

The Rock Struck
Exodus 17:1-7
May 10, 2026

Last May I was in the East Memphis bookstore *Novel*. I have a few spots I frequent there, one being the section on World War II. To be more specific, I *always* look to see what they have on the Pacific theater. Because that's where my grandfather was.

I've learned over the years that most of the time, most of the books on that aspect of the war are big picture—mostly about generals, overarching strategy, or large battles like Manila or Midway. But on this particular day, I saw a book that had *just* come out. This book—*much* more narrow in its focus—was entitled *Red Arrow Across the Pacific*. And by a more narrow focus, I mean *this* book chronicled the movements of just *one* division—the 32nd division, a division called the *Red Arrow*. And maybe you guessed it, that so happens to be the division my grandfather was a part of.

Now, like many others of his generation, Sam Slinger didn't talk much about his experience overseas. For that reason, our knowledge of his time in that war was quite limited. So, when I saw this book at *Novel*, focused as narrowly as it was, I bought the single copy they had. Then I bought another and mailed it to my dad.

I bring it up today because about a month ago the book was sitting on the dining room table at my parent's house. And my father and I had a conversation about it that I think might help us understand our text today. And it has to do, in part, with what the 32nd Division was called—the *Red Arrow*. This was a designation given them during World War I, when they punctured German lines one after another. After that, *Red Arrow* became their name. And it became the emblem each man in the 32nd wore on their left shoulder.¹

Today's text is *full* of what some would call symbolism, what we might call typology. We've attempted to define typology multiple times, but simply it's when people, events, institutions, or various *other* things in the Old Testament anticipate, then escalate toward, and finally resolve in something revealed later.

Said another way: there are shadows; and there is substance. And in *this* passage, there's a rock.

But, we're not there yet. Note first,

1. **The LORD Tests Israel** (v. 1)

Verse 1: Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin.

“All the congregation” means close to a million people. The delivered are still on the move, journeying. It says here that they do so **by stages**, likely meaning they're moving from place to place a little at a time. In terms of time, we should think of weeks.² In terms of place, we should think of wilderness. And in terms of direction, we should think of the next clause in verse 1: **according to the command of the LORD**. They're journeying, by stages, over weeks, in the wilderness, as the pillar of cloud and fire leads them.

Are they where they're supposed to be? Every day they are. And that includes the place verse 1 describes, when it says they **camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink**. Like He had back in chapter 15, the LORD leads His people to a place where they might

¹ Mark D. Van Ells, *Red Arrow Across the Pacific*, 18.

² Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 387.

thirst. Once again He'd done so to test them, not *only* to reveal what *they* were like; but also to train them, that He might show them what *He* was like.

At this point He's established rhythms for this testing. Every morning the manna would fall, this **bread to the full** (Ex. 16:8), this "dew of blessing."³ But every day there were rules concerning how much they were to gather and when they were to do so. In all this, the LORD was revealing Himself. Every day, and every *week*. Daily rhythms and weekly rhythms intended to teach and train them to trust.

The LORD tests His people. But note secondly,

2. Israel Tests the LORD (v. 2; v. 7)

I considered titling this sermon, "God in the Dock and the Rock," but that's as cringe as sermon titles get. However, I considered doing so because the scene over the next few verses is akin to C. S. Lewis's essay, *God in the Dock*. There, he writes this: "The ancient man approached God as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man, the roles are quite reversed. He is the judge. God is in the dock."⁴ Which is what's described in verse 2: **There the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?"**

Bear in mind, this is yet *another* day that they'd gathered manna in the morning and meat the night prior. In wonder, they could've responded, "He did it *again*." And, yet, they quarrel—a strong term that indicates a new level of hostility.⁵ Here at Rephidim, there's something of an escalation.

But Moses makes clear—to them, and to us—that the Hebrews are not merely quarreling with *him*. The language indicates that they've also presumed to ascend and sit on the bench of the heavenly court. There robed, gavel in hand, they **test the LORD**.

While I hesitate to skip ahead, I do think the final verse of our text clarifies what this test centered upon—what this pseudo-trial sought to prove. Verse 7 tells us the charges brought before Moses, and before Yahweh, ending, **they tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us, or not?"**

That's the content of this heightened quarrel, the charge of their kangaroo court. It's *not* an insignificant charge, nor a neutral posture. In fact, "Is He with us, or not?" reveals a trajectory that will prove to be calamitous.

