

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expository-times\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php)

pdfs are named: [Volume]\_[Issue]\_[1<sup>st</sup> page of article].pdf

## The Temptation of Christ.

BY THE REV. ALFRED E. GARVIE, B.A., B.D., MONTROSE.

### I.

ALTHOUGH the temptation of Christ is one of the Christian facts into which Christian thought with a mistaken awe does not care to search earnestly, yet it is a fact which offers us many questions, the answers to which help us greatly to understand the being and the work of Christ. To some of these questions answers will, in what follows, be attempted.

I. The first of the questions which meet us is the value and the source of the records. Is Mark's brief report to be preferred to the longer accounts of Matthew and Luke? If the longer accounts are accepted, are we to follow Matthew's order of the temptations, or Luke's? Whichever of the records we may prefer, we must further ask ourselves, Whence and how did the evangelists get their reports?

1. Is Mark to be preferred to Matthew and Luke, or are the longer to be chosen rather than the brief account? On this question opinions are divided. Holtzmann maintains Mark's originality, while Keim as emphatically asserts his dependence. The former declares that 'the truly historical situation can be detected only in Mark i. 12, 13, where no pictorial representation has yet taken place, and where the sole purpose is to allow Him who was inwardly decided for the Messiahship to endure a first decisive test' (*Handkommentar*, i. p. 68). The latter says of the narrative of the temptation in Mark, that it 'is but the barren, and in itself obscure and un-serviceable outline of the dramatic narrative of Luke, only somewhat strengthened by the addition of the wild beasts, an addition which again is itself obscure' (*Jesus of Nazara*, English translation, i. p. 135). This difference of estimate results from opposed solutions of the Synoptic problem, into which it is impossible now to enter; only a few words can be given to dealing with this narrower question. It must be acknowledged that it is not easy to understand how or why Mark chose to give so general an account of this event, if the detailed reports of the temptation were current in apostolic circles. His Gospel is

marked by vivid, graphic description, to which this record is an exception. Assuming the traditional account of the origin of his Gospel as representing the preaching of Peter, it seems very unlikely that Peter would be ignorant of the detailed report, and knowing it, would be content to communicate to others this bare outline. But, on the other hand, it is an assumption which destroys the credibility of the other evangelists as historians, that they can have been capable of so free and daring an expansion of their traditional material as must have taken place, if Mark's is regarded as the original report. Even if this expansion be carried back to their literary sources, the same doubt of the trustworthiness of the story told in the Gospels must assert itself. It is further to be noted that the explanation usually given of the literary composition of the longer records is artificial and arbitrary, and assumes an ingenuity and a subtlety of thought in the writers that do not appear at all probable. Lastly, here there seems to be no reason why the shorter account should be preserved by tradition. It is too indefinite and obscure to serve any didactic purpose, whereas the longer reports do offer lessons interesting and important for Christian faith. It must be frankly acknowledged that, whatever view we take, there remain questions unanswered; but it seems to me that there is less difficulty in choosing the longer records rather than the brief account.

2. But as soon as we turn to these longer records, another question meets us. Are we to prefer Matthew's or Luke's order of the temptations? Matthew's order is usually taken to be right. It is generally argued that Matthew's Gospel is nearer the original sources than Luke's, even if Farrar's statement, that 'as an actual apostle he is more likely to have heard the narrative from the lips of Christ Himself,' cannot be unhesitatingly accepted. It is also generally agreed that Luke exercises much greater editorial liberty in dealing with his sources; and here reasons for the change of order can be suggested. Holtzmann suggests that the answer of Jesus in

the second temptation (according to Matthew's order), 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God,' appeared to Luke a fitting close to the temptations, as it appeared to forbid any further attempts on the part of the tempter; and that 'geographical reflexions may have co-operated in commending the change in the order of scenes'—first, the desert, then the mountain, and, lastly, the city. Farrar says that Luke 'adopts a different order of the temptations, perhaps because he thought that the temptation to spiritual pride was keener and subtler than that to temporal ambition; perhaps, too, because he believed that the ministering angels (whom, however, he does not mention) only appeared to save Christ from the pinnacle of the temple' (Farrar's *Luke*, p. 144). Although the reasons for the change suggested may not all equally commend themselves to one's judgment, yet there is a strong presumption in favour of Matthew's order of events.

3. Having preferred Matthew's and Luke's longer records to Mark's brief account, and having decided in favour of the order of temptations given by Matthew, we now reach the third stage in our inquiry. Whence did the evangelists get their reports? Two answers present themselves for our choice. The narratives are literary compositions of the evangelists themselves, or of their literary sources, under the guidance of theological considerations, Old Testament analogies, and actual occurrences in the life of Jesus; or the account of the temptations was communicated to His followers by Jesus Himself.

(a) The first view has already been touched on in answering the first question regarding the originality or dependence of Mark; but it needs to be more fully treated now, although we have hitherto gone on the assumption that what we

have before us in the narratives is not fiction, but history. Holtzmann's account of the formation of these narratives may be taken fairly as one of the best of these attempts. The starting-point of the formation is the theological assumption that Jesus, who cast out demons, must Himself in personal conflict have overcome the devil, and maintained His Messiahship against all assaults and suggestions of the tempter. The history of Israel, God's 'first-born son' in the wilderness, suggested the forms taken by the temptations. Israel, when hungering, murmured against God in unbelief; demanded a display of the divine power; and fell before the temptation to idolatry and apostasy. The true Son of God must be shown victorious over the same temptations as overcame the people. The passages quoted by Jesus from Deuteronomy indicate the connexion of the evangelical narrative and the Old Testament history. But the events of Jesus' ministry also helped to give shape to the story of the temptations. He would not feed the crowds again, when they came to Him after the feeding of the five thousand; He would not give a sign from Heaven to prove His claims; He would not set up an earthly kingdom, although urged thereto by the wishes of His followers, as well as the hopes of the people. This account is ingenious and subtle; but is such an artificial formation of the narratives more probable or more credible than the assumption that Jesus was Himself thus tempted? What follows will, I trust, show that we are not forced to accept any such literary composition on the part of the evangelists.

(b) If we assume that Jesus was thus tempted, it is clear, that as there were no eye-witnesses in the wilderness, we must owe the reports of the evangelists to Jesus Himself.