

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 7: Exodus 17-19

THE TEST OF WATER

Israel journeyed on to a place called Rephidim where they set yet another example of spiritual whining. It is hard to imagine how they could be eating manna everyday and still have such a faithless response to the problem of getting water. Their cry was almost identical to the one in the chapter before: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us in this place?" Exodus 17:7 says that they provoked the Lord by asking, "Is the Lord among us or not?" It was not God who was on trial but the children of Israel. Once again they let the seriousness of the problem convince them that there was no solution. (Do we ever do that?) They had yet to learn in a way that really sunk in, that God can do the hardest thing as easily as He can do the easiest thing. Man's limits are no limit to God.

God's solution to the problem of water was for Moses to take his rod and strike a prominent rock near the base of Mount Horeb. When he did this, water came gushing out and we assume a spring was opened that provided water for months to come. Particularly beautiful is Isaiah's poetic retelling of this miracle: "Tell this: utter it even to the end of the earth; say ye, The Lord hath redeemed his servant Jacob. And they thirsted not when he led them through the deserts: he caused the waters to flow out of the rock for them: he clave the rock also, and the waters gushed out." (Isaiah 48:20-21)

CHRIST: OUR ROCK AND LIVING WATER

By now we know that this miracle of the rock must be a type of Christ. Perhaps the clearest scriptural statement of this is in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4: "Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ."

The rock is a clear type of Christ as the source of their blessings. And the water that comes out of it is also a type of Christ. Christ's words to the Samaritan woman at the well were, "If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." (John 4:10,13-14)

We might wonder how a person can be like a rock and also like water. Aren't they totally different? In all these "types" of Christ in scripture, the thing we should ask ourselves is "How is He like a rock?" or "How is He like water in the desert?" Each of these different word pictures points up a different part of Christ's character and deepens our understanding. Since a person may have many different facets to his character, He can be likened to many different things.

There is another scripture that refers to Christ as our source of life giving water. The prophet Jeremiah recounts the Lord's lament that "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me--the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." (Jeremiah 2:13) This is a warning to us not to seek other sources for quenching our spiritual thirst.

We all know what it is to be thirsty. And we all know the wonderful sensation of quenching our thirst with cool, clear water. We have only to believe that Christ can be for us that satisfying, cool draught that quenches the thirsts of our hearts to make it so. If we turn to other sources for that refreshment we will miss the Savior. We can't turn to other Gods for our needs to be met and also turn to Christ. *We must leave Egypt to find the God of Israel!*

FIRST BATTLE—SECOND ENEMY

We learn from Deuteronomy that the people of Amalek were desert raiders who plundered and preyed upon the weak among the Israelites. "Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt; How he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that

were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God.” (Deut. 25:17-18)

Why did the Amalekites attack Israel in this unprovoked manner? The Bible doesn't answer directly, but we note that these people, the descendants of Amalek, were also the descendants of Esau, for Amalek was his grandson. (Gen 36:9-12) Like the Lamanites who were taught an “everlasting hatred” against the Nephites for the supposed wrongs done them by Nephi (see 3 Nephi 3:4), Esau's descendants likely remembered the “wrong” done Esau when Jacob “stole” his birthright by deceiving their blind father. Genesis records that Esau was determined to kill his brother for the wrong he felt was done to him and that he “hated Jacob.” (Gen 27:41-42) It seems that much of the narrative in both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon is driven by sibling rivalry that persists for generations!

Moses tells Joshua to take an army and defend Israel against the Amalakites. His untested band lacks confidence but when they see Moses standing on a hill above them with his rod in his hand and his arms raised toward heaven in prayer, they take courage and prevail in battle.

