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The Temple on the Mount

Author(s): John W. Welch

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Chapter 2

The Temple on the Mount

One thing indicated for sure is that the Sermon on the Mount was given on a “mountain” (Matthew 5:1). The possible significances of this detail are expansively intriguing. In the sign language of religious symbolism, the “mount” evokes images such as Sinai, Moses, the Temple, the heavenly seat, and the domain of God. These images link Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount potently and vibrantly to the very heart of the central traditions of Israel, the Temple on the Mount.

Jesus had been active in Galilee, and his fame had quickly spread into the neighboring Roman province of Syria; large crowds of people had followed him from Galilee and the ten cities of the Decapolis, as well as from Jerusalem, Judaea, and east of the Jordan (Matthew 4:23–5). Seeing “the crowds”—apparently there were several crowds on several occasions—Jesus retreated up into a mountain, taking with him some of his *mathētai* (pupils, learners, disciples). There Jesus sat down, opened his mouth, and instructed his devotees (Matthew 5:1–2). This is all that Matthew says about the location or setting of the Sermon on the Mount.

For all that the text offers, this particular mountain could have been anywhere in the entire region. But the mere fact that Matthew wanted his readers to see the Sermon on the Mount as having been presented on “a mountain” is itself already amply freighted with meaning. The mountain setting of the Sermon is no trivial, romantic or pastoral aside. This singular piece of revealing information is crucial for many reasons and in many ways to our reception of this text.

Most of all for present purposes, the narrative setting of the Sermon on the Mount on a mountain invites readers to consider this text as ritual-related—perhaps even ritual-laden—and to view these words of Jesus as having been delivered in a surrogate temple setting. This interpretive invitation arises not only as a hermeneutical hypothesis but carries with it a presumption of plausibility, for sacred instructions are often dispensed in a ritualized setting, and introductions or inductions into religious groups are typically performed and solemnized in holy environs: in temples, at cultic sites, or in spaces separate from profane, worldly surroundings. Inconvenient excursions and strenuous pilgrimages to get up into high places for religious purposes are driven not only by a desire to get away from the press and corruption of the secular world but also to draw closer to God¹ and to make contact with the heavenly realms above. And thus, as the following brief survey of literature on this subject amply shows, deep-seated traditions both in Israel and also throughout the ancient world associated theophanies, divine

¹ Jewish thought associated “the mountain with a sense of God’s nearness.” See Werner Foerster, “*Oros*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 5, p. 481.

councils, and contacts between mortals and immortals with experiences on the tops of mountains.² These deeply engrained traditions should not be, and perhaps cannot be, disentangled from the intended meaning and the hearer's response to the Sermon on the Mount.

The general significance of the Sermon's mountain setting has not gone unnoticed by scholars, even though they do not always agree on its specific meaning. Envisioning the quiet and solemn setting, Hans Dieter Betz imagines its naturalistic, psychological impact: "The whole appearance [of the Sermon on the Mount] had the aura of the familiar and sincere, the attractive and the dignified. The open sky above him, the rural surroundings, all that formed a natural temple. No synagogue, not even the Temple in the capital, could make a solemn impression such as this."³ Indeed, Jesus would not have been welcome in the Temple of Jerusalem to conduct any such instruction or unconventional gathering there. His choice of a mountain setting was undoubtedly the most sacred environment available to him. Emphasizing primarily the religious responses of listeners in this setting, Emmet Fox states that "'hill' or 'mountain' always means prayer or spiritual activity."⁴ Focusing more on the divine manifestation in this setting, Georg Strecker sees the mountain as most significant, emphatically declaring, "The concept *mountain* signalizes that here is a suitable place for an epiphanous event! Here God's revelation makes itself known! Here Jesus appears as the revealer!"⁵ Thinking of historical antecedents and literary allusions, Werner Foerster of the University of Münster insists that "it must be seriously asked" whether "the choice of a mountain by Matthew, and indeed by Jesus Himself, was intended as an antithetical reference to the mount of the Law in the Old Testament."⁶ In fact, each of these meanings has much to offer. The mountain setting of the Sermon on the Mount not only provided a peaceful environment for the delivery of Jesus' unparalleled instruction, but it also engenders a prayerful search, a divine disclosure, and calls to mind the rich symbolism of sacred mountains in Israelite and ancient religious traditions.

² For a general discussion of such religious notions as the world mountain, cosmic mountains, and Israel's "Mountain God," see S. Talmon, "Har," in *TDOT*, vol. 4, pp. 436–45; Foerster, "Oros," vol. 5, pp. 475–83.

³ Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Minneapolis, 1995), p. 20.

⁴ Emmet Fox, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938), p. 52.

⁵ Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary*, trans. O.C. Dean Jr (Nashville, 1988), p. 24.

⁶ Foerster, "Oros," vol. 5, p. 485.

Mount Sinai and the Mount

Most directly, the mountain setting of the Sermon on the Mount transports its participants to Mount Sinai and brings into the picture all which that holy mountain symbolizes. Indeed, key language at the beginning of this text in Matthew 5:1 is precisely the same as certain wording in the Septuagint text of Exodus 19:3 and 24:12 that introduces Moses and his people into the sacred mountain domain. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the words “And Jesus went up (*anebē*) into the mountain (*eis to oros*).” Because this expression is rightly translated as describing more than going out onto a gently sloping hillside above Capernaum a few feet above the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, the fictive title “Sermon on the Mount” conveys an incorrect impression.

Indeed, Jesus “went up (*anebē*),” just as Moses had gone up (*anebē*, Exodus 19:3 and 24:12) “into the mountain (*eis to oros*),” first by himself and then with the elders of Israel (Exodus 19:3, 20; and 24:9). Foerster wrongly diminishes Matthew’s allusion to Moses in the wording of Matthew 5:1, thinking that one would expect to find some reference to Jesus going up “to *the top* of the mountain (*epi tēn koruphēn*)” as in Exodus 19:20,⁷ but the Matthean verbiage is identical to the first time that Moses went up into the mountain by himself in Exodus 19:3 and, more significantly, to the time when Moses took others with him up “into the mountain” (not necessarily to the top) in Exodus 24:12.

Thus, Jesus going up on the Mount with his disciples is significantly reminiscent of Moses going up into the mountain with the seventy elders (Exodus 24:9–11).⁸ There “they saw God” (Exodus 24:11) and the law was given (Exodus 24:12), just as Jesus promised his disciples who are pure in heart, “for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8), and then dispensed the law, beginning with the Ten Commandments. Noting the Sinai symbolism in the Sermon on the Mount’s setting, Dan Lioy

⁷ Foerster, “*Oros*,” vol. 5, p. 485 (emphasis added), where Foerster was overly influenced by Dalman in claiming ex cathedra that “to a Palestinian *anebē eis to oros* could hardly mean any more than that He went up into the mountains.” This view disregards numerous biblical and extra-biblical Jewish texts that see mountains are more than just that.

⁸ Ulrich Luz discusses the potential meaning of Jesus’ various mountain ascents (for the SM as well as on other occasions) described by Matthew, noting the potential connection to Moses. He writes: “The mountain in Matthew is a place of prayer (14:23), of healings (15:29), of revelation (17:1; 28:16), and of teaching (24:3). It does not have a fixed meaning. But it is probable that the association with the ascent of Moses on Mount Sinai is connected with the phrase *anabainō eis to oros* (Exod. 19:3, 12; 24:15, 18; 34:1f., 4). The conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, 7:28f., again recalls these texts.” *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis, 1989), 224. Dale Allison also notices the parallel; he writes: “Jesus ‘goes up’ on the mountain. The Greek is *anabē eis to oros*. Now in the LXX, *anabainō + eis to oros* occurs twenty-four times. Of these, a full eighteen belong to the Pentateuch, and most refer to Moses.” *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 174–5.

observes that from the mountain, Jesus might have intended to offer “a parallel to the giving of the law on Sinai,” especially as he gave his interpretations of three of the Ten Commandments, “you have heard it said of old . . .,” concerning murder, adultery, and the swearing of oaths. On another occasion that is mentioned in Luke 6:12, Jesus likewise went up “into the mountain (*eis to oros*)” to pray, and there he commissioned the twelve apostles before Jesus came down with them off the mountain to teach the masses. According to Richard Horsley and Jonathan Draper, this too was “reminiscent of Moses on Sinai.”¹⁰ As W.J. Dumbrell rightly states, while these “points of parallelism with Sinai are not to be overstressed,” the import of these connections “clearly cannot be ignored.”¹¹ These parallels suggest that the Sermon on the Mount was not positioned conceptually on any ordinary, mundane hill. For reasons such as these, many Christians from the earliest generations to modern times have viewed Moses as a foreshadowing type of Jesus.

