

UNIT 30

“DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS AT *MASSA* AND *MERIBAH*” (Exodus 17:1-7)

INTRODUCTION¹

Text and Textual Notes

17:1 And all the community² of the Israelites traveled on their journey³ from the Desert of Sin according to the instruction of Yahweh, and they pitched camp in Rephidim.⁴ Now⁵ there was no water for the people to drink.⁶ **17:2** So the

¹ This is the famous story telling how the people rebelled against Yahweh when they thirsted, saying that Moses had brought them out into the wilderness to kill them by thirst, and how Moses with the rod brought water from the rock. As a result of this the name was called Massa and Meribah because of the testing and the striving. It was a challenge to Moses' leadership as well as a test of Yahweh's presence.

The narrative in its present form serves an important point in the argument of the book. The story turns on the gracious provision of God who can give His people water when there is none available. The narrative is structured to show how the people strove. Thus, the story intertwines God's free flowing grace with the sad memory of Israel's sins.

The passage can be divided into three parts: the situation and the complaint (1-3), the cry and the miracle (4-6), and the commemoration by naming (7).

² “congregation”

³ The text says that they journeyed “according to their journeyings.” Since the verb form (and therefore the derived noun) essentially means to pull up the tent pegs and move along, this verse would be saying that they traveled by stages, or, from place to place.

⁴ The location is a bit of a problem. Exodus 19:1-2 suggests that it is near Sinai, whereas it is normally located near Kadesh in the north. Martin Noth simply concludes that two versions came together without any details provided (*Exodus*, p. 138). Driver simply says that the writer wrote not knowing that they were 24 miles apart (p. 157).

people strove⁷ with Moses, and they said, “Give us water that we may drink.”⁸ Moses said to them, “Why do you strive⁹ with me? Why do you test¹⁰ Yahweh?”

This passage is located near Horeb, or Sinai.

Critics have long been bothered by this passage because of the two names given at the same place. Childs notes, however, that if two sources had been brought together, it is not possible now to identify them. But Noth insisted that if there were two names there were two different locations. The names Massa and Meribah occur alone in Scripture (Deut. 9:22, and Num. 20:1 for examples), but together in Psalm 95 and in Deuteronomy 33:8. But none of these passages is a clarification of the difficulty.

Most critics would argue that Massa was a secondary element that was introduced into this account, because Exodus 17 focuses on Meribah. From that starting point they can diverge greatly on the interpretation, usually having something to do with a water test. But although Numbers 20 is parallel in several ways, there are major differences: 1) it takes place 40 years later than this, 2) the name Kadesh is joined to the name Meribah there; and 3) Moses is punished there. One must conclude that if an event could occur twice in similar ways (complaint about water would be a good candidate for such), then there is no reason a similar name could not be given.

⁵ The disjunctive *waw* introduces a parenthetical clause that is essential for this passage--there was no water.

⁶ Here the construction uses a genitive after the infinitive construct for the subject: “there was no water for the drinking of the people--for the people to drink” (GKC, par. 115c).

⁷ The verb *wayyareb* is from the root *rib*; it forms the basis of the name “Meribah.” The word means “strive, quarrel, be in contention” and even “litigation.” A translation “quarrel” does not appear to capture the magnitude of what is being done here. The people have a legal dispute--they are contending with Moses as if bringing a lawsuit.

⁸ The imperfect tense with the *waw* follows the imperative, and so it carries the nuance of the logical sequence, showing purpose or result.

One wonders if the people thought that Moses and Aaron had water and were withholding it from the people, or whether Moses was able to get it upon demand. The people should have come to Moses to ask him to pray to God for water. But their action led Moses to say that they had challenged God (Jacob, p. 476).

⁹ In this case and in the next clause the imperfect tenses are to be taken as progressive imperfects--the action is in progress.

