

The Sermon on the Mount
By Chris Kelley

November 12, 2006

The goal of this paper is to provide a brief discussion on the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew 5:1 – 7:29. This is not meant to be an exhaustive exegesis of the text, but rather an examination of broad themes and the goals of Matthew in recording the sayings of Jesus. Additionally, I will briefly consider the relationship between Matthew's narrative of these sayings and the similar sayings recorded by Luke (6:17- 7:1).

Understanding Matthew's goal must begin by an understanding of his audience. Matthew makes more references to the Hebrew Scriptures than any of the other Gospel writers. He includes over forty direct citations and a large number of allusions to Old Testament references. Matthew often precedes or follows his points with statements such as, "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet..." (*cf.* Matthew 1:22; 2:5; 2:15; 2:17; 3:3; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 24:15; 27:9). The emphasis of Matthew's narrative is to prove that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies. Jesus is the promised Messiah. Perhaps a key verse along this line is found in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (NIV).

These prophetic connections would have had little impact on Gentile readers; however the Jewish reader would immediately understand the implications. This strongly supports the idea, held by most if not all commentators, that Matthew was targeting the Jews with his gospel. He starts his message by first stating Jesus' legitimate position in the Davidic line. He then addresses potential challenges to the legitimacy of the advent by linking the virgin birth and early experiences of Jesus to the prophecies of Isaiah

(Matthew 1:22-23; 3:3), Micah (Matthew 2:6), and Jeremiah (Matthew 2:18). In a sense, it seems that Matthew is earning the right to be heard; the foundation of the prophets is laid so that the rest of the story will be considered. What follows is the Sermon on the Mount, also known as the beatitudes.

The beatitudes provide a wonderful collection of Jesus' sayings. For some, these words provide inspirational thoughts and pithy statements about Christian or Kingdom living. They also can be misunderstood concepts that people relate to physical poverty and personal meekness (Matthew 5:3 & 5). How might our understanding be helped by considering the Jewish audience intended?

Certainly, the first ten verses of the beatitudes provide important concepts that every believer must consider, take to heart and act upon; I will leave the exegetical task of these verses for future work. For this paper I must ask, what is Matthew trying to say to his Jewish audience? As I read the first ten verses of chapter five with my ears attentive to the Jewish mindset I can certainly find myself recognizing attributes of the prophets. Given the history of the message of the prophets and the response to their messages, who was poorer in spirit? Who mourned more for their nation, or offered greater mercy than the prophets? Indeed, it seems that Matthew drives home the point when he records Jesus' words, "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:12).

I find myself thinking that if I were a Jew reading Matthew's dissertation, I would see the connections being made to the foundations of my faith. The beatitudes would capture my attention, if for nothing else than the beauty of the sayings like, "Μακάριοι οἱ

πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.” What a profound thought that the “poor in spirit” have joy in knowing that their strength, their power, is real in the kingdom of heaven. That theme of blessing (Μακάριοι) advances to the connection that persecution followed the prophets, so what better company to be in (Matthew 5:12).

The connection with the persecution of the prophets is immediately followed by, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men” (Matthew 5:13). I get the impression that Matthew is taking a logical approach in persuading his audience. If Jesus is the promised Messiah, proclaimed by the prophets and attested to by God, how should the reader respond? Matthew then takes on the imagery and importance of being “salt of the earth,” perhaps a connection with the covenantal relationship of the Hebrew Scriptures (Leviticus 2:13, Numbers 18:19).

Two Jewish scholars, Jacob Milgrom and Baruch Levine, provide interesting thoughts on the imagery of salt in the Old Testament framework. Milgrom notes that salt stands in contrast to “leaven and other fermentatives, whose use is forbidden on the altar.” He understands salt as a symbol of permanence, as opposed to “leaven which produces change.” Therefore, salt brings to mind an unbreakable covenant (The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1990, p. 154). Levine comes to a similar conclusion using a different path; he suggests that its use was more likely a reflection of the overall tendency toward uniformity in ritual. “The phrase *melah berit eloheikha*,” (“salt of your covenant with God,” Lev. 2:13) refers to the binding, God-ordained obligation, or commitment to use salt. In Leviticus

24:8-9, *berit olam* similarly means a commitment for all time” (The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989, p. 13). In other words, salt reminds the reader of a permanent obligation.

Given the above stated Jewish understanding of salt’s connection with an unbreakable covenant and/or permanent obligation, Matthew may be saying that the Jew that trusts in the faithfulness of God to fulfill what the prophets foretold must remember their responsibility before God to be salt; to add flavor and provide permanence. I see this as an allusion to the role of Israel to show that there is “a God in Israel” (*cf.* 1 Samuel 17:46, 1 Kings 18:36). Additionally, there is a direct connection to the permanence of the Davidic kingship as a covenant of salt in 2 Chronicles 13:5. Perhaps Matthew is coming full circle in his assertion of Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s promises. He starts with the validity of Jesus as a descendant of David, builds on the words of the prophets and then reconnects with an allusion to the prophets and a call to the Jewish nation to fulfill its purpose as “salt of the earth” and perhaps a covert connection to God’s promise to provide David with an eternal throne. This draws me to the prophecies of Ezekiel where the Lord says, “I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken. (Ezekiel 34:22-24). Is it possible that Matthew’s intended audience had similar thoughts going through their mind? It seems reasonable that Matthew was trying to reinforce these connections.

The strong connections between the ministry of Jesus and the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures continue in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew's use of Jesus' words, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (5:17&18) seems to be an important transitory exclamation between the critical "kingdom living" verses (blessed are they...) and Jesus' comparisons to Moses with his "you have heard it said...but I say (*cf.* Matthew 5:21; 27, 33, 38, 43). As suggested in some of the readings and expounded on in class, Matthew appears to be developing a direct connection between Moses on Mount Sinai and Jesus on the "mountain" by the Sea of Galilee. The Jewish audience would certainly recall Moses' word from God, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him" (Deuteronomy 18:18).

The question that I ponder is, did Matthew construct the setting of the Sermon on the Mount for his inspired purpose or did Jesus truly deliver the sayings recorded in Matthew 5:1-7:29 in the setting described? I have no doubt that the words recorded were the words of Jesus, but when confronted with what seems likely a parallel account in Luke 6:17-7:1, the surroundings change from a climb up a mountainside (Matthew 5:1) to a level place (Luke 6:17). I have to ask does the setting matter?

Again I am drawn to Matthew's Jewish audience. If the goal was to present Jesus as the "prophet like Moses" and to provide illustrations and allusions to support that recognition, it seems reasonable that Matthew would use creative license for that purpose.

I don't sense a loss of integrity with such a move. Matthew could have used a number of methods to make the same point. He could have said, "as if Jesus ascended the mountain of God, he said 'you have heard it was said, but I say...'" He could have been more direct and said Jesus is the prophet like Moses, something he all but did in recording the transfiguration in Matthew 17. Instead, Matthew chose to take his readers on a journey. They knew the Hebrew Scriptures, and Matthew's consistent references to that known frame of reference provided the spark that the Holy Spirit could fan into a vibrant fire.

As I read and study the Gospel of Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount in particular, I am drawn to Matthew's effective use of the Hebrew Scriptures to help his readers recognize the movement of God. The words of the prophets come alive as the reader considers Jesus' historic ministry. If Matthews words were written twenty to thirty years after the resurrection, there is no doubt that stories of Jesus' life were abundant; the book of Acts records the growth of Christianity beginning in Jerusalem, reinforcing that fact. Matthew takes history and the sayings of Jesus and paints a picture; Jesus, son of man, Son of God. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises; a prophet like Moses, in fact a prophet greater than Moses. Only by recognizing the fulfillment of God's promises could the Jew find completion.