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The Temple Context and Unity of the Sermon at the Temple

Author(s): John W. Welch

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CHAPTER 3

THE TEMPLE CONTEXT AND UNITY OF THE SERMON AT THE TEMPLE

While the Sermon at the Temple adds to our understanding of the Sermon on the Mount in several ways, its most important contribution for me is how it unlocks the age-old mystery of the unity of the Sermon. The main reason that the Sermon on the Mount has remained a sealed text for most readers is the problem of discerning what holds it all together. Does the Sermon on the Mount have a single theme or logic, or is it a haphazard collection of disjointed sayings? To this question, the Sermon at the Temple offers clues to a most remarkable answer.

Simply stated, the Sermon at the Temple is a temple text. By “temple text” I mean one that contains allusions to the most sacred teachings and ordinances of the plan of salvation, things that are not to be shared indiscriminately. In addition, temple texts are often presented in or near a temple. They ordain or otherwise convey divine powers through symbolic or ceremonial means, presented together with commandments that are or will be received by sacred oaths that allow the recipient to stand ritually in the presence

of God. Several such texts may be found in the scriptures, notably including Jacob's speech at the temple in the city of Nephi (Jacob 2–3) and King Benjamin's speech at the temple of Zarahemla (Mosiah 1–6).¹ The temple setting is an essential element in the fabric of these speeches.

The temple context likewise gives the Sermon its unity and, therefore, an exceptionally rich background against which it can be understood and appreciated. I therefore advance an interpretation of the Sermon that sees it not only as a moral or ethical discourse, but also in a sacred temple setting. I do not diminish the ethical and didactic functions of the Sermon; on the contrary, the moral force of the Sermon is only enhanced by the solemnity of a sacred setting, which encourages listeners to receive its values with deepened commitment.

This view of the Sermon, like any other interpretation, cannot be proved absolutely but can only be set forth for consideration, scrutiny, reflection, and comparison with other possible analyses. And like any other interpretation, my theory undoubtedly has its weaknesses along with its strengths (although, especially in dealing with a text so fundamental and so extensively studied as has been the Sermon on the Mount, telling those two apart is not always easy). Thus, if a reader knows of another interpretation that accounts better for every element in the text of the Sermon than does the approach I am suggesting, I would certainly encourage him or her to entertain that view. But of all the interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount that I have studied, I see the interpretation of it as a temple text as the most coherent and insightful. If my view on this is correct, it has far-reaching implications for how we should understand the Book of Mormon, the New Testament, and early Christianity, as well as the Latter-day Saint temple experience in general.

What follows, therefore, especially in chapter 4, is an interpretive essay. It is more of an exploration than a proof. Before getting to the individual details of that interpretation, I will first discuss in this chapter the general temple elements in the setting of the Sermon at the Temple, for they provide the basis for the ceremonial and covenantal interpretation that follows. This study is both exegetical, drawing meaning out of the text, and interpretive, bringing meaning to the text. I recognize that I offer a new Latter-day Saint interpretation of the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount. I have tried to write just the way I think and feel about this material. I would not expect people unfamiliar with the Latter-day Saint temple ceremony or doctrine to see spontaneously or completely what I see. Still, I hope that any reader will be able to view and ponder the familiar landscape of the Sermon on the Mount from that fruitful vantage point, for the Sermon on the Mount can be understood by anyone as a text constituting or accompanying a covenant-making ritual.

Knowing something about the setting of a speech usually enhances our understanding of it. Where, when, and to whom a sermon is delivered often affects what its words intend, why the speaker selects certain phrases, and how its listeners and readers understand those words. Thus in search of greater understanding, biblical scholars have combed the scriptures for clues about the *Sitz im Leben*, or life setting, of many prophetic discourses and cultic expressions. This search has yielded valuable results in biblical studies. This is true also of research into the Book of Mormon.

In general, we know that we only see the tip of the iceberg in the scriptural record. When Jesus appeared to the Nephites in Bountiful in 3 Nephi, he said and did a great many more things than are recorded in 3 Nephi 11–28.

Recall that not “even a hundredth part of the things which Jesus did truly teach unto the people” are reported (3 Nephi 26:6; compare 17:16–17). Since the record is incomplete, readers must thoughtfully ponder the existing materials and carefully draw possible inferences from the known background information, trying to re-create a vivid picture of what transpired. The following background data can be gleaned from the text, all pointing in the direction of a sacred covenant-making context.

