

OpenTheo

March 10th: Exodus 17 & Matthew 18:15-35

March 9, 2020



Alastair Roberts

Water from the rock and fighting the Amalekites. Forgiving brothers.

Some passages referenced:

Deuteronomy 6:16, Psalm 78:17-20, 81:7, 95:9 (Massah and Meribah as sites of testing); Numbers 14:22 (testing God ten times); Numbers 20 (another Meribah); Deuteronomy 32 (God as Rock); Deuteronomy 25:17-19 (Amalek's sin); Genesis 36:12, 16 (Amalek's ancestry); Genesis 32-33 (meeting Esau after the water crossing); Exodus 24:14 (Aaron and Hur judging the people in Moses' absence); Exodus 31:2 (Bezalel the grandson of Hur); 1 Kings 7:21, Zechariah 4 (correspondence to Aaron and Hur as pillars).

Deuteronomy 19:15 (witnesses testing words); Genesis 4:23-24 (Lamech's seventy times seven vengeance); Daniel 9:24ff. (seventy weeks of years leading to restoration).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Exodus 17. All the congregation of the people of Israel 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.

Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, Give us water to drink. And Moses said to them, Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord? But the people thirsted there for water and the people grumbled against Moses and said, Why did you bring us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst? So Moses cried to the Lord, What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me. And the Lord said to Moses, Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go.

Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarrelling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, Is the Lord among us or not? Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

So Moses said to Joshua, Choose for us men and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand. So Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.

And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, Write this as a memorial in a book. And recited in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my banner, saying, A hand upon the throne of the Lord. The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation. In Exodus chapter 17, Israel is moving by stages through the wilderness, toward the promised land, following the itinerary that has been established for them by the Lord.

And the people blame Moses for bringing them out into the wilderness to die of thirst. They've run out of water. There's another water crisis.

They've had that crisis at Marah, and now there's another. Masa and Meribah are spoken of on a number of occasions within the Old Testament, as places where Israel tested God. In Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 16, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Masa.

In Psalm 78 verses 17 to 20, Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the

Most High in the desert. They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God, saying, Can God spread a table in the wilderness? He struck the rock so that water gushed out, and streams overflowed.

In Psalm 81 verse 7, In distress you called, and I delivered you. I answered you in the secret place of thunder. I tested you at the waters of Meribah.

Then in Psalm 95 verses 7 to 9, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on the day at Masa in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my works. By the time of Numbers chapter 14 verse 22, we're told that the Israelites had tested the Lord ten times. This testing of God proceeds from unbelief, and is an attempt to force God's hand, to set God an ultimatum.

We can see examples of this, perhaps most clearly in the temptations of Christ. It's an attempt to force God to prove himself to sight, rather than living by faith. It's not taking God at his word, it's trying to force God to prove himself.

Moses recognized that his own life at this point was potentially under threat. The people were almost at the point of being willing to stone him. Moses and some of the elders were sent ahead.

Ahead of the Israelites with the staff with which the Nile was struck. And just as the striking of the Nile with that staff led to undrinkable water, so the striking of the rock with the staff produces water that all can drink. Once again, we shouldn't presume that this is a suspension of the laws of nature.

Rather, the God of nature is proving his power over nature, to be able to provide whatever his people need from the wilderness. This most unpromising of locations can spring forth with rivers that will feed a multitude. It can offer quail from the heavens, and rain of bread from heaven.

God can provide for his people in whatever situations they find themselves in. He is the God of nature. Moses brings the elders of Israel with him, presumably as witnesses to God's power and his faithfulness in providing for his people.

It's interesting to note that the Lord stands before Moses upon the rock, and he has to strike the rock. This appearance of God upon the rock, and Moses striking the rock, associates God with the rock. In Deuteronomy chapter 32, this language is used of God.

The rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness, and without iniquity, just and upright is he. And then later on, in verses 28 following.

For they are a nation void of counsel, and there is no understanding in them. If they were wise, they would understand this, they would discern their latter end. How could one

have chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight, unless their rock had sold them, and the Lord had given them up? For their rock is not as our rock.

Our enemies are by themselves, for their vine comes from the vine of Sodom, and from the fields of Gomorrah. The imagery of the rock is used earlier on as well. He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he suckled him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock.

And then a few verses later, again its language applied to God. But Joshua grew fat and kicked, he grew fat, stout and sleek. Then he forsook God who made him, and scoffed at the rock of his salvation.

They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods. With abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded.

You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth. The language then of rock is associated with God. God is the rock that gives security to his people.

He's the rock from which living waters flow. He's the rock who is able to withstand all that would buffet it. He's the rock who is unchangeable and secure.

