

# **CHRISTIAN ETHICS 104**



## **THE CONTEXT OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

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## **INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT IS CRUCIAL**

Jesus said: <sup>12</sup>*“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)*

The quote is the Golden Rule from the Sermon on the Mount. It is perfectly clear and simple, yet infinitely complex in practice. Knowing how to act in our relationships is a skill and an art. We often have to make decisions on how to act in complex situations. Sometimes we only have split seconds to decide on how to act. Knowing how to act requires skillful thinking. Jesus taught his first followers how to think skillfully. That has been a bit obscured by two millennia of distance from his original setting.

We sometimes think that Jesus taught in memorable soundbites. For example, Jesus once said (Matthew 12:25, *NRSV*):

“Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste,  
and no city or house divided against itself will stand”

In reference to the arguments over slavery and the future of the union, Abraham Lincoln quoted it in his 1858 speech to the Illinois Republican Party: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Everyone in the audience back then knew he was quoting Jesus.

However, Jesus taught a lot more than memorable soundbites. He taught his followers far more on *how* to think than *what* to think. If we could learn from Jesus how to think about our relationships, we will be much clearer on how to act.

This primer is the first in a series on the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus teaches his followers how to think about all their relationships. Matthew’s first readers knew the Jewish context of Jesus’ teaching. We don’t anymore. If we could also see the context, we too could learn from Jesus how to think skillfully about actions in relationships in our context of a secular, technocratic society.

## 1. CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND ITS CONTEXT

How to act in relationships falls under the heading of ethics. Let's review the context of the Sermon on the Mount in Christian Ethics.

Every aide-mémoire to date begins like this: Christianity is not first a set of beliefs and rules. First, it is a *Way of Life*.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles records the apostle Paul defending himself before the Roman governor Felix<sup>1</sup> as follows:

But this I admit to you, that according to *the Way*, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets (24:14, *NRSV*).<sup>2</sup>

The first Jewish followers of Jesus stated it in their community codes of conduct as the very first point:

“There are two *Ways*, one of life, the other of death, and between the two ways there is a great difference.”<sup>3</sup>

The answer to the question “What is Christianity?” is “For us, it is the *Way of Life*.” Over a lifetime, we transfer our allegiance from the world to Jesus. We learn from him how to follow his *Way*.

We learn how to:

- (1) heighten our *ethical behaviour*, and
- (2) deepen in *spiritual wisdom*.

The focus of *ethics* is on our *transformation*: how to *act* so that we grow in health (wellbeing) along the *Way* here and now. The focus of *spirituality* is on our *sanctification*: how to *be* so that we grow to

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<sup>1</sup> Felix held office 52 to 60 C.E.

<sup>2</sup> *NRSV* translation: Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, *The New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Edition*, 1989, 1995. Known hereafter as *NRSV*.

See also Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22.

<sup>3</sup> *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary*. Translated by Aaron Milavec. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Michael Glazier, 2003.

become more whole (wholeness, i.o.w., holiness) along the Way into the life of the world to come. A church is not first a social club that meets weekly and does good work, like a Lions club or a Legion branch, although it is also that. A church is first a vehicle of transformation and sanctification.

The ethical teachings of our Way of Life help us to live healthy lives within the supportive community of our parish and in the networks of our relationships with family, friends and work. Learning from Jesus how to think about our actions transforms us from being enslaved to those selfish, unhealthy behaviours that are destructive to us and others. We become free to practice self-giving behaviour that builds up health and wellness in us and in others, as well as free to seek and find justice for ourselves in all our relationships.

Our ethics are based on the parts of our tradition closest to Jesus:

- the *ethical teachings of Jesus* in the gospels, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount;
- the *codes of conduct* of the first Jewish Christian communities, which teach the Way of Life to members and newcomers; and
- the *virtue ethics* of the Christian tradition, which map practical ethical philosophy onto the ethical teachings of Jesus.

So far in our series of ethics primers, we have introduced a community code of conduct,<sup>4</sup> and, in virtue ethics, we have covered character and virtues, and the four cardinal virtues.<sup>5</sup> This series hopes to ground us in the ethical teachings of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. On completion (D.V.), we will have a solid basis for understanding Christian ethics, based on the sources in our tradition closest to Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> Please see the primer “Christian Ethics 101: The Two Ways.”

<sup>5</sup> Please see the primers “Christian Ethics 102: Character and Virtue” and “Christian Ethics 103: The Four Cardinal Virtues.”

## 2. THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT FOR THE SERMON

The Sermon on the Mount<sup>6</sup> contains some of our most beloved teachings, such as the Lord's Prayer. It also contains some of the most misunderstood. What exactly is this business of "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away"? (5:29) Yikes.

Much of the confusion about Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount is due to reading it without knowing any context. In the real estate business, the prime directive is location, location, location. In reading the Bible the prime directive is context, context, context. Reading the Bible and the Sermon, and in fact anything else, without understanding context and fact is dangerous and detrimental.

Without context, people make stuff up. When we ignore context, we read our own inner stuff into the text and then project that out to others through the language of the text.<sup>7</sup> Our goal is to be aware of this human tendency and seek out context as guide and corrective.

The purpose then of this primer is to provide some of the original Jewish context of the Sermon. Once we understand some of the context, we could focus on what each of the teachings in the Sermon meant then and how they could help us now.

The primers on the Sermon itself will hopefully also illustrate some of the principles of gaining spiritual wisdom from reading scripture, a topic which we had introduced in the earlier aide-mémoire "Christian Spirituality 202: Spiritual Wisdom from Scripture."

Let's have a look at the topics we're going to cover in this primer:

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<sup>6</sup> Hereafter known as "Sermon." We're only going to talk about this particular sermon.

<sup>7</sup> There are two types of preachers I ignore: those who won't dance and those who don't provide the context of a text. Can you think of why that may be? :=)

### *The Sermon's Setting in Matthew's Gospel*

Here we will look at Matthew's brilliance as an author, specifically in the structure he gives to his gospel and how the sermon fits into the overall gospel structure.

### *Who is the Preacher?*

Before we can understand the Sermon, we need to understand who is preaching it. Well, it is Jesus, isn't it? Sure enough. However, the authors of our four gospels each tell the story of Jesus from their own personal context. This results in differing emphases and different orders of their source material. Matthew views Jesus as the new Moses, as the fulfillment of Israel's national story. Thus, in this section, we will provide a visual overview of this national story and how Matthew views Jesus as the new Moses.

### *What is the Topic of the Sermon?*

In some Bibles, the Sermon teachings run on one after another, such that it looks like a jumble of weird, unrelated sayings. Other Bibles add headings based on the content of a paragraph. For example, the *NRSV* Bible adds a header to the Sermon's introduction in Matthew chapter 5:3-12. It is called "The Beatitudes," because, well, the paragraph contains the beatitudes. That is nice, but it doesn't tell us how the beatitudes relate to anything else in the Sermon.<sup>8</sup> This section will introduce the sermon's over-arching main topic. The topic is *right conduct in relationships*, as we shall see. That is why we're covering the Sermon under the Ethics rubric, as it deals with our actions, our behaviour.

### *Matthew's Prologue to the Sermon*

After we have seen how the sermon fits into Matthew's gospel, who its preacher is, and the main topic, we will introduce the format of the next primers in discussing Matthew's prologue to the sermon.

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<sup>8</sup> We will spend more time on the beatitudes in the next aide-mémoire (105).

