THE MOUNTAIN

When he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain. And when he had sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and began to teach them, saying:
Matthew 5:1-2

Here we see Matthew setting up the event that is to follow which is traditionally called *the Sermon on the Mount.*

These introductory verses suggest that the primary people Jesus desires to teach are the disciples. In fact, it almost seems as if it is the *"crowd"* that causes him to ascend the mountain which would then afford him the ability to teach the disciples.

However, Matthew ends the Sermon section with another mention of the *"crowds"* perhaps prompting the reader to understand that teaching directed to the disciples also had an effect on the larger audience as well and this effect was expected by Jesus.

In a sense, what is seen here is that the teaching of Jesus will not be contained by those he teaches: it will and must move beyond any confines.

The reason for this should be clear: *it is his teaching* AND *the way he teaches.*

We can gain a better understanding of the intention to teach the disciples while allowing for the access of that teaching by the crowds when harmonizing Matthew's and Luke's accounts.

his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and began to teach them,
Matthew 5:1-2

And he lifted up his eyes to his disciples, and said,
Luke 6:12

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching.
Matthew 7:28

After he finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum.
Luke 7:1

Matthew relates to us that the Sermon took place on a mountain while Luke tells us that it took place *"on a level place."*

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain,
Matthew 5:1

And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon.
Luke 6:17

Obviously, Matthew has a special reason in locating the Sermon on *"the mountain."*

The introduction to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount has been carefully constructed out of the following.

1) Jesus goes up on a mountain (a special place for a special event).

2) He sits down and his disciples come to him (as a rabbinic sage).

3) He opened his mouth to teach them (this language points to something of weighty significance that is about to be said).

When he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain. And when he had sat down, his disciples came to him.
Matthew 5:1

Matthew uses this *"mountain"* language in other places.

After he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on a mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.
Matthew 14:23

Jesus went up from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on a mountain and sat down there.
Mattthew 15:28

Mountains in Matthew are locations where special events take place and in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sits to teach *on a mountain.* Indeed, the whole history of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew can be told as a series of *mountain* experiences.

1. The Mount of Temptation (Matthew 4:1-11)
2. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)
3. The Miracle Mount before walking on water (Matthew 14:23, 15:29-31
4. The Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13)
5. The Mount of Olives (Matthew 24:3; 21:1) – The Consummation Mount
6. Golgotha (Matthew 27:33) – The Crucifixion Mount
7. The Commission Mount (Matthew 28:16-20) – The Ascension Mount

Figuratively, mountains are where heaven and earth meet thus, ascending a mountain is an ascent *from* earth *to* heaven.

The king of Babylon claims that he will ascend to sit on the mountain, which represents his claim to the throne of God.

You said in your heart, "I will <u>ascend to heaven</u>; above the stars of God. I will set my throne on high; <u>I will sit on the mount of assembly</u> in the far reaches of the north;
Isaiah 14:13

As Moses met Yahweh on the mountain to bring the Law to earth, Jesus sits enthroned on the mountain to bring the words of the Kingdom of heaven to the people of earth. This is how God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Just as Jesus fulfills the typologies of the Old Testament, so too is Jesus the mountain that connects heaven and earth so that humanity can return to the Creator.

And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder (mount) set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!
Genesis 28:12

Jesus said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."
John 1:51

Eden was on a mountain and Jesus is fulfilled humanity establishing a new Eden.

The temple was on a mountain and Jesus is the fulfilled temple and from there the Law of the Lord flows like a living fountain to those parched with thirst.

To Daniel it was revealed that the stone cut from a mountain without hands would destroy the kingdoms of this world and become a mountain to fill the entire earth. The mountain symbolizes the Kingdom of God and the stone that is Christ became the mountain.

The first creation centered on a mountain in Eden and all subsequent new creations have had mountains central to their story.

Mount Ararat after the flood of Noah.
Mount Moriah and new life through the seed of Abraham.
Mount Sinai with the Law given to Moses.
Mount Zion and the kingdom given there to David.
The mountain already mentioned in Daniel and the restored mountain in Isaiah 2.

