Chapter 4  
Trinity in the temptation narrative and the interpretation of Noordmans, Dostoyevski, and Mbeki

Abstract  
Firstly, this chapter gives a Biblical theological account of the use of the term ‘temptation’ throughout the Bible and relates it to the temptation narrative in Luke. It proposes to show that there is a trinitarian structure in the temptation narrative in Luke. It is argued that the temptation narrative is primarily concerned with the person and work of Christ from a Christological perspective, while it can be related to the believer only from a secondary Pneumatological perspective.

Secondly, this chapter will focus on the way the temptation narrative has been interpreted by Oepke Noordmans, Fyodor Dostoyevski, and in the South African context by President Thabo Mbeki in his Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture. Noordmans, the theologian, emphasizes the Christological aspects of the temptation narrative, while Dostoyevski explores the Pneumatological aspects by looking at humankind in its concrete socio-political and religious situation. President Thabo Mbeki refers to the temptation narrative from an anthropological perspective to indicate how a citizen must live responsibly in South Africa.

Temptation and the Father  
The Hebrew term for the word ‘tempt’ (נָסָה) with its Greek equivalent (πειράζω) can also mean ‘test.’ In the Old

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211 In the discussion that follows all the exegetical references to biblical texts either use the Greek word πειράζω or its Hebrew equivalent נס. Although it can be translated with ‘tempt’ or ‘test,’ I will only use the translation ‘tempt,’ while remaining aware of the other possible translation.
Testament one finds two basic distinctions concerning temptation: God tempting the people, and the people tempting God.

In Ex 16:4 God says he will tempt (נָסָה) the people with the bread from heaven, which will rain down on them. This manna would be just enough for a day, and this would tempt (נָסָה) the people to see if they would walk in God’s law or not. In Dt 8:2, 16, one reads that God led the people for forty years through the desert to tempt (נָסָה) them in order to see what they have in their hearts, whether they would keep his commandments. This was done to teach the people that humankind does not live by bread alone, but by everything that comes from the mouth of God (Dt 8: 3).

Dt 6:12-15 contains God’s commandments to Israel just before they are to enter the Promised Land. After the שְׁמַע (v 4), one finds Jesus’ response to the second temptation (v 13). The exhortation to serve God alone is followed by a prohibition against following other gods. On numerous occasions the people did enrage the Lord by worshipping other gods and idols.

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212 Ja 1:12-15 creates some problems, seeing as it says that God tempts (πειράζω) no-one, but that desire arises from one’s heart and conceives sin, which, in turn, grows into death. This seems to conflict with many of the Old Testament texts, which explicitly says that God tempted Abraham and the people in the desert to test their faithfulness. This passage is most likely intended for those who would try and pin the blame for their sin on God.

213 Dt 8:3 in the LXX reads “but man will live from every word from the mouth of the Lord” (ἄλλα ἐπὶ παντὶ ρήματι τῷ ἐκπορευόμενῳ διὰ στόματος θεοῦ ὥστε τὸ ἄνθρωπον ναὶ ἐκ πάντων παλαιστῶν θερίσεων), while the MSS reads “but man will live from everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (ἢ ἄνθρωπος λιπαῖσθαι ὅτι ἐκ πάντων λαβεῖ τὸν ἀνθρώπον).


215 A number between brackets refers to the particular verse.

216 This would amount to breaking the first commandment (Ex 20:3) and is reiterated in Dt 8:19. In Dt 13:1-4 one finds a close parallel to the temptations of Jesus. The people are warned about the prophet who comes to show them a sign or a wonder. When this wonder comes to pass, they must not follow other gods
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Dt 6:16 contains Jesus’ third response that one must not tempt God. This passage forms a striking parallel to Jesus’ temptation. During their time in the desert at Massah\textsuperscript{218} or Meribah\textsuperscript{219} (Ex 17:2, 7; Dt 33:8), the people demanded water from God and by doing so tempted (נָסָה) the Lord by saying, “Is the lord among us, or not”? Jesus is likewise tempted to prove God’s presence, but he does not tempt God like the people.

Temptation and the Son

In Jn 6:6 Jesus tempts (πειράζω) Philip to see what he would do when faced by the hungry crowd. Jesus multiplies the food, and immediately the people want to make him king by force (15). This kingship would not have been any different from that proposed to him by the devil. The rest of John 6 elaborates on the true bread of heaven, which is not like the manna that fed Israel (32, 49). Like a refrain Jesus says that He is the “bread from heaven,” the “bread of life,” the “living bread” (35, 48, 51). Jesus’ statement, “whosoever eats of this bread will never die,” not only enrages the Jews, but also causes many of his disciples not to follow him any longer (66).

and serve them as this prophet tells them to do. God tests the people in this way to see if they love him with all their heart and soul. Verse 4 then contains a direct parallel to Jesus’ response to the second temptation; namely, that one must follow God and fear him alone.

\textsuperscript{217} Lev. 26:30, Dt 9:16, Dt 32:21.

\textsuperscript{218} From נָסָה.

