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ANGELS AND THE STORY AT MARK 1:12-13 & Q

Mark 1:12-13 reads “At once the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness and there he remained for forty days, tested by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and angels attended to his needs”.

Forty¹ is a good round number, like “seventy”. Moses neither ate nor drank for forty days and forty nights as a penance at Dt 9:18,25 and as an attempt at propitiation at Dt 10:10. Jesus required neither penance nor propitiation. Mark does not suggest a ritual fast, nor the angels’ failing to attend to him (cf. 1 Kings 19:5-8) throughout the forty days, while Satan “tempted” him during that period. Since the angels’ intervention resembles *devatās* either offering to feed the Bodhisattva or undertaking his alimentation surreptitiously², Mark 1:12-13 and its parallels may present one of the few cases where gospels can have gained from Buddhists³. The scene where Māra assails the Buddha to hinder his teaching seems more complete and intelligible, and better articulated with Buddhist mythology than Mark 1:12-13 fits the gospel – it is free-standing even when richly supplemented from Q. As for Q itself⁴, there

1. Acts 7:36; Ps 95:10. W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988, vol. 1, pp. 358-359.

2. J.D.M. Derrett, “Angels Jewish and angels Buddhist”, *Ind. Taur.* 26, 2000, pp. 73-92 at pp. 87-92.

3. J.D.M. Derrett, *The Bible and the Buddhists*, Bornato in Franciacorta: Sardini, 200, pp. 56-57, no. 11. A reviewer takes the point, but the whole needs to be reconsidered.

4. Siegfried Schulz, Q. *Die Spruchquelle der Evangelisten*, Zürich; Theologischer Verlag, 1972, pp. 177-190.

is some doubt whether the so-called Temptation by Satan as related at Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13⁵ has been inserted into Mark to mitigate its laconism⁶.

What would Mark 1:13 mean to a Jewish audience without the aid of Matthew or Luke? I doubted an allusion to Moses⁷ chiefly because Moses is subordinate to Jesus (cf. Mark 10:3-6;12:19). But Exodus 34:28 (cf. 24:18) and Deuteronomy 9:9 do conjure up the image of Moses as Yahweh's guest while he learned the Torah. Exodus 34:28-29 says:

“So Moses remained there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without food or drink. The Lord wrote down the words of the covenant ... on the tablets”.

Merely failing to eat or drink can be ambiguous (Matthew 11:18-19), but Moses associated with the angels there⁸. Angels do not eat or drink⁹. It is said that manna is the food of angels¹⁰, but the angels *mill* that material¹¹, they do not eat it. God himself does not eat or drink¹².

5. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, pp. 351-374; Joachim Gnilka, *Das Matthäusevangelium*, I, Freiburg: Herder, 1986, pp. 82-93; Christopher F. Evans, *Saint Luke*, London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990, pp. 254-260.

6. Schulz, *Q.*, p. 177, n.6. That Mark has a shortened version (*ibid.*, p. 182⁹⁻¹¹) is highly controversial.

7. See n. 2 above. Scholars are not agreed about the relevance of Exodus 34:28. Jacques Dupont, for example, *Les Tentations de Jésus au Désert*, Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1968, p. 28 values it; Birger Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son*, Lund: Gleerup, 1966, p. 42, touches it more lightly. Gnilka, *Matthäus*, p. 86 not only values it but adduces the valuable *haggada* of Abraham, who went without food forty days and forty nights on the road to Horeb, satisfied with the sight and speech of his accompanying angel (p. 86, n.22). He cites Apocalypse of Abraham 12,1; Midrash Rabba Genesis 56; and Babylonian Talmud, *Sanh.* 89b. He also cites Māra's interference with the Buddha at p. 86, n.21, citing F. Heiler, *Religionen der Menschheit*, Stuttgart, 1962, pp. 256-257. On the other hand Ernest Best, *Temptation and the Passion*, Cambridge University Press, 1965, pp. 5-6, rejected Exodus 34:28 as irrelevant.

8. See n. 13 below.

9. Pesiqta Rabbati 16.2. At Genesis 18:8 they *appear* to eat. They can, however, be waiters: Babylonian Talmud, *Sanh.* 59b.

