

Chapter 2

Overburdening Jesus with divinity causes theological limitations: Matthew 4:1-11 as test case

*Peter Nagel*¹

1. Introduction

The divinity of Jesus is a contentious issue and arguments both against and in favour of it have been widespread ever since the start of his public ministry in the early first century CE. Furthermore, it is reasonable to infer that the New Testament authors, in general, defined “divinity” as possessing “super” human abilities;² and that the title “Son of God” was used for someone with such abilities. It does, however, seem as if the Matthean Gospel explored alternative ways of understanding “divinity,” especially in relation to Jesus as the “Son of God.” The theory to be tested, here, is if the Jewish embeddedness of the Matthean Gospel encouraged the author to explore alternative ways of understanding the divinity of Jesus.³ The premise underlying this theory is that the theological potential of the Matthean Gospel lies within the reinterpretation

1 Dr Peter Nagel, Department of Old and New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion; University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.

2 It should be noted that there are various nuanced emphases and differences between the New Testament authors in this regard. It goes without saying that there was no uniform idea of “divinity.” Moreover, I do not suggest that the New Testament authors intentionally defined “divinity.” Based on the New Testament evidence, I postulate that they would have defined “divinity” as possessing supernatural abilities.

3 Versnel (2011:268) makes a valuable remark that “the terms *ho theos*, *hoi theoi*, *to theion*, *ho daimon*, *hoi daimones*, referring to an anonymous and mysteriously interfering divine (or at least supernatural) power, abound in Greek idiom of all periods”; see also Klauck (2000:25-30).

and recontextualisation of the Jewish tradition. Therefore, the emphasis on the divinity of Jesus in the traditional sense of the word undermines and limits the theology offered by the Jewish tradition. The continuation of the Jewish tradition is the foundation for theological relevance and effectiveness of the Matthean Gospel in and through the person of Jesus; I summarise this in the title of this chapter as “overburdening Jesus with divinity causes theological limitations.” A valid question in this regard is if the Matthean Gospel has any interest in divinising Jesus.

The primary aim of this chapter is not to address the divinity issue *per se*.⁴ It aims, rather, to evaluate and discuss the theological⁵ limitations that result from overburdening Jesus with divinity, seen specifically in the context of Matthew 4:1-11. The contention here is that the devil is representative of the “traditional” understanding of Jesus’ divinity as the “Son of God.” Moreover, the author allows the devil to confront Jesus as “Son of God,” while playing into three essential Jewish roles, prophet (the desert), priest (the temple), and king (the mountain) symbolically representing the Jewish tradition as a whole, making Matthew 4:1-11 an ideal literary context to test the theory of whether the Jewish embeddedness of the Matthean Gospel encouraged the author to explore alternative ways of understanding Jesus’ divinity.⁶ A simple textual analysis of this passage will reveal the traditional understanding of divinity as having the ability to perform supernatural deeds, and to act metaphysically. The tone for the scene in Matthew 4:1-11 is set with the phrase *καὶ καλέσουσιν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἐμμανουήλ* (Matt. 1:23b), explained in the Greek vernacular as *ὁ ἐστὶν μεθερμηνεύμενον μεθ’ ἡμῶν ὁ θεός*. Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, is

4 I agree with Versnel (2011:382) that human beings (including the author of the Matthean Gospel) cannot perceive a completely non-anthropomorphic “god” since we cannot speak about him/her in non-anthropomorphic terms. In the case of the Matthean Gospel, the appropriate “anthropomorphic” constructs to use are for the most part informed by the Jewish tradition.

5 My working definition for theology is that it concerns both the verbal and non-verbal expression of – and reflection on – the human experience of and relation to the Transcendent, embedded as it is in a deep spiritual awareness and existential experience.

6 Versnel (2011:390) makes a valuable remark that “gods unite complete sets of anthropomorphic and allomorphic characteristics, which are all available on demand according to situation and context.”

introduced here as the “coming-into-flesh” of $\text{לֵא} (El, \text{the wise Hebrew deity}).$ ⁷ This construct signifies a great deal more than the mere identification of Jesus as the expected Messiah.⁸ It is the Hebrew deity – the metaphysical – that becomes existential in the flesh and person of Jesus. This gives rise, though not exclusively so, to the “Son of God” title. This construct, sanctioned by the Isaiah 7:14 citation, allows the author of the Matthean Gospel to present the Hebrew deity in anthropomorphic terms, even though the idea that a person “embodies” the Hebrew deity, and may thus himself be deemed divine, was wholly unacceptable in Jewish thought, as is clear from the interaction between the high priest and Jesus in Matthew 26:59-66.⁹ The creative challenge for the Matthean Gospel is to show how Jesus as Emmanuel reveals the God of the Jews.

The identity of the son of Mary and Joseph in relation to the Hebrew deity stems from first century Jewish-Christian thought. According to Dean Overmann (2010:10), the divinity of Jesus relies on the consistency of the high Christology found in primitive Christianity. Udo Schnelle (2007:48),¹⁰ on the other hand, refers to Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), who argued that the Jesus of history¹¹

7 The Hebrew phrase לֵא וְנִבְּנָה , captured by the Greek Ἐμμανουήλ , forms the centripetal force of Jesus’ divinity. Knupp (1996:164) refers to “Emmanuel” as the collective remnant and corporate faith in God’s deliverance; the “with-us-God” embodies the assurance of God’s dynamic power.

