
CHAPTER 7

THE COMMON ISRAELITE BACKGROUND

The previous pages display many differences between the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple and show that all those variations were purposeful and consistent with the delivery of the Sermon in Bountiful. In further support of the assertion that the Sermon on the Mount appropriately appears in the Sermon at the Temple, one may wonder if Jesus did *not* change some things from the Sermon on the Mount that he should have changed in order to make the text understandable to the Nephites. Although it is impossible to know for sure how much of the Sermon at the Temple the Nephites readily recognized from their Old Testament and Israelite heritage (and 3 Nephi 15:2 makes it clear that they did not immediately understand everything that Jesus said), I conclude that there are few individual words or concepts in the Sermon at the Temple that should have been puzzling to the Nephites. In my opinion, there are no other words or phrases in the Sermon where something needed to be changed but was not.

Indeed, most of the words and phrases, images, ideas, and modes of logical expression in the Sermon on the Mount are rather universally understandable to all mankind. What person does not understand such basic words or concepts as mercy, the poor, peacemakers, salt, light, sun, wind, darkness, open, secret, treasure, heart, mote, beam, bread, serpent, tree, fruit, blossom, rock, sand, men, brother, love, hate, enemy, adversary, marriage, divorce, greet, day, tomorrow, throw, hand, pigs, dogs, grass, power, glory, rejoice, fields, barns, ask, seek, knock, listen, clothing, good, evil, sin, forgive, righteousness, obey, cut off, swear, kill, prophet, wide, narrow, parents, children, holy, stature, eye, call, judge, lamp, riches, pearls, fast, pray, law, debts, and so forth? There are some 383 Greek words in the total vocabulary of the Sermon on the Mount. Most are everyday words. The translation of these words is generally straightforward. Their overt meanings can hardly be mistaken, whether they are expressed in English, Latin, Greek, Aramaic, Nephite, or any other language.

Krister Stendahl has suggested one such translation problem in the way the Sermon at the Temple renders the fourth beatitude. It reads, "Blessed are all they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost" (3 Nephi 12:6). He remarked that it seemed unnatural to associate the Greek word *chortazō* (physically filled) in Matthew 5:6 with a spiritual filling, since the New Testament Greek usually uses a different word, *plēroō*, when it speaks of being filled with the Spirit and since *chortazō* appears in passages about actual feedings of multitudes, eating crumbs, and so on.¹

The problem, however, is solved when we turn to Old Testament backgrounds of the Sermon. The promise of Jesus, that those who hunger and thirst after "righteous-

ness" (*dikaio-sunēn*) shall be filled (*chortasthēsontai*), is closely related to the last two verses of Psalm 17 (Psalm 16 in the Greek Septuagint), a rarely mentioned text that Stendahl apparently overlooked. This psalm contrasts the filling (*echortasthēsan*) of the stomach in uncleanness with beholding the face of God in righteousness (*dikaio-sunē*): "I shall be satisfied [*chortasthēsomai*] when I awake, with thy likeness" (Psalm 17:15). Here the word *chortazō* is used to describe one's being filled with the Spirit and being satisfied by beholding the righteousness of God. The distinctiveness of this use of *chortazō* in Psalm 17 and Matthew 5:6 only increases the likelihood that Jesus' New Testament audience would have recognized his allusion to these words in the psalm, a passage that would have been quite familiar to them. It shows that the translation in the Sermon at the Temple does well by making explicit this particular understanding of *chortazō* as having reference to a spiritual filling by the Holy Ghost, such as that which comes when a person beholds the face of God in righteousness.²

The text of the Sermon on the Mount is steeped in phraseology of early biblical literature. Although most Christians assume that Jesus' words were completely original, in fact many of the words and phrases in the Sermon on the Mount were taken directly or proximately from the Old Testament scriptures. These expressions would have had a familiar ring to his audience in Galilee and probably also to his listeners in Bountiful, who shared the Israelite scriptural heritage up to the time of Jeremiah. The following list shows the main biblical antecedents and precedents drawn upon by Jesus in the Sermon. Some are direct quotes; others are paraphrases or closely related expressions.

Old Testament

The Sermon

“The meek also shall increase their joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 29:19).

“Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3; compare 3 Nephi 12–14 throughout this table).

“To comfort all that mourn” (Isaiah 61:2).

“Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4).

“To set up on high those that be low; that those which mourn may be exalted to safety” (Job 5:11).

“The meek shall inherit the earth” (Psalm 37:11).

“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5).

“The meek shall eat and be satisfied: they shall praise the Lord that seek him: your heart shall live for ever” (Psalm 22:26).

“The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way” (Psalm 25:9).

“God arose to judgment, to save all the meek of the earth” (Psalm 76:9).

Old Testament

“The Lord lifteth up the meek:
he casteth the wicked down to
the ground” (Psalm 147:6).

“The Lord taketh pleasure in
his people: he will beautify the
meek with salvation” (Psalm
149:4).

“Good tidings unto the meek”
(Isaiah 61:1).

“I shall be satisfied [*chortas-*
thēsomai] . . . , I will behold thy
face in righteousness [*dikaio-*
sunēi]” (Psalm 17:15 LXX).

“They shall not hunger nor
thirst; neither shall the heat
nor the sun smite them: for he
that hath mercy on them shall
lead them, even by the springs
of water shall he guide them”
(Isaiah 49:10).

“The meek shall eat and be
satisfied: they shall praise the
Lord that seek him: your heart
shall live for ever” (Psalm
22:26).

The Sermon

“Blessed are they which do
hunger and thirst after righ-
teousness [*dikaiosunē*]: for they
shall be filled [*chortasthēson-*
tai]” (Matthew 5:6).

Old Testament

The Sermon

“Who shall ascend into the hill [temple] of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:3–4; see 73:1).

“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

“They shall be called [*klēthē-sontai*] the sons [*huiōi*] of the living God” (Hosea 1:10 LXX).

“They shall be called [*klēthē-sontai*] the children [*huiōi*] of God” (Matthew 5:9).

“I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High” (Psalm 82:6).

“They mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets” (2 Chronicles 36:16).

“Men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely . . . for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you” (Matthew 5:11–12).

“Neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking” (Leviticus 2:13).

“Ye are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13).

“Trodden under feet” (Isaiah 14:19).

“Trodden under foot” (Matthew 5:13).

Old Testament

The Sermon

“A nation meted out and trodden under foot” (Isaiah 18:7).

“The crown of pride . . . shall be trodden under feet” (Isaiah 28:3).

“The Lord hath trodden under foot all my mighty men” (Lamentations 1:15).

“Thou hast trodden down all them that err from thy statutes” (Psalm 119:118).

“I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6; see 42:6).

“Ye are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14)

“I give unto you to be the light of this people” (3 Nephi 12:14).

“When his candle shined upon my head, and when by his light I walked through darkness” (Job 29:3).

“Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel” (Matthew 5:15).

“For thou wilt light my candle: the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness” (Psalm 18:28).

Old Testament**The Sermon**

“Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17).

“Thou shalt not kill” (Matthew 5:21).

“Do not go hastily to court, for what will you do in the end if your neighbor puts you to shame? Argue your case [out of court] with your neighbor; and do not betray the confidence of another, lest hearing about it he may shame you and your bad reputation will never go away” (Proverbs 25:8–9; from the Hebrew).

“Agree with thine adversary quickly, while thou art in [a legal dispute] with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing” (Matthew 5:25–26).

“Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14).

“Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Matthew 5:27).

“Lust not after her beauty in thine heart; neither let her take thee with her eyelids” (Proverbs 6:25).

“Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).

“Seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring” (Numbers 15:39).

Old Testament

The Sermon

“Let him write her a bill of divorcement” (Deuteronomy 24:1).

“Let him give her a writing of divorcement” (Matthew 5:31).

“The Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away” (Malachi 2:16).

“Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery” (Matthew 5:32).

“Thou shalt not bear false witness” (Exodus 20:16).

“Thou shalt not forswear thyself” (Matthew 5:33).

“Ye shall not swear by my name falsely” (Leviticus 19:12; see Numbers 30:2).

“Thine enemies take thy name in vain” (Psalms 139:20).

“Pay thy vows unto the most High” (Psalm 50:14).

