

Matthew 4:1-11 ¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry. ³ The tempter approached and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread.” ⁴ He said in reply, “It is written: ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.’” ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the temple, ⁶ and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you and ‘with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” ⁷ Jesus answered him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.’” ⁸ Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, ⁹ and he said to him, “All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.” ¹⁰ At this, Jesus said to him, “Get away, Satan! It is written: ‘The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.’” ¹¹ Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Context

From the 4th Sunday to the 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time, the Sunday gospels include most of the “Sermon on the Mount” (Mt 5:1-7:29)¹ On the first Sunday in Lent, the traditional reading reverts to several chapters earlier – Mt 4 – to consider “the tempting of Christ in the desert.” We would be well served to remind ourselves of the context of our gospel reading:

Mt 3:13-17	Jesus revealed as the Son of God: the baptism of Jesus. “ <i>And a voice came from the heavens, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’</i> ” (Mt 3:17).
Mt 4:1-11	testing of the Son of God in the desert
Mt 4:12-17	beginning of the public ministry in Galilee
Mt 4:18-22	calling of the first disciples
Mt 5:1-7:29	teaching on discipleship, revealing the authority of the Messiah (“Sermon”)
Mt 8:1-9:34	anthology of actions revealing the Messiah’s authority (miracles and signs)
Mt 9:35-10:42	the Son of God’s authority shared with the disciples sent on mission

Here in the temptation setting, there is continuity with the scene of Jesus’ baptism. The temptation is connected by “Spirit,” “wilderness,” “Son of God.” The motif of the voice of God (central to Deuteronomy, from which Jesus quotes), and more subtly, by the resistance that both John and Satan offer to the obedient response of the Son to the Father’s will.

Boring [162-163] offers that this one scene in the wilderness sets the plot for the whole of Matthew’s narrative and that this one encounter with Satan is only prelude to the resistance that Jesus will face in proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven:

Conflict with Satan is not limited to this pericope, but is the underlying aspect of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world, which is the plot of the whole Gospel of Matthew. The friction between Jesus and the Jewish leaders throughout the Gospel, already anticipated in the conflict with Herod, the high priests, and the scribes (and even the hesitation of John to baptize Jesus) is actually a clash of kingdoms. Jesus is the representative of the kingdom of God; Satan also represents a kingdom (12:26). Thus, elsewhere in the

¹ In a typical Year A of the Lectionary, unless Easter is very late – April 20th or later – the period prior to Lent will include only portions of the 4th-9th Sunday gospels.

Gospel, “test” or “tempt” (peirazō) is used only of the Jewish leaders (16:1; 19:3; 22:18, 35), and Jesus always resists them by quoting Scripture, as he does here. The conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders is a surface dimension of the underlying discord between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. This is what Matthew is about. God is the hidden actor, and Satan is the hidden opponent, throughout the Gospel; but God is always offstage, and Satan appears only here as a character in the story. Satan is worked into the outline at strategic points, but the conflict between Jesus and Satan is not to be reduced to any one scene. In Matthew’s theology, Satan, though defeated (12:28–29) continues to tempt Jesus during his ministry (16:23), at the crucifixion, and into the time of the church (13:19, 39); Satan is finally abolished at the end time (25:41). The narrative of Jesus’ ministry, which now begins, is told at two levels. It not only portrays the past life of Jesus, but also looks ahead to the post-Easter time, when the disciples must still confront demonic resistance to the gospel message (5:37; 6:13; 13:19, 39)—and not only from outsiders, but from other disciples as well (16:23).

As well, reminded that this reading forms the first weekend in Lent. There is also a context for its inclusion in this season. On this same Sunday, everywhere in Catholic Churches the RCIA catechumens (those not yet baptized) and candidates (those already baptized and seeking full communion with the Church) will gather for the Rite of Sending. The parish community will affirm their preparedness, bless them, and send them to the cathedral where the Bishop will receive them. The catechumens will be “accepted” and declared the Elect. Their names symbolically written in the “Book of Life.” The candidates too are welcomed and affirmed in their decision of faith.

All three synoptic gospels record an incident of Jesus confronting the devil in the wilderness immediately after his baptismal experience at the Jordan River. Where Mark notes quite simply: “*At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him*” (Mark 1:12-13). Matthew and Luke record a three-part dialogue between Jesus and the devil that is recorded traditionally as a “tempting.”

A Test? A Temptation? A Trial?

It is difficult to know how to translate *peirazo* (4:1) and the more intensive *ekpeirazo* (4:7) – “to test” or “to tempt”. The word is often used in the LXX of God testing people, e.g., God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son (Gn 22:1). When God rained bread from heaven, God asked that they gather only enough for that day. “*thus will I test them, to see whether they follow my instructions or not*” (Ex 16:4).

