

The Work of Incarnation – Fulfilling Israel’s Sonship

I. Introduction

1. The four gospel writers set down their own accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry, culminating with His death and resurrection, but each according to his own perspective and priorities.
2. Together they provide a composite portrait, with both shared and distinct content among them. But, at bottom, each writer was concerned to show that Jesus of Nazareth is Israel’s long-awaited Messiah. Thus all four evangelists oriented their accounts to connect Jesus’ person and work with the Scripture’s intricate and organic messianic revelation.
3. At the center of this revelation was God’s oath to Abraham that his covenant descendants would be the instrument of His restorative project in the world. This oath necessitated that the Messiah would be a son of Abraham, and Yahweh later connected him with David and his regal line. But all of this meant that Israel’s Messiah would be an *Israelite*, and the later writing prophets indicated that Yahweh’s design was that this Israelite would restore Israel so that Israel could fulfill its sonship on behalf of the nations and the cursed creation.
4. And because Israel’s prophets situated this messianic work within Yahweh’s pledge to return from His own self-imposed exile to liberate and restore His people, the gospel writers show that Jesus of Nazareth, who is Israel’s Messiah, embodies Yahweh’s return to Zion: *He is the human embodiment of Israel’s God and His intentions, disclosures and promises. He is the incarnate Logos, but as taking up Israel’s life in order to reconstitute Israel in Himself.*
5. The gospel writers recognized, and demonstrated in their own way, the reality of incarnation as Israel’s God taking up Israel’s existence, so that Jesus the Messiah, the incarnate Son, is the True Israel as the ultimate “seed” promised to Abraham and David. * Gal. 3:1-29

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

The theme of Jesus as True Israel – the Israelite in whom Israel is reconstituted – is fundamental to all four gospel records, evident first in the genealogical accounts provided by Matthew and Luke, and then secondly in Jesus’ baptism. As noted previously, all four evangelists recounted Jesus’ interaction with John the Baptist and His own baptism in solidarity with Israel. The three synoptic writers, then, turned their attention to Jesus’ wilderness testing, which they indicated followed immediately after His baptism. * Mat. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13

A. General Considerations

Matthew, Mark and Luke all present Jesus as departing from the Jordan River and heading into the wilderness (most likely toward the east into what is present-day Jordan). This close chronological connection, together with the Spirit’s central role in both Jesus’ baptism and His wilderness ordeal, *indicate that the two episodes must be interpreted together.* Matthew and Mark recorded that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness after descending upon Him at His baptism (Mat. 4:1; Mark 1:12), while Luke’s language suggests that the Spirit led Jesus throughout the time of His wandering and testing (Luke 4:1).

The Spirit of Yahweh who anointed and empowered Jesus for His messianic mission directed Him in executing it, and the starting point was His agonizing ordeal in the hostile wilderness.

1. The synoptic gospels show that Jesus' baptism and testing must be interpreted together, with the Spirit as the centerpiece of both episodes. And because the Spirit's descent accompanied Yahweh's affirmation of Jesus as His well-pleasing *son*, the Spirit's presence and leading in these two episodes must be understood in terms of Jesus' status as God's *True Israel*: His faithful son empowered, informed, and led by His Spirit (Hag. 2:4-5; Isa. 63:11). As True Israel, then, Jesus was *True Man*: man of the Spirit; man as God created him to be.
2. The Spirit's descent upon Jesus and God's pronouncement identified Him as True Israel, and this suggests that God intended His forty-day testing to correspond to Israel's forty-year ordeal in the Sinai desert. *And when the particulars of His testing are examined, it becomes obvious that Jesus was undergoing what was essentially a repeat of Israel's testing.* The Spirit and divine affirmation singled out Jesus as Yahweh's faithful son – Israel in truth, but now that status needed to be proven out by His triumph through the same trial of faith and faithfulness that Israel had endured and miserably failed.
 - a. Israel's journey from Sinai – where its sonship was ratified – led them through the Sinai wilderness toward Canaan where they were to dwell with their covenant God and Father. A vast wasteland lay between Israel and its covenant inheritance, and Yahweh used this passage as a test of the nation's faithfulness to its sonship. This episode fills two of the Pentateuch's five books and details Israel's complete failure as covenant son and the catastrophic consequences of it. Of the adult generation that Yahweh redeemed from Egypt, only Joshua and Caleb lived to enter Canaan. Even Moses himself fell short and was sentenced to die outside the promised land. * Num. 20:1-13; Deut. 32:48-52
 - b. But Israel's testing didn't begin with its departure from Mount Sinai; the Pentateuch records five distinct tests during the three months that preceded the people's arrival at Yahweh's holy mountain (ref. Exod. 15:22-18:27), as well as the gold calf incident that occurred there. But these failures were all addressed by covenant renewal mediated by Moses, so that Israel left Sinai with a "clean slate," as it were. Nevertheless, the people's penitence and recommitment didn't transform their hearts, and their rebellion resumed as soon as they marched out into the Sinai wilderness, reaching its climax when their scouts returned from spying out the land.