\textsuperscript{219} Num. 20:13 tells of how Moses hit the rock with his staff to bring forth the waters of Meribah and in doing so could no longer enter into the Promised Land. Dupont points out the parallel between God showing Moses the Promised Land, and the devil promising Jesus the Kingdoms of the world (Dupont, Les tentations de Jésus au désert 1968, 25). Jesus did not test God and did not hit the rock or prescribe to God how to help him take the Promised Land with his own power. Through his faithfulness in the desert, he became the Rock of Ages who was cleft for us and opened up the way to the Promised Land.
Jesus did not come to do his own will and win the people’s favour, but to do the will of his Father (38).\(^\text{220}\)

Dupont\(^\text{221}\) claims that Luke’s statement, \(\alpha'\, \delta\, \lambda\, \beta\, \omicron\, \lambda\, \omicron\, \sigma\, \tau\, \omicron\, \alpha'\, \omicron\, \tau\, \omicron\, \omicron\, \iota\, \chi\, \rho\, \iota\, \kappa\, \alpha\, \iota\, \rho\, \omicron\, \omicron\, \omicron\) points forward to the Passion:\(^\text{222}\) “The temptations and the Passion are two actions of the same struggle between Jesus and Satan, fought in the desert, the devil only disappears to prepare another offence, one that leads Jesus to the suffering of the cross.”\(^\text{223}\)

Jesus’ response to the temptations of the devil is, in a sense, delayed. He answers the question about bread by instituting the Eucharist (Lk 22: 19). In response to the question of the glories of the worldly kingdoms, he offers the eschatological kingdom of God by way of the cross saying: “Wasn't it necessary for the Christ to

\(^{220}\) Lk 11 forms a striking parallel to the temptation narrative. It starts with the Lord’s Prayer (1-4), asking God for daily bread and not to lead the believers into temptation (\(\pi\, \epsilon\, \iota\, \rho\, \omicron\, \alpha\, \zeta\, \omicron\)). This is followed by the story of the man asking bread from a friend late at night (5-8). Then Jesus drives out a demon, and the people accuse him of being the prince of the demons (14-19). Jesus teaches that the strongest man owns the house and that the only sign afforded to those that demand it is the sign of Jonah, which is contained in the Bible (21, 22, 28, 29). In this passage almost all the elements of the temptation narrative are present: the asking for bread, the question of authority, and the appeal to the Word.

\(^{221}\) Many exegetes in the early church and the Middle Ages agree with Dupont on this point and even believe that the meaning of the temptation in the desert becomes clear when it is read in light of the Passion narratives, Köppen, K. *Die Auslegung der Versuchungsgeschichte unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Alten Kirche* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1961), 71, 98. See also Mahnke, H. *Die Versuchungsgeschichte im Rahmen der synoptischen Evangelien* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1978), 155.

\(^{222}\) However, it is striking that only in Luke the last temptation is from the top of the temple.

\(^{223}\) “Les tentations et la Passion sont deux actes d’une même lutte entre Jésus et Satan; battu dans le désert, le diable ne disparaît que pour préparer une autre offensive, celle qui conduira Jésus au supplice de la croix.” (Translation by author) (Dupont, *Les tentations de Jésus au désert* 1968, 64-67).
suffer these things and enter into his glory”? (Lk 24:26). The leaders of the people echo the devil’s taunting phrase by saying, “…let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, his chosen one” (Lk 23:35). He answers this by not coming down from the cross. This was the ultimate temptation that Jesus had to endure. He, however, consistently refuses to take any help to prevent his suffering—by not allowing anyone to resist the guards in Gethsemane (Lk 22:50, 51). The cross is the price for belief without coercion, and it is, in a sense, his answer to all three temptations.

It has become clear that the temptation narrative is an extract from the whole of Jesus’ life. All the temptations during his life culminated in the temptation to come down from the cross.

Temptation and the Spirit

In the rest of the New Testament (after the Gospels), ‘temptation’ (πείραζω) is related to the believers’ life in the Spirit.

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224 Lk 24:26 reads οὐχὶ ταῦτα ἔδει παθεῖν τὸν Χριστὸν καὶ εἰσέλθείν εἰς τὴν δοξαν αὐτοῦ; Compare this to the devil’s proposal of the glory of the worldly kingdoms: (Lk 4:6) καὶ ἐπεν αὐτῷ ὁ διὰ βολος· σοι δω σω την εξουσιαν ταυτην ἀπασαν καὶ την δοξαν αὐτων, ὅτι ἐμοι παραδεδοται, καὶ ἐὰν θελω δι δωμι αὐτην. The glory of Christ’s kingdom was not possible without suffering.

225 The Pharisees also tempt him by asking if it is lawful to divorce (Mt 19:3), whether it is necessary to pay taxes to the emperor (Mt 22:17; Lk 20:25), and what is the greatest of all the commandments (Mt 22:35). This could almost be considered as priestly, kingly, and prophetic temptations. Mahnke argues that the three temptations could refer to Jesus as the eschatological prophet, priest, and king of the Jewish expectation (Mahnke, Die Versuchungsgeschichte 1978, 103, 126, 142). In Jn 8 the Pharisees again tempt Jesus by asking him whether they should do what the law of Moses demands concerning the woman taken in adultery. Jesus did not succumb to temptation like the woman had, and, therefore, he can take her sin on himself.
Ananias and Sapphira died because they tempted (πειράζω) the Holy Spirit (Ac 5:9) by placing their own needs above that of the community. They broke the spiritual unity by lying to the community created by the Spirit.

