

THE ROCK THAT ROLLED

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And they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ (I Cor. 10: 4).

This verse is not without its challenges. Two difficulties emerge. How can a rock *follow* the children of Israel for 40 years during their wilderness wanderings? And how can it be said that **the rock was Christ**?

There was a tradition in First Century Judaism, that the rock smitten by Moses rolled down the mountain, and proceeded to literally follow the children of Israel throughout their wilderness wanderings. Imagine that! According to such midrashic commentary, we are to imagine a literal rock miraculously rolling along behind the Israelites, with water gushing forth from its perforations. And this went on for 40 years! Paul almost certainly would have known about this oral and written Jewish tradition when he penned our text.

Surely we cannot for a moment seriously accept this woodenly literalistic interpretation? It makes the apostle responsible for a Jewish fable. It implies Paul was misled by the tradition of his times. We might even irreverently suggest that if literally so, Moses and the Israelites enjoyed some rock 'n roll in the desert!

Although most Christians reading the verse today cannot imagine a literal rock rolling around in the desert following the Israelites to miraculously assuage their thirst for 40 years, they fall into the same woodenly literalistic error when interpreting the second matter. For when they read **the rock was Christ**, it proves for them that Jesus Christ personally pre-existed in the Old Testament as God.

The rationale is that since the OT says Yahweh alone was the Rock of Israel, and since the rock that followed Israel in her wilderness journeys is said by the NT to have been Christ, then *ipso facto* Jesus Christ is God.

Of course we agree the OT *metaphorically* teaches that Yahweh is God the Rock, indeed our Rock;

He is the Rock, His work is perfect: for all His ways are just: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is He (Deut. 32: 4).

The LORD (*Hebrew for YHWH, Adonai*) is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust ... my salvation, and my high tower (Ps. 18:2).

Thus, the argument goes, that when Paul says to the believers in Corinth, that Israel **drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and that rock was Christ**, we are to therefore accept that *the rock that rolled was Christ himself!* Which is to say, that prior to his human birth, Jesus already existed as the "pre-incarnate" Messiah *personally* accompanying Moses and Israel in the desert.

This notion is actively encouraged by some very biased Bible translations. The NIV translates the word **follow** as "accompany". They want you to think that Christ personally "accompanied" the Israelites in their wildness journeys.

The Greek word (*akoloutheteo*) occurs about 90 times in the NT and in almost all of them, it is translated as "follow". Even the NIV translates the word as "accompany" only twice, the other time being in **Mark 6: 1** where the disciples accompany Jesus to his hometown. But even there, "follow" is the more natural idea. ¹ However, the vast majority of translators at **I Corinthians 10: 4** read that the rock **followed** the Israelites.

As has been rightly said, translation is the subtlest form of commentary!

¹ The Greek has a perfectly proper way of saying "accompany" and the word is *sunakoloutheteo*. It is used in Mark 5:37; 14: 51 and Luke 23:49, but definitely not here in I Cor. 10: 4! This is not the first time the NIV alters the text in favour of promoting a pre-existent Christ. Another classic instance is in John 13: 3 where the Greek simply states that Jesus knew he was going to God, yet the NIV wants you to believe Jesus was "going back to God", that is, "returning" to where he had previously been.

FOLLOWING IN TIME

There is a tantalising nuance possible in this word “follow”. Follow can mean to come after in place or in time. I can follow after my grandfather, in the sense that I follow his steps and arrive at the place where he goes, perhaps his house. Or, I can follow after my grandfather, in the sense that being born after him I arrive later in time. This second idea, that Christ followed Israel in time is the one that best fits the context here, as I shall show.

Christ was the future hope and expectation of Israel, and they looked forward to his appearance as per God’s promise. The great patriarch and founder of the Hebrew nation --- Abraham --- is said by Jesus to have **rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it and was glad (John 8:58)**. Abraham by faith anticipated the future coming of the Messiah.

This expectation was foreshadowed in the guise of many types and patterns throughout the OT. For instance, the Passover Lamb foreshadowed the Messiah dying to deliver from sin. The tabernacle portrayed Messiah being the one in whom the Glory of God would dwell with us. The manna anticipated Christ as the true bread from heaven. The High Priest was a type of Jesus Christ who would come to be our mediator in due time.