“Perform unto the Lord thine oaths” (Matthew 5:33).

“If thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee” (Deuteronomy 23:22).

“Swear not at all” (Matthew 5:34).

“Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay” (Ecclesiastes 5:5).

Old Testament**The Sermon**

“The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool” (Isaiah 66:1).

“Neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool” (Matthew 5:34–35).

“Zion . . . city of the great King” (Psalm 48:2).

“Jerusalem . . . the city of the great King” (Matthew 5:35).

“Eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21).

“An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” (Matthew 5:38).

“I gave my back to the smiters [*rhapismata*], and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair” (Isaiah 50:6 LXX).

“Whosoever shall smite [*rhapizei*] thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:39).

“If thou at all take thy neighbor’s raiment to pledge, thou shalt deliver it unto him by [sundown]” (Exodus 22:26).

“If any man will sue thee . . . and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also” (Matthew 5:40).

“Hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment” (Ezekiel 18:7).

Old Testament

The Sermon

“[Thou] shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need” (Deuteronomy 15:8).

“From him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away” (Matthew 5:42).

“Giveth unto the poor” (Proverbs 28:27).

“If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not . . . lay upon him usury” (Exodus 22:25).

“Love thy neighbour” (Leviticus 19:18).

“Love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy” (Matthew 5:43).

“In that thou lovest thine enemies, and hatest thy friends” (2 Samuel 19:6).

“If thou meet thine enemy’s ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again” (Exodus 23:4; see Deuteronomy 22:1).

“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you” (Matthew 5:44).

“If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink” (Proverbs 25:21).

Old Testament

The Sermon

“Ye are the children of the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 14:1).

“That ye may be the children of your Father” (Matthew 5:45).

“Ye are Gods . . . children of the most High” (Psalm 82:6).

“Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2).

“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

“Thou shalt be perfect” (Deuteronomy 18:13).

“Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord our God” (1 Kings 8:61).

“He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the Lord” (2 Kings 4:33; compare Isaiah 26:20).

“When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father” (Matthew 6:6).

“He turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord” (2 Kings 20:2).

“Yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear” (Isaiah 1:15).

“For they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matthew 6:7).

Old Testament

The Sermon

“I will sanctify [hallow] my great name” (Ezekiel 36:23).

“Hallowed be thy name” (Matthew 6:9).

“His name shall endure forever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in him: all nations shall call him blessed” (Psalm 72:17).

“Holy and reverend is his name” (Psalm 111:9).

“They shall sanctify my name” (Isaiah 29:23).

“This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat” (Exodus 16:15).

“Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11).

“Satisfied them with the bread of heaven” (Psalm 105:40).

“Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all” (1 Chronicles 29:11).

“Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever” (Matthew 6:13).

Old Testament

The Sermon

“The whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3).

“Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?” (Isaiah 58:5).

“The fast . . . shall be . . . joy and gladness” (Zechariah 8:19).

“If a thief be found breaking up” (Exodus 22:2).

“If thieves [come] by night, they will destroy till they have enough” (Jeremiah 49:9).

“The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord” (Proverbs 20:27).

“When ye fast, be not . . . of a sad countenance. . . . When thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face” (Matthew 6:16–17).

“Where thieves break through and steal” (Matthew 6:19).

“The light of the body is the eye” (Matthew 6:22).

Old Testament

The Sermon

“And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Genesis 22:18).

“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33).

“A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day” (Deuteronomy 11:27).

“Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart” (Psalm 37:4).

“Gather [manna at] a certain rate every day” (Exodus 16:4).

“Take . . . no thought for the morrow” (Matthew 6:34).

“Holy men . . . : neither shall ye eat any flesh that is torn of beasts . . . ; ye shall cast it to the dogs” (Exodus 22:31).

“Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine” (Matthew 7:6).

“Those that seek me early shall find me” (Proverbs 8:17).

“Seek, and ye shall find” (Matthew 7:7).

“Ye shall seek me, and find me” (Jeremiah 29:13).

Old Testament

The Sermon

“To seek the Lord; but they shall not find him” (Hosea 5:6).

The Two Ways (see Deuteronomy 11:26; 30:15, 19; Jeremiah 21:8; Proverbs 28:6, 18).

