

Temptation of Jesus

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The first verse of the temptation narrative contains the strange remark that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness in order to be tempted by the devil. Obviously the Spirit is the same " Spirit of God" that was just mentioned in 3:16 and that descended on Jesus when he was baptized. This account is puzzling. Questions come up why God's Spirit would lead Jesus into temptation and whether or not God uses Satan as his instrument to tempt Jesus.

The following suggestion is made: In order to understand Mt 4:1, one has to recognize that Jesus was not just a second Moses repeating to a certain degree the experience of Moses (Deut 18:15; Acts 3:17-26; John 6:1-15). Jesus had also to cover the ground where Israel had walked. He had to repeat Israel's experience to gain the victory where the historical Israel had failed. The Spirit of God led Jesus in the desert for 40 days (4:2) in order for him to go through what Israel had experienced in the wilderness throughout 40 years.

Evidence for this conclusion is provided by Jesus' response to the first temptation. When Satan demanded that Jesus prove his divine sonship by turning stones into bread, since he was hungry (4:2-3), Jesus replied: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (4:4). In quoting Deut 8:3 Jesus referred to the context of Deut 8. Deut 8 falls between the proclamation of the Decalogue (Deut 5) and the report on the rewriting of the two tablets of the Decalogue (Deut 10). The issues are covenant, obedience, faithfulness, and love toward the Lord. Deut 8:1-6 refers back to Israel's wilderness experience:

"All the commandments that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the LORD swore to give to your

forefathers. You shall remember all the ways which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. Thus you are to know in your heart that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him."

The correspondence between Mt 4:1-4 and Deut 8:1-6 is interesting. Not only are Deut 8:3b and Mt 4:4 identical, but, a number of common words are found in both records, namely "to tempt/test," "desert," and "forty." The idea of being hungry also is present. Obviously, Jesus quoted from Deut 8 in order to point to the similarity between his experience with Israel's. The people were tested by God in order to prove their commitment, obedience, and love to the Lord. Israel failed. Jesus, in taking Israel's place succeeded.

The responses to the second and third Matthean temptation are taken from Deut 6 and also remind us of Israel. First, although God may test his people, humans are not to test God (Mt 4:7; Deut 6:16). Reference is made to the incident at Massah. Secondly, God offers the promised land to Israel (Deut 6:10-11). Israel is called not to forget the Lord and to "fear only the LORD your God" and "worship him" (Deut 6:12-13). Satan offers the kingdoms of the world to Jesus (Mt 4:8-9). Jesus responds with Deut 6:13, determining to worship and serve God alone.

The temptation narrative therefore presents Jesus as the new Israel. Moved by the Holy Spirit he went over the same ground that Israel had gone over previously.[1] In passing the test it is evident that Jesus was totally committed to the Lord and rightfully called "My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Mt 3:17). Even in difficult times his love toward

the Father transcends the gratification of physical needs, emotional desires, and rational deliberations. In his perfect obedience he is the real servant of the Lord who not only sets a perfect example to be imitated by his followers, but even more so is the lamb without blemish, the one that was able to take away humanity's sins.

[1]. See Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary 33a (Dallas: Word Book Publishers, 1993), 64-69; and Frank E. Gaebelin (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 111.