Chapter 12

Significance of Mountain Prayer in Biblical Narrative with Reference to Matt. 17: 1-5

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Abstract

Mountains and hills were particular places of interest in Israel. Due to their durability, height, and make-up, they often became natural places for refuge and security, territorial boundaries and strategic military locations. Mountains have a significant symbolic value in the Bible; they, first and foremost, are part of the physical reality of the Bible. As a result, mountains and hills are mentioned over 500 times in the Bible. Mountains have a logical religious symbolism for biblical cultures, since they are 'closer to God' who is believed to dwell in the heavens. Every day on the news, we hear about people in desperate need: victims of war, disease, crime, poverty and those with family and personal problems. For God's people to rely on His strength, they answer to the call for mountain prayer. In the light of this observation, the objective of this paper is to unearth the significance of the Lord going into a mountain to pray and to find out if the Lord hears us better from the mountain top than elsewhere. To achieve the set goal, the author used both exegetical, historical and sociological methods. Data were gathered through primary sources, (the Bible) and secondary sources, in which related books and journals were consulted. The paper discovered that mountains are sites of transcendent spiritual experiences and encounters with God or the appearances of God. They are places of special worship and meetings with God, since they provided seclusion that is free from interruption, and filled with impressiveness and grandeur to raise the thoughts to the God that had formed the high hills and the deep-shaded groves. In conclusion, though the transfiguration itself instructs us about the true nature of Jesus, it also gives us a glimpse of what is yet to be, not only of His appearance in heaven, but our glorification as well.

Introduction

The phenomenon of prayer is a universal phenomenon that can be found in all human societies and religions. In Christianity, for example, prayer plays an important role in a Christian's life: it is both an offensive and defensive weapon for humans. In other words, he looks unto God for help to fight the enemy through prayer. Human beings by nature are spiritual beings, and it is this spiritual nature that flames their desire to provide answers to certain metaphysical questions of Lving. Hamman (2012) corroborates this position by saying that, in prayer, we connect ourselves to God and seek a deeper and more meaningful purpose for our lives. Some of the urgent needs of life make Christians pray to God, because He has the ultimate power. Yokes are broken through prayers, people experienced breakthroughs in their marriages, carriers, and academies through the power of prayer. Again, because of economic recession, political crisis, higher level of crime, poverty and child trafficking in the society, people pray much more than ever before. They do not limit their prayers to church alone, they go to hills and mountains to answer the calls to pray.

As an element of religious belief, prayer cannot be separated from the faith of man. According to Ebojah (2011) prayer strengthens the believer, builds up his courage and his confidence in the ability of God to do the impossible. Certain Hebrew words further strengthen the need to pray, such as *Sa'al,* which means to ask, require, wish, desire or request for oneself (Deut 10: 12, Judges 5: 25, Job 31: 30). Another Hebrew term is *eranao* which means to consult, seek or counsel. *Hanan* in Hebrew means to beg for favour (Eerdmans, 2002, p.227). Other words are *rinn̂ah,* a cry of lamentation, a prayer of lament (*Pst.* 17: 16, 106: 44) and *sawah,* a cry for help (*Pst.* 34: 17). It is used only for supplication and calling upon God in prayer, often standing alongside *Proseuche* prayer (Luke 8: 38, Jer. 11: 14; Brown, 1998). Adewunmi (2010) asserts that prayer will ever remain God's given spiritual weapon in the hand of every godly man to solve all manner of earthly problems. Pratt (1987) opines that prayer is the believer's communication with God; this definition suggests three

main elements of prayer: God, the believer and the communication. If one of these components is missing, prayer cannot occur. Without God, no one listens, without the believer no one speaks and without communication, nothing is said.

