

“LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION”

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These familiar words from the Lord’s Prayer invite certain questions: Is it true that God leads men into temptation? If God leads people into temptation, why should anyone pray not to be led into it? Why is it that the followers of Jesus are encouraged to pray that they may not be led into temptation when such a passage as James 1:2 encourages them to rejoice when they meet temptations?

First of all, it should be noted that “temptation” may not be a satisfactory translation of *peirasmos*, the respective Greek word in both the Matthaean and Lukan versions of the Lord’s Prayer. Modern readers understand “temptation” to mean “enticement to evil.” Now it is true that such a meaning for *peirasmos* seems to be supported by James 1:14, “Each person is *peirazetai* when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.”¹ Moreover, quotation of the Epistle of James in this connection becomes especially significant when it is realized that this epistle seems to owe a great deal to the teachings of Jesus, particularly as they are represented in the Sermon on the Mount. Indeed, there are at least ten statements in James that are strongly reminiscent of the Sermon.²

On the other hand, it must be noted that James 1:14 does not attempt a definition of *peirasmos* but rather describes what takes place in *peirasmos*. Of course, in so doing it does assist in the definition of *peirasmos*, but the door is open to the possibility that an adequate definition is not to be deduced therefrom. That an adequate definition is not to be derived from James 1:14 is intimated by statements in the verses preceding. In James 1:2-4, Christians are exhorted to “count it all joy ... when you meet various *peirasmoi*” because “the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” In James 1:12 it is said that the man is “blessed” who endures *peirasmos* because, having victoriously met it, “he will receive the crown of life.” Surely there is more suggested here re *peirasmos* than mere enticement to evil. Moreover, is it not highly improbable that the author would shift to a quite different connotation of this word in 1:13-14 from the one used in 1:12 without any indication of so doing? (Of course, if the author has not shifted to a connotation quite different from the one used in 1:12, it is necessary to understand that in 1:13 he is simply denying that God can be the active source of *peirasmos*, and does not intend his readers to understand that He has no responsibility for it. We shall see below how this is possible.)

An exhaustive examination of the Biblical use of *peirasmos*, and of the Hebrew equivalent, *massah*, makes it clear that “enticement to evil” may not be primarily in view in the Lord’s Prayer. In the earliest period this

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vocabulary was used of testing in order to “know” the true state of the religion of the person or persons tested,³ and without any suggestion of hostility toward the person or persons concerned. This meaning is evident in Gen. 22, where it is stated in the first verse that God “tested” Abraham. (MT: *nissah*; LXX: *epeirase*). He did it by giving Abraham something very difficult to do. In verse twelve we have the result of the *peirasmos*: “Now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” It is clear that the *peirasmos* was with a view to revealing whether Abraham really “feared” God, as he claimed to do. Likewise, in Ex. 16:4, the *peirasmos* of Israel is in order to know “whether they will walk in my (God’s) law or not”; in Deut. 8:2, “to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not”; in Deut. 13:3 (4), “to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul”; in Jud. 2:22, to know “whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not”; and in Jud. 3:4, “to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by Moses.” In Psalm 26:2 God is invited by the Psalmist to “test (MT: *nasseni*; LXX: *peirason*) my heart and my mind.” He is certain that if God does so He will know that “Thy steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to thee.” In II Chron. 32:31 God’s *peirasmos* of Hezekiah was in order to “know all that was in his heart.” As far as the evidence goes, *peirasmos* language in the Old Testament is always used of tests administered with a view to disclosing whether commitment to God is wholehearted, or not.

This meaning of *peirasmos* continues to occur in Jewish literature of the inter-Biblical period. This is evident in such a passage as T. Jos. ii.7, “In ten temptations (*peirasmōis*) he showed me approved.” In Sir. 4:17-18 it is said of divine Wisdom in relation to each of “her sons”: “At first she will walk with him on tortuous paths, she will bring fear and cowardice upon him, and will torment him by her discipline until she trusts him, and she will test (*peirasei*) him with her ordinances. Then she will come straight back and gladden him....” “Until she trusts him” indicates that the Old Testament connotation is very important, though the reference to “discipline” shows that the circle of ideas connected with our vocabulary has enlarged. According to Judith 8:25-27, “The Lord our God ... is putting us to the test (*peirazei*) as he did our forefathers. Remember what he did with Abraham, and how he tested (*epeirasen*) Isaac.... For he has not tried us with fire as he did them, to search their hearts, nor has he taken revenge upon us; but the Lord scourges those who draw near to him, in order to admonish them.” Though other ideas are in evidence, the use of the phrase “to search their hearts” emphasizes the primary meaning of our vocabulary. A similar judgment is to be made concerning Wisd. 3:5, “Having been disciplined a little, they (the righteous) will receive great good, because God tested (*peirasen*) them and found them worthy of himself.” In the New Testament it is found in I Peter 1:6-7, where it is said of “temptations,” “Their purpose is to prove that your faith is genuine” (TEV). Moreover, James 1:12, quoted above, states that the person who has experienced *peirasmos* and “has stood the test ... will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him.” It seems to be

