

Review Article

The Temptation of Jesus in the Early Church

by Jeffrey B. Gibson

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The book is a revised version of an Oxford DPhil. dissertation (two of the key chapters of which have appeared in earlier forms in *JSNT*). Its central thesis is that there was in the early church a substantially unified view of the nature and content of the temptations of Jesus, even to the extent that secondarily created materials continue to reflect the same understanding of the specific temptations faced by Jesus. Curiously, there does not appear to be at any point of the book a clear delineation of the content to be claimed for this unified view, but what the author seems to have in mind is something like this: Jesus was tempted to gain his messianic destiny by forceful imposition of his rule and destruction of Israel's enemies, but he resisted this temptation in favour of God's call to a Sonship which mirrored his (God's) own compassion, and involved serving and suffering for Israel and all humanity.

The introduction argues briefly that there was a widespread recognition in 'the early church that the life of Jesus was primarily a life under "temptation"' (p. 18). (The case is made by bundling together all NT instances of the *peiraz-* word group. This procedure is not justified here, but will be partly addressed in the text-based explorations to follow.) The introduction moves on to map out what would constitute a full justification of the thesis of the work and then identifies a more modest project which, it is claimed, should take us a good way towards the goal and which is a more realistic project for a single monograph. The study will explore what are identified as 'literarily independent and, from a source-critical point of view, the oldest and most original' (p. 21) of the relevant gospel traditions (Mark 1:9-13; 8:1-13, 27-33; 10:1-12; 12:13-17; 14:32-44; Luke 22:28; John 7:53-8:11; and the Q materials reflected in Luke 4:1-13; 11:16, 29; 10:25-26). Secondary literary adaptations of these earliest traditions fall outside the scope of the study. The scale of attention to the identified materials is not at all uniform: the wilderness temptation materials and the demand for a sign materials have three chapters devoted to each and there is a chapter each on Mark 8:27-33; 10:1-12; 12:13-17; 14:32-44; while the remaining materials are addressed in passing or not at all.

An exploration of the Markan temptation narrative provides the foundation stone from which Gibson builds. He insists that the Q and Mark versions are quite independent of one another. He argues that the pre-Markan traditional unit embraced 1:9-13; that Mark has not modified the tradition; and that despite the brevity of the account, a

quite precise understanding of the nature of the temptation envisaged can be gleaned, especially by identifying the implications of the baptismal commissioning of Jesus for the nature of the mission entrusted to him. Jesus' task is 'to attain and exercise God's sovereignty over the world by serving, and giving one's life for, rather than taking the lives of, Israel's enemies' (p. 82). The temptation which Jesus faced was to pursue the realisation of the sovereignty of God over Israel in a less costly manner. Gibson gains clarity of detail for his reading by setting Mark 1:9-13 in its larger Markan setting. The pre-Markan sense is judged to be identical because Mark is considered not to have intervened editorially.

Gibson's linking of the baptismal account with the temptation account for purposes of interpreting the latter is quite effective. He is, however, too optimistic about how much precision about the nature of Jesus' temptation can be drawn out of the (correct) recognition that the way of temptation will contrast with the way of obedient sonship to which Jesus is called in the baptismal narrative. The identification between the Markan and pre-Markan senses is made much too quickly and in my view will only be considered successful by readers who are convinced of an allusion in v. 11 to the sacrifice of Isaac (and at that an allusion which can be discerned without the help of the larger Markan context). Outside the Markan context, only the fact that temptation follows commissioning remains to suggest that the path of obedience is in some way costly and demanding, but this does remain and Gibson might have made something of it.

The Q temptation narrative is next examined. The form is that of a test of faithfulness. The narrative was from its inception a single unified construction. None of the traditional understandings of the temptations is deemed satisfactory: Jesus is not proving to himself his own sonship; nor is he proving it to others; nor are we dealing with the devil's attempt to get Jesus to choose a false way of being the Son of God at a time before Jesus has clarified for himself the nature of the ministry entailed in his own sonship. Rather the identification of Jesus as Son of God carried with it an understanding of sonship as imitation of the divine Father: the Son is called to mirror the 'all-encompassing, indiscriminate, and limitless mercy and love of God' and so will practice 'forgiveness of all injury, non-retaliation, willing endurance of ridicule and suffering, uncomplaining submission to persecution, and above all, love of one's enemies' (p. 109).