8 An important question in this regard is how the title Χριστός relates to the concepts Ἐμμανουήλ and ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ . The term Χριστός , used as title for Jesus, was adopted very early on in primitive Jewish-Christian thought, even as the divinity of Jesus remained a contentious issue (Ochs 2013:3-6); Hahn (2011a:530), on the other hand, notes that, for the Matthean Gospel, the Χριστός title is closely related to the Old Testament Messianic tradition. For a more in-depth study on Messianism in Second Temple Judaism, see Horbury (1998:5-35), in particular his discussion of the messianic origins and the cult of Christ (Horbury 1998:109-152).

9 It is obvious that the “Emmanuel” construct does not imply that the recipients of the Gospel will ascribe the unique qualities of the Hebrew deity to Jesus, e.g. immortality and power over nature and human life (see Versnel 2011:391).

10 Schnelle also refers to M. Kähler, who is of the opinion that Jesus can only be comprehended through the Gospels, while for Bultmann Jesus can only be known clothed with a mythical garment (Schnelle 2007:49; see Hahn 2011a:31).

11 Hahn (2011a:31) explains the distinction made in the German vernacular between the “historischer Jesus” and the “irdischer Jesus.” The former implies Jesus as the object of historical critical research, while the latter refers to the proclaimed, post-Easter Jesus

and the proclaimed Christ are not identical. The discovery of new artefacts around the middle of the 20th century (Qumran and Nag-Hammadi manuscripts, especially the Gospel of Thomas), heralded the era of interpreting Jesus of Nazareth within the context of Judaism. Overmann alludes to the prominence of these artefacts, especially the Gospel of Thomas and its dating, as “prooftexts” for the human nature of Jesus. Overmann will concur with Schnelle’s critique on the matter:

Das Ziel solcher Konstruktion liegt zweifellos darin, die Deutungsmacht der kanonischen Evangelien zu brechen und ein alternatives Jesusbild zu etablieren. Dabei dienen häufig die Lust am Sensationellen, die bloße Vermutung und das unbewiesene Postulat als Stimulans für eine bewusst öffentlichkeitswirksam geführte Debatte. Historischer Kritik halten solche Konstruktionen nicht stand, denn weder die Existenz eines, geheimen Markusevangeliums’ oder einer „Semeia Quelle” lassen sich wahrscheinlich machen und das Thomasevangelium gehört in das 2.Jh.! (Schnelle 2007:51; see Overmann 2010:7-8).

The Matthean Gospel uses the “significant other”, the devil, to “force” Jesus to act “stereotypically” divine and by so doing, highlights the theological potential of Jesus as the “Son of Man.” The question whether the Matthean Gospel nurtured the divinity of Jesus will be addressed next.

2. Does the Matthean Gospel nurture the divine identity of Jesus?¹²

The title “Son of Man” dominates in the Matthean Gospel,¹³ and, according to Schnelle (2007:131), refers to “eine himmlische, menschenähnliche Gestalt

as the exalted “Lord”: “... vorösterliche Geschichte und Botschaft Jesus, und sie ist die Grundlage für die gesamte nachösterliche Tradition” (Hahn 2011a:128).

12 Kim (1983:3) argues that Mark’s adaption of Peter’s response to Jesus’ question, from *σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστός* (Mark 8:29) to *σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστός ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζώντος* (Matt. 16:16) is the clearest example of the equation of the Son of Man with the Son of God in the Synoptic Gospels. Kim fails to take the text-critical data into account, however. The text-critical data for Mark 8:29 suggest a variant reading in codex Sinaiticus, among others, as *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ*. One could, therefore, infer that *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ* came from an earlier *Vorlage* from which both Mark and Matthew inherited the concept. The *Χριστός* title is nowhere near a dominant term in the Matthean Gospel. It is used in only five instances (Matt. 1:1, 17, 18; 11:2; 23:10), two of which are in close conceptual proximity to the term *Ἰησοῦς* (Matt. 1:1, 18).

13 Matt. 8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8, 40; 13:37; 17:9, 12, 22; 19:28; 20:18; 25:31; 26:2, 24, 45; see Schnelle (2007:130-134). O’Collins (2009:62) mentions that Jesus refers to

mit Richter-, Herrscher- und Retterfunktion". This interpretation of the "Son of Man" as a "heavenly" being in human form fits in well with the kingdom of heaven-construct, also predominately used throughout the Gospel.¹⁴ The concept of heaven as a divine locality, on the one hand, and the title "Son of Man" ascribed to Jesus, on the other, reveals Jesus' unique relationship to this locality, and reveals his authoritative function. This, however, does not necessarily speak to Jesus' divine character.¹⁵ To determine the author's predisposition to the divinity of Jesus, one ought to attend to two other titles used for Jesus, namely Jesus as "Son of God," and Jesus as "the Christ."¹⁶ By doing this, it is not suggested that the author's perception of Jesus' divinity is limited to these titles or constructs. Rather, it is generally accepted that the definitions of these concepts inform the divine nature of Jesus (O'Collins 2009:229-334).¹⁷

himself as "Son of Man" sixty-nine times in the Gospels. As part of the Jewish polemic against Jesus' divinity, Ochs deals extensively with the title "Son of Man"; in *Sefer Yosef ha-Meqanne* (Ochs 2013:149-151, 158); in *Kelimmat ha-Goyim* (Ochs 2013:271); and in *Hizzuq Emunah* (Ochs 2013:302, 309, 311).

