

Water of Life

By Jos M. Strengholt

Exodus 17:1-7 John 4:5-42

Here in Egypt we know how utterly important water is. Cut off the sources of the Nile, and Egypt dies. That is why the government of Egypt has made it perfectly clear to Ethiopia and Sudan, that if these countries ever cut off Egypt's water sources by damming the Nile, this would be immediately seen as a *casus belli*, a justification for war.

Water for People, Water for Life is the title of a recent United Nations report on the water situation in the world. This report says that one-third of the world's population lives in an environment with grave problems due to a lack of fresh water. Thousands of children die each day because they have no access to clean water. They have no water at all, or, more common, their water is polluted. Many of these children are from Christian families. They go to church, they pray, they believe in the power and nearness of God. Yet they die of thirst and disease.

People can live for weeks without food, but certainly in the dry climate of the Middle East, no water means death within 48 hours. That is why the response of Israel when in the desert without water was so understandable.

Our own Egyptian church father, saint Athanasius from Alexandria, wrote: 'the commonwealth of Israel was the school of the knowledge of God for all the nations.' So let us learn from what Israel experienced.

We have read that the whole Israelite community set out from where they had been camping for a while. The whole community of Israel. The Hebrew word for community is *Qâhal*. That word is translated in our English bibles as community, or assembly, or congregation.

When the Jews here in Alexandria, around 200 before Christ, were forgetting their own Hebrew language, they had a Greek translation made of their holy books, and when they came to Exodus 17, they translated that word community, *Qâhal*, into the Greek word *Ekklesia*. That is the same word that the apostles in the New Testament used for the new community of Jews and Christians – the church.

We are intimately linked with Israel in the Old Testament; we are one community, one *Qâhal*, one church. This is important as it helps us to better empathize with our believing forefathers and with what they went through.

Reading this story of Israel can easily make us critical. 'O my goodness. They were always nagging, always complaining. Why did they not trust in God?' But that would be

a very shallow response, condescending, and without empathy. We know the end of the story: God gave them water. The Israelites – dying of thirst - did not know the *grand finale* of their story yet.

Just before our story begins, Israel had experienced some great miracles. First, God had made them escape from slavery in Egypt. Aaron slammed the Nile River with the staff of Moses, to show God's power and to punish Egypt. God made the water of the Nile turn into blood. Egypt could not drink its own water and went thirsty. Because of this and many other clear manifestations of God's power, Egypt was finally prepared to let Israel go.

Israel traveled through the desert, and God sustained them; when they became hungry for a lack of food, we can read this in Exodus 16, the Lord God made bread rain from heaven.

Just imagine, every morning the desert was covered was food. Exodus 16:31 says:

The people of Israel called the bread manna; it was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.

The book of Exodus says that this miracle of God supplying Israel with bread, continued for 40 years, all the time when Israel traveled through the desert, until they reached the border of Canaan.

Israel had just begun experiencing this provision of bread by God, when it set out from the desert of Sin. Sin was the name of that desert, and had nothing to do with sinfulness or something.

God provided in their needs, and Israel traveled exactly in accordance with how God guided them, from station to station. They were totally obedient. They did what God told them to do, they traveled where He guided them by his column of fire and smoke. What an amazing nation. God was with them, and they were with God.

And in accordance with how God guided them, they then camped at Rephidim. Many scholars believe that this may refer to the present Wadi RUFAYID, some 13 kilometers northwest of Mt Sinai.

'But there was no water for the people to drink'.

How is this possible? They served God, they obeyed His laws, they were faithful, good believers. But God brought them in a place with no water.

Israel had seen how Moses punished pagan Egypt with thirst, when the Nile turned into blood. Now Israel, the nation that followed God, was also suffering from thirst. How can this be! 'We do not deserve this'.

Don't we recognize the problem? We do everything we believe God asks us to do, with a heart that is dedicated to serving and loving Him. And in spite of this, things go badly wrong. You may even presently be in such circumstances. Where is God? This question is not a theological question – it is an existential question. Where is He? Look at our misery. He promised to be with us, but He does not act!