“The prophet, which shall presume to speak [what] I have not commanded him to speak, . . . shall die” (Deuteronomy 18:20; see Zechariah 10:2).

“They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion” (Psalm 22:13).

“Her princes in the midst thereof are like wolves ravening the prey” (Ezekiel 22:27).

“The Lord alone shall be exalted in that day” (Isaiah 2:11, 17; see Exodus 8:22; and many others).

The Two Ways (see Matthew 7:13–14).

“Beware of false prophets” (Matthew 7:15).

“Inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

“In that day” (Matthew 7:22).

Old Testament

The Sermon

“[They] prophesy lies in my name” (Jeremiah 14:14; compare 14:15; 23:25; 27:15; 29:9, 21).

“Have we not prophesied in thy name?” (Matthew 7:22).

“Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity” (Psalm 6:8; see 141:4; Isaiah 31:2; 32:6; 59:6; Hosea 6:8; Micah 2:1).

“Depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matthew 7:23).

“And one built up a wall, and lo, others daubed it with untempered mortar [sand]: . . . there shall be an overflowing shower; and ye, O great hailstones, shall fall; and a stormy wind shall rend it” (Ezekiel 13:10–11).

“A foolish man . . . built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell” (Matthew 7:26–27).

“The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

“Come unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit” (3 Nephi 12:19).

“A broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:17).

This list is undoubtedly incomplete, but it is striking—and I believe most readers will be as surprised as I was by the substantial number of phrases in the Sermon on the Mount that essentially repeat or allude to phrases in the Old Testament. Many other parallels can also be adduced from the Dead Sea Scrolls and other Jewish writings. Obviously, the lines of the Sermon “are not a spontaneous lyrical outbreak of prophecy, but a profound message founded on a complex network of biblical reminiscences and midrashic exegesis.”³

My purpose in displaying these parallels and likely precedents is not to claim that Jesus quoted each of these Old Testament passages verbatim. Several of them are precise quotes; others are only paraphrases or presentations of similar concepts. My point is simply to show that Jesus’ words would not have sounded strange to either his Jewish or Nephite listeners. Their common Israelite and prophetic heritages would have prepared both audiences to understand and appreciate the messages in this Sermon as Jesus transformed their old laws into new.

While we cannot know for sure how many of these Old Testament expressions were found on the plates of brass or how closely they were rendered by Jesus into the contemporary Nephite dialect, certainly many of these phrases were known to the Nephites (especially the passages in the Pentateuch and Isaiah). Accordingly, although the Sermon is often thought of as a uniquely “Christian” scripture, it is saturated with Israelite and Jewish elements.⁴ Passages from the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms; covenantal injunctions about giving to the poor (see Mosiah 4:16–26), praying, and fasting (see Omni 1:26; Mosiah 27:23; Alma 5:46); and specific references to wealth (see Jacob 2:12–19), the temple of Solomon (see 2 Nephi 5:16), and the “strait

and narrow” (1 Nephi 8:20) were familiar territory to the Nephites.

An informed Israelite or a devout Nephite would have readily recognized that the Sermon took the threads of the old covenantal law and wove them into a splendid new tapestry. Once we are aware of this rich background of Israelite origins, we can hardly imagine a reaction more fitting than that of the Nephites: Their reaction was one of marvel and wonder at how all their old and familiar things had suddenly become new (see 3 Nephi 15:3).

It is not difficult to identify many ways in which the Nephites could well have recognized that Jesus was presenting ideas to them that they had known before but that now appeared in a new form or context. Their Israelite backgrounds had schooled and prepared them to recognize and finally receive the principles and ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some of the places in the Sermon at the Temple where one can discern points of transforming continuity between the old and the new—especially seen in the temple legacy of the giving of the law of Moses in Exodus 19–24 and its connections with the Sermon at the Temple in 3 Nephi 11–18—include the following:

1. Whereas previously “the Lord descended upon [Mount Sinai] in fire” and tumult to a place set apart as holy (Exodus 19:18), now he came peacefully to the temple as “a Man descending out of heaven” (3 Nephi 11:8).

