Type: Book Chapter

The Quest for a Unifying Understanding of the Sermon on the Mount

Author(s): John W. Welch
Source: *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple*
Published: Farnham, UK; Ashgate, 2009
Pages: 1–14

Abstract: No abstract available.

Chapter 1

The Quest for a Unifying Understanding of the Sermon on the Mount

No text has had greater influence on Christianity than the Sermon on the Mount. It would be hard to overstate the importance of the roles that the Sermon on the Mount has played over the centuries in shaping Christian ethics and in conveying the teachings of Jesus. Known variously as the Great Sermon or the Speech of Speeches, thousands of insightful books and articles have extensively and minutely analyzed its three chapters in the Gospel of Matthew.[1] Without exaggeration, one commentator has rightly noted, "There is no section of the Bible which has been so quoted (by non-Christians as well as Christians), worked over, commented upon, argued about, taken apart and put together, preached and taught, praised and scorned as has the Sermon on the Mount."[2]

The intense fascination generated by the Sermon on the Mount derives from a widely held consensus that it is "one of the main biblical texts on which we ground our view of discipleship"[3] and that it contains "the pure uncorrupted expression of the will of God as it agrees with the law and prophets, i.e., as it always was."[4] Because the Sermon stands close to the beginning of the New Testament and because it is typically among the first biblical passages to be translated into new languages, many people have "their first introduction to the Bible via the Sermon on the Mount."[5]

---

[1] Among the general studies of the Sermon on the Mount are Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis, 1995); Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis, 1989); Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary*, trans. O.C. Dean Jr (Nashville, 1988); Joachim Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia, 1963); and Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (Westport, Connecticut, 1978). A valuable annotated bibliography is Warren S. Kissinger, *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (American Theological Library Association Bibliography Series, no. 3, Metuchen, New Jersey, 1975).

[2] James H. Burtness, "Life-Style and Law: Some Reflections on Matthew 5:17," *Di* 14/1 (1975): 13.

[3] Daniel Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount: Four Legitimate Readings, Four Plausible Views of Discipleship and Their Relative Values* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1996), p. 1.

[4] Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, p. 217.

[5] Kissinger, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. xiii.

Just as this text has long been viewed as critically important to Christian discipleship, its interpretation has been taken up by "an almost endless chain of theologians and philosophers,"[6] and even today, this vast interest in the Sermon on the Mount "shows no sign of diminution."[7] Although entire volumes have been devoted to presenting bibliographies of Sermon on the Mount scholarly materials,[8] the quantity of this scholarly material "exceeds what even computerized bibliographies can handle."[9] The quantity and passion invested into the Sermon on the Mount throughout centuries of study and research caused bibliographer Warren Kissinger to comment:

> Like a mighty mountain, the Sermon on the Mount continues to attract persons of different backgrounds and traditions. There is general agreement that the Sermon offers a compendium of the teachings of Jesus, and that it is one of the most lofty and powerful expressions of the essence of the moral life. Gandhi was much impressed by it, and its impact upon him was second only to that of the Bhagavad Gita. Tolstoy came to a new *Weltanschauung* through his reading and study of it. Claude Montefiore, writing from a liberal Jewish perspective, spoke of the Sermon's great nobility, significance, and power. Nietzsche was one who did not share this almost universal admiration. For him the Sermon on the Mount represented a significant part of Jesus' ethics, which was a "slave morality."[10]

Yet, in spite of the Sermon on the Mount's acclaimed preeminence and apparent simplicity, it has still remained paradoxically inscrutable. What kind of a text is this so-called "sermon"? In fact, the New Testament never calls Matthew 5–7 a "sermon," and indeed it does not read much like a typical preacher's sermon. This all leaves readers wondering, What was the original function or purpose of this text? Does it have a unifying coherence, or is it a scrapbook of disjointed sayings? How was it able to generate binding spiritual power, unlike the teachings of the scribes (Matthew 7:29)? Persistent questions such as these have continuously fueled Sermon on the Mount research, powering the relentless and seemingly endless barrage of interpretations and studies. Joachim Jeremias, the renowned Lutheran New Testament scholar from Göttingen, referred wistfully to "the long-debated question of the aim of the Sermon on the Mount,"[11] and Georg Strecker, who succeeded him as holder of the Chair of New Testament Studies, struggled to find a solution to what he termed the "problem of the proper exegesis of the

---

6   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 1.

7   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 3.

8   For example, Kissinger, *Sermon on the Mount*; Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 643–63.

9   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 3.

