

Mountains as Theological Tools in the Gospel of Matthew Small Group Study Week One Introduction

Welcome to a study of mountains as theological tools in the gospel of Matthew. Landscapes are important parts of ancient stories that often go unnoticed. The location of a story provides additional meaning for the original audiences and clues for modern readers into the sense of the narrative. Location is often an unspoken component of the story. This study hopes to recover the use of mountains as theological tools in the gospel of Matthew. Mountains were used to re-enforce the importance of Jesus as the Messiah of the coming Kingdom and tie him to Old Testament heroes.

Goals for Week One

1. The primary goal is to increase the spiritual awareness of the participants. A greater spiritual awareness is the first step to spiritual growth.
2. Establish group engagement rules to create a safe space for spiritual exploration.
3. Create an atmosphere of inquiry and spiritual curiosity. There are no bad questions; however, as a leader you can assist participants in unpacking or restating questions.
4. Understand that our faith is a journey that requires us to navigate several landscapes.
5. Explore Mountains in the Gospel of Matthew as theological tools.

Seven Mountain in the Gospel of Matthew

There are seven major mountain stories in the gospel of Matthew: Temptation, Sermon on the Mt., Feed 500, Transfiguration, Feeding 4000, the Mt of Olive and the Great Commission. In each case, the landscape is an important part of the narrative that ties Jesus to Old Testament heroes. The importance of mountains and the addition of water in some stories, re-enforce the fact that Jesus is in the line of the prophets and a great teacher of Israel.

This study will explore seven mountain stories in the gospel of Matthew highlighting the use of landscapes as unspoken teaching elements used to weave Jesus into the prophetic history of Israel.

Matthew 4:1-11

The Temptation of Jesus

Matthew 5-7

The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 14:13-33 & 15 29-39

The Feed of the 5000 and 4000

Matthew 17

The Transfiguration of Jesus

Matthew 24:3-8

The Mount of Olives

Matthew 28 16-20

The Great Commission

These stories highlight major elements in the ministry of Jesus from the temptation that starts his ministries to the final commission to his followers. Mountains signify additional importance of the narratives. Biblically, mountains are places to encounter God. The Old Testament is filled with divine encounters on mountains: Moses, Elijah, David, Joshua, Abraham, etc.

The ancient world cultures also had stories of mountains and gods. Mount Olympus in Greek mythology is perhaps the best known. The Lakota Sioux believed the Black Hills and the Grand Tetons were sacred. Mountain, of all sizes, are closer to the heaven where most religions believed the gods to dwell.

Comparison of Moses and Jesus Narratives

Moses Meets God on the Mountain
Moses received the Law
Moses is transformed by God's Glory
Moses looks over the Promise Land
Moses empowered Joshua
Moses Stopped the Red Sea
Moses brought water from rocks
Joshua Stopped the Jordan River

Jesus often goes to the Mountains to Pray
Jesus outlines his Ethics in the Sermon on the Mt.
Jesus is Transfigured
Jesus wept of Jerusalem.
Jesus Commissioned the Disciples
Jesus calmed the storm.
Jesus walked on water.
Jesus fills fishing nets.

Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's gospel has been the most popular throughout Christian history. It is structured well. It has memorable stories, and it clearly articulates the ministry of Jesus.

The gospel was first verbalized, stories shared among believers. The stories were collected and arranged by the author to address issues in the church as more Jews and Gentiles became Christians. It is important to remember that the gospels were written first to address the historical context. Meaning, they were not written with modern readers in mind. The stories first address the situation that 1st generation Christians faced. This does not mean that the text cannot speak to us or other generations. It has and will continue to shape and form lives. However, we must first understand the social location of the text and its original audience and intent.

Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish flavored. It does not represent a new religion, nor does it set up Christianity over against Judaism. It invites Jews and Gentiles to accept Jesus as the Messiah and anticipate the Kingdom of Heaven as the children of God. Matthew does not advocate a new religion, but the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies about the Messiah, which is now realized in Jesus.

Kingdom language is central to the gospel of Matthew. The Kingdom is the vision of how God would engage humanity. In Matthew, the ministry of Jesus begins with Jesus announcing the Kingdom and ended his ministry announcing the Kingdom.

Matt. 4:17 *"From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"*

Matt. 25 represents some of Jesus' final teachings. The parables focus on the coming Kingdom.