Why does God test people? One reason is given in Dt 13:4: “*for the LORD, your God, is testing you to learn whether you really love him with all your heart and with all your soul.*” A slightly different reason is given in Dt 8:16: “*that he might afflict [humble] you and test you, but also make you prosperous in the end.*” God does not test his people so that He would know the answer, what is in our hearts – He already knows. God tests his people so that we would know what is in our hearts (cf. Dt 8:2).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. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither 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.” (NRSV)

² In the NAB Dt 8:2 the word “intention” is a translation of *l'ēbāb* [לִבָּב:] which means heart, intention, conscience, mind.

That is this positive side of *peirazo* and *ekpeirazo*. They can also have negative connotations: “to tempt” or “to try and cause someone to make a mistake” or “to try and cause someone to sin.” At the same time that God is “testing” so that one self-discovers the depths of one's faithfulness, the “Tempter” may be “tempting” someone to sin. God's purpose is to strengthen faith. Satan's purpose is to weaken trust in God.

One should also be aware that this pericope of conflict with Satan is part of a recurring theme within Matthew of conflict between the kingdom of Heaven and the kingdom of this world. In Matthew's theology, the devil though defeated (12:28-29) continues to tempt Jesus during his ministry (16:23), at the crucifixion and into the time of the Church (13:19,39). This pericope also sets the stage for the post-Easter period when the disciples must still confront the devil-inspired resistance to the gospel message (5:37; 6:13; 13:19, 39)

The Testing/Tempting in the Dessert

It is helpful to consider this pericope as being “both-and:” Jesus is tested by his heavenly Father so that Jesus knows what is “in his heart” at the same time Jesus is tempted by Satan to be other than fully obedient to God. We should note that Jesus is *led by the Spirit* into the wilderness to be tempted/tested (v. 1). This is a softening of Mark's account where the Spirit “*throws Jesus out*” into the wilderness (Mk 1:12). Lest there be any concern, as Boring (163) notes: “... [Jesus'] submission to temptation is not an accident or a matter of being victimized by demonic power, but is part of his obedience to God.”

The focus of the “testing” agenda (which will be focus of this commentary) is indicated by the devil's first two suggestions (vv.3,6) – “*If you are the Son of God.*” There could not be a more clear connection to the last verse of the preceding chapter: “*And a voice came from the heavens, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'*” (Mt 3:17). That very relationship is not under scrutiny – and the basic filial relationship: father-son. Rather the demonic suggestions explore, given that relationship, what ways are appropriate to act and how can the devil take advantage in order to drive a wedge into the relationship. For example, there was an expectation that the Messiah would produce a lavish miracle of *manna* in messianic times. Is this an appropriate response by Jesus? If Jesus does such a lavish miracle, the people's expectations can be derailed from salvific to political power. If Jesus refuses, then how can he be the messiah – he does not meet our expectations?

What is the divine expectation? It is because of the filial relationship of love and obedience that God the Father will ultimately ask Jesus to give up his own life for the life of the world. The real test is not here in the Galilean wilderness. This is but a prelude to what occurs in the holy city of Jerusalem during Jesus' Passion and Death. There are echoes between the two locales:

Galilean wilderness Jerusalem – the Holy City

<i>If you are the Son of God</i> (vv.3,6)	<i>if you are the Son of God</i> (27:40)
tempting of angelic deliverance (4:6)	the right to call upon a host of angles for deliverance (26:53)
<i>Get away, Satan</i> (v.10)	<i>Get behind me, Satan!</i> (16:23) when Peter tries to dissuade Jesus from Jerusalem and death on a cross

A Foundation in Scripture

R.T. France suggests that the key to understanding this story is found in Jesus' three responses – all from Deuteronomy 6-8 a part of Moses' address to Israelites before their entry into the promised land. It is significant that this section begins with the great *Shema*, the daily prayer of all true Israelites: “*Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength*” (Dt 6:4-5).

In Moses' address, he reminds Israel of their 40 years of wilderness experience which was a time of preparation and of proving the faithfulness of their God. Among the things the Israelites, the children of God, should have learned is

- not to depend on bread alone but rather on God's word (Dt 8:3),
- not to put God to the test (Dt 6:16), and
- to make God the exclusive object of their worship and obedience (Dt 6:13).

Now another "Son of God" is in the wilderness facing those same test and learning so perfectly what Israel had so imperfectly grasped. At best Israel's occupation of the promised land was a partial and flawed fulfillment of the hopes they carried to the banks of the River Jordan. But this new "Son of God" will not fail and the new "Exodus" will succeed because this Son loves his Father with all his heart, his soul and his strength. Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel and will become the one through whom God's redemptive purpose for the world is fulfilled.

¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry. ³ The tempter approached and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread." ⁴ He said in reply, "It is written: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.'"

Command these stones...

