Testing and Temptation in Second Temple Jewish and Early Christian Texts

Edited by
DANIEL L. SMITH and
LOREN T. STUCKENBRUCK

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of primary and secondary sources follow The SBL Handbook of Style: For Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines, ed. Billie Jean Collins et al., 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL, 2014).

Introduction

Many Second Temple Jewish and early Christian writings show testing and temptation to be influencing human experience, from Eden to the eschaton. Though God is often presented as one who tests, testing is carried out by a wide range of figures, including Satan, Mastema, the people of God, and individual human beings. Sometimes, groups of people or individuals are tested; sometimes, God is described as being put to the test.

The essays in the present volume represent the fruit of a three-day conference on Testing and Temptation in Second Temple Jewish and Early Christian Texts, held at the Studienzentrum Josefstal in Schliersee, Germany, 20–22 May 2017. We asked participants to reflect on the following questions: How did ancient interpreters react to texts that depict the God of Israel as testing, tested, or intervening on behalf of those undergoing a test? What assumptions do authors have about the role of testing in human experience? What roles do expressions such as מסה and πειρασμός play in Second Temple Jewish and early Christian texts? How does the identity of the tester or the tested relate to the nature of the test? How are we to understand "testing" vs. "temptation"? These essays constitute an opening foray into addressing these questions, and we hope that this volume will be catalytic for further research exploring additional dimensions of testing, overlooked motifs in the relevant literature, and other traditions featuring a process of testing with or without the more common vocabulary (נסה/מסה/πειράζω/πειρασμός/δοκιμάζω).

The volume leads off with three essays that adopt a largely synchronic approach, investigating the use of testing and temptation language in a single author. First, Michael Francis offers a study of "Philo of Alexandria on Testing and Temptation." He focuses on Philo's reading of scripture in the register of interpretation that most interests the allegorical exegete, namely, the responses of the individual soul to the multiplicity of phenomena and experiences that inevitably come its way within the earthly, embodied realm. Francis considers the different kinds of response to such temptations that Philo discerns in the various characters of the Pentateuch. For Philo, the soul's embodied existence ineluctably yields a life of testing, which only the noble soul can overcome.

Madison N. Pierce then takes up the Epistle to the Hebrews, working through the four testing passages (2:14–18; 3:7–4:11; 4:14–16; 11:17–19) in her essay, entitled "Testing and Being Tested in the Epistle to the Hebrews." She notes a number of tensions. Testing can be positive (2:18) or negative (3:8–9), and can be experienced by God (3:8–9) or by human (11:17). Pierce explores the relation-

ship between these elements of testing, situating the theme within the flow of the larger argument of Hebrews. Like Francis, Pierce addresses the testing of Abraham (Heb 11:17; Philo, *Somn*. 1.195), the testing of the Israelite wilderness generation (Heb 3:7–4:11; Philo, *Leg*. 3.162–168; *Congr*. 163–165), and the differing roles related to testing. Each of these topics will find further treatment in several other essays in the volume.

Despite surveying the entire early collection of Enochic literature, Loren T. Stuckenbruck finds only one mention of testing (1 En. 94:5), which he treats in his essay, "Eschatological Temptation the Enochic Way: A Note on 1 Enoch 94:5." After illuminating the Ge'ez vocabulary of testing and temptation, Stuckenbruck explores the different interpretive possibilities for this short text found in an early portion of the Epistle of Enoch. He then moves beyond exegesis to explore the world of the text, concluding that the writer of the epistle uses the socio-religious categories of "righteous" and "wicked" to consolidate and confirm the identity of the target audience.

Todd R. Hanneken retains a synchronic emphasis in his study of "Ten-Times-Tested Abraham in the Book of Jubilees," yet he does incorporate more diachronic features in his work. He notes that Jubilees and later rabbinic literature assert that Abraham was tested ten times. The identity of the ten tests is not clear from Jubilees, which lists only seven, and varies in the rabbinic formulations. The question of the counting of tests of Abraham leads into examination of how Jubilees used its sources to arrive at the number ten, as well as the process of Jubilees' composition as evidenced by seams and contradictions. Ultimately, Hanneken concludes that "ten-times tested" served as a rhetorical convention in the Second Temple period, meaning "thoroughly tested," and he notes the use of the same motif in rabbinic literature.

