

On Matthew's Mountains: Immanence and Transcendence in the First Gospel

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Abstract

*Any discussion of the person of God must first deal with the two aspects of His divine nature which are the starting point for theology proper: transcendence and immanence. God's transcendence is what ultimately separates God and humanity; God exists outside our limited dimensionality. God's immanence is His self-revelation in an understandable way. Transcendence refers to the "wholly otherness" of God, whereas His immanence is what allows us to approach the throne of grace, particularly through the highest revelation of His immanence in the person of Jesus Christ. This article will follow these two themes, specifically as they are demonstrated through St. Matthew's employment of the word *oros* (Koine Greek, usually translated "mountain" but sometimes best seen as representing "hills").*

Keywords: Matthew, immanence, transcendence, Gospel, nature

Immanence and transcendence as aspects of God's nature

Theology proper is a discussion involving God's nature and His attributes. When we consider the nature of God we are primarily interested in the ways in which He interacts with His created world. While the variety of aspects of God's nature and attributes, for instance His omnipotence, His goodness, or His love, are viable conversations, they must be considered against a background of two primary viewpoints. These two viewpoints are God's transcendence and immanence. Grenz and Olsen, the imminent historians, see a discussion of immanence and transcendence as the starting point for a historical view of Christian theology and weave the twin themes throughout their

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excellent overview *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age*. Speaking of His transcendence they write: "...God is self-sufficient apart from the world. God is above the universe and comes to the world from beyond."¹ That God is transcendent from creation is clear in that He exists on a completely other plane than that defined by our senses. The laws of nature do not apply to Him, for the simple reason that He created these laws. God exists outside of time and space for the same reason. In this way God is beyond His creation, and may be considered to be beyond our comprehension. This is true insofar as God is so far beyond the capability of human reason to understand that this would be impossible, except that He has revealed Himself to us. God created humankind with reason and the capability of comprehension beyond what we can see, and shows us Himself in understandable ways so that humanity may experience some of that for which they were created: relationship with the divine. In this way God is immanent to the world in His self-revelation; this revelation is seen in the created world (general revelation), in the recorded words of God in the Bible, in the person of Jesus Christ, and in the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. Speaking of God's immanence, Grenz and Olson write: "...God is present to creation. The divine one is active within the universe, involved with the processes of the world and of human history"² These two aspects of the divine nature must be held in balance, without straying too far from a middle point and into overemphasis of one over the other.

Throughout the history of the Christian religion, maintaining this balance has been elusive. An overemphasis of God's transcendent nature leaves the theologian wondering if He can be known at all. This is often represented in the Deistic "watchmaker" model in which the great craftsman made the world, and then has left it to its own devices, more or less. God is distant from the world by virtue of His

¹ Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age*, (Downer's Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 11.

² Ibid.

transcendence. Likewise, in oversteering toward a position of God's immanence one may be confronted with earth worship, where God becomes so immanent in His creation that He loses His otherness and general revelation becomes God-in-itself. Another offshoot of an overemphasis on immanence is the belief that the revelation of God may only be truly known through what can be drawn from the human experience, which forms the foundation of existentialism. In this way, God becomes so clearly revealed in His creature that humanity becomes God. Both positions are fallacies. Therefore to strike the proper balance one must recognize that although humankind will never fully understand God's transcendence (He is so far beyond our fathoming) or His immanence (how can God reveal Himself in a comprehensible way to frail and shattered reason?), we can and must come to the point of realizing the truth of both aspects of God's nature, and agree that they exist in a perfect cohesion. Grenz and Olsen again:

Where such a balance is lacking, serious theological problems readily emerge. Hence an overemphasis on transcendence can lead to a theology that is irrelevant to the cultural context in which it seeks to speak, whereas an overemphasis on immanence can produce a theology held captive to a specific culture.³

Immanence and transcendence on the mountains

Let us turn then to one way a balance of these views can be seen in the Scriptures, in particular within the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew's Gospel, incredible events routinely occur on mountains, and he uses these mountains to demonstrate both the immanence and transcendence of God and of His divine Son Jesus. Dorothy Lee refers to this specific terrain usage as "...the geographical symbolism of Matthew's Gospel, each of the six mountain scenes being numinous and cosmic, associated

