

Moses' One Weird Trick to Teach the People About Freedom

Hespeler, March 8, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42

The story that we read this morning from the Book of Exodus is not just a story about something that happened a long time ago in a world very different from our own. It is a story that the people of Israel told over and over again throughout their history. That is why there are so many variations on the theme of the people complaining in the wilderness in the Bible – including two different versions of the story of the water that flowed from the rock.

They didn't just tell these stories in the aftermath of experiences of Egyptian slavery; they continued to tell them and retell them in different ways because they recognized that it was a continual challenge to live as free people. They told them as a reminder that the temptation to sell themselves back to those who would exploit them would always be there.

Not Just Egyptian Pharaohs

And don't forget that such exploiters do not come only in the form of Egyptian pharaohs. These stories also warn about the danger of submitting to autocratic rule by your own elected or hereditary leaders. They are warnings against religious and spiritual leaders who control every aspect of the lives of their flock.

And, if the people who first told these stories were still telling them today, they would definitely tell them as warnings against handing the control of your life over to billionaire tech lords and their companies or to artificial intelligence chatbots. They would tell them as warnings against seeking to create a safe society by means of constant surveillance.

Ongoing Relevance

These are not just ancient stories focused on situations that have nothing to do with us if we have never been lost in a desert. They remain very important and relevant stories, perhaps more today than ever, given the temptations we face to abandon our freedom for the sake of security and convenience today.

So, let's take a look at the story of the Wadi Rephidim to see where it speaks to us about the temptations of modern living as people of faith.

The Hard Part About Freedom

Moses had very quickly learned that it was one thing to obtain freedom for people, but quite another to help them to live out that freedom. When people are oppressed or enslaved, they readily recognize their enslavers and how they are being exploited for their labour. They see how it is sucking the life out of them.

But they don't always recognize that there are many things that they take for granted in their bondage. Say what you will about oppression, but it does offer people a certain structure to their lives. They know what they have to do and when they have to do it. There is a comfort in that.



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Enslavers and exploiters can be incredibly cruel in their methods of extracting every last bit of work from people. But in their pursuit of that, they generally recognize that people need a certain level of nutrition in order to perform, and they will provide that.

Complaining

So, while Moses had persuaded the people to follow him into freedom, he had found himself dealing with a people who complained ever since. They complained because he could not provide them with the kind of stability and predictability that they had known in Egypt.

And he was getting tired of it. No matter where he led them or what he found for them, it was never good enough. Whatever God offered them in their freedom, it seemed that their taskmasters had been able to give them better before. And so one day God inspired Moses with a brilliant idea.

Moses in Midian

They were travelling, in those days, through the desert around Midian. And remember that Moses had spent many years in that region. After he had murdered a man and fled from Egypt, Moses had come as a refugee to the land of Midian.

There, he had been taken in by the local priest, a man named Reuel in some of the stories and Jethro in others. Jethro had even given him one of his prized daughters, Zipporah. He had also given Moses charge over his sheep.

As chief shepherd to the priest of Midian, Moses had ranged far and wide in the wilderness over many years. And in those years, he saw many wonders and had deep spiritual experiences in desolate places. He once saw a bush that burned, but that was not consumed in the fire; but, that is another story for another day.

Local Knowledge

The chief job of shepherds is to find water and pasturage for their flocks, and that is not easy in such places. There is little rain for much of the year, and so a shepherd has to know the location of every well and spring and learn the secrets of such places. And so, Moses had sought out such specialized knowledge from his father-in-law and from others who had lived there for many generations. That is how he came to know about the spring at the Wadi Rephidim.

The elder had led Moses there and watched him with amusement as Moses tried to make sense of the strange landscape. It was clearly a wadi, which is the word in that part of the world for a riverbed that is sometimes full of water but often not. The land was green enough that there was plenty of fodder in and among the rocks. The flock bleated gladly and quickly set to grazing.

Hidden Source

But the thing that puzzled Moses was that there was no water source to explain the existence of this wadi. How would he be able to water his sheep? As he surveyed the place, all he could see was a ground littered with rocks of various size.

As Moses looked up at him with bewilderment, the elder merely laughed and led him to one particular rock. It didn't really look all that different from any of the others, but the elder pointed at this one and told Moses to remember which one it was and memorize its exact shape.

Then the man took his shepherd's staff and raised it up above his head before striking the rock with a mighty blow. To Moses' wonder and amazement, the staff did not just bounce off the rock. It broke it

apart and, as the pieces of rock fell away, water began to flow freely. The sheep all rushed forward and began to drink greedily.

