

Thirst in the wilderness

Avner Ramu

After leaving Egypt and on their way to Canaan, the Hebrew crossed several deserts, where the availability of drinking water was naturally in short supply.

Marah



"The Water of Marah," engraving by **Gérard Jollain**, 1670.

We read in the Book of Exodus:

ויסע משה את-ישראל מים-סוף, ויצאו אל-מדבר-שור; וילכו שלשת-ימים במדבר, ולא-מצאו מים.

“And Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water” (Ex 15:22).

This information is somewhat surprising as we read in the Book of Genesis that when the pregnant Hagar ran away from her abusing mistress Sarai,

וימצאה מלאך יהוה, על-עין המים-במדבר: על-העין בדרך שור.

“And the messenger of YHWH found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur” (Gen 16:7).

על-כן קרא לבאר, באר לחי ראי-הנה בין-קדש, ובין ברד.

“Wherefore the well was called 'Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered”
(Gen 16:14).

Surprisingly this well became a place of dwelling for Sarai's son - Isaac (Gen 24:62; 25:11). We may wonder how, unlike Hagar, the Israelites could not find there edible water. The description of Shur in the Book of Genesis also poses difficulty in locating the “wilderness of Shur.”

We read in the Book of Samuel:

ויד שאל את-עמלק, מחוילה בואך שור אשר על-פני מצרים.

“And Saul smote the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur that is in front of Egypt”
(1 Sam 15:7; see also: 1 Sam 27:8).

These verses suggest that the “wilderness of Shur” of the Book of Exodus is the same as the “Shur” mentioned in the Book of Genesis.

Now we read about the Israelites that Moses was leading out of Egypt:

ויבאו מרתה-ולא יכלו לשתת מים ממרה, כי מרים הם; על-כן קרא-שמה מרה.
וילנו העם על-משה לאמר, מה-נשתה.

“And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah.

And the people murmured against Moses, saying: What shall we drink?” (Ex 15:23-24).

ויצעק אל-יהוה, ויורהו יהוה עץ, וישלך אל-המים, וימתקו המים;

“And he cried to YHWH; and YHWH showed him a tree, and he cast it into the waters, and the waters were made sweet.” (Ex 15:25).

This verse ends with following peculiar phrase:

שם שם לו חק ומשפט, ושם נסהו.

“There He made him a statute and an ordinance, and there He tested him” (Ex 15:25).

It is not clear here who tested whom, and what was the nature of the “statute and an ordinance” that were made there. Yet it is possible that a late scribe tried to give some clearer meaning to this statement by adding:

ויאמר אם-שמוע תשמע לקול יהוה אלהיך, והישר בעיניו תעשה, והאזנת למצותיו, ושמרת
כל-חקיו

“And He said: If you wilt diligently hearken to the voice of YHWH your God, and will do that which is right in His eyes, and will give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes” (Ex 15:26).

Yet only later Moses will instruct the Israelites about God's law.

Massah and Meribah



“Massah and Meribah” by Norman Bendroth

From Marah the Israelites moved to Elim where they “encamped there by the waters” (Ex 15:27; see also: Num 33:9).

According to the Book of Exodus:

ויסעו מאילם, ויבאו כל-עדת בני-ישראל אל-מדבר-סין, אשר בין-אילם ובין סיני-בחמשה עשר יום לחדש השני לצאתם מארץ מצרים.

“And they took their journey from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of the land of Egypt” (Ex 16:1).

Apparently the writer of the Book of Numbers believed that here in the Book of Exodus an erroneous deletion had occurred and he wrote:

**ויסעו מאילם; ויחנו על-ים-סוף.
ויסעו מים-סוף; ויחנו במדבר-סין.**

“And they journeyed from Elim, and pitched by the Red Sea.

And they journeyed from the Red Sea, and pitched in the wilderness of Sin” (Num 33:10-11).

We are told that in the “wilderness of Sin” the Israelites complained about hunger, but there is no mention here about lack of water to drink (Ex 16:2-36). As we will later suggest, the writer of the Book of Numbers was attempting to “correct” the supposed omission about the question of the availability of edible water in the “wilderness of Sin.”