Note the similarity of the language in today's passage and Matthew 24.

When he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain. And when he had sat down, his disciples came to him.
Matthew 5:1

As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately,
Matthew 24:3

Matthew's use of mountains in his narrative usually lends itself to revelation. Thus, the use of *"mountain"* here functions as a literary device. Most likely in the mind of Matthew, given his allusion to the Exodus story and Jesus as the True Israel who recapitulates the history of the nation, is the story of Moses ascending Sinai to receive the Law.

There Israel encamped before the mountain while Moses went up to God. The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain.
Exodus 19:2-3, 20; 34:2

Given this possible Exodus parallel, is Matthew linking the Sermon of the Mount with a Zion eschatology background by providing the scene of the Messiah renewing Torah for his eschatological people?

This concept makes sense if we see Jesus Messiah as the fulfillment of Israel, the fulfillment of Moses, the fulfillment of the Exodus, and a fulfillment of the what the Law pointed to.

Even so, beyond Sinai and these other instances of mountain usage, there is the prophetic promise of a great future mountain.

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, <u>that he may teach us his ways</u> and that we may walk in his paths." <u>For out of Zion shall go the law</u>, and <u>the word of the LORD</u> from Jerusalem. <u>He</u> shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.
Isaiah 2:2-4 / Micah 4:1-3

And when he had sat down, his disciples came to him.
Matthew 5:1

There is something of *majesty* within Jesus that Matthew captures by the use of this language. First the disciples *"came to him"* which reveals his messianic character. Secondly, *"he sat down."* It was customary in Judaism for rabbis to teach from a seated position. Thus, Jesus sits down before teaching.

In Matthew, sitting is a characteristic posture for Jesus as he teaches and this is by intention. He sits in a boat near the Sea of Galilee as people bring those needing healing.

> *Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them.*
> *Matthew 15:28-29*

He sits to deliver the prophecy of judgment against Jerusalem and its corrupted temple (Matthew 24:3).

He also promises that he will return and sit on His throne to pass judgment.

> *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angles with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.*
> *Matthew 25:31*

Then there is the *reason* Matthew records Jesus ascending the mountain to sit and teach.

> *Jesus, somewhat like the new Moses, goes up to the mountain to mediate the true interpretation of the Torah.*
> *Harner – Matthew, page 86*

> *And he opened his mouth and began to teach them, saying:*
> *Matthew 5:2*

The phrase *"he opened his mouth"* is a Semitic idiom which was used at the beginning of a public address.

Matthew may have in mind the words of Asaph in Psalm 78 where the words being spoken are given to tell the coming generation of God's presence and faithfulness to his people.

> *Give ear, O my people, <u>to my teaching</u>; incline your ears <u>to the words of my mouth</u>! I will open my mouth in a parable; <u>I will utter dark saying from of old, things that we have heard and known</u>, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.*
> *Psalm 78:1-4*

> *And he opened his mouth and began to teach them*

Matthew deliberately begins the Sermon with this impressive formula. This teaching comes from the *Word of the Lord*, himself and will carry the authority of the *Word* delivered through Torah.

The force of the Sermon on the Mount cannot be understated given the corruption of Judaism. Jesus is the new and greater than Moses. This was difficult to accept since Moses held a high place among Judaism's leaders.

> *And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses."*
> *John 9:28*

To the Pharisees and Judaism, God had given the interpretation of Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. Now Matthew places Jesus in the role of the Mosaic redeemer giving him the *definitive interpretation of Torah* in the Sermon on the Mountain.

Matthew, on his part, however, does not press Moses typology in the Sermon on the Mount nor does he need to. Jesus is far more to him than a new Moses, and the teaching of Jesus is not to be construed as a new law.

Jesus can teach as he does because of his identity as the Messiah, the Son of God. His teaching alone – not that contained in the oral tradition of the Pharisees - penetrates and reveals the full meaning of God's commandments.

Jesus then, in his majesty, rightly assumes the authority due him as a teacher and begins in a definitive manner to expound the way of righteousness to his disciples.