Blocked Spring

What was the explanation for this wonder? It is simply this. The water in a spring can be very rich in calcium, magnesium and other minerals. This is especially true when it flows through chalk or limestone.

And when the water flows in a certain way, the deposits of these minerals tend to build up around the springhead. They can even build up to the point where the flow slows and then even stops altogether. Any ignorant passerby, seeing such a spring, would assume there was no water, but those who have lived in those lands for generations and who have had the knowledge passed down to them, just as it was now being passed on to Moses, know exactly what to do.

An Inspired Idea

As Moses travelled with the restive children of Israel, who had wanted to be free, but who clearly did not understand the cost of living free, he felt his frustration grow. One night, after having spent a day fielding endless complaints, he had a brilliant idea. In fact, it was so brilliant that he knew it was inspired.

They were within a day's journey of the Wadi Rephidim. He suddenly felt quite certain that God was telling him exactly what the next stop on their journey needed to be.

Grumbling at the Wadi

As they arrived at the wadi, Moses heard the people's grumbling start immediately. "What is this! This is supposed to be an oasis, but there is no water? Remember how we never ran out of water in Egypt." Yes, they always came back to the idea that things were so much better in Egypt.

Remembering his own first reaction so many years ago, Moses had totally expected theirs. But rather than the frustration that usually overtook him when the people started complaining, this time he felt something different. Indeed, he struggled to contain his glee and present a stern countenance.

He let them go at it for a while – allowing their resentment and regret grow as the whiners and grumblers wound each other up. Once the chorus of discontent had reached a fever pitch, he finally decided that the time for the object lesson had come.

The Demonstration

"Alright, alright," he called out, "I get it. Let the elders of the people come with me, and I will show you what God thinks about your grumbling!"

Moses had resolved to make a show of it. No more words were necessary. He just made sure that all the elders had a good view as he made his way unerringly to the one rock where he knew he needed to stand. And you can bet that he raised his staff high and delivered a mighty blow to just the right spot.

As the water began to flow, he grinned uncontrollably at the shouts of amazement.

Miracle Stories?

We tend to treat the stories of the people complaining in the wilderness as straightforward miracle tales in our tradition. God's provision for the wandering nation of Israel during those years is thought of as a series of wonders that happened once under the most extraordinary of circumstances, never to be repeated.

That effectively turns these stories into tales that have little to do with us, who, as we go through our ordinary lives, do not expect to have such wonders performed on our behalf.

Natural Desert Phenomena

But these desert stories do contain elements that are a natural part of desert life in that part of the world. There is a substance, produced by the secretions of tamarisk trees, that is white and flaky and can be eaten by nomads. That sounds an awful lot like manna.

And the stories about the Israelite camps being filled with quail that the people gathered and ate until they were full. Believe it or not, that actually happens in the Sinai desert, where huge flocks of migrating quail become so exhausted on their flights that, when they pause, nomads can gather them at will.

And, yes, there are rocks from which streams of water will flow, at least if you can find the right rock and hit it in just the right way.

Natural or Supernatural?

And when you learn all of that, you realize that these stories are stories of God's provision for God's people, but that that provision may be more natural than supernatural. And that makes me suspect that the point of these stories is not simply to demonstrate how awesome and powerful God has been in the past. They are to teach us about relying upon God today.

So, with all of that in mind, what was Moses trying to teach the people of Israel by letting them worry and complain and then putting on such a dramatic display at the rock? I think he was trying to teach them about the dangers of putting your trust in the powerful oppressors of this world to provide your needs.

They Say We Need Them

That is the argument that the powerful and the wealthy make all the time. They tell us that they are the only ones who can give us what we need. Only they can create employment. Only they can keep us safe. We must rely on them to create our communication networks, our "public" forums and put all the information at our fingertips.

And we can have all of that, they tell us, for the low, low price of giving up all of our privacy and allowing them to set the agenda of our entire economy and political system so that they can get richer and maintain their power. They beckon us, in other words, with the promise of Egypt – the promise of safety and security at the cost of our freedom.

God's Resources

And so, what does the dramatic demonstration with the staff at the rock say to that? It is Moses reminding us all that God has placed depths of resources all around us. There are cool streams of running water just below the surface.

And we don't need the tyrants of Egypt to release those resources for us. We may need to reconnect with the traditions of our ancestors to find them. They have memories that will show us how those resources can be release. We may need to find the strength that is in the community of free people to release them. But they are there.

The resources of this world do not belong to the mighty Pharaohs of Egypt. They belong to God, and God gives them to the free people of this earth. That was the message that Moses was communicating loud and clear with the mighty crash of a staff against that rock.