Moses and Jesus on the Mount

Seeing Moses as a type of Christ in connection with the Sermon on the Mount receives additional support and expansion from other parallels between the lives of Jesus and Moses. Besides the point that the law of Moses and the Sermon on the Mount were both given on mountains, the settings for several other stories about Jesus recall sacred settings strongly associated with events in Israel’s history. For example, Mark McVann notes that the sequence of scenes in Jesus’ own ritualistic transformation in Luke 3–4 from a private man to a public figure appropriately taking place over forty days “in settings which recall adventures in Israel’s experience where uncompromising loyalty to God is demanded” for forty years, namely in the desert, on a high mountain, and finally in the Temple (Luke 3:1–13).¹² Likewise, W.D. Davies finds “new exodus” symbolism in many of the events in the life of Jesus, ranging from his flight into Egypt as an infant (Matthew 2:14), to his ten miracles in Matthew 8–9 (which may echo the ten plagues that Moses set upon Pharaoh and the land of Egypt), to the radiant glorification of Jesus, complete with three tabernacles, on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–5), reminiscent of the face of Moses that shone after conversion with Yahweh (Exodus 34:29–30).¹³

⁹ Dan Liroy, *The Decalogue in the Sermon on the Mount* (New York, 2004), p. 90.

¹⁰ Richard A. Horsley and Jonathan A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1999), p. 200.

¹¹ W.J. Dumbrell, “The Logic and the Role of the Law in Matthew 5:1–20,” *NovT* 23/1 (1981): 5, cited in Liroy, *Decalogue in the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 91.

¹² Mark McVann, “Rituals of Status Transformation in Luke–Acts: The Case of Jesus the Prophet,” in Jerome H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke–Acts* (Peabody, Massachusetts, 1991), pp. 346–7.

¹³ W.D. Davies, *Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 20.

These similarities served only to heighten the fact that both Jesus and Moses were viewed by early Christians as figures of unparalleled importance. Linking them in every way possible solidified that connection in their minds and enhanced the belief that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy spoken by the Lord through Moses, that “I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him” (Deuteronomy 18:18). John Lierman’s recent treatise *The New Testament Moses* discusses in considerable detail the cultural and religious importance of Moses to the people of Jesus’ day and shows how the early Christians ascribed to Jesus numerous terms and titles that had been previously used primarily or saliently to describe Moses.¹⁴ Known as a king,¹⁵ priest,¹⁶ lawgiver,¹⁷ revealer,¹⁸ and saliently the prophet of all prophets,¹⁹ Moses was a uniquely important figure in Jewish consciousness, yet “ancient Judaism looked for deliverance in the form of a second Exodus. This included the expected repetition of the blessings of the Exodus, among the most prominent and significant of which was the provision of food.”²⁰ Actions such as feeding the 5,000 in the wilderness echoed the miracle of the manna in the wilderness, thereby inviting a general recognition of Jesus as a new Moses.²¹ Indeed, this view of Jesus as the new Moses was predominant among first-century Christians: “The conception of Jesus as the new Moses . . . has left behind it manifold traces in the New Testament. Though indeed, in most contexts, its role is only minor, the conclusion is easily drawn that it is an old view, which at an earlier stage dominated the scene.”²² Indeed, Bernard Jackson has argued that when Jesus says in Matthew 5:17 that he has come to fulfill (or complete) “the law and the prophets” he was claiming to fulfill the law *of* the prophet in Deuteronomy 18:18, and thereby claimed “precisely the authority of a prophet-like-Moses.”²³ Early Christians, such as Peter in Acts 3:20–24, used the many-nuanced idea of

¹⁴ John Lierman, *The New Testament Moses: Christian Perceptions of Moses and Israel in the Setting of the Jewish Religion* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament Series 2, Tübingen, 2004).

¹⁵ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 79.

¹⁶ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 65.

¹⁷ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 124.

¹⁸ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 44.

¹⁹ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 44.

²⁰ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 107 (citations omitted).

²¹ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 107.

²² Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 261, n. 19, quoting Ferdinand Hahn, *Christologische Hoheitstitel: Ihre Geschichte im frühen Christentum* (Göttingen, 1963), p. 404.

²³ Bernard S. Jackson, “The Prophet and the Law in Early Judaism and the New Testament,” in Bernard S. Jackson, *Essays on Halakhah in the New Testament* (Leiden, 2008), pp. 20–21.

the prophet-like-Moses in Deuteronomy 18:18 as one of their principal scriptural evidences that Jesus was the messiah appointed for Israel.

Although there is no question that Jesus came to be viewed as a new Moses at least to some degree, the debate is still open over the degree to which (and by whom) Jesus was consciously understood as representing a new Moses. The question is particularly engaging with respect to the Gospel of Matthew. The idea that the Gospel of Matthew clearly makes unique reference to Moses and to the Exodus rests in part on B. W. Bacon's structural analysis linking the five discourses in Matthew to the five books of the Pentateuch.²⁴ Dale Allison argues that, of the four gospel writers, Matthew particularly presents Jesus as the new Moses, but suggests that in doing so, Matthew reflects an already-common perception since "it is unquestionable that early Christians regularly compared Jesus and Moses."²⁵ A common argument against viewing Jesus as a "new Moses" is the idea that Jesus' role was surely much greater than that of the prophet and lawgiver Moses.²⁶ This point, however, does not preclude a Matthean intent to draw parallels between these two great leaders. Allison imagines that Matthew "composed a book in which Moses, while remaining normative, becomes a symbol of someone greater, a promise awaiting fulfillment, a book in which the exodus becomes history anticipating eschatology."²⁷ Given Moses' role as the one who led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt and gave them a new life, the idea was easy to embrace that Moses foreshadowed Jesus, the one who delivers mankind from the bondage of sin and offers the new birth of eternal life.

All of this brings us back to the connection between the Sermon on the Mount and the mountain of the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai, for of all the events in Jesus' life that tend to recall specific events of the Exodus, the giving of the Sermon on the Mount has provided the most readily and widely recognized parallels. While New Testament scholars fall on all sides of the "new Moses" debate, few of them fail to notice the potential comparison between Moses on Sinai and Jesus on this Mount, and for good reason. Although Strecker insists that "the mountain motif . . . is not set up as a parallel to Sinai as the mountain of the old covenant and the law of Moses," he nevertheless concludes, "the teaching of Jesus on the mountain means: in his speech divine epiphany occurs."²⁸ Ulrich Luz similarly understands the parallel as demonstrating that "God, through Jesus,

²⁴ Benjamin W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York, 1930).

²⁵ Dale C. Allison Jr, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis, 1993), p. 97.

²⁶ See, for example, Joachim Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 14.

²⁷ Allison, *New Moses*, p. 273. See also Liroy, *Decalogue in the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 91 (recognizing the debate over the "new Moses" idea and concluding that the parallel at least cannot be ignored).

