

Historical Jesus 3: Rulers in Christ's World

Life in the First Century

They had no social media, no internet, no phones, no tablets, no computers, no light bulbs, no electricity, no steel, no plastic, no cars, no trains, no planes, no satellites, no rockets, no gasoline, or no antibiotics. Even so, we must be careful not to fall for the temptation of chronological snobbery. These were not primitive people, incapable of deep thought or great accomplishments. In fact, they had water fountains (aqueducts), underground sewage in large cities, concrete public baths (hot, medium, and cold), libraries, theaters, sports (running, wrestling, boxing, chariot racing), and outdoor markets providing all organic, pesticide-free, locally sourced foods. The rich enjoyed constantly running water, personal baths, heated floors, time to learn the classics, and participation in the politics of the local city.

One of the shocking facts of antiquity is that life expectancy was so low.¹ The average expected age of death for those born in the Roman Empire was between twenty and thirty years of age. This was due to an exceeding high rate of infant mortality, resulting in one out of three babies dying before their first birthday. Half of their children died by age ten. However, if someone survived until ten, he or she could expect to live to a ripe, old age of forty-seven years. The few who lived to sixty would likely make it to seventy. Consequently, the elderly comprised only seven percent of the population (compared to thirteen percent in America in the early twenty-first century). Life was cheap, and death all too common.

Wealth was concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority who dominated local and imperial politics. Since the middle class was minuscule, most folks lived, worked, and died as peasants, subsisting on what little they could earn without any hope of upward mobility.

The Roman emperors and the Senate, to a lesser extent, ran the empire. Often Rome would work through provincial rulers drawn from the local people, though they frequently also employed their own governors as well. The client ruler's task was to keep the peace and collect the taxes.

Generally, inhabitants of the empire enjoyed freedom of religion due to polytheism. Ancient polytheists believed in many gods, so they weren't concerned that others worshipped different gods than their own. However, for Jews this was a major issue since they could not worship the Roman gods at all. Eventually, they arranged a compromise with the empire. Rather than offering a sacrifice to Caesar, they would offer it to God on behalf of Caesar.

I want to look at three significant rulers during the life of Christ so that you can understand how the world worked in his day. First we will consider Herod the Great, then his son, Herod Antipas, and lastly the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

Herod the Great: A Man Driven by Fear

- Herod's father was an Idumean (Edomite) and his mother was a Nabatean (Arab).
- He married Mariamne since she was a Hasmonean princess (granddaughter of Aristobolus II on one side and granddaughter of Hyrcanus II on the other).
- He had constant turmoil in his home as his sister and mother constantly clashed with his wife and her mother, eventually ending in the execution of his beloved wife.