- 14 Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 5:10, 19, 20; 7:21; 8:11; 10:7; 11:11, 12; 13:11, 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52; 18:1, 3, 4, 23; 19:12, 14, 23; 20:1; 22:2; 23:13; 25:1. The author also alludes to *ἄγγελοι ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ* (Matt. 22:30; 24:36). The construct *παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς μου τοῦ ἐν οὐρανοῖς* (Matt. 7:11, 21; 10:32, 33; 11:25; 12:50; 18:10; 14, 19) is not only prominent, but also well developed. The concept of *τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ* (Matt. 5:16, 45; 6:1, 9, 26; 8:20; 13:32), though not as frequently used, emphasises the author's inclination towards "heaven" as a divine locality. The voice and spirit from heaven during Jesus' baptism further highlights this notion (Matt. 3:16); see Hahn (2011a:527).
- 15 Regarding the origin of the "Son of God" title, O'Collins (2009:122) reiterates that 1 Thes. 1:10 is the oldest Christian reference to Jesus as Son of God. From this he argues, and I agree, that for Matthew the destiny of God's (collective) son, Israel, was understood to have been fulfilled in Jesus (O'Collins 2009:123). The pre-Christian, Judaic version of the "Son of God" as royal sonship, if you will, dominates the Matthean Gospel (see O'Collins 2009:122-126). Also see the discussion on Jesus as god/God in Dunn (2010:132-136). Hurtado (2005:46-48) would categorise Jesus as one of the principle agents of the One God.
- 16 Hahn (2011a:530) describes how the title *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ*, the conception through the Holy Spirit, and the virgin birth, are intertwined with the Messianic function. The temptation narrative, as captured in Matt. 4:1-11, is a perfect example of the connection between the divine sonship of Jesus and his messianic function (Hahn 2011a:530).
- 17 See the discussion on the revision of the exclusive understanding of titles assigned to Jesus and the problems associated with the Christological title in Theißen & Merz (2011:453-455), as well as the discussion on the development from Messiah to the

The ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ construct occurs as a title for Jesus in only ten instances,¹⁸ and is never claimed by Jesus himself.¹⁹ In the Beatitudes, we learn that “peacemakers” will be called υἱοὶ θεοῦ (Matt. 5:9), but in light of chapter 4, it is the two demon-possessed men who draw attention when they refer to Jesus as υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ. This is not a statement made in the third person; instead they are addressing, in fact mocking, Jesus to his face (Matt. 8:29). They (the demons) apparently know that Jesus is able to drive them out of the men because of his so-called “divine” status as the “Son of God.” Suspiciously, it is first the demons, and later the devil, that push the metaphysical dimension of Jesus’ divine character. Following Peter’s failed attempt to walk on water, and Jesus’ ability to calm the winds, those around him confess: ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς εἶ (Matt. 14:33). Ironically, it is the same Peter who, in response to Jesus’ question of who the disciples say he is, confesses in Caesarea Philippi: σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος (Matt. 16:16).

It is noteworthy that a confession of this nature is never isolated from a response by Jesus himself, confirming that this perception of both Jesus and his divine nature is being critiqued or put into context. This particularly holds true for Matthew 26:63, where the high priest poses the question to Jesus: ἐξορκίζω σε κατὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος ἵνα ἡμῖν εἴπῃς εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (“I charge you under oath before the living God, to tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God”). Jesus does not answer in the affirmative, but responds as follows: ἀπ’ ἄρτι ὄψεσθε τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καθήμενον ἐκ δεξιῶν τῆς δυνάμεως καὶ ἐρχόμενον ἐπὶ τῶν νεφελῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (“But I say to you all, that in future the Son of Man will be sitting on the right hand of the mighty one and coming on the clouds of heaven”), herewith affirming his cosmic-apocalyptic function as the “Son of Man.” The contemptuous nature of referring to Jesus as the “Son of God” is also illustrated in Matthew 27:39-44, when those passing Jesus on the cross call out at him: εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ, [καὶ] κατὰβηθι ἀπὸ τοῦ σταυροῦ. The chief priests and

“Son of God” (Theißen & Merz 2011:481-482). See Schnelle (2007:134-136), as well as his discussion on the development of the Christological title (Schnelle 2007:163-172); as well as Hahn (2011b:194-225).

