

## **The incident at Massah and Meribah (Exodus 17:1–7)**

Now occurs a most severe test for the people of Israel. The people are travelling in stages through the desert. They arrive at Rephidim and there is no water. How do they respond to the hardship? We are now introduced to the fourth instance of grumbling in the wilderness (the first three are 14:11–12; 15:24; 16:2). 17:1. And the whole congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, place by place, according to the command of Yahweh. And they camped in Rephidim. And there was no water for the people to drink.

The Hebrews depart from the area in which manna and quail are first given to them, that is, the Wilderness of Sin. They travel, literally, ‘according to their goings out’. That is all one word in Hebrew, and it derives from a verb normally denoting source, origin, or beginning. The vein that yields silver (Job 28:1), the spring that gives rise to water (2 Chron. 32:30; Ps. 107:33–35) and the bud from which the flower develops (Job 38:27) are each called by this Hebrew word. The term also signifies the place of a journey’s commencement. Simply put, it denotes a starting-point, or place of departure.

The directions to and locations of these encampments are given to the Hebrews, literally, ‘by the mouth of Yahweh’. God is the one directing the people through the desert, and he is taking them from one oasis to another.

On the significance of the verb ‘to camp’, see the commentary on 14:9. The siting of the camp at Rephidim is uncertain.

The problem at Rephidim is lack of water. It is a more severe problem than at Marah. At Marah there was water, and God made it sweet. At Rephidim water must appear, apparently, *ex nihilo*.

17:2. So the people quarrelled with Moses and they said, ‘Give us water to drink and we will drink.’ And Moses said to them, ‘Why are you quarrelling with me? Why are you testing Yahweh?’

The response of the people to their circumstances is more combative than mere grumbling. The word ‘quarrelled’ is a strong word meaning ‘to strive’, or to find fault with a measure of hostility. The intensity is further emphasized by the stark demand of the Hebrews, the imperative: ‘Give us water to drink!’

The prophet answers the rebels in much the same way as he responded to the third case of grumbling (see 16:7). When Israel contended with Moses they were really testing the Lord who had placed Moses in a position of authority. It was ultimately a lack of faith in Yahweh that led the people to act in such a manner.

The second occurrence of the verb ‘to quarrel’ ends with a nun paragogicum. This ‘usually expresses a marked emphasis’ and certainty, although it can also signify that something is by way of contrast. In any event, its appearance in this verse demonstrates Moses’ strong reaction to the accusation made by the Hebrews.

17:3. But the people were thirsty for water there. So the people grumbled against Moses. And they said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’

The language of Israel’s response is angry and hostile. They accuse Moses of bringing them out to the wilderness to die. It is the second time they have charged him with this crime (see 16:3).

The spoken complaint reflects the oneness and self-centredness of the people. It is reported in the first person singular and reads, literally, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt? To kill me, and my children and my livestock?’ Numerous versions, such as the Septuagint, the Syriac and the Vulgate, translate the endings as first-person plurals—and, indeed, every English translation does the same.

17:4. Then Moses cried out to Yahweh, saying, ‘What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me.’

The opposition of the rebels to Moses’ authority is reaching fever pitch and mounting towards a climax. Moses himself discerns that the people are close to murdering him: he says, literally, ‘Yet a little while and they will stone me.’ The first part of that statement in the Hebrew is a durative phrase that conveys a

sense of impending action and urgency (see Hosea 1:4; Jer. 51:33). It is not hyperbole in any sense, but it demonstrates clear and present danger.

The prophet's response is to pray to the Lord. He petitions the God of the Hebrews for an answer to the problem.

17:5. And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Cross before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel, and your rod with which you struck the Nile. Take it in your hand and go.'

Yahweh's solution to the prophet's dilemma is constructed on three imperatives. First, Moses is commanded to 'pass on by' the Hebrews. That verb carries the idea of going ahead of the people into the wilderness. Second, the prophet is told to 'take' some of the elders of Israel with him. They are to serve as witnesses to the subsequent event. Finally, Moses is instructed to 'take' the rod that had been a tool of God's miraculous power during the plague cycles in Egypt.

Yahweh makes mention of the first plague that came upon Egypt. The probable reason for the comment is to draw a contrast. The very rod that had struck the Nile river to deprive Egypt of water (7:14–25) now becomes a source of benefit to the people of Israel by providing water for them.

17:6. 'Behold, I will stand before you there upon the rock at Horeb. And you will strike on the rock, and water will come forth from it so that the people may drink.' And Moses did so before the eyes of the elders of Israel.

God meets Israel's needs, and he does so miraculously and abundantly. Moses is to go to 'Horeb', to the place where God had revealed himself to the prophet at the burning bush. Horeb is an alternative name for Mount Sinai, where the Hebrews will soon receive the law from Yahweh (see commentary on 3:1,12). Yahweh announces that he 'will stand' on the rock at Horeb. Some commentators argue this is mere anthropomorphic language, using human imagery to describe the presence of God. Others see a theophany in which the pillar of cloud descends upon the rock. Either way, God is at Horeb in a special, unique way in order to provide for his people.

A natural explanation of water spewing from rocks, such as that given by Cassuto, is unwarranted. The point of the story is to demonstrate that if need be God will go to great and miraculous lengths to sustain the Hebrews.

17:7. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the children of Israel and because they tested Yahweh, saying, 'Is Yahweh among us or not?'

In good Semitic fashion, Moses names the place of the miracle according to the incident that occurred there. These etymologies are based upon assonance. 'Massah' means 'test', and it is a derivative of the verb 'to test' in verse 2. 'Meribah' means 'quarrel', and it derives from the verb 'to quarrel' also in verse 2. The purpose of naming the site in this way was so that the people of Israel should never forget how foolishly and shamefully they had acted here.

The author drives home the point of the etymology by employing a chiasmic structure:

### **Application**

Many authors have suggested that the events at Massah/Meribah serve as paradigms or pointers to certain New Testament stories. Some of these proposals have been good, while others have been less convincing. For example, the claim that the water ceremony in John 7:37–39 is a re-enactment of the wilderness water miracle seems to be stretching parallels too far. Also, the idea that the Lord's Prayer is based upon the Massah/Meribah tradition is a bit strained.

On the other hand, when Satan tempts Jesus to throw himself off the temple to see if God would be faithful and truly save him as he promised (Matt. 4:5–7), Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16: 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.' Jesus is being tempted to commit the same sin into which Israel fell when they were tested in the wilderness. Jesus, however, does not fail, as Israel failed, but remains true, obedient and faithful to God.

The apostle Paul also provides us with a fuller meaning and understanding of the Massah/Meribah occurrence, when he says, 'For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under

the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was the Messiah' (1 Cor. 10:1–4). The identification of the Messiah with a rock is not an anomaly in the Old Testament. It is a term that is frequently used of God (see Gen. 49:24; Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 30–31). And, thus, Paul '... connects an episode from the history of Israel with the current conditions in Corinth. Christ was present in the wilderness as he is present with the church today. God's rejection of those Israelites who tested and tried him is a relevant lesson and reminder for those Corinthians who dabble in idolatry.' Israel is the church in the Old Testament. And we should learn from our forefathers, and not act the way they did at Massah/Meribah. Attempts to use Moses at Massah/Meribah as a model for ministry today are not very successful. That is not the point of the story, and many of these studies easily slip into allegorical teaching.