### 3. OUR SOURCES FOR STUDYING THE SERMON

The first source is a good translation of the Bible. Anglicans prefer the NRSV Bible for good reason: it is readable (long as one knows a lot of old words), yet hews close to the original Greek of Matthew.

Then we'll use a number of commentaries and dictionaries. The one we'll use often is by Jonathan T. Pennington, a respected Evangelical professor of Biblical Studies. It is called *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*.<sup>9</sup> Pennington reminds us of something that gets forgotten: The Bible is about human flourishing. The Sermon shows the importance of our ethical transformation along the Way so that we could flourish in this life.

The next source is bits from me. As Jerry Garcia once said,  
"Somebody has to do something and  
it's just incredibly pitiful that it has to be us."<sup>10</sup>

So far in these primers, I have served the role of editor and collated the words of the teachers of our tradition. The nature of these primers requires a bit more synthesizing of commentaries and a more active role in highlighting key points on thinking skillfully.

The last source is you. The Sermon printed in the Bible is useless unless it enters our hearts and informs our decision-making. Our task is to inscribe Jesus' teachings on our hearts and allow the holy Spirit to transform our behaviour to help us become healthier and flourish in all our relationships. This includes finding justice for ourselves in those relationships.

Well, that's enough of the context of the context!

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<sup>9</sup> Published by Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> I've lost the source where I read it somewhere. I do have a full set of Grateful Dead albums though and a masters in divinity :=)



## **THE CONTEXT OF THE SERMON**

### **1. THE SERMON'S SETTING IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL**

We know nothing about the identity of the author of Matthew's gospel,<sup>11</sup> except that he was a brilliant writer. The early church piously assigned it to Matthew the tax collector mentioned in Matthew 9:9, who would have been literate. Matthew's community was still primarily Jewish with gentile (pagan) newcomers, but he defines them as a new people over against both Jews and pagans. Most scholars think that Matthew's community was in Antioch, a city in Syria with a strong Jewish presence and connection to the apostles. Matthew wrote in fluent Greek. He knew his Jewish Bible, but in its Greek translation.<sup>12</sup> Matthew's brilliance is displayed in his intricate ordering of his material and sources into the structure of his gospel.

#### **1.1. The Place of the Sermon in the Gospel**

Matthew tells the story of Jesus in five blocks. Each block has a story component followed by a teaching component.<sup>13</sup> The reason for this was so that his church community could use the gospel to teach members and newcomers. The early church only baptized adults, after they had been instructed on The Way.<sup>14</sup> See Table 1 below.

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<sup>11</sup> The following comments of this paragraph are based on the introductory essay by M. Eugene Boring in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume VIII*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995, p.89ff.

<sup>12</sup> This was called the Septuagint. It was created in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. for Jews outside of Israel who had become more comfortable in Greek than in Hebrew.

<sup>13</sup> For all of its brilliance, the structure has as many explanations as there are scholars!

<sup>14</sup> In Matthew's community, newborns would have been circumcised and named on the eighth day, and then presented to Yahweh in the ceremony of purification for Mary, the following Jewish custom. See Luke chapter 2.

Table 1: Matthew's Five Teaching Blocks			
<i>Block</i>	<i>Topic</i>		<i>Chapter</i>
	Introduction: Birth and Life		1-2
Block 1	Story	<i>Baptism &amp; healings</i>	3-4
	Teaching	<b><i>Ethics in relationships</i></b>	5-7
Block 2	Story	<i>Healings and miracles</i>	8-9
	Teaching	<i>Witness</i>	10
Block 3	Story	<i>Conflict</i>	11-12
	Teaching	<i>Kingdom (in parables)</i>	13
Block 4	Story	<i>Community &amp; conflict</i>	14-17
	Teaching	<i>Community</i>	18
Block 5	Story	<i>Conflict &amp; polarization</i>	19-22
	Teaching	<i>Justice &amp; the world to come</i>	23-25
	Conclusion: Death and Resurrection		26-28

## 1.2. The Spiritual Context of the Sermon's Mountain

Before we lost contact with nature through our technological society, humans used to live in close contact with nature, its forces, fauna and flora, and its geography.<sup>15</sup> The ancients lived in a three-tiered universe. They considered high places, like hills and mountains, to be connected to the sacred realm and the divinity. They held low places, like deserts, marshes, and waters to be connected to struggle, death and the demonic.

Matthew creates the spiritual context of a story or teaching by emphasized their locations, especially high and low places. His first readers would have instinctively understood the "spiritual mood" of a given scene. We have to be told. Here are some examples.

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<sup>15</sup> Have you noticed how much easier it is for people to be secular and reductionist (insisting that the only things that exist are those we can measure) when the electricity is on? If you've ever spent significant time away from electricity, you know the difference.

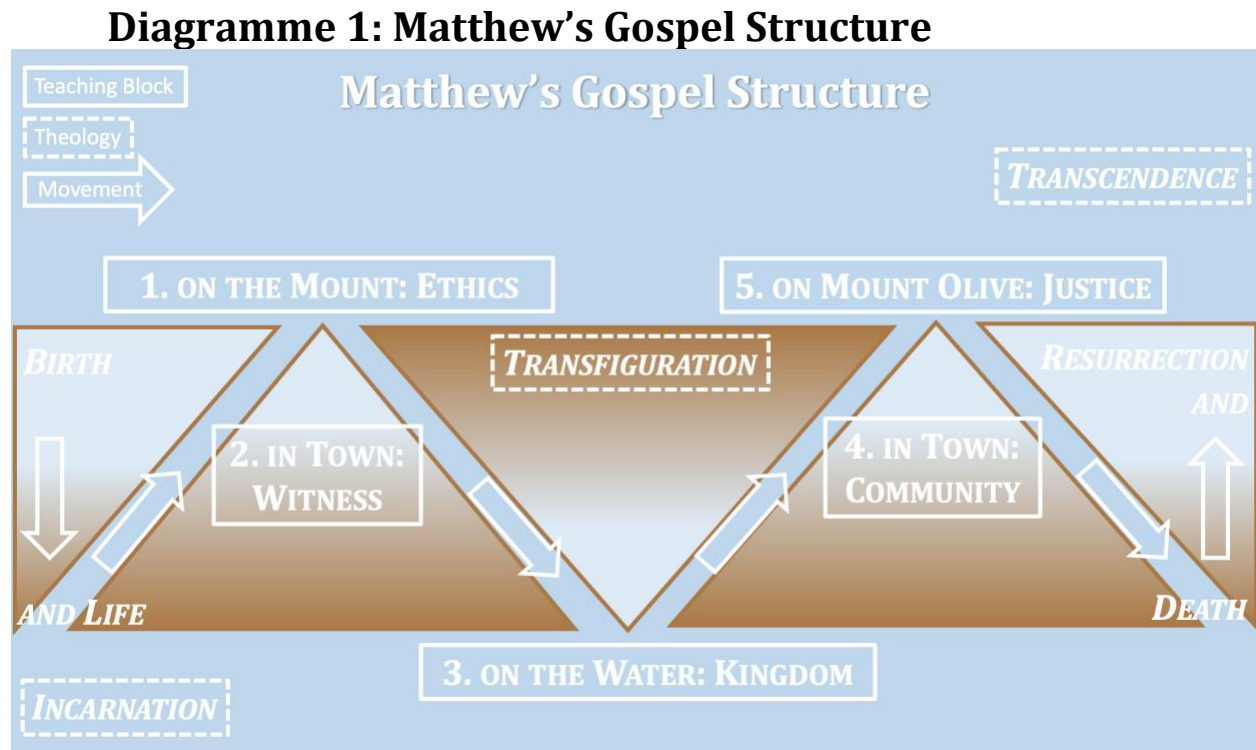
## High Places

Matthew famously contains seven mountains. Jesus

1. is tempted on a mountain in the Judean wilderness (4:9),
2. delivers the Sermon on the Mount in Galilee (5:1),
3. separates himself to pray on a mountain (14:23),
4. heals and feeds the crowds on a mountain (15:29)
5. is transfigured on a mountain (17:1)
6. delivers the future justice sermon on Mount Olive (24:3), and
7. commissions the disciples on a mountain in Galilee (28:16).

