

Notes on Exodus 17:1–7

—Rev. Chuck Taber

1 A few weeks after God started to provide them with manna, God guided them to **Rephidim**, “Resting Places.” It was an unlikely resting place because there *seemed* to be no available water. They wanted an obvious oasis with shade, dates, water, and game, not another wilderness spot.

2 They **quarrel with Moses**, which is more than grumbling or complaining. The Hebrew verb indicates they were bringing up formal charges against him that could lead to stoning him to death.

Put the Lord to the test means to make God prove himself to be worthy of their trust and obedience; cf. Pss 95:8–11; 78:14–22; Neh 9:15–17.

3 They **grumbled** expressing their dissatisfaction and hostility, and brought up the absurd charge that Moses wanted to kill all of Israel’s people and livestock through dehydration.

4 Whereas the people *grumbled*, Moses *complained*. He expressed both his fear and willingness to do whatever God told him to do.

5 God had Moses take up his **staff**, the symbol of God’s power and authority, and had him go in **front** of the people, where normally the pillar of smoke and fire resided. The location indicated Moses was God’s spoke-person. Moses brought along **elders** to be witnesses to what was going to happen. Moses was neither going to perform for the crowd, nor allow them to ignore God’s work in their midst. Moses provided a non-anxious presence; he did not respond to the crowd in anger or fleeing from them, and waited for God to vindicate him.

6 Moses struck a **rock** which burst forth enough water to sate the thirst of the people and animals. Water can become trapped and build up behind sedimentary rocks, so having water come out of a rock formation is not beyond belief. The miraculous part, though, was that it provided enough water for all the people and animals.

The **Rock** is a *type* pointing to the coming Messiah, Jesus (1 Cor 10:1–4). It was supposed to be struck once and only once, since Jesus was struck and broken once, when he was crucified. Later in Numbers 20:1–13, when Israel grumbled again about dying from the lack of water, God commanded Moses to gather the people together, go to the rock, and speak to it. Then water would flow out for the people and animals. That was all Moses was supposed to; but instead, he lectured the people and then hit the rock twice. He thus disobeyed the expressed command of God and acted out of anger, not grace. God thus condemned Moses’s mistrust and acting contrary to God’s gracious and unique character (God’s holiness). Moses acted in the same way for which he had earlier condemned the people, and his action marred the type that points to Christ. As punishment, he was kept from entering the Promised Land with the people.

Not only the Rock, but also Moses himself was a type for Christ (Deut 18:15). Jesus endured grumbings and hostility by the people of Israel, just as Moses had. People would enter the Promised Land if and only if they remained connected to, supported, followed, and obeyed Moses. Likewise, we are guaranteed salvation only if we are so united to Jesus. Church membership, sacraments, and religious experiences are insufficient to get us into the Promised Land. In other words, we must live out our baptism (1 Cor 10:1–5).

Also note, just as a waterless spot in the wilderness seems to be an unlikely spot to find refreshment, so also it is unlikely to find spiritual strength and refreshment from a *crucified criminal*. But God’s surprising grace and power shows up in the wilderness, and often for and through the seemingly insignificant (Ps 78:17–22; Isa 35:4ff; 40:3ff; 1 Cor 1:27ff).

7 Massah means “Testing” and **Meribah** means “Quarreling.” Contrary to Israel’s immature thinking, difficulties and sufferings do not indicate a lack of God’s presence. We may be completely in God’s will and still experience various troubles (Mt 5:11; 2 Cor 1:3–11; 11:21–30; James 1:2–4).