10   Kissinger, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. xi.

11   Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. vii.

Sermon on the Mount."[12] The work of Warren Kissinger readily recognized "a cluster of problems" surrounding the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount.[13] Despite a long history of complicated analysis, the Sermon's most recent premier commentator, Hans Dieter Betz, observes, "The texts themselves did not put the historical questions to rest, but the facts continued to keep scholars busy."[14]

Indeed, every possible tool of critical scholarship has been brought to bear on the Sermon on the Mount, and yet it still eludes and transcends explanation.

In some circles, the Sermon on the Mount has been examined in great detail by textual critics who specialize in comparing the early New Testament manuscripts in their variant forms. For example, scholars such as Julius Wellhausen, Rudolf Bultmann, Karel Klostermann, C.H. Dodd, and others have asserted that the third beatitude (Matthew 5:5) was not originally part of the text of the Sermon on the Mount since it switches places with the second beatitude in some early Greek manuscripts, while others argue that such a conclusion is unwarranted.[15] Textual variants, even if perhaps insignificant or inconsequential, have been duly noted and exquisitely scrutinized. Was "falsely," a word which is absent in some manuscripts, a later editorial addition at the end of the phrase "and utter all kinds of evil against you" (Matthew 5:11), or was it originally present? Did the Lord's Prayer originally end with "deliver us from evil," or did it go on to end with a doxology, "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever, amen" (Matthew 6:13)? Given the oral tradition that ran concurrent with the reduction of the four New Testament Gospels to writing, can one even rightly speak of an original text?

Likewise, source criticism has yielded a kaleidoscope of possible structural designs[16] and theories of authorship for the Sermon on the Mount. Nevertheless, it remains quite uncertain how, when, why, or by whom this text was written or assembled. For example, some have proposed that Matthew, not Jesus, was personally responsible for writing the five beatitudes in Matthew 5:5, 7–10 that happen to be absent from Luke 6:20–22.[17] Searching for literary and religious influences on this text, the Sermon on the Mount has been combed for traces,

---

[12] Strecker, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 7.

[13] Kissinger, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. xi–xii.

[14] Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 24.

[15] Robert A. Guelich, "The Matthew Beatitudes: 'Entrance Requirements' or Eschatological Blessings?" *JBL* 95/3 (1976): 423 n. 46; see also McArther, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 85.

[16] Neil J. McEleney, "The Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain," *CBQ* 43/1 (1981): 1–3; and C.M. Tuckett, "The Beatitudes: A Source-Critical Study," *NovT* 25 (1983): 193–216.

[17] J. Dupont, *Les Béatitudes: Le problème littéraire—Les deux versions du Sermon sur la montagne et des Béatitudes* (2nd edn, Paris, 1969), vol. 1, pp. 250–64; Hubert Frankemölle, "Die Makarismen (Matt 5:1–12; Luke 6:20–3): Motive und Umfang der redaktionellen Komposition," *BZ* 15/1 (1971): 52–75; and N. Walter, "Die Bearbeitung der Seligpreisungen durch Matthäus," *SE* 4 (1968): 246–58.

however faint, of Jewish or Hellenistic thoughts or idioms. For example, David Flusser, an Orthodox Jewish scholar of Christian origins at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, points out parallels between the *Thanksgiving Scroll* 18:14–15 from the Dead Sea community and Matthew 5:3–5.[18] Erik Sjöberg expounds at length on the Judaic backgrounds of Matthew 6:22–3, while Betz finds in those same two verses Hellenistic ideas and ancient Greek theories of vision.[19]

Related to source criticism is form criticism, by which other scholars have hypothesized that during the centuries between the original speaking and the actual transcribing of the Sermon (or its parts), the Church and its traditions significantly influenced the Sermon's content and form.[20] Altogether, explorations of the Sermon on the Mount's authorship frequently conclude by expressing the opinion that "the whole section is merely a collection of unrelated sayings of diverse origins, a patchwork, which cannot possibly retain the pre-eminence once accorded to it as the authoritative source for the teaching of Jesus."[21]

