

# The Synoptic Gospels: A Journey Into the Kingdom

by Edward L. Bleynat, Jr.

Matthew  
Mark  
Luke

Volume II:  
*From the Desert  
to the Mount*

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R. BRENT AND COMPANY  
Asheville, North Carolina  
rbrent.com

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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).

4. How, on the one hand, do we embrace the freedom to make moral choices and, on the other, hold those people accountable whose choices turn out not to be moral? As you sort through this question, you may wish to bear in mind the way Jesus responds to the testing in the desert.



Luke's and Matthew's versions of the testing in the desert have the same elements. However, they present the temptation episodes in a slightly different order, with nuances embedded in each version of the story. Because we have used the Q reconstruction to describe some of the imagery and Luke's version to explore the role Satan plays in the Bible, Matthew will serve as our basis for a more detailed commentary on the text itself. We will also use Matthew as a springboard to examine both the similarities and the differences in the ways the two longer Gospels use their shared Q source.

#### † *Matthew 4:1–11 The testing of Jesus*

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

<sup>3</sup>The tempter came and said to him,

*"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."*

<sup>4</sup>But he answered,

*"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>saying to him,

*"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

**<sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him,**

***“Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”***

**<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup>and he said to him,**

***“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”***

**<sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him,**

***“Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”***

**<sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.**

1. How do you understand each of the temptations Jesus confronts? What is he resisting when undergoing each test?
2. At the end, the devil leaves and angels arrive. What does this change of companions imply?
3. What differences do you notice between Luke’s and Matthew’s versions of the testing in the desert? What meaning, if any, do these differences hold for interpreting the two stories?

Matthew’s version of the testing in the desert directly follows the baptism of Jesus. There is no genealogy inserted here, as in Luke. By connecting baptism and testing directly, Matthew makes a powerful point about the relationship between Jesus’ title and what it means. The voice of God has just said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Now the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, for this specific purpose: “to be tempted by the devil.” And, at his first appearance, Satan is not identified by name, but rather by the function he serves in this episode. “The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God. . . .’”

In this intense proving ground, we see how Jesus’ identity as the Son of God must be realized. The voice from Heaven has made a powerful proclamation

about him. *But what does it mean?* If someone is so intimately connected to the Creator of the Universe, should we not expect to see him in some powerful role, serving like the lord chancellor carrying out the king's commands?

As always, God has surprises in store for us.<sup>27</sup> Jesus' immediate experience after the baptism is to be set apart for a time. His separation is not for privilege, but for preparation to accept responsibility. The experience begins with fasting for forty days—the “long time” we have previously discussed. To Matthew's predominantly Jewish Christian audience, this description would evoke the memory of Moses, who fasted with the Lord for forty days and forty nights, taking neither food nor drink, as he wrote down the words of the ten commandments on Mount Sinai (Exod. 34:27–28).<sup>28</sup> The image reaffirms a central passage from the Old Order, one that is nothing less than God giving the law itself to the leader of the covenant people. The parallels between Moses and Jesus, Old and New, show us just how critical the testing in the desert is for defining Jesus' ministry and affirming his role as God's Messiah, the Anointed One.<sup>29</sup>

## The Three Tests

In this passage, we see a remnant of the role that Satan played in the book of Job. His duty is to test the righteous one, to see just how strong and good he is.

Each of the three tests Satan presents to Jesus reflects an experience of the Jewish people in the wilderness at the time of Moses. Each one tempts Jesus with a way of living out his mission and ministry that has a plausible appeal, but which is ultimately flawed. Each also involves a struggle around the proper relationship between interpreting scripture and living life.

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<sup>27</sup>Another way to say this comes from one of the favorite quotes of my good friend, the Rev. Jim Petty, author of *Souvenirs from the Life of a Renegade Priest*: “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans!”

<sup>28</sup>We have already seen how Matthew treats Jesus as the new Moses—the one who comes out of Egypt to deliver the people to the Promised Land, providing them with the new covenant of their relationship with God. See Introduction at 13.

