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THE MEANING OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL*

David Hill

It is probably true to say that no other part of the Gospel tradition has undergone more diverse interpretation over the centuries than the Sermon on the Mount. It has been regarded as -

- a new moral law (nova lex) to be carried out literally by all Christians: or, in other words, the epitome of Christian ethics;
- an interim or emergency ethic, applicable only to the period between Jesus' ministry and the cataclysmic coming of the supernatural Kingdom of God (A. Schweitzer);
- an ethic of intention (Gesinnungsethik) providing to the Christian a general direction rather than specific directions for Christian behaviour, i.e. a compass rather than an ordnance map, a design rather than a code for life in the Kingdom;
- an absolute ethic whose purpose is to show man the futility of all his moral striving and thus cast him, in repentance, upon the gospel of God's forgiveness, i.e. the impossible ideal of Lutheran orthodoxy;
- as the prophetic, or the ideal ethic realisable in its perfection only when the Kingdom is ushered in (Richard Niebuhr).

None of these - or the many other interpretations offered of the Sermon - is devoid of at least some element of truth. It is not my task to assess them here. What I am setting out to do is to try to see if and how the author who composed or compiled the Sermon on the Mount (as we know it, especially from Matthew's Gospel) has given indications as to how he interpreted it.

*A lecture given to the Sheffield Theological Society in January 1984 as the first of three on the subject 'Understanding the Sermon on the Mount'.

I suppose I have to defend the words 'the author who composed or compiled the Sermon'. Without going into the intricacies of Synoptic criticism we can say (on the basis of observation) that over half of the 111 verses of Matthew's Sermon have parallels (be they loose or very close) in Luke's Gospel, but apart from Luke's own Sermon - a Sermon of 30 verses given to disciples on the plain after Jesus came down from the mountain - these parallels are scattered throughout our Third Gospel and may be accounted for by Matthew's and Luke's different handling of Q material, i.e. material belonging to a tradition of Jesus' words independently used by Matthew and Luke, in addition to Mark. Be that as it may, there is a basic similarity between the long Matthean Sermon and the Lucan Sermon on the Plain which, despite their many differences, urges us to argue for a Sermon nucleus, probably inherited by Q and reworked, with Q, by the two evangelists, each in his own way. What are these similarities? They are found in the following points:

- (a) general subject matter: teaching about conduct expected of disciples and/or crowds which follow;
- (b) the opening, i.e. the Beatitudes. (Luke's Woe-words are his own composition, I think; though there are scholars who claim that the Q tradition and Matthew omitted them);
- (c) content: almost all the Lucan Sermon sayings are found in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount; the eschatological dimension of Jesus' words is the same, and the teaching about love of one's neighbour (even of one's enemy) is in both;
- (d) conclusion: the parable of the house-builders which challenges the listeners to be doers;
- (e) occasion: early in Jesus' (one-year) ministry and preceding the cure of a centurion's servant;
- (f) relation to a common place: cf. Matt. 5.1 'on the mountain' and Luke 6.17, after the descent from the mountain.

These similarities suggest that the tradition has here preserved something of an extended Sermon delivered by Jesus towards the beginning of his ministry. /1

Now this nucleus-Sermon (which may have looked something like Luke 6. 20-49) has been expanded by Matthew through additional use of Q material (material which Luke has reserved mostly for his travel narrative) and by material from sources of his own. That is the justification for saying that the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew reflects the author's compilation or composition.

There are two points of interest to note at this stage:

- 1 Verses distinctive to the Matthean Sermon as we have it, whatever their origin, include those in Chapter 5 which deal with Jesus' teaching on the law (5.17, 19-20) and most of the antitheses section; the general teaching in Chapter 6 about almsgiving, prayer and fasting (6.1-8, 16-18); and the sayings in Chapter 7 about not giving what is holy to dogs (v.6) and the warning about false prophets (v.15). It is generally agreed that this material represents a Jewish-Christian bias or interest on Matthew's part. /2
- 2 Matthew's putting together of the contents of his long Sermon shows, by and large, a topical arrangement and this gives to his Sermon on the Mount a relatively well-constructed form. The order of the Matthean Sermon is straight forward.
 - a. Exordium: the Beatitudes and the important introductory sayings on 'salt' and 'light'.
 - b. A proposition stated at the end of the sayings on the Law, 'For I say unto you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven' (5.20); this proposition controls what follows.
 - c. The righteousness of the scribes is set out and intensified in 5.21-48, the well-known antithesis section marked by 'You have heard that it has been said...., But I say unto you...'
 - d. The righteousness of the Pharisees - illustrated by the three practices of almsgiving, prayer and fasting - is described and its outward showiness criticised in 6.1-18.

