

THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

02 • A Jesus Dramatization • Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13 • Ian Vroon

By the Father's command, there was one remaining task for Jesus before he could begin his ministry on this Earth—one crucial thing. Human and divine, strong in the Spirit yet vulnerable in the flesh, he retreated to the desert alone.

It was a test—a trial.

Heat rose from the desert in waves. Jesus sat on a rock with head in hands, breathing deeply. Before him a lion growled—but did not approach.

A snake slithered past Jesus' feet. He did not turn or lift up his head, but exhaled. The sun beat down on his neck and hands. Sweat trickled down his cheek, and he licked his cracked lips.

“He doesn't love you.”

A voice, sickeningly sweet, whispering in Jesus' ear. Jesus lifted his head, eyes half-closed. It hurt to swallow.

“He will not provide for you.”

A hot wind stirred the nearby sand—and it became a small tornado, which dissipated at Jesus' feet.

The well-dressed man sitting beside him had smooth skin and a pleasant smile. His voice was like silk. “You are abandoned.”

A whisper of a cough from Jesus. He dipped his head, trying to wet his lips again. His hands were beginning to peel.

“You must be hungry.”

Jesus reached unsteadily for the flask of water on his lap. He opened it with trembling fingers, then raised it to his lips.

“Forty days,” the man said, standing up. He walked a few feet, then stooped down. “Forty days without food. Must feel like forty years.”

Jesus swallowed the water—then gasped in relief as it washed down his throat. He set the flask on a rock.

His tormentor stood, stone in hand. “This,” he presented the stone to Jesus, “is your salvation.”

Jesus stared at him, silent.

Satan turned the stone in his hands, watching it with exaggerated interest. “To most people, this would just be a stone.” He caught Jesus’ eye and smiled. “But you are the Son of God.” He tossed the stone and caught it. “To you this stone is bread.”

Jesus’s eyes settled on the rock. He swallowed.

“Just say the word,” the man lowered his voice, “—and the meal is yours.”

Jesus’ face was expressionless. His mouth slowly opened, but he remained silent.

Satan gripped the stone tighter. “You have no choice!” he spat, suddenly indignant. “Your God will not provide for you! You must provide for yourself!” He gritted his teeth. “He has abandoned you.”



2nd Millennium BC

Forty years in the desert. Forty long years and before that, no one knew. The sand, the wind, the brush and occasional mountain—this was their world.

But now they were entering the Promised Land.

The Israelites stood before Moses. Livestock bleating, children crying, mothers hushing, fathers attempting to restore order, others coughing—the beginnings of a proud nation. No one to show them the way into the promised land except their mighty leader—and he was forbidden from entering by the God they all served.

It would be a very long day.

Moses now recited the law to them. His voice boomed across the gathering, authority punctuating each syllable. “Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today,” he said, “so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the Lord promised on oath to your forefathers.”

Those forefathers had disobeyed. Now their children stood ready to receive the promise. If Moses wasn’t clear enough: *don’t you blow it too.*

“Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years—” there were some murmurs and uneasy shuffling in the crowd—“to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.” He cleared his throat. “He humbled you, causing you to hunger—and then feeding you.”

The crowd murmured louder, some casting angry glances in Moses’ direction. Oh, they remembered. That delightful manna. Fell from heaven every day, never to be saved except before the Sabbath. Every week for forty years they remembered.

Moses silenced them with his hand. “He did this to teach you,” he said firmly. “To teach you that man does not live on bread alone—” he pointed at the heavens—“but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”



The Present

Jesus spoke. “It is written.” Though faint, his voice carried conviction. “Man does not live on bread alone.”

The stone dropped to the sand.

“Very well,” Satan sneered, grasping Jesus’s shoulder. The ground fell from their feet as they ascended, and a pleasant breeze rippled their garments. Sun was obscured by clouds and desert replaced by Jerusalem. Under them flew markets, soldiers, passages and carts—then they arrived. Upon the pinnacle they alighted.

The Temple of Jerusalem.

“Ah, yes,” Satan said, gesturing at the people below. “This is your Father’s house.”

Jesus remained silent.

The devil took on an apologetic tone. “You know, I haven’t been fair with you.” He walked around to Jesus’ other side. “I haven’t given you the respect you deserve.”

Jesus swallowed, raising his chin.

“I have not acknowledged your indisputable knowledge of the Scriptures.” Now a gleam entered Satan’s eye. “But why should I pretend to be different?” He spread his arms. “After all, I too love the Scriptures.”

Jesus exhaled slowly, closing his eyes.

“That is why I took you here.” The devil’s eyebrows creased piously. “I attend the Temple worship on *Shabbat* too. Faithfully. In fact, every day I am there.” He smiled wickedly. “In the hearts and minds of the teachers and their aspiring pupils.”