And this language applied to God also has that connection in the story itself as God stands upon the rock, associates with the rock, and then the rock is struck in a way that associates the striking of the rock perhaps with the striking of God himself. This might be particularly important to reflect upon when we consider the later tradition of the rock that followed them in the wilderness, and the way that Paul can use that in 1 Corinthians 10. This is a second water crisis in the story of the wilderness.

There are two water crises early on in Israel's experience in the wilderness, but no water crisis mentioned again until nearer the time that they're about to enter into the land, just after Miriam dies. Massah is associated with the name trial, and Meribah with the word quarrel. And we see another Meribah in Numbers chapter 20, with a similar thing that takes place, although in that occasion, Moses is supposed to speak to the rock, but he strikes it when he should not.

At this point, Amalek comes upon Israel. They attack Israel. Now this attack is a preemptive strike.

Israel has not done anything to antagonize them. The Amalekites see them in the wilderness. They see they're weak, and they want to prey upon them.

In Deuteronomy chapter 25, verse 17 to 19, we're told about this incident. Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on

the way, when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God. Therefore, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

You shall not forget. Amalek, at this point, is placed under the ban. They're described as lacking the fear of God, acting in a way that rejects all established moral principles.

They're brutal, treacherous, and predatory, seeking to take advantage of those who are weak, as those who are thirsty, hungry, don't have many resources. Amalek is first introduced to us as one in the line of Esau's family. In Genesis chapter 36, verse 12, Timnah was a concubine of Eliphaz, Esau's son.

She brought Amalek to Eliphaz. And then in verse 16, Korah, Gatham, and Amalek, these are the chiefs of Eliphaz in the land of Edom. These are the sons of Adar.

Perhaps we're supposed to see Amalek as bearing something of the grudge that Esau had against his brother Jacob. It's been forgotten in the rest of the family, but Amalek keeps that grudge alive. Maybe we're supposed to see some symmetry with the encounter with Esau after the water crossing in Genesis chapter 32 to 3. Amalek, however, is the son of a concubine.

He's a descendant of the Horites, who dwelt in Seir before the Edomites. He seems to have a less official place within the nation than the children of Esau's full wives. Joshua leads Israel in the fighting of the battle.

But Moses goes up on the hill and holds up his arms. And as he holds up his arms, Israel prevails. And if his arms fall, Israel starts to be beaten back.

His hands are raised, perhaps in prayer, but this isn't the usual term for that. It's not entirely clear what Moses is doing at this point. Is he engaging in prayer? It's quite possible.

That would be the natural thing to suspect. Others have suggested that he's holding up a banner, which explains why it's later said that the Lord is my banner. That holding up of the banner would explain also why, when his hands drop, the situation changes.

It's not that he's stopped praying as his arms drop. It's the fact that he's no longer holding up the banner. That's another possibility.

But one thing to notice here is the presence of two people around him. One on either side. Aaron, who's the high priest, and Hur, who seems to be a leading civil leader.

He's a political leader. He's a descendant of Judah, and he seems to have some authority

within the camp. Later on, in Exodus 24, verse 14, when Moses goes up the mountain, he leaves the people in the charge of Aaron and Hur.

And so he seems to be a prominent son in the line of Judah. And on the other side, you have the high priest. There are three figures.

Moses the prophet, the Judahite Hur, a prominent son of the line of Judah, whose grandson happens to be Bezalel, the one who will be especially responsible for the crafting of the tabernacle. And then on the other side, you have the priest, Aaron. This pattern of supporting pillars might remind us of Yacon and Boaz, the two pillars as you enter into the temple.

Also of the picture that we see in Zechariah chapter 4, the relations of Israel by which they will win their victories may be described here. So in the center, you have the prophet Moses, the one who relays the word of God to the people. And then on the one hand of him, you have Aaron, the high priest, who represents the law of God in the rule and managing of the tabernacle and its worship.

And on the other side, you have a chief civil leader, a member of the tribe to which the throne will one day be given. These are the relations by which Israel will be equipped to prevail. As they relate to God, as they lift their hands up to God, and as the prophet is supported by the king and the priest, that triumvirate will be the means by which they succeed.

After they win the battle, Moses builds an altar called the Lord is my banner. And after the battle, the Lord instructs Moses to write down in a book, for a memorial to Joshua and others, that the memory of Amalek will be utterly blotted out. This is the first mention of writing within the Bible.

It's here given in the context of the importance of being mindful of, attending to, and learning from history. And this conflict with Amalek continues in the story of Israel. It continues in the story of Saul, where Saul fails to deal with the problem of Amalek.

It continues later on in the story of the Exodus. And then it continues in the story of Esther, where we have Haman, the Agagite, a descendant of Amalek. A question to consider, How can we see the New Testament using the events in this chapter to refer to Christ? What are some other ways beyond the ways that are identified by the New Testament, that we might see Christ being symbolized or figured here? But if he does not listen, And if he refuses to listen even to the church, Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Then Peter came up and said to him, Did your brother sin against me and I forgive him, as many as seven times? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but seventy seven times. Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished

to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees imploring him, Have patience with me and I will pay you everything. And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. And seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, Pay what you owe. So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, Have patience with me and I will pay you.