Against this backdrop, mountains have been singled out for mention several hundred times in the Scriptures. Due to their durability, height, and make-up, they often become natural places for refuge and security, territorial boundaries, and strategic military locations. Mountains can serve as places of revelation (Rev. 2: 9-10) or places that carry the sense of God's presence for special worship and meetings with God. God uses imagery of mountains and valleys often in His Word, to describe His power, the high moments of success in life and obstacles that stand in our way. It is not surprising, therefore, that mountains occupied an important place in Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus instructed his disciples, 'on a mountainside' (Matt. 5: 1). On one occasion, having gone up a mountainside and having sat down with his disciples, Jesus fed 5,000 people (John 6: 3). Mountains comprised a special refuge for Jesus to spend time alone with his heavenly Father in prayer (Matt. 6: 45-46; Luke 6: 12; John 6: 15). People go to mountain prayer to avoid distraction. It is like being alone with God. Jesus Christ took three of his disciples to the mountain during the transfiguration, and he taught and prayed with them there. Moses communicated with God on the mountain where he received the Ten Commandments. The objective of the paper is to find out what makes a mountain a place of prayer. What biblical reference supports such practice? We will further examine what takes place in mountains prayer, as well as the significance of mountain prayer to the 21st century Christians in Nigeria.

Background to Matthew 17

The amazing dramatic account of the transfiguration of Christ on the mountain in Matt. 17 marks a major turning point in the gospel narrative, for Jesus was beginning to turn more and more towards Jerusalem and the suffering and death that awaited Him. But before all of that would take place, there was this glimpse of glory.

Interestingly we read in the New Testament that the glory that was set before Him motivated Him to endure the cross. The revelation of Christ's glory in this chapter was a clear confirmation to the disciples of the truth of Peter's confession of faith (Matt.16: 16). However, it was also great encouragement for Christ Himself, as He faced the agony that would occur on another hill called Golgotha. We may divide the passage into three major parts for our analysis. First, we have the record of the event of the transfiguration (verses 1-3). Second, we have Peter's suggestion and the divine response to it (verses 4-8). Third, we have the instruction by Jesus and the question by the disciples (verses 9-13) (McClister 2017).

The record of the event certainly is the basis and key to the entire passage. The record simply reports what happened without going into as much detail as the other narratives. But in the other two sections, we have the all important dialogue. In the second part, we have Peter's suggestion, followed by the voice from heaven. This revelation struck terror in the disciples, but that fear was relieved by the Jesus' words of comfort. Between Peter's suggestion, the voice from heaven and Jesus' words, there are three 'speeches' in the second part to be considered. Then, the third section, which is the aftermath of the event, also has three 'speeches': an instruction, followed by a question and an answer. What is interesting is that in the event, Jesus does not explain the transfiguration at all. The voice from heaven explains who Jesus is, but not why Moses or Elijah are there on the mountain. We are left with a number of questions, as indeed the disciples must have been left as well (McClister, 2017).

Exegesis of Matt. 17: 1-5

Ο ρ ο ς (Mountain) *in* Heb **ha**ˆ**ra**ˆ**r**. This means in the singular a 'mountain.' To some people, according to Bermbaun (2006), the mountain is believed to be a very sacred place, visited by the people to seek the face of the Supernatural. It is observed that not only Christians visit the Prayer Mountain, but non-Christians, who feel the need to seek God to find spiritual solutions to their problems, also visit the Prayer Mountain. Mountains are frequently

associated with Yahweh's presence and with a sense of God's nearness. Isaac was to be offered on a mountain (Gen.22: 2); during the battle with the Amalekites, Moses prayed on top of hill (Exod.17: 9-10); Elijah climbs to the top of Mount Carmel to pray (1 Kings 18: 42; Jos. Ant., 8, 344); the circumcision of the Israelites takes place on the hill Haaraloth (Josh 5: 3); the ark is set on a hill (1 Sam 7: 1; 2 Sam 6: 3); a hill is the high-place of sacrifice for the Israelites in Canaan, the oldest cultic site and Samuel offers there (1 Sam 9: 12ff.19,25) (Verbrugge, 2000, p.536). According to The UBS (1997), in Jewish thought, a high mountain was a suitable place for a divine revelation (see Matt 4: 8; 5: 1; 28: 16).

