

Listen to Him:
The Exhortation of Matthew 17:5
in the Context of the Transfiguration Narrative

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Dedication

Dr. Alan Tomlinson has taught me more about the New Testament than any other person, and the comparison is not close. I have never heard him discussing a passage of the New Testament without fresh and decisive insight, either by revealing its deeper logic and connection to the wider context or by placing it against the background of Greco-Roman history and culture. Usually, he does both at once, taking our perception of the text from black and white to living color. His many students would concur, I trust, sometimes with nostalgia for old (now useless) sermons and days of blissfully misplaced certainty. Thus, it is with great enthusiasm and unease that I offer this essay in his honor, knowing how much he deserves the praise and how far short I may have fallen. And that is, after all, an added problem: I might be have gone wrong in this very article—wrong in a way that only Alan could see—and he would have no heart to tell me; but if so, one may reckon this fact as another token of his greatness, not just as a biblical scholar, but also as a Christian and a friend. They do not get any better.

Introduction

In the Transfiguration scene, the Father states a fact about Jesus and gives a specific command. The fact is that Jesus is the Father's beloved Son, with whom he is well pleased (v. 5). The command is to listen to Jesus. But this event invites certain questions as to its larger purpose. Why does it happen at all, and what—if anything in particular—must the disciples hear when Jesus speaks? Of course, there is no logical rule in

force here, calling for just one answer. Perhaps the Transfiguration hits several related targets. Nevertheless, it may be instructive for us to consider the other possibility, as an experimental step. Could this event have been called for, in essence, by recent events in Matthew's gospel? Does it happen 'on cue,' so to speak, as if to meet a need—or answer a particular question—raised implicitly by what we observe in chapters 1-16? We shall argue that it does. That is, Peter, James, and John are allowed to see what they do as a corrective gesture, the necessity of the latter being established by preceding chapters of Matthew's gospel.

To make our case, therefore, three steps will be necessary. First, we must underscore the fact that Matthew's gospel makes an apologetic case, supporting Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."¹ This part of our task will not be difficult, of course, because it is uncontroversial. We know that Matthew's gospel serves an evidential purpose, whatever else it does. Nevertheless, the argument given here will be stronger if we have surveyed this material as a prelude to chapter 16. Secondly, we shall consider the contents of chapter 16 which accentuate a theoretical problem found elsewhere in Matthew's gospel, though in muted form. This problem concerns the plausibility of Peter's high Christology, seen in the light of all facts revealed thus far by Jesus himself, whether in word or deed. Finally, we shall examine both the Transfiguration itself and its immediate aftermath (17:9-27).

Matthew's Case for Christ

From the first verse of his gospel, Matthew advances the claim that Jesus is "the Messiah, the son of David" (v. 1). He proceeds to do so by telling the story of Jesus in ways that display the latter's qualifications as such.² Accordingly, in 1:1-17, we observe that Jesus is qualified to be the Messiah (or at least not eliminated on this ground) based on his genealogy. He is, whatever else, a son of David the king. Then in 1:18-25, Matthew presents the circumstances of Jesus's birth as fittingly

¹ All citations of Scripture in this essay are taken from the English Standard Version.

² So W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. 1, ICC, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p. 157.

Messianic.³ He is conceived virginally by the Holy Spirit (v. 18). His father Joseph is guided by an angel in a dream, during which Joseph is told to name his son ‘Jesus,’ given this name’s soteriological nuance (v. 21).⁴ These events will also fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, as Jesus is “God with (his people)” in an escalated sense (v. 23).

The same marshaling of evidence continues in chapters 2 through 4, as Matthew adds further credentials. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, as the Messiah should be, based on Micah 5:2. Even the adversaries Jesus—the chief priests and scribes—confess that the Messiah would have to be born in Bethlehem, as Jesus was (vv. 4-6). Furthermore, the experiences of the Magi underscore the supernatural aspect of Jesus’ birth. They appear in Bethlehem because of an unusual star, and this star (in mysterious ways) guides them straight to newborn King (vv. 2, 9).⁵ The remainder of chapter 2 finds Jesus being angelically protected from Herod’s rage, as one of them warns Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt, until the old king dies (vv. 13-15). Before that event occurs, however, Herod is able to kill a great number of young boys—seen as potential threats—based on the timing of the Magi’s earliest sightings of the star. This slaughter of innocents fulfills both the dark and light elements of Jeremiah 31. There is weeping in Ramah because of Herod’s ruthless act; yet the same deed signals the dawn of a new covenant, centered on the person and work of this child (vv. 16-19).

