

Test run (Mark 1:9-15)

In an account in which only Satan, wild animals, and angels are with Jesus, the reader is also present.

by [Fred Craddock](#) in the [February 22, 2003](#) issue



Briton Riviere, *The Temptation in the Wilderness*, oil on canvas, 1898.

It is difficult to listen to a text when there are other texts in the room talking about the same subject matter, often in ways more elaborate and more familiar. Mark is the text before us, but Matthew, Luke and John are also in the room. Each has a right to be heard, and there are times when it is profitable to entertain them all at once, noting differences and wondering why. But for the present, Mark is speaking; courtesy and respect demand that we pay attention to him.

Even when listening to one text, it is remarkable how many echoes of other voices can be heard. Most texts are layered, tradition upon tradition, and from those layers come instruction and enrichment. To be sure, the text being read carries its own sense and sufficient clarity. One does not have to know Exodus, Kings, Psalms, Isaiah and Malachi to find satisfaction in reading Mark 1:1-15, just as one does not need to know Shakespeare to appreciate John Steinbeck's *Winter of Our Discontent*, or Ezra Pound to follow Adela Rogers St. John's *The Honeycomb*. But how much fuller and richer the experience when one does! Reading Mark is a blessing; reading Mark aware of his rich resources is a double, a triple blessing.

Now to Mark 1:9-15. The writer, with almost shocking brevity, relates three major events: Jesus' baptism, temptation in the desert and first preaching in Galilee. The sequence of events is significant, not simply because it seems the natural order of things, but because in a new exodus Jesus recapitulates the journey of Israel: baptism (Red Sea), struggles in the desert (40 years) and good news (entry into the promised land). In a similar move, Paul drew a parallel between the Corinthian church's experience of baptism, table fellowship and temptations, and Israel's baptism in the sea, sharing of God-given food and drink, and temptations in the desert (1 Cor. 10:1-13). The texts and the experiences of God's people unfold, layer upon layer.

Let's attend to Jesus' temptation in the desert. Notice how aware of the reader the narrative is. In an account in which only Satan, wild animals and angels are with Jesus, the reader is also present. This is no historical reporting with all the proper distance of objectivity; the reader is drawn in to hear, to see, to experience. Such is the way of scripture to make its message present to the one who reads. The reader is on Mount Moriah where only Abraham and Isaac are talking. The reader is on the Mount of Transfiguration where only Jesus, Peter, James and John experience God. The reader is with Jesus in Gethsemane while the apostles sleep and in Pilate's chambers as he and Jesus talk privately. The reader is close enough to the cross to overhear Jesus speak to his mother and the beloved disciple. Questions of historical accuracy may be raised, but not here, not now.

Notice also the vigor of the language when the subject is testing or temptation. Immediately after receiving the Spirit at baptism, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the desert. Clearly God is at work here, but so is the Adversary, Satan. Forty days the struggle continues. He is in the company of wild animals, and angels "were waiting on him"; that is, serving him food. It is unclear whether Mark has in mind the

pre-fall state of Adam when wild animals were as yet no threat or the post-fall state in which wild animals were a danger to the expelled Adam. Since the scene before us is one of struggle, very likely the wild animals and the angels represent the two forces battling with Jesus. Whatever the ancient echoes, it is clear that Jesus is not on a pensive evening walk in the desert; he is being tested intensely.

Mark does not elaborate on the temptation. So what is happening? Obviously, Jesus was really being tempted. There is no need to protect Jesus by saying he only seemed to be tempted in order to set us an example. Anyone who pretends an experience in order to set an example is not setting an example. "We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Nor should one rob the event of its reality on the assumption that temptation is weakness. We are not tempted to do what we cannot do but what we can. The testing is one of strength, and the stronger, the more capable, the greater one is, the greater the temptation. As George Buttrick once said in a sermon, "You do not have a sea storm in a roadside puddle."

And if the temptation is real, it most certainly is deceptive. Temptation is not obvious, definitely not a caricature: "Hi, I am Satan; I am here to tempt you." The tempter often looks and sounds like a friend or relative. "Get behind me, Satan!" was not Jesus' word to the local fiend but to his friend, Simon Peter. At the heart of the deception are offers not to fall but to rise. The tempter in Eden did not ask, "Do you wish to be as the devil?" but "Do you wish to be as God?" "If you are *really* the Son of God . . . ," says the voice in Jesus' mind. There is nothing here of the debauchery often associated with temptation. No self-respecting Satan would approach a person with offers of personal, social and professional ruin. That is in the small print at the bottom of the temptation.

Still wet from his baptism, Jesus struggles, apparently, with the burden that lies within the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."