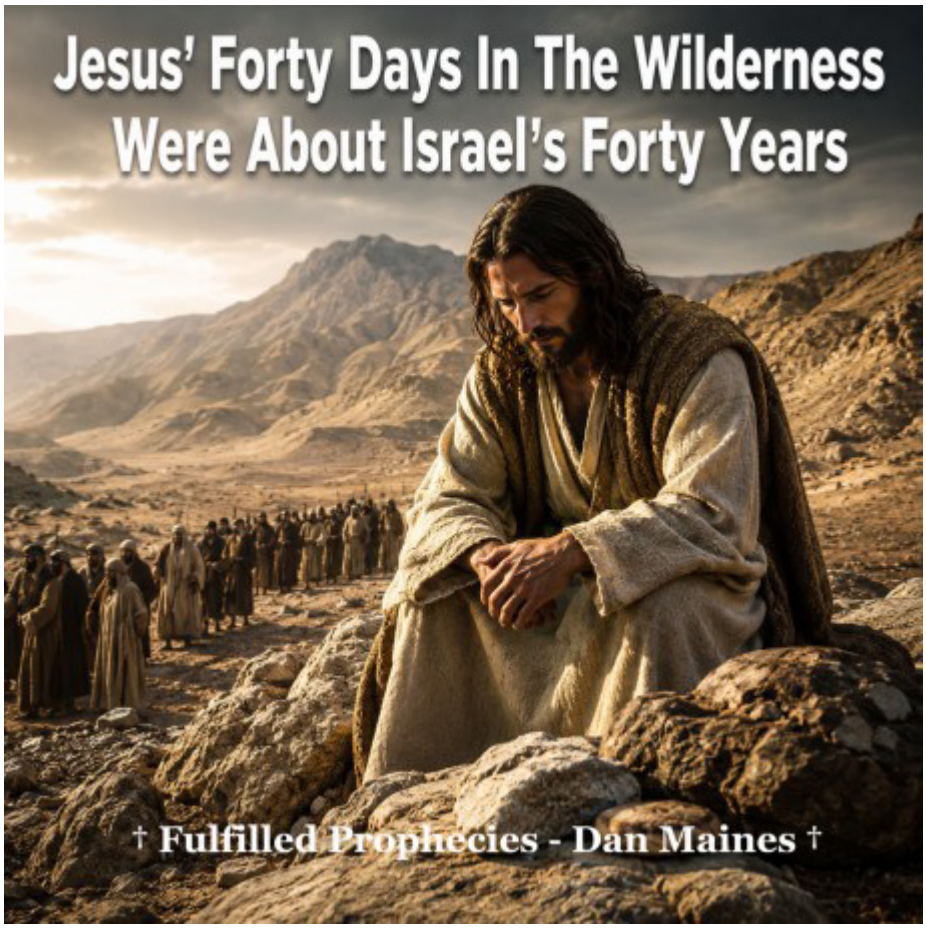
Fulfilled Prophecies

Jesus' Forty Days In The Wilderness Were About Israel's Forty Years



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† Jesus' forty days in the wilderness weren't an isolated story about resisting temptation. Matthew deliberately places Jesus into the pattern of Israel's history. Israel passed through the sea, entered the wilderness, was tested, became hungry, and repeatedly failed to trust God. Jesus passed through the waters of baptism, entered the wilderness, was tested, became hungry, and remained faithful.

† The connection becomes unmistakable when we notice how Jesus answered Satan. He didn't randomly select three convenient Bible verses. Every Scripture He used came from Deuteronomy, specifically from Moses' explanation of Israel's wilderness testing (Deuteronomy 6:13, 16; 8:3).
† Israel spent forty years in the wilderness because of unbelief. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness and succeeded where Israel failed. The forty days weren't accidental. Jesus was retracing Israel's story as the faithful Son.
† This is one of those places where the Old and New Testaments lock together. Without Israel's wilderness history, Jesus' temptation account can look like three disconnected temptations. With Deuteronomy open beside Matthew, the pattern becomes clear.