Questions:

1. Do you pay attention to the location from which a story originates?
2. What can we learn from the location and the landscapes from which stories emerge?
3. Why do you think mountains are important in the gospel of Matthew?
4. Do agree or disagree with the statement: "Matthew does not advocate a new religion, but the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies about the Messiah, which is now realized in Jesus."

Week One Small Group Study Landscapes as Theological Instruments in the Bible

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Goals for Week One

1. Begin to draw parallels between Old Testament Stories and Matthew
2. Understand the use of landscapes as teaching tools in Matthew.
3. Look for “Water Stories” that follow mountain stories.
4. Understand the theology of landscapes in Biblical narratives.

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain,² beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. Ps 48:1-2

The Importance of Mountains

Mountains are a major theological landscape referred to in the bible. Both Old and New Testament writers used mountains to note special encounters with God. The mountains in the region are less than 4000 feet in height and most under 500 feet. The prefix “Tel” means hill or mound. Tel aviv, one of the largest cities in Israel, is 16 feet above sea level. We would hardly consider that a mountain. Mt. Hermon is the highest mountain in Israel at 9232 feet. The term “Mountain” can refer to a hill or a 7,000 foot plus peak.

LANDSCAPES IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Common mythology in the ancient world held that the divine dwelt in high places. Gods looked down upon humanity and engaged humans. It is not surprising that Abraham would encounter God on a mountain with Isaac, (Genesis 22:2). Moses first encountered God on Mt. Horeb and then many times throughout his life (Exodus 3). Israelites encountered God who came down from the mountain (Exodus 19). Moses received the Ten Commandments on the mountain (Exodus 24). Elijah met God at Mt. Horeb, (1 Kings 19).

The major mountains of Palestine region: Mt. Ebal, Mt. Gerizim, Mt. Hazor, Mt Scopus, Mt. Zion, Mt. Carmel, Mt. Gilboa, and Mt. Hermon.

On the Mountain with God

Read Exodus 24:9-11 and explore the story.
Were you familiar with the texts?
Did the 70 elders have lunch with God?

⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹ God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

The Uses of Water Stories

Water stories are also important in scripture. The Middle East is an arid climate. Water is vital to survival. Water stories often illustrate the power of God over creation. The first major water story is the Flood account in Genesis. The second major water story is the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews who fled Egypt. Moses tapped a rock in the desert and water flowed to sustain the Israelites. Joshua stopped the Jordan River so the Israelites could cross over. Elijah was sent to Ahab to declare the end of a three-year drought. The prophets often interpreted droughts as divine acts of withholding rain. Ezekiel spoke of streams of living water that flowed from the temple.

LANDSCAPES IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Mountains and water stories illustrate: first, encounters with God, second, God's ability to control nature. In addition, water stories often reflect God support for the character or characters. Crossing the Red Sea and the Jordan River are stories that reflect God's control of nature and God's support for a people.

Valleys or Low Places

Additional landscapes used as a teaching tool are low places or valleys. Spirits were said to walk in the low places at night. People would avoid staying in the low places overnight. When Jacob wrestled with an angel-God, it was in a low place. In the New Testament, the Bethsaida valley, the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, was where non-Jewish and demon stories emerge for that region. When Jesus crossed over the Sea of Galilee to the other side, it carried additional meaning of Jesus going to a place where spirits roamed.

Matthew and Landscapes

The Gospel of Matthew builds on the use of landscape images in the Old Testament tradition. Mountains are places to encounter God and water is conquered. Matthew often follows mountain stories with water narratives. Some connections are subtle: Jesus comes down from the mountain where he had prayed and then goes to the Sea of Galilee. Other stories are more direct, like in chapter 14. The story of Jesus feeding the crowd of 5000 is followed by Jesus' walking on the water.

Matthew often parallels narratives that reflect the historical character of Moses. Moses received the Law from God on the mountain. Jesus outlines the ethics of the Kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount. Moses was transformed and glowed after meeting God on the mountain. Jesus was transfigured and joined by Moses and Elijah on a mountain. These parallels were intentional and the first century audience would have known it.

Questions

1. Can you name mountain and water stories in the New Testament?
2. Why do think there are so many stories of encountering the divine on Mountains?
3. Do stories from other ancient cultures parallel Old and New Testament Mountain narratives?

