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Abstract Review of *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (2009), by John W. Welch.

A UNIQUE APPROACH TO THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Gaye Strathearn

Review of John W. Welch. *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple*. Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009. xii + 254 pp., with bibliography and indexes. \$99.95.

In this monograph, John W. Welch expands upon an earlier work, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*,¹ which was subsequently enlarged and republished as *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount*.² The previous volumes originated with Welch's recognition of the importance that, in the Book of Mormon, the sermon was given at the temple. In the ancient world, temple experiences often happened atop mountains.³ From that foundational point he goes on to examine the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount through the lens of ancient temples and ritual studies. These earlier volumes were specifically written for a Latter-day Saint audience. The latest volume, however, targets an academic audience. It is based on much additional research and is more

1. *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990).

2. *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999).

3. John M. Lundquist, "What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, ed. Herbert B. Huffmon, Frank A. Spina, and Albert R. W. Green (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 205–19; and Richard J. Clifford, "The Temple and the Holy Mountain," in *The Temple in Antiquity*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1984), 107–24.

technical in nature than the previous volumes, but it is still eminently accessible to an educated Latter-day Saint reader.

The value of this latest work stems from its contribution to the scholarly discussion of the nature and structure of Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Many New Testament scholars, particularly those who adhere to Q (a hypothetical sayings source used by Matthew and Luke in writing their Gospels), judge Matthew's Sermon on the Mount to be a compilation of sayings rather than a unified sermon. Many argue that Luke's version (6:17–49) represents the original sermon given by Jesus. For example, Ulrich Luz writes, "The Sermon on the Mount is a composition shaped by the evangelist Matthew. We presuppose that the Sayings Source [i.e., Q] lies at the basis of the Sermon on the Mount. The evangelist is following the structure of the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20–49)."⁴ Welch spends the first chapter discussing this academic position in some detail. For Latter-day Saints, the idea that Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is a later compilation is untenable because the 3 Nephi version is closer to Matthew's account than it is to Luke's, and in 3 Nephi it is clearly a unified sermon given by Jesus on day one of his American ministry.

Although not stating it specifically, Welch uses his earlier work on 3 Nephi as the genesis for his position in this volume: the coherency of the Sermon on the Mount is found when looking through the lens of the temple and ritual theory. He writes:

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 gives the Sermon on the Mount a unified rhetorical voice and a powerful sense of authority that explains what it is that makes and has always made this text so ethically compelling. (p. ix)

4. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 213. See John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 171–72.

This reading of Matthew 5–7 is a unique contribution to the scholarly discussion.

In chapter 2 Welch sets up his position by discussing in detail the ancient associations between mountains and sacred space/temples:

One thing indicated for sure is that the Sermon on the Mount was given on a “mountain” (Matthew 5:1). The possible significances of this detail are expansively intriguing. In the sign language of religious symbolism, the “mount” evokes images such as Sinai, Moses, the Temple, the heavenly seat, and the domain of God. These images link Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount potently and vibrantly to the very heart of the central traditions of Israel, the Temple on the Mount. (p. 15)

He then proposes that the sermon consists of

a series of twenty-four stages,⁵ 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. (p. x)

Each of these stages is discussed in chapters 3–6. Welch’s approach in these chapters is primarily linguistic, identifying word and theme associations. He argues that, given the oral nature of ancient societies, people were well attuned to recognizing verbal connections and allusions. Thus many of the words and phrases of the Sermon on the Mount would have been familiar to them and carried connotations to them that would be missed by modern readers unless they become likewise attuned. For Latter-day Saints this should not be a difficult concept, because our insider language works in similar ways. Most English-speaking Latter-day Saints would easily complete the

5. Counting the concluding admonition as the final stage, there are twenty-five stages altogether.

phrase “Come, come . . .” with the words “ye Saints,” which would bring to their minds thoughts of the hymn, as well as thoughts of the pioneers, their exodus, and their sufferings and blessings. So Latter-day Saint speakers, by just using the language of the hymn, can tap into the wealth of associations to pioneers without ever mentioning them specifically.