## Low Places

Low places also figure prominently, such as the Sea of Galilee, which is often portrayed as stormy and dangerous, wilderness and deserts, and Golgotha at the abandoned quarry outside Jerusalem. Matthew moves the story of Jesus from low to high places and back again in several evolutions. The diagramme below illustrates only the most basic general picture of how Matthew's brilliance.



## **2. WHO IS THE PREACHER? ISRAEL'S NATIONAL STORY**

Matthew views Jesus and the movement that followed his Way as the fulfillment of Israel's national story. We're not his first readers and cannot "read between the lines" as they could. Here is a survey of their national story and how Matthew's Jesus is the new Moses.

### **2.1. Israel's Prehistory: The Ancestors**

The Book of Genesis together with the next four books formed the first written scriptures of Israel, called the (written) Torah by Jews and the Pentateuch by Christians.<sup>16</sup> The Torah tells their national origin story up to their settlement in Canaan. It also contains their laws and is held in the same high repute as Americans used to have for their "Founders" and their Constitution.

Genesis tells the stories of Israel's prehistory and their ancestors, from the creation stories through to the great flood, and then to the stories about Abraham and his family.<sup>17</sup> Genesis concludes with Abraham's descendants migrating to Egypt during a period of famines to settle there in security.

### **2.2. Liberation: The Exodus and Birth of a Nation**

After centuries in Egypt the descendants of Abraham had grown into the tribes (small clans, really) of the Hebrews. By the 13<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.E., they had fallen into slavery in Egypt. The second book of the Pentateuch is Exodus. It begins with the stories of Moses, their leader, and of the tribes' escape with the Egyptian army in hot

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<sup>16</sup> The word "pent" comes from the Greek word *pente* for five, as in Pentecost, which is the fiftieth day after Easter Day. The books of the Pentateuch are: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The word Torah means "Teachings" and "Law."

<sup>17</sup> Abraham is the patriarch of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

pursuit. The tribes were delivered miraculously at the Sea of Reeds and then they fled into the Sinai Peninsula. During their migration in the desert the tribes unified into a nation searching for a home. At Mount Sinai, Moses and the elders received the divine laws of the Covenant between the Israelites and Yahweh. According to the Covenant, they would live by the divine law and Yahweh would establish them in the promised land.<sup>18</sup>

Matthew’s gospel tells the stories of Jesus in the introduction (chapters 1-2) and the first block (chapters 3-7) such that his Jewish-Christian readers would be reminded of Moses and the events of the Exodus. See Table 2 below for the parallels.

<b>Table 2: Jesus the New Moses in the First Block</b>		
<b>Parallels</b>	<b>Moses</b>	<b>Jesus</b>
Infant threatened by a wicked ruler	Pharaoh Ramses II <i>Exodus 1-2:10</i>	King Herod the Great <i>Matthew 2:1-18</i>
Rejected by his own people	Hebrew Slaves <i>Exodus 2:11-14</i>	Hometown Nazareth <i>Matthew 13:54-58</i>
Called “Out of Egypt” <sup>19</sup>	Going to Midian <sup>20</sup> <i>Exodus 2:15</i>	Going to Galilee <i>Matthew 2:19-23</i>
Undergo a water miracle	Sea of Reeds <i>Exodus 14</i>	Jordan River <i>Matthew 3:13-17</i>
Tested and molded in the desert	Sinai Peninsula <i>Exodus 15:22-17:16</i>	Judean Wilderness <i>Matthew 4:1-11</i>
Give divine law from the sacred mountain	Mount Sinai <i>Exodus 20-23</i>	Mountain in Galilee <i>Matthew 5-7</i>

<sup>18</sup> These events are described in various ways in the Book of Exodus. Some scholars date the stories of the exodus to the reign of Ramses II (1279–1213 B.C.E.) See Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> Hosea 11:1 “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

<sup>20</sup> Midian is thought to have been an area in the northwest of the Arabian Peninsula.

When reading the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's readers would have understood that Jesus was the new Moses who brought a new liberation, a new covenant with the new people of God, and led them to the world to come, the kingdom of God on earth. Why was a new covenant needed though? The answer to this question lies in the next phase in the national history of Israel, which would be categorized, in drama terms, as a tragedy.

### **2.3. Golden Age: Conquest and David's Kingdom**

Moses died on the edge of the promised land. Joshua, his successor led the invasion and established them there in a tribal confederacy, with each tribe in its own territory. The tribal confederacy was led by a series of Judges until the establishment of a kingdom led by Saul, then David and his son Solomon, who built the First Temple in Jerusalem. This era is considered Israel's golden age.<sup>21</sup>

After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom split into a northern kingdom, called Israel, comprising ten of Israel's tribes, and a southern kingdom called Judah, for the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

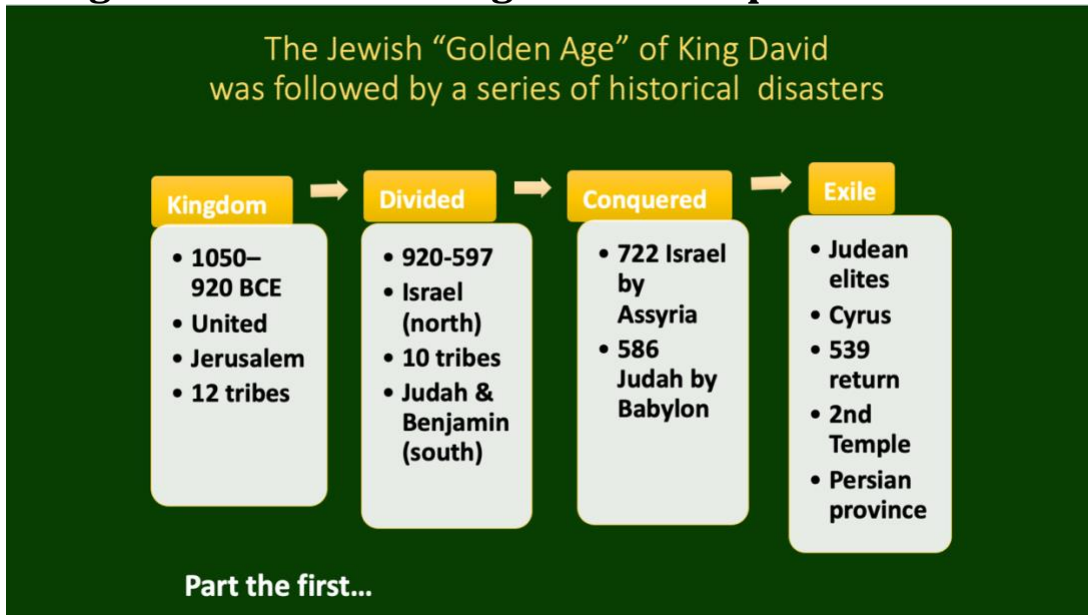
### **2.4. Broken Covenant: A Colony of Successive Empires**

The ten northern tribes of Israel were defeated by the Assyrian Empire and its people taken into slavery, where they disappeared from history. Judah was defeated by the Babylonian Empire and its elites taken into exile. When the Persian Empire defeated Babylon 70 years later, some returned to rebuild as a Persian colony (called Yehud), which became a Greek colony (Judea) and then a Roman one. The two diagrammes below visualize the full catastrophe.