In fact, what happens here is spoken of in the gravest of terms later on. In Deuteronomy 6, the admonition we know, **You shall not put the LORD your God to the test**, is linked to this chapter (Deut. 6:16). One of the Psalms we'll consider this summer reflects on it as well, singing, **they still continued to sin against Him, to rebel against the Most High in the desert, and in their heart they put God to the test** (Ps. 78:17–18). Another Psalm, Psalm 95, references what happened here. And then in Hebrews 3 we read a sermon on that Psalm, saying, **Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tried Me by testing Me** (Heb. 3:7–9).

For years a meme, gif, clip—whatever you want to call it—of R. C. Sproul looking bewildered and saying, "What is wrong with you people?" has made the rounds. At least it has in my slice of the reformed evangelical world. To me, it's instantly recognizable. But I don't think I'd ever seen the context in which he asked that question until this week. The context is a panel in 2014 at some Ligonier event. They were doing a Q&A and someone asked this question, "Since God is slow

³ Borrowed from Jeremiah Burroughs' *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*.

⁴ Quoted by Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, 452.

⁵ Ryken, 448.

to anger and patient then why, when man first sinned, was His wrath and punishment so severe and long lasting?”

At that moment, the five or so guys on that panel nervously shift in their seats. And R. C. Sproul leaned forward and said this, “Timeout . . . that God's punishment for Adam was so severe?⁶ This creature from the dirt defied the everlasting, holy God. *After* God had said, "The day that you shall eat of it, you shall surely die." And instead of dying, *that* day, he lived another day and was clothed in his nakedness by pure grace and had the consequences of a curse applied for quite some time, but the worst curse came upon the one . . . whose head would be crushed by the seed of the woman. And the punishment was too *severe*!” It was then that Sproul said, “What’s wrong with you people?! I'm serious. *This* is what's wrong with the Christian church today. We don't know who God is. And we don't know who we are.”

In other words, implicitly, explicitly, loudly, or quietly, we—like these Israelites—put God in the dock. We experience His faithfulness—over and over and over again—and then ask, “Is He here, or not?”

3. Israel Fails the LORD’S Test (vv. 3–4)

Whatever it is—a test to reveal what was in their hearts, or a training to help them trust Him, they fail. Verse 3: **But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, “Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”** Speaking of charges, Phil Ryken says that—in essence—they’re charging Moses with attempted homicide.⁷

Again, things have escalated significantly. Because it’s not *only* that they charge Moses with harming *them*, 600,000 men think *this* guy is out to harm—and maybe even kill—their children. Should we doubt the intensity of the quarrel, verse 4 makes it quite plain: **So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, “What shall I do with this people? A little more and they will stone me.”**

They’d charged him with something like attempted homicide. And if Moses was on trial, he senses that they’re eager to also carry out the sentence.

Throughout history, recognized leaders were not above the justice of the mob.⁸ Even a mob of *this* religion. All we have to do is read the book of Acts. In Acts 7, there’s Stephen, stoned and left dead by the Pharisees (Acts 7:58). In Acts 14, there’s Paul, stoned and left for dead by those from Antioch and Iconium (14:19). In John 8, there’s Jesus of Nazareth, quoting the book of Exodus, calling Himself “I AM,” followed by the Hebrews picking up stones (John 8:59).

Long before, Moses cries out, asking what he should do, knowing what they *might* do.

This wasn’t a test the Hebrews *almost* passed. It was one they failed miserably. And as mentioned, it revealed a certain trajectory. They would *continue* to doubt His presence. They would *continue* to doubt His protection, for decades ahead. And they would continue to doubt His provision, so much so that they would not enter the land. So much so that Paul would say, **with most of them God was not well-pleased** (1 Cor. 10:5). So much so that the author of Hebrews would say that the **word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard** (Heb. 4:2).

The LORD tested the Israelites. They failed.

The Israelites “tested” the LORD. He did not.

⁶ He said that with a perplexed look.

⁷ Ryken, 448.

⁸ Stuart, 390.

4. The LORD Does Not Fail (vv. 5–7)

After Moses cried out to Him, verse 5 records what happened next: **Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pass before the people.”** The idea here is that he was to go out in front of them.⁹ Then verse 5 says he was to **take with you some of the elders of Israel.** At this time, elders of a community would often pass judgment on matters of dispute, like the one here.¹⁰ In this *case*, they would soon serve as *witnesses*.