John the Baptist appears in chapter 3, as required, given the content of Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 4:5-6. To qualify as the Messiah, Jesus must have his presence signaled by just such a prophet. At the close of chapter 3, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus following his baptism, and the Father speaks from heaven, confirming what Matthew’s gospel has suggested thus far. “This is My beloved Son,” the Father says, “in

³ So, e.g., Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, ECNT, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), p. 61; Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, Translated by David Green, (Atlanta: Knox, 1975), p. 21.

⁴ While it is a popular name of that time, *Yeshua* (= Jesus) acquires precise significance as a name for this child as the one through whom “Yahweh saves.”

⁵ Some attempt has been made to construe this guidance as an instance of poetic license (cf. discussion in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, pp. 246-247), but its concrete historicity is intended by Matthew, though he does not specify the precise form that this guidance took (so, then, R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 69).

whom I am well-pleased” (vv. 16-17)—words that we shall encounter once more in 17:5.⁶ Even so, Matthew’s Christological case proceeds. Chapter 4 shows us that Jesus can pass the wilderness test (4:1-11), unlike the rebellious first “son” (Israel) who was called out of Egypt (2:15; cf. Hosea 11:1-2).⁷ Jesus settles in Capernaum, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, which enlightens these regions (vv. 15-16) and marks Jesus as the extraordinary figure of Isaiah 9:6-7. He is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace who shall reign forever on David’s throne.⁸ The same technique—which finds Matthew citing an OT passage briefly while expecting the reader to recall its wider context—is present in 2:18. Matthew quotes only Jeremiah 31:15, in that context, but he trusts the reader to remember Jeremiah’s subsequent prophecy of a new covenant, just a few verses later (31:31-34).

In chapters 5-7, Jesus teaches with authority, as the Messiah must do, and so boldly that the crowds are “amazed at his teaching” (7:28-29). He has authority to teach in his own right, as a king issuing decrees, and this implicit claim is authenticated by two subsequent chapters that show us his ability to heal grave illnesses and command the forces of nature, at times and in ways that only God could do.⁹ By the time we reach chapter 10, therefore, Matthew expects us to have concluded that Jesus must be the Messiah. No one could claim this record of word and deed without being the Christ. But in chapter 9, and with increasing emphasis as Jesus approaches the cross, we see another theme emerge, one dimly present in earlier texts (cf. the rejection-verses in 8:10-12; 18-22; and 33-34), but now almost inescapable: dark forces

⁶ So Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, p. 339.

⁷ Cf. Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 51; R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 53.

⁸ Cf. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 174: “It is not likely to be lost on Matthew that his citation from Isaiah has in its context the messianic text Is. 9:6-7, which makes such a good connection with his own infancy account in 1:18-25.”

⁹ So, e.g., R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, TNTC, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 150; Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 258-259.

will oppose Jesus and his followers, sometimes in violent form. The parables of the kingdom presuppose and account for this kind of adversity (chapter 13), and we see ties between glory and suffering in chapters 14 and 15. In such contexts, the kingdom suffers opposition; nevertheless, Jesus validates his Messianic status by doing spectacular miracles.

