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Title The Book of Mormon and the Problem of the Sermon on the Mount

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Abstract The Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi parallels the accounts in Matthew and Luke, although it is closer to Matthew. The sermon was addressed partly to a general audience and partly to the twelve disciples exclusively, although the crowd heard it. In many cases the account in 3 Nephi clarifies the New Testament accounts; in particular, the Joseph Smith Translation and Book of Mormon explain the Lord's Prayer.

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In this chapter we shall consider a literary problem of the Book of Mormon which involves the New Testament. It concerns the presence and character of the Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi.

Textual Variants

The sermon is found in 3 Nephi 12–14, which corresponds to Matthew 5–7. When the resurrected, glorified Savior appeared to the Nephite people, one of the first things he did after appointing twelve disciples was to deliver this important address on the essentials of the good life. Its form in 3 Nephi closely parallels the greater part of the familiar English text found in the King James Version of the Bible. However, a number of very interesting textual variations are to be seen.

This originally appeared as chapter 15 on pages 178–90 of Our Book of Mormon.

One of the first facts in the sermon in 3 Nephi that interests the scholar is that it follows the text found in Matthew and not that in Luke 6:20-49. The question has often been asked, "Do Matthew and Luke record the same discourse?" Some authorities have asserted that the two discourses are entirely distinct in respect to time, place, circumstances, and audience. They claim that the time of delivery of the two addresses appears to be different; that the place is different, because one is a mountain (Matthew 5:1) and the other is a plain (Luke 6:17); and, moreover, that the audience is different, not to mention the radical difference in contents between the sermons.

Other authorities have claimed that the two sermons are distinct, but spoken on the same day, and near together. This theory has had few followers.

Still other experts have held to the opinion that the sermon in Matthew is not a single discourse but a collection of discourses delivered on different occasions and to various audiences, woven together and placed in the present position. Luke's account is held to be but one of the discourses used by Matthew.

The consensus of many able authorities at the present time is that both Matthew and Luke give substantially similar accounts of the same discourse. The one reported by Luke differs from that in Matthew almost entirely in omitting a large part of what is given in Matthew. The order of topics common to the two is almost identical.

Professors Kirsopp Lake and Silva Lake, write, "Not only the contents, but the ordering of the subject matter and often the phraseology render it clear that Matthew and Luke have a common tradition, but quite differently arranged."¹ Professor A. T. Robertson writes, "The omissions and additions in each case suit the specific purpose of the writer. The apparent contradictions, when studied carefully, blend into a harmonious whole. Hence we seem to be justified in maintaining the identity of the discourses recorded by Matthew and Luke."²

¹ Kirsopp and Silva Lake, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 44.

² A. T. Robertson, *Harmony of the Gospels* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 276.

It seems clear from the report of the sermon in 3 Nephi that Matthew's version must be regarded as nearer the original than that in Luke. Moreover, the circumstances surrounding the Savior's delivery of the address to the Nephites must cause us to throw out the theory already mentioned that it is not a single discourse, but a collection of discourses delivered on various occasions and to various audiences. The fact that the delivery of the whole sermon was only a small part of his first day's ministry among the Nephites points strongly in that direction. The likelihood that Jesus would throw several small discourses into one like that in Matthew seems remote.

Another problem that concerns the sermon as reported by Matthew is the question of the audience. Did the Savior deliver his address to his apostles only, or was it given to a mixed audience of apostles and multitude? In Matthew 5:1 we read, "And seeing the crowds he went up on the mountain, and when he had seated himself his disciples came to him"; on the other hand we read at the end of the sermon the following: "When Jesus had ended these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching" (Matthew 7:28). With these quotations may be compared Luke 6:17:

And having gone down with them [the apostles], he took his stand on a level place, and a crowd of his disciples, and a great throng of the people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.

Everything considered, it would appear that Jesus spoke both to his apostles and the multitude.

