

The Temptation of Christ: An Eco-Critical Interpretation

Dr Jyotsna Pathak 

Associate Professor, English Delhi College of Arts & Commerce University of Delhi

Received 01-09-2025

Revised 24-09-2025

Accepted 28-09-2025

Published 01-10-2025



Copyright: ©2025 The Authors. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Abstract:

The Bible and Christ's ministry present inspiration and guidelines on living a moral and pious life. Christ's temptations before he embarks on his life's work form the central feature of his Messianic role. His ability to face, resist and reject the conventional formulations of success and popularity will be studied through an ecocritical lens. This paper will attempt to analyse the way Christ's rejection of Satan's offers opens possibilities of questioning the conventional anthropocentric reading of the Bible and offers a more humanistic and equitable way of defining human progress and striving to achieve the same.

Keywords: Ecology, Messiah, Nature, Satan, Temptation

Introduction:

The Bible records the natural world responding to the birth and death of Christ. A "star in the east" (Matthew 2:2) heralded the birth of Christ. The wise men followed the star that "went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was" (Matthew 2:9). Similarly, as Christ breathed his last on the Crucifix "the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake; and the rocks were rent" (Matthew 27:51-52). "There was a great earthquake" (Matthew 28:2) and an angel whose "appearance was as lightning" (Matthew 28:3) came and proclaimed the Resurrection of Christ. An ecocritical reading of the story suggests an intimate symbiotic relationship between Nature and Jesus: the earth and life on it responds physically and literally to his life events. His experiences and suffering embody the Earth's and Nature's experiences and suffering.

The three synoptic Gospels mention the temptations. While Mark (1:12-13) alludes to it, Matthew 4:1 -11 and Luke 4:1-13 describe Christ's temptation by the Devil in detail. In the first temptation the Devil asks Christ to "command these stones become bread" (Matthew 4:3). Then the Devil asks Christ to "cast thyself down" (Matthew 4:6) from the "pinnacle of the temple" (Matthew 4: 5) since "He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: And on their hands they shall bear thee up, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone" (Matthew 4:6). The Book of Matthew records the third and final temptation occurring when the Devil takes Christ to "an exceeding high mountain" (Matthew 4:8) and saying, "All these things I will give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me". (Matthew 4:9). In Luke the order of the last two temptations is reversed (Luke 4:7 and 4:9). According to St Augustine, Christ's temptations are teachable

moments for those “who are in danger how to reply to the tempter and how not to follow the tempter, but to escape from the danger of temptation” (Teske, 261).

The Temptations:

The temptations can be viewed as a dramatization of a conflict in Christ's mind at the beginning of his ministry. This is the moment when he is called to do his life's work and must decide what path to take. He does not succumb and stays faithful to his messianic work. This moment and his choice echoes forward into his life: Christ chooses not to utilise the faith of his followers for his own personal agenda. He does not deify himself and create a ministry around himself. He refuses to create a cult of the self. This critical moment finds its echoes in the life of every individual when they transition from an age of innocence to a period when they must define the organising principle of their life. It is at this moment that every individual must decide whether to succumb to pleasures of fame, ambition and success or stay true to their beliefs. This struggle and the ultimate conversion of staying true to truth or succumbing to the unholy marks every life. Nations, communities and civilisations also face such moments of choice wherein their 'true soul' is revealed. According to Biblical scholar Yoder, Satan isn't simply tempting Christ *to* sin but rather offering more seducing options of *becoming a Messiah*.

An eco-critical interpretation of the temptation of Christ must consider the human-nature relationship envisaged in the Bible, the historicity of the Gospel of Matthew, the parallels between John and Christ and the significance of the symbols and images that abound in the story. Genesis mentions that God gave “dominion” (1:26) “over fish fowl cattle, and over all earth every creeping thing (1:26-27) and bade them to “subdue it; and have dominion” (Genesis 1:28) over these things He had created for man. White interpreted that the “Christian axiom” underlined in the Bible implied that humanity had a mandate to control and exploit the natural world. However, such a reading to suggest that the Bible gives man untrampled freedom to exploit the

natural world as he sees fit is a gross misrepresentation of its teachings. Indifference to nature and an outright exploitation of the natural world is not the “Christian axiom”. Man was “put into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Genesis 2:15) suggesting a Christian ‘stewardship’ tradition. The moral struggle between and within men; and the visions of the apocalypse described in Revelations, do not imply a willingness to succumb to hysteria. The belief that “nature has no reason for existence save to serve man hits wide off the mark” and instead “biblical affirmation of the worth of non-human creation” (395, Tonstad) is the true teaching of Christ's ministry.