Like Hanneken, Susanne Luther focuses on one text in her study of the Letter of James, entitled "Preparing for Temptation in a Culture of Mutual Ethical Responsibility," and she, too, sets the text within a larger diachronic context. Luther reads the Letter of James as presenting models of ethical conduct, thus preparing the reader to resist the power of temptations and at the same time stressing each person's responsibility for the correct ethical conduct of others in the face of the impending eschatological judgement. Within this framework of James's ethical instruction, the omnipresence of temptations becomes the keystone for an ethics of responsibility, motivated by the narrative Christ figure, the eschatological judge, as well as by allusion to stories of probation in the Jewish scriptures. Luther proposes that testing and temptation may be considered the gateway to James's teaching on Christology and soteriology.

Tzvi Novick's essay on "Life as Test: Reflections on m. 'Abot 2:4 and Related Texts" takes as its starting point a terse mishnaic maxim about trust in oneself. After elucidating the literary context, Novick draws on the important work of Jacob Licht to help outline a conceptual link between trustworthiness,

friendship, and testing. He then turns to relevant material on temptation in Ben Sira – a text also consulted by Hanneken and Luther in their essays. These texts especially highlight the allure of dishonest gain. Novick then turns to Tannaitic literature, where he notes a continuity between the test of endurance and the temptation to sin. Finally, his consideration of the Palestinian Talmud leads him to a concluding discussion of "second-order temptation," whereby one is tempted to "trust in oneself" by believing oneself to possess an immunity to testing and temptation.

The next three essays dwell at length on the Israelite experience of temptation in the wilderness; despite their different emphases, each one adopts a diachronic approach. Andrew Bowden undertakes a reception-historical study of Num 11:4 LXX in his essay, "'And the Mixed among Them Desired a Desire': The Reception of Desire in Numbers 11 LXX in Greek Texts, Ending with the Apostle Paul." Though Num 11:4 LXX does not employ any testing vocabulary, Bowden shows how its language of desire is picked up in a number of other Greek texts. Intriguingly, Ps 77:18 LXX introduces the language of testing (ἐκπειράζω) into its retelling of the incident described in Num 11, as does Ps 105:14 LXX. Bowden also treats Wis 15–16, relevant material in Philo, and 1 Cor 10. While he continues to trace the language of desire specifically, his essay helpfully brings into view the many connections between desire and testing.

Jan Willem van Henten focuses on the roles of those testing and tested in his essay, entitled "The Triangle of Testing in the Wilderness." Noting that treatments of the testing motif often focus on either God testing humans or humans testing God, van Henten draws attention to a third member in the "triangle of testing," namely, the leader of the people. He begins with the prototypical episode of testing at Massah and Meribah (Exod 17:1–7; see also Num 20), which focuses upon the people of Israel's quarrelling with Moses and God's testing of Moses as faithful leader of the people. The two key motifs are reflected in the meanings of the geographical names: Massah ("Test") and Meribah ("Quarrel"). Re-interpretations of the episode show that the testing motif is elaborated in several ways. The question therefore arises: Who tests whom? The Israelites can put God to the test, but God can test the people or its leader. Even the people can put its leader to the test. In exploring the triangle of testing, van Henten surveys re-interpretations of the Massah and Meribah episode in the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, and Judith.

Daniel L. Smith offers further reflection on the testing of Israel in the wilderness in "Testing the Child of God at the Beginning and until the End: ΠΕΙΡΑΣΜΟΣ and Theological Anthropology in Ancient Jewish and Christian Texts." Smith begins where Bowden ends, by looking at Paul's comments on testing in 1 Cor 10. Paul describes the Corinthian πειρασμός as ἀνθρώπινος, and Smith uses this pairing as a starting point for his discussion of the role of testing in Second Temple Jewish understandings of the human person – under-

standings that would include the human-divine relationship in their purview. He then traces the testing motif throughout a series of texts that connect testing with a "child of God" figure, from Israel in Deut 8:2–5 and Wis 11:10, to Jesus in Mark 1:12–13 and various passages in Matthew (4:1–11; 6:9–13; 26:26–42). Smith notes that this wide array of texts regularly foregrounds an understanding of πειρασμός as a test of loyalty or faithfulness.

The final two essays bring to the study of ancient texts a more pronounced concern for present-day contexts. Susan R. Garrett examines four ancient texts (Job, the Testament of Job, Mark, and John) in her contribution, which is entitled "(Not) Knowing Where I'm Going: Ignorance and Agony for Jesus and for Job." Garrett analyzes testing in these texts in terms of *discernment* (with regard to the nature of a test) and *prescience* (with regard to the outcome of the test). She first treats canonical Job, who undergoes a crisis of discernment, since he does not understand why he is suffering. The Testament of Job, however, features a protagonist with perfect discernment and prescience. Garrett then turns to portraits of Jesus in Gospels of Mark and John. Mark's Jesus has discernment and prescience, yet his incomplete knowledge leaves him vulnerable and suffering, like the canonical Job. John eliminates many of the tests found in the Synoptic Gospels, leaving an omniscient and certain Jesus who more closely resembles the Job of the Testament. Garrett argues that these different epistemologies are not only of historical interest but also important for contemporary theology and proclamation.

