

THE SIX MOUNTAINS OF JESUS

1 – THE MOUNTAIN OF TEMPTATION

1. INTRODUCTION

Sacred mountains and mountain symbolism were common features in the landscape of Israel's religious life from its earliest times up to the time of Christ.

2. SINAI

The mountain of the Law is Sinai

The only reference to Sinai outside of the Pentateuch is Neemiah 9: 13.

You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments,

It was at Sinai that Yahweh bound Israel to himself as a teacher. The Sinai event is not just a revelation of God or even his will, but an event in which Yahweh binds his people to himself in covenantal relationship.

Sinai played a foundational role as a mountain associated with Israel's constitution as a people.

3. Mt. ZION

Mt. Zion is the site of the temple at the heart of Jerusalem. It was identified as "the mountain of the house, the mountain of the house of the Lord, the mountain of the Lord, Zion, and Jerusalem.

Micah 3:12-4:2

Therefore because of you

Zion shall be ploughed as a field;

Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,

and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Peace and Security through Obedience

In days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house

shall be established as the highest of the mountains,

and shall be raised up above the hills.

Peoples shall stream to it,

and many nations shall come and say:

'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,

to the house of the God of Jacob;

that he may teach us his ways

**and that we may walk in his paths.’
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.**

The major concentration of these identifications are in Isaiah and the Psalms.

The fundamental feature of Zion theology in the Old Testament is **election**. The Davidic covenant is one example from Psalms.

Psalm 132: 11-13

**The Lord swore to David a sure oath
from which he will not turn back:
‘One of the sons of your body
I will set on your throne.
If your sons keep my covenant
and my decrees that I shall teach them,
their sons also, for evermore,
shall sit on your throne.’**

**For the Lord has chosen Zion;
he has desired it for his habitation:**

In the Royal Psalms Zion is the place of the **enthronement** of the King, which is an important theme in Matthew.

Mt. Zion was the center of worship for God’s people, who met God there.

Sinai represented Israel’s constitution, Zion represented the political and religious life of its people (compare to Philadelphia and Washington.)

The ideal Zion of the psalmists evolved into the **apocalyptic** Zion of the prophets, which included the restoration of Zion as the renewed mountain of Israel and the seat of Yahweh’s **worldwide kingdom**.

From Ezekiel 20

For on my holy mountain, the mountain height of Israel, says the Lord God, there all the house of Israel, all of them, shall serve me in the land; there I will accept them, and there I will require your contributions and the choicest of your gifts, with all your sacred things. As a pleasing odor I will accept you, when I bring you out from the peoples, and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered; and I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations.

There is a positive presentation of **the nations** coming to Zion to share in God’s eternal blessings.

Zion is a place of enthronement. This is very important to Matthew.

4. INTERSECTION

In Micah we see the temple theology of Zion come together with the Messianic promise: the vision of an eternal Zion becomes a place of enthronement.

Micah 5: 2-4

**But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
 who are one of the little clans of Judah,
 from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to rule in Israel,
 whose origin is from of old,
 from ancient days.
 Therefore he shall give them up until the time
 when she who is in labor has brought forth;
 then the rest of his kindred shall return
 to the people of Israel.
 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
 in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
 And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
 to the ends of the earth;**

Why did this happen? The return from exile was a disillusioning experience for Israel. The prophets then proclaimed that the vision had not failed, but had been deferred. The Zion idea came to be seen as no longer realizable in this world, but in the eternal kingdom of God. **A divinely-made temple would descend upon Mt. Zion and restore Israel.**

5. ZION AND THE TORAH

Judaism survived from 200 – 100 BCE by combining the Zion vision with the Torah (Sinai).

As the temple became a political entity under the Hasmoneans, groups like the Qumran community separated themselves from the “wicked priests” and the “defiled temple.” Matthew was influenced by the Qumran writings and beliefs.

Among the Rabbis, the election of Zion continued to be a theme. Scribes and prophets of this period began to link the important figures and events of Genesis with “the holy mountain of Zion.”

Abraham, Adam, Noah, Isaac, and Jacob were all linked in stories to Mt. Zion (labelled as “Mt. Moriah.”) It was on Moriah that Isaac sacrificed his son. Mt. Zion was considered to be Mt. Moriah.

6. COVENANT

Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion were both “covenant mountains”. Zion became the fulcrum between Israel’s sacred past and their eternal future.

In this time the temple mount also became the “**axis mundi**” as it linked heaven, earth, and the underworld.

Writings during this period declare that, like Mt. Zion, Mt. Sinai was also a “cosmic” mountain, the contact point between heaven and earth where the Torah came to earth.

In summary, here were of the two mountains that existed during the New Testament period: Covenant, Cosmic, Revelation, Eternal kingdom

THE MOUNTAIN OF TEMPTATION IN MATTHEW

Matthew 3-4

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.” ’ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” ’ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

From Matthew 28 (The Sixth and Final Mountain)

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

In the third temptation, Satan takes Jesus to the top of a mountain and offers Jesus world sovereignty on the condition that he worship him.

Settings

The settings of the first two temptations are 1) wilderness and 2) temple. This order is important for Matthew. Most scholars believe that, unlike the story in Luke, this was the original order of where the three temptations took place.