³ Ibid, 12

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with timely revelation”.⁴ It is the apposition between the cosmic and the revealed which will be central to this discussion. The Greek word *oros* (mountain) occurs sixteen times in the book of Matthew and these mountains become the landscape for important scenes from the life and ministry of Jesus. In the first of these, the Tempter meets Jesus, who is hungry from fasting forty days and nights, in the wilderness to tempt Him (Matt 4.8). To set the stage for the third of these temptations, he takes Jesus to an exceedingly high mountain and shows Him all the kingdoms of the world. Satan attempts to steal some of the transcendence of God by implying his ownership over all these kingdoms. He offers Jesus these riches if only Jesus will bow before him, but the Lord says: “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’”.⁵ Jesus will allow no one to infringe upon the ownership of God over creation and over the blessings He gives to people. God exists outside creation and this text points to Christ emphasizing that fact to one of God’s creatures, the Devil himself.

John Thomas Fitzgerald writing on the temptation of Christ, correctly notes that the encounter between Jesus and Satan here is indicative of the Messiah bringing the kingdom of heaven into contact with the world. This act of immanence is central to the themes of Matthew and the other Gospels, and is a concept which Jesus consistently attempts to make real to His disciples. Fitzgerald notes: “This confrontation between Satan and Jesus is central to the bringing in of the kingdom....The kingdom is then the enlarging arena in which the Spirit of Jesus is active in making God’s reign on earth as real as His reign in Heaven”.⁶ While I would argue that the reality of God’s reign on the earth was never *not real* per se, He has given dominion over the earth

⁴ Dorothy Lee, “On the Holy Mountain: The Transfiguration in Scripture and Theology”, *Colloquium* 36 (2004), 143-159.

⁵ All Scripture quoted from NRSV, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ John T. Fitzgerald, “The Temptation of Jesus: The Testing of the Messiah in Matthew,” *Restoration Quarterly* (1972), 152-160.

to Satan for a time. The kingdom of God, or the kingdom of Heaven, is the realm where God lives. Therefore it is untouchable, unknowable, and unfindable by humankind. No amount of searching the universe with satellites and telescopes will allow us to discover the location of the kingdom of God. But in Matthew, and most forcefully here in Jesus' rebuffing of Satan, we see God's effort at bringing His world into alignment with ours to a certain degree, enough that He is lifting the lid just a little on His kingdom. Fitzgerald goes on to say: "This confrontation is in keeping with Matthew's effort to reveal the true nature of the Messianic enterprise".⁷

In Chapter 5, Matthew uses a slightly different construct in the Greek text, which the NRSV chooses to translate as "he went up the mountain" (5.1). The English Standard Version (ESV) maintains the more direct translation of "up on a mountain" and NIV uses "he went up on a mountainside" but the theological principles are not weakened either way. Here the Lord Jesus, seeing the crowds following Him, sits down and delivers His longest recorded sermon. Allison Trites notes: "In typical Oriental fashion, Jesus 'sits' to teach (cf. Mt 23.2) and the recipients of his teaching are the 'disciples' (5.1)".⁸ She goes on to say: "... we must affirm that the teaching given was not to be restricted in its application to the original band of twelve disciples. All who read Matthew's Gospel are meant to 'overhear' the radical character of life under the reign of God."⁹ This enlightens us to an additional aspect of the conversation regarding God's immanence and transcendence in that God's moral attributes are unattainable by us, yet He expects us to maintain a lifestyle which reflects His values and ethical standards (5.48). Indeed the law was given to show our guilt (Rom 3.20) and our consciences warn us against going outside God's established guidelines of behavior (i.e. missing the mark or sinning, Rom 2.15).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Allison A. Trites. "Blessings and Warnings of the Kingdom (Matthew 5:3-12, 7:13-27)," *Review & Expositor* 89 (1992): 179-196.

⁹ Ibid.

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Jesus opens His sermon with what are now called the Beatitudes, a series of lessons on the kingdom of God which do not make much sense from a purely human perspective. In this way, He reveals some of the transcendent nature of God, who shows Himself to the pure in heart and grants the kingdom of heaven to the spiritually poor. God invites us to understand His principles, which often are in opposition to our human preferences and understanding, in order that He might share some small part of Himself with us. Here we can see transcendence *and* immanence at work through revelation, encouraging human encounter with the otherness of God. Later in this Sermon on the Mount, Christ describes believers as “the light of the world” and specifies to His audience that a city on a hill (*oros*) cannot be hidden from view (5.14). This statement seems to breathe immanence where God’s presence is represented by His disciples in the world. Like the brightly lit city which guides travelers and shelters them, so God wishes to be the Father to all who believe Him, to guide and shelter all who look to Him throughout their lives.