²⁸ Strecker, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 24–5.

will again speak in a fundamental way to Israel as at that time on Mt. Sinai.”²⁹ Allison includes an extensive discussion of Matthew 5:1–2, writing of “an old Christian proclivity to associate the speaker of Matthew 5–7 with Moses and Sinai.”³⁰ Jonathan Draper comments that the “location on a mountain surrounded by the waiting people suggests Moses, Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah to Israel.”³¹ Davies concludes his thought about the mountain setting of Matthew 5–7 stating that “probably no simple geographic mountain is intended. The mountain is the mountain of the New Moses, the New Sinai.”³² K.C. Hanson, one of the early members of the Context Group of New Testament interpreters, similarly asserts, “Like Sinai, this mountain is the place where revelation will proceed from God to the community via a mediator.”³³

In short, when Matthew reports that Jesus “went up (*anebē*)” into the mountain, thereby conspicuously echoing the story of Moses on Sinai, the evangelist may well have intentionally presented a parallel that was already commonly recognized in the early Christian community. The text assumes as much. This parallel would have lent high significance and great solemnity to the reading of the great Sermon. Whether or not the Gospel of Matthew is, as Bacon suggests, structurally designed to echo the Pentateuch, and while one may wish to allow for the point that Jesus’ role was greater than that of Moses, the giving of the Sermon on the Mount on the mountain offers one of the clearest verbal parallels between the two great figures, pregnant with sacred symbolism and connotation.

²⁹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis, 1989), p. 224.

³⁰ Allison, *New Moses*, pp. 172–3.

³¹ Jonathan A. Draper, “The Genesis and Narrative Thrust of the Paraenesis in the Sermon on the Mount,” *JSNT* 75 (1999): 25–48, quote on p. 30, citing W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, “Reflections on the Sermon on the Mount,” *SJT* 44 (1991): 297–8; J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis, 1990), pp. 77–8. Draper further hypothesizes that the SM was taught directly to four disciples, with the multitude as a secondary audience; and he notes a symbolic connection between this setting and the setting on Mount Sinai, where Moses was joined by four followers Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and Joshua (see Exodus 24:1, 13), pp. 30–31, thus drawing on “the Sinai symbolism to legitimate the teaching and to indicate its continuity with the Torah,” p. 32.

³² Davies, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 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; Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 109.

³³ K.C. Hanson, “Transformed on the Mountain: Ritual Analysis and the Gospel of Matthew,” *Semeia* 67 (1994): 160. “The Gospel of Matthew depends on this [Sinai/Mountain] tradition when it has Jesus deliver his new Torah from a mountain.” Robert L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space* (Chico, California, 1981), p. 61.

Indeed, Moses-Jesus parallels were remembered for several centuries, as can be seen in the artwork of early Christians. Significant among these remembered parallels were the images of law-giving on a mountain. Lierman explains:

The Lawgiving element of Moses Christology persisted into the second century AD in the Christian comparison of the teaching activity of Jesus to the Mosaic Lawgiving. The view is not mentioned as such in the New Testament, but Christians in the second century certainly taught that Jesus had delivered a new Law, and early Christian sarcophagi feature the *traditio legis* motif, which depicts Jesus standing on a mountain (or being otherwise elevated) handing down the scroll of his heavenly “new Law” to Peter and Paul, who stand on either side. Extant remains of this kind go back to the fourth century AD.³⁴

Most impressively, sixteen large, masterful frescoes to this same effect are on the walls in the Sistine Chapel (which are so completely overshadowed by Michaelangelo’s awe-inspiring ceiling that they are usually ignored by tourists and are rarely discussed even by art historians). On the south half of the famous chapel, seven paintings depict events in the life of Moses; and on the north half of the chapel, seven frescoes show events from the ministry of Jesus in parallel.³⁵ Painted by such artists as Perugino, Botticelli, and Rosselli, these scenes counterpose, for example, the finding of Moses in the bulrushes with the nativity of Christ, the circumcision of Moses’ son with John baptizing and preaching, and the last testament and death of Moses with the Last Supper and crucifixion of Jesus. Near the center of these long walls, the fourth fresco on the north side depicts Jesus giving the Sermon on the Mount and, in parallel on the south wall, Moses giving the Law on Sinai, both painted by Rosselli.³⁶ The superscriptions over these frescoes face each other and read, “Promulgatio Evangelicae Legis Per Christum” and “Promulgatio Evangelicae Legis Per Moisem.”³⁷ Altogether, these two parallel rows show the durability of the Jesus-as-Moses typology down through the centuries and well into the time of the Renaissance. Carol Lewine sees in these two sets of frescoes a long “forgotten liturgical scheme” which recognizes a typological parallel between Moses and Jesus.³⁸

³⁴ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 276 (citations omitted).

³⁵ The two fresco cycles are no longer complete, as some of the frescoes have been covered by other works. In *The Sistine Chapel Walls and the Roman Liturgy*, Carol F. Lewine discusses these parallel frescoes in detail and includes black and white pictures of them (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1993).

³⁶ Shown as Plates IV and XI in Lewine, *The Sistine Chapel Walls and the Roman Liturgy*.

³⁷ Lewine, *Sistine Chapel Walls and the Roman Liturgy*, pp. 60–61.

³⁸ Lewine, *Sistine Chapel Walls and the Roman Liturgy*, p. 19. In the nineteenth-century murals high on the walls of the chapel of St. Germain des Près in Paris, ten Old Testament scenes are similarly set forth in parallel with ten New Testament scenes, including

Thus, the view that Jesus was a “new Moses” and the fulfiller of the Law of Moses, with Moses as a foreshadowing type of Jesus, was recognized in early Christianity and cannot be casually ignored. On several grounds, parallels connect the Christian experience in the Sermon on the Mount and the Israelite experience on Mount Sinai, and that connection invites a further consideration of the nature of Moses’s experiences on Mount Sinai and especially the direct connections between those experiences and the Tabernacle, the Temple of Solomon, and the Temple of Herod.

The Temple and the Mount

No mere mountain, Mount Sinai was a sacred, temple-like space which served as a natural temple during the events of Exodus 19 and 24. Indeed, in Israelite thought, “‘sanctuary’ and ‘mountain’ became conceptually identical,”³⁹ providing a temple framework and rarified mountain setting for Jesus’ Sermon.

The ceremonial activities as the Israelites prepared to enter the holy mountain on the third day synchronize fully with rituals of preparation associated with the Temple. Moses, under God’s direction, told the people to wash themselves and their garments in preparation to going to the mountain (Exodus 19:10, 14),⁴⁰ as one would do before entering the Temple. During the three days of preparation at the base of Sinai, the people also abstained from sexual relations (Exodus 19:15), another common prerequisite for entrance to ancient temples.⁴¹ The purpose of these purifications was to prepare the people to enter into the presence of the Lord, an admittance normally reserved for those entering the holiest parts of temples. As would occur ritually at the Temple of Jerusalem, “the voice of the trumpet sounded long” (Exodus 19:19) to announce the coming of the Lord upon the top of the mountain. “The God who has the mountain as a dwelling place ‘meets’ people there: ‘the God of the Hebrews has met with us.’”⁴² The meeting between the people and

Balaam’s blessing of the Hebrew people paralleling the adoration of the Magi, the crossing of the Red Sea paralleling the baptism of Jesus, and Melchizedek’s offering of bread and wine paralleling Jesus’s institution of the eucharist; but apparently the parallel between the Sermon on the Mount and giving the law on Mount Sinai had become less recognized then.

³⁹ S. Talmon, “*Har*,” in *TDOT*, vol. 4, p. 444.

⁴⁰ Lierman notes that other sources besides Exodus (such as Pseudo-Philo) mention this preparatory sanctification, in *New Testament Moses*, p. 68.

⁴¹ Susan Guettel Cole, “Temples and Sanctuaries: Greco-Roman,” *ABD*, vol. 6, p. 381, states, “Inscriptions at the entrance to sanctuaries often prohibited from entry those who had recently participated in a funeral, assisted at a childbirth, or engaged in recent sexual intercourse.”

