

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Aug 6th 2016

Reflecting on Luke's narrative of the transfiguration of Jesus from a special point-of-view-- how I imagine the experience of these Jewish men, Peter, James, and John—has given me a whole new way of understanding what is going on.

As Luke tells it, Jesus has taken them up a mountain to pray. That must have reminded them of Moses going up Mount Sinai to commune with God as the disciples knew from the book of Exodus. Jesus' face has changed and his garment turns dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear in glory with him. For these three disciples Moses and Elijah appearing together (as they could not have done in their lifetimes, having lived a couple hundred years apart) would have symbolized the essence of the Torah—Moses stood for the law and Elijah represented the prophets. When Peter, James and John routinely said the Jewish daily prayer, the Shema Yisra'el (Hebrew for “Hear, O Israel!”), they knew that the main thing they were to hear was the word of God expressed in the law and the prophets.

When Luke says that these two talked with Jesus, he alone of the three synoptic writers speaks of the content of the conversation; they were conversing with him “about the exodus [or departure] that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.” The Greek word *exodos* can simply mean ‘departure’ [as a reference to his death, resurrection and ascension], but when it is Moses himself talking, one surely thinks of the biblical exodus, the divine release from bondage and the making of the covenant. Apparently the disciples did not hear this as Luke says they were asleep during the conversation; but we the readers do hear it and we can connect it with the theme of New Exodus that Luke develops in his Gospel. For Jesus is indeed a “new Moses,” leading a new kind of freedom march.

When the three awaken, they see Jesus' glory and the two men with him. As the two were leaving, Peter expresses the understandable desire to “freeze” the moment. “Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Luke next writes, “While he was still speaking, a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened when they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said,

‘This is my chosen Son; listen to him.’”

Having learned about the Shema (“Hear [Listen up!], O Israel!”), I can now only hear the voice saying, “This is my chosen Son; listen to him.” In other words, ‘Having listened to the law and the prophets, now listen to my Son. What you learned from Moses and the prophets, you can now hear as fulfilled in

the words and person of Jesus.’ Our narrator seem to underscore that meaning when he writes, “After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone”—bearing in his person, words, and action, the fullness of the law and the prophets. It is our task as followers of Jesus to hear him as Israel was called to respond to the law and the prophets. And that is why we still read the law and the prophets, to hear Jesus even more fully as their fulfillment.

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