

Luke 4:1-30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 4 verses 1 to 30. And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil.

And he ate nothing during those days, and when they were ended he was hungry. The devil said to him, If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread. And Jesus answered him, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone.

And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.

If you then will worship me, it will all be yours. And Jesus answered him, It is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.

And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, He will command his angels concerning you to guard you, and on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.

[1 : 08] And Jesus answered him, It is said, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test. And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country, and he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

[2 : 13] And all spoke well of him, and marvelled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son? And he said to them, Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, Physician, heal yourself.

What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well. And he said, Truly I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land.

And Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.

When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff.

But passing through their midst, he went away. Luke chapter 4 tells the account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Each of the accounts of the Gospels of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness differs slightly.

[3 : 25] Each account is introduced with different language, for instance, language that sets up different sets of echoes. Matthew speaks of Jesus being led up to the wilderness by the Spirit. The allusion here seems to be Israel being led up out of Egypt into the wilderness by the Spirit, the pillar of cloud and fire in the Exodus, where they were there for 40 years.

Mark speaks of Jesus being cast out by the Spirit into the wilderness, perhaps reminiscent of David being driven out from Saul's court into the wilderness. While in the wilderness, David lived with the wild beasts, resisting the temptation to snatch the kingdom for himself before it was time.

Luke, however, phrases things differently. Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. This is the language of the prophet caught up and transported by the Spirit, the sort of language that we find in the book of Ezekiel.

The hand of the Lord was upon me and I was led in the Spirit. We should also note the similarities with Luke 2, verse 27, where Simeon comes by the Spirit into the temple.

Another interesting parallel might be seen in Revelation 17, verse 3, where the seer John is carried away in the Spirit into the wilderness, where he encounters the whore of Babylon on the beast.

[4 : 38] If Matthew's introduction to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness foregrounded themes of the Exodus and the law, and Mark's foreground themes of kingship, in Luke, the themes are more those of the prophet.

We have already noted earlier similarities with the story of Ezekiel. The similarities seen, for instance, in the fact that Jesus was about 30 years old when he was baptised by John.

In Ezekiel chapter 1, verse 1, it's in the 30th year that Ezekiel sees the heavens opened and sees visions of God. And Jesus, in his baptism, sees the heavens opened and there is a vision of the Spirit descending upon him in the form of a dove.

But the allusions seem to continue here. The hand of the Lord came upon Ezekiel and he was carried in the Spirit into the wilderness valley of dry bones, in Ezekiel chapter 37, verse 1.

And then there's a continued pattern from there. He's first transported by the Spirit into the wilderness, then to a very high mountain, in chapter 40, verse 2, then to various extremities of the temple, in 40, verse 17, 24, 28, 32, and then in chapter 41, 42, 43, and 44 at the very beginning.

[5 : 50] This visionary journey is also mirrored in Revelation, which begins in the wilderness, 17, verse 3, then goes to the mountain, in 21, verse 10, and then to the temple, in 21, verse 22, following.

The mountain and the temple are closely related, as in Ezekiel. And the devil seems to be giving Jesus a sort of false apocalypse here, a twisted alternative to the visions of God's future that are received by the prophets.

This is what the future could look like if Christ bows to Satan and takes his route. There might be ways we are reminded of the Exodus story here, beyond the fact that it's 40 years.

There is the water crossing, connected with baptism of the Red Sea. There is a period in the wilderness associated with miraculous bread, manna. The idea of turning the stone into bread might recall both the manna and the rock in the wilderness.

There's coming to the mountain of Sinai, the high place, and then there's the temple, or the tabernacle. You can also see similar patterns in the story of Elijah. Elijah is fed with miraculous bread baked on hot stones, in 1 Kings chapter 19, verses 5 to 8, and that gives him strength to go without food for 40 days and nights.

[7 : 02] This is accompanied by the word of the Lord. He then goes to the mountain of Sinai, where he is given a vision and a commission for the future of the kingdom. Refusing to eat the food of the land bearing the curse, the prophet is fed with heavenly bread.

The Israelites rejected the old leaven and ate manna, bread from heaven. Moses went without bread for 40 days on the mountain, receiving tablets of stone from God. David ate the holy bread of the tabernacle in 1 Samuel chapter 21, verses 1 to 6.

Elijah is fed by the ravens, and then by the miraculous bowl and jar, then by the bread from the angel. The devil wants Jesus to produce bread from the curse-bearing territory, rather than relying by faith upon God's bread.

