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THE  
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ARTICLE I.

THE SONG OF THE WELL.

SOME NOTES ON NUMBERS XXI. 16-18.

BY PROFESSOR MILTON S. TERRY, D.D.

THE entire twenty-first chapter of Numbers is, on the face of it, a compilation from various sources, and three separate fragments from the ancient national songs of Israel are incorporated in the narrative. One of these is said to have been written in "The Book of the Wars of Jehovah" (ver. 14), and another is credited to "those who speak in proverbs" (דְּבָרֵי חָכְמָה, ver. 27). The other purports to be part of a song sung by Israel at Beer, or at "the well whereof Jehovah said to Moses, Gather the people together, and I will give them water" (ver. 16). Four lines of this song are given, and they are thus rendered in the Revised Version:—

"Spring up, O well; sing ye unto it:  
The well which the princes digged,  
Which the nobles of the people delved,  
With the scepter and with their staves."

1. Our first difficulty with this passage is to adjust it to the context. In the preceding narrative we are told that the Israelites had journeyed northward and encamped

beyond the Arnon, which is the northern boundary of Moab, and the southern border of the territory of the Amorites (ver. 13). "From thence," we are told in verse 16, they marched on "to Beer," which is identified as "the well whereof Jehovah said to Moses, Gather the people together, and I will give them water." The natural meaning of these words is that of a simple reference to a celebrated place, which called for no further description, but which had been the occasion of a familiar song in Israel. But for its position in the context, which describes the later journeys of Israel as they neared Canaan and took possession of the east-Jordanic region, no one would think of referring it to any other event than that which is described at length in the preceding chapter (Num. xx. 1-13) as having occurred at Kadesh. There we are told how the people *strove* (בָּרָו) with Moses because there was no water, and how Jehovah commanded Moses to assemble the congregation, and "speak unto the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water." But Moses and Aaron gathered the people, and Moses smote the rock with his rod, "and water came forth abundantly." In celebrating such an event a poet might well say:—

"The princes digged a well;  
The nobles of the people delved it,  
With their scepter and their staves."

But something in the words or manner of these "nobles of the people" offended Jehovah, and the waters were called *Meribah* (מֵרִיבָה), "because the children of Israel strove with Jehovah, and he was sanctified in them."

2. Additional difficulty presents itself in comparing the narrative of Ex. xvii. 1-7, where the same or a like miracle is wrought "upon the rock in Horeb," when the Israelites were "encamped in Rephidim," and the place was called "*Massah* and *Meribah*, because of the *striving* of

the children of Israel, and because of their *tempting* (מִצְטָה) Jehovah."

3. Both Massah and Meribah are mentioned in the Blessing of Moses (Deut. xxxiii. 8), where Levi is called "thy godly one, whom thou didst prove at Massah, with whom thou didst strive at the waters of Meribah." These two names also appear together in Psalm xcv. 8:—

"Harden not your heart, as at Meribah,  
As in the day of Massah in the wilderness:  
When your fathers tempted me,  
Proved me and saw my work."

4. The event of Meribah in Kadesh is mentioned (without allusion to Massah) in Num. xxvii. 14; Deut. xxxii. 51; Ps. lxxxii. 7; cvi. 32; and in each instance (except Ps. lxxxii. 7) specific mention is made of the offense of Moses and Aaron in failing "to sanctify Jehovah in the eyes of the children of Israel." The temptation and provocation at Massah are mentioned (without allusion to Meribah) in Deut. vi. 16; ix. 22.

5. In many other scriptures (Deut. viii. 15; Ps. lxxviii. 15, 20; cv. 41; cxiv. 8; Isa. xlviii. 21) allusion is made to the miraculous supply of waters in the desert without any specific designation of time and place; as, for example:—

"He clave rocks in the wilderness,  
And gave them drink abundantly as out of the depths."  
"Behold, he smote the rock that waters gushed out,  
And streams overflowed."  
"He turned the rock into a pool of water,  
The flint into a fountain of waters."

6. From these later scriptural references we must not omit the New Testament passage in 1 Cor. x. 1-4, where it is said that "our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual

drink; for they drank of a spiritual rock that followed them: and the rock was Christ."