Moses was to go out in front of the people, taking elders with him. Verse 5 goes on: **and take in your hand your staff.** As you know, whenever the LORD instructed Moses to use this staff in Exodus, it was done so with purpose. Repeatedly it had represented His power and His authority.¹¹ And in case we are quick to forget, verse 5 makes another connection for us. This staff was the one **with which you struck the Nile.** Here Moses would strike water in an altogether different sense.¹² But, as with the Nile, it would once again be concerned with judgment.

Something of a trial is happening. Moses is in front. The elders are with him. He’s carrying *that* staff. In verse 6, the instructions continue. And the LORD says this: **Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb.**

When Moses heard Horeb, he *couldn’t* have missed the significance. Because that’s where all of this had begun. Exodus 3:1: **Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.** There, in a bush ablaze but not consumed—at Horeb—Yahweh revealed Himself to Moses.

He would do so again here. Verse 6: **Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb.** His presence almost certainly¹³ was continuing to be made known through the pillar of cloud and fire.

There, at Horeb, with the elders, before Yahweh, Moses is told what he must do. Verse 6 ends: **and you shall strike the rock.** The staff that brought judgment upon Egypt falls *again*. But this time, not upon Egypt, nor upon the people, but on the rock.

And because of *that*—in and through that—provision would come. Verse 6: **and you shall strike the rock and water shall come out of it, that the people may drink.** Psalm 105:41 describes it: **He opened the rock and water flowed out; it ran in the dry places like a river.** Psalm 78 sings: **He split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them abundant drink like the ocean depths. He brought forth streams also from the rock and caused waters to run down like rivers.**

Then, in summary fashion, verse 7 tells us: **He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us, or not?”** The names describe what unfolded, with Meribah meaning “quarrel” or “strife” and “Massah” meaning “testing” or “trial.”¹⁴

And if the question was, “Is the LORD among us, or not?” the verdict was in. They’d failed *His* test.

⁹ Stuart, 390.

¹⁰ Ryken, 451.

¹¹ Ryken, 451.

¹² Stuart, 391.

¹³ Based on Psalm 81:7 “I answered you in the hiding place of thunder,” and other considerations. See Stuart, 391.

¹⁴ Stuart, 392.

He *did* not, and *does* not, fail.

With *that* in mind, we might go to Matthew 4, when the Son of God too went into a wilderness. And there, He was asked to transform a rock, to turn *stones* into bread. He quoted Scripture, instead. Then, tempted *again*, He told the tempter, **You shall not put the LORD your God to the test** (Matt. 4:7). In *that* wilderness, He lived by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). There, He served God only (Matt. 4:10). Because like every other day of His life, He was accomplishing what humanity had not.

Conclusion

I mentioned a conversation my dad and I had about the *Red Arrow* division that helped me to think about what's going on in this text. I should first say that my parents live in the house my dad grew up in, the house my grandfather would've returned from the war to live in. And up in the attic of that house was a metal briefcase, with a bunch of my grandfather's stuff—stuff he didn't show my father, stuff he didn't talk about.

But after he died in 2003, my father opened it; and he found a number of things, including a ring. For decades now, my father's held on to that ring, knowing it was his father's, but not knowing anything else about it, *certainly* not the significance of it.

That is, until last year, when we found that book. Because on that ring was the insignia of the 32nd Division—an arrow. And what he told me was this, “I *never* knew what that symbol meant. The book showed me.”

Which is often the case with symbols. Someone must explain them. And the Apostle Paul is glad to do so in 1 Corinthians 10—when he writes about Israel, about their deliverance, and about their time in the wilderness. In fact, in that passage, he tells us what this moment in Exodus 17 *really* was: **For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ** (1 Cor. 10:1-4).

There's shadow; and there's substance. Instead of the people dying of thirst, and instead of Moses being struck by rocks, *the* Rock was struck, and the people drank. And, of course, this is not something Paul came up with. The One who would be struck said it Himself. In John 7, at the Feast of Tabernacles—a re-enactment of the desert wanderings¹⁵—John writes this: **Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water’”** (John 7:37–38).

He came to *be* what we were not.

He came to do what we *have* not.

The Rock of Ages struck so we might *not* be.

So that, instead, we might drink and live.

¹⁵ Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 211.