

Bible Study # 29 Exodus 17.1–16 03–12–2021

The next section in this book (Exod. 17:1–18:27) continues the narrative of how Israel moved southwards towards Sinai. Three problems that the people faced are noted. First of all, they were again desperate for water (see the comments on the previous incident (15:23-27), and the Lord had to intervene for them.

Secondly, this need was just satisfactorily met when, still at Rephidim, they had their progress impeded by the military strength of the Amalekites. Then thirdly, the burdens on Moses from excessive responsibility for legal decisions were to be met by the appointment of leaders who were able to exercise a legal role.

Moving on from the Desert of Sin (see 16:1), all of Israel travelled by stages just as the Lord had commanded. In Hebrew there is a close link between the verb ‘to set out’ and the expression ‘travelling from place to place’. This latter expression is an attempt to translate ‘by their stages’, with the noun ‘stage’ coming from the root verb, ‘to set out’.

There was orderly progression on the way as determined by the Lord, but when they reached Rephidim, no water was available for them. The location of Rephidim cannot be ascertained with certainty, but usually it is identified as being Wadi Refayid in southwest Sinai.

Moses again became the object of the people’s displeasure (v. 2), as they quarreled with him, and demanded that he provide water for them. ‘To quarrel’ is a Hebrew verb that later in the Old Testament became a technical term for God’s challenges to His erring covenantal people (see, e.g., Micah 6:2; Amos 7:4; Isa. 3:13; Jer. 2:9).

That word is the basis for the word naming the place where this dispute took place, Meribah (see v. 7). In reply Moses asks why the quarrel is directed to him, while the actions of the people are in effect putting the Lord to the test. The tables were reversed in that in the earlier incidents it was the Lord testing them (15:25; 16:4), whereas now it was the people of Israel testing their God.

This aspect is picked up in a significant way by the psalmists as they recount the wilderness experiences (Pss. 78:18; 106:14, 25, 29). Thirst drove the people to complain further against Moses. Their earlier hunger had caused them to long to be back in Egypt and eating the food to which they had been accustomed. On this occasion they complained that the result of Moses’ leadership was that they, their children, and their cattle were all going to die because of thirst.

In view of the previous intervention of God, when He had responded to the complaints (16:9, 11), Moses voiced his complaint to Him. The same verb is used here of Moses as occurred earlier regarding the cry of the people to the Lord. The Lord’s servant was compelled to approach his Sovereign seeking direction on how to deal with the people at this juncture. His fear was that he was shortly going to be stoned by them.

The NIV translation, ‘They are almost ready to stone me’, is a good idiomatic translation of the Hebrew text here (lit. ‘still a little [time] and they will stone me’). Other ancient Near Eastern law codes embodied capital punishment, but never by stoning. In the Mosaic code, stoning could apply to animals (Exod. 21:29) and to humans (Deut. 13:10; 17:5).

5-6 God’s instruction to Moses was to go ahead of the people (vs. 5–6), and to take with him some of the elders. Also, he had to have in his hand the staff with which he had struck the river Nile at the time of the second sign (7:20). There is a marked difference, however, in the two incidents. The first one concerned making the water of the Nile undrinkable (7:21), while this one related to the provision of water in a desert.

Moses was to stand by the rock at Horeb, which was an alternative name for Mount Sinai. Presumably here in this passage it is used with a wider connotation to denote the general area. This also explains why it is said that the meeting was to be 'at the rock', not 'at the mountain'. The final stage of the journey and the arrival at the mount itself is related in 19:1-2. God declared that He would Himself stand before Moses at the rock.

While the text does not specify in what form God was going to appear, it is most natural to think of an appearance of the glory cloud. In the presence of the elders as witnesses, Moses fulfilled the Lord's command to him, striking the rock so that water would flow. This supernatural event was remembered later in the poetry of Israel (see Ps. 105:41).

Moses gave to that place the names Massah ('testing') and Meribah ('quarrelling'), doubtless as a reminder that there they tested the Lord by quarrelling and by saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?' These names were meant to be a reminder to Israel, in time to come, of what transpired there. Psalmists reminded the people of the nature of what happened at Meribah and the Lord's reaction to their sin.