implied that *peirasmos* is with a view to disclosing whether love to God is characteristic of the individual, or not. The context of both quotations, however, makes it clear that other ideas are also prominent, as we shall see later.

Beginning in the inter-Biblical period *peirasmos* came to be used on occasion in a sense which implied a disciplinary purpose. Preparation for such a use of the word may possibly be found in Ex. 20:20 (MT), "Do not fear; for God has come to prove (*nassoth*) you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin." Though it is not explicit that *peirasmos* is with a view to the fear of God and freedom from sin, the two ideas of proving and fearing are in parallel construction. In Deut. 8 *peirasmos* and discipline are twice brought into close conjunction, first in 8:2-5 and again in 8:16. During the period between the Testaments, and especially in the later Sages, i.e., the authors of Sir. and Wisd., the idea of disciplinary purposes is often implicit when our vocabulary is used. In addition to the preparation for this development in the Pentateuch, it is possible that the development of this connotation was facilitated by the influence of Greek thought with its emphasis on education. No doubt it had also been observed that difficult circumstances were the chief means of *peirasmos*. At any rate evidence of such a connotation is found in Sir. 4:17-18 and Wisd. 3:5, both of which were quoted above. Clear evidence is also provided by Wisd. 11:9, "When they were tried (*peirasthesan*), though they were being disciplined in mercy, ..." Still further evidence is to be found in this period in Sir. 2:1-5, Judith 8:25-27; Dan. 12:9-10 (LXX).

In the New Testament, such a connotation is evident in James 1:2-4 where Christians are urged to rejoice when they are called upon to experience various *peirasmoi* "for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness...." The same is true of I Peter 4:12, where persecution is described as "a fiery ordeal which comes upon" Christians of the day for a *peirasmos*. Since the word translated "fiery ordeal" is used of the refinement of metals, it is indicated that moral improvement is in view. Though Hebrews 12:5-11, which discusses discipline at length, does not use our vocabulary, it does refer to experiences evidently described as *peirasmoi* in 2:18 and 4:15. Concerning them, the author says, "Have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons?—'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord ...'" (12:5). The words "have you forgotten" indicate that those addressed should have been aware that *peirasmos* is disciplinary.

Closely related to this connotation is one in which tribulation is a prominent idea. The first extant examples occur in the interbiblical literature. In Sir. 2:1 "calamity," "humiliation" and "changes that humble" are used in parallel with *peirasmos*. In IV Macc. 9:7-8, "Proceed, then, with your trial (*peiraze*) tyrant; and if you take our lives ... We by our suffering and endurance shall obtain the prize of virtue," the parallel use of "trial" and "suffering" suggests that in this context "suffering" is prominent in the meaning of *peirazo*. A clear New Testament example is found in Acts 20:19, where Paul speaks of the "temptations" which "befell (him) through the plots of the Jews." Another example is to be found in the Lukan version of the Parable of the Sower which gives "temptation

(*peirasmou*)” (8:13) as the reason why certain people “fall away,” whereas the Markan and Matthaean parallels have “tribulation or persecution” (Mark 4:17; Matt. 13:21). Since the three versions of the parable are otherwise closely parallel, it appears that *peirasmos* was used as a synonym for tribulation. Further examples seem to occur in Heb. 2:18; 11:37; James 1:2-3 and I Peter 1:6-7. (Rom. 5:3-4, which is more or less parallel to both James 1:2-3 and I Pet. 1:6-7, has “sufferings” instead of *peirasmoi*.) A special case of *peirasmos* being used in a sense in which tribulation is a prominent idea is its use to describe the eschatological tribulation in Rev. 3:10 which speaks of “the hour of trial (*peirasmou*), which is coming on the whole world, to try (*peirasai*) those who dwell upon the earth.”

Finally, *peirasmos* is frequently used in the New Testament in a connotation in which enticement to evil is prominent. The outstanding example is in James 1:14 quoted above. Other passages in which this connotation apparently occurs include I Cor. 7:5 where husbands and wives are exhorted not to refuse one another cohabitation for an extended period, “lest Satan tempt (*peiraze*) you through lack of self-control”; I Cor. 10:13, “No temptation (*peirasmos*) has overtaken you that is not common to man,” of which the context warns against “desire(ing) evil” (10:6); Gal. 6:1, “Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted (*peirasthes*)” to “trespass.”

At this point the question arises whether the word is ever used without the presence of the original idea of testing with a view to disclosing whether religious commitment is genuine. Though there are occurrences, such as the one in I Cor. 7:5, where it is impossible to tell, the only New Testament usage which may seem to imply that the original meaning has completely disappeared is in James 1:13-14. However, we have already pointed out that the context of these verses makes such a conclusion highly improbable. Indeed, it appears that the original connotation of the word occurs in James 1:12.

In view of what has been stated thus far, it is probable that the reference to *peirasmos* in the Lord’s Prayer contains the idea of testing the genuineness of faith. However, there is reason to believe that there is also implicit the idea that such testing is through enticement to evil. As we shall see, there are intimations that Satan is the active source of the *peirasmos* here mentioned, and in the Synoptic Gospels it is characteristic of Satan to entice to evil. Furthermore, the nearest rabbinic parallel to the petition we are discussing includes *peirasmos* in a list of predominantly moral evils. (b Ber. 60b)

On the other hand, the suggestion that the eschatological tribulation is in view in the sixth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, because of the concern of the earlier part of the prayer with the coming of God’s kingdom, is improbable because it is unlikely that the intervening petitions have an eschatological orientation. Certainly the rabbinic parallel to which we have referred does not.

Since *peirasmos* serves good purposes as well as evil ones, it is not surprising that God may be involved in its onset, as the Lord’s Prayer intimates. Indeed, in the Old Testament it is almost always traced solely and simply to the divine being. Gen. 22:1 explicitly states: “God tested

(MT: *nissah*; LXX: *epeirase*) Abraham." Similar statements explicitly attributing *peirasmos* to God and to Him alone are found in Ex. 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut. 13:3; Jud. 2:22; 3:1; II Chron. 32:31; Ps. 26:3. Statements implying such an attribution are found in Deut. 4:34; 7:19; 8:2; 16; 29:3. In the intertestamental period simple attribution to God occurs in Wisd. 3:5, "God tested (*epeirase*) them (the righteous)"; T. Jos. ii. 6-7, "In ten temptations (*peirasmois*) He showed me approved"; Judith 8:25-27, "The Lord our God ... is putting us to the test (*peirazei*) ... He tested (*epeirasen*) Isaac."⁴

A more complex view of the source of *peirasmos* is evident in the Prologue of Job, even though the term itself does not occur. Testing of the genuineness of Job's devotion to God is clearly portrayed. It is to be noted that God is not only described as giving Satan permission to test Job (Job 1:12; 2:6), but that the test is also described as God's doing: "You (Satan) moved me (the Lord) against him (Job)." (Job 2:3. See also Job 1:21; 2:10).⁵ Likewise we read in the Epilogue, "They (Job's brothers and sisters and other acquaintances) showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him" (Job 42:11). What God permits is also described as His own doing! Conversely, what is simply described as God's doing may be subsequently understood as that for which He is only indirectly responsible, or which He has permitted. An example is found in Jub. xvii. 16-17, where the Gen. 22 story receives legendary expansion to the effect that the testing of Abraham was the result of a Satanic appeal to God to bid him offer Isaac on the altar "to see if he will do this command, and Thou wilt know if he is faithful in everything where Thou dost try him."

