

The NT as Midrash

This weeks reading is from **Parsahat Bamidbar** (*Bamidbar / Numbers 1:1-4:20*). The Torah reading this week tells us the Lord God spoke to Moshe in the Ohel Moed commanding him to number the Children of Israel. The Lord said the Levites were not to be numbered because they are given to the service of the Lord in the Tabernacle (*1:47-50*). The Levites are instructed to camp around the Tabernacle so the wrath of God will not fall upon the congregation of Israel (*1:53*). The Lord tells Moshe that the first born in Israel, from man or beast, are His (*3:13*). The reading ends with the mitzvot on what to do when the Tabernacle moves from one place to another and how the Levites are to prepare the Tabernacle for traveling (*4:4-20*). I read recently someone said that the all of the Apostolic Writings (NT) is midrash. While looking in the rabbinic commentaries on these Scriptures, we discover that the Apostle Paul uses an ancient midrash to describe something about Christ in his letter to the Corinthians.

ספר במדבר פרק א *Bamidbar / Numbers 4:1-4*

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר
סִינַי בְּאַהֲל מוֹעֵד בְּאַהֲד לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי
בְּשָׁנָה הַשְּׁנִיית לְיֵצֵאתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
לֵאמֹר: ב שְׂאוּ אֶת-רֹאשׁ כָּל-עֲדַת
בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם
בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמוֹת כָּל-זָכָר לְגִלְגֻלָּתָם:
ג מִבְּנֵי עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה כָּל-יֵצֵא
צָבָא בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל תִּפְקְדוּ אֹתָם לְצַבְּאֹתָם
אִתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן: ד וְאִתְּכֶם יִהְיוּ אִישׁ אִישׁ
לְמִטָּה אִישׁ רֹאשׁ לְבֵית-אֲבֹתָיו הוּא:

1:1 Then the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, 1:2 'Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, every male, head by head 1:3 from twenty years old and upward, whoever is able to go out to war in Israel, you and Aaron shall number them by their armies. 1:4 'With you, moreover, there shall be a man of each tribe, each one head of his father's household. (NASB)

Midrash Rabbah (the Great Midrash) on the very first portion from the book of Numbers is quite extensive. The midrash begins with the rabbis already having a thorough working knowledge of the book of Numbers and this becomes apparent in *Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashah 1, Part 2* (מדרש רבה במדבר פרשה א סימן ב) as we read their take on the Scriptures.

Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parshah 1, Part 2

"In the exposition of the text, And the Lord spoke unto Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai (Bamidbar / Numbers 1:1) ... And there was no water for the congregation (Bamidbar / Numbers 20:2). How was the well constructed? It was rock-shaped like a kind of bee-hive, and wherever they journeyed it rolled along and came with them. When the standards under which the tribes of journeyed halted and the tabernacle was setup, that same rock would come and settle down in the

court of the Tent of Meeting and the princes would come and stand upon it and say, Rise up, O well (Bamidbar / Numbers 21:17), and it would rise.” (שם במדבר כ') ולא היהמים לעדה, והיאך היתה הבאר עשויה סלע כמין כוורת היתה ומתגלגלת ובאת עמהם במסעות וכיון שהיו הדגלים חונים והמשכן עומד היה אותו הסלע בא ויושב לו בחצר אהל מועד והנשיאים באים ועומדים על גביו ואומרים עלי באר והיתה עולה, ואח"כ הבאתי לכם שלום, המדבר הייתי לישראל שמא כמדבר נהגתי עמכם אלא אם ארץ מאפליה לא אני בידי הייתי מאיר לכם שנא' (שמות יג)

According to the midrash, the rabbis say that when the children of Israel needed water, the Lord constructed for them a well that was shaped like a bee-hive that gave forth water and this rock followed them wherever they journeyed in the wilderness. In addition to this, the rock that gave life giving water settled down in the Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting) and the princes of the tribes of Israel would come and stand upon it and say *“Rise up O well.”* The rock tabernacled with His people. In the rabbinic literature, there are other references to this same life giving rock, the children of Israel, and the wilderness. In the Targum Jonathan (Aramaic Translation) the rabbis expands upon *Bamidbar / Numbers 21:19* to describe the rock or *“well”* that *“followed”* them (the children of Israel):

“From the time that the well in Mattanah was given them, it was made again to them brooks that were overflowing and violent; and again it went up unto the tops of the mountains, and went down with them into the valleys...”

ומן דאתיהבת להון למתנא חזרת למיסוק עימהון לטוורייתא רמייתא ומ-
טוורייתא רמייתא נחתא עימהון לגלימתא מחזרא לכל משיריתא דישראל
ומשקיא יתהון כל חד וחד בתרע משכניה

The Aramaic translation uses a parable to say these waters that proceeded from the rock followed Israel and gave them life giving waters. According to the Tosefta, this tradition of the rock is related in the following way:

“It was likewise with the well that was with the children of Israel in the wilderness, it [the well] was like a rock that was full of holes like a sieve from which water trickled and arose as from the opening of a flask. It [the rock-well] ascended with them to the top of the hills and descended with them into the valleys; wherever Israel tarried there it tarried over against the entrance to the tabernacle”

Based upon these rabbinic references, there appears to be a Midrashic tradition that was captured in the translation of the Targums and of the Talmud. The idea of a rock that

gave forth life giving waters, that followed Israel in the wilderness. While studying the Apostolic Writings, the Apostle Paul utilizes the rabbinic midrash while speaking to the Corinthians in *1 Corinthians 10:1-4*. Because of this midrashic explanation of the book of Numbers, the first Century people would have been very familiar with the parable of the rock that followed Israel giving them life.