Alternatively, oral analysis of the Sermon on the Mount focuses on this body of teachings more as a harmonic discourse, delivered and received as a speech or performance. This type of analysis recognizes that although the Sermon on the Mount is known today as a written text, it was originally "oral in nature and function," and thus might have been used to communicate not only through words but through "sense perception."[22] As described by Richard Horsley, Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts and the Study of Religion at the University of Massachusetts, this type of analysis seeks to find and appreciate "the *register* in which the discourse was recited,"[23] and thereby opens the door for viewing the Sermon in the context of the oral traditions ubiquitous throughout the ancient world. In particular, Horsley and his coauthor Jonathan Draper conclude that, when considered as a single speech or performance, the various pieces of the Sermon on the Mount come together in a manner reminiscent of a "covenantal" structure, the Beatitudes having "the form and function of covenantal blessings, not sapiential macarisms."[24] Rhetorical and literary critical approaches per se, however, have not satisfied everyone. Donald Senior, for example, insists that this type of analysis must be employed with caution, since "attempting to decipher

---

[18]   D. Flusser, "Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit," *IEJ* 10/1 (1960): 1–13.

[19]   Erik Sjöberg, "Das Licht in dir: Zur Deutung von Matth. 6,22f Par," *ST* 5 (1952): 89–105; Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 71–87.

[20]   W.D. Davies gives an overview of form criticism in *The Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, 1964): p. 2–3.

[21]   Davies, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 1.

[22]   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 83, 84.

[23]   Richard A. Horsley with Jonathan Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1999), p. 201.

[24]   Horsley, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me*, p. 197, pp. 216–25.

Matthew's literary and rhetorical strategies without fully engaging the Gospel's theological convictions will lead interpreters in the wrong direction."[25]

Moreover, the Sermon on the Mount has been interpreted typologically. One such view, developed by Karlmann Beyschlag, sees the Sermon as reflecting the five dimensions of the early Christian church and the five main themes of its ecclesiastical history.[26] These five themes were initially formulated by Gerhard Ebeling, who styled them as being exhaustive of early church history; these themes account for several parts of the Sermon on the Mount, namely (1) the mystical ("seeing God," "seeking and finding"), (2) the building of faith and the teaching of theology, (3) differentiating orthodoxy from heresy, (4) withstanding persecution and accomplishing mission, and (5) defining Christian sin and implementing ecclesiastical repentance. Going off in another intriguing typological direction is Duke University's W.D. Davies, who suggests that the Sermon on the Mount is none other than the new law of God given at a mountain, replicating the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai, set in a five-part structure that mirrors the five books of the Pentateuch.[27] Aternatively, John Hellerman argues that the Sermon on the Mount should be seen as a type of charter for a close-knit community, inasmuch as it defines "interpersonal behavior appropriate for Mediterranean siblings in [a] newly forming community."[28]

Questions have also been raised about the intended audience of the Sermon,[29] with some readers suggesting that Jesus addressed himself only to the disciples, not to mankind in general.[30] Swiss professor Ulrich Luz simultaneously offers the hypotheses that the Sermon on the Mount "presupposes the calling of the disciples" and is directed at them, while at the same time affirming that it also "makes a demand of the whole world through the proclamation of the disciples."[31] Others have puzzled over which early Christian communities might possibly have played a role in producing or shaping the final versions of the Sermon on the

---

[25]   Donald Senior, "Directions in Matthean Studies," in David E. Aune (ed.), *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), p. 17.

[26]   Karlmann Beyschlag, "Zur Geschichte der Bergpredigt in der alten Kirche," *ZTK* 74 (1977): 291–322.

[27]   Davies, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 6–27.

[28]   John H. Hellerman, *Jesus and the People of God: Reconfiguring Ethnic Identity* (Sheffield, 2007), p. 285.

[29]   Jack D. Kingsbury, "The Place, Structure, and Meaning of the Sermon on the Mount within Matthew," *Int* 41 (1987): 131–43; J.R.C. Cousland, *The Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew* (Boston, 2002), p. 243.

[30]   T.W. Manson, *Ethics and the Gospel* (New York, 1960), p. 50.

[31]   Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, p. 216.

