

7. Grumbings in the desert Exodus 15:22–17:7

The incident at Marah

(Exodus 15:22–27)

We mentioned earlier that the grumbling of the Israelites becomes a dominant negative motif of the wilderness wanderings (see comment on 14:11). Instances of it occur repeatedly throughout the books of Exodus and Numbers (see, e.g., Exod. 14:11; 15:23–26; 16:2–3; 17:2–3; Num. 11:4–6; 14:1–4; 16:11–14; 20:2–5). George Coats remarks: ‘A form-critical study of the relevant texts reveals that the murmuring motif is not designed to express a disgruntled complaint. Quite the contrary, it describes an open rebellion ... In the wilderness theme the murmuring motif characterizes a basic tradition about the rebellion of Israel.’ The biblical author sees this rebellion in direct contrast to the grace and favour that Yahweh has bestowed upon the people. This episode is also to be seen by way of antithesis to the preceding scene of joyful singing. And what a contrast it is!

This section is carefully written and crafted. It employs elaborate word-plays that anchor the entire section to the main idea, which is that the Israelites are living by sight and not by faith. The Hebrews are required to depend totally upon God for their sustenance and means.

15:22. Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out to the wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness, and they did not find water.

The style of the initial phrase of this verse is unusual. It employs a Hiphil verb (causative), meaning, literally, ‘Moses caused Israel to set out.’ It may be that the Hebrews were lax, or slow, in departing from the Red Sea region—perhaps they were merely basking in the glory of victory over the Egyptians. In any event, the prophet is described as having been the catalyst, or prime mover, in Israel’s decampment and setting out.

Israel entered the wilderness of Shur. The term šûr means ‘wall’ in Hebrew. For years scholars have supposed that it denotes a wall of fortresses built by pharaohs to the east of Egypt, the purpose of which was to deny access to Egypt by Asiatics. The wilderness of Shur is mentioned elsewhere in the Torah (see, for instance, Gen. 16:7; 20:1; 25:18). It appears to have been one of the principal caravan routes to Palestine, in particular, through the Negev to the town of Beersheba.

Three days of travel in the wilderness yielded no sources of water.

15:23. And they came to Marah. And they were not able to drink from the waters at Marah because they were bitter. (Therefore its name was called Marah.)

When the people of God finally discover water they cannot drink it because of its unsavoury taste—a possible indicator of poisoning. Thus begins a testing of the Hebrews, and the reader is anxious to see how they will respond.

This is a good example of the writer of Exodus’ penchant for using plays on words. The name of the location, ‘Marah’, is the Hebrew word for ‘bitter’. So the name of the site reflects the noteworthy event now taking place there. No wonder the location of Marah is uncertain.

15:24. So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’

The Hebrews react unfaithfully. This is the first time the verb ‘grumble/murmur’ appears in the Old Testament. It is used only in the following chapters of the Hebrew Bible: Exodus 15, 16, 17; Numbers 14, 16, 17; and Joshua 9 (v. 18). In every instance it reflects the rebellious attitude of the Israelites against their leaders and authority structures.

15:25. And he cried out to Yahweh, and Yahweh showed him a tree. And he threw it into the waters, and the waters became sweet. There he set a decree and a law for them, and he tested them there.

In response to Israel’s distress, God causes the water to become sweet. He performs that miracle by first ‘show[ing]’ Moses ‘a tree’. That verbal form is from a root which in the Hiphil pattern means ‘to teach/instruct’. The noun Torah, or law, is a derivative of that verb. Thus God is directing Moses how to change the nature of the water.

Some commentators explain the water's transfiguration in naturalistic terms. Purportedly wood absorbs salt and, thus, it filters impurities from the water. But in reality there is nothing in the text to support this anti-supernatural understanding of events.

The last part of the verse is a parenthesis or an editorial. We are not told of what the pre-Sinaitic law consisted. However, Yahweh apparently tested Israel by that law through the episode of the bitter water. Israel obviously failed the test. The lesson seems to have been that the Hebrews were totally dependent upon God for their survival. They needed divine guidance and aid, apart from which they would surely perish.

15:26. And he said, 'If you will certainly listen to the voice of Yahweh your God, and you do the right thing in his eyes, and you listen to his commandments, and you keep all his decrees, then I will not set upon you any of the diseases which I put on Egypt. Because I am Yahweh, the one who heals you.'

Perhaps this verse constitutes the 'law' referred to in verse 25. Moses records it in a series of three parallel couplets: first, a complete synonymous, chiasmic one; secondly, a complete synonymous one; and, finally, an incomplete synonymous one. The following is a translation according to the order of the elements in the Masoretic Text:

a

b

If you certainly listen

to the voice of Yahweh

A

b1

a1

And the right thing in his eyes

you do,

B

a

b

And you listen

to his commands

A

a1

b1

And you keep

all his statutes,

B

a

b

c

Every disease

I set

on the Egyptians

A

b1

c1

I will not set

on you.

B

The directive to ‘listen carefully’ is actually two forms of the same verb. It is an infinitive absolute followed by an imperfective form. In Hebrew the verbal idea is strengthened and made more forcible by this construction.

Yahweh is called ‘your healer/physician’. This is a common title for the Lord in Scripture (see Isa. 19:22; Hosea 6:1; 11:3). The episode of changing the waters at Marah from bitter to sweet is a physical symbol of this spiritual reality that Yahweh is the healer of his people.

The ‘diseases’ or ‘sicknesses’ that God had sent upon Egypt obviously refer to the plagues of Exodus 7–12 (see the references in Deut. 7:15; 28:27–29).

The healing of the waters at Marah serves as a paradigm for a similar event in 2 Kings 2:19–22. In that incident, Elisha purifies bad water by throwing salt into it. Even some of the vocabulary of the two episodes is alike. For example, God proclaims in the later episode in that ‘I have healed these waters’ (2 Kings 2:21).

15:27. Then they came to Elim, and there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms. And they camped there near the waters.

Soon the people travelled to Elim, where they found plenty of food and water for their sustenance (in contrast to Marah). The location of Elim is much disputed, although a good case for it is made by Simons: ‘From Marah the Israelites came to Elim (Exod. 15:27; Num. 33:9), whose well-watered and wooded oasis is usually recognized in Wadi Gharandel. Though the stopping-place by the Sea of Reeds, mentioned only in Numbers 33:10, is not further specified, we may think of the plain of El-marhah providing a comfortable camping-ground, where the travellers could prepare for the march inland.’

Application

The Israelites move from a period of ecstatic joy (at the Red Sea) to a phase of unbelief, grumbling and murmuring (at Marah). What was it that brought the Hebrews to so great a depression in so little time? They were living by sight, and not by faith. At Marah they ran into a material problem, and they responded unfaithfully. But, again, let us not judge them too harshly, because—oh, how like the Israelites we are!