10. Dt 8:3; Ps 78:24-25.

11. Angelo S. Rappoport, *Myth and Legend of Ancient Israel*, vol. 2, London: Gresham, 1928, p. 298.

12. On the scene see Pesiqta Rabbati 16.2, trans. W.G. Braude, vol. 1, p. 345.

Moses naturally has to go without and enjoys the Law itself as well as the divine refulgence as the angels do¹³. This therefore could be the paradigm for Mark 1:12-13. Jesus spends forty days in the desert and would be without food and drink but for the intervention of angels.

Q, realizing that just as Satan tried to annul Moses' receipt of the Law¹⁴, so he, Satan, would attempt to distract Jesus from his mission. In the desert such a contest is both practicable and plausible.

Luke 4:1-2 says:

"... and for forty days he moved led by the Spirit in the desert and was tempted by the Devil. During that time he ate nothing and at the end he was famished".

No reference is made to the angels here but they figure at Luke 4:10-11 (the angels are charged with care of Jesus as at Matthew 4:6d)¹⁵ and the point could be assumed. The story in Q taken up by Matthew makes it clear that Jesus *fasted* for forty days and forty nights. Thereafter he was hungry and angels performed their service then (so Matthew 4:11):

"Then the Devil left him; and angels came and attended to his needs".

The allusion to Moses is less obscure in Matthew than in Luke: the former may be closer to the text of Q¹⁶ which seems to have started from a point like Mark.

The story in Mark does not suggest a scenario like the Buddha's. The absence of food for 40 days requires to be explained, but since Jesus began to preach at Matthew 4:17 as at Luke 4:14-15 it follows

13. Pesiqta Rabbati 48.3; Braude, vol. 2, p. 821. Sifre on Deuteronomy paras. 306, 357; trans. R. Hammer, pp. 305, 381. Moses suffered during those forty days and nights: Sifre Dt paras 14, 306; Hammer, pp. 38, 305. Moses neither ate nor drank because of his unique joy (Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* III. 51, trans. S. Pines, vol. 2, pp. 620, 623), devoting his soul (*nefeš*) to the Torah (Mekilta, *Šrata* 1.41; ed., trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, vol. 2, p. 4). That the Word is food is said at Dt 8:3; Wisd 16:26; cf. Jn 4:34. See n.7 above.

14. *Babylonian Talmud, Šabbat, 89a*. Rappoport, *Myth*, pp. 312-313.

15. Derrett as at n.2 above, p. 81 (nos. 9-10) and 1 Kings 19:5-8.

16. Schulz, *Q*, p. 181²¹. Doubted, however, by Evans, *Luke*, p. 256.

that both evangelists understood the Temptation to be a test of his fitness to preach in his homeland; and this agrees with the Buddhist myth.

We are now in a difficulty which I could not remove in 2000. Which myth is earlier, the Buddhist or the Christian? A criterion for placing the one earlier than the other might be its fitness for its context, but there is no such guide here. Matthew's forty days and forty nights and Luke's "forty days" recall Moses and can hardly be explained without him. This might make the Judaeo-Christian *haggada*¹⁷ of Christ primary and the Buddhist elaboration secondary (see below)? If so the New Testament does lack a startling borrowing from Buddhism. On the other hand Māra has no intellectual debate with the Buddha. His role is to be abusive and to interfere generally. In the Q story Satan, prompted by the Baptism, attacks Jesus's identity as the Son of God¹⁸ (cf. Mark 1:11 and parallels): he does not attack Jesus as teacher. The episode arises as if in a period of introspection which hardly applies to the Buddha. Apart from Satan's suggestion of an *alternative* career (Matthew 4:8-10; Luke 4:5-6) the situations of the Buddha and Jesus do not tally. Jesus's predicament is related to his supersession of Moses, whose followers were dramatically inadequate ("of *thee* I am approving": Mark 1:11). Moreover there is no Holy Spirit in the Buddha story.

