In Contest with Satan: Reading the ur-Gospel

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On a simple view, biographers assemble the facts about their subject's doings and present them in a suitable order. The biographical narrative may dramatise a conflict, illustrate a trajectory, body forth a moral idea, or in other ways tell a story. The gospels stand close to the phenomena concerning Jesus, and document their authors' findings in relation to events with which contemporaries were still coming to terms. But communicated to audiences ancient and modern, the findings of the Evangelists and the apostles become a transformative message, the Gospel.

The authors of the gospels do not claim to produce *ex nihilo* their understanding of the events. One of their principal aims is to demonstrate Jesus' continuity with Jewish tradition. The Holy Spirit leads their discovery, reveals how what is already given in the Law and the Prophets prefigures Jesus, and helps interpret what he did and said. Furthermore Jesus is his own explicator, and his message is set out at the beginning as News concerning his advent. 'The time has come, the Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'

Much is encapsulated in that summary allusion to the Kingdom: there's a required audience response, and fulfilment is not just imminent but actual. The imperative to repent picks up warnings issued in the recent past by John the Baptist, as well as harking back to Isaiah. Like John, Jesus invoked an impending Judgement, though he did so with qualifications. His public ministry began when he lived for a time in Capernaum, where he adapted John's message, bringing it from the desert to the town and synagogue. Powerful healings and exorcisms reinforced his preaching, and he assembled a group of disciples to accompany him from one synagogue to another in Galilee. Crowds, whose commitment was more ephemeral, augmented the disciples, and when the rising numbers burst the confines of synagogue and of town, Jesus' preaching, accompanied by miracles, removed again to the open country. Some time later events reached a fateful conclusion in Jerusalem. But two of the Evangelists, Matthew and Luke, present the Temptation like a kind of viewfinder before these developments, framing them with a controlling perspective. (Mark makes a slighter reference to the Temptation in just two verses.)

When Jesus went into the desert after his 'special case' baptism by John, any intention he may have had to seek prayerful communion with the Father was displaced, or overlaid, by an intent which was not, as it were, his own. 'Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil,' Matthew declares (4:1, c.f. Luke 4:1-2). Gospel readers have thrust on them the threat that confronted the hero: his position as God's beloved Son was recently announced, but had still to be realised, or in the expression favoured by the writer of Hebrews, made perfect. Held over at this early stage of the Gospel's formulation, is the term Messiah, which would be given special notice in relation to Peter. The question for the moment was how would Jesus deal with the alternatives before him, and with adversarial powers?

So the Temptation narrative looks forward to the events that constitute Jesus

as Son. The miracles and teaching will create a pattern of conflict, the whole directed towards an objective, undertaken by and for God, against the hostile power of evil. Each temptation subsumes a significant aspect of the biographical history that is to follow, and each addresses one of three major questions.

The Embodiment of Evil

How, though, is the adversary figured? We have no difficulty with Jesus. Coordinates of the kind found in biographies are there: a geographical location, placing in Romano-Jewish history, and information about his family with its highly significant ancestry. *Prima facie* at least, he is a man as other men. The devil however is not so straightforward. The grammar attributes a conventional masculinity, suggesting, with the feature of speech, personality, and the narrative calls him also the tempter. He is an agent who suggests initiatives and proposes acts which the reader can sense to be of cosmic significance; but it is not stated that he has a human body, nor implied that he is a man. He conducts Jesus to the highest point of the Jerusalem Temple, and to a high mountain, and all the while Jesus is in the Transjordanian desert, which suggests that he functions in a non-literal, mental sphere, that of imagination and spirit.

The clue in the epithet 'tempter' leads back to Eden and to Job.[1] In Genesis 3 the primal man and woman are tempted, 'deceived' is the word used, by the wiliest of beasts, a serpent. Nothing in Genesis suggests that the tempting was done by another human figure, or even by an angelic spirit taking human form; but the Fall narrative makes it explicit that permanent damage is done to the status of mankind in relation to the Creator, and in relation to the rest of creation, and that a malign agent made the decision thinkable. The responsibility though, has to be borne by Adam and Eve who themselves made, consciously enough, their fateful choice.

The Satan in *Job* appears in the introductory scene in heaven at the same time as angels or sons of God before the divine throne. He is not accorded the status of the familiar angels, having his own dialectical function, which is to actuate the debate which makes up the Book of Job. Now, the fullness and the symmetry of Job's initial position of prosperity suggest that he is put forward as a hypothetical figure. In terms of family, property, reputation and religion Job fulfils norms, and is a test case. *Job,* setting out his peripeteia, dramatising it with different voices, sounding its depths of desolation, provides a way to consider the hardest of questions for religious faith: what when there's nothing in experience to justify it? The name Satan denotes adversary and accuser, but Job is tested as by some trial or torturous interrogation of his virtue. In this sense, his Satan is a tempter. Inasmuch as Job is vindicated in the end, he is vindicated in his own right, for although he represents a hypothesis, there's no promise of salvation for others in his dénouement.

With Jesus, the Good News is for others, and his success against evil gives them a break which, the human condition being what it is, would not otherwise be available. The ur-Gospel we are looking at presupposes rather than explains this. Its pivot *sine qua non* is Jesus' identity as Son of God. The Temptation at once presupposes and establishes his supernatural ability to take on Satan. The condensed narrative dramatises the combat over three stages and shows Jesus as a champion who is powerfully armed with an authoritative alternative to what the devil suggests. When the devil proffers, credibly or not, the kingdoms of the world, the inference must be that the values Jesus invokes are those of the Kingdom of heaven. Later Jesus would teach that he was to undergo death to

provide a ransom for many/others.[2]

The three engagements

When it is suggested that bread be miraculously made from desert stones, the reader with recollection of what comes afterwards will connect the Temptation with an event like the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus did these things, so the focus is perhaps on the manner or motive. Not stones, but the bread of disciples and followers were proper to metamorphose; or for others, perhaps, and not for private benefit. Does the devil's suggestion imply a deserted setting, or is the crowd that would attend the signs and miracles to be inferred? Is this about miracle as a potentially high impact medium of publicity, about occasions when miracles are not what God requires and so serving the devil's cause?

'Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"' What seems initially to be a straight no, must, in the light of the miracles he did later, be a qualification. Miracles yes, but not in these circumstances. Miracles not to wow an audience, but to support the message of his teaching. More important, Jesus takes the discourse to a different plane when he refers to the value of the word that issues from the mouth of God. Mankind hardly needs to be persuaded of the importance of food, but does have to learn from God, and from those he sends with his word. 'Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.'[3] People are to be taught what the life of the Kingdom is, and how they can be sustained in it. Often they need to be jogged away from mundane preoccupations. In the right circumstances miracles may do the trick.

'If you are the Son of God,' suggests the devil envisaging Jesus at the highest point on the Jerusalem Temple, 'throw yourself down.' 'Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!' is the mockery of passers-by at the moment of crucifixion. Both of these would be events with high impact, and necessarily public. Behind them is a trope of triumphant escape. Supernatural help would be required, a vindication of privilege, status and authority. Daniel had had it in the lions' den, and something of the sort happened to his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.[4] Jesus did of course effect a triumphant escape from the grave, but this was after draining to the dregs the cup of wrath that went before. Moreover in the Gospel the resurrection is an event in which Jesus' role is passive, he was raised by the action of the Holy Spirit[5] rather than contriving some kind of Houdini effect on his own.

The second temptation (third in Luke) makes a further contribution to the flesh-spirit dialectic already signalled in the introduction (he was 'led by the Spirit') and developed in the first temptation: spirit and life have been conjoined, and the Kingdom of God has primacy over the claims of the world and flesh. Now the temptation is to call angels to the rescue, that is, to use the resources of heaven to prop up or save events on earth. But heaven is God's throne, earth his footstool. Interventions, miracles, are at his discretion and his initiative. To invert the order of priority is wrong, to call for such help is to 'tempt' God, trying to skew his way of working. Peter's understandable remonstrance at Jesus' prediction of his humiliating arrest, trial and death, was met with the brusque 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.' Even if the experience and the result promise failure, as with Job, as with the cross, the course set by God is the one that is to be followed. It is a principle for the life of the disciple, as it is a cardinal point for

understanding and proclaiming the Gospel.

As the reward for his worship, the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. Marlowe's Faustus in a deal with the devil received supernatural powers, though only for a set term, and at the price of his perdition. In the Judgement revealed in Revelation 14:11, written when the Roman emperor[6] was demanding the worship of his subjects, 'There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image.' To worship is, among other things, to own the implications of one's subordination. In his reply, quoting Deuteronomy 6:13, Jesus makes an emphasis he will reinforce in parable: 'serve him only'. A slave cannot work for two masters at the same time, especially if the masters are enemies. The demands made by God exclude the blandishments of the world, the flesh and the devil. If it seems to us unlikely that the Son of God would consider for a moment worshipping the devil,[7] we should recall the deceptiveness of the power at work in the world and in the human heart. Here, and in the whole of this Temptation drama he recounts, Jesus lifts a curtain. Behind specious appearance is the reality of spiritual combat *à l'outrance*. Appearing in the arena of the created world, the Son engages not with issues and problems on their own, but with the power behind them that is not God – the power Paul would characterise as the ruler of the kingdom of the air.[8] To act outside the known will of God, or to do the right deed for the wrong reason, becomes an act of homage to the adversary.

Milton's Christ in *Paradise Regained* is victorious in this encounter, though not yet conclusively. After the temptations an angelic chorus warns Satan and salutes Christ:

> … like an autumnal star,
> Or lightning, thou shalt fall from Heaven, trod down….
> Hereafter learn with awe
> To dread the Son of God: he, all unarmed,
> Shall chase thee, with the terror of his voice,
> From thy demoniac holds….
> Hail Son of the Most High, heir of both worlds,
> Queller of Satan! On thy glorious work
> Now enter, and begin to save mankind.[9]

John makes the point about the war between two spiritual kingdoms when he writes in a letter that 'he who does what is sinful is of the devil.' No doubt remembering what Jesus said recounting his Temptation, John adds that 'the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.'[10] That cosmic reversal, all but restoring Eden, provided a signifying framework, a Gospel, for the events of Jesus' life. Jesus invokes it in John's gospel (where routine exorcisms are not mentioned), saying as he approached the final struggle at Golgotha, 'now the prince of this world will be driven out.'[11] Luke refers to a moment of conclusive triumph glimpsed by Jesus at the time of the Mission of the Seventy-two. The apostles had seen astonishing healings and exorcisms achieved on the authority of Jesus' name, but he had seen 'Satan fall like lightning from heaven.'[12] Luke describes Jesus as exulting in the victory, seeing the greater in the lesser, the certainty of the conclusion from the early success. Galileans had been liberated from the power of the devil, but potentially the world itself was exorcised when the Son of God drove out its evil prince.

[1] In Rev 20:2 four titles, dragon, serpent, the devil and Satan, are collated.

[2] Mat 20:28.

[3] Jn 3:6.

[4] *Aka* Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, Dan 3, 6, 9.

[5] Rom 8:11.

[6] Domitian, emperor AD 81-96.

[7] Ben Witherington suggests that the devil was 'offering [Jesus] a shortcut to how the prophecy of Dan 7 could be fulfilled for him' as Son of Man, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy*, Massachusetts, Hendrickson, 1999, p. 280.

[8] Eph 2:2.

[9] iv, 619-635.

[10] 1 John 3:8.

[11] Jn 12:31.

[12] Lk 10:18. In the antagonistic exchanges about Beelzebul, Jesus may be suggesting that he has already overcome the strong man (Mat 12:25-30, see also N T Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1996, pp. 457f.).