

# THE WILDERNESS TEMPTATIONS



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“The world says: "You have needs - satisfy them. You have as much right as the rich and the mighty. Don't hesitate to satisfy your needs; indeed, expand your needs and demand more." This is the worldly doctrine of today. And they believe that this is freedom. The result for the rich is isolation and suicide, for the poor, envy and murder.”

(Fyodor Dostoevsky: The Brothers Karamazov)

## INTRODUCTION

The story of Jesus in the wilderness is one of the foundational texts of Christianity. It is the story of a spiritual battle, as Jesus faces down Satan in an epic confrontation that will shape the remainder of his life. It is narrated in three of the four canonical gospels, in the Marcan account (Mark 1:13) it warrants only a short mention, but a significant one, as it serves to set Jesus up in the tradition of his illustrious forbears Moses (Exodus 34:28) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:5-7) In the Matthean and Lucan accounts, the story is longer, richer, more detailed, and it is these two accounts which this short essay will draw upon most heavily.

It's important to understand that this piece of writing relies upon one key assumption: that we accept Jesus was a real person. This is of course disputed, but not in this essay. There is little that is immediately straightforward about this remarkable story, which, besides being found in all three of the synoptic gospels is also referred to, albeit obliquely, elsewhere, including in the Gospel of John. So in order to try and understand what is going on in it, we must first understand what sort of story it is, and what kind of message it seeks to convey: so let's try and boil it down a little.

## POLAR

There are a number of ways of looking at what did, or did not happen in the wilderness. Briefly, here are the two extreme points in the debate:

- 1) Jesus was a man who went into the desert for forty days to fast from food, and at the end of his fasting period, he encountered a individual who he knew to be Satan, a physically manifested spiritual being, who tried to tempt Jesus in three different, and ultimately futile ways. Eventually Satan buzzes off, and Jesus' trials are over.
- 2) Jesus was an insurrectionist who gained a cult following in first century Palestine, and after his death those who were his followers mythologised his life, inventing a number of incidents to prove their various claims about him, one of which is the so called 'Wilderness temptations narrative'.

These two positions are polar, and perhaps the most common belief concerning this story sits somewhere in the middle of them. The first, after all, has a number of logical difficulties – not least the question of how tempting something really is, if the Devil himself turns up to offer it to you. Not least when you are divine in nature. I have some personal experience to draw upon here, having once fasted from food for forty days, and I can say from my own recollection that while I was very glad to break my fast, I don't think that even I, weak willed and thoroughly human though I am, would have been up for submitting myself to the Devil for some food at that point. Reason, along with my own experience leads me to note

too that really these temptations aren't anything to do with breaking a fast. I'm sure that bread would have been tempting to a hungry man, but I find it hard to imagine that Jesus would have gone with bread to break a forty day fast. If Satan had really wanted to tempt him by means of hunger, all he needed to do was suggest a lovely bowl of soup, or something similar that a seriously hungry man's stomach could actually handle. You can't break a six week fast by tucking in to baked goods. There is, however, no corresponding scripture verse in Deuteronomy about man living by soup alone. For a wide variety of reasons, the simple approach of taking the story as 'literal' is problematic. Even those who do take it as literal accept the use of some hyperbole within the text – there is for instance no peak high enough from which one can see all the kingdoms of the world, so one must make some adjustments to account for that sort of textual inconsistency.

The opposite pole has the mythology of Jesus developed entirely after his death, by followers keen to prove that claims concerning his Messiah status were provable. This account is favoured by some liberal Christians, and some Muslims, who largely see the narrative as a demonstration that Jesus himself was not in fact Divine, but a prophet as they maintain. For those with a strongly political bent, this approach has some things to recommend itself. The early Jesus movement certainly was a political movement, and writers like 'Matthew' evidently went to great pains to develop a series of narratives around the life of Jesus which prove a series of points to his readers. Much of the writer's motivation revolved around demonstrating that Jesus fulfilled a variety of Hebrew prophecies, and that he was, therefore – the promised Messiah. 'Matthew' is keen to draw parallels throughout his text between Jesus and Moses, using aspects of Jesus' ministry to illustrate the way in which the two mirror one another. Just as in Mark, there are definite echoes of that theme in the forty days spent in the wilderness, as well as the fasting. But the fact that the story appears in all three of the synoptic gospels, written in different styles and with different audiences in mind, hints that perhaps this was more than a later invention. It would appear that this was a story that Jesus or at least the very earliest Jesus movement told in some form or other, and which was then reproduced for each writer's target readership.

## **PARABOLIC**

One 'middle way' approach to the story of the wilderness temptations is to read it as a parable. A parable is an allegorical story told with the intention of getting across a moral meaning of some sort. A parable is a 'fictional' story in the sense that it is not bound to the rigid conventions of what we think of as 'fact; or 'history', but instead it takes commonly understood situations and uses them to illustrate an important point. The sense that a parable is both 'false' and 'true' is important: the truth of the story doesn't rely upon it's historical veracity, in general this is not hard to accept, but the problem some have with the approach is that it can be hard to know when something is, or is not, a parable. Jesus made much use of parables in his recorded teaching, among the best known of these are the story of the Good

Samaritan, and there are a host of others which are not only well known within Christianity, but have become cultural touch stones of some sort – the Prodigal Son, and the Lost Sheep for instance have become well known metaphors. In general, these stories have been readily identified as parables, because they don't involve any 'real' characters. Rather they contain fictional or generic characters (" a certain man..."), designed to resonate with the hearers. If this story is to be read as a parable then, it seems as if it is a different kind of parable to the majority that Jesus told – but perhaps not to all.