Mount,[32] as well as wondering about the potential targets against whom its critical statements may have been aimed.[33]

Regarding the literary structure of the Sermon as a whole, "there is no agreement . . . with regard to the structure of the Sermon on the Mount."[34] Dale Allison, a leading scholar on the Gospel of Matthew, focuses especially on triadic structures in the Sermon and finds similar three-part structures in the Mishnah.[35] Joachim Jeremias sees basically a three-part structure in the Sermon (covering issues regarding the manner of interpreting scripture, controversies concerning the righteousness of the Pharisees, and instructions about the new righteousness of the disciples).[36] Luz sees the structure of the Sermon on the Mount centering on the Lord's Prayer.[37] Then again, there may be value in seeing the body of the Sermon on the Mount as a chiastic elaboration on the eight beatitudes, taking them one by one in the reverse order from that in which they are initially introduced,[38] or as an overall chiasm centered on the Lord's Prayer, or first seeking God's righteousness and his kingdom,[39] but these suggested structures have their weaknesses and difficulties.[40] Dan Lioy discusses at length several notable attempts by Nils Lund, John Breck, and others, and advances his own proposal to see the Sermon on the Mount as an overall A-B-C-B-A chiasm (with all of 5:17–7:12 as the single centerpiece),[41] but in the end Lioy candidly acknowledges that his "comparison of the chiastic structures overviewed indicates that there are some areas of agreement

---

[32]   Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 19–22, 65–9; and Krister Stendahl, *The School of Matthew and Its Use in the Old Testament* (Ramsey, New Jersey, 1990), pp. 13–35.

[33]   Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 125–51; and David Hill, "False Prophets and Charismatics: Structure and Interpretation in Matthew 7:15–23," *Bib* 57 (1976): 327–48.

[34]   Dale C. Allison Jr, "The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," *JBL* 106/3 (1987): 424.

[35]   Allison, "Structure of the Sermon on the Mount," 423–45; developed further in Glen Stassen, "The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:2–7:12)," *JBL* 122/2 (2003): 267–308.

[36]   Joachim Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 23; see also Alfred M. Perry, "The Framework of the Sermon on the Mount," *JBL* 54 (1935): 23.

[37]   Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, p. 215.

[38]   John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the New Testament," in John W. Welch (ed.), *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim 1981; reprint, Provo, Utah, 1999), pp. 236–7; see also H.W. Hernandez, *The Chiastic Structure of the Sermon on the Mount* (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1994).

[39]   Jonathan A. Draper, "The Genesis and Narrative Thrust of the Paraenesis in the Sermon on the Mount," *JSNT* 75 (1999): 33–4.

[40]   Dan Lioy, *The Decalogue in the Sermon on the Mount* (New York, 2004), pp. 96–7.

[41]   Lioy, *Decalogue in the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 97–103.

and some significant areas of disagreement among them. In fact, 'no consensus has been reached as to [the] precise shape' of the Sermon's chiastic arrangement."[42]

Efforts to find the contextual meaning of individual sections of the Sermon on the Mount have proven just as frustrating, as have attempts to configure its overall structure. Speaking of Matthew 5:21–47, Betz concedes, "There clearly appears to be a rationale behind the six antitheses and their arrangement in the SM, but that rationale has so far eluded scholarship."[43] Similarly, the organizing principle behind Matthew 6:19–7:12 has been declared "most difficult to explain,"[44] even seemingly nonexistent.[45]

While all of these studies have contributed valuable perspectives and significant insights into various dimensions of the Sermon on the Mount, this text still stands in need of further attention. Especially lacking in all previous approaches to the Sermon on the Mount is a theory capable of successfully unifying all of its elements. Thus, some commentators have simply concluded that the Sermon on the Mount is an eclectic collection of isolated sayings of Jesus, which Matthew or early followers of Christ gathered together without a single theme or organized development. Such arguments mainly rely on the fact that certain verses in the Sermon on the Mount are also found in the gospels of Mark or Luke but are presented on those occasions as separate sayings of Jesus in different settings. Other exegetes, unsatisfied with that assessment, for it fails to explain the obvious strength of the Sermon as a whole, have attempted to bring all the disparate parts of the Sermon on the Mount under unifying main themes, such as Jesus' fulfillment of the law of Moses, the golden rule, freedom,[46] prayer,[47] love,[48] the attainment of greater righteousness,[49] or overcoming the fear of death.[50] The main problem with the unifying approaches offered so far, however, is that no one of them can account completely for all of the text, for each of these suggested distillations selectively ignores many parts of the Sermon that do not happen to fit its particular theme, scheme, or constraints.

Turning from thematic or theory-based analyses to practice-driven readings has produced no clearer results. The Sermon on the Mount has been given an astonishingly wide variety of practical applications and moralistic interpretations in contemporary theology and religion. For some, the Sermon on the Mount makes

---

[42]   Lioy, *Decalogue in the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 102, quoting John Breck.

[43]   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 201.

[44]   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 423.

[45]   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 426.

[46]   Peter Stuhlmacher, "Jesu vollkommenes Gesetz der Freiheit," *ZTK* 79 (1982): 283–322.

