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## Some Personal Reflections

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## CHAPTER 5

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### SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

In the welter of opinions concerning Jesus' masterful Sermon transmitted by both Matthew and Mormon, I offer a view of the Sermon, especially at the temple in Bountiful, as a rich temple text. I realize that in assembling this view I have relied on circumstantial evidence, contextual inferences, and comparative studies, and have read the Sermon at the Temple in light of a Latter-day Saint's understanding of the temple. Nowhere does Jesus say to us, "I am presenting a temple experience here."<sup>1</sup> In such cases, he says only, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9).

I also readily acknowledge that one can understand the Sermon in many other ways. There are many legitimate readings and many good interpretations of this deeply spiritual text. Many elements present in the Sermon are basic to the first principles of the gospel and thus are certainly also relevant to general ethical exhortation, preaching the gospel, personal righteousness, and the covenants of baptism. For example, at baptism one covenants to care for the poor, to comfort those that mourn,

and to keep God's commandments (see Mosiah 18:8–10; see also Mosiah 5:3–8; Moroni 4:1–5:2), topics stressed also in the Sermon. So, individual teachings of the Sermon will apply in many gospel settings. Yet I know of no other single interpretation that makes more consistent sense of the Sermon as a whole or gives more meaning to all its parts than does the temple reading. No part is out of place or left out under this approach.

Although I cannot conclusively say through deductive logic that my view of the Sermon at the Temple is correct, I can say that I did not go into this text looking for this result. Whatever subtle bias or predisposition toward the temple may be involved, the pattern that emerges from this text is too natural for me to think that I have imposed it intrusively upon the data. After working for many years on the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple, all these things fell quite suddenly into place, without prodding or coercing. The experience was strong, as the echoes in the text became clearer voices for me. Finding a significant number of details compatible with this view scattered among the writings of various scholars then reinforced the experience.

I also realize now, better than ever before, how imprecise our tools and instruments are as we attempt to map the contours and main features of this rich spiritual landscape. As Jesus said to us, "I perceive that ye are weak" (3 Nephi 17:2); nevertheless, he will bless us in our weakness, and, God willing, our "weak things" may "become strong" (Ether 12:27). I hope that the Spirit will guide all readers who take Jesus' advice to go home and ponder upon the things he said to the Nephites and "prepare [their] minds for the morrow" that he might come again (3 Nephi 17:3). To do this, more than dissecting analysis is

called for. The meaning of the Sermon is reduced when it is subsumed under certain focal points only: the truth about God's mysteries is not likely to be found at the end of a syllogism or textual analysis.

Reading the Sermon in light of the temple can enhance our understanding of the Sermon. Equally, experiencing the Latter-day Saint temple in light of the Sermon enhances our understanding of the temple. President Ezra Taft Benson has promised that the Book of Mormon will give intellectual and spiritual unity to the lives of all those who will truly receive it.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this is one more example of how that promise can be fulfilled.

I hasten to add that people should also notice some differences between the Latter-day Saint temple experience and the Sermon. I do not think that the Nephite temple experience was exactly the same as today's—which itself changes somewhat from time to time. For example, the sequence in which the laws of obedience, sacrifice, chastity, consecration, and so forth are presented is not exactly the same in both, although it is quite close. And the Sermon at the Temple mainly reports the ordinances, laws, commandments, ritual elements, and covenants; little background drama or creation narrative is given. Moreover, the Sermon may have functioned in several respects more to prepare people for specific features of the temple or other ordinances than to conduct them through the experience itself. Nevertheless, the essential elements appear to be there—certainly more than I had ever before thought present in the Book of Mormon, and, as for the rest, the presence of the Lord would have been drama enough.

If the Sermon at the Temple is in some way a ritual text, one must next wonder the same about the Sermon on the Mount. I would not expect scholars unfamiliar with the

Latter-day Saint temple to see—or even imagine—what I think is going on in the Sermon. Still, the number of New Testament scholars willing to recognize the importance of esoteric or sacred ordinances and liturgical or cultic teachings among the early Christians is increasing. I think these scholars should be able to discern a number of possible ritual elements in the Sermon on the Mount.

As we have seen, several ritual-related elements appear specifically with respect to the Sermon on the Mount: the use of macarisms (beatitudes); the requirement that a participant withdraw if he or she has aught against a brother; the instruction about how one is to swear one's oaths; the meaning of *teleios* as being fully introduced into the mysteries; the giving of an exemplary group prayer; connections between the Lord's Prayer and John 17<sup>3</sup> (which connects it with the rituals of the last supper and the upper room); the promise of garments more glorious than Solomon's robes; the insistence upon secrecy; the asking, seeking, knocking, opening, and receiving of a gift; entering into the Lord's presence or rejecting those who are good but lack a certain knowledge; "knowing" God (with its connotations in connection with covenant making generally);<sup>4</sup> the sealing statement that Jesus taught with unusual authority (see Matthew 7:29); the prelude to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 3 with the baptism of Jesus, the Father's voice speaking from heaven, a heavenly being descending out of heaven, and in Matthew 4:11 with the expulsion of Satan; the venue of the mount as a new Sinai, a new Temple Mount;<sup>5</sup> the fact that a new covenant resulted, later witnessed by the cup of that new covenant (see Matthew 26:28; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6); the recognition that the Sermon was directed only to a small group of disciples;<sup>6</sup> and the possible use of Sermon on the

Mount materials as a cultic or ceremonial reminder in the earliest decades of Christianity in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> It requires little familiarity with esoteric texts and basic religious ritual to notice that such are the elements of which ceremony is readily and meaningfully made.

To me, the Sermon at the Temple in this way restores covenantal and sacred meaning to the Sermon on the Mount—meaning that was lost or forgotten, as Nephi had prophesied in 1 Nephi 13:26. I infer from the Book of Mormon that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount to much the same effect in Palestine as in Bountiful as he gave his disciples the new order of the gospel, which they eventually accepted by way of oaths and covenants, with promises and penalties.

In 1 Nephi 13, Nephi explained in some detail how the apostasy from early Christianity would occur. First Nephi 13:24–32 seems to identify *three* stages in this process—not just one.<sup>8</sup>

First, the gentiles would take “away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious” (1 Nephi 13:26). This stage could have occurred simply by altering the *meaning* of the things taught by the Lord without necessarily changing the words themselves. This change in understanding was the fundamental problem Nephi saw, for the things that would cause many to stumble were those things “taken away out of the gospel” (1 Nephi 13:29).

Second, the gentiles would take away “many covenants of the Lord” (1 Nephi 13:26). This step too could have been taken without deleting any words from the Bible. The knowledge and benefit of the covenants of God would then be lost simply by neglecting the performance of ordinances, priesthood functions, or individual covenants. Then, once the understanding of a text like the Sermon on

the Mount had been changed, the rest was merely paperwork. The words could even stay the same, yet they would already have lost their plain and precious meanings.

Only third did Nephi behold that “many plain and precious things” were consequently “taken away from the book” (1 Nephi 13:28). Apparently Nephi understood this step as a consequence of the first two stages, for 1 Nephi 13:28 begins with the word *wherefore*. Thus, things that were lost from the texts of the Bible were not necessarily a cause but a result of the fact that, first, the gospel, and second, the covenants of the Lord had been lost or taken away.

Understanding this process helps us to see how the Book of Mormon corrects this situation. Containing the fullness of the gospel (see D&C 20:9), the Book of Mormon gives a correct understanding of the divinity, mission, and atonement of Jesus Christ, along with the principles of faith and repentance, and teaches with unmistakable clarity other plain and precious parts of the plan of salvation. It also restores many covenants of the Lord. It provides us with the words of the baptismal prayer, along with instructions concerning the meaning and proper mode of baptism (see Mosiah 18; 3 Nephi 11; Moroni 6) and of confirmation (see Moroni 2). It preserves from ancient times the words of the sacrament prayers (see Moroni 4–5),<sup>9</sup> makes understandable the covenants of the Lord to the house of Israel, and teaches the necessity of priesthood authority and the manner of ordination (see, for example, Moroni 3). In addition, the Book of Mormon restores an understanding of the covenantal context of the Sermon on the Mount.

Indeed, Nephi prophesied that “the records of [his] seed,” or in other words the Book of Mormon, would be instrumental in making known “the plain and precious things

which have been taken away" (1 Nephi 13:40–41), and one of the book's stated purposes is to make known "the covenants of the Lord" (title page). Lehi also prophesied that the Book of Mormon would bring people in the latter days "to the knowledge of [the Lord's] covenants . . . And out of weakness [his people] shall be made strong" (2 Nephi 3:12–13).

For many years, however, the Book of Mormon has been taken lightly by the world. People who harden their hearts "cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things of naught" (2 Nephi 33:2). This has been especially the case with respect to the presence of the Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi. In reality, though, what has seemed to many to be an embarrassing problem in the Book of Mormon is no naïve plagiarism but a scripture fully constituted and meaningfully contextualized. If Doctrine and Covenants 84:57 is instructive here, reminding us that the children of Zion are under condemnation until they "remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon," it is perhaps not the Book of Mormon's fault that we have not seen the full potential of this Sermon text before.

## Notes

1. The temple itself is mentioned explicitly in the Sermon at the Temple only in 3 Nephi 11:11, but one such introduction is typically adequate to firmly establish the setting (compare Mosiah 2:5–8).

2. Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988).

3. See W. O. Walker Jr., "The Lord's Prayer in Matthew and in John," *New Testament Studies* 28/2 (1982): 237–56, arguing that John 17 is a midrash on the Lord's Prayer.

4. Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 120–24.



5. W. D. Davies, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 31–32.

6. H. Burkhardt, "Die Bergpredigt—Eine allgemeine Handlungsanweisung?" *Theologische Beiträge* 15 (1984): 137–40.

7. Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 1–16 (on the whole Sermon on the Mount as an epitome of the gospel); 55–69 (on Matthew 6:1–18 as an early Jewish-Christian *didache*).

8. For further discussion see John W. Welch, "The Plain and Precious Things," FARMS Update, January 1987; reprinted as "The Plain and Precious Parts," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 37–40.

9. Discussed in detail in John W. Welch, "The Nephite Sacrament Prayers: From King Benjamin's Speech to Moroni 4–5" (FARMS, 1986); reprinted as "Our Nephite Sacrament Prayers," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 286–89. See also "Benjamin's Covenant as a Precursor of the Sacrament Prayers," in *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom,"* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 295–314; and "From Presence to Practice: Jesus, the Sacrament Prayers, the Priesthood, and Church Discipline in 3 Nephi 18 and Moroni 2–6," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 119–39.