

Exodus 17:1-7ⁱⁱ

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." 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 complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

ⁱⁱ About the First Reading: Exodus 17:1-7

This is the second story about thirst and water in Exodus (see also 15:22-27). The geographical differences in the accounts led to the later rabbinical story that the miraculous rock, source of providential water, followed the Israelites in their wandering. Paul would later identify this rock with Christ.

For people living in an arid land, thirst was a powerful metaphor for a human's need for God. Moses now uses the staff that made the Nile foul to bring forth clean water. Israel's murmuring is a constant feature of the Exodus narratives. This incident at Massah (meaning "test") and Meribah (meaning "quarrel") became a byword for Israel's faithlessness.