

The Work of Incarnation – Fulfilling Israel’s Sonship

I. Review Observations

1. Jesus’ wilderness ordeal was a test of His sonship, *ordained and orchestrated by His Father* who had affirmed Him as His beloved, well-pleasing Son and anointed Him with His Spirit at His baptism. Immediately after, the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert and then led Him through His trial. The Satan – the adversary/accuser – was only the instrument of the test.

Thus this episode must not be understood (as is often the case) as the devil devising a scheme to tempt Jesus to submit to his own evil agenda. The entire ordeal was the Father’s doing, intended to vindicate His own declared assessment of the Son.

2. God intended this testing ordeal – which the Spirit directed and the Satan served – to prove out Jesus’ sonship as True Israel and True Man. It would demonstrate to Jesus Himself, as well as the satanic adversary, that He is God’s image-son in truth, the true human being.

*Thus Jesus came away from this testing fully confirmed in His self-understanding, thereafter adopting the title **Son of Man** as His characteristic way of referring to Himself.*

3. As seen, the first of the three tests challenged Jesus’ sonship in terms of His dependent, patient trust in His Father. Fundamentally, the test involved the confusion of categories: Jesus as *divine* Son of God and as *human* Son of God (son of Adam and son of Abraham).
 - a. God had identified Jesus as His beloved, well-pleasing Son in the context of His solidarity with Israel and the anointing of the Spirit, and it was as God’s messianic servant-son “Israel” that Jesus was led out into the wilderness to be tested.
 - b. The adversary understood this, and so his challenge to Jesus to exercise His prerogative as divine Son of God had its goal in leading Him to deviate from the truth of His human sonship, thereby falsifying His Father’s assessment and the Spirit’s anointing.

II. Fulfilling Israel’s Sonship – Jesus’ Wilderness Testing

C. The Second Test – Distinguishing Faith and Presumption

1. The second test in Matthew’s gospel is the final one in Luke’s gospel. Both writers recorded that the Satan took Jesus to Jerusalem (“the holy city”) and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple (Mat. 4:5; Luke 4:9). Since Jesus was in the wilderness, scholars have debated whether this was a literal or visionary journey to Jerusalem. Neither writer addressed this question, but both emphasized that the devil (the *slanderer*) orchestrated this circumstance. Clearly he didn’t march Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem and up into the temple, but Matthew and Luke focused their attention on the test itself and the way Jesus responded to it.
2. Having positioned Jesus on the top of the temple, the Satan challenged Him to throw Himself down, citing one of the core promises set out in Psalm 91: “*He will give His angels charge concerning you... they will bear you up in their hands, lest you strike your foot against a stone...*” (vv. 11-12). As before, the adversary’s premise was that Jesus is the beloved Son of God, and therefore He has legitimate claim to Yahweh’s pledge of care and protection as set forth by the psalmist. Two initial observations are important to note:

- a. First of all, the devil’s citation underscores the fact that he knows the holy Scriptures and is neither repelled by them nor unwilling to interact with them in his dealings with men. This, in turn, implies a critical truth that many miss or downplay: *The Scriptures can be readily used to deceive and mislead, even when they are accurately quoted in context.* The reason is that scriptural truth – and therefore inspiration – is a matter of meaning, not linguistic features as such (words, grammar, syntax, etc.). ***The implication is that God’s inspired “word” becomes false when it is misunderstood and/or misapplied.***
 - b. Secondly, and flowing out of the previous observation, this test exposes the inherent danger in the common Christian practice of “claiming promises” extracted from the Scriptures. God’s integrity and the truthfulness of His word are the usual justification for this practice; if God has promised something, we can claim that promise with full assurance, for He always keeps His word. But this sort of thinking fails to recognize two crucial truths: *First, the Bible isn’t a collection of timeless divine promises and truisms that have universal pertinence. But beyond that, a person’s perception of what God has promised isn’t necessarily what He actually promised.* Both of these truths show the folly and wrongfulness of carelessly “claiming” scriptural promises; those who do so are almost certainly attempting to bind God to their own notions and expectations, and all in the name of believing and trusting Him who is true and whose word cannot fail.
3. Once again the devil tempted Jesus with respect to His sonship (Mat. 4:6a), pointing Him back to God’s pronouncement at His baptism (Mat. 3:16-17). As noted earlier, the title *Son of God* connotes both Jesus’ *divine* and *human* sonship. In the first test, the Satan drew on Jesus’ divine sonship, exhorting Him to use His prerogative to produce bread from a stone. He attempted to undermine Jesus’ faithfulness to His human sonship (True Israel and True Man) by seducing Him to intervene on His own behalf as the divine Son.