The Gospel of Matthew is targeted at a primarily Jewish audience who have been waiting for the Messiah to join them “into one stick, that they may become one in thine hand” (Ezekiel 37:17) into a united nation of Israel. However, living under Roman dominion the Jewish hope transformed into anticipation for a political Messiah. This messiah would overthrow Roman rule and reestablish Davidic monarchy. He would appear in the Temple, rebuild it and prove his Messiahship with wondrous acts. He would then reign in glory on the throne of God in Jerusalem, the city of the Great King. Israel would rule the world under his sovereign power, and his disciples would reign with him in splendour and glory. In contrast to this Christ builds God's temple and his kingdom in the hearts and minds of the faithful. This repudiation of political and economic power in favour of empathy is a founding feature of the Christ's ministry.

John the Baptist was a forerunner of Christ. He baptised Jesus of Nazareth at Bethany beyond the Jordan (*Al-Maghtas*), in the Jordan Valley. This story picks up the practice of ceremonial washing to achieve spiritual purity by the Essenes (the Jewish group John is surmised to have been a part of). The baptisms performed by John in the Jordan River extend this analogy to signal a break from the old world and a new spiritual awakening. They do not confer “purity” and remove sin according to Mosaic Law but instead are a marker of

repentance. Being baptized by John demonstrated a recognition of one's sin, a desire for spiritual cleansing, and a commitment to follow God's law in anticipation of the Messiah's arrival. Jesus did not receive John's baptism for conversion, but to indicate its importance for all believers. Therefore, baptism by holy water signals not just spiritual cleansing and a remission of sin, but also incorporation into Christ and the Church. Christian baptism is a mark of one's identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. It is representative of a cleansing that is complete and a commitment that is the natural response of one who has been made new. Water plays an important role later when Pilate "saw that he prevailed nothing" (Matthew 27:24) "took water, and washed his hands before the multitude saying, I am innocent of the blood of this righteous man: see ye *to it*. And all the people answered and said, His blood be on us and our children" (Matthew 27: 24-25). Thus water, and immersion in it, plays an important role in Christian belief.

Christ is "led up of the Spirit into the wilderness" (Matthew 4:1) following His baptism by John the Baptist. He wandered in the desert for forty days and nights and "afterward hungered" (Matthew 4:2). The temptation of Christ is the central event in Christ's elevation to sainthood. The wilderness with a community surviving through mutually symbiotic relationships between themselves and the world around them can be seen to form a bulwark against an industrialised, materially progressive world view and social order. However, as Christ stumbles through it for forty days and forty nights it morphs into a synecdoche of a general environmental collapse. His lonely trek, and the temptations he overcomes, suggest that they perform an ideological function in so much that they question the legitimacy of the conspicuous consumption of a privileged class and nation and the consequences on the others in the biosphere.

This journey mirrors the forty-year wanderings of the Jews to the Promised Land and arrival in Canaan. After Moses led the Jews out of Egypt many grew impatient with their trials and

tribulations and wished to go back. One can view this as amnesia, a re-writing of the past or a reluctance to venture into the unknown and take further risks. During these trials they wished for food and security, complained, worshipped the Golden Calf, performed 'witchcraft', refused to follow the Sabbath and even rebelled against Moses in their wish to return to Egypt and the stable life they had there. Consequently, they were punished with wandering for forty years. The Sabbath is more than a day of rest; it allows for contemplation of one's actions, choices and opens the possibility of reorienting and correcting them. These actions reflect the breakdown of the social contract within social groups leading to exploitation of people as well as nature. The Jews become a diaspora who are condemned to wander till they reorient themselves as individuals and as a nation to follow the laws laid down by God. This implies more than just an obedience to Divine Law; it hints at an understanding of the need to temper one's desires and consumptions so that a more equitable society can be created which is at peace at the larger natural world. Thus, it is only when nature heals, and they have followed up on the rest that Sabbath requires, that they can enter the Promised Land.

As Christ moves from the river Jordan to the desert the narrative shifts from a pastoral to an apocalyptic tone suggesting not just Christ's self-view under potential collapse and erasure but also of the people he had come to redeem and save. The temptations centre around ambition, greed and self-aggrandisement. Christ at the beginning of his ministry must face mortal desires and overcome them. The tests present an alternative path Christ's ministry could have taken had he succumbed to the temptations of glory, popularity and instantaneous gratification. His triumph is extremely significant. It reminds the reader about His authenticity, especially when he is made to trudge the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha. They also serve to humanise Christ when the faithful encounter him during his messianic phase.