It was in the wilderness journeys that this great prophecy of the coming Messiah was repeated;

A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will arise out of Israel ... His kingdom shall be exalted ... I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near ... One from Jacob shall have dominion ... (Numbers 24: 17, 7, 19).²

As they believed in their God-given destiny in the coming Messiah, and their part in that coming glorious kingdom, every faithful Israelite received strength and nourishment for their souls by faith. *In this sense*, they **drank from the spiritual rock which followed them, which rock was Messiah**. Believing in God’s promised future Messiah and his kingdom always strengthens the believer no matter how hot, dry and dusty our wilderness walk in this day may be!

Jesus claimed to be the fulfilment of that prophetic type when he **stood to loudly proclaim, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the Scripture has said, Out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water (John 7: 37-38)**.

And so the water flowing miraculously from that rock in the desert was a foreshadowing of how God would mightily meet the heartfelt needs of every man, woman and child through the life-giving Spirit-empowered words and works of His Messiah.

And yet, the idea that this passage teaches that a so-called “pre-incarnate” Son of God, Christ Himself, was personally following the Israelites in that desert, persists. Once the horse bolts, well you know the rest of the story!

I could list a whole bunch of trinitarian scholars who think Christ himself was the rock that followed Israel in the desert. For this article, just 3 short ones will do. The first is from esteemed Robert Haldane in his verse by verse commentary;

This passage distinctly asserts not only the preexistence of our Lord, but also that he was the Jehovah of the Old Testament.

Robertson’s Word Pictures in the NT agrees;

He definitely states here in symbolic form the preexistence of Christ.

And Hodge’s Commentary;

The rock that followed them was Christ. The Logos, the manifested Jehovah, who attended the Israelites in their journey, was the Son of God who assumed our nature, and was the Christ. It was he who supplied their wants ... The idea is not that they drank of the typical rock; it was not the type but the

² The careful reader will note I have altered the order of these verses to make better sense for good reading. This is of course, perfectly acceptable and follows the pattern of the Bible writers and subsequent Jewish commentary!

anti-type that supplied their wants ... He was the source of all the support which the Israelites enjoyed during their journey in the wilderness. ³

Is this sampling of a wider consensus to be trusted? When Paul says, **and that rock was Christ**, are we really meant to conclude as our erstwhile commentators would have it, that Paul is teaching this rock is really the “pre-incarnate Messiah” --- second member of the godhead, “**the manifested Jehovah ... the Son of God who assumed our nature**” ?

Is it wise to follow the crowd, no matter how well-credentialed and generally accepted they may be, when there are solid contextual and grammatical reasons for not doing so (not to mention those scholars who disagree the verse teaches any such notion anyway!)? I say, Let the Scriptures be our authority. Each of us bears the responsibility before God to examine our doctrine in the light of the holy Scriptures. (Nor should you agree with what I say --- for who am I but a voice in the wilderness? --- unless it is exegetically sound!)

WIDER CONTEXT

Let’s observe the reason why Paul introduces chapter 10. The chapter break here actually comes right in the middle of a serious homily from Paul. In the previous chapters Paul has been discussing the question of Christian liberty. Is the believer free to eat food that had been offered to idols?

Some in the Corinthian church had the attitude that since they had been baptized into Christ, and since they were partakers of the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, and were thus partakers of the benefits of the Lord’s body and blood, that they therefore were quite free to partake of food offered to idols. They felt immune to the subtle dangers lurking in their free-lance approach. After all, they reasoned, an idol is nothing anyway.

So they felt they had no need to exercise self-discipline. They would arrive at their foreordained destiny regardless.

To check this potentially serious mindset, the apostle has already exhorted them to disciplined self-denial so that they might obtain the crown of life (**I Cor. 9: 24-25**). Christian liberty was not a licence to live without self-control. So adamant is Paul on this, that he even holds his own discipline up as an example they should emulate. He testifies that “**I beat [or as some translate it, I punish, I bruise, I buffet] my own body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified**” (**I Cor. 9: 27**).

Nothing is going to keep Paul from winning the prize.

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

It should go without saying that **First Corinthians 10** continues this same theme. **For I do not want you to be ignorant ... (v.1)**. “For” is a connecting word. The argument from the previous chapters continues.