Lastly, Benjamin G. Wright III explores past and present understandings of temptation and sexuality in his essay, "Unbridled Libido: Ben Sira and the Billy Graham Rule." In Spring 2017, U. S. Vice President Mike Pence made headlines for his refusal to be alone with a woman (except for his wife), a measure that has come to be known as the "Billy Graham Rule." Wright argues that this position both over-sexualizes the relationship between men and women and, more importantly, creates a picture of masculinity in which men cannot – or cannot be expected to – contain their libido. This lack of male control is blamed on women, who are considered responsible for the temptation. Wright explores similar dynamics in Ben Sira, which tends to reserve the language of testing for non-sexual contexts. Ben Sira presents women as more of a danger than a mere temptation. In the end, Wright challenges readers not to leave hegemonic constructions of masculinity implicit or unexamined, but rather to work to dismantle the apparatus of male domination and other unjust systems.

It is our pleasure to bring this introduction to a close by acknowledging the many debts that we have incurred along the way. First, we would like to thank the contributors to this volume for their cheerful participation in the conference and their timely responses to editorial input. Second, we would like to express our gratitude to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and to the Evangelische Fakultät of Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München for the funding

that made the conference, and thus this volume, possible. We also would like to thank Anna Kellerer of LMU and Anja Summers of the Studienzentrum for their hard work in helping us with the logistics and organization of the conference. We are grateful to Joseph Grone, who read several of the essays and offered useful feedback, as well as Mirjam Seidler and Clayton Killion, who compiled the indices. And finally, we would like to express our appreciation to Professor Jörg Frey, chief editor of the WUNT series, as well as Dr. Henning Ziebritzki and Dr. Katharina Gutekunst of Mohr Siebeck, for their enthusiastic support in bringing this volume to publication.

27 August 2019

Daniel L. Smith
Loren T. Stuckenbruck

Philo of Alexandria on Testing and Temptation

Michael Francis

How does Philo of Alexandria understand the significance of the idea – or ideas – of testing and temptation?[1] This essay will offer a summary assessment based on a selection of texts drawn from the large Philonic corpus, proceeding in three stages. First, the primary Philonic data are surveyed, with particular attention to Philo's understanding of the value of testing/temptation as tool of pedagogy and ethical appraisal, and the role of testing/temptation in the narrative construct that dominates Philo's allegorical reading of scripture, the progress of the individual soul. Second, the essay considers Philo's perspective on personal agents of testing/temptation, namely, malevolent angels or demons, and God himself. Third, and building on the preceding discussion, the essay reflects on the place of testing/temptation within Philonic thought, especially in relation to Philo's assessment of the condition and responsibilities of created humanity.[2]

1. Testing and Temptation in Philo's Interpretation of Scripture

Is the idea of testing or temptation important to Philo of Alexandria? We might respond readily in the affirmative and offer support in several ways. Most obviously, we observe Philo's concern with the idea in his treatment of what might be called, for the purposes of this study, certain headline biblical passages. If Philo is above all else an interpreter of scripture, his attention to and handling of

[1] The formulations employed in the introductory paragraph reflect recognition of both the variety of particular concepts or nuances that might be considered a form of testing or temptation, and the hazard of imposing unwarranted categorical distinctions on specific lexical items, Greek or English (most obviously "test" and "temptation" themselves, on which see the discussion at the start of Daniel L. Smith's essay in the present volume).

[2] My essay is necessarily selective in scope; a comprehensive study of all relevant Philonic material would be welcome. I consider the essay to be complementary with the discussion provided by Nicholas Ellis in chapter 6 (on Philo) of his fine study, *The Hermeneutics of Divine Testing: Cosmic Trials and Biblical Interpretation in the Epistle of James and Other Jewish Literature*, WUNT 2/396 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), and with whom it was a pleasure to interact during the Josefstal conference. I express my thanks to Loren Stuckenbruck and Daniel Smith for the invitation to participate in the conference and most generous hospitality. I have preserved the style and organization of the paper as originally given. Block quotations employ the translations provided in the Loeb Classical Library.

