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Christ's Temptation.

The nature and design of Christs temptation.

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. Matth. 4. 1.

Several theories have been framed by theologians of this and earlier times, to explain the nature and design of our Lords temptation, which took place immediately after his baptism, by John, in the river Jordan. Most of them I consider to be objectionable, and these it may be proper briefly to notice, before entering upon what I consider to be the true nature and design of this temptation.

1st The first supposition, which presents itself, is the common one of the day, and this supposes that the narative of the whole affair, is to be interpreted literally. It supposed that Christ had a personal interview with the "prince of darkness" received and rejected his proposals in an oral form, and was removed by his "Majesty" from one place to another, as circumstances seemed to favor the object which he wished to accomplish. There are very numerous reasons for rejecting this explination, but my limits will only allow me, to, briefly, notice a few of them.

The first objection to this theory, is that it is contrary to the nature of the devil, as represented by its advocates, to suppose that he would openly attempt to seduce our Saviour. What advantage could he expect to gain by showing his hideous form? He is held to be a willy adversary, and very circumspect and cautious in all his transactions with mankind. But this is inconsistent with his supposed character, and comports illy, indeed, with his reputed sagaciousness. Farmer, well remarks, that by a personal and undisguised appearance, he can never hope to prevail over the feblest virtue. And if to evade this difficulty it should be said, that he assumed a form better suited to his purpose, a sufficient answer would be, that we have no

proof of such a fact in the narrative; and furthermore it is evident that Christ knew who he was dealing with, for he calls him by name, and bids him to "go hence;" or as Luke has it "to get behind him."

I object to this theory, in the second place, because it reflects dishonor upon our Saviour. Its advocates tell us that he held a personal interview with the "arch fiend," was transported from place to place by him, and passively yielded himself, in this respect, into the foul hands of his adversary. Hence he must have been accessory to his own temptation, else why would he have allowed himself to be conveyed from one point to another, at the mere suggestion of the devil. It gives us pain to think that the pure and spotless Son of God should hold intercourse, with the enemy of all good, as nothing either advantageous to himself or his followers, would result from such an interview. Again we are commanded to avoid temptation, and Christ is held up as a pattern for our imitation. But according to the theory we are examining, he voluntarily submitted to the will of his tempter, without the least effort to resist or avoid him. This objection alone, with the wording of the narrative, is, in my mind, sufficient to overthrow the whole hypothesis.

Leaving several objections, which might prove a source of profitable inquiry, I pass to notice the third, and last one, which will claim our attention under this head. It is this, the common theory, ascribes to the devil, the performance of certain things, not only absurd, but impossible. Luke says that the devil took Christ up into a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. I need not say that this was literally and totally impossible. Whether we regard the expression, "all the kingdoms of the earth," to embrace the then known world, the Roman Empire, or the small province of Judea, it appears to be wholly irreconcilable with the facts in the case. It would

be utterly out of the question to see from any one mountain the splendour of even, the kingdom or empire, of which Palestine was a part, much less to see it in a moment of time. This theory, then, supposes what is absurd and ridiculous, it gives to the devil power to work the greatest of miracles. It supposes him a spirit, with power to assume at pleasure a corporeal body, all of which suppositions, need much more proof to substantiate them as true. From these considerations which have been greatly contracted, I am compelled to reject the foregoing hypothesis, as inadequate to answer the end for which it was designed. It appears to me, to be both unreasonable and unscriptural.

2nd The second theory, makes the history of this temptation, a recital of visionary representations, and among its advocates there is very wide difference. One party strenuously contends that the vision was framed and presented to the mind of our Saviour by the devil himself, while the other represents the Spirit of God as its sole author. One holds it to be a diabolical delusion, the other a divine vision. Now I object to both these modes of interpretation, on the ground that they suppose the existence of a being, which I conceive to live only in the imagination. I cannot believe in the personal existence and outward agency of the devil, and as this theory rests upon such a belief, manifestly at least, it may be proper to give my readers, briefly, for rejecting it.

