A Literary Analysis of Matthew 17:1-13 (The Transfiguration)

The mountaintop Transfiguration story, told by each of the three synoptic gospel-writers, describes a temporary transformation (or a more complete revelation) of Jesus, shown in His fully glorified state. Packed with allusions and deeply symbolic references, as well as poignant and powerful foreshadowings, the Transfiguration as been described as "at once the commentator's paradise and his despair" (Caird 1956, 291) on account of its complexity and ambiguity. This essay looks specifically at the Matthean account of the Transfiguration, conducting a literary analysis of the story found in Matthew 17:1-13. The first section briefly introduces the literary and narrative critical approach which I shall be employing here. Section II examines many literary aspects of the story – such as character, genre, intertextuality, allusion and structure – in order to understand the text. Section III concludes with a critique of the tools and methodology of the literary approach and considers its applicability to biblical interpretation. It is hoped that the benefits as well as the limitations of literary and narrative criticism will become apparent in its application to what Hare (1993, 198) rightly called "one of the most difficult [stories] in the New Testament."

Section I

From the late 1960s, a number of scholars felt that historical-critical methodologies, whilst insightful, were providing an incomplete understanding of Scripture and, especially, that they "fail[ed] to take seriously the narrative character of the Gospels… and attempted to interpret not the stories themselves but the historical circumstances behind them" (Powell 1990, 2). By 1972, there were growing calls for a more literary approach to the Bible, and that year Norman Perrin argued that since "the evangelists are authors, then they must be studied as other authors are studied" (quoted in Powell 1990, 3). To a large extent, Perrin's call has been heeded over the last three decades – so that by 1994 Anderson was enthusing that the tools of this new approach (and relating specifically to Matthew's gospel) "continue to reveal/create new and exciting interpretations" (1994, 9). It is probably fair to say, however, that while many tools have been borrowed from the existing field of literary criticism, there has yet to emerge a systematic classification of these tools and how they relate specifically to biblical study.

An acceptance that the Bible can be studied as a work of literature has not been easy for many Christians to come to, and literary critical approaches are spurned by many: after all, the Bible is so much more than 'literature'. There has been, however, considerable recognition that applying such tools can add to our understanding of Scripture, rather than misleading us. Literary criticism, together with its close cousin narrative criticism, seeks to understand the Bible by asking such questions as how does the author shape and structure his material, how does he portray the characters within the narrative, what literary devices does he employ to convey meaning, and what deliberate allusions does he employ to add new layers of meaning? It is less concerned with historical questions such as which 'Matthew' was the real author, or which mountain did the Transfiguration occur on? Application of these literary techniques has allowed a new generation of Biblical scholars to reconsider the meaning of passages of Scripture, including our Matthean text, and often to reach a fuller or more vivid interpretation. While Section II utilises the tools and concepts of literary criticism, Section III below asks more probing questions about this methodology and its applicability to Holy Scripture.

Section II

The various tools of the literary and narrative critical schools have not lent themselves to easy classification, being a diverse range of techniques and concepts. The approach taken here is necessarily artificial, therefore, and consists of four groupings: (a) how is the story structured and how it may be described stylistically; (b) who are the participants in this story, including the narrator, range of characters and implied reader; (c) what references lie above and beyond the text, e.g. allusions and foreshadowings; and (d) what other literary devices does the author employ, such as setting and climax.

(a) Structure and Style

One of the strengths of literary criticism is that it insists upon treating a text as a unified entity; it is the whole text in its final form that interests us here.[1] Our passage in Matthew 17 clearly follows Mark's (earlier) version, but such historical concerns are not immediately relevant. Looking at this passage as a whole, therefore, several features are noteworthy. Firstly, the story is told with considerable economy: the trip up the mountain, the Transfiguration itself, the reaction of the disciples accompanying Jesus and Jesus' response to their reaction are all covered in the first seven verses. While some have found Matthew's style rather wooden, Billingham and Billingham (1982, 1) marvel at its "awe-inspiring grandeur of concept… [like] the great symphony or the Gothic cathedral," a claim which correctly suggests that much of the author's literary merit lies in his ability to arrange material and add meaningful references within it, rather than in poetic or literary excellence per se.[2]