[47]   Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, p. 215.

[48]   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 205.

[49]   Kingsbury, "Place, Structure, and Meaning," p. 136.

[50]   Andrej Kodjak, *A Structural Analysis of the Sermon on the Mount* (Berlin, 1986), pp. 51–2.

nothing less than a divine demand for ethical perfection.[51] For others, it proclaims a set of ideals so impossible to fulfill that it should be understood as "a call to the Mercy Seat."[52] Along this line, David Greenwood argues that the imperatives in the Sermon should not be thought of as law, for "a good law should be worded in such a way that at least the majority of those on whom it is imposed are capable of obeying it in all normal circumstances," and the high demands of the Sermon on the Mount do not meet this criterion.[53] Similarly sobered, J. Duncan M. Derrett, professor of comparative law and religion, sees the Sermon as nothing short of an ascetic discourse—somber, austere, and even "masochistic."[54] For still others, it preaches an urgent and expedient interim ethic relevant only to the supreme apocalyptic crisis of the world at hand.[55] No wonder Joachim Jeremias has asked:

> What is the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount? This is a profound question, and one which affects not only our preaching and teaching but also, when we really face up to it, the very roots of our existence. Since the very beginning of the church it has been a question with which all Christians have had to grapple, not only the theologians among them, and in the course of the centuries a whole range of answers has been given to it.[56]

In short, the Sermon on the Mount provokes many questions about its overall purpose and meaning; yet, traditional approaches have failed to answer these questions satisfactorily. As Hans Dieter Betz has summarized, "New Testament scholarship up to the present has offered no satisfactory explanation of this vitally important text."[57] Such scholarship has presented a multitude of hypotheses focused on the questions of authorship, purpose, meaning, structure, historical setting, and others, but has resulted in no consistent understanding. Some studies of the Sermon on the Mount include histories of interpretation which reveal that from the time of Augustine through the Reformation and Enlightenment and

---

[51]   Hans Windisch, *Der Sinn der Bergpredigt* (Leipzig, 1929).

[52]   This is the view of Robert Frost in McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 18.

[53]   David Greenwood, "Moral Obligation in the Sermon on the Mount," *TS* 31/2 (1970): 304; see 301–9.

[54]   J. Duncan M. Derrett, *The Ascetic Discourse: An Explanation of the Sermon on the Mount* (Eilsbrunn, 1989), p. 14.

[55]   Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, trans. W. Lourie (New York, 1914), pp. 97–9; see the views summarized by Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, 1–12. McArthur identifies twelve ethical approaches in *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 105–48; Georg Strecker discusses other types of exegesis in *The Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 15–23.

[56]   Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 1.

[57]   Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, p. ix.

beyond, the Sermon on the Mount has been variously interpreted,[58] and Betz comments that during the entire history of all biblical interpretation "almost every author . . . had one thing or another to say on the subject" of the Sermon on the Mount.[59] It has been viewed practically, idealistically, ethically, legally, spiritually, ecclesiastically, personally, and ascetically. The principles taught in the Sermon have been theologically applied as an "obedience ethic" constituting actual legal requirements, and simultaneously it has been hailed as an "impossible ideal."[60] In modern times, it still remains possible to "understand and interpret the Sermon on the Mount in a thousand different ways."[61] "Even in the twentieth century, philosophers and political theorists, for whatever reason, find themselves challenged by these teachings."[62]

This expansive variety of approaches to the Sermon on the Mount is daunting. This state of diffusion, if not confusion, is also prescriptive, for most of these interpretations reveal more about the beliefs of the interpreters than about the meaning of the Sermon itself: "Interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount from the time before the Enlightenment were always an expression of the relevance of the Sermon on the Mount for its interpreter, i.e., they reflected always his or her church situation and his or her own approach to interpretation."[63] This is true of modern interpretations as well: "What each believes Jesus was, did, and said, determines the method by which each interpreter builds his bridge between Jesus and the twentieth century."[64] Perhaps it is for this reason that some, such as Daniel Patte, have concluded that even conflicting interpretations should be considered as "equally legitimate and plausible."[65] Consequently, little consensus has emerged out of this diversity about the original purpose and organization of the Sermon on the Mount: "When one turns to questions about the Sermon's meaning and relevance, there is far from unanimity of opinion."[66]

The following book may simply add to this proliferation of interpretations, but I hope that it will do more than that. In an effort to discover some sense of form and meaning in this seemingly unorganized matter, this book proposes a stronger,

---

[58]   Robert M. Grant, "The Sermon on the Mount in Early Christianity," *Sem* 22/1 (1978): 215–29; see examples of histories of interpretation in Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 6–44; bibliographic classifications of interpretation in Kissinger, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 1–122; and discussion in Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, pp. 218–23.

