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Betz, Hans Dieter Collins
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*The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the
Sermon on the Mount, including the Sermon on the Plain
(Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*

Hermeneia

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This massive commentary opens with an introduction which surveys the history of the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount (SM) and the Sermon on the Plain (SP) and discusses their compositional history, genre, and literary function. A very detailed commentary on the SM and a separate, less detailed commentary on the SP follow. Although Betz investigates the tradition-histories of the various units, focus is on the final form of the texts. The book ends with a useful bibliography and extensive indices.

The chief value of Betz's work lies in its exegetical richness, in the way in which traditional exegetical questions as well as Jewish and Greco-Roman parallels are thoroughly explored down to the minutiae. No exegete can fail to learn much from it, and the commentary will remain an exceedingly valuable reference tool indefinitely. There is nothing else like it.

Betz's work, however, is as controversial as it is helpful, for it forwards several uncertain theses. Among the more intriguing is his source theory, which seemingly envisages the following sequence: (1) Q originally contained a discourse consisting of, among other things, beatitudes, the love of enemy complex, the sayings on judging, the sayings on two trees, the parable of the builders (p. 43). (2) This discourse was removed from Q and developed in two different directions. The SM was formulated for Jewish Christians as an epitome of the teaching of Jesus, the SP for Gentile Christians (pp. 44, 70-80). (3) The SM and SP were reintroduced into Q^{mt} and Q^{lk}, whence Matthew and Luke adopted them (pp. 43-44).

Many will doubt that Betz has made his case. The SM features dozens of words ("righteousness," "fool," "evil (one)," "hypocrite(s)," "little faith" are among the more obvious) as well as phrases and constructions (e.g. "kingdom of heaven," *pros to + infinitive*, instrumental *apo*) characteristic of Matthew. It also includes emphases (e.g., the validity of Torah and the importance of love) and uses compositional techniques (e.g., triadic arrangements) typical of the rest of the Gospel. The SM looks very Matthean, and it is not clear that Betz has an effective rebuttal to this simple observation, which was first made years ago in reviews of his earlier work.

Another problem arises from the suggestion that the SM is not Matthean because it exhibits "tension" with the remainder of Matthew (p. 44). To illustrate: the SM, it is said, opposes the Gentile mission (pp. 320, 566-67), does not have a "higher christology" (p. 147), and makes no allusion to Jesus' salvific death and his resurrection (pp. 145, 153, 160)--all themes foundational for Matthew. In response, however, one may observe that Matthew 10 also opposes the Gentile mission, and that many portions of the Gospel fail to contain important christological ideas or themes found elsewhere. Jesus is not "Son of man" in Matthew 1- 4, nor is there a single christological title in the speech in chap. 18. In chap. 10 Jesus is once "the Son of man" but never "Lord," "Christ," "Son of David," or "Son of God." "Son of David" is missing from every single major discourse, "Son (of God)" from every discourse save chaps. 24-25. And references to Jesus' salvific death and resurrection are very few and far between in the first half of the Gospel.

The problem is pressing because Betz concedes that the SM itself is at points inconsistent. He discovers "some tensions between the Lord's Prayer and the SM as a whole" (p. 391; cf. p. 348); he agrees with those commentators who find it "hard to reconcile" the secret piety of 6:1-18 with the use of good deeds for missionary work (5:13-16; p. 347); and he thinks that "a contradiction seems to exist between a theology of God's hiddenness (6:1-6, 16-18) and another theology emphasizing God's manifest activity in creation (5:45; 6:25-34; 7:11, 24-27)" (p. 343). He accordingly affirms that the compiler of the SM "did not care to harmonize" sources but instead showed "a considerable degree of tolerance for diversity" (p. 339). Yet how does this comport with implying elsewhere (p. 44) that one reason for holding the SM to be pre-Matthean is because it does not fit perfectly into Matthew? One wants to know why, if the compiler of the SM could put together discrepant things, Matthew could not have done likewise.

Betz's desire to support his theory of a pre-Matthean SM by noting differences between the SM and Matthew leads to some disputable statements. He affirms that "the SM gives no indication whether it intends 'the [eschatological] earth' to be the old or the new," that Matthew, on the other hand, clearly speaks of a new earth (19:28), and that "the difference between the SM and Matthew is at this point apparent" (p. 128). But instead of being "apparent," is not Betz's contention proof that he sometimes looks too hard for inconcinnities? If one text takes position A, and if a second text *could* take position A, then where is the contradiction? Again, Betz observes that whereas Matthew 24-25 shows

"special attention to the sequence of events in the apocalyptic drama," the SM differs: it "remarkably . . . shows no more interest in apocalyptic timetables and sequences of events" (p. 528). But where in Matthew, outside of chaps. 24-25, do we find "special attention to the sequence of events in the apocalyptic drama"? Does not Betz's commitment to interpreting the SM as an epitome, as a systematic statement of Jesus' teaching, move him to find too much meaning in what it does not say? If one instead views Matthew's five major discourses as incomplete statements about various topics, it is no longer remarkable that what is treated in one place goes unmentioned in another.

The source-critical question is not just of interest to students of Q. It matters for hermeneutics. Betz's approach means that he does not much use Matthew to interpret the SM. Indeed, he frequently does just the opposite, that is, he highlights how Matthew's understanding was not that of his hypothetical pre-Matthean redactor. But those who do not share his source-critical theory will regret that he is interpreting a text that probably never existed in the form he imagines. One can, moreover, make the strong case that, over the years, much misinterpretation of the SM has stemmed precisely from commentators ignoring the obvious fact that the SM is three chapters in a book of twenty-eight. But for Betz the SM really does stand alone. In this respect at least Betz is another Tolstoy.

It is the isolation of the SM that allows the argument that Jesus is, in the SM, not Messiah or Son of man or Lord or eschatological judge but only teacher and advocate for the disciples on the last day. (7:21- 23, which condemns those who say "Lord, Lord" but do not do the Father's will, is polemic against Gentiles who confess Jesus as "Lord.") This is a far-reaching conclusion for interpretation (and one which will be rejected by those who think, among other things, that the allusions to Isaiah 61 in Matt 5:3-12 imply Jesus' status as anointed eschatological prophet). Related to the SM's allegedly low Christology is Betz's conviction that the teaching of the SM is grounded less in Jesus' naked authority than in argument, and that the arguments are conducted in dialogue with Hellenistic philosophy. For example, finding a conscious rejection of Platonic anthropology in 6:19-23 (pp. 437, 452), Betz characterizes these and other SM units as "succinct statements of theological arguments involving philosophical ideas of a more developed nature" (p. 438). This is clearly a proposal others will need to test.

Any book this big and venturesome gives ample opportunity for criticism. My final point, however, must be that this commentary deserves our profound respect, for it is a treasure of great learning and the product of long and serious reflection. Even those of us who disagree with many matters major and minor will find it both extraordinarily rich and usefully provocative. If from time to time the nearly exhaustive treatment unavoidably gets a bit tedious, there is always a payoff of insight for trudging on. The book is also beautifully produced, and there are some nicely expressed thoughts (as on p. 129: "If physical hunger is the result of social injustice, as the SP has it, hunger and thirst for righteousness is the beginning of the way out of it"). Finally, the commentary appears to

be remarkably free of misprints and errors (although something has gone wrong with "an a man" on p. 286). (8/97)