LANDSCAPES IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

In the weeks ahead, we will explore the landscape connection in Matthew in more detail.

There are seven major mountain stories in the gospel of Matthew highlighting the use of landscapes as unspoken teaching elements used to weave Jesus into the prophetic history of Israel. This study will explore a few of the examples below.

Matthew 4:1-11	The Temptation of Jesus
Matthew 5-7	The Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 14:13-33 & 15 29-39	The Feeding of the 5000 and 4000
Matthew 17	The Transfiguration of Jesus
Matthew 24:3-8	The Mount of Olives
Matthew 28 16-20	The Great Commission

Week Two Small Group Study Mountains as Theological Tools in the Gospel of Matthew

Goals for Week Two

- 1 The primary goal is to increase the spiritual awareness of the participants. A greater spiritual awareness is the first step to spiritual growth.
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Question:

1. Can you think of additional comparisons with other Old Testament characters and Jesus?
2. What stands out for you after reviewing the list above?

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Week Three Small Group Study The Sermon on the Mount

This week we will explore the Sermon on the Mount. It is the longest, most structured speech in Matthew. It has long been a central element of the teachings of Jesus. It outlines his ethics, understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven and how the Jews (the major audience of Jesus' teachings) can be closer to God.

We will not explore the entire content of the Sermon on the Mount, which include chapters 5,6 and 7. Instead, this week's lesson will focus on the overall teaching and its importance symbolically and theologically to reenforce Jesus as the second Moses, the Messiah.

Parallels Between Moses and Jesus

The gospel of Matthew highlights many parallels between Moses and Jesus. Last week's lesson identified a few.

1. Can you highlight additional parallels between Jesus and Moses?
2. How is the birth story of Jesus parallel the birth story of Moses?
3. Moses was the law giver from the mountain, now Jesus outlines his understanding of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount.
4. What do you think Matthew is trying to communicate?

The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount starts with: "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up to the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him."

Note: The term "disciples" as used in Matthew 5:1 refers to followers of Jesus, not the 12. At the time of the sermon on the mount, only four stories of disciples being called are recorded in Matthew. Chapter 4:23-25 outlines how Jesus had gained popularity and drew crowds from many regions. So, disciples would refer to followers of Jesus.

Sermon on the Plain & the Sermon on the Mount

In contrast to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Luke states that Jesus stood on a level place. Luke parallels Jesus' popularity in the region but contrasts two specific theological elements. Matthew highlights a mountain first as the sight of teaching and secondly a place that Jesus sat. These two elements communicated a parallel to Moses as Law Giver and Jesus as a teacher. Rabbis would stand to read scripture but sat to expound on a text or to teach. This was a very Jewish pattern.

Luke is not familiar with Palestine geography, nor is he interested in making Old Testament connections to Jesus. So, in Luke chapter six, Jesus stood to teach on a level place.

Kingdom Ethics

The Sermon on the Mount has long been understood as Jesus' outline of the ethics of the Kingdom of God. It is a parallel to Moses giving the Ten Commandments to the Israelites. Jesus built on Old Testament teachings. He added his interpretation, which was common for teachers/rabbis, and he added new elements for the Kingdom.

Can you identify areas where Jesus affirms the Law, areas where he reinterprets the Law and new areas of teaching for the coming Kingdom?

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Matthew 5:17

Jesus was clear that he did not want to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Later, Christian leaders took a different approach to the Law, including Paul. Jesus reinterprets basic Mosaic Law and calls followers to a new standard. One way to identify these teachings is the phrase "You have heard it said."

"You have heard that it was said" phrases highlight Jesus as teacher or rabbi. Jesus highlights areas of the Ten Commandments and then adds, "But I say to you," as his updated or enhanced review of the laws of Moses. These "Antitheses" are important to the movement from the Law to Jesus. Jesus does not just reinterpret the law; he points to himself as the fulfillment of it.

Review the following texts and discuss the implications on the teachings of Jesus.
Matthew 5:21, 5:27, 5:33, 5:38, 5:43

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quotes the “Golden Rule”, Matthew 7:12 “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” This summation of the law and the prophets came from a Rabbi Hillel a first century BCE Rabbi. Jesus simply restated a rabbinical teaching of his day.

This lesson paralleled Jesus with Moses, Luke’s account with Matthew’s of Jesus’ great sermon, and began the exploration of the Kingdom’s ethics. This lesson offers a lot of information.