The spies' mixed report provoked paralyzing fear and hopelessness among the people, and this faithless reaction proved to be a decisive moment in Israel's covenant life; in response to it, Yahweh decreed that all of the adult generation that came out of Egypt (except Joshua and Caleb) would perish outside the land and the entire nation would wander and suffer in the desert until His sentence was fully executed.

Those who claimed to fear for their children, disbelieving Yahweh's covenant oath and faithfulness, would watch their children suffer because of their unbelief, and then they would die without seeing those children enter the land and flourish in it. * Num. 13-14

3. If the Israelite people viewed the Exodus as the great redemptive event that gave birth to the covenant nation, the wilderness episode symbolized their failure as covenant son, which eventually culminated with the desolation of the kingdom and the exile of its sons and daughters. *Hence, if Jesus were to fulfill His election and calling to be True Israel, He would need to relive Israel's testing of its sonship and triumph where they had failed.* Only then would He be able to reverse the outcome of Israel's failure and bring them back from their exile and restore Yahweh household and kingdom.

4. As noted, all three of the synoptic writers mentioned this testing episode, but only Matthew and Luke recounted its details. Both of them record the same three core temptations at the hand of the Satan, although they differ in their order. Both accounts also suggest that these satanic enticements occurred at the end of the episode when Jesus was at His weakest point, having endured forty days without food and water while battling the elements and wild animals. And finally, both accounts have Jesus issuing the same rebuffs to Satan's temptations – rebuffs that reinforce the conclusion that this episode amounted to Jesus repeating Israel's wilderness testing, but so as to prevail where they had succumbed.

B. The First Test – Sonship and Submissive Trust

1. The first temptation derived from Jesus' excruciating hunger at the end of his ordeal. Both Matthew and Luke recorded that He didn't eat for forty days, afterward "becoming hungry" (Mat. 4:2; Luke 4:1-2). On the face of it, this seems like an absurd understatement; after forty days with no food, Jesus would have been nearing death from starvation. Clearly Matthew and Luke understood this, and so they must have had a reason for their understatement.

It's impossible to be certain, but the test itself and Jesus' response to it suggest that both writers wanted to emphasize *Jesus' submissive trust* and *His Father's care* in His situation, not the dire state of His physical condition and how He was able to survive 40 days with no food. Certainly Jesus would have been on the verge of starvation, but His bodily needs were His Father's creation and He would address them (cf. Mat. 6:25-34).

- a. The adversary tempted Jesus at the point of His imminent starvation, but the actual temptation transcended His desperate need for food; *it pressed Him to stumble in regard to His identity and mission*. At face value, the tempter's challenge was straightforward: "If you are the Son of God, then use your authority and power to provide for your need."
- b. But this wasn't a crass attempt to provoke Jesus to pride of power; it was a subtle assault on His sonship and His faithfulness to it. *Satan directed his ploy at Jesus' divine identity as Son of God, but the real target was His human sonship*. The purpose for Jesus' wilderness ordeal was to prove out His identity and calling as God's new Israel, and taking up divine prerogative would render Him unfaithful and disobedient. Turning a stone into bread would be failing His sonship just as Israel had.
- c. Drawing on divine power would break Jesus' solidarity with Israel (demonstrated at His baptism) and so render Him disobedient to His calling. At the same time, seeking self-remedy in His need and not trusting His Father's care and provision would demonstrate solidarity with *unfaithful* Israel. For this was Israel's consistent pattern throughout the nation's history, and certainly during the wilderness episode. In every circumstance of lack and threat, Yahweh's covenant children bemoaned their lot and wailed that their demise was at hand. They accused their God of capriciousness and lack of concern and sought to remove themselves from Him and remedy their plight themselves.