- e. The righteousness of (Christian) disciples is described in a series of loosely related sayings, 6.19 - 7.27: for example, words on anxiety, on judging others, on perseverance and integrity, ending with the parable of the two householders, or, better, the two foundations.

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, then, is a relatively well constructed block in a Gospel which, as a whole, is structured. The most structurally striking feature of our first Gospel is the presence of five major discourses of Jesus, each ending with the same kind of formula, 'and when Jesus had finished these sayings', found in 7.28, repeated in 11.1 (after the commission to the Twelve), 13.53 (after the parables of the Kingdom), 19.1 (after the discourse on life in the community of Christians) and at 26.1 (after the discourse on the Last Things). This five-fold pattern was deliberately chosen by the evangelist, but that does not imply that for him his Gospel paralleled the five books of Moses (for it doesn't). But because of the great authority of the Pentateuch five-foldness had become something of a fashion, witness the five books of the Psalms, the Megilloth (five books), 1 Enoch, the original sections that make up Pirke Aboth ('The Sayings of the Fathers') and Papias' Exposition of the Lord's Oracles, itself patterned after the five discourses in Matthew. /3 Whatever be the significance of the five-fold formula or pattern, for our purpose it is important to note that the Sermon on the Mount - the fruit of Matthew's compiling, editing and even composing - is placed first among the discourses of which it is the longest and probably also the most carefully planned.

Before we proceed, may I say that, while I imagine that Matthew believed and wanted his readers to believe that Jesus spoke all (or virtually all) the words of the Sermon (i.e. all or nearly all of those 111 verses), I do not think that the evangelist believed that Jesus spoke them all at once, in a single sermon. Matthew himself constituted the Sermon into its unitary form and quite deliberately placed it where it is in his Gospel, the first major block of Jesus' teaching. That, incidentally, is not a new or recently arrived-at view: it was held by John Calvin who, when writing on Matthew 5.1 in his Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists shows that he understood the Sermon as a representative summary of the doctrine of Christ

collected out of his many and various discourses. Calvin's comment is worth quoting:

Those who think that Christ's sermon, which is here related, is different from the sermon contained in the sixth Chapter of Luke's Gospel, rest their opinion on a very light and frivolous argument. ...It is probable that this discourse was not delivered until Christ had chosen the twelve; but in attending to the order of the time, which I saw the Spirit of God had disregarded, I did not wish to be too precise. Pious and modest readers ought to be satisfied with having a brief summary of the doctrine of Christ placed before their eyes, collected out of his many and various discourses. /4

Now let us begin to focus on factors which may help us to understand the Sermon in Matthew's purpose and theology. To whom does Matthew say the Sermon was addressed? Following a statement that great crowds followed Jesus from Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem and other places - a statement which clearly recalls Mark 3.7-8 - Matthew says in 5.1,

And seeing the crowds he went up into the mountain, and when he had sat down his disciples came to him. And opening his mouth he taught (ἔδιδάκει) them saying...

It is to the disciples alone, then, that the mountain Sermon is addressed, the ascent up the mountain being a retreat from the crowds? That is the view of many (and it is crucial for their understanding of the Sermon), but it fails to take account of the statement at the end of the Sermon (7.28-9) that 'the crowds (ὄχλοι) were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one having authority and not as the scribes' - a statement which recalls Mark 1.22, the first reference in that Gospel to Jesus' activity of teaching. So obviously the crowds heard the teaching and were impressed. In view of this verse and in view of Matthew's interest in the 'crowds' (ὄχλοι) in general - and for him they are not hostile crowds or indifferent crowds, but fringe crowds, people on the edge with the potential for belief. /5 In view of these two points we must say that the Matthean Sermon on the Mount is presented as having been given to the disciples in the hearing of, or in the presence of the crowds, the interested who followed and who were an important objective of Jesus' ministry.

