

The Wilderness Temptations (Matthew 4:1-11)

Setting the Stage

Up to this point in the story of Jesus told by Matthew, the birth has been recounted, the magi have come to visit the child, the family has fled to Egypt, Herod the Great has ordered the killing of the infants as a way to eliminate this predicted threat to his power, and after his death the family returned to Nazareth in the Galilee region. The story then jumps decades to the arrival of John the Baptist announcing a new movement of God; he challenges some of the local leadership to change their ways, declares the imminent arrival of the leader of the movement, and then affirms and baptizes Jesus as the coming one. It is in the baptism event that Jesus experiences the spirit of God descending upon him and the heavenly voice declaring “This is my beloved son in whom I am delighted.”

It is immediately following the baptism scene that we are told:

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He *fasted* forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

Many readers have come to see in the arrangement of stories here a deliberate correlation between the baptism and wilderness testing of Jesus and the Israelites’ passing through the Sea of Reeds and the subsequent years in the wilderness. Both narratives contain the sequence of passing through water and emergence into a wilderness, and there is also the link between the 40 years Israel spent in the wilderness and the 40 days / 40 night Jesus spends in the desert.¹ Jesus is led by the spirit; Israel by the pillar of fire. Jesus is tested in the desert, and so are the Israelites. Jesus has just been declared the son of God, and Israel also bears that designation (Israel as God’s son - Exod 4:22-23; Deut 1:31; 32:5,6,18-20; Hos 11:1; cp. also Deut 8:5 - Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child/son so the LORD your God disciplines you.).

The key background text here, which is quoted by Jesus in the first test, comes from Deut 8:1-10. The parallels are striking:

Deut. 8:1 This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. 2 Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these *forty years in the wilderness*, in order to humble you, *testing you to know what was in your heart*, whether or not you would keep his commandments. 3 He humbled you by letting you *hunger*, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

The writer of Deuteronomy here views the wilderness period as a time of testing Israel’s allegiance and fidelity to Yhwh, their adherence to his word and their trust in his provision. The period of desert fasting undertaken by Jesus under the direction of the spirit is also a time of testing, with the specific tests described by Matthew following immediately after the 40 day period.

Interestingly, while Israel’s period of testing was imposed upon them by Yhwh, Jesus is led into this period of testing by the spirit, but the testing itself is carried out by the devil. Over the course of theological reflection by the Jewish community, the testing / tempting experienced by the faithful was increasingly construed as the work of the evil one (see 2 Sam 24:1 cp. to 1 Chr 21:2; see also James 1:13

¹ Moses ate nothing for 40 days and 40 nights – see Exod 34:28; Deut 9:9. Israel as 40 years in wilderness: Exod 16:35; Num 14:33; Deut 2:7; 8:2,4; 29:5; Josh 5:6; Neh 9:21; Ps 95:10; Amos 2:10; Acts 7:36. Fasting in Matthew: see 6:16-18; 9:14-15.

“No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one”; 1 Cor 7:5; 1 Thess 3:5; Rev 2:10).

This wilderness scene, marked by fasting and testing, is a crucible experience for Jesus as the divine son. His fidelity to God and his commitment to the divine mission is at stake. And it is not just the aim or objective of the kingdom mission that is in view, but also the manner in which it is to be carried out. What is put to the test is whether Jesus, with the privilege and status of being God’s son (i.e., the baptism) and the power that attends that status, will stay true to the way of the kingdom.

Structure

Test 1 & 2 are tied together by repetition of “If / Since you are the son of God ...” Of course as readers of Matthew, we know that Jesus has just been designated son of God by the heavenly voice at his baptism. The devil in these statements is uttering a first-class condition in which the condition “if” is assumed to be the case. Given that Jesus’ status as son of God is assumed to be true, we can legitimately translate the statement “Since you are the son of God...”.

Test 2 & 3 are tied together by designating the tester (as he is referred to in test 1) “the devil” and by the transportation of Jesus to other places (paralamba/nei ujto'n oJ dia/boloß in vv. 5,8).

Names for the adversary: dia/boloß – Matthew 4:1,5,8,11; 13:39; 25:41; satanaß – 4:10; 12:26; 16:23; Beelzebul – 10:25; 12:24,27. Satan (NDfDC) “adversary, accuser” in the Hebrew scriptures: 1 Chr 21:1; Ps 109:6; Job 1-2; Zech 3:1-10; 1 Kgs 22:19.