This strategy prevails as long as Moses is able to keep his hands raised but when he lowered his arms the battle turned against Israel. Aaron and Hur¹ come to his rescue by holding aloft Moses' arms for him. We see the same dynamic in the Lord's work today. People expect a lot of their leaders. It gives them courage for the battle to see a leader in his or her strength, calling on heaven in their behalf. But in fact, leaders are human and grow weary. Wisely has the Lord provided counselors to “lift up the hands that hang down”, as he counseled Frederick G. Williams, who was a counselor to Joseph Smith. (D&C 81:5)

JEHOVAH NISSI

After their victory over the Amalakites, Moses does two noteworthy things. First he makes a written record of the battle with an instruction to future commanders of Israel's armies that they are to wipe out Amalek “from under heaven.” (Ex. 17:14) It is fashionable among liberal Biblical scholars to refute the idea that Moses himself wrote the 5 books normally attributed to him. This passage is a clear reference to the fact that Moses was keeping a written record. Also new atheist critics and so called ‘higher critics’ of the Bible like to call Israel's campaign to wipe out Amalek a “genocide,” as it later plays out under King Saul. They are prone to forget that Amalek was a sworn military enemy of Israel, bent on a genocide of its own. This was a battle Amalek started, and Israel had to finish it or be killed by those seeking to destroy them.

The other thing Moses did was to build an altar and call it “Jehovah-Nissi” or God is my Banner. This is another of the name-titles of God that we can add to our list. In old-fashioned warfare, an army fought under a banner, and while that banner flew proudly in the breeze, the army could see it and take hope. God's people, when they fight, fight under the protecting banner of their God, who promises to act in their behalf.

EXODUS 18: THE POWER OF LOVE

There are several possible ways one could title this section on Exodus 18, the chapter that tells the story of Moses and the visit of his father-in-law Jethro. But perhaps the thing that most stays with us is the value of human love in our lives. Moses was a mighty prophet. When he dies the people call him their king in tribute, though he never took that title in his life. Moses talked with God himself. Yet it was a precious refreshment to his spirit to have his father-in-law come to camp and to be able to relate to him all that had befallen them since Moses began his confrontation with Pharaoh. Here is a man who could understand what Moses had been through. When we read “Moses kissed him; and they asked each other of their welfare; and they came into the tent,” we are truly glad for Moses. Think of those times in life when we are able to visit with a beloved mother, sister, or friend, and the joy we find in each other's company. Think of staying up late into the night talking together of all that the Lord has been doing in your life. It is such a renewal to be able to unburden your heart with complete freedom to someone you have known for years, whom you love and who loves you in return.

After Moses fills him in, Jethro's response is to rejoice, and to praise God in recognition of His deliverance. The children of Israel may have been slow to acknowledge God but Jethro was not. He was schooled in the things of God. He had also been a father figure to Moses for 40 years. Because of the trust and respect that existed between them, Jethro was the perfect person to give Moses much needed counsel. His guidance about how to set up the affairs of the camp so that Moses would not “wear away” was gratefully accepted. How precious are those friendships close enough that we can accept counsel from such friends without being offended. How precious are those friendships that nourish us in the Lord. God knows what we need and is good to us.

THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORDS HOUSE

Finally the people are brought to the place God had purposed to bring His people, to Mt. Horeb, also called Mt. Sinai, the sacred mountain from which He first called Moses. From the burning bush God had said to Moses, “this shall be a sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.” (Exodus 3:12) Now they have arrived and they will stay in this place, camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai for one year (or fifty-seven chapters of scripture, until Numbers 10) when they are once more commanded to be on the march.

God often uses mountains as sacred places because they are above the common daily experiences of men, and require a climb for man to reach God. Exodus 19 opens as the Israelites, three months into the journey, arrive at the Holy Mountain. Moses begins by telling the people what it has taken to get them here: how God has miraculously delivered them from Egypt, and “borne them on eagle’s wings” to bring them to Himself. This poetic picture is actually a very accurate description of God’s labors to get the people that far.

Eagles nest high in the crags of mountains, and so don’t have an easy job teaching their young to fly. If an eaglet falls, they fall to their death from such a height. But learn to fly they must, so an adult eagle will push its young from the nest and let them fall for some distance before finally flying underneath them and letting them land on the parent’s back, then flying them back up high only to begin the process again, until finally the baby eagle gets the idea and hang of flying. This metaphor is a pretty accurate picture of God’s patience in dealing with the baby nation that repeatedly falls into faithlessness only to be lifted on God’s wings each time².