To ask 'Where was the Sermon located by Matthew?' is almost gratuitous. Of course we know that it was delivered (according to Matthew) on the mount:

Seeing the crowds he went up to the mountain, or up into the hilly country, and when he sat down (the traditional posture for the Jewish teacher) his disciples came to him...

Now before we ask what special significance for Matthew this location had, let us observe

- (i) that Luke's Sermon is given by Jesus after he had gone up into the mountain (**εἰς τὸ ὄρος**) stayed all night in prayer, chose the twelve disciples whom he named apostles and had come down again to stand on a level plain (**ἐπὶ τόπῳ πεδινῷ**) where he addressed his words to the disciples : and
- (ii) that in his introduction to the Sermon (from 4.23 onwards) Matthew shows indebtedness to Marcan language and the Marcan sequence. Already I have drawn attention to the dependence of 4.25 on Mark 3.7b-8. Now the account of the gathering of the crowds in those two verses from Mark 3 is immediately followed by the statement that in order to escape the crush of the multitude Jesus **ἀναβῆναι εἰς τὸ ὄρος** (Mark 3.13a), where he proceeded to summon the disciples and appoint the Twelve. Given the dependence of Matthew's account of the gathering of the crowds in 4.25 on Mark 3.7b-8 and the similarity of language between 5.1 and Mark 3.13a, it is apparent that Matthew's mountain-setting has been drawn from Mark. The context has been altered, admittedly: in Mark the mountain is a place of retreat from the crowds where Jesus appoints the Twelve: in Matthew, where the appointment of the Twelve is postponed until their commissioning in chapter 10 (cf. Mark 6.7-13), the mountain becomes the setting for an extended discourse in the presence of the gathered crowds. Putting these two observations together, it

seems clear that both Matthew and Luke bring the Sermon of Jesus into relationship with the mountain of Mark 3.13a; Matthew adopts it as the location for the Sermon, and Luke has the Sermon take place as soon as Jesus has descended from it.

Such a coincidence between Matthew and Luke is striking, and little attention has been paid to it until recently, although it may well have ramifications for Synoptic relationships. All I wish to suggest here is that the presence of τὸ ὄρος Mark 3.13 is sufficient in itself to account for the settings of the Sermons in Matthew and in Luke, and the seemingly artless way in which these evangelists deviate in their precise settings (but in nothing else) suggests that the Sermon in the Q-tradition was not supplied with any geographical setting at all.

Now what is the point of arguing that Matthew's mountain setting for the Sermon is ultimately derived from Mark 3.13? Because I wish to challenge the very common interpretation of Matthew's mountain-setting as part of a conscious attempt on the part of the evangelist to present the Sermon as the new (Christian) Torah, and Jesus as the new Moses, with the mountain being viewed as an anti-type to Sinai. This view - that Moses-Sinai typology dominates the Sermon - has had a lengthy history in New Testament study. /6 In his book The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount (a book which devotes surprisingly little attention to the Sermon's immediate setting in Matthew) W. D. Davies offered a counsel of caution by demonstrating a real ambiguity: 'Mathew seems to present Jesus as giving a messianic law on the mount, but he avoids the express concept of a New Torah and a new Sinai: he has cast around Jesus the mantle of a teacher of righteousness but avoids the express ascription to him of the honorific 'New Moses'. /7 He resolves this ambiguity by showing that wherever Moses-typology appears in Matthew, it is not dominant, but is absorbed into and transcended by a higher Son-christology. Be that as it may, the important point to be made is that Moses-Sinai typology is not the controlling feature of Matthew's Sermon. If, as I have suggested, Matthew's mountain setting for Jesus' sermon is ultimately derived from Mark 3.13, what pointers to the significance of the setting might that offer?