¹⁰ The verb *nasah* means “to test, tempt, try, prove.” It can be used of people simply trying to do something that they are not sure of (such as David trying on Saul’s

17:3 But the people thirsted¹¹ there for water, and they murmured against Moses, and said, “Why in the world¹² did you bring us up out of Egypt--to kill us and our sons and our cattle with thirst?”¹³

17:4 Then Moses cried out to Yahweh, saying, “What shall I do with¹⁴ this people?--a little more¹⁵ and they will stone me.”¹⁶ **17:5** And Yahweh said to Moses, “Go over before the people,¹⁷ and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and your rod, with which you struck the Nile, take in your hand and go. **17:6** I will be standing¹⁸ before you there upon¹⁹ the rock in Horeb, and you shall

armor), or of God testing people to see if they will obey (as in testing Abraham in Gen. 22:1), or of people challenging others (as in the Queen of Sheba coming to test, i.e., “stump,” Solomon), and of the people in the desert in rebellion putting God to the test. By doubting that God was truly in their midst, and demanding that He demonstrate His presence, they tested Him to see if He would act. There are times when “proving” God is correct and required, but that is done by faith (as with Gideon); but when it is done out of unbelief, then it is an act of disloyalty.

¹¹ The verbs and the pronouns in this verse are in the singular because “the people” is singular in form.

¹² The demonstrative pronoun is used as the *enclitic* form for special emphasis in the question; it literally says, “why is this you have brought us up?” (Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, par. 118).

¹³ Their words deny God the credit for bringing them out of Egypt, impugn the integrity of Moses and God by accusing them of bringing the people out here to die, and show a lack of faith in God’s ability to provide for them.

¹⁴ The preposition *lamed* is here specification, meaning “with respect to” (see Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, par. 273).

¹⁵ Or: “they are almost ready to stone me”

¹⁶ The perfect tense with the *waw* consecutive almost develops an independent force; this is true in sentences where it follows an expression of time, as here (see GKC, par. 112x).

¹⁷ “Pass over before” indicates that Moses is the leader who goes first, and the people follow him. In other words, *liphne* indicates time and not place here (Jacob, pp. 477,8).

¹⁸ The construction uses *hin^eni ‘omed* to express the *futur instans* or imminent future of the verb: “I am going to be standing.”

The reader has many questions when studying this passage--why water from a rock, why Horeb, why strike the rock when later only speak to it, why recall the Nile

strike²⁰ the rock, and water will come out of it so that the people may drink.”²¹ And Moses did so in plain view²² of the elders of Israel.

17:7 And he called the name of the place Massa, and Meribah, because of the striving of the Israelites, and because of their testing Yahweh,²³ saying, “Is

miracles, etc. Jacob says that all these are answered when we realize that they were putting God to the test. So water from the rock, the most impossible thing, cleared up the question of His power. Doing it at Horeb was significant because there Moses was called and told he would bring them to this place. Since they had doubted God was in their midst, He would not do this miracle in the camp, but have Moses lead the elders out to Horeb. If people doubt God is in their midst, then He will choose not to be in their midst. And striking the rock recalled striking the Nile; there it brought death to Egypt, but here it brought life to Israel. There could be little further doubting that God was with them and able to provide for them. See Jacob, pp. 479-480.

¹⁹ Or “by”

²⁰ The form is the *hiphil* perfect with the *waw* consecutive; it follows the future nuance of the participle, and so is equivalent to an imperfect tense nuance of instruction.

²¹ These two verbs are also perfect tenses with *waw* consecutive: “and [water] shall go out . . . and [the people] shall drink.” But the second verb is clearly the intent or the result of the water gushing from the rock, and so it may be subordinated.

The presence of Yahweh at this rock enabled Paul to develop a *midrashic* lesson, an analogical application: Christ was present with Israel to provide water for them in the wilderness. So this was a Christophany. But Paul takes it a step further to equate the rock with Christ, for just as it was struck to produce water, so Christ would be struck to produce rivers of living water. The provision of bread to eat and water to drink provided for Paul a ready analogy with the provisions of Christ in the gospel (1 Cor. 10:4).

²² Literally, “in the eyes of”

²³ The name Massa (*massah*) means “Proving”; it is derived from the verb “test, prove, try.” And the name Meribah (*m^eriba*] means “Strife”; it is related to the verb “to strive, quarrel, contend.” The choice of these names for the place would serve to remind Israel for all time of this failure with God. God wanted this and all subsequent generations to know how unbelief challenges God. And yet, He gave them water. So in spite of their failure, He remained faithful to His promises.

The incident became proverbial, for it is the warning in Psalm 95, which is quoted in Hebrews: “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the day of provocation, and as the day of testing in the wilderness; when your fathers tested me

Yahweh in our midst or not?"

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

This story reports how the people murmured when they thirsted, saying that Moses had brought them into the wilderness to kill them by thirst, and how Moses received instructions from the LORD to take the elders and the rod and bring water from the rock for the people. As a result of the incident the name of the place was called Massa and Meribah because of the striving (*rib*) and because the people tested (*nasah*) the LORD. The crisis amounted to a challenge of Moses' leadership as well as a test of the LORD's presence.