As will be seen, the Sermon at the Temple was definitely delivered at the temple, in connection with the issuing of commandments and the making of personal religious commitments, for the purpose of successfully withstanding the final day of judgment. It can probably also be associated with Jesus’ other secret, sacred teachings, which, according to tradition, he delivered after his resurrection in Jerusalem. Moreover, all this may have transpired in Bountiful on a traditional holy day of convocation.

The Place

First, the Sermon at the Temple was given in a temple setting—Jesus spoke at the temple in Bountiful (see 3 Nephi 11:1). Since he could have chosen to appear anywhere he wanted (at the marketplace, at the town gate, or any number of other places where people traditionally congregated), and since we may assume that he chose to appear where he did for some reason, his appearance at the temple invites the idea that his words have something important to do with teachings and ordinances found within the temple.

It would not have surprised the Nephites that the Lord would choose to teach them at the temple. From what we know about their temples in the cities of Nephi and Zarahemla, these sacred places were obviously important reli-

gious and political centers for teaching (see Jacob 1:17; 2:2), as people were routinely taught within its walls (see Mosiah 2:7); for preaching (see Alma 16:13); for imparting the mysteries (see Mosiah 2:9; Alma 12:9; 13:3, 16); for gathering for ceremonies, coronations, obligatory annual festivals, ordinances, and covenant renewals (see 2 Nephi 6–10; Jacob 2–3; Mosiah 1–6); for making royal proclamations (see Mosiah 2:30; 7:17); and for sacrificing “according to the law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:3).² Nephite temples were patterned after the temple of Solomon (see 2 Nephi 5:16) in layout and in many of their functions, but they were not its equal in size or splendor.³ What Jesus taught them in 3 Nephi 11:8 struck the Nephites as a marvelous transformation of their old temple order into a new one (see 3 Nephi 15:3).

Of course, some things taught in the temple may also be similar to things said outside the temple, and so it is not inconsistent with understanding the Sermon as an esoteric or sacred text that Jesus should also have spoken parts of it on other occasions scattered throughout his public ministry in Palestine (for example, Luke 6 and 11). At the temple in particular, however, a single, systematic presentation of the essence of the gospel is to be expected and is found.

What is stated so explicitly in the Book of Mormon can only be inferred by New Testament scholars of the Sermon on the Mount. The “mount” may have been a quiet hillside in Galilee, but it also may well symbolize the “mountain of the Lord,” a scriptural expression referring to the temple mount in Jerusalem itself. The possible connection between the sermon mount and the temple mount has not escaped the notice of biblical scholars. In Israel, the temple became synonymous with God’s mountain (for example, Isaiah 2:2 and Micah 4:1 call the temple in Jerusalem the mountain of

the Lord's house). Just as God spoke to Moses from Mount Sinai, he continued to speak and act in Israel from his temple-palace on his chosen mount in Jerusalem, and the temple became "the architectural embodiment of the cosmic mountain."⁴ Mount Zion in Jerusalem became the most important mountain in the world for the Jews, precisely because the temple was there. That low and undistinguished mound was nonetheless called, in the Bible, the world's tallest mountain, because God dwelt there.

That sacred place was thought to be protected from all evil enemies, who were powerless against that spiritual fortress, and life was said to flow forth from it in fertilizing streams. In this image of the temple, there came together for the ancient mind the linkage of things in heaven (where God sat upon his throne surrounded by his celestial council) and the earth, his footstool. It was a place set apart, and there the divine presence related to the world of man—ordering and stabilizing that world and acting upon it through natural and spiritual forces. At that point, the earth touched the divine sphere, just as mountain peaks reach the sky.⁵ Thus, as W. D. Davies concludes, when Matthew reports that Jesus spoke from a mount in Matthew 5–7, "probably no simple geographic mountain is intended. The mountain is the mountain of the New Moses, the New Sinai."⁶ Understood this way, we can imagine no more appropriate place than the temple as the site of the Sermon at the Temple. In the Sermon at the Temple, the temple imagery is no longer veiled.

The Covenant-Making Context

The temple in Israel has always been the shrine of the covenant, the home of the ark of the covenant, and the place where the covenant was renewed and perpetuated.

