



The Devil in the Wilderness: Evaluating Christadelphian exegesis of the temptation narratives

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1. Introduction

One of the most distinctive doctrines of the Christadelphian community is their understanding of the devil and Satan – that is, their satanology. While the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith (the most widely used Christadelphian confessional document) does not spell out Christadelphian satanology, it does include “that the devil is a supernatural being” among its doctrines to be rejected.¹ As the Statement of Faith has historically been used as a test of fellowship, those who believe that the devil is a supernatural being are officially unable to become members of a Christadelphian ecclesia or participate in a Christadelphian breaking of bread service.

Christadelphian satanology can be summarised succinctly thus: “So then the devil and Satan are personifications of sin; that is, they are words used to represent sin.”² A more nuanced definition is given to explain certain passages in which personified sin is clearly not the referent (such as [Mark 8:33](#), [1 Peter 5:8](#) and [Revelation 2:10](#)). Thus, “the personification is sometimes in a single individual” and “Sometimes a body of people, a government for example, could be referred to as the devil or Satan”.³

This doctrinal stance isolates Christadelphians from the overwhelming majority of Christian thinkers and communities down through history. The view that the devil and Satan are personifications of sin was virtually unheard of prior to the Enlightenment. Christadelphian apologist Jonathan Burke was able to find only two writers prior to the 18th century who “rejected the concept of Satan or the Devil as a literal supernatural agent of evil”: Thomas Hobbes (1651) and Balthasar Bekker (1691).⁴ It appears that neither of these writers articulated the idea that the biblical devil and Satan is a personification of sin. For Hobbes, “by Satan is meant any Earthly Enemy of the Church.”⁵ Bekker “did not deny the existence of the devil *per se*, but for all practical purposes by denying his influence on the world.”⁶ Thus evidence for the Christadelphian view of the devil is scant if not non-existent prior to the 18th century.

Among the most detailed New Testament texts about the devil are the narrative accounts of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness recorded by Mark, Matthew and Luke. A careful analysis of these passages will help us to establish whether the Christadelphian interpretations of these texts are sound.

2. A History of Christadelphian Exegesis of the Temptation Narratives

There have been two prevalent interpretations of ‘the devil’ (Greek: *ho diabolos*) in the wilderness temptation narratives in Christadelphian history. For the first few decades of the movement the preferred interpretation was that Jesus was tempted by an unknown external being. This view was eventually superseded by a wholly figurative interpretation which was more typical of the Christadelphian approach to ‘devil’ and ‘Satan’ passages.

¹ Doctrines to be Rejected. <http://www.christadelphia.org/reject.htm>

² Pearce 1986: 13.

³ Pearce 1986: 13.

⁴ Burke 2007: 6.

⁵ Tuck 1996: p. 314.

⁶ Gerstner 1991: 133.

a. The ‘unknown external tempter’ view

The pioneer writers of the Christadelphian movement, Dr. John Thomas and Robert Roberts, both held that Christ was tempted by an external, personal being. Thomas distinguished ‘the devil’ in the temptation narrative from ‘Satan’ or ‘the tempter’. The former he equated with “sin”⁷ and “the mind of the flesh”.⁸ The latter he understood to refer to an unknown external tempter: “Who he was does not appear.”⁹ He affirms, however, that “This individual, probably, was an angel”¹⁰ (an angel of light, not a fallen angel). He reconciles the link between ‘the tempter’ and ‘the devil’ thus:

“The visitor, though styled ‘devil,’ was not *diabolos* within, as in our case, but an excitant thereof; in ‘the likeness,’ or sin’s flesh; therefore his sayings are recorded as those of *diabolos*.”¹¹

Roberts was aware that the nature of Christ’s tempter was a “much disputed question” with some arguing for an internal tempter, some for an external tempter and some for both. For his part he held that it was probable that Christ’s temptation included an external tempter, and that “it certainly was not his flesh nature merely”. However, he concurred with Thomas that “Who the personal tempter was cannot be decided, because there is no testimony.”¹²

Thus the dominant interpretation of the wilderness temptations in the early years of the Christadelphian movement was that, while the fleshly nature of Christ contributed to his susceptibility to the temptations, they were instigated by an external tempter whose identity is not revealed.

b. The ‘personified internal tempter’ view

By the end of the 19th century, the view that Jesus’ temptations were entirely internal was being defended in print by leading Christadelphian writers such as Thomas Williams, editor of *The Christadelphian Advocate*. In his pamphlet *The Devil: His Origin and End*, which was also a chapter of his 1898 book *The World’s Redemption*, he wrote concerning the wilderness temptations:

“lust is the tempter...it will readily be seen that Christ’s temptation was necessarily a thing of the flesh, as all temptation is, and that there is no reason to seek further for an adequate cause”.¹³

From this point on, the view that ‘the tempter’ was a personification of Jesus’ internal desires came to dominate Christadelphian exegesis of the temptation narratives. In the past half century, this interpretation has been defended by Christadelphian writers such as Peter

⁷ Thomas 1852: 202.

⁸ Thomas 1867: 77.

⁹ Thomas 1867: 78.

¹⁰ Thomas 1852: 202.

¹¹ Thomas 1852: 202.

¹² Roberts 1880: No. 51.

¹³ Williams 1892.

