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Jesus and the Water in the Wilderness

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Following up on my earlier discussion of Miriam's provision of water in the wilderness (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAEpcarR9MA>), I discuss the New Testament's use of the Exodus water stories.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Yesterday, I discussed the character of Miriam and how in the Old Testament, she's connected on a number of occasions with water events. First of all, in the deliverance of the infant Moses from the water of the Nile, in the deliverance of Israel through the Red Sea in chapter 14 and 15 of Exodus, and then as she dies, with the crisis of water that Israel experiences.

Suggested as we look a bit more closely, as we see the three major crises that Israel experiences concerning water, each one of these is subtly connected with the character of Miriam. Miriam sings at the end of the story of the Red Sea crossing. Immediately after that, they come to Mara.

Mara is playing upon things associated with Miriam's name. Bitterness. Her name means bitter sea.

It plays upon bitterness. It's described as merim, this water that's bitter and can't be drunk, using the same consonants as we find in the name Miriam. So there's a connection between her and that water.

There is water that's provided there in a way that the water that is bitter is made sweet. So Israel has provided water in the wilderness and that's immediately after the song of Miriam. The name associations are striking there, but apart from that, there doesn't seem to be that strong of an association.

In chapter 17, you have a further event where Moses strikes the rock at Meribah and there is contention and the people test God at that point. Again, there seems to be a subtle play upon the name of Miriam. Miriam and Meribah, it's playing upon that name and you have the same place name used of a very similar event just after Miriam's death.

Now, as I suggested, in the death of Miriam, it's connected with the drying up or the loss of the water from the original rock that was struck in Exodus chapter 17. That water had provided for them for 40 years and then it dries up immediately as Miriam dies. And this, I suggested, is something that gives warrant to some of the stories connected with the water in the wilderness that spoke of it as Miriam's well.

As you look through those stories, the stories of the two Meribahs, the story of Marah, every one of those place names playing subtly upon the name of Miriam. And also Moses speaks about the Morim, the rebels at the events of Meribah, the second Meribah, and again playing upon the letters of Miriam's name. It seems that there is some connection there.

And then as we look, previous to the death of Miriam in chapter 19, there's the ritual of the red heifer, which again is about the provision of water. It's about a female cow, a heifer that is killed and it's ashes and it's associated with the right of leprosy, associated with leprosy as well, with cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet yarn. And it's burnt and then that's used outside the camp in a way that reminds you perhaps of the story of Miriam in chapter 12 of Numbers.

And then that's used to provide water for cleansing. And I suggested that this isn't just a story about Israel having some minor right to provide cleansing water, but it's about something greater than that. It's about entering into the land.

They've been associated with the dead bodies in the wilderness and now they're allowed to enter into the land. And the provision of cleansing water is associated with the death of the red heifer, the death of this female cow. And then later on you have the death of

Miriam immediately after that.

And I would suggest there's a connection between the two. The death of Miriam is one of the means by which they will be purified so that they will be able to enter into the promised land. Now, as I look through that, I suggested that there are connections with various things in the New Testament.

I mentioned in passing that the story of the striking of the rock is one that has messianic overtones. And it's one that maybe gives us some understanding of why in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 Paul can talk about the rock that followed them. And he speaks of that rock as being Christ.

And they all drank the same spiritual drink for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them. And that rock was Christ. As you look through the story of the Exodus, you'll see on several occasions this theme of the rock emerging.

It emerges in a very literal sense, the striking of the rock in chapter 17 of Exodus. And then the striking of the rock again against God's word in Numbers chapter 20. There are other times when you might see the rock being mentioned.

In chapter 33 of Exodus, the Lord says, Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock. And while my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Moses is sheltered by the rock.

Later on in Moses' song, he uses the word rock to refer to the Lord on several occasions. Verse 4 of chapter 32 of Deuteronomy. The rock, his work is perfect, and for all his ways are justice, a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright as he.

In verse 15. And as you look through this, there are further references. Now, what we're seeing here is the connection of the rock with God.

And then the rock playing very significant parts within the story. The rock note. It's not just a rock.

It's a rock that's very specific in all of these stories, whether it's the story of Moses being hidden in the cleft of the rock, whether it's in Numbers 20 when he's told to go to the rock. And then in chapter 17 of Exodus, again you have the same reference. There he's told to go to the rock, to strike the rock.

It's a particular rock. And then when we hold that alongside the fact that God is referred to as the rock, there seems to be more going on here. Look further at Exodus chapter 17 and you'll note that there is a very explicit connection between God and the rock.

In Exodus chapter 17, Moses is instructed by the Lord. 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.

So God is standing before Moses on the rock. And that standing before Moses, what is being referred to there? Presumably it's a reference to the pillar of cloud. The pillar of cloud that's described as the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light that they might travel by day and by night.

