

## Exodus 17 – Rehidim – the place of the test [Massah] and the quarrel [Meribah]. Provision of the water of life.

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The narrative:

- 1-4 The people move from the **wilderness of Sin** to **Rephidim** [See Num 33.12-14 which speaks of two stations Dophkah and Alush, on the way, to Rephidim. Probably not much happened there]. At Rephidim the people murmur for lack of water.
- 5-6 Moses asks advice of the Lord, Who promises water from a rock as Moses strikes it with the rod with which he struck the Nile.
- 7 Moses calls the place Massah [trial, test] and Meribah [contention, litigation]
- 8-13 Amalek fights against the people. Joshua fights while Moses, Aaron and Hur pray.
- 14 A note is made that Amalek is to be made war with constantly and to be wiped out.
- 15-16 Moses built an altar to the Lord calling it YHWH Nissi, “the Lord is my banner”.

### 1 - The waterless camping place as a provision of the Lord. 17.1

As the congregation journeys further and further into the wilderness of Sin it is “according to the command of the Lord”. This wilderness is between Elim and Sinai [Exodus 16.1]. The camp is made at Rephidim, in a place where there is no water. Now, this is remarkable – the Lord has led them to make camp in a place where there is nothing to drink; surely the most basic reason for making it a stopping place at all!

Is this the deep reason for the “quarrel” they have with their leadership? Are they basically showing their disdain for the leader who would lead them to a camp where there is no water at all? This circumstance, to which the Lord has led them will now cast the focus onto the relationship between the people and the Lord Himself. This is made clear by verse 7; Rephidim was remembered and named by Moses, not so much as the provision of water, but as a test [Massah] and a quarrel [Meribah] with the Lord; “was He among us, or not.”

### 2 - The wilderness as a provision of the Lord. 17.1

The people are clearly being led, and they have no option but to follow the leader. This throws their focus entirely upon the Lord and his prophet Moses.

Later in the Bible, the Revelation to John, given after the life and ministry of Jesus and his Ascension into heaven will think of Israel as a woman, from whom the Messiah has come [Rev 12]. She gives birth to the Messiah and then as He is caught up to heaven, a war in heaven follows and Satan and his angels are cast to the earth as defeated. In this terrible anger of defeat Satan persecutes the woman. In this dire situation Revelation speaks of her as drawn into the wilderness where God has appointed a time for her there to be shielded from the presence of Satan. The wilderness is a provision of the Lord for an unwilling people to learn to relate and then be the better for it.

That it is a wilderness points to the lack of luxuries and the soft life. Things are back to basics of food and drink. Their dependence on God is always before them and in their constant cries for provisions. Nothing has changed for us today. So we should not be put off by this position of being dependent creatures. What the wilderness means then, is that it is a time in Israel's life when she was forced to attend to her relationship to God. “Forced” not because dominated, but because she was by nature and her sin unwilling for this salvation and needed to be focused on Him in a way which she could not avoid. She was required to relate by virtue of her precarious position and so her deep need of God's help and care. In this way the wilderness is a gracious provision itself.

This enforced inter-relating between a people and their saving God is reflected in all the subsequent history of Israel. It is the watershed of their knowledge of God.

It also tells us what sort of knowledge is meant – it is personal knowing, the sort that is derived from going through tough times together. Paul, the apostle of Jesus, will speak of it as a time when the people were “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” [1 Cor 10.1-5]. They were immersed into a relationship with their leader by going through things together. It is this relationship between them that was established by the very adventure itself.

### 3 - The exchange between the people, Moses and the Lord 17.2-7

To quarrel with Moses over the absence of water simply serves to highlight the relation between Moses and the Lord. To quarrel with him is to “test” the Lord. This directs the people to their relationship to the Lord and explains that Moses is simply taking his direction from Him. In this way Moses is asking that they relate to the Lord in the way he does. As He has saved them and led them through such wonderful rescues He will surely know what He is doing now [verse 2].

But the people are very thirsty and are driven by their anxiety and desire for drink for themselves, their children and their livestock. They also question the salvation worked for them in the light of their current precarious position. So they accost Moses with the claim that “you have brought us up from Egypt...”

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In their eyes the person who had arrived into their Egyptian-based bondage was Moses with a message that they were about to come out of Egypt. We, the readers of the Bible know, that it was in answer to their own cries for release that God had acted on their behalf in sending Moses in the first place [Exodus 6.2-8]. Perhaps the people had forgotten their cries, or had ceased to believe that they would be heard. It was their unbelief in that matter of their prayers that portrays Moses to them as an instigator of release that they always seem reluctant to participate in. Perhaps they feared the cost. But Moses understands that if the bush burns it is not consumed [Ex 6.3].

Had they now, here at Rephidim, forgotten the deliverance that they were initially, so reluctant to embrace, had ended in Egypt with a mighty destruction of Pharaoh's army? This is not to judge them, but to simply point out that 'that was then, this is now' is the issue of Rephidim. It wasn't that they had forgotten the wonderful rescue. It was all too clear to them at that time that the Lord was among them as cloud and fire and mighty deeds – it was impossible to say otherwise. But new circumstances of a waterless camp now present a new challenge to their relationship again, more faith is called for; and it will ever be so. They are now committed to a life of trust in the Lord for every circumstance. Here they are not coming submissively and asking the Lord for water, they are quarrelling with Moses; so this constitutes a "test" of the Lord by them. There is an attitude of demand here, expressed with an underlying questioning of the whole life into which they have now been led. And so is He still "among them".

Moses is, of course helpless, of himself to do anything about the water. He also fears for his life [verse 4].

The Lord instructs Moses to "pass in front of the people..."; he is to visibly lead and to take some action in an open accessible way. He is to "take some elders with him"; it is not to be a focus on his own person, there are also to be credible witnesses [verse 6b] who will be drawn in to stand with Moses in his action. He is to take his "staff"; this is a sign to all that the same instrument of deliverance at the Red Sea will now be in evidence again – this signals something is about to happen.

And if the rocks are an example of the seemingly waterless environment, so offensive to the rebellious anxious people, then the staff, as a symbol of his care for them will be used again. For with the same staff that he "struck the Nile" in judgment against the Egyptians worshipping of a river they thought provided their life; now the people of God will see a rock struck in judgment. Instead of their own rebellion bringing God's wrath upon their heads, this rock will be struck on their behalf and will bring forth water to drink, life for the people of God; even as they question God's provision. All this will be in the sight of the elders of Israel, who cannot but testify to what they have seen.

Paul uses this powerful image of the rebellious setting of this portion of Exodus to show that the rock that followed them was Christ [1 Cor 10.1-5]. Using the section we have just studied, we see that Paul has in the back of his mind Exodus 16 concerning the manna, and Exodus 17.1-7 concerning the water. Paul sees this as God feeding the people supernatural food and drink. And he says that the people were being followed by a Rock, who was the their food and drink; and this Rock is Christ. Here, in Paul, understood to be the person of the Messiah who was God's provision of food and drink to his people.