The location of the event poses a problem and may need to be mentioned in the exposition, although not in great detail. Exodus 19:1-2a says Rephiden is at Sinai, whereas it is normally located near Kadesh to the north. Martin Noth's view is representative of most critical scholars; he concludes that two versions came together without any details of location given (*Exodus*, p. 138). Driver says the author wrote not knowing that they were 24 miles apart (*Exodus*, p. 157). These views are based on the presupposition that these accounts were written centuries later and not as eye witness accounts. Our text locates the event at Horeb.

Critics have been bothered by this passage for some time because of the two names given to the place as well as the two accounts of water from the rock at Meribah. Childs notes, however, that if two sources were brought together, it is now impossible to identify them. But Noth contends the passage is J with the exception of verse 3 which he assigns to E. He is not certain of the divisions, but does say verses 1b-2 and 7 are linked by *rib*. To Noth the fact that the water hole receives two names shows that Meribah and Massa were different places. But there are many samples in the Bible of places with two names (and for each one these critics claim different sources). So the problem is the double name and the double popular etymology. The difficulty is that with the exception of Exodus 17:7, the names Massa and Meribah never denote one place (of course, the names are only mentioned a handful of times). Meribah is located near Kadesh in Numbers 20:1;

and proved me and saw my work." The lesson is clear enough: to persist in this kind of unbelief could only result in the loss of divine blessing. Or, to put it another way, if they refused to believe in the power of God, they would wander powerless in the wilderness. They had every reason to believe, but they did not (note, this does not mean they are unbelievers, only that they could not take God at His word).

and the name Meribah-Kadesh in Numbers 27:14, Deuteronomy 32:51, Ezekiel 47:19 and 48:28 agrees with this. The site of Massa is not clearly indicated (Deut. 9:22). Most critics hold that they are distinct, that their fusion in 17:7 is due to the conflation of sources. That they are distinct, Coats says, “can be seen chiefly from various references to both place names which unmistakably hold them to be two different and independent places” (*Rebellion in the Wilderness*, p. 62)—as if Israel strove with God only once or twice.

Massa appears alone in Deuteronomy 6:16, which warns against putting God to the test “as you put him to the test at Massa,” and 9:22, which says, “And at Taberah, and at Massa, and at Kibioth-hatlaavah you provoked the LORD to wrath.” Meribah is found by itself in Numbers 20:13, which says, “There are the waters of Meribah, because the Israelites strove with the LORD.”

But Massa and Meribah occur together in Psalm 95:8-9, which warns, “Harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as in the day of Massa,” and in Deuteronomy 33:8, which says, “Whom you did prove at Massa, with whom you strove at the waters of Meribah.” Neither of these passages fully resolve the difficulty. Psalm 95:8-9 corresponds to Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13; and Deuteronomy 33:8-10 is a problem in that it says God tested Levi at Massa and contended with it at Meribah.

The most widely held view of Exodus 17 among critical scholars is that Massa is a Deuteronomic element (which they do not ascribe to Moses, by the way) which has been secondarily introduced into the present narrative on the basis of earlier poetic parallelism; Exodus 17 focuses on Meribah, but somehow Massa was added. Cassuto says that the names antedate the incident and the verse tells us only that these names are suited to the district, since they are in keeping with what happened there to the Israelites. But other scholars argue for more speculative views (e.g., an old trial by water ordeal).

Although Numbers 20 is parallel in many ways, there are some differences. First, the Numbers story takes place 40 years later and far from Sinai. Moreover, with Meribah is the name Kadesh, giving the location and forming a word play with “sanctify” in verses 1 and 13). Finally, the punishment of Moses is unique to Numbers. In fact, his presumption may in part be explained by an earlier episode. Cole, surprisingly, grants that the stories could be the same, but not necessarily so. He says the name Massa belonged to the first, and Meribah the second. If the event happened twice, then the names could have become confused (*Exodus*, p. 134).

But if an event could occur twice in very similar ways, there is no reason that the name Meribah could not have been used twice. Then, the idea that Massa was inserted later is based on the idea that a place cannot have two names and that this narrative does not include testing. It is likely that the place was given two names, and that later poets referred to one, and then to the other, and twice to both names. At least we can say that in the final form of the text both names were included. Or, we could say that the narrative includes remnants of traditions about ancient Israel concerning the explanation of the two names, and that the biblical writers thought they were identical and yet distinct from Meribah-Kadesh. In fact, Kadesh seems to distinguish that Meribah.