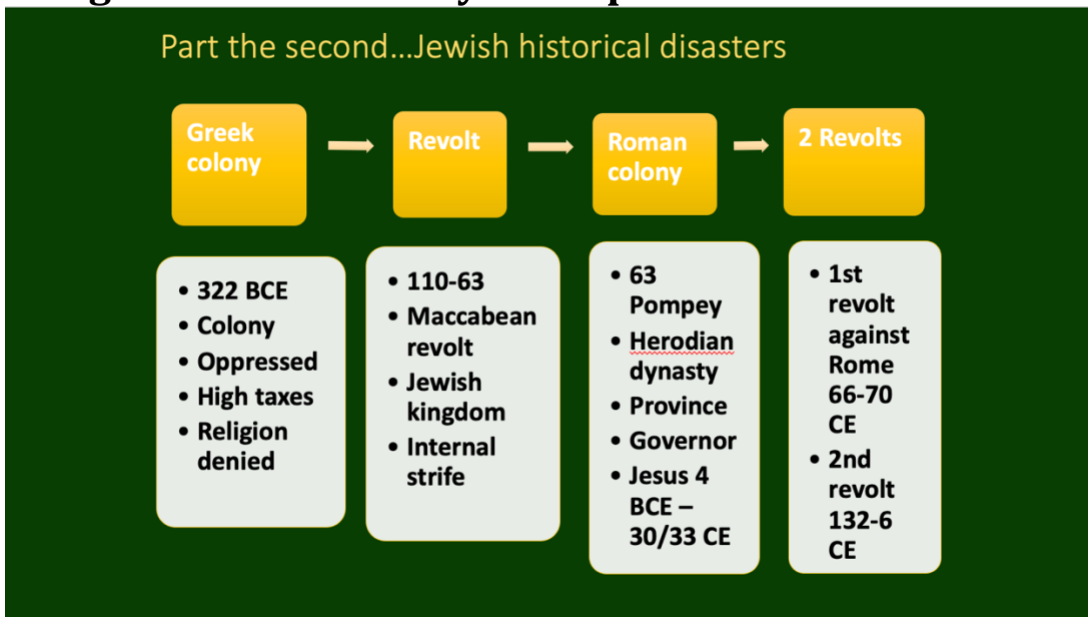
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<sup>21</sup> The Bible tells the stories of this golden age in a series of historical books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel, to 1<sup>st</sup> Kings, chapter 11.

## Diagramme 2: From Kingdom to Conquered



## Diagramme 3: A Colony in Perpetual Revolt



The historical era that spanned the time of colonial oppression of diagramme three, with three large revolts and several smaller ones is known as the Second Temple Era, of which more below.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Some may recognize these two diagrammes from a presentation in August 2020.

## 2.5 Apocalypse Now: The Second Temple Era

The Persian colony became a Greek colony when Alexander the Great conquered Persia in 330 B.C.E. After two centuries of misrule as a Greek colony, the ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes tried to



eradicate Jewish religion and culture.

This occasioned a successful Jewish revolt led by the Maccabee family and Jewish (quarrelsome) freedom from 110 to 63 B.C.E. The Roman warlord Pompeii then conquered Jerusalem and even despoiled the Temple. Jesus was born when the Jewish people were governed by a Roman client king named Herod (the Great). The despotic Herod died soon after. Rome divided his territory among his children and ruled the colony of Judea directly through the Governor.

The kingdom was divided in 920 B.C.E. and Jesus was executed by the Romans around 33 C.E. That is a millennium, a thousand years of disaster, suppression, exile, slavery, starting over, and oppression under colonial rulers. The prophets of this millennium of disasters gave voice to the people's questions about why and how their covenant with Yahweh had become so broken.<sup>23</sup>

Under colonial oppression, society inexorably fractures. Many of the priestly and business elites and some of the ordinary people became collaborators. In the time of Jesus, many of the temple priesthood, the Sadducees, were loathed for collaborating with the Roman government, and the local tax collectors for the Romans were reviled by the Jewish people (as sinners). Some people turned inwards and focus intensely on their own culture and religion. The faction of the Pharisees is portrayed in the gospels as focused

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<sup>23</sup> E.g., Jeremiah was written during the wars against Babylon and Ezekiel during the Exile.



narrowly on religious purity and customs, and Jesus as their opponent. The Essenes took that to an extreme in separated desert communities, such as at Qumran. Some of the elites and many of the people supported violent revolution. The Roman census for tax purposes around the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1) resulted in a revolt in Galilee by the Zealot movement. Another group, the Sicarii, assassinated members of the collaborating elites.<sup>24</sup> Greedy elites dispossessed many people from their land, pushing them to become bandits or homeless beggars.

Despite their society's multiple fractures, most Jews were united in seeking deliverance from oppression by colonial masters and collaborating elites. Many looked to Yahweh to seek divine deliverance, justice for their oppressors, and the restoration of the golden age kingdom under a renewed covenant.

## **2.6. Jesus the New Moses**

On the one side were those who sought sanctuary from colonial oppression in personal holiness within religious communities, like the Pharisees and Essenes. On the other side were those who worked to "give God a hand" through violent resistance to collaborators and colonial rule, like the Zealots and the Sicarii. Caught in between were the ordinary people, the people of the land (*am ha'aretz*). Whose Way should they follow? What would bring them justice, food, security, and health? How should they live?

Matthew's readers would have carried this historical context with them as they ascended the mountain, the high holy place, with the disciples and the crowds to listen to the new Moses teach. What was the Way he would have them follow?

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<sup>24</sup> An excellent introduction is a book by Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

### 3. THE SERMON THEME: RIGHT CONDUCT IN RELATIONSHIPS

The central theme of the Sermon is right conduct in relationships.<sup>25</sup> The Sermon is like a string of pearls: the teachings are like unique pearls and right conduct the string that holds them all in common.

The context of Jesus' teachings on right conduct in relationships in the Sermon is the covenantal relationship between Israel and Yahweh as told in the Jewish Bible.<sup>26</sup> In the Sermon, Jesus rejuvenates the Jewish teaching on right conduct. Here we will review the meaning of right conduct in the Jewish tradition, so that it would be easier to understand Jesus' teachings in the Sermon when we get there.<sup>27</sup>

First, we should clarify our terminology a bit.

*English:*

Right conduct is the modern term I use for the old English adjective "righteous" and the noun "righteousness," which is the translation used in the *NRSV* Bible. Words change over time, both in meaning and in favour.<sup>28</sup> The word "righteousness" has fallen into disuse: few use it anymore in daily language, except perhaps ironically.

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<sup>25</sup> I have based this chapter on the article "Righteousness in the OT" from Buttrick, G.R., (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: R-Z*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1962, 1990, pp.80-85. Known hereafter as *Interpreter's Dictionary*.

<sup>26</sup> We Christians call the Jewish Bible our Old Testament. "Testament" is another word for "covenant." A covenant is a contractual relationship, which the parties to the contract often swear to uphold in a formal ceremony. Examples are marriages and business contracts.

<sup>27</sup> I hope to explore right conduct as Jesus refocused it in a primer on the sermon body (aide-mémoire 106) to follow after the next primer on the sermon introduction (105).

<sup>28</sup> The second-largest failure of Christians in the modern era has been a failure of imagination. When language ossifies it always shows a failure of imagination following the loss of confidence in one's worldview, such as Christianity has experienced since the Enlightenment. (The largest Christian failure has been the lack of episcopal leadership throughout. Our bishops have become experts in managing decline graciously.)

We now use other words. We say: “She is a fair person,” “He is a good judge,” “They are honest brokers,” etc. That’s also what they said in ancient Hebrew. It’s just that our English translations are lagging: our Bibles aren’t being updated fast enough.<sup>29</sup>

### *Hebrew:*

The best way to figure out the meaning of a word is to search for its roots. The Hebrew word for the adjective “righteous” is צדק, transliterated as *tsedeq*. The noun “righteousness” is צדקה, *tzedakah*.<sup>30</sup> It has a range of meanings covering the topic of justice:

- being a just, honest, and fair person,
- acting justly and rightly,
- being in the right, and
- receiving justice, vindication, a fair share, or due honour, all according to the norms and customs of the community.<sup>31</sup>

### *Example:*

One of the earliest biblical examples concerns weights and measures for all who use them: households, traders, rulers and so forth.

Deuteronomy 25:15 states the law and the expected societal norm:

You shall have only a full and honest (קִיּוֹן) weight;  
you shall have only a full and honest (קִיּוֹן) measure,  
so that your days may be long  
in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (NRSV)

Notice how the NRSV translation phrases the outcome of just and right conduct rather neutrally: “so that your days may be long...”

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<sup>29</sup> A riveting exception is by Eugene Peterson, called *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Taken from *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1906, #8021-8027, p.841-3. This abbreviates as *BDB*; accessed at: <https://archive.org/details/BDBHebrewLexicon>

<sup>31</sup> In this regard it is very similar to the Greek concept of justice (as we discussed in primers 102 and 103 on virtue ethics), in particular as the fourth of the cardinal virtues.

The Jewish Bible translation says it rather more forthrightly:  
“if you are to endure long  
on the soil that the LORD your God is giving you. (NJPS)  
Yikes. You get the picture. It rather does make sense. How long do  
people allow a trader to cheat them? Usually just as long as it takes  
to find out the trader is unjust and figuring out what to do.

Second, we should emphasize that right conduct is always acting  
“in relationships.” Our conduct always has *effects*, in that actions  
always result in outcomes. Our conduct also always *affects* someone  
else, even if indirectly. In our modern world, the cultural ethos  
emphasizes the individual and freedom. In the ancient world,  
the cultural ethos emphasized the individual and the relationships.

As we saw in Aide-Mémoire 102: Character and Virtue, right conduct  
is usually the mean (in the middle) between two extremes. It is good  
for us who live in the modern era of boundless individuation to be  
reminded of the biblical ethos: our individual freedom is always  
freedom in relationships. This includes the freedom to seek and find  
justice in relationships. Other people also have to do right by you.

From the *Interpreter's Dictionary*:

Right conduct in the Jewish Bible is the fulfilment of the  
demands of a relationship, whether that relationship be with  
other people or with God. Each person is set within a multitude  
of relationships: king with people, judge with complainants,  
priests with worshipers, ordinary person with family, herder  
nomad with community, community with resident alien and  
poor, all with God. And each of these relationships brings with  
it specific demands, the fulfilment of which constitutes right  
conduct.

The demands may differ from relationship to relationship;  
right conduct in one situation may be wrong conduct in

another. Further, there is no norm of right conduct outside the relationship itself. When God or human fulfils the conditions imposed by a relationship, they are *in the right*.<sup>32</sup>

This is an important point and understanding it will help grasp how Jesus revitalizes it in the Sermon. Right conduct is a concept of relationship and those who are *in the right* have fulfilled the demands laid upon them by the relationship in which they stand.

For our purposes, there are three components of right conduct:

- in social relations;
- the afflicted as *in the right*; and
- in covenantal relationship with Yahweh.<sup>33</sup>

### **3.1. Right Conduct: Social Relations**

Ancient Israel was, like all its neighbours and most societies still today, a patriarchal society.<sup>34</sup> Also, personal prestige (honour or shame) mattered a great deal in ancient societies. People accumulated public honour or shame through their conduct in their relationships.<sup>35</sup> The following example from the Book of Job provides a snapshot of the ordinary, everyday conduct of the head of a household who is *in the right* in all his social relationships and has accumulated public honour for it. Before the example, the context.

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<sup>32</sup> *Interpreter's Dictionary*, p.80.

<sup>33</sup> This topic in the *Interpreter's Dictionary*, p.80-5, covers nine components. It also covers right conduct in forensic (judicial) and contractual matters, Yahweh's right conduct, right conduct and sin, faith, and justification.

<sup>34</sup> The biblical language is therefore unavoidably patriarchal and this matters today in our own context. Our first step is to recognize it and its context, so that we could mediate it for our time and context.

<sup>35</sup> Japanese society is an example of a culture that has preserved public honour and shame. Western societies have lost this to a large extent. Only in the modern West could a thrice-married, multiple-bankruptcy hustler and sexual aggressor become the president, representing the conservative party of all things.

The Book of Job is a story in the form of a play, much of it in poetry.<sup>36</sup> The story is set in the time of the ancestors, as in Genesis, with Job as a perfect example of the head of a rural household who is in the right in all relationships and flourishing in family, flocks, slaves and society. The prosecutor of the heavenly court (Satan) challenges the presiding king-judge (Yahweh) that Job would curse God if he lost his personal prestige. God then allows for Job to lose everything.<sup>37</sup>

Here is an extract from Job's final speech, where he describes his previous life (in poetry). Read it (slower, don't scan it) and visualize the rich images of ancient rural life in the bronze age. It describes the prestige, the rewards, and the expectations of a man who lives in the right in all his relationships, with God and his community. The extract comes from Job chapter 29 (*NRSV*).

<sup>1</sup>Job again took up his discourse and said:

<sup>2</sup> 'O that I were as in the months of old,  
as in the days when God watched over me;  
<sup>3</sup> when his lamp shone over my head,  
and by his light I walked through darkness;  
<sup>4</sup> when I was in my prime,  
when the friendship of God was upon my tent;  
<sup>5</sup> when the Almighty was still with me,  
when my children were around me;  
<sup>6</sup> when my steps were washed with milk,  
and the rock poured out for me streams of oil!  
<sup>7</sup> When I went out to the gate of the city,  
when I took my seat in the square,

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<sup>36</sup> The poem is sandwiched inside an ancient folktale. The poem was likely composed in the Persian period of Israel's history. The main topics are: Job's friends talk about innocent suffering (theodicy); Job talks mostly about knowledge (epistemology) and about honesty in talking about God.

<sup>37</sup> Remember it is a play, not a history.

<sup>8</sup> the young men saw me and withdrew,  
and the aged rose up and stood;  
<sup>9</sup> the nobles refrained from talking,  
and laid their hands on their mouths;  
<sup>10</sup> the voices of princes were hushed,  
and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths.