Matthew 3:16-17
After He was baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and settling on Him, and behold, a voice from the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."
† Matthew identifies Jesus as God's Son immediately before sending Him into the wilderness. That sequence matters. Israel had also been called God's son before being brought out of Egypt and into the wilderness (Exodus 4:22-23).
† Jesus' baptism is followed immediately by wilderness testing. Israel's deliverance through the sea was followed by wilderness testing. Matthew is showing us a pattern, water, sonship, wilderness, testing.
† The Father declared Jesus to be His beloved Son before the testing began. The wilderness would reveal the obedience of that Son, not because Jesus needed to discover who He was, but because His faithfulness would stand in deliberate contrast with Israel's failure (Matthew 4:1-11).

Exodus 4:22-23
Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord says:

"Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I said to you, 'Let My son go so that he may serve Me'; but you have refused to let him go. Behold, I am going to kill your son, your firstborn.""
† Long before Jesus entered the wilderness, God called Israel His son. This makes Matthew's sequence especially significant. Jesus is declared God's Son, then immediately led into the wilderness to be tested.
† Israel's calling as God's son carried the responsibility of covenant faithfulness, but Israel repeatedly failed under testing. Jesus enters the same pattern and demonstrates the obedience Israel didn't demonstrate (Deuteronomy 8:2).
† Matthew had already connected Jesus with Israel when he wrote that Jesus' return from Egypt fulfilled the words, Out of Egypt did I call my son (Matthew 2:15; Hosea 11:1). Matthew isn't hiding the connection. Jesus is deliberately presented against the background of Israel's story.

Numbers 14:32-34
But as for you, your dead bodies will fall in this wilderness. Also, your sons will be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years, and they will suffer for your unfaithfulness, until your bodies perish in the wilderness. In accordance with the number of days that you spied out the land, forty days, for every day you shall suffer the punishment for your guilt a year, that is, forty years, and you will know My opposition.
† Israel's forty years weren't a random period. They were directly connected with Israel's unbelief and rebellion in the wilderness.
† Notice the biblical relationship between days and years in this judgment. Israel's spies searched the land for forty days, and the rebellious generation received forty years in the wilderness, a year corresponding to each day.
† When Jesus later spends forty days in the wilderness, a Jewish reader familiar with Israel's Scriptures wouldn't miss the significance. The faithful Son enters the place associated with Israel's forty years of testing, but His response is obedience

rather than rebellion (Matthew 4:1-2).

Deuteronomy 8:2-3
And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, in order to humble you, putting you to the test, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you go hungry, and fed you with the manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, in order to make you understand that man shall not live on bread alone, but man shall live on everything that comes out of the mouth of the Lord.
† This passage gives us the key to Jesus' first answer to Satan. Israel was hungry in the wilderness, and God used that hunger as a test of whether Israel would trust His word.
† Jesus was also hungry in the wilderness. Satan challenged Him to turn stones into bread, but Jesus answered from the very passage describing Israel's wilderness hunger (Matthew 4:3-4).
† Jesus wasn't merely saying that Scripture is important. He was standing in Israel's wilderness test and giving the faithful response Israel should've given. Physical hunger wouldn't cause Him to distrust His Father or misuse His authority.
† Israel received manna and still complained. Jesus had the power to create bread and refused to use that power outside His Father's will. Where Israel failed over bread, Jesus remained faithful.

Matthew 4:1-4
Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted for forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God.'"
† Matthew specifically tells us that Jesus was led by the Spirit

into the wilderness. His forty-day experience wasn't accidental. It was part of God's redemptive purpose.
† Satan's challenge focused directly on Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Israel had been called God's son and failed in the wilderness. Now the true and faithful Son was being tested.
† Jesus answered from Deuteronomy 8:3, a passage explicitly referring to Israel's forty years in the wilderness. That's the interpretive key. Jesus' forty days are tied directly to Israel's forty years.
† Jesus didn't answer by performing a miracle. He answered by trusting the Father's word. Israel questioned God's provision when hungry. Jesus trusted God while hungry.