The opening word in v.3 is also validly translated as "since." Thus, the devil is not attempting to raise doubts in Jesus' mind, but arguing about what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. There were expectations that the Messiah would reproduce the miracle of the manna in the desert, thus an overflowing of food and prosperity.

Note that Jesus is "tempted" to change "stones" into "loaves." One loaf would be enough to satisfy the hunger Jesus feels (v.2), but the devil is asking that Jesus use the divine power to satisfy his need and provide food for all human need. In alleviating his own hunger Jesus would deny his humanity and the trust in God that Jesus himself will teach (6:24-34). Meeting the need of all humanity is the gateway to fulfilling popular messianic expectations and political power. Will Jesus use his divine power for his own advantage to accomplish God's will rather than to trust in his Father's plan?

Jesus recognized in his hunger an experience designed by God to teach him the lesson of Deuteronomy 8:3: "*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.*" The contrast is paradoxical – God's word does not fill the stomach, but it is really a question of where one is anchored. His mission was to be one of continual privation, for the sake of his ministry of the word of God; a concern for his own material comfort could only jeopardize it. As Son of God, he must learn, as Israel had failed to learn, to put first things first. And that must mean an unquestioning obedience to his Father's plan.

Jesus' use of the OT verse indicates that Jesus understood his experience of hunger as God's will for him at that moment – not something to be supplanted by a self-indulgent use of his powers for his own benefit. Jesus, as he had done at the Jordan River, continues to trust and comply with the will of his Father.

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the temple, ⁶ and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you and 'with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"⁷ Jesus answered him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.'"

Command the angels...In a wilderness filled with stones and rocks, no special mention is needed about place or details of the place. But the next two tests "transport" Jesus to a new location. While

much has been made in attempts to make the “transport” physical, the pericope works just as well as a vision. What “*high mountain*” (v.8) exists where one can see all the kingdoms of the world? Does one need to leave the wilderness to see the Jerusalem Temple? Ezekiel remained in Babylon will being “transported” to Jerusalem (Ezek 8:1-3, 11:24). We should remember that Jesus is *led [up] by the Spirit* to be tested. One need not worry about which mountain or which parapet of the Temple

The devil again draws on the assumed privileges of the “Son of God.” If Jesus can quote Scripture, then the devil will use God’s word. Satan delves into Ps 91(vv. 11a, 12) to suggest that Jesus should throw himself off the temple (Mt 4:6a). After all, the psalmist promised that angels would take charge over God’s faithful people to keep them from harm. Psalm 91 is one of many psalms that appears to promise the faithful believer complete freedom from harm. Here the promises appear to apply to a monarch who has just escaped violent death and is still exposed to future danger. Even within the context of the psalms’ worldview, there is no justification for inciting God by deliberately putting oneself in harm’s way, demanding that he come to rescue.

France (1985, 104) notes that “As Son of God, he could surely claim with absolute confidence the physical protection which God promises in Psalm 91:11–12 (and throughout that Psalm) to those who trust him. So why not try it by forcing God’s hand (and thus silence any lingering doubts about his relationship with God)? But this would be to tempt God . . . as Israel did in the wilderness at Massah (Deut. 6:16), when they ‘put the LORD to the proof by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”’ (Exod. 17:2–7). The Son of God can live only in a relationship of trust which needs no test. Christians perplexed by the apparently thin line between ‘the prayer of faith’ and ‘putting God to the test’ should note that the devil’s suggestion was of an artificially created crisis, not of trusting God in the situations which result from obedient service.”

All this I will give to you... The view from the *mountain* recalls Moses’ view of the promised land from Mount Nebo (Deut. 34:1–4). The devil’s dominion over all the world, implied here and explicit in Luke 4:6, is stated also in John 12:31 (cf 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 John 5:19). France (2007, 135) considers that Satan’s offer is mere bluff and bluster – or did in fact Satan have some dominion over the world? Several times in the NT Satan will be described in such language, e.g., “ruler of the world” (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 6:11-12; 1 John 5:19; Rev 12:9-17). The gospels seem to take for granted that Satan does have such power but that is always seen within the ultimate victory of God.

Ironically it was this very dominion which Jesus had come to claim (Dan. 7:14; cf. Matt. 28:18), and the resulting contest was and is fierce. The devil was not too subtle in seeking to avoid the conflict by asking for Jesus’ allegiance. Nonetheless, it provided a crucial test of Jesus’ loyalty to his Father, even where it meant renouncing the easy way of allowing the end to justify the means.

Israel had fallen to this temptation again and again, and had renounced their exclusive loyalty to God for the sake of political advantage. At the entry to the promised land the temptation met them in an acute form (Deut. 6:10–15; Jesus’ reply quotes v. 13). But the true Son of God cannot compromise his loyalty, and sharply dismisses the devil, using now for the first time the name which reveals his true purpose, *Satan*, ‘the enemy’ of God and of God’s purpose of salvation.