The whole scene is held together in a number of ways. (a) The framing verses of the passage contain references to beings representing good and evil: in v. 1 the spirit and the devil; v. 11 the angels and the devil. (b) All the tests contain quotes by Jesus from Deuteronomy 6-8. (c) There is a marked geographical movement in the passage, with each test taking place in a more elevated place: wilderness (v. 1) / pinnacle of the temple (v. 5) / very high mountain (v. 8). (d) The third test is clearly the climax of the scene, not only by it being the most elevated place but also because the challenge directed to Jesus by the devil involves a gesture of complete submission and loyalty.

One other point of general interest: the word used here describing it as a test: peira/zw – occurs 4 more times in Matthew (16:1; 19:3; 22:18; 22:35) and in each case it involves members of the local leadership who ask Jesus difficult questions in order to undermine his authority or to discredit him. In each case Jesus responds by quoting scripture.

First Test

3 The tempter came and said to him, “*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.*”

4 But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

This test comes at the end of 40 days of fasting, and follows the writer’s statement that Jesus was famished. The physical need for food was no doubt tremendous. Recall also that hunger was a feature of Israel’s wilderness experience (cp. Exod 16; Num 11). Their response to it was doubt, demand and dissatisfaction (Exod 17:2,7; Num 14:22; Ps 78:18,41,56; 95:9; 106:14).

The primary thrust of the test is for Jesus to use the extra-ordinary power he has as a result of his status as son of God to turn the desert stones into food; to use his privileged standing to alleviate his own suffering and procure his personal comfort; to direct his power toward the satisfaction of his own bodily needs and desires.

Jesus' refusal of the offer is not because he is disdainful of bodily needs and the necessity of food. While he will instruct his audience during his teaching on the mount to not be anxious about food but trust in the provision of God (6:25-33), he will twice take a few loaves of bread and with it feed thousands of hungry people. Nor is it that he is just rigorous in his fasting practises thereby reinforcing his special status; he will later warn people against fasting as a way to increase the appearance and prestige of religious piety (6:16-18).

His response, in Matthew's account, is specifically through this quote from Deut 8:3: One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Meeting the body's needs, even when those needs are great, is not his ultimate concern. Using prestige and power to secure his own personal well-being does not take precedence over aligning himself with the divine directive. Staying true to the word trumps all.

I suppose it is only in watching how Jesus lived that we get a sense of what living by the word of God meant for him. His teaching (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount) and his actions disclose his own understanding of that word, what it was calling him to be and do. The kingdom mission constituted a way of healing, of solidarity with the poor, of challenging the oppressive and unjust structures of social control operating in his day, of opposing social and religious conventions that generated exclusion of the weak and the outcast. In the end, this way would lead to the cross, that place of state execution for those deemed a threat to the *status quo* of political and economic power.

It is interesting that the phrase "If you are the Son of God ... " will occur again in Matthew's account.

Matt. 27:38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! **If you are the Son of God**, come down from the cross." 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 *He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'*" 44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

Being the son of God, so they thought, meant avoiding such extreme physical suffering and humiliating death. The privilege and power of divine sonship gives one the ability to avoid such torture and pain.

So the first test in the wilderness invites Jesus, ever so reasonably, to actualize his power in the service of comfortable self-preservation; to accept that invitation would inevitably lead him away from the cross. If Jesus, alone in the desert, employed his power to ensure his own personal well-being and personal comfort, if he made use of his privilege and status for the sake of meeting his own needs and wants above all else, then the way to the cross would have been short-circuited.

Second Test

- 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, “*If you are the Son of God*, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” 7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

The devil takes Jesus from the isolation of the desert to the holy city of Jerusalem, then to the dominant building of the city, the Temple, then up to an elevated spot in the temple complex.

The pinnacle of the temple (literally, the “little wing” of the temple) is not easily identifiable. The main proposals have been the east corner of the south wall, which overlooked a ravine; a projection of the roof of the temple; the superstructure of the temple gate; a tower in the temple precincts. Whatever the reference, it was a distance from the ground.

This test is formulated in similar manner to the first one: “If you are the son of God ...” followed by an imperative. In this case it consists of an invitation to Jesus to hurl himself down from the spot on which they stood. By itself, it is not clear what the point might be of this proposal for suicide; what might be the purpose of this offer?

The devil reveals his rationale in the following quote from Psalm 91: “... for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” This particular Psalm is one that is focused entirely on the theme of the protection of the righteous: those who trust in Yhwh will be granted divine protection from all harms, whether they be the harms of pestilence, sickness or hostile human attacks.

It is of interest that the psalm also refers to finding shelter under the wings of God (v. 4 – “under his wings you will find refuge”) which links up with the location of this second test (i.e., the “little wing” of the temple). It is also noteworthy that the temple was viewed as a special place of protection and safety (Exod 21:12-14; Ps 61:4-5).