In 8.1, Matthew speaks of an event which occurs after Jesus and His disciples had left a mountain (*When Jesus had come down from the mountain*. This is similar to 17.9, which uses *As they were coming down from the mountain*). Following the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus demonstrates most clearly God’s immanence in the world by healing a leper. This leper came to Jesus and recognized Him immediately as God’s Son, the Messiah, and in obvious deference to His Divine nature, the leper bows down and worships the Son of God. In speaking of this act, Martin G. Collins in the *Forerunner Commentary* praises the humility of the leper who recognizes the gap that exists between humanity and the transcendent God: “Sadly, few of us can see the true devastation that sin has caused in our lives and how much we need spiritual healing”.¹⁰ The leper is aware of the immanence of God as

¹⁰Martin G. Collins. “Bible verses about Healing of the Leper”. *Forerunner Commentary* by multiple eds. Accessed 28 April 2020 from Church of the Great God, <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Bible.show/sVerseID/23347/eVerseID/23347>.

seen in the person of Jesus Christ, and clearly sees that God's transcendence is thereby embodied as well. No one can, by their own power, bridge that gulf between God and humankind, and we can only fall to our knees in recognition of the incredible gift He gives. Christ takes upon Himself the effort of spanning the gap for us. The Messiah's act of kindness and compassion also interferes with the laws of nature which God has established. In opposition to Deism, where God is aloof and otherworldly, we see God himself reach out to touch the most despised wretch of that society, a person rejected and considered unclean. This unique moment in which the Divine meets our world in a deeply personal way, of course in Matthew comes on the heels of Jesus' descent from a mountain.¹¹

We see in 14.23 and following an incredible encounter with God which shows in one passage both His transcendence and immanence. As Jesus goes up the mountain alone to pray (note that even our Lord wearied of the crowds and even His own disciples from time to time) and He craved pure Divine interaction with His Father. Although Jesus was fully human, his Divine nature, by necessity yearned for pure relationship with the Divine which was constantly limited by his interaction with humanity in a fallen world. He sends His disciples across the sea and they are thrown into a severe storm, so cataclysmic they fear for their very lives. Jesus, defying the laws of nature, appears to them walking on the water. This is incredibly transcendent and shows God can act as He pleases within the nature He created, because He exists on a completely other plane, one unaffected by our dimensional limitations. The lesson becomes beautifully immanent

¹¹ Piotrowski and Schrock bring an excellent perspective on this miracle as exhibiting the priestly aspect of Christ's ministry and role on earth, an aspect which, although a key mode of God's revelation of Himself in Christ, we will not touch on in depth here. (Additionally, see Kingsbury on Matthean Theology.) Nicholas G. Piotrowski and David Stephen Schrock, "You Can Make Me Clean": The Matthean Jesus as Priest and the Biblical-Theological Results", *Criswell Theological Review* 14 (2016), 3-13. Jack Dean Kingsbury, The Miracle of the Cleansing of the Leper as an Approach to the Theology of Matthew." *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 4 (1977), 343-349.

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when Peter recognizes the Lord and calls out to Him. Jesus invites Peter to walk on the waves as well, an immensely personal interaction that none of the other disciples shared. When Peter cannot maintain his position as can our Lord, and begins to sink and drown, Jesus reaches down to rescue him. This may be seen as a picture of God reaching from His transcendence immanently into our world to offer a way of salvation. Shortly after this event, Jesus goes up on a mountain to preach and heal, which results in the miracle of the Feeding of Four Thousand (15.38). Nothing could reveal God to humankind more expressively than miraculous food!