From Doubt to Faith and Back Again

In chapters 1-14, therefore, Matthew's case for Christ is strong. He has given the reader a basis to conclude that Jesus really is the Messianic Son of God. Nevertheless, Jesus remains an object of doubt more than trust, and this problem escalates in chapter 16, which then sets the stage for the Transfiguration. In vv. 1-4, Jesus faces a demand from the Pharisees and Sadducees to show them a "sign from heaven," although he has recently and miraculously fed groups of five and four thousand (chapters 14 and 15, respectively).¹⁰ Given their skill in reading the weather, Jesus marvels at their willful blindness regarding his signs and their significance, which would be clear in any case, quite apart from this analogy.¹¹ Yet in vv. 5-12, the disciples also go wrong in a similar way, suspecting that Jesus may be incapable of providing bread for their small group. Thus, they interpret his warning, "beware of the leaven of Pharisees and Sadducees," in literal terms.¹² For such reasons, one

¹⁰ On the culpability of their refusal to believe, cf., e.g., Margaret Hannan, *The Nature and Demands of the Sovereign Rule of God in the Gospel of Matthew*, (London: T & T Clark), pp. 135-136.

¹¹ On the text-critical matter of the words beginning, "When it is evening, you say. . .", cf. Jeffrey Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-20:34*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2010), p. 797 and D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 360-361; contrasted with Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, translated by James Crouch, Hermeneia, Vol. 2, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p. 347, who favors the shorter reading. In either case, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of self-inflicted blindness regarding the significance of his previous miracles.

¹² Keener (1999) and France (1985) attribute this failure to sinful preoccupation with physical need, which is a natural aspect of this exchange. Nevertheless, the warning of v. 6, "Beware," etc., suggests a common sin linking vv. 1-4 and 5-12: the disciples have drifted into a pattern of unbelief that compares too closely

approaches vv. 13-20 pessimistically. One expects continued error regarding the identity of Jesus and his own frustrated responses to it. No one has shown a durable grasp of who Jesus is. All convictions regarding his nature are, it seems, defeasible by moderate forms of contrary evidence. However, on a clear note of contrast, v. 16 reports a triumph of divine power.¹³ No one has understood; then Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” What has changed to make his response possible?

In vv. 17-19, Jesus accounts for Peter’s confession in supernatural terms. “Flesh and blood” did not reveal such facts to Peter (the pronoun is singular), but the “Father who is in heaven” (v. 17).¹⁴ The same idea has appeared previously in 11:25-27 and 13:11, both of which emphasize the revealing power of the God, overcoming natural human blindness concerning the person and work of his Messianic Son.¹⁵ This power will strengthen the church, as supernaturally fortified, even when it is assaulted by the forces of Hades (v. 18). Thus, in vv. 19, Jesus can announce that whatever the disciples bind and loose on earth will take effect, because these transactions are supernaturally underwritten in heaven (v. 19).¹⁶ Nevertheless, this passage concludes on a mysterious

with the Pharisees and Sadducees, whose agenda is not to be filled but to have their skepticism overcome by freshly supplied miracles.

¹³ France, *Matthew*, (1985), and Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, WBC 33b, (Dallas: Word, 1995), p. 469, balance the miraculous/revelatory cause of Peter’s confession with a sense of gradual recognition as to the Lord’s identity; nevertheless, the contrast between vv. 5-12 and v. 16 should not be missed: an act of divine revelation has made all the difference.

¹⁴ So, then, James Penner, “Revelation and Discipleship in Matthew’s Transfiguration Account,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (April-June 1995), p. 202; Ian S. Kemp, “The Blessing, Power and Authority of the Church: A Study in Matthew 16:17-19,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 40:2 (2016), p. 131.

¹⁵ On v. 17 as reminiscent of 11:25-27, cf. John Nolland, *Matthew*, p. 666.

¹⁶ Some difficulty surrounds Matthew’s use of the future perfect passive verbs (‘will have been tied up,’ ‘will have been untied’) in this verse, specifically as to whether it requires the translation, “shall have been bound,” so that a divine ‘already’ precedes and grounds what the disciples have yet to bind and loose. For our purposes, we need only observe what Matthew would not, in any case, permit: viz., the notion that God follows the lead of Peter and others. So, e.g., Osborne, *Matthew*, p. 629; and Carson, “Matthew,” pp. 370-374, whose treatment of this issue is especially useful. France, *Matthew*, p. 627, sees more

note, especially in light of vv. 18-19. That is, notwithstanding Peter's high confession, Jesus tells his disciples to conceal his true identity (v. 20). He forbids evangelism at this point, which is not intuitive. Why *not* tell everyone who he really is?