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| 1 You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, | 9 Because you have made the LORD your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place, |
| 2 will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.” | 10 no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent. |
| 3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence; | 11 For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways. |
| 4 he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. | 12 On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a
stone. |
| 5 You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day, | 13 You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will
trample under foot. |
| 6 or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday. | |
| 7 A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you. | 14 Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name. |
| 8 You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked. | 15 When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them. |
| | 16 With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation. |

It seems the proposed act was for Jesus to test the divine promise of protection that was his by virtue of his status as son of God. Here the adversary uses the scriptures that Jesus claimed earlier as his ultimate reference to entice him to test God's declaration of safety and deliverance for the faithful. The argument is something like this: since you are the son of God, use your status and privilege to insure your safety and protection in accomplishing your mission.

Certainly there is something of the demonstrative here; it is a spectacular, dare-devil (no pun intended) action. It is not really an invitation to use his special power, as in the first test, or to gain more power, as will be the case in the third test; it is rather the challenge to claim the promised protection and safety that belonged to him by virtue of his status. Force God to act on your behalf, and in this way demonstrate your privilege.

If we imagine this test as being a public affair, with the Temple filled with hordes of worshippers and temple personnel, then the demonstration would be a dazzling spectacle affirming Jesus' special standing with God, his messianic status. If, like the other tests, the two are alone in the scene, it is an invitation to Jesus to assure himself of divine protection and safety as he sets out on his mission.

Jesus' response ("Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'") seems to view this invitation as an expression of deep mistrust of God. His response quotes Deuteronomy 6:16 where the reference is to the Israelites testing God at Massah when they demanded water fearing that their lives were in jeopardy.² For Jesus to demand protection from God would again mean to embark on a mission that would lead somewhere other than the cross. An interesting link to our passage is Jesus' refusal to summon angels to rescue him from his impending trial ... Matt 26:53-54 - Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"

Remember as well that when Jesus enters the Temple later in his mission, he disrupts its practises (21:12-17), and it is this action of prophetic challenge, resistance and dissent that lead to his execution. The temple was not a place of refuge or protection but of conflict; it had become a place of abuse and exploitation, of oppression and exclusion. His adversaries and accusers were all closely associated with this place of domination and power.

While hanging on the cross, those opposed to his mission and his teaching, those who assisted in his removal, relieved their own conscience by arguing that if Jesus were truly the son of God and if he genuinely trusted in God, he would not be up there.

Matt. 27: 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 *He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'*"

No, Jesus would not use his status and privilege to demand special protection, to ensure his own safety. His mission was to announce and embody the liberating reign of God, to proclaim good news to the poor and the afflicted, to declare God's embrace of the outcasts and judgment against the ruling elite; and in actualizing that mission, he refused to take up the sword in his own defense. His stance of non-violence would inevitably take him along the way to the cross. His mission of solidarity with the least (Matt 25) would leave him vulnerable to suffering, affliction and death, and he here accepts this vulnerability and foregoes claiming the protection and safety of his privileged status.

² Israel tests Yhwh at Massah; cp. the account in Exod 17:1-7; Num 20:2-13; and Ps 95:7-9. See also Heb 3:7-4:13.

Third Test

- 8 Again, **the devil** took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10 Jesus said to him, “Away with you, **Satan!** for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

The third test takes place at the highest elevation: “a very high mountain.” There will be other occasions in Matthew’s story when Jesus is located on a mountain: Matt 5:1ff (Sermon on the Mount); 14:23 (place of prayer); 15:29 (location for healing crowds of people); 17:1ff (Transfiguration); 21:1ff (Mount of Olives before entry into Jerusalem and the Temple); 26:30ff (Mount of Olives on the way to Gethsemane); 28:16ff (Ascension). The mountain will be the place of teaching, healing, prayer; of reaffirming his identity as divinely appointed prophet and son (which is followed by discussion of his immanent suffering as they descend the mountain); of his movement into Jerusalem where his arrest, trial and execution will take place; the place of final departure and instruction.

In our passage it is the place of testing, and acquiescence to this test would have fundamentally altered all subsequent mountain experiences.