We next encounter three uses of *oros* in one chapter, a chapter that coincides with Matthew's most vivid demonstration of God's transcendence (Ch.17). Jesus takes Peter, James, and John "up a high mountain, by themselves" (17.1), where He is Transfigured before them. Much has been written on this subject of the Transfiguration with a variety of applications to differing aspects of the Christian life but we focus on the aspects of God's nature as they are revealed to the three disciples.¹² Here the Transfiguration of Jesus shows most clearly the separation between God and men. He is truly outside our comprehension and even a small amount of Himself shown to the disciples makes them unable to even look on His face. God's glory is revealed in this moment in a way that is unique to Scripture, for Christ is shown for who He really is, the Son of God. In fact, to add Divine emphasis, the disciples hear a voice telling them to listen *because* this is God's Son. Penner says of this moment:

The command to listen also points to Jesus' significance as the Son of God. While referring to Jesus as 'a prophet like [Moses]' to whom they must listen (Deut. 18-15-20), the command seems also to separate Him from Moses and

¹² Lee, "Holy Mountain," 143-159. See also James A. Penner. "Revelation and Discipleship in Matthew's Transfiguration Account." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995), 201-210 and Walter L. Liefeld. "Theological Motifs in the Transfiguration Narrative." *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997).

Elijah, setting Him on a completely different plain [sic]. The disciples are to listen to Him even more than they would to Moses or Elijah.¹³

This fact becomes even more clear when we realize that because of Christ's true Divine nature He does indeed exist on an unattainable *plane*, yet represents the connection between creature and Creator by virtue of his fully human nature which is held consubstantially.

When the disciples are afraid and fall to the ground (a natural reaction when human beings experience even a peek at the grandeur of God), Jesus, in his now less-than-transfigured state, takes compassion on the disciples and comforts them. Penner again tells us:

Jesus' touch and call demonstrate compassion and gentleness without condemnation. The disciples seriously misunderstood Jesus' true nature, as shown by Peter's suggestion [to build three booths], which immediately resulted in God's response. They had been admonished by the Father Himself, but the time for compassion and perhaps a spiritual or psychological 'healing' had come.¹⁴

This is so true in that it clearly speaks to the role of Jesus on earth which is to embody both aspects of God and humanity. He moves seamlessly from showing the glory of God to touching the disciples with a word of comfort. His touch symbolizes that transition from transcendence to immanence with a physical gesture. Still, Jesus cautions the disciples not to speak about the event they have just witnessed until after He has died (17.9). This is curious until one realizes that the experience of seeing God, even just a sliver of Him, is not something to be bragged about or told to others, but is to be cherished in one's heart. This knowledge of the God of the Universe in such a personal way is only

¹³ Penner, "Revelation", 203.

¹⁴ Ibid, 209.

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recaptured in the moment of salvation and conversion. After the Transfiguration, Jesus encourages His disciples' faith by telling them they could say to "this mountain," presumably the one they just left, to be thrown into the sea and it would happen (17.20). This concept is replicated as well in 21.21.

We come now to a very specific use of *oros* in Matthew which is repeated three times – that of reference to the Mount of Olives. This mountain takes on significant emphasis toward the end of Christ's earthly ministry and Matthew uses this location to show the nature of God in three contexts. In the first (21.1) we read the story of Jesus sending His disciples into the town of Bethphage on the Mount of Olives to secure transport for his entry into Jerusalem. No mere transport either, but the destrier of a Conqueror! Alas (from the disciples viewpoint) far from it. Jesus rides a humble donkey, which bespeaks a message He had consistently and vainly attempted to impart to His followers. The message was that He was not the conquering transcendent king they expected Him to be *in this life*. He was a humble servant yet one who would one day return as the King of all the World. Jesus expounds on this other worldly perspective again on the Mount of Olives (24.3) when his disciples, suddenly understanding the nearness of His death, ask for a sign of His return. He informs them that they will be tortured and put to death, famines and wars will break out, and many will suffer. In fact the time will come when many have no recourse but to flee "to the mountains" (24.16, similar syntax to 18.12. NIV more effectively renders this as "into the hills."¹⁵ Finally, after these things "they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (24.30, NLT). Here the true transcendence of God will ultimately be revealed to the whole world, and none will be able to withstand it. When God chooses at the end of

¹⁵ I have chosen not to address 18.12, which deals with the story of the Shepherd who loses one sheep and leaves the 99 scattered on the hills (NIV). This is a unique construct in Matthew and demonstrates the better use of the word "hills" for *oros*. While the significance of God's love for us is portrayed in the story, it seems to stand apart from the other uses of *oros* in Matthew.

days to fully reveal Himself to humankind, it will bring with it the end of all we know, to the eternal joy of some and eternal sorrow of others.

