**Water from the Rock**

My parents led a somewhat nomadic life during the first 20 years of their marriage, living in small rural towns in West Tennessee where my father had farmed all his life. After I was born, we moved to the suburbs of Middle Tennessee so I went to school far from where my parents grew up. When Michele was born, both sides of her family had been in North Augusta for many years. When Michele started high school, she learned that one of her teachers had taught her mother years earlier. While that’s a nice story and speaks well of the longevity of the teacher, I can see a potential down side to having a teacher who taught one of your parents. If the parent had done well in school, the same would be expected of you. On the other hand, if the parent was known as a trouble maker, you would be suspected of the same behavior. If one is fated to inherit a teacher, best to have an unremarkable parent who was renowned for neither scholastic achievement nor juvenile delinquency and thus long forgotten by the teacher. Children have the additional shield of anonymity provided by their mother’s married name. In our study of chapter 20 of Numbers, we see Moses dealing with a new generation of Israelites whose behavior is similar to the previous one.

The chapter begins and ends with the deaths of Moses’ siblings, first Miriam then Aaron. The setting is Kadesh which was located in the Desert of Zin near the land of the Edomites and the Israelites are nearing the end of their 40 years of wandering. The Bible is silent on about 37 years of their history although there is a listing of the locations of their camps in chapter 33. As is often the case in historical records, women are allocated far less ink than men. While Miriam’s death is described in less than one-half of a verse, Aaron’s death rates 8 verses including the account of 30 days of mourning by the Israelites.

About a third of the chapter is devoted to a replay of something that had occurred almost 40 years previously. In chapter 17 of Exodus we read the account of the Israelites quarrelling with Moses over the lack of water. God told Moses to take some of the elders with him and strike a rock with his staff which caused water to pour from the rock. The location was named Massah and Meribah which mean testing and quarrelling. In chapter 20 of Numbers, an almost identical event is recorded as the Israelites once again complain about the lack of water. These Israelites are the sons of the older generation, most of whom had died but their attitude lived on. The complaint was the same as that of their parents; why did you bring us into the desert to die? Why didn’t we stay in Egypt instead of coming to this place that has no crops. Moses and Aaron fell before God who instructed them to again bring water from a rock. The end result was the same, Moses struck the rock and water came forth. A close examination of the text, however reveals that God did not tell Moses to strike the rock, He told him to speak to the rock. The attitude of Moses was much different in this account. He called the people rebels and said “Must we bring you water out of this rock?” meaning himself and Aaron rather than God. God immediately pronounced judgment on Moses and Aaron, telling them that because of they had not trusted Him, they would not be allowed to enter Canaan.

Verses 14-21 describe Moses’ request of the Edomites that they be allowed to cross over their land on the way to Canaan. Moses offered to reimburse the Edomites for any food and water they consumed as they passed through. He referred to the Israelites as their brothers, a reference to the Edomites’ heritage as descendants of Esau (see Gen. 36:31-42). They refused and Moses was forced to turn away from their land. Despite the enmity between the descendants of Jacob and Israel, God made special provisions for the Edomites (see Deut. 2:2-6 and 23:7).

The chapter ends with Aaron being taken to the top of Mount Hor where he died. The title and garments of the high priest were passed on to his son Eleazer.

While God’s judgment on Moses and Aaron seems harsh, their sin was that they did not trust God to provide the water. It would have been a moment of truth for them to fully trust God to bring water from the rock. Just as Elijah at a later time, they had a large audience since God had commanded the assembly to appear before them. Striking the rock had brought results before while only speaking to it was not a sure thing in their minds. It was not unreasonable for Moses to be impatient with the Israelites as they were quarrelling with him just as their fathers had so he struck the rock twice in his anger while taking credit that belonged only to God. The sin was compounded since all this was done in the presence of the people. Moses had an opportunity to bring glory to God in the sight of a large crowd but chose to retain it for himself and his brother.