

Pope Francis says God doesn't lead us into temptation. What does the Bible say?

## **Who tests Abraham, or Jacob, or Jesus—and why?**

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Pope Francis in the Philippines, 2015

Last week Pope Francis made news by suggesting a change in the wording of the Lord's Prayer. In [both English and Italian](#), the traditional version of the prayer petitions God to "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." A loving divine parent would not impose temptation upon us mortals, says Francis. A better translation of the original Greek would read, "Do not let us enter into temptation."

French Catholics are already using the new translation. [A parish priest in Paris said](#) that the old one “made some people think God threw banana peels in front of people to see if they would slip and fall, but that is absolutely not the biblical view of God.”

Scholars debate whether or not the Greek text presupposes that God causes testing. The Epistle of James echoes Matthew's Gospel at many points, especially the Sermon on the Mount, where we find the Lord's Prayer. James insists that God tempts no one; we suffer temptation due to our own desires (1:13-14). Pope Francis may be correct.

Yet the Bible also includes prominent stories of divine testing. God tests Abraham by commanding him to slaughter his son Isaac in sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-19). Jacob grapples with a mysterious assailant, eventually concluding he has wrestled with God (Genesis 32:24-32). Even Jesus undergoes a period of testing (Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13).

These stories lurk in the background when people interpret suffering in terms of divine testing. Others are uncomfortable with the notion that God uses tests, especially painful ones, to teach us a lesson or to develop our character.

The biblical testing stories defy our attempts to fit them neatly into our prepackaged theologies.

The tests of Abraham, Jacob, and Jesus have vexed interpreters throughout the centuries. Why would God need to test mortals if God knows our character in advance? Are not the tests overly severe? And why should even Jesus need to be tested by God?

Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac has made a particularly deep impression. The story begins with its own partial interpretation: God tests Abraham (22:1). It concludes with God blessing Abraham *because* he was willing to sacrifice his son (22:16). [James L. Kugel points out](#) that the dramatic moment with Isaac is hardly the only test of Abraham. Indeed, early interpreters saw Abraham as a model passer of divine tests.

Ancient readers nevertheless struggled to reconcile Isaac's ordeal with a beneficent God. Some believed Satan challenged God to prove Abraham's obedience. Others read Genesis 22:16 to indicate not that God learns Abraham is faithful but that God proves *to others* that Abraham is obedient. According to Islam, Abraham prepares to

sacrifice Ishmael, not Isaac—and Ishmael agrees to the ordeal, becoming the story's hero rather than its unwitting victim.

A narrow focus on Abraham neglects poor Isaac, who watches his father bind him, lay his would-be corpse upon the wood, and grasp the knife. No wonder, commentators have suggested, Isaac plays only a minor and generally passive role as the story moves forward. How does one recover from such an experience?

“Jacob wrestled the angel,” [says U2](#), “and the angel was overcome.” That's not quite what Genesis says. It introduces Jacob's adversary as “a man,” and the match looks like a draw: the injured Jacob simply won't let his opponent leave without giving Jacob a blessing. Nevertheless, the man later informs Jacob, “you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed,” and Jacob concludes he has wrestled with God. He receives a new name, Israel—a name that indicates the identity of a people who will be characterized by their continual struggling with God. No wonder Jacob leaves with a limp.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all relate Jesus' encounter with the devil in the wilderness, but they differ slightly as to God's role:

- According to Mark, the Spirit casts Jesus out into the wilderness, where Satan besets him. Mark's short account, which lacks the other Gospels' series of three temptations, doesn't say whether it is God's will for Satan to test Jesus.
- In Matthew, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness *in order* to be tested. The Greek can be translated in several ways, but the sense is that the Spirit is in cahoots with the devil on this one: it is God's will.
- Like Matthew, Luke describes the Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness, where he faces the devil's tests. Luke leaves God's role unclear.

The Gospels routinely describe Jesus' opponents “testing” him with questions, as the devil does in Matthew and Luke. Each time, Jesus confounds his opponents, demonstrating his authority. Why does Jesus need to be tested? As with Abraham, one explanation is that God aims not to explore how Jesus will do but to demonstrate Jesus' character. But the stories don't say.

We modern people have our own experiences of testing. I recall a particularly gruesome final exam in an advanced philosophy seminar. The three-hour exam consisted of one essay, basically requiring us to turn everything we'd read into a focused argument. Exhausted by the end—I'd written 12 pages—I later realized that

the exam itself had been a learning experience.

Good testing educates us and makes us stronger. Military veterans recall basic training with pride. But they also recall it with terror. Some people die in basic training, and tests sometimes crush the spirit. It's not fair to say that testing is always good for us.

And it's important to remember that not every Bible story should be read as a lesson for our individual lives. Biblical authors told stories for lots of reasons. With Abraham and Jacob, those reasons include defining the people of Israel and their relationships to God and to their neighbors. Likewise, the testing of Jesus might not be about building his character. [According to Justo González](#), God places Jesus in proximity to the devil because it is Jesus' calling to confront and defeat evil. I buy that.

Indeed, none of these stories focuses upon building character. Yes, adversity can build character (Romans 5:3-5). But adversity sometimes breaks us. I tend to agree with James: God does not will our suffering. The biblical testing stories involve other lessons.