2. The old Hosanna Shout of Psalm 118 could only look forward to him “that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Psalm 118:26), but now it rang out to bless him who had finally come (see 3 Nephi 11:17). This long-awaited event must have broken forth into the lives of the people at Bountiful with the kind of unbelievable euphoria that so many people in the world experienced with the initial

opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989—they had never dared to dream that they would actually live to see it happen.

3. To take the place of the old sanctification of the people and the ritual washing of their clothes, the Nephites were given an expanded understanding of the ordinance of baptism for the remission of sins. (For widespread indications of ancient Israelite ceremonial or ritual ablutions to remove impurity both from the worshippers and temple priests, see Exodus 19:14; Leviticus 13:58; 15:17; 2 Samuel 12:20; 2 Chronicles 4:6; Psalms 24:4; 26:6; 73:13; Ezekiel 16:9.)⁵

4. Radically upgrading the nature of witnesses—which under the old law could be seventy of the elders (see Exodus 24:9), or stones (see Joshua 24:27), or the heavens and the earth (see Deuteronomy 4:26)—now the members of the Godhead themselves stood as primary witnesses of the doctrine and covenants of Jesus Christ (see 3 Nephi 11:35–36).

5. The old list of curses that for centuries had been ritually invoked upon those who privily worked wickedness (see Deuteronomy 27:11–26) were now transposed into or replaced by a list of glorious blessings upon those who secretly worked righteousness (see 3 Nephi 12:3–11; 13:4, 6, 18).

6. The old view of creation had presented the words “Let there be light” as a physical phenomenon, but now it became a personal creation, “Let your light so shine” (3 Nephi 12:16).

7. The old law of sacrifice was explicitly replaced by the sacrifice of a “broken heart and a contrite spirit” (3 Nephi 12:18–19), and whereas previously the sacrificial animal was to be pure and without blemish (*haplous*), now the disciples themselves were to become “single” (*haplous*) to the glory of God (see 3 Nephi 13:22; Matthew 6:22).

8. Similarly, old commandments regarding murder, adultery, divorce, and oath-swearing (see Exodus 20:13–17) were dramatically transfigured in the new order of Christ to promise results even more glorious than Solomon’s temple of old (see Matthew 6:29; 3 Nephi 13:29).

9. In the covenant at Sinai the people covenanted to do “all the words which the Lord hath said” (Exodus 24:3; see Deuteronomy 24:1–4), and the Lord promised in return to “bless thy bread, and thy water; and [to] take sickness away from the midst of” the people (Exodus 24:25). So too the Nephites newly covenanted with blessed bread and wine to do what the Lord had commanded (see 3 Nephi 18:3–10), and he healed all their sick (see 3 Nephi 17:9).

10. Moses wrote the words of the covenant, built an altar (see Exodus 24:4), sprinkled blood on the people, and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words” (Exodus 24:8). As the Nephites looked back on the divine and ritual-laden origins of the law of Moses, they could easily see its fulfillment in the new revelation that they received from Jesus at the temple in Bountiful, at a symbolic mount, with laws concerning sacrifice, obedience, adultery, consecration, the healing of the sick, the blessing of bread, and the drinking of the cup of the blood of the new testament.

In broad terms, the main themes of the Sermon at the Temple are also the topics treated in the book of Leviticus, regarded by Jews as the most sacred of the five books of Moses. Its main concerns are implementing the law of sacrifice (Leviticus 1–7; 17), bestowing the priesthood (chaps. 8–10), assuring purity (chaps. 11–16), holy living and loving one’s neighbor (chap. 19), defining chastity (chaps. 18, 20), hallowing the Sabbath days (chap. 23), eschewing

blasphemy (chap. 24), and caring for the poor and consecrating property to the Lord (chaps. 25–27). Not being steeped in the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the law of Moses, modern LDS readers tend to overlook the profound religious legacy of these underlying purposes of the law that have enduring relevance to the temple.

Over and over it is evident in the Sermon at the Temple that indeed “all things had become new” (3 Nephi 15:3) in a great and marvelous way. Jesus identified himself as the prophet-like-Moses and said, “I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel” (3 Nephi 15:5). The continuity from the law of Moses to the law of Christ is nowhere more visible than at the temple in Bountiful as Christ gave the Nephites laws, covenanted with them, and made all their old things new.