<sup>29</sup>These parallels are also connected to the rabbinic practice of *midrash*, or studying texts of the Hebrew Bible and relating them to one's own experience and to all of life. *Midrash* embraces an echo effect that connects the past to the present. See, e.g., *Volume I of the Journey* at 31–32.

The wilderness now hosts a curious meeting between the physical and spiritual worlds. Jesus must encounter and overcome its challenge if he is to live into his identity as the Son of God.

## *To Make Bread*

Matthew has told us that Jesus is famished. Amid the stones of the desert, many of which are the size of small loaves of bread, the devil plays a deceptive card from his hand. He exploits an optical illusion. The tempter points at the stones, and suggests to Jesus that he transform them into loaves. If he is the Son of God, just a word will do. . . .

Jesus declines. Why? Is it wrong for Jesus to use his power to feed the hungry? The answer to that question must be “no”—or at least, “not always.” If it were wrong in all circumstances, Jesus would not have used his power to feed the hungry multitudes along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Nor would God have used his power in the desert to feed the children of Israel manna—literally, bread from heaven.

We need something to help us determine the circumstances in which feeding can be wrong. We may remember Deuteronomy 8. In one of Moses’ addresses to the people, he entreats them not to forget God in times of prosperity.

**<sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor 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 (Deut. 8:2–3).**

Jesus’ response to the tempter quotes this passage. He shows that sonship is about more than feeding; it is about not allowing food to become an end in itself. Jesus refuses to become an exclusively economic messiah.



The careful reader, comparing this passage to Luke's version, may note that here the devil does not tempt Jesus to make a single loaf—something that would have assisted greatly in his time of hunger—but multiple loaves. According to Professor Boring, “some Jewish expectations of the Messiah [were] that he would reproduce the miracle of the manna and that there would be a lavish supply of food in the messianic time.”<sup>30</sup> Read against this backdrop, Matthew's multiple loaves imply that Jesus is being tempted to use his power to meet popular expectations of a conquering, bountiful messiah.

But Jesus resists. The feeding of the people must maintain its proper place, as one of the many facets of their relationship with God. “Bread alone” is not enough.

Jesus' first test also parallels the experience of the children of Israel. Israel itself was sometimes called the son of God (Exod. 4:22–23). By using this name to address Jesus, the tempter draws him into a memory of his people's failure, a story recorded in Exodus 16. There, the children of Israel, having escaped slavery in Egypt, are out in the wilds. They begin complaining against Moses and Aaron over their hunger, longing for the days in Egypt when they ate from the fleshpots. In response to their complaints, God gives them manna from heaven in the morning and quail from the skies in the evening, so that they have both bread and meat.

Even with this bounteous windfall, the Israelites do not trust God. They hold the bread overnight against his instructions, only to find that worms have consumed the excess. Yet, on the sixth day, there is a double portion that does not spoil overnight, so that on the seventh day they can both eat and rest. God provides for the people despite their lack of trust.

The tempter hopes that Jesus, too, will misunderstand the bounty of God. Will he faithlessly grab at multiple loaves, using them to achieve messianic status by leading his people with bribery—giving them bounty, rather than offering them true greatness? Will he clutch and grasp, faithlessly failing to see that God will provide each day, just as he did in Moses' time in the desert, and just as Jesus himself teaches that God will continue to do? (See Matthew 6:11, the Lord's Prayer).

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<sup>30</sup>*New Interpreter's Bible* series commentary on Matthew at 163.

Jesus passes the test. He does not discount the importance of bread; but he does put it in proper perspective. Quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, he says: “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Jesus is neither faithless about what God will provide, nor willing to use the power from above to become a demagogue messiah, promising bread and circuses to his followers. Whereas the children of Israel—the first “son of God”—failed the test of Exodus 16, Jesus has passed it. The taunting call, “if you are the Son of God . . .” has no power against him.

### *Comparison to Luke’s Version*

Luke uses the image of a single loaf, rather than multiple loaves. Some scholars suggest that this version is closer to Q, with Matthew containing an elaboration.