There is another story, widely regarded as a parable, which also uses both a named character, (perhaps one familiar to the hearers of the original story) and also aspects of 'supernatural' imagery. This is the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, or 'Dives and Lazarus' as it is sometimes known. In that story, which appears in the gospel of Luke (Luke 16: 19 – 31), a rich man dies as does the beggar who (Lazarus) who used to sit at his gate. The rich man goes to Hades, from where he can see Lazarus in heaven. He begs first that Lazarus might dip his finger in some water, and bring him a tiny little bit of comfort from the agony of fire he is surrounded in. When this request is denied, the rich man renews that Lazarus may be sent to tell his family to repent so that they may avoid the torment of Hell, this too is denied. Some readers do approach this story as 'literal', but I think this really stretches the boundaries of credibility, and flies in the face of what the wider gospel narrative would seem to be about. It seems more credible and honest to accept that this is a parable, and to recognise the message that 'Luke' seeks to convey. One of the key arguments against it being a parable would be that it falls out of line with the other parables which are in the first place, entirely 'earthly' and in the second place involve unnamed characters. However, if we come to think of the wilderness temptations as a parable, then actually the two share these two characteristics as similarities.

## POINTED

What then is the point of the story, if we are to see it as a parable? In the first place, we should recognise that what Jesus describes is his own 'internal' battle. This is a story about how he was feeling, and the ways in which he was tempted to go. To understand why this is important, we have to recognise the point at which this story is set. It comes directly after Jesus is baptised by John – which in itself is a pivot point in the wider narrative (particularly for 'Mark'). Although it's commonplace now, we need to understand that the ritual of Baptism in first century Palestine was subversive – a ritual of resistance. Jesus didn't have John dunk him in the river because he needed, somehow, to have his sins washed away – rather his baptism was a signifier that he was committed to a different path to that of the empire. (Streett, 2018) Similarly the Lucan account of the aftermath of Jesus' baptism is redolent with symbolism. Firstly the dove descends upon Jesus, according to 'Luke' "in bodily form". The dove as a symbol of peace and love, is the antithesis to the imperial eagle. And then God speaks: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased." (Luke 3:22) To set up Jesus, as Luke continues to do, as 'God's son' is nothing

short of treason – he does this in the face of the Divine emperor (Augustus Caesar) and the Jewish authorities of the time, who were Roman stooges.

This then is the start point of Jesus' ministry – he has been baptised, taken the revolutionary alternative to the Roman 'Sacramentum' (an oath of loyalty to the empire) and now is set to begin his work. But what shape shall that work take? Should he liberate and distribute resources to win 'cupboard love' from those around him? Should he gather a band of warriors to fight and overturn the Roman authorities? Or should he turn to miraculous signs and dramatic spectacle to win acclaim from the crowds? (Yoder, 1972) In other words, should he abuse resources, relationships or power to take his place as the leader or his people? Jesus chooses none of the above. He recognises each for what they are – the work of the Devil, temptations born of pride and vanity. He returns, time and again to the basis of his people's way – the Torah – to remind himself that his is a different way. This is the story he tells his followers, we cheapen and devalue it by turning it in to an arm wrestle with the Devil. He told it too to demonstrate that this process, this kind of spiritual battle, is something which we all need to join. We must do the 'inner work'.

Later scholars came to realise that these temptations were faced by all who sought to walk in 'God's way' – to live a radically anti-empire life. We all face these temptations, just as all face the temptation not to do the inner work – an idea which I describe as the 'fourth wilderness temptation'. (Cross, 2010) Monastic and religious vows and commitments came to reflect that, the cardinal virtues of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience respond directly to those first three temptations, Stability responds to the fourth. For each of us, the need to do the inner work is pressing, it is vital. For as long as we continue to treat the story of Jesus in the wilderness as 'history' of a time of trial for one man, we miss the point.

## CONCLUSION

The story of the wilderness temptations is a parable of a different sort – unusual in style, but not entirely without precedent – Jesus tells the story to make a point. He is setting out what kind of leader he is, what kind of approach he will take. He has already participated in the revolutionary washing ritual of John's baptism, demonstrating his allegiance to a different empire to that of Rome. Now he has to choose – what's next? So he does the inner work – he goes into the wilderness with the wild beasts. He faces his temptations, names them and recognises them for what they are. Eventually he is ready, and begins his ministry, the story he tells is a formative one, and one which his later followers will come to retell and repurpose for their own audiences.

The wilderness temptations. [simonjcross.com/longform](http://simonjcross.com/longform) (March 2019)

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