Language

The first two temptations are an imperative from Satan. The last one is an offer. In the final temptation, Jesus is offered not private release from hunger or deliverance from personal harm, but world sovereignty.

Interpretation 1.

Some scholars suggest that the temptations follow the order of the events in Exodus as the people follow Moses to Sinai: Manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16) the testing at Massah (Exodus 17) and the worshiping of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32.)

Desert/mountain/temple, as in Luke, is a more natural geographical and symbolic progression in the culture of Palestine in the New Testament period.

More important than anything else, Matthew wanted to make a connection between the mountain of Temptation and the Mountain of Commissioning.

The gospel of Mark has a different point of view of the temptation story. Deuteronomy was the root of Mark's version:

Deuteronomy 8: 2-5

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you.

Interpretation 2

Another interpretation states that Matthew was writing this story in his time to defend the Messiahship of Jesus against accusations that Jesus did not qualify as the Messiah. Jewish Messianic expectation contained these three requirements:

- 1) The Messiah would provide miraculous manna in the wilderness (the fast)
- 2) The Messiah would give a vivid display of his divine authority (the pinnacle of the temple)
- 3) The Messiah would achieve authority over the world by political means (the offer of sovereignty)

Interpretation 3

Another interpretation is more pragmatic than Messianic. In the three temptations Jesus provides an example for pious people who wish to obey God. In this approach, Matthew's interpretation is seen as a refutation of the Hellenistic belief in and practices of magic (extremely important in the post-Pentecost church.)

Interpretation 4

However, the interpretation most agreed upon is that in Matthew the temptations create a pattern of **"sonship"** that is successful as opposed to the failure of Israel's "sonship." In this view, the Satan's temptations are an attempt to induce Jesus to be unfaithful to the divine Father.

Jesus's "sonship" was lived out in the temptation story in the manner that was to characterize Israel's sonship:

- 1) Dependence on God for provision (wilderness)
- 2) Trust in God without demands for demonstration (temple)
- 3) Acceptance of sovereignty only on the Father's terms (mountaintop)

For Matthew, the Messiah is a corporate personality. Where Israel failed in their temptations, the Messiah succeeds.

Matthew's Church

Matthew wanted to answer three questions for the church in his time:

1. Why did Jesus's Messiahship differ from the common expectations?
2. How did a church that was being forced out of the synagogues show continuity with the people of God in the Hebrew scriptures?
3. Who can claim to be the true Israel? (Paul would answer this question before Matthew.)

Prophetic Interpretation

The third temptation followed a theme familiar in the story of Moses and several other significant prophets: the ascent of a mountain, the viewing of land, and the promise of possession. This progression was also associated with Abraham and Isaac.

The Mountain of Temptation should be viewed through a passage with which Matthew and the church was very familiar – Psalm 2: 6-8

**‘I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.’
I will tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to me, ‘You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.**

Satan’s promise of world sovereignty arises from this Psalm. Psalm 2 is also a vision of enthronement, which was extremely important for Matthew.

Jesus’s responses must be understood as a unified reflection of how Israel viewed their own idealized sonship – how Israel was suppose to respond to God as they journeyed with him through the wilderness, and how they were to be the people of God in the world. Israel believed that the wilderness, the temple, and the mountain were places where the end-time events would take place.

Matthew is making the point that it was only by the Son’s humble obedience to the Father that fulfillment of time would take place. This is why the three settings of the temptation – wilderness, temple, and mountain, were appropriate for Jesus to affirm the way of the Son.

The Baptism as Introduction and Transition

The climax of Matthew’s **introductory** story is when, after Jesus’s baptism, God declares, **“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”** This is where the theme of Sonship begins for Matthew and continues with the Sonship of Jesus being put to the test.

The Temptation and the Passion

The relationship of the temptation story to Jesus’s Passion in Matthew is easy to connect. First, Jesus’s rebuke of Satan appears again in Matthew 16:

But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

Matthew also links Satan’s temptation of both the leap from the temple and the offer of sovereignty to Jesus’s statement about the path to the cross in Matthew 16:

Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?’

Also, when Jesus rejects angelic deliverance from the cross, it reflects once again the Temple temptation in Matthew 26:

Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?

“The Son of God”

Matthew also specifically uses the language of the “Son of God” to link the events of his story, starting with the temptations, to Jesus’s final vindication of his Sonship. In the course of Matthew’s story, demons, the disciples, and Peter all declare that Jesus is the Son of God.

The Transfiguration

The theme of Jesus’s Sonship, starting with God’s declaration, is reaffirmed at the Mountain of Transfiguration – a preview of the Mountain of Commissioning.

In a sense, between the Mountain of Temptation and the Mountain of Commissioning there is an arc that ties all six mountains into one truth – that Jesus is the Son of God.

Matthew’s gospel itself moves thematically from the **wilderness** of the Baptism, to the city and the **temple** where Jesus is crucified, to the **mountaintop** where Jesus’s sovereignty is bestowed upon him.

The Baptism and the Temptation declare that the Sonship of the Messiah must be characterized by humble obedience leading to the cross. Thus, Matthew establishes his Christology as the heart of his gospel.

Questions