Here the devil was again targeting Jesus’ human sonship, but from a different vantage point. In the first test he attempted to get Jesus to violate His human sonship by drawing on divine prerogative; *in this second test, he was enticing Jesus to violate His human sonship by fully embracing it in accordance with His Father’s own word of promise.*

- a. The tempter shrewdly drew from Psalm 91, a jubilant summary of the triumph, protection and blessing that mark the relationship between Yahweh and His faithful children. It celebrates the vast riches that are the portion of the faithful man, and so served as a compelling exhortation to the Israelite people to become such faithful sons and daughters.
- b. Put simply, this psalm is an ode to *man* as truly man – man as living with God in a relationship of perfect intimacy, loving devotion, and complete trust as image-son. This is the reason the adversary drew from it in his temptation (which he strategically orchestrated at the *temple* – the place most associated with God’s presence, faithfulness, care, and provision). This, then, was the devil’s challenge:

God Himself has openly affirmed that you are His faithful and beloved son; you are preeminently the sort of man the psalmist extolled, and thus you will demonstrate your faithfulness to your sonship by fully owning the relationship of care and provision the psalm celebrates. Indeed, anything less than that indicates distrust of your God and Father. If you would honor your sonship and your Father and the integrity of His pledge to you, you must embrace and act upon His promise of care and protection.

4. Satan presented his temptation as an exhortation to faithfulness and trust, but Jesus saw through the deception. He didn't deny that the psalm pertained to Him or accuse the tempter of twisting its meaning, but He recognized that it was being misused. Hence His rebuke: "*On the other hand, it is written, 'You shall not put Yahweh, your God, to the test.'*" * Deut. 6:16
 - a. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to undergo an ordeal of *testing* (Mat. 4:1) to prove out His Father's affirmation of Him and His faithful sonship (Mat. 3:16-17). And here, Jesus rebuked the devil as attempting to provoke Him to *test God*. Both of these instances involve the same Greek verb, but the form used in verse 7 (and also in Luke's account) adds a preposition that focuses and intensifies the meaning, indicating a test whose specific purpose is to prove out the truth or falseness of a claim or status (hence, "put to the test"). * cf. Luke 10:25; 1 Cor. 10:9; also LXX of Deut. 6:16, 8:2, 16
 - b. Here it is *Yahweh* – the God of Israel and of Jesus the Israelite – who was to be tested, *which itself would test Jesus' solidarity with Israel*. Hence He answered from the same context (Deut. 6-8) in which Moses was exhorting the Israelites to be mindful of their God and His past interaction with them as they now prepared to enter the land. He warned them about becoming complacent and self-satisfied once they settled in Canaan and were enjoying its abundance and rest. Their ease would encourage forgetfulness and neglect, and they could easily find themselves straying from Yahweh and embracing the culture and idolatrous practices of the people around them. Thus Moses warned Yahweh's sons against "putting Him to the test" in the land as they had done in the wilderness, citing the Massah episode as exemplifying their unbelief throughout that period. * ref. Exod. 17:1-7; cf. Deut. 9:22, 32:51, 33:8; Psa. 81:7, 95:8, 106:32

The sons of Israel didn't "test" God by tempting Him to do evil; yes, they charged Him with evil intentions and actions when they suffered under His care, but they never tried to elicit evil from Him. Israel "tested" Yahweh by questioning and even denying His integrity and faithfulness and requiring that He prove it to their satisfaction based on their own judgment, expectations and concerns. *In Israel's judgment, their God would show Himself faithful and true when He complied with their criteria of faithfulness.*

5. This, then, was the issue in this second temptation and Jesus wasn't about to fall for it. Put simply, the adversary was attempting to get Him to confuse *presumption* with *faith*. In this way, he was actually challenging Jesus as True Man and not simply True Israel. *For mistaking presumption for faith is inherent in all human religious practice, even as it is a fundamental manifestations of the broken relationship between God and humans.* Put another way, presumption is how people naturally conceive and express "faith," but the two are actually antithetical: Presumption is a hallmark of the natural mind, while faith distinguishes a renewed mind; presumption defines natural human interaction with God, while faith and faithfulness define the relationship of true image-sons with their Father. At bottom, presumption reflects a life governed by *sight*, which is antithetical to *faith*.

Presumption defines Adamic man because he is effectively his own god. As such, he cannot help but assess and appropriate God's words through the lens of his own personal judgments, sensibilities, concerns and expectations. Presumption "puts God to the test" because it demands that He submit His veracity and faithfulness to human judgment and determination; presumption takes truth away from the One who is Truth and makes it the servant of the sovereign self. *Presumption seeks and insists upon what it believes God has promised; faith entrusts itself to the One who has promised – the One who is faithful, whatever may come.*