He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, You wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you? And in anger, his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. The second half of Matthew chapter 18 is a passage dealing with the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Sins against us within the body of Christ need to be considered in the light of brotherhood. And we have to deal with our brothers. When your brother wrongs you, you can't just let it fester.

You have to interact with your brother day by day, and you have little choice but to relate to your brother. And our relationships in the body of Christ should be the same. There is an imperative to uphold and establish peace between us and to heal any wounds that might exist.

We confront each other in order to sort things out swiftly. And Jesus gives here a procedure that is designed to avoid any sort of premature escalation of situations to conflict. Many people seem to approach this as if the earlier stages are unfortunate prerequisites for really dealing with the problem, finally being done with people that have wronged us and bringing them to the point of being cast out.

Yet Jesus' teaching here is very clearly designed with the end that we might win over our brother. That's the optimal outcome. We care about our brothers and sisters, so we very much wish to win them back if at all possible.

The point of this is that we are not the ones that want to see things escalate. Every form

of escalation is a result of the resistance of the other party, of their opposition, not something that we seek to bring about ourselves. This begins in private and it's an important thing to give people a chance to climb down.

It's very hard to climb down from something that we've said that is wrong or hurtful in public. We very often feel that desire to stick to our guns, to stick to what we have said, to save face. And dealing with things in private gives people an optimal context in which to repent for what they've done, to set right wrongs, to take back perhaps some of the words that they have said.

And it is also a way of avoiding gossip and rumours and seeds of bitterness. We are going to deal with this directly and we're going to deal with it quickly. We take the step of approaching people rather than letting anything fester.

And we approach them in a personal way. This is us going to them, we're not sending someone else on our behalf. We're dealing with this personally and in a way that gives them the ideal situation in which they could repent and set things right.

A healthy society needs a minimum of law but litigiousness is a sign of people who cannot adequately resolve their own disputes. And so we do have to take these things to other people at certain points. But we draw out that process, we don't go straight to the most extreme authority.

This may be a particular problem for us where we can always appeal to the crowd, we can always appeal to some other parties to intervene and to come into our situation and cast their judgement upon it, particularly as we have access to the internet. Resisting the power that that gives us and dealing with things closer to home, dealing with things in a way that gives people the opportunity to stand down, to repent and to set things right without putting them to a public shame or putting their feet to the fire so that they have no choice but to back down. That's not what we're trying to do.

Rather we seek to establish peace where at all possible. We bring witnesses along on that second occasion to test the words of all. Now no testimony is being given yet but the witnesses introduce that implicit warning of it, that this may come to something more and at this point we want people to establish the words.

We don't want false rumours, we don't want a sort of he said she said situation. We want the words to be established and true. We want to know exactly what was said, who stands where and how things can be resolved if they are possible to be resolved.

Finally we bring things to the church and if they refuse to listen to the church we don't associate with them as brothers anymore. The point of all of this is that we are peacemakers, we are people who seek reconciliation, we are people who deal with things quickly and always in a way that seeks to avoid unnecessary escalation and here

we should note the importance of being in a situation where we are relating to each other deeply and in a sustained fashion. It's very easy to be a person that never needs to forgive if you're not relating to people as brothers and sisters.

It's very easy to avoid forgiveness if whenever you fall out with someone you just go to the next church in town. We need to relate to people in a sustained way and it will form in us the virtue of forgiveness. This is something that doesn't come easily, it's very easy to cut off connections with people, it's very easy to avoid the sort of connections that might really impinge upon our will, that really might make us vulnerable to being wronged by others but yet we're called to put ourselves in that position and that's in part how we will learn what it means to forgive.

We should remember that Jesus' teachings don't operate in isolation from each other. His earlier teaching about not wanting to be a stumbling block and about the importance of humility is still in play here. What is our concern when someone sins against us? Is it primarily the assertion of our rights? Or are we concerned for the spiritual health of our brother and the church of which we are both members? Are we trying to restore peace and establish harmony between people? Or are we more concerned about ourselves and our own rights and entitlement from our brother? Are we concerned about restoring the lost sheep? Or in this case restoring the lost brother? And this is the concern that should be animating our practice at this point.

Jesus talks again about binding and loosing here, once again in reference to the church and the authority that's given to it. He declared a similar statement with Peter a few chapters earlier. God uses the words and actions of his people to affect his work in the world.