Moving along from his own example of endurance to Israel’s history, Paul will now show that even God’s people who enjoy enormous privilege are not immune to the consequences of compromise or careless living. Chapter ten is thus a ‘preacher’s illustration’ from the OT designed to bring home a powerful lesson to his audience. ⁴

It must have been very tempting for the Israelites standing on the victory side of the Red Sea to feel that all dangers were now in the rear vision mirror. Their future inheritance was secure. The God of Moses was their God. Their experiences gave Israel a perfect union with Moses the great law-giver. It could be said they **were baptized into Moses**, even though of course, the waters never touched them (**v. 2**). But they all perished before entering the Promised Land --- with the exception of Joshua and Caleb.

So Paul says, O you Corinthians blessed in Christ, beware. Do not take your standing in Christ for granted lest you suffer the same kind of judgment they did!

³ The three quotes are sourced from www.studylight.org under their Bible Commentary Section pertinent to I Corinthians 10: 4.

⁴ To use the technical term, Paul employs Jewish midrash.

Think of the miraculous help those people had received. They had eaten of the manna from heaven, which is described as **spiritual food (v. 3)**, not because it was ethereal in substance and had literally dropped out of heaven where God's Throne is. No. The manna was real physical food but is termed "spiritual food" because it was not from a man-made source, but had been specially provided by God. And it was "spiritual food" even more so, because it pointed forward to Messiah's coming to be the bread of life for the world.

The same idea applies to their water. It was **spiritual drink (v 4)**. It was not supplied by a natural fountain or spring already existing in the desert rock. It was spectacularly provided by God's creative power. They **all were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them (v. 4)**. God Himself was sending it out of the rock. It was miraculously supplied. And it too was a foreshadowing of how God would supply His life to the world through His coming Messiah.

THE ANOINTED ROCK

Many Bible readers today are unaware that in the Hebrew Bible there are many messiahs. Prophets, priests and kings who were consecrated for service to God were called "messiah".⁵ Appointed to do His service, they were anointed ones, which is to say, messiahs. The Hebrew word is '*meshiach*'. Even inanimate objects set aside for God's use were said to be 'anointed'.

Let's apply this Hebrew contextual mind-set to our verse which says "the rock was Christ". One Jewish Christian commentator writes

When discerning the meaning of this allegory, it should also be taken into account that the simple meaning of the Hebrew concept of *meshiach* [*messiah*] points to something that is anointed. The rock was anointed to perform a purpose for HaShem [ie. for God]. It was set aside for HaShem's use only.⁶

In other words, this was a rock that God set aside and used for His purposes to give water to the Israelites in the desert. We could even say It was a sanctified rock --- an ordinary rock chosen and used by God for an extraordinary purpose. In classic Hebrew-speak, **the rock was messiah**. The rock was appointed and anointed for special use.

And this, by the way, helps us see why Christ Jesus himself does not need to be the "pre-incarnate" God so as to save the world. God is the origin of the water of life and He has appointed His Son to be the fountain or conduit bringing that life to us. Jesus himself testified he was the water of life precisely because the Father had given him this 'authority'.⁷ In another place Paul puts it this way,

This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Messiah Jesus ... (I Tim. 2: 3ff).

God is the one who gives that water of life to us, through His appointed mediator, our *Meschiach* (Messiah) Jesus. The rock from which the Israelites drank was a beautiful portrayal ("type") of Christ who would be our fountain of the water of life. Jesus is God's provision for our every spiritual need!

THESE THINGS ARE EXAMPLES

And lest we miss Paul's point that he is speaking allegorically when he writes, **the rock was Christ**, he plainly states, **These things took place as examples for us (v. 6)**. In fact, like a good teacher should do, Paul repeated this very point later, **Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction ... (v. 11)**.

The word in the Greek is literally, "a figure" or perhaps even better, "a type". Paul is speaking figuratively, typically in the sense that the baptism of Moses, the manna from above, the supernaturally supplied water from the rock, are

⁵ E.g. I Sam. 12:3, 5; 24:6; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam. 1:14, 16, 21, etc.

