In my previous post I started to discuss the hypothetical Signs Source that some scholars have claimed lay behind the accounts of Jesus’ miracles in the Gospel of John – one of the now lost documents of early Christianity (assuming it once existed) that I very much wish could be discovered. Before giving evidence that there was some such written source, I started in the last post by discussing the distinctive view of Jesus’ spectacular deeds in the Fourth Gospel, where they are called “signs” rather than “miracles.”

In that post I argued that John has a completely different view of these deeds from that found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In these Synoptics Jesus refuses to do miracles in order to prove his identity. When he is asked to do so, he indicates that “no sign will be given to this generation” – apart from the sign of Jonah. Not so in John. Jesus does signs. They are designed to make people believe who he is (4:54). And the Gospel writer himself indicates that this is the very reason he narrates them (20:30-31).

Once more, before discussing evidence that the writer had a written source for his account of Jesus’ signs (soon, I promise!) I thought it would be interesting to illustrate these points of difference between the Synoptics and John by discussing one of the important stories found in the former but not in the latter.

In all three of the Synoptics, Jesus is “tempted” by the Devil in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry. This story is not found in John.

Mark has only a very brief mention of the 40-day temptation (Mark 1). Matthew and Luke have the familiar three-temptations (Matthew 4 and Luke 4). That means their passages come from Q (another hypothetical source: the one that gave Matthew and Luke the material they have that is not found in Mark). It is one of the two narratives known to have been in Q; all the other Q materials are sayings. The Temptation narrative itself is principally sayings – of the Devil and Jesus. But the sayings are set in a narrative context, unlike virtually all the rest of Q.

The three temptations are given in different orders in Matthew and Luke: what is the second temptation in Matthew is the third in Luke, and vice versa. Following the somewhat less familiar order of Luke, the first temptation comes after Jesus has been fasting for forty days. The devil appears to him and tells him that if he is the Son of God, he should make the stones turn into bread and satisfy his hunger. Jesus rebukes the temptation by quoting a Scripture from the book of Deuteronomy: “A person does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

This second temptation is especially interesting and not always fully understood. The devil is not simply promising Jesus power over the kingdoms of the earth. He is promising to
give Jesus that power without requiring him to suffer first. For the Gospels, Jesus will
indeed be given the power and the glory over the earth. But first he must die for the sins of
the world. This is a temptation not to go to the cross.

The third temptation is the hardest to understand, or at least is the one that is least
understood. The devil takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple, that is, to its highest
point. That was pretty high – as tall as a modern ten-story building. The devil urges Jesus
to jump off, since Scripture indicates that God will not allow his chosen one to come to
harm: the angels will swoop down and catch him before he hits bottom. Once more Jesus
quotes the book of Deuteronomy: You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.

So it’s not hard to see how Jesus resists this temptation. But what exactly is the
temptation? The other two are easy to understand. In the first he is hungry and is tempted
to do a miracle to feed himself. In the second he is being tempted not to suffer. But what
exactly is tempting about jumping off a ten-story building?

I think the key to understanding the story is to realize where this building was. It was the
temple, in the heart of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship. And who would be there,
oberving his actions? Faithful Jews. If he were to jump, and the angels came then and
swooped him up, everyone below would see. And they would realize who he is, the Son of
God.

This is a temptation to prove his identity by doing a miracle. And Jesus rejects it as a
Satanic temptation.

That is why it makes perfect sense that this story is not in the Gospel of John. It is
impossible to know if John had ever heard the story, but even if he had, I think it highly
unlikely indeed that he would have told it. That’s because the view of Jesus’ miracles
implicit in the story is just the opposite of John’s own view. This story presupposed that
Jesus would not do a miracle as a sign to prove who he is. But in the Gospel of John that is
precisely why he does miracles – all of his miracles. They are signs to unbelievers to show
that Jesus is the Son of God, so that they can believe in him.

**Why Jesus Does Miracles**

**Signs in the Gospel of John**