⁴² Thijs Booij, “Mountain and Theophany in the Sinai Narrative,” *Bib* 65 (1984): 1–26, 11.

God on Sinai involved fire, thunder, cloud, and smoke; from the presence of these elements, Thijs Booij has concluded that “the mountain-of-God tradition was united with a very specific theophany conception,” whose manifestations were only seen in sacred spaces such as the tabernacle or Temple.⁴³

Down below at the base of Sinai, Moses set up a boundary to delineate between the assemblage of Israel at the foot of the holy mountain and the holy upper region where God would personally instruct Moses (Exodus 19:12, 24). Crossing this boundary without permission would cause the people to perish or die (Exodus 19:21). This type of boundary is typical of a temple-setting, for as Jon D. Levenson explains, “between the Temple and ordinary reality lies a barrier of *holiness*, a palpable energy or force which resists the intermingling of the two modes of reality. The sanctuary itself . . . is a place that guards the perfection of the divine presence.”⁴⁴ Likewise, protecting the Temple of Herod from improper entrance in Jesus’ day were prominent signs chiseled in stone, warning that “no man of another nation is to enter within the barrier and enclosure around the temple. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which follows.”⁴⁵

In this natural temple on Mount Sinai, Moses and seventy of the elders presented themselves before God. Accordingly, in temple-psalms, “the expression ‘to behold the face of God’ is rendered in the Septuagint as ‘to appear before God’ (Pss 16 [17]:15; 62 [63]:3; etc.),” as Othmar Keel notes in his visually compelling volume.⁴⁶ In the sacred space high on Mount Sinai, Moses and seventy of the elders “saw God” (Exodus 24:11). Thus, rabbinic literature asserts that “in his ascent of Mt. Sinai Moses *entered into heaven* for an audience before God.”⁴⁷ There he not only received the law giving Israel its identity as a holy, or “sacral,” state,⁴⁸ but he also experienced great visions in which “God told Moses ‘many wondrous things, and showed him the secrets of the times and declared to him the end of the times.’”⁴⁹ In a corresponding way, Jesus took his disciples with him up into the mount and prepared them to “see God” (Matthew 5:8) and stand in the presence of the Lord (Matthew 7:23).

⁴³ Booij, “Mountain and Theophany,” 14.

⁴⁴ Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis, 1985), p. 127.

⁴⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (3rd edn, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003), p. 562, illustration on p. 564.

⁴⁶ Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett from the first, 1972, German edition (London, 1978), p. 176.

⁴⁷ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 148 (emphasis added); see also p. 94.

⁴⁸ Levenson argues that because of the “essential identity conferred at Sinai” at the giving of the law to the prophet Moses, Israel became a “kingdom of priests.” Thus, the law was viewed as sacred and holy and pertaining to something higher than a mere political state. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, pp. 74–5.

⁴⁹ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 43, quoting 4 Ezra 14:5.

Deification on the Mount

In addition, there is even the image of Moses having become an angelic or deified being on the holy mount. Lierman mentions various texts which point to Moses being raised to an “angelic” status on Mount Sinai.⁵⁰ For example, in the allegory of *1 Enoch* 89:36, “the sheep (Moses) who leads the other sheep (Israel) is transformed into a man at the point in the allegory corresponding to the Sinai revelation. Fletcher-Louis argues, ‘In this apocalyptic allegory . . . angels are anthropomorphic and humans zoomorphic. Moses’ transformation is thus an angelization.’”⁵¹ Fletcher-Louis likewise points to a Qumran fragment which “in the midst of a description of the mediation of the Law at Mount Sinai, describes Moses the man of God . . . speaking as an angel from his mouth.”⁵² Thus on Mount Sinai, as many texts agree, Moses became, in some sense, an angel, not unlike the beings that inhabit the inner rooms of sacred temples.

Angelic status drew with it a clear sense of eventual exaltation and apotheosis. This effect is portrayed in Jewish literature from the Second Temple period, particularly in the *Exogage* by Ezekiel the Tragedian, as Lierman describes:

In one scene (lines 68–89), Moses dreams of a great throne on the peak of Mt. Sinai (68). On it Moses sees a “man” with a crown and a scepter (70–71). On Moses’ approach, the man hands over to Moses the crown, scepter, and throne, and then withdraws (74–76). From the throne Moses beholds the entire world, and a host of stars does obeisance to him (90–91). The undoubted highlight of the passage is clearly the moment when the figure on the throne gives his place entirely over to Moses. The pointed royal symbolism may be taken to establish that Moses is depicted as a surrogate ruler for God, a divine king. But how divine is the divine king? Is it Ezekiel’s intent not merely to portray Moses as (even a very grand) king but as a god? (91)

This passage suggests a concurrent coronation and glorification of the prophet Moses on Sinai.⁵³ Even considering the later monotheism of Judaism, Lierman argues, “among Jews it was acceptable to speak of men as ‘gods,’ or ‘angels,’ which amounts to the same thing.”⁵⁴ Moses’ beatific elevation corresponds with his ascent of Mt Sinai, when he “approached God.”⁵⁵ Moses’ shining face was associated in some traditions with God’s “crown of light,” which furthers this

⁵⁰ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 244.

⁵¹ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 244.

⁵² Cited in Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, pp. 244–5.

⁵³ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 232. In a later chapter, Lierman cites additional sources besides the *Exogage* which appear to refer to the deification of Moses, including *Ecclus.* 45:2 and Qumran fragments.

⁵⁴ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 246.

⁵⁵ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 94.

understanding of the Sinai theophany.⁵⁶ In support of this analysis, Lierman enlists the further insights of Wayne Meeks:

Meeks identifies the “coronation on Sinai” motif in *Pesiqta de Rav Kahana*, which interprets the expression “Moses, the man of God” in Deut. 33:1 as, “A man when he ascended on high; a god when he descended below.” Meeks interprets, “Thus it was in heaven that Moses was made ‘god’ (and therefore king), which meant that Moses . . . was crowned . . . as the heavenly King’s earthly vice-regent.” Despite Meeks’ placement of the word “god” in scare quotes, and his insistence that Moses remained “earthly,” he immediately goes on to interpret the passage in *Pesiqta* as implying that Moses “became imbued in some sense with God’s fiery substance,” etc. or, in other words, became divinized. Meeks himself calls attention to *Midr. Pss.* 90.1: “When a mortal goes up to the Holy One, blessed by He, who is pure fire, and whose ministers are fire—and Moses did go up to Him—he is a man. But after he comes down, he is called God.” *Deuteronomy Rab.* 11.4 . . . seems in touch with a similar tradition when it says, “When he went up to heaven he was a man. And in which respect was he a man? Compared with the angels who are made entirely of fire. But when he came down from heaven he was as God.”⁵⁷

Along these lines, Dale Allison also discusses the tradition that Moses was enthroned and deified on Mount Sinai, likewise citing Ezekiel’s *Exagoge*, rabbinic tradition, and other ancient sources referring to Moses becoming a god on Sinai.⁵⁸ Most interestingly for our interpretation of the words and events relative to the Sermon on the Mount, Allison’s discussion of this theme arises specifically as he aims to demonstrate the existence of a tradition that Moses “sat” on the mountain, much as Jesus sits on the mount to deliver his sermon (Matthew 5:1). Allison hastens to assert that he is not “proposing that Matt. 5:1–2 be directly related to the traditions of Moses’ *enthronement* on Sinai,”⁵⁹ for Allison’s intent is simply to show that Matthew may have been recalling a Moses tradition when he wrote of Jesus sitting on the mount. However, Allison’s discussion of this Moses theme directly in the context of the Sermon on the Mount is fascinating, for he notes that “it may be worth recalling that some commentators have dimly sensed a royal motif in Matt. 5:1–2.”⁶⁰ When Jesus sat, was he symbolically taking his place on his throne in a sacred, heavenly setting? Especially in conjunction with the metamorphosis of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration it may be understood that,

⁵⁶ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 96.