This might be part of what's going on. It's what James Jordan has suggested. The wilderness becomes the source of a feast, both in Ezekiel chapter 39, verses 17 to 20, and in Revelation, chapter 19, verses 17 to 21, after the great victory has been won.

Luke has already mentioned a miraculous transformation of stones in chapter 3, verse 8. Notice that in Luke, the devil calls Jesus to produce bread from a single stone, rather than from many.

[8 : 15] Christ has been connected with Adam in the verse immediately before the temptation account. He is then described as being filled with the Spirit, the breath of God. Like Adam, he is tempted by the devil to eat forbidden food and to jump the gun on God's kingdom plans.

Like the serpent in the wilderness, the devil seeks to twist God's word. The last Adam resists in the hunger of the wilderness, what the first Adam failed to resist in the plenitude of the garden.

We should also recognise the importance of the statement, if you are the Son of God. Jesus has just been declared to be the Son of God with the voice from heaven, and he's also been declared the Son of God at the end of the genealogy.

Now he's being tested concerning that. Is he a faithful son? Is he a son that will obey the word of his father? Where Adam, the firstborn man of the dust, failed. Seeing all of the kingdoms in a moment in time might be like the visions in Daniel of the different successive empires.

The devil is the ruler of the wider empire, making him the direct adversary of Gabriel, who has appeared earlier to announce the births of John and Jesus. John's baptism of the mightier Jesus leads to this conflict, as Jesus will fight on Gabriel's behalf against his greater adversary.

[9 : 30] Perhaps we should relate what Jesus is doing here to the role of Michael, the heavenly prince of Israel, in supporting Gabriel against the opposing kings in Daniel chapter 10 verse 13 and 21.

Michael is connected with the angel of the Lord in Zechariah chapter 3, and perhaps Jude verse 9 fills this out a bit. The angel of the Lord, or the angel of the covenant, is connected with Christ in other places.

Malachi 3 verse 1 is a key verse here, as it relates the coming of the angel of the covenant to the ministry of John the Baptist and Christ. The Lord, the messenger of the covenant, is Christ.

Once this has been appreciated, I think an interesting picture starts to emerge. Gabriel tells Daniel that Michael will stand up at some point in the future, in Daniel chapter 12 verse 1.

Luke presents us with the coming of the mighty champion, who will equip Gabriel to defeat the devil and his princes. John speaks of Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon, the full-grown serpent, in Revelation chapter 12 verses 7 to 9.

- [10 : 32] The references to angelic rulers, the heavenly army, and conflict with the devil in these early chapters of Luke, should make clear that there is a battle of spiritual powers occurring throughout the gospel, and that we shouldn't merely focus upon the surface events.

The devil's second temptation is an invitation to Christ, to rule under and with him, rather than under the Father. This temptation would be a way for Jesus to avoid the great battle of the cross.

When Jesus resists his second temptation, the devil tempts Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, to cast himself out of the realm of God's presence, assuring him that the angels will protect him, much as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were protected in the fiery furnace.

If Jesus won't rule alongside the devil on the devil's terms, the devil assures Jesus that God will protect him if he exiles himself. Rather than plundering the strongman and resisting the devil's claims over God's house, Jesus would be protected if he abandoned the house to the devil.

It would be so much easier for Jesus if he just cast himself away from Israel. All of Jesus' responses to the devil involve quotations from the book of Deuteronomy. Chapter 8 verse 3, chapter 6 verse 13, chapter 10 verse 20, and chapter 6 verse 16, and all refer to the testing of Israel in the wilderness.

- [11 : 53] We're supposed to think back to what happened to Israel and how Israel failed, and think about how Christ is fulfilling what Israel had failed to achieve. The devil departs from Jesus until an opportune time, presumably Gethsemane.

We should observe the emphasis upon trial, which is probably a more appropriate word than temptation, in the Garden of Gethsemane. In Luke chapter 22 verses 39 to 46 we see this.

The same word for trial is used here as in chapter 4 verse 13. Perhaps we should see some relationship between the trials in the wilderness and the trials leading up to and upon the cross.

So one possibility would be that the first trial is found in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus must live by every word of the Father, and the Father's word takes the form of a cup that he must drink.

While Jesus could reject the cup of his Father and eat the portion of the devil, he chooses to live by the word of his Father. The second trial could relate to his claims of kingship, while before Pilate and Herod.

- [12 : 55] The kingdoms of this world cast their judgment upon Christ, ridiculing and condemning him, even though the kingdoms of this world are his proper inheritance. Jesus could assert his reign in a demonic fashion, but he accepts the crown of thorns and is raised up on the cross.

The third and final trial occurs while Jesus is on the cross. Those watching the crucifixion, the rulers among them, the soldiers and even one of the criminals crucified with him, call upon him to save himself, to cast himself down from the cross, to abandon the temple and his mission.

Luke's account of the temptations of Christ in the wilderness is followed by his teaching in the synagogue of Nazareth. He begins with reading from the book of Isaiah. His reading brings together Isaiah chapter 61 verses 1 to 2 and chapter 58 verse 6.

The acceptable year of the Lord might be a reference to the Jubilee. In Leviticus chapter 25 verses 8 to 17 we read about the Jubilee. It would fit well with Luke's emphasis upon economic themes.

Jesus is bringing the release of all debts. This would also relate to the Sabbath and the true farce spoken of in Isaiah chapter 58. Jesus doesn't quote the end of Isaiah chapter 61 verse 2 with its reference to the day of vengeance.

[14 : 13] His current ministry is one of blessing and restoration. The day of vengeance comes later for Israel in AD 70 and unsurprisingly the expression occurs in that context later on in Luke chapter 21 verse 22.

Jesus' proclamation of liberty should be related to his defeat of the devil's power over the land, restoring the land to its original owners. The people of Nazareth observe that Jesus is Joseph's son.

With this they're attempting to exert some sort of authoritative claim upon Jesus. Physician, heal yourself. It's the claim that Jesus owes them special treatment on the miracle front.

He should recognise the greater duty that he has towards his own country. Literally his fatherland in verse 23. And Jesus challenges this claim with the examples of Elijah and Elisha.

The reference to Elijah and Elisha here is significant. Not merely on account of the numerous allusions that have already been made to them in the book so far. Later on in the book there are healings that are reminiscent of Elijah and Elisha.

[15 : 14] The healing of the centurion's son in chapter 7 verses 1 to 10 is a miracle done at a distance for a military man of a foreign power. And that can be related to Elisha's healing of Naaman the Syrian, another foreign military man, which Jesus mentioned in verse 27.

The raising of the dead son of the widow of Nain relates to Elijah's raising of the widow of Zarephath's son. The widow of Zarephath is mentioned in verse 26. There seems to be something interesting going on here when we read this passage alongside the account of the temptations.

There are some peculiar features of the text that should grab our attention. First of all, the fact that the quote from Deuteronomy in response to the first temptation is not completed.

Man shall not live by bread alone. We know the words that come next, they're given in Matthew, but they're not given here. But by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. But we're not told that.

And yet, in the story of the preaching of Nazareth, we hear some reminder of those words. The people marvel at the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

[16 : 25] If you're talking about speaking, it's a rather strange way to speak about speaking. But this is the expression that Luke uses in this context. And presumably because he wants us to think back to Jesus' response to the first temptation.

In Luke chapter 4 verse 17, Jesus is handed the scroll of prophecy. And then he proceeds to speak the word of prophecy as a word that he incarnates. One of the peculiar features of this text are the many references to the scroll.

It's referenced three times. He is handed the scroll. He opens the scroll. He gives the scroll back. Now, if he had wanted to, Luke could have said that Jesus got up and he read from the prophet Isaiah.

Why mention the scroll? It seems to me that again this is a connection to the story of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel chapter 2 verse 9, Ezekiel is handed the scroll of prophecy, the word of God.

[17:35] And that word received into his mouth is then something that he can speak forth from within him. Jesus is doing the same thing. He's handed the scroll. And then the words proceed from him.

In Christ himself, that scroll and its meaning is standing before them. What does this mean? Well, it helps us to understand the response to the first temptation. Man shall not live by bread alone.

He is speaking out his mission. And that mission is a mission of liberation, of deliverance to the captives. Jesus is the one by whom the true bread of God's word is given, rather than the bread of the devil.

Jesus' own people are seeking to cast him down from the temple. To exile him from them. To cast him off. Which would mean for Jesus an abandonment of his purpose and his vocation to deliver the people.

Even when they are trying to cast him down. And in the same way as he remains on the cross. Even if he could come down and deliver himself. And abandon the people to their fate. He remains faithful.

[19:35] But in the deep agony that he experiences too. He will not allow Israel to cast him away. Because he will be cast away for Israel.

He is going to serve God alone. His vocation is given to him by his father. Not by his townsfolk. Not by his countrymen. Rather than proudly seeking demonic mastery of the world.

In what ways, analogous to the specific ways in which Jesus was tempted, might we be tempted as Christians in the present day?