Type: Book Chapter

Unifying the Sermon with Temple Themes and Ritual Theory

Author(s): John W. Welch
Source: *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple*
Published: Farnham, UK; Ashgate, 2009
Pages: 183–207

Abstract: No abstract available.

Chapter 7
Unifying the Sermon with Temple Themes and Ritual Theory

This book set out to find a way to read the Sermon on the Mount as a unified text. The method employed was to read the Sermon on the Mount against the rhetorical background of the Jerusalem Temple. Although the Sermon on the Mount has been studied extensively over the centuries, no analysis of this text has ever pursued this particular approach before, striving to identify and value its temple-related elements. At the outset, it was argued the distinctive mountain setting of the Sermon supplies prima facie evidence for seeing the Sermon on the Mount in the light of the Temple. In the end, the detection of prominent uses of temple terms, concepts, and themes throughout the Sermon bears out the validity and value of that approach. These temple elements give the Sermon on the Mount its consistent voice. They hold its various parts together in a logical progression. They imbue the text with authority and transformative power.

A Summary of the Sermon's Temple-Related Vocabulary

First and foremost, this study exposes the consistent use in the Sermon on the Mount of the temple-related words and phrases from the Old Testament, especially from the Psalms and the blocks of temple materials at the end of the book of Exodus and in the first part of Leviticus. Table 1 recaps much of the evidence,[1] displaying 120 of the temple themes that have been found in the Sermon on the Mount, from beginning to end.

Two-thirds (86) of these elements can be strongly linked to words, phrases, or concepts in the Psalms. Some are immediately recognizable as quotations or direct paraphrases of well-known passages such as Psalms 6:8, 24:4, 37:11, 48:2, 50:22, and 94:8, as discussed individually above. Others make use of vocabulary that appears multiple times, giving this text a strong ring of psalmody. For example, the Beatitudes begin with the word *makarioi* (blessed), which is also the first word in Psalms 1:1, and it goes on to appear twenty-five more times in the Psalms.

---

[1] I have used the Brenton version of the Septuagint throughout. The frequencies listed are based on the number of times these words appear in Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint* (Oxford, 1897), giving a general idea of word usage. Several of the listed word frequencies are higher in the Psalms than in any other book in the Septuagint.

Table 1: Temple Themes and Temple-Related Texts in the Sermon on the Mount

Sermon on the Mount	Psalms	Other OT Texts	Pertinent Temple Themes
Into the mountain	24:1	Isa 2:2	Mountain of the Lord
Blessed (*makarioi*)	1:1 (+25 more times)		Celestial beatification
Rewards	19:11		Source of heavenly rewards
Poor (*ptōchoi*)	69:32 (+15x)		Beseeching and bowing down
Kingdom of God	145:11–13		God as eternal king
Mourning		Ezra 10:6	Sadness over covenant breaking
Comfort (*paraklēsis*)	94:19		Comfort and joy
Meekness (*praeis*)	76:2–9 (+8x)	Num 12:3	Like Moses, waiting on the Lord
Meek inherit the earth	37:9, 11, 18		Receiving peace and prosperity
Hungering	37:19; 107:9		Needing and seeking righteousness
Thirsting for God	42:2; 63:1; 107:9		Needing and seeking God
Righteousness	17:15 (+80x)		Divine justice
Filled (*chortasthēsontai*)	17:15 (+8x)		Beholding God's glory
Receiving mercy	5:7 (+171x)		Through covenantal fidelity
Pure in heart (*katharoi*)	24:4 (+6x)	Exod 25–Lev 24 (101x)	Entrance and purity requirements
Seeing God	17:15; 24:6; 63:2		Encountering God's glory
Peace, peacemakers	147:14 (+23x)	Isa, Jer (49x)	Peace of complete atonement
Sons of God	2:7; 82:6	Job 38:7; Dt 32:8	Sonship, angels, deified beings
Persecution	7:1; 31:15; 35:3		Deliverance from persecution
Exclusion (*aphorisōsin*)	69:28; 109:13		Blotting out the wicked
Unjustly cursed, reviled	119:86, 161		Imprecations, swearing of oaths
Rejoice, rejoice	32:11 (+60x)		Cultic joy
Hallelujah (*agalliasthe*)	5:11; 32:11 (+51x)		Cultic exultation, singing
Salt of the earth	60:1	Lev 2:13	Salt of the covenant
Casting out (*ekballein*)	78:55; 109:10		Excluding evil, excommunication
Trodden underfoot	7:5 (+5x)	Isa (14x)	Judgment, humiliation
Light of the earth	27:1; 104:1–2		Light to the world

Sermon on the Mount	Psalms	Other OT Texts	Pertinent Temple Themes
City on a mountain	48:2		Holy city, temple city
Lamp (*luchnos*)	18:28; 119:105		Word of God, God's Torah
Lampstand (*luchnia*)		Exod 25 (9x)	The Menorah (*luchnia*)
Letting light shine	31:16	Gen 1:1–3	Creation, Let there be light
Decalogue	19; 50:18–20	Exod 20:13, 14, 16	Daily temple Decalogue recitation
Anger	7:6; 56:7		The anger of the Lord
Prohibition of anger	37:7–9		Vengeance is only of the Lord
Judgment	(24x)		Judgment by temple councils
Gift (*dōron*)		Lev 1–9 (30x)	Sacrifice
Altar (*thusiastērion*)		Exod 27–Lev 10 (125x)	Altar of the Temple
Reconciliation		Lev 6:1–7	Unity and harmony
No adultery	50:14–19	Lev 18; Ezek 23:37	No infidelity, impurity, or idolatry
Purity of heart	24:4		Complete purity
Covenant marriage		Mal 2:14; Ezek 16	The creation of man and woman
Divorce (*apostasion*)		Hos 4; Lev 21	Requiring purity of priests
Right hand	16:7 (+38x)		Priest's use of right hand
Yes, yes		Deut 27; Num 5:22	Amen, amen
Oaths	50:5, 14	Num 30	Solemnizing obligations
God's throne in heaven	11:4 (+5x)		Throne of God, ark
In the name of the earth		Isa 66:1	Connecting heaven and earth
City of the great king	48:2		Holy city of Jerusalem
Make hair white (*tricha leukē*)		Lev 13:2–10 (5x)	White hair of leprosy
Talion		Exod 21; Lev 24	Divine justice
Repay good for evil		Exod 23:4; 1Sam 24:17	Divine mercy
Slap on the cheek	3:7	Isa 50:6; Lam 3:30	Ritual humiliation of the king
Coat (*chitōn*)		Ex 28–Lev 16 (12x)	Linen garments of priests
Lend and give generously	37:26; 112:5	Deut 15:7–8	Caring for the poor
Love (*agapaō*)	(50x)	Lev 19:18	Love, peace, holiness