⁵⁷ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 96, citing Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Supplements to *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 14, ed. W.C. van Unnik and others, Leiden, 1967), p. 195.

⁵⁸ Allison, *New Moses*, pp. 175–9.

⁵⁹ Allison, *New Moses*, p. 179.

⁶⁰ Allison, *New Moses*, p. 179.

through these traditions of Sinai, Matthew wants his readers to understand that Jesus too, when he descended from the heavenly mount, was likewise to be seen as a god and as God's holy representative who came down "having authority (*exousian*)" and not speaking as the Scribes (Matthew 7:29).

The Cosmic Mountain

The concept of divine regulation of the world from a mountain venue was universal enough that alert participants or later hearers would probably have been struck by the cosmic importance of the words handed down in the Sermon on the Mount. People all over the ancient world readily connected the idea of the gods dwelling in local temples with the idea that each god resided on the top of his or her favorite mountain.⁶¹ Most ancient cultures considered their mountain-like temples to be nearby houses or palaces for their gods, and the ancients commonly recognized mountains as cosmic dwelling places of gods. For example, various Ugaritic texts feature gods as inhabitants of mountains.⁶² Baal, the Canaanite god, lived on a mountain, as did El, whose name was later applied as one of many names for the God of Israel. El "presides over the council of the gods" on his mountain.⁶³ Keel describes statues which represent a "mountain god."⁶⁴ These statues are "identified by the scale-pattern on his robe and cap,"⁶⁵ and also include depictions of trees and streams in paradise, "thought to be located on a mountain."⁶⁶ Similar things can be said of Zeus on Mount Olympus in northern Greece or on Mount Ida south of Troy.

These ancient cultures likewise recognized these mountains (or their temple surrogates) as sacred places where humans could meet the gods. Egyptian pyramids and Mesopotamian temples and other sacred edifices were either built on mountains or otherwise incorporated the idea of mountains into their architecture.⁶⁷ The temples which rested atop these holy mountains were "the architectural embodiment of the cosmic mountain."⁶⁸ That sacred place was thought to be

⁶¹ For a bibliography concerning temples as mountains, see Donald W. Parry, Stephen D. Ricks, and John W. Welch, *A Bibliography on Temples of the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean World* (Lewiston, New York, 1991), pp. 120–24.

⁶² Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 112.

⁶³ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 112.

⁶⁴ Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, pp. 116–18.

⁶⁵ Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, p. 116.

⁶⁶ Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, p. 118.

⁶⁷ Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, p. 113.

⁶⁸ John M. Lundquist, "What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology," in H.B. Huffmon and others (eds), *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1983), p. 207; Donald W. Parry, "Sinai as Sanctuary and Mountain of God," in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (eds), *By Study and*

protected from all evil enemies, who were powerless against that spiritual fortress, and life was said to flow forth from it in fertilizing streams.⁶⁹ In this image of the idealized temple, things in heaven (where God sat upon his throne surrounded by his celestial council) and things on earth (his footstool) came together for the ancient mind. 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.⁷⁰

The concept of “cosmic mountain” permeated these and other ancient cultures, lending potential sacred significance to all mountain settings. Viewed as the center or navel of the universe, as the highest place in the world, the point of the creation, and the only peak not covered by the great deluge, the idea of “cosmic mountain” was attached to mountains and temples of various cultures including the Babylonians, Canaanites, Tibetans, Buddhists, Finns, Japanese, Indians and others.⁷¹ In *1 Enoch* 13:7–8 and *Testament of Levi* 2:5–6, Mount Hermon is the high mountain that becomes “the gates of Heaven. . . . It is used here as the site of a special revelation of God.”⁷² Besides ascending natural mountains to commune with God, individuals and communities built structures which symbolically reached toward the heavens. Altars and towers, like the mountains they represented, gave the people who used them pious “hopes of establishing contact with heaven.”⁷³

And thus it was on the cosmic mountain that God communicated in various ways back with humans. As Theodore Mullen has shown with respect to Ugaritic and early Israelite literature, “The god ’El controls rulership over the cosmogonic deities through his decree, which comes either from his mountain . . . or from his ten-shrine located at the sources of the rivers.”⁷⁴ From his mountain, the god issued imperatives, instructions, and judgments.⁷⁵ Levenson concurs: “The base of the mountain lies in the chaotic underworld, and its head reaches into the heavens.

Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley (Salt Lake City, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 482–500. See also Carol Myers, “Temple, Jerusalem,” in *ABD*, vol. 6, p. 360.

⁶⁹ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 131 (discussing the holy or “sacramental” nature of “the cosmic stream which issues from that mountain and sheds its fertilizing waters upon the face of the whole earth”); R.E. Clements, *God and Temple* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 10, 107.

⁷⁰ Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 7–8.

⁷¹ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York, 1961), pp. 42–3; Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1974), pp. 5–16; Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, pp. 113–8.

⁷² E. Theodore Mullen Jr, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, California, 1980), p. 158.

⁷³ Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Provo, Utah, 1987), p. 360.

⁷⁴ Mullen, *Divine Council*, p. 140.

⁷⁵ Mullen, *Divine Council*, pp. 132, 144, 146.

On it, messages can be passed from heaven to earth and *vice versa*. It is the prime place of communication between transcendent and mundane reality.”⁷⁶ The cosmic mountain is thus identified as “the battleground of conflicting natural forces,” “the meeting place of heaven and earth,” and “the place where effective decrees are issued.”⁷⁷ These functions were domesticated and brought into the mountain-like temples of Sumeria as early as two millennia BCE with the restoration in Nippur of the Ekur, the massive temple that embodied the mountain of divine judgment, that brought dread into the hearts of the wicked but held forth the tablet of life to the innocent.⁷⁸

This mountain and temple typology was not limited to certain cultures but was widespread, spilling over into ancient Israel. Israelite religious history is replete with instances of God meeting men on mountains. Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah and his obedience was rewarded by a visit from an angel on the mountain (Genesis 22). No mundane mountain, Mount Moriah was equated with the temple mount, as the sacred sanctuary was said to have been built on the exact spot that Abraham saw the angel.⁷⁹ On this holy mountain as on others, “the theophany authenticates the sanctuary.”⁸⁰ Other mountains, though of less enduring significance, were also places of divine contact. Elijah ascended Mount Carmel to call upon God and was rewarded with much-needed rain (1 Kings 18:42); then later on another mount, Mount Horeb, the same prophet heard the still small voice of God (1 Kings 19:8–12). Moses experienced the divine not only on Mount Sinai, but also on Mount Nebo as God showed him the promised land which he would not live to see Israel obtain (Deuteronomy 34:1–4). Various rabbinic sources, interpreting Deuteronomy 3:27, suggest that Moses saw “the whole world and the secrets of all ages” as a part of this mountain vision.⁸¹ The Samaritans worshiped on a mountain (John 4:20) called Mount Gerizim, significant in that it was the mountain designated by Moses to receive a declaration of blessings (Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12). Mount Gerizim was likewise believed to be “a connection between heaven and earth.”⁸² Mount Tabor was recognized as a place of worship where the tribes of Zebulun and Issachar were directed to offer sacrifices (Deuteronomy 33:18–19).⁸³ In Jerusalem, “many of [the Canaanite] traditions came to be associated with the mountain of Yahweh, Mount Zion, the ancient fortified hill between the Kidron and Tyropoeon Valleys. It was on this

⁷⁶ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 122.

⁷⁷ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, pp. 111–12 (quoting Clifford).

⁷⁸ Samuel N. Kramer, “The Temple in Sumerian Literature,” in Michael V. Fox (ed.), *Temple in Society* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1988), pp. 9–11.

⁷⁹ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, pp. 94–5.

⁸⁰ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 95.

⁸¹ Birger Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son: An Analysis of Early Christian Midrash* (New Testament Series 2:1, Sweden, 1966), pp. 62–3.

