
CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW

No text in the Bible is more important or has had more influence on the history and character of Christianity than the “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew 5–7. It would be hard to overstate the value of the Sermon on the Mount in shaping Christian ethics and in conveying to the world the teachings of Jesus and of early Christianity. It is known as the Great Sermon, *die Rede von Reden*, an “unparalleled address,”¹ and thousands of books and articles have analyzed it extensively and minutely.² It stands unsurpassed as the sermon of the Master *par excellence*.

Embedded in the Book of Mormon, in the account of the first day of Jesus’ ministry among the Nephites at the temple in Bountiful (3 Nephi 11–18), are three chapters (12–14) that are substantially the same as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. They stand in the Book of Mormon as a temple text.

The account of what Jesus said that day I call the “Sermon at the Temple.” The materials in the two sermons are so profound that no single approach can capture their

full meaning and significance. These texts can be studied profitably from several angles. They work together, hand in glove, to give deep insight into the meaning of the Master. When speaking of the shared collective meaning of these texts, I will refer to them together simply as the “Sermon.”

In this book I have gathered some thoughts together around one approach to the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple that may be of special interest to Latter-day Saints. I explore the contours of the Sermon through its history, language, and temple context. While I draw upon many particular points from Christian scholars to enrich and corroborate my interpretations, I find that the unique insights afforded by 3 Nephi in the Book of Mormon bring the greatness of the New Testament Sermon on the Mount most dramatically into focus. I view those words of Jesus as a sacred Sermon, as a temple text. The spires and peaks of that monumental Sermon, towering from that everlasting hill, loom even larger than usual when they are understood through the setting of Jesus’ Sermon at the Temple.

The present study is divided into three parts. The first part, “Setting the Stage,” offers introductory comments to set the stage for exploring the contexts to which the Sermon originally belonged. The next two sections advance ideas to ponder and theories to be considered. These sections are neither exhaustive nor definitive. In exploring a number of possibilities that will hopefully prove to be worth further reflection, they address a variety of issues and audiences.

Following a statement in chapter 2 about the search for a unifying theory of the Sermon on the Mount, the heart of this book, part two, titled “A Sacred Sermon,” analyzes the Sermon as more than merely a moral discourse or an eclec-

tic collection of various sayings of Jesus. Here, in chapters 3, 4, and 5, I offer a Latter-day Saint interpretation that illuminates the Sermon in the context of a sacred, ancient temple experience, for that is its setting in the Sermon at the Temple. Seeing the teachings, instructions, doctrines, and commandments of the Sermon on the Mount in this way—in connection with or in preparation for the ceremonial stages and ordinances of covenant making—opens new insights into a unified meaning and comprehensive significance of the otherwise segmented Sermon on the Mount. I invite readers to ponder the prospects of the exceptional view of the Sermon that the Book of Mormon presents to us, for that view has far-reaching implications.

Part three, “Further Studies,” offers several additional studies that support and develop the idea of seeing the Sermon as a temple text and shed further light on this material as it appears in the Book of Mormon. The first six chapters in this part come in three pairs.

In chapter 6, I compare the words and phrases in the Sermon at the Temple with those of the Sermon on the Mount to show their points of independence. The subtle differences between these two texts give information about the unique settings for the two presentations and the audiences that Jesus addressed each time he delivered his message. My aim in this chapter is to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the Sermon at the Temple as a solid historical text and, at the same time, to offer further insights into the Sermon as a whole. In chapter 7, I point out a number of elements in the Sermon that were derived from or were present in the common Israelite heritage generally shared by the Jews in Jerusalem and the Nephites in Bountiful. From the comparisons developed in chapters 6 and 7, I strive to show that the Sermon on the Mount materials in

3 Nephi have not simply been spliced naïvely into the text of the Book of Mormon. The Sermon fits into the Book of Mormon context comfortably and appropriately.

In chapter 8, I look at Joseph Smith and the specific text of the Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Mormon. The fact that King James language of the Matthean Sermon appears in 3 Nephi has spawned questions from Book of Mormon critics, and it undoubtedly will continue to raise issues among lay and scholarly readers of the Book of Mormon. What does the text of the Sermon at the Temple tell us about the nature or process of the translation of the Book of Mormon? How may one account for the similarities between the Sermon at the Temple and the King James translation of the Sermon on the Mount? In chapter 9, I add support to the Sermon at the Temple by verifying the essential meaning of certain received translations and by noting one significant variant found in the ancient Greek texts of the Bible. In this pair of chapters, my purpose is to sustain the text of the Book of Mormon as a credible record through textual analysis.

The last pair turns to several issues and insights derived from source criticism and other areas of biblical studies. Chapter 10 asks, what of the synoptic question pursued so thoroughly by critical New Testament scholars? How does the Book of Mormon corroborate the words of Jesus found in the Bible? What stands behind Jesus' great concern over the Temple during his mortal ministry as presented in all four Gospels? Chapter 11 then draws on a growing field in religious studies which seeks to identify possible ritual or ceremonial features standing behind biblical texts. Social scientists find that rituals help religious people create order in their lives, form cohesive relationships, make major transitions, give sacred significance to ordinary elements of daily life, and memorialize their spiri-

tual experiences in many important ways. These have, to some extent, been functions of rituals detected in the Sermon on the Mount, and they are even more explicitly evident in the Sermon at the Temple. My hope is to show how studies of these two sermons can be mutually enriching.

Finally, a few concluding thoughts are given in chapter 12. In the end, when the Sermon is seen as a temple text, as it stands in the Sermon at the Temple, this magnificent scripture is even more powerful and meaningful than typical readers have ever suspected.

This book is a revised edition of my book entitled *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*, copublished in 1990 by Deseret Book and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). The invitation of FARMS to reprint this title in paperback afforded me the welcomed opportunity to make a few corrections, clarifications, and several substantive additions that have emerged out of a decade of further research and correspondence. This new edition, however, is largely the same in purpose, style, and approach as the first edition.

I am sincerely grateful to all the staff in the research, editorial, and operations divisions at FARMS. They are deeply devoted friends of the Book of Mormon who have made this revised edition possible by assiduously combing the literature, carefully attending to production details, and sincerely encouraging this project. I remember especially from FARMS the library work of Daniel McKinlay, memos of John Gee, suggestions by Todd Compton,³ John Sorenson, Stephen Ricks, Donald Parry, Don Norton, and others, and many levels of editorial assistance by Claire Foley, Alison Coutts, Wendy Thompson, Amy Bingham, and Mary Mahan, in addition to the polish that was given to the 1990 edition by Richard Tice and his colleagues at

Deseret Book. I am also ever mindful of the support and feedback given to me by my family. I hope that this book is tangible evidence of my love and appreciation to all who have found joy in this work.

Notes

1. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 727.

2. Among the general studies of the Sermon on the Mount are Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988); Joachim Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963); and Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1978). A valuable annotated listing of hundreds of works on the Sermon on the Mount is Warren S. Kissinger, *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography*, American Theological Library Association Bibliography Series, no. 3 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1975). Extensive bibliographic information is also found in Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, and Luz, *Matthew 1–7*. From Latter-day Saint circles, see Robert E. Wells, *The Mount and the Master* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991); and David H. Yarn Jr., “The Sermon on the Mount,” *Ensign*, December 1972, 53–57. For additional references, see “We Rejoice in Christ”: *A Bibliography of LDS Writings on Jesus Christ and the New Testament* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1995), 49–52; see also the bibliography at the end of the 1990 edition of the present book.

3. Todd Compton’s review of the 1990 edition of this book is in the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 319–22.