Only a few passages require discussion in regard to the Nephites’ ability to understand what Jesus was talking about. The first instance is whether the Nephites would have understood the word *mammon*. The ancient origins and etymology of this word are highly uncertain.⁶ Around the time of Jesus it was a frequently used Aramaic word in Palestine, meaning “wealth, property, profit, or money,” appearing in the Targums, the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Damascus Document.⁷ It is unknown how far back in history the word was known or where it came from, and thus one cannot be certain about the nature of its occurrence in 3 Nephi. Aramaic is old enough that a Nephite word for money could have been “mammon,” but without access to the original Nephite texts it is unclear if Jesus used this Aramaic word in the Sermon at the Temple, or if it was a part of Nephite vocabulary, or whether Jesus used some closely comparable Nephite word for “wealth” that was simply translated by Joseph Smith as “mammon.”

Nevertheless, the context of laying up heavenly treasures and serving only one master makes it clear what Jesus was talking about. Similar things can be said of the Aramaic word *Raca*, whose antiquity and possible derivation from Hebrew is also uncertain but whose basic meaning is unmistakable in the context of calling another a fool in ridicule or derision.

The second problematic passage raises the question of whether the Nephites would have known where it was written, “Hate thine enemy” (Matthew 5:43). One searches in vain in the Old Testament for exactly such a writing; and, indeed, in this particular instance Jesus does not say to the Nephites, “It is also written *before you*” (3 Nephi 12:43), as he did with the first law against murder. Thus the Nephites may have been left to wonder who *had* written such a thing. Several scholars have suggested that Matthew 5:43 refers to a text from the community at Qumran: God commands his sons to “love everything that he has chosen but to hate everything that he has rejected.”⁸ Thus Jesus’ listeners in Palestine may have recognized in his words a veiled criticism of that specific sect. Another possibility is that Jesus was responding to some other contemporary “popular maxim or partisan rallying cry” glossing Leviticus 19:18.⁹ The roots of Matthew 5:43, however, may run much earlier, for similar sentiments are found in 2 Samuel 19:6, which criticizes the king for having everything backwards, “in that thou lovest thine enemies, and hatest thy friends.” The implication is that one should hate one’s enemies and love one’s friends. In any event, whether or not the Nephites knew where such a saying was written, they would have had no difficulty understanding Jesus’ meaning. They may have thought immediately of their own ongoing, painful problems with the Lamanites, a group that

expressly taught their children to hate their enemies eternally (see Mosiah 10:17; compare Jacob 7:26).

Third, “figs” and “grapes” are mentioned in 3 Nephi 14:16: “Do men gather grapes [literally ‘bunches’] of thorns, or figs of thistles?” Thorns and thistles were present in the New World, but grapes and figs are slightly more questionable. John Sorenson points out that “certain grapes were present, but we do not know that they were used for food or drink,”¹⁰ although he reports that this is now thought to be more likely. Still, we cannot be sure what a Nephite might have thought when he heard the words *figs* and *grapes*. There are several possibilities. Certainly the words were known to the Nephites from the Hebrew records brought with them from Jerusalem, and thus these fruits may have been known to them simply as archaic terms; or perhaps the Nephites used these names for local fruits; or again, perhaps the sense behind the Greek word *staphulas* (“bunches,” usually of grapes) was simply understood to mean bunches of some other kind of fruit. In any event, several varieties of figs and grapes existed in the New World (fig bark was used to make paper in Mesoamerica), and the context would have made it clear to Jesus’ audience that he was talking about bunches of fruit gathered from trees.