⁸² “Gerizim, Mount,” in *ABD*, vol. 2, p. 993.

⁸³ “Tabor, Mount,” in *ABD*, vol. 6, pp. 304–5.

mount that Yahweh dwelt. Life-giving streams flowed forth from its base.”⁸⁴ Solomon’s Temple was dedicated, above all else, as the place where people could pray to God and where he would have respect for their supplications for rain, food and victory and where he would forgive them of their sins against God and their trespasses against their neighbors (1 Kings 8:28–50). Another mountain, Mount Hermon, is mentioned in various psalms (Psalms 42:6, 89:12, 133:3) as another place of divine contact.

The Mountain of the Lord in Jerusalem

Nowhere was this mountain imagery closer to home than in Israel. In early eras, many neighboring mountains and several regional temples were recognized as points of contact between heaven and earth in Israel, and so, by delivering the Sermon on the Mount and later experiencing the Transfiguration on outlying mountains, Jesus reclaimed the older tradition of multiple mountain venues for divine revelation and intervention. But as political and priestly pressures played out in the kingdom of Judah, some sought to focus the worship of Jehovah exclusively on the temple mount in Jerusalem, and that place became known pre-eminently as the Mountain of the Lord. Most notably, Josiah’s condemnation of “high places” in the late seventh century BCE was an attempt to ban the ritual use of all other mountain locations (2 Kings 23). In Jerusalem, Josiah’s reforms effected “changes at the very heart of the temple,”⁸⁵ leading Judah into its Second Temple period following the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 587–86 BCE. Whether Josiah’s actions are viewed positively, as “pav[ing] the way for the reunification of the people,”⁸⁶ or negatively, as a loss of the true “faith of the first temple,”⁸⁷ one clear effect of these actions was that one mountain, which came to be recognized exclusively as the Mountain of the Lord, became pre-eminent among Jews in Jesus’ day.

Just as God had spoken to Moses from Mount Sinai, he continued to speak and act in Israel from his temple-palace on his chosen mount in Jerusalem, the holy mount, the mount of God’s revelation, “the mountain of the Lord” (Psalms 24:1). Thus Isaiah 2:2 and Micah 4:1 refer to the Temple as “the mountain of the Lord’s house.” In Israel the Temple itself became synonymous with God’s mountain. Indeed, in its construction on a prominent hill, the Temple “resembled a mountain, for

⁸⁴ Mullen, *Divine Council*, p. 154.

⁸⁵ Margaret Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?,” in John W. Welch, David R. Seely, and Joann Seely (eds), *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem* (Provo, Utah, 2004), p. 526.

⁸⁶ Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (New York, 2001), p. 176.

⁸⁷ Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?” p. 537.

‘the mountain itself was originally such a place of contact between this and the upper world.’”⁸⁸

The traditions surrounding Sinai, the mountain on which Israel had received its identity, had “not so much been forgotten as absorbed” by the temple mount in Jerusalem.⁸⁹ As Levenson observes, “The assumption by Zion of the themes of Sinai was so thoroughgoing that even the location of the latter came to be forgotten. Zion became *the* mountain of Israel.”⁹⁰ Mount Zion in Jerusalem became the most important mountain in the world for the Jews and was viewed as the center of the world, the starting point of the creation.⁹¹ Though a relatively low and undistinguished mound, it was nonetheless called, in the Bible, the world’s tallest mountain, because God dwelt there.⁹² Lending deep significance to the temple mount was a famous rock, considered to be a capstone of the earth’s creation:⁹³

The hill Zion is identified with the primeval hill, paradise, the cosmic mountain and mountain of the gods. But this identification depends less on Zion’s relative merits as a mountain than on its *Holy Rock*. The rock, with its solidity and strength, constitutes the antipole to the bottomless, slimy, sluggish floods of Chaos, which threaten the ends of the earth (Pss 18:2–5; 61:2; Isa 28:15–16; Mt 16:18).⁹⁴

Endowing his holy house on the mountain with his “‘name’—i.e., his essence, his nature, his signature,”⁹⁵ the God of Israel there, as on the mountain, engaged in divine communication with man. In a vision, Isaiah experiences this communication and sees God enthroned in the Temple. Levenson notes, “The relevant point about this justly famous passage is that it occurs in the Temple, in other words, on the cosmic mountain, Zion.”⁹⁶ He concludes, “[Isaiah’s] vision is not different in essence from what was held to take place at the Temple all along—the enthronement and glorification of YHWH in his cosmic abode, the pilgrimage of his worshipers, and his instruction of them in his sacred law, which transforms and elevates them.”⁹⁷ In many details such as these, Jesus’ vision of righteousness projected through the Sermon on the Mount is not unrelated to these holy mountain templates, whether in the tradition of the law or of the prophets.

⁸⁸ Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, p. 360 n. 28, citing Contenau, *Le Déluge babylonien*, p. 246.

⁸⁹ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 91.

⁹⁰ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 187.

⁹¹ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 118.

⁹² Clements, *God and Temple*, p. 106, n. 3.

⁹³ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 133.

⁹⁴ Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, p. 118 (internal cross-reference omitted).

⁹⁵ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 125.

⁹⁶ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 122.

⁹⁷ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 126.

Discussions of Moses typology generally overlook temple symbolism, perhaps because Moses himself predated the Temple. Typical Moses typology is based on going to Egypt, crossing the Red Sea, being tried in the wilderness for forty years and giving the law. However, although there is no actual temple edifice at Sinai, many elements of temple ideology are clearly present in the narratives of the Pentateuch. For example, the physical symbols of the archetypical temple find striking parallels to their antecedents on Mount Sinai. The Lord revealed himself amidst fire and smoke to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18) and similarly to Isaiah in a vision set in the Temple (Isaiah 6). Fire and smoke were common temple images, since the burning of sacrifices occupied a significant portion of the Israelite temple experience. The Temple's menorah, a candlestick in the form of a stylized tree, is reminiscent of God appearing to Moses in a burning bush on a mountain (Exodus 3:2). Although this particular event occurred on Horeb rather than Sinai, Levenson observes a linguistic connection between the bush (*sēnê*) and Sinai (*Sīnay*), and a "popular association" of them, even noting the Israelite belief that "the emblem of the Sinai deity was a tree of some sort."⁹⁸ Trumpets are also present in both locations, heralding the coming of the Lord to Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:13, 16, 19) and in recognition of him at the Temple (see Leviticus 25:9; Numbers 10:8; Hosea 8:1; Joel 2:1).

The holy experiences of Mount Sinai and of the tabernacle/temple also parallel each other in significant ways. In each location, the humble servant of the Lord was able to receive instruction, make covenants, and obtain greater knowledge of God. There, both on the mountain and later in the Temple, decrees were issued to Israel through a prophet-priest. In both locations, covenants, vows and oaths were made or renewed. The identity-conferring covenant inaugurated on Sinai was perpetuated through the Temple. Just as Moses appeared before God and saw Him on Sinai, so the Psalms of the Temple recognized this type of theophany; as Alan Kerr explains, "The expression 'before the Lord' signifying the presence of the Lord, indicates a temple site."⁹⁹ In short, the Temple and the mount shared the experiences of seeing God, defining the relationship existing between the deity and mankind.

⁹⁸ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 20. Lierman recognizes this connection between Sinai and the burning bush on Horeb and then states: "In the encounter of Moses and the burning bush, two of YHWH's emblems—tree and fire—clash, and neither overpowers the other. The two will appear again in tandem in the *mēnōrâ*, the Tabernacle candelabrum which is actually a stylized tree This arborescent lampstand appears not only in the Tabernacle which served as Israel's central sanctuary in the period of wandering in the wilderness, but also in the Temple that was to be built by Solomon in the early monarchical era (1 Kgs 7:49). The Temple at Jerusalem was lit by the fires of the burning tree." pp. 20–21.