Next we read in the Book of Exodus:

ויסעו כל-עדת בני-ישראל ממדבר-סין למסעיהם-על-פי יהוה; ויחנו ברפידים
“And all the congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, by their stages, according to the commandment of *YHWH*, and encamped in Rephidim” (Ex 17:1).

It seems that here again the writer of the Book of Numbers believed that certain details were erroneously deleted from the Book of Exodus and he wrote:

**ויסעו ממדבר-סין; ויחנו בדפקה.
ויסעו מדפקה; ויחנו באלוש.
ויסעו מאלוש; ויחנו ברפידים,**

“And they journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, and pitched in Dophkah.
And they journeyed from Dophkah, and pitched in Alush.
And they journeyed from Alush, and pitched in Rephidim” (Num 33:12-14).

The writers of the Books of Exodus and Numbers tell us that in Rephidim:
ולא-היה שם מים לעם לשתות - “and there was no water for the people to drink” (Num 33:14; see also: Ex 17:1).

Soon we hear:

**וירב העם עם-משה ויאמרו, תנו-לנו מים ונשתה; ויאמר להם משה, מה-תריבון עמדי, מה-
תנסון את-יהוה.
ויצמא שם העם למים, וילן העם על-משה; ויאמר, למה זה העליתנו ממצרים, להמית אתי
ואת-בני ואת-מקני, בצמא.**

“Wherefore the people strove with Moses, and said: Give us water that we may drink. And Moses said to them: Why strive you with me? wherefore do you try *YHWH*?
And the people thirsted there for water; and the people murmured against Moses, and said: Wherefore had you brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?” (Ex 17:2-3).

Similarly to verse Ex 15:22, it is not clear here what Moses meant by “wherefore do you try *YHWH*.”

After Moses appealed to God for help he was told:

**ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, עבר לפני העם וקח אתך מזקני ישראל; ומטך, אשר הכית בו את-
היאר-קח בידך והלכת.
הנני עמד לפניך שם על-הצור בחרב, והכית בצור ויצאו ממנו מים ושתה העם; ויעש כן משה
לעיני זקני ישראל.**

“And *YHWH* said to Moses: Pass on before the people, and take with you of the elders of Israel; and your rod, wherewith thou smote the river, take in your hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there upon the rock in Horeb; and you shall smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel” (Ex 17:5-6).

However, as the Israelites arrived at Rephidim prior to their entry into the “wilderness of Sinai” we should consider **הנני עמד לפניך שם על-הצור בחרב** - “Behold, I will stand before you there upon the rock in Horeb” as a letter-deletion error of:

הנני עמד לפניך שם על-הצור כבחרב - “Behold, I will stand before you there upon the rock as in Horeb.” These words of God could be referring to the first revelation that Moses had in “**the mountain of God, at Horeb**” (Ex 3:1).

Although we are not told here whether indeed water came out of the rock, we read:

ויקרא שם המקום, מסה ומריבה: על-ריב בני ישראל, ועל נסתם את-יהוה לאמר, היש יהוה בקרבנו, אם-אין.

“And the name of the place was called Massah, and Meribah, because of the striving of the children of Israel, and because they tried YHWH, saying: Is YHWH among us, or not?” (Ex 17:7).

The last part of this verse is problematic as we have not yet heard the Israelites questioning whether God was with (or among) them. The name: **מסה** - “Massah” is grammatically not related to the root **נסה** (nsh) - “try”, which suggests that, unless this word was corrupted by a spelling error, the “explanation” for the name: **מסה** - “Massah” is not genuine, and it is probably a late insertion (as the phrase: “**wherefore do you try YHWH?**” of verse Ex 17:2).

Furthermore, it is not clear why the request for water by the thirsty Israelites is considered “testing” of God. Nonetheless, we also read in the Book of Deuteronomy:
לא תנסו את-יהוה אלהיכם, כאשר נסיתם במסה - “You shall not try YHWH your God, as you tried Him in Massah” (Deu 6:16; see also: Deu 9:22; 33:8; Ps 95:8-9).

Now we read: **ויבא עמלק; וילחם עם-ישראל ברפידם** - “Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel in Rephidim” (Ex 17:8). Although we are not told what the casus belli of this war was, it is not unlikely that it was over the control of the meager resources of fresh water in this desiccated area.

