

**SERMONS ON EXODUS: XVIII**  
**WATER FROM THE ROCK**  
**(Exodus chap. 17)**

All the congregation of the people moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped at Rephidim; but there was no water for the people to drink. (17:1)

This is the third and last of the series of trials that faced the people of Israel after their crossing of the Red Sea, and Rabbi Cassuto may be right in saying, “On this occasion the circumstances were worse than those described in the two preceding narratives. At Marah the children of Israel found bitter water, and thereafter they suffered in the wilderness from restriction of diet; but now the supreme calamity of desert travelers befell them—complete lack of water.”<sup>1</sup> And once again, true to pattern, the people turned on Moses, saying, or rather, demanding, “Give us water to drink.” This time it was not the murmuring of various huddles of people as at Marah, nor the united outcry of the people as when they wanted more adequate food. This time the people was on the edge of violence. Moses cried out to God, “The people are almost ready to stone me” (17:5). If you can recall a scene in an old Western movie where an angry mob was on the verge of a lynching, you have the picture. This was serious! The people’s attitude was always the same, unbelieving and rebellious, refusing to learn that the Lord was trying to teach them the way of faith and trust in him, and that they should look to him first and above all, and let their requests be known unto him in prayer. Instead they became more and more restive and belligerent.

Now, we are naturally inclined to have little or no sympathy for the Israelites, to judge them quickly and thoroughly, and, consequently, fail to recognize that our motives and behavior could be anything like theirs. Even Moses shared this disdain when he cried to the Lord, “What shall I do with *this people*?” (17:4). Later he accused them, “Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you” (Deut. 9:24). Moses was not much more congenial than the people. Jonathan Kirsch in his somewhat

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<sup>1</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 201.

fictional biography of Moses would have us consider other factors in the situation of the people in relationship to their leader. He writes,

Of course, it is also possible to look on the Israelites with more compassion and insight than then the biblical authors were able to muster. Moses, after all, had not been elected by anyone except an unheard and unseen God, and so far God had not deigned to speak to anyone other than Moses and his brother. Yet Moses had urged them out of the relative safety and comfort of Egypt into an empty and threatening wilderness, all on a vague promise that someday they would reach a distant land of “milk and honey.” Such rhetoric had surely been heard before among the poor and oppressed, and history assures us that it would be heard again through the centuries. The Bible encourages its readers to regard the skepticism and defiance of the Israelites toward Moses as an appalling lack of faith, but the modern reader might take a very different view of any man who claimed to speak for an invisible deity and sought to rule a nation through a harsh theocracy.<sup>2</sup>

Now, this is a view that ignores the whole scope of God’s revelation and his dealings with this people from the days of Abraham on, but I cite it because we are apt to conclude that faith and obedience should have been easy for them, and it never is--for any of us. Let such considerations remind us that the Israelites were made of the same flesh and blood as we, and we of the same flesh and blood as they. The tendencies of human nature are universal.

Sigmund Freud, in his book *Moses and Monotheism*, focuses on this scene as a supreme example of man’s desire to break free from the father figure, from external authority, and even goes so far as to claim that the people of Israel did in fact rise up and murder Moses, the first Moses, that is, who was an Egyptian prince, and then chose a second Moses as their leader, a Midianite, the son-in-law of Jethro, who led them on to the promised land. Martin Buber expressed astonishment “that a scholar of so much importance in his own field as Sigmund Freud could permit himself to issue so unscientific a work, based on groundless hypotheses,”<sup>3</sup> and Freud himself eventually renounced his theory as “wholly my own invention.” At least he fessed up!

(Parenthetically, it is interesting that Freud seemed to have something of a Moses complex, regarding Carl Jung as his Joshua and successor and identifying his critics as the Israelites who would murder him. Jonathan Kirsch says, “On holidays in Rome,

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<sup>2</sup> *Moses: A Life* (New York: Balantine Books, 1998), p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, p. 7, n. 1.

[Freud] would always make what he called a pilgrimage to Michelangelo's statue of Moses [of which we spoke a number of weeks ago]: [Freud wrote,] 'I stood daily in the church in front of the statue, studied it, measured it, drew it. . . .'" Interesting!)

In his speculations, however, Freud does, in fact, touch inadvertently on this truth, namely, that the same murderous rebellion that motivated the Israelites against Moses was manifested centuries later in the killing of one whom, in Freud's words, "a small number of adherents in Judea believed to be the Son of God and the promised Messiah, and who later on took over some of the childhood history that had been attached to Moses."<sup>4</sup> He is referring to some of the parallels between the infancy of our Lord and that of Moses which the Gospel of Matthew especially points out. This analogy between the ancient Israelites who were ready to do away with Moses and the contemporaries of our Lord who cried out for his crucifixion brings the roosters home to rest, so to speak, for we know full well that in the rabble cry, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" we all had a part. Well do we sing in the hymn, "Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended?"