The answer to our question follows in vv. 21-23, and it provides the central context of the command, "listen to him," which is forthcoming. We now learn that the disciples have accepted only half of the story regarding the person and work of Christ. To be sure, the villains of Matthew's gospel would have continued their game, opposing Jesus at periodic intervals. He would have enemies, and so would his disciples. Matthew's gospel has prepared us for rising hostility as it proceeds. Jesus has even alluded to the violent end of his own life (9:15; 10:38; and 12:40). Thus, the news of v. 21 could not have been a complete shock to his disciples.¹⁷ However, v. 21 still disturbs them, because it enforces the certainty of their master's death and describes the latter in added detail. Jesus is killed, and worse yet: with the "elders and chief priests and scribes" leading the way. He will not escape from death, nor from such a death; and it is this grim portrait that offends Peter. He is ready to call Jesus the Christ and Son of God, as he has been blessed to do. What he cannot abide, however, is the concept of his master's defeat and death, its unrelenting necessity.

Two ideas are thus suggested by this exchange between Jesus and Peter, following his statement in v. 21, and they constitute the essential backdrop of the Transfiguration. First, as Matthew has noted previously, Peter could not have said what he does in v. 16 by "flesh and blood" alone. Even the bright side of Matthew's case for Christ—the authoritative teaching combined with miracles—does not speak for itself, compelling belief on strictly natural grounds. Rather, if Peter now sees that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God, he must do so by means of

behind the tenses involved, so that they should be taken with full sequential import. At a minimum, the sense is of "coordinated action" (cf. Nolland, *Matthew*, p. 681).

¹⁷ Cf. Paul Tanner, "The Cost of Discipleship: Losing One's Life for Jesus' Sake," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 56.1 (2013), p 45: "His rejection, on the other hand, was more understandable in that there had been plenty of occasions in which Jesus had been in confrontation with the religious leadership of the nation. So the announcement of their rejection of him would not have been so surprising."

special revelation. But secondly, the exchange seen in vv. 21-23 highlights the deepest challenge faced by the disciples. Having confessed Jesus as Christ and Son of God, will they stand convinced as he approaches Jerusalem? Will they take his passion predictions at face value, as plain statements of what must take place?

Once again, Matthew's gospel offers little hope regarding our last question, especially given Peter's rebuke in 16:22. The disciples are in clear danger of resisting Jesus all the more, and this hazard would account for the events described in 17:1-8. Peter himself has fallen from previous heights of Caesarea Philippi, and thus a greater form of revelation may now be necessary, whatever its final effect. The Transfiguration may well serve a corrective purpose, accentuating the real identity of Jesus and insisting on acceptance of his teaching, however unwelcome the latter may be. Jesus has the right and power to tell them what must and will occur in Jerusalem, because his authority surpasses even Moses and Elijah.

The Transfiguration

Consider, then, the events of 17:1-8. Our scene begins with visible changes happening to Jesus, all of them suggestive of deity. His face shines like the sun, and his garments become white as light (17:2). Either simultaneously or subsequently, Moses and Elijah appear (v. 3), and Matthew describes the two prophets as conversing with Jesus, though he does not specify the topic of their remarks (cf. Luke 9:31, where the subject is his "exodus"). In any case, the appearance of these two prophets has two plausible objectives, given what Matthew's gospel has shown thus far, with the one depending on the other. First, the intent of the Transfiguration is to emphasize the essential difference between Jesus and these Old Testament figures, notwithstanding their acknowledged greatness. Moses is the prophet *par excellence* who sets the pattern for one who is to come (Deuteronomy 18:18). Elijah is a prophetic herald, filling shoes later worn by John the Baptist (Malachi 4:5-6). Both of them experience the extraordinary presence and power of God on mountains (Exodus 19-20; 1 Kings 18-19). Nevertheless, this scene portrays them as flatly inferior to Jesus, given the latter's visible glorification and description by the Father as "My beloved Son" (v. 5). Moses and Elijah are heroes indeed, but they are not Sons of God, as per

the spotlight on Jesus. Secondly, by raising the status of Jesus far above these other prophets, the Transfiguration also casts his authority in a unique light; and this authority will be crucial in addressing the disciples' doubts in the wake of his passion predictions.¹⁸