Still another view of the source of *peirasmos* developed in the Intertestamental period. In Sir. 15:14 (Heb.); 17:31 (Syr.); 21:11 (Heb.); 22:27-23:6 (LXX); 27:5-6 (Heb.); and 37:3 (LXX) we have the first occurrences of the doctrine of the evil *yetzer* or evil impulse in man, which is responsible for evil and sin, a doctrine which is common in Jewish literature thereafter. (E.g. T. Ash. i. 3-9; IQS v. 4-5; CDC ii. 16; IV Macc. 1:31; II En. xxx. 16; IV Ezra 3:21-22; etc.) In accord with the understanding that the evil *yetzer* was created by God, in the earliest document extant which contains the doctrine it is indicated that God wills enticement to evil through the evil *yetzer*: "God created man from the beginning ... and gave him into the hand of his inclination (*yetzer*)." (Sir. 15:14, Heb. The following verse shows that man need not follow the dictates of the evil *yetzer*.) Statements to the same effect are found in II En. xxx. 15-16; *Apocalypse of Abraham* xxxiii. On the other hand there are passages in which the evil *yetzer* is said to be controlled by Satan, so that both Satan and the evil *yetzer* are responsible for enticement to evil. An example is found in T. Benj. vi. 1, "The inclination (*yetzer*) of the good man is not in the power of the deceit of the spirit of Beliar." (Cf. T. Ash. i. 8-9; *Apoc. Mos.* xvi. 1-5.) Finally it is to be noted that there are two rabbinic passages in which we seem to have God, Satan and the evil *yetzer* all involved in the onset of *peirasmos*, in b. Sanh. 107a and in Ex. R. xix. 2. The latter passage reads: "Lord of the universe ... let not the Tempter (*yetzer?*) have power to influence me ... namely, that Satan do not lead me astray."

This prayer seems to imply that temptation is by the permission of God, that the evil *yetzer* is its internal possibility and that Satan is the external power responsible for its onset.

When we turn to the New Testament, in Heb. 12:3-11 we apparently have *peirasmos* described simply as God's doing. The experience to which reference is apparently made in this passage is described as a *peirasmos* in Heb. 2:18; 3:15. But simple ascription to God need not preclude the understanding of a more complex view of the matter. Indeed, such may be intimated by the reference to the devil in 2:14. It may be noted, moreover, that simple ascription to God is facilitated, and no doubt warranted, by the fact that it is the disciplinary value of the experience that is to the fore. On the other hand, we have *peirasmos* traced simply to Satan in I Thess. 3:6; and Rev. 2:10. (Cf. Mark 8:33.) But again a more complex view, one in which both God and Satan are involved, is set forth in Luke 22:31-32, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." Of more significance for our present purpose is Matt. 4:1, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The *peirasmos* of Jesus in the Wilderness has the devil for its active source but is also due to the divine will!

That *peirasmos* is due to one's "own desire" (evil *yetzer*?), as indicated in James 1:14, brings further complication into the picture. With that statement may be coupled the teaching of Jesus that "from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery ..." (Mark 7:21). Somewhat comparable is the significance Paul accords to "the flesh" in what he has to say concerning *peirasmos* in Gal. 5:16-6:1 and elsewhere. That James had a more complex view than his statement in 1:13-14 suggests is intimated not only by the "rejoicing" and "blessing" (1:2, 12) which may ensue, and by his warning to "resist the devil" (4:7), but also by the fact that in 1:13-14 itself he seems to be reflecting what is said in Sir. 15:11-14:⁶

Do not say, "Because of the Lord I left the right way"; for he will not do what he hates. Do not say, "It was he who led me astray"; ... It was he who created man in the beginning, and left him in the power of his own (evil) inclination.

"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God' " (Jas. 1:13) corresponds to "Do not say, 'Because of the Lord I left the right way' ... Do not say 'It was he who led me astray' "; and "his own (evil) desire" (Jas. 1:14) corresponds to "his own (evil) inclination." It is probable, therefore, that James assumes that God is in some sense responsible for the fact that man is "lured and enticed by his own desire" (1:14), in correspondence with the statement that God "left him in the power of his own inclination," or, as the Hebrew text has it, "God ... put him into the hand of him that would spoil him, and gave him into the hand of his inclination (*yetzer*)." Not only do these considerations suggest that James did not trace *peirasmos* simply to man's "own (evil) desire," Scriptural evidence has been previously adduced which shows that Jesus and Paul had more complex views of the source of *peirasmos* than Mark 7 and Gal. 5, 6 indicate. A comprehensive doctrine of the source of *peirasmos* by any of these would probably have

included the will of God, the activity of Satan, and the nature of man.