From the Prophet Joseph Smith's inspired revision of the text of Matthew it would appear that Jesus addressed his remarks more particularly to the disciples, but the multitude round about also heard him. The text in Matthew 6 is prefaced by these words, not found in the usual version: "And it came to pass that, as Jesus taught his disciples." The following words are found at the head of Matthew 7: "Now these are the words which Jesus taught his disciples that they should say unto the people." At the end of the sermon the revision reads, "And it came to pass when Jesus had ended these sayings with his disciples, the people were astonished

at his doctrine" (Matthew 7:36 JST) The account of the sermon in 3 Nephi 12–14 clearly indicates that the multitude as well as the newly appointed twelve heard all of the address. One section of it, however, was directed to the twelve disciples and did not apply to the masses of the people. This is the part beginning with the words, "Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat," and ending with "Sufficient is the day unto the evil thereof." (3 Nephi 13:25–34. cf. Matthew 6:25–34.) There is no suggestion in the text of Matthew that this section was addressed to Jesus' apostles only. The wisdom of the Book of Mormon version is very evident. What would happen to the world if people took no thought for the morrow, or failed to look forward to their supply of food and raiment? Almost utter chaos would ensue. On the other hand, we can readily understand the application of the section to the chosen twelve, whose labors and thoughts were to be in the ministry. God would see to it that their needs were taken care of.

Now, let us examine in some detail the differences in text between the sermon as found in Matthew and that in 3 Nephi. First of all, we call attention to the two opening verses of 3 Nephi 12, which read as follows:

And it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words unto Nephi, and to those who had been called, (now the number of them who had been called, and received power and authority to baptize, was twelve) and behold, he stretched forth his hand unto the multitude, and cried unto them, saying: Blessed are ye if ye shall give heed unto the words of these twelve whom I have chosen from among you to minister unto you, and to be your servants; and unto them I have given power that they may baptize you with water; and after that ye are baptized with water, behold, I will baptize you with fire and with the Holy Ghost; therefore blessed are ye if ye shall believe in me and be baptized, after that ye have seen me and know that I am.

And again, more blessed are they who shall believe in your words because that ye shall testify that ye have seen me, and that ye know that I am. Yea, blessed are they who shall believe in your words, and come down

into the depths of humility and be baptized, for they shall be visited with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and shall receive a remission of their sins. (3 Nephi 1-2)

It does not necessarily follow that the opening verses of Matthew 5 should read exactly the same as this Nephite text. However, the inspired revision of Matthew 5:2-4 is quoted herewith for its great interest:

And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,
Blessed are they who shall believe on me; and again, more blessed are they who shall believe on your words, when ye shall testify that ye have seen me and that I am.

Yea, blessed are they who shall believe on your words, and come down into the depth of humility, and be baptized in my name; for they shall be visited with fire and the Holy Ghost, and shall receive a remission of their sins. (Matthew 5:2-4 JST)

The Nephite text we quoted is valuable in that it gives us confidence in the belief that the sermon in Palestine was delivered in the hearing of both the apostles and "the people."

The Beatitudes

The Nephite parallel to the Beatitudes (3 Nephi 12:3-12; cf. Matthew 5:3-12) contains several readings which diverge sharply from the text of Matthew. We present these below in a form which clearly reveals the differences:

Matthew 5:3-12

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

3 Nephi 12:3-12

Yea, blessed are the poor in spirit *who come unto me*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn:

And again, blessed are *all* they

for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

that mourn, for they shall be comforted.

And blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

And blessed are *all* they *who* do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled *with the Holy Ghost*.

And blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

And blessed are *all* the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

And blessed are *all* the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

And blessed are *all* they *who* are persecuted for *my name's* sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake;

For ye shall have great joy and be exceeding glad, for great *shall be* your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets *who* were before you.

The divergent readings of the Nephite text are all interesting and thought-provoking, but lack the confirmation of practically all ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Nor do the ancient versions lend much support, a fact which might well be expected. This is in great contrast to the surprising amount of support given by the ancient versions to many unusual readings of Isaiah in the text of the Book of Mormon. However, we call atten-

tion to the reading of Isaiah 61:2, last clause, which reads, "to comfort *all* that mourn" (emphasis added). This should be compared with 3 Nephi 12:4 above, in which the Nephite reading contains the word *all*. A distinct possibility exists that Jesus had the text of Isaiah in mind when he delivered the beatitude in question. Other readings of lesser value might be pointed out, but their application might not be immediately apparent to the reader.