particular texts is instructive.[3] Philo's interest in the opening chapters of Genesis is well known, and he attends at length in several passages to the story of the tempting serpent and its fateful influence on the first human pair.[4] Abraham is a figure of extraordinary importance across the Philonic corpus as the primary biblical exemplar of wisdom, one who, over the course of life, progresses towards true virtue and knowledge of God. Philo interprets several aspects of Abraham's life as trials or tests, most famously, of course, the patriarch's ordeal in Genesis 22 in the near death of his son, an event in which Philo is unashamed to recognize explicitly, at least on occasion, that God tested (ἐπείραζε) Abraham (*Somn*. 1.195, citing Gen 22:1).[5] Elsewhere, Philo addresses a selection of pentateuchal texts dealing with the divine testing of Israel in the wilderness (Exod 15:25; 16:4; Deut 8:2, 16). These texts afford Philo the opportunity to reflect on both the role of testing for the human soul and the nature of God's involvement in testing his people (*Leg*. 3.162–168; *Congr*. 163–179).[6]

Central to Philo's exegesis across multiple passages is the idea of testing as a useful pedagogical device, or as a mechanism of discrimination in regard to ethics or piety. Correspondingly, testedness is a mark of genuineness; it is proof of an agent's true character. Philo explains or justifies details of the law of Moses several times in the Exposition of the Law by way of appeal to the idea of a test.[7] Why, according to the divine instructions (Deut 12), is worship to be centralized, with each household prohibited from engaging in merely local rites? As a nec-

[3] Recognition of Philo as first and foremost an exegete of scripture has shaped the trajectory of Philonic studies in recent decades, influenced decisively by the major works of Valentin Nikiprowetzky and Peder Borgen in particular. See Nikiprowetzky, *Le commentaire de l'Écriture chez Philon d'Alexandrie*, ALGHJ 11 (Leiden: Brill, 1977); Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time*, NovTSup 86 (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

[4] The primary passages are *QG* 1.31–41, *Leg*. 2.71–108, *Opif*. 157–166, and the closely related discussion in *Agr*. 94–101. Regrettably, Philo's treatment of Gen 3:1b–7 in *Legum allegoriae* has been lost; the primary focus of *Leg*. 2.71–108 is Gen 3:1a.

[5] Philo considers various details of Gen 22 in a range of passages (e. g., *Post*. 20–23 on Abraham's seeing the place of sacrifice from afar; *Leg*. 3.203–210 on God's oath); the primary treatments addressing the character of Abraham's experiences as trial or test are *Somn*. 1.194–195 and *Abr*. 167–207. On other episodes in the patriarch's life as tests, see the discussion below on *QG* 3.56; 4.73; and *Abr*. 256–257. It is widely recognized that the persona of "Abraham the tested" is a prominent interpretive trope among early readers of Genesis. For a survey of texts and related ideas, see J. L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 297–99, 308.

[6] These texts are quoted at length below. Note also the related discussion in *Post*. 153–157 and *Fug*. 137–139.

[7] The Exposition of the Law and the Allegorical Commentary are Philo's most significant commentary series, each with its own distinctive approach to the interpretation of scripture. Allegorical readings predominate in the Allegorical Commentary; literal readings have a more prominent place in the Exposition. I refer to these series from time to time in the present essay as a way of organizing the consideration of testing and temptation in Philonic thought, that is, across both literal and allegorical readings of scripture.

essary test (βάσανος) of the worshipers' dispositions.[8] Only the genuinely pious would make the necessary trip and so endure the discomfort of separation from family and friends (*Spec.* 1.67–68). In another passage, Philo expounds the significance of Moses's charge to the Israelites caught in the act of idolatry on his descent from Sinai – "Who is with the Lord? Let him come to me!" (Exod 32:26 NETS) – in a related way. Moses's words serve as a test (βάσανος) of the mind or disposition (διάνοια) of each party, that is, to distinguish (διαγνῶναι) those vexed by or repentant of idolatry from the incurable sinners among the people (*Mos.* 2.167–168).[9] Elsewhere, Philo reflects on the instructions concerning the feast of tabernacles, and in particular the call for the people to dwell in tents during the time of the feast (*Spec.* 2.206, on Lev 23:42–43). Philo explains that by subjecting the people to a taste of their forebears' experience living in tents as they journeyed in the desert, the feast encourages gratitude among the people along with due supplications that they may not be tested with evils again (ὑπὲρ τοῦ μηκέτι πειραθῆναι κακῶν).[10] On a larger scale, Philo sets up the whole treatise *De praemiis et poenis*, in which he focuses on the blessings and curses promised in the law of Moses, by framing Israel's response to the divinely given word as a kind of test. Having received instructions, exhortations, threats, and warnings, the Israelites' sincerity in obedience will be tested in practice, with the true athletes of virtue proving themselves and so receiving their reward (*Praem.* 4–6).