Deuteronomy 6:16
You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested Him at Massah.
† This command reaches back to Israel's failure at Massah, where the people questioned whether God was really among them because they lacked water (Exodus 17:1-7).
† Israel demanded evidence of God's presence. They effectively said, prove that God is with us. That background explains why this particular verse was Jesus' answer when Satan challenged Him to throw Himself from the temple (Matthew 4:5-7).
† Satan wanted Jesus to force a dramatic demonstration of divine protection. Jesus refused. The faithful Son wouldn't test His Father.
† Once again, Jesus selected a Scripture rooted directly in Israel's wilderness failure. This wasn't coincidence. Jesus was succeeding at the exact kind of test Israel had failed.

Matthew 4:5-7
Then the devil took Him along into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and he said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written: 'He will give His angels orders concerning You'; and 'On their hands they will lift You up, So that You do not strike Your foot against a

stone.'" Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written: 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"
† Satan even quoted Scripture, but Jesus refused to use God's promises as an excuse for presumption. Trust doesn't demand that God prove Himself.
† Jesus' answer comes from Deuteronomy 6:16, which points directly back to Massah. Israel tested God in the wilderness. Jesus refused to repeat Israel's sin.
† The contrast is powerful. Israel questioned God's presence after witnessing extraordinary deliverance. Jesus trusted the Father without demanding a spectacular sign.
† Jesus didn't merely know Scripture better than Satan. He understood Scripture in its covenant and historical context. His answer deliberately placed His temptation inside Israel's wilderness story.

Deuteronomy 6:13-15
You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name. You shall not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who surround you, for the Lord your God who is in the midst of you is a jealous God; so follow Him, or else the anger of the Lord your God will be kindled against you, and He will wipe you off the face of the earth.
† Israel's wilderness generation repeatedly struggled with idolatry. The golden calf became one of the clearest examples of Israel turning from exclusive loyalty to God (Exodus 32:1-8).
† Satan's final temptation offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship. Jesus answered from Deuteronomy again. God alone must be worshiped and served (Matthew 4:8-10).
† Israel compromised its worship. Jesus wouldn't compromise His worship even when offered kingdoms.
† The three Deuteronomy passages used by Jesus aren't random proof texts. All three come from the section where Moses teaches Israel how to understand its wilderness experience and how to remain faithful to God.

Matthew 4:8-11
Again, the devil took Him along to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Go away, Satan! For it is written: 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'" Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to serve Him.
† The final test concerned worship and kingdom. Jesus wouldn't receive kingdom through compromise. His kingdom would come through obedience to the Father.
† Israel repeatedly fell into idolatry, but Jesus gave Satan no worship at all. Where Israel's loyalty fractured, Jesus' loyalty remained complete.
† Jesus answered all three temptations from Deuteronomy. Bread came from Deuteronomy 8:3. Testing God came from Deuteronomy 6:16. Worshiping God alone came from Deuteronomy 6:13.
† That concentration in Deuteronomy is the evidence that unlocks the entire account. Jesus wasn't simply collecting favorite verses. He was answering from the very Scriptures that interpreted Israel's wilderness failures.
† Israel was tested for forty years and failed repeatedly. Jesus was tested for forty days and remained obedient. The Son was reliving Israel's story and getting it right.

Hebrews 3:8-11
Do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, As on the day of trial in the wilderness, Where your fathers put Me to the test, And saw My works for forty years. Therefore I was angry with this generation, And said, 'They always go astray in their heart, And they did not know My ways'; As I swore in My anger, 'They certainly shall not enter My rest.'"
† Hebrews confirms how the wilderness generation was remembered, unbelief, hardened hearts, testing God, and failure to enter God's rest.
† Jesus stands in direct contrast. He doesn't harden His heart.

He doesn't test the Father. He doesn't complain about God's provision. He doesn't turn toward false worship.
† The wilderness that exposed Israel's unbelief displayed Jesus' faithfulness. The same kinds of pressures produced opposite responses.
† This helps explain why Matthew's account is much deeper than a simple lesson about resisting temptation. It's the story of the faithful Son accomplishing what the unfaithful son failed to accomplish.

