Near the beginning of Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness (Exodus 17), and again near its end (Numbers 20), God mysteriously supplies his people with water out of solid rock. These narrative bookends are not only hydrologically impressive. They are hermeneutically intriguing. Might these parallel stories be related? How was Israel’s need for water met during the many days, even years, in between? Why did God provide manna daily but water only twice? Why were these places designated Massah and Meribah? And what did Moses do to get himself excluded from the land? Questions like these compelled Israel’s tradents to comb through the story’s details, fill in its gaps, resolve its puzzles and, at length, create a fuller, more satisfying account that makes everything clear. This fuller account of Israel’s experience in the desert is nicely summarized by Louis Ginzberg in his magnum opus, *The Legends of the Jews*:

[On this occasion] there was revealed to them [= Israel] a well of water, which did not abandon them in all their forty years’ wandering, but accompanied them on all their marches. God wrought this great miracle for the merits of the prophetess Miriam, wherefore also it was called “Miriam’s Well”. But this well dates back to the beginning of the world, for God created it on the second day of the creation, and at one time it was in the possession of Abraham…. This well was in the shape of a sieve-like rock, out of which water gushes forth as from a spout. It followed them on all their wanderings, up hill and down dale, and wherever they halted, it halted, too, and it settled opposite the Tabernacle. Thereupon the leaders of the twelve tribes would appear, each with his staff and chant these words to the well, “Spring up, O well, sing ye unto it; nobles of the people digged it by the direction of the lawgiver with their staves”. Then the water would gush forth from the depths of the well, and shoot up high as pillars, then discharge itself into great streams that were navigable, and on these rivers the Jews sailed to the ocean, and hauled all the treasures of the world therefrom…. Upon the entrance to the Holy Land this well disappeared and was hidden in a certain spot of
the Sea of Tiberias. Standing upon Carmel, and looking over the sea, one can notice there a sieve-like rock, and that is the well of Miriam.¹

As it happens, our two earliest surviving references to this “rolling stone” tradition both date from the first century C.E. In First Corinthians, Paul recalls the “spiritual following rock” (pneumatikēs akolouthēs petras) from which all Israel drank in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:4). A few decades later² Pseudo-Philo described how God “brought forth a well of water to follow” the wilderness generation (LAB 10:7) and how this water “followed them in the wilderness forty years” (LAB 11:15). When the Israelites finally entered the land, we’re told that the well of water was finally “taken away from them” (LAB 20:8).

The similarities between these two early, yet independent, accounts are striking. First of all, both authors assume, rather than explain, the tradition. As Peter Enns has observed, Paul’s appeal to this tradition was “not the result of conscious exegetical activity on his part”.³ According to Enns, Paul represents “merely one witness to a tradition that is itself the end product of exegetical activity”