Jesus kept his eyes closed.

“You doubt me?” Satan feigned offense. “Well! I certainly didn’t expect that from the Son of God!” He shook his head. “I need to demonstrate for you.”

He put his arm on Jesus’ shoulder and walked him to the edge. A gust of wind stirred Jesus’ hair—the valley was hundreds of feet below.

“Now this is an excellent opportunity to test the promises of the good Lord,” he said jovially, patting Jesus on the shoulder. He kicked some dust off the edge and watched it fall to the ground below. “Throw yourself down.”

Jesus surveyed the valley, eyes half-lidded.

“Come on,” Satan said, nudging him gently, “you know you won’t get hurt.” He held up a finger. “For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands—’” he made a scooping motion with his hands, “‘so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Satan stepped back and sighed in satisfaction. “See? Scripture.”

Jesus inhaled deeply.

“Well surely you don’t doubt God’s provision, do you?” Satan’s eyes widened. “I mean, look where we are: his very temple!” He indicated Jesus energetically. “And look who you are! You’re the Son of God!” He put his hands on his hips. “You are so sure God will provide for you and watch over you.” The devil pointed to the valley below. “Then prove it.”



2nd Millennium BC

“We’re going to die out here!”

Rephidim was not exactly a reservoir of water, and the people knew it. Now the elders pleaded with Moses for their lives, scraping at his feet and clenching their fists.

“Stop this,” Moses said sharply. “The Lord will provide. Look at the manna.”

Even now, white flakes were falling from the sky gently, coating an entire race with nourishment for the day's journey.

“But water!”

“Don't worry. Don't be afraid.”

“We'll die of thirst!”

Moses sighed. “Why? Why do you quarrel with me?” He threw up his hands. “Why do you put the Lord to the test?”

One of them shook his head. “I should be asking you why,” he began, getting to his feet. “Why you led us out here.” He shoved his finger in Moses' face. “So that we can die? So that our children can die? So that our livestock can die?” He spun to the people. “So that we can all die of thirst!”

Protests rippled through the crowd. Moses had betrayed them! He'd failed to provide for them! His God had let them down! If they'd just stayed in Egypt, they would have plenty to drink now.

Moses retreated behind a rock. The elders raised their fists and shouted, chanting, “Water! Water! Is the Lord among us or not?”

“God,” he whispered, “What do I do? These people are about ready to stone me!”

The crowd took up the chant. One of the elders went up by the rock and yelled, “Come on, Moses! Does your God care for us or not?”

Moses closed his eyes. “Thank you, Lord,” he said, leaning on his staff. “Now give me the strength to obey you.” He stepped out from behind the rock and indicated the elders. “Come with me.”

The elders stopped chanting, exchanging victorious glances. Now they would see. That God of Moses would prove he cared for them. He would show his power.

That, or they would die of thirst.

Moses walked ahead of them, marking each step with his staff. Would they never learn?

An enormous boulder loomed before them: The Rock of Horeb. Barren and hard as they came. Flat, unbreakable.

Perfect for displaying the power of God.

Moses stood next to the rock and cleared his throat. “Watch and see,” he declared, “the Lord your God always provides.”

The elders scoffed. What was he talking about? There was no water here. The man must be hallucinating.

But what the elders did not see was the other man standing by the rock. The Lord stood with tears in his eyes, watching them. *Why?* His voice went unheard. *Why don't you trust me?*

Moses bit his lip. *God, I trust you. I trust you enough to carry out even this command.*

But why don't they? The Lord held his palm out. *Don't they know how much I love them? Didn't I prove it when I brought them up out of Egypt? A tear flowed down his cheek. I feed them with manna every day! I care for them more than they care for themselves!* He stretched out both hands, pleading. *Israel, why don't you trust me?*

Moses raised his staff to carry out the Lord's command. The elders watched with bated breath, waiting for proof that God really cared for them.

The staff struck the rock, bouncing off. No wooden staff could ever penetrate such stone—

Slowly, cracks formed in the surface where the staff had struck. Jagged valleys penetrated the rock like lightning in a stormy sky. Stone crumbled and disintegrated from the impact point, tumbling to the dirt.

And then, with a thunderous roar, came water.

A flood of it—too much for the men to drink. Pure and clean, it became a rushing torrent, fleeing the broken rock and emptying into a gorge.

The elders were speechless. How could this be?

Slowly but steadily, Moses lowered his staff, as drained as the rock beside him. He sighed. “Now do you believe?”



The Present

Jesus shook his head. “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Satan snarled—then they were off again, beyond city, desert, river and plain. Clouds began to clear as they ascended, and specks of green became trees as the face of their destination approached. A mountainside loomed before them.

Chill winds snapped at them as they rose—and they flew over springs and carpets of flowers. Snow flurried around them, stinging Jesus’s cheeks as they shot over the peak.