An Ecocritical Reading:

Ecocriticism studies the "relationship between literature and the physical world" (Glotfelty, xix)

and studies texts through the lens of the environmental crises the world is facing currently. 'Ecology' itself is a shifting and contested term, and ecocriticism has a moral and political orientation. The wilderness has associations with the elemental man in his 'natural' surroundings. The temptations emphasize the argument that the 'hyperseparation' of man and nature is false, instead a symbiotic relationship exists between the two. They resist an androcentric reading and emphasise the respect of 'earth others'. In contrast to the Romantic notion of man in his 'natural' setting in close relationship with Nature is at peace with himself and the world, the Bible presents a more realistic view of man and his relationship with the world. Man's penchant for comfort and his susceptibility to temptation is highlighted from the Fall of Adam. Seen in this light the temptations reveal the necessity of resisting readings centred on ultra rationalistic alienation and animistic assimilation. They acknowledge the human desire for domination and control and portray the tussle between this impulse and the wish to exist in a 'peaceful' world. Through the temptations the reader is made aware of the fact that we can and must choose to be equitable in our interactions with the world around us to create a sustainable future for all.

Satan tempts Christ not simply to quench his hunger when he challenges him to convert stone to bread, but to embrace material prosperity. Satan's view is that Christ would prove his divinity if he were to perform this miracle and gather even more 'faithful' around him. The story here explores the idea of 'love': is it generosity of material need or the desire to help transform for the better. The promise of material affluence inevitably results in mental and intellectual enslavement. Christ, the benevolent Messiah, should ideally quench hunger. However, Christ's ministry becomes a focal point of resistance to the use of the promise of material prosperity to enslave people. It is this erroneous promise of prosperity that locks individuals, communities and nations into subservient positions wherein they are denied access to their own natural resources and are forced to adopt a homogenised lifestyle

projected by corporations as ideal and happy. Without ownership and access to their resources they are further divorced from their cultural history and become untethered and more susceptible to economic and political manipulation. At this point of time the story raises pertinent questions about the idea of 'progress' and the role of the nation state. However, extended to the idea of the modern nation-state this indulgence is in danger of devolving into a benevolent dictatorial nation state. Such a state would satisfy the basic survival needs of the citizen without requiring him to strive to improve his condition. The tale thus raises questions about prosperity and the conditions in which it is achieved. The story undermines the utopia of absence of hunger and instead foregrounds the necessity of labour to meet ones needs.

Similarly, when Satan challenges Christ to throw himself from the highest temple, he is enticing Christ to embrace the role of the Messiah. The latter's refusal to follow through is a recognition of the fact that miracles, and even the promise of one in the face of suffering can be used to captivate the conscience. In fact, in times of distress the human mind will create false miracles through games and an increasing permissiveness. One finds this through the glorification of sportspersons and celebrities despite severe moral failings and criminal activity by multinational corporations. Christ values humanity and its freedom too much to weigh it down with false truths. This resistance to 'perform miracles' and challenge the physical scientific laws is important since it indicates an acknowledgement of cause and effect.

The final temptation works on various levels. Christ refuses Satan's offer since he recognises that any promise of power, sovereignty and authority is a mirage. The body is God's temple and need not be defiled either through suicide or false labour. Striving to achieve material glory does not bring true reward. More importantly the story highlights the perils of creating a great unified society. The kingdoms of the world are all temporally insignificant in the face of God's magnificence.

The temptations also serve to highlight the ‘megahazards’ of ‘myth of mutual constructionism’. The architectural metaphor seems to privilege man’s right and ability to refashion the ‘natural’ world as he deems fit and exalts human as a species over all other creation. While the natural, physical environment, traditionally, influences human activities and culture; in the modern world increasingly, it is man-made environment that is influencing cultures as well as the natural world. This creates the belief that man can ‘shape’ the world in his image without any repercussions. This decouples the integral symbiotic relationship between man and his environment creating a society blind to the risks of the same. The invisibility of these consequences in the public discourse and day to day life of people dematerialises the pollution around us and creates a ‘world risk society’ that are often in practice indissociable from their cultural elaborations. The idea that Christ, and by extension, any man, may ‘govern’ the world and shape it to his image without disastrous consequences on all is the central point of the last two temptations. The temptations bring the point home that all empires, economic, political and ideological are based on cultural practices and beliefs. The exploitative nature of these empires creates dichotomies at their core which inevitable leads to their implosion and destruction. Thus, Christ’s refusal to succumb to Satan’s temptations needs to be seen as a critique of the capitalist industrial complex. The unquestioning praise and acceptance of material wealth and progress has cultural and environmental consequences that need to be foregrounded.