There is compelling reason for our doubts. The long section of the *Samyutta-nikāya* dealing with Māra, called *Māra-samyuttam*, has one section (IV.2.10; text i, pp. 116-117)¹⁹, sited in the Himālaya (*pabbatarāja*, "King of Mountains")²⁰, entitled *rajjam* ("kingly rule", "governance"). The Buddha was wondering whether righteous rule was possible, a mirage incidentally caricatured by John (John 6:15; cf. 18:36-39; 19:12). Could one exercise *rajjam* without killing or causing others to kill, without conquering or causing others to conquer, without grief or causing others to grieve, in other words right-

17. Gerhardsson, *Testing*, pp. 12-16. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, p. 352 (the haggadic tale is based, they say, on Deuteronomy 6-8).

18. Schulz, *Q*, p. 188.

19. Transl. by Caroline Rhys Davids, *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, vol. 1, London: P.T.S., 1917, repr. 1979, pp. 145-146.

20. S i. 116³². For Sela's temptation see SN 553-4

eously (*dhammenāti*)? This reminds us of Plato's fallacious idea of a philosopher king. Māra approaches and with a not uncharacteristic irony assures the Buddha that the latter can do this, and urges him to do it. He adds that since the Buddha's *iddhis* are complete he can even wish the Himālaya to become gold, and make that wish come true. Mrs Rhys Davids, a former civil servant's wife and pupil, pertinently remarks in her footnote as follows:

“Māra's plan was to make him absorbed in the fascination of exercising power. *Commentary*. Cf. S. Luke iv.5-8”.

In fact she could have recalled Luke 4:3 (turning stones into bread).

Faced with such material one experienced in detecting Jewish and Christian material inside Buddhist texts²¹ would surmise that within *Samyutta-nikāya* IV.2.10 we see the Temptation in the Wilderness being expounded to, and in turn by, Buddhists. These will have recognized Māra under the names Satan, Tempter, or Devil. In short the passage could be a Buddhist response to the Lukan version of Q. The great mountain, the fantasy of exercising dominion such as only Satan can give, and, by no means unconnected therewith, the accumulation of “money for nothing”, all point to such a sequence of thought. It was a commonplace of Buddhist diction that Māra had a realm or domain, otherwise a “grip” (*māra-dheyya*)²² for he was the king of Desire (*kāmādhipati*) and Death. The senses and objects of sense were indeed his peculiar province²³, and normal human reactions were his “armies”²⁴.

But even if the Christian story would be of interest to Buddhists it does not beget the story of the *Māra-vijaya*. There the victory arose from *concentration*, a recognizable Indian quality. Jesus's battle succeeds, so far (Luke 4:13), not by virtue of consecration or concentration but by biblical knowledge, by the application of *midrash*, such as the Devil could not disparage, the sort of debate which rabbis have

21. J.D.M. Derrett, “Versatility, Angels and Space”, *JRAS*, ser.3, 16/3, 2006, pp. 231-242 at pp. 237-239.

22. *Sutta-nipāta* 764. *Ad* Luke 4:6 see Allen Brent, *The Imperial Cult & the Development of Church Order*, Leiden: Brill, 1999.

23. *Samyutta-nikāya* IV.2.9,5-6; text i, p. 115; transl. Rhys Davids, vol. 1, p. 144.

24. *Sutta-nipāta* 436-442, cf. 760.

always relished²⁵. Perhaps a normal Buddhist theme, about the perils of a forest-dwelling ascetic²⁶, has resonated with a Judaeo-Christian messianist's desire that from an early stage Jesus apprehended he was Messiah and Satan was forced to admit it; so the conjecture that the gospel story influenced the *sutta* remains unproven, while the opposite movement remains plausible. Māra can have reappeared as a Hebrew Satan, complete with textual equipment!

25. Babylonian Talmud, *Sabbat* 88b-89a illustrates this commonplace.

26. J.D.M. Derrett, "Athanasius, Antony, and the Buddha", *Ind. Taur.* 31, 2005, pp. 103-119. H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 4, pt. 1, pp. 515-516. H.A. Kelly, "The Devil in the Desert", *CBQ* 26, 1964, pp. 190-220.