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**Title** Basic New Perspectives on the Sermon on the Mount

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**Abstract** Review of *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (2009), by John W. Welch.

# BASIC NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

George L. Mitton

Discussion of John W. Welch. *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple*. Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009. xii + 254 pp., with bibliography and indexes. \$99.95.

Professor John W. Welch of Brigham Young University recently published an important new study that should enhance our understanding and appreciation of the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon has, of course, had very wide influence; it is a Christian text of great significance. Although it has been much studied, vexatious questions have remained on which scholarly consensus has not been possible. These questions include such basic things as the sermon's purpose, where and to whom it was given, and whether it has a unifying theme or structure or is merely a collection of isolated sayings. The question also remains as to how it would have been understood by those who first heard it. Welch proposes that many such uncertainties can be removed by considering the ancient temple of Jerusalem—its practices, vocabulary, and imagery—as a primary influence reflected in the sermon. He argues that the Sermon on the Mount, when looked at in the light of temple ritual and ritual theory, seems to have served to instruct and guide the earliest Christians in their own ritual performances. In treating these matters, Welch's book affords many insights and suggests a richer meaning and understanding of numerous passages in the sermon.

We provide here two pieces to help our readers sense the purpose, scope, and import of Welch's work. The first is an excerpt from Welch's preface to the book. It provides an explanation and overview of the book's contents and appears here, with slight modification, courtesy of the author and the publisher. The second piece is a book review by Professor Gaye Strathearn of BYU's Department of Ancient Scripture. A specialist in the New Testament and in Christian origins, she also provides insight into the significance of Welch's study for Latter-day Saints.

This book is published in the monograph series of the Society for Old Testament Study, under the editorship of Margaret Barker, a scholar who has written extensively on the ancient temple and its importance for the understanding of Christian origins.<sup>1</sup> One may question whether Welch's book belongs in that series, but it is not inappropriate considering the comprehensive work in the Old Testament and related sources that Welch had to undertake to learn of the temple. This becomes evident when we see the remarkable number of Old Testament quotations or allusions in the Sermon on the Mount as adduced by Welch, especially in the temple-related psalms. These psalms are considered in the ancient Greek Septuagint version, which was used by the New Testament writers.

As this is being written, it is much too early to assess the scholarly response to Welch's study and concepts. Preliminarily, there is reason to hope that the work will receive careful and respectful attention. We have at hand two reviews in scholarly journals that point to this. The first is provided by David Scott, an editor of *Letter & Spirit*, a Catholic journal of biblical theology.<sup>2</sup> This reviewer finds that "Welch sees a strong Temple motif underlying the central presentation of Jesus' teaching, and his book gives us a fine reading of the Sermon on the Mount that stresses its covenantal and liturgical dimensions," adding that "throughout, Welch makes a convincing argument that Jesus' vocabulary and thematic concerns—mercy, enemies,

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1. See the discussion of her book *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* in *FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009): 1–25.

2. *Letter & Spirit* 5 (2009): 271–73.

righteousness, glory, rejoicing, love, meekness, forgiveness, purity—are directly related to the themes of the psalms and Israel’s Temple liturgy.” The study even suggests to him some additional dimensions for consideration, “which would only reinforce Welch’s findings in this fine book.”

Another review of Welch’s study comes from A. E. Harvey, a distinguished scholar of the New Testament. It appears in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, published by Oxford University Press.<sup>3</sup> Harvey discusses the idea “that the sermon is a unity, and that it has a seamless structure that can be clearly traced when the many subtle allusions to Temple practice and ideology are recognized.” He describes this as “a bold claim.” He also sees that Welch “offers what he claims is a new reading of the Sermon in its entirety, arguing that it is the programme for a consistent progress towards initiation into a company worthy to enter the holy presence . . . and [that] the Sermon takes the hearer or the reader through progressive stages of that ‘higher order of righteousness and consecration’ which is demanded of those who have entered a new covenantal relationship with God . . . to draw near to him in a new temple community . . . as priests drew near to him in the Holy of Holies” of the ancient Temple. He finds that this “thesis is attractive.” “If the author,” he comments, “has indeed made a discovery that has lain hidden for centuries the reader must be prepared to recognize that the evidence for it lies deep below the surface of the text.” However, I cannot help but observe that if the case were more obvious, it would have been obvious to everyone long ago.

A. E. Harvey thinks Welch’s thesis “leads to intriguing results” but raises questions that should be addressed. These will doubtless be discussed as Welch’s work is considered—a process that must take place in the introduction of any new and fundamentally different concept. Although such questions may be raised in the minds of readers, Harvey concludes that “this will not prevent them from having been alerted by this well-presented argument to new possibilities of interpretation that seem, in some instances, to have much plausibility.” In light of

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3. *Journal of Theological Studies*. Advance Access published 15 March 2010, doi:10.1093/jts/flq041.

Harvey's comment, it appears to me that even if Welch's thesis only has "much plausibility," it follows that a new and enhanced understanding of the Sermon on the Mount is both possible and perhaps warranted. From an LDS perspective, this would be desirable.