The tussle between Christ and Satan sharply bring these ideas to the fore. Satan’s should be viewed as a cornucopian who believes that man has an indisputable claim over the natural world and its resources. He embodies the post-industrial capitalist machinery that consistently tries to ‘efficiently’ harness natural and human resources for greater productivity and profits. Since the non-human environment exists only in so much as it can benefit man, its usefulness is limited and its threat non-existent. Nature thus becomes a

resource that can be indefinitely ‘harnessed’ for human welfare. This in turn leads economists like Julian Simon to claim that there exists an unceasing ‘virtuous cycle’ of economic and demographic growth marked by increasing populations, life spans and lifestyles. The development of science and technology in turn mean that ‘scarcity’ becomes an economic and not an ecological phenomenon. Therefore, one need not curtail consumption since it would have no impact on the world around us. Buell has labelled such an approach a ‘toxic discourse’ since it refuses to consider the damage that it causes not just to the natural world but also to the mental and physical health of people. He calls this privileging of unceasing consumerism while wilfully turning a blind eye towards its consequences the ‘mythography of betrayed Edens’.

Satan’s constant presence also embodies the modern surveillance society which created its own hysteria. Increasing consumerism celebrated as a signifier of economic prosperity that should not be ‘limited’ and constrained by government policies and social mores. Moreover, any attempt to present scientific evidence for the damage it presents is dismissed as a ‘perceived risk’. The ‘real risk’ to the environment and human life presented by researchers is often dismissed as irrelevant or tentative while sophisticated surveillance mechanisms filter the information that comes to the general public. The temptations dramatize the ecclesiastical and administrative mechanisms used to undermine the narrative of environmental degradation even as a questionable narrative of progress is created. Christ’s refusal to succumb to Satan’s words need to be viewed through the lens of deep ecology which demands a shift to a nature-centred system of values which affirms our “otherness and our community in earth” (Plumwood, 137).

Satan’s denunciation is the rejection of pollution, environmental and biological simplification as well as the homogenisation of human values, culture and taste. It is a celebration of ecological diversity and a refusal to view the natural world merely through the prism of productivity and

usefulness. At the social and political level it is the repudiation of viewing humans as faceless workers and a mass market.

Conclusion:

Christ's temptations question the Western philosophy at a fundamental level. In the light of the ecological disasters facing us, the rejection of metanarratives and their associated value systems imply a celebration of diversity and an opposition to all forms of violence and domination.

The *Bible* is primarily a religious text, it contains extensive nature writing that reflects a deep awareness of the environment, the rhythms of the natural world, and humanity's responsibility toward it. By recognizing creation as a divine work, it encourages reverence for nature, ethical stewardship, and the recognition of the natural world as a space of spiritual insight and revelation. In this sense, it can be viewed as a text that contributes to our understanding of ecological ethics and the sacredness of the natural world. Viewed through the lens of ecocriticism, the Temptations of Christ can be understood as a symbolic reflection on humanity's relationship with nature and the environment. Jesus' rejection of the temptations can be seen as a model for ecological ethics, emphasizing restraint, respect for natural laws, and a rejection of domination and exploitation. The story encourages a more harmonious relationship with the natural world, advocating for humility, spiritual fulfilment over material gain, and stewardship rather than control.

References:

1. Endres, Father David. "The Baptism of John" in *The Catholic Telegraph*. Archdiocese of Cincinnati, November 8, 2022. <https://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/th-e-baptism-of-john/83472>

2. Fleming, J. Dick. "The Threefold Temptation of Christ: Matt. 4:1-11." *The Biblical World*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1908, pp. 130–37. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3141888>. Accessed 15 Sept. 2024.
3. Garrard, G. (2004). *Ecocriticism* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203644843>
4. Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold (ed.) 1996 *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
5. Helgesen, Linnea. "Ecocritical Bible Reading" in *Spectrum*. Adventist Forum, April 15, 2019. <https://spectrummagazine.org/views/ecocritical-bible-reading/>
6. Sessions, George. *Deep Ecology for the Twenty First Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*. Shambhala, 1994.
7. Teske, Roland J. "ST. AUGUSTINE ON THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST AND TEMPTATION." *Augustiniana*, vol. 54, no. 1/4, 2004, pp. 261–77. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44992685>. Accessed 15 Sept. 2024
8. *The Holy Bible*, British and Foreign Bible Society, London, 1938
9. White, Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767, 1967, pp. 1203–07. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1720120>. Accessed 16 Sept. 2024.
10. Yoder, John Howard. *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*. Eerdmans Publishing company, 1994.