

Matthew 4:1-11

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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My comments for this text are drawn directly from, *Social Sciences Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Second Edition, 2003, by Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, Fortress Press.

Matthew has made extraordinary claims for the unknown son of an unknown carpenter from a backwater unknown hamlet. If we are to believe Matthew, his claims about Jesus must pass the severest test.

In Job, Satan acts as a secret agent of God who tests the loyalty of Job through a series of tragic calamities. Indeed, the name "Satan," comes from the Persian for just such a person - a secret agent of the King who secretly tests subjects loyalty to the King.

However, by the time of Jesus, Satan has become a rogue agent who not only tests loyalty but also recruits persons to join his circle of anti-God people.

Testing of loyalty through trial and temptation is not uncommon in the Bible - beginning in the Garden of Eden, Genesis 3; the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, Genesis 22; and the people of Israel in the wilderness:

This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors. 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. 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.

Deuteronomy 8:1-3

The reference to the number forty is also significant - it rained for forty days and nights, Genesis 7; the forty years in the wilderness before entering the Holy Land; King David and his son, Solomon, the two greatest Kings of Israel, each reigned for forty years; and most significantly Moses' own fast:

He was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

Exodus 34:28

And finally, the resurrected Jesus remains with his followers for forty days before ascending into heaven.

While it is not wise to read too much into the numbers (I do not believe in numerology), it certainly is wise to pay attention when the Bible uses the number "forty." It signifies that something very extraordinarily Holy is about to happen - God will be particularly present and involved.

The three tests / temptations are intended to demonstrate that Jesus is indeed worthy of the most exalted position: Son of God. (Three is also a significant number.)

The first test - turning stones into bread - is not so much about Jesus possibly mis-using his special relationship with God for personal gain (thought that **IS** a worthy sermon). The test is really in that first little word Satan uses: **IF**. "If you are the Son of God ..."

Well the whole of the New Testament exists precisely because of this point: Jesus **IS** the Son of God.

When we ask, "Is Jesus the Son of God? What does it mean to say: Jesus is the Son of God?" we are playing the Devil's game - raising doubts, weakening loyalty and commitment.

Jesus meets the tempters challenge **NOT** with his own skill, wisdom, power, or authority; but by doing the only honourable thing an worthy son would do: quote his father. (Deuteronomy 8:3)

The second test also involves that sneaky little word, "if," but now the Devil also uses scripture to tempt Jesus. Jesus used scripture to rebut the tempter for the first test; but as we all know from personal experience, even the Devil can quote scripture for his own purposes. (Psalm 91:11-12)

The thoroughness of Jesus' knowing of his father's character, aim, and purposes is now being deeply tested. Jesus again does the honourable thing by quoting his father (Deuteronomy 6:16) to rebut and correct how the tempter has mis-used his father's words.

Thirdly, the Devil tempts Jesus by claiming that actually he, the devil, can act as an agent of God, and bestow on Jesus what belongs to God (the nations of the world and their glory), if only Jesus will honour the Devil and show him the obeisance a loyal subject ought to (by bowing).

Again Jesus meets this challenge by quoting scripture (Deuteronomy 6:13) and remaining true to his loyalty to God.

Thus Jesus has passed the loyalty test in the court of the heavenly realm - now he will begin his earthly ministry and be severely tested there also.

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