The final mention of the Mount of Olives comes just before the end. Jesus and His disciples have shared a meal, the betrayer has been identified and has exited to do his work, and the picture is one of a moment of calm before the storm. “When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (26.30). This moment of intimacy so well demonstrates the immanence of God in Christ, where the God-Man is able to share a meal and quiet peaceful moment with His friends. God is personally revealed in the person of Jesus at that moment; He is relatable, emotional, and vulnerable. While Jesus always fully maintained His Divinity, there are glimpses such as this of the daily interaction which His Deity and humanity had to share. Ham adds to this revelation the aspect of the renewal of the God’s covenant with people in the breaking of the bread and drinking of the wine at the Last Supper.¹⁶ In many places in the Bible we see a transcendent God limiting Himself in some way to enter into relationship with humankind and the act of forging a covenant is a key aspect of relationship¹⁷. This act of covenant-making extends far beyond a blood oath which can be made between peers, and represents a means for a transcendent God to enter our world in a way which forms the strongest bond between Himself and His subjects. Christ becomes both the means of the Covenant and its mediator as well.¹⁸ Additionally, Ham goes on to say that the fact the wine/blood was “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ suggests that Jesus’ death has significance for more

¹⁶ Clay Ham. “The last supper in Matthew.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 10 (2000), 53-69.

¹⁷ For a more in-depth study of covenant theology see also: William D. Barrick, “New covenant theology and the Old Testament covenants”, *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 18 (2000), 165-180; William P. Brown, “The character of covenant in the Old Testament: a theocentric probe”, *The Annual Society of Christian Ethics* (1996), 283-293; and Scott Hahn, “Covenant in the Old and New Testaments: some recent research”, *Currents in Biblical Research*, 3 (2005), 263-292.

¹⁸ Walter E. Aufrecht, “Transcendence and Covenant.” *Religious Studies and Theology*, 12 (1992), 30-32.

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than just the disciples”.¹⁹ This is the most important role Christ plays on earth, that of the sacrifice which allows fallen, broken, and sinful humankind to reenter a right relationship with the transcendent God (Rom 3.25, Eph 5.2). He is the bridge for the chasm that exists between God and humankind, and could only fulfill that role by being God and human, and by being sinless throughout His life on earth.

Matthew’s final use of *oros* also comes with the final appearance of Christ after the resurrection and coincides with the greatest instructions He ever gave His followers, now referenced as The Great Commission (28.16). Here Jesus specified a place (indeed, a mountain) where his disciples could meet Him after His death and they arrive with expectation. Christ instructs them to do as He Himself had done: to go out, teaching and preaching, and most importantly, making more followers of Him. His earthly ministry was now conferred on His followers, who were to propagate the message of the cross, the tomb, and empty grave. David Bosch writes an excellent piece on a Catholic response to Evangelical Protestant enthusiasm at the use of this passage to demonstrate the mission of the Christ-follower. He notes that Luke 4.18-19 may better express such a task and says:

To many people, particularly those touched by liberation theology, this passage [Luke] constitutes the summation of the church’s mission, in much the same way as the Great Commission does for evangelicals. We are thus confronted with two reductionist positions; the one interpreting the church’s mission exclusively in narrow evangelistic categories, the other in liberationist categories.²⁰

From either view, we clearly see that the transcendent God, who can never be fully grasped, must be made known to others, with the hope

¹⁹ Ham, “Last Supper,” 59.

²⁰ David J. Bosch, “The scope of mission.” *International Review of Mission*, 73 (1984), 17-32.

that His immanent nature, continuing in this world particularly in the person of the Holy Spirit, will reveal a small portion of God Himself to people. Millard Erickson says so appropriately:

We have seen that God has taken the initiative to make Himself known to us in a more complete way than general revelation, and has done so in a fashion appropriate to our understanding. This means that lost and sinful humans can come to know God, and then go on to grow in understanding of what He expects and promises to His children.²¹

In this way, Christ's final directives to His followers are as applicable today as when they were spoken, on a mountain, to humble 1st century disciples.

²¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 223.

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