<sup>11</sup> When the ear heard, it commended me,  
and when the eye saw, it approved;  
<sup>12</sup> because I delivered the poor who cried,  
and the orphan who had no helper.  
<sup>13</sup> The blessing of the wretched came upon me,  
and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.  
<sup>14</sup> I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;  
my justice was like a robe and a turban.  
<sup>15</sup> I was eyes to the blind,  
and feet to the lame.  
<sup>16</sup> I was a father to the needy,  
and I championed the cause of the stranger.  
<sup>17</sup> I broke the fangs of the unrighteous,  
and made them drop their prey from their teeth.  
<sup>18</sup> Then I thought, "I shall die in my nest,  
and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix;  
<sup>19</sup> my roots spread out to the waters,  
with the dew all night on my branches;  
<sup>20</sup> my glory was fresh with me,  
and my bow ever new in my hand."

The *Interpreter's Dictionary* summarizes it as follows:

"Generally, the righteous man in Israel was the man who preserved the peace and wholeness of the community, because he fulfilled the demands of communal living."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Interpreter's Dictionary*, p.81.

In the Bible, the conduct of the wicked man is wrong because he destroys the community itself by failing to fulfil the demands of the community relationships.

The *Interpreter's Dictionary* explains:

The wrong doer is he who exercises force and falsehood, who ignores the duties which kinship and covenant lay upon him, who tramples the rights of others under foot. His sin is not murder, theft, falsehood, evil in itself, but evil which is committed against one with whom he stands in relationship.<sup>39</sup>

### **3.2. Right Conduct: The Oppressed are *In the Right***

Those who fulfil the demands of a relationship are in the right; those who have had their right(s) taken away within such a relationship are also *in the right*. This was an integral part of right conduct and the judicial system. The judge declared the oppressed one to be in the right and restored the right to those who have been deprived of it by others. The judge decided in favor of those who have been wronged against the powerful elites and/or the ruler.

Here is how the *Interpreter's Dictionary* describes it:

Over against her enemies Israel is always righteous. Her righteousness consists in the fact that she is oppressed and deprived of her right.

However, the same is true within the community of Israel itself.

Those who are righteous are those who are victims:

- of oppressors (Ps. 14:5),
- of enemies (Ps. 69:28),
- of wicked rulers (Ps. 94:21),
- of violent men (Ps. 140:13).

And their hope is the Lord, for he it is who restores their right, who saves those who are bowed down (Ps. 116:6; Ps.146:8).

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<sup>39</sup> *Interpreter's Dictionary*, p.81.



His judgments are always favorable (Ps. 146:7-9) for  
the oppressed and the hungry,  
the prisoner and the blind,  
the widow and the fatherless,  
the alien and the poor (Amos 2:6).

It seems clear, however, that that which gives the oppressed Israel or the afflicted person within Israel his ground for hope in Yahweh's deliverance is not his sinlessness. His righteousness consists not in ethical or moral blamelessness...

Yahweh, who punishes the wicked, does not overlook the sin of the afflicted because the latter is bowed down. No, the poor and oppressed have a further righteousness which is all-important before Yahweh, *and this righteousness is their faith, their fulfilment of their relationship with Yahweh.*<sup>40</sup>

(Can you already hear Jesus in the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount?)

### **3.3. Right Conduct: The Covenant with Yahweh**

In Israel's national story, the word "covenant" means a solemn agreement between two parties, for example, to make an alliance, a pact, a treaty, or a constitution. The agreement states their promises, stipulations, privileges, and responsibilities. The Hebrew word is *bĕrit* and the expression was "to cut a covenant."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Interpreter's Dictionary*, p.81.

<sup>41</sup> The practice for solemnizing a covenant was to cut a sacrificial animal in two. The parties had to pass between the two halves and recite their solemn oaths and then eat the meat together. The ceremony reminded the parties that he who breaks the covenant would receive the same fate.

During the prehistoric era, a covenant's terms was carved into stone tablets. A covenant is more than just a contract: think of an international treaty, such as the peace treaty ending the Great War on 11 November 1918, or a traditional wedding ceremony.

The Bible contains a number of stories about covenants. The one relevant to the Sermon on the Mount is called the Mosaic Covenant, made when the Israelites were camping at the foot of Mount Sinai during their exodus from Egypt. This covenant was not between people, but between the Israelite tribes and Yahweh, as revealed to them by their leader Moses and the tribal elders.

The Book of Exodus tells it like this:

<sup>3</sup>Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying,

'You shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites:

<sup>4</sup>You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

<sup>5</sup>*Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.*

Indeed, the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup>but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.' (Exodus 19:3-6, *NRSV*)

In the next chapters of Exodus, we read of the divine law: the ten commandments and the rest of the laws governing the people of Israel. The laws were the "terms of the contract" between Israel and Yahweh.

Israel committed to following the laws. These laws would:

- keep them physically safe and healthy - think pork meat without refrigeration in the desert sun (Leviticus 11:7), and

- protect the vulnerable and ensure justice – the laws were very clear on protecting the poor, widows and orphans, which was crucially important in a nomadic warrior society, where death in battle and accident was common (Exodus 22:21-27).<sup>42</sup>

As far as they kept these laws, Israel would be *in the right* in their covenant relationship with Yahweh. In other words, the people would be physically and mentally healthy. They would think skillfully and conduct themselves such that all their relationships were healthy. They would seek and find justice because the elders and the elite would also be skilled at right conduct. In return, Yahweh would lead and protect the nation and give them Canaan, their promised land, for the new nation to settle.

The *Interpreter's Dictionary* says it like this:

Israel's relationship to Yahweh was not dependent on her righteousness. Israel's righteousness consisted in the fulfilment of the demands of her relationship with Yahweh, but righteous or unrighteous, she still stood in relationship. The covenant relation was prior to all law and all demands. Yahweh had chosen Israel. That was the basic fact of her existence. All else followed after...

Thus, in the OT there is nothing legalistic about the relation of Israel with her God. It is a relation based, not on law, but on grace, on Yahweh's loving choice of a few oppressed Semitic tribes in Egypt to be his people, his peculiar treasure (Exodus 19:4-5). And because this is true, it is a relationship received primarily with joy and thanksgiving by the people Israel.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> In the context of a nomadic warrior society of the bronze age where male attrition was high from battle and accident, a prohibition of male homosexual sex ensured a higher rate of reproduction to replenish the warrior stock. See Leviticus 18:22. Notice there is no prohibition in the verse against female homosexual acts and there isn't one in the whole Torah. Why? Because it didn't affect producing new warriors. Context, context, context.

<sup>43</sup> *Interpreter's Dictionary*, p.82.

#### 4. MATTHEW'S PROLOGUE TO THE SERMON

In this last section on context, let's look at the prologue to the Sermon as an example of the approach we will take in the following Aides-Mémoire on the Sermon itself.

Matthew's prologue has two parts. The first part is Matthew's summary of the first block's story and the second part is his nifty way of using spatial movement to create context, as we saw earlier in this primer.

We'll take the *NRSV* translation of the Sermon from the Bible and create a study text with commentary notes as we go along. The study text will have our own headings that indicate the role of that teaching point in the Sermon and we will provide modern words where the wording of the translation is obscure.<sup>44</sup>

The text will be accompanied by a notes section, where I will provide commentary. Some commentary will come from biblical scholars such as Jonathan Pennington and some will come from me. I will make sources clear. In the notes, we will sometimes break up a verse into two sections. The verse numbering came centuries later and sometimes contain separate ideas.

Please remember that you are the last source. My task is to bring you the material; yours is to grapple with the teachings of Jesus and lodge it in your heart, which the ancients knew as the deep source of our actions and behaviour.