18 Matt. 4:3, 6; 5:9; 8:29; 14:33; 16:16; 26:63; 27:40, 43, 54.

19 The prominence of the “Son of David” title should also not be overlooked. The opening lines of the Gospel begin with Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ υἱοῦ Δαυὶδ υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ (see Matt. 1:20; 9:27; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15). The father-son analogy is alluded to in Matt. 11:27; see Matt. 5:45.

teachers, also party to the mocking of Jesus, went a step further by suggesting that Jesus should wait for God to rescue him, since Jesus had proclaimed his trust in God by claiming, θεοῦ εἶμι υἱός. This statement made by the chief priests and teachers is, of course, false. Jesus never referred or alluded to himself as the “Son of God,” but used the title “Son of Man.” Their mocking thus reflects their ill-informed perception of Jesus’ identity, and their skewed expectation of his presumed divinity as “Son of God.”

Table 1 provides a condensed overview on how the title “Son of God” is used in the Matthean Gospel.

Table 1: An overview on how the title “Son of God” is used in the Matthean Gospel

Text reference	Construct	Context	Person uttering it
Matt. 5:9	Peacemakers will be called “sons of God”	Beatitudes, Sermon on the Mount	Jesus
Matt. 8:29	Jesus as the “Son of God”	Jesus driving out demons	Demon possessed men
Matt. 14:33	Jesus as the “Son of God”	Jesus calming the wind after Peter failed to walk on water	Disciples
Matt. 16:16	Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God	Jesus posing the question to his disciples, “Who do you say I am?”	Peter
Matt. 27:38-43	Jesus as the “Son of God”	People mocking Jesus while hanging on the cross	Chief priests, teachers and other

Following this brief discussion on the Matthean approach to the divinity of Jesus, it seems plausible that Jesus’ divinity in the cosmic-apocalyptic, heavenly-authoritative, and functional sense of the word, forms the backdrop against which both the “Son of Man” title and Jesus’ relationship to and with the Hebrew deity should be interpreted. Jesus, as mediator of the kingdom of heaven, finds widespread support in the Matthean Gospel. The divinity of Jesus in the metaphysical, supernatural sense of the word, however, is critiqued rather than nurtured. The variant, ambiguous, and satirical utilisation of the “Son of God” concept highlights the sceptical stance taken toward Jesus’ divine character as an equation with the Hebrew deity: Peacemakers will be sons of God, demon-possessed men mockingly confront Jesus, the disciples and Peter confess Jesus to be the Son of God, followed again by people mocking Jesus.

The author does not burden Jesus with divinity, let alone overburden. It will be interesting to see to which extent Matthew 4:1-11 fits in with this approach.²⁰

3. Analysis of Matthew 4:1-11

The temptation narrative should be understood in the context of Matthew 3:1-4:11 (see Nolland 2005:162; Luz 2007:147-148). Matthew 3 introduces Jesus' alternative Jewish affiliation with John the Baptist, living in the desert as opposed to the stronghold in Jerusalem (vv. 1-12), and points to the father-son relationship between God and Jesus (οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς μου ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν ᾧ εὐδόκησα; vv. 13-16). This is followed by Jesus being led into the desert, an alternative space, where he is to be tempted (Matt. 4:1-11).²¹ The citation from Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23b should also be kept in mind, since it sets the tone for how Jesus will be understood in relation to the Hebrew deity.

3.1 Prophetic role: First divinity challenge (Matt. 4:1-4)

The (god-forsaken) desert, where Jesus is “led” by the “Spirit,” sets the perfect scene for the divinity challenge²² of Jesus as the “Son of God,”²³ as orchestrated

20 In light of *Milhamot ha-Shem*, Ochs (2013:188) suggests that, from the outset, Matthew did not consider Jesus to be divine.

21 Nolan is of the opinion that the three trials of Jesus, as found in Matt. 4:1-11, echo the story of David (Nolan 1979:172). He makes this claim in light of the prominence of the “Son of David” title, discussed extensively in chapter 7.

22 Ochs (2013:191). argues that the temptation in Matt. 4:1-11 operates under the premise that Jesus is somehow able, as “Son of God”, to follow Satan’s suggestions. He elaborates, “[T]his would suggest that Matthew saw Jesus as a human with ‘divine powers’ (who could turn stones into bread), or as a divine being that experienced hunger” (Ochs 2013:191, n. 106). I do not, however, consider these to be the only options. It is equally plausible to interpret the challenges posed to Jesus, especially in the manner and in the context that they were posed, as the author’s critique against those (represented by the devil) who suggested that Jesus as the “Son of God” is divine. This will support the general Jewish polemic against the divinity of Jesus. According to Knupp (1996:33), the narrator is one of the most important rhetorical elements in the discourse of the First Gospel. The implied author speaks in the third person, and by so doing reveals his ideological point of view and executes his critical function (see also Knupp 1996:34).