Watkins,¹⁴ Fred Pearce,¹⁵ Don Harrison,¹⁶ Robert Miller,¹⁷ Duncan Heaster,¹⁸ Jonathan Burke,¹⁹ John Pursell,²⁰ and Ken Clark.²¹

The ‘personified internal tempter’ view has become the Christadelphian consensus; however, the debate remains alive. This is evident from correspondence received by the Testimony Magazine in response to the article by Don Harrison. Two Christadelphian contributors, David Dudding and Castulo Martinez, both argued that Jesus was tempted by an external being, more specifically an angel.²² Alan Fowler also acknowledged “the question as to whether the tempter was a person or a personification of sin” and declined to offer a clear response.²³

Having surveyed Christadelphian views of the temptation narratives, we now turn our attention to a grammatical-historical analysis of the texts ([Mark 1:12-13](#); [Matthew 4:1-11](#); [Luke 4:1-13](#)). Our objective in doing so will be to evaluate the two interpretations upon which Christadelphians have depended over the course of their history. We will focus particular attention upon Burke’s exegesis because it is recent, is by far the most detailed, and it interacts with criticism of the Christadelphian position.

3. Mark’s Temptation Narrative

Many Christadelphian treatments of the temptation narratives neglect Mark’s account because of its brevity. Of the above Christadelphian writings on the temptations of Christ, only Burke’s discusses the Markan narrative in any depth.

Mark’s account of the wilderness temptations reads thus:

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." (Mark 1:12-13 NRSV)

When we take a literary-historical approach to Mark’s account it is apparent that it is very valuable to us. Burke agrees with this, but the significance he sees in it and the significant I see in it are very different. Burke points out that only Mark provides the detail that “he was with the wild beasts” and argues that this detail is “essential to an understanding of the entire temptation process.”²⁴ More specifically, he argues that “Mark is drawing a parallel between the bestial nature of the satan, and the bestial nature of the wild animals with whom Christ found himself”.²⁵

¹⁴ Watkins 1971: 10-13.

¹⁵ Pearce 1986: 14.

¹⁶ Harrison 2000: 2.

¹⁷ Miller 2005.

¹⁸ Heaster 2012.

¹⁹ Burke 2007: 171-194.

²⁰ Pursell 2009.

²¹ Clark 2011.

²² Testimony Magazine 2000: 381.

²³ Fowler 2004: p. 44.

²⁴ Burke 2007: 173.

²⁵ Burke 2007: 176.

This parallel is very tenuous, since Mark does not explicitly draw a connection between Satan and the wild animals. One might just as easily adduce a parallel (or more precisely, a contrast) between Satan and “the angels” who were ministering to Jesus. Indeed, John Thomas saw such a parallel, and this was one reason why he understood the tempter to be an angel.²⁶

Burke himself acknowledges that the alleged bestial parallel is insufficient to account for Mark’s inclusion of the detail about the wild beasts. He also sees this detail as “saying that Christ was isolated from others, and had to face his temptations alone, without human or angelic support.”²⁷ He further sees it as positioning the temptation account in the context of Messianic prophecies from the Old Testament, particularly [Psalm 91:13](#), which asserts how the Lord would protect the Messiah from dangerous creatures.²⁸

Other biblical scholars have argued that “Satan, the animals, and the angels point to early Jewish Adam traditions.”²⁹ As such, Mark is presenting an ‘Adam Christology’ in which Jesus exercised dominion over the animals prior to overcoming temptation just as Adam exercised dominion over the animals prior to succumbing to temptation ([Genesis 1:28](#); [2:19-20](#)).

In view of these other explanations for Mark’s inclusion of the ‘wild beasts’ detail, the claim that this detail provides the key to identifying Satan in this text is unconvincing.

Mark expected his readers to be able to identify *ho satanas*, (either a title, ‘the Satan’ or a proper name, ‘Satan’), even though he provided no details of the nature of the temptations. This is remarkable because it is widely agreed that Mark was writing to a predominantly Gentile audience (perhaps in Rome) two to four decades after the events he described. How can he use the term *satanas*, a transliterated Hebrew word, and expect his readers to know what he is talking about without any further explanation? It is probable that the term *ho satanas* was by this time well-established in the early church either as a proper name or as a technical term conveying a specific idea:

“The figure whom Mark designates as the perpetrator of Jesus’ Wilderness temptation, whether called Satan or one of a host of other names, was not an ‘unknown quantity’. On the contrary, in Mark’s time and in the thought world which Mark and his audience shared, Satan’s identity and the activities characteristic of him were both well-defined and widely known.”³⁰

This was not a reference to a generic, unknown adversary, as John Thomas and Robert Roberts alleged. Nor was it a literary device invented by Mark. Mark was drawing on earlier tradition.³¹ But what was the source of that tradition? Who, or what, was this well-defined, widely known

²⁶ Thomas 1852: 202.

²⁷ Burke 2007: 176.

²⁸ Burke 2007: 177-178.

²⁹ Dochhorn 2013: 101.

³⁰ Gibson 2004: 58. Gibson argues that *ho satanas* as used by Mark here is “a proper name, not a common noun, and denotes a particular being, a distinct personality”.

³¹ So Gibson writes, “Commentators are in little doubt that Mark’s story of Jesus’ Wilderness temptation does not originate with the evangelist but is derived from, and is largely dependent for both its form and substance on, an older pre-Markan tradition.” (Gibson 2004: 42).

entity referred to as *ho satanas* in the thought world of the early church? The Hebrew word *satan* always refers to personal beings in the Old Testament, and never to abstract entities ([Numbers 22:22](#), [22:32](#); [1 Samuel 29:4](#); [2 Samuel 19:22](#); [1 Kings 5:4](#); [11:14](#); [11:23](#); [11:25](#); [1 Chronicles 21:1](#); [Job 1:6-12](#); [2:1-7](#); [Psalm 109:6](#); [Zechariah 3:1-2](#)). Furthermore, in later Second Temple Judaism some streams of thought affirmed the existence of a specific personal being called Satan, while others wrote polemic against this idea.³² Since Mark's reference to Satan is straightforward and bears no hints of polemic, it is likely that Mark was referring to a specific personal being.