Questions:

What stood out to you as a new insight into scripture?

Why is Matthew so focused on Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament?

Can you see the connection between Moses and Jesus as “Law Givers”?

How do you reconcile Jesus who reinterpreted the Law and fulfilled it with Paul who seems to focus moving beyond the Law?

Week Four
Small Group Study
Mountain and Water Stories

Goals:

1. Connect mountain and water stories in Matthew with Old Testament images.
2. Understand the “Feeding” stories as a prophetic sign.
3. Compare the two feeding stories in Matthew.

Reading Matthew 14:13-21 & 15:29-39

Compare the two stories and determine how they are similar and different.
How is water part of both stories?

Matthew offers two separate accounts of Jesus feeding the crowds. Great crowds would come and listen to Jesus as he spoke. Feeding the people became a problem as the days went on.

Note: We know that Jesus sat with people and taught; however, we have only a few stories recorded that tell us what Jesus spoke. Most of the time Jesus was speaking to the crowds, we are not sure what he said. It does seem to be important to Matthew. We already have the great sermon on the Mount.

What do you think the point(s) are that Matthew is trying to make with these two feeding stories?

Matthew 15 29-39 explores Jesus feeding crowds that followed him. Jesus often went up to the mountain when he had crowds following him. (Matt 5:1, 14:23, and 17:1 are a few examples). Once again, Matthew parallels Moses and his movement away from the people to go up to the mountain to be with God. In addition, Matthew's story points out that Jesus sat, which is a teaching posture for rabbis. (Matt. 15:29)



Water Stories

As stated in earlier lessons, mountain and water stories are important teaching elements in the gospel of Matthew. The first major water story occurs following the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 8. Jesus came down from the mountain and began a series of healings, including Peter's mother-in-law.

Jesus did the following: 1. Delivered his sermon on the mount establishing his position as a teacher, 2. Started his healing ministry, 3. Illustrated his power over nature.

Matthew 8:23-27 reflects the power Jesus had over nature, specifically water by calming the storm. The result of the story is the disciples getting another insight into who Jesus is, which is reflected in the text: *They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?'* Matt 8:27

The clearest connection between mountain and water is reflected in Matthew 14. After hearing the news of the death of John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew in a boat, but the crowds waited for him to come ashore again. This begins the feeding of the 5000 men plus women and children. After the feeding narrative, Jesus dismissed the disciples to get into a boat and go across the sea of Galilee while he went to the mountain to pray. In the morning, the boat was far from shore, so Jesus walked across the water to the boat and the disciples. The story is a great expression of faith, doubt, and confession. "Truly you are the Son of God" was the great confession of the disciples.

Matthew also connects water to this story with the feeding of the 4000 in chapter 15 by ending with: ³⁹After sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan."

These are a few examples of how Matthew connects mountain and water in his stories.

1. What is the point of telling two great feeding stories?
2. Moses cared for the Israelites. Jesus cared for the crowds. Can you see the unspoken parallels Matthew makes?
3. What Old Testament Stories can you think of that highlight mountains and water?
4. What are the great water stories of the Old Testament and how is Matthew building on them?
5. Does Jesus' command of water connect to Old Testament narratives? Which ones and how?

Week Five
Small Group Study
The Mountain of Transfiguration

Goals for week five

1. Compare the Transfiguration story with the Moses account on Mt. Sinai.
2. Understand the importance of Moses and Elijah in the Matthew story.
3. What is the result of an encounter with God?

Read Matthew 17:1-13 & Exodus 34:29-35

Compare the two stories

1. What do the stories share in common?
2. How does Matthew's account of the Transfiguration connect to the story of Moses?
3. Why is Moses an important character in the transfiguration?

In the presence of God, we are transformed and that transformation becomes visible to others. The Celtic Christians referred to these type of encounters as "Thin Places", which referred to the space between us and the divine. Thin places can be geographic locations or simply moments when the distance between us and God seems to be greatly reduced.

Can you highlight a "Thin Place" in your spiritual journey?

One key element of the story of the transfiguration is that Jesus is greater than Moses, while following in the tradition of Moses. Once again Matthew states that Jesus went to a high mountain, which is believed to be Mt Tabor at 1,886 feet, or Mt. Hermon at 9,232 feet. The exact location is not important. (Tourists go to MT. Tabor, which was identified by Origen in the 3rd century.)

