

The Work of Incarnation – Fulfilling Israel’s Sonship

I. Review Observations

1. Jesus’ wilderness ordeal was a key aspect of His solidarity with Israel. It was His testing as “son of God,” orchestrated by the Spirit to prove out His sonship as affirmed by His Father.
2. Each of the three recorded temptations connected His testing with Israel’s wilderness testing and highlighted His triumph as faithful son where Israel had failed.
3. All three tests were directed at Jesus’ *human sonship* as True Israel (and so True Man), with each one confronting that sonship from a particular vantage point.
 - a. The first test challenged Jesus’ sonship in terms of His confident, dependent trust as human image-son. It tempted Him to undermine that sonship through *divine prerogative*.
 - b. The second one challenged His human sonship by tempting Him to defer to His *Adamic humanness* in His relationship with His Father. Yielding to this temptation, Jesus would have shown wrongful solidarity with Israel by joining it in its failure as Yahweh’s son.
 - c. The third test had a climactic quality in that it tested Jesus at the point of the ultimate goal of His human existence as God’s image-son. Specifically, man was created to be image-lord, administering God’s rule over His creation, and this was the vantage point from which the Satan made his final assault against the Son.

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

D. The Third Test – The Snare of Human Lordship

1. Matthew placed this test last, while Luke situated it in between the other two. Scholars and others have proposed various explanations for this, but it’s impossible to be certain. The difference might reflect an intentional decision by either Matthew or Luke to deviate from the actual order of the tests, but it’s equally possible that the order is irrelevant to the meaning of the tests and their combined contribution to Jesus’ testing. In other words, the three tests form a crucial and complete whole, but not as a matter of sequence. At the same time, this final test does have a notable climactic quality, and so its being treated last here.
2. The setting for this third test was a high mountain from which Jesus could survey the kingdoms of the earth (Mat. 4:8; Luke 4:5). Interestingly, Luke used an expression that emphasizes the *inhabited world* rather than the earth as such. This is not to say that he contradicted Matthew’s account, but he made it clear that the focus here was the human realms and kingdoms – *inhabitations* – that fill the earth, and not the physical planet.

To a modern reader, the first question that likely comes to mind is how Jesus could possibly view the entire inhabited world from the top of a mountain. The mountains in Israel aren’t very tall, and though the Middle East does have a mountain that exceeds 18,000 ft. (Mount Damavand in Iran), a round earth makes it impossible to see its entire surface, no matter how high one’s vantage point. This obvious reality, along with the fact that Jesus was still in the wilderness after this test was completed (cf. Mat. 4:11 and Luke 4:14), shows that this was a visionary experience (as was likely the case with the temple one).

3. As with His appearance at the temple, Matthew and Luke weren't concerned to explain the phenomenon of Jesus finding Himself on a high mountain; once again, the issue was the test itself, its significance for the messianic work, and the way Jesus responded to it. Here, the Satan was tempting Jesus with the lure of complete authority over the human realm and all of the splendor, power, and glory associated with it.
 - a. The first thing to note is that the devil insisted that this grant was his to bestow – "*I will give you all this dominion and its glory, for it has been handed over to me...*" (Luke 4:6; cf. Mat. 4:9) – and Jesus didn't question his claim. This raises the question of satanic authority and rule over the world and what it means that it was "handed over" to him. Jesus Himself spoke of this lordship by identifying the devil as the "*ruler of this world*" (John 12:31, 16:11), and Paul similarly referred to him as the "*god of this world*" (2 Cor. 4:4). So John insisted that the whole world "*lies in the evil one,*" indicating universal satanic influence over the lives of men and the course of this world (1 John 5:19).
 - b. The Scripture is clear about the Satan's dominion in the world, but gives no direct explanation for how it came about. (Passages like Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 are often cited to explain Satan's "fall," but that exegesis is questionable.) Here, the devil asserted that his rule over the world had been given to him, which suggests that he obtained it from God, since He is the sovereign Lord of all creation. Many Christians have held this view, *but the language, context, and especially the significance and purpose for Jesus' testing all point in a different direction.*

Viewed within the wider biblical narrative, it's clear that the Satan's dominion over the world was "delivered over" to him by *man* – first in Eden, and then continually after by Adam's offspring. For man was created to be lord of the earth, with his lordship manifested in a corporate human "inhabitation" that reflects and propagates God's own life, mind and rule throughout the earth. The Creator is sovereign Lord, but He determined to exercise His lordship over His creation in and through man, His image-son.

