

Why Did the Spirit of God Lead Jesus into the Wilderness (Matt 4:1)?

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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” who had just been mentioned in Matthew 3:16 and who descended on Jesus when he was baptized. This is puzzling. Why would God’s Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, and did God use Satan as his instrument to tempt Jesus?

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

Evidence for this conclusion is provided by Jesus’ response to the first temptation. When Satan demanded from Jesus to 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, NASB). Jesus in quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 referred to the context of Deuteronomy 8. Deuteronomy 8 is located between the proclamation of the Decalogue (Deut 5) and the report on the rewriting of the two tablets of the Decalogue (Deut 10). At issue are the covenant, obedience, faithfulness, and love towards the Lord. Deuteronomy 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.” (NASB)

The correspondence between Matthew 4:1-4 and Deuteronomy 8:1-6 is interesting. Not only are Deuteronomy 8:3b and Matthew 4:4 identical but additionally, a number of common words are found in both records, namely “to tempt/test,” “desert,” and “forty.” The idea of being hungry is also present. Obviously, Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 8 in order to point to the similarity between his and Israel’s experience. Israel was tested by God in order to prove its commitment, obedience, and love to the Lord. Israel failed. Jesus took its place and succeeded.

The responses to the second and third Matthean temptation are taken from Deuteronomy 6 and also remind us of Israel. First, although God may test his people, humans are not supposed to test God (Mt 4:7; Deut 6:16). Reference is made to the incident at Massah. Furthermore, 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 Deuteronomy 6:13 and decides to worship and serve God alone.

The temptation narrative seems to emphasize that Jesus represents Israel. Moved by the Holy Spirit he went over the same ground that Israel had covered previously. When he passed the test it was 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 surpassed the gratification of physical needs, emotional desires, and rational deliberations. In his perfect obedience he was the real servant of the Lord who would not only set a perfect example to be imitated by his followers, but even more so was the lamb without blemish that was able to take away humanity’s sins.