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

10:1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; 10:2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 10:3 and all ate the same spiritual food; 10:4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. (NASB)

¹Οὐ θέλω γὰρ ὑμᾶς ἀγνοεῖν, ἀδελφοί, ὅτι οἱ πατέρες ἡμῶν πάντες ὑπὸ τὴν νεφέλην ἦσαν καὶ πάντες διὰ τῆς θαλάσσης διήλθον, ²καὶ πάντες εἰς τὸν Μωϋσῆν ἐβαπτίσθησαν ἐν τῇ νεφέλῃ καὶ ἐν τῇ θαλάσσει, ³καὶ πάντες τὸ αὐτὸ πνευματικὸν βρῶμα ἔφαγον, ⁴καὶ πάντες τὸ αὐτὸ πνευματικὸν ἔπιον πόμα: ἔπινον γὰρ ἐκ πνευματικῆς ἀκολουθούσης πέτρας: ἡ πέτρα δὲ ἦν ὁ Χριστός.

Here, the Apostle Paul is drawing upon the rabbinic tradition to illustrate what Yeshua the Messiah has done for God's people. It also seems that the rabbinic midrash regarding the "*rock that followed Israel in the wilderness*" is not problematic with "*the rock as Christ.*" The Apostle Paul ascribes the deity of Yeshua as the "*Rock*" that is also a term that was reserved for the Lord God Almighty only (i.e. Parashat Ha'azinu). David says the Lord is his "*rock of strength*" (לְצוּר-מְעוֹז) and "*You are my rock and my fortress*" (כִּי-סֵלְעִי וּמְצוּדָתִי אַתָּה) seems to suggest that he (David) understood the Lord as a source of strength and life just like Paul is saying in *1 Corinthians 10* with the help of the rabbinic midrash. The phrase, "...*that followed them,*" in the Apostolic Writings, comes from the Greek word, ἀκολουθούσης "*akolouthouoses,*" which means "*to follow one who precedes, join him as his attendant, or accompany him.*" The Apostle Paul is explaining to the Corinthians that the "*rock*" at Meribah was spiritually patterned after Yeshua the Messiah. Using this example, Paul is saying that Yeshua comes along side of us and walks with us in life and therefore he uses this parable to direct our attention to the Messiah. The Rock, who is God, was a figure or shadow, of the Messiah in a similar way that the Pesach lamb prefigured Yeshua. In addition to this, in the wilderness, the Rock was struck with the rod for the sake of Israel. Can you see the parallel here in the biblical text, with the parable of the rabbis and the things that Yeshua did for us? Yeshua suffered for our sakes (*1 Peter 2:24*) and he is the life giving waters (*John 4:10, 7:37-39, and Revelation 22:17*). What an awesome picture we see of Christ in the rabbinic literature and the words of the Apostle Paul in *1 Corinthians 10:1-4*.

In addition to this, the rabbis continue in *Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashah 1, Part 7* (מְדַרְשׁ רַבֵּה בַּמִּדְבָּר פְּרָשָׁה אַ סִּמָּן ז) to illustrate the power of God and the Torah

saying the following.

Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parshah 1, Part 7

“And the Lord spoke unto Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai. Why in the wilderness of Sinai? Our Sages have inferred from this that the Torah was given to the accomplishment of three things, fire, water, and wilderness. Fire: whence is this derived? From the text, Now Mount Sinai was altogether on smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire (Shemot / Exodus 19:18). And water: whence is this derived? For it is said, The heavens also dropped, yea, the clouds dropped water (Judges 5:4). And wilderness: whence is this derived? From the text, And the Lord spoke unto Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai. Why was the giving of the Torah marked by these three features? To indicate that as these are free to all mankind, so also are the words of the Torah free; as it is said, Ho, every one that thirsts, come for water (Isaiah 55:1). Yet another exposition of the text, And the Lord spoke unto Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai. Anyone who does not throw himself open to all like a wilderness cannot acquire wisdom and Torah; and so it is said, In the wilderness of Sinai. ז וידבר ה' אל משה במדבר סיני למה במדבר סיני מכאן שנו חכמים בג' דברים ניתנה התורה, באש, ובמים, ובמדבר, באש מנין (שמות יט) והר סיני עשן כולו וגו' ובמים מנין שנאמר (שופטים ה) גם שמים נטפו גם עבים נטפו מים ובמדבר מנין וידבר ה' אל משה במדבר סיני ולמה ניתנה בג' דברים הללו אלא מה אלו חנם לכל באי העולם כך דברי תורה חנם הם שנאמר (ישעיה נה) הוי כל צמא לכו למים, ד"א וידבר ה' אל משה במדבר סיני אלא כל מי שאינו עושה עצמו כמדבר הפקר אינו יכול לקנות את החכמה והתורה לכך נאמר במדבר סיני.

The rabbis draw a parallel to water, fire, and the wilderness to indicate God's perspective on the Torah. The Torah is for all of mankind not just Israel. This is the principle being taught, God gave the Torah to all of mankind freely (like water, fire, and wilderness). The words of the Torah are free, and the proof of that is in the text from *Isaiah 55:1* “*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.*” (NIV) In *Isaiah 55*, the prophet Isaiah says the Lord invites the repentant to come and drink and be refreshed (*55:1-4*) while the disobedient are to repent of their evil ways (*55:6-7*). Isaiah speaks of the blessings of the Messianic kingdom, of peace and righteousness, in the previous chapter (*Isaiah 54:13-14*) and Yeshua uses this context to call men unto himself all who are thirsty on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles (Succot, *John 7:7*). Like the rabbis say the Torah is given freely to all who are thirsty, even those from the Gentile nations; Christ is given for all of mankind to those who would believe and be saved! Is that not an awesome picture for how the Lord desires that all would be saved (*1 Timothy 2:4-5*) in Christ our Savior?