

SERMON SERIES ON GENRES OF THE BIBLE

**The "Myth" of Jesus' Temptations:
The True Self and the False Self,**Jerry Truex; May 17, 2008

A. Introduction**1. What is a "genre"?**

Today, we begin a series on the different genres of the Bible. A genre refers to a type of literature or a type of writing. The Bible was not only written by many people over many centuries, but it also contains many different types of genre.

For example, the Bible includes laws, poetry, songs, letters, parables, oracles, prophecy, apocalyptic, history, a creation poem, a creation narrative, genealogies, wisdom literature, myths, legends, and Gospels to name some.

2. Different genres, different expectations

Readers bring different expectations to different kinds of literature

- newspaper editorial vs. newspaper article
- science fiction vs. science textbook
- historical accounts vs. romance novels

For example: Suppose you read about a breakthrough in genetic research that could potentially save the human race from cancer. However, the research is dangerous and, if gene specimens were to escape the laboratory, they could mutate beyond control and bring worldwide death. If you read in a novel by Stephen King, you might enjoy it and recommend book. But if you read about on the front page of the New York Times, you might panic and write your senator.

The point is: The expectations we have about what we read in the Bible will affect the way we read them. Knowing whether we are reading history or myth makes a difference.

3. What is myth?

Today, we are going to focus on myth and, in particular, the story of Jesus' three temptations.

The popular view is that myth is something not true (e.g., "The Myth Busters" on the Discovery Channel). In contrast to myth, history is considered a true account of some event. That's the popular view.

However, the term "myth" has a more positive meaning—and this is the view I would like us to embrace. A myth is a story that conveys religious or spiritual truth.¹ Myths:

- Tell us about our purpose in life, struggles we face, and how to overcome them
- Put us into contact with the Sacred
- Offer us a way to interpret our lives

B. Jesus' Three Temptations

I think the best example of a "myth" or "sacred story" in the Bible is the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. You might call it a "true myth," because the temptation story tells us something ourselves and God. It presents existential truths we can verify, if we have courage.

1. Indications of myth

Factors point to myth, rather than history:

- The event has no witnesses
- Jesus seeing all the kingdoms of the world in an instance (before CNN)
- The Devil transporting Jesus from wilderness to Temple (before Star Trek)
- Chiastic structure, editing, arrangement (compare with Matt 4:1-8)
- Use of scripture quotations points to *midrash*

2. Literary context

Both Matthew and Luke present the story of the three temptations of Jesus. However, Luke presents them in a different sequence within a different set of episodes.² Notice how Luke inserts the genealogy. Why does he do this?

¹ Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science & Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974) 19-28.

Luke: baptism (3:22-23), genealogy (34-38), temptations (4:1-14), Nazareth (4:15-30)

Matthew: baptism (3:13-17), temptations (4:1-11), Nazareth (4:12-17)

3. Jesus recapitulates sacred history

Luke wants to link Jesus' temptations with the people of God in the OT, especially those who experienced great temptations. Can you think of some of the OT stories that included temptations or testing?

There are parallels between the temptation of Adam and the temptations of Jesus.

- Adam was called the "son of God" (Lk 3:38) and so was Jesus (Lk 3:22).
- Both Jesus and Adam were confronted by mythic figures—the Devil and the Serpent.

There are parallels between the testing of Israel in the wilderness and the testing of Jesus.

- Israel was led by God; Jesus was led by the Spirit.
- Israel was called "the son of God" (Exod 4:22) and so was Jesus (Lk 3:22).
- Both were in the desert: Israel for forty years, Jesus for forty days.
- Both were times of testing.
- In addition, each of the three quotes that Jesus cites is from Deuteronomy, part of Moses' instruction to Israel while they were in the desert.

In this way, Luke's story of Jesus' temptations creates strong allusions to the temptations of Adam and Israel. Luke seems to be presenting Jesus as recapitulating (reliving) the stories of Adam and Israel. In this way, Jesus represents a New Adam and a New People of God.