Similarly, the Sermon at the Temple was delivered in a covenanting context. Its teachings were expressly designed to prepare people to enter into a covenant with Christ, for at the end of the Sermon the people sacramentally promised and witnessed that they were willing to do what Jesus had commanded them that day, to take upon them his name, and to partake of emblems to help them remember that he had shown his body to them and shed his blood for them (see 3 Nephi 18:1–11).

Moreover, many aspects of the Sermon at the Temple deal overtly with gospel ordinances. For example, the Sermon on the Mount materials in the Sermon at the Temple appear immediately following Jesus' explanations of baptism, of the gift of the Holy Ghost, and of the rock upon which one should build, namely, the covenantal relationship formed by repentance, baptism, and becoming as a little child (see 3 Nephi 11:38–39).

To a Nephite, the invitation to “become as a little child” (3 Nephi 11:38) would probably have reminded them of their own traditional covenant ritual, for at least since the days of King Benjamin they understood that “because of the covenant” they had made that day at the temple of Zarahemla, they were “called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters” (Mosiah 5:7). Becoming a “child of God” may well also have reminded these people of the divine inheritance of the elect as the “sons and daughters” of God (see Mosiah 27:25–26)⁷ who enter into God's presence, the theme on which the Sermon on the Mount also ends (see Matthew 7:21; 3 Nephi 14:21). By both beginning (see 3 Nephi 11:39–40) and ending (see 3 Nephi 14:24–15:1) with this theme of entering into God's presence and withstanding the final judgment, the Sermon at the Temple gives added emphasis to the establishment

of a covenantal relationship as a main purpose of the entire Sermon.

The metaphorical explanation of how a person must build upon this rock, instead of upon a sandy foundation (see 3 Nephi 11:39–40; 14:24–27), brackets the words of the Sermon on the Mount that appear in 3 Nephi 12–14. The rock is the doctrine of repentance, baptism, and becoming God’s child by spiritual rebirth. So we see that obedience to the commandments given in 3 Nephi 12–14 is not merely advisory or ethically desirable. Obedience to these stipulations is to be understood in connection with the making of a covenant through being baptized, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and becoming a child of God fully blessed to inherit the Father’s kingdom. These are among the requirements, or terms, of the covenant.

The Laws of the Covenant

Next, the teachings of the Sermon at the Temple were expressly given by way of commandment. Scholars have debated the basic character of the injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount: Do they form a new public order, a set of ideals, a set of commands, a law of the future kingdom but not of the present church, rules applicable only for a brief period before a shortly awaited coming of the kingdom, an existential claim of God on the individual, or general conditions of discipleship?⁸ However, in one of the most significant sets of disclosures in the Sermon at the Temple, Jesus refers explicitly, emphatically, and consistently to his words as “commandments” (see 3 Nephi 12:19–20; 15:10; 18:10). They are necessary if the individual is to “come unto Jesus.”

Just as the commands and laws promulgated in the making of the covenant at Sinai formed the basis of the

Old Testament, the commandments of the Sermon at the Temple form the basis of this new covenant (or “testament”) of Jesus Christ. For this reason, seeing the Book of Mormon as “Another Testament of Jesus Christ” is all the more meaningful, since the word *testament* in Greek literally means “covenant, . . . usually [describing] the entire relationship between God and the children of Israel.”⁹ As “Another Testament” or “Covenant,” the Book of Mormon indeed reestablishes a modern-day understanding of God’s commandments, which his people agree to obey by covenant (see D&C 21:1). Accordingly, the Doctrine and Covenants admonishes the Saints to “remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon” (84:57).

Seeing the Sermon on the Mount essentially as a set of commandments is not the normal approach of most interpreters, though this view has been proposed by some ruthlessly honest commentators.¹⁰ Interestingly, this view has the support of the early Christian Didache 1:5, 4:13, and 13:7. For example, this so-called Teaching of the Twelve Apostles tells early members of the church to follow Jesus’ instructions to give generously (quoting Matthew 5:41–42) and thereby not to “abandon the *commandments* of the Lord”; and it promises that “blessed is the man who gives according to the *commandment*, for he is without blame” (Didache 1:5; italics added). The version of the Sermon in the Joseph Smith Translation, which I consider a third telling of the speech, reflects the same idea in yet another setting (see Matthew 5:21, 50 JST; 6:30 JST).

