

Thus the children of Israel were “baptized” into Moses in the sense that he was Yahweh’s interface between Himself and the Abrahamic people. From the divine side, Yahweh spoke and acted through Moses; from the Israelite side, Moses represented the people as their mediator and intercessor. In practical terms, Moses mediated Yahweh to Israel and Israel to Yahweh; he was the chosen bridge between the maker and the recipients of the Abrahamic Covenant (cf. Exodus 4:1-16, 20:1-21, 24:1-34:9 with Deuteronomy 34:9-12). Thus Paul’s declaration that all Israel was baptized into Moses was his recognition that the Abrahamic people obtained their promised covenant union with God through the vehicle of Moses.

Paul’s **third** instance was God’s provision of *manna* to Israel (10:3). The question associated with its name (“what is it?”) attested its otherworldly character. The manna in the wilderness was Yahweh’s supernatural sustenance; it was “bread out of heaven” (cf. Exodus 16:1-35; John 6:24-31), and Paul was emphasizing this heavenly quality by referring to it as “spiritual food.” As with Yahweh’s presence, manifest power and provision of a mediator, His gift of heavenly bread testified to His covenant union with His people and the commitment that attended it.

The **fourth** thing Paul mentioned forms the counterpart to its predecessor: As all Israel ate the same spiritual food, so they drank the same spiritual *drink* (10:4). Though God continually met the people’s need for water during their forty years in the wilderness, Paul was alluding to one of the two times when He supernaturally brought forth water from a rock. That incident occurred shortly after Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea before the covenant was ratified at Sinai (ref. Exodus 17:1-7; cf. the second such occurrence at Kadesh recorded in Numbers 20:1-13). This provision, too, emphasizes Yahweh’s faithfulness to His covenant people, even to the point of providing for their needs supernaturally with “spiritual” food and drink (ref. Deuteronomy 8:1-18; cf. Nehemiah 9:1-15).

Paul noted what is clear in the biblical text: On at least two occasions, God satiated Israel’s thirst with “spiritual drink” brought forth from a stone. But he went beyond the scriptural revelation, insisting that *one “spiritual” rock followed Israel throughout its wanderings, and this rock was Christ Himself*. This assertion is profound and spotlights Paul’s christological understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul was taught his gospel by Jesus Himself, and he’d come to grasp what the Lord and His disciples constantly affirmed, which was that all the Scripture testifies of Him. Interpreted properly, this particular statement helps to illumine how Paul conceived that all-important truth.

- The first thing to note is that Paul was not in any way denying the literal truth that God provided physical water for Israel from physical rocks. At the same time, he recognized in those physical events christological significance that went beyond mere metaphor or prophetic promise. *Paul’s statement shows his conviction, not that these physical events merely prefigured and anticipated what would come in Jesus Christ, but that, in a very real way, Yahweh’s messiah was present in them.*

- Paul's conviction points to a second observation, namely that the Old Testament speaks of the divine presence at Rephidim (Massah) where this event occurred, but it associates that presence with Yahweh Himself, not the pre-incarnate Angel of the Lord (cf. Exodus 17:1-6 with Psalm 78:15-20, 35). Many Old Testament references to Yahweh are applied to Jesus in the New Testament (cf. Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58; Psalm 102:25-27 and Hebrews 1:10-12; Isaiah 44:6 and Revelation 1:17-18; Isaiah 45:23 and Philippians 2:9-11; etc.), and it might appear that Paul was only making the same association. Jesus Christ is indeed True God, and yet it seems clear that Paul was doing more than simply affirming the essential oneness of the divine Father and Son.