There has been fierce and unresolved debate over the structure of Matthew's gospel, as well as this specific passage.[3] While the passage may fit several different frameworks, I would argue that it is best understood as being a series of five responses and reactions to Jesus' actions (or action by God concerning Jesus), thus:

	17:1	Link and introduction		
	Verse(s)	**Divine Action**	**Verse(s)**	**Human Reaction**
1.	17:2-3	Jesus transfigured	17:4	Peter's offer
2.	17:5	Jesus declared God's son	17:6	Disciples afraid
3.	17:7	Jesus reassures the disciples	17:8	Disciples trust
4.	17:9	Jesus instructs the disciples and foretells his death and resurrection	17:10	Disciples question Jesus about Elijah
5.	17:11-12	Jesus explains his necessary suffering as the Son of Man	17:13	Disciples understand

By telling the Transfiguration story in this way, the author is inviting the reader to empathise with the disciples and marvel, as did they, at Jesus' revealed glory. Patte (1987, 236f) has studied the use of 'oppositions' within Matthew (which he classifies as explicit, semantic and narrative) and finds strong evidence that the author deliberately uses responses, reactions and contrasts to make his points. An oppositional interpretation provides a better fit for this passage than, for example, the proposed chiastic structure of Davies and Allison (cited by Garland 1993, 183).[4]

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[1] Bauer (1989, 135) describes the literary critical approach as one that "focuses upon the final form of the text, and brings with it a special concern for the identification of rhetorical features that point toward the structure of the final text." Elsewhere, and more specifically, Marguerat and Bourquin (1998, 3) define narrative criticism as "a method of reading the text which explores and analyses how narrativity is made concrete in a particular text." This approach owes much to Robert Alter, who regarded a text's primary meaning as lying autonomously rather than historically (and who was a literary critic, rather than a theologian).

[2] There is good evidence that Matthew deliberately arranged events and sayings into groups of (especially) 3, 5, 7 or 9.

[3] Bauer, for example, notes that "there is still no consensus regarding the structure of Matthew's Gospel" (1989, 54). The principal arguments are that the book of Matthew is arranged in 5 blocks of teaching (which may deliberately mirror the Pentateuch, as Bacon argued, with Jesus cast as a new Moses); that it is a chiasm pivoting at the end of Chapter 13 (so Billingham and Billingham 1982, 3 et seq.); or that it consists of a threefold division (pace Kingsbury).

[4] Patte asserts that Matthew "cannot take the risk of being misunderstood on such matters around which revolve all the meaning and purpose of existence... Oppositions set in the text are the primary mode of expression of such convictions" (1987, 6).

As well as asking questions about the structure of our passage, it is also profitable to consider its style or, more technically, its genre. The genre(s) of the gospels has long been a contentious issue, and the debate continues unabated. Whilst some have concluded that the genre of Matthew is "gospel," there is obviously some circularity involved.[5] Green (2000, 19) describes the gospels as "an entirely new literary form… not biography, though it contains it… not history, though it reflects it. A Gospel is the proclamation of good news: the good news of salvation which had long been looked for in Judaism, and which Christians were persuaded had burst upon the world in Jesus of Nazareth."[6] This description is very useful in applying a genre to our Matthean passage: recognising it as a *gospel* passage, we should therefore be alert for the fulfilment of Jewish religious (specifically, messianic) expectations and for declarations of salvation through Jesus.[7] Examining the text, we see that the first aspect is reflected in the eschatological symbolism of Elijah's presence (v.3,4), Jesus' description as the "Son of Man" (v.9,12 cf. Daniel 7), and the reference to the suffering servant (v.12); and the second aspect is reflected in Jesus' divine identity (v.5) and the foretelling of his death and resurrection (v.9). We may conclude, therefore, that this passage is consistent with Green's description of the gospel genre; it is as much apologetic as historical, and the author's intent is to combine the two for the benefit of the assumed reader (or listener).[8]

(b) Participants in the Story

This subsection considers all the participants in the story, including the narrator and the characters involved. It is important to understand that, even though there was a historical and human Peter (for example), what we encounter in Matthew is actually a literary construct (albeit based on that actual Peter), reduced into a character with limited known traits and arguably serving as an archetypal disciple or follower of Jesus. Within the confines of our passage, Jesus and God are also characters who can be studied and interpreted, and who serve a thematic and plot-related purpose.