23 O’Collins (2009:121) explains that sonship, in general, means: (1) belonging or being related to God in some special way, and (2), being commissioned by God to fulfil some vocation. Bird argues that Jesus identified himself as a divine agent with a unique

by the devil.²⁴ Jesus' "alternative" affiliation, identification, and association are being questioned, namely with that of the desert, John the Baptist, and baptism for the forgiveness of sin.²⁵ It is not merely a man, Jesus, going into the desert to confront the devil; he is led by the Spirit. The scene has, therefore, been carefully constructed by the author, to respectfully reaffirm, first, that Jesus is not divine in metaphysical terms, and second, that Jesus understood himself as "Son of Man" (see O'Collins 2009:66-67). These aspects alone already provide substantial enough ground upon which to infer that (over)burdening Jesus with divinity, as the "Son of God," causes theological limitations.

The symbolic "forty" (ἡμέρας τεσσαράκοντα καὶ νύκτας τεσσαράκοντα) calls an array of conceptual memories to mind.²⁶ Some of the most prominent among these include the Israelites' wandering in the desert for forty years before entering Canaan as the Promised Land, and Moses' Mount Sinai retreat.²⁷ Like Jesus, Moses also refrained from eating and drinking during this period of writing the Ten Commandments, the covenant, on the stone tablets.²⁸ With this phrase, then, particularly ὕστερον ἐπεινάσεν, the author manages to emphasise Jesus' mental and physical state before he was tempted. Specifically, his humanity and the limitations as a mortal being are put to the fore. As Ochs (2013:190) puts it, if Jesus were God, he would not have become hungry and the Spirit would have sustained him indefinitely. It is, therefore, inconceivable, from a Jewish point of view, that Jesus should "be" the Hebrew deity, and that God could have

authority and a unique relationship with Israel's God (Bird 2014:46). While I agree with Bird on this point, I do not think that Jesus believed himself to embody the very personhood of God (*contra* Bird 2014:64).

24 Meyer (1864:115) comments that the ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος and ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου phrases stand in close relationship with one another, both in this verse and in history. According to Berger (2011:22), the themes addressed by the temptations of Jesus are (1) the personal calling of Jesus, (2) the definition of God's kingdom, and, subsequently, (3) the revelation of God.

25 These aspects stand in direct opposition to the temple, the Jewish elite, and the law.

26 Gen. 7:12; Ex. 16:35 (see Deut. 2:7; 8:2; Amos 2:10; 5:25); 24:18.

27 Ex. 24:18; see Ex. 34:28 (see Deut. 10:10). See also Nolland (2005:162-163); Luz (2007:151).

28 Ex. 34:28; see Deut. 9:11, 18.

“become” a human, or at most, be found in human form. Jesus’ fasting, in short, places him in the same category as other pious Jews.²⁹

The tempter approaches Jesus with a challenge: “If you are the Son of God, instruct these stones to become bread.” The conditional clause, introduced by the preposition εἰ, does not aim to highlight the tempter’s doubt. On the contrary, like the demon-possessed men, the tempter accepts that Jesus is the “Son of God,” and understands this to mean that Jesus possesses supernatural abilities, or at least that he is able to intervene in the “natural” world.³⁰ This is, however, not the issue at stake. The tempter plays into ὑστερον ἐπεινασεν (Matt. 4:2) when he suggests that Jesus should command the stones to turn into bread. He hopes that Jesus will be overcome by his frail physical and mental state and will use his “supernatural” powers as a “divine” or “spiritual” being. The question posed by a presumed “heavenly” or “spiritual” being reveals the author’s understanding that to act “divinely,” especially when forced by physical challenges, will result in a limiting “divine” impact. Thus, the imbalanced interplay between the physical and the spiritual limits the theological potential. The scene is set by means of the locality (the desert, a space void of divinity), the characters (the heavenly being and Jesus, presumed divine), and the dialogue between the characters. The “un-divine”

29 Nolland (2005:163) interprets the fasting as “self-deprivation to facilitate exposure to one’s self of the nature of the self before God: the pressure of hunger can be immensely self-revealing”. For Luz (2007:151), the aim of the fasting is to distinguish Jesus as the Son of God. See Hagner (1998:64).

30 Meyer (1864:116) interprets v. 3 as meaning that not only is the devil not ignorant of Jesus’ identity (stated negatively), but that he also has no doubt that Jesus is the “Son of God” (stated positively). The tempter’s challenge thus aims not to establish the identity of Jesus, but to stimulate Jesus to act upon the challenge as “Son of God” (Nolland 2005:163-164; see Luz 2007:151). Hagner (1998:64-65) is correct when he comments that the devil regards the title “Son of God” as something to exploit. Ochs (2013:110) discusses Rabbinic rejections of Jesus’ divinity, based on interpretations of Matt. 4:1-11, namely that of Jacob ben Reuben, *Milhamot ha-Shem*; Duran, *Kelimmat ha-Goyin*; and Rabbi Troki. Jacob ben Reuben believes (1) that God cannot be tempted and (2) that Jesus’ divinity is rubbished by both this statement and Jesus’ subsequent response. Duran (see Ochs 2013:268) regards the temptations in general as far-fetched and improper, and holds that Jesus does not consider himself to be divine. The fact that Satan wants to cause Jesus to sin is in itself sufficient illustration of the improbability of Jesus’ divinity. Finally, Rabbi Troki (see Ochs 2013:308) makes it clear that, since God cannot be tempted by Satan, it is evident that Jesus is not God.

space, the heavenly being, and the divine nature presumed by the tempter's challenge, create the impression that Jesus' divinity is indeed the central theme of the narrative. Jesus' own response, however, will prove the opposite.

