

A Question about the Transfiguration

Commentary for June 14, 2009 — Moses and Elijah Are Not Alive

A question was asked regarding the state of the dead relative to Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. Of course, Moses and Elijah each had been dead for many centuries.

Question: *Please can you answer/comment: If we are destined to remain in our graves with no senses at all until the resurrection, how do you explain the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus at the transfiguration? Thank you.*

Answer: The transfiguration of Jesus happened as presented:

“And after six days Jesus takes Peter, James, and John his brother, and brings them up into a high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias [Elijah] talking with him.”

• *Matthew 17:1–3*

Parallel passages occur of Mark 9:2–9 and Luke 9:28–36. In the Matthew account the quality and nature of what Peter, James, and John saw is precisely stated: the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus at the transfiguration was a VISION:

“Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.”

• *Matthew 17:9*

In the parallel passages in Mark and Luke the word “vision” in Greek is not used. The event had every indication of a physical reality, even to the extent that Peter wanted to build shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah (Matthew 17:4; Mark 9:5; and Luke 9:33). Perhaps Peter thought they would all spend several days there, as Moses did on Mount Sinai.

The Mark and Luke passages describe what was seen, but did not explain how they saw it. Matthew 17:9 explained how they saw it. In fact, as a result of the vision the three apostles asked questions among themselves about the resurrection from the dead¹:

“And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead. And they kept that saying with themselves, questioning one with another what the rising from the dead should mean.”

• *Mark 9:9–10*

The Word “Vision” in Matthew 17:9

The same Greek word translated “vision” in the King James Version for Matthew 17:9 is found in Acts 2:17, 7:31, 9:10, 12, 10:3, 17, 19, 11:5, 12:9, 16:9–10, 18:9; and Revelation 9:17 in various noun forms. In all but one of these occurrences the Greek word is translated “vision” in the KJV. Only in Acts 7:31 is the word translated “sight” but “vision” is consistent and correct as well. When Stephen spoke to the Sanhedrin he said:

1. Were they questioning whether Moses and Elijah were resurrected? That is doubtful because Jesus told them (albeit in Matthew 17:9) that the appearance of the two prophets were not real but was a vision. No, they were questioning “rising from the dead” of the Son of man and what it would mean.

“When Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight [the vision]²: and as he drew near to behold it, the voice of the Lord came unto him ...”

• Acts 7:31

- In Acts 2:17 the apostle Peter uses the word “visions,” plural, to describe what he expected to occur in a few years, when he quoted the Book of Joel.
- Both Ananias’ (Acts 9:10) and Saul (Acts 9:12) received a vision from God after Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus.
- Both Cornelius (Acts 10:3) and Peter (Acts 10:17, 19, and 11:5) received a vision from God.
- The apostle Paul had a vision instructing him to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:9–10).
- Paul later had a vision in Corinth (Acts 18:9).
- John saw horses in the vision of Revelation 9:17.³

What They Saw

What Peter, James, and John saw on the mount was a real event, they actually did see Moses and Elijah, but they were not alive at that time. The apostles were shown a moving life-like vision of the two prophets. Moses and Elijah continued to be dead and are dead at this moment, just as King David is dead (Acts 2:29). Only Christ has risen from the dead and has immortality (1 Timothy 6:16).

Moses and Elijah were not alive at that time. Jesus was not actually in His glory at that moment; He only appeared to be in His glory in vision. Moses and Elijah appeared in the same vision. Yet the vision was so real that Jesus even talked with them both (Matthew 17:3; Mark 9:4; and Luke 9:30).

The effect of all such visions are profound and significant. Each has every appearance of reality. As a pale comparison, technology today can reproduce voices of people who are long dead, movies can reproduce moving images of people long dead. Another way to describe such a “vision” experienced by Peter, James, and John would be that it was like a vivid holographic image or a three-dimensional movie surrounding the viewer with not just sights and sounds, but even sensations of touch and smell and taste, all so real they seem to be more than just a vision.⁴ Yet in Matthew 17:9 Jesus Himself called it a vision.

After that experience the apostles asked Jesus about Elijah:

“And his disciples asked him, saying, ‘Why then say the scribes that Elias [Elijah] must first come?’ And Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things.’”

• Matthew 17:10–11

For more details, especially about the two witnesses (of which Moses and Elijah were types), and other information about the transfiguration episode, see Dr. Martin’s information in the article [“The Elijah to Come.”](#)

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2. Stephen means that the burning bush that was not consumed in Exodus 3:1–12 was also a vision.
 3. In Luke 1:22, 24:23 and 2 Corinthians 12:1 the King James Version uses the English “vision/visions” to translate from a different Greek word than the one used in Matthew 17:9 and the other verses in this Commentary.
 4. The apostle Paul described something similar when he tells of an experience (the word translated “vision” is from a different Greek word) in 2 Corinthians 12:1–4. In that instance Paul could not tell whether he was in his body or outside of it when taken to the **“third heaven”!**