First, then, we consider the narrator. In keeping with nearly all narrators in the ancient world, the narrator of this passage is trustworthy and reliable; we can read his account safe in the knowledge that he does not intend to mislead us. Our narrator is both omniscient (he knows all that happened, including the terror of the disciples) and omnipresent (he is able to tell the story from wherever events occur, be they on the mountaintop or elsewhere). As Anderson has noted (1994, 86), the narrator at one point becomes explicit, when he states that "[t]hen the disciples understood…" (v.13), thereby interrupting the story somewhat.

Secondly, let us consider the human characters. These are the three disciples, Peter, James and John, and (the now resurrected) Moses and Elijah. The author gives us very little description of these characters, and only Peter is given a speaking role (although the disciples do also ask a collective question in v.10). We are given no description of their appearance or emotions, other than one instance of the disciples' fear (v.6) and what can be inferred from Peter's bumbling – and interrupted – offer to erect three shelters (v.4). Within this passage, these are all flat characters, and we may suspect two things of the author: that he wishes to focus all our attention on the transfigured Jesus, declared to be God's son; and that the characters are intended to perform roles as witnesses (the disciples) and testifiers (Moses and Elijah).[9]

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[5] We may have some sympathy, therefore, with France's assertion (1989, 126) that "[t]he question arises whether the whole attempt to define a genre to fit Matthew into it is not *artificial*," (emphasis mine).

[6] This is to disagree with Carter's assertion (1996, 49) that "Matthew is an ancient biography… [of a] hero's life," since there are radical differences and discontinuities between the gospels and literary forms of the time.

[7] Barclay states the conventional belief that "it was the consistent Jewish belief that Elijah was to be forerunner and herald of the Messiah, and it was also believed by at least some Jewish teachers that, when the Messiah came, he would be accompanied by Moses" (1975, 159).

[8] Further, assumed readers are encouraged by the author to "read the book on two levels. On the one hand, it is the record of what Jesus said and did. On the other, it is written to correlate with… their situation" (Green 2000, 29).

[9] A final character, John the Baptist, appears in v.13, in a narratorial reference to what the disciples understood. That which is revealed about the character of John the Baptist is entirely in relation to his parallel function to that which was expected of Elijah (which, according to Tasker (1983, 165) was rooted in Malachi 4:5-6: "I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord…").

Thirdly, God and Jesus are both characters within this passage. In this regard, the titles which the author attributes to Jesus are highly significant, and are as follows: "Lord," according to Peter (v.4); "my Son," according to God (v.5); and "Son of Man," used by Jesus of Himself (vv.9,12). Yet the author also stresses the humanness of Jesus – in response to the disciples' fear, he "came and touched them" (v.7). In the later discussion when the group are descending the mountain (v.9f), Jesus is shown to be the wise teacher who brings understanding to His followers. It can be seen, therefore, that we are presented with various ways of learning about a character, namely, how they are described by other characters; how they are described by themselves; how they are described by the narrator; and how they act. Kingsbury (1986, 12-14) has helpfully summarised character traits as described by Matthew to be saving, authoritative, enabling, faithful, compassionate, confrontational and self-giving for the character of Jesus; and loyal, loving, attentive, observant, obedient, servant-like, vulnerable but also fearful, distraught, learners, perplexed, self-concerned and desirous of power for the disciples.

(c) Reading Beyond the Text

This section is undoubtedly the most significant for understanding Matthew's version of the Transfiguration as a literary work – in fact, whole books have been written about one or more of the Old Testament allusions Matthew embroiders his account with.[10] More than one author has noted that Matthew's gospel contains so many Old Testament allusions and cultural references that it cannot be understood without their appreciation. So here we briefly explore some intertextual references, as well as noting the foreshadowing of future events in Matthew's gospel.