The Psalmist wrote: **בארץ-ציה ועיף בלי-מים** - “in a dry land, and weary without water” (Ps 63:2; see also: Jer 31:25; Pro 25:25; Job 22:7). However, the content of this verse suggest that here **עיף** (*a'yeph*) means “thirsty” and not “weary.”

Now we hear the words of the Deuteronomist:

**זכור את אשר-עשה לך עמלק בדרך, בצאתכם ממצרים.
אשר קרך בדרך, ויזנב בך כל-הנחשלים אחריך-ואתה עיף ויגע;
“Remember what Amalek did to you by the way as you came forth out of Egypt;
How he met you by the way, and smote the hindmost of you, all that were enfeebled in your rear, when you was faint and weary”** (Deu 25:17-18).

As here again **עיף** (*a'yeph*) may mean “thirsty” rather than “faint”, the words of the Deuteronomist may support the suggestion that the war in Rephidim was about the control of the water resources.

We are told that after the combat with Amalek at Rephidim:

ויבא יתרו חתן משה, ובניו ואשתו-אל-משה: אל-המדבר, אשר-הוא חנה שם-הוה האלהים.
“And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses into the wilderness where he was encamped, at the mount of God” (Ex 18:5).

However, we have not yet heard that the Israelites moved from Rephidim. It is only after telling us that Jethro departed and “went his way into his own land” that we hear:

ויסעו מרפידים, ויבאו מדבר סיני, ויחנו במדבר; ויחן-שם ישראל נגד ההר.
“And they were departed from Rephidim, and were come to the wilderness of Sinai, they encamped in the wilderness; and there Israel encamped before the mount” (Ex 19:1; see also: Deu 33:15).

However, in the verse that precedes it we read:

בחדש השלישי לצאת בני-ישראל מארץ מצרים-ביום הזה באו מדבר סיני.
“In the third month after the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they into the wilderness of Sinai” (Ex 19:1).

The content of verses Ex 19:1 and 19:2, suggests that a late scribe, who was concerned about the dating of the travels of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan, inserted verse Ex 19:1 in front of what appears to be the genuine first verse describing this event.

There is no mention of water resources in the “wilderness of Sinai”, yet in spite of their long stay in that place, we do not hear the Israelites complaining there even once about lack of water (or food).

Now we read in the Book of Numbers:

ויהי בשנה השנית, בחדש השני-בעשרים בחדש; נעלה הענן מעל משכן העדת.
ויסעו בני-ישראל למסעיהם ממדבר סיני; וישכן הענן במדבר פארן.
“And it came to pass in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth day of the month that the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle of the testimony.
And the children of Israel set forward by their stages out of the wilderness of Sinai; and the cloud abode in the wilderness of Paran” (Num 10:11-12).

Yet twenty verses later we find:

ויסעו מהר יהוה דרך שלשת ימים; וארון ברית-יהוה נסע לפניהם דרך שלשת ימים לתור להם מנוחה.
“And they set forward from the mount of YHWH three days' journey; and the ark of the covenant of YHWH went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting-place for them” (Num 10:33).

Next we read about a succession of catastrophes that fell upon the Israelites in תבערה - “Taberah” (Num 11:3), קברות התאוה - “Kibroth-hattaavah” (Num 11:34), and חצרות - “Hazereth” (Num 11:35).

And then we read: ואחר נסעו העם מחצרות; ויחנו במדבר פארן - “And afterward the people journeyed from Hazereth, and pitched in the wilderness of Paran” (Num 12:16).

We may conclude that the order of verses Num 10:11 to Num 12:16, is incorrect, or that verses Num 10:11-12 (similarly to verse Ex 19:1), is an insertion by the late scribe who was concerned about the dating of the travels of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan.

Furthermore, twenty-two chapters later we read:

ויסעו ממדבר סיני ; ויחנו בקברת התאוה.
ויסעו מקברת התאוה ; ויחנו בחצרת.
ויסעו מחצרת ; ויחנו ברתמה.

“And they journeyed from the wilderness of Sinai, and pitched in Kibroth-hattaavah.

