

Exodus 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Exodus chapter 17. 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. Therefore the people quarrelled 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? But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?

So Moses cried to the Lord, What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me. 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. 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. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarrelling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, Is the Lord among us or not? Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill, with the staff of God in my hand.

So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, Write this as a memorial in a book, and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my banner, saying, A hand upon the throne of the Lord. The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. In Exodus chapter 17, Israel is moving by stages through the wilderness, toward the promised land, following the itinerary that has been established for them by the Lord. And the people blame Moses for bringing them out into the wilderness to die of thirst. They've run out of water, there's another water crisis, they've had that crisis at

Marah, and now there's another. Massa and Meribah are spoken of on a number of occasions within the Old Testament, as places where Israel tested God. In Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 16, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massa. In Psalm 78 verses 17 to 20, Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert. They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God, saying, Can God spread a table in the wilderness? He struck the rock so that water gushed out, and streams overflowed. In Psalm 81 verse 7, In distress you called, and I delivered you. I answered you in the secret place of thunder. I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Then in Psalm 95 verses 7 to 9, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massa in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my works. By the time of Numbers chapter 14 verse 22, we're told that the Israelites had tested the Lord ten times. This testing of God proceeds from unbelief, and is an attempt to force God's hand, to set God an ultimatum. We can see examples of this, perhaps most clearly, in the temptations of Christ. It's an attempt to force God to prove himself to sight, rather than living by faith. It's not taking God at his word, it's trying to force God to prove himself. Moses recognised that his own life at this point was potentially under threat. The people were almost at the point of being willing to stone him. Moses and some of the elders were sent ahead, ahead of the Israelites with the staff with which the Nile was struck, and just as the striking of the Nile with that staff led to undrinkable water, so the

striking of the rock with the staff produces water that all can drink. Once again, we shouldn't presume that this is a suspension of the laws of nature. Rather, the God of nature is proving his power over nature, to be able to provide whatever his people need from the wilderness. This most unpromising of locations can spring forth with rivers that will feed a multitude. It can offer quail from the heavens, and rain of bread from heaven.

God can provide for his people in whatever situations they find themselves in, for he is the God of nature. Moses brings the elders of Israel with him, presumably as witnesses to God's power and his faithfulness in providing for his people.

[5 : 44] It's interesting to note that the Lord stands before Moses upon the rock, and he has to strike the rock. This appearance of God upon the rock, and Moses striking the rock, associates God with the rock.

In Deuteronomy chapter 32, this language is used of God, The rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice, a God of faithfulness, and without iniquity, just and upright as he. And then later on, in verses 28 following, For they are a nation void of counsel, and there is no understanding in them. If they were wise, they would understand this, they would discern their latter end. How could one have chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight, unless their rock had sold them, and the Lord had given them up? For their rock is not as our rock. Our enemies are by themselves, for their vine comes from the vine of Sodom, and from the fields of Gomorrah. The imagery of the rock is used earlier on as well.

He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he suckled him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock. And then a few verses later, again its language applied to God. But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked. You grew fat, stout, and sleek. Then he forsook God who made him, and scoffed at the rock of his salvation. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods. With abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth.

The language then of rock is associated with God. God is the rock that gives security to his people. He's the rock from which living waters flow. He's the rock who is able to withstand all that would buffet it. He's the rock who is unchangeable and secure. And this language applied to God also has that connection in the story itself, as God stands upon the rock, associates with the rock, and then the rock is struck in a way that associates the striking of the rock, perhaps, with the striking of God himself.

This might be particularly important to reflect upon when we consider the later tradition of the rock that followed them in the wilderness, and the way that Paul can use that in 1 Corinthians 10.

[8 : 23] This is a second water crisis in the story of the wilderness. There are two water crises early on in Israel's experience in the wilderness, but no water crisis mentioned again until nearer the time that they're about to enter into the land, just after Miriam dies. Massa is associated with the name trial, and Meribah with the word quarrel. And we see another Meribah in Numbers chapter 20, with a similar thing that takes place, although on that occasion Moses is supposed to speak to the rock, but he strikes it when he should not. At this point, Amalek comes upon Israel. They attack Israel. Now this attack is a pre-emptive strike. Israel has not done anything to antagonize them. The Amalekites see them in the wilderness, they see they're weak, and they want to prey upon them. In Deuteronomy chapter 25, verse 17 to 19, we're told about this incident. Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of

Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God. Therefore, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget.