Sermon on the Mount	Psalms	Other OT Texts	Pertinent Temple Themes
Pray for enemies	(*echroi* 108x)		Intercessory prayers
Sons of God	82:6		Fatherhood of God
God gives to all		1 Kings 8	Life-sustaining blessings
Sun over all	84:11		The Lord is a sun
Rain on all the earth	147:8		Ensuring rain
Perfect (*teleios* = *shalom*)	1:3; 65:1; 119:165	Deut 18:13; 2Sm 22:26	God's nature, gift for doing his will
Perfect (*teleiōsis*)		Exod 29–Lev 8 (11x)	The ram of "consecration"
Giving in secret			The Chamber of Secrets
Trumpets	81:3; 105:3	1 Chron 15:24	Music, heralding God
Glorify (*doxazein, doxa*)	22:23 (+65x)		Glorifying God
Prayer in secret	55:1	1 Kings 8 (hear 12x)	Being heard of God
Prayer	(37x)	Isa 56:7	House of prayer
God as Father	89:26; 103:13		Nomina sacra
Hallowed name, make holy	72:17; 103:1; 111:9		Sanctification
Kingdom come	22:28; 45:6		Praising God
On earth as in heaven	135:6		Connecting heaven to earth
Daily bread	105:40	Exod 25:30	Manna, Bread of the Presence
Kingdom, glory, power	145:10–12	1 Chron 29:11	Doxology
Forgive	25:18; 32:1 (+6x)	1 Kings 8:30	Forgiveness
Fasting	35:11–14; 69:10	Lev 16	Self-abasement, humility
Anointing		Exod 40:15	Ritual anointing
Washing		2 Sam 12:20	Ritual washing
Treasures		Neh 10:37	Temple treasury, making vows
Light	27:1; 56:13		The Lord is Light
Seeing in the light	36:9; 119:130		Understanding, enlightenment
Reflecting the light	34:29	Exod 3:2	Transfiguration
Eye single (*haplous*)		Prov 11:25	Purity
Radiating light	38:10		The Temple as a beacon, lighthouse
Full of light	139:12		Driving away darkness
Serve the Lord only	2:11; 22:30 (+6x)	Exod 20:3	Temple service
Love the Master (*agapaō*)	(+50x)	Deut 6:4–5	Loving God
Cleave unto (*antechō*)		Prov 3:18; Isa 56:4	Loyalty to God
Necessities of life	23:5	1 Kings 8:35–39	Providing sufficient abundance

Sermon on the Mount	Psalms	Other OT Texts	Pertinent Temple Themes
Anxiety	38:18		Worrying about sin
Stature, life span (*hēlikia*)		Sira 26:17	Unimprovable life, excellence
Cubit (*pēchus*)		Exod 25–38; Ez 40–46	Temple measurements (+120x)
Spin (*nēthousin*)		Exod 26–39 (10x)	Temple veil, garments, curtains
Clothes (*endumata*)	93:1; 104:1	Exod 28:2; Job 40:10	Holy garments
Grass is temporary	37:2 (+3x)		Temple is eternal
Seek first, all else added	37:4		Eternal promises
Judgment	7:8; 35:24 (+22x)		Eternal judgment, the Mercy Seat
Measure (*metron*)		Ezek 40–48 (+40x)	Divine order of creation
Measure for measure (talion)		Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20	Principle of divine justice
Speck, chip (*karpos*)		Gen 8:11	Evidence of divine peace
Beam (*dokos*)		1 Kings 6:15–16	Beams in the Temple
Cast not the holy (*hagion*)	2:6 (+59x)	Exod 26–Num (300x)	Guarding sacred things
Tear in pieces	50:5, 22		Punishing covenant breakers
Seek	69:32; 105:4	Isa 2:3	Seeking the Lord in his Temple
Bread, fish	23:5; 132:15		Sacred meals
Others (*plēsion*) as the self	15:3 (+10x)	Lev 19:18	Community, collectivity
Two ways (*hodos*)	1:6	Deut 30:19	Separating polar opposites
Gate (*pulēs*)	24:7–10; 118:19–20	Exod Num Ezek (38x)	Temple gates
False prophets		Jer (9x); Zech 13:2	Mismanagers of the Temple
Tree as archetype	1:1–3	Gen 3:3, 22	Tree of Life, individuals as trees
Works judged as fruits	58:11; 104:13; 128:3		God's judgment
Vine and fig		1 Kings 4:5	Blessing the righteous
Thornbushes and thistles		Gen 3:19	Cursing sinners, the fallen state
Lord, Lord	116:4		Invoking the name of the Lord
Knowing God		Amos 3:2	Covenant making
Entering	118:26	Isa 33:17	Entering into the Lord's Presence
Excluding iniquity (*anomia*)	6:8, 141:4		Defeating evil
Wise man (*phronimos*)	94:8	Prov, Sir (26x)	Wisdom
Upon the rock	27:5	Num 20:8; Jdg 13:19	Temple, mountain, altar
Foolish man (*mōros*)	94:8	Sira (28x)	Lack of Wisdom
Upon the sand		Ezek 13:10–11	Chaos, false prophets
Floods	78:16; 93:3; 105:41		Cosmic floods, destruction of evil

Whereas "makarisms" are found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in the Enoch literature, in proverbial sayings and in the Old Testament Apocrypha, one may rightly suspect that the average Galilean or Judean audience would have been most familiar with this distinctive word's prominent use in the Psalms. Several key words in the Sermon on the Mount appear multiple times in the Psalms, ranging from mercy (171x), enemies (108x), righteousness (81x), glory, glorify (66x), rejoice (61x), holy (60x), hallelujah (53x), love (*agapaō*, 50x), right hand (39x), and prayer (37x), to meek (9x), filled (9x), forgive (8x), serve (8x), pure (7x) and trodden underfoot (6x). Moreover, 43 of these 86 psalmic elements can be tied additionally to technical terminology used in other Old Testament texts that are clearly related to the Temple, such as the instructions for the construction and operation of the Tabernacle or the Temple, as well as the prayer dedicating the Temple of Solomon in 1 Kings 8 and the futuristic vision of the ideal temple in Ezekiel 40–48. The consistent use of temple vocabulary and the extensive use of the Psalms in the Sermon on the Mount are most noteworthy. Never before have temple themes in the Sermon on the Mount been catalogued in this breadth and detail.

The remaining third (34) of these temple elements do not draw on vocabulary that is found in the Psalms, but they appear significantly in the Old Testament—and sometimes exclusively—in temple-related passages. For example, words such as *luchnia* (lampstand, menorah) or *nēthousin* (spin) would have been quite unforgettably known to scripturally literate listeners as words distinctively associated with the Tabernacle and Temple. 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.

Each of these references to the Psalms can be counted as being related to the Temple. Even though it is probably true that the book of Psalms was not published or used as a hymnbook in the sense of a modern Christian hymnal, there can still be no doubt that the Psalms were sung (or chanted) in the Temple by Levitical cantors and lay worshipers, by pilgrims as they went up to make legally required appearances at the Temple, by individual worshipers in the Temple, by dispersed Jews yearning for the Temple, and by families giving thanks for the blessings of the Temple.[2] While poetry written in psalmodic form served several purposes in many settings (as the Psalms of Solomon, the Dead Sea Thanksgiving Hymns, and the Odes of Solomon show), it remains overridingly clear that the Temple unites the biblical Psalms. They all have something directly or proximately to do with the Temple.

Readers may well be surprised by the number of phrases in the Sermon on the Mount that essentially repeat or allude to temple-related texts in the Old Testament. By my count, there are 383 words in total vocabulary of the Sermon on the Mount,

---

[2] See generally, Dirk J. Human and Cas J.A. Vos (eds), *Psalms and Liturgy* (London, 2004). Discussed above in chapter 3, see notes 8–14.

approximately one-third of them casting a temple shadow. Obviously, David Flusser is right in saying that the Sermon on the Mount should not be thought of as "a spontaneous lyrical outbreak of prophecy," but rather as carrying profound messages "founded on a complex network of biblical reminiscences and midrashic exegesis."[3]

But perhaps this should not come as any great surprise. Readers are well aware of Jesus' apparent practice of quoting from the Psalms. The report of the crucifixion is especially punctuated with verbiage from the Psalms: for example, the piercing of hands and feet is found in Psalms 22:16 LXX;[4] the giving of gall in Matthew 27:34 draws on Psalms 69:21; the parting of garments in Matthew 27:35 builds on Psalms 22:18; and Jesus' final cry of abandonment in Matthew 27:46 quotes Psalms 22:1. This use of the Psalms was neither a late nor an isolated practice.