[59]   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 3.

[60]   Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 2, 6.

[61]   Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. E. Mosbacher (New York, 1970), p. 115.

[62]   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 2.

[63]   Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, p. 218.

[64]   Irwin W. Batdorf, "How Shall We Interpret the Sermon on the Mount?" *JBR* 27 (1959): 213; see generally 211–17.

[65]   Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 14.

[66]   Kissinger, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. xi.

more unifying approach. Its analysis turns to the Temple. I propose that temple theology and ritual studies offer new leverage in opening the power and meaning of the Sermon on the Mount, giving place and meaning to the Sermon seen as a whole as well as to each of its parts taken individually.

Reading the Sermon on the Mount in the light of temple imagery, symbolism, functions, and significance is long overdue. It almost goes without saying that the temples of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome were the most prominent buildings and important cultural features of Luxor, Nippur, Athens, and Rome. Temples were pervasive. "Egypt can truly be called a land of temples"; there they "pervaded every aspect of society and culture."[67] In Mesopotamia, "no institution played a more significant or enduring role in ancient Mesopotamian society than the temples of the great urban centers of Babylonia and Assyria," and "just as the temple dominated the city architecturally, . . . the temple's household dominated—or at the very least, played a vital role in—the city's economic life."[68] Greek and Roman temples served an equally wide array of crucial functions, including the worship of patron gods and goddesses, the performance of public offerings, divination, civic meetings, trials, healings, dedications, vows, and rituals of sacred instruction. On this last point, for example, "because mysteries were secret ceremonies, the rituals were sometimes performed inside the temple. The Telesterion of Demeter at Eleusis [near Athens], for instance, . . . could accommodate hundreds of worshippers standing in rows at the annual celebration of the mysteries. At Samothrace the sanctuary of the Theoi Megaloi [in the northern Aegean] had two buildings for the two separate stages of initiation, *muēsis* [teaching, initiation] and *epopteia* [attaining the highest grade of initiation, vision, and happiness]. Both buildings had seats for spectators at the ceremonies."[69] All aspects of life—whether personal, familial, economic, or civic—were unthought of independent of some aspect of temple ideology and sacral infusion.

The same general points apply to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was overwhelmingly the dominant religious institution of Jerusalem in Jesus' day.[70] The Temple gave context and meaning to nearly every part of the religious life of all Jews at that time. All Jews and every Jewish group felt strongly about the Temple. For the Pharisees, purity was of utmost importance; every Pharisee strived to live temple-ready, even if he or she lived in a land or village far removed from the Holy City.[71] For the Sadducees and chief priests, the Temple was their main

---

[67]   William A. Ward, "Temples and Sanctuaries: Egypt," in *ABD*, vol. 6, p. 369.

[68]   John F. Robertson, "Temples and Sanctuaries: Mesopotamia," in *ABD*, vol. 6, p. 375.

[69]   Susan Guettel Cole, "Temples and Sanctuaries: Greco-Roman," in *ABD*, vol. 6, p. 381.

[70]   Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple* (Downer's Grove, Illinois, 2002) pp. 87, 93–8; Lee I. Levine, *Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period, 538 B.C. – A.D. 70* (Philadelphia, 2002), p. 258.

[71]   Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia, 1969), p. 257.

source of political, economic, and religious influence and power.[72] The Essenes felt so strongly about the idea of the Temple that they separated themselves from the Temple of Herod, which they considered to be defiled and unrighteous, and took up their desert vigil, anticipating the time when God would reign in a massive new temple at the end of time.[73] Jews of the Diaspora, scattered around the Roman Empire and beyond, felt so deeply about making their temple oblations that they obtained extraordinary privileges from the Romans that allowed them to send their annual temple taxes and other dedications to the Temple in Jerusalem.[74] Being worthy to enter the Temple precinct was the ultimate behavioral goal common to most Jews in the first half of the first century, and all purity laws and moral requirements functioned as requisites and conditions of temple participation. Various Jewish groups certainly differed in how they defined purity, holiness, and righteousness; but they all agreed (along with all ancient peoples) that one had to be clean, however that state of cleanliness was defined, in order to enter sacred space.[75] Richard Bauckham has rightly said that the Temple was "central [to] Jewish self-identity"; and even if Jews of all types held a wide variety of opinions about it, each group had deeply-grounded, distinguishing feelings about the Temple, one way or another.[76]

Inasmuch as the Temple directly or indirectly gave meaning, coherence, and unity to the most salient aspects of religious experience for Jews in Jesus' day, the Temple is the most promising place to seek the highest degree of unity, coherence, and meaning in the Sermon on the Mount. Accordingly, the chapters that follow strive to show how each element in the Sermon on the Mount relates to temple themes and to the temple view of divine order.