Turning to Philo's allegorical exegesis, we find that Philo's primary and dominant interpretive concern as reader of scripture almost inevitably entails some measure of focus on the concept of testing. Philo reads the Pentateuch primarily as an allegory of the human soul. That is to say, he finds in the scriptural narrative (the narrative of Genesis in particular) an account of the pathway of progress in virtue open to the human subject by way of struggle with the body and the passions, with experience of the divine as the ultimate goal. Across the Allegorical Commentary, then, Philo finds in the various biblical characters and episodes particular dispositions and experiences of the human soul. Within this interpretive scheme, the general idea of being tempted or tested is a common component of human experience. Philo's primary interpretation of the serpent of Genesis 3 is as a figure for pleasure, ἡδονή (or, derivatively, the lover of pleasure) – that is, for Philo, the arch-enemy of the proper pursuit of virtue and, ul-

[8] Philo commonly employs πειράζειν (and cognates) when the terminology is present in the biblical passage under consideration (e. g., Gen 22:1; Exod 15:25; 16:4), sometimes in tandem with δοκιμα-terminology (which is pentateuchal language in Gen 23:16 only, however). Elsewhere, Philo most commonly employs βασανίζειν/βάσανος as his preferred terminology. See the helpful summary provided by Ellis in *Hermeneutics of Divine Testing*, 97–98.

[9] For the purposes of this summary, I group the two-volume *De vita Mosis* with the Exposition of the Law, following the influential arguments of E. R. Goodenough that the work serves an introductory function to the Exposition; see his "Philo's Exposition of the Law and His De Vita Mosis," *HTR* 26 (1933): 109–25.

[10] *Spec.* 2.207–209.

timately, the divine, no less than the starting point for wrongdoings and transgressions (*Opif*. 152),[11] and to whose voice we are by constitution, it would seem, easy prey on account of its appeal to our material bodies. It consorts with our senses first, and through them proceeds to deceive the mind as well (*Opif*. 165). Accordingly, the threat posed by this anguine voice is a staple of human affairs, a threat to be taken with the utmost seriousness by anyone seeking the virtuous life. Pleasure is Potiphar's wife, seeking to compromise the character of the soul possessed of self-control. Joseph succeeds in rejecting her advances by recalling the divine predilection for virtue (*Leg*. 3.237). What should the human soul do when facing such temptation? Learn the lesson of Joseph's quick getaway, or, similarly, Jacob's flight from Laban: turn the mind away from sensory pleasures and focus, rather, on the genuine beauty of virtue (*Gig*. 43–44, *Leg*. 3.17).

We should also observe that it is not only on the negative side of the ledger that the idea of testing is important in Philo's allegory of the human soul. If Potiphar's wife, on several occasions, serves Philo as a cipher for pleasure, we find in another female character of the patriarchal narratives one who both tests and is tested, albeit, and rather counter-intuitively, in a much more wholesome way. In the figure of Tamar, who disguises her true identity from those who encounter her casually, Philo finds knowledge testing the sincerity of those who claim to pursue her.

> But sometimes she makes trial (ἀποπειρωμένη) of her scholars, to test their zeal and earnestness; and then she does not meet them, but veils her face and sits like Tamar at the cross-roads, presenting the appearance of a harlot to the passers-by (Gen 38:14–15). Her wish is that inquiring minds may unveil and reveal her and gaze upon the glorious beauty, inviolate, undefiled and truly virginal, of her modesty and chastity. (*Congr*. 124 [Colson, LCL])

In a related and highly complex extended treatment of the story in the treatise *De fuga et inventione*, Philo finds in Tamar's pursuer Judah the soul resolute and patient in pursuit of virtue, while Tamar's refusal to exchange for material gain the three pledges received from Judah, which Philo takes to be particular virtues, proves both her genuineness and the appropriateness of Judah's pursuit (*Fug*. 149–151). True virtue is tested, and tests those who aspire to know her.[12] In sum, the characteristic emphases and coordinates of the story of the soul that is central to Philo's allegorical reading of scripture trace a narrative shaped quite consequentially by the idea of testing and temptation.

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[11] *Opif*. 152. Although the opening treatise of the Exposition of the Law rather than the Allegorical Commentary, *De opificio mundi* features the kind of allegorical exegesis characteristic of the latter in the treatment of Genesis 3 in *Opif*. 157–166. On Philo's methods of exegesis in the treatise, see D. T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria: On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses*, PACS 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 17–19.

[12] In contrast with this verdict on Judah, Philo offers in *Abr*. 103–105 an assessment of the pleasure-loving soul whose profession of admiration for virtue is no more than a sham, and whose testing (βάσανος) with the various parts of virtue is thus truly a form of torture.

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