Hill, Sermon on the Mount, IBS 6, July 1984

In the tradition contained in Mark 3.13-19 the mountain is the setting for an event of great theological importance, namely, the summoning of the twelve to form the foundation of the eschatological community. As Denis Nineham says,

Jesus now climbs a mountain - the traditional setting for a solemn divine act - and chooses from all Israel gathered together the foundation members of the eschatological community. /8

Now when we look at the immediate introduction to the Matthean Sermon (4.23ff.) we find that Matthew too has placed the address in the context of a great gathering of the people of Israel to Jesus (cf. Mark 3.7-8), crowds from Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and beyond Jordan; and we also find that Jesus' ministry of teaching, preaching and healing - three terms which are found together only in Matthew 4.23 and 9.35 - suggests also (cf. 11.2-6) the presence of the age of fulfilment. In short, Matthew has placed the Sermon on the Mount in a context suffused with the theme of fulfilment: the Sermon is not just a teaching collection, but part of, even the climax of, an event of eschatological fulfilment. The gathering of the crowds and the disciples to Jesus on the mountain in Galilee stands in the tradition of the eschatological gatherings of the people of God (cf. Micah 4.1-2, Isa.2. 2-3; 56.7, Jer 3.17): the disciples who are taught are the foundation of the eschatological community called into being by the (messianic) activity of Jesus, and the crowds - hearers but not yet real followers - are being invited to respond to the signs of eschatological activity being worked in their midst and to join the company of disciples. And the Sermon is the messianic interpretation of Torah for this community, the authoritative revelation of the nature and characteristics which the community is called to exhibit: it is the didache which provides the basis for and prescribes the characteristics of the eschatological community Jesus had come to call into being.

That, I think, is the kind of understanding of the Sermon to which the mountain-location and its precise placing by Matthew points. Do the contents confirm this view? Let us remember that we are not discussing the genuineness (or otherwise) on the lips of Jesus of this or that particular verse or section of the Sermon, but rather the meaning and

the case of adultery as it is not in Mark's Gospel (cf. Matthew 5.32 with Mark 10.11). Fasting, praying, almsgiving are required exercises of piety (note their rejection in the Gospel of Thomas), but they must differ from the practice of both the Jews and the Gentiles in their seriousness and adequacy. The ethics of a higher righteousness is the order of a new and more perfect - that is, more dedicated, more devoted in love - community. This 'perfection' (and Matthew alone of the Synoptic writers uses the term) is the goal of the conduct of all Kingdom-disciples: nothing indicates a special ethics for advanced members of the community. 'Everyone who hears these sayings of mine...', says the Jesus of the Sermon - and 'hearing' means 'paying attention to', even 'obeying';

everyone who hears these sayings of mine and does them shall be like a man who built his house on rock...

Although it takes me beyond the very specific subject of the Sermon's setting in Matthew's Gospel, I cannot resist quoting Eduard Schweizer's observation on that verse:

Just as a man does not really hear music until it sets his feet in motion, so a man does not really hear Jesus' words until they are transformed into action and permeate his being. /13

Matthew would have agreed. The righteousness proclaimed in his Sermon stands as the inspiration and challenge for the living of disciple-life in the community of the Kingdom. But, remember always, the Sermon on the Mount is part of Matthew's Gospel -book; it is not the whole, nor is it the whole of Jesus teaching for Matthew. If we read or treat the Sermon on the Mount in isolation we do so contrary to Matthew's purpose and we shall end up with a shallow moralism or what sometimes appears to be kerygmatic amoralism which, in its despair before the radicalism of the words, evacuates them of any real significance for the understanding for Jesus himself or for the business of living. The Sermon occurs after 4.23-25 which tells that Jesus went about not only teaching and preaching but 'healing every disease and every infirmity among the people'. And the same emphasis on the mercy of Jesus' acts re-emerges immediately after the Sermon, in chapters 8 and 9 with their account of Jesus healing miracles. Before and after the Sermon

and its demand stands the compassion of the Messiah. In Matthew's work, says W.D. Davies,

the words of Jesus Messiah bring us to the climax of God's demand, but they do this in the context of a ministry which is the expression of the ultimate mercy. /14

Whether in attempting, however tentatively, to make of Jesus' expression of the 'ultimate demand' (which seems so little governed by any consideration of historical contingency) a way of life (halakah), a vision of Kingdom-life, and the basis for it, Matthew wholly departed from Jesus, it is not possible to decide categorically owing to the extreme complexity of our sources. But we may well ask whether Jesus was always concerned with proclaiming the demand and not also sometimes with the contingencies of existence. There are, I think, traces of Jesus as traditor of Wisdom which have also to go into the picture.