Peter says that the Jewish Christians tempt (πειράζω) God if they demand circumcision and observance of the Law of Moses from the Gentiles (Ac 15:10). The Gentiles have received the Holy Spirit as have the Jewish Christians, and therefore to demand obedience to the law of them would be placing a burden on their necks that neither their ancestors nor they could bear. Demanding something other than faith is tempting the Spirit of God.

In 1 Cor 10 Paul makes some elucidating connections. He takes examples from the Old Testament to warn against idolatry. Paul exhorts the believers not to put Christ to the test (πειράζω) like those who were destroyed by snakes, but to eat of the spiritual food and drink, which is Christ’s body. Giving in to temptation amounts to not being satisfied with this spiritual food and drink.226

The Spirit speaks in Heb 3:7-19, calling the believers not to tempt (πειράζω) God like the people in the desert and let their hearts be hardened by the deceit of sin. Unbelief prevented them from entering into God’s rest. Abraham’s resistance to temptation (πειράζω in Heb 11:17) is an example to believers because he believed in God’s promises—even to the point of offering his son.

Heb 2:18 provides a wonderful explanation of Jesus’ temptation. He had to suffer temptation in order to help those who are tempted (πειράζω). Jesus became completely human and suffered like

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226 Physical self-control in sexual matters is also an aspect of human life in which the devil can tempt (πειράζω) believers to trespass against their covenant fidelity in marriage (1 Cor 7:5). This all too human aspect must also be related to the first temptation of Jesus concerning physical nourishment. It is interesting to note that from the numerous passages referring to temptation in scriptures, only a very few refer directly to sexual temptation. This is in contrast to the popular use of temptation in society.
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believers do. From a Pneumatological perspective, this fact affords the believer with the immeasurable comfort of the Spirit. This is the whole gospel in a nutshell. He became equal to us in all respects—even unto death. In this way, He could conquer the one who holds power over death—the devil (Heb 2:14). This relates to Heb 4:15, where Christ is the High Priest that has sympathy for humankind’s weaknesses since he was tempted (πειράζω) in the same way. Although nothing is hidden to Jesus, the Son of God, humankind can go to the throne of grace with confidence (Heb 4:12-16).

Anti-trinity

The temptation loses its power if it does not contain convincing arguments. This is why one has to try and look at the temptations critically: which arguments does the devil use?

In the first temptation, the devil is indirectly questioning the Father’s providence in creation. One could say that the devil caringly offers Jesus a means to survive by offering him bread, while the Father leaves him in the lurch. It would seem that the devil is a better provider than the Father himself.

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227 The devastation of the suffering that the believers had to endure is listed in Heb 11:37. The believers were mocked, flogged, imprisoned, stoned, sawed apart, murdered, destitute, afflicted, and tormented, as well as tempted, but they stayed true to the Word.

228 The ‘good intentions’ of the devil become evident when he speaks through Peter and tries to protect Jesus from suffering (Mt 16:23). In Matthew 4:10 reads ὑπάγε Σατάνα and in variant readings of Matthew and Lk 4:8, Jesus says to the devil, “Get behind me Satan” (ὑπάγε ὄπι ὦ μου, Σατάνα), which is exactly the wording in Mt 16:23. It is terrifying to consider the fact that the devil’s temptation could appear as love.

229 In hindsight it is easy to see all the bad intentions of the devil, but from a certain point of view, the devil’s concern for Jesus’ health is striking. At first glance one could be surprised by his ‘kindness’ to propose some respite from hunger. One could, of course, counter this argument by saying that he did not give Jesus bread, but left him to fend for himself. In developmental terms,
The devil takes Jesus to show him the kingdoms of the world.\textsuperscript{230} It is noteworthy how giving the devil is.\textsuperscript{231} His subtlety must not be underestimated, even if he proposes that Jesus worship him. His generosity stands uppermost in his offer. Would the power over all the kingdoms of the world not afford Jesus the opportunity to eradicate poverty and save many people? How much could he have accomplished if he had taken over the power from the Caesars of Rome?\textsuperscript{232} Jesus’ response is less evident than one would suppose. The devil is, in a sense, showing him how charitable his (the devil’s) messianic kingdom would be. In his request lies a devastating criticism of Jesus’ kingdom of need and submission. The devil would use his power for the good and not give up all his power to the abusive rulers of this world.

At face value, the third temptation does not seem wicked at all. Having quoted from scriptures twice and having already expressed his trust in God in the first temptation, Jesus is now given a seemingly pious citation from scriptures\textsuperscript{233} to entrust his life to God. How subtle is the difference between the trust God expects in the first temptation and the trust the devil proposes in the third temptation? One could even say that Jesus already threw himself from the temple in the first temptation, by trusting God completely to save his life. Moreover, did he not throw himself however, one could argue that he did not give Jesus a fish, but would rather teach him how to fish.

\textsuperscript{230} The verb ‘to lead’ is used both for the Spirit and the devil’s actions. The exact word used is \textit{ἤγετο} for the Holy Spirit (Lk 4:1), while \textit{ἀναγάγω} (Lk 4:5) and \textit{ῄγαγε} (Lk 4:9) are used for the devil.

\textsuperscript{231} The verb \textit{διδωμι} appears three times in this one verse (Lk 4:6).