It remains unpopular, though, to see Jesus’ words here as commandments figuring prominently in his doctrine of salvation. This is especially the case among many Protestant scholars who see salvation by grace as primary, if not exclusive. Thus Martin Luther relegated the epistle of James

(which declares that “faith without *works* is dead,” James 2:26; italics added) to the straw pile¹¹ and called the Sermon on the Mount “the devil’s masterpiece”¹² because in his opinion “the devil so masterfully distorts and perverts (*verdrehet und verkeret*) Christ’s true meaning through his Apostle [Matthew] especially in the fifth chapter.”¹³ To this, Hans Windisch answers, “Let us be honest; let us free ourselves once and for all from that idealistic and Paulinizing exegesis! We must admit that the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount is every bit as much an obedience-ethic as is the ethic of the Old Testament.”¹⁴ The Sermon at the Temple confirms this view, and more: Not only is the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount an obedience-ethic, the Sermon on the Mount also belongs every bit as much to the creation of a sacred covenant relationship between Jesus Christ and his people as did the Old Testament commandments, which belong unequivocally to the covenant made between Jehovah and the children of Israel (for example, Exodus 19–24).

The Sacred Teachings of the Forty-Day Literature

A further contextual clue is found in a disclosure by Jesus that may place the teachings of the Sermon in the same class as his postresurrectional teachings to his apostles in Palestine, namely, that of the so-called forty-day literature. After basically rehearsing the Sermon on the Mount to the Nephites, Jesus told them that they had now “heard the things which I taught *before I ascended* to my Father” (3 Nephi 15:1). This may mean that Jesus reiterated the Sermon on the Mount to his apostles once again after his death and before his ascension. Otherwise, he could have said to the Nephites, “Behold, ye have heard the things which I taught *during my ministry* in Palestine.” I suspect

that Jesus taught his disciples the Sermon, or parts of it, many times during his ministry (for example, when he began preaching in Galilee as reported in Matthew 5, when he sent out the apostles as missionaries as reported in Matthew 5 JST, and after his resurrection as reflected in 3 Nephi) and that his followers grew in understanding each time they heard it repeated.

Hugh Nibley, in several articles entitled “Christ among the Ruins,” has demonstrated a number of connections between the Sermon at the Temple and the forty-day literature.¹⁵ Jesus addressed most of his teachings at that time to his apostles and instructed them in their priesthood duties; told them about their premortal existence, the creation of the world, and the purpose of this life; and explained how they could return to the glory of God through obedience to ordinances for the salvation of the living and the dead. He blessed them with an initiation or endowment, generally called the “mysteries,” which emphasized garments, marriage, and prayer circles.¹⁶

Correspondences between this body of literature and the Sermon at the Temple enhance the possibility that the Sermon on the Mount played a role in the Palestinian post-resurrectional ministry as well. For example, I think it likely that the references in the Sermon to “raiment” and “clothe” (see Matthew 6:25 and Matthew 6:28–30) had something to do with what Jesus gave the apostles who were instructed to remain in Jerusalem after the resurrection: “until ye be endued [i.e., endowed, or clothed] with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).¹⁷ This view is corroborated by the fact that Joseph Smith taught that Peter and John received the “fulness of priesthood or the law of God” at the Mount of Transfiguration and that Peter “washed and anointed” all the apostles and received “the endowment” on the day of

Pentecost in Jerusalem.¹⁸ President Heber C. Kimball similarly once remarked that Jesus had “inducted his Apostles into these ordinances [the holy endowments].”¹⁹ Since the esoteric and postresurrectional teachings of Jesus in the forty-day literature contain, above all, hints concerning the sacred mysteries he taught to his apostles prior to his ascension,²⁰ the postresurrectional context of the Sermon at the Temple invites the conclusion that the materials in the Sermon on the Mount are also at home as part of the sacred or secret teachings of Jesus.

Preparing to Pass the Final Judgment

Another thing the Sermon accentuates is its orientation toward the day of judgment. Its concluding remarks expressly instruct the disciple how to pass through the final judgment, to enter into God’s presence “in that day” (3 Nephi 14:21–23; Matthew 7:21–23). This purpose is stated more clearly in the Sermon at the Temple than in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Book of Mormon, Jesus expressly states that the purpose of the Sermon is to assist the disciple in surviving the eschatological day of judgment: “Whoso remembereth these sayings of mine and doeth them, him will I raise up at the last day” (3 Nephi 15:1). The purpose of this statement in the Sermon at the Temple is to encourage remembrance and to stimulate the people to keep the commandments that the Lord has given.

Elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, the first thing done after a covenant ceremony is, likewise, to appoint priests to exhort the people to remember their promises so they may withstand God’s day of judgment (see Mosiah 6:1–3; compare 2 Nephi 9:52). The disciple’s salvation turns on remembering and doing the things taught in the Sermon. Therefore, one should not think of the standards set forth

in the Sermon as unreachable ideals. Observing this specific set of requirements is essential to eternal exaltation, for only thereby can the Lord raise us up at the last day. In this way, the speech embraces both this-worldly and other-worldly concerns. Its requirements impose standards of conduct upon ethical human behavior in this world, but at the same time it reveals the principles whereby the final judgment will proceed, which principles, if followed, will enable a person to survive the final judgment in the next world.

More Than Words Alone

Evidently the presentation of the Sermon at the Temple involved more than words alone. The Nephites heard many things, but they also saw things presented in an unusually powerful way (for example, 3 Nephi 11:15). The amazed reaction of the righteous Nephites may indicate this. Even though they had long anticipated that the law of Moses would be superseded upon the coming of the Messiah, they were astonished at what Jesus taught on this occasion. They “marveled” and “wondered” (3 Nephi 15:2). The apostles in Galilee were likewise “astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as *one* having authority” (Matthew 7:28–29; italics added). The authority Jesus made evident contributed significantly to their astonishment.

While the amazed reaction of the Nephites can be understood in several ways, it seems possible to me that it had something to do with the idea that what Jesus said and did somehow went beyond mere words or conventional discourse. Jesus presented things to these audiences in a marvelous way. This was not an ordinary lecture or a simple, generic moral sermon. His presentation was far different from the logical thinking of the scribes, which

was well-known among the Jews; it also extended beyond the teaching of high moral standards, which had been common among the Nephites throughout their history. Included among the Nephite doctrines had always been powerful prohibitions against disputation, anger, strife, evil thoughts, greed, pride, and neglect of the poor. Why then should similar teachings of Jesus at the temple produce such an amazed reaction? It would seem that their amazement would have something to do with *how* the holy and glorified Jesus taught the principles, not just *what* he taught. The presentation must have been powerful, not just with dynamic intonation or forcefulness, but particularly with divine authority (*exousia*).

A Traditional Temple Occasion

Finally, one may wonder if Jesus appeared to the Nephites at an auspicious time or on a ritually significant occasion. The record leaves it unclear exactly when Jesus appeared at the temple in Bountiful. Was it shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection at the beginning of the Nephite thirty-fourth year, "soon after the ascension of Christ into heaven" (3 Nephi 10:18), or was it later in that year? Kent Brown and John Tvedtnes have both skillfully presented alternative arguments on this matter. The main question is how to understand the phrase "in the *ending* of the thirty and fourth year" that introduces the verse of 3 Nephi 10:18, and none of the proposed interpretations are conclusive.²¹ There are good reasons to think that Christ's appearance did not occur immediately after his resurrection, yet there are equally ample reasons for thinking that it was not at the very end of the thirty-fourth year either.

In light of the inconclusiveness and ambiguity here, it may be more fruitful to consider *what kind* of a gathering

was likely involved instead of asking how long after the crucifixion Jesus' appearance in Bountiful was. Had the great multitude gathered together simply for an emergency civilian meeting, or had they assembled for another purpose? Since the Nephites had "gathered together . . . round about the temple" (3 Nephi 11:1) with "men, women, and children" (3 Nephi 17:25), one is reminded of King Benjamin's great covenant-renewal convocation assembly, when all his people gathered "round about" the temple, every man with his family in a traditional Feast of Tabernacles fashion (Mosiah 2:5; compare Deuteronomy 31:9–13)²² and had "the mysteries of God . . . unfolded to [their] view" (Mosiah 2:9).

Also, since the size of the crowd in 3 Nephi did not increase as the day went on, apparently all these Nephites had gathered for a specific purpose at the beginning of that day. Thus it seems likely that all the people in Bountiful had come to the temple on a scheduled religious festival or holy day. It is evident that these people would have been strict to observe their traditional religious laws, for they were among "the more righteous part of the people" (3 Nephi 10:12; compare 9:13), the wicked having been destroyed. Moreover, the fact that women and children were present supports the idea that their meeting was not simply an emergency session of the city elders to consider the mundane needs for construction repairs and debris removal.²³ Although we cannot be sure what festival it might have been, it seems likely to me that some holy festival was involved at the time the Nephites gathered in 3 Nephi.

Traditionally, all Israelites (and hence Nephites) were instructed to gather at the temple three appointed times each year, namely, for the solemn feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles: "Three times in the year all thy

males shall appear before the Lord God" (Exodus 23:17); and "at the end of *every* seven years, . . . in the feast of tabernacles, . . . all Israel [must] come to appear before the Lord thy God" at the temple, "men, and women, and children" (Deuteronomy 31:10–12).

Particularly important for the celebration of the law of Moses and for the renewal of the covenant of Israel with the Lord were two feasts, one called Shavuot in Hebrew (Pentecost in Greek), which came in June fifty days after Passover, and the other called Tabernacles, which followed closely after the Day of Atonement in the fall. These two festivals were each celebrated over a period of seven days, probably reminiscent of the seven days of the Exodus from Egypt and the seven periods of the creation.²⁴ There is considerable circumstantial evidence that the Nephites, who were strict in their observance of the law of Moses "in all things" (2 Nephi 5:10; see Jarom 1:5; Alma 30:3; 3 Nephi 1:24), observed these essential Israelite festivals.²⁵ The purposes and themes of these ritual days related closely to covenant-making, law-giving, and prophetic instruction, which are also dominant themes in the Sermon at the Temple.

If the Nephites were assembled on one of these traditional holy days sometime after the signs of Jesus' death had been given, they probably would have wondered what they should do next. We know that they observed the law of Moses until Jesus proclaimed its fulfillment (see 3 Nephi 1:24–25; 15:2–8), but while Jesus' voice, which was heard out of the darkness, had announced the end of the Mosaic law at the time of his death (see 3 Nephi 9:17), no new instructions had yet been given to the Nephites about the law that was to take its place. Indeed, when Jesus spoke to the Nephites in person at the temple of Bountiful, he reiterated

the fact that the old law had been fulfilled (see 3 Nephi 12:18; 15:4), but they were still confused in particular about what he meant by this (see 3 Nephi 15:2–3). They “wondered what he would [have them do] concerning the law of Moses” (3 Nephi 15:2). It was inevitable that, sooner or later, as they gathered at their temple, they would have wondered if it was still appropriate for them to continue using their old ritual order. Since it seems unlikely that they would have gone twelve months without addressing the implications of Christ’s death for the continuation of their public rites and temple practices, this suggests that his appearance was probably not too long after his crucifixion and ascension.

We do not know how the Nephite ritual calendar in Bountiful related to the Israelite calendar in Jerusalem, for there had been no contact between the two for over six hundred years. It is impossible to determine which of the traditional festivals would have been observed in Bountiful in the months following Jesus’ crucifixion. Thus, it could have been around the Nephite time of Passover when Jesus appeared, as John Tvedtnes has suggested, or just before their New Year celebrations, as Kent Brown has proposed. Indeed, a year-rite gathering would make good sense of the occasion in 3 Nephi 11, for at such assemblages kings were typically crowned, laws promulgated, and covenants made or renewed.

If one can assume, however, that the two ritual calendars had not grown too far apart, the feast of Shavuot would have been celebrated in Bountiful a few months after the Passover crucifixion and shortly after the best-known ascension of Jesus from Jerusalem, reported in Acts 1:9–11. Such a scenario would thus make good sense of the reference in 3 Nephi 10:18 to Christ’s appearing in Bountiful “soon after” his ascension.²⁶

Moreover, that date is close enough after the events of the destruction that the people could still “marvel” and “wonder” about the whole situation as they conversed about Christ and the signs of his death (see 3 Nephi 11:1–2). Such a date accommodates most of the information Kent Brown has gathered about the settled condition of the people at the time of Jesus’ appearance, and it also solves John Tvedtnes’s major problem by allowing time for records to have been kept between the time of the crucifixion and the appearance in Bountiful. The tension between the words “soon after the ascension” and the phrase “in the ending of the thirty and fourth year” (3 Nephi 10:18) remains unresolved, however, under any theory.

The hypothesis that Christ appeared at the feast of Shavuot in Bountiful also raises many interesting implications. No occasion more relevant than Shavuot can be imagined for the day on which to explain the fulfillment of the old law and the issuance of the new. According to recent scholarship, ancient Israelites may have celebrated, as part of Shavuot, the giving of the law to Moses and the revelation of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.²⁷ That revelation was received about fifty days after the Exodus from Egypt (“in the third month,” Exodus 19:1), although it is uncertain when the similar dates of this theophany and of the early summer festival of Shavuot became associated. The obvious connections between three of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Jesus’ teachings about murder, adultery, and oaths in Matthew 5 and 3 Nephi 12 afford another possible link between the day on which the Nephites would have traditionally celebrated the giving of the Ten Commandments and the time when Jesus taught the new understanding of those very commandments.

In addition, Shavuot was a day for remembering great spiritual manifestations. Thus, the Holy Ghost was manifest as tongues of fire to the Saints gathered for Pentecost (the Greek name for Shavuot) that same year in Jerusalem (see Acts 2:1–4). Shavuot came to be associated with the day on which the Lord came down in smoke and flame on Mount Sinai and appeared to Moses on behalf of the host of Israel. Now Jesus had come down and appeared to all gathered in Bountiful. As the face of Moses had shined radiantly on Sinai, so “the light of [Christ’s] countenance did shine upon [his disciples], and behold they were as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus” (3 Nephi 19:25).²⁸ Indeed, the ancient model for Shavuot was the three-day ritual the Israelites observed before the law was given at Sinai (see Exodus 19:15), and Jesus similarly “did teach the [Nephites] for the space of three days” (3 Nephi 26:13; see 3 Nephi 11:1–8; 19:4–15), after which subsequent appearances followed (see 3 Nephi 26:13; 27:2). Thus, while the suggestion that Jesus appeared at Bountiful on Shavuot or any other particular holy day remains tentative, the choice of Shavuot is attractive and symbolically meaningful.

In any event, as the Nephites had washed and presented themselves ritually clean before the Lord at the temple, the question must have forcefully arisen again, as it had a generation earlier when the sign of Jesus’ birth was seen (see 3 Nephi 1:24), asking what priestly functions this branch of Israel should continue to perform at its temple now that Jesus had lived and died. Indeed, their conversation “about this Jesus Christ, of whom the sign had been given concerning his death” (3 Nephi 11:2) immediately preceded, if not precipitated, the marvelous manifestation that they experienced.

What Jesus then taught them would have been understood, implicitly if not explicitly, as the new doctrines and ordinances the Nephites were to observe in their temples from that point forward in place of their old temple rituals and performances. Those earlier Nephite ordinances, as I have discussed elsewhere,²⁹ were after the order of Melchizedek and were given symbolically, “in a manner that thereby the people might know in what manner to look forward to [Christ] for redemption” (Alma 13:2; see v. 16). The new order no longer looked forward to Christ but rather celebrated and looked back on the fulfillment of his atoning sacrifice (see 3 Nephi 11:11).

All this combines to indicate that the Sermon at the Temple is no simple ethical or abstract doctrinal discourse. It is rooted in and around the temple and its covenants and commandments. It prepared those righteous participants to pass successfully by the judgments of God. It instructed them in the new ordinances of the priesthood in a wondrous and marvelous way. Accordingly, we turn our attention next toward an understanding of the possible ritual elements in the Sermon at the Temple.

Notes

1. Discussed in John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 297–387. See several sections or chapters in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998).

2. Discussed extensively in Welch, "Temple in the Book of Mormon."

3. *Ibid.*, 323–26.

4. John M. Lundquist, "What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall*, ed. H. B. Huffmon et al. (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 207; see Donald W. Parry, "Sinai as Sanctuary and Mountain of God," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 1:482–500.

5. Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 7–8.

6. W. D. Davies, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 17, acknowledges that "not all scholars accept this view, but it is not to be dismissed cavalierly." Some scholars suggest that there are ten beatitudes, echoing the Ten Commandments of the covenant at Sinai. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 109.