Jesus' response, οὐκ ἐπ' ἄρτω μόνῳ ζήσεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος ("But one does not live from bread alone"), though in itself "un-divine," produces a wealth of theological potential. First, he quotes Deuteronomy 8:3b-c: οὐκ ἐπ' ἄρτω μόνῳ ζήσεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ παντὶ ῥήματι τῷ ἐκπορευομένῳ διὰ στόματος θεοῦ ζήσεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος ("But one does not live from bread alone, but from every word that goes out from the mouth of God, to give life to a human").³¹ In the Old Greek (hereafter OG) version of Deuteronomy 8:3b-c, the opening phrase (οὐκ ἐπ' ἄρτω μόνῳ ζήσεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος) and the concluding phrase (ζήσεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος) cause ζήσεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος to take centre stage. The text is concerned with sustaining human life as a collective, not with the pampering of an individual's divinity. The Matthean opening phrase (οὐκ ἐπ' ἄρτω μόνῳ ζήσεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος) and concluding phrase (διὰ στόματος θεοῦ) in turn, place the emphasis on στόματος θεοῦ. It is the word proceeding from God's mouth that sustains human life.³² The divine character of the tempter's question, ironically, holds little or no value for sustaining human beings, even though it is a matter of "bread and butter." Jesus' response, on the other hand, shifts the focus from the "self" as the "Son of God" to God, which results in the realisation that it is divine wisdom that sustains human life.³³ Jesus' response is not a satisfactory one for the tempter, however, compelling him to pose another "divine" question.

3.2 Priestly role: Second divinity challenge (Matt. 4:5-7)

The "tempter" is replaced with the "devil" as acting agent – the one who takes Jesus to the holy city and leads him to stand on the edge of the temple.³⁴

31 The Matthean Gospel "omits" ζήσεται ὁ ἄνθρωπος (Deut. 8:3c).

32 The "Lord's prayer" in Matt. 6:9-11 confirms the notion that the "divine" is called upon not for "supernatural" matters, but for τὸν ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον δὸς ἡμῖν σήμερον. It confirms the healthy interaction and interplay between human beings and the divine, referred to as the "Father in heaven."

33 In the words of Berger (2011:23): "Die Brisanz und die Anstößigkeit der Versuchsberichte liegen genau darin: Gött verzichtet auf das kurzfristig und sichtbar Hilfreiche. Das überlässt er im Zweifelsfalle dem Satan."

34 Berger (2011:25) comments that the appearance of the devil is not in itself important, but rather the fact that it is presented as an intelligent, suggestive power – characteristics that make him almost human-like.

Everything about this phrase exemplifies divinity, sacredness, holiness, and the spiritual. The intensity of the “divine” challenge has now been stepped up: The εἰς τὴν ἔρημον is replaced with a more “appropriate” setting, namely τὴν ἁγίαν πόλιν (the holy city) and τὸ πτερύγιον τοῦ ἱεροῦ (the pinnacle of the temple).³⁵ The traditional Jewish view regards the temple in Jerusalem as the space most suitable to the divine, but setting the scene at the highest edge of the temple adds even more tension to the narrative.³⁶ If the burden of being considered divine by way of the title, “Son of God”, is not enough, the “divine” and “godly” locality will surely succeed in overburdening Jesus. It is therefore “fitting” that it is no longer ὁ πειράζων who is juggling with divinity, but Ἰϋϋϋ, the accuser, the opponent of old, who will burden Jesus with his version of being divine.

The repetition of the conditional clause (εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ) accentuates the devil’s desperation to have Jesus “act out” his divinity as “Son of God”. The “Son of God” construct is once again understood as a title of divinity, implying a metaphysical dimension with supernatural powers. The devil supports his request by quoting Psalm 90:11-12, making the point that τοῖς ἀγγέλοις αὐτοῦ ἐντελεῖται περὶ σοῦ (“He will send his angels to protect you”). The author allows one to assume that the devil knows that the cited content refers to θεός, while the third-person personal pronoun, αὐτοῦ, refers to Jesus. It is also possible, however, to interpret αὐτοῦ as referring to θεός – not just in its source context (Ps. 90:11-12), but also in the target context (Matt. 4:6). The former interpretation (that αὐτοῦ refers to Jesus) places Jesus’ divinity in the centre, whereas the latter interpretation (that αὐτοῦ refers to θεός) reaffirms Jesus’ close, intimate relationship with God – the Son in which God, the Father, delights. The devil’s interpretation of Psalm 90:11-12 is misplaced. Enjoying angelic protection from bumping one’s foot against a stone is vastly different from jumping from the highest point of the temple. The devil is

35 Hagner (1998:66-67) agrees that the challenge is intensified by the fact that, this time around, Jesus’ life will be in mortal danger, which will force God to save him. I am in agreement with Luz’s (2007:152-153) insight that the wealth of meaning hidden in this second temptation becomes visible only when read in the context of the entire Gospel. Nolland (2005:164-165) calls this heightened intensity “an increasing concentration of uses of the historic present through this episode ... [T]hey do create a sense of crescendo.”