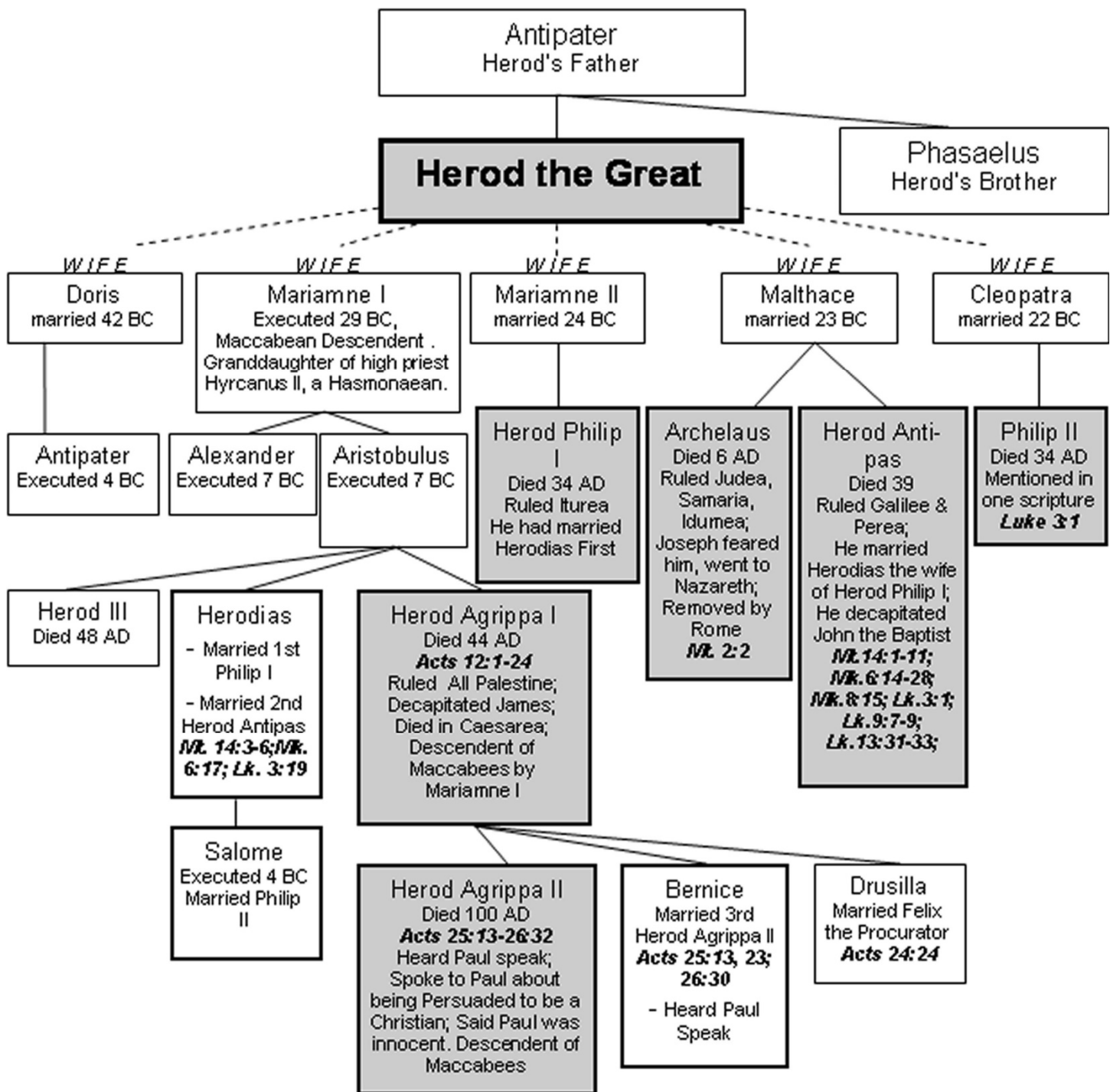
¹ Karen Cokayne, *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 2-3.

- “But when she was once dead, the king’s affections for her were kindled in a more outrageous manner than before, whose old passion for her we have already described; for his love to her was not of a calm nature, nor such as we usually meet with among other husbands; for at its commencement it was of an enthusiastic kind; nor was it, by their long cohabitation and free conversation together brought under his power to manage; but at this time his love to Mariamne seemed to seize him in such a peculiar manner, as looked like divine vengeance upon him for the taking away of her life; for he would frequently call for her, and frequently lament for her, in a most indecent manner.”²
- Herod suspected his sons from Mariamne, Alexander and Aristobulus and eventually convinced a Roman court to execute them.
- One year later wise men from the east came inquiring about “king of the Jews”
 - Mathew 2:1-22

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 6 "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."
 - Herod became infuriated when the wise men didn’t return, so he sent soldiers to Bethlehem and killed all the male children 2 and under
- One year later, he brought his son Antipater to court and requested death penalty from Augustus who agreed. Allegedly, the emperor once quipped, “Better to be Herod’s pig than his son.”
- Just before he died, he rounded up all of the leading men of Jerusalem into the hippodrome and ordered them shot with arrows upon news of his death so people would mourn rather than rejoice over his death.
- His will bequeathed his kingdom to his three surviving sons: Herod Archelaus, Herod Philip, and Herod Antipas.
 - Herod Archelaus took over Jerusalem, mismanaged matters so badly that the enraged Jews were able to convince Rome to fire Archelaus and send their own governor instead.
 - Matthew 2:19-22

19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." 21 And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee
 - Herod Philip married Herodias and ruled as tetrarch.
 - Herod Antipas ruled as tetrarch of Galilee

² Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 15.7.6



Herod Antipas: Living to Impress Others

- He petitioned Augustus for sole rule over his brothers but was denied. Instead, he ruled over Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39. This was nearly all of Jesus' life since he died around AD 30.
- Beyond keeping the taxes coming and keeping the peace, he worked hard to impress the emperors who reigned during his tenure: Augustus, Tiberius, and Caligula.
- For Augustus he rebuilt Sepphoris and renamed it Autocratis (emperor) and after he built a wall around Betharamphtha, he called it Livia (Augustus' wife) and later renamed it Julias (Augustus' daughter).
- For Tiberius he renamed the Sea of Galilee to Lake Tiberias and built a city on its shore called Tiberius.
- When his brother's wife, Herodias, divorced Philip and married him, John the Baptist confronted him.

- He arrested John
 - o Mark 6:17-20

17 For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. 18 For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.
- He was afraid to kill him
 - o Matthew 14:5

And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet.
- Herodias outmaneuvered him
 - o Mark 6:22-24

22 For when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." 23 And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." 24 And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist."
- Later, Antipas heard reports about Jesus performing miracles and decided to arrest him.
 - o Luke 13:31-32

31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." 32 And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.
- In the end, he saw Jesus at trial but decided not to get involved, sending him back to Pilate.

Pontius Pilate: Domination via Brute Force

- Pilate governed the province of Judea from AD 26 to 36
- According to Philo, Pilate "was a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate."³ Philo despised Pilate for "his corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity"⁴
- Soon after Pilate took office, he had his legions bring their military standards, but after six days of Jewish protesting, he relented.
- When he used funds from the Temple to build an aqueduct to Jerusalem, another riot broke out. This time he ordered his soldiers to brutally attack the mob.
- One time, Pilate killed some Galileans such that their blood intermingled with that of their sacrifices (Luke 13:1).
- Pilate sat in judgment on Jesus, probably one of many he judged that day. The Gospels show that Pilate remained unconvinced despite the Jewish leaders' insistence that Jesus deserved execution. Eventually he gave in when they threatened to tell Caesar that he wasn't taking sedition seriously.
- Later in his term, Pilate put shields onto Herod's palace in Jerusalem with the name of Tiberius on them. The people sent a petition to Tiberius who ordered them to be removed.

³ Embassy to Gaius 301

⁴ Embassy to Gaius 302

- His time came to an end as a result of a complaint after he slaughtered a group in Samaria who had gathered in a village at the base of Mount Gerizim for following a prophet who said he would show them where Moses had hidden the sacred vessels.

These three are not the worst Roman rulers, nor were they the best. They were, however, the men in charge of the affairs of the world when Jesus grew up and carried out his ministry. Based on their behavior, we can see they believed in the kind of power expressed through domination, that life was cheap, that they should identify and eliminate threats, achieve advancement through flattery and excessive gift-giving, especially to Caesar, keep the peace at all costs, and tax their subjects aggressively.

Now that we've calibrated our historical lenses to see what was "normal" in Jesus' world, we can appreciate all the more how magnificent and unique he was in against the background of his own context.

Historical Jesus 4: Baptism & Temptations

Baptism: Jesus Is Humble

Matthew 3:1-6 John the Baptist was a wildly successful prophet who preached repentance in light of God's coming Kingdom.

His unusual style was similar to Elijah the prophet who had lived several centuries before him.

2 Kings 1:7-8

7 He said to them, "What kind of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?" 8 They answered him, "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite."

The prophet Malachi, one of the last Old Testament prophets predicted Elijah would return before the day of the LORD.

Malachi 4:5-6

5 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

John's way of life was very different from Jesus. However, Jesus thought very highly of John the Baptist and believed he fulfilled the Elijah prophecy.

Matthew 11:7-19

7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" 11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, 14 and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. 15 He who has ears to hear let him hear. 16 "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, 17 "'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'" 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

Matthew 3:11-17 John preached about the coming judgment of God and urged people to change their lives. People signified their faith in this Kingdom message by submitting to baptism in the Jordan River. Although Jesus did not have sin,⁵ he still received John's baptism in order to fulfill all righteousness.

⁵ Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses because he was tempted in every respect like us, but he never sinned (Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5).