⁹⁹ Alan R. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus' Body: A Temple Theme in the Gospel of John* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supp. 220, New York, 2002), p. 35, n. 2, citing Lundquist, "What Is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology," p. 207.

Indeed, the very nature of the mountain setting of the Sinai theophany parallels the Mountain of God tradition of the Temple situated on Mount Zion. Both Mount Sinai and the Temple bring to mind the tradition of the cosmic mountain,¹⁰⁰ and each location signifies a point of contact and even overlap between heaven and earth, a place where “spatial dimensions are transcended,”¹⁰¹ because God dwells there in a holy space which belongs simultaneously to heaven and earth. God’s presence both on the mountain and in the Temple was carefully guarded against the introduction of impurity. Thus the concepts of cleansing and sanctification before approaching God, of a holy barrier separating the world from the sacred interior, and of a physical and spiritual ascent in order to reach the divine Presence are common to both spaces.

Furthermore, Mount Sinai and the Temple are integrally linked because it was on Sinai that Moses received instructions for the building of the tabernacle, or portable temple. The prophet directed the building of the tabernacle “on the basis of a glimpse of the ‘blueprint’ or ‘model’ of the heavenly shrine which he was privileged to behold upon Mount Sinai (Exodus 25:9, 40).”¹⁰² Upon completion of the tabernacle’s construction, the sacred edifice took the place of Mount Sinai as the designated location for communication between God and his prophet Moses. “Desisting from further ascents of Sinai, he now entered the tabernacle and there received responses on all that he besought from God’ (*Ant.* 3.212).”¹⁰³ In short, the special role of Moses as a prophet and priest among the people of Israel began on Sinai and then continued in the tabernacle,¹⁰⁴ showing that the mountain served as a substitute temple when no sacred edifice was available. These elements likewise provided durable precedents that coalesce with Jesus’ use of mountain and temple themes at the outset of his dispensation of salvation.

The tabernacle itself was the conveyance of the “temple” of Sinai to the temple mount in Jerusalem. The tabernacle first replaced Mount Sinai, and later the Temple replaced the temporary tabernacle. The connection between these sacred places was not soon forgotten, for “the Sinaitic experience was re-enacted in the Temple in Jerusalem, which was not built until hundreds of years later.”¹⁰⁵ In the Jewish consciousness, therefore, the significance of the Sinai experience, complete with God’s giving of the Ten Commandments, cannot be overstated. To an Israelite

¹⁰⁰ Thomas B. Dozeman, *God on the Mountain: A Study of Redaction, Theology and Canon in Exodus 19–24* (Atlanta, 1989) pp. 13, 19.

¹⁰¹ Dozeman, *God on the Mountain*, pp. 33–4.

¹⁰² Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 140.

¹⁰³ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 75 (quoting Josephus).

¹⁰⁴ “While he lived, it was Moses who in the tabernacle (Exod. 25:22; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.212, 222) received the continuation of the Sinai oracles through an access to the divine presence that even exceeded the priestly privilege of Aaron and his successors (Lev. 16:2).” Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 66 (citation omitted).

¹⁰⁵ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 17.

mind, that mountain in the wilderness and the Temple of Jerusalem would have been inherently linked.

The Temple, positioned on the “mountain of the Lord” in Jerusalem, thus served as a “meeting place” between heaven and earth. It was viewed as “an institution common to the heavenly and the terrestrial realms; they share it.”¹⁰⁶ To ascend the holy temple mount was, therefore, to enter into a different and holier reality: “The ascent into the Temple and participation in the liturgy that took place there were thought to endow the worshiper with a higher self.”¹⁰⁷ Because of the sacred Presence in the Temple, the edifice was to be carefully guarded against impurity, reminiscent of the boundary set around Sinai. For this reason Psalm 24 asks, “Who shall ascend into the hill (*anabēsetai eis to oros*) of the Lord?” and responds with a list of requirements including both purity and cleanliness.

Temple and Covenant

At the Temple, people needed to present themselves in a holy state because the mountain and by extension the temple mount were places of covenant making and covenant renewal in the biblical tradition. On Mount Sinai God met with man to create the sacred covenant which was central to Israel’s identity. On Sinai, God defined his relationship with his people Israel as covenantal,¹⁰⁸ for which reason that mountain was viewed as “*the* place of Torah and covenant.”¹⁰⁹ As a result of the covenant made on Sinai, “the format of covenant served as the controlling metaphor for Israel’s relationship to God through most of biblical history. . . . The literary legacy of ancient Israel is incomprehensible apart from covenant theology.”¹¹⁰ Such covenant theology is inextricably linked to the mountain and then, by extension, to the Temple, for “as important as the ideas of cosmic center and divine accessibility are for understanding the role of the Temple, so too is the association of sanctuary with covenant.”¹¹¹ John Lundquist goes so far as to incorporate the concept of the ancient temple directly into his definition of *covenant* as “a formal, ritually enacted ceremony mediated by a prophet or king *in* (more exactly ‘in front of,’ or ‘on,’ in the case of a mountain) *the temple*, a ceremony in which the community is founded through the people’s . . . acceptance of the revealed law.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 123.

¹⁰⁷ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 175; see also p. 142.

¹⁰⁸ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, pp. 26, 35.

¹⁰⁹ Booij, “Mountain and Theophany,” p. 17.

¹¹⁰ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 36.

¹¹¹ Meyers, “Temple, Jerusalem,” 360.

¹¹² John M. Lundquist, “Temple, Covenant, and Law in the Ancient Near East and in the Old Testament,” reprinted in Donald W. Parry (ed.), *Temples of the Ancient World* (Salt Lake City, 1994), p. 275 (emphasis added).

For this reason, in the Temple rested the ark of the covenant, containing the two tablets of stone (the “covenant document”) on which were written the covenant and which symbolized God’s presence in the Holy of Holies.¹¹³ Delbert Hillers describes this holy temple furnishing as “the point at which the heavenly sphere touched the earthly.”¹¹⁴ From Mount Sinai to the tabernacle, and then finally to the Temple, the covenant was at the center of Israel’s most sacred spaces, making such spaces “the focus of Israel’s religious life.”¹¹⁵ Thus, the Temple in Israel was a shrine of the covenant, the home of the ark of the covenant, and the place where the covenant was renewed and perpetuated. There the priest acted as a mediator between God and his covenant people Israel, offering the sacrifices of Israel up to God and instructing the people in God’s name.¹¹⁶

The tables of the Ten Commandments served “as a formulation of conditions for membership in the community.”¹¹⁷ The Sinai covenant was frequently renewed, as scholars have become increasingly aware. As Hebrew University’s Moshe Weinfeld correctly notes, “In the last fifty years the view has become increasingly accepted that the event at which God pronounced his words at Sinai was not regarded as a once and for all event but as an occurrence that repeated itself whenever the people of Israel assembled and swore allegiance to their God.”¹¹⁸ Certain rites and ceremonies of the Temple involved, above all, covenant commemoration and renewal;¹¹⁹ in this connection, “in Second Temple times, the Decalogue was read daily in the Temple, together with the *Shema*^c prayer, close to the time of the offering of the Daily Offering. . . . Josephus testifies in regard to the Decalogue: ‘These words it is not permitted us to state explicitly, to the letter’ (*Ant.* 3:90), . . . because of their sanctity.”¹²⁰

Seeing the Sermon on the Mount as a text grounded in such an ethic of obedience has not always been popular, but its mountain setting and its explicit inclusion of three of the Ten Commandments make its genre presumptively covenantal, and the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount support the idea that its provisions were given by way of commandment and accepted through the formation of a covenant. Just as the commands and laws promulgated in the making of the covenant at Sinai

¹¹³ Meyers, “Temple, Jerusalem,” 360.

¹¹⁴ Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore, 1969), p. 74.

¹¹⁵ Hillers, *Covenant*, p. 74.

¹¹⁶ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, p. 126.

