

Moses: earth's meekest man

15. Miracles at Rephidim*

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Israel's journey through the wilderness under Moses continues to Rephidim, where God's guiding hand is shown in two miracles: the provision of a stream of water from the rock and the defeat of the Amalekites.

GOD WORKS in mysterious ways His wonders to perform. His control over the nations to the extent of setting boundaries they cannot pass is paralleled by His control over the pounding waves that represent them. Nevertheless, when He wishes to show openly His authority over all men, with their "gods many, and lords many", He intervenes directly and unmistakably in a catastrophic way. The great Flood in Noah's day, and the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah in the days of Lot, are examples of this, and precursors of an even greater intervention that is to come.

The overthrow of Pharaoh's army, and its annihilation in the waters of the Red Sea, achieved the double purpose of triumphing openly over the powers of Egypt, both political and religious, that had defied the God of heaven, and of saving His people from further servitude. "The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten Me honour upon Pharaoh, upon his chariots, and upon his horsemen" (Ex. 14:18), He said. Thus was a sneering, vicious and cruel representative of earthly despotism disposed of as another type of the overthrow of the powers of this world that is yet to come. All these may be described as God's solus performances wherein men played no part.

Into the mountains

In addition, of course, there have been many examples of occasions in the history of God's people when they were required to do far more than "stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD" (v. 13). They had to act in faith. Such an occasion happened during the next stage of the journey of the children of Israel, when the time came for them to leave the shoreline of the Red Sea and strike out inland towards the mountainous hinterland of the Sinaitic peninsula. The move was inevitable, but doubly hazardous on account of the rough terrain

and the fierce tribesmen who jealously guarded its scarce pasture-lands and poor supplies of water.

The exact route taken by the Hebrews after they left the shores of the Red Sea has been much debated.

Indeed, the whole concept of it has recently been challenged by suggesting that the route they followed from Etham was well to the north of the traditional route, and that they crossed the Red Sea at the Gulf of Aqaba and not, as has been assumed in this study, at the Gulf of Suez.¹ Such matters are difficult to decide and have been rendered uncertain because many of the place names provided in Scripture are incapable of clear identification today. According to Numbers 33, the children of Israel "removed from the Red sea, and encamped in the wilderness of Sin. And they took their journey out of the wilderness of Sin, and encamped in Dophkah. And they departed from Dophkah, and encamped in Alush. And they removed from Alush, and encamped at Rephidim" (vv. 11-14).

The fact that there were three intervening encampments before that at Rephidim has led some to assume that the names cited were overnight stopping places and took up just three days' journeying time. However it was, by the time they reached Rephidim the host was seriously short of water, of which the last major supply had been at Elim. Fractious because of the heat

* Quotations from Exodus 17 are from the NIV. Other quotations are from the AV unless stated otherwise.

1. The case for the Aqaba route is graphically presented by Jonathan Gray, archaeologist and explorer, on a video cassette produced by See it, Believe It, 8/259 Glen Osmond Road, Frewville, SA 5063, Australia. Information also from The Advent Truth, PO Box 41, Derby, DE1 9ZR. [See also *The Miracles of Exodus: a Scientist's Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories*, Professor Colin J. Humphreys, Continuum, London and New York, 2003. The subject of the Exodus route and the location of Mount Sinai was reviewed in my articles, "Where is Mount Sinai?", *Testimony*, Apr. 1997, p. 125, and May 1997, p. 170, and in subsequent correspondence in Aug. 1997, p. 310, and Oct. 1997, p. 380.—T.B.]

and thirst, the children of Israel turned once again to baiting Moses with even greater ferocity than usual. "Give us water to drink", they demanded. "Why do you quarrel with me?", replied Moses. "Why do you put the LORD to the test?". Why did not they, after all the provision God had made for them, have faith that He would provide as necessary? But the people's representatives only became angrier and angrier, and a personal animosity developed towards Moses that he had not experienced before. "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?", they shouted menacingly, to such an extent that Moses began to fear for his life. In an impassioned plea, he, in turn, cried out to the Lord, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me".

Water provided

"Walk on ahead of the people", said the angel of God's presence. "Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink'. So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel".

How plainly and simply do the Scriptures describe what must have been a most impressive miracle! The water that came out of that rock was no mere fountain, not even a rivulet, but a gushing stream that filled the wadi, up which the children of Israel had been toiling, with a constant supply for every man, woman and child, and every beast they had brought with them. For that was the only way the needs of over two million souls could be met. A mere trickle with everyone lining up to fill their pots and pans would have been useless.

The reason Moses was told to go on ahead with the elders was so that all the host would be catered for when the waters began to flow. Thereafter all that the straggling multitude and their cattle had to do was go to the side of the stream to fill their utensils or quench their thirst. It was total provision by Almighty God on a scale that should have made both elders and people ashamed. So Moses had their lack of faith very much in mind when he called the place Massah and Meribah, meaning 'testing' and 'quarrelling', for the children of Israel had failed on both counts.