God is standing in front of Moses upon the rock. And then when Moses strikes the rock, presumably he is striking through the pillar of cloud. He's striking the Lord upon the rock.

And that association between God and the rock is a very pronounced one. It's a symbolic association of God with this rock. And there I would suggest that this might be the same rock that Moses has hid behind, the cleft of the rock into which he's placed, that God protects Moses in Exodus chapter 33.

From his glory, that he says, while my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Again, there seems to be an association between God and the rock, the sheltering of God's hand and the sheltering of the cleft of the rock. Now, when we look at later Jewish tradition, it connects a number of these different things.

First of all, the well is seen as the well of Miriam. It's the rock that provided water in chapter 17 of Exodus, provides water all the way throughout their wilderness time. And wherever they go, the water from this rock is giving them what they need to drink.

There's no more water crisis after that point until just after the death of Miriam. They don't have time to mourn Miriam because the water has run out, whereas there is a mourning period after the death of Aaron. Now, the second rock is again described as the rock, the rock at the second Meribah.

And the association of names also connects those two things. Moses strikes that rock in the same way as he struck the first one. And that rock being once more associated with the Lord seems to suggest that we're supposed to see these two rocks as associated with each other.

These two rocks are essentially the same rock in symbolic intent. And later on, when they sing to the well in chapter 21 of Numbers, again, that is associated with the rock in some Jewish tradition. Which in turn is associated with the well of Jacob in chapter 29 of Genesis, where Jacob removes this stone covering upon a well so that all the flocks can be watered.

It's a similar thing that's taking place in the provision for Israel. Now, where would Paul have got the background for his statement that this was Christ, the Messiah? Think about

what happened at the rock at Meribah. The rock was struck.

The rock was associated with the Lord. Israel was testing the Lord at that point. And as a result of their sin, there was judgment.

But yet that judgment involved the striking of the rock. And so the Lord bore the judgment, as it were, that was upon his people. And then the water was provided.

As you look in the New Testament, a number of places take up these sorts of themes. Maybe we can see in the book of Mark the removal of the stone with the three women that come to the tomb. Maybe that's associated with the removal of the stone from the well of Jacob.

But the main place where we'll see these connections is in the Gospel of John. As we go through John's Gospel, there are several references to the provision of water. The provision of water in a miraculous way, whether it's the striking of the rock, whether it's some other sort of provision of water that is associated with the eschatological purpose of God.

So first of all, there's the stone water pots that have water placed within them, but then yield wine. This eschatological drink, it's the water that has been turned into wine. And Christ brings that miraculously forth from them.

The beginning of John's Gospel, and for many chapters, has this emphasis upon water and the water that's going to be provided, the water of the Holy Spirit, born of water and the spirit of baptism. And then the events that will happen through Christ's greater baptism that is anticipated. Now that shedding forth of the spirit is also referenced in Christ at the well at Sychar, at Samaria, when he speaks with the woman and offers living water that will spring up.

He is the one that will provide living water. He is the one who is the true well, the true well that will give this living water. He's the one that the water made living in chapter five as the pool is stirred up by the angel.

Christ is the one who actually gives deliverance greater than that. He's the one who heals the man. In chapter six, he's the one who walks upon the water.

In chapter seven, he's the one who declares that the one who believes, he says, If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. Now this he said about the spirit whom those who believed in him were to receive.

For as yet the spirit had not been given because Jesus was not yet glorified. Later on, we see a further reference to living water in the story of Christ as he's the one who has water flowing from his side, blood and water. In verse 34 of chapter 19, It is an event

that's not just this thing happened.

It's an event that has a great symbolic import in the mind of the evangelist. As he's recounting this event, he wants the reader to notice that this is something that's fulfilling all these prophetic anticipations. And then finally, at the very end of the gospel, you have the great quantity of fish that is caught.

Now I've suggested elsewhere that this is a reference back to Ezekiel chapter 47, where there is this river that flows from the temple, the water that flows out of the temple, and then it becomes this great river that goes out and brings life and heals the bitter waters. Again, we can think back to Mara here. Then he led me back to the bank of the river.

As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river, very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, the water flows towards the eastern, this water flows towards the eastern region and goes down into the Araba and enters the sea where the water, when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live.

And there will be very many fish for this water goes there that the waters of the sea may become fresh. So everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea from Engedi to En-Eglayim.

It will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds like the fish of the great sea. But its swamps and marshes will never will not become fresh.

They will be left to be left for salt. And on the banks on both sides of the river, they will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor will their fruit fail.

But they will bear fresh fruit every month because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing. Now, in John, chapter 21, the water of life from Christ's side has gone out and it's going out to heal the nations.

And so the disciples, they're sent out as fishers of men. They fish and they draw in this mighty catch. And in the great work of strength, Peter pulls in this net full of 153 fish, fish that would be enough to break a net on many occasions.