Fulfillment of the Law

The remainder of 3 Nephi 12 differs in a marked degree from the parallel readings in Matthew 5. It is significant also that Joseph Smith's inspired revision differs in many respects from both. This fact indicates that through the spirit of revelation the prophet found that the traditional text of Matthew 5 needed considerable correcting; moreover, it indicates that the text delivered to the Nephites did not in all respects follow that given in Palestine. It is impractical here to exhibit the differences that exist between the remainder of the Nephite text and that of Matthew in the same way that we did for the Beatitudes. We also point out here that the Greek manuscripts of the Gospels, as well as other ancient versions, offer little support to the divergent Nephite readings. Nevertheless, one should notice the smoothness and consistency of the renderings in the Book of Mormon.

Writers have pointed out the inconsistency of Matthew 5:17-20 with the general tenor of the sermon. The verses in question read:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Phari-

sees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The *International Critical Commentary* on Matthew says of these words:

The meaning of these words is clear. Christ did not come to overthrow the authority of the Mosaic law, which was to be eternally binding upon the hearts and consciences of men. So long as the world lasted its authority was to be permanent. If any of his disciples taught men to disobey any of its commandments, he would be placed in an inferior position in the coming Kingdom. If he was a faithful servant of the law, and upheld its authority before men, he would receive high rank in the Kingdom. Commentators have exhausted their ingenuity in attempts to explain away this passage, but its meaning is too clear to be misunderstood. Christ is here represented as speaking in the spirit of Alexandrine and Rabbinical Judaism. The attitude to the law here described is inconsistent with the general tenor of the Sermon.

The Book of Mormon makes a genuine contribution to the question of the meaning of these verses, for in 3 Nephi we have the following reading:

For verily I say unto you, one jot nor one tittle hath not passed away from the law, *but in me it hath all been fulfilled.* (3 Nephi 12:18)

How far the commentator in the *International Critical Commentary* misses the point the reader must judge for himself. In all fairness to him we must recognize that he did not have before him a text as helpful as that in the Book of Mormon. It is our desire only to indicate how the Nephite text helps clear up an apparent inconsistency in the sermon. It may be also pointed out that in 3 Nephi 15 the Savior refers again to the law of Moses in the following words:

Behold, I say unto you that the law is fulfilled that was given unto Moses.

Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfil the law; therefore it hath an end. (3 Nephi 15:4–5)

The Book of Mormon position with reference to the meaning of Matthew 5:17–20 is clear.

Turning now to 3 Nephi 13, we find that this chapter differs less from its parallel in Matthew 6 than 3 Nephi 12 does from Matthew 5. Earlier in the chapter we discussed the contribution that 3 Nephi 13:25 makes to the question of Jesus' audience in Palestine when he spoke the words about taking no thought for the morrow (see Matthew 6:25–34; cf. 3 Nephi 13:25–34).

The Lord's Prayer

One other important problem dealing with the differences of text between Matthew 6 and 3 Nephi 13 should be discussed. It relates to the variations in the wording of the Lord's Prayer. The Nephite version is notable for its brevity:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven.

And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,
and the power,

and the glory,
forever, Amen.

For convenience in comparison we present the ordinary version of the prayer according to Matthew 6:9-13:

Our Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
In Earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day
Our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
As we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,
And the power,
And the glory,
Forever, Amen.

The omissions in the Nephite text of the prayer are obvious. The reasons for them, however, are not always so obvious. Why, for example, does it omit "Thy kingdom come"? Perhaps we ought not to expect the Savior to deliver the prayer exactly the same as Matthew's version. Certain differences might well be expected from a great creative mind. On the other hand, why does Jesus pray, "And lead us not into temptation"? This is a difficult question for a thoughtful person to answer with respect to either version of the prayer. Surely God does not lead men into temptation. Most of us like to believe that that is a function reserved for the Archtempter and his legions and not for God. Before dealing with this problem at greater length, let us consider another difficulty. Immediately following the prayer the following words occur in both versions:

For, if ye forgive men their trespasses your heavenly Father will also forgive you;

But if ye forgive not men their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (3 Nephi 13:14–15; cf. Matthew 6:14–15)

Now, as a matter of fact, neither version of the prayer says anything about trespassing. The above words strike us, therefore, as being out of place, since they seem to assume that Jesus did say something about it.