36 For Nolland (2005:164-165) the temple location calls to mind the presence of God and therefore the reality of God’s help.

anxious to manipulate Jesus into acting “divinely,” in the stereotypical sense of the word, but this very anxiety short-circuits the devil’s sound theological interpretation of Psalm 90:11-12, stripping it of its theological content. This not only underscores the devil’s devious intent, but also ridicules the divinisation of Jesus. Jesus is led to stand on the edge of the highest point of the temple, a sacred and holy space, and then challenged to jump, if he is the “Son of God.” Jesus would not have had a problem with the jumping, nor with the falling, because both are normal aspects of the human experience. It is the “supernatural” aspect of divine intervention that would have been problematic, because it places a damper on common sense, forces unwise action, and results in attempts to sustain life apart from God (διὰ στόματος θεοῦ).³⁷ The author allows the devil to pose these challenges, so to accentuate both the skewed perception of Jesus’ nature as divine, and how theologically limiting this is. There was great theological expectation when the devil led Jesus to the edge of the highest point of the temple, but these hopes are thwarted when the devil’s metaphysical understanding of the divine overburdens the situation, resulting in a lack of benefit for both mortal (natural) and immortal (supernatural) alike.

Jesus again responds with a quotation, this time from Deuteronomy 6:16: οὐκ ἐκπειράσεις κύριον τὸν θεὸν σου (“You shall not tempt the Lord your God”). The phrase is rich in ambiguity. On the one hand, one can interpret it as Jesus referring to himself as “the Lord God”, implying that the devil is the one testing him (Jesus), as the Lord and God. On the other hand, by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, Jesus opens the possibility to interpret the Lord God as referring to the Hebrew deity. The implication is that he, Jesus, like all other pious Jews, should not challenge or tempt the Lord God – in this case by jumping off the temple in the hope of supernatural, divine intervention. If the devil understood the divinity of Jesus as the “Son of God” to mean that Jesus himself had the ability to evoke metaphysical intervention from angelical beings, then by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, Jesus refutes this claim on three levels. The first is that Jesus is not the Lord God and can, therefore, not call upon angels to act on his behalf. Second, if Jesus had such an ability as a divine figure, he still should not force the Lord God to intervene in the natural world, especially because God had

37 Luz (2007:152-153) points out that, at his arrest, Jesus also refuses to call on God’s angels for help, instead remaining obedient to the Scriptures.

already shared his wisdom for sustaining human life.³⁸ Finally, no one should manipulate the metaphysical nature of the Hebrew deity for selfish reasons, and this includes the disciples and the devil. Jesus thus does not understand himself to be the Lord God in the narrative. Instead, by acting wisely as a Son of Man, he creates the theological potential that may be indirectly contributed to him as being divine.

3.3 Kingly role: Third divinity challenge (Matt. 4:8-11)

The intention of the devil remains unchanged. He is persistent in forcing Jesus to act his part as “Son of God,” or at least act in accordance with his perception of Jesus’ divinity. The intensity of the challenges is now even further increased. Jesus is taken up the highest mountain and shown the kingdoms of the world. This challenge introduces a conceptual shift on the part of the devil; the focus is no longer on the divinity of Jesus, but on the devil and his desire for power. Jesus and the devil are now on the highest mountain, overlooking all the kingdoms. The stakes are high.

The devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, if he would only bow down and worship him. It is almost as if the accuser of old, so aptly introduced in Job, wants to reclaim the power given to him by the Lord to do what he likes with Job’s possessions (Job 1:12). Let us entertain this parallelism for a moment. It is obvious that the role and function of the devil remains unchanged. The Lord, likewise, still has the ultimate power, with Job and Jesus being exemplary, pious Jews. In the case of Job, it is the Lord that offers the devil the necessary authority and ability to act against Job, whereas in Matthew 4:9, it is the devil who claims to have the authority and the ability to give someone else the authority over kingdoms. Moreover, the condition upon which this is offered is for Jesus to bow down and worship him. Up until this point the challenges put forward by the devil represented a fair picture of how power in the public space was understood. The devil’s request that Jesus should worship him, however, takes it a step too far. With this request, the intent and true character of the devil is

38 Hurtado (2003:338) points to the widespread consensus that “Son of God,” as expression of Jesus’ divine sonship, is the only thing the author wishes to affirm. While I agree in principle, I disagree that this is the only thing the author wishes to establish. In my view, the author also aims at allowing Jesus to make his true nature and character known, and by doing so, reveal the true essence of the kingdom of heaven.

exposed. His aim was never to reveal the divine nature of Jesus as the “Son of God,” but rather to force him to act stereo-typically, whereby he would have portrayed metaphysical abilities while losing theological relevance. The indirect implication would have been that the devil had exposed Jesus as typical (acting with supernatural power) and not unique (acting with humility, amid the divinisation of the flesh). Like the disciples, high priests, and others, the devil too misunderstood the true character and nature of divine flesh.

