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Title From the Preface to *The Sermon on the Mount in Light of the Temple*

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Abstract This brief essay on temple themes in the Sermon on the Mount introduces Welch's book *The Sermon on the Mount in Light of the Temple*.

FROM THE PREFACE TO
THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT
IN THE LIGHT OF THE TEMPLE

John W. Welch

This book sets out to show that the Sermon on the Mount is best understood in a matrix of temple themes. Temple vocabulary and allusions saturate every stage of this text. This consistent confluence of temple themes, which gives the Sermon on the Mount a unified rhetorical voice and a powerful sense of authority, explains what it is that makes and has always made this text so ethically compelling. However, no systematic analysis of Matthew 5–7 has previously attempted to connect the Sermon on the Mount so thoroughly with the temple. No sustained commentary has ever before suggested that the totality of the Sermon on the Mount is viewed most clearly when seen in the light of the temple.

The temple in Jerusalem was an overwhelmingly dominant presence in Judaism during the life of Jesus, as many scholarly studies have recently recognized. No Jewish institution at that time was richer than the temple in tradition, ritual, and symbolism; in power, wealth, and influence; or as a monument of architectural splendor, as a marker of ethnic identity, and as an awe-inspiring source of spiritual elevation. The temple tied together all aspects of life, be they religious, economic, ideological, political, or cultic. One may safely posit that

This essay is from the preface to John W. Welch, *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009). It is reprinted courtesy of the author and by permission of Ashgate Publishing Limited.

temple theology was therefore profoundly influential, whether as type or antitype, in the earliest stages of formative Christianity.

Accordingly, this book assumes that the temple was likewise of utmost interest to Jesus and his initial followers, as reflected in the Sermon on the Mount. All four New Testament Gospels locate the epicenter of Jesus's Judean activities in or around the temple. Whenever he was in Jerusalem, he was in or about the precinct of the temple. His self-proclaimed mission was not to tear down or destroy, but to fulfill and to fill full all things, including the temple. Jesus yearned for the restoration of an earlier, ideal temple-centric culture. Of course, he objected vehemently to the temple's economic dereliction of the poor, and he prophesied that the temple would be destroyed; but he prophesied this in tears, wishing that it could be otherwise. For these and other reasons, Jesus's most persistent opponents were not the ordinary Jewish people, with whom he had much in common, but rather the temple's few entrenched chief priests and their elite professional cohorts, the scribes.

But at the same time, Jesus's most ardent followers were deeply impressed that he spoke "as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:29). Something about what Jesus said, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, drew from deep wells of power and authority that his listeners somehow recognized. This book strives to establish a *prima facie* case that the Sermon on the Mount's main source of compelling coherence is to be found by hearing its temple register.

Conditions are currently ripe for reading the Sermon on the Mount in a temple context. The recent decade has seen a dramatic rise in scholarly interest in temple studies. The number of books, articles, conference sessions, and academic papers about temples, temple rituals, and temple themes has sharply increased. Yet the Sermon on the Mount has been almost entirely overlooked in these studies.

The prominence of temples has been recognized not only in biblical societies but also in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, Southeast Asia, Mesoamerica, and throughout the ancient world. Modern scholars, working in a secular culture that is fundamentally divorced from all the sacral institutions that permeated every ancient

civilization, are reawakening to the realization that very little from antiquity can be fully understood without seeing it in relation to temple settings. The same can now be said of efforts to understand early Christian theology, worship, community, and mission, as well as central Christian texts such as the Sermon on the Mount.

For many reasons, a temple reading of the Sermon on the Mount is amply needed. Without a unifying foundation, the Sermon on the Mount collapses into a fragmented heap of randomly disjointed sayings. As is shown in chapter 1, all previous efforts to digest or explain the Sermon on the Mount completely and consistently have been unsatisfactory. Perhaps a new approach will prove to be more successful.

The approach offered in this book takes its first cue from the setting of the Sermon on the Mount: “Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up into the mountain, and when he was seated his disciples approached him, and opening his mouth he instructed his disciples” (Matthew 5:1–2). The image evoked here is not one of an ordinary hillside but of “going up into the mountain.” The Greek expression here is the same as that used of Moses going up into the mountain with seventy elders. As chapter 2 explains, the imagery of Mount Sinai, Mount Zion, the temple mount, and the cosmic mountain of God all lead into temple realms.