Where is He in our sickness? When family-members or friends die? In problems in our work? In Kenya, when people slaughter each other? In Darfur? When a child dies in a car accident?

How I understand the Israelites when they became upset. Just imagine how you feel when your children begin to be thirsty. When your animals do not have water to drink. When your children start to look sick... when they do not sleep during the night because they are thirsty...

Israel's response to its disaster was that it blamed Moses. They began to quarrel with Moses, demanding water. This whole situation must have developed very fast, because you only survive very briefly in the desert with no water.

A few comments about this quarrel. The word used here for quarrel is often used in the Bible as a *legal* term. Nowadays we would say: they sued Moses. They began a court-case. The complaint they filed was formal – maybe they did this by approaching the elders of the nation. 'He has brought us here, and our children are about to die. He himself should be punished. He deserves to die.'

A second comment: The Israelites assumed Moses COULD actually give them water. Moses had just shortly before been the 'means of grace' through which God had delivered them from slavery and fed them with manna.

They had seen how God had used him in the past to supply in all their needs. They did not doubt God's ability to save them; interestingly, even while they were very thirsty, God gave them manna each morning. But they needed water and they wanted it NOW. The behavior of Israel was not the anger of people who reject any belief in God. They were people questioning why God was not intervening right now, as they needed Him. As we need Him today.

The basis for their complaint is so understandable, and I think we all regularly hear this question or we ask ourselves: If God is almighty, and if He is good, why does He allow all this misery in the world, and in my life...

Israel experienced a crisis of faith. Would I have acted differently, had I been with Israel in the dry desert? I don't know... I have sympathy for the people. They were crying out for fear of death.

But fear is a bad advisor. They accused Moses of purposely having taken them into the desert to make them die.

Moses then also became deeply upset and worried. He cried to the Lord: 'What am I to do with these people, they are about to stone me to death'. To me this sounds as if the legal complaints against Moses could indeed lead to his death penalty. How strange, in a situation where they could all be dead in 24 hours anyhow.

Like the Israelites, Moses was also afraid to die. But unlike Israel, he reacted wiser; he had not lost all perspective. He addressed God.

I think Israel major mistake was that they stopped talking to God. Instead of directing their problems at Him, they addressed Moses.

Even in the midst of our questions and hurts and problems in life, we must continue addressing God directly, even though that is sometimes very hard. But it is better to tell him about your anger and fear and lack of faith, than to stop communicating with Him. It is like in a marriage. If communication stops, the marriage is over. Better a good fight every now and then, than silence, because that spells the end.

Moses responded wisely. He did not try to duck his responsibilities, even in times of crisis he was the leader of Israel. But instead of fighting his people in a court-case, he relays their complaints to God. Lord, save us.

God then tells Moses to take action, to change the desperate situation of Israel. Moses is to get up, and involve the leadership of the nation in solving the problem. Maybe these elders were the same people who were handling the formal complaint.

And Moses is told to take the staff he used for striking the Nile.

Just imagine that scene. The nation of Israel knew that staff: Moses had punished Egypt with it. The Nile turned into blood, the fish died, the river began to stink. No longer did Egypt have water to drink. That heathen nation suffered badly.

They now see that Moses took that same staff and he went with some leaders of the nation away into the desert... It was so easy for Israel to really fear now... God will punish us as he punished Egypt. Our behavior of anger and resistance against God is not different from Egypt's behavior. God will finish our nation...

But there was a difference. God has chosen Israel, and He was indeed in their midst. The Lord God was in their midst, even when they did not experience anything of that. Even when they suffered from thirst. Even when He seemed so far, even at times of disaster, He did not leave them alone. And in spite of their unbelief and complaints, God in his grace did not strike Israel to punish it.

'The Lord God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.'

Moses was not to strike Israel, but he had to strike a rock, and God made water gush out of the rock for the people to drink.