\textsuperscript{232} Mahnke points out that that Nero was called: \textit{ο του πάντος κοσμου κυριος}. (Mahnke, \textit{Die Versuchungsgeschichte} 1978, 144).

\textsuperscript{233} Jesus suddenly changes his response from “it is written” (γεγραπται) to “it is said” (εἰπεται) when the devil has now ironically quoted scriptures with “it is written” (γεγραπται).
of God when he fell into the hands of sinners who crucified him? Did not the Spirit of truth lead him to the cross with the same request as the evil spirit? How frighteningly close to each other is the whispering of the Holy Spirit and that of the devil?

Looking at the three temptations without preconceived conclusions, one could easily say that they illustrate the care (even love), the charity, and the faith of the person proposing them. These are the devil’s subtle attempts at imitating the Trinity.

**Trinity and temptation**

Dupont says that the temptations are not a mere moral catechism, but show how the Messiah overcame the temptations, which the chosen people of God could not. He did not conform to the popular view of a temporal and political Messiah because he rejected these conceptions as diabolical. Neugebauer also quotes Hengel in saying that the “call to follow Jesus cannot be understood without the category of the Messianic.”

Instead of contrasting the messianic and the moral aspects of the temptations narrative, I would propose that one view it from a Christological and a Pneumatological perspective. The temptations have a uniquely Christological character with an inter-play between Christ’s divine nature and work within the Trinity, and Jesus’ human nature and work within humanity. The Son is

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234 If one were to detract from their ambiguity and too easily see Jesus winning a great victory, it would not do justice to the suffering of the cross and the subtle struggle against the devil that Jesus had to endure and which all believers still face.


237 The devil twice asks, “If you are the son of God …”.
baptized in the Spirit just before the temptations in the desert. Therefore, one first has to look at the temptations from a Christological perspective, before the implications of the temptations for each believer and the life of the church are viewed from a Pneumatological perspective. Thus, the guidance of the Word and Spirit remains foremost in the discussion and prevents a moralistic reduction of the theological context in which the temptation narrative is situated. These two perspectives are, therefore, not interchangeable and cannot be separated without succumbing to the temptations themselves.

From a Christological perspective the following aspects are of importance: Physical hunger provides the point of contact in the first temptation. This places Jesus firmly in our daily existence and directly in touch with *la condition humaine*. The temptation to turn a stone into bread not only reflects on the human nature of Jesus, but it also carries with it an indirect critique of God’s providence in creation. Ambrosius argues that “If he had therefore decided to change nature, he would have betrayed the Creator (in himself).”

Could this temptation, from a Christological perspective, not be one in which Jesus was tempted to infringe on the work of God the Father—the Creator?

Neugebauer points out that Jesus’ sonship was established by the fact that he used the Word of the Father and not his own words to reject the devil’s proposals, “It is in this case of simply of essential importance that Jesus does not reject the proposal and its eventual consequences in his own words, but that he speaks to the tempter in the words given to him by the Father concerning the way

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238 “Hätte er nämlich die Umwandlung der Natur vorgenommen, würde er den Schöpfer (in sich) verraten haben” (Translation by author) (Köppen, *Die Auslegung der Versuchungsgeschichte* 1961, 40). In answering the question why the devil says, “If you are the son of God…,” Chrysostomus makes mention of the promise in Gen. 3:5 saying that “Hier und dort will der Teufel zeigen, dass Gott seine Geschöpfe getäuscht und hintergangen habe, dass er Jesus umsonst seinen Sohn genannt hat” (Köppen, *Die Auslegung der Versuchungsgeschichte* 1961, 79).
that the Son must follow. The Son calls on the Father. At the same time, however, he allows the words of the Father to do the talking. The Word of the tempted Son is the Word of the Father to the Son.”

The second temptation is directly related to the question of the Messiah. Thompson says this is the only temptation that easily fits into the description messianic. God does promise the whole world to the Son, but only after the Passion and the submission to God’s will (1 Cor 15:28). The devil wants to give Jesus the world, a kingdom for free, as he allegedly received it. Jesus’ acceptance of his offer would have evaded the cross and his whole mission towards the salvation of humankind. Jesus Christ must establish the kingdom of God by way of the cross. If Jesus had evaded the cross, he would have become the anti-Christ.

\[\text{Translation by the author}\]


It must also be noted that this is the only temptation that does not include the line “If you are the Son of God …”. This could either make the proposal to worship the devil more reasonable, or it could very subtly play in on the true vocation of the Son of God.

The other two temptations are not messianic since it is not concerned with bread for others. Jesus’ answer that one should not tempt God does not make sense from a messianic perspective according to Thompson and Schniewind, Thompson, G H P. "Called-Proven-Obedient: A Study in the Baptism and Temptation Narratives of Mathew and Luke." Journal of Theological Studies 11 (1960): 6. Dupont, however, sees the temptation on the temple as a messianic temptation due to its reference to the messianic figure in Ps 91, Dupont, J. "L’arrière-fond biblique du récit des tentations de Jésus." New Testament Studies 3 (1956,7): 298.