Seeing these connections is not second nature for modern readers, who have rarely seen a temple, let alone have witnessed any ancient temple in operation. Nevertheless, as the works of Margaret Barker and others have insightfully shown, temple themes are readily recognizable, once a person knows what to look for.[77] Allusions to the Temple are more common in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout the entire New Testament than casual, modern readers usually realize. As a sampler of temple features, consider the following, all of which were not just ordinary, everyday-life words in the first century, but also had conspicuous temple

---

[72]   Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, pp. 180, 228–9.

[73]   Andrew M. Mbuvi, *Temple, Exile, and Identity in 1 Peter* (New York, 2007), pp. 18–20.

[74]   Marty E. Stevens, *Temples, Tithes, and Taxes* (Peabody, Massachusetts, 2006), pp. 109–10.

[75]   Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1985), pp. 175–88; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus* (New York, 2000), pp. 1398–400.

[76]   Richard Bauckham, "The Parting of the Ways: What Happened and Why?" *ST* 47 (1993): 141.

[77]   See, for example, Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London, 2007).

connections in Second-Temple Judaism and early Christianity (many of which will be discussed subsequently below): creation, light, sun, stars, fire, waters, life, cloud, pillar, covering, tent, tabernacle, mountain, rock, humility, fasting, washing, anointing, veil, garden, tree of life, vine, gates, glory, holiness, purity, angels, the name of God, entrance, presence, vision, unity, throne, sonship, kingship, priesthood, garments, bread, sacrifice, lambs, incense, smoke, prayer, forgiveness, absorbing evil, covenant, law, commandments, oaths, secrets, mysteries, ascending, resurrection, Heaven, atonement, healing, treasures, revelation, wisdom, power, judgment, triumph, deification, avenging evil, harmony, communion, eternity, and peace.

Thus, for example, without focusing on the features and functions of the long vanished Temple, it will not likely occur to modern readers to think of the vine as being connected significantly with the Temple, but Josephus let us know that on the gate of the Temple was a huge representation of a vine; visitors to the Temple would bring gold leaves and hang them on this vine,[78] expressing their uncompromised willingness to be included as a leaf on the "choice vines" that the God of Israel planted "on a very fertile hill" and looked that it should bring forth good fruit—grapes, not thorns (Isaiah 5:1–3, 6). While not all of the temple elements listed above are present in the Sermon on the Mount, many of them are. Indeed, temple imagery pervades the Sermon on the Mount, when one "seeing sees" and "hearing hears" these things of the Temple.

Fortunately, New Testament scholars have begun to realize, more than previous generations of biblical scholars have done, the importance of the Temple to the earliest Christians.[79] From archaeological and other discoveries, "there has been a radical rethinking in the last half of the twentieth century about the functioning of the Temple in Jewish society. . . . Temple concerns, such as the priests, purity, and the sacrificial cult, have been designated as central to the Jewish religious agenda of pre-70 Palestine—so much so that the various sects and ideologies of the period all sought to define themselves in contradistinction to this central Jewish institution."[80]

Today, everyone would agree that the Temple is part of the background of early Christianity, and most would insist that the Temple is much more than a faint piece of passing background or marginalia. Indeed, the Temple is in the foreground of that background. The Temple is much more than a blank scroll in the background on which Christian experience is written as it unfolds. The Temple aggressively provided much of the powerful language and many of the symbols, meanings, purposes, and values in which the earliest Christian messages about the presence of God and of his kingdom were originally veiled and, still today, wait to

---

[78]   Josephus, *War*, 5.210; compare Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.395.

[79]   Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple*, p. 14; Margaret Barker, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven: Temple Symbolism in the New Testament* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. ix–xii.

[80]   L.I. Leving, "Archaeology and the Religious Ethos of Pre-70 Palestine," in *Hillel and Jesus* (Minneapolis, 1997), p. 112.

be unveiled. Thus the time has come to consider the Temple context of the Sermon on the Mount.