Gibson offers good criticism of some of the standard views, but he by no means covers them all with his three categories, and he somewhat misleadingly slants the third category to move it further away from the broad shape of his own view than it often actually is in the literature. He assumes without argumentation that the three temptations should have a single thrust. He should have considered the possibility that they form a coordinated set of related but different temptations. In the end he assumes without discussion a large gospel context to gain the precision he seeks for Jesus' understanding of the role of the Son of God. This is

partly, but only partly, justifiable in a Q context, but leaves the question unaddressed as to whether the tradition pre-existed Q and, if it did, how it should be understood in some pre-Q state. In the end Gibson's understanding of the temptations is determined by what he takes to be the Q sense of 'Son of God' and not by the specific features of the temptation narrative.

Gibson now turns his attention to the demand-for-a sign materials. He argues at length and with some persuasiveness for a most original form which has the exception clause. Mark has developed his form from this original, but has it, not directly from Q, but along an independent line of transmission. Gibson then addresses the question of the Markan understanding of the demand for a sign. Making use of quite a lot of deft footwork, he argues that the sign demanded, if granted, 'would be nothing less than to advocate, initiate and engage in triumphalism' (p. 194).

The argumentation has a number of weaknesses, not all of which can be addressed here. Gibson treats the issue between Jesus and the Pharisees (in the whole gospel) in a much too narrowly focussed way: Jesus insists that 'there is now to be an end to the institutions, rituals and ordinances by which Israel pretends to hold a position of power and privilege in God's purposes' (p. 168). On the basis of the links of *apo tou ouranou* in the LXX and other sources, Gibson claims that something which is *apo tou ouranou* will necessarily be 'a phenomenon which is instrumental in bringing about divine wrath against Israel's enemies and/or salvation to the people of God' (p. 178). But this is to claim too much and in part confuses the semantic contribution of the phrase with the semantic value of that with which it is regularly found. Gibson offers an attractive case which others may or may not find convincing for taking the 'signs and wonders' of Mark 13:22 as directed towards the realisation of the Israel's national identity through 'violence, conquest and war' (p. 183). But when he almost immediately concludes that this understanding should be allowed to determine the meaning of 'sign' in 8:12, there is little reason for coming with him.

The sense of 'the "sign" demand temptation according to Q' is now explored. It is a curiously ironic view of the material which emerges. Gibson insists that the sign which Jesus' compatriots demand of him in order to believe 'God wishes his emissaries . . . to cease hoping for divine vengeance . . . and to extend the gift of salvation to those who do not deserve it' would need to consist of nothing less than the beginning of 'the process of judgment and punishment which . . . [Jesus] repudiates' (p. 201).

Since there is no sign that Gibson thinks that the editor of Q is engaging in some form of intentional irony, the sheer logical inconsistency should have caused Gibson to rethink his case. Among other weaknesses in the argumentation here is the need to take the fifth occurrence of 'sign' in quite a different sense to all the previous uses in the set.

Attention then moves to 'Jesus' temptation at Caesarea Philippi'. Gibson argues that Mark's source here treated Peter's confession as what constitutes his siding with Satan (the view is similar to that of Dinkler who is a major influence here). However, instead of seeking to identify what the content of the Satanic suggestion might be in this source form, Gibson moves immediately to an exposition of the temptation in the Markan text. Though one might quibble with certain details and emphases, the case for a clash between expectations of a servant messiah and of a triumphalist messiah is well laid out. But here Gibson is, for the most part, reflecting the consensus of scholarship rather than offering anything new.