The devil is, at the same time, pretending to give like the Father, but without cost and hinting at his own successful ‘messianic’ mission in creating for himself a kingdom in the world.
The Spirit on All Flesh

In the third temptation the devil quotes from scriptures. In a sense, this is the most human of the temptations. No person can make bread from a stone or rule the world, but anyone can jump from the temple. Having caught on to Jesus’ answers, the devil now approaches Jesus with a verse from scripture in a very Reformed and pious manner. It directly impacts on faith and God’s will for humankind. Faith and knowledge of God is given to humankind by the testimony of the Word and the Holy Spirit. If Jesus were to have tested his own faith by relying on an autonomous use of scripture, he would have effectively resisted the work of the Spirit. In a sense, the devil tempts Jesus to take over the work of the Spirit. Jesus remained steadfast in faith and chose to live by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and not by the dictates of his own spirit. Jesus showed that he is the Word of God by not following his own words and thoughts.

In this way, Jesus’ specific vocation within the Trinity was established. From this Christological perspective one can now look at the implications for the believer and the church from a Pneumatological perspective: Jesus grew hungry like the people in the desert, but his physical need did not cause him to tempt God like the people did at Massah. Faith, power, and physical needs are closely linked. There is a connection between prophecy and

243 This is not a temptation to demonstrate power or to gain power like the other two temptations.
245 Despite this fact, Ps 34:10 and Pr 10:13 say that God does not let the righteous go hungry or lack anything.
246 Hunger is not only a sign of human weakness, but insatiable hunger is related to God’s punishment (Is 9:20). Jesus would elaborate on hunger during his ministry saying that it in a sense allows one to break the law (Lk 6:1-3). He would even go as far as saying that the hungry are blessed (Lk 6:21) and pronouncing judgement on those who are not hungry (Lk 6:25).
247 Jn 6, where the people wanted to crown Jesus as king elucidates the relationship between needs and power.
hunger in Scriptures. Elijah, John, and the prophet in 1 Ki 13 prophesied when they were hungry. The prophet in 1 Ki 13 is noteworthy since his hunger caused his downfall. Providing autonomously for one’s own food, and in this way exploiting nature and other people, results from a lack of faith and is basically an attempt to take over the Father’s work of providence. The church and the individual believer have seldom been able to resist this temptation.

If one allows for interrelatedness between the temptations, one could say that the first temptation leads to the second where the power over nature is used to gain power over humankind. The devil’s concern for the needs of Jesus and his power over the whole earth are related. Thus humankind’s (also believers’) attempts at

248 In 1 Ki 17: 6 the ravens fed him after pronouncing judgement over Ahab. 1 Ki 19, Elijah is fleeing before Jezebel after he exacted the judgment of God over the prophets of Baal. He went into the desert and was fed by angels and took a forty-day journey to the mountain of God in Horeb.

249 Mt 3 says he lived from locusts and honey.

250 Having pronounced judgment over the idolatry of Jeroboam, God told him not to eat and drink anything, even if the king offered him something to eat. Having refused the king’s food, another prophet convinced him to take food by saying that God told him to feed the prophet.

251 The manipulation of nature by almighty humanity contradicts belief in the providing Creator. By attempting to replace the Creator, modern man has time and again succumbed to this temptation See the first film in The Decalogue by Krzysztof Kieslowski, where a father loses his child even though he tested the ice before he let his son go ice-skating.

252 Violet saw the Lukan sequence of the temptations as proposals to gain power over nature, man, and God. Mahnke would object by saying that in the first temptation the bread would give power over humankind (Mahnke, Die Versuchungsgeschichte 1978, 173). He does not, however, allow for the possibility of the interrelatedness of the temptations.

253 The intriguing passage in 1 Ki 13 also throws light on the relation between these two temptations. The prophet dies because he did not live from everything that comes from the mouth of God. This highlights the subtlety of the devil and even incorporates the essence of the third temptation by putting the tempter’s
establishing a universal kingdom (or suffering for one) on earth is in a sense an attempt to take over the work of the Son of God.

Looking at the third temptation from a Pneumatological perspective, one could say this is the culmination of all the temptations. It touches on the very foundations of belief in God. Faith is something beyond need, power, and proof. It is empty as the Reformation confessed. Faith is work of the Spirit. The witness of the Spirit to the faith of the Gentiles is sufficient for Peter in Ac 15:10. For the believer to measure faith by the works of the law, Jewish descent, or any other tangible means is infringing on the work of the Spirit.

Looking at the three temptations of Jesus, it has become evident that faith is humanly impossible because it demands that humankind does not provide for itself, does not gain the power to do so, and does not test the wisdom of these acts. Faith is starving powerlessly without ever knowing if it is the right thing to do.

“If you are the Son of God come down from the cross.” The Word and Spirit are witnesses to the fact that he is the Son of God exactly because He did not come down from the cross. Christ is the foundation of our faith. The Holy Spirit is the token of this gift in our hearts. The necessity to make the distinction between the Christological and the Pneumatological perspective now becomes evident. Our faith is the work of the Spirit through whom we participate in the faith of Christ. This faith has been tried and tested. To test this faith again would amount to falling from faith.