And they journeyed from Kibroth-hattaavah, and pitched in Hazeroth.

And they journeyed from Hazeroth, and pitched in Rithmah” (Num 33:16-18).

We should also notice that in this itinerary of the travels of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan (Num 33:1- 49), **מדבר פארן** - “the wilderness of Paran” is never mentioned.

The waters of Meribah



Francesco d'Ubertino Verdi (1494–1557)

From **מדבר פארן** - “the wilderness of Paran” Moses sent the spies (Num 13:3). When the spies return we read:

וילכו ויבאו אל-משה ואל-אהרן ואל-כל-עדת בני-ישראל, אל-מדבר פארן-קדשה;
“And they went and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, unto the wilderness of Paran, to Kadesh” (Num 13:26).

Yet forty-five years later we hear one of these spies - **Caleb the son of Jephunneh** telling Joshua:
בן-ארבעים שנה אנכי, בשלח משה עבד-יהוה אתי מקדש ברנע-לרגל את-הארץ; ואשב אתו דבר,

“Forty years old was I when Moses the servant of *YHWH* sent me from Kadesh-barnea to spy out the land; and I brought him back word” (Jos 14:7; see also: Num 32:8; Deu 9:23).

At the beginning of the Book of Deuteronomy Moses recounts some of the events that the Israelites experienced on their way to Canaan. Among them:

ונסע מחרב ונלך את כל-המדבר הגדול והנורא שהוא אשר ראיתם דרך הר האמרי, כאשר צוה יהוה אלהינו אתנו; ונבא עד קדש ברנע.

“And we journeyed from Horeb, and went through all that great and dreadful wilderness which you saw, by the way to the hill-country of the Amorites, as *YHWH* our God commanded us; and we came to Kadesh-barnea” (Deu 1:19).

The comparison between these verses suggests that **קדש ברנע** (*qadesh barnea*) is **פ** (p) - **ב** (b) bilabial exchange, a **א** (a) - **ע** (a') exchange, and an order-type error of **קדש פארן** (*qadesh paran*) - “Kadesh of Paran.”

Prior to sending the spies from **מדבר פארן** - “the wilderness of Paran”, to: **לתור את-ארץ כנען** - “to spy out the land of Canaan” (Num 13:17), Moses instructed them to inquire about certain specific details. However, we do not hear that these spies were asked to find out if fresh water resources are to be found in Canaan.

Now we hear about the spies: **ויעלו ויתרו את-הארץ, ממדבר-צן עד-רחב, לבא חמת** - “And they went up, and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin to Rehob, at the entrance to Hamath” (Num 13:21).

It is not clear where **מדבר-צן** (*midbar-tsin*) - “wilderness of Zin” is, or for what reasons the spies went there. The Greek translator named this place: “wilderness of Sin” which is also the name he previously used for **מדבר-סין** (*midbar-sin*) - “wilderness of Sin”, and we have to wonder if the Greeks assumed that **צן** (*tsin*) is a sibilant letter-exchange of **סין** (*sin*).

Furthermore, in the itinerary of the travels of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan we read:
ויסעו מעצין גבר; ויחנו במדבר-צן, הוא קדש - “And they journeyed from Ezion-geber, and pitched in the wilderness of Zin--the same is Kadesh” (Num 33:36). According to the Book of Kings: **עצין גבר** - “Ezion-geber” is **על-שפת ים-סוף** - “on the shore of the Red Sea” (1 Ki 9:26). As we previously read: **ויסעו מים-סוף; ויחנו במדבר-סין** - “And they journeyed from the Red Sea, and pitched in the wilderness of Sin” (Num 33:11), it seems that even the writer

of the Book of Numbers believed that **מדבר-צן** (*midebar-tsin*) - “wilderness of Zin” is the same as **מדבר-סין** (*midebar-sin*) - “wilderness of Sin.”

Now we read:

ויבאו בני-ישראל כל-העדה מדבר-צן, בחדש הראשון, וישב העם בקדש; ותמת שם מרים, ותקבר שם.
ולא-היה מים לעדה;

“And the children of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there.

And there was no water for the congregation” (Num 20:1-2).