This section then will contain the study text and notes for the prologue to the Sermon. Note, we're not at the Sermon yet, so these notes won't have pointers to applying teachings to us today.

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<sup>44</sup> I took Biblical Greek a very long time ago, but I kept my textbooks and dictionaries :=)

## 4.1. Summary of the First Block's Story

*Matthew 4:23-5*

<sup>23</sup> Jesus <sup>c</sup> went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news <sup>d</sup> of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. <sup>24</sup> So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. <sup>25</sup> And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

*c Gk He; d Gk gospel<sup>45</sup>*

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### Notes

*Verse 4:23 Jesus in Galilee*

Note the threefold activity:

- (1) *teaching* in their synagogues;
- (2) *preaching* the good news of the Kingdom of God;
- (3) *healing* all disease and sickness

Like many ancient authors, Matthew loved to use triads throughout his gospel to emphasize points. <sup>46</sup> This triad is an example. Triads are a very big example of how one goes wrong in understanding Jesus' teachings when one isn't shown the context. Note for future reference that triads are a central feature of the Sermon. We will point out the triads as we go along and explain their use and effect.

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<sup>45</sup> These are the footnotes from the NRSV Bible, where the editors explain the use of key words. It often gives the wording from the Greek original. They abbreviate it to "Gk."

<sup>46</sup> For example, ancient philosophy and rhetoric generally thought deductively in terms of a first proposition, a mediating term, and their necessary conclusion.

## 4:24 Jesus the Healer

This verse describes an important, undervalued topic for which we have no space in this primer, but hope to cover in future. Jesus was an extraordinary traditional healer, gifted in spirit possession, who healed through altered state consciousness.<sup>47</sup> Western people since the enlightenment and the scientific revolution have lost the ability to understand this phenomenon of the human experience.<sup>48</sup>



## 4:25 Crowds from Everywhere

Matthew mentions the Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and Transjordan (Perea), i.o.w., people came from everywhere. The crowds would be comprised mostly of Jews, in all their varieties, from the areas historically settled by the twelve tribes.

The crowds would have also included gentiles (pagans) in all their varieties and the God-fearers among them. "God-fearers" were what Jews called gentiles who

worshipped Yahweh with them. For example, the Book of Ruth is a lovely story of Ruth, a Moabite God-fearer, who moves to Bethlehem and marries Boaz, a Jew, so becoming one of King David's ancestors.

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<sup>47</sup> The best exposition is by Stevan L. Davies, *Jesus the Healer: Possession, Trance and the Origins of Christianity*, 1995.

<sup>48</sup> I was born and raised a westerner in Africa and gained some rudimentary understanding of premodern cultures on my travels there. The field of biblical studies is embarrassingly ignorant of premodern cultures, traditional healing and spirit possession.

## 4.2. Ascend and Learn

*Matthew 5:1-2*

<sup>1</sup>When Jesus <sup>a</sup> saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

*a Gk he*

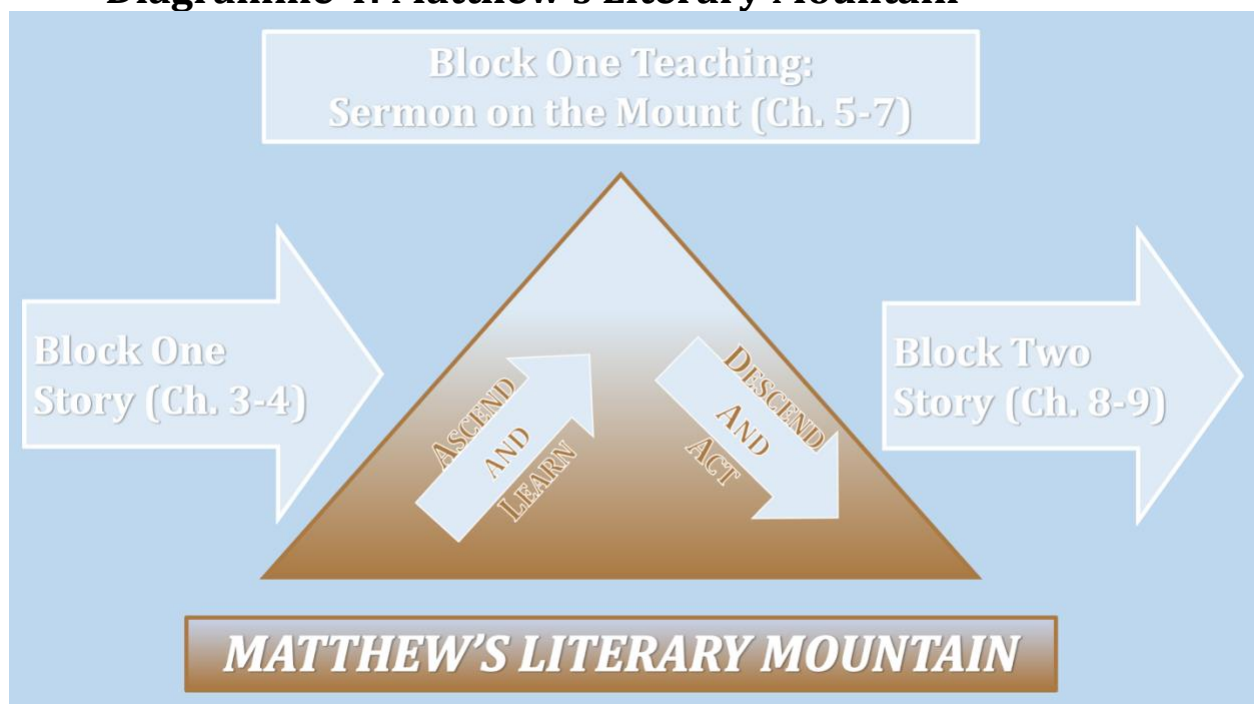
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### Notes

*Verse 5:1a Matthew's Literary Mountain*

Here is our first split verse. Block one's story follows the beginning of Jesus's ministry in Galilee, so one assumes the mountain is in Galilee. Remember our earlier point on high places as holy. The diagramme below shows Matthew's artistry in creating movement through structure in his setting of the Sermon.

**Diagramme 4: Matthew's Literary Mountain**



In block one's story, Jesus calls disciples and attracts large crowds. Now at the beginning of block one's teaching component, they *ascend and learn* about right conduct in relationships in the new covenant between Yahweh, the heavenly father, and the new people of God, Jews and God-fearers who follow Jesus into the kingdom of heaven on earth, which Yahweh would bring about in divine power. After the Sermon, Jesus and the people *descend and act* from out of this new paradigm.<sup>49</sup>

*Verse 5:1b Jesus teaches like a traditional Jewish sage*

In the second part of verse one, Jesus takes the seated position of a Jewish sage when instructing people: "and after he sat down, his disciples came to him." He addresses the four disciples he had called thus far. The crowd that followed him sit behind the disciples.

*Verse 5:2 Jesus the New Moses*

This verse is brief and simple. Yet it is not a mere sentence of "stage direction" (for want of a better phrase): "Then he began to speak, and taught them" contains multitudes. As we have discussed throughout this primer, Matthew's original readers would have automatically "read between the lines."

They would have recollected Israel's national story and recognized Jesus as the new Moses, speaking to them as if they were the Israelites encamped at Mount Sinai receiving the covenant and its laws and its promises of the world to come.