Jesus’ response to the tempter’s request is to be expected. He instructs Satan to leave,³⁹ while substantiating his stance by citing Deuteronomy 6:13: κύριον τὸν θεόν σου προσκυνήσεις καὶ αὐτῷ μόνῳ λατρεύσεις (“Worship the Lord God, and serve him alone”). Jesus’ reply reaffirms that the Matthean Jesus does not regard himself as the Lord God incarnated. He does, however, in the author’s view, have a very significant role to play and function to fulfil in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus rebuking Satan should not be interpreted as two divine entities opposing one another. “Satan”, “the devil” and “the tempter” represent humanity’s desire for metaphysical visibility, divine power, and supernatural actions. Jesus’ counter argument emphasises the preconceived idea and expectations of divinity in general, and Jesus as the “Son of God,” in particular.

Finally, the over-emphasis on the metaphysical or supernatural conceptualisation of Jesus as “Son of God,” as represented by the devil, has been successfully refuted by Jesus’ own self-understanding, namely that his divinity does not lie in some supernatural ability, but in the fact that (and the moment in which) he existentialises the metaphysical in the flesh – incarnation. It is not Jesus who instructs the angels to take care of him, as mediators of the heavenly realm – they simply come to take care of him. By attending to Jesus, the angels acknowledge both his divinity as “Son of God” and his function and role as the anthropomorphic existent of the Hebrew deity.

3.4 Summary

With the phrase ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀνήχθη εἰς τὴν ἔρημον ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος πειρασθῆναι ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου, the stage has been set and the intent made known. Jesus is led to a “god-forsaken” place by the Spirit to undergo the divinity test, and the one

39 Calling “the devil” “Satan” reinforces the notion that his function as accuser, as introduced in Job, has remained unchanged.

who will conduct the test is none other than the devil. The view taken here is not that Jesus is stereo-typically “tempted” by the adversary, who wishes Jesus to commit a sin. Rather, the scenario is sketched with the aim of challenging the metaphysical or supernatural understanding of Jesus’ divine character as “Son of God.” The narrative is a showdown between Jesus as the perceived metaphysical, divine-becoming-flesh on the one hand, and the “Son of God” possessing supernatural abilities as presented by the devil, on the other. It is a face-off between the identifiable relevance of the “Son of Man” in service of the Hebrew Deity, and the inaccessible, metaphysical, and supernatural perception of Jesus’ divine nature as the “Son of God.” It is the Divine taken up by the flesh as opposed to the Divine acting through the flesh. The scene where Jesus goes into the desert to be tested by the tempter invites us to question whether overburdening Jesus with divinity causes theological limitations. Table 2 serves as an abbreviated summary.

Table 2: An abbreviated summary

Challenge	Response	Outcome	Implication	Reference
Change stones into bread!	Life is not sustained by bread alone, but by the word proceeding from God’s mouth.	Jesus’ submission to God and his wisdom take priority over Jesus’ perceived divine identity.	The burden to act supernaturally is transformed into the supernatural acting to sustain life.	Matt. 4:3-4
Jump from the temple so that the angels can save you!	Do not tempt the Lord God!	Jesus’ recognition and respect for God’s commandments are more important than supernatural actions.	The burden to act supernaturally is again transformed into the supernatural acting to protect life (through his commandments).	Matt. 4:5-7
Bow down and worship the adversary!	The Lord God is the only God who should be worshipped!	Jesus reaffirms the supreme rule of the monotheistic Hebrew deity.	The desire to be worshipped as a deity, is opposed by the mundane.	Matt. 4:8-11

4. Conclusion

The theological contribution and the effectiveness of the Matthean Gospel are based on the notion that Jesus as Emmanuel, the “Son of God”, “Son of Man”, and “the Christ,” is introduced against the backdrop of Moses as

the one instrumental in revealing the Hebrew deity to Israel by way of his “commandments” and “covenant”. The divinity of Jesus as the “Son of God” is understood in a Jewish context, as to avoid overburdening Jesus with divinity, and in so doing, unleashes theological potential. The Gospel allows Jesus to infiltrate the Jewish mind-set by systematically revealing Jesus as a unique representative of the kingdom of heaven. The references to Jesus as the “Son of God” aim not to promote his divine character, but to reveal the insignificance of a Jesus who is overburdened with divinity. The analysis of Matthew 4:1-11 has shown that interpreting the divinity of Jesus as (a) exclusively supernatural or metaphysical, and (b) detached from its Jewish context is a burden with limited theological potential. Overburdening Jesus with divinity alienates the Matthean Gospel from the Jewish tradition, limiting its theological relevance, potential, and significance. The theological impetus of Jesus is not accomplished by him claiming divine status as the “Son of God,” but by him revealing the kingdom of heaven, while pointing to the Hebrew deity, the sustainer of life. Matthew 4:1-11 takes a critical stance against the overburdening of Jesus with divinity as the “Son of God.” This critical stance produces the potential for the Jews to relate and identify with Jesus as the one “becoming divine” through his loyalty and obedience to the Jewish God. It calls for a theologically responsible reading of the Matthean Gospel as part of the Jewish tradition.

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