The exact answer to this problem and the one before it may be difficult to find, but an interesting solution is offered by Joseph Smith in the inspired revision of the Bible. There the prayer reads:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
On earth, as it is done in heaven.

Give us this day,
Our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And suffer us not to be led
into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,
And the power,
And the glory,
Forever and ever, Amen.
(Matthew 6:10–15 JST)

It will be observed in this version of the prayer that Jesus invokes our Father not to suffer us to be led into temptation. This is a far more reassuring reading than that in the version of 3 Nephi or in the common rendering of Matthew. Why isn't such a reading found in 3 Nephi 13? The prophet's revision seems so reasonable that most of us find it hard to doubt its inspiration. Nevertheless, he never saw fit to change the Book of Mormon

reading at this point in any of the editions that appeared during his lifetime. We shall have to accept the present rendering in good grace.

The inspired revision also suggests that Jesus did ask God in the prayer to forgive men their trespasses as they forgive those who trespass against them. This would answer the difficulty we have mentioned concerning the Savior's remarks about trespasses immediately following the prayer. But, again, why does not the version of the prayer in 3 Nephi contain the same satisfying words about trespassing as does the inspired revision of the Bible? Third Nephi 13:14–15 almost demands their presence, so it seems to me. Perhaps the solution of this problem may be found by translating 3 Nephi 13:11 (so Matthew 6:12), "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" as follows: "And forgive us our sins [trespasses], as we forgive those who sin [trespass] against us." The original Aramaic words which underlie the Greek words *debt* and *debtor* mean also "sin" and "one who has sinned against another," respectively. The Aramaic renderings are therefore in harmony with Matthew 6:14–15 and 3 Nephi 13:14–15.

The differences in text exhibited by 3 Nephi 13 in relation to its parallel in Matthew have little or no confirmation from the ancient manuscripts and versions.

Jesus' Audience

An examination of the last chapter of the Nephite version of the Savior's sermon (3 Nephi 14) shows that it differs comparatively little from Matthew 7. However, the opening words of the chapter deserve a little comment. They are as follows:

And now it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words he turned again to the multitude, and did open his mouth unto them again, saying: Verily, verily, I say unto you, Judge not, that ye be not judged.
(3 Nephi 14:1)

These words indicate that Jesus intended all of the last chapters of his sermon to apply to the multitude. It will be recalled that the

part of the address immediately preceding (3 Nephi 13:25–34; cf. Matthew 6:25–34) he applied only to his chosen twelve.³

Similarities in the Sermons

There only remains one more problem of popular interest concerning the two versions of the sermon. That has to do not with the differences between them, but the likenesses. The intelligent non-Mormon student of the text of the sermon in 3 Nephi 12–14 is bound to ask this question, “Granting that there are many interesting differences between the text of the sermon as it appears in 3 Nephi and that in Matthew, how, on the premise that the Book of Mormon is a translation, do you Mormons account for the fact that a great proportion of the text is precisely that of the King James version?”

This problem is much like the one considered in the chapter on the “Isaiah Problem” in the Book of Mormon.⁴ The answer given will be similar in most respects. We recognize the fact that no two independent translators would be likely to translate a large portion of the sermon word for word the same. That Joseph Smith used the King James Version when he came to familiar scripture on the gold plates we shall not deny. As long as the sermon in the familiar rendering of Matthew 5–7 agreed substantially with the Nephite version, the prophet used it word for word; otherwise he corrected it to conform with the text before him on the metal plates. In this respect Joseph Smith did only what many translators would have done.

What we have said about the sermon will introduce the reader to the basic literary problems inherent in 3 Nephi 12–14.

³ See pages 155–57 above for further information on Jesus’ audience.

⁴ See pages 129–52 in this issue.