Turning back, now, to Num. xxi. 16, the passage with which we started, we note the statement that Beer, or the well at which the Israelites arrived after leaving the border of Moab, "is the well (בֵּיתֵי, *the Beer*) whereof Jehovah said to Moses, Gather the people together, and I will give them water"; on which occasion they sang the song beginning, "Spring up, O well!" Our first inquiry touches the relation of this passage to the event in Horeb, as narrated in Ex. xvii. 1-7, and to the like event in Kadesh, as told in Num. xx. 1-13. Were there three distinct events of this kind during the exodus journeys of Israel? For aught that we have any right to presuppose or assume to the contrary, there might have been a score of events of like character during the period of the journeys through the desert. The question is not one of possibilities in the abstract, but of the most rational and satisfactory manner of explaining these different passages of the scripture. If it were clearly stated that one smiting of a rock occurred at Rephidim or at Horeb, and the name of the place was thence called Massah, and that another smiting of a rock took place in Kadesh and gave rise to the name Meribah, there would be no difficulty in the record; but the name Meribah is given both to the place in Horeb and to that in Kadesh. The one event is assigned to the beginning, the other to near the close, of the forty years' wandering in the desert. But the arrival at Beer, and the origin of the song "Spring up, O well!" are described as something that occurred after Israel had crossed the Arnon and entered the territory of the Amorites, on the east of the Jordan. They are also mentioned as a well-known event that connected with the history of Moses, when that great leader assembled the people, and God gave them water, and they sang of it as a well which the chief leaders of the people

digged with scepter and staff. This digging or delving with a staff is most naturally explained as the language of a poet in describing the smiting of the rock with the rod of Moses, and the immediate gushing forth of waters in abundance.

If now this event at Beer, on the north of the river Arnon, be a third instance of Moses' smiting a rock, and thus supplying waters for the people and their cattle, it is inexplicably strange that a writer of history should mention it as the one well-known event of the kind in the life of Moses. The difficulty is not removed, nor the language of the scripture fairly explained, by the statement of Keil, "that here God gave the people water, not as before by a miraculous supply from a rock, but by commanding wells to be dug." If we had no other accounts on record of Moses' gathering of the people, and God's supplying them with water when Moses smote the rock with his staff, such a supposition as Keil offers might be admissible, but not in the face of two different narratives which tell us how Moses did gather the people and cause waters to come forth abundantly for the people and their flocks.

We inquire, next, whether all these narratives and references may be traceable to one and the same event. The language of Num. xxi. 16 implies one well-known event of Jehovah's supplying Israel with water. May we suppose that the narratives of Ex. xvii. 1-7, and Num. xx. 1-13, are two divergent traditions of one such great and memorable fact in the early history of Israel? We may say of this, as we said of the hypothesis of three different events of the kind already noticed, that it is certainly possible. Several different legends, starting from the basis of one event in the history of a people, but afterwards becoming confused and somewhat inconsistent with each other, are not only possible, but, as matter of fact, have in many instances thus developed themselves. The famous fount-

ain Hippocrene on Mount Helicon, and also that of Pirene on the Acro-Corinthus in Greece, are said to have sprung forth at a blow from the hoof of the winged Pegasus, and both these springs have sometimes been confounded in the legends of the Muses with the Pierian spring at the base of Mount Olympus in Thessaly. Any famous story of a fountain or a hero naturally becomes attached in the course of time to different places.

"Seven Grecian cities boasted Homer dead,  
Through which the living Homer begged his bread."

The hypothesis of modern criticism in its analysis of the Hexateuch supposes the blending and editorial redaction of the three sources known as J, E, and P. The narrative in Ex. xvii. is mainly from E (3-6), but verses 16 and parts of verses 2 and 7 are from J. The narrative of Num. xx. 1-13 is, on the other hand, mainly from P, blended, however, with fragments of J and E (1b, 3a, 5, 8b). In his notes on this passage, Addis observes, that "here we have one of the few instances in which the documents of the 'oldest book of Hebrew history' have been inextricably entangled, not, as is often the case, with each other, but with the narrative of the 'Priestly writer.' Both narratives have suffered in the process, and we can only guess at their full meaning."<sup>1</sup> In a very thorough discussion of these two passages, Cornill<sup>2</sup> follows Nöldeke and Kayser in construing the words of Num. xx. 10b—"Hear now [Sept. = *hear me*] ye rebels,"—as if they were addressed by Jehovah to Moses and Aaron, and not by Moses to the people. It is confessedly difficult to determine from this passage, or from any other allusions to the strife at Meribah, just what the great offense of Moses was. It seems to have been some matter of unbelief on the part of Moses and Aaron, and a conse-

<sup>1</sup> The Documents of the Hexateuch, Translated and Arranged in Chronological Order, with Introduction and Notes, Part i. p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 1891, pp. 20-34.