In the temple, or on the mountain of the Lord, God opens his mouth and is heard. There he reveals his word and teaches his law; there the teachings of the law and the words of the prophets coalesce. As chapters 3–6 thus undertake to show, the Sermon on the Mount then unfolds in a series of twenty-four stages, all related to the temple or temple themes. Item by item, these stages progress from an initial set of ultimate blessings, to the covenantal formation of a righteous community, to a series of cultic regulations about the proper worship and service of the one true God, and finally to a section of instructions that endow and prepare people to withstand divine judgment and enter into the presence of God.

In seeking to uncover the temple backgrounds of the Sermon on the Mount, these chapters employ several tools. Vocabulary and idiomatic expressions are often very telling. Technical terminology and words or phrases that were predominately used in temple contexts

give strong signals of temple implications. These indicators come especially from the Psalms, whose words were well known as hymns strongly associated with the temple. Whether the Sermon on the Mount was originally given in Greek or Aramaic, the only version of it that has survived from the first century is in Greek. Thus, I have relied most heavily on the words and phrases of the Greek Septuagint (LXX) version of the Psalms, which is most pertinent in analyzing the Greek New Testament. Septuagint readings that differ significantly from the Hebrew are so marked, but even in unmarked cases the LXX has been consulted. Otherwise, the Revised Standard Version has been used, including its chapter and verse numbers. Whether the Greek text of the Sermon on the Mount preserves its original language or reflects its translation into Greek soon after it was initially given, the pervasive use of expressions from the Psalms in the Sermon on the Mount significantly reflects its originally intended temple orientation.

Using a listener response analysis further exposes the likely rhetorical impact of these coded expressions on its earliest hearers. Most people who hear the Sermon on the Mount today immediately recognize its words as coming from Jesus or from the Gospel of Matthew. One must wonder, however, how its words would have sounded to a person who had never heard the Sermon on the Mount or the Gospel of Matthew before. To a person steeped in contemporaneous Jewish culture, many of the buzzwords in the Sermon on the Mount would have had a very familiar ring, and most of that familiarity would have been associated with the temple. After recognizing the first dozen of these loaded expressions in the first few verses of the Sermon on the Mount, listeners would have been attuned to recognize the many other temple references as they came along.

Anyone who had heard Jesus speak on other occasions would have known of his tendency to speak in veiled language. The parables of Jesus, which were often critical of powerful opponents, masked deeper and more esoteric messages from the gazing crowd. Likewise, his ethical teachings that can certainly be read at one level as ordinary moral statements could just as well have enshrouded holier and more mystical instructions that were intended to be fully understood

only by those insiders who had been given ears to hear and eyes to see. Insights from Jewish, Hellenistic, and early Christian literatures strengthen the consistent temple signals sent by many of the otherwise disparate sayings in the Sermon on the Mount.

Another tool that has proven useful in excavating a stratum of temple discourse in the Sermon on the Mount is ritual theory. Anthropologists and other scholars who study religious rituals from a social scientific point of view have improved our capacity to identify texts that were originally associated with rituals in one way or another. Temples being quintessentially ceremonial and ritualistic, programmatic allusions to temple features alert listeners to possible interpretations and meanings that point beyond mere theoretical discourse to repeated application and ritualistic implementation. These rituals comprise a heavenly model upon which earthly society should be organized.

While the approaches used in this book are somewhat eclectic and variegated, and while the detection of allusions and subtexts is always intriguingly debatable, the cumulative weight of evidence that emerges from this examination—and I emphasize the word *cumulative*—is more impressive than most people would think possible at first blush. Even if one discounts some of this evidence or resists some of the assumptions at work here, enough remains to give assurance that this approach is asking the right sort of questions. Often, asking the right question is half the answer.

Following the stage-by-stage examination of the Sermon on the Mount, chapter 7 briefly explores some of the implications and potentialities of this study. If this approach to the Sermon on the Mount is persuasive, it stands to contribute in many new ways to ongoing studies about the sources and authorship of the Sermon on the Mount, as well as about the synoptic question and the historical Jesus. It can also shed light on the extensive use of materials that parallel the Sermon on the Mount in the four Gospels, the Epistle of James, and several writings of the apostolic fathers; illuminate the presence of temple themes in Acts, 1 Peter, and in the mysticism of Paul; and help explain early Christian initiation rituals, the formation

of utopian societies, and a persistent patristic envy of the temple. It can also uniquely explain the perceived power and authority of the Sermon on the Mount, answering questions about what kind of text it originally was and what it potentially still can be.

Above all, seeing the Sermon on the Mount in the light of the temple inseparably situates this text together with its Old Testament background.