

BIRGER GERHARDSSON

The Testing of God's Son

(MATT 4: 1—11 & PAR)

AN ANALYSIS OF AN EARLY CHRISTIAN MIDRASH

Διὰ τοῦτο πᾶς γραμματεὺς
μαθητευθεὶς τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν
ὅμοιός ἐστιν ἀνθρώπῳ οἰκοδεσπότῃ,
ὅστις ἐκβάλλει ἐκ τοῦ θησαυροῦ αὐτοῦ
καινὰ καὶ παλαιά.

(Matt 13:52)

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**Translated from the author's manuscript by
the Rev. JOHN TOY**

To Kerstin

Foreword

The analysis of the synoptic tradition of the temptations of Jesus which is here presented is one of a specifically genetic character. It is intended not only as a piece of exegesis but also as a contribution to the investigation of gospel origins. I am anxious however to guard against false generalisations. The synoptic material contains many *Gattungen*; one of these, one among many, can be designated *haggadic midrash*; the temptation narrative belongs to this *Gattung*. I have selected this tradition as the object of analysis with two facts in mind: (1) the temptation narrative has a very slight connection with history; a priori, its historical value is minimal; (2) as a consequence this narrative gives us unusually good opportunities for observing the mechanisms of the “*work with the Word of the Lord*” carried out by the early church; in it the ways in which the early Christian scribes thought and the ways in which they created their *logoi*—at least those of a certain type—lie open for dissection. The extent to which other elements in the gospel material belong to the same *Gattung* and have originated in the same manner can only be established by further investigations.

The present work can be read independently of my previous writings, even though I have here pursued further the lines of enquiry outlined in them (see especially “*Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity*”, 1964, pp 5—10, 25 f, 37—47).

The study “*The Testing of God’s Son*” comprises eleven chapters. The four chapters which constitute the first fascicle were completed on 31st March, 1963 (when they were submitted in connection with my application for the vacant chair of Exegetical Theology in the University of Lund). Owing to pressure of teaching and other work I have been unable to prepare the remaining chapters for the press and since I do not want to delay any longer making known my exeget-

ical thesis, the contours of which are clear enough after the first four chapters, I have chosen the expedient of publishing my study in two fascicles.

Since the Table of Contents is not included in the first fascicle, I have briefly sketched the course of the analysis in the Introduction, p 17 f.

Lund, 1st July, 1966

The Author.

Introduction

A. The purpose of this study

According to all three versions of the synoptic tradition, Jesus of Nazareth, immediately prior to his public ministry in Galilee, was baptised by John the Baptist in the Jordan and then tempted by the devil in the wilderness. The Markan version covers the latter incident in three simple sentences: Jesus is tempted by Satan; is with the wild beasts; and is ministered to by angels. A more extended treatment is to be found in Matthew and Luke, where an argument, a kind of verbal duel, develops between the tempter and Jesus over the true understanding and application of God's will as it has been revealed in the Scriptures.

This unique narrative has a fascinating exegetical history; its graphic imagery and mythological symbolism have stimulated to the full the fantasy and imagination of its interpreters who have, at the same time, found in it some of the central themes of the Christian faith and the Christian concept of existence. The reader is referred to the sketch given in E. Fascher's "Jesus und der Satan" (1949)¹ and to the relatively exhaustive treatments of patristic exposition of this pericope recently published by K.-P. Köppen (1961)² and M. Steiner (1962)³.

A pericope of this nature has so many aspects that it is impossible to consider them all in this study; we shall concentrate on two of the most important: i) the origin and development of the narrative in its three versions and ii) its meaning. In fact, the nature of the sources makes it imperative that these two questions be treated together in a study of this type, for they are closely inter-related.

Scholars have long discussed the relationship between the short narrative of Mark and the longer ones of Matthew and Luke. There seem to be three main possibilities:—

i) There is one tradition only. The question then is: is the short version

¹ Jesus und der Satan. Eine Studie zur Auslegung der Versuchungsgeschichte (Hall. Monogr. 11, 1949).

² Die Auslegung der Versuchungsgeschichte unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Alten Kirche (BGBE 4, 1961).