The fact that we do not hear that the returning spies warn Moses that in: **מדבר-צן** - “the wilderness of Zin” there is “no water for the congregation”, makes us wonder whether the spies that were sent by Moses, had indeed been in **מדבר-צן** - “the wilderness of Zin.” Alternatively, it is possible that Moses already knew (from their previous stay in the “wilderness of Sin”) about the limited resources of water in this area.

As in **מדבר-צן** - “the wilderness of Zin” there was “no water for the congregation” “the people strove with Moses” saying:

ולמה הבאתם את-קהל יהוה אל-המדבר הזה, למות שם אנחנו ובעירנו.
ולמה העליטנו ממצרים, להביא אתנו אל-המקום הרע הזה: לא מקום זרע, ותאנה וגפן ורמון,
ומים אין לשתות.

“And why have you brought the assembly of *YHWH* into this wilderness, to die there, we and our cattle?

And wherefore have you made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in to this evil place? it is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink” (Num 20:4-5).

These words of the Israelites sound similar to those said by them when they lacked water in Rephidim (Ex 17:3).

Now we read in the Book of Numbers:

ויבא משה ואהרן מפני הקהל אל-פתח אהל מועד, ויפלו על-פניהם; וירא כבוד-יהוה אליהם.
“And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tent of meeting, and fell upon their faces; and the glory of *YHWH* appeared to them” (Num 20:6).

וידבר יהוה אל-משה לאמר.

קח את-המטה, והקהל את-העדה אתה ואהרן אחיך, ודברתם אל-הסלע לעיניהם, ונתן מימיו; והוצאת להם מים מן-הסלע, והשקית את-העדה ואת-בעירם.

“And *YHWH* spoke unto Moses, saying:

Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aaron your brother, and speak you to the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock; so you shall give the congregation and their cattle drink” (Num 20:7-8).

Here again God's instructions to Moses are similar to those He gave him in Rephidim (Ex 17:5-6). The only significant difference is that while previously God instructed Moses to: "**smite the rock**" (Ex 17:6), now He instructs him to: "**speak you to the rock.**"

After hearing God's orders, we read:

ויקח משה את-המטה מלפני יהוה כאשר צוהו.
ויקהלו משה ואהרן את-הקהל אל-פני הסלע; ויאמר להם, שמעו-נא המרים-המן-הסלע
הזה נוציא לכם מים.

וירם משה את-ידו ויך את-הסלע במטהו-פעמים; ויצאו מים רבים, ותשת העדה ובעירם.
"And Moses took the rod from before *YHWH*, as He commanded him.

And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them: Hear now, you rebels; are we to bring you forth water out of this rock?

And Moses lifted up his hand, and smote the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle" (Num 20:9-11).

Although, it appears that, as in Rephidim (Ex 17:6), Moses complied here with God's command, we should notice that although this time Moses was not instructed to hit the rock, he did it, in fact twice. However, we should wonder whether this alteration was sufficient to spark God's following words:

ויאמר יהוה אל-משה ואל-אהרן, יען לא-האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל-לכן לא
תביאו את-הקהל הזה אל-הארץ אשר-נתתי להם.

"And *YHWH* said to Moses and Aaron: Because you believed not in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" (Num 20:12).

The basis for the supposed sin of Moses and Aaron, which is described here as:

יען לא-האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל - "Because you believed not in Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the children of Israel", is not known nor fully comprehensible.

Apparently, in an effort to explain Moses' and Aaron's sin, the writer of the Book of Numbers also wrote:

כאשר מריתם פי במדבר-צן, במריבת העדה, להקדישני במים לעיניהם:

"As you rebelled against My commandment in the wilderness of Zin, in the strife of the congregation, to sanctify Me at the waters before their eyes" (Num 27:14).

In this regard the Deuteronomist wrote:

על אשר לא-קדשתם אותי בתוך בני ישראל - "because you sanctified Me not in the midst of the children of Israel" (Deu 32:51).

However, in spite of these explanatory efforts, the nature of Moses' and Aaron's sin remains largely elusive.

Now we read:

המה מי מריבה, אשר-רבו בני-ישראל את-יהוה; ויקדש בם.

