thing, all the while running the theme of light on a parallel track. In addition, it may be significant that Peter’s choice of terms here is not the same as is found in the LXX. He has used a Hellenistic word that was sometimes used of emperors and deities, perhaps as a further polemic against the paganism of his day” (NET, n. 64).

On a detail of historical relevance concerning verses 21 and 22, the NET says: “The adjective ἰδίας (idias) has been understood to mean (a) one’s own – i.e., the reader’s own, (b) its own – i.e., the particular prophecy’s own, or (c) the prophet’s own. ... But [none] of these views satisfactorily addresses the relationship of verse 20 to verse 21, nor do they do full justice to the meaning of γίνεται” (NET, n. 68). NET concludes: “The connection that makes the most satisfactory sense is that prophets did not invent their own prophecies (v. 20), for their impulse for prophesying came from God (v. 21).” The Christian’s faith and hope are not based on cleverly concocted fables but on the sure Word of God – one which the prophets, prompted by the Spirit of God, spoke. Peter’s point is the same as is found elsewhere in the NT, i.e., that human prophets did not *originate* the message, but they did convey it, using their own personalities in the process (NET, n. 68).

Matthew 17:1-9. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, and this reading sets out Matthew’s Gospel’s description of the occasion. The incident reflects our theme of the transforming impact of the presence of God. Like Moses, Jesus takes up with him three named disciples (Exod 24:1), but unlike Moses, the three continue up the mountain with him. A high mountain is associated with Moses and Elijah in the Hebrew Scriptures (Exod 19:20; 24:9–18; 1 Kgs 19:8–18) (JANT). Clearly, the mention of the cloud of God’s presence and his voice directly parallels what happened with Moses on Sinai.

NET says: “In 1st century Judaism and in the NT, there was the belief that the righteous get new, glorified bodies in order to enter heaven (1 Cor 15:42–49; 2 Cor 5:1–10). This transformation means the righteous will share the glory of God. One recalls the way Moses shared the Lord’s glory after his visit to the mountain in Exod 34. So the disciples saw Jesus *transfigured*, and they were getting a sneak preview of the great glory that Jesus would have (only his glory is more inherent to him as one who shares in the rule of the kingdom)” (NET, n. 3).

Why, we may ask, were Moses and Elijah present? JANT says it suggests “that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.” NET adds: “The most likely explanation is that Moses represents the

¹ Interestingly, the metaphor was also used by Shimon Bar-Kochba (Aramaic for “son of the star”), a messianic claimant and leader of the second Jewish rebellion against Rome, 132–135 CE. (JANT).

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prophetic office (Acts 3:18–22) and Elijah pictures the presence of the last days (Mal 4:5–6), the prophet of the eschaton (the end times)” (NET, n. 6).

It is interesting to note that Matthew reports Peter in the first person saying: “I will make ...”, but in Mark and Luke it is “Let us make ...”. NET explains why Peter suggests making booths: “Peter apparently wanted to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles or Booths that looked forward to the end and wanted to treat Moses, Elijah, and Jesus as equals by making *three shelters* (one for each). It was actually a way of expressing honor to Jesus, but the next verse makes it clear that it was not enough honor” (NET, n.10). Again, the voice from the cloud alludes back to Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15 by saying of Jesus: “...listen to him.” Jesus is the promised prophet like Moses and the disciples have much they have to learn from him.

The Transfiguration is loaded with allusions to the Tanakh, for example:

- The mountain as a place of revelation parallels Sinai (Exod 24).
- The appearance of Jesus' face-change may echo Exodus 24:17. The dazzling also reflects the mystical experience in Daniel 12:3.
- Moses and Elijah appeared in glory with Jesus, and (in Luke) they spoke about his “departure.” This word in Greek is the word *exodus* and obviously refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus. (Also: 2 Pet 1:15; and other Jewish writings: Philo, *Virtues* 77; Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.189; Wisdom 3:1–3).
- Moses and Elijah may be related to Jesus in a number of ways:
 1. Their unusual departure (Deut 34.6; 2 Kgs 2.11)
 2. Their experience of God's glory (Exod 25-31; 1 Kgs 19.8-18)
 3. Their pivotal prophetic status and their representation of the Law and the Prophets
- The presence of the cloud recalls God's guidance of his people by the cloud (Exod 13:21–22; 14:19–20, 24; 16:10; 19:9, 16).
- The Greek word for “overshadow” appears three times in regard to God's cloud: 1) In Ex 40:35 (in the Gk LXX), the cloud had overshadowed the new tabernacle and the glory of the Lord was filling it; 2) in Luke 1:35, it is used of the overshadowing Spirit on Mary, so conceiving the Holy One, the Son of God; and 3), here in Luke 9:34, it is used of the cloud overshadowing Jesus. Whenever the cloud overshadows, God is indwelling!
- The voice coming from the cloud also finds parallel in the passages where Moses enters the cloud to meet with God (Ex 24:15–18).
- The voice instructs the disciples to “listen to him” (9:35). In Deut 18:15, Moses says God will raise up “a prophet like me” and says: “You must listen to him.”
- The use of “My Son” resonates with Psalm 2:7, where YHWH instals his King on Zion, his holy hill. And note the use previously at Jesus' baptism (Lk 3:22).

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- The use of “the Chosen” (literally, in Luke 9:35) resonates with Isa 42:1, used of Israel as the LORD’s chosen servant, but clearly only fulfilled perfectly in his Messiah.
- This scene all took place “about 8 days after” (Luke 9:28). The Eight Day or Closing Assembly (*Atsarah*) is a term used for a special Sabbath at the end of the week-long Festival of Tabernacles. Is this also hinting at the closing of the old covenant and the commencing of the new? Certainly, Jesus also rose from the dead on the eighth day, on the first day of a new week, thereby inaugurating the new kingdom.
- In later scriptures, the cloud imagery signifies God's eschatological presence (Isa 4:5; 14:14; 19:1; Ezk 10:3–4; Dan 7:13–14)
- After the Transfiguration reading, Matthew 17:14–20 refers to Jesus coming down the mountain, not like Moses with two stone tablets in his hand but with the power to heal a demon-possessed boy. It says in Luke 9:43, after the healing: “They were all amazed at the majesty of God.” Jesus’ majesty is to be seen, not just in the glory of transfiguration, but also in the transformation of broken lives! In this incident, the disciples were powerless to heal the boy, and Jesus calls them “a faithless generation” (Luke 9:41), and this is the same description Moses uses in his final speech, regarding those in Israel who refuse to follow the LORD (Deut 32:5).

All these links show that the Tanakh talks of a Mosaic figure who is also the Suffering Servant and the Davidic royal figure, appearing at the end of times.

ACNA Readings

Psalm 99. This is the final kingship psalm² with a focus on God’s holy presence in the temple. Notice the virtues of God referred to in this psalm: He is King, awesome, great, higher than all, praiseworthy, holy, strong, a lover of justice, uprightness/equity, a doer of justice and righteousness, worthy of worship, answerer of prayers, a communicator to his people, and faithful to his word, forgiving and avenging injustice! Observe especially the emphasis on God’s holiness, and see the response of the seraphs in the celestial temple: Holy, holy, holy! (Isa 6:3). This was what made Moses’ face shine in the Exodus reading!

“He dwells between the cherubim” refers to the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies in the tabernacle and the temple. The ark was covered with the solid gold “atonement cover” out of which were beaten two golden cherubim (Ex 25:18–22; 1Chron 28:18). The LORD of Hosts or Armies (*YHWH*

² The other Royal Psalms are Psalm 29, 47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98. Wrasman says: These eight psalms reveal and emphasise ten key characteristics of God’s kingship: God is Lord over all the waters; over all the earth; over all gods; God is coming in judgement over all; is just and righteous in judgement; God’s enemies will face his wrath in the judgement; God’s people will receive his peace, strength, blessing and protection; God works out the salvation of his people; the proper response is for all to praise him. <https://andywrasman.com/2019/11/12/10-key-characteristics-of-gods-kingship-from-the-psalms/>

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Tse-va-ot) is said to sit between the cherubim, as this signified the throne of YHWH (1Sam 4:4; Isa 37:16). The ark is also called his “footstool” in v. 5 as in 1 Chron 28:2; Is 66:1; Lam 2:1.

We are told here that Moses was also a priest, with Aaron. Aaron was called the high priest, but in the narrative, Moses was seen as over Aaron, and so could be called “the great high priest,” and as Moses is a type of Christ/the Messiah in the NT, this may be one reason for the term used of Jesus in Hebrews (Heb 4:14). Though there is reference in the psalm to priests and prophet, there is no reference to a human king, as YHWH is king.

The psalm then shifts to Moses and the nation, referring to God speaking to them in a pillar of cloud (Exod 33:9–10; Num 12:5; Dt 31:15). Verse 8 may be based on Exodus 34:6–7. The Hebrew here is literally: “YHWH our Elohim, **you** answered them, a God of lifting you are to them, and avenging their deeds.” The term *ēl nōsē*, literally, “God of Lifting/Bearing,” means a God who carries away sin, so a forgiving God! The following verb seems to be in parallel, so meaning “and (a God of) avenging their (sinful) deed.” The vowels were added later in the middle ages, and if this verb was given different vowels, it could mean “and purifying them of their (sinful) deeds.” Both meanings are true, of course, purifying and avenging, in different circumstances.

Philippians 3:7-14. This epistle reading is much more grounded than the glorious mountains dominating our readings in Exodus and Matthew, but it still focuses on a *transfiguration*, a metamorphosis—Saul’s encounter with the resurrected Yeshua truly transformed him. He was led to turn his back on all personal gains that he valued in his previous life as “a Hebrew of the Hebrews” (vv. 5–6), and to find his delight in “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (v. 8), and to live in the light of “the upward call of God” (v. 14). He rejected what he saw as his former gains in Judaism to obtain a better gain. He has left his faith in his own righteousness based on law-keeping, and accepted the righteousness from God through faith in the Messiah, and because of the faithfulness of the Messiah. “Christ himself would henceforth be the gain which would enrich his life” (Müller, 1955, 114).

His “Damascus Road Experience” transformed his life then (v. 7) and still does (vv. 8–11), because he has come to know Christ Jesus personally as “my Lord,” and Christ would continue to motivate him right on till he gains the prize, the heavenward call of God (vv. 12–14). What a metamorphosis! The traditional translation of “faith in Christ” (v. 9) takes the phrase as an *objective* genitive, but it may be translated as a *subjective* genitive, meaning “Christ’s faith” or, concretely, “Christ’s faithfulness.” Either and both are true, of course, and certainly faith *in* Christ is clear elsewhere in Paul’s writings. This suggested alternative translation argues that the object of our faith is reliable and worthy of faith, which is also a blessing in our journey.

Further Reading

- Alter: *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (3 vols): Robert Alter

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- **JANT:** Levine, A.J., & Brettler, M.Z. (2011). *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Oxford University Press.
- **JSB:** Berlin, Adele, Brettler, Marc Z., & Fishbane, Michael A. (Eds.). (2004). *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*. Oxford University Press.
- Müller, Jac J. (1955). *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and Philemon*. Eerdmans.
- **NET:** *The NET Bible: Translation and Notes* (2019). Thomas Nelson.

About the author. Dr Paul Hocking has had a varied career in education, leadership and management development, planting and pastoring of a social-enterprise church, supporting the leadership of many churches and Christian charities under the auspices of Evangelical Alliance Wales, and directing the Cymru Institute for Contemporary Christianity (2010-2019). He has qualifications in Microbiology, Public Health and Action Research, and a PhD on the Hebrew Bible focusing on the composition of the book of Leviticus. He has publications in health services management and the Hebrew Bible, including two papers for CMJ on the Decalogue and Leviticus. Paul is married with two adult children.