

It is written: the wilderness temptation of Jesus

Setting the scene

It is important to establish the context of the temptation before examining the text in detail. Some of the following is probably already well known to readers, nevertheless, the full import of the temptation can only be understood against the background of what some may call midrashic treatment,¹ especially by Matthew. Firstly, the temptation occurred before the beginning of his public ministry directly after his baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit. That means that he was unknown to the general populace. The Priests and Pharisees had no knowledge of his existence or the threat he posed. As far as they were concerned they were still trying to determine the phenomenon of John the Baptist. At this point in time he had no followers as his first disciples were former followers of the Baptist. He had then complete anonymity and the temptation was deliberately induced to determine his motivations. Would he become the “messiah” foretold in the Old Testament or would he become a magnificent secular ruler akin to King Solomon? In other words would Jesus fulfil the role of Sonship that the nation of Israel had rejected in the wilderness and that the first human pair had abrogated?

The connections with Israel are multiple. All the temptations and refutations are based on “wilderness citations” and as HAW has pointed out,² there is a natural progression to the arguments. Moreover, similar to the nation, Jesus had passed through the waters of baptism and commenced his 40 day (not 40 year) wilderness wandering. The parallels are obvious. What sort of “son” would Jesus be? Would he initiate the New Israel and the New Covenant?

Intertextual connections

The fact that the devil constantly refers to scripture lends credence to the proverb that “even the devil can quote scripture”. Scripture is often taken out of context and misquoted and the “devil” is actually very good at “wresting scripture”. So, a cautious interpreter should analyse these passages carefully as there is more going on than the surface level citations from the Pentateuch (and Psalm) suggest. There are, for example, also intertextual links with the book of Daniel.

¹ (מדרש) is an interpretive act, seeking the answers to religious questions (both practical and theological) by plumbing the meaning of the words of the Torah.

² Harry Whittaker, Studies in the Gospels, “Tempted of the Devil”

<http://www.christadelphianbooks.org/haw/sitg/sitg19.html>

For example, the Gospel of Mark (1.13) tells us that Jesus was “with the wild beasts” which obviously did not harm him as he had “dominion” over them as this had been granted to Adam from the beginning (Gen 1.26). However, in Scripture, “beasts” are used to depict human Empires (particularly in Daniel 8). This is because Israel was created to “have dominion” and rule the world as a nation of king-priests. Nebuchadnezzar saw his Empire as a giant tree offering shelter and sustenance to all. In his hubris he boasted of the glory of Babylon built to reflect his honour (Dan 4.30) – at that point God literally turned him into a “beast”. He wished to force the world to “fall down and worship his image” (Dan 3.15) thus negating the fact that man had been made in “the image of GOD”(Gen 1.27). Thus, the desire of man to create Empires (kingdoms) and have dominion outside of God is an act of self-divinization and rebellion. It is akin to Adam snatching at power. Nebuchadnezzar was forced to admit that God gives it (the kingdoms of the world) to whoever he wills (Dan 4.17).

These two texts find correspondence in the temptation on the wilderness mount:

“...if thou wilt fall down and worship me” (Matt 4.9)

“.....for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it”
(Luke 4.6)

In the above text it is Satan who has the power to give it (dominion over kingdoms *and the glory*) which begs the question if Satan operates independently from God. Of course, this is not the case as the OT makes clear:

And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel. (1 Chron 21.1)

And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah. (2 Sam 24.1)

Whereas the chronicler names Satan the parallel text in Samuel attributes the incident to Yahweh. The bible writers saw no contradiction in this. Moreover, the terms for the provocateur (satan/devil) are virtually interchangeable in the NT which directs them all back to the “ancient serpent” that provoked the first temptation in Eden:

“And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years” (Rev 20.2).

Here we have Satan with all his “aliases” notably also called a “dragon” with reference to the “dragon empire” (beast) who attempted to devour the man child. So, human power that is opposed to God is depicted as Satanic as it embodies the principle of self-divinization (snatching at divine prerogatives). Moreover, the Apocalypse also depicts “worshipping the image of the beast” in reference to Nebuchadnezzar’s image and this is all linked to the “ancient serpent” in Eden.

