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The Sermon in Light of Ritual Studies

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CHAPTER 11

THE SERMON IN LIGHT OF RITUAL STUDIES

One final approach to understanding the nature and function of the Sermon on the Mount has come recently through the channels of religious ritual studies. Taking this additional tack provides further insights into the ritual character of the Sermon. Having exhaustively plowed the fields of form, source, and historical criticism and still having come up short on completely satisfying approaches, students may find helpful insights by turning in other directions, such as to rhetorical or social scientific studies.

Seeing the Sermon through the lens of ritual studies would seem particularly promising. Several rituals were practiced by the early Christians from the first century onward, including baptism (offered by John the Baptist), almsgiving, prayer, fasting, washing and anointing (as mentioned in the cultic instructions in Matthew 6:1–18), the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost or to ordain priesthood officers (mentioned as early as Acts 6:6; 8:17), the sacrament of the Lord's supper or the Eucharist

(well established by the time of Paul's letters to the Corinthians in the early 50s A.D.), blessing the sick (James 5:14), and marriage (the most extensive evidence coming from the *Gospel of Philip*),[1] to mention only some.

Such rituals were important to early Christianity. Indeed, it seems unlikely that any new religion could successfully emerge in the ancient world without inaugurating its own rituals. All ancient religions were highly ritualistic, especially when compared with modern religions. Their individual and sometimes iconoclastic rituals served as markers to distinguish one group from the others. Cultic observances and solemn rites served to foster needed loyalty of members to the group and to enshrine the basic tenets of each religion, as well as to offer sacrifices to their gods and to pay homage to the spirits of their kindred dead. Although they were influenced to some extent by philosophical schools of thought, ancient religions were more than mere bodies of abstract teachings and more than logical systems of philosophical thought. For this reason, such religious philosophers as Philo of Alexandria did not launch a religious movement. Religions had rituals, temples, priests, regulations, and cultic systems.

Primitive Christianity, along with its host Jewish culture, soon had to deal with the loss of the temple in Jerusalem, but well before its destruction in A.D. 70, Jesus and his apostles had already begun their program of replacing that temple with a new temple concept and system. Given its Jewish antecedents and matrix, it seems unlikely that Jesus' temple program was entirely spiritualized at the beginning, as it soon would come to be. Thus, the recent search for further clues about the earliest Christian rituals is well warranted.

Studies of Ritual and Ceremony

Interest in ritual studies rose sharply among social scientists in the 1980s. Beginning in the winter of 1987, the *Journal of Ritual Studies* commenced publication on this subject under the auspices of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. This interest soon spilled over into biblical studies. In 1994 a full issue of *Semeia*, a journal dedicated to experimental biblical criticism and published by the Society of Biblical Literature, devoted its total attention to ritual elements in the New Testament. Without attempting to survey everything in this growing field of religious scholarship, I will sketch some of the basic definitions, concepts, and functions that this discipline has come to associate with rituals in general, and I will apply these criteria to the Sermon on the Mount. Seeing the Sermon as a temple text places it in a ritual context, and the plausibility of that contextualization is confirmed by the broad findings of ritual studies.

Victor Turner was among the first social scientists to analyze rituals. By *ritual* he meant any "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers."[2] Religious rites have been classified under two headings: as rituals or as ceremonies. In general, rituals (such as baptisms) are said to occur at any time, are primarily oriented toward the future, are presided over by professionals, and transform a person from one status to another. Ceremonies (such as the observance of Passover or the sacrament of the Lord's supper) usually occur at regular times, celebrate past events, are conducted by many kinds of officials, and serve principally to reconfirm the status and role of people in the religion.[3] In

reality, however, the lines between these two categories are not rigid.

Whether the Sermon on the Mount in its earliest iterations should be thought of as accompanying a transforming ritual or a repeated ceremony probably depends on developments within the lives of individual early Christians. The first time the Sermon was experienced by a disciple, either in Galilee or at Bountiful, it was generative and transformative; as a text that accompanied baptism or prepared initiates for entrance into the kingdom of God on earth, the Sermon is probably best understood as a ritual text. Subsequent reiterations of the Sermon, either by Jesus or his disciples, however, are probably best thought of in terms of ceremony. Out of the Sermon, for example, came the ceremonial use of the Lord's Prayer in the ancient Mediterranean arena and also the ceremonial sacrament prayers among the peoples of the Book of Mormon. Ceremonially rehearsing these sacred texts reminded worthy Christians of the things Jesus had said and reconfirmed their status and role as believers. Thus, the Sermon may well be seen both as ritual and ceremony.

General Functions of Ritual

According to social scientists, rituals and ceremonies serve several generic functions. Significantly, as the following discussion demonstrates, the Sermon amply serves each of these functions as articulated in the scholarly literature.

For example, one common function served by most religious rites is to give order to the community's way of life: "Societies employ rituals that express their guiding ideas . . . by dramatizing [their] world view and way of life."[4] Without doubt, the Sermon expresses the guiding ideas of

the Christian's way of life. It is a guide for daily living with an eternal perspective.

