

Proper 21
Cycle A RCL
Revised

Exodus 17:1-7

This JE narrative has a parallel in Numbers 20:1-13, researchers often ascribe to J and P. The Wilderness of Sin lies NW of the Sinai, and so our text as well as Numbers 20 put the testing of the Lord in the immediate region of Kadesh-barnea. This identification makes more geographical sense in Numbers than in Exodus since in Numbers 20 the people are indeed approaching the land of promise whereas in Exodus 17 they have not yet reached Mt. Sinai/Horeb. While the exact locations of Rephidim, Meribah, and Massah are unknown, the word plays in our passage (Massah, “testing” and Meribah, “confrontation”) suggest local traditions to explain the names of these sites. Israel’s perfidy in testing the Lord in the desert finds remembrance in Deuteronomy 6:16; 9:22; 33:8; Psalm 95:8. The connotation of the word “quarrel” (*riv*) can mean anything from a complaint to a formal legal process.

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Psalms 78, 105, 106, and 136 are historical in content and were likely used during the great festivals in Jerusalem. Wisdom language abounds in the first two verses with mention of the psalmist’s “teaching” (Hebrew: *torah*) and reference to the content as a “proverb” (*mashal*) or “riddles” (*xidot*), but the balance of the Psalm is a recitation of God’s faithful activity in Israel’s history compared with the faithlessness of Israel. On the whole Psalm 78 resembles a *hymn* more than any other form

OR

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Ezekiel was a priest and prophet who went into exile with the Jews in 597 BC and prophesied from his exile near the Babylonian city of Nippur. The present passage relates to the situation of the city of Jerusalem before the final Babylonian destruction of the city in 586 BC. The popular proverb about the fathers eating “sour grapes” (also found in Jeremiah 31:29) reflects the idea that God would not only punish Israel for its own sins but for the sins of its ancestors. (See Exodus 20:5.) The prophet claims that this proverb acts as an excuse for Jerusalem to duck responsibility for its plight and contends, as does Jeremiah, that God is just and punishes his people only for their own sins.

Psalm 25:1-8

This personal *lament* is an imperfect alphabetic acrostic, with each of the verses of the psalm beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The psalm, however, repeats the letter *resh* in verses 18 and 19 (verses 17 and 18 in the *Book of Common Prayer*): “Look upon (*Re’eh*) my adversity...” “Look upon (*Re’eh*) my enemies...” The last verse also breaks the sequence by repeating the letter *pe* (*Pedeh*, “deliver”), already used in verse 16 (verse 15 in *BCP* (*Peneh*, “turn”) and may be a later addition. Although some personal laments protest the psalmist’s innocence and undeserved suffering, this psalm, like Psalm 51, admits the psalmist’s wrongdoing but counts on God’s compassion and covenant faithfulness (verse 6, *BCP*, verse 5) to bring forgiveness and deliverance.

Philippians 2:1-13

This passage contains in verses 6–11 an early Christian hymn that Paul picked up and used to exhort his readers in Philippi. Paul, however, likely added the words “even death on a cross.” By “emptying himself” of his preexistent divinity (2:7), Christ saved us by taking on our humanity. Paul uses this familiar hymn as a way of encouraging his readers to a similar humility before one another.

Matthew 21:23-32

The setting for this series of teachings is in the *stoa* (southern porch) of Herod’s temple and derives from Mark 11:27-12:11. The First Gospel alone tells us this parable and puts it together with a series of teachings by Jesus in the temple (21:23–24:2) that end with a prediction of the destruction of the temple (24:1–2). The issue of authority in 21:23-27 has specifically to do with Jesus’ authority to take command of the temple cultus in the way he has done. Rather than answer the question, Jesus exposes the religious cowardice of his questioners. He multiplies the offense by telling the most learned of the Pharisees and Sadducees that prostitutes and tax collectors would enter God’s kingdom ahead of the righteous of Israel because they have heeded the word Jesus delivered while the pious and just teachers of the people have ignored it.

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