Jesus' Gethsemane temptation is next quarried. Mark is judged the single source for Matthew and Luke, and Mark is deemed to have built the narrative up out of no more than two isolated fragments of tradition: the prayer of 14:36 and the saying of v. 38 (since Gibson believes John to be independent of the Synoptics, would attention to John 12:27 have broadened this traditional base?). But as in the previous chapter it is the Markan sense which is pursued and not the original sense of the source fragments. Gibson finds the core of the temptation in the tension between Jesus' conviction that it is God's will that he suffer and the realisation that his suffering will entail 'the dissolution of the small band of followers whose response . . . was in the end the only tangible result of his entire public ministry' (p. 250). 'How can I obey God, and trust in him, when he seems to be willing to jeopardize his own purpose?' (p. 252). The alternative to which Gibson sees Jesus as drawn is, not surprisingly, a vision of the messianic task as involving 'violence and domination . . . and envisag[ing] the punishment and destruction . . . of those not of Israel' (p. 253). In part, Gibson uses his exploration of the Gethsemane scene to support his view that at Caesarea Philippi Jesus was genuinely tempted. It is presumably for this reason that at the end of the present chapter he comes back to the Caesarea Philippi episode and claims, merely by appeal to Dinkler, that, so far as the temptation involved is concerned, the Markan sense for the Caesarea Philippi materials is not substantially different to that of the tradition before him.

While more is needed, Gibson has made a creative contribution here with his suggestion about Jesus' concern about the scattering of his followers. But the choice of the alternative, to which Gibson has Jesus immediately consider turning, exhibits a weakness which mars Gibson's work throughout: he works with a far too rigid typology of messianic options. Appeal to Dinkler is an inadequate basis for confidence that the pre-Markan sense of the Caesarea Philippi materials will be identical to the Markan.

Gibson also sees the questioning of Jesus about divorce in Mark 10:1-12 as involving temptation for Jesus. Mark is considered to be Matthew's sole source and Mark is considered to have been largely responsible for the pericope, making use of a the free floating dominical saying included in v. 9 (one wonders what Gibson thinks this independ-

ent saying could possibly have meant?). Gibson offers an interesting argument in favour of the reading in v. 12 in D Θ Φ 28 543 *et al.* which has the wife departing from her husband rather than divorcing him. According to Gibson, Jesus is being challenged to declare openly his (known) opposition to divorce. The temptation involved for Jesus comes from the fact that to declare himself openly in this way would expose him on the one side to the same threat of death to which John has succumbed after his criticism of Antipas' marriage, and on the other side to the accusation of leading Israel astray from the law of Moses. (Though Gibson does not make this distinction, his argument fits best with understanding *peirazontes* in connection with the experience of Jesus and not the intention of the Pharisees. It is probably in part a failure to reflect on this distinction which stands behind the odd suggestion, which runs in the opposite direction to the main understanding Gibson offers, that an open declaration from Jesus could be used in support of a view which consigned sinners to judgment—Gibson is anticipating here a perspective which is to emerge in the following chapter.)

Gibson's link between John on marriage and Jesus on marriage is rather strained (it is a long way from Jesus teaching in general terms a particular view of marriage to John's public criticism of Antipas' marriage), and it is probably fanciful to think that the suggestion that people should in *pursuit of a higher righteousness* refrain from making use of the divorce provision of the Mosaic law was likely to lead to accusations of 'leading Israel astray' from the law.

The final text to be explored is that concerning taxes to Caesar. Mark is the source for the other synoptic versions. Gibson argues for much more Markan intervention in the pericope than most have found. Mark's source would have been quite like the form of this tradition found in *Gospel of Thomas*, Logion 100: a minimal narrative setting and the Dominical pronouncement. Mark presents those who approach Jesus, Gibson insists, as being well aware of his views on the Imperial tax levy (repugnance). According to Gibson, 'Why do you tempt me?' is not intended to indicate that the intention of Jesus' interlocutors was to tempt, but rather that Jesus himself experienced the situation in which the approach placed him as a temptation to abandon his loyalty to God. As might be expected, Gibson draws attention to the threat to Jesus' life that might attend a public repudiation of the tax. And he also draws attention to the offensive nature of this tax in Jewish eyes: to pay it, he claims, was tantamount to blasphemy. Gibson also insists that an open advocacy of refusing to pay the tax would 'render the one making it an advocate both of a war of liberation with Rome and of the demise of those who had no loyalty to the Law of God' (p. 311). Given this mix, it is not clear what Gibson thinks Jesus was tempted to do (Gibson never clearly addresses the question of what the Markan answer is intended to mean). The chapter ends with a fairly modest attempt to claim that the pre-Markan original had the same basic thrust as the developed Markan form (here the answer of Jesus is labelled as equivocal, and this is

probably how Gibson would take Jesus' answer in the Markan form as well.)