Furthermore, religious rites typically derive much of their ability to link the individual with the cosmos—the particular with the general, the real with the ideal—by turning ordinary experiences into sacred symbols. "Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities,"[5] such as eating bread, drinking wine, or being washed. Similarly, the Sermon on the Mount imbues the ordinary occurrences of daily life with sacred import, utilizing everything from salt, light, cheeks, and coats, to lilies, thistles, fish, and bread.

The ordinary, however, "becomes significant, becomes sacred, simply by being there," in a sacred place, a place of clarification, where "it becomes sacred by having our attention directed to it in a special way."[6] Functioning as a focusing lens, ritual, especially at a temple or other sacred space, is "a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things."[7] Throughout the Sermon, a tension tugs at us between the way things usually are and the way perfection would have us be. It presents in dramatic images the doctrine of the Two Ways and holds out to our view the contrast between our old way of seeing things and a new vision of the divine way things can and should be.

Observers also find that silence ritually heightens the ability of participants to hear these clarifying messages. Temples and rituals in general function best when, "as in all forms of communication, static and noise (i.e., the accidental) are decreased so that the exchange of information can be increased."[8] Hence, it is no idle point that the Sermon at the Temple commences in a state of utter silence

(see 3 Nephi 11:8), and both Sermons admonish people to go into their quiet closets to pray behind closed doors (see Matthew 6:6; 3 Nephi 13:6).

Religious rites are not only private experiences; they are also interpersonal. One of their salient purposes is "to create social cohesion."[9] Unquestionably, the Sermon serves this purpose as well by prohibiting anger against others; by requiring people to settle their differences quickly; by demanding kindness, generosity, honesty, and forgiveness; and by abolishing judgment of a brother. The golden rule, which sums up the Law and the Prophets, is perhaps the ultimate touchstone of social cohesion.

Moreover, in implementing that social order, rituals and ceremonies unleash spiritual power from "'the generating source of culture and structure.'"[10] They provide structure and control to the social order, making important public statements "about the hierarchal relations between people."[11] Thus, scholars conclude that rituals are not only a source for setting social boundaries but are much more: they are "'models *of*' what people believe and . . . 'models *for* the believing of it.'"[12] Rituals model the behavior of believing, righteous people. Ritual texts tell the believer how to respond to certain situations and how to believe the sacred ritual itself. In this light, one may consider the functions served by the social structures, boundaries, and models that are set in and by the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon provides fundamental rules for interpreting law and order, structuring marriages and divorce, serving masters, and rejecting false prophets; it sets boundaries by identifying improper conduct, for example, in those who love only their friends or who parade to be seen of men; and it provides many models for believing in God and his righteousness, trust-

ing in God, going the extra mile, and giving to those who ask for help.

In addition, ritual is more than simple symbolic expression and more than a dramatic presentation. Ritual is a system of "redressing social crisis and restoring order" after disruption.[13] Reacting against the unsettling effects of change, the stability afforded by ritual rejuvenates community values and institutions. This ritual function is detectable in the Sermon's reassurance that Jesus did not come to destroy but to fulfill the law. The teachings of Jesus were unsettling to many people. He was controversial in his own lifetime, and his followers were considered blasphemers by the dominant culture. In the face of these monumental crises, the ritualized reassurances of the Sermon restored order in the lives of the early followers of Jesus. In the Sermon at the Temple, the crisis was of epic proportions, involving not only ethical and social reorientations, but also the destruction of entire cities and the obsolescence of the traditional order of temple sacrifices (see 3 Nephi 9:3–20).

Structurally, rituals of transformation then conduct the initiates through three stages. Rituals and rites of passage, according to standard theory, typically involve (1) a separation from the old society, (2) an isolation in a marginal or liminal, amorphous state, and (3) a reaggregation into a new social set.[14] Interestingly, K. C. Hanson has applied this three-stage ritual analysis fairly successfully to the Sermon on the Mount.[15] Thus, he suggests: (1) "In ritual terms, [Jesus] left the general population and gathered his disciples for instruction."[16] They are at first strongly separated from other people; they are not to be like the Pharisees or hypocrites. Thus, (2) the initiates find themselves next on the border, in a no man's land, neither Jew

nor Greek, and they see themselves in a state of reflection and as a group of equal brothers and sisters, "divested of their previous habits of thought, feeling, and action," thinking about "the powers that generate and sustain them."[17] Through adherence to "keeping secret the nature of the *sacra*," which is "the crux of liminality,"[18] the result of the Sermon (3) is, finally, "the group's initiation into Jesus' teaching. . . . The master-teacher has guided the initiands into a new status."[19] Aggregation as a new group of adherents has resulted.

The contours of this three-stage ritual process are even more prominent in the Sermon at the Temple. There the traumas of destruction, loneliness, and uncertainty accentuate the stages of separation and liminality. There the rituals of baptism (see 3 Nephi 11:21–27) and taking a new name (see 3 Nephi 18:11; see also Moroni 4:3) are integrally connected with the Sermon, and the ordination of new officers (see 3 Nephi 12:1–2) overtly structures the reaggregation of the believers into a new society.