The UBS (1997) further adds that the striking natural phenomenon of the mountain has attracted attention and awakened religious concepts, in all ages and among all peoples. First, the power of the mountain has caused it to be honoured as divine, along with rivers, springs, waterfalls and the earth. Second, mountains and high places are peopled with spirits. In lofty religions, the soaring up of the mountain has led to its being viewed as the abode of the gods, or to the cultic worship of higher beings on its peaks. 'Above' and 'below' in their symbolical content are not interchangeable in religion and mythology. In the words of Donaldson (1987), in the Matthean perspective, it is when Jesus is 'on the mountain' that his significance and the nature of his mission are most clearly seen. Consequently, it can be said that mountains in the book of Matthew, function not primarily as places of revelation or isolation, but as eschatological sites, where Jesus enters into the full authority of his Sonship.

Μ ε τ ε μ ο ρ φ ω θ η **or transfigured**

This word, predominantly middle or passive, when active means 'to change into another form.' The change may be an external one a change of state, or an inner change. This term *Μ ε τ α μ ο ρ φ ό ω*, to transform, literally or figuratively 'metamorphose' means to change, transfigure or transform. The word refers to an inward spiritual change. The transformation touched the inner man, the form and the nature. Christ changed from humiliation to the glory of

His Deity. Jesus took on the form of His heavenly glory and was transformed. It was a change in appearance, and does not denote the change of the substance of a thing (Barker, 1994). It occurs four times in the NT (Matt. 17: 2; Mk.9: 2, Rom.12: 2 and 2 Cor.3: 18). In Matt.17: 2 and Mk.9: 2 *Μετα μορφόω*, describes the transfiguration of Christ's features and clothing during his transfiguration. Matt.17: 2 uses the imagery of the shining sun to express the transfigured radiance of Jesus' face. In Jesus' transfiguration, his clothing was also rendered brilliant: 'white as the light' (Matt.17: 2), 'more dazzling than bleached cloth' (Mk.9: 3) and 'bright as a flash of lightning' (Lk.9: 29). This experience is called a *ὁραμα horamá*, sight or vision (Matt.17: 9), a word that denotes a thing of supernatural quality that becomes observable (cf. Acts 7: 31; 9: 10, 12; 10: 3, 17, 19). The meaning of the transfiguration is to be found in the biblical context. The imagery is that of Daniel 7: 13-14. This point of reference does not exhaust the meaning, however. For not only are there messianic motifs, but the imagery of the exodus is also prominent (Verbrugge, 2000,). As Vine (1985) observes:

> The Transfiguration is one of the only two places that "heaven" speaks directly about Jesus . . . No other event in the Gospels involves the presence of luminaries of the past. The visible glorification of Jesus is also unique. Even in His resurrection appearances, He is not described as bearing the brilliance He does here.

At the transfiguration of Jesus, we see the *Shekinah* in the face of Jesus. The incarnate God made Himself visible. It is the undiluted glory of deity dwelling in Christ made manifest. 'We beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten Son from the Father' (John 1: 14b). Morris (2005) says, 'Jesus underwent a unique transformation before the disciples.' It was an unusual radiance with even His clothes becoming splendid in appearance. 'Even before His most intimate disciples the human appearance of Jesus was for a moment changed into that of a heavenly being in the transfigured world,' writes J. Behm. Robertson (2006) adds,

> The purpose of the Transfiguration was to strengthen the heart of Jesus as He was praying long about His approaching death, and to give these chosen three disciples a glimpse of His glory against the hours of darkness coming. No one on earth understood the heart of Jesus, and so Moses and Elijah came. The poor disciples utterly failed to grasp the significance of it all.

The important truth of the Transfiguration is the authentication of the Son as the Messiah, by means of the voice that spoke to the disciples out of the *Shekinah* cloud. Jesus may be rejected by men, but He is accepted by His Father. 'While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!"' (Matthew 17: 5).