254The top of the temple is the highest point in Luke’s account of the temptations, since he does not mention that the devil took Jesus up to a mountain like Matthew.
Noordmans, Dostoyevski, and Mbeki

The chapter will now look at the way the temptation narrative has been interpreted by the Dutch theologian, Oepke Noordmans; the Russian author, Dostoyevski; and the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki in his speech at the Nelson Mandela Memorial Lectures. Noordmans, the theologian, emphasizes the Christological aspects of the temptation narrative, while Dostoyevski explores the Pneumatological aspects by relating the narrative to humanity in its concrete socio-political and religious situation. President Thabo Mbeki refers to the temptation narrative from an anthropological perspective to indicate how citizens should place social cohesion above personal gain in order to live responsibly in South Africa. These three interpretations will be set out in turn and will then be discussed in light of the trinitarian view on the temptations.


In “The Question of Bread,” he points out that both Jesus and Israel were tempted to provide their own food. Jesus chose to follow the Word of God and did not come from the desert with a ready-made social program. As a result he has lifted a huge burden from humankind because we no longer have to ask “what will we eat or drink” for the unconverted pursue these things, while God

257 “Stille Tijd” (Noordmans, Verzamelde Werken Deel 8 1990b, 66-68).
258 “God Verzoeken” (Noordmans, Verzamelde Werken Deel 8 1990b, 278, 279).
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cares for the believers (Mt 6:31, 32). Noordmans says that shows us that “Life should not become mere feeding at a trough.”

In his meditation “Bread for Tomorrow,” he relates the prayer “give us today our daily bread” (from the Lord’s Prayer) to the first temptation. One can too easily view this ‘daily bread’ as that which is your due for today. This way of thinking makes the receiving of bread as something that is part of providence. The danger of this view becomes evident when it is related to the first temptation because the devil tempted Jesus exactly with this daily providential bread. According to Noordmans, the difficult word for ‘daily’ should rather be translated in context as “give us today our bread for tomorrow.” He adds that one must be aware that this fourth prayer in the Lord’s Prayer follows on the prayers for the honouring of God’s name, the establishment of his kingdom, and the doing of his will. In this way, the dependence on God and the faithful expectation of his help is honoured. Then one lives from his bread as promised by the words from his mouth. This is the bread of heaven—of the kingdom of God, which brings salvation (Lk 14: 15).

In Quiet Time, Noordmans indicates that Jesus had to learn in the desert how he was to fulfil his vocation on earth. His baptism confirmed his vocation as the Son of God, but did not show him how he was supposed to go about it. The devil tempted him to find an answer by way of a miracle, but Jesus stayed true to the Word of God as a guide to his vocation. The devil then offered Jesus great power if he would worship him, but again Jesus subdued him through the Word. Finally, the devil quoted from scripture on the roof of the temple—hinting that with one jump Jesus could

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260 “Het leven mag geen trieste voeding worden aan een trog.” (Noordmans, Verzamelde Werken Deel 8 1990b, 277).

261 “Geef ons heden ons brood voor morgen.”

262 Noordmans, Verzamelde Werken Deel 8 1990b, 121.
complete his work. Noordmans contends that Jesus did not find answers in the silence of his thoughts, but found his way in the Psalms and the prophets, groping in the dark from Gethsemane to Golgotha. In the solitude on the cross he still found the answer as to how he was to fulfil his vocation in the Psalms when he said “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

In *Tempting God*, Noordmans indicates that the third temptation is hidden behind the third prayer in the Lord’s Prayer, “your will be done.” The phrase “Let your will be done” is the *sine qua non* of faith and the kingdom of God. God does not act according to our dictates—as is evident in the most definitive moment when Jesus’ cries on the cross, “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me”?

In a sermon on Lk 4:1-13, Noordmans places emphasis on the fact that the forty day period is not a part of our life, but of his life. He knew the hunger, famine, and struggles of human life, and, in this way, came to know a life of waiting, faith, hope, and love. In the second temptation, Jesus chose the mystery of the power of the Father, not that of the devil, to rule over those who wait, believe, and hope. In the third temptation, the choice of Biblical texts becomes a temptation. Jesus did not choose his own texts, but allowed God to lead him on the way to the cross. Noordmans says the hungry, the afflicted, and those who bear their cross will be able to see into the mysteries of Jesus’ temptations.

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263 In a fragment of a letter to his children during the war, Noordmans advises them that God protects our life like he protected the life of Paul when he had to live on the brink of death, but that making an adventure of one’s life, and thus tempting fate, would amount to tempting God, Noordmans, O. *Verzamelde Werken Deel 9B*. Editor: J M Hasselaar e.a. (Kampen: Kok, 1999b), 988, 989.

264 Ps 22 in the KJV.

265 In an answer to a question from his Dutch fellow-theologian, J. J. Buskes, on the relation between the Lord’s Prayer and the three temptations, Noordmans agrees that it is not so obvious to relate the second temptation to the second prayer, but that the analogy between the Lord’s Prayer and the temptations are still too striking to disregard (Noordmans, *Verzamelde Werken Deel 9B* 1999b, 820, 821).
In the *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevski provides us with an extensive discussion on the temptation of Jesus in the chapter about the Grand Inquisitor.\(^{266}\)

Jesus appears in Spain during the Inquisition one day after more than hundred heretics were burned at the stake. He performs miracles in healing the sick and is promptly arrested and taken prisoner by the Inquisitor. He visits Jesus alone at night and rebukes him for having taking so long to appear on earth again. He is, however, keen enough to know that Jesus would not add anything to what he had already said because this would take away men’s freedom of faith.