Amalek, at this point, is placed under the ban. They're described as lacking the fear of God, acting in a way that rejects all established moral principles. They're brutal, treacherous, and predatory, seeking to take advantage of those who are weak, as those who are thirsty, hungry, don't have many resources. Amalek is first introduced to us as one in the line of Esau's family.

In Genesis chapter 36, verse 12, And then in verse 16, Korah, Gatham, and Amalek, these are the chiefs of Eliphaz in the land of Edom. These are the sons of Adar. Perhaps we're supposed to see

Amalek as bearing something of the grudge that Esau had against his brother Jacob. It's been forgotten in the rest of the family, but Amalek keeps that grudge alive.

Maybe we're supposed to see some symmetry with the encounter with Esau after the water crossing in Genesis chapter 32 to 3. Amalek, however, is the son of a concubine. He's a descendant of the Horites, who dwelt in Seir before the Edomites. He seems to have a less official place within the nation than the children of Esau's full wives. Joshua leads Israel in the fighting of the battle, but Moses goes up on the hill and holds up his arms. And as he holds up his arms, Israel prevails. And if his arms fall, Israel starts to be beaten back. His hands are raised, perhaps in prayer, but this isn't the usual term for that. It's not entirely clear what Moses is doing at this point. Is he engaging in prayer? It's quite possible. That would be the natural thing to suspect. Others have suggested that he's holding up a banner, which explains why it's later said that the Lord is my banner. That holding up of the banner would explain also why when his hands drop, the situation changes. It's not that he's stopped praying as his arms drop. It's the fact that he's no longer holding up the banner. That's another possibility.

[12:04] But one thing to notice here is the presence of two people around him, one on either side. Aaron, who's the high priest, and Hur, who seems to be a leading civil leader. He's a political leader. He's a descendant of Judah, and he seems to have some authority within the camp. Later on, in Exodus 24, verse 14, when Moses goes up the mountain, he leaves the people in the charge of Aaron and Hur.

And so he seems to be a prominent son in the line of Judah. And on the other side, you have the high priest. So there are three figures. Moses the prophet, the Judahite Hur, a prominent son of the line of Judah, whose grandson happens to be Bezalel, the one who will be especially responsible for the crafting of the tabernacle. And then on the other side, you have the priest, Aaron. This pattern of supporting pillars might remind us of Yachin and Boaz, the two pillars as you enter into the temple.

Also of the picture that we see in Zechariah chapter 4. The relations of Israel by which they will win their victories may be described here. So in the centre, you have the prophet Moses, the one who relays the word of God to the people. And then on the one hand of him, you have Aaron, the high priest, who represents the law of God in the rule and managing of the tabernacle and its worship. And on the other side, you have a chief civil leader, a member of the tribe to which the throne will one day be given. These are the relations by which Israel will be equipped to prevail.

As they relate to God, as they lift their hands up to God, and as the prophet is supported by the king and the priest, that triumvirate will be the means by which they succeed. After they win the battle, Moses builds an altar called The Lord is My Banner. And after the battle, the Lord instructs Moses to write down in a book for a memorial to Joshua and others that the memory of Amalek will be utterly blotted out. This is the first mention of writing within the Bible. It's here given in the context of the importance of being mindful of, attending to, and learning from history. And this conflict with Amalek continues in the story of Israel. It continues in the story of Saul, where Saul fails to deal with the problem of Amalek. It continues later on in the story of the Exodus. And then it continues in the story of Esther, where we have Haman, the Agagite, a descendant of Amalek. A question to consider. How can we see the New

Testament using the events in this chapter to refer to Christ? What are some other ways, beyond the ways that are identified by the New Testament, that we might see Christ being symbolized or figured here?