This passage relates the first incident in which Israel was involved in battle with another nation after leaving Egypt. It is the first of many such battles, and the lesson should have been learned – victory would not come through natural ability or acquired military skills. Israel's trust had to be firmly rooted in the Lord as the defender of His people.

Amalek was Esau's grandson (Gen. 36:15-16). The bitter relationship between Jacob (later called Israel, Gen. 32:22-28) and Esau was replicated in later times (see, for the biblical record, the encounters with Saul, 1 Sam. 15:1-35, and David, 1 Sam. 27:8-11, 30:1-20). All of them draw attention to the message that divine assistance, not military prowess, achieves victory against God's foes.

An unprovoked attack was made on Israel by the Amalekites (v. 8), while the camp was still at Rephidim. Moses instructed Joshua to go out and engage in battle with the Amalekites on the following day, while he remained standing on the top of the hill with God's staff in his hand. This is the first biblical reference to Joshua, who was later to be designated as the leader in succession to Moses (Deut. 31:1-8).

Joshua's earlier name was Hoshea ('salvation') but Moses changed it to 'Joshua' ('the Lord saves'; see Num. 13:8, 16). He was from the tribe of Ephraim, one of the largest and most powerful of the twelve tribes. Joshua was obedient to the directions that the Lord had given him. Along with Moses, Aaron and Hur, he went up to the top of the hill. Hur is mentioned later in 24:14 as associated with Joshua in judicial work.

He is also noted as the grandfather of Bezalel, the chief workman responsible for building the tabernacle (Exod. 31:2; 35:30; 38:22). The Jewish tradition about him, that claimed that he was the husband of Miriam, was preserved by Josephus.

While Moses had his hand with the staff in it lifted up, Israel prevailed, but whenever he lowered it through tiredness, Amalek prevailed. The staff was a symbol of God's power and, when lifted up, it denoted that He was acting in power to enable Israel to prevail over Amalek.

To assist Moses, Joshua and Hur seated him on a stone, and helped by holding up his hands. This continued right through the day until sunset, by which time it was clear that the victory had been achieved.

The record of what had happened that day had to be recorded in 'the scroll' (not 'a scroll', as most English versions have it). This suggests an existing, well-known document recording important events in Israel's history. The NIV rendering of the next clause, 'and make sure that Joshua hears it', is rather free. The Hebrew text has: 'and set it in the ears of Joshua', which is better translated as 'and recite in the ears of Joshua'.

The message was that Amalek would ultimately be destroyed completely (see also v. 16). Moses constructed an altar, just as the patriarchs did. Abraham built an altar where God had appeared to him (Gen. 12:7), as did Jacob when he arrived at Shechem, calling it 'God the God of Israel'. The name given by Moses to this altar was 'The Lord is my Banner'.

The Hebrew word for 'banner' meant a standard or signal pole, especially one used to rally troops in battle. Moses' appearance on the top of hill acted like a banner, and it indicated the presence of God with His people. The purpose of the altar is not stated, but from the name it would appear that it was more than just a commemorative stone.

The word 'altar' denotes the place where sacrifices are offered, and so one like this could serve the dual purpose of remembering God's graciousness in giving victory over the Amalekites, as well as providing a suitable site for making sacrificial offerings.

The first part of what Moses said is difficult to translate and interpret, as it reads like cryptic poetry. A literal translation is, 'For a hand against/towards the throne of the Lord'. The text does not speak explicitly about 'my hand' or 'hands', while the Hebrew word seems to be an abbreviated form of the normal spelling of 'throne'.

'The Lord' represents Yah, the abbreviated form of the divine name yhwh. A Jewish interpretation was followed by the AV, 'Because the Lord hath sworn', and this has been accepted by the NASB and NKJV. Another interpretation is that the text is speaking of the actions of the Amalekites in raising their hands against the Lord.

While this viewpoint is possible, the connection between verses 15 and 16 inclines towards acceptance of the NIV understanding that the hand(s) referred to are those of Moses, lifted up in prayer towards God's throne. Help had been given in answer to prayer, with the assurance that this was not just an isolated case but represented the Lord's continuing attitude towards the Amalekites.

They would reap the reward for their challenge to God's authority, and his hostility would be maintained generation after generation. Chapters 15 and 30 of 1 Samuel describe the ultimate blotting out of the Amalekites.

Next we will study 18:1–12.