Rituals in all cultures aid in this difficult process of transformation across boundaries. They provide coherence and comfort as people walk the perilous path from one stage in life to another. With respect to the Sermon on the Mount, Philip Esler agrees with Hanson's analysis particularly with respect to this element of transformation: "There is clearly a transformation here both in the restoration to wholeness of the sick and broken who come to Jesus and the fact that, upon seeing this, the people give glory to the God of Israel."[20] The same can be said of the Sermon at the Temple, where the healing is not only verbal but also physical. In many ways, the Sermon is transformational: It turns the world upside down. Barbara Babcock has shown how effectively rites can invert an existing social or religious or-

der, thereby introducing a new society, order, or cosmos, even as it sets aside the old.[21] What one has heard one way of old is now said another way; enemies become friends; money becomes worthless; deeds done in secret are rewarded in the open; and mortals become as God.

Imagining the Conduct of Such a Rite

No single rite or ceremony, of course, incorporates every possible performative element of ritual, but the Sermon on the Mount potentially contains many of them. Common elements in ancient rituals include such things as actual purifications, symbolic journeys, inspired lectures on future behavior, multiple levels of initiation, the giving of secrets, expositions of holy objects, and investiture or crowning. The Sermon on the Mount alludes to such items, even if only obliquely: purification ("blessed are the pure in heart"), journeys ("the way"), lectures on future behavior (see Matthew 6:19–7:12), multiple levels of initiation ("be ye therefore perfect"), giving secrets and showing holy symbols ("give not that which is holy"), and investiture ("even as Solomon").

We may even imagine the nature of ritual actions that could have accompanied a ceremonial or ritual usage of the Sermon.[22] Consider the following prospects. Is it possible that the blessings of the Beatitudes were bestowed by the laying on of hands? That the people responded with an acclamation of rejoicing? That salt was tasted or poured out on the ground and trampled underfoot? That a coat was requested and an undergarment given? That alms were actually collected? That a group prayer was recited? That people were marked as slaves of the One Master? That robes were donned? That one stood before a surrogate eschatological judge? That something belonging to the initiate was

turned and rent? That people knocked three times? That the group actually ate some bread and fish? That they passed through a narrow opening, past a tree of life, into the symbolic presence of God? Any attempt to reconstruct such ritual actions is admittedly conjectural, for that knowledge became lost with the deaths of those early initiates and remains unknown to us. But it is at least fair to wonder.

Far less conjectural, however, are the general patterns and purposes that investigators have discerned in rituals across all cultures. I point to those phenomena as further support for the basic suggestion that the Sermon functions well in a temple or ceremonial context. Just as ritual provides social order to one's way of life, ritual analysis can supply a deeply needed sense of underlying, unifying order in the Sermon itself.

Notes

1. April D. DeConick, "Entering God's Presence: Sacramentalism in the Gospel of Philip," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1998 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 483–523.

2. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), 19. Turner's pioneering efforts have long since been refined and expanded beyond the domain of religion.

3. K. C. Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain: Ritual Analysis and the Gospel of Matthew," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 152–54; Mark McVann, "Reading Mark Ritually: Honor-Shame and the Ritual of Baptism," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 180; and Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 95.

4. Bobby C. Alexander, "An Afterword on Ritual in Biblical Studies," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 210–11.

5. Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," *History of Religions* 20 (1980): 125.

6. Ibid., 115.
7. Ibid., 125.
8. Ibid., 114.
9. Alexander, "Afterword on Ritual," 210.
10. Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 189, quoting Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ, 1986), 158.
11. Esther Goody, "'Greeting', 'Begging', and the Presentation of Respect," in *The Interpretation of Ritual: Essays in Honour of A. I. Richards*, ed. J. S. La Fontaine (London: Tavistock, 1972), 39.
12. Carol Schersten LaHurd, "Exactly What's Ritual about the Experience of Reading/Hearing Mark's Gospel," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 204–5, quoting Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, ed. William Lessa and Evon Vogt (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).
13. Alexander, "Afterword on Ritual," 211.
14. Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 94, following the theories of Van Gennep.
15. Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain," 154–61. Kari Syreeni, "Methodology and Compositional Analysis," pt. 1 of *The Making of the Sermon on the Mount: A Procedural Analysis of Matthew's Redactoral Activity* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1987), 217, anticipated this structural analysis. Philip F. Esler, "Mountaineering in Matthew: A Response to K. C. Hanson," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 171–77, is critical of Hanson's efforts elsewhere in Matthew but finds that "the Sermon on the Mount is a little more promising for Hanson's view" (ibid., 173).
16. Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain," 160.
17. Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 105; italics in original.
18. Ibid., 103.
19. Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain," 160–61.
20. Esler, "Mountaineering in Matthew," 173.
21. Barbara Babcock, ed., *The Reversible World: Symbolic*

Inversion in Art and Society (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998). I am grateful to Richard DeMaris for this reference.

22. In general, see Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).