But to return to the issue in hand, the setting of Matthew's Sermon: the infinite demand is embedded in infinite succour: they both belong together: Jesus' acts and his words are congruous. He displayed the utmost agape to the lost and demanded the utmost agape of his own. The words of the Sermon on the Mount - as patterned by Matthew - lie between these twin poles and are themselves congruous with them. It was this insight that made Matthew set the Antitheses after the Beatitudes and close them with a demand for watchfulness as before some 'threat' (implied at least), but to embed the whole of his Sermon in the context of the Messiah's ministry of compassion.

Notes

1. The topically-arranged Sermon in parables in Mark 4 may also be a recollection of such an early extended discourse by Jesus.
2. If any or all of these were in the Q-tradition, then Luke presumably eliminated them as being unsuitable for the Gentile Christians for whom he has primarily destined his account.
3. Cf. R.H. Gundry, Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art (Erdmans, Grand Rapids; 1982) pp.11-12.

4. I owe this quotation to H.K. McArthur, Understanding the Sermon on the Mount (Epworth, London, 1961). p.23.
5. The important work on this has been done by Paul S. Minear, 'The Disciples and the Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew', Anglican Theol Review Supplement 3 (1974), pp.28-44. Note that the crowds throng around Jesus (4.5; 8.1,18; 9.36; 13.2; 14.13; 15.30; 19.2; 20.29); they hear and acclaim his teaching (7.28f.); they glorify God on his behalf (9.8; 15.31) and they acknowledge Jesus in messianic terms (12.23; 21.9-11): they are presented as a major objective of Jesus' ministry - he carries out his ministry of teaching, preaching and healing among them; he has compassion on their physical and spiritual hunger (9.36; 14.14; 15.32) and speaks of them as a ready harvest (9.37f). Matthew distinguishes the crowds from the disciples and from the Jewish leaders (cf. J.D. Kingsbury The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13 (SPCK, London; 1969, pp.24-28). Matthew excludes them from denunciations addressed to the leaders (cf. Matthew 3.7 'many of the scribes and Pharisees' and Luke 3.7, 'the crowds') and shows that the crowds did not share the negative estimate of Jesus' person (9.1-8, 32-34; 12.22-29; 21.14,17,26; 22.32f; 23.1 and par).
6. It goes back at least to B.W. Bacon, Studies in Matthew (Constable; 1930).
7. W. D. Davies, The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount (C.U.P., 1966) p.108
8. D.E. Nineham, The Gospel according to Mark (Pelican Gospel commentaries: Harmondsworth, Middlesex; 1963). p.114.
9. Cf. the language of the Beatitudes and that found in Isa. 61.1-3.
10. Cf. J. Fitzmyer, The Gospel of Luke (Anchor Bible series: Doubleday, New York; 1981). Vol.1 p.629
11. H.D. Betz, 'Die hermeneutischen Prinzipien in der Bergpredigt (Mt.5:17-20)' in Verification (Festschrift for G. Ebeling: Tubigen Mohr, 1982). pp.27-41; quotation from p.41.

12. Elsewhere Betz (Journal for Religion, 59(1979) pp.285-97: 'The Sermon on the Mount; its literary genre and function') suggests that the function of the Sermon on the Mount is to provide the disciple of Jesus with the necessary tool for becoming a 'Jesus-theologian'. 'Hearing and doing the sayings of Jesus enables the disciple to theologize creatively along the lines of the master's theology. The Sermon is not law to be obeyed, rather, it is theology to be appropriated intellectually and internalized, in order then to be developed creatively and implemented in concrete situations of life'. Here Professor Betz is concerned with how the Sermon may function for the Christian disciple today, rather than with how it functions in its setting in Matthew's Gospel.

13. E. Schweizer, The Good News According to Matthew
(SPCK, London; 1976) p.192.

14. W.D. Davies, The Setting of the Sermon p.434.
I am indebted to this great work for the ideas which follow in this paper.