The glory of God.....or self-glorification?

There is however, more going on, as the reference to “glory” (of the kingdoms) and the location (an exceeding high mountain) echo the revelation of “divine glory” showed to Moses while on a mountain:

“And he said, I beseech thee, shew me thy glory.... And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by”. (Exod 33.18-20)

“And sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them”. (Matt 4.8)

Here then is a stark choice between showing the glory of God or the “glory of man”. What would Jesus chose? The route to self-divinization and glorification....the choice that mankind always makes, or the role of “suffering servant” and obedient son?

All the while Jesus knew that Moses himself had stood on another mountain (Nebo) and seen the kingdom but had been refused entry because he did not sanctify God (Deut 32.48-50). Even Moses had fallen into the trap of self-divinization at the waters of Meribah (strife); “Must we fetch you water out of this rock?” (Num 20.10) Only God could fetch water from the rock and that rock was Christ, (1 Cor 10.4) the “law” would leave them “thirsting” (John 4.10) and should have taught them that self-divinization through “law keeping” could not

force entry into the kingdom. Moses could not lead the way out of the “wilderness” only Joshua (Jesus).

A Progressive Argument

Harry Whittaker has noted that the temptations are progressive and naturally flow from one into the other in Matthew's gospel. The order is different in Luke but that suggests that the temptations were a recurrent feature during this period until they “left him for a season”.

To paraphrase the argument;

Satan: “You are hungry; why not use your power to change these stones into bread? After all, what good is a dead messiah to Israel? You have an important mission ahead of you. Anyway, the Israelites in the wilderness were provided with bread from heaven why not provide bread for yourself?”

Jesus: “I live by the word of God...the same word that commanded the angels to provide bread for the people. My mission will rely on my Father's providential care. I will not use my powers to provide for my own comfort or luxury but I will use it to feed the people”.

Satan: “That is good! You have faith in the care of the Father. It says in the Moses wilderness Psalm that God will protect you. He will not even allow you to stub your little toe. How about you start your ministry with a bang! Reveal yourself to the nation by throwing yourself off the temple tower. You will not have to abuse your power as the Father will save you. You will be demonstrating your faith in God”.

Jesus: “That would be tempting God. That would not be a matter of faith but an act of rebellion. That is not the kind of shallow mission I have been sent for. Spectacular miracles did not convert Israel in the wilderness in fact they hardened their hearts. I have come to reflect the glory and grace of the Father as revealed to Moses on the mount”.

Satan: “OK then. Let me show you the glory awaiting you. Let me take you up a mountain. All this can be yours...I have the authority to give it to you right now. You can make Israel great again! (MIGA). A kingdom of priests...with you at the head...dispensing wisdom and comfort to the nations – is that not a good thing? Why the need for suffering? You will be like God to the people. Go on then, give in to your better self and do the right thing.”

Jesus: Go away Satan! Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

The Nature of Flesh

Above all else scripture depicts flesh as “weak”. Sin is a consequence of giving in to the weakness of the flesh. The “flesh” becomes sinful when it gives itself over to those impulses and effectively rebels against God. Jesus knew this when he warned the disciples; “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt.26.41). The same temptations came back to haunt Jesus during his ministry. For example, they attempted to crown him king. What did Jesus do? He rejected the offer and went up a mountain to pray. This was the advice he gave his disciples, “watch and pray” because he knew *from personal experience*. His advice was not “detached” or “theoretical” as he struggled with the same weak flesh that could so easily tip over into sinfulness. His victory against “flesh” was hard won; “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered” (Heb 5.8). This was a continuous ongoing battle during his ministry (Satan left him for a season). The apostle Paul sums it up as follows: “For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh,³ and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: (Rom 8.3). The principle stands that God’s strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12.9). No “flesh” will be able to boast of its accomplishments before God. And yet, Jesus exhorts us to “eat his flesh and drink his blood”. Why is that? Because the nature of Jesus (his flesh and blood) has been completely subjected to the Father – despite temptation he never sinned (he was only in the likeness of sinful flesh).