Fourth is the “sanhedrin” mentioned in Matthew 5:22. Since the Greek word *synedrion* seems to have been first used in the days of Herod as a title for the Great Sanhedrin of Jerusalem,¹¹ one may wonder if the Nephites would have understood what Jesus meant when he said, “Whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of his judgment [*krisei*]. And whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council [*synedrion*]; and whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire” (3 Nephi

12:22). Commentators on Matthew sometimes assert that the Greek words for *judgment* and *council* refer technically to local Jewish courts, the Small Sanhedrins and the Great Sanhedrin,¹² but the terminology is not so specific. Courts or councils of all kinds could be denoted. Strecker argues that “judgment” can be understood only “figuratively. . . . Jesus is thinking of the final judgment.”¹³ Alternatively, the “council” could allude to the council in heaven, which figures in God’s judgments upon the world (see 1 Nephi 1:6–10),¹⁴ or, as I have suggested above, to an apostolic council that judges mankind in this world or in the world to come (see 3 Nephi 27:27).¹⁵ Likewise, the Nephites had synagogues, places of some kind, where they gathered together (see 2 Nephi 26:26; see also Alma 16:13), and they used a trumpet or horn to call people to repentance (see Alma 29:1). All these are concepts the Nephites would have readily understood.

The above cases are ones where a Nephite might have had difficulty readily understanding the Sermon at the Temple. Most of its common human experiences and life settings, such as thieves breaking in or going a second mile, need not presuppose anything out of the ordinary in Nephite civilization.¹⁶ To my mind, this result is worth observing: In all the places where the two texts differ, good and sufficient reasons exist for the divergence; yet no further changes were probably needed in deference to the Nephite culture or audience, because much of the newness of the Sermon was firmly grounded in familiar terrain.

Notes

1. Krister Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi,” in *Reflections on Mormonism*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 142. Stendahl,

an outside observer, offers several valuable insights into the Sermon at the Temple, but his explanations of them usually fall short. He notes well the emphasis on baptism, the ordination of the twelve disciples, “coming unto Jesus,” and the role of the commandments (ibid., 141–43). More is involved in 3 Nephi 11–18, however, as shown above, than the mere introduction of certain literary Johannine features.

2. See numerous references to the notion of being physically “filled with the spirit” in Robert F. Smith, ed., *Book of Mormon Critical Text: A Tool for Scholarly Reference* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1987), 3:961 n. 287.

3. D. Flusser, “Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 10/1 (1960): 13.

4. In further discussions of the thoroughly Jewish character of the Sermon on the Mount, others have convincingly found Jesus the Jew at virtually every turn in the Sermon on the Mount. See, for example, Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1922), 1:188–474; Samuel T. Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament* (New York: KTAV, 1987); and “Does the Sermon on the Mount Follow a Rabbinic Pattern?” in W. D. Davies, “My Odyssey in New Testament Interpretation,” *Bible Review* 5/3 (June 1989): 15.

5. Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 93–96; Robert A. Wild, *Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis*, *Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain*, no. 87 (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 143–48; and Thomas F. Torrance, “The Origins of Baptism,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 11 (1958): 158–71.

6. G. Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:388–90.

7. Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 139–40, citing A. M. Honeyman, “The Etymology of Mammon,” *Archivum Linguisticum* 4/1 (1952): 60; see Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur

Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 490.

8. 1QS I 3–4, see Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 87; mentioned also in S. Kent Brown, “The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Mormon Perspective,” *BYU Studies* 23/1 (1983): 65.

9. O. J. F. Seitz, “Love Your Enemies,” *New Testament Studies* 16 (1969): 51. On the possible historical settings of Matthew 5:43–44 and Luke 6:27–28, see pp. 39–54.

10. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 186.

11. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary*, 7:862.

12. Strecker, *Sermon on the Mount*, 65–67.

13. *Ibid.*, 65, as the concluding reference to “hell fire” makes apparent.

14. Raymond E. Brown, “The Pre-Christian Semitic Concept of ‘Mystery,’” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 20 (1958): 419 n. 10, includes the word *synedrion* among the terms used in “the vocabulary [of] the LXX to translate *sōd* where it is used of the heavenly assembly,” citing, however, only Proverbs 3:32 and Jeremiah 15:17. See E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, Harvard Semitic Monographs, no. 24 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1980); and John W. Welch, “The Calling of a Prophet,” in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 35–54.

15. On the use of the word *synedrion* in early Christianity to refer to a council of apostles, see Kittel, *Theological Dictionary*, 7:871, who points out that Ignatius spoke of a council of elders as the *topon* of the *synedrion* of the apostles and as “the council [*synedrion*] of God and the council [*synedrion*] of the apostles.”

16. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 326, 345.