While it is true that parallels can also be adduced from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the occurrences of these points of similarity are limited. For the most part, these pertain only to passages in Matthew 5 and thus do not characterize the entire Sermon. While Jesus occasionally "followed Essene thought," he more often "taught and acted in diametrical opposition to it" and "decisively rejected all [its] excessive features."[5] Likewise, while many parallels have also been found in rabbinic writings,[6] these Jewish texts are often too late to be very indicative. Certain passages in the Sermon on the Mount may be well understood in terms of Hellenistic philosophy or culture (such as going the second mile, or living the

---

[3] D. Flusser, "Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit," *IEJ* 10/1 (1960): 13.

[4] New evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls supports the Septuagint reading of this passage. See 5/6 Hev-Sev4Ps Fragment 11, in James H. Charlesworth and others (eds), *Miscellaneous Texts from the Judaean Desert*, Discoveries in the Judean Desert 38 (Oxford, 2000), 160–61, and discussed in Shaun Hopkin, "The Psalm 22:16 Controversy," *BYU Studies* 44/3 (2005), 161–72.

[5] A classic article is Kurt Schubert, "The Sermon on the Mount and the Qumran Texts," in Krister Stendahl (ed.), *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (New York, 1957), pp. 118–28, quote on 128. Besides beatitude-type statements (4Q525) and ethical dualism (1QS 1:9–10; 3:18–26; 4:16–19; and throughout 1QM), one finds in the Scrolls lines about hating enemies (1QS 1:10; 2:4–19; 9:16, 21–3; 10:5), being poor in spirit (*ebionim*, 1QpHab 12:3, 6, 10; 1QM 14:7; CD 6:21; 14:14; 1QH 3:25; 18:29–30; 1QS 6:18–20), treading in the ways of light (1QS 3:20), "eyes of unchastity" (1QS 1:6), not swearing by God's name El (CD 19:1); prayer (1QH 5:5–6; 11QPs[a] 19), forgiving (1QS 5:24–6:1); and not repaying a man with evil (1QS 10:17–18), as well as statements about suffering persecution, righteousness, perfection, divorce, numbering the hairs of the head, and keeping secrets.

[6] In discussions of the thoroughly Jewish character of the Sermon on the Mount, others have convincingly found Jesus' Jewishness 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, 1922), vol. 1, pp. 188–474; Samuel T. Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament* (New York, 1987); and W.D. Davies, asking the question "Does the Sermon on the Mount Follow a Rabbinic Pattern?," in "My Odyssey in New Testament Interpretation," *BRev* 5/3 (June 1989): 15.

Golden Rule), but these ethical ideals are not exclusively Hellenistic. A profusion of temple themes, temple texts, and temple contexts, however, accounts quite satisfactorily for every stage of the Sermon on the Mount.

Imbuing the Sermon on the Mount with Authority

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.

Divine Authority

In order to be compelling, all ethical pronouncements must be grounded in some form of authority, be it traditional, social, logical, political, familial, or religious. Not drawing on the modern preference for utilitarianism or rationalism as it source of authority, the Sermon on the Mount relies primarily on the voice of divine authority as its major force of ethical influence. In this text, as in the Temple (the place of God's presence and revelation), that voice speaks distinctly and preeminently.

To draw people up to a higher standard of moral behavior, speakers must speak from a position of higher authority and stand on a higher moral ground than the listeners. To speak from a position of power and influence, speakers must have stature, charisma, and demonstrated capabilities to lead and to instil confidence. They must be able to ensure some enforcement of consequences for ignoring their messages, and they must have some means of delivering any promised rewards. By standing on the verbal and theological platform of the Temple, Jesus drew on the authority of the divine place in just such ways.

In a temple setting, he was able to give commandments that captured the charisma of Moses (as in Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 44), to make promises that evoked the glory of Solomon (Matthew 6:29), and to invoke in effect the authority of Melchizedek, the Great High Priest, to bless the people of Abraham, to receive their treasures, and to control the elements of the created cosmos, even the rains from above and the floods from the deep. Echoing sacred words from the Temple, Jesus' blessings and promises carried the bright prospect of God's inviolable endorsement of fulfillment, especially to those who ask (Matthew 7:11) and act

(Matthew 7:21, 24), just as all blessings pronounced upon the righteous by temple priests brought with them the deepest possible assurances that they would certainly materialize. Cloaked in the mantle of temple gnosis and revelation, Jesus' warnings and promises carried with them the most intense vouchers of prophetic forecasting (as in Matthew 5:13; 7:11).

Jesus issued these commandments, warnings, and promises so strongly and clearly that people immediately wondered by what authority he was able to make such statements (Matthew 7:28–29). By the end of the Sermon, he openly answered that inevitable query, unequivocally stating that he spoke for God, his Father, when he limited his blessings to those who do "the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Within conventional expectations, it was only because of temple access to the holy Presence that one could speak in such a way with credibility. In this voice of divine authority, there is hope that divine power can solve all problems that threaten the earth; but in the context of a temple theology, mankind must also do its part to love and serve God and to maintain the sacred order of the Lord's creation, as most temples of the ancient world were designed to do.

Social Cohesion

Ethical formation requires societal trust and cooperation, and temples enshrined, celebrated, and protected the most treasured values shared by a bonded community. The Temple was an institution of consummate social order. Temples necessarily involve large numbers of people working in harmony to celebrate and perpetuate the sacred order, not only for the benefit of believers but of the entire world. If God sends rain in answer to the prayers of the righteous few, the rain will necessarily fall on the entire land, not just on certain plots. Temples draw on venerable traditions of ancestors, on deeply seated world views, and on ritually repeated routines. Violating these sacred boundaries and traditional norms brought social shame, if not casting out, expulsion, and effectual death.

By embedding its messages in a temple framework, the Sermon on the Mount did not destroy but built on these things that are generative of healthy societies. In the Temple of Jerusalem, vast numbers of people were involved in the cooperative activities of the Temple, including builders, gatekeepers, priests, chief priests, Levites, singers, worshipers, scribes, wood-gatherers, and many people in an elaborate temple infrastructure. Temples forged community bonds and defined social identity. In a temple community, the collective took precedence over the individual, and duties overshadowed rights. By working within a temple framework, the Sermon on the Mount readily communicates a firm sense of belonging, the support of healthy social pressure, and durable bonds of community relationships within the otherwise fragile new Jesus movement (see Matthew 5:21, 47; 6:2; 7:3). In the established Christian community two thousand years later, social justice and peace can still be achieved, beyond normal individual abilities, through praying for enemies, seeking and granting reconciliation and forgiveness, and strengthening commonalities as children of God. After all, the Temple was all

about becoming sons of God, obtaining forgiveness, and praying for help in facing challenges that exceed our own abilities.

Personal Commitment

In terms of the role of individual commitment in moral formation, to be morally influential a statement must be sufficiently clear, consistent, presumptively correct, and adequately complete. Being saturated with temple images, the Sermon on the Mount enjoys a clearly coherent and unified character. The Temple's pervading sense of order and completeness enhances the authority of the Sermon on the Mount by communicating a sense of permanence and cosmic control, and by orienting humans to the guiding grid of heavenly coordinates. The Temple induced and inculcated voluntary personal commitment to and adoption of durable moral principles based on selflessness, sacrifice, obedience, love, forgiveness, purity, and consecration. The motivation engendered by this clear ethical vision offers hope in the continuous campaign to lessen the gap between the wisdom of hearing and doing these teachings and the foolishness of hearing and doing them not.