ω φ θ η **(There appeared)**

This term is a singular aorist passive verb with Moses (to be understood also with Elijah), but the participle σ υ λ λ α λ ο υ ν τ ε ς is plural agreeing with both. In the words of Tenney (1973), it is from the verb ὁ ρ ά ω which means to look, see, experience, perceive, take note, see, take care or vision. The main Hebrew original for the verb is *râ'eh,* seeing. Generally it means to see with one's own eyes, becoming aware (Gen. 27: 1). Figuratively, it can denote to perceive intellectually or spiritually, or become conscious etc. (Psal.34: 8). 'Seeing' in the Old Testament can also refer to perception by means of other senses, for example, 'hearing' (Jer.33: 24) or 'understanding' (1 Sam.12: 17). In the word of Verbrugge (2000), in the New Testament, the meaning also remains the same. It further means a vision of the spirit or intellect (Lk.2: 30) or seeing salvation (Acts 2: 17; 26: 16). 'Sufficient objectivity is guaranteed by the vision being enjoyed by all the three.' The Jewish apocalypses reveal popular expectations that Moses and Elijah will reappear. Both have mystery connected with their deaths. One represented law, the other prophecy, while Jesus represented the gospel (grace). On the mountain they spoke of his demise (Luke 9: 31), the cross, the theme

uppermost in the mind of Christ, which the disciples did not comprehend. Jesus needed comfort and he gets it from fellowship with Moses and Elijah (Robertson, 2006).

Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ Υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός **(This is my beloved Son).**

It was one thing to see Jesus transfigured, with His clothing and His appearance brighter than the sun—that was frightening to the disciples, as the other gospels tell us. But it was quite another thing to hear a voice from heaven confirming that Jesus was the Son of God. Peter had just made that confession, but now Peter heard it in a new light. The Christ, the Messiah (in Hebrew), was not merely a son of David and therefore designated 'Son of God'; He was God's Son in a unique way. God (the Father, we know) declared, 'This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him.' Barker (1994) opines that the word from heaven made three clear points: Jesus is the Son of God; Jesus is loved by the Father and pleasing to the Father; and Jesus must be obeyed. All of these ideas were being challenged by the religious leaders of the day and questioned by the people. The disciples, however, knew Jesus was God's Son (in some way), that He was doing the will of the Father and that He was to be obeyed. Now, this direct revelation confirmed their faith, and it surely encouraged Jesus, as well, as opposition had begun to mount and would increase.

According to McClister (2017) the word from heaven meant, first, a lesson for the disciples about who Jesus was. It showed Peter, James and John that Jesus was no ordinary man, nor even a great prophet, but that he was indeed no less than the Son of God, the Messiah of Israel. God was confirming the disciples' confession. Second, this scene demanded that men regard Jesus as one with the authority to speak to them. The transfiguration was a statement on the authority of Jesus. On that mountain, it was demonstrated that it is Jesus alone who has authority over men. Moses and Elijah served only a temporary purpose in the plan of God (Rom. 3: 21). Third, the transfiguration confirmed that the kingdom of the Messiah would be

characterized by glory. In the transfiguration, the three selected disciples saw a foreshadowing of the glory and victory of Jesus. Fourth, this scene is the key to understanding the cross of Jesus and his commitment to it. Here, Matthew shows us that the transfiguration was meant to be interpreted in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. References to Jesus' death literally surround the transfiguration story (Matt.16: 21; 17: 12, 22).

Significance of Mountains Prayer

Hebrews 12: 22-24 states:

> But you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels; verse 23: to the general assembly and church of the firstborn [who are] registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect; verse 24: to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than [that of] Abel (NKJV).

In the light of the above biblical text and the discovery from the study of mountain prayer, this researcher observes the significance of mountain prayer below:

Solution Centre

The Prayer Mountain is a place that is believed to offer spiritual encounters and a good environment for communication with God. Corroborating this, Ayegboyin (2010) submits that in order to aid spiritual exercises, the *Aladura* developed preference for the use of what they have termed as *ileminmo* or *Ori-Oke* (sacred places), which they use for the purposes of prayer or as a sort of spiritual retreat. It is believed that prayer when offered in these sacred places is always efficacious. People who go to the mountain have the positive belief that when faced with difficult or insurmountable situations in day-to-day life, like the loss of a valuable thing or person, an incurable illness,

a major financial problem, among others, they can go to the mountain to pray and their prayers are answered by God. The quest to find solutions to every problem in life has increased over the years, and so too has the urge to travel miles and climb mountains anticipating solutions to problems. Prophet Alo (2017), the coordinator of the CAC, *Ori-Oke* Eyebiokin, Oshogbo, states that 'the practice of praying on mountains has its origin in the Bible, and it offers many spiritual benefits for those who understand the importance.'