The narrative in its present form serves an important purpose in the argument of Exodus. The whole point of the story turns on the gracious and surprising provision of God who gives his people water when none is available. The narrative is constructed to show that the people strove (*rib*) with Moses when there was no water. When this happened Moses accused them of striving (*rib*) with him and tempting (*nasah*) the LORD by doubting God's presence and ability.

So the narrative intertwines the memory of God's free flowing grace with the sad memories of Israel's sins. Traditions of Israel's striving with God through unbelief, and tempting God over his presence and ability, were forever preserved in the two names.

The passage can be divided into three parts: the situation and the complaint in verses 1-3, the cry to the LORD and the miracle in verses 4-6, and the commemoration in verse 7 by the naming. Since this is another deprivation-murmuring-testing story in the book, there will be similarities with the story of Marah, and of the Manna. The difference is that by now they should have known what the LORD could do. Instead, they disbelieve that the LORD is with them and so demand evidence of it. One must be careful, however, in describing the unbelief here. These are, for the most part, the people of God. Later, Moses himself will be accused of not believing. So the basic message is still for God's people who, when faced with deprivation, have too weak of a faith to believe that God is with them.

I. People with weak faith test God in times of need (1-3).

In the first point I would develop the idea of how God's people often put

God to the test when things do not go as they would like, often bringing their charge against God's chosen leaders. Those who do this have not really come to know God by faith, nor trust him fully. Here the word studies of *rib* and *nasah* will have to be fully developed for the impact. Also, the exposition will need to go back and pick up the word study on “murmur” to reiterate that it was covenant disloyalty.

II. People must learn to pray to God in times of need (4-6).

The second point is didactic: the solution to such difficulties is prayer to the LORD, seeking instruction from him. This miracle is worked before the elders at the rock with the rod of God. The point is that the spiritual leaders would see the confirmation of the presence of God with them. Here one would have to study the purpose of miracles and signs--this one confirms God's presence and abilities. God did the sign in spite of the unbelief and the challenge of the people.

III. People need to remember their failures so that they might learn from them (7).

Paul says that all these stories were written for our sample, that we would not murmur as they did. Psalm 95 had already called for people to remember Massa and Meribah, so that they would not harden their hearts. The third point, then, the naming, should not be a restatement of all that has happened in this event. Rather, the new point is the commemoration--preserving the memory of it. The naming in each story makes the remembrance of each event easier. So the point here is that the strife, not the miracle, is to be remembered. God wants this people, and all subsequent generations, to know how unbelief challenges God. The incident became almost proverbial, as in Psalm 95 and in Hebrews, quoting the Psalm. Do not harden your heart as in the day of provocation. This sad account is to be remembered.

CONCLUSION

Be careful not to end up preaching Psalm 95 or Hebrews here, i.e., God swore that they would not enter into his rest. That is not stated in this account. Rather, the idea will have to deal with God's miraculous proof of his presence with his unfaithful people. It is a story of God's grace and man's unfaithfulness. Even though we might be unfaithful, he is faithful. One could reword this instructionally to say that

***God's people should never challenge God in times of adversity,
for his protection and provision ever remains with his people.***

But this is worded negatively (hard to do otherwise in a negative passage); if you want to satisfy the guidelines of homiletics and make the message positive, you may say,

***In times of adversity the devout believers will pray to the Lord
and not test him with their complaints.***

What happens if they do challenge? We would have to say that the provision they receive (as in the passage) is their only reward (“they have their reward, water”), and that they destroy any future reward or blessing for faith (and as the Bible says elsewhere, never saw the promised land). Moreover, we would have to say that persisting in this pattern of unbelief will bring discipline.

The question will come up, based on Hebrews: If they all died in the wilderness because of unbelief, not entering the rest, does that mean they are all eternally lost? Of course not (that would include Moses). Hebrews is developing a *midrashic* interpretation, an analogical application. Their “rest” was the promised land; ours is the kingdom to come; their unbelief was a weak faith of believers, Hebrews warns people now that if they remain in unbelief they will not enter that eternal rest. As with so many passages used in the New Testament, there are parallels, but the meaning is greater now.