Beyond dispensing practical instructions, effective moral statements must orient, inspire and motivate the hearers to aligning their willing desires with the objectives of the speaker. Through comforting reconciliations and reassurances, both the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount (as in Matthew 5:3–12, 45; 6:4, 6, 14; 32; 7:7, 25) motivate the hearer to want to do, to voluntarily agree to do, and to actually do whatever it takes to succeed in obtaining these glorious, promised rewards.

Ultimately, moral texts derive their most powerful authority from some consequential force outside of the present time and the immediate space. Temples do this by instantiating divine law and universal order, by providing access to and communication with God, and by enshrining holiness and worthiness in an aura of awe and spiritual reverence. In the Temple of Jerusalem were found some of the most powerful images and most awe-inspiring institutions on which the Judeo-Christian tradition rests. The Sermon on the Mount is systematically and effectively constructed in such a way that listeners are ritualistically guided, with confidence, stage by stage, from preliminary blessings and conditions, to higher cultic instructions and warnings, to eventually enable the hearers to withstand the forces of evil (as in Matthew 6:13; 7:20, 23, 25) and enter perfected into the presence of God (Matthew 5:48; 7:21). Temples always involved more than texts alone; the Temple is a template, an active model, of principles of righteousness demonstrated.

Thus, in many ways, temple elements unify the authorial voice of the Sermon on the Mount and give it a permeating aura of authoritativeness. Indeed, it is now no wonder that the reaction of the people as they heard this teaching of Jesus was one of astonishment precisely because Jesus spoke as one having true authority and not as the scribes (Matthew 7:28–29). By tapping into potent temple themes,

the Sermon on the Mount spoke in a clear rhetorical register of traditional authority coupled with the indisputable authoritativeness of all that is sacred and holy.

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. 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.[7] 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.

Seeing the Sermon on the Mount as a Possible Conversion Ritual

Having such a strong, authoritative character, the Sermon on the Mount lent itself readily to ritual and ceremonial applications. Individual initiation into a religious group and the personal adoption of a code of spiritual conduct often involves some form of ceremony or ritual. Likewise, a group response to an authoritative plan of action typically involves some form of ritual expression of approval and compliance. Temples of the ancient world were intrinsically ritualistic, and thus it should not be surprising to find that temple themes further enhance the unity of the Sermon on the Mount by lending this text a ritual quality, allowing it to serve as a script that lays out a course of transformational stages that are not just to be learned but also experienced by initiates converting to Christianity.

From the very outset, viewing the Sermon through the lens of ritual studies would seem promising. Rituals were practiced by the early Christians from the first century onward, including baptism (Matthew 3:15; 28:19); almsgiving, prayer, fasting, washing and anointing (mentioned in the cultic instructions in Matthew 6:1–18); the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost or to ordain priesthood officers (see Acts 6:6; 8:17; 1 Timothy 4:14); the Eucharist (Matthew 26:26–28; 1 Corinthians 11:23–29); blessing the sick (James 5:14); and marriage

---

[7] "The mythology and symbolism of the ancient temple are the key to understanding much of Christian origins. Modern translations of the New Testament which obscure this imagery are counterproductive, . . . for when the meaning of these symbols is lost, the meaning of Christianity will also be lost." Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven* (London, 1991), p. 181.

(in the *Gospel of Philip*[8]). Might the Sermon on the Mount have been involved with any such rituals?

The most likely ritual uses of the Sermon on the Mount would have been connected with its role as an "early Christian catechetical instruction to new converts."[9] Betz and others have marshaled considerable evidence that the Sermon on the Mount is precisely the kind of document that would have been used as a cultic text or to instruct or remind initiates of church rules.[10] Drawing on Christian, Jewish, and other ancient practices as parallels, the idea that the Sermon on the Mount was uses to instruct neophytes for baptism becomes quite plausible. Especially the Didache, which draws extensively on the Sermon on the Mount, was used toward the end of the first century CE to prepare converts for baptism.[11] Moreover, the main themes and structure of the Sermon on the Mount compare well with the Giyyur ritual required, according to the Talmud, of all persons desiring to become Jewish converts.[12] While it is unknown how early this particular practice was in place, it stands to reason that it (or something like it) would have been in use during the first century CE, when proselytism was favored by certain Jewish groups. According to the Giyyur ritual, the following interrogation and instruction preceded circumcision and immersion, by which the Jewish convert became an Israelite in all respects:

First, the proselyte was told to expect to be persecuted: "Do you not know that Israel at the present time is persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?" Likewise, early in the Sermon on the Mount, Christian disciples are warned that they will be reviled, reproached, insulted, persecuted, and cursed (Matthew 5:11).

If the Jewish proselyte accepted that first burden, he or she was next "given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments." In the Sermon on the Mount, the disciples are likewise next instructed in some of the rules of ordinary life as well as in major laws of highest consequence (Matthew 5:17–47).

Next, the Jewish inductee was "informed of the sin" of neglecting the poor by not observing the law of gleanings, the law of the corner, and rule of the poor man's tithe. In the Sermon on the Mount, the subject also turns next to almsgiving,

---

[8] April D. DeConick, "Entering God's Presence: Sacramentalism in the Gospel of Philip," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1998 Seminar Papers, Part One* (Atlanta, 1998), 483–523.

[9] Andrej Kodjak, *A Structural Analysis of the Sermon on the Mount* (Berlin, 1986), p. 16.

[10] Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Laurence Welborn (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 55–70; and W.D. Davies, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 105–6.

[11] See below, chapter 8, note 27.

[12] TB, *Yebamoth* 47a–b. See A. Sagi and Z. Zohar, "The Halakhic Ritual of Giyyur and Its Symbolic Meaning," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 9/1 (Winter, 1995): 1–13.

serving God and not Mammon, and understanding how the Lord cares for his children by providing them with what they need to eat, drink and wear (Matthew 6:1–4, 24–34).

The Talmudic ritual continued by telling the candidate clearly "of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments." The person was reminded that, before conversion, he was not subject to stoning for breaking the Sabbath laws or liable to excommunication for eating the forbidden fat. Likewise, on several occasions in the Sermon on the Mount the consequences of failed discipleship are articulated in graphic imagery and with similar terminology: the salt that becomes impotent is taken out, cast away, and trampled down (Matthew 5:13); the affronting brother is subject to the council (Matthew 5:22); and the one who defiles the holy thing is trampled, torn, and cut loose (Matthew 7:6).

At the same time, the Jewish candidate was told "of the reward granted" to those who keep the commandments. In the same manner, interspersed throughout the Sermon on the Mount, great rewards are promised to the faithful (Matthew 5:2–12; 6:4, 6; 7:25).

Finally, the Rabbis concluded by making it clear "that the world to come was made only for the righteous," while being careful not to persuade or dissuade too much. In a similar tone, the Sermon on the Mount states its case firmly and unequivocally but without any spirit of coercion or compulsion, concluding unambiguously that the kingdom of heaven will be open only to those who do the will of the Father who is in heaven (Matthew 7:21).

While the precise date of this Jewish ritual is uncertain, these parallels raise interesting questions about the origins of the pattern it shares with the Sermon on the Mount. Both texts yield a clear idea of the kinds of admonitions, instructions, and stipulations that likely were typical of initiation rituals in early Jewish-Christian days. In this regard, David Daube has argued expansively that early Christian catechisms followed the same five-phase structure as did the Tannaitic catechism: namely (1) testing the candidate's commitment, (2) accepting the commandments, (3) assuming a duty of charity, (4) imposing penalties, and (5) promising future rewards.[13] Daube educes evidence for each of these five elements from scattered Christian sources but pays no particular attention to the Sermon on the Mount, as well one might. In addition, Sagi and Zohar point out in their discussion of this Jewish ritual that "the concept of conversion as a [legally literal] physical rebirth into the Jewish kinship" is more constitutive of conversion than simply of a theological change in one's belief-system.[14] As a convert, the newly constituted Jew has a new father and new kinship structure. Not dissimilarly, Jesus positioned his disciples to address God as Abba, Father (Matthew 6:9), and he

---

[13] David Daube, "A Baptismal Catechism," in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1956), pp. 106–40, reprinted in *New Testament Judaism*, vol. 2 in the Collected Works of David Daube (Berkeley, 2000), pp. 501–28.