This is further confirmed when one considers Mark's other references to *ho satanas* ([Mark 3:22-27](#); [4:15](#); [8:33](#)). Given that this is a transliterated foreign word with the definite article, it is inconceivable that Mark uses it with various different meanings. Rather, Mark develops his own satanology which is an "important theme" within his Gospel.³³ In Mark 3:22-27, *ho satanas* unmistakably refers to a specific supernatural personal being who is the prince of demons and whose domain is being plundered by Jesus' exorcisms. In Mark 4:15, *ho satanas* is the referent of the birds which devoured the seed in the parable of the sower. Mark again considers the term *ho satanas* a sufficient identifier, but the description of "coming" and "taking away" the Word implies an external entity. Finally, in Mark 8:33 *satanas*³⁴ is a spirit who possesses Peter.³⁵

Thus, elsewhere in Mark *ho satanas* is a supernatural, external, spiritual being and this is clearly the tradition which lies behind *ho satanas* in Mark's temptation narrative.

4. Matthew and Luke's Temptation Narratives

Matthew and Luke provide more substantial accounts of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, which probably draw upon a common source. Some redaction has occurred, however, since the two Gospels differ in certain details as well as in the order of the three temptations. The two accounts read as follows:

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you,

³² See, for example, Bell 2007: 15-23.

³³ Dochhorn 2013: 104.

³⁴ It is impossible to determine whether *satanas* is definite or indefinite in Mark 8:33. The article does not occur, but would not occur with a noun in the vocative case even if it were definite (cf. Matthew 4:10).

³⁵ So Dochhorn writes, "A person 'is' the spirit which dwells in the person concerned...It seems probable that Mark 8:33 presupposes a pneumatology resp. Satanology of inspiration." (Dochhorn 2013: 99)

if you will fall down and worship me.” 10 Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” 11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. (Matthew 4:1-11 NRSV)

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3 The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” 4 Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” 5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” 8 Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” 9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ 11 and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” 12 Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:1-13 NRSV)

What follows will not be an exhaustive analysis of these two passages but will instead focus on certain details which are relevant to assessing the Christadelphian interpretations. In particular we will need to ask whether these details support the idea that this narrative is, in Burke’s words, “a representation of Christ’s inner struggle with his own temptations”³⁶ – temptations which were not prompted externally but “arose from within his own heart.”³⁷ And again, we must ask whether it is plausible that “The devil that tempted the Lord Jesus was his own human desires.”³⁸

Some preliminary observations are in order. It is widely agreed by scholars that the background and model for this temptation story is in the account of the temptation of Israel in the wilderness outlined in [Deuteronomy 6-8](#).³⁹ Thus these two Gospels portray Jesus typologically as the true Israel. Some scholars also see these temptation accounts as antitypical of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (and the two typological frameworks are not mutually exclusive).⁴⁰ Additionally, the form of this tradition “may be due to the influence of the wisdom tradition, in which a sage is tempted by his opponent(s), often a demonic figure.”⁴¹

Secondly, it must be conceded that Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13 appear to narrate a dialogue between two persons: Jesus and the tempter, *ho diabolos* (also addressed as *satanas* in Matthew). The default interpretation must therefore be that such a dialogue actually took place.

³⁶ Burke 2007: 171.

³⁷ Burke 2007: 173.

³⁸ Watkins 1971: 11.

³⁹ Gibson 2004: 85.

⁴⁰ Talbert 2002: 50.

⁴¹ Yamazaki-Ransom 2010: 88.

The burden of proof rests with the person who would claim that Matthew and Luke intend the reader to understand the accounts as something other than a dialogue.

Indeed, an important obstacle to the view that the exchanges between the devil and Jesus are “figurative representations of the internal struggle he was having with the temptation to sin”⁴² is that their genre is narrative. The Gospels introduce and describe the temptations in the same way as their many other biographical narratives about Jesus. There is no other example of a narrative about Jesus in the Gospels which the writers did not intend to be read literally. The temptation accounts do not in any way correspond to parables, which were told by Jesus and never explicitly include “Jesus” as a character.

a. The tempter comes and goes

The fact that the devil “left” Jesus at the end of the temptation narrative was one reason why Robert Roberts concluded that the tempter was external, since Jesus’ flesh nature did not leave him.⁴³

As Sir Anthony Buzzard pointed out in his critique of Christadelphian satanology, the language of the devil “coming” to him and “leaving” him is difficult to reconcile with an internal struggle, especially since angels are described as “coming” to him in the immediate context (Matthew 4:11). Buzzard asks, “On what principle of interpretation can we justify taking the words ‘came up to him’ in two totally different senses in the same paragraph?”⁴⁴ In his reply to Buzzard, Burke argues that the word ‘came’ is not being taken in two totally different senses:

“It is being understood in both places to be speaking of something which came to Christ. It is the word ‘satan’ which is being interpreted figuratively, not the word ‘came’.”⁴⁵

Later on in the same work, however, Burke contradicts himself by arguing that *proserchomai* (the Greek verb rendered ‘came’ in Matt. 4:3, 11) can be taken figuratively:

“Buzzard argues that the use of the word *proserchomai* in the Matthew account of Christ's temptation in the wilderness is proof that the source of Christ's temptation was an individual external to himself. He argues further that this Greek word can never be used figuratively, or refer to something within an individual. It was demonstrated to Buzzard that both of these claims are false.”⁴⁶

Burke then provides two references from classical Greek in which the verb is used of increasing pain and fulfilled expectation, respectively. It is obvious that Burke is defending a figurative interpretation of *proserchomai* in Matthew 4:3, which is indeed totally different to the literal interpretation of *proserchomai* he accepts in Matthew 4:11. Buzzard’s argument about the inconsistency of the Christadelphian hermeneutic stands.

⁴² Burke 2007: 37.

⁴³ Roberts 1880.

⁴⁴ Buzzard 2000.

⁴⁵ Burke 2007: 39.

⁴⁶ Burke 2007: 113.

Aside from Matthew 4:11, however, is it plausible to understand *proserchomai* figuratively in the expression, “The tempter came and said to him” in Matthew 4:3? From a purely lexical point of view, a figurative meaning does exist, but it is rare. The primary meaning of *proserchomai* is “to move towards”, most commonly of physical movement or of entry into the presence of a deity. However, when used of inanimate subjects, it can mean ‘come upon’ or ‘come over’.⁴⁷ This meaning is nowhere else attested in the New Testament, but does occur in the second-century work *The Shepherd of Hermas* 3.1.5: “a fit of shuddering **came upon** me, because I was alone.” Are we justified in adopting this rare figurative meaning in Matthew 4:3?

A reading of Matthew’s Gospel reveals that the construction “came and said to him” occurs frequently: a scribe came and said to him ([Matt. 8:19](#)), or the disciples came and said to him ([Matt. 13:10](#); [14:15](#); [15:12](#); [17:19](#)), or Peter came and said to him ([Matt. 18:21](#)), or the chief priests and elders came and said to him ([Matt. 21:23](#)), or the bystanders came and said to Peter ([Matt. 26:73](#)), or Jesus came and said to the disciples ([Matt. 28:18](#)). It is not plausible that Matthew expected his readers to read “came and said to him” figuratively in Matt. 4:3, without any explicit instructions to do so, when he used it on so many other occasions as an introductory formula to a dialogue.

Furthermore, *proserchomai* occurs in the participial mood in Matt. 4:3, and the participial form of *proserchomai* is “frequently used with verbs denoting an activity, to enliven the narrative.”⁴⁸ By my own count Matthew uses *proserchomai* in the participial mood at least 25 other times to this end ([8:19](#); [8:25](#); [9:20](#); [13:10](#); [13:27](#); [14:12](#); [15:12](#); [15:23](#); [16:1](#); [17:7](#); [17:19](#); [18:21](#); [19:16](#); [21:28](#); [21:30](#); [25:20](#); [25:22](#); [25:24](#); [26:49](#); [26:50](#); [26:73](#); [27:58](#); [28:2](#); [28:9](#); [28:18](#)).

In summary, it is grammatically *possible* to read Matt. 4:3 figuratively as in, “the tempter came over him”, but to do so we must assert that Matthew broke with his typical usage in favour of a very rare figurative construction, without giving any indication that he was doing so.

b. Was Jesus tempted atop a literal mountain?

One of the main exegetical arguments put forward by Christadelphians in support of their interpretation concerns the “very high mountain” referred to by Matthew in his account of the third temptation.

Christadelphians have observed that there exists no very high mountain from which all the kingdoms of the world can be seen. Thus Jesus didn’t really ascend a mountain; he imagined himself atop a mountain looking at the kingdoms of the world. This indicates that the whole account is not literal but figurative. Christadelphian resource *Wrested Scripture* makes this argument,⁴⁹ as have Peter Watkins⁵⁰ and Duncan Heaster.⁵¹ The same argument was made by Phipps, the only modern, non-Christadelphian biblical scholar (as far as I know) who has defended the ‘internal struggle’ interpretation in print.^{52 53} But is the argument convincing?

⁴⁷ Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000: 878.

⁴⁸ Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000: 878.

⁴⁹ Abel & Allfree 2011: <http://www.wrestedscriptures.com/b07satan/matthew4v1-11.html>

⁵⁰ Watkins 1971: 10.

⁵¹ Heaster 2012: 385.

⁵² Phipps 1993: 38.

Read in its historical context, it is likely that 'all the kingdoms of the world' refers only to the then-known world, i.e. the Roman Empire. However, even if we reduce the scope of this phrase to the limits of the Roman Empire, the premise still holds that there is no mountain from which the entire Roman Empire can be seen with the natural sense of sight. Yet this does not necessarily mean that the mountain is figurative. Let us consider two alternatives:

- The statement "showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" could be hyperbolic. That is, Jesus was literally looking out from the top of a high mountain in all directions but didn't literally see the entire Roman Empire.
- Jesus may have been taken up a literal mountain and then experienced a supernatural vision which enabled him to see all the kingdoms of the world.

Which of these possibilities is most plausible?

It may be observed that in at least two other texts ([Ezekiel 40:2](#) and [Revelation 21:10](#)), a prophet of God is taken up to a very high mountain to be shown places. In both cases the text states that this was a visionary experience and not a physical trip. Ezekiel says, "In visions of God he brought me to the land of Israel, and set me down on a very high mountain", and John says, "And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain." Furthermore, in both texts the place seen by the prophet did not literally exist in space-time (the future temple in Ezekiel's case, and new Jerusalem in John's case).

These texts provide a possible template for understanding the third temptation account (in Matthew's ordering) as a visionary experience. However, important differences should be noted: the temptation account does not explicitly describe the mountain trip as visionary, and the places shown to Jesus did literally exist in space-time. Besides this, it should be noted that both Ezekiel and John's mountain visions were initiated by external beings (God in Ezekiel, and an angel in Revelation). Thus we do not have a precedent for understanding the third temptation as something Jesus conjured up in his own mind (as the 'internal tempter' interpretation requires).

Besides this, even if we take the 'mountain' as part of a visionary experience, there is no justification for taking the whole temptation account figuratively. By way of comparison, other events involving mountains in Matthew are obviously literal: the sermon on the mount ([Matthew 5:1ff](#)), the transfiguration ([Matt. 17:1ff](#)) and the Great Commission ([Matt. 28:16-20](#)). The transfiguration is especially noteworthy since, like the temptations, it involved a visionary experience atop an unspecified "high mountain" but in which the mountain is obviously literal (cf. [Mark 9:1](#); [2 Peter 1:18](#)).

Furthermore, the reference to the devil taking Jesus up follows (or, in Luke, is followed by) a reference to the devil 'taking' Jesus to Jerusalem and 'placing' him on the pinnacle of the temple.

⁵³ Phipps has been heralded by some Christadelphians as having vindicated their view of the temptation narratives, but he makes for a rather strange bedfellow. Besides doubting the historicity of the temptation narrative, he interpreted Eve's dialogue with the serpent and Jacob's wrestling match with the angel in terms of Freudian psychology. In line with his stated goal of curing Christianity of the supernatural, he understood the empty tomb accounts and Paul's Damascus Road experience subjectively, devoid of any metaphysical reality. Finally, Phipps had a flair for the provocative, as shown by his books *Was Jesus Married?* (which he answered in the affirmative) and *The Sexuality of Jesus*. I do not think Phipps was a scholar with whom most Christadelphians would want to be associated.

This location must be taken literally, since it is very specific and the temptation itself involved throwing himself down from a great height, which is possible only if Jesus was physically located at a great height! Thus we have a precedent in the immediate context for Jesus being literally relocated by the devil for the purpose of temptation.

Additional light is shed on the temptation accounts when they are read against their literary-historical background. Scholars widely agree that [Deuteronomy 34](#) lies behind Matthew's and Luke's accounts.^{54 55} This text reads as follows:

"1 Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, 2 all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, 3 the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. 4 The LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” (Deut. 34:1-4 NRSV)

The similarities are obvious between this narrative (which itself likely draws on [Genesis 13:14-15](#)) and the temptation narratives. Indeed, the temptation accounts as a whole draw extensive typology from Deuteronomy, showing Jesus to be the true Israel. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness are typified by Israel's forty years in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-2 cp. [Deut. 8:2](#)). Jesus' three responses to the temptations all quote from Deuteronomy ([Deut. 8:3](#); [6:16](#); [6:13-14](#)).

In Deuteronomy 34 it is clear that Moses was shown the whole land by God from atop a literal mountain. However, commentators have pointed out that several of the places mentioned (such as the Mediterranean Sea, Dan and Zoar) cannot be seen from the mountain believed to be Mt. Nebo.^{56 57 58} While liberal scholars might take this as a geographical inaccuracy, some commentators have interpreted it as hyperbole.^{59 60} Others have understood it in terms of a "supernatural vision" which nonetheless involved Moses literally climbing the mountain.⁶¹

That the account was read in ancient times as a supernatural vision is apparent from the tendency of later Jewish writers to expand the scope of Moses' view to include the land of Egypt, or "all the regions from Egypt to the Euphrates".⁶² Moreover, the Jewish apocalyptic work 2 Baruch (probably written in the late first or early second century) likely draws on Deut. 34 when it depicts Baruch as instructed by God to go to the top of a mountain, "and there shall pass before you all the regions of that land, and the figure of the inhabited world" ([2 Baruch 76:3](#)).

Thus Deuteronomy 34 and its treatment in later Judaism supports the plausibility of understanding the third temptation to be a supernatural visionary experience atop a literal

⁵⁴ Pao & Schnabel 2007: 287.

⁵⁵ Yamazaki-Ransom 2010: 88.

⁵⁶ Lundbom 2013: 943-945.

⁵⁷ Walton, Matthews & Chavalas 2000: 208.

⁵⁸ Work 2009.

⁵⁹ Driver 1902: 419

⁶⁰ Smith 1918: 379.

⁶¹ Work 2009.

⁶² Yamazaki-Ransom 2010: 89.

mountain. The notion of a supernatural vision receives further support from Luke's temptation account, which omits any reference to a mountain and adds the phrase "in an instant." As Yamazaki-Ransom points out, this serves to emphasise the "supernatural character of the event".⁶³

In summary, the third temptation begins with a supernatural visionary experience in which Jesus is shown all the kingdoms of the world. Stein writes that this temptation is "visionary in nature" but that "It is unclear whether a specific mountain is meant or whether this is to be understood as part of the vision".⁶⁴ Whether Jesus was literally taken up a mountain is of no great importance to the account, since Matthew neglects to name the mountain and Luke omits it altogether. However, the key insight is that the impossibility of seeing all the kingdoms of the world with natural vision from atop a literal mountain in no way undermines the natural reading of Matthew 4 and Luke 4 as a dialogue and series of events which actually, objectively took place. As Stein writes:

"Were the temptations primarily psychological or visionary in nature? Were they entirely subjective? To understand the temptations in this manner would not make them any less real. Yet the general impression from reading the accounts is that they were objective and involved external events: a real place (the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem) and real, if symbolic, time (forty days and forty nights)...This argues against seeing the temptations as entirely subjective visions or experiences."⁶⁵

It is apparent that the "very high mountain", whether literal or figurative, does not provide any compelling reason to take the whole temptation narrative figuratively.

c. Was the devil's offer of the whole world plausible?

Having looked at the setting of the third temptation (second in Luke's ordering) we will now examine the devil's offer to Jesus. In this case Luke provides more detail than Matthew. A key feature of the Lucan narrative that must be explained is the devil's claim to exercise power over the kingdoms of the world and give it to whomever he pleases. Under the Christadelphian interpretation this statement comes from the personified carnal nature of Jesus, which is attempting to persuade Jesus to take a wrong course of action. If this is really what this passage conveys, it does so in very odd language.

We discussed previously how a figurative dialogue between a person and a personification is quite foreign to the genre of the Gospels. Yet even if we allow the possibility of internal temptations being narrated in this way, it makes little sense for the personified evil inclination (Hebrew *yetzer hara*) to base its offer on a grandiose claim to temporal power. Notice that the other two temptations begin, "If you are the Son of God..." and thus use Jesus' privileged status as their jumping-off point. Why does the narrative deviate from that formula in this case? An appeal to Jesus' Messianic prerogative would be even more persuasive here. If this temptation consists of an urge from within to usurp temporal political power, it might have been phrased something like this:

⁶³ Yamazaki-Ransom 2010: 90.

⁶⁴ Stein 1996: 106-108.

⁶⁵ Stein 1996: 104.

"If you are the Son of God, march into Jerusalem and declare yourself king, for that is your right, as it is written, 'Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom.'"

Instead, the tempter makes no reference to Jesus' right to rule but instead asserts his own! Christadelphians need to provide an explanation for why the introductory formula is different for this temptation. Furthermore, if this dialogue is strictly internal and involves no third party, then what does "I give it to anyone I please" mean? To whom might Jesus' carnal nature give authority over the kingdoms of the world other than himself?

It is apparent, then, that the way the devil phrases his offer to Jesus in Luke's account presents serious difficulties for the Christadelphian view. However, Christadelphians have suggested that to be a temptation must be plausible in order to truly tempt,⁶⁶ and a claim to absolute political power from a fallen angel is not plausible. Let us then assume for the sake of argument that *ho diabolos* in this passage is an angelic being, and assess the plausibility of the claim and offer he made to Jesus.

We may first observe that, within the narrative, it is not necessarily the case that Jesus was aware from the beginning who his interlocutor was. Elsewhere in the New Testament we read that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), so it is not impossible that the devil presented himself to Jesus as an angel. The devil does not introduce himself to Jesus; it is the narrator who makes the reader of the Gospel aware who the tempter was. In Matthew's account, after the final temptation Jesus says, "Away with you, Satan!" which makes it possible that the offer of illicit political power and the demand for worship gave away the tempter's identity. However, this is only a conjecture, and perhaps not a likely one given Jesus' remarkable powers of discernment (Matt. 9:4; Luke 9:47; John 1:48; 2:24; 6:64).

If we judge that Jesus knew who stood before him, would this then render the temptation a "sham" as Christadelphian writer Thomas Williams put it?⁶⁷ Scholars have identified the devil's statement in Luke 4:6 as an allusion to God's claims in Jeremiah 34(27E):5 LXX and Daniel 4:31 LXX, and as such "Luke pictures Satan as usurping God's prerogative to confer authority on whomever God wishes."⁶⁸ Does this mean the devil's offer was implausible? Yamazaki-Ransom provides useful insights on this point:

"In the Lukan temptation narrative, Satan claims to be the lord of the world. Is he telling the truth? The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, although Satan is not a reliable character in the narrative, the implied reader is expected to take Satan's claim at face value. First, Jesus does not deny Satan's claim. Second, Paul later describes his ministry as opening the eyes of the people 'so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power (*exousia*) of Satan to God' (Acts 26.18). This assumes the reality of Satan's *exousia* over people, although it is undermined by God through Paul's ministry. Thus Satan's power over the world is a real, not an illusory, one. On the other hand, as was just shown, he is not the true lord who deserves worship. For Luke the true Lord is God and Jesus, but not Satan. Thus Satan's lordship over the world is a real but illegitimate one, one that is to be dismantled. The reality of diabolic authority over the

⁶⁶ Abel & Allfree 2011: <http://www.wrestedscriptures.com/b07satan/matthew4v1-11.html>

⁶⁷ Williams 1892.

⁶⁸ Carroll 2012: 103.

world, and Jesus' refusal to receive this authority from Satan, has great significance in Luke's narrative."⁶⁹

Indeed, there are numerous New Testament passages which state or imply that the devil or Satan possesses power. Importantly, some of these texts are in Luke's writings ([Luke 10:19](#); [Acts 26:18](#)). In John's Gospel, Jesus himself refers to the devil as "the ruler of this world" ([John 12:31](#); [14:30](#); [16:11](#)),⁷⁰ and in John's first epistle he writes that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" ([1 John 5:19](#)).⁷¹ Paul too describes Satan as a powerful ruler ([Eph. 2:2](#); [6:11-12](#)). Finally, in Revelation the dragon (symbolic of the devil) gives power and authority to the beast (symbolic of an earthly empire) ([Rev. 13:2](#) cf. [12:9](#)). In this last case the devil's power is explicitly political in nature.⁷² Hence, as one commentator writes concerning the devil's claim to Jesus, "In a way clearly parallel to the scenario painted in Revelation 13, we discover that the world of humanity is actually ruled by the devil."⁷³

Where did this notion of the devil possessing political power come from? Behind it lies "the idea of angelic beings ruling over earthly kingdoms" which "has a long tradition, both before and after the New Testament."⁷⁴ Several Old Testament texts develop this idea, most notably [Daniel 10](#), and while it is not prominent in the New Testament, it is found in Revelation 12-17 and may be presupposed in other New Testament texts such as [Luke 10:1](#), [Acts 16:9](#), [1 Cor. 4:9](#), [6:3](#) and [1 Tim. 3:16](#).⁷⁵

Therefore, far from being preposterous we find that the devil's claim here is consistent with the overall testimony of the New Testament. The devil did have some basis for claiming to wield great political power, and as such his offer to confer this power on Jesus in exchange for worship was at least plausible.

d. What did the devil tempt Jesus to do?

We now turn our attention to what the devil tempted Jesus to do. Our focus is again on the third temptation (second in Luke's ordering) because it is the most problematic for Christadelphians.

Anthony Buzzard succinctly stated the difficulty that the Christadelphian interpretation faces here: "It is most unnatural to think that Jesus invited himself to fall down before himself and worship himself!"⁷⁶ To this, Christadelphian apologist Jonathan Burke responded:

"It is not argued that Jesus 'invited himself to fall down before himself and worship himself'. It is argued that the narrative represents the internal struggle in Christ using the language of personification."⁷⁷

⁶⁹ Yamazaki-Ransom 2010: 95-96.

⁷⁰ For an important study of this title in John, see Kovacs 1995.

⁷¹ That 'the evil one', 'the devil' and 'Satan' are synonyms can be seen by comparing the three parallel accounts of the parable of the sower in [Matt. 13:19](#), [Mark 4:15](#) and [Luke 8:12](#); cf. [Matt. 13:38-39](#). That John also uses the term in this way is apparent from comparing the similar language in [1 John 3:12](#) and [John 8:44](#).

⁷² See comments in Morris 1988: 113.

⁷³ Green 1997: 194.

⁷⁴ Yamazaki-Ransom 2010: 93.

⁷⁵ Wink 1984: 34-35.

⁷⁶ Buzzard 2000.

⁷⁷ Burke 2007: 40.

In this response, Burke does not say what Jesus was actually tempted to do. Following on the precedent of the other two temptations, it stands to reason that Jesus was actually tempted to do something concrete, and the text tells us what it was: to fall down and worship the devil (*ho diabolos*). Burke, however, proposes a figurative interpretation of what Jesus was tempted to do:

"The temptation represents Christ as the one having power to elevate himself, and self-worship, rather than the worship of God, is both the requirement and result."^{78 79}

Although Burke denies that Jesus was tempted to fall down before himself and worship himself, he affirms that Jesus was tempted to self-worship (i.e. worship himself!) The only difference between what he denies and what he affirms is the 'falling down' part. Thus it appears that Burke believes Jesus was tempted to worship himself in mental attitude and not in a physical act of obeisance. The problem is that the text of Matthew says "fall down and worship me". That this is a demand for a physical act of worship is even clearer in the Greek than in the English.

The Greek verb translated "worship" in both Matt. 4:9 and Luke 4:7 is *proskuneo*. The most respected lexicon of ancient Greek defines this verb thus: "to express in attitude or gesture one's complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure, (*fall down and*) *worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully*".⁸⁰ While Christadelphians might seize on the words "in attitude", it is plain from the list of synonyms that even this refers to an outwardly expressed attitude and not merely a mental state.⁸¹

There is no known evidence that *proskuneo* was ever used as a reflexive verb (i.e. in relation to oneself) in ancient Greek. The only known use of this verb with an abstract direct object is a reference to worship of wealth by Philo, in which he explicitly stated he was using "figurative language."⁸²

Greeven further emphasizes the "concreteness" of the term, observing that, as used in the New Testament, "Proskynesis demands visible majesty before which the worshipper bows."⁸³ Thus, in order to take *proskuneo* in the sense of figurative self-worship instead of physical other-worship, one must give it an unprecedented meaning.

Furthermore, although the mere use of the word *proskuneo* virtually settles the matter, both Matthew and Luke qualify it with another word which makes the physicality of the worship even more explicit. In Matthew, the qualifier is the participial form of the verb *pipto*, which means "to move with relative rapidity in a downward direction, *fall*".⁸⁴ It usually has a literal sense, and one of the lexical meanings is "*fall down, throw oneself to the ground* as a sign of devotion or humility, before high-ranking persons or divine beings".

There are also figurative meanings of *pipto* which include to fall in a transcendent or moral sense. It might be argued that Jesus' evil impulse tempted him to fall (morally) and elevate himself in self-worship. However, this would again be an utterly unprecedented meaning. The

⁷⁸ Burke 2007: 181.

⁷⁹ Watkins offers the similarly oblique explanation that Jesus was tempted to "bow down to self" (1971: 12).

⁸⁰ Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000: 882.

⁸¹ See, for instance, the first definition of 'attitude' at <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/attitude>

⁸² Philo of Alexandria. Delineation of the Mosaic Legislation for non-Jews, Book 27, IV.25.

⁸³ Greeven 1968: 765.