In the first place, it is unreasonable to suppose that there is a being able to cope with God, and even thwart his most righteous purposes. It amounts to an absurdity unless sustained by the word of inspiration. I think it can be shown, that the language of Scripture on this point, has been misconstrued or misapplied. By comparing texts in

the old Testament, we shall find that Satan means nothing more than an opponent or adversary. Thus 1st Kings XI. 14. "And the Lord stirred up an adversary unto Solomon." 23. "And God stirred him up another adversary." 25. "And he was an adversary to Israel all the days of Solomon." Satan, in the original, hebrew scholars tell us. Thus to the same point in Numbers XXII. 22. "The angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary to Balaam." By comparing 1st Chron. XXI. 1. with 2d Sam. XXIV. 1. we see that the anger of the Lord and the instigation of Satan is refered to as the cause of the same effect. In the New Testament, Satan means bad passions, unholy thoughts, evil intentions, wickedness and vileness. Thus, Acts V. 3. where Peter says to Ananias, "why hath satan filled thy heart." Also, in John XIII. 27. Satan is said to have entered into Judas. In Luke X. 18. we have the following passage. "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven." Our Saviour while listening to the Seventy, as they recounted to him what they had done, saw at a glance, as he looked down through the vista of time, the downfall of idolatry and sin. He saw every thing that was unholy bending to the principles of truth and goodness. Principalities, and all the powers of wickedness, must fall beneath its mighty power.

Unclean Spirits and demons, so often mentioned in Scripture, are frequently brought in, to prove the personality of the devil, and by them I think, are ment nothing more than the various diseases, both of body and mind, which afflicted the Jews and other nations at that time. An "unclean Spirit," was used by them in the same manner, as a "Spirit of infirmity." Luke XIII. 11. 12.

It is evident from the general tenor of scripture that the evangelists adopted the language of the day or the popular language of the times, in order to express their ideas as clearly as possible to such as they were teaching. Nor did they intend to confirm or assent to the doctrine, which this language when interpreted litterally, might imply. St. James says, 1:13.14. "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted of evil, neither tempteth he any man; but every man is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lust." The only meaning of such language is, that the bad passions and vicious hearts, which find a place in our own bosoms, are the tempters, which we are most to dread, the only adversaries to holiness and virtue, the only opponents to whose power we are subjected.

Again we are told that the phrase, "In the spirit," means simply, "In a vision;" or that when Jesus was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness, the evangelist means, that those events which he afterwards describes, took place in a vision. Now this appears to be a strained interpretation, at least other scriptures would seem to contradict it. Luke 4:18. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me." Eph 5:18. "Be not drunk.... But be filled with the spirit." and to the same point in Isaiah 48:16. "The Lord God and his Spirit hath sent me." Here it appears that the spirit signifies the divine influence, the Spirit of truth. And thus the writer of this narrative would say that Christ was led into the wilderness by a divine impulse. It is evident that when the phrase, "In the spirit," is used separate from any mention of a vision, that it is not to be regarded as a vision, and that there appears to be a distinction, is plain from Ezkiel 2:2. "Afterwards the Spirit took me up, and brought me in vision, by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to them of the

captivity." Here we have the two phrases coupled together. But where they are used separately, their meaning is very different, and cannot be reconciled when interpreted alike.

But those who take the ground, that this was a divine vision, lay themselves open to the charge, of making God the tempter of his Son. If it was through the agency of a vision that our Saviour was tempted, and if this vision was produced by the Spirit of God, it would follow that the Almighty, who tempteth no one, was the tempter of Christ. Different modes of interpretation have been resorted to, in order to escape this conclusion, but the most ingenious is that one, adopted by Dr. Farmer. He urges that it was an instructive and symbolical vision. But we have nothing in the wording of the narrative which supports the position there assumed. No instruction is pretended to be given, and nothing of the kind is even hinted at. The whole scene is spoken of, as a temptation. No circumstance is mentioned, which would lead us to suppose, that God wished to convey any instruction, either prophetic or otherwise, to our Saviour at this time. The evangelists narrate the whole transaction as nothing more nor less than a temptation. Let us for a moment compare this scene with the vision of Peter, (Acts 10: 9-16.) the proper object of which was to give instruction. Here we read, that when Peter would have eaten, he fell into an error respecting the propriety of the food which was presented to him. But he was immediately corrected by a voice from heaven, declaring "that what God had cleansed, was neither common nor unclean." The case of our Saviour is very different. He appear to have received no instruction whatever. The temptation is met and overcome without any direct aid or intervention of divine

power. I dismiss this theory, then, believing with the evangelist that Christ was tempted, and that this temptation, whatever it might have been, was real and not visionary. I reject it because upon examination it appears both at variance with reason and scripture. To adopt it would in my opinion, destroy the simplicity of the whole narrative, and introduce a confusion, which would be contradictory to the general tenor of scripture.