This is so much in line with how the whole Bible speaks of the grace of God. That character of God is fully revealed in his Son Jesus Christ, and this made the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians write that their forefathers drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

The fact that the Apostle Paul, when reading his own Jewish Bible, recognized Jesus Christ in the rock in this story, is because God showed himself to be imminent and a great help in times of need. He was there for Israel, invisible, but present. In the midst of their misery, He was always there. He traveled with them. He is God with us.

And even though the concept of the Trinity was mostly hidden in Old Testament times, with hindsight, Paul concludes: it was the Son of God himself who was present with Israel. HE is Immanuel: God with us, traveling with us on our journey of life, and suffering with us and for us.

Even though Israel was not a sublime example of trust in God, their thirst was quenched, because God was in their midst. Is this a promise that God will always come and change our circumstances?

It is too simple to look at this story of Israel and conclude that if you have problems and you pray, then God will do miracles and change your situation. It is religious pulp to think that if you claim a Bible verse about healing or restoration each time when something aches, your problems will be solved.

The Christian faith is not a guarantee for a pain-free life. Many of the problems we have, we carry with us for a lifetime. It does not need much theological understanding to know this; it only needs a modicum of honesty and open eyes. The Bible also makes very plain that a life without suffering is not what man should expect, not even Christians who carefully serve and obey their Lord.

Let me read some verses from Hebrews 11:32 and further.

Yes, God does sometimes change our miserable circumstances if we pray to him:

32And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, 33who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 34quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. 35Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

Great, how God sometimes intervenes and changes our circumstances.

But read on... Hebrews 11:35b-40:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. 36Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. 37They were stoned[[f]]; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

So what do we see? Sometimes circumstances are changed for the better, but more often, the faithful believers in God suffered badly. You do not hear too many encouraging and comforting sermons on these verses.... God was with them and gave them stamina in the midst of their troubled life.

And we? We may be in great problems, we may be in great need. Like Moses, we pray to God. And He may change our circumstances, or maybe He does not not.

In either case, He is the spiritual rock who travels with us through the wilderness of life. If he makes our life pleasant and easy, we praise Him. And if we have to await, with all those saints we read about in Hebrews, the moment when God will make all things new, we trust in Him. In either case, in this life, He is with us on the journey through the wilderness.

In a very personal way, this is experienced by the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well where she had come to find water.

Her life was not good; she had been married five times and she was now living with another man with whom she was not married.

You can just imagine what that meant in Samaritan society. The woman was ostracized, and she must also have felt that life had dealt her all the wrong cards....

Traditional commentators have suggested that this woman had moral problems, and I think they are right; some recent scholars suggest that she was a victim of her culture and context, and that is probably also true.

But for this woman, did it matter whom she could blame? Her own choices, society, her upbringing. Whatever. She was miserable and she wondered: where is God. 'We pray to him on our mountain, and you Jews pray to him in Jerusalem, who knows where God is....'

And Jesus, the rock who traveled with Israel, also offered this Samaritan woman living water. Everyone who drinks normal water will become thirsty again, and without that water, he will die in a few days. But Jesus offered something much better; He did not offer temporary relief; He offered to change something inside her, a radical change of life and direction. His focus is not on our circumstances, but on who we are.

‘Whoever drinks the water I give him, will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’

What Jesus promised, was a relationship with God to a woman whose life was badly damaged. Far better than anything available in this life, He offered her a faith-relationship with God that would not be for this life only, but that would be anchored in eternity.

Is this cheap, or cheesy? I do not think so. What we talk about is being related to the Father, the Almighty, who in the midst of our life, promises to be near to us, yes, indeed, in us.

Are the circumstances of the life of a follower of Jesus Christ better than the life of the people around? No. No, we suffer just as much from the inexplicable disasters of life, poverty, loneliness, troubles, disease, and death. The major difference is that He is in our midst. The spiritual rock, Christ, travels with us on our life’s journey, and He quenches our thirst and He enables us to stand firm in the storms of our lives.

*In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit
Amen*

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