quent failure to sanctify Jehovah in the eyes of the congregation. It has been suggested that in the processes of combining documents and of editorial revision some things have been omitted in order to soften the offense and to place Moses and Aaron in a better light. But without further attention to these more disputable points of criticism, it is quite sufficient for our purpose to note that the current analysis of the Pentateuch finds characteristic elements of the documents J, E, and P worked together in the present form of these narratives. The passage in Ex. xvii. is principally from E, and the passage in Num. xx. principally from P; but the Massah story, with its name and references to temptation and provocation of Jehovah, belongs mainly to J, as does also Num. xxi. 16-20. But this analysis does not explain how the divergent traditions came to connect, one with the beginning, and the other with the end, of the journey through the desert. If we could so adjust the narratives as to connect the Massah story with Horeb or Rephidim, and the Meribah with Kadesh, it would relieve the difficulties somewhat, and help toward showing that there were really two distinct events of like character, one in the first year, and the other in the last year, of Israel's wanderings. But we have seen that the narrative in Ex. xvii. 7 ascribes both names, Massah and Meribah, to the event of the first year at the rock in Horeb. The two poetical passages (Deut. xxxiii. 8 and Ps. xcv. 8) in which both names occur together, may, however, be explained as synonymous parallelisms, each name referring to the same event, as in Ex. xvii. 7. Thus:—

“Whom thou didst prove at Massah,  
With whom thou didst strive at the waters of Meribah.”  
“Harden not your heart, as at Meribah,  
As in the day of Massah in the wilderness.”

The narrative in Num. xx. 1-13 conveys the idea that the strife at Meribah occurred soon after the arrival of the



Israelites at Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin. The first verse, which shows a mark of P's care for exact dates, is peculiar in naming "the first month," but omitting the year. But the preceding narrative of journeys in the desert and Deut. i. 19 ff. represent Kadesh as the place to which the Israelites came at an early period of their journeys, and whence the spies were sent out to explore the land of promise. It would seem, therefore, that the compiler of this narrative saw the inconsistency of placing the event of Meribah at the end of Israel's wanderings, and so omitted the year from P's narrative, which he was using as one of the sources of his composite history.

Apart from the matter of time and place, the language of the two narratives now found in Ex. xvii. 1-7 and Num. xx. 1-13 might without difficulty be explained as referring to one and the same event. Though varying in details, there is nothing necessarily inconsistent or irreconcilable in the two accounts. The writer or editor who applies both names, Massah and Meribah, in Ex. xvii. 7, to the event in Horeb evidently felt that the ideas of *temptation* and *strife* with Jehovah were both compatible with one and the same event. And, as we have observed above, the passage in Num. xxi. 16 obviously implies one well-known fact of Moses' gathering the people together, and God's supplying them with water in such a marvelous manner that Israel sang a song commemorative of the well which the princes digged with scepter and staff. It is also worthy of note, that in Ex. xvi. 35 it is said that "the children of Israel did eat manna forty years . . . until they came unto the borders of the land of Canaan." Also, in Josh. v. 12, "The manna ceased on the morrow after they had eaten the produce of the land of Canaan." The idea is that all through the forty years the bread from heaven was miraculously supplied. The later writers refer to the manna from heaven and the water from the rock as cor-

relative facts, illustrative of God's marvelous care for his people during their exodus from Egypt to Canaan. Thus, in Neh. ix. 15, "Thou gavest them bread from heaven for their hunger, and broughtest forth water for them out of the rock for their thirst." So, again, in Ps. lxxviii. 15-25 (e.g. 20 and 24):—"He smote the rock, and waters gushed out, and streams overflowed. . . . He rained down manna upon them to eat,<sup>1</sup> and gave them of the grain of heaven." Comp. Ps. cv. 40, 41: "He satisfied them with the bread of heaven; he opened the rock, and waters gushed out."

We must next notice the remarkable translation of Num. xxi. 18-20, as found in the different Jewish Targums. The Targum of Onkelos reads thus: "And from the wilderness it [the well] was given to them. And from the time it was given to them it went down with them to the rivers, and from the rivers it went up with them to the height, and from the height to the valleys which are in the fields of Moab, at the head of the height which looks over the face of Beth-jeshimon." It is easy for the critical reader to see that this translation is due in part to a mistaking of proper names in the Hebrew text for the more common words of cognate signification.<sup>2</sup> The Targum of the Pseudo-Jonathan is quite similar, but has some peculiarities of its own: "From thence it was given to them

<sup>1</sup> Verse 27 of this psalm also says that—

"He rained flesh also upon them as the dust,  
And winged fowl as the sand of the sea."

So manna and quails were alike "rained from heaven"; but Ex. xvi. explains that the manna was like a small seed found on the ground, and Num. xi. says that the quails were driven into the camp by a wind from the sea.