The most obvious allusion in this Transfiguration episode is to the Sinai narrative of Exodus 24, and we may follow Chiltern (amongst very many others) in observing the following parallels and references:[11]

Verse	Feature	Parallel
Matt.17:1	After 6 days	Exodus 24:16
Matt.17:1	Jesus ascends the mountain	Exodus 24:13,15,18
Matt.17:1	Accompanied by 3 closest followers/friends	Exodus 24:1,9
Matt.17:2	And is transfigured	Exodus 24:2
Matt.17:2	His clothes shine white	Exodus 24:10, 33:23
Matt.17:3	He is accompanied by Moses and Elijah	
Matt.17:4	A suggestion is made to build booths	Exodus 26:1f
Matt.17:5	A cloud covers the witnesses	Exodus 24:15, 40:35
Matt.17:5	The voice of God is heard	Exodus 24:16b
Matt.17:6	The disciples are struck by fear	

As Allison has pointed out, "[i]t beggars belief to entertain coincidence for all these parallels. It also beggars belief to suppose that the spiritually learned Matthew missed them. In fact, everything argues that he added to their number" (1993, 244). For Allison, then, the implied author is "spiritually learned" who skilfully enhances the connections he sees between Jesus' Transfiguration and Moses' meeting with God on Mount Sinai. This is an exceptionally skilful practice, and the implied reader would be familiar with these parallels (even if we as modern day readers must pause to consider what the theological implications must be).[12]

It is worth giving special attention to what the presence of Moses (vv.3-4) and Elijah (vv.3-4,10-12) – as well as the reference to John the Baptist (v.13) – adds to the story. It has frequently been claimed that Moses serves as a symbol of the Law, and Elijah as a symbol of

[10] For example, Allison's thorough and impressive *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

[11] Chilton outlines these parallels (1980, 120-121) while more generally arguing that analysing the passage as a "literary entity… dispenses with the necessity of assuming its reliability or unreliability as 'history'" (160).

[12] We would do well to remember Liefeld's reminder that a "multiplicity of meanings," i.e. numerous allusions and symbols, should not result in "meaningless allegorization" (1974, 178).

the Prophets, and that the appearance (and subsequent disappearance) of these two Old Testament figures testifies to Jesus' authority, His fulfilment of Old Testament expectations, and indeed His surpassing all previous persons within the Jewish religious tradition. The inclusion of these two characters in the story serves to emphasise the continuity between it and Old Testament narratives (and hence theology) – the author is presenting us with a revelation of fulfilment, an event within a tradition, and the implied reader is expected to sympathise with the author's view of who Jesus is. The concluding reference to John the Baptist is intended to persuade us further. We need to be alert to such inferences, since if "we do not pay sufficient attention to the phenomenon of intertextuality, we risk missing precious indications at the moment of interpretation," (Marguerat and Bourquin 1998, 106).

A related effect to allusion is that of *foreshadowing*; this is more than merely textual elements which are then reflected by later allusions – the author's foreshadowing is a deliberate shaping and arranging of material so it will tie in with later aspects of the story. In our passage, this can be seen as a contrast to the crucifixion passage of Matthew 27:33-43, as contended by Tom Wright (2002, 15), who found that "[t]he mountain-top explains the hill-top – and vice versa."[13] Alternatively, Hagner (1995, 498), amongst others, has concluded that Matthew's relating of the Transfiguration foreshadows a different event, being "a foreshadowing of Jesus' glorious resurrection (cf. the appearance on the mountain in 28:16-20)," e.g. where the body of Jesus was transformed and his clothes were "white as snow" (28:3).[14] Such foreshadowings serve a further literary purpose: they create *suspense* as the reader waits with anticipation the ominous events alluded to in verses 9 and 12.

(d) Other Literary Devices

We have at our disposal further literary tools and techniques to interpret Matthew 17:1-13, and in this subsection we briefly apply two of them.[15]

Firstly, what does the *setting* of this story tell us? The "high mountain" (v.1) where this narrative is situated stands in a long tradition of Jewish religious experiences occurring on mountains, such as Mount Moriah, where Abraham offered to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1-14); Mounts Horeb and Sinai, where Moses met with God and the covenant relationship was established (Exodus 3;19;24); Mounts Carmel and Horeb, where Elijah witnessed God's power and His presence (1 Kings 18;19); and Mount Zion, described by David as God's dwelling place (Psalms 78;132). The fact that this story occurs atop a mountain immediately signals to the reader that a profound encounter with God may be at hand, and is hence "fraught with symbolic meaning" (Powell 1990, 29).[16] From this perspective, the actual location – whether it be Mount Hermon, Tabor or Meron – is immaterial.