Welch notes, “By my count, there are 383 words in total vocabulary of the Sermon on the Mount, [with] approximately one-third of them casting a temple shadow” (pp. 188–89). Many of these words are part of the 120 temple themes that he has identified (and conveniently placed in a table on pages 184–87). With these words and themes, Welch has relied heavily on the work of Sigmund Mowinckel and others who argue that the Psalms “were originally designed or later adapted for use in (or in connection with) the Temple, and the words of the Psalms derived much of their power in local use or private meditation because they were deeply associated in the first instance with public worship” (p. 43). Two-thirds of the themes Welch has identified are quotations, paraphrases, or words found in the Psalms. He argues that the remaining themes come from other Hebrew Bible passages that likewise contain temple allusions.

Some may wonder if Welch may have gone too far in some of these associations. When, for instance, are references to a lamp or bread simple references to light or food, without a more ritualistic meaning? Welch readily acknowledges that the temple connections for some of these words or phrases are sometimes limited and that his argument does not rest upon individual cases. Rather, the strength of this work is found in the wealth of connections the author has identified.

While the individual significance of each instance may be small, the cumulative effect of these verbal echoes only increases the likelihood that listeners would have appreciated the temple register of the words used in the Sermon on the Mount, especially with temple-related elements being found in each of its twenty-five stages. (p. 188)

In the past, Welch has been criticized for neglecting the ethical aspects of the sermon in his discussions.⁶ In this work, at least in the initial chapters, he acknowledges the ethical dimension but then argues, “Once hearers had begun listening to the Sermon on the Mount through a register of temple-related signals and meanings, they would have caught on to the idea that something more than a plain ethical discourse was being presented” (p. 42). Thus his purpose is to focus on the ritual aspects. Once he has outlined his argument in detail, however, he discusses in chapter 7 the implications of his ritualistic reading for its ethical teachings.

Detecting the rhetorical and thematic unity of the Sermon on the Mount is not a trivial or inconsequential observation. By hearing the Sermon on the Mount as a text that draws heavily on numerous temple themes and temple allusions, a listener is inescapably impressed by its unified and targeted voice of authority. Through these strong threads that tie the Sermon on the Mount to the Temple, this text taps into potent religious bedrock, speaks in a rhetorical register of traditional authority, and draws on the authoritativeness of all that is most holy and sacred. Everything that pertains to temples has to do with moral and religious authority, and thus these temple themes confer moral authority on the Sermon on the Mount in many ways, which can be bundled under the headings of divine authority, social cohesion, and personal commitment. (p. 190)⁷

I think the author has made his case that understanding the temple connections reinforces, rather than diminishes, the ethical aspects of the Sermon on the Mount. If there is one paragraph that sums up the message of this book, it is the following:

Without recognizing this emphasis on the Temple, other views of the Sermon on the Mount fail to understand, and may actually diminish, its main source of moral authority.

6. Todd Compton, review of *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*, by John W. Welch, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3/1 (1991): 319–22.

7. For a discussion of each of these issues, see pp. 190–93.

Cut off from its firm roots in the traditional sacred values of its Jewish heritage, the Sermon on the Mount withers without a legitimizing moral foundation. Seeing the Sermon on the Mount as a jumble of random, isolated maxims diminishes its claim to presenting a clear, complete, mature statement with moral effectiveness. Beyond that, logic alone is not enough. People may rationally agree that certain behaviors are desirable, but without some form of authoritative imprimatur, ethical maxims and words of moral encouragement remain in the realm of polite hypotheticals. And if the Sermon on the Mount presents only folk norms that were popular among Galilean peasants in the first century, and if it launches only hyperbolic attacks against passing sectarian competitors, it lacks durable moral value. The mystery of the Temple, however, offers keys for unlocking the enduring potency of the Sermon on the Mount in ethical formation. (p. 193)

As people read this work, undoubtedly there will be those who take issue with some points. But the individual concerns should not outweigh the book's collective importance. This is cutting-edge scholarship. It challenges some of the basic presuppositions that underlie much of the scholarship on the Sermon on the Mount in an articulate and, in many respects, a persuasive way. It needs to be an important part of any discussion on the Sermon on the Mount.