So then, Jesus assures his disciples that he will suffer and die, and they resist him all the while. But the Transfiguration puts a foot down, as it were, insisting that they accept the unacceptable. Jesus does more than speak for God, as Moses and Elijah could do: he speaks *as* God, matching his supreme authority with his supreme nature. Thus, Jesus should not be challenged when he predicts his own suffering and death. The disciples must "listen to him" on this point, as well as any other, whatever their own desires. In fact, some trace of doubt may have contributed to Peter's offer to construct "three tents" on the mountain for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah (v. 4).¹⁹ That is, if Jesus will die in Jerusalem, he might barely escape by staying away and remaining where he now is. Certainly it would make sense for Peter to think along such lines, if he has taken the statement of 16:21 as being true 'other things being equal' or 'until further notice.'²⁰ Even if he simply blurts out this suggestion, however, the Transfiguration would have the same, larger purpose: it confronts the doubts of Peter, James, and John with the unique authority of Jesus; and the same doubts surface in the next two scenes of Matthew's gospel.

¹⁸ So, then, Armand Puig J. Tarrech, "The Glory on the Mountain: The Episode of the Transfiguration of Jesus," *New Testament Studies*, 58 (2012), p. 169, who reaches similar conclusions regarding 17:5 and its implied context: "The command to listen to Jesus takes on a profound dimension when it is set against the failure to listen and the rebuke Peter had addressed to the Master. It is especially to Jesus that one must listen, even before Moses and Elijah."

¹⁹ Peter may have offered to build temporary stone shelters, as opposed to tents ('tent' need not be technical here; so Tarrech, "The Glory on the Mountain," p. 169.). His motive would be the same in any case, to be explained in due course.

²⁰ Thus we are allowing Peter's offer to have been more strategic, perhaps, than most commentators on this passage do, while allowing it to be sufficiently 'tone deaf' to deserve Mark and Luke's reference to Peter as not knowing what he was saying (Mark 9:6; Luke 9:33). Cf. Nolland, *Matthew*, p. 703; France, *Matthew*, p. 649; Carson, "Matthew," p. 385-386, who express greater doubts as to Peter's objectives here.

Events Following the Transfiguration

In 17:9, Jesus and his disciples begin their descent; and as they do so, Jesus requires silence as to what they have seen “until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” But instead of noting the good news behind his command—viz., that he will defeat death at last—the disciples concentrate on his death. That is, if Jesus will surely rise from the dead, then he will surely die; and how could this calamity strike, if John the Baptist preached as “Elijah,” preparing the Lord’s way (Is 40:3-5)?²¹ This concern informs their question, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?,” and it may also point to an even greater worry, albeit a subtle one. If doubts remain concerning John the Baptist, doubts must arise concerning Jesus himself. As the one goes, so goes the other. Therefore, Jesus answers this question in two stages. First, he confirms that John is ‘Elijah,’ but then he corrects the disciples’ view of what it means for John to have prepared the Messiah’s way. They believe that a prepared way leaves no place for the Messiah’s suffering and death. Jesus responds by construing John’s suffering and death foreshadowing his own. Suffering and death are simply what happens when the kingdom confronts the world. For our purposes, however, it is enough to note that this dialogue turns on the same problem raised immediately before the Transfiguration in 16:21-28. Can the Messiah really suffer and die?