But he's strong enough to bring it in and the net is strong enough to hold it. And there seems to be some symbolism there of the later mission of the church. Ngedi is associated with Gedi, the gematria of that is 17 and then 153 for Eglion.

And put those together, it's the triangular number of 17 is 153. And some have suggested, I think with good warrant, that there is an allusion back to that story in this account of John. So what's going on in John? Let's put the pieces together.

Jesus is the one who's providing water. He's the one that's providing water. He deals with

the bitterness.

He's the one who gives living water, water that will give life. He's the one who's associated with the test of jealousy, but with a test of jealousy that does not bring judgment, but blessing. As you look at the events of chapter four and the event of chapter eight, which is a disputed text.

But in both of those accounts, you can see Jesus playing upon the background of Numbers chapter five. And in those stories, you see the testing of jealousy for the woman suspected of adultery. Israel was tested at the bitter waters of Mara as the bride.

Israel was also tested in chapter 32 of Exodus when they had to drink the water that the dust of the golden calf had been poured out upon. In both cases, you have a jealousy test. In the story of chapter four of John, the woman at the well is tested and she's spoken of concerning her husband's.

And she's blessed. In chapter eight, you have a similar thing. That there's, first of all, this suggestion of the judgment that involves is usually involved for adultery with the stoning.

But then that's disqualified and the people just go away because they're all complicit in some way. It's been the case of entrapment, probably. And Jesus actually enacts the alternative rite, the ritual of jealousy.

He writes on the floor and it's associated with the dust taken from the tabernacle floor. And also this event in which that is placed upon the waters. The water is drunk by the woman suspected of adultery.

And then God declares in her case. And in his case, in that case, Jesus declares the woman that she can go away. And so there is that play upon the waters of bitterness.

Jesus is the one. Out of his belly will come rivers of living water. Is that referring to Christ or the believer? It could be referring to either.

I think it's most likely referring to Christ. But it also refers to the believer, too. The believer is the one who has the spirit within him or her as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Christ, of course, is the great temple of the Holy Spirit. And we enjoy that status and that identity in him, too. He's the one who provides an alternative to the.

He turns the water into wine. Now, think back to the story of the Exodus. Water is turned into blood.

And that's the great first judgment. Jesus begins not with a judgment, but with a healing of the water, not just a healing of the water, but a glorification of the water. He turns the water that was purely for cleansing.

It wasn't even supposed to be drinking water. He turns it into the most glorious wine. And as you read that story, you're seeing an allusion back to the first plague.

But Jesus is not bringing a plague. He's bringing a sort of glorification of that water. He's the one who with that.

Also, you can think back to the story of Mara, that there's bitter water. And then there's the use of wood to turn the bitter water sweet. Maybe that can again refer to the Nile.

The Nile, you have regular water turned bitter, turned bloody. And now you have again with the staff and now you have wood again being used. But this time to turn water sweet.

Christ is the one who struck. He's the one who's struck into the rock with the spear, with this pointed stick. And out of him flows water and blood.

And this flows out as a means of cleansing. It's the water that flows out to bring healing to the nations. It's the water that flows out to bring life so that fishermen can go out and get fish in the seas.

And in all these ways, we see that John in particular is drawing upon this background of the Old Testament story of the rock and the waters healed and judged. And he's showing Christ is the one that fulfills all of those meanings and brings them to their true climax. So when Paul speaks about Christ as the rock that followed them, he's not just dealing with a speculative myth.

That myth itself is grounded upon close reflection upon the biblical text, upon thinking about why did they not have any further water crises between chapter 17 of Exodus and the death of Miriam? Well, because that water provided for all that time. And then you see another rock at another place called Meribah, again with all these similar themes. And so the two rocks are associated with each other.

The rock is also associated with the Lord because God is described as the rock on several occasions within the teaching of Deuteronomy and elsewhere. So putting all those things together is quite a reasonable thing, both to associate the well with Miriam, but also to associate the well, this rock, with the Lord. And that rock which provides for them is the means by which Christ is described by Paul.

And of course Christ is also represented in manner, he's also represented in other things. But as the one who is struck, who bears the judgment of the people for their testing of the Lord, and then gives water and life that serves them for the entire wilderness period, and then he's spoken to, supposed to be spoken to, and will provide water freely in Numbers 20, the rock represents Christ. The rock that was associated with the Lord, that stood upon it.

The rock that sheltered Moses from the presence of God, so that Moses was sheltered from God's presence and also saw God's presence. Now there are many other things we could think about here, and I'll leave you to think more deeply upon these connections. But the statement that the rock that followed them was Christ is one that's grounded in deep reflection upon Scripture.

And as we read through the Old Testament narrative, particularly in the light of a book such as John's Gospel, we'll see a great many treasures to be uncovered. Thank you very much for listening. If you have any questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account.

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