Then the Inquisitor refers to the temptation in the desert. What he calls the “wise spirit of self-destruction” revealed the whole future of humankind in these three “apparent” temptations. All the insoluble historical contradictions in human nature meet in them. Jesus did not follow his advice, but went into the world empty-handed.

If Jesus had turned the stones into bread, he could have made men run after him like sheep, grateful and obedient. Jesus, however, did not want to coerce men into belief, but wanted men to love freely. For earthly bread, the spirit of the earth will rise against Jesus, and men will proclaim: “…that there is no crime, and, therefore, no sin, but that there are only hungry people.”\(^{267}\) In his work, *Diary of a Writer*, Dostoyevski goes as far as saying that the need for food reduces humans to bestiality. Human life loses all its humanity, and the image of humans is replaced by the image of cattle when “stones turned into bread” rule their lives.\(^{268}\)

Since Jesus did not prevent the suffering caused in the search for bread, the people ran to the church. People realized that there

\(^{266}\) This is a poem written by Ivan Karamazov that he recounts to Alyosha, his younger brother (Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov* 1958a, 289-311).

\(^{267}\) Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov* 1958a, 296.

cannot be enough bread and freedom because humankind is not able to let everyone have his fair share. There are those who would follow Jesus for heavenly bread, but the millions who are weak and worthless will follow whoever gives them earthly bread. The Inquisitor tries to show that they (the church) actually love the weak more than Jesus.

The second temptation touches on the need in human nature for universal worship. Men have killed each other to find one incontestable truth, which they could all worship together. Jesus knew this, but rejected the opportunity to make all men worship him by means of the incontestable truth of bread.

The Inquisitor understands that Jesus was aware that humankind does not only need bread, but also a sound conscience. “For the mystery of human life is not only in living, but in knowing why one lives.” This is another tormenting truth of human nature, which humankind is not able to endure. Instead of giving humankind a firm foundation for choosing between good and evil, Jesus chose everything vague and unsure. In doing this he ensured humankind’s freedom, but this burden was too much for humankind to bear. Jesus left humankind in such confusion and despair that they eventually rejected Jesus’ kingdom.

The wise spirit showed the three forces that could capture the conscience of the weak rebels; namely—miracle, mystery, and authority. On the temple, when the spirit asked Jesus to cast himself down, he rejected the offer because he was too proud, but humankind is weak. Jesus knew if he took one step forward he would have tempted God, lost all faith in him, and would have been dashed to pieces against the earth he came to save. The Inquisitor says that humankind is mostly too weak to reject a miracle at the

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269 Dostoyevski, The Brothers Karamazov 1958a, 298.

270 Dostoyevski sums up the three temptations with the terms ‘miracle, mystery, and authority.’ It must be noted that he follows the sequence of the temptations in Matthew where the offering of dominion over the kingdoms of the earth follows on the temptation to jump from the top of the temple.
most fearful moments in life. Humankind needs miracles, but Jesus did not come down from the cross and win humankind over with a miracle. Jesus wants faith from free will and free love. If Jesus respected humankind less, he would have asked less of it. Since he did not, humankind would be driven to despair and end up blaspheming against God. If Jesus only came for the chosen, this is a mystery. The church also has mystery, but the mystery of blind obedience. On the basis of miracle, mystery, and authority, they will lead men like sheep. As the Inquisitor says, “Did we not love humankind when we admitted so humbly its impotence and lovingly lightened its burden and allowed humankind’s weak nature even to sin, so long as it was with our permission”?271

The church has taken over the authority of Caesar and has thus accepted the third counsel of the wise spirit. In doing so, the church has accomplished everything humankind seeks: whom to worship, to whom to entrust his conscience, and how to unite everyone.

In his Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture, President Mbeki272 quotes Nelson Mandela in saying that South Africa needs a RDP (Reconstruction and Development Program) of the soul. Where the RDP was intended to help in the material need of people, he agrees with Nelson Mandela that human beings also have spiritual needs that cannot be ignored. Subsequently, he elaborates on the social conditions that prevent the development of a society with a soul that is humane and caring.

Since 1910, capitalism, with its material rather than moral incentives, has been used to buy out the whole white population to accumulate capital and defend the status quo. Since the liberation of 1994, the capitalist value of individual wealth as a measure of

271 Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov* 1958a, 301.

success is still dominant even among the oppressed. Social capital and the capitalist market replaced social relations and solidarity (Ubuntu). President Mbeki calls these forces demons that are embedded in the society that incessantly advise us to “get rich! get rich! get rich”! He says that the intangible gift of liberty has been replaced by the tangible reality of property and the status that goes with it.

Mbeki quotes George Soros in calling this capitalist value of private profit maximization ‘Market Fundamentalism,’ and sees it as a negation of social cohesion and human interdependence. He refers to Engels and Lenin as exponents of materialist philosophy, who say that humankind must first eat before it can think and engage in politics, science, art, and religion.

From Idealistic philosophy and the Bible, Mbeki, however, attempts to illustrate that life is more than economy. He then quotes from the temptation narrative saying, “…the Biblical injunction is surely correct, that ‘humankind cannot live by bread alone’, and that the mere pursuit of individual wealth can never satisfy the need immanent in all human beings to lead lives of happiness.”