From the height of this place, the devil grants Jesus a panoramic view of the world’s kingdoms and the magnificence of their wealth and splendor. He offers Jesus possession of these kingdoms; it is an offer of ultimate political and economic power, unchallenged domination of the nations, absolute imperial authority and control. This is the deal on the table. Although not said explicitly, the status and privilege of Jesus as the divine son is implicit in the offer. It is only reasonable to make this offer to one of such elevated standing; he deserves such power; it is natural for him to rule over all.³

Of course it is the condition upon which the offer is based that reveals the devil’s true intention. The protasis is left to the end as the final revelation of the adversary’s objective. What he demands in exchange for such power is complete loyalty and devotion, an abandoning of fidelity to God and his ways and an unmitigated affirmation of ultimate allegiance to the ruler of this world.⁴

Here again it is noteworthy that while the wilderness period in Israel’s experience was seen as a time of testing their trust in Yhwh in conditions of physical threat, it was also a test of their loyalty to him alone among the plethora of ancient near eastern deities (cp. Exod 32ff). And mountains were often associated in their history with places of foreign worship and non-Yhwhistic practices. What is at stake, then, is the issue of idolatry, of ultimate allegiance, of fundamental loyalty. It is the offer of the ring and the power that would accompany it.

³ It is a scene with echoes in the Hebrew scriptures associated with prominent biblical figures. It recalls Abram standing on a mountain and hearing God promise him land and offspring (Gen 13:14-17 - The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; 15 for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. 16 I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. 17 Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.”). But it also has ties with the scene of Moses on Mt. Pisgah surveying the promised land into which he would not be permitted to go (Num 27:12-14; Deut 3:27; 32:48-52; 34:1-4).

⁴ Satan as ruler of the world – 2 Cor 4:4; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph 6:12. In the Lukan parallel, it reads: “*To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.*” See also 1 John 5:19 - *We know that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one.*

But we have already seen in Matthew's account what political power under allegiance to the evil one looks like: Herod the Great orders the slaughter of children as a way of protecting his power from possible threat. And the brutality of the Roman empire, with its use of military violence, mass enslavement, economic exploitation, rampant corruption, etc. was well known. Control of the empire and enjoyment of its wealth would inevitably require the ruthless use of violence, deceit and abusive power. Cp. the images in the Apocalypse of falling down to worship the dragon and the beast, see Rev 13:4,8,12,15.

Jesus says NO: "Away with you, **Satan!** for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" – a rephrasing of Deut 6:13 (The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear). The language of dismissal is also interesting in its anticipation of another scene of refusal. After Jesus had spoken to the disciples of his impending trial, torture and execution, Peter takes him aside to challenge his construal of the future of the movement.

Matt. 16:21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "**Get behind me, Satan!** You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Again, as was the case in the other two tests but in a more audacious manner, this is an invitation to abandon the way of the cross, the path of solidarity with the victims and outcasts of imperial power. It is an offer to sovereign power and endless wealth which would require the usual methods of domination and control: violence, punishment, torture, exploitation, oppression, fear, deceit, coercion. Jesus refuses this offer and takes up the narrow way of God's kingdom, a way of healing, inclusion, sharing of goods, community, simplicity, truth, and the willingness to suffer for the sake of another. He chooses to stand with the victims rather than produce more victims, to challenge abusive power and structures of social control, to side with the outcasts, to announce God's embrace of the poor, to uphold the worth of the rejected, to form an alternative community with values and practises counter to those of the surrounding dominant culture.

It is only after the passion in a post-resurrection scene that we see Jesus on a mountain again, with his disciples, being worshipped and claiming ultimate power.

Matt. 28:16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..."

Concluding Reflections

The wilderness testing scene finds Jesus, recently baptized by John, recipient of the divine spirit, and identified as God's son, in a time of intense preparation for his mission. Fasting and weak, he is offered opportunities to use his status and privilege to secure his physical needs and desires, guarantee his protection and safety, and increase his political and economic power.

Acquiescence to these offers would entail abandoning the mission of the kingdom he was sent to proclaim, set him on a path that was incommensurate with the way of the cross. The path before him was one of solidarity with the poor and afflicted, resistance to the structures of oppression and exclusion and those who backed it, and invitation into an alternative reality of healing, forgiveness, community and love.

He remained true to this way, even though it would mean encountering hostility, conflict, suffering, torture and death. It was a path of non-compliance to the dominant institutions of power and control, and the embodiment of another vision of life in a truly human community.

Using privilege to ensure our needs and wants are met, to guarantee the protection and security of our lives and our way of life, to lever more social, political and economic power constitute great temptations indeed. Increasing personal comfort, security and power is what we are socialized to desire and actively pursue. Yet to seek these is to turn aside from the way of the kingdom that Jesus brought, it is to declare allegiance to another god.

The Olympic Games event, it seems to me, functions as the grand festival of another god; it is the seductive spectacle that summons our allegiance to another master. It constitutes for us, followers of the Way who are embedded in the Empire, a profound wilderness-like test, an occasion for clarifying our loyalty and devotion to God's movement of liberation embodied in Jesus.