This satanic temptation, then, has echoes of the seduction in Eden, which isn't surprising since it pressed against the fundamental human obligation required of man as divine image-bearer. Jesus was being tested as *True Israel*, but Israel was to be God's *image-son* in the world – a family of human beings defined by unfailing love, devoted trust, confident dependence, and humble gratitude as is appropriate to true children of the divine Father.

2. In both gospel records Jesus answered Satan with a citation from Deuteronomy, but Matthew has a fuller version. Many Christian readers and commentators focus on the fact that Jesus used Scripture to rebuff the adversary, and so conclude that this is the primary point to be taken: *When believers find themselves encountering testing or temptation in any form, their proper recourse is to turn to the Scriptures.* A person's ultimate need isn't for physical food, but the spiritual food that is God's word. But to treat the incident this way is to entirely miss the point – both of the temptation itself and of Jesus' answer to it.
 - a. Jesus cited from Deuteronomy 8:3, and this wasn't simply Him drawing on this passage because it speaks to the human need for nourishment ("bread"). He was quoting Moses as he had reminded the children of Israel of their God's faithfulness to them, not just in providing for their physical needs in the wilderness, but in disciplining and nurturing them in their sonship. Indeed, Yahweh had used their physical needs and deprivation as a teaching tool – not that they would develop the ability to delay self-gratification, but that they would learn what it is to be *true sons*, the very marrow of which is genuine, loving trust and humble dependence – i.e., believing and submitting to the Father's words regardless of one's own perceptions, judgments and experiences. * Deut. 8:1-5
 - b. Thus Jesus wasn't plucking out an isolated scriptural proof-text to waylay the adversary, but was meeting his deceitful challenge with the truth of His identity and calling and His resolve to fulfill them. Put simply, Satan's temptation was directed at Jesus' sonship as He embodied Israel in order to fulfill its election and vocation in obedience to the Father, and He answered that temptation as the faithful son that Israel had failed to be.
3. Jesus' wilderness ordeal repeated the one that Israel had undergone centuries earlier as they departed from Mount Horeb to make their way to their inheritance in Canaan.
 - a. When Yahweh redeemed the children of Israel, He brought them to His holy mountain where He affirmed and ratified the covenant relationship of Father and elect "son." But within days, Israel violated its obligation of sonship, leaving their God to pick up the pieces. He renewed the covenant relationship through Moses' mediation, and then led His covenant children out into the Sinai wilderness where a great test of sonship awaited them. * cf. Exod. 3:1-10, 6:1-8, 19:1-8, 32:1-14, 34:1-28, 40:1-38; Num. 9-10
 - b. There they experienced every sort of physical challenge in an unimaginably hostile and oppressive environment, but with Yahweh's covenant pledge to carry them through to their inheritance, supported by the presence and power of His Spirit.
 - c. Yahweh's *covenant* and *presence* stood with them in their adversity and deprivation, yet Israel's response was unbelief, fear, unceasing complaint, and attempts at self-remedy (cf. Exod. 16:1-20, 17:1-7, 32:1; Num. 11:1-35, 12:1-10, 13:1-14:38, 16:1-17:13, 20:1-13, 21:1-5 with Deut. 1, 8-9).

Israel's wilderness episode tested the nation's sonship, and they utterly failed. But Jesus, the well-pleasing son, was determined to triumph through His trial, entrusting Himself without reserve to His Father, fully confident that He would prove faithful to His love and His purposes in and through Him. Jesus understood – and insisted that the adversary understand – that He was Yahweh's image-son *in truth*: a man who lives in single-minded devotion and trusting dependence on the Father, well content with every provision that comes from His hand and finding all sufficiency in it.