Gibson's appeal to *Thomas* will not be found convincing by all. The evidence offered for Jesus' hostility to the payment of taxes to Caesar cannot bear all the weight placed upon it. Gibson's way of taking 'Why do you tempt me?' seems quite unnatural in the immediate Markan context. Gibson appeals to the semantic range of *peirazò* in pre-second-century CE and offers a large list of references in an appendix, but because the texts are neither quoted nor discussed the reader is offered nothing more than his personal judgment. The claim that to pay the tax was tantamount to blasphemy must be considered an idealistic rather than a realistic view of how most first century Jews accommodated themselves to their life situation. The jump from opposition to the tax to a war of liberation and the annihilation of the lawless is another instance of the use of over-rigid typologies. On the analysis offered by Gibson, each of Jesus' options would seem to have within them a mixture of what accords with God's purpose for Jesus and what flies in the face of them. This seems more like a dilemma than a temptation! And if there is a temptation to save his life, Gibson's Jesus seems to have given in to the temptation. This is one of Gibson's least successful explorations.

Gibson's book is clearly written, methodologically coherent and well informed. At many points it is well argued and it has succeeded in casting fresh light of some of the NT passages explored. It will, however, be clear from the above that the present reviewer does not believe that Gibson's study succeeds in establishing its thesis. This is a pity since I consider that some form of the basic thesis is probably sustainable: Gibson has sought to defend a form of the thesis which is too tightly formulated, but I suspect that he is correct in his view that there was broad based agreement in the early church about the nature of the path from which Jesus was tempted in various ways to turn aside; I suggest, however, that the unity is to be looked for primarily in the vision of that messianic destiny from which Jesus was tempted to depart, rather than, as Gibson would have it, in agreement about that to which Jesus was tempted to turn.

What may we retrieve from Gibson's thesis? Gibson is right to think that the Markan temptation was to depart from a calling of costly service. (The place of Israel's enemies in this is, however, at best implicit.) For the Markan source we can say nothing more precise than that the place of temptation following baptismal commissioning probably implies a costly or demanding role. As Gibson claims, the Q temptations do involve a departure from a call to be a specific kind of Son of God: this is a call not to a self-serving but to a potentially self-sacrificing role. (Gibson gains greater precision by investing rather too much of a wider Q understanding of the role of the Son into the temptation narrative itself.) Greater attention to the specific features of the temptations would confirm that the call not to a self-serving but to a potentially self-sacrificing role would also be required for a pre-Q

understanding of this material. The Caesarea Philippi materials yield a clash between expectations of a servant messiah and of a triumphalist messiah (Gibson is prone to excessive precision as to the content to be given to this triumphalism). (Gibson should probably not be followed in his delineation of the pre-Markan form of the tradition: more work needs to be done here.) The Gethsemane crisis clearly involves a temptation to seek a less costly path, but it remains much less clear than Gibson suggests what this less costly alternative might be. (The demand for a sign materials, the divorce materials and those concerning taxes to Caesar should probably be dropped from the discussion altogether.) Rather less remains than one might have hoped for, but there is a common denominator here: that from which Jesus was tempted to depart was a vision of his destiny which involved not self-service, but costly service of others.¹

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¹ Beyond minor typographical errors and missing cross reference numbers, the main errors noticed are as follows. P. 37 l. 22: 'not' should read 'not only'; p. 43 l. 19: *hai ekeinai hemera* is not NT Greek; p. 66 n. 93: the list of texts in support of *meta* signifying mastery over fails to distinguish texts in which the proposed 'master' is in the subject of the verb from those in which the 'master' is governed by the *meta*; p. 79 l. 25: for 'concessive' read 'consecutive'; p. 80 n. 143 the lexicon (BAGD) has been confused with the grammar (BDF); p. 98 ll. 8-10: though part of the argument seems to assume that it does, 'since' does not express 'concession'; p. 272 ll. 25-28: the reading attributed to 'other (primarily Byzantine) witnesses' seems to represent a conflation of readings, based, in part, on a misreading of the evidence and is not, so far as I can tell, the actual reading of any single text.

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