⁶ Uriel ben-Mordechai, *If? The End of a Messianic Lie*, Volume 1, p218

⁷ The woman at the well was told this precise thing by Jesus who claimed to be "the Christ" whom God the Father had appointed to be the source of living water to the world (John 4).

types of the Christ who was to come. Obviously, the apostle is making a parallel between Christian experience and OT type.

Just by the way, did you happen to notice earlier what Hodge's comment concerning the figure of the rock was? This time let me underline his unfortunate claim, and put in bold his negation;

The rock that followed them was Christ. The Logos, the manifested Jehovah, who attended the Israelites in their journey, was the Son of God who assumed our nature, and was the Christ. It was he who supplied their wants ... The idea is **not** that they drank of the typical rock; **it was not the type but the anti-type that supplied their wants...**

So who is right? Will you believe Paul spoke the truth when he said **twice** that he is speaking "typically" (typologically) and therefore allegorically or figuratively, or will you believe Hodge --- who represents the trinitarian doctrine --- when he says, The idea is **not** that they drank of the typical rock; **it was not the type but the anti-type that supplied their wants?** I never cease to be amazed by the careless tactics our trinitarian friends adopt to promote their theory, thus cancelling out the clear word of our God!

PAUL'S POINT IS ...

The warning is clear. **We should not crave evil things, as they also craved (v. 6). We should not be idolaters, as some of them were (v. 7). Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day (v. 8). Nor let us tempt the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents (v. 9). Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer (v. 10).**

Paul sums up his whole argument this way: **Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall ... flee from idolatry (v. 12, 14). The whole context, the whole point of Paul's illustration, the whole allegory, the whole typological import, the whole example, is a warning against idolatry** and the inevitable list of sins that flow from that sin ... **Do not be idolaters!** Do not run after other gods.

Yet that is the very thing our trinitarian commentators do when they impose upon this text their preconceived notion that Jesus is "the manifested Jehovah", the "pre-incarnate Son of God who took on our nature", the so-called God the Son (a descriptive title found nowhere in the Scriptures!) , second member of a multipersonal godhead!

This point of the passage is not to tell us that Jesus Christ was alive as God in the OT. It is a lesson on understanding the consequences of what happened to the nation of Israel and how we must heed their example. Surely the message is that we are to learn from the mistakes of the children of Israel who were on the wilderness journey just as we are?

Anyone who wants to find "Jesus" as the **god-man** in these verses is hijacking it to a place it never was intended to take us, and is playing irresponsibly with our Torah, doing exactly what Sha'ul [Paul] is telling him not to do. ⁸

There is no compelling evidence in this passage to support the notion that Paul was attempting to introduce a new doctrine about Christ being the "pre-existent God-man".

In conclusion, the miraculous supply of manna from 'heaven' and of water from the rock in Israel's history are types or models of spiritual truth. When the apostle says **and that rock was Christ**, he is using the same kind of Hebrew expression that Jesus used of the communion, when he said of the bread he held up, **"This is my body broken for you"**. Nobody (except the Roman Catholic doctrine of trans-substantiation) really believes the bread Jesus was holding up at Passover was his own literal body.

The **"is"** clearly means "represents" --- this bread represents, or is a type of Christ's body ---and that is Paul's point here. The rock and the water flowing from it --- and the manna for that matter --- are types of our spiritual food and drink supernaturally supplied as we share in the benefits of God's provision mediated to us through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁸ Op Cit, Uriel ben-Mordechai, p 219

Have we taken to heart Paul's main message here? The main thing is, that the main thing is, it's sadly possible for God's people to fall into sin and disaster. No matter how greatly blessed we are in Christ, there remains the tragic possibility of being **disqualified (I Cor. 9: 27)** as that generation was.

Of course, you are free to be woodenly literalistic if you like. You are free to picture a literal rock rolling around on the ground after the Israelites in the desert for 40 years. You are also free to say that the rock that followed them was a pre-existent, pre-incarnate Christ who is the God of the OT. Anybody can bend the context and grammar to fit their own theory. We live in a world where God allows us to make our own choices. We are free to have our own light and sound show --- our own rock 'n roll show in the desert --- if you will.

However, the warning is, **Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall ... flee from idolatry (v. 12, 14)**. The antidote to that fearful possibility is to continually drink from the living waters that come to us from God through Jesus our Lord Messiah.