There is only one answer: *The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve* (Dt 6:13 – with an implication of v.14: *You shall not follow other gods*). Nothing more need be said and Satan is dismissed curtly leaving no doubt about who is in control. Unlike Luke, Matthew does not say that Satan’s withdrawal is temporary, but as is clear in narratives that follow there are other encounters with the demonic ahead.

Angelic help arrives...

The angelic help of Psalm 91:11, which Jesus refused to call for illegitimately (vv. 6–7), is now appropriately given. *Ministered* implies particularly the provision of food, and again the experience of Elijah seems to be recalled (1 Kgs 19:5–8). The lessons of the period of hunger have been well learnt, and God’s messengers break the fast that Jesus himself would not break (vv. 3–4).

Final thoughts...

Boring (165) raises an important question and provides some good answers:

Is Satan language passé? The interpreter's first question today may be whether there is still a place in our thinking for images of Satan, especially since such images can be abused by a literalism that uses "the devil made me do it" as an escape from personal responsibility and that brands its opponents as tools of the devil. Yet, language and imagery of the demonic played an important theological role for Matthew, and it can continue to do so for us. Such imagery provides a way of acknowledging the reality of an evil greater than our own individual inclinations to evil, a supra-personal power often called "systemic evil" today. Another valuable aspect of such language is that it can prevent us from regarding our human opponents as the ultimate enemy, allowing us to see both them and ourselves as being victimized by the power of evil.

Perhaps too quickly we readers consider this passage as a model of “resisting temptation” of greed, lust, and others sins of the earthly realm. In reality, it is a deeper model of discipleship that is on display. The temptation is to misuse Scripture and our gifts for ourselves and our own will and ambition. We are tempted to do our own will rather than the Father’s. *Unless the LORD build the house, they labor in vain who build. Unless the LORD guard the city, in vain does the guard keep watch.* (Psalm 127:1)

Notes

Matthew 4:1 lead by: The Matthean *anagō* (lead, direct) is softening of the Markan *ekballō* (throw, throw out, cast away; Mk 1:12). *Anagō* can also carry the sense of “up” thus many translations use “lead up” indicating away from the River Jordan (3:17). **dessert:** The Greek noun *érēmon* is used, derived from *érēmos* which means abandoned, or desolated. Given the topography of Galilee, “wilderness” is a more suitable translation. Perhaps too much is made of the wilderness as a uniquely appropriate place to encounter the devil. See Mt 12:43-45 – perhaps one can deduce that a waterless place is the last place the devil wants to be. The devil is present in the wilderness because he has a role in the testing of Jesus. **tempted:** see notes within the text.

Matthew 4:2 forty days and forty nights: “forty days” in biblical use is an idiomatic expression for a significant but limited amount of time (e.g. Gen 7:4, Ng 13:25; 1 Sam 17:16, Jonah 3:4; Acts 1:3). Matthew speaks more specifically of *forty days and forty nights*. Give that Matthew elsewhere connects Moses and Elijah to this narrative, it seems likely that Matthew intends the “forty” to be quite specific and to echo the period Moses (Ex 24:18) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8) spent without food. That being said, the reference of “forty” strongly echoes the forty years of wilderness wandering during the Exodus.

Matthew 4:3 the tempter: Where Luke’s telling of this same pericope uses the Greek *diabolos*, a synonym for Satan, here the word is *peirázōn*. As explained in the “Commentary” section, this word is better translated as “tester” - not only for the context of the passage, but “tester” is the primary meaning of the word in Greek and in its NT usage. **If you are...** the word “if” (*ei*) can be translated as “if, because, since.” Thus the question from the devil begins with “Son of God” as a given and asks, “Since you are the Son of God...”

Matthew 4:5 devil: here Matthew does use the Greek *daibolos*. **holy city:** given the Temple, it clearly refers to Jerusalem – a fact Luke 4:9 makes clear. **parapet:** *pterygion* – this is actually a quite obscure word whose lit. meaning is “small wing.” It is not known elsewhere as a particular part of any building. All that is clear is that it is at a high point from which there is a precipitous drop. The suggested parts of the Temple are: (1) a protruding rampart corner of the temple square, e.g., the southeast corner, which protrudes high over the Kidron Valley, (2) the roof pinnacle of the “royal hall” at the south end of the temple square (mentioned in Josephus *Ant. xv.412* emphasizes its dizzying height), (3) a gate structure with a three-cornered, wing-like design, (4) a balcony on the outer side of the temple wall, or possibly (5) the roof of the temple building. It is not possible to determine the exact location. (EDNT)

Matthew 4:8 mountain: The traditional identification of the “Mountain of Temptation” above Jericho has no real historical basis. **kingdoms of the world:** the contrast to the kingdom of Heaven is clear and sets the context for the “Sermon on the Mount”.

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