"These are the waters of Meribah, where the children of Israel strove with *YHWH*, and He was sanctified in them" (Num 20:13).

Here again it is not clear what the words: **ויקדש בם** (*vaiqadesh bam*) - “**and He was sanctified in them**” actually mean.

This event occurred in **קדש** - “Kades” of **מדבר-צן** - “the wilderness of Zin” (Num 27:14; see also: Deu 32:51), and now we hear: **ויסעו מקדש; ויבאו בני-ישראל כל-העדה, הר ההר** - “**And they journeyed from Kadesh; and the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, came to mount Hor**” (Num 20:22; see also: Num 33:37).

In mount Hor we hear God telling Moses and Aaron:

יאסף אהרן אל-עמיו, כי לא יבא אל-הארץ, אשר נתתי לבני ישראל-על אשר-מריתם את-פי, למי מריבה.

“**Aaron shall be gathered to his people; for he shall not enter into the land which I have given to the children of Israel, because you rebelled against My word at the waters of Meribah**” (Num 20:24; see also: Num 33:38).

Seven chapters later we read:

ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, עלה אל-הר העברים הזה; וראה את-הארץ אשר נתתי לבני ישראל. וראיתה אתה ונאספת אל-עמיך גם-אתה, כאשר נאסף אהרן אחיך. כאשר מריתם פי במדבר-צן, במריבת העדה, להקדישני במים לעיניהם: הם מי-מריבת קדש, מדבר-צן.

“**And YHWH said to Moses: Get you up into this mountain of Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the children of Israel.**

And when you have seen it, you also shall be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother was gathered;

Because you rebelled against My commandment in the wilderness of Zin, in the strife of the congregation, to sanctify Me at the waters before their eyes. These are the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin” (Num 27:12-14; see also: Deu 32:48-52).

On the way around the land of Edom



Evangélaire d'Averbode. Université de Liège. Bibliothèque, Manuscrit 363, fol. 86r.

Between the death of Aaron and that of Moses, we read about another place where the Israelites suffered lack of water:

ויסעו מהר ההר, דרך ים-סוף לסבב את-ארץ אדום; ותקצר נפש-העם בדרך.
וידבר העם באלהים ובמשה, למה העליתנו ממצרים למות במדבר: כי אין לחם ואין מים,
ונפשנו קצה בלחם הקלקל.

“And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way to the Red Sea, to compass the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became impatient in of the way.

And the people spoke against God, and against Moses: Wherefore have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread, and there is no water; and our soul loathes this light bread” (Num 21:4-5).

It is rather interesting that here again, prior to arriving at a location where the Israelites suffered from lack of water we are told they have come **“by the way to the Red Sea.”** Furthermore, the wording of Israelites complaint here is similar to that uttered in previous locations of lack of fresh water (e.g. Ex 17:3; Num 20:5).

Now we are told:

וישלח יהוה בעם את הנחשים השרפים, וינשכו את-העם; וימת עם-רב מישראל.
“**And YHWH sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died”** (Num 21:6).

This verse suggests that in addition to the Israelites, this time the soul of God also became impatient. In any case the text here does not tell us, what the remedy for the lack of water in that location was.

In the Book of Deuteronomy we read about the words of Moses about God:

המוליכך במדבר הגדל והנורא, נחש שרף ועקרב, וצמאון אשר אין-מים; המוציא לך מים מצור החלמיש.

“Who led you through the great and dreadful wilderness, wherein were serpents, fiery serpents, and scorpions, and thirsty ground where was no water; who brought you forth water out of the rock of flint” (Deu 8:15).

We may wonder, whether these words of the Deuteronomist were written (in a manner similar to verse Deu 1:19), in an effort to “complete” the information given in verses 21:4-6 of the Book of Numbers. It appears, the according to the Deuteronomist the lack of drinkable water “on the road encompassing the Land of Edom” was also ameliorated by forcing a “rock of flint” to ooze water.

The legacy of the lack of water in the wilderness

For one reason or another, the ‘thirst events’ at “Massah and Meribah” and at the “waters of Meribah” (but not those at “Marah”, or on the “way around the land of Edom”), became the emblems of an unforgivable insurrection against God.