And, the difference in the number of loaves *may* suggest a slightly different meaning. Under one view, by transforming a single rock into a single loaf and eating it while he is hungry, Luke’s Jesus would be misusing his power to serve his own ends, rather than properly using it for service of God’s people in need. Other scholars suggest that the test in Luke is really identical to what occurs in Matthew—Jesus is being tempted to become a merely social messiah.

A further difference between Matthew’s and Luke’s versions is the point at which Jesus’ quotation of Deuteronomy stops. Luke’s Jesus simply says, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” The reference to living “by every word that comes from the mouth of God,” found in Matthew, is omitted. This, too, may offer some different interpretive possibilities. Is the second part of the statement implied in the first? Or, is the second part of the statement something that simply has more meaning to Matthew’s Jewish Christian audience than to Luke’s Gentile Christian audience?

My best guess is that, in this section, Luke more closely tracks Q. Matthew, a knowledgeable Jewish Christian, sees expansion on the Q text as a way to correct some popular Jewish misconceptions about what the Messiah might be like. The Messiah is not a man on a horse. Instead, he is what Jesus’ encounter with the devil implies—one characterized more by restraint than shows of power. Matthew sees the Messiah not so much as a giver of good material



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.

How does Jesus respond to this offer? As before, he relies on scripture. Again, a passage from Deuteronomy: “The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear” (Deut. 6:13). Jesus has plumbed the depths of his experience to find a passage of scripture that points toward God and away from Satan. God alone is worthy of worship.

We again see Jesus passing a test that his ancestors failed during the Old Order. While Moses was receiving the law from God, the children of Israel grew impatient in their waiting.

**When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”<sup>2</sup>Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”<sup>3</sup>So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. <sup>4</sup>He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”<sup>5</sup>When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.”<sup>6</sup>They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel (Exod. 32:1–6).**

The children of Israel forgot God’s graciousness and turned to worship an image they had made. They ignored who delivered them from oppression and allowed their imaginations to run wild with outlandish possibilities.

Such idolatrous ingrates! But—are they worse than the rest of us? The Bible would suggest not. This act of denial is another in a long line of human folly. Some centuries later, speaking not just of his own Jewish people, but of the world as a whole, the Apostle Paul wrote:

**<sup>22</sup>Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup>and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles (Rom. 1:22–23).**

These are the idols that the ancients fashioned. Does it make you squirm to think of the idols that we have built? False worship is not restricted to golden calves and devils tempting us with kingdoms. The idols we create may be money, home, family, country, community, success, prestige, sex, power, achievement. The possibilities are endless. They even include our perceptions of God, whom we often create in our own image—a most serious distortion of the divine.

When we regard the biblical witness as a whole, we might conclude that the tendency to worship false gods is the most pervasive and insidious of all the monumental forms of human failing. It extends throughout the human experience. It is little wonder that the first commandments God gave Moses spoke directly to matters of true and false worship.

**<sup>2</sup>I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God (Exod. 20:2–5).**

Jesus turns to this theme as he rejects the way Satan is putting before him and commands him to depart. In dismissing Satan, Jesus throws off the appeal of empire and power, of glory without cost, of achievement without suffering. Jesus rejects the shortcut to sonship. He refuses to become a strictly political messiah. Jesus will walk through the desert experience and reenter the world. He will embrace both the lovely and the disgusting people he meets. He will graciously listen to the praise of well-wishers and even more graciously endure the scorn of those who stand against the kingdom of heaven that he proclaims.

This will not be the only time Jesus looks down from a lofty peak. He will deliver his oratorical masterpiece on a Galilean mountain. He will be transfigured in an other-worldly experience, visited by God's powerful spokesmen of the Old Order rather than by the tempter. He will climb a hill where the puppets of



the earthly kingdoms whose rule he has rejected will kill him. And, at the end, having come through the wildly vacillating experience of life as the Son of God, and the death he must endure, he will rise again to climb an unnamed mountain in Galilee. There, he will accept all the authority “in heaven and on earth” that has been given him (Matt. 28:17).