It is surely because of some such understanding that the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer implies that God leads people into the experience of *peirasmos*. *Peirasmos* originates in the will of God, no doubt because of the good that may result. On the other hand, it is not stated that He himself "tempts" us. The way the petition is worded leaves the door open, if it does not positively suggest, that the active source of the "temptation" is elsewhere. In view of the close parallel with Matt. 4:1, it seems probable that we should understand that Satan is the active source. This accords, moreover, with many other statements of the New Testament, and is supported by the last petition of the Lord's Prayer, if that petition is properly translated "but deliver us from the evil one" (NIV). It has been argued that the seventh petition refers to man's own evil desire,⁷ but the argument has not found favour. There is nothing in the Prayer to suggest either man's sinful desire or his sinful flesh. On the other hand, we have seen that Jesus taught that evil deeds come out of a man's heart. It is not impossible that, if He had been pressed concerning what takes place when God, or His Spirit, leads one into *peirasmos*, He would have indicated that Satan stirs up one's evil desire.

Finally, why should one pray not to be led into *peirasmos* when it is apparently God's will that we should suffer it, and when benefits become available through it? This question is more difficult to answer. Our suggestion is that the word *peirasmos* is here used in what is called the pregnant sense, that is, in the sense of *peirasmos* which results in fall. That this is what is meant is perhaps intimated by the succeeding petition: "But (*alla*) deliver us from evil." Such use of the word apparently occurs in the Gethsemane narrative in which Jesus warns: "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Mark 14:38). Surely what is meant here is "temptation which will result in fall." Another occurrence of such usage is to be detected in Gal. 6:1, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted." Here again it is undoubtedly to be understood that the "temptation" envisaged is one which results in fall. If *peirasmos* is indeed being used in the pregnant sense in the Lord's Prayer, the petition is not so much a petition to be kept from *peirasmos* as it is a petition to be kept from yielding when one does experience it. This accords with the scriptural emphasis on the importance of prayer as an aid to making a proper response to *peirasmos*. See Mark 14:38; Eph. 6:10-18; James 1:2-5.

The difficulties of the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer are largely, if not altogether, dissipated, when it is realized:

- (1) That the petition does not refer to "temptation" in the modern sense of the word, that is, it is not to be understood as merely referring to enticement to evil, but fundamentally has to do with hard testing, albeit with the intimation that such testing is by means of such enticement;
- (2) That the experience to which the petition refers is one which can result in great benefit, and that it is, therefore, appropriate that God should have some kind of responsibility for its onset;

- (3) That what is envisaged is not merely “temptation” but “temptation which results in fall,” so that the desire expressed in the petition is not so much for escape from *peirasmos* as for the ability to be victorious when one experiences it.

End Notes

1. RSV is the basis for quotations in this paper, unless otherwise indicated.
2. Compare Jas. 1:2 with Matt. 5:11-12
 Jas. 1:4 with Matt. 5:48
 Jas. 1:5 and 4:3 with Matt. 7:7
 Jas. 1:22 with Matt. 7:26
 Jas. 2:13 with Matt. 6:15
 Jas. 3:12 with Matt. 7:16
 Jas. 3:18 with Matt. 5:9
 Jas. 4:11-12 and 5:9 with Matt. 7:1
 Jas. 5:2 with Matt. 6:19
 Jas. 5:12 with Matt. 5:34-37
3. We are disregarding the non-religious use and the use re the “tempting” of God by man.
4. In Sir. 4:17 Wisdom is the source of *peirasmos*, and in Tobit 12:14 (Aleph) Raphael is the source. It appears, however, that they function for God.
5. Compare the relationship between God and Satan in II Cor. 12:7 and in II Thess. 2:9-11. See also I Cor. 5:5 and I Tim. 1:20.
6. For other evidence that James was acquainted with Sirach, compare Jas. 1:6 with Sir. 7:10
 Jas. 1:8 with Sir. 1:28
 Jas. 1:19 with Sir. 5:11
 Jas. 1:25 with Sir. 11:27; 14:23; 19:20; 51:19
 Jas. 2:6 with Sir. 10:23
 Jas. 3:2-12 with Sir. 19:16; 28:13-26
 Jas. 5:3 with Sir. 12:10, 11; 21:10
 Jas. 5:16 with Sir. 38:9
 Jas. 5:17 with Sir. 48:3
7. Abrahams, I., *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, II, 101.