In the first place, the Exodus text states that Yahweh *stood upon* the rock (17:6), while Paul asserted that Jesus *was* the rock (10:4). The issue for Paul wasn't the divine presence at Rephidim or even that it was the second person of the Trinity who was present. Paul's focus was on the event itself, what it represented in terms of the ongoing relationship between Yahweh and His covenant people, and the central role the rock played in settling the dispute. Treated in context, *his assertion draws from salvation-historical considerations more than Trinitarian ones.*

The interpreter must place the event at Massah (Meribah) within the larger salvation history if he is to rightly understand its historical meaning and, more importantly, its *christological* meaning (how it contributed to the revelation of Jesus Christ) as Paul discerned it. Several considerations are crucial in that regard:

- 1) The first is that this event was the third of five circumstances which tested Israel's faith and devotion to Yahweh *before He'd even formalized His covenant relationship with the nation.* Those "tests" are recorded in Exodus 15-18, and this particular one paralleled the first. It, too, involved Israel's need for drinking water, but it raised the stakes of Israel's faith. The reason was that Yahweh had already shown Himself capable and faithful by purifying the bitter waters of Marah (15:22-27). Only weeks earlier Israel had experienced Yahweh's care and miraculous provision; would they trust Him now that the same need had arisen again?

The people had every reason to trust the Lord, but instead they brought a formal charge against Him. (The Hebrew verb rendered *quarrel* or *contend* connotes a formal dispute that can even take the form of a legal complaint or charge to be settled in a court of law). In a very real sense, Yahweh's son was bringing a lawsuit against Him: *The Lord and Father who'd proven Himself faithful from the day He made His covenant with Abraham – the One who'd delivered Abraham's seed in order to take them to Himself according to His covenant oath – was now being charged with unrighteousness and malfeasance with respect to that oath by the very ones who were the beneficiaries of it and the blessings attached to it.*

- 2) Israel was entering into judgment against Yahweh when they were the guilty ones; they were the ones who proved themselves unfaithful yet again in spite of the Lord's unwavering faithfulness toward them. The people couldn't stone Yahweh for His alleged offense, but they could stone His representative, and this is precisely what they were prepared to do. Moses knew they meant business and He cried out to the Lord to intervene before they took his life (ref. 17:3-4).

- 3) It was at this point that the Lord rose up in His own defense. The covenant son had brought suit against the Father for alleged malfeasance and was now prepared to carry out the sentence. Israel had appointed itself judge, jury and executioner in their case against Yahweh, but He was to have the last word. And His word of defense was to vindicate the truth – not by condemning the guilty party (as Israel had condemned Him), but by demonstrating His innocence: He once again showed Himself faithful to His covenant with Abraham – in spite of the incorrigible unfaithfulness of the sons of the covenant. Yahweh demanded that His accusers watch Moses strike the rock where He was present *using the very staff with which Moses had testified to Him to the unbelieving Egyptians* (17:5-6). And having done so, water flowed from the rock for the people to drink.

- 4) Israel was no better than the Egyptians, yet God remained faithful to His covenant. He'd rescued them in Egypt through Moses' staff and was doing the same thing again – *this time by symbolically taking the blows Himself*. In and by Himself, Yahweh came to His people's aid and satisfied the contention between them. The guilty were reconciled and satiated through the condescension and self-punishment of the innocent accused. Yahweh had pledged Himself as the surety of His covenant on behalf of the world (ref. Genesis 15:1-21), and He would not depart from His oath.

Together with its four counterparts, this incident highlighted God's covenant faithfulness and Israel's inability to fulfill its identity and role as His covenant son: He hadn't even ratified His covenant relationship with Israel at Sinai and yet it was already painfully obvious that the Abrahamic seed would be unable to uphold it; if Yahweh's gospel promise to Abraham of global reconciliation and blessing (Galatians 3:8) were to be realized, it would be because He alone secured its triumph; He would have to meet the covenant obligation of Abraham's seed. And He would do so by raising up another Israel, a faithful son and servant.

These considerations lay behind Paul's assertion to the Corinthians. He may well have believed that the pre-incarnate Christ was Yahweh's manifest presence at Massah, but his words look beyond that. The "rock was Christ" in the sense that that stone – associated with Yahweh Himself – took the blow deserved by His people and so poured forth life-giving water for the sons of the covenant. Ongoing preservation through their God's self-giving faithfulness defined Israel's covenant life; it was no empty cliché for Paul to insist that the rock *followed them*.