Key Elements of the Transfiguration Story

Read Matthew 16:13-20 and determine how the Confession of Peter relates to the Transfiguration story.

Moses and Elijah are Old Testament leaders. Both had major mountain encounters with God. We have highlighted Moses earlier. What major mountain stories can you name that related to Elijah? What elements do you think relate to Jesus?

In verse 5, “a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said. . . .”. What comes to your mind when you read this? When and where did clouds descend, and a voice speak?

Eschatological Elements

Eschatological may be a term unfamiliar to most. It simply refers to the “end of time”. Eschatology was an important element in Jewish theology. The coming of the Messiah was a key element of the redemption of Israel. John the Baptist was a key player to prepare the way for Jesus as Moses and Elijah had done.

There was a popular notion that Elijah would return as stated in Matthew 16:10. It is also an element in Matthew 16:13-20 when the disciples responded to Jesus that some people said he is Elijah. Some thought John the Baptist was Elijah. Elijah

was seen as key to the coming of the Messiah and the coming of the Kingdom of God. John the Baptist takes on the role of Elijah and Jesus was the second Moses but only greater.

These eschatological elements are largely lost on the modern reader; however, they were additional tools that Matthew used to highlight Jesus as the Messiah.

The Transfiguration story highlights God's connection to Jesus and affirms the role of Jesus as the Messiah. The story specifically places Jesus in the line of Moses and Elijah. Earlier lessons have stated how Matthew alludes to Old Testament stories and Moses. The Transfiguration clearly ties Jesus to Moses and places Jesus as the Son and Beloved of God.

The importance of the story is both to affirm Jesus as the Messiah and that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophets' declarations of the coming of the chosen one.

Modern Eschatology

Discuss your ideas of eschatology, the end of time.

Do you hold specific views of the end of time? How did you come to your views?

Do you believe that certain things must occur before the end of time?

How are you being transformed by the Spirit of God?

How have others seen your transformation?

Week Six
Small Group Study
The Great Commission

The Commissioning of the Disciples

The final story in Matthew is on a mountain in Galilee. Jesus commissioned 11 of his disciples to take the “Jesus Movement” to the next stage.

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

There are several issues with the final words of Jesus in Matthew that we will not explore in this study. It is important to note that the gospel of Matthew is written after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Verse 19 is particularly specific and reflects later church developments around baptism that are not reflected in other New Testament writings.

The final story of Jesus as he “commissions” the disciples is on an unspecified mountain. The location is not as important as that it is on a mountain, which continues to symbolize the messianic character of Jesus. The final words of Jesus to his disciples were to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, teaching them to obey what Jesus had commanded. In short, the commission was to continue to bring about the Kingdom of God.

This final mountain setting for, the parting words of Jesus completes the parallels with Moses. Much like Moses commission to Joshua, Jesus encouraged disciples to continue the work of the Kingdom of God. Mountains in Matthew have more theological importance than geographical. Mountains are theological instruments to reenforce that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the anointed one, the Messiah.

Ending of Matthew

The final chapter of Matthew gives a short narrative on the resurrection and then quickly moves to the Great Commission. Mark and Matthew have short resurrection narratives, while Luke and John have longer stories.

Why do you think Matthew spent so little time on the resurrection story given the elements of the study over the last six weeks?

Matthew spent more time with the Mt. Olive/Gethsemane story and the events leading up to the resurrection. Why do you think that is?

The key focus for Matthew is the reality that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one sent by God to bring about the Kingdom of God.

Does the great commission hold more importance than the resurrection for Matthew?

Conclusion

Over the last six weeks, we have explored landscape images in the Old Testament and in Matthew. The goal has been to understand landscapes as theological tools, which Matthew used to emphasize theological points. Matthew attempted to connect the stories of Jesus with his context of Jewish converts joining the emerging “Jesus Movement”. Matthew highlights Jesus as the anointed one of God who stands in the line of the prophets. This is specifically emphasized in the Transfiguration story; however, the inference to Moses is woven throughout the gospel.

Final Questions

I invite each group to create questions around this study.
I will invite all small groups to come to a session that I will host at Hillspring to discuss your questions and thoughts.
This optional session will be scheduled to allow all group members to attend who wish.