The same concern informs the failure described in 17:14-20. Some of the disciples did not witness the Transfiguration, but stayed among the people. Thus, in the structure of Matthew’s gospel, their most recent theory of Jesus would be shaped by images of his suffering and death. Jesus would lose evidently, having been rejected as Israel’s Messiah; and this fact, once accepted, would explain the disciples’ doubts in vv. 14-20. A man presents his son to Jesus, referring to former’s symptoms as indicative of lunacy or insanity (vv. 14-15). He also laments that the other disciples could not heal the boy (v. 16), even though they have done far more at other times (cf. 10:8: “. . . heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons”). What would account for their inability to do this relatively simple thing? In v. 20, Jesus answers: their failure stems from a lack of faith, which has now shrunk to a size

²¹ So, then, Carson, “Matthew,” p. 389; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 499.

not even as large as a mustard seed.”²² At one point, they had sufficient trust in Jesus, and now they do not. Perhaps his passion predictions occasioned their rising doubts. Certainly these statements are, from the perspective of the Twelve, the most unwelcome that Jesus has made, and we could have expected such ideas to upend his followers. But if so, the command, “listen to him,” is even more likely to have the passion predictions in view.

A third passion prediction occurs in 17:22-23, and it supplies more detail. Jesus will suffer and die because someone will hand him over to the authorities, as his use of παραδίωμι in v. 22 (παραδίδοσθαι εἰς χεῖρας ἀνθρώπων) implies. But again, if men can lay hands on Jesus in this violent sense, perhaps he is not the Messiah. How could the transfigured person of 17:2-3 be overcome by mere mortals? Something has to ‘give’; and the question fielded by Peter in v. 24 only makes the problem worse. Does Jesus pay the Temple Tax? Peter confirms that he does; but in saying “Yes,” Peter’s doubts may have resurfaced. If Jesus pays his taxes—if he pays his dues, so to speak—perhaps he is just a man, subject to human authority, scandalous betrayal, and horrific death. But two events follow in this context, and they would have the same effect as the Transfiguration. First, when Peter enters a house occupied by Jesus, the latter speaks first, depending on knowledge that only the Son of God could have. He already knows what the collectors asked Peter and what his response was.²³ Then, having secured Peter’s agreement that special people (like a king’s sons) are not required to pay taxes (vv. 25-26), Jesus arranges to pay the Temple Tax in a way that only the Son of God could,

²² Jesus might also be contrasting the faith that they have now with a different kind to be manifested in the future (so James W. Scott, “The Misunderstood Mustard Seed: Matt 17:20b; Luke 17:6,” *Trinity Journal*, 36, (2015), pp. 25-48), though an actual crisis of faith may be more congruent with the immediate context of this passage. On the reference to a mustard seed, cf. Nolland, *Matthew*, p. 716: “the ‘little faith’ conceded to the disciples is at this point so small that it makes faith as small as a mustard seed very grand by comparison.”

²³ Thus, the knowledge suggested here is probably more than what “a good prophet” would have (*pace* Keener, *Matthew*, p. 444) or what might have been drawn from overhearing the conversation (cf. Carson, “Matthew,” pp. 394-395; France, *Matthew*, p. 668, who leave the matter open). This time is precisely right for a reminder of who Jesus really is, starting with his ability to know what an ordinary man could not know.

i.e., by means of a miracle. Peter will find a coin in the mouth of the first fish that he catches, and it will be sufficient for the two of them. As with the Transfiguration, these smaller displays of divine power answer doubts raised by the vulnerability of Jesus—his subjectivity, if one will—to suffering and death.

Conclusion

The argument presented above advances the theory that when the Father insists, “listen to (Jesus),” the latter’s suffering and death are principally in view. They are shocking facts about him, and they will continue to be a concern in, for example, the letters of Paul (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18f.). As Matthew has emphasized, it is hard enough to understand Jesus, without the static created by these terrible realities. More than “flesh and blood” is required, even in ordinary circumstances. But the Transfiguration confronts the larger mystery of the passion, answering it with maximally displayed authority. The disciples must listen to Jesus in all that he says, even when his teaching opposes the doctrines of Israel’s teachers and the selfish motives of human agency. Still more, they must listen to him in the face of doubt created by his predictions of betrayal, suffering, and death. Peter has resisted this news, and the other disciples have failed as well. We also know that they will collapse entirely before the Third Day comes. Only then will they have accepted what, in this setting, they long to deny: when the Lord says that he must suffer and die for their sake and ours, we must listen to him.