¹¹⁷ Moshe Weinfeld, “The Decalogue: Its Significance, Uniqueness, and Place in Israel’s Tradition,” in Edwin R. Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss, and John W. Welch (eds), *Religion and Law: Biblical Judaic and Islamic Perspectives* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1990), p. 15.

¹¹⁸ Weinfeld, “Decalogue,” pp. 26–7.

¹¹⁹ See Joshua Berman, *The Temple: Its Symbolism and Meaning Then and Now* (Northvale, New Jersey, 1995), pp. 126–45.

¹²⁰ Weinfeld, “Decalogue,” p. 34.

formed the basis of the Old Testament, the commandments and teachings of the Sermon on the Mount form the basis of the new covenant (or new “testament,” *diathēkē*). Scholars have long debated the basic character of the injunctions of the Sermon: Do they form a new public order, a set of ideals, a set of commands, a law of the future kingdom, an existential claim of God on the individual, or general conditions of discipleship?¹²¹ Seeing the Sermon on the Mount essentially as a set of commandments issued in connection with the making of a new covenant is not the normal approach taken by most interpreters, though this view has been proposed by some ruthlessly candid commentators.¹²² 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 (compare Matthew 5:41–2) and thereby not to “abandon the *commandments* of the Lord”; it promises that “blessed is the man who gives according to the *commandment*, for he is without blame” (*Didache* 1:5; emphasis added).

It remains unpopular, though, to see Jesus’ words here as commandments figuring prominently in his message of righteousness. 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; emphasis added) to the straw pile¹²³ and called the Sermon on the Mount “the devil’s masterpiece”¹²⁴ 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.”¹²⁵ 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.”¹²⁶

Not only is the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount an obedience-ethic, this text belongs every bit as much to the mediation by Jesus of a sacred covenant relationship between God and his people as to the covenant mediated by Moses between Jehovah and the children of Israel. Davies refers to the law given by Jesus

¹²¹ B. Friesen, “Approaches to the Interpretation and Application of the Sermon on the Mount,” *Direction* 10 (1981): 19–25; Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 1–12.

¹²² Hans Windisch, *Der Sinn der Bergpredigt* (Leipzig, 1929), discussed in Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 2. See Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 187; and Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, p. 208.

¹²³ 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, 1906), vol. 6, p. 10.

¹²⁴ “Das heißt ein Meister Stuck des Teuffels.” *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, vol. 32, p. 300.

¹²⁵ *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, vol. 32, p. 300.

¹²⁶ As paraphrased by Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 2.

in the Sermon on the Mount as “the Messianic Torah,”¹²⁷ and Lierman asserts that “the wonder-struck marveling of the people [to Jesus’ giving of this law] is best explained as a reaction to Jesus’ display of Moses-like authority.”¹²⁸ The law-making authority of Moses on Sinai was a part of the covenant formed there, and thus Jesus’ demonstration of unprecedented authority in interpreting and making law signifies that his commandments fall within a new covenant.

Furthermore, just as the Sinaitic covenant was renewed by ceremonies designed to remind Israel of the Sinai experience, so it becomes increasingly evident that the Sermon on the Mount and its regeneration of the Decalogue would not have been regarded by early Christians merely as an ordinary historical event but as a new dispensation of God’s commandments from a new mount. Such words are to be remembered, rehearsed, and perpetuated. Much as the Decalogue was repeated daily in the Temple of Jerusalem, the Sermon on the Mount may well have been rehearsed on many occasions by early Christians. Indeed, as Richard Horsley has argued, the use of the presumed New Testament source Q 6:20–49 as an oral “covenant renewal discourse” probably began very early in Christian communities.¹²⁹ In this light, it would have been completely natural for Matthean Christians likewise to rehearse the entire Sermon on the Mount in their congregations, synagogues, or sanctuaries, especially as part of initiation rituals such as baptism, or in connection with renewal ceremonies such as the Eucharist, more than has been usually even entertained as a possibility.

Alternative Holy Mounts

All of this raises the possibility that the Sermon on the Mount should be seen as being deeply rooted in the foundational Israelite tradition of the mountain of the Lord. Exploring and testing this hypothesis will be the burden of the remainder of this book. But at the outset, this theory brings with it a number of inviting prospects that draw upon cosmic mountain imagery in general, seeing connections between Moses and Jesus as lawgivers, transporting the imagery of Sinai, the tabernacle and the Temple, as the Sermon on the Mount functions in the process of covenant making and community formation.

The way for seeing these holy mountain traditions as the setting for the Sermon on the Mount is certainly feasible, for these traditions were too deeply rooted in essential Israelite perceptions to be suppressed or restricted successfully.¹³⁰ Margaret Barker argues that, even after the reforms of Josiah and down through Second Temple times, large numbers of people continued to worship according to

¹²⁷ Davies, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 27.

¹²⁸ Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, p. 275.

¹²⁹ Horsley and Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me*, pp. 195–227.

¹³⁰ For descriptions of King Josiah’s reform and two very different viewpoints on its merits, see Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah*, and Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?”

their old customs in new places, leaving records in which they declared their belief that the older faith and its vital implements in the First Temple would one day be restored.¹³¹ Josiah's reforms may even have had the unintended effect of elevating all mountain imagery by exalting one mountain above the others, as a rising tide raises all ships.

This mountain ideology was still potent in first century Palestine during the New Testament formative era. In the surrounding culture, it is only appropriate that the vision of Levi—to whom the rights of the temple priesthood were entrusted—took him into heaven from the top of a mountain: "Then sleep fell upon me, and I beheld a high mountain, and I was on it. And behold, the heavens were opened" (*Testament of Levi* 2:5–6).¹³² The same phenomenon is also true of several key events in the New Testament. The mountain setting demonstrated the sacred nature of these events for Jesus and his followers. Jesus ascended mountains to teach (Matthew 24:3), to pray (Matthew 14:23, Mark 6:46, Luke 6:12), to perform healings (Matthew 15:29), and to formally call his twelve apostles (Mark 3:13–14, Luke 6:12–16). On a mountain, Jesus overcame the temptation of Satan (Matthew 4:8–10). On the Mount of Transfiguration, three apostles witnessed a heavenly transformation of their Lord as well as the glorious appearance of prophets Moses and Elias (Matthew 17:1–3, Mark 9:2–4). The final verses of Matthew depict the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples on a mountain and instructing them to carry the Gospel from there to "all nations" (Matthew 28:16–20).¹³³

Given all of these points of signification, we can suspect that the mount on which the Sermon was delivered was thought of as an extraordinary place. As Jesus prepared to give the Sermon on the Mount by ascending a mountain apparently somewhere in Galilee, his disciples and listeners may readily have seen in this ascent a greater purpose than simply becoming more "visible and audible to the people when he speaks."¹³⁴ Being unsettled by the state of affairs at the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus inaugurated his own divine order from this new mountain, apparently with the inspiration of the Temple in mind.

But the old traditions and symbols were not destroyed or rejected; rather they were infused with new meaning: "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). In reading the Sermon on the Mount, one should not assume that it was created out of thin air. "It is a good general rule that all religions in history do not usually create their institutions *ex nihilo*, but inherit them from earlier stages and

¹³¹ Barker, "What Did King Josiah Reform?" pp. 533–7.

¹³² James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols, Garden City, N.Y., 1983), vol. 1, p. 788.

¹³³ Georg Strecker notes many of these NT mountain settings, using them to demonstrate that mountains were the sites of significant revelatory events in Jesus' lifetime. *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 24.

¹³⁴ Strecker, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 25.

mostly only infuse them with a new spirit or afford them a special meaning.”¹³⁵ If the Sermon on the Mount is understood as emanating from or in relation to the imagery of Sinai and the institutions of the Temple, the details of that sacral context should prove crucial in construing its deepest meanings.

¹³⁵ Menachem Haran, “Temple and Community in Ancient Israel,” in Michael V. Fox (ed.), *Temple in Society* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1988), p. 20.