Mbeki asks the question of how people can become cruel and inhumane, and, concurring with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, he expresses the hope that South Africa should never permit itself to witness the inhuman actions of colonialism and apartheid again. The question of reconciliation of nations must remain as a central concern on the agenda of humanity. He concludes by reiterating that South Africa needs a RDP of the soul.

**Conclusion**

Noordmans treats the temptation narrative mostly from a Christological perspective, with the main emphasis on the vocation of Christ and the question of how he is to be the Son of God in the world. The forty days in the desert is not part of our human life, but

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a part of Jesus Christ’s life. There is no possibility to reduce the temptation narrative to a moral exhortation from Noordmans’ perspective. The temptations are all about Jesus Christ who neither proves his sonship with a miracle, nor works out a program on how to fulfil his vocation, nor forces God to help him. Depending on God, seeking the Father’s will, and not demanding proof point to the seemingly empty content of his vocation.

Dostoyevski refers only twice to Christological issues. Firstly, the Inquisitor says that Jesus is not allowed to say anything in addition to what is said in scriptures, which is in agreement with the temptation narrative. Secondly, the Inquisitor says that Christ could not have come down from the cross to force humankind to believe. In making these two Christological references, Dostoyevski places his predominantly Pneumatological perspective within a Christological framework where Christ’s work is related to humankind.

With the miracle of food and the mysterious relief of conscience, the church will unite humankind under one authority in universal worship. Jesus did not follow this three-step program to gain possession of men’s hearts. Jesus respected humankind too much to coerce it into loving or believing. Here Dostoyevski touches on the central problem of human faith; namely, that if there is any form of coercion involved, then it can no longer be faith.

On this point, Noordmans agrees with Dostoyevski from a Pneumatological perspective by saying that belief excludes the possibility of a program. He sums up the temptations by saying that they are all related to the will of God because “thy will be done” is the essence of faith. What Noordmans has Christologically indicated, Dostoyevski has Pneumatologically illustrated.

Mbeki does not have any Christological references and therefore views the temptation narrative from an anthropological perspective.

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274 In the Brothers Karamazov, Jesus never says a word to the Inquisitor, only kisses him softly after he has spoken.
Mbeki proposes that the RDP in South Africa, which is aimed at providing in the physical needs of people, is not sufficient to build a happy society, but that an RDP of the soul is necessary. In this regard, he agrees with Noordmans who says that humankind must not be reduced to mere feeding animals, and with Dostoyevski who says that bread will reduce humankind to obedient sheep and bestiality.

Mbeki illustrates historically how the white people in South Africa were bought since 1910 with bread (capital) and that the new South Africa must avoid this from happening again by not giving in to the demons of market economy, but to build a happy nation through social cohesion and Ubuntu (which would be the “more than bread alone” for Mbeki). Dostoyevski’s Inquisitor, however, points out the difficulty that Mbeki faces by showing that earthly bread rather than the bread of heaven is all that can ensure peace and happiness. For Dostoyevski the RDP that focuses on physical need and the RDP of the soul would be mutually exclusive.

Mbeki is aware of the problem he encounters when he asks the question of how a people can become so inhumane and cruel. The terrible answer is that it is done for bread and survival, but also for happiness. In Dostoyevski’s terms, the white people in South Africa’s soul was bought with bread, they gave up their conscience to the authority of the Dutch Reformed Church who thus created universal worship through the power of bread. In light of the Inquisitor’s speech, the motivation behind it all was unity and love. This love did not include only the personal love of the white husband for his wife and children, but also the love for the weak, childlike, black people.

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275 Interestingly, the (South African) one Rand coin still bears the adagio of the Reformation: soli Deo Gloria (to God alone the glory).

276 Ironically, the motto of the Republic of South Africa has always been ex unitate vires – “strength from unity.”
Would Mbeki’s proposal of social reconciliation and cohesion prevent similar inhuman actions? Would this unity not be another form of the capture of conscience of which the Inquisitor speaks, which is motivated by love? Would a unity of conscience under *Ubuntu* be a better bulwark against inhumanity than the ‘Christian’ unity of conscience of the white Afrikaner people?

Mbeki’s anthropological approach has positive aspects because he is calling for liberation from the demons of market fundamentalism and personal enrichment. One could say that his audience did not allow him to speak of Christ, but exactly therein lies the danger of his use of Scripture. Humankind is about more than the question of bread, agreed, but striving for a unity under any other spirit than the Holy Spirit through the cross, the Bread of Life, the person of Jesus Christ, is succumbing to the second temptation.

In the Word of God, eating the bread of heaven is becoming bread for others. The problem is that this cannot be translated into a program. Mere ideas of humanity, charity, reconciliation, and love will not protect humankind against disaster. The devil uses these very things to tempt humankind away from faith in God. Any such anthropological translation of the temptations is tantamount to succumbing to the temptations themselves. The ultimate of this would be to see oneself, like the Inquisitor, as one of those who will ‘lovingly’ better Christ’s work, rather than submitting to the will of God the Father and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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277 His audience contained Christian and non-Christian people.

278 How would we be able to distinguish the voice of the Holy Spirit from the voice of the evil spirit if it seems that the Holy Spirit is not as a matter of course on the side of the hungry? As Dostoyevski says, nothing is more tangibly, universally true than bread. Who could possibly speak against someone that is concerned with the poor in South Africa today?