God gave man dominion over the earth, but man unwittingly handed over his dominion to the Satan when he succumbed to the seduction to establish human identity and lordship independent of the Creator whose image man bears. Adam and Eve embraced the Satan's counsel with the intent of establishing their autonomous supremacy in the earth, but in so doing they delivered over themselves and their God-ordained lordship to the adversary.

- c. Thus the devil was offering to grant Jesus a dominion that was his to bestow, but he was merely presenting Him with the same enticement he'd offered up in Eden. Like Adam and Eve, Jesus could become lord of the earth in His own right, but under the ultimate sovereignty of the Satan: "*All these things I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.*" Autonomous human authority and rule is subjugation to the destroyer of men.

Once again, Jesus was being tested as the human son of God. This final test was a clear recapitulation of the original satanic temptation in Eden, and so particularly targeted Jesus' status as a *son of Adam* and His calling to be True Man. But this same dynamic of human autonomy operating under satanic governance defined *Israel's* existence throughout its generations. One need only consider Israel's persistent *idolatry* to make the case. The children of Israel were continually seduced by the "gods" of the nations – powers and influences other than Yahweh, all of which reflected and served the "god of this world."

Thus Yahweh's perpetual assessment of His people was that they were unclean adulterers given over to other "lovers" (i.e., other "gods" – Ezek. 16; 23; Hos. 1-2, etc.). Indeed, they used His material blessings to pursue and show their devotion to these lovers, until He'd finally had enough and sent them away, even as He also departed from them. Not all Israelites became open worshippers of other gods, but even the faithful among them were sons of Adam, and so subject to the satanic lord and his governance of the human world.

4. Thus the Satan was challenging Jesus as *son of Adam* and *son of Israel*, but, unlike His human counterparts, He recognized that this offer of autonomous lordship held out the promise of His *destruction* as man, not His glorification. For man is the image of the living God, so that a human being "dies" – he ceases to be truly human – when he distances himself from the One who is His life and truth; man's independence is his abolition.

Humans were created to rule God's creation, but as image-children administering His rule. The human vocation is *priestly* as well as *kingly*, and this precludes any notion of human autonomy, let alone autonomous human authority and dominion in the world. Thus Jesus answered the Satan in a way that expressed *His* authority and power over him – *the authority and power that were His as man in proper relation to God as image-lord*. * Mat. 4:10

The satanic lord sought to elicit the Son's fealty, but Jesus commanded him to leave His presence, again citing from Deuteronomy (ref. 6:13) to assert His absolute devotion to His God and His commitment to seeing His Father's will accomplished (cf. Mat. 16:21-23). And once again Jesus' citation was right on target, coming from a passage in which Moses was warning Israel to remain utterly committed to their covenant God and Father and not allow their devotion to be distracted or displaced to other "gods." They were to worship and serve Yahweh alone, and this faithful devotion would ensure their well-being in their promised habitation and their triumph over all their enemies. * ref. Deut. 8:1-16, also 6:1-19

Put simply, Moses challenged the Israelites to fulfill their election as sons by keeping His covenant. Through their faithfulness they would become a royal and priestly kingdom, exercising Yahweh's sovereign, wise, and loving lordship in the earth, thereby ministering the light of His truth and blessing to all of its inhabitants. Thus they would prove themselves well-pleasing sons. But Israel's failure in the wilderness was followed by even worse unfaithfulness in the land; everything that Moses had warned about ultimately came true. Israel was an unruly and incorrigible son, prideful and independent and determined to pursue its well-being through relations forged with the surrounding nations and their gods.

5. But now, Yahweh had focused Israel's election and vocation on Jesus of Nazareth. He had taken up Israel's life and lot in the incarnate Son for the sake of His intent for His creation, bound up in Israel by covenant oath. Thus Jesus was born a son of Israel in order to liberate and renew Israel by crushing the satanic power that had enslaved all men, subjecting them to an anti-human, anti-creation reign of terror. And redeemed and renewed, Israel could finally fulfill its mandate on behalf of mankind, so that Israel's God could at last realize His design to fill the earth with His presence and glory through the rule of His faithful image-children.

In Jesus' own words, He had come to "bind the strongman" in order to "plunder his house," and this conflict saw its initial triumph in the wilderness. Thereafter, Jesus' interaction with the Satan and his minions would reflect this decisive encounter and manifest His triumphal power as the *Son of Man* – the Father's beloved and well-pleasing Son whose ultimate triumph through the power of love would bring many sons to glory. * John 12:23-32