



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 3 | Number 1

Article 23

1991

John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*

Tod Compton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Compton, Tod (1991) "John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol3/iss1/23>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title

Author(s) Todd Compton

Reference *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3/1 (1991): 319-22.

ISSN 1050-7930 (print), 2168-3719 (online)

Abstract Review of *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (1990), by John W. Welch.

John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990. 229 pp., including appendix comparing Matthew 5-7, 3 Nephi 12-14, and JST Matthew 5-7; with name, passage, and subject indexes. \$13.95.

Reviewed by Todd Compton

This book is an extended treatment of 3 Nephi 11-18 and, as the title suggests, a comparison with Matthew 5-7. In chapters 2-3, Welch views the Nephite sermon in a temple context; in chapter 4, he does the same for the Sermon on the Mount. In chapter 5, he analyzes differences between the 3 Nephi and Matthew accounts. In chapter 6, he examines the Israelite background of much of the Sermon on the Mount to show that this background would be the common heritage of both the Jews in Palestine and the Nephites (or, rather, the Lehites) in America. Chapters 7-9 deal with textual matters, including a discussion of Stanley Larson's examination of the text of the Sermon at the Temple, in which Larson claims that Joseph Smith took the King James Sermon on the Mount whole cloth, copying many textual mistakes reflected in the King James translation of Matthew.

Welch brings impressive tools to bear on this study. He handles Greek, he controls the New Testament secondary literature, and his command of the secondary literature on the Book of Mormon is superb. He knows ancient law intimately and has published important, original research on chiasmus both in the Book of Mormon and in antiquity generally. Therefore, it is not surprising that the book he has written here is a consistently interesting and valuable one. Though I sometimes disagreed with it, it often supplied insights that rang true. Aside from its apologetic value in dealing with attacks on the Sermon at the Temple in 3 Nephi, it serves as an excellent commentary on these important chapters in 3 Nephi.

A chapter-by-chapter analysis of the book follows:

Chapters 2-3 (which follow the introduction in chapter 1) are, to me, the most tentative part of the book. Here, Welch seems to be applying a "pan-temple" interpretation to our text, in which he sees endowment ceremony imagery in much of the text. Such "pan-anything" interpretations are useful in that they take a certain new perspective to its logical limits, often revealing

new insights; however, not all readers will find his examples equally convincing. In certain of his interpretations, Welch seems to me to be stretching the point somewhat. An example of this occurs on page 66, when Welch takes 3 Nephi 13:17 as a reference to ritual washing and anointing. But in context, the washing and anointing refer only to avoiding any unusual appearance while fasting, such as disfiguring the face, perhaps with ashes (see Isaiah 58:5). But he rightly acknowledges that not all of his forty-eight points of possible temple significance are of equal strength (p. 34) and that his interpretation is neither exclusive nor conclusive (pp. 84-85).

Welch also strikes me as forcing the Book of Mormon context somewhat in his suggested interpretation of Christ ministering to the children in 3 Nephi 17. In context this passage presents a beautiful outpouring of love for children by Christ; Welch, however, reads it ritually, and hints that it might have constituted some kind of sealing ceremony, which to me takes away some of its dramatic effect. Welch emphasizes that the Nephites both saw and heard Christ's prayer at 3 Nephi 17:15-17 and suggests that he did things during the prayer; however, the text emphasizes the content of the prayer uttered by Jesus, not acts performed by him. Then he blesses the little children of the congregation, one by one, and prays for them. He instructs the congregation to observe their children, after which angels descend and "minister" to them. The parents do not seem to receive blessings with the children, although as a group they stood behind the children, who surrounded Jesus who stood in the midst (3 Nephi 17:12-13). If there had been a sealing, Christ logically would have received child and parent together. The narrative in 3 Nephi, however, focuses on the love Christ had for the children and on their receiving ministrations of angels. In 3 Nephi 17:23 ("Behold your little ones"), Christ is not "just inviting the parents to look at their children and admire them": he is preparing the parents for the imminent appearance of angels among the children.

In addition, it seems to me that Welch sometimes comes dangerously close to subordinating the moral aspects of the Sermon to its ritual aspects (it is, according to Welch, a "ritual text," p. 86), when the whole point of Christ's ministry is to show that ritual must be guided by inward conversion and morality (3 Nephi 9:19-22, and much of the gospels). See also pp. 58-61, in which Welch interprets *teleios* mostly as a ritual term (which he does with great insight), without emphasizing

sufficiently its important ethical shades of meaning. But generally he does not ignore the ethical aspects of the Sermon, and his excellent section on the importance of giving to the poor in a temple context (pp. 62-63, cf. p. 150) shows that he knows the relative importance of the moral and the ritual, which can sometimes seem opposed (see Isaiah 58; cf. p. 101). As Welch points out, "many elements in the Sermon are basic to the first principles of the gospel and thus are certainly also relevant to general ethical exhortation" (p. 84). Indeed, Christ taught that morality does not preclude ritual and ecclesiastical practice, as in Matthew 23:23, though "justice, mercy and faith" are "weightier" than outward practice.

I found chapter 5, on the differences between Matthew and 3 Nephi, very insightful, an important addition to Book of Mormon scholarship. Chapter 6 is also excellent; it includes an entirely successful response to a critique by Krister Stendahl of 3 Nephi 12:6 (pp. 114-15). The chapter as a whole reminds us of an important truth that is generally forgotten, that the New Testament is thoroughly grounded in the Old Testament. Some of those who criticize the Book of Mormon for plagiarism from the King James Bible would be surprised to find how many phrases from the New Testament echo the Old.

Chapters 7-9 are also full of valuable discoveries. Here, Larson's somewhat weak work critiquing 3 Nephi's text is solidly countered. One sees how Larson, aside from committing methodological missteps, has overemphasized the importance of some supposed problems and has ignored textual issues that did not support his thesis. Welch points out that in 3 Nephi 12:22/Matthew 5:22, the Book of Mormon drops *eikē*, "without a cause," and that many of the best Greek manuscripts do the same (p. 162). Other impressive points are his analysis of the Semitic word behind *dikaiosunē*, "righteousness," as an explanation for 3 Nephi 13:1 (pp. 150-51) and his analysis of a Semitic perfect, translated by an English present (as in KJV and 3 Nephi 13:11), behind Matthew 6:12 (p. 153).

Welch's earlier treatment of the doxology of the Lord's prayer, found in 3 Nephi but not in the earliest New Testament manuscripts, is similarly convincing (p. 65), showing that such doxologies were common ritual practice at the end of prayers, whether they were written down or not.

I close with a short list of methodological objections and minor problems. Often in Welch's footnoting I would prefer a primary source instead of a secondary source, or at least a

primary source preceding a secondary source, especially when the secondary source itself is controversial. For instance, on p. 63 Welch writes, "several early Christian texts document the use of sacred group prayers, with the participants standing in a circle around Jesus," and cites Nibley's "The Early Christian Prayer Circle" article.¹ Yet some of the examples cited by Nibley are not really group prayers, or are not really circles, and so on, though there are some similarities to prayer circles. It would be better for Welch to select an example from a primary source that he thinks is absolutely foolproof and use Nibley as a second reference (likewise on p. 36 n. 2).

Nibley, quoted by Welch, seems to be pushing things a bit in translating "hallowed be thy name" as "to which our present tie and password is the name" (p. 64).

The transliteration of the Greek words is not entirely consistent. Macrons are often left off of words (pp. 59, 69, 75, 97, 156). Iota subscripts are left off a Greek phrase on p. 97, but are used on p. 148.

What is the basis for "[priesthood]" in the Clement quotation on p. 59? Is this Welch's suggested gloss? If so, *hierophantikos* means "of a hierophant," and the hierophant at Eleusis was the special "initiating priest," "he who shows sacred things"; thus "priesthood" seems too simple an explanation of the word. A more complex translation would seem to fit well with Welch's purposes ["initiatory priesthood"?].

On Beatitudes in the mysteries, add line numbers 480-82 to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* citation (p. 43).²

¹ Hugh W. Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, vol. 4 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1987), 45-99.

² For further references, cf. Pindar, frg. 131a; Sophocles, frg. 837; Euripides, *Bacchae* 72-77; the "Orphic" gold tablets, see Günther Zuntz, *Persephone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 342-43; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 289; Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1956), 100 n. 1; Gustav L. Dirichlet, *De veterum macarismis* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1914), 62-64; Robin Seaford, "Dionysiac Drama in the Dionysiac Mysteries," *Classical Quarterly* 31 (1981): 260; Eva Keuls, "Mystery Elements in Menander's *Dyscolus*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 100 (1969): 218. More references in A. P. Burnett, *Three Archaic Poets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 237.