The question is, will Jesus be a faithful son of God. Notice how the Devil throws doubt on whether Jesus can be called "the son of God." Jesus' identity and faithfulness is at stake. Will Jesus cave into temptation or human craving? Will he fail like the First Adam and Israel?

² There are a number of problems with Luke's genealogy. Luke lists 76 names, Matthew gives 42, and they rarely agree. Both genealogies trace Jesus back to King David and from King David back to Abraham. Only Luke traces Jesus' lineage clear back to Adam. From Jesus to David, Luke and Matthew share only five names. From David to Abraham, they share all the names except Luke includes two names that Matthew does not. Only Luke continues to trace Jesus lineage back to Adam and his list corresponds to what is found in Genesis.

4. Jesus, the New Human

Jesus passes the tests. Jesus is the New Adam or New Human, who succeeds where the first human failed. Jesus is the New Israel. He is faithful to God, whereas Israel was not. Similarly, Paul wrote:

1 Cor. 15:45. ⁴⁵ Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. (NRSV)

Rom. 5:18. ¹⁸ Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. (NRSV)

The question for us is this: Are we going to live in solidarity with the First Adam or the Second Adam? Are we going to be faithful to God, resist evil, and become the children of God, like Jesus? So the myth provides a story or a framework for interpreting our lives. Will we succeed or will we fail?

5. Structure: Chiastic

[Point out structure, parallels, Spirit/Word connection.]

SPIRIT POWER	¹ Jesus, <u>full of the Holy Spirit</u> , returned from the Jordan and was <u>led by the Spirit</u> in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.
1ST TEST/WORD	³ THE DEVIL said to him, ' <u>If you are the Son of God</u> , command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'
	⁴ JESUS answered him, ' <u>It is written</u> , "One does not live by bread alone."
2ND TEST/WORD	⁵ Then THE DEVIL led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ <u>If you, then, will worship me</u> , it will all be yours.'
	⁸ JESUS answered him, ' <u>It is written</u> , "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."'
3RD TEST/WORD	⁹ Then THE DEVIL took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ' <u>If you are the Son of God</u> , throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", ¹¹ and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."'
	¹² JESUS answered him, ' <u>It is said</u> , "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'
SPIRIT POWER	¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. ¹⁴ Then Jesus, <u>filled with the power of the Spirit</u> , returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.

6. The Temptations

a. First Temptation (3-4)

³ THE DEVIL said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' ⁴ JESUS answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."

(1) What is the appeal?

The appeal is to meet legitimate needs (provision & pleasure). Jesus was hungry and surely he wanted to eat. On a human level, it was an appeal to satisfy legitimate bodily cravings or desires—food, water, sex, and other bodily desires. It is the temptation to put personal needs and desires ahead of all else.

Unfortunately, when we are UNWILLING to GIVE UP satisfying bodily desires—at least momentarily—the desires takes hold of us and controls us. We become attached and addicted.³

An attachment (addiction) can be anything a person is unwilling to give up (we may not have to give it up, but we must be willing to do so to be free).

If we become attached or addicted, we develop ANXIETY and FEAR that we might not be able to satisfy our desires. And anxiety and fear leads to conflict within oneself and with others. When an addiction becomes overwhelming, people have sacrificed their jobs, health, friends, and family in order TO GET what they think they MUST have.

(2) How does Jesus respond?

Jesus quotes scripture (Deut 8:36). The quotation indicates that human life is more than physical subsistence. Jesus is willing to GIVE UP meeting basic needs and desires. Jesus was not attached to bodily desires. Jesus has a Higher Power and Center of control.

The myth tells us that humans have access to a Higher Power and a Higher Center of control than bodily desires. Like Jesus, we have the potential to transcend ourselves. We GIVE UP pleasures and even satisfying certain bodily needs—when the time calls for it. When we do, we experience a type of self-transcendence. We discover Something Higher within us, namely, God.

³ Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1988) identifies five essential characteristics of addiction: (1) tolerance, (2) withdrawal symptoms, (3) self-deception, (4) loss of willpower, and (5) distortion of attention (25-26).

(3) True/False Self.