This isn't an absolute power, a sort of blank cheque that allows the church to act in whatever way it wants with the assurance of complete divine backing. No, the point is that Christ works authoritatively through his church and that where his church is faithfully active, its words and actions can have the force of the proclamation of the words of Christ by his spirit. Peter's question to Christ that follows is perhaps one that reveals the hearts of many of us.

How many times should I forgive my brother if he sins against me? This is something that many of us have dealt with. People who have again and again they've sinned against us and should it be up to seven times, seven strikes and you're out? Is there some sort of limit to this? And yet Jesus says up to 70 times seven. That's a strange number to give.

Why that particular number? If we look back in the very early parts of the Bible in Genesis chapter 4 there is a reference to 70 times seven. Lamech said to his wives, Ada and Zillah hear my voice you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.

If Cain's revenge is sevenfold then Lamech's is 77 fold. So if Cain was seven times then Lamech is 77 fold. This is the line of Cain.

This is the line of the brother killer and what Christ is calling Peter to be is the exact inverse of the line of the brother killer. Rather he is the one that seeks to win over his brother. If Cain is going to be revenge seven times and Lamech 77 times then Peter is one who's going to be forgiving his brother not just seven times but 77 times.

He's going to express the inverse of vengeance in extreme forgiveness. But there's more going on because in Daniel chapter 9 verse 24 following God establishes his own pattern of forgiveness. 70 weeks or 77s are decreed about your people and your holy city to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet and to anoint a most holy place.

God is going to forgive the of his people. He's going to restore them and he's going to do it after 77s. This is the time of restoration.

It's the restoration from exile. It's the year of the Lord's favour. 70 times 7 490.

It's connected. It's a mega jubilee. 10 times that jubilee number 77s.

God is restoring and forgiving and establishing his people after all that they have done. After all the ways that they have rejected and despised and mistreated him. In all the ways that they have turned their backs and gone to serve other gods.

In all the ways that they have committed spiritual adultery. In the ways that they have mistreated their neighbours and despised the image of God in their brothers. In all these ways that they have wronged him, God is going to restore them in 70 times 7 and bring them to life in his presence.

Now what Christ is teaching Peter, among other things, is that that must provide the paradigm for his exercise of forgiveness. Not the behaviour of Lamech, the descendant of the brother killer, who replaced the 7 times of Cain's vengeance with 77 times of his own. It's the inverse of that and indeed it's the pattern that God himself has given.

70 times 7. Peter then must extend the pattern of God's own forgiveness of his people to others. And once we've appreciated this, Jesus' parable that he proceeds to give makes so much sense. Because God is the great king that has forgiven the incalculable debt that his people owe to him.

He has given them that relief 70 times 7. And yet, there are so many of them who want to hold their rights against their neighbour. To insist upon getting their pound of flesh. And God says that they're not to do that.

Rather they're to extend the forgiveness that he has given them to their neighbour. We are a people who are called to have a life founded upon and driven by forgiveness. We don't seek our own rights but seek to set things right.

We seek to restore broken relationships, to win back the lost brother, rather than to assert our rights over him. God makes us active participants in his giving and his forgiving. God, for instance, has given us the Holy Spirit.

He gives the church the gift of the Holy Spirit. But he gives each one of us as members of the church gifts of the Holy Spirit. The point is that as we exercise our gifts, we're representing that one gift of the Holy Spirit.

And as I exercise my gifts and you exercise yours, we are giving to each other that one gift that Christ has given to his church. We are representing that thing that belongs to all of us. God makes us active participants then in his giving and likewise in his forgiving.

And those who resist this cut themselves off from the grace that he's given us. As he gives us his spirit, as he gives us his forgiveness, what he is doing is giving us the capacity to extend the same to others. To take the grace that has been given to us and show that grace to people who need it every bit as much as we do.

We are in a cycle of grace that has been opened up by the bountiful, liberal gift of God. A gift beyond all measure. A gift beyond all value or compare.

And we are called and privileged with the possibility of extending this. Of being people who give to others what has been given to us. We have been given freely and bountifully.

And this blessing is so that we can give it to others. That we can share in that. That's the gift that we have been given.

God does not just leave us as paupers who have been given some bounty that we can enjoy. Rather he has entrusted us with his gifts. That we might be those who extend gifts of forgiveness to others.

We can proclaim God's forgiveness to others. It's one of the things that the reformers recognized along with the church beyond the reformers. The recognition that we can declare Christ's forgiveness to our neighbor.

Christ has forgiven us and he calls us to be those who declare with the authority of Christ the forgiveness of all who truly repent. That we might be sources of security and assurance for those people who have troubled consciences. That they come to God's throne and we can declare as people who act in Christ's name that they too are forgiven.

That he holds none of their sins against them. And this teaching concerning the

unforgiving servant is the absolute inverse of what should characterize the church. A question to consider.

How does this teaching develop the earlier teaching concerning forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount?