

# The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

by Edward L. Bleynat, Jr.

Matthew  
Mark  
Luke

Volume II:  
*From the Desert  
to the Mount*

Foreword by Phyllis Tickle, best-selling author and founding religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*



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## • CHAPTER TWO •

# *From the River to the Desert: The Journey Into Messiah*

*"The devil made me buy that dress!"*

Comedian Flip Wilson's alter ego, Geraldine, used this excuse when she felt consumed by guilt over purchasing an article of clothing she could not afford. It was a funny line; but it was hardly the first time someone had used it as a defense after finding that temptation was just too strong to bear.

*"The serpent tricked me, and I ate" (Gen. 3:13).*

The original version of the defense came earlier. It was how Eve responded to God when he asked her what she had done with the forbidden fruit.

Who could speak too harshly of Eve for pinning it on the serpent? After all, Adam had just tried to deflect all the blame on her: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12).

things, but as one who comes to make us whole. By Jesus resisting the multiple loaves, and Matthew adding the phrase that we live by every word that comes from God, he uses the Hebrew Bible to dispel any misconception about how the Messiah will use his power.

1. What do you make of Jesus' temptation to be a social or economic messiah? How is it that role "not enough?"
2. Yet, isn't feeding the hungry critically important? See Matthew 25, where Jesus tells his audience that it will be judged by its treatment of those in need—who are identified with Jesus himself.
3. It has been suggested that Jesus has more to say about social justice, the relationship between rich and poor, and one's connections to his possessions, than about any other topics. Do you agree? As we will see when we study the Sermon on the Mount later in this volume, social justice is an area that receives expansive commentary from Jesus.
4. How do we embrace both the social gospel of economic justice and the call toward relationship with God and our neighbors in other ways? Does it seem like an either/or proposition? How can we make it a both/and ministry?

## *To Soar and Not Fall*

Satan does not give up quickly. Having failed in his suggestion that Jesus provide bread, he now turns to the next logical choice for mass manipulation: circuses.<sup>31</sup> Satan tempts Jesus to perform a spectacle that will leave all dazzled, and Jesus in position to acquire a spellbound following.

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<sup>31</sup>We will examine this notion of "bread and circuses"—a Roman historian's shorthand for deterioration of public morals—on page 59.

Driving toward this goal, the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and urges him to throw himself down, because he will not fall to the ground. He quotes scripture to bolster the suggestion. This is his version of the “comeback”—the time-honored, smart-mouthed retort that is intended to win debate points and wow the crowds.

But before we explore Satan’s and Jesus’ respective uses of scripture, let us examine the setting. The first point is location. When the devil takes Jesus to the holy city of Jerusalem, and places him on the pinnacle of the temple, he is making a bold stroke. The temple was a huge structure. While it did not have a true “pinnacle” in the architectural sense, Matthew may have used that word to describe either of two high points. One possibility is where Solomon’s Porch and the Royal Porch met at a corner of the temple. Given where it was situated on Mount Zion, the place was as high as 450 feet above the valley of Kedron.<sup>32</sup> Another possible location is the roof right over the temple court where the priests sounded the trumpet at first light to announce to the world that the morning sacrifice was beginning.<sup>33</sup>

The temple was a busy place. A leap from either height would be witnessed by a large crowd. Can you imagine the reaction of those gathered when they saw that Jesus’ fall did not end with a sudden, fatal stop?

But Satan knows that the spectacle itself is not enough to tempt Jesus. He must dress it up with respectability. He tries to use Jesus’ own tactics against him by quoting a passage from scripture, Psalm 91:

**<sup>11</sup>For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.**

**<sup>12</sup>On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.**

**<sup>13</sup>You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.**

What, precisely, is Satan trying to do with this passage? He knows that place is important. The temple was closer to the heart of first-century Jewish religious experience than we can comprehend. It was the site where the sacred rites were

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<sup>32</sup>See Barclay commentary on the gospel of Matthew, Volume I, from *The Daily Study Bible Series* at 68.

<sup>33</sup>*Id.*

observed. It was the jewel of Judaism, the place where God's chosen people worshiped with all the trappings of divine blessing. Judaism of the day was more centered in the temple than Christianity has ever been centered in a given place. By making a spectacular show mimicking scripture before a large crowd in the heart of Judaism, Jesus would be sending a message about his sonship in supernatural, dramatic fashion.

What is wrong with this? After all, did Jesus not from time to time display power in ways that led people to believe in him? Here in Matthew, we might think of the walking on the water (Matt. 14:22–23). In John, the wonders Jesus performed, beginning at the wedding at Cana in Galilee, prompted faith among his disciples (John 2:1–12).

To see why some displays of power are acceptable and others are not, we need to look at the whole gospel story. Jesus' deeds of power in the synoptic Gospels were most often performed to alleviate human suffering. They were not done to win friends and influence people. And, they can best be understood against the whole context of his experience. His identity as Son of God is to be seen in light of his obedient suffering, not in his ability to impress people.

There is more still to the story. We have already seen in the first temptation that Jesus revisited an experience of Israel's failure, but ended in success. The pattern is repeated here. In Exodus 17, the children of Israel again confronted Moses with dissatisfaction and complaints.

**From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. <sup>2</sup>The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?"**

Moses appealed to the Lord, who told him to strike a certain rock with his staff, and water would come forth. At the end of this crisis—and after Moses was no longer afraid of being stoned by an unhappy mob—he memorialized the experience by giving the place a descriptive name. "He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'" (Exod. 17:7).

The people have again been faithless, while God has again been faithful. Their needs are met. But they were not right to test the Lord in the first place.

As with the first temptation, Jesus will find a way to resist this one. He settles again on the use of scripture to make his case. Jesus recalls what occurred with Moses, and how that experience was to be remembered. “Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah” (Deut. 6:16). When Jesus alludes to this verse of Deuteronomy, he *properly* uses scripture to refute Satan’s *improper* use of it. While God may powerfully provide for us, we should not test his patience with demands for intervention. This is true not only in the wilderness, but also when one is being asked to create a spectacle for the sole purpose of showing that God is an ally. Jesus refuses to become a strictly religious messiah, tampering with miracles like playthings.

There are teachings here well worth remembering. Citing scripture is not an automatic route to true and faithful knowledge. After all, the devil can use it, too. Just because someone can quote the Bible and mouth pious phrases does not mean he is doing the Lord’s work. Satan, who was viewed as a master deceiver by this stage in the biblical witness, is using the very tool that Jesus has used.

The responsible interpretation of scripture does not involve citing proof texts and applying them conveniently to our own agendas. It involves working toward the true meaning behind the text, treating it reverently, respectfully, and holistically.

### *Comparison to Luke’s Version*

Interestingly, Luke seems to reverse the order of the second and third temptations.<sup>34</sup> The Rev. O. C. Edwards, Jr., professor emeritus of preaching and former dean and president of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, an Episcopal institution,<sup>35</sup> suggests that Luke may use this technique to have the

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<sup>34</sup>This statement assumes that Matthew more closely tracks the order of Q here than Luke does. Because there seems to be a shade of scholarly authority in that direction, we will accept it at face value for purposes of studying this segment.

<sup>35</sup>Professor Edwards has recently completed Volume I of his twelfth book, *A History of Preaching*. He is also currently serving the church in an ecumenical capacity as a member of the Executive Committee of the National Council of Churches.



climactic event occur in Jerusalem.<sup>36</sup> If so, this is in keeping with Luke's pattern of moving significant events in the direction of Jerusalem and the temple, the place where the disciples will be found praying after the resurrection in the final verse of Luke's gospel (Luke 24:52–53).

An irony is here if we look deeply enough. The devil is tempting Jesus to force God's hand, to make God deliver Jesus from death *and* give a great show of power in Jerusalem. Jesus' mission will involve the opposite. He will accept death in Jerusalem many chapters hence, and the power of God will be revealed in how he overcomes it.<sup>37</sup>

1. Satan uses scripture to test Jesus. What uses and abuses of holy scripture have you seen? How can you tell the difference?
2. One way to look at this text is that Satan is tempting Jesus to test God's love. Have you been involved in circumstances where one's love is manipulatively tested? What have you done to address it?
3. When is it right to call on God for assistance? When is it wrong? In our scientific world, how do we experience the relationship between the natural and the supernatural?

## *To Rule a World*

The third and final test in Matthew involves a direct appeal to ambition. We see Satan taking Jesus to a very high mountain and tempting him with power over the kingdoms of the world. From his perch, the devil shows Jesus vast empires in all their splendor. Wealth, beauty, finery, power, lushness—all are available to Jesus if he will simply worship Satan.

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<sup>36</sup>See *Luke's Story of Jesus* at 33. Edwards does not necessarily conclude that Luke changes Q. He does offer this as a possible explanation, though, for any change that Luke might have made.

<sup>37</sup>See Professor Culpepper's commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreter's Bible* series at 100.