7. H. Riesenfeld, "Guds söner och de heligas församling" (Sons of God and the congregation of the Holy Ones), *Svensk Exegetisk Arsbok* 41–42 (1976–77): 179–88.

8. B. Friesen, "Approaches to the Interpretation and Application of the Sermon on the Mount," *Direction* 10 (1981): 19–25; and Joachim Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 1–12.

9. John W. Welch, "Word Studies—Diatheke—Testament," *Newsletter of the Religious Studies Center of Brigham Young University* (June 1987): 5; also in *Ensign*, January 1995, 29.

10. Hans Windisch, *Der Sinn der Bergpredigt* (Leipzig: Heinrichs Verlag, 1929), discussed in Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, 2. See Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 187; and Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 208.

11. Martin Luther called the Epistle of James “ein rechte stroern Epistel” (a right strawy epistle) because it has “no Gospel quality to it.” *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlhaus, 1906), 6:10.

12. “Das heißt ein Meister Stuck des Teuffels [sic].” *Ibid.*, 32:300.

13. *Ibid.*

14. As paraphrased by Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, 2.

15. Hugh W. Nibley, “Christ among the Ruins,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 121–41; also in *Ensign*, July 1983, 14–19; reprinted in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 407–34.

16. *Ibid.*; see Hugh W. Nibley, “Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum: The Forty-Day Mission of Christ—the Forgotten Heritage,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 10–44; see also John Gee, “Forty-Day Ministry and Other Post-Resurrection Appearances of Jesus Christ,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:734–36.

17. The Greek word *enduō* means “to dress, to clothe someone” or to take on “characteristics, virtues, intentions.” For further discussion, see John W. Welch, “Enduō,” *Newsletter of the Religious Studies Center of Brigham Young University* (January 1990): 2; reprinted in *Ensign*, April 1993, 29.

18. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 211, 246, 285 n. 8, 331; see *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 158.

19. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:241. Robert J. Matthews concludes that this occurred “after the Savior’s resurrection” in his *A Sure Foundation: Answers to Difficult Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 112.

20. Nibley, “Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum.”

21. For detailed discussions of the chronological issues, see S. Kent Brown and John A. Tvedtnes, “When Did Jesus Appear to the Nephites in Bountiful?” with an introduction by John W.

Welch (FARMS, 1989); and S. Kent Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 146–56.

22. Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, “King Benjamin’s Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech*, 147–223.

23. Although John A. Tvedtnes, “The Timing of Christ’s Appearance to the Nephites,” in Brown and Tvedtnes, “When Did Jesus Appear to the Nephites in Bountiful?” asserts that “the gathering of the people at the temple is not evidence that it was festival-time,” his reasons for this are not persuasive to me. He claims that the multitude did not gather until the word had gone out that Jesus would appear again on the morrow (see 3 Nephi 19:2), but the crowd is called “a great multitude” even on the first day (3 Nephi 11:1). Those who came for the second day apparently had to travel much of the night to be there (see 3 Nephi 19:3), so their absence on the first day should not preclude it from being considered a festival day observed by those living in the temple-city of Bountiful.

24. Abraham Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of the Jewish Holy Days* (New York: KTAV, 1978), 182.

25. Regarding these holy convocations at the temple that the law of Moses required, see Exodus 23:14–19. Concerning the Book of Mormon, see Szink and Welch, “King Benjamin’s Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals”; see also FARMS Updates, “The Sons of the Passover,” August 1984, and “Abinadi and Pentecost,” September 1985, reprinted in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 196–98, 135–38. For a discussion of the observance of the law of Moses by the Nephites up until the time when that law was fulfilled by the atonement of Christ, see Welch, “Temple in the Book of Mormon,” 301–19.

26. John L. Sorenson notes in his study of seasonality in Book of Mormon warfare, however, that if the Nephites celebrated the grain harvest aspect of Shavuot and held this festival fifty days after the grain harvest in Mesoamerica, its date in the New World

would have been sometime in December. See "Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerica," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 445–77.

27. Moshe Weinfeld, "The Decalogue: Its Significance, Uniqueness, and Place in Israel's Tradition," in *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. Edwin R. Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss and John W. Welch (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 38–47.

28. I thank my student Daniel Belnap for drawing this connection to my attention.

29. John W. Welch, "The Melchizedek Materials in Alma 13:13–19," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, 2:238–72.