[14] Sagi and Zohar, "The Halakhic Ritual of Giyyur and Its Symbolic Meaning," p. 8.

assured them that this Father will not turn away any of his sons who ask good gifts of him (Matthew 7:11).

Although, unfortunately, little is known about ancient religious rituals, they were very important in most ancient societies. Comparisons between the Sermon on the Mount and the eminent Eleusinian mysteries may prove instructive. The Greek mysteries featured four stages, namely of (1) purification, (2) initiatory rites and sacrifices (compare Matthew 5:3–16, 23–4), (3) a prior or lower induction (compare Matthew 5:13–48), and (4) a finishing or higher induction (compare Matthew 6:1–34), that culminated by admitting the initiate into the divine presence (compare Matthew 7:7, 13–14, 23).[15] It was forbidden to speak about these things, except to initiates alone.[16]

Moreover, becoming a member of utopian societies, such as those led by Pythagoras, the Essene Teacher of Righteousness, Pachomius, Proclus, and others, involved similar types of instruction and initiation into their regimes of rigorous religious and esoteric lifestyles.[17] To become a Pythagorean, initiates had to divest themselves of property, swear oaths, and be instructed, tested, and purified. Pythagorean rites of initiation were called *teletai*;[18] initiates who were admitted became Esoterics who could pass through a temple veil, where they heard and saw Pythagoras.[19] Initiates were forbidden to speak of these sacred things lightly, if at all.[20] Likewise at Qumran, by saying "Amen, amen," Essenes became full members of the community there by freely and solemnly covenanting to keep God's commandments and to dedicate all their property to the community in the Lord's perfect ways.[21] If it was typical for close-knit religious groups in the ancient Mediterranean to be formed by inducting initiates into the sacred teachings and revealed practices of their inspired founder through ceremonial texts and rituals that were closely tied to or imitated temples, it would have been perfectly natural

---

[15] See G. Bornkamm, "*mysterion*," *TDNT*, vol. 4, pp. 803–8; Bollington Foundation, *The Mysteries: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks* (Princeton, 1955).

[16] *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, line 479; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 5.49.5.

[17] See generally Brent J. Schmidt, "Utopia and Community in the Ancient World" (PhD dissertation, University of Colorado, 2008), directed by Noel Lenski; see pp. 52–70. I am grateful to Brent for his service as a research assistant on this topic and many other subjects I have addressed in this book.

[18] Plato, *Republic*, 363C and 364E.

[19] Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica Liber*, 18.89. Brent Schmidt, pp. 38–40, and others argue that this Hellenistic work may draw on the historian Timaios (350–260 BCE) and may reflect Mediterranean ritual practices close to New Testament times.

[20] Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica Liber*, 23.103–5.

[21] 1QS 1:11–20; 5:2–3, 7–11. For punishments imposed on those who did not keep their covenants, see 1QS 7:5–18.

for Christians to have done something similar,[22] and the Sermon on the Mount would appear to be an ideal text for such purposes.

Of course, one must not jump from comparison to equation, for no doubt Christians, Eleusinians, Pythagoreans, and Essenes would have seen many essential differences between their respective cults, but to outsiders some similarities may well have seemed striking. Nevertheless, the approach suggested here may help to close the ideological schism that has long divided Catholic and Protestant approaches in comparing Christian ritual with the religions of late antiquity. As Jonathan Z. Smith articulates, Christians have divided over seeing their early rituals either as operational sacraments or as instructional dogmatics.[23] In reality, the bridge forged through the Sermon on the Mount shows that it may have been both.

The Sermon on the Mount and Ritual Theory

Seeing the Sermon on the Mount in a ritualistic setting invites further questions about its similarities to ritual functions in general, as have been defined by ritual theory. Indeed, the Sermon on the Mount functions in all of the ways that rituals typically function. Various cultic rituals and ceremonial systems align religious adherents with the religion's understanding of the cosmic order; they serve as markers to distinguish members of the group from others; and they foster group loyalty, enshrine basic tenets, and commemorate foundational events, such as the creation of the world or the inception of the law. The recitation of the Sermon on the Mount would have served similar purposes.

Victor Turner was among the first to conduct a social scientific analysis of religious rites, classifying them functionally under two headings: rituals and ceremonies. By *ritual* Turner meant any "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers."[24] Rituals (such as Christian baptisms) are transformational:

---

[22] See Marvin W. Meyer (ed.), *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook* (San Francisco, 1987), including chapter 8, "The Mysteries within Judaism and Christianity," which begins with the statement, "During the time of the Roman Empire, several Jewish religious traditions, and especially early Christianity, showed remarkable similarities to the mystery religions." See also, Meyer, "Mystery Religions," *ABD*, vol. 4, pp. 941–5.

[23] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 1990).

[24] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (New York, 1967), p. 19. Turner's pioneering efforts have long since been refined and expanded beyond the domain of religion. See, for example, Robert Wuthnow, *Meaning and Moral Order: Explorations in Cultural Analysis* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 97–123, discussing ritual and moral order in terms of symbolic expressivity, human interaction, motives, embellishment, and social contexts.

they may occur on any day and at any time, are primarily oriented toward the future, are presided over by professionals, and transform a person from one status to another. *Ceremonies* (such as the observance of Passover or the sacrament of the Lord's Supper) are reenactments: they usually occur at regular times, celebrate or memorialize momentous past events, are conducted by many kinds of officials, and serve principally to reconfirm the status and role of people in the religion.[25] Both of Turner's concepts may apply to the Sermon on the Mount. The first time a listener, whether in Galilee, Greece, or Rome, heard a recitation of the Sermon on the Mount, it may well have been a generative, transformative, ritual experience for that person. On other occasions, such as rehearsing the Sermon on the Mount to remind people of things that they had originally come to know "in the context of liturgical initiation,"[26] this text may well also have been used ceremonially.

One of the first tasks undertaken by ritual studies was to identify criteria by which one might recognize ritual or ceremonial texts. Since the original genre of many ancient texts remains obscure, the question often arose, "Is there a ritual in this text?" Endeavors to answer this question anthropologically and literarily soon spilled over into biblical studies, with the Psalms being a particularly fertile field for the detection of liturgical vestiges.[27] In 1994, an entire issue of *Semeia*, a prestigious journal dedicated to experimental biblical criticism, was devoted to detecting ritual texts in the New Testament. Notably, K.C. Hanson's contribution to that volume focused attention on the Sermon on the Mount in terms of ritual transformation.[28] More recently, Richard DeMaris, one of the leading biblical scholars in the study of ancient rituals, speaks with justifiable enthusiasm of the "recent blossoming of the field" of ritual studies pertinent to the New Testament,[29] citing many fruitful works, especially the methodologically rigorous work of Christian Strecker, who postulated that, among other criteria, a text may be said to have a ritual function if it stemmed directly from ritual use (as with the Lord's Prayer), was intended to be read aloud, or was connected "synecdochically with a

---

[25] K.C. Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain: Ritual Analysis and the Gospel of Matthew," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 152–4; Mark McVann, "Reading Mark Ritually: Honor-Shame and the Ritual of Baptism," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 180; and Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 95.