Temptations: Jesus Trusts God Totally

Satan had tempted Eve with such subtlety, she never recognized what he was doing until it was too late. He asked her, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”⁶ Eve replied, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” Satan retorted, “You surely will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When she saw it was good for food, a delight to the eyes, and that it would make her wise, she took and ate and gave to her husband and he ate. Satan’s temptations made her doubt God’s motives and broke her trust in God.

Satan is not some minor mythical creature in Scripture. He is the “god of this age,” the one behind the curtain pulling the strings, tainting and corrupting the world with his massive influence.⁷ He is the malevolent force behind Herod, the wickedness infecting Antipas, and the puppet master behind Pilate’s brutality. He works tirelessly to spoil and ruin goodness and to twist and bend everything away from God’s will.

First Temptation: Turn the Stone into Bread (Matthew 4:1-4)

The devil uses hunger, but his true aim is to break Jesus’ trust that he is the Son of God. Either Jesus attempts to turn the stone into bread (if God doesn’t back him up, then he’ll have major reason to doubt) or doesn’t do it, and never knows for sure if he really is the Son of God. Jesus replies with an exceptionally appropriate Scripture quotation.

Deuteronomy 8:2-4

2 And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. 3 And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. 4 Your clothing did not wear out on you and your foot did not swell these forty years.

For forty years, the people wandered in the desert and had to trust God to provide manna.

Second Temptation: Throw Yourself Down (Matthew 4:5-7)

Here the tempter quotes the Bible himself. Note how adaptable he is. He sees that Jesus has this amazing faith in God and uses that against him. If you really trust him, then jump! Again, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 6:16

“You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.”

Exodus 17:1-7

1 All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2

⁶ See Genesis 3:1-6 for the full account. Revelation 12:9 tells us that Satan, the devil, the great dragon, and the ancient serpent are all the same individual.

⁷ Satan is “the god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4), “the ruler of this world” (John 14:30), “the deceiver of the whole world” (Revelation 12:9), “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), the one who “has been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8), and the one who “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" 3 But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" 4 So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 5 And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

This is precisely the question the devil is maliciously pushing Jesus to ask himself: "Is God with me or not?" If God is with him, then he can jump without a worry in the world. Instead, Jesus shuts the temptation down. As the representative Israelite who now faces the wilderness temptations, he demonstrates radical trust in God and chooses not to put Him to the test.

Excursus: What It Means To Be the "Son of God"

2 Samuel 7:12-14

12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son...

Luke 1:32-33

32 He will be great and will be called the **Son of the Most High**. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Matthew 26:63

But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the **Son of God**."

Luke 4:41

And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the **Son of God**!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.

John 1:49

Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the **Son of God**! You are the King of Israel!"

John 11:27

She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the **Son of God**, who is coming into the world."

John 20:31

but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the **Son of God**, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Third Temptation: Fall Down and Worship Me (Matthew 4:8-11)

Satan here offers to fulfill Jesus' destiny without suffering or death. Jesus can take the easy way out. Surely, he'll be a better ruler than the evil one. He doesn't need to wait; he can have it all now! However, Jesus doesn't give him an inch! A third time, he quotes from Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 6:13-15

13 It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. 14 You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you-- 15 for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God-- lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth.

N. T. Wright insightfully summarizes these temptations with the following words:

“Jesus responds to the devil, not by attempting to argue (arguing with temptation is often a way of playing with the idea until it becomes too attractive to resist), but by quoting scripture. The passages he draws on come from the story of Israel in the wilderness: he is going to succeed where Israel failed. Physical needs and wants are important, but loyalty to God is more important still. Jesus is indeed to become the world's true lord, but the path to that status, and the mode of it when it arrives, is humble service, not a devilish seeking after status and power. Trust in God doesn't mean acting stupidly to force God into doing a spectacular rescue. The power that Jesus already has, which he will shortly display in healings in particular, is to be used for restoring others to life and strength, not for cheap stunts. His status as God's son commits him, not to showy prestige, but to the strange path of humility, service and finally death. The enemy will return to test this resolve again. For the moment, an initial victory is won, and Jesus can begin his public career knowing that though struggles lie ahead the foe has been beaten on the first field that really matters.”⁸

⁸ N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 44.