At this mountain the Israelites are called to be a holy nation, and to ratify their covenant with God. God is about to give the children of Israel the law they must follow so they can become His servants. This transaction is commonly called the Sinaitic covenant. God tells them “if they will obey his voice, then they shall be a peculiar treasure unto Him, above all people...a kingdom of priests and an holy nation.” (19:6) This is an amazing promise! God tells these people that they are a unique treasure to Him with a special place in His plan for the human race. Israel is of great value to Him and His loving concern is always over them. It is a truly remarkable relationship that God is offering to have with them if they will agree to make and keep covenant with Him.

A HOLY PECULIAR PEOPLE

The word “peculiar” is easily misunderstood if we think of its modern meaning of odd or unusual. The ancient Latin roots of this word give us insight. It means to be “*private property*,” “*belonging exclusively God*.” This definition speaks to the call from the Lord to come out of the world, to be in a special relationship Him, specifically to belong to Him as His possession.³

The other description the Lord wants to apply to them is HOLY. The old roots of this word help us to understand. “Holy” comes from the word “whole”—suggesting that one is *wholly* given to God. It means “*set apart to the service of God*”: Separate—set apart—holy—not like the ordinary or the common.⁴ This is why the Lord often calls the Sabbath the *Holy Sabbath*, because it is the day set apart from the other days. We wear different clothes and do different activities on that day to teach us about being HOLY and separate from the usual manner of things of the world. It means more than just different however; it means to be set apart for something higher. The Sabbath is a day higher than other days, one that brings us closer to God.

This idea is summed up in the beautiful words of Leviticus: “*And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the Lord am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine.*” (Leviticus 20:26) God wants his people to be holy, or in other words, to live elevated lives, on a higher plane than the lives of men and women who don’t know God and who simply live to gratify their flesh. We should aim higher; we should aim to be like God.

The application in our own lives should be obvious. Are we striving to be a holy people, to give ourselves wholly to the Lord? Are we seeking to separate ourselves from the things of the world in order to be his peculiar treasure? Those who serve God must be holy, a nation of priests. We cannot serve both God and Mammon.

WE WILL

There is a preliminary agreement with the people in verses seven through nine. The elders of the people speak in the people’s behalf to Moses, certifying that the people agree to keep all the words of commandment that God will give through Moses. Then when God speaks to Moses, who is enveloped in a “thick cloud” (v9), the people actually hear the voice of God speaking. They need to know for certain that it is not Moses who is making up the law, but that God is actually speaking through Moses to the people.

PREPARING TO COME TO THE MOUNT

The people have come to the base of Mt. Sinai but there are things they must do to prepare for the experience of meeting God. Though God would “come down” to the mountaintop, none of them were to presume to “come up” and meet with Him. They were strictly commanded to keep their distance and let certain chosen men be “go-betweens” who will actually meet with God on their behalf. This, by the way, is the definition of a priest: “a person ordained to act as a mediator between God and man⁵.” A barrier is erected at the base of the mountain and the people are warned in the strictest fear of death, not to attempt to cross the barrier and go up the mountain.

The Israelites are commanded to wash their clothes and cleanse themselves in preparation to come before the Lord. They were to restrain the flesh by abstaining from sexual relations so that their minds could be singly fixed on the great experience ahead of them. By doing all in their own power to prepare and be as clean as they could be, they could receive further knowledge at the mountain.

THE SPECTACULAR MOUNT SINAI SOUND AND LIGHT SHOW

As the third day dawned, the people began to experience an unprecedented introduction to the power and glory of Almighty God. They heard loud thunder and the blasting sound of a trumpet sounding from heaven. They saw thick smoke cover the mountaintop and felt the whole earth tremble. Their nostrils filled with the smell and taste of smoke and their faces glowed from the fire atop the mountain. This experience involved all their senses and was so powerful that it could not be denied.

The people of Israel were only three months removed from the dramatic “show-downs” against the idol gods of Egypt. They had experienced there the power of Israel’s God triumphing over the false gods of the nations (the Hebrew word *gentiles* literally means ‘the nations.’). Now as they experience the presence of God on Mt. Sinai, they also experience His power over nature. The elements of earth, water, fire, weather, light and sound all are at His command. There is nothing He can’t do, nothing he can’t control. Second Chronicles says it well: “O Lord God of our fathers, art not thou God in heaven? and rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in thine hand is there not power and might, so that none is able to withstand thee?” (2 Chronicles 20:6) Again the Israelites are taught in the context of the ancient world, with its thousands of different gods, that they are making a covenant with the One True God, the Almighty King of heaven and earth. This knowledge is to be the unique foundation of their nation throughout its history.

