Book Review


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This collection of twelve essays seeks to bring the insights of cognitive science to a specific text, the sermon on the mount in the Gospel of Matthew. The volume intentionally eschews major areas of well-worn scholarly ground – historical considerations (did Jesus actually say any of these things?) and textual criticism (which version is original?). These points are touched on only when necessary. Rather, the focus is on attempting to explain the historic appeal of the sermon by considering how the sayings interact with our innate cognitive systems. This is an innovative approach. The text contains paradoxical inversions, challenging morality, and an ethos not only shocking but at times seemingly cruel. Imagine telling a freezing person not to worry about clothing, or a starving parent with a starving child not to worry about food. “Let them eat cake” pales in comparison. As humans past and present know, God does not miraculously clothe the poor or feed the hungry; they die. The sermon’s history of interpretation is thus filled with attempts at mitigation, often through creative interpretation or appeals to an eschatological mindset. This, however, does not address the historical issue of why such a text became so influential in the first place. The volume asserts that it is precisely the shocking, questionable, and seemingly impossible ideals contained in the sermon that make it cognitively “sticky.” It is impossible, here, to give a thorough response to each essay. I will lay out the main arguments of each contribution and try to assess the approach.

The opening essay by the editors effectively summarizes the history of scholarship on the sermon. It also lays out the central premise, namely that the human brain has not changed in the roughly 2000 years since the text’s creation. Therefore, stable elements of human cognition can help explain how people would have experienced specific elements of the text. The editors also provide useful framing for the main cognitive sub-theories employed in the ensuing essays.

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The second chapter by Shantz considers Mt 6.22-23 (the eye as lamp of the body). She shows the cognitively normative salience of eyes (looking in eyes/following people’s gaze) in constructing Theory of Mind, the subsequent ubiquity of eye-related metaphors for understanding in many languages, and the notion of the “evil eye.” The third essay by Riotto analyzes the riskiness of the ideology in the sermon. The main risks were humiliation and loss of status. How does the text attempt to portray these risks as “worth it?” Cognitive theory shows that risk/benefit analysis is not logical but highly influenced by emotional response. By strategically avoiding the consequences risk (humiliation), the sermon seeks to lessen perceived risk and increase perceived benefit, not through ineffective logical argument but intuitive emotional appeal.

The essay by Katzen considers Mt 5.38–48 (the antitheses on non-retaliation and loving your enemy) in light of research on prosocial behavior and altruism. Katzen outlines the evolutionary basis of morality as well as precursors to the sermon in Leviticus 19. He concludes that the sermon seeks to extend cognitively normative empathy and altruism beyond their normal limits of in-group individuals only. Werlin’s essay analyzes Mt 6.1–8 (give alms, pray, and fast in private) in terms of its implications for ritual. The essay leverages the work of McCauley and Lawson to consider the unseen role of gods as full-access agents in interpretations of ritual. Katzen’s second contribution assesses the role of exaggeration, hyperbole, and metaphor in the sermon’s more extreme sayings. He includes a summary of theoretical work on each of these phenomena, arguing that humor plays a larger role than typically assumed. Building on his earlier essay, he concludes that statements in the sermon should be seen as figurative, hyperbolic attempts to emotionally influence the audience to expand their perceived in-group.

The seventh chapter by Thurén addresses elements of the sermon as examples of parables. These are analyzed using Toulmin’s model of argumentation analysis. He concludes that the parables do not tell the audience anything new. Rather, they seek to communicate a general ethos of what it means to be a Jesus follower. Lahti’s essay offers a pragma-dialectical analysis of Mt 6.25–34. The pragma-dialectical approach consists of stages and rules for resolving differences using critical discussion. Lahti concludes that many of the arguments in the sermon are unrealistic and easy to critique. The emphasis is on Jesus’ personal authority, not the logical or reasonable nature of his arguments.

Teehan’s essay broadly considers religion as a strategy for in-group formation. Teehan lays out cognitive and evolutionary models of group formation and concludes that the sermon seeks to articulate a new Christian in-group using costly signaling and the concept of supernatural punishment. This group is defined by commitment to Jesus rather than ethnic identity. The tenth essay by Gudme
considers reciprocity in the sermon as compared to Proverbs. Gudme offers an analysis of concepts of reciprocity related to altruism as discussed by Tullberg. The sermon’s precept to give alms in secret raises interesting problems for the relations-building aspects of reciprocity as well as concepts of altruism (it still promises rewards from God). The penultimate essay by Uusimäki compares the beatitudes in Matthew to those in the Dead Sea Scrolls 4QBeatitude (4Q525). Uusimäki argues that beatitudes aid in-group identity by pronouncing that identity already blessed, thus inviting hearers to identify with the group. The final essay jumps ahead in time, considering how the Protestant pastor André Trocmé interpreted the sermon in the context of “The Plateau,” a region in France where citizens incurred great personal risk to shelter Jews during the Nazi occupation of WWII.

The approach of the volume is valuable in that it stresses the oddity of this text and the unlikelihood that it would come to serve, for many, as an epitome of Christian ideology. The essays focus not on logical or literary interpretation of the text but rather on how the text affects people – how it might impel people to take particular actions, or understand themselves and others in a specific way. This is enormously valuable as scholarship has often focused on logic and reason in considering an author’s goals and a text’s reception, assuming that people are rational actors. An enormous body of work shows that humans are, often, not rational actors; their actions are based on emotion and affect, with reason only coming in as a post-facto explanation/justification. As the Covid-19 pandemic has amply shown, flawed reasoning and terrible arguments can still be completely effective at influencing behavior. Cognitive theory provides an opportunity to consider how hearing these texts may have impacted people’s conceptions and actions. The volume’s stress on this aspect of Biblical interpretation promises a much more realistic understanding of how these texts impacted the real world.

There are challenges to this approach. Cognitive theory is macro-level theory. It provides stunning insights into how evolutionarily derived aspects of human cognition influence human proclivities in the long run. Things become difficult, however, on the small scale, such as considering how one particular group might have experienced a text. We almost never know enough about the proximate social context to use cognitive theory at this finite level. Attempts to do so are often disappointing. P ace the contributors, this is the case in several essays here. There are many assertions about Matthew and his “community” which are open to debate. Cognitive theory may support one interpretation, but if we posited a slightly different social situation, it would support a different conclusion. We just do not know enough to be sure. As someone fully committed to the cognitive approach, this is difficult. I worry that attempting to use
the approach at such a finite level at times does not add much, and many throw doubt on cognitive approaches as a whole.

The volume raises one more interesting issue that illustrates the challenge of separating the cognitive from the social. It assumes that the undeniable salience of the sermon is due to cognitive elements. Is it? Have thinkers struggled with the sermon for centuries because it has universal appeal, or simply because its inclusion in the Christian canon, with the subsequent dominance of Christianity, make it salient – cognitive salience or social salience? If we could find a human with the requisite linguistic knowledge but with absolutely no knowledge of the significance of the Bible, Jesus, or Christianity, would they find the sermon intrinsically compelling or ridiculous?