The incident has, of course, resonances with the New Testament, where the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:3,4 writes, "They [the children of

Israel] 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" (NIV). On account of this saying, some have opined that the rock in Horeb literally went with them from place to place to supply the people with water throughout their wilderness journey; but if that were its meaning, why was a similar incident of water from a rock needed later in the journey? What is plainly implied is the all-sufficiency of God in providing spiritual water through His Holy Spirit for the people of God in all ages. Hence the cry of the Lord Jesus himself in the temple at Jerusalem: "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink" (Jno. 7:37); and earlier by the well in Samaria: "whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:14, NIV).

Attacked by the Amalekites

With the provision of water, one hazard had been overcome, but even as the people refreshed themselves, another was in the making. The inhabitants of the area into which the Israelites were entering viewed with increasing alarm the invasion of so large a population. They were the Amalekites, who were themselves distantly related to the invaders. Their founding father was Amalek, one of Esau's grandsons by his eldest son Eliphaz and a concubine named Timna (Gen. 36:12). Their descendants became both numerous and powerful, and occupied large areas of southern Palestine and the Sinai peninsula, living a semi-nomadic life combining cattle-raising with robbery of passing caravans. But the significance of the Amalekites in Scripture far outweighs that of a Bedouin tribe who just happened to be in the way of the children of Israel. They became the historical type of those who seek the destruction of God's people, for they "feared not God" (Deut. 25:18), and their open design was to destroy those who did.

Seeing the Israelites faint and weary after their long trek from the coastal regions, the Amalekites marshalled their forces in an adjoining wadi and burst upon the hindmost in a familiar tactic that would have enabled them to carry off both captives and spoil, and teach the Israelites what they might expect in days to come. No right of passage was to be afforded them, and no quarter would be given.

The situation was critical, so what should be done? As we have already seen, there are those who, without evidence to prove it, have assigned

to Moses previous military experience, and even generalship, when he was a prince in Egypt.² If that were so, he did not play the part of a military leader in the crisis now upon Israel, for although what happened would be a combination of God's power and human bravery, strength would come only by prayer and under the banner of the Almighty. Accordingly, Moses quickly summoned a young prince of the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea by name, who had already shown remarkable qualities of leadership, and urged him quickly to select young men of similar prowess to go out, sword in hand, ready to fight the Amalekites on the morrow.

A God-given victory

Moses' part in the coming battle was of a higher order. Overlooking the area where the clash would take place, in sight both of the Amalekites and the Israelites, was a hill, and it was to the top of this hill that Moses laboured, staff in hand, taking with him Aaron his brother and a member of the tribe of Judah named Hur. The rod, of course, was the same as had accompanied Moses throughout his contest with the powers of Egypt and in all the miraculous signs God had granted the Israelites. It was a symbol of the true God Who is from everlasting to everlasting and Who is the strength and stay of all those who believe in Him.

And so it was that when Hoshea, significantly renamed Joshua (Yahweh is help), led out his warriors, sword in hand, they could see the rod of Moses held up toward heaven above them. No details of the number of troops on either side is given, only that the battle was long and very hard fought. But the remarkable thing was that, as long as Moses was able to hold up the rod

toward heaven, like a banner in the sky, Israel prevailed, and when he grew tired and could not sustain it, Amalek prevailed. Perceiving this to be so, Aaron and Hur stepped in, brought forth a stone for Moses to sit on, and then, one on each side, supported his uplifted arms. In this way, though it took until the going down of the sun, Israel emerged victorious, and fought the Amalekites 'into the ground'.

To commemorate the victory and to emphasise the nature and significance of it, Moses afterwards built an altar and called it Yahweh-nissi, meaning 'The LORD my banner', and then he added, by way of explanation, "For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD. The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation". Moreover, when the Israelites were at last settled in the land that the Lord their God would give them for an everlasting possession, they must "blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven" (Deut. 25:19).

The intense hatred of the Amalekites for Israel showed itself in their periodic attacks against them for over 400 years, even when they were settled in the land, and it was not until King Saul destroyed them as a nation, and Samuel the prophet slew Agag their king, that as a people they were finally driven into the ground. Even then their hatred and desire to destroy God's people reared its ugly head once more in the person of Haman the Agagite, last of the line, who in the days of Ahasuerus conspired to kill them, but was himself hanged on the gallows that he had intended for Mordecai the Jew, the saviour of his people.

(To be continued)

2. [See Part 2, Sept. 2006, p. 317.](#)

An Exposition of Joel

A 92-page A4-size study of Joel by Brother Chris Maddocks, available from the author at 22 Kingsdale Court, Milton Road, Swanscombe, Kent, DA10 0LX at £3.00 plus postage and packing. Can also be downloaded free of charge as a PDF file from <http://www.christadelphian.uk.com/downloads.html>. The following is the first paragraph:

"Being written we believe, at the time of Zedekiah, the Prophecy of Joel begins with an exhortation to the Elders, and other inhabitants of the land to 'Hear this', and 'Give ear', to 'The word of Yahweh'. The Judgments of God had already begun. Like a swarm of Locusts, Yahweh's 'great army', the Babylonians—led by Yahweh's servant, Nebuchadnezzar (Jer. 25:9)—had come upon the Land, and made it desolate. The Temple had been plundered, and the offerings had ceased. None remained in the the land, 'save the poorest sort' (2 Kings 24:14). It was to these that Yahweh spoke to through His Grace, giving them yet another opportunity to repent".