In most regards, nothing is more important than context in determining the meaning of any expression.[81] And yet, the lack of information about the original context of the Sermon on the Mount has long been recognized as a crucial problem in trying to understand this text. As Jeremias has lamented, "The instructions of the Sermon have been torn out of their original context,"[82] and thus he and others have sought to supply the needed context. Some have sought to find such contexts by importing into the Sermon on the Mount the settings of other New Testament passages that parallel the Sermon. But this approach inevitably produces a dither of contexts, not anything close to an original context for the Sermon on the Mount itself.

A few others have productively hypothesized that the early Christians developed the Sermon on the Mount for use in their cultic teachings. Moving in a direction concurrent with ritual and, therefore, gravitating toward the Temple, which is inseparable from ritual, these studies have suggested possible cultic or ritualistic functions for the Sermon in early Christian piety. For example, Jeremias sees the Sermon on the Mount as an early Christian *didachē,* or set of instructions, that was taught to all new Christian converts as a part of their initiation or induction into the true way of Christian righteousness. In his view, the Sermon may have been used to instruct baptismal candidates or to complete or perfect newly baptized Christians.[83] If this is so, Jeremias argues, the context for the giving of the Sermon was still relatively preliminary; it was only "preceded by the proclamation of the gospel and it was preceded by conversion, by a being overpowered by the Good News."[84] Ulrich Luz has advanced a related argument, suggesting that the commandments of the Sermon on the Mount constituted the entrance requirements for admission into God's kingdom.[85]

Somewhat similarly, others have focused on the locus of the Sermon on the Mount in subsequent Christian exhortation, reminding disciples of the pledges they made at the time they converted to Christianity and were baptized. Betz classifies the Sermon on the Mount as an *epitome,* or summary, which implies that what it summarizes was more complex and that its original context was more advanced. Thus the Sermon on the Mount was "not intended for outsiders or beginners, but for the advanced students [to help] 'those who have made some advance in the survey of the entire system . . . to fix in their minds under the principal headings

---

[81]   Barker, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven*, pp. 1–2.

[82]   Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 30.

[83]   Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 55–69; Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 22–3.

[84]   Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 23.

[85]   Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, p. 217.

an elementary outline of the whole treatment of the subject.'"[86] As a Harvard Professor and later the Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl has somewhat similarly concluded that the Gospel of Matthew was produced for use in "a school for teachers and church leaders" and that, for this reason, the Sermon on the Mount "assumes the form of a manual for teaching and administration within the church."[87] Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount can be readily seen as a text whose purpose was to give distinct instructions for developing Christian discipleship among the members of the church,[88] and thus this text served as the Christian counterpart to the laws given by God to Moses on another mount in stipulating the conditions of covenant between the God of Israel and his people.[89] In all these cases, the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is necessarily seen as not far removed from the initiation rituals and ecclesiastical retention practices associated with becoming a follower of Jesus Christ in earliest Christianty.

If the Sermon on the Mount can be seen in these ways, as Jeremias, Luz, Betz, Stendahl, and others have suggested, in the context of preparing candidates for baptism, and of teaching neophyte converts, or in perfecting committed disciples, training leaders, and forming a community unified in Christ, then the domain and context of ritual cannot stand very far beyond. And if these Christian concepts and practices owe anything to Jewish ritual antecedents, the Temple is immediately implicated, as it was the fountainhead of ritual in first-century Judea. Indeed, as will be argued below, just as ritual theory has recently been used to illuminate many New Testament passages and other religious texts, viewing the Sermon in the context of temple theology and ritual theory offers answers to many pressing questions about the original context, structure, and function of the Sermon on the Mount.

Thus the aim of this book is to answer, in light of the Temple, questions such as, Why was the Sermon on the Mount composed? What words, phrases, images, and recognizable precedents does it draw on? What is the nature of this text? How does its context give meaning to what is actually being said? How do all of the pieces of the Sermon fit together? What unifies this sublime and supernal text? The first and most salient clue in finding an answer to these questions is that the Sermon on the Mount was presented precisely upon "a mountain" (Matthew 5:1).

---

[86]   Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 79, arguing that the Sermon can be matched with Diogenes' description of a philosophical *epitome*.

[87]   Stendahl, *The School of Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament*, p. 35.

[88]   Patte, *Discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount*.

[89]   Davies, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 6–27.