⁸⁴ Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000: 815.

words *proskuneo* and *pipto* modify each other in two passages of the LXX and eleven other passages in the New Testament, and in every single instance they clearly denote a physical act of worship (2 Chr. 20:18 LXX; Dan. 3:4-15 LXX; Matt. 2:11; Matt. 18:26; Acts 10:25; 1 Cor. 14:25; Rev. 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4; 19:10; 22:8). Particularly noteworthy are the two other Matthean texts:

"On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down (*pipto*) and paid him homage (*proskuneo*). Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." (Matt. 2:11)

"So the slave fell to the ground (*pipto*) and prostrated himself (*proskuneo*) before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.'" (Matt. 18:26)

Thus, when used together, *pipto* and *proskuneo* depict a physical act of homage. It is all but certain that this is what the devil demanded of Jesus in Matt. 4:9; this is undoubtedly how most readers in the first century would have understood the narrative. To take this text as a temptation to figuratively worship oneself requires abandoning the usual lexical and syntactical meaning of these words and giving them a sense which is foreign to Matthew, to the New Testament, and to the ancient Greek language!

The verb *pipto* does not appear in Luke's parallel account. Nevertheless, while most Bible translations render the key phrase in Luke 4:7 simply as "if you worship me", there is also a qualifying word in the Greek here which makes the physical nature of the temptation explicit. This is the adverb/preposition *enopion*, which primarily means "before; in the sight of; in the presence of".⁸⁵ Thus a more literal translation of this phrase in Luke 4:7 is, as the NASB has it, "if you worship **before** me" (the NASB has 'bow down before me' as a marginal rendering; Young's Literal Translation also translates 'bow before me'). This makes it clear that the worship was to take place in front of or in the presence of some external party. This word is superfluous if the temptation refers to self-worship.

Once again, if we look at other occurrences of *proskuneo* with *enopion* in Scripture, we find that it always denotes a physical act of worship (2 Kings 18:22 LXX; Ps. 22:27-29 LXX; Ps. 86:9 LXX; Isa. 66:23 LXX; Rev. 3:9; 15:4). Typical is Rev. 15:4b: "All nations will come and worship **before** you, for your judgments have been revealed".

Responding to Buzzard's analysis of the verb *proserchomai* in Matthew 4:3 (discussed above), Burke writes that Buzzard

"deliberately over translates the Greek...in order to create the sense of a greater distinction between Christ and the satan, giving the false impression that the text wishes us to understand that Christ and the satan are two separate individual beings".⁸⁶

Regardless of whether or not Burke's statement is accurate with regard to Matt. 4:3, we have seen that the Greek text of Matt. 4:9 and Luke 4:7 unmistakably create a distinction between Christ and the devil/Satan, demonstrating that they are two separate individual beings. Given that Matthew and Luke use the language of physical worship, it simply is not plausible that

⁸⁵ Arndt, Danker & Bauer 2000: 342.

⁸⁶ Burke 2007: 37.

Jesus was tempted to engage in an act of obeisance either to himself, or to his personified 'evil inclination'.

We can say with certainty, then, that the text indicates Jesus was tempted to physically bow down before the devil. In view of this, the only way to sustain the Christadelphian 'internal struggle' interpretation is to take the temptation narrative figuratively at a more fundamental level. That is, none of the temptations actually happened as such; instead, they use vivid pictures to portray Jesus' battle with his evil inclination.

The problem with this approach is that the other two temptations are clearly concrete: Jesus was literally in the wilderness, was literally hungry and was literally tempted to turn stones into bread to satisfy his hunger. Similarly, Jesus was literally placed atop the temple pinnacle and tempted to throw himself down to test God's providential care. Neither 'turning stones into bread' nor 'throwing himself down' can be understood metaphorically. Consistency thus dictates that we take the temptation narratives at face value as concrete events in the life of Jesus. The idea that *ho diabolos* refers to a personification of an abstract entity is grammatically impossible and must be rejected. Jesus was tempted to physically worship a concrete personal being external to himself.

5. Conclusion

The above analysis has shown that the 'personified internal tempter' view of the temptation narratives which currently dominates Christadelphian exegesis can in fact be ruled out on grammatical grounds.

This brings us back to the 'unknown external tempter' view which was popular earlier in Christadelphian history. This earlier interpretation makes better grammatical sense, but is also fraught with difficulties.

If we attempt to ascertain the identity of *ho diabolos* just from what the temptation narratives tell us, we can infer that the tempter (a) knew Jesus' identity at the outset of his ministry (as the demons also did), (b) had the supernatural power needed to place him atop the pinnacle of the temple or induce a visionary experience, and (c) could make a credible claim to absolute temporal power. As there was no human being external to Christ who met these three criteria, we are left with only one possibility: *ho diabolos* refers to a supernatural personal being.

John Thomas' view that the tempter was an unspecified angel may be consistent with (a), (b) and to a lesser extent (c) above, but it has other difficulties. It fails to account for the definite article: *the* tempter as opposed to *a* tempter, and *the* devil (or slanderer) as opposed to *a* devil. It also fails to account for the reappearance of *ho diabolos/ho satanas* elsewhere in the Gospels, and indeed, the prominence of this theological term throughout the New Testament. Finally, it is difficult to imagine an angel of light asking Jesus to worship him (cf. [Revelation 19:10](#); [22:8-9](#)), and to imagine Jesus telling an angel of light, "Be gone, Satan!"

With both Christadelphian interpretations of the temptation narratives discredited, there remains only one possibility: that the devil who tempted Christ was a specific, evil supernatural being. It just so happens that this interpretation has been the near-unanimous consensus of the church throughout its history. Satanology is one aspect of the Christadelphian belief system which is in urgent need of review.

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