[26] Hanz Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Laurence Welborn (Philadelphia, 1985), p. 28.

[27] See, for example, Dirk J. Human, "Psalm 136: A Liturgy with Reference to Creation and History," 73–88; Stephanus D. Snyman, "Psalm 32—Structure, Genre, Intent and Liturgical Use," in Human and Vos (eds), *Psalms and Liturgy*, pp. 155–67; and Hans Ulrich Steymans, "Traces of Liturgies in the Psalter: The Communal Laments, Psalms 79, 80, 83, 89 in Context," in Human and Vos (eds), *Psalms and Liturgy,* pp. 168–234.

[28] Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain," pp. 147–70.

[29] Richard E. DeMaris, *The New Testament in Its Ritual World* (London, 2008), p. 5, elegantly and compellingly shows that a ritual logic was at work in the framing of 1 Corinthians.

rite," that is if it echoes or alludes to a rite "even though the text may not be about ritual per se."[30]

From these religious ritual studies, ten significant functions can be extracted as significant indicators that a ritual or ceremony in some way stands behind a given text.[31] All of these ten characteristics can be plainly discerned in the Sermon on the Mount:

1. *Transformation from one religious status to another.* Standard theory sees rituals as conducting initiates through three phases, typically involving (1) a separation from the old society, (2) an isolation in a marginal or liminal, amorphous state, and (3) a reaggregation into a new social set.[32] It was K.C. Hanson who successfully applied this three-stage ritual analysis to the Sermon on the Mount.[33] Thus (phase 1), "in ritual terms, [Jesus] left the general population and gathered his disciples for instruction."[34] They are strongly separated from other people, being told not to understand the law in the same way as others and not to act as Pharisees or hypocrites. The initiates then (phase 2) find themselves in a liminal state, all equally estranged from their previous group affiliations and "divested of their previous habits of thought, feeling, and action," thinking about "the powers that generate and sustain them."[35] Finally (phase 3), through adherence to "keeping secret the nature of the sacra," which is "the crux of liminality,"[36] the Sermon results in "the group's initiation into Jesus' teaching. . . . The master-teacher has guided the initiands into a new status."[37] Hanson argues that all five mountain experiences in the gospel of Matthew are transformational in nature and

---

30 DeMaris, *The New Testament in Its Ritual World*, p. 6, summarizing the six ways in which rites and texts may be interwoven as identified by Christian Strecker, *Die liminale Theologie des Paulus: Zugänge zur paulinischen Theologie aus kulturanthropologischer Perspective*, FRLANT 185 (Göttingen, 1999), pp. 78–80.

31 See generally, Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (San Francisco, 1991), p. 71.

32 Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 94, following the theories of Van Gennep. See also Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain," pp. 153–75; McVann, "Rituals of Status Transformation," pp. 335–41.

33 Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain," pp. 154–61. Kari Syreeni, "Methodology and Compositional Analysis," pt. 1 of *The Making of the Sermon on the Mount: A Procedural Analysis of Matthew's Redactoral Activity* (Helsinki, 1987), p. 217, anticipated this structural analysis. Philip F. Esler, "Mountaineering in Matthew: A Response to K.C. Hanson," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 171–7, is critical of Hanson's efforts elsewhere in Matthew but finds that "the Sermon on the Mount is a little more promising for Hanson's view" (Esler, "Mountaineering in Matthew," p. 173).

34 Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain," 160.

35 Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 105.

36 Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 103; italics in original.

37 Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain," pp. 160–61.

were "meant to be replicable experiences within the community on the path of discipleship."[38]

2. *Successfully crossing boundaries*. The Sermon on the Mount directs people in the difficult process of crossing ethical boundaries, in turning one's world upside down. Barbara Babcock notes the effective role of rites in inverting an existing social or religious order, thereby introducing a new society, order, or cosmos, even as it sets the old aside.[39] One of the most obvious characteristics of the Sermon on the Mount is its inversion of old ways into new. What one had previously heard in old times is now said in a new way: enemies become beloved; valuables become worthless; deeds done in secret will be rewarded in the open; and flawed mortals become perfect, even as the Father in heaven is perfect.

3. *Setting forth a social order*. Another common function served by most religious rites is to give order to a community's way of life: "Societies employ rituals that express their guiding ideas . . . by dramatizing [their] world view and way of life."[40] Early ritual studies observed how "ritual presents or dramatizes in symbolic form a society's worldview and ethos."[41] In many ways, the Sermon on the Mount sets forth the community's way of life by clearly expressing the guiding ideals of Christian discipleship: being exemplary, considerate, chaste, honest, loving, generous, prayerful, forgiving, dedicated, faithful, uncritical, and doing good, to name a few.

4. *Linking the individual with the cosmos*. Rituals tie the particular to the general and the real to the ideal by turning ordinary experiences into universal symbols. Jonathan Z. Smith rightly observes that "ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities,"[42] such as eating bread, drinking wine, or being washed. Similarly, the Sermon on the Mount imbues the ordinary occurrences of daily life with sacred import, inexhaustibly drawing profound religious principles out of ordinary mundane elements. Its repertoire ranges from salt, light, cheeks, and coats, to lilies, thistles, fish, and bread.

5. *Sacred setting*. In ritual or ceremony, Jonathan Smith continues, the ordinary "becomes significant, becomes sacred, simply by being there," being in a sacred place, a place of clarification, where "it becomes sacred by having our attention directed to it in a special way."[43] Functioning as a focusing lens, ritual or ceremony, when performed at a temple or in some other sacred space, presents "the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that

---

38 Hanson, "Transformed on the Mountain," p. 147.

39 Barbara Babcock (ed.), *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca, New York, 1998). I am grateful to Richard DeMaris for this reference.

40 Bobby C. Alexander, "An Afterword on Ritual in Biblical Studies," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 210–11.

41 Alexander, "Afterword on Ritual in Biblical Studies," p. 210.

42 Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," *History of Religions* 20 (1980): 125.

43 Smith, "Bare Facts of Ritual," p. 115.

this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things."[44] In the Sermon on the Mount, the ordinary events of daily existence, such as handling conflicts, helping someone in need, or building a house, take on new meaning as they become constitutive elements of a higher order of life.

6. *Performative force*. Social scientific observers are interested not only in what rituals and ceremonies do, but how they do it. For example, ritual silence heightens the ability of participants to hear these clarifying messages. Temples and rituals in general function best when "as in all forms of communication, static and noise (i.e., the accidental) are decreased so that the exchange of information can be increased."[45] Accordingly, people are admonished in the Sermon on the Mount to give their alms in secret and to go into their secluded closets to pray.

7. *Interpersonal experiences*. By nature, rites and ceremonies are interpersonal. They typically foster fellowship and community bonds. A salient purpose of ritual is "to create social cohesion."[46] Unquestionably, the Sermon also serves this purpose. It prohibits anger against other members of the community, requires members of the group to settle their differences quickly, demands kindness and generosity, encourages honesty and forgiveness, and restrains judging others. The Golden Rule is widely recognized as the ultimate touchstone of social cohesion.

8. *Empowerment*. Rituals and ceremonies are seen as unleashing spiritual power by drawing on "the generating source of culture and structure."[47] They provide structure and control to the social order, making important public statements "about the hierarchical relations between people."[48] Thus, Clifford Geertz and Carol LaHurd have concluded that rituals are "'models *of* what people believe' and . . . 'models *for* the believing of it.'"[49] In this light, the Sermon on the Mount sets social structures, group boundaries, and communitarian models. It provides fundamental community rules for interpreting law and order, for increasing spousal fidelity, for serving God, and rejecting false leaders. It sets boundaries by criticizing those who love only their friends or who parade to be seen in public. It

---

[44] Smith, "Bare Facts of Ritual," p. 125.