³ La tentation de Jésus dans l'interprétation patristique de Saint Justin à Origène (EB, 1962).

the original and the longer a scribal elaboration, or is the long one the original and the shorter an abbreviation?

ii) There are two different traditions. Mark relates in summary form an exuberant popular story; Matthew and Luke reproduce another narrative from scribal circles.

iii) The longer version is a conflation of two traditions; the brief mythological statement found in Mark has been combined with an already-existing dialogue of a scribal character; alternatively, a scribal temptation story from Q has been enriched by Matthew and Luke with elements from a shorter popular story in Mark.

Later in this study (Chap 6) we shall return to this problem, but some preliminary comments must be made here. In both accounts we find a tradition that Jesus was driven out into the wilderness immediately after his baptism and that he remained there forty days to be tempted by the devil. It seems unnecessarily complicated to suggest that there are here two quite different traditions; the only reasonable supposition is that we have two versions of one and the same tradition.⁴ It also seems inescapable that the Markan version, brief to the point of obscurity, is a concentrated and abbreviated form of a longer narrative, which could have been less restrained and more popular in tone than the stylised accounts of Matthew and Luke, but clearly is the same story. The main reason for thus affirming that the shorter and the longer texts are versions of the same narrative is that both are based on the Book of Deuteronomy. To this we will return.

Our attention will be mainly directed to the longer version, for the short, cryptic phrases of the Markan pericope are not a suitable basis for a reasoned historical investigation. Insofar as the shorter version can be given a plausible *historical* exegesis, it must be with the help of the longer; on its own it is only an enigmatic fragment of an early, otherwise unknown, haggada about Jesus before the beginning of his public ministry.

A possible method of beginning our study of the longer narrative would be to attempt to discover the redactional alterations of Matthew and Luke by comparing their two texts and so reconstructing an "original form" of this story, which they both have taken from Q. This is the process used, for instance, by A. Meyer in his justly famed and pioneering work published in the *Blümnerfestschrift* (1914)⁵.

⁴ Cf. R. Schnackenburg, *Der Sinn der Versuchung Jesu bei den Synoptikern*, in *Theol. Quart.* 132 (1952), pp. (297—326) 300 ff.

⁵ *Die evangelischen Berichte über die Versuchung Christi*, in *Festgabe H. Blümner* (1914), 434—468. See the introduction, p. 434 ff.

We however shall not employ this method. It does not seem the best procedure to reconstruct an original text, which can only be a hypothetical one, and then to make that the basis for an investigation: the element of uncertainty is brought in unnecessarily early. We shall analyse the three passages separately, preserved as they are in a copying tradition that is very satisfactory from the textual point of view. The Matthean version will be the basis of our study and we will devote only one chapter (Chap 6) to the accounts of Mark and Luke; most scholars regard the Matthean as nearer to the original than the Lukan⁶ and to their arguments we will add a further one. We will show that it is in the Matthean version that we can still see how the temptation narrative was born and indeed, still perceive the cord joining the new-born babe to its mother. Our investigation will confirm the priority of the Matthean version in all essentials.

B. *The temptation narrative as midrash*

From a form-critical point of view the longer temptation narrative is to be placed in the category of *haggadic midrash*. The tempter bases his assertions on passages or themes from the Scriptures, and Jesus answers with scriptural quotations. The three decisive replies in the dialogue are all from Deut 6—8, the deuteronomic exposition of how God allowed his “son” Israel to wander for forty years in the desert that he might discipline and test him. The task before us therefore is to define more closely the relationship that indisputably exists between the account of how “God’s son” Jesus was tempted in the desert in Matt 4:1 ff & par, and the account in Deut 6—8 of what God said to his “son” Israel in the desert.

A closer examination of the texts shows that the relationship cannot be plotted out merely by examining the actual quotations; a wider comparison must be made, embracing the themes of the dialogue and even the scenic background. The temptation narrative was not written by some simple soul who constructed his story with a few suitable quotations from an old and valued scroll: on the contrary, we have in it a narrative whose every detail bears the stamp of the late-Jewish (and early Christian) scribal tradition. It is an example of an early Christian midrash.

When we give our narrative such descriptive titles as midrash or haggada we are not doing anything new.⁷ What we propose is to let

⁶ Cf. A. Feuillet, *Le récit lucanien de la tentation* (Lc 4, 1—13), in *Bibl.* 40 (1959), pp. 613—631. See *infra*, Chap. 6.