

Moses: earth's meekest man

29. The bitter blow*

John Mitchell

We come now to the final months of the wilderness journey, and the sad episode in which Moses sins by speaking wrongly in providing water from the rock, in an incident that has important spiritual lessons.

LIFE FOR THE children of Israel must have been hard during their thirty-eight years of enforced wandering in the Wilderness of Zin while the condemned generation of older people came to their end. It appears to have been a 'dead' time in more senses than one, for little of it is recorded, and even the locations of the encampments that are named are obscure. Jeremiah says it was "a land that was not sown" (2:2, AV), where new pastures had constantly to be found for the great flocks of cattle and herds of sheep. One advantage, however, appears to have been that no enemies harried Israel, the surrounding nations being content to leave them alone in the harsh landscape that was coveted by no-one.

They were, of course, still God's people, blessed daily with manna from heaven and perennially with shoes and clothing that, miraculously, did not wear out. Indeed, God's care over them waxed greater than ever, according to Moses in his farewell song:

"For the LORD'S portion is His people,
Jacob His allotted inheritance.
In a desert land He found him,
in a barren and howling waste.
He shielded him and cared for him;
He guarded him as the apple of His eye,
like an eagle that stirs up its nest
and hovers over its young,
that spreads its wings to catch them
and carries them on its pinions.
The LORD alone led him;
no foreign god was with him".

(Deut. 32:9-12)

The thirty-eight years of harsh living with the eternal God as their refuge, while underneath were His everlasting arms, served only to toughen the younger generation, the oldest of whom were well over forty years of age by the time the wan-

derings ended. They were the ones who would now have to battle with nations stronger than they as they also faced the test their fathers had failed at the entry to the Promised Land.

In the purpose of Him Who governs the times and the seasons of all nations, the children of Israel at last returned to the place from which they had started. But now they were minus the elders whose sentences had been to die in the wilderness, with the exception of the two faithful spies, Caleb and Joshua, and, of course, Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Even there the family circle was quickly broken by the death of Miriam, Moses' elder sister, who was over 120 years of age. The esteem in which she was held was shown, according to Josephus, by great pomp and general sorrow expressed in a public mourning for thirty days.

Water from the rock

About this time, perhaps moved by Miriam's obsequies and the memories of their lost ones, the people wallowed in an excess of grief and regret, especially as their water supply began to fail: "They quarrelled with Moses and said, 'If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! Why did you bring the LORD'S community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!'" (Num. 20:3-5).

Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the tent of meeting and prostrated themselves before the Lord, Whose glory immediately appeared to them. He said to Moses, "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so that they and their livestock can drink" (v. 8).

* Quotations from the NIV unless stated otherwise.

Moses' staff, which had figured so conspicuously in the miracles that had occurred in Egypt and on the way to Horeb, was brought "from the LORD'S presence", the sign and symbol of His almighty power in the hand of the prophet who had led Israel so faithfully during their wanderings. He and Aaron gathered the people before the rock as instructed, and Moses prepared to address them. It was not, however, the humble man of God who had patiently borne the many humiliations that his people had imposed on him who spoke to them now, but a tired and exasperated man at the end of his tether as he realised the new generation were no better than their fathers: "they provoked his spirit, so that he spake unadvisedly with his lips" (Ps. 106:33, AV). "Listen, you rebels", he said, "must we bring you water out of this rock?". Then he raised his arm and struck the rock twice with the staff, and the water gushed out abundantly to satisfy the needs of man and beast.

Moses' sin and its significance

But Moses had sinned, and thereby he suffered a bitter blow: "Because you did not trust in Me enough to honour Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them", said Yahweh.

Interpretations of the manner of Moses' sin have exercised the minds of many. The principle of holiness in approaching the Lord had been constantly emphasised during the pilgrimage of Israel, and was never more clearly expressed than after the incident of Nadab and Abihu, when the Lord said, "Among those who approach Me I will show Myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured" (Lev. 10:3). Therefore the core of Moses' indiscretion would seem to be his words, "must we bring you water out of this rock?", as though he and Aaron were God's plenipotentiaries instead of His servants.

There appears, however, to have been more than a word or two at fault before that rock in Kadesh, such as the deed and the symbolism behind it. And for this we turn to the Apostle Paul in the New Testament as the greatest exponent of the underlying truths. In 1 Corinthians he writes concerning Israel in the wilderness, "They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (10:3,4).

To the children of Israel who rebelled and lacked faith, that water, like the manna they ate, was just sustenance for the flesh, to keep it going from day to day. It could never become within them what the Lord Jesus referred to as "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jno. 4:14). The nature of that spring is explained, in the context of its rejection by Israel, in a warning note in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where Paul (as I believe) writes, "since the promise of entering His rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith" (4:1,2).

Moreover, since Paul also tells us that "God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Cor. 5:19), it follows that the waters of reconciliation could only flow when the Christ was smitten on the cross, once and for all.

So in this also the action of Moses in smiting the rock twice was unholy and inconsistent with the work of the one greater than Moses, who was to appear "once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26). Only he who was "smitten by [God], and afflicted" (Isa. 53:4) could accomplish that, not Moses.

There is also one great emblematic fulfilment in the failure of Moses. As the greatest servant of the Lord, mediator of His covenants, and foremost prophet of the Old Testament, Moses came to represent in the minds of the children of Israel the very embodiment of the Law. It was a perfect law, holy, just and good. But no man was capable of keeping it, not even Moses. Therefore his sin at the waters of strife served only to emphasise the need for another Prophet, greater than Moses, of whom he himself prophesied, who would not sin and through whose sacrifice the sin of Moses and that of all others who believed would be taken away.

The sentence upon Moses that he would not be allowed to bring his people into the Promised Land did not mean his immediate departure from the scene. There was yet more work for him to do to take them to the very threshold of it, and, incidentally, in so doing, to signify how God would show His love for the whole world in providing the promised Saviour.

[\(To be continued\)](#)