In the midst of this experience Moses is commanded to come up, only to be told to go back down and warn the people once more that none of them should try to “break through unto the Lord to gaze...and perish.” (v.21) So Moses returns with this solemn warning that the people are to respect the bounds that have been set or die.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD IS THE BEGINNING...

It seems obvious to the modern observer that the Lord was trying to put a healthy “fear of the Lord” into the people. To understand the reason for this approach, we must remember how warped Israel’s understanding of God was after 400 years of being surrounded by a degraded idol-worshipping culture that practiced an attractive religion which appealed to the basest sensual instincts in men and women’s natures. We will see just how quickly they revert to this powerful past modeling in the incident of the golden calf a few chapters from this one. The antidote to this kind of poison from their past was necessarily a strong one.

The Bible says in more than one place “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 9:10) Or, as it says in the Book of Mormon, “If there was no law given against sin men would not be afraid to sin.” (Alma 42:20) When people learn that those who are in authority over them are “all bark and no bite,” it invites disrespect and insolence. People need to be convinced that there is a painful consequence attached to sin to be dissuaded from sinning.

Israel at this time was about to be given God’s Law—specifically the Law of Moses. This law would not only shape their nation but would go on to be a light to the whole world. If this new law were to become effective and operative in their lives, the people would have to be convinced that the lawgiver was also an effective law-enforcer. If the law had just been read aloud to them by Moses, without any demonstration of power, it would have been easily ignored and ineffective. They would have forgotten it as soon as it was convenient for them to forget it; that is, as soon as their appetites pulled them in some other direction. The Great Lawgiver needed this introduction to the people, so that they would properly reverence the law He gave.

¹ Hur is a bit of a mystery. He seems to play an important leadership role but the text never states who he is. Jewish tradition reports him at various times as Miriam's son, thus Moses' nephew, or Miriam's husband, thus Moses' brother-in-law.

² The following excerpt is from the website "Zoo Torah." <http://zootorah.blogspot.hk/2009/05/on-eagles-wings.html>

"Many ornithologists have thought that the Bible picture of an eagle carrying her young was merely figurative, but in recent years certain reliable observers have actually seen a parent bird let its young rest for a moment on the feathered back - especially when there was no other roosting place in sight. When an eagle nests on the ledge of a sheer-walled canyon, many feet above the earth, with no jutting tree or protruding rock to break the fall, the quick movement of a mother bird to offer her own back to a frightened fledgling may be the only way to let it live to try its wings again." (V.C. Holmgren, *Bird Walk Through The Bible* [New York: Dover Publications 1988] p. 98)

One report of this behavior is as follows:

"Our guide was one of the small company who have seen the golden eagle teaching the young to fly. He could support the belief that the parent birds, after urging and sometimes shoving the youngster into the air, will swoop underneath and rest the struggler for a moment on their wings and back. ... Our guide, when questioned, said that every phrase of the verse [Deut. xxxii, 1 I] (which was new to him) was accurate, save the first; he had seen it all except the stirring up of the nest." (W.B. Thomas, *Yeoman's England* [1934], pp. 135-6)

Another report concerning the golden eagle comes from Arthur Cleveland Bent, one of America's greatest ornithologists, on the authority of Dr. L. Miller:

"The mother started from the nest in the crags and, roughly handling the youngster, she allowed him to drop, I should say, about ninety feet; then she would swoop down under him, wings spread, and he would alight on her back. She would soar to the top of the range with him and repeat the process. Once perhaps she waited fifteen minutes between flights. I should say the farthest she let him fall was a hundred and fifty feet. My father and I watched him, spellbound, for over an hour." (A. C. Bent, *Bulletin of the Smithsonian Institution* CLXVII [1937], 302)

³ peculiar, Easton's 1897 Bible Dictionary. Retrieved April 28, 2014, from Dictionary.com website:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/peculiar>

⁴ holy. Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/holy> (accessed: April 28, 2014).

⁵ Collins World English Dictionary