On the snow they descended. It crunched beneath their feet as they landed. A vast panorama lay before them.

“Welcome,” Satan said, “to my kingdom.”

Jesus turned to find his tormentor—the prince of this world—clothed in flowing robes, a golden scepter caressed in one hand.

“We should be honest,” the devil said, tilting his head. “The road you are about to walk will be unimaginably difficult the whole way.” He leaned in, lips curling back. “And I will oppose you at every turn.” He paced to Jesus’ other side. “You will be flogged, beaten, mocked, tempted in every way. You will sweat blood and tears. You will be tortured,” he whispered, enunciating each syllable, “and bear every piece of hatred your people have ever felt on your shoulders.”

Jesus swallowed.

“You will know pain,” Satan breathed, “and I will make you suffer until you beg for another path.” He held his fist before Jesus. “Nails will pierce your skin, those you love most will reject and betray you!” The fist shook with rage. “And I will be there for every blow.”

Jesus inhaled deeply, staring ahead.

“I will see to it myself that you suffer the most excruciating death imaginable.” He smiled wickedly. “I will destroy you.”

Then the prince shrugged. “So why bother? Ah yes,” he snickered, “your Father has promised you something, hasn’t he?” He rolled his eyes. “Dominion over all the kingdoms of the world. Set under your feet.”

Jesus gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Satan shook his head. “Ah, but I already have all the kingdoms of the world. They were given to me by your Father.” Now the devil indicated Jesus, eyes gleaming. “And I can give them to anyone I want to. So I can give you a shortcut—a much easier way.” He stretched his scepter toward the panorama. As Jesus looked, a whirl of images played across it.

Legions of Roman soldiers marching in perfect unison, called to a distant battle.

Egyptian horses galloping across a plain, pulling chariots and armored drivers.

Showers of arrows from Macedonian archers across a darkened field.

A vast empire of aqueducts and roads running across the world. Caravans with delicacies and spices, perfumes and dyes.

Harems and slave women dancing for an emperor. Rich feasts and extravagant baths, servants standing by for the next command.

Temples with ancient altars and incense burning to an unknown god. Enormous statues of gold and silver. Columns of granite.

The kingdoms of the world.

“Everything anyone could ever want,” the devil said, grinning. “And it’s all yours.”

Jesus stood silently in the wind, cloak flapping. The montage continued, but he looked toward heaven.

“I can give you all of this,” Satan offered, “all their authority and splendor. Yours.” He leaned in close as if whispering a secret. “No sacrifice needed. You won’t have to suffer one bit. You can have it *all* right now without the pain and torment.”

Jesus closed his eyes.

“The catch, well—” Satan chuckled, tapping his palm with the scepter, “it’s not really a catch. It’s nothing, really.”

The tempter strolled over to Jesus’s other side, putting a hand on his shoulder. With his other hand he pointed the scepter at Jesus’s heart. “All you have to do,” he said, moving the scepter to himself, “is bow down and worship me.”

Satan smiled and stepped back. He spread his arms wide. “Well?” he asked, watching the Son of God. “What do you say? You’d have to be a *fool* to choose the other road.”

Faintly, as a whisper in Jesus’ mind, Isaiah’s voice carried over the centuries:

I the Lord have called you in righteousness;

I will take hold of your hand.

I will keep you and will make you

To be a covenant for the people

And a light for the Gentiles,

To open eyes that are blind,

To free captives from prison

And to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

“Away from me, Satan!” Jesus shouted, waving a hand. “For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

Satan’s scepter cracked. The prince of darkness stared at Jesus, incredulous. “You—” he swallowed suddenly, then bared his teeth. “Very well.” He turned with a flourish of his robe, darkness shrouding him. “You have won.” His form vanished, but a faint whisper penetrated the wind. “For now.”

Instantly Jesus was back in the desert. He looked around slowly—the sun forced him to squint—and spotted water flask on the rock. He stepped toward it, but his knees collapsed. With a groan, Jesus fell to the ground.

Sand rose by his face. Two pairs of sandaled feet stood beside him. He rolled onto his back, looking up to see his rescuers.

Two men stood dressed in white linen. They stooped and, carefully lifting Jesus in their arms, walked him to a nearby rock. He lay face up on the stone, eyes half-closed.

“Eat,” one of them said, procuring a loaf of bread from thin air.

The Lamb of God stared at it. The bread glowed white in the sun, and he took it with a trembling hand. Then he tried to sit up, and the angels pulled his arms until he was upright. Calmly he broke the bread.

“Thank you, Father,” he whispered, raising a piece to his mouth. He took a bite, chewed, took another bite—and his strength began to return. “You have provided, as always.”

A few feet away from him lay a stone, untouched, unmoved.