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Coherence and Prominence in the Sermon on the Mount: A Systemic-Functional Approach

Language is a social phenomenon used for communication and to convey messages from one individual to another. The systemic-functional approach is a way to approach the *linguistic* expression of the Sermon, the co-text, as well as its *paralinguistic* reference points, the context. My analysis, however, will be limited to highlighting a few intra-linguistic features and seek to demonstrate how the various levels of text — ranging from the word and phrase levels, to the levels of the clause, the paragraph, the entire discourse of Matthew, and Matthew in the greater discourse of the Old Testament — interplay to create coherence as well as marking features of prominence, or, to put it differently, to answer questions such as: How do the various parts of the Sermon relate to each other? What is it that makes them hang together? Are there features of the text that are more emphasized than others and, in that case, how do we know that?

An ideal discourse analysis will approach the text both from 'bottom-up,' starting with the smallest elements of language and moving on to higher ranks, and 'top-down,' where the starting point is the big picture and then moving down towards increasingly lower ranks of discourse. Each level of rank informs the next level and contributes to the overall meaning regardless of whether one starts from the top or the bottom. I will here restrict myself to a primarily top-down approach to the Sermon on the Mount, even though it will be obvious as we proceed that there is a natural interpenetration between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'.

In this overview (below), the analysis starts with the Old Testament, moves to Mark (where Markan priority is supposed) and Luke and then moves on with the gospel of Matthew in its entirety, and then down through the various levels of rank, all the way down to morpheme level. I will primarily deal with those levels that I have marked in red, and among those in red will spend most time on the level that pays attention to the overall structure of the Sermon itself.