In the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

לא תנסו את-יהוה אלהיכם, כאשר נסיתם במסה.

“You shall not try *YHWH* your God, as you tried Him in Massah” (Deu 6:16).

ובתבערה, ובמסה, ובקברת התאוה-מקצפים הייתם את-יהוה.

“And at Taberah, and at Massah, and at Kibroth-hattaavah, you made *YHWH* wroth” (Deu 9:22).

וללוי אמר, תמיך ואוריך לאיש חסידך, אשר נסיתו במסה, תריבהו על-מי מריבה.

“And of Levi he said: Your Thummim and Your Urim be with your holy one, whom you did test at Massah, with whom you did strive at the waters of Meribah” (Deu 33:8).

The Psalmist wrote:

אל-תקשו לבבכם, כמריבה; כיום מסה במדבר.

אשר נסוני אבותיכם: בחנוני, גם-ראו פעלי.

ארבעים שנה אקוט בדור-ואמר, עם תעי לבב הם; והם לא-ידעו דרכי.

אשר-נשבעתי באפי; אם-יבאון אל-מנוחתי.

“Harden not your heart, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness;

When your fathers tried Me, proved Me, even (though) they saw My work.

For forty years was I wearied with that generation, and said: It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known My ways.

Wherefore I swore in My wrath, that they should not enter into My inheritance” (Ps 95:8-11).

However, as indicated above, the nature of Moses’ and Aaron’s sin at the “waters of Meribah” is hardly explicable, and it seems that even the writers of the Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy did not fully comprehend it (Num 27:14; Deu 32:51).

In the Book of Deuteronomy we also hear Moses telling the Israelites that after he asked God to allow him to enter Canaan:

ויתעבר יהוה בי למענכם ולא שמע אלי; ויאמר יהוה אלי, רב-לך-אל-תוסף דבר אלי עוד בדבר הזה.

עלה ראש הפסגה ושא עיניך ימה וצפנה ותימנה ומזרחה-וראה בעיניך: כי-לא תעבר את-הירדן הזה.

“But *YHWH* was wroth with me for your sakes, and hearkened not to me; and *YHWH* said to me: Let it suffice you; speak no more to Me of this matter.

Get you up into the top of Pisgah, and lift up your eyes westward, and northward, and southward, and eastward, and behold with your eyes; for you shall not go over this Jordan” (Deu 3:26-27).

We may wonder whether these words of Moses indicate that he did not admit his guilt in the events at “the waters of Meribah”, or whether he did not really understand in what sense he sinned there.

The Psalmist wrote:

ויקצו על-מי מריבה; וירע למשה בעבורם.
כי-המרו את-רוחו; ויבטא בשפתיו.

“They angered Him (also) at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses because of them;

For they embittered his spirit, and he spoke (rashly) with his lips” (Ps 106:32-33).

The Greek translator assumed that here it is not “Him” but “him”, and it is suggested that he believed that it was Moses that was angered by the people and therefore: “parted with his lips” and apparently said some despicable words which angered God.

After reading about the travels of the Israelites who left Egypt on their way to Canaan, one of the major questions that come to mind is why the Israelites’ vital urge to drink water was considered as an expression of rebellion against God?

In fact we may question why Moses (or God) who knew that the Israelites are about to cross several large and dry deserts did not made the necessary preparation to supply the Israelites with sufficient quantity of drinking water.

We read that after the first instance of Israelite’s complaint about lack of food, God told Moses: **“I will cause to rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day”** (Ex 16:4). **“And the children of Israel did eat the manna forty years, until they came to a land inhabited”** (Ex 16:35). We may therefore ask, why in spite of repeated Israelite’s complains that they are thirsty, God had not made a similar arrangement about water. Clearly, a daily supply of drinking water could have prevented to a large degree the rancor in the relations between God and the Israelites.

The multiple biblical accounts about the thirst bouts that the Israelites endured on their way from Egypt to Canaan apparently also troubled some of the biblical writers. In the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

וזכרת את-כל-הדרך, אשר הוליכך יהוה אלהיך זה ארבעים שנה-במדבר: למען ענתך לנסתך,
לדעת את-אשר בלבבך התשמר מצותו-אם-לא.

