

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10: 8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Notes on the Old Testament Lesson

This passage is one of the occasions that instruct the people of Israel to offer God the “first fruits” of a harvest. The principle is simple: all that we have is because of God’s blessings. To show that we recognize this fact we offer back to God the first produce of a harvest. The principle was not limited to the early Israelites. Ancient Greeks and Romans also honored their gods with a first fruits offering.

This is also one of the many passages that refer to the land of Israel as “a land flowing with milk and honey”. This oft-misunderstood reference contains a literal truth. The Holy Land contains an astounding array of geographic features. In the south there is abundant pastoral land in which sheep and goats may graze. While we get most of our milk from cows, in ancient Palestine the primary source of milk was goats.

The northern part of the country has incredibly rich soil and a year-long growing season which supports a wide variety of agricultural products. The flora of the north also attracts bees that make honey. The phrase, “a land flowing with milk and honey” describes a land that supports both herding and agriculture.

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

The Wilderness in which Jesus was tempted is a place. In this case, “wilderness” is a proper noun, referring to the “Wilderness of Judea”. (Although some translations use “desert” instead of “wilderness”, this term is incorrect as the region does not conform to the definition of a desert.) A rough description of the Wilderness of Judea is that it is bordered by the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem south to the area of Bethlehem, east to the Dead Sea, north to Jericho, and then west back to the Mount of Olives. It is a spectacular area that closely resembles a moonscape for most of the year (see photo right) but bursts into green growth during the rainy season. It is also literally covered with stones so that the temptation to change stones into bread was not to provide immediate sustenance but an abundance.



The “pinnacle of the Temple” was for many years mis-identified as the southeast corner of the Temple Mount as that corner towered over the deep Kidron Valley. An excavation in the early 1990’s revealed the correct location: the southwestern corner of the Temple Mount. Uncovered in those excavations was the pinnacle itself, marked by the broken inscription on its left side. This top corner of the wall sits today where it fell in A.D. 70 when the Temple was destroyed by the Roman army (see photo right). The inscription reads, “to the place of trumpeting to declare...”. The Mishnah, the written collection of oral Jewish law, describes how a trumpet blast from the Temple’s pinnacle would announce (or declare) the beginning and end of Sabbath, feasts, and other holy days.



Note that the devil’s temptation in verses 10 and 11 are from this week’s Psalter reading, verses 11 and 12.

There is another important aspect to this week’s Gospel Lesson. Although somewhat complex, it offers a crucial insight to this passage of Scripture.

Jesus did not grow up in a twenty first century American culture, but one of the first century Mediterranean world. Our western culture is guilt-based. Even the theology of western Christianity is largely based on guilt and forgiveness. The first century Mediterranean culture, and much of Middle Eastern culture today, is based instead on an honor/shame system. This system permeates every aspect of one’s life. There is simply nothing more important to an individual in such a culture than maintaining one’s honor and avoiding shame.

Much of one’s honor comes from the family into which one is born. Having an impressive lineage or having a great person as an ancestor brings great honor. In such a culture, loyalty to one’s family is paramount. The obedience and respect that was due to one’s parents when one was an adult was no less than that which was due as a little child.

With this much abridged background in mind, consider the context of this week’s Gospel Lesson. Luke has just completed his genealogy of Jesus; a genealogy that begins with Joseph, goes through David - the greatest of Israel’s kings - and goes all the way to Adam but it does not stop there. The last three individuals mentioned are “Seth, son of Adam, son of God”. From the very beginning, Luke is demonstrating to an honor/shame culture that Jesus has the greatest of all possible lineages; he is the son of God.

In the Temptation story, that claim is challenged. The devil puts Jesus to the test and in reply to each test; Jesus quotes scripture which, in effect, is quoting his father. Jesus is demonstrating his upmost loyalty to his heavenly father as well as his solidarity with his heavenly father. A person

from an honor/shame culture would immediately understand this to mean that the honor claim about Jesus is true.