Secondly, what should we consider to be the *climax* of Matthew 17:1-13? Even though Jesus is "transfigured before them [the three disciples]" in verse 2, it is my contention that this passage's climax is in fact verse 5. Here, God declares aloud that Jesus is His beloved Son (phrased as at Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:17) and with the added instruction "Listen to him!" The passage centres on this verse because it confirms Jesus' identity (and what our response to Him must be). It is especially interesting that we are told the disciples' terror and prostration was in response to this declaration, rather than to when Jesus was transfigured (v.2) or even when the deceased Moses and Elijah appeared (v.3). The fact that the reader is

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[13] The parallel/contrast includes the following features: Jesus on a mountain, revealed in glory vs. Jesus on a hilltop, revealed in shame; shining white clothes vs. stripped; a bright cloud vs. darkness covering the land; Peter marvelling vs. Peter hiding in shame; Jesus flanked by Moses and Elijah vs. Jesus flanked by two criminals. Although Kermode (in Alter and Kermode 1987, 398) argues that "Matthew is not concerned" with linking the Transfiguration to Jesus' crucifixion, the deliberate arrangement of material in the story suggests otherwise. A more thorough evaluation of the linkages can be found in Davies and Allison, forming what the authors label "a remarkable set of twins" (1991, 706 et seq.).

[14] Some have argued (e.g. Bultmann, Carlston) that this similarity can be explained by the Transfiguration being a misplaced resurrection story. Such a claim must not be too readily dismissed, but the balance of evidence would seem to suggest otherwise.

[15] In this short essay, we are not able to apply further tools such as considering perspective and point of view, detection of irony and humour, the function of narrative time, etc.

[16] It may well be that because a mountain is "the nearest earthly place to the divine sphere" that it has become an archetypal symbol of a "place of epiphany and supernatural encounter" (Carlston 1961, 237).

"led… up" the mountain in verse 1 and comes "down the mountain" in verse 9 intensifies this feeling of climax and culmination in verse 5.

Section III

We have seen that the literary critical approach can be used to interrogate and explain passages of the Bible, here the "densely allusive" (Allison 1993, 285) Matthew 17:1-13, and in this concluding section we briefly discuss how appropriate and adequate such an approach is.

One of the greatest strengths of the literary critical approach is its treatment of the text as a unified whole. Whilst it can undoubtedly be both interesting and rewarding to dissect Bible passages a verse or a word at a time, it is worth remembering that since Christians believe that Scripture is inspired by – and a gift from – God, that that gift has come to us in a final form and that arguably, therefore, we should be reading and interpreting it in its unified, complete state. With reference to our passage, whilst it may be helpful to dissect the verses or study the etymology of individual words, it is also valuable to note the passage's tone, climax, setting and perspective. Looking at Matthew's gospel as a whole, we can also see the development of characters over time, progressive revelation, plots and subplots, as well as both forward and backward intertextuality.

Powell (1990, 91f) lists some of the objections to narrative criticism being applied to the gospels, such as it being wrong to treat the gospels as coherent narratives when they are often mere arrangements of pericopes or teaching material; it being improper to impose modern literary concepts on ancient literature; and it also being improper to use methods originally devised for studying fiction. Further criticisms are that this approach ignores the gospel's historicity and that it lacks objective criteria. To a large extent, these are valid criticisms – but it is worth remembering why relevant methods of literary criticism were sought in the first place, i.e. to add to our understanding and appreciation of the Bible, rather than to replace historical and other critical approaches with an all-explaining, all-embracing methodology. Powell (1990, 99) approvingly quotes Culpepper's maxim that "truth requires a larger field than history"[17] and we would do well to agree with his conclusion that God is certainly able to speak through *story* as well as *history*. This being so, we should welcome techniques that help us to recognise how those stories are best understood, without necessarily expecting all Biblical truth to be evident through any single mode of reading the Bible.

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[17] Although this need not lead us toward Beare's conclusion that, being a story in this form, "it is unquestioningly a literary creation" and the product of a "mythopoetic imagination" (1981, 361), a conclusion specifically and convincingly rebutted by Mounce (1991, 167).

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