<sup>2</sup> Thus the Hebrew מַתָּן is not taken as a proper name, but in the sense of a gift, and is translated by the Aramaic מַתָּת, from יָתַב. The name נְחֻלִּיאַל is resolved in the Aramaic נְחֻלִּי, emphatic plural of נְחַל; and so on with other words.

for a gift. Going about, it went up with them to the high mountains, and from the high mountains it went down with them to the valleys, going round about all the camp of Israel, and giving them drink each one at the door of his dwelling. And from the high mountains it went down with them to the deep valleys, and it was hidden from them in the borders of Moab, . . . because they set at nought the words of the law." The Targum of Jerusalem reads: "And from thence was given to them the well as a gift, going about until it became strong flowing streams. Going about it went up with them to the top of the mountains, and it went down with them to the ancient valleys. The well was hidden from them at the borders of Moab." This Aramaic translation of Num. xxi. 18-20 certainly embodies and so witnesses, if it did not indeed originate, the Jewish tradition that the miraculous stream of water, that gushed from the smitten rock in the desert, followed or accompanied the Israelites during all their journeys.<sup>1</sup> To this same legend Paul seems to refer in 1 Cor. x. 4, where it is noticeable that he, like the Old Testament psalmists, associated the manna and the rock: "Our fathers . . . did all eat the same spiritual food, and did all drink the same spiritual drink; for they drank of a spiritual rock that followed them: and the rock was Christ." We may call his exegesis rabbinical, allegorical, or symbolical; but whatever we call it, or whatever else we may say about it, Paul discerned in the story of the manna and of the rock, after the manner of Jesus in John's Gospel (vi. 32-51), a profound spiritual significance which he saw fit to emphasize without any apparent regard for the historicity of the letter of the Old Testament narratives.

On the basis of what we have now presented in connection with "the song of the well" in Num. xxi. 16-20, we

<sup>1</sup> The various forms of this tradition may be read in Schoettgen's *Horae Hebraicae*, Vol. i. pp. 623-624.

may submit the following statements as parts of a tentative hypothesis of the true scriptural significance of such Hebrew traditions and songs:—

1. According to the first impression one receives on reading the different records concerning the smitten rock as so many accurate historical statements, there were at least three distinct instances of miraculous water supply during the forty years' wanderings,—one in Horeb, one at Kadesh, and one at Beer, on the east of the Jordan, somewhere north of the river Arnon.

2. Critical analysis finds these records composite and divergent, and resolves them into different versions of one and the same memorable event in the history of Israel.

3. This event, whatever its real nature and particulars as actual fact, became a favorite theme of the poets in Israel, and was thus magnified and embellished in the national songs.

4. Its intimate and very natural association with the miraculous supply of food called manna, which is said to have been continuous from the beginning to the end of the desert journey, led annalists and poets to connect the memorable supply of water also with the beginning, middle, and end of the sojourn in the wilderness.<sup>1</sup>

5. The real significance and truth of this unfailing supply of food and drink is suggested in the later story of the rock that followed the people in all their journeys, going about the whole camp, and supplying every one in his own

<sup>1</sup> May it not be that many a time, during the years of their desert journeys, Israel in great distress for want of water or of food suddenly discovered springs of water, and other natural supplies, when they least looked for them? Such glad surprises were naturally and truly recognized as the interposition of Divine Providence, and the poets of the nation celebrated them in sacred song. Such songs and traditions would thereafter be very readily connected with different events of the kind, whether at the beginning, middle, or end of the journeys of the forty years. Manna and quails, as well as springs of water, would thus in popular thought become supernatural gifts of Jehovah to his people.

tent. This was construed by Paul as a figurative and typical method (*τυπικῶς*, 1 Cor. x. 11) of portraying the living presence of God with the Hebrew fathers in all the journeys of the exodus. He was truly, as the poets sung, "the Stone of Israel," "the Rock of his salvation," the Rock whose ways are all judgment (Gen. xlix. 24; Deut. xxxii. 4, 15, 18; Ps. xviii. 2, 31, 46, etc.). Most naturally, therefore, might Paul identify this living spiritual rock with Christ, the Rock of Ages.

6. From all this we may learn that the real value of this class of Holy Scriptures "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness," consists not, as we have been so much wont to assume, in the letter of its narrative, and not in thus attempting to shoulder a burden which neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear, nor in a persistent life-and-death struggle to maintain the historicity of ancient traditions against the critical methods and widely accepted results of modern research. Shall we not rather imitate the method of Jesus in his interpretation of the manna as "the true bread out of heaven which giveth life unto the world" (John vi. 32-51), and note how he "read in the Book of Moses, in the Bush," a lesson which the superficial Sadducee had never learned, namely, that God is not the God of the dead, but of the living? Let us also follow Paul, who saw in the story of the smitten rock the doctrine of the ever-living Christ. Following this method, we find the Sacred Scriptures an inexhaustible fountain of religious teaching, containing manifold revelations and illustrations of the goodness and severity of God. Incidentally they connect with many facts of human history, and are true to the human experiences of all times and peoples; but their chief purpose is not to acquaint us with details of history, but rather to inculcate and enhance the reality of spiritual food and drink,—the bread and water of eternal life.