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?  
 Alas, my treason, Jesus hath undone thee.  
 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee:  
 I crucified thee.

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It may seem that we have strayed rather far away from our text by jumping ahead to the crucifixion of our Lord, and yet when we read Scripture whole we soon realize that we have not. Remember what the Lord said to the Emmaus disciples who were so dismayed over the crucifixion that had taken place just two days before: "'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-27). And surely one of the things he interpreted was this, that Moses, whom the people would stone, would be the instrument for their salvation, and that the means by which under God's guidance he would provide for their need would be the striking of the rock.

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<sup>4</sup> *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. by Katherine Jones (New York: Vantage Books, 1939), p. 113.

Now this event of water gushing from a rock is not an unknown phenomenon. Rabbi Cassuto wrote,

Several commentators have already mentioned a similar occurrence in our own time, namely, that on the mountain called by the Arabs Jebel Musa ('the Mountain of Moses'), which is identified in their tradition with Mount Sinai, there was suddenly opened up a stream of running well water through the breaking of a thin layer of rock. Not long ago, too, an English officer saw with his own eyes, in a wadi in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula, a company of the Sudanese camel corps digging in the gravel heaped up by the side of a cliff in order to discover the source of the water that was dripping between the pebbles, when suddenly, after a hard knock with an axe that broke the outer face of the cliff, numerous cavities were revealed in the stone from which an abundance of water began to gush."<sup>5</sup>

This provision of water from the rock, however explicable an occurrence, came about not only under the direct guidance of God and for the immediate appeasement and refreshment of the people, but as a foretelling, a precious indicator, of the far greater provision of grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that was to come. The early Church Father, Caesarius of Arles, wrote,

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Take the staff and strike the rock, that it may produce water for the people." Behold, there is a rock, and it contains water. However, unless this rock is struck, it does not have any water at all. But when it has been struck, it produces fountains and rivers, as we read in the Gospels: "He who believes in me, from within him there shall flow rivers of living water." When Christ was struck on the cross, he brought forth the fountains of the New Testament. Therefore it was necessary for him to be pierced. If he had not been struck, so that water and blood flowed forth from his side, the whole world would have perished through suffering thirst for the word of God.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes the exegesis of the Church Fathers can be a bit fanciful, but here the old master is on solid ground. Wrote St. Paul to the Corinthians, "I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (I Cor. 10:1-4). It is a beautiful picture,

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<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>6</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; Old Testament III: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, p. 90.

Christ as the Rock which was struck to provide spiritual drink, the water of life eternal, the cup of salvation, the chalice of his blood. Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, the Rock that was struck, to receive glory and honor and power forevermore.

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There is a warning in this for us, however. St. Paul continues in the passage just quoted, “All ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. . . . *Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness.* Now these things are warning for us” (I Cor. 10:5-6). It is possible, he says, to partake of the provisions of God’s grace, the sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist, and not receive the blessings toward which they point *if* our hearts do not learn the lessons of faith and faithfulness that God was trying to teach the Israelites of old. After Moses struck the rock and great fountains gushed forth for the people to drink, we read, “And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the faultfinding of the children of Israel, and because they put the Lord to proof by saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (17:7). Massah, ‘proof,’ for they put God to on trial, and Meribah, ‘contention,’ for such was their spirit. The names would be repeated throughout scripture as a warning to the people not to tempt or test the Lord, but rather to let him test them and trust in him without wavering (cf. Deut. 6:16; Num. 20:13; Ps. 81:7). The same warning is stated in the latter part of Psalm 95, the Psalm we call the *Venite* and read daily at the outset of Morning Prayer, but from which in the American Prayer Book the stern concluding words are omitted. “O come let us worship and fall down, and kneel before the Lord our Maker. For he is the Lord our God; and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand,” we read. But the Psalm continues, “Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts as in the provocation, as in the day of temptation in the wilderness; when your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works. Forty years long I was grieved with this generation, for they have not known my ways: unto whom I swear in my wrath, that they should not enter into my rest” (Ps. 95:6-11).

The Collect for this Second Sunday in Advent echoes the Epistle for the day in reminding us that “Whatsoever things were written aforetime (“all holy Scriptures”) were written for our learning.” Let us then be properly warned against the unbelief that would

doubt God's presence with us and rather look to the way in which he provides for our every need through Jesus Christ his Son our Savior in whose death and resurrection we find true life.

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