An Undistracted Experience

Praying on mountains helps a person to focus, unlike what is obtained when there is a crowd. One withdraws oneself from the busy life of the society, to a solitude and quiet place, to seek the face of the Supreme God, concerning some important personal, family or national issues. Akande (2017) said that a mountain prayer is a place of holiness. A mountain or hill is a traditional place to pray, since it provides seclusion that is retired, free from interruption, and fitted by impressiveness and grandeur to raise thoughts to the God that has formed the high hills and the deep-shaded groves. Its elevation gives the person praying a special sense of nearness to God. Prayer Mountains are places people can go to detach themselves from others, so that they can concentrate on their communication with God, in order to experience His grace without distraction. Mountains Prayer offer spiritual sanctuary for their occupants, and provide an almost direct link with God in the spirit.

Divine Experience

Ernst Sellin and Carl Watzinger (1973) claim that mountains can serve as places of revelation (Rev. 2: 9-10) or places that carry a sense of God's presence, to serve as places of special worship and meetings with God. Indeed, 'almost from the beginning of the Bible, mountains are sites of transcendent spiritual experiences, encounters with God or appearances by God.' Thus God instructed Abraham,

'take your son—your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah! Offer him up there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I will indicate to you' (Gen 22: 2).

Mountains are also associated with God's power

Many have had their faith boosted by visiting these prayer places, because the more you pray, the more your spiritual eyes and ears open. Hence, you can see the unseen and hear the unheard at these prayer places. Problems and misfortunes vanish into thin air; blessings and spiritual gifts fall into open palms that are accepting and appreciating. Jesus could not have carried out his world-transforming ministry without a profound lifestyle of communion with God. Hence, Osungade (2017) is of the opinion that mountain prayer helps man to be in a place of His presence, encounter, and transformation, where people experience God, encounter His love and power, uncover their truest identities, learn to live supernaturally, and are empowered to fulfil their highest calling. A mountain top experience is a very sacrificing experience, but somehow, our generation has been convinced otherwise, and has come to believe that prayer is about the blessings we can receive alone. It is about praying, 'yet not my will but Yours be done.'

Unity in Diversity

Prayer Mountains not only provide a good environment for spiritual communication, they also have helped boost religious unity, because of their multi-religious nature. People from various religious affiliations converge on a mountain to pray, and this has helped in boosting unity, friendship and interpersonal relationships among different religious denominations.

Conclusion

This paper had discovered the dynamism of the concept of mountain prayer as it effected the divine encounter of the disciples

of Jesus on the Mountain of Transfiguration. As a result, several areas of application come to mind. First, the transfiguration itself instructs us about the true nature of Jesus. It also gives us a glimpse of what is yet to be, not only of His appearance in heaven, but our glorification as well. That is why Paul's instruction in Romans to be transformed is so important. Second, revelation demands a response. The natural instinct is fear and worship, falling on our faces before Him. But the practical continuation of our response comes at the divine instruction to listen to Jesus. If Jesus truly is the Lord of Glory, and not just a man from Galilee, then we must worship Him and obey Him. Third, God's revelation is given to us because God loves us, and desires that we be with Him in glory. The twelve apostles were human, just like us. They had their strengths and weaknesses. They made their share of mistakes. Each of them is different, showing us that there is no one God cannot use if he or she is willing. Since the paper has revealed to us that, through mountain prayer, God can be experienced in our personal and private closets, especially when we give our hearts to seeking Him, the church should avail herself of this opportunity by making good use of mountain prayer. At the same time, even though mountain prayer has a lot of blessings, it should not be seen as an end in itself, but a means to an end.

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