[45] Smith, "Bare Facts of Ritual," p. 114.

[46] Alexander, "Afterword on Ritual in Biblical Studies," p. 210; see also Francis Schmidt, *How the Temple Thinks: Identity and Social Cohesion in Ancient Judaism* (Sheffield, 2001).

[47] Driver, *Magic of Ritual*, p. 189, quoting Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York, 1986), p. 158.

[48] Esther Goody, "'Greeting', 'Begging', and the Presentation of Respect," in J.S. La Fontaine (ed.), *The Interpretation of Ritual: Essays in Honour of A.I. Richards* (London, 1972), p. 39.

[49] Carol Schersten LaHurd, "Exactly What's Ritual about the Experience of Reading/Hearing Mark's Gospel," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 204–5, quoting Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in William Lessa and Evon Vogt (eds), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (New York, 1965).

also provides prototypes for believing in God, going the extra mile, and giving to those who ask for help.

9. *Restoring order*. Ritual is also a system of "redressing social crisis and restoring order" after disruption.[50] Quelling the unsettling effects of change, the stability afforded by ritual rejuvenates community values and institutions. This ritual function is detectable in the Sermon's optimistic promises of God's blessings and in its reassurance that Jesus did not come to destroy but to fulfill the law. The teachings of Jesus were certainly unsettling to many people. He was controversial in his own lifetime, and his followers were condemned as blasphemers by the dominant culture (Acts 6:13). In the face of these monumental crises, the reassurances given by the Sermon undoubtedly stabilized the lives of the early followers of Jesus, especially when they assented to the prospects offered by this text in sacred, ritual settings.

10. *Celebration*. Finally, ritual and ceremony celebrate important events of the past. By reenacting a giving of the law of Sinaitic proportions, and by reembracing the essence of that law, the Sermon on the Mount in its own way fully celebrates the formation of a covenant relationship between God and Israel. Ritually rereading these words of Jesus, Christians also remembered and celebrated the Lord's giving of the new law.

In all these respects, the Sermon on the Mount operates in ways that are generally recognized by social-scientific theory as being typical of the functions of texts that are interwoven with ritual.

Imagining the Sermon on the Mount as a Ritual Experience

One final step remains in seeing a ritual unity in the Sermon on the Mount, and it pertains to the fact that all rituals must be performable. Ritual studies invite modern scholars to imagine how rituals work in actual performance. In trying to reconstruct ancient rites and ceremonies from surviving textual clues, students of ritual must dare to "engage in the rituals described or implied in the text through imaginative participation," as Gorman and Alexander have encouraged.[51] The following excursus attempts just such a venture.

With rare exception, biblical scholars have paid little attention to ritual, perhaps because they often view "the [human] body with suspicion" in contrast to "the spirit as the reservoir of truth."[52] The Sermon on the Mount, however, manifests no such aversion to the body. This text is filled with references to hungering, eating,

---

50 Alexander, "Afterword on Ritual," p. 211.

51 Alexander, "Afterword on Ritual," pp. 221–2, alluding to Frank H. Gorman Jr, "Ritual Studies and Biblical Studies: Assessment of the Past, Prospects for the Future," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 24–5. For such an attempt to reconstruct the ritual activity standing behind the Gospel of Philip, see DeConick, "Entering God's Presence," pp. 483–523.

52 Gorman, "Ritual Studies and Biblical Studies," p. 25.

seeing, washing, dressing, mourning, and many parts of the body (hair, cheeks, eyes), again inviting the mind of the reader to roam into a world of "gestural construal, a world enacted, a world bodied forth."[53]

Social scientific examinations of rituals across numerous cultures have identified certain elements commonly found in ancient rituals. No single rite or ceremony incorporates every possible performative element that has been identified with ritual, but many rituals and ceremonies include performances such as (a) purifications, (b) symbolic journeys, (c) inspired lectures on future behavior, (d) initiations, (e) the giving of secrets or expositions of holy objects, and (f) investiture or crowning. The Sermon on the Mount contains or alludes to many of these: (a) purification ("the pure in heart," Matthew 5:8), (b) journeys or paths of life ("the way is hard, that leads to life," Matthew 7:14), (c) instructions on future behavior, persecution, forgiveness, and serving God, (d) step by step progressions toward becoming perfect, (e) the imparting of a holy thing ("do not give your holy thing to the dogs," Matthew 7:6), and (f) an investiture ("even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these," Matthew 6:29).

Initiatory rituals from the Second Temple period are scarce, but the few that are known from rabbinic Judaism, the Essenes, and the followers of John the Baptist all involve some form of washing with water and demand certain behavior, such as "giving up property, professing belief, taking oaths, or leading righteous lives."[54] The Sermon on the Mount also expects or requires washing and the relinquishment of property (see Matthew 6:17 and 19).

Equipped with the foregoing, one may begin to imagine an array of actions that could have potentially accompanied ritual uses or ceremonial recitations of the Sermon on the Mount.[55] Imagine even a few of the following actions as possibilities:

- The singing of pertinent psalms at certain points in the ritual
- Accompanying the initial makarisms with hand gestures of blessing
- Making themselves "poor" by falling prostrate before God and beseeching blessings
- Mourning over transgressions, followed by embraces of comfort
- Receiving a new name (compare Revelation 2:17) as part of being "born" as "sons of God," name transmission being frequently found as part of rituals
- Responding with a shout of joy as do the sons of God in Job 38:7; shouting "hallelujah" in the face of impending maledictions and persecutions
- Pouring salt on the ground and dramatically trampling it underfoot

---

53 Gorman, "Ritual Studies and Biblical Studies," p. 22.

54 Jonathan D. Lawrence, *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (Atlanta, 2006), p. 76.

55 In general, see Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship* (Oxford, 1994).

- Lighting lamps in a dark room and setting them on a menorah
- Reciting the Ten Commandments
- Pausing to reconcile with others in preparation for making some offering
- Accepting the main covenantal requirements presented in the Sermon on the Mount by uttering the words "yes, yes" or "no, no"
- Slapping an initiate on one cheek (as in the humiliation of the king in the ancient Akitu year rite festival), and having the initiate then turn the other cheek
- Asking an initiate to surrender a tunic and, in response, having him give not only his undergarment but also his outer garment, thus becoming stripped of all worldly things
- Receiving a more glorious garment later as the rite progressed
- Offering a prayer of blessing for enemies and opponents
- Anonymously collecting alms or offerings
- Allowing some time for private meditation and secret prayer
- Reciting a collective prayer (one recalls that the Lord's Prayer immediately became part of early Christian liturgy)
- Having come fasting, the participants are washed with water and anointed with oil
- Making vows to consecrate or treasure up property to the Lord
- Marking the initiates as slaves who belong completely to the true Master
- Standing before a judge and confessing one's sins (thereby removing a beam from one's own eye)
- Tearing to pieces and throwing out something that represents the initiate, dramatizing the punishment of those who inappropriately talk about the sancta
- Making a threefold petition (knocking, asking, and seeking) requesting admission into the presence of deity
- Eating food and drink, fish and bread, figs and grapes, in a sacral meal
- Passing, one by one, through a narrow opening into the symbolic presence of God, and being there received and recognized by God.

Many other ceremonial actions are easily imaginable. Any attempt to reconstruct such ritual actions is admittedly conjectural, for the details of any such ceremony would have become lost with the deaths of any such early Christian initiates and remains unknown to us. But one may well wonder if even a few such gestures or actions might actually have been employed, since virtually every element in the Sermon on the Mount lends itself easily to possible ritual presentation.

