

January 5, 2003
The Eve of Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Two mountain scenes in Matthew's gospel are studied best, I submit, when studied together: his first, wherein the Lord is tempted (4:8), and his last, in which Jesus commissions the Apostles (28:16).

First, there is the mountain of the Lord's temptation. Matthew's account of the three temptations places the mountain scene last in the series, making it the climax of his whole temptation narrative. It is instructive to contrast Matthew with Luke in this respect. In Luke's temptation narrative the climactic third place is occupied by the scene, not on the mountain, but on the pinnacle of the temple (4:9).

On the presumption that both Matthew and Luke relied on a common source for their temptation stories, it is really quite impossible to say which evangelist changed the original order of the temptations, because in each version a special propriety attends the literary setting of that third temptation. We may look at Luke and Matthew individually in this respect.

Luke, in placing the Lord's third temptation on the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem (4:9), is consistent with his usual pattern of emphasis on Jerusalem in general and on the temple in particular. Not only does Luke treat the whole public ministry of Jesus as a journey to Jerusalem (cf. 9:31,51,53), he makes the temple itself the culminating point of his infancy narrative (2:27,41-46). Indeed, Luke begins and ends his gospel in the temple (1:9; 24: 53). It is hardly surprising, then, that Luke's temptation story also culminates at the temple, and numerous interpreters of Holy Scripture have argued that this arrangement of the story was specifically crafted by Luke to fit a more general pattern in his work.

This is far from certain, however, and a closer look at Matthew may prompt us to think that it was he, not Luke, who made the change. By putting the Lord's third temptation on top of "an exceedingly high mountain," Matthew placed Satan's political enticement in the climactic position. It was on that

mountain that Satan "showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (4:8). This was the attraction to grasp international power by receiving it from Satan: "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me" (4:9). Now, how is this special placement of the third temptation consistent with Matthew's gospel in general?

Adequately to address this question, we must go to the final mountain scene in Matthew, that Galilean mountain where the Lord commissions the Apostles. Just as Luke's story of the Lord's temptations ends at the temple, the same place where Luke ends his whole gospel, so Matthew ends his own story of the Lord's temptations on a mountain, the same place where he ends his whole gospel. The internal consistency of each narrative could hardly be more striking.

In the case of Matthew, this consistency prompts a further comparison of his first and final mountain scenes. On Matthew's first mountain, as we observed, the temptation has to do with "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory." The Lord rejects that temptation to political power, in which Satan pledges to give Him "all these things." Now it is remarkable that these very nations also appear on Matthew's final mountain, where the Lord sends out His Apostles with the mandate to "make disciples of all the nations" (28:19). In the first instance, Satan offers universal political power to Jesus. In the second, Jesus commissions the Apostles to a universal ministry founded in His own authority as the Son of Man prophesied by Daniel: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations." Jesus' reception of this universal authority from God is thus contrasted with Satan's earlier offer of a universal gift of "the nations and their glory."

All the other mountains in Matthew are positioned between these first and last: the mountain of the Beatitudes (5:1; 8:1), the mountain of Jesus' prayer (14:23), the other mountain of His teaching and healing (15:29), the mountain of the Transfiguration (17:1,9), and the Mount of Olives (21:1; 24:3; 26:30). These mountains are all embraced within the ministry of Jesus, which begins with "all the kingdoms of the world" in thralldom to Satan, and ends with the commission to "make disciples of all the nations."

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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