Historical References
† Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book III, Chapter 15, described Israel's sentence of wandering in the wilderness for forty years because of the generation's rebellion and unbelief. Josephus preserves the same historical framework that stands behind the forty-year wilderness pattern.
† Josephus continued the wilderness history in Antiquities, Book IV, describing the remaining thirty-eight years and Israel's continuing struggles with disobedience. His account shows how deeply the forty-year wilderness period belonged to Jewish historical memory.
† Irenaeus, writing in Against Heresies, Book V, Chapter 21, understood Christ's temptation as part of His victorious work of reversing humanity's earlier defeat. While his emphasis includes Adam, he recognized that Jesus' temptation wasn't an isolated moral lesson, but part of Christ's larger work of faithfully overcoming where others had fallen.

How It Applies To Us Today
† Jesus' wilderness victory teaches us to read the Bible as one connected story. Matthew expects us to know Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy if we're going to understand what Jesus was doing.
† We shouldn't read Jesus' quotations as detached proof texts. Context explains why He chose those exact passages. Every answer reaches back into Israel's wilderness experience.
† Jesus shows us what true faithfulness looks like. He trusted

God's provision when hungry, trusted God's presence without demanding proof, and worshiped God without compromise.
† We also learn how to face temptation. Knowing individual verses matters, but understanding what those verses mean in context matters too. Jesus knew both the words and the story behind the words.
† Most importantly, our confidence isn't ultimately in our ability to repeat Israel's test and perform better. Our confidence is in Christ, the faithful Son who succeeded where Israel failed.
† Forty years and forty days belong together. Israel's wilderness revealed the failure of the old generation. Jesus' wilderness revealed the obedience of the faithful Son.
† Once we see the Deuteronomy connection, Matthew 4 opens up. Jesus walked into Israel's wilderness story, faced Israel's tests, quoted Israel's wilderness Scriptures, and gave the answers Israel should've given.

Q & A Appendix
Q: Why did Jesus fast for forty days?
A: The forty days deliberately echo Israel's forty years in the wilderness. Israel's forty years were a period of testing marked by repeated unbelief, while Jesus' forty days demonstrated the faithfulness of God's Son (Numbers 14:32-34; Deuteronomy 8:2-3; Matthew 4:1-2).
Q: Why did Jesus quote Deuteronomy three times?
A: Because Deuteronomy explains Israel's wilderness experience. Jesus answered the bread temptation from Deuteronomy 8:3, the temptation to test God from Deuteronomy 6:16, and the temptation involving worship from Deuteronomy 6:13 (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10).
Q: Was Jesus simply giving us three verses to use against Satan?
A: There's more happening than that. The verses Jesus selected all come from Israel's wilderness context. Matthew is showing Jesus faithfully facing the kinds of tests Israel failed (Deuteronomy 6:13-16; 8:2-3).
Q: What does Israel being called God's son have to do with

Jesus?
A: God called Israel His son before the Exodus. Matthew presents Jesus as God's Son, brings Him out of Egypt, takes Him through water, and then shows Him being tested in the wilderness. Jesus fulfills the pattern faithfully (Exodus 4:22-23; Matthew 2:15; 3:16-17; 4:1-11).
Q: What was the major difference between Israel and Jesus in the wilderness?
A: Israel repeatedly responded with unbelief, complaining, testing God, and idolatry. Jesus responded with trust, obedience, and exclusive worship of God (Deuteronomy 6:13-16; 8:2-3; Hebrews 3:8-11).
Q: What's the great message of Jesus' wilderness victory?
A: Jesus is the faithful Son. He entered the story of Israel, faced the wilderness test, and succeeded where Israel failed (Matthew 4:1-11).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †
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Source Index
† Matthew 3:16-17; Exodus 4:22-23; Numbers 14:32-34; Deuteronomy 8:2-3; Matthew 4:1-4; Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:5-7; Deuteronomy 6:13-15; Matthew 4:8-11; Hebrews 3:8-11
† Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book III, Chapter 15; Antiquities of the Jews, Book IV; Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book V, Chapter 21

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