Far less conjectural, however, are the general patterns and purposes that investigators have discerned in ceremonies and ritual dramas across all cultures. The phenomena laid out above support the basic suggestion that the Sermon functions exquisitely well in a temple or ceremonial context. Because the Temple—any

temple—is nothing if not ritualistic, the consistent appearance of temple themes throughout the overall, unifying program of the Sermon on the Mount raises the possibility that this text could have been originally repeated or deployed in some ritualistic manner. Just as ritual provides social order to one's way of life, ritual analysis can strengthen further the long-sought sense of underlying, unifying order within the Sermon on the Mount itself.

Unity in Ascent

Finally, temple themes provide an ultimate unity to the Sermon on the Mount by allowing readers to see it as an ascent text. More than ethical wisdom literature and more than a text centrally structured on a midpoint,[56] this text begins by placing its hearers in a lowly state and then, step by step, guides them to its climax at the end, entering the presence of God.

Texts and rituals of ascent were common enough throughout the ancient world, from Enoch's ascent into the tenth heaven, to Paul's or Isaiah's being taken up into the seventh heaven.[57] Roots of the heavenly ascent motif reach deeply into Akkadian mythology, Egyptian funerary texts, Greek processions and magical papyri, initiations into the mystery religions, and Gnostic literature.[58] Whether the architectural features and the progressive rituals of the temple were patterned after this basic spiritual yearning, or the cosmic journeys and the esoteric experiences described in these texts assumed the temple as the stage on which these events were orchestrated, texts of ascent are deeply intertwined with the Temple.

Augustine's insight that the Beatitudes chart the stages of ascent for the soul[59] can and should be extended to the entire Sermon on the Mount. John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent* similarly guides the monk's life up thirty steps, from humbly renouncing life (step 1), mourning for sin (step 7), being meek and not angry (step 8), not judging (step 10), being totally honest (step 12), living a life of complete chastity, including no sexual thoughts (step 14), conquering avarice, not having money as an idol (step 16), seeing poverty as a life without anxiety (step 17), shunning vainglory and being seen of men (step 22), praying devoutly (step 28), to being perfectly united with God in faith, hope, charity (step 30). Quite a number of these thirty steps correlate with the themes and instructions of the Sermon on the

---

[56] Discussed in chapter 1, see notes 23, 37–42.

[57] For example, in 1 Enoch, 2 Corinthians 12:1–4; Ascension of Isaiah. See, for example, Margaret Barker, *On Earth As It Is in Heaven: Temple Symbolism in the New Testament* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp. 18–21, 64–7; *The Gate of Heaven* (London, 1991), pp. 150–71.

[58] James D. Tabor, "Heaven, Ascent to," *ABD*, vol. 3, pp. 91–4, citing a host of leading sources.

[59] Discussed in chapter 3, see note 90.

Mount. Interestingly, John Climacus draws rarely on the Sermon on the Mount, but he turns extensively and explicitly to the Psalms for authority and inspiration.[60]

Similarly, the Sermon on the Mount builds step by step, through its twenty-five stages in an overall crescendo. Its progression is understandable, each point leading to the next. The commission to being a light to the world brings up a warning about false teachers, which raises the question of what to teach, beginning with an explanation of the Ten Commandments, including the need for men to reconcile with each other and how to behave toward women. That leads to the need for honesty and keeping one's word, and not only doing what one promises, but then some. However, these actions should be done inconspicuously, and prayer and fasting also should be done in secret, to pray especially for forgiveness, and so on. Tightly stitched together, this sequence culminates in the final divine destination.

Individual thematic escalations accentuate the overall path of ascent in the Sermon on the Mount, as concepts take on new dimensions of elevated religious and moral importance over the course of the Sermon. Often these steps build from an initial concern about one's obligations toward others (mainly in part 1, in Matthew 5), to a second concern about personal and secret virtues (mainly in part 2, in Matthew 6), and finally culminating in qualities related to God and his holiness (mainly in part 3, in chapter 7). This pattern involves others, the self, and God.

For example, the focal theme of the Kingdom of Heaven arises several times in the Sermon on the Mount. After the promises in the Beatitudes that the righteous will obtain the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:3, 10), the initial concern is about those who might teach other people to break even the least of the commandments of God; such teachers will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:19). The next mention of the kingdom comes in the Lord's Prayer, where members of the righteous community submit their individual wills to God's will (Matthew 6:10). This expression of personal commitment is reinforced a few sections later with the admonition to seek first the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33), making it not just one of their committed objectives but now the supreme goal of their existence. Finally, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, those who do the will of the Father are told that they will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 7:21). The progression here is from community instruction, to complete individual commitment, to doing God's will and entering into the divine presence.

Similarly, prayer is featured three times in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:44, people are told to pray for other people, particularly their enemies, having love for their neighbors and doing good to all. Second, in the Lord's Prayer, people are now to pray for themselves, seeking forgiveness of their own transgressions (Matthew 6:12). Finally, in Matthew 7:11, prayers seek gifts from the Father in

---

[60] John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (London, 1982). This edition identifies 179 passages of scripture quoted from throughout the Bible, 96 of which (54%) come from the Psalms.

Heaven. In particular, those who ask and knock and enter in at the strait gate are promised that the divine presence will be opened to them.

The same pattern of intensification surfaces in the admonitions about generosity. In the first instance, people are told to give generously to others if they ask for clothing or assistance (Matthew 5:40–41). The obligation to give arises if someone asks. In Matthew 6:3, however, the obligation to give becomes an affirmative obligation of the righteous to give of their own accord and in secret for their own eternal benefit. Anonymous charity purifies the soul and allows for open rewards in heaven. Finally, in the culmination of the Sermon on the Mount, the person has reached the stage of being able to give good gifts in a divine fashion, doing all things unto others that one would have them do to him (Matthew 7:12).

Punishments are mentioned three times in the Sermon on the Mount. First, the salt that is cast out is trodden underfoot by men because it has become useless to other people (Matthew 5:13). Second, when a person jeopardizes his own eternal well-being, it becomes better for him to cut off his own hand than to lose his entire soul (Matthew 5:30). Third, those who cast the holy thing before swine will find themselves torn and trampled by instruments of divine punishment (Matthew 7:6). Just as the offences here are against others, oneself, and God, the punishments are inflicted by men, oneself, and divine agents respectively.

Similarly, the law of talion progresses through three stages. Socially, one is instructed not to return to others eye for eye, or evil for evil, but good for evil (Matthew 5:44). Personally, this virtue turns inward as one must be forgiving in order to be forgiven (Matthew 6:14). Finally, in relationship to God and his divine judgment, the principle of talion emerges as the fundamental concept of divine justice by which all people will be judged according to the same measure by which they have measured (Matthew 7:2).

Other themes intensify as the Sermon on the Mount builds in a crescendo to its final culmination. Concerns about food move from a petition for daily bread (Matthew 6:11), to an awareness that life is more than food and drink (Matthew 6:25), to a personal delivery of bread and fish from the Father himself (Matthew 7:9–11). Reconciling with brothers at the outset (Matthew 5:24) eventually leads to being able to help the brother by removing a flaw in his eye, but only after one has removed the greater flaws from one's own eye (Matthew 7:4–5), allowing one to see clearly and judge properly, even as will the Lord.

In this progression, one encounters the two great commandments, "thou shalt love [1] thy neighbor as [2] thyself," and "[3] the Lord with all thy heart." In the experience of this ascent, the fundamental unity of this text is found. Its pieces work together, and belong together. Progressively, there comes fulfillment, perfection, and completion as the culminating goal of the Sermon on the Mount is reached.