This time, the authority will not be offered by the devil, but granted by the father.

### *Comparison to Luke's Version*

By reversing the order of the last two temptations, Luke puts this one in the middle. He makes other changes as well.

One is that the vision of kingdoms does not take place on a mountaintop. Professor Edwards suggests that this reflects Luke's understanding of mountains as places of God's revelation; they are not proper places for the devil to be initiating action.<sup>38</sup> The kingdoms are also shown to Jesus from on high in an “instant,” adding to the other-worldly feel of the piece. It is as if Jesus has stepped out of the space-time continuum, so that the vastness of the Earth and all it has to offer can be perceived in a moment.

Luke also presents a somewhat different picture of the nature of Satan's power. Here, Satan explains that his claim of right to these empires and kingdoms is based on what has been given over to him. Of course, the only being with the power to grant that sort of control is God. Given how God's hand is in this picture, Satan's role recalls the Book of Job, where his power over events was delegated to him by God (Job 1:12).

Finally, Luke's version draws clearly the lines of authority that Satan claims to control. Because the book was likely written for a gentile audience, its images of kingdoms would most quickly bring to mind the glory of Rome. What the devil is offering Jesus is power beyond imagination, extending over and past the known world, exceeding even the unrivaled authority of Rome.

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<sup>38</sup>Luke's Story of Jesus at 33.

## *The End of the Encounter*

Matthew and Luke end their versions in a slightly different way. Matthew's Jesus orders Satan to depart. Suddenly, the angels whose assistance Jesus had earlier declined now rush to his side. He no longer needs to resist being borne up on their wings. They come and wait on him. The fast is over. Jesus has passed the tests and finds himself under God's care. He is living into his identity as the Son of God.

Luke's Jesus does not directly order Satan away. Instead, it seems the tempter leaves on his own, ominously biding his time for something more "opportune." He will reappear at the Last Supper and enter Judas (Luke 22:3), demanding also to sift the apostles (Luke 22:31).

In both versions, Jesus' discipline, faithfulness, and deep understanding of the biblical witness turn him away from Satan and toward God. The devil did not "make" him do anything. There is no blame to shift, no behavior to justify. Jesus has discovered and followed the pathway that God has put before him.

1. The Roman writer, Juvenal, who lived in the days that the gospels were being written, criticized the decline of his society from the age of the Republic to the age of the Empire. With heroism and virtue on the wane, he observed that there were "two things only the people anxiously desire—bread and circuses."<sup>39</sup> Distributing free food and staging huge spectacles kept the people fat, dumb, and happy. Is this what Satan tempts Jesus to try—seeking after glory and popularity by cutting corners? Is this a short-term route to achieve worthy goals? Does the route itself compromise those goals and the people in the process? Are we guilty of such corner-cutting? How do we resist?

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<sup>39</sup>*The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (3d ed. 2002) (edited by Hirsch, Kett and Trefil). I owe my familiarity with this quote to my law school classmate, Mark Stafford. I generally call Mark my "right wing buddy." He prefers to think of himself as an "accurate Anglican observer of modern society." We may both be right.

2. Do you understand Satan as a conscious being? A representative of the presence of evil in our midst? Do you take him literally? If not, do you still take him seriously?
3. In the history of Satan that we traced, we saw how God conferred certain authority on him. One example is the testing of Job, who was found to be righteous. An example from Luke is Satan being given kingdoms that he can grant to others. What do you make of this idea about God giving power to the author of evil? Does it seem counterproductive? Or is it an example of God allowing other beings to experience freedom, with all the risk that implies? How do we live with such blessing and burden? With such responsibility and accountability?
4. Is it possible that God is, of all things, working through Satan? If Jesus needs to be tested to accomplish his mission and ministry, who better to administer that test than the ancient adversary? What does this situation say about God's sovereignty? The devil's position in the cosmos? Jesus' character? God's will?
5. We have seen Jesus reject being a strictly economic messiah, a strictly religious one, and a strictly political one. Just what kind of messiah *will* he be?

