

Did the Transfiguration Fulfill Matthew 16:28?

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Speaking to a “crowd...along with his disciples” (Mark 8:34), Jesus said this:

²⁶What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. ²⁸I tell you the truth, *some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.* (Matt. 16:26-28, NIV throughout)

Those who believe that the Second Coming of Christ occurred in the first century simply take this prediction at face value. They believe that probably, most of those “standing” there died, but “some” were still alive in AD 70 when Jesus returned. However, for those who are still waiting for the Second Coming, there is a glaring problem: none of those standing there that day are still alive. Many believe that the Transfiguration account immediately following Matthew 16 provides an adequate solution (Matt. 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36). For this interpretation, those included in “some who are standing here” are only Peter, James and John, and “the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” refers to Christ’s transfiguration. This article presents a test of the Transfiguration interpretation.

Notice how the translators have contributed to the confusion surrounding this issue. The following is an excerpt from the gospel of Mark with the words of Christ highlighted. The placement of the chapter break seems unnatural:

^{8:36}What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?
^{8:37}Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?
^{8:38}If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Chapter 9

^{9:1}And he said to them, “I tell you the truth, *some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.*”

^{9:2}After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them.

Evidently, whoever was responsible for breaking this gospel into chapters subscribed to the Transfiguration interpretation and felt that Christ’s prediction belonged in chapter 9 as a preamble to the Transfiguration account. However, many would protest that it should have come at the end of chapter 8. Why create a chapter break before Jesus finishes speaking? Chapter 9 verse 2 is where the break should be because it was “After six days.” In fact, that is exactly where the break is in Matthew’s gospel:

^{16:28}I tell you the truth, *some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.*”

Chapter 17

^{17:1}After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

In Luke’s account, there is no chapter break at all. The translators could not have been more inconsistent.

The following is a synopsis of the Transfiguration as recounted in Matt. 17:1-9:

1. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a high mountain;
2. Jesus is transfigured (his face shines and his clothes appear white);
3. Moses and Elijah appear;
4. A bright cloud envelopes the disciples;
5. A voice says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. *Listen to him!*";
6. Moses and Elijah disappear;
7. Jesus says, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

If the Transfiguration fulfilled Matt. 16:26-28, what should the disciples have seen?

1. "the Son of Man coming in his Father's glory";
2. "angels";
3. Each person being rewarded for what he has done (the Judgment);
4. "his kingdom"

At the Transfiguration, the Son of Man *was* there and he *was* changed to a certain glorified state (Matt. 17:2; Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29). However, strictly speaking, he was not "coming" because he was already there. Where would he have been coming from? There were no angels present at the Transfiguration, nor was there any sign of the Judgment taking place. In fact, very little at the Transfiguration resembled Christ's description. If Jesus was referring to the upcoming Transfiguration, we must wonder why he mentioned the Judgment. It was *completely absent* from all three Transfiguration accounts. What was the point of verses 26-27? It would be as though Jesus had said this:

1. Here's what the Transfiguration is going to look like;
2. Some standing here will live to see it;
3. When they do, it won't look anything like I just said it will look.

Who could believe such a ridiculous interpretation? Yet that's exactly what the popular explanation amounts to, and millions of Christians have accepted it without question. What details might one have expected to see in connection with the Judgment event?

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (1Thess. 4:16-17)

During the Transfiguration, the Lord did not "come down from heaven." There *was* a command that came out of the cloud, but not necessarily a "loud" command (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34-35). There was no trumpet sound, nor any sign of the Resurrection or Rapture, events that most certainly were to coincide with the Judgment. Actually, this "coming" had to be none other than the Second Coming because all of these events are linked to the Judgment and the arrival of the Kingdom of God. In short, if the Transfiguration was supposed to be the fulfillment of Matt. 16:28, then we should be reading about a scene that appears unmistakably like the Second Coming. However, the Transfiguration looks nothing like it. The disciples were *enveloped* by a cloud, but they were not "caught up...in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." And there was much more missing from the Transfiguration:

See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones (Jude 14b-15a); The seventh

angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.” (Rev. 11:15)

“[T]housands upon thousands of his holy ones” were absent from the Transfiguration, and the voice in the cloud said nothing about “the kingdom of the world” becoming “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.” Also, only Moses and Elijah were present with Jesus, but they are never mentioned as having an especially prominent position at Christ’s return, so we must wonder why the vision includes only them. If the Transfiguration is about Christ’s *coming*, why is his *departure* the topic of discussion (Luke 9:31)? All these inconsistencies make the Transfiguration interpretation look rather weak at best. What is the Transfiguration all about? Why are just Moses and Elijah present? To answer these questions, it is necessary to begin at Mount Sinai:

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and *we will listen*. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.” (Exod. 20:18-19)

From that day forward, God spoke to the Israelites through Moses, and the people said, “we will listen.” However, Moses would not live forever and was not even allowed to enter the Promised Land. Before his life was over, he warned the Israelites about the danger of taking up the ways of the heathen nations that they would encounter (Deut. 18:9-14) and then explained how he would be replaced:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must *listen to him*. (v. 15)

After Moses died, this prediction met an immediate fulfillment in Joshua:

Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites *listened to him* and did what the LORD had commanded Moses. (Deut. 34:9)

Moses and the Prophets spoke for God under the Old Covenant. It’s difficult to imagine a more prestigious calling. Israel was commanded to “listen” to them. The Law came through Moses, and for hundreds of years God spoke to his people through prophets. The high regard for “Moses and the Prophets” as the two great authorities in the history of Israel continued right down to the time of Jesus. The New Testament contains numerous references to “Moses and the Prophets” or “the Law and the Prophets.” Moses and the Law were synonymous.

Elijah was arguably Israel’s greatest prophet after Moses (Deut. 34:10-11) having raised the dead (1Kgs. 17:17-24), and his name was associated with the arrival of the Messiah (Mal. 4:5-6). At the Transfiguration, we see Jesus standing with Moses, who is representing the Law, and Elijah, who is representing the Prophets. The voice from the cloud refers to Jesus and says, “*Listen to him!*” (Matt. 17:5b). Then, Moses and Elijah disappear leaving only Jesus. The Transfiguration appears to have been a demonstration showing that Jesus was the successor to Moses and the Prophets. That is how the author of Hebrews portrayed Christ:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son*, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Heb. 1:1-2)

The command “Listen to him!” links Christ to Israel’s prophets and the original prediction made by Moses. It becomes obvious that the Transfiguration had nothing to do with Christ’s final “coming in his kingdom” at the end of the age. Clearly, there is no valid reason to abandon the

literal meaning of Matt. 16:28 for a highly questionable interpretation. Those who do are motivated only by the presupposition that Jesus could not possibly have returned in the first century, not by the details of the Transfiguration accounts. However, even if accepted, the Transfiguration “solution” solves nothing because Paul reiterated Christ’s prediction of an early Second Coming *long after* the Transfiguration. He understood that some would still be alive when it occurred:

According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord...the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God...we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air... (1Thess. 4:15-17)

This seems to be a direct reference to the words of Jesus in Matt. 16:28. Paul predicts exactly what Jesus did. However, Paul’s prediction could not possibly be referring to the Transfiguration which took place decades earlier.

The Transfiguration appears to be quite unrelated to Christ’s prediction in Matt. 16:28 since there is very little evidence to support interpreting the event as a preview of the Judgment. The two events have practically nothing in common. The “coming” in verse 28 is inextricably linked to verse 27. It cannot be separated from the image of thousands of angels being present as the Resurrection and Judgment take place.

Objection: You have stated that Moses’ prediction in Deut.18:15 was fulfilled by Joshua. However, in Acts 3:22-24, Peter indicates that it referred to Jesus:

²²For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. ²³Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.’ ²⁴‘Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days.’ (Acts 3:22-24)

Answer: When Moses said, “God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers,” it’s doubtful that he was thinking about Jesus. If Moses *was* thinking ahead to Christ, it would have gone right over the heads of the people. For Moses, the issue was providing a successor after his 40 years of leadership, and the people would have understood it that way. Moses said, “You must *listen to him*.” This was clearly fulfilled by Joshua: “So the Israelites *listened to him*.” Of course, God could have inspired Moses to speak words that would later be reinterpreted by Peter. Other New Testament authors offer interpretations of the Old Testament that seem quite unrelated to the original text. Actually, in Acts 3:24, Peter connects Jesus *and* numerous other prophets to Moses’ prediction. In effect, every prophet would be another fulfillment with Christ being the last and greatest prophet.

Objection: Peter refers to the Transfiguration as the “coming of our Lord” in 2Pet. 1:16-18:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and *coming of our Lord* Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. (2Pet. 1:16-18)

Answer: It is unlikely that Peter’s “coming of our Lord” in this passage is referring to the Transfiguration. It appears that Peter is simply referring to Christ’s first coming into the world and then using the Transfiguration to buttress his testimony regarding Christ’s divinity. If Peter did intend the “coming” to refer to the Transfiguration, it is by no means clear. After his salutation in verses 1-2, Peter begins his message:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2Pet. 1:3-4)

The first two chapters of Peter's letter are about avoiding sin and replacing it with "wholesome thinking" (3:1). He reminds his audience that Christ's "divine power" is available to help them deal with "the corruption in the world caused by evil desires." Next, he encourages them to keep the faith and reminds them of their eternal reward (v. 10-11). Then in verses 16-18, he endeavors to further establish and defend Christ's credibility. He mentions Christ's "coming" — *into the world* — and then draws on the Transfiguration event as further support for Christ's divinity. However, he never clearly states or implies that the "coming" was the Transfiguration. That *assumption* is spawned by the unfortunate close proximity of the two items in text. Some might argue that since the wording here is somewhat ambiguous, it could actually allow for the "coming of our Lord" to be referring to the Transfiguration. Perhaps, but only if we ignore the rest of the New Testament.

Here is the essential question: When Jesus predicted that some would still be alive to witness "the Son of Man coming in his kingdom," was he referring to the Transfiguration? There is no unquestionable support in 2Pet. 1:16-18 for that interpretation. Peter offers no clear indication that the Transfiguration was intended to be a vision of "the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" as specified in Matt. 16:26-28. Furthermore, there is no solid support to be found anywhere else. In fact, we have seen that evidence throughout the New Testament exposes the Transfiguration interpretation as being suspect to the point of being completely unbelievable since the key features of the Judgment and other related events were entirely absent.

Ultimately, those who take the position that all Bible prophecy has been fulfilled can believe whatever they want to on this. They are actually free to believe that the Transfiguration was the fulfillment of Matt. 16:28. It will not affect the outcome of their eschatological system. It's only those who are still waiting for the Second Coming of Christ who feel compelled to adopt this highly questionable interpretation for lack of anything more substantial. They understand that Matt. 16:28, if taken at face value, obliterates futurism. So they tell themselves that the Transfiguration provides a way out. However, the "coming" that Jesus referred to in Matt. 16:28 included the Judgment (v. 26-27), which of course, coincided with the Second Coming, Resurrection and Rapture; and Jesus said plainly that some of those standing there that day would live to see it. Baffled expositors of futurism, blinded by their presupposition, grasp for something to rescue their futurist paradigm, but in the process, abandon sound exegesis to accept a seriously flawed interpretation.

Objection: You have stated that "the coming of our Lord" in 2Pet. 1:16 refers to Christ's first coming. However, the word "coming" in the Greek is *parousia*. Isn't that referring to the Second Coming?

Answer: The Greek word *parousia* does not refer to the Second Coming exclusively in the New Testament. For instance, "the coming of the lawless one" in 2Thess. 2:9 is also a *parousia*. In other places, *parousia* is translated as "presence" or "arrived" and does not refer to Jesus. So Peter's use of *parousia* does not necessarily refer to the Second Coming.

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