

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International
(Sola Publishing, Edited Version © 2023 H. Wendt)



Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Matthew 4:1-11

Year A - Lent 1, Text: Matthew 4:1-11
Year A - Lent 1, Text: Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus' baptism is recorded in Matthew 3:13–17. In the narrative that follows, Jesus is subjected to a triple temptation in which Satan tempts Jesus to rebel against God. Satan does so subtly in the first two temptations, more overtly in the third.

Each refusal of Jesus is expressed in language drawn from Deuteronomy; see Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:13, 16. The testing of Jesus resembles those of Israel during the wilderness wanderings, and later in Canaan. Old Israel failed; Jesus, the New Israel, did not.

Matthew does not try to explain evil or temptation, nor does he reflect on the history of Satan — how Satan was once a member of God's heavenly court (Job 1, 2), or on how Satan, in later tradition, replaces God as the source of testing and temptation; compare 2 Samuel 24:1 with 1 Chronicles 21:1. Nor does Matthew distinguish between God's testing and Satan's tempting. He simply tells how Jesus wrestled with Satan and conquered every temptation. What Matthew is doing is proclaiming Jesus as Savior from Satan's sovereignty.

Verse 4:1: Jesus travels up from the Jordan into the wilderness. He does not just go there, but is led by the Spirit. The traditional location of His fasting and first temptation is up on the cliffs and barren heights to the west of Jericho.

Verse 4:2: “**Forty days and forty nights**”; see Exodus 24:18. However, the link is most likely to the 40 years in the wilderness when Israel was tested and tried (Deuteronomy 8:2). Mark and Luke say only “forty days.” Perhaps Matthew is focusing on the utter completeness of Jesus' fasting. It signifies total reliance on God and freedom from every earthly security, including the ordinary necessities of life. After the temptation, Jesus is hungry. Remarkably, God's beloved and exalted Son experienced one of humanity's most nagging sensations: the pangs of hunger!

Verse 4:3: In Jewish and Christian traditions, Satan wears many hats: accuser, slanderer, adversary, ruler

of the underworld, prince of demons, the one who punishes the wicked. However, in the present narrative, Matthew focuses on Satan as tempter. The devil tries to drive a wedge between Jesus and God, His Father. He tries to draw Jesus away from total reliance on His Father to an unholy independence.

When Satan addresses Jesus, he makes use of a title proclaimed at Jesus' baptism, “Son of God” (Matthew 3:17). When doing so, Satan proposes that Jesus make use of His divine power to serve Himself — to satisfy His personal hunger.

Verse 4:4: Jesus refuses to use His power to benefit Himself, to supply His own needs. He accepts whatever His Father wills (see Deuteronomy 8:3). He states that one shall not live by bread alone (by what is visible and edible), but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. When responding, Jesus does not seek to display any cleverness; He simply quotes Scripture — in childlike submission and trust. In fact, in each of His responses Jesus applies to Himself terms from the first chapters of Deuteronomy.

Verse 4:5: In the second temptation, the scene shifts from the wilderness to the Holy City. The Devil sets Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple, the Royal Stoa that ran the length of the southern edge of the Temple platform. A peak on the roof of the southeast corner, high above the Temple court, has often been identified with the “pinnacle.” Any person who fell from that high point, either to the stone floor of the Temple court or to the stone-covered area surrounding the Temple structure, would suffer severe physical damage — most likely, death.

Verse 4:6: The devil now puts pressure on Jesus for a public display of power and appeals to Scripture to support his suggestion. He reminds Jesus that God has promised that His angels will come to His Son's rescue and prevent Him from suffering any pain as a result of His fall.

Verse 4:7: Again, Jesus refuses to test His Father by demanding from Him any extraordinary display of power. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:16 when doing so.

Verse 4:8: For the third temptation, the scene shifts to a very high mountain. From the top of Mount Nebo, Moses saw all the land that the Lord would give His people (Deuteronomy 3:27). However, Jesus sees all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. Perhaps Satan is tempting Jesus to become the political ruler of the vast geographical realm that He saw — without suffering. After all, had not the anointed ruler referred to in Psalm 2 been promised universal dominion — the nations as his inheritance and the ends of the earth as his possession?

Verse 4:9: The devil boasted, “These I will give you if you will fall down and worship me.” However, what path must Jesus travel if He is to become King of kings and Lord of lords, to receive all authority in heaven and on earth (see Matthew 28:19–20)? And what does it mean to worship Satan? After all, did not Israel in the wilderness fashion and worship a golden calf by sacrificing to it, and dancing around it (Exodus 32)?

Verse 4:10: When Jesus responds to Satan, He uses words that reflect what He will eventually say to Peter (Matthew 16:23). Jesus’ refusal is based on Deuteronomy 6:13. Whatever diverts the people of God from the path of trust, obedience, and the service of God is satanic and idolatrous.

Verse 4:11: Jesus is the only human being in this narrative. The devil fails to achieve his goal and is forced to leave the field. God’s everlasting arms surround Jesus. In the beginning of the incident, the Spirit leads Jesus out into the wilderness. In the end, the angels come and minister to Him.