“And you shall remember all the way which YHWH your God had led you these forty years in the wilderness, that He might afflict you, to test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments, or not” (Deu 8:2; see also: Deu 8:16).

It appears that some later biblical writes, were not convinced by the Deuteronomist’s argument, and as they could not come with an alternative rational explanations for these events, they just denied them. For example:

In the Book of Isaiah we read:

ולא צמאו בחרבות הולכים-מים מצור הזיל למו; ויבקע-צור-ויזבו מים.
“And they thirsted not when He led them through the deserts; He caused the waters to flow out of the rock for them; He cleaved the rock, and the waters gushed out” (Is 48:21).

The Psalmist wrote:

יבקע צרים במדבר; וישק כתהמות רבה.
ויוצא נוזלים מסלע; ויורד כנהרות מים.

“He cleaved rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as out of the great deep.

He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers” (Ps 78:15-16).

הכה-צור, ויזובו מים-ונחלים ישטפו:

“He smote the rock that waters gushed out, and streams overflowed” (Ps 78:20).

פתח צור, ויזובו מים; הלכו, בציות נהר.

“He opened the rock, and waters gushed out; they ran, a river in the dry places” (Ps 105:41).

ההפכי הצור אגם-מים; חלמיש, למעינו-מים.

“Who turned the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a fountain of waters” (Ps 114:8).

In the Book of Leviticus we read:

וידבר יהוה אל-משה לאמר.

דבר אל-בני ישראל לאמר: בחדש השביעי באחד לחדש, יהיה לכם שבתון-זכרון תרועה,
מקרא-קדש.

כל-מלאכת עבודה לא תעשו; והקרבתם אשה ליהוה.

“And *YHWH* spoke to Moses, saying:

Speak unto the children of Israel, saying: In the seventh month, in the first day of the month, shall be a solemn rest to you, a memorial proclaimed (with the blast of horns), a holy convocation.

You shall do no manner of servile work; and you shall bring an offering made by fire to *YHWH*” (Lev 23:23-25).

וידבר יהוה, אל-משה לאמר.

אך בעשור לחדש השביעי הזה יום הכפרים הוא, מקרא-קדש יהיה לכם ועניתם את-
נפשתיכם; והקרבתם אשה ליהוה.

וכל-מלאכה לא תעשו בעצם היום הזה: כי יום כפרים הוא, לכפר עליכם לפני יהוה
אלהיכם.

“And *YHWH* spoke to Moses, saying:

Howbeit on the tenth day of this seventh month is the day of atonement; there shall be a holy convocation to you, and you shall afflict your souls; and you shall bring an offering made by fire to *YHWH*.

And you shall do no manner of work in that same day; for it is a day of atonement, to make atonement for you before *YHWH* your God” (Lev 23:26-28; see also:Num 29:7).

However, the literal meaning of מקרא-קדש (*miqra-qodesh*) is: “a call for sanctity.” The Israelites are also expected to afflict their souls on this יום הכפרים - “day of atonement” (its modern name is: **Yom Kippur**).

The Psalmist wrote: **עניתי בצום נפשי** - “**I afflicted my soul with fasting**” (Ps 35:13). Therefore, this “day of atonement”, is associated with an ancient tradition of not eating or drinking for a whole day.

Although the reasoning for this holyday is not found in the Bible, it is not unlikely that the **מקרא-קדש** - “call for sanctity” and afflicting the soul by not eating and drinking, is an annual atonement for the perceived rebellion of the Israelites against God on their way from Egypt to Canaan.



It is also possible that the post-biblical Jewish sages, also did not comprehend the exact meaning of: **על אשר לא-קדשתם אותי בתוך בני ישראל** - “**because you sanctified Me not in the midst of the children of Israel**” (Deu 32:51), or its variant forms (Num 20:12; 27:14), and for being on the safe side, they produced several prayers and hymens that “sanctify God.” One of the most common of such hymens is the **קדיש** (*qadish*) - “**Kaddish**” meaning: “holy” in Aramaic. There are several versions of this hymen but they all start with: **יתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא** - “**May His great name be exalted and sanctified**”, and in contrast to verse Deu 32:51, they are frequently recited in the Israelite’s congregations.