

Matthew 4:1–11—Jesus Quotes Scripture to Satan (and Vice Versa)

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke record the story of Jesus’s temptation by Satan in the wilderness. Their versions are quite similar, though their orders of temptations differ.

Matthew 4:1–11	Luke 4:1–13
<p>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.’”</p> <p>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.’”</p> <p>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, 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.’”</p> <p>11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.</p>	<p>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.’”</p> <p>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.”</p> <p>8 Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”</p> <p>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.’”</p> <p>12 Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”</p> <p>13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.</p>

Numerous scholars would note the words “it is written” (or “it is said”) and, from this, they deduce a strategy for overcoming the devil’s snares:

The first thing worth noting is that Christ uses Scripture as a shield against [Satan], and this is the true way of fighting, if we wish to win a sure victor. (John Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels* 1.135)¹

Satan discovers that while persuasive rhetoric had been powerful enough to defeat Eve (see Gen. 3:1–1–7), the “It is written” of scripture is more powerful still. Christ refutes Satan not with rational argument but with revelation.²

Also noticed at times is how Satan quotes Scripture to Jesus! In Matthew 4:6 and Luke 4:10, Satan cites a passage from Psalm 91:11–12 in an attempt to convince Jesus that he should trust God to preserve him from a foolish death.

This would inspire some memorable lines from William Shakespeare:

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.
An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,
A goodly apple rotten at the heart.
O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath!

The Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 3

1. John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 1, trans. A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 137.
2. David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 754.