Our FALSE SELF clings to attachments; our TRUE SELF releases attachments and finds union with God.

b. Second Temptation (5-8)

⁵ Then THE DEVIL led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'

⁸ JESUS answered him, It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

(1) What is the appeal?

The appeal is to power and greed. It is the temptation to grasp for power and control. If the first temptation focuses more on inner drives and felt needs, the second temptation focuses on outer relationships and the political aspect of life.

Surely there are legitimate and beneficial uses of power. But in this case, Jesus refuses an illegitimate source and use of authority. Here we see Jesus is WILLING to give it up power at the right time. Jesus was not attached to power. He did not crave power.

Unfortunately, addiction to power leads to a preoccupation with dominating and controlling people in order to hold on to or increase power. People addicted to power will tend to develop anger, resentment, and hostility whenever their power is threatened. Addiction to power is one of the most dangerous and harmful addictions. Wars have been fought and genocides perpetrated because of power-addictions.

(2) How does Jesus respond?

Jesus quotes scripture (Deut 6:13). The quotation indicates that service is owed only to the Ultimate Source of life. Jesus implies that power outside of the service of God is illegitimate. Power at any cost and by any means is of the Devil.

The willingness to GIVE UP power is to recognize the HIGHER POWER. It is willingness to let go. It is accept of reality as it is. Acceptance means seeing things as they are, rather than as you

think they should be. Acceptance is openness to what is here. The sense of struggle is released.

When you are willing to release power—whatever little bit of power you think you have—your awareness expands. You can sense that God Is. And God is in control. And you can relax. It doesn't mean you stop doing things; but it does mean that you release the outcomes to God.

(3) True/False Self.

Our FALSE SELF clings to power; our TRUE SELF is willing to release power and finds union with the Higher Power.

c. Third Temptation (9-12)

⁹ Then THE DEVIL took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here,¹⁰ for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you",¹¹ and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."¹² JESUS answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

(1) What is the appeal?

The appeal is to special protection and status with God. It is the temptation to presume that you have special status with God; that God will give special exemption when we do stupid things; that God will magically protect you from your harmful behaviors.

(2) How does Jesus respond?

Jesus quotes scripture (Deut 6:16). Jesus will not force God's hand or presume he knows God will. Jesus' response is an act of humility. And humility is an act of self-transcendence. It is to restrain self-centeredness. It is openness and awareness that I am connected to a Divine Reality, who is infinitely more than me.

(3) True/False Self.

Humility shrinks the narcissistic ego, the FALSE SELF, and allows us to discover that our TRUE SELF is united to a Divine Reality much greater than ourselves.

C. True Self vs. False Self

The **False Self** is the one who is attached to possessions, pleasure, power, and prestige. The False Self is controlled by attachments. And you know when you are controlled by attachments when you experience negative emotions. Anger, frustration, envy, depression, fear, worry, and anxiety are indicators that your False Self is making demands and not getting what it wants. In the temptations, we see Jesus saying an emphatic no to the temptation to create a False Self.

The **True Self** is faithful to God and a child of God. The True Self is something we experience already, but not yet fully. The True Self depends on God and does not experience controlling attachments. The True Self may prefer this or that, but it never demands and is always WILLING TO GIVE UP what is preferred. For this reason, the True Self is free from everything that might control us, except God. Apostle Paul might say, "The True Self is freed from SIN and enslaved to God" (Rom 6:22).

D. Reflections

1. The story of Jesus' three temptations is a "myth". It is a sacred story that tells us about how to overcome the struggles we face and become what Adam and Israel were suppose to be.
2. When we are as courageous as Jesus and rely totally on God, and not on attachments, we fulfill human destiny. We will discover our True Self, which is union with God.
3. When we deal with temptations and potential attachments of pleasure, power, and prestige the way Jesus did, we are liberated from suffering. We are set free from cravings and attachments, and the negative emotions associated with them, and we become children of God.

[Notice how the both the True Self and the False Self are reflected in Pauline theology, but with different language. Read Gal. 5:16-24.]

Galatians 5:16-24. ¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (NRSV)