Jesus himself recognised that in the days of his flesh he was not in *every way* like his Father. While it is correct to say that he bore the true image he also bore the capacity to sin and to be tempted (which is impossible to say of God). “And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? none is good, save one, that is, God”. (Luke 18.18-19) Without the possibility of temptation and sin the victory of Jesus would have been manufactured and hollow. Jesus had to bear our nature;

“Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil;

³ ὁμοίωμα (homoiōma); a *form*; abstractly *resemblance*: - made like to, likeness, shape, similitude. **Romans 8:3** ^{NIB} For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. **Philippians 2:7** ^{KJV} But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness (homoiōma) of men: ⁸ And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted" (Heb 2.14-18).⁴

Temptation is not Sin

In the final instance it matters not whether the provocateur (Satan) is an external instrument or not. Virtually all temptations have an external trigger but unless they resonate with the person (at some level) they are not a temptation. An alcoholic might find a glass of wine a temptation but for others it is a "take it or leave it" option. There is a fine line between temptation and sin. When does temptation become sin?

James 1:12-15 ¹² Blessed *is* the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him. ¹³ Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: ¹⁴ But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. ¹⁵ Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

God cannot tempt any man but he does test them; "And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt⁵ Abraham (Gen 22.1), moreover, he allows Satan to test men; "And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power" (Job 1.12). Temptation is therefore a process wholly "owned" by man and not attributable to God (or any external

⁴ This is the Litmus test: ^{KJV} **1 John 4:3** And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh (partook of the same i.e., his nature is like our nature) is not of God: and this is that *spirit* of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.

⁵ The Greek LXX of Gen 22.1 uses the same word as in James from *πειράζω* (peirazō); to *test* (objectively), that is, *endeavor, scrutinize, entice, discipline*: - assay, examine, go about, prove, tempt (-er), try.

factor) which when left unchallenged leads to giving into desire and allowing enticement. At that point, even though it may not lead to concrete “action” it is still sinful. It is sinful to fantasize about adultery even if it does not lead to action. But if it is cut off at the root, temptation is not sinful, it is just temptation. When David spots Bathsheba bathing his first thought might be, “she is beautiful and desirable” his second thought might be, “She is already married” his next thought determines whether or not his temptation becomes sin *even if it does not result in action*. Ideally his next thought would be “thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife” and the process would end. However, if he continues to fantasize then scripture applies, “That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart”. At that point, although lust has not “conceived” or resulted in action *it is still sin*. So, the line between temptation and sin is very fine. Jesus was rarely tempted and usually only when in a weak state (40 days fasting and hallucinating?) or when in extremis (due to stress; sweating blood in Gethsemane) but “in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able **to succour them that are tempted**”. Here then is the only man who never yielded to temptation and therefore never sinned. Although he had the same weak flesh as us his love for the Father was stronger than his love for self. God’s strength is indeed perfected in the weakness of the “flesh”.

Who is Satan in the wilderness?

The suggested options of a Priest or a Pharisee as provocateur simply do not hold water, apart from the fact that Jesus was still unknown, Judea was under Roman occupation and the priests could not act autonomously. The priesthood was corrupt and the High Priest was appointed by the Roman client King Herod. If an external provocateur is sought the only reasonable suggestion is an angel who has been granted permission (as in Job) to test Jesus. However, the wilderness story has midrashic elements that present a stylized description of an internal struggle in conventional, contemporary, literary terms. It also has much in common with the parabolic rhetoric often employed by Jesus himself reinforcing the historicity of the underlying events. The only way this could have been related to the disciples is if it was conveyed by Jesus himself *as there were no witnesses present during the temptation*. This probably occurred after the resurrection (Luke 24.27), otherwise why would Peter present virtually the same temptation (Matt 16.23) in the latter stages of Jesus’ ministry?