We'll end our discussion of the Sermon's prologue here. We'll have a quick visual look ahead next in the conclusion.

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<sup>49</sup> Matthew tells in the story part of block two (chapters 8-9) of further traditional healings and the supernatural in its premodern context (about which, more another time).



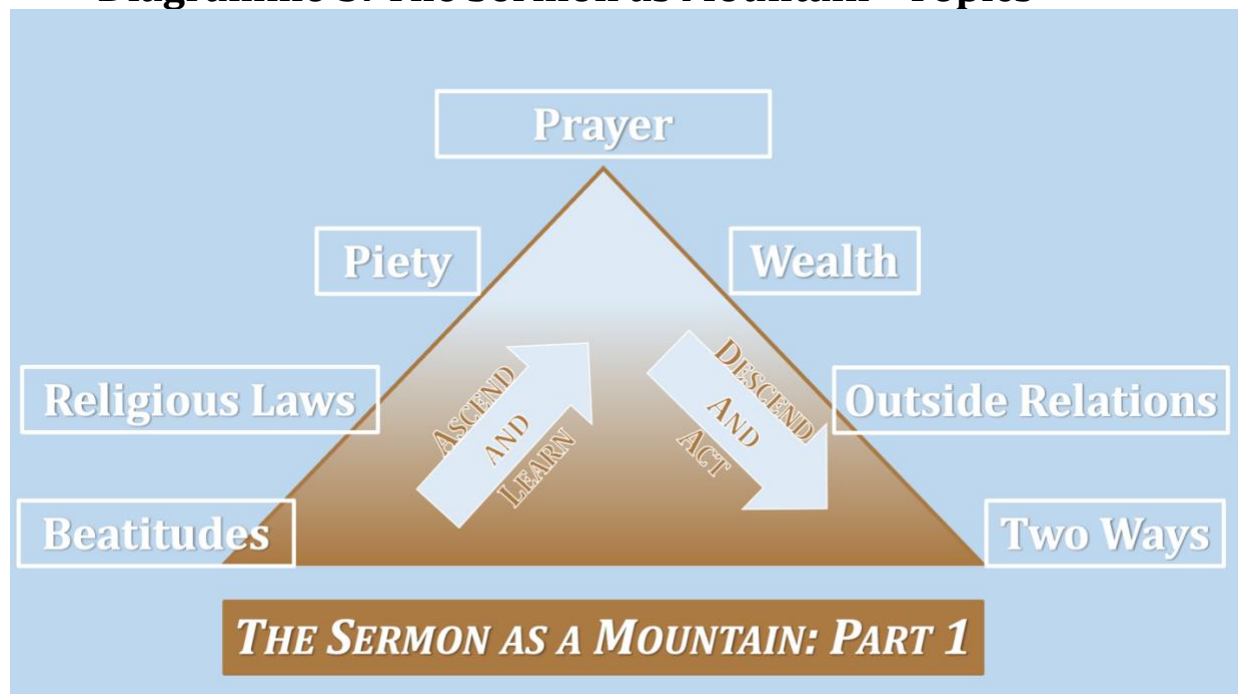
## **CONCLUSION: THE SERMON AS A MOUNTAIN**

As we had discussed, part of the literary context of the Sermon on the Mount is Matthew's artistry in using the geographic location of a story to create its "spiritual mood." The Sermon is set in a high place, a mountain, one of seven in the gospel. Well, the Sermon itself is also structured as a "mountain." Recall the emphasis on "ascending and learning" and "descending and acting." The diagramme below sets out the specific topics in the Sermon within this context.

### **1. THE SEVEN TOPICS OF THE SERMON**

There are seven specific topics in the Sermon. Prayer is the centre.

**Diagramme 5: The Sermon as Mountain - Topics**



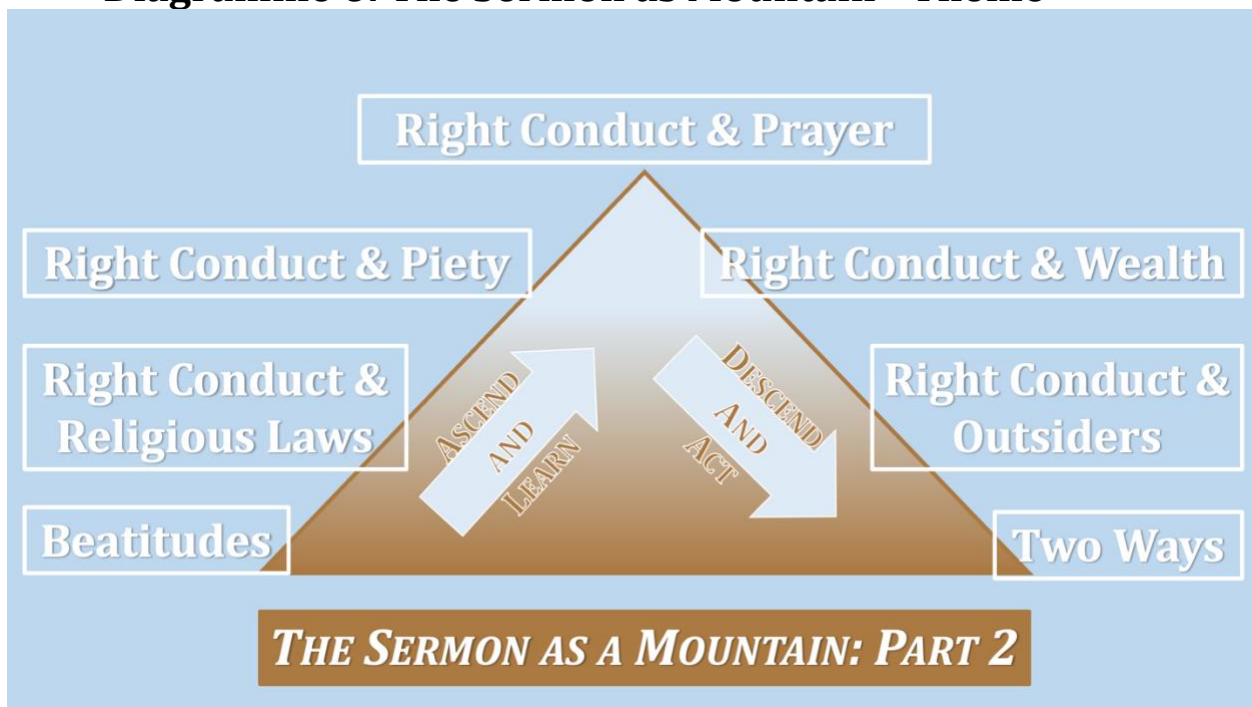
The first topic is the Beatitudes. Notice that the three headings going up the mountain all concern topics interior to a person. The Lord's Prayer is at highest, holiest location, the peak of the mountain.

The headings going down the mountain all concern topics exterior to a person. The concluding topic is the Two Ways (remember Aide-Mémoire 101: The Two Ways).

## 2. RIGHT CONDUCT AND THE SEVEN TOPICS

Our next diagramme shows the seven topics mapped on to the Sermon's main theme: right conduct in relationships.

**Diagramme 6: The Sermon as Mountain - Theme**



It's pretty cool, eh! Now we have enough context and are ready to explore the first topic in the next primer (105) on the Beatitudes. As always, the good Lord willing and the creek don't rise :=)

Thank you for reading.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Compiled for the Anglican Parish of St. Mary's, Russell, by Gerrit Botha, March, 2021. Front page image credit: <https://media.istockphoto.com/>