But there are other modes of interpreting this account, such as supposing it to be a parable, or the tempter to have been a wicked man or a servent of the Jewish high Preast, which our limits will not allow us to notice, and which, to one acquainted with scripture, needs only to be named to be rejected. What we consider to be the true nature and design of this temptation, will now claim our attention. We find, that the various theories which we have had occasion to mention, are more or less burdened with objections, and such too, as vitaly affect their importance and truthfulness. What then was the true nature and design of this temptation? — It is very natural to suppose that Christ after being baptized, and receiving his commission to go forth and preach the glad tidings of salvation, and wishing to prepare himself by prayer and meditation, for his ministry, would desire to be excluded from the anxious gaze of the multitude. By the copious effusions of the holy Spirit, new light in relation to his future destiny and duty, were thrown upon his mind, and that preparation seemed necessary, in order that he might gain strength to undergo all the trials and endure all the labors which awaited him, and faithfully and successfully to perform all the duties of the high mission, with which he was intrusted.

For this purpose he sought, or was led by the spirit into the wilderness, that he might in communion with his Heavenly Father, gain strength and confidence in himself, and banish all apprehension from his mind. It is evident that Jesus went not up into the desert for the purpose of being tempted. He had another object in view, and besides, this would have been a practical violation of his own precepts. "Lead us not into temptation," is the language which he used when in prayer to his Father. His purpose was to strengthen his soul for the stern conflicts which were before him. He had a work to accomplish, greater than had ever before been performed, and notwithstanding the spirit of God was poured out upon him without measure, he needed a firm hand and a resolute will. Here then we find a sufficient ~~reason~~ motive, to induce our Saviour to leave this busy crowd, and seek that retirement which his peculiar situation, seemed most imperitively to demand. Here was an object to attain which required this preparation. Taking this view of the subject the simplicity of the narrative is preserved, and a fair and rational interpretation is presented to the mind, in relation to the design of our Saviour in seeking the solitude of the wilderness. It is reasonable to suppose that Christ felt, at this time, more deeply, than he had ever before, the responsibility of his divine mission. He more fully realized the magnitude of his office, as a Saviour and Redeemer of the world. Impressed with these thoughts he sought the desert. He might have been led thither by the providential suggestions of divine power, or by a miraculous interposition of the Spirit of God. Whether this be true or not, it appears that the true design of our Lord, as manifested by his conduct upon this occasion, was to prepare himself for the great work, which his Father had given him to perform. — I come now to speak more particularly of this temptation. As I have before stated, it appears,

to be real and not visionary. But while I hold that the temptation was a reality I differ very widely from those who would interpret the narrative of it literally. Christ, when recounting his experience to his disciples, informed them of events which were true, but the facts are conveyed in the strong and figurative language of his countrymen. The beautiful imagery of the east is employed to give strength to the expression, and deepen the impression on the minds of the apostles. Actual transactions are set forth in figurative language.

We are told that "when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterwards a hungered." We are not to understand that our Saviour was without food during this period, but that he lived sparingly. The wild fruits of the place, were probably his only sustenance, and this amounted to much less than he actually needed. At the expiration of this time the temptation is represented as taking place. Faint and weary with fasting, worn down by severe and constant exercise of mind, and deeply impressed with the magnitude and importance of his mission, his mind might have been perplexed, or some doubts might have occurred to him, in regard to the use of the miraculous power which he had so lately received. He was destitute of food, but he possessed the power to obtain it. The tempter cannot be supposed to have been an evil spirit or a designing priest, for their very appearance would have prevented the possibility of his being tempted at all. But the desire for food under his peculiar circumstances of weakness and want, led to the thought of supplying it by the aid of his power. And in this evil suggestion lay concealed the temptation. We might recur to our own experience, and inquire how we are tempted. 2

In the epistle to the Hebrews, we read that Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin". Never who does not know, that an open and blunt proposal, made to induce a person to commit a gross act of injustice, would be sure to fail, when a more cautious mode of procedure would have been successful. We are tempted when outward circumstances come in contact with inward desires. The thief, for instance, desires to obtain a certain article, and when this is by chance thrown within his reach, he is led to appropriate it to his own use. This is the case in the commencement of his career in crime, but when he has given away to the first solicitations of evil, he is led to seek the object of his desire. The evil consists not in the thought, that by the violation of the principle of virtue, we can secure the object of our earnest wish, but in cherishing it, in indulging an evil imagination, until it gain the ascendency over us, and in keeping it before the mind until we are led to act in accordance with its evil suggestions. And in this way was Christ tempted. Vain thoughts and evil imaginations, would at times, cross his mind, but they were resisted and repelled at once, and he, left as pure and uncontaminated by sin, as before. A voice from Heaven had just declared him to be the Son of God, he was invested with power from on high, and was clothed with the glory of his Father. "Then why" he might ask, "am I to endure this painful hunger and weariness of body"? why not command these stones to be made bread, and free myself at once from this burden? Is not this a fitting occasion to test the reality and authority of my mission?" Thus the circumstances, which surrounded our Saviour, corresponding with his peculiar condition at this particular time, were the means of this temptation. But it was promptly met and instantly repelled, for says Jesus

"It is written that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." ~~but if~~ He was indeed the "Son of God," but his mission had a higher end to attain than the mere support of animal life. His miraculous power was not given him for the purpose of benefiting himself, but the world, and like others he must trust in the kind care of his Father to supply his physical wants.

The second temptation according to the order of Matt. represents our Saviour as seated upon the pinacle of the temple, and requested by the Devil, to cast himself down in proof of his mission, as the Son of God. This again was an operation of the mind. His tempting imagination flew with him to Jerusalem, and seated him upon the top of the temple. He was led to think upon his own condition, and the most effectual means of securing the favor of the Jews. To cast himself down from the giddy height here spoken of by the evangelist, would be a most striking proof of the reality of his mission in the eyes of the chosen people of God, and in their view would identify him as the Messiah. "For it is written" that God "should give his angels charge concerning thee, and bear thee up lest thou shouldst be injured." But Jesus, whose whole aim was the promotion of truth, saw at once the fallacy contained in such reasoning. He was not to appear in the splendor and temp of a king. He came to minister to the wants of others, but himself must be despised and neglected. Afflictions and sorrows must mark his pathway through life, and stern oppression sink him to the grave. But he was to conquer all difficulties, and triumph over death, by the power of God, and in his own good time. "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God." "Thou shalt not try or put him to the proof," as a later translation has it.

In the third temptation, Christ is represented as standing upon the top of a high mountain, with the kingdoms of the world before him, all of which, with their glory, he can become the possessor of, if he will fall down and worship Satan. The most natural interpretation of this representation, is to suppose that Christ made some reflections upon the condition, which he might attain, by making use of that power which he had received from his Father. He might establish an earthly kingdom, surpassing all the kingdoms of the world. The Jews, if he declared himself a temporal king, would flock to his standard, and it is readily to believe, that many of other nations, would have united with them, for he had long been expected, not only by Jews, but by Gentiles. But his object was the salvation of all mankind. Real and permanent good was not to be sacrificed for transient pleasure and momentary gratification. He could not break his allegiance to God, for the purpose of gratifying the expectations of a worldly people. His "kingdom was not of this world." He was willing to labor in obscurity, and submit to the will of him from whom he had received all things. "Get thee hence Satan, for it is written, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve."

Thus, I have hastily sketched my own views in relation to this temptation. There are numerous suggestions, which in my mind claim a due consideration in connection with this subject, and at some future time, I may have occasion to notice them. Any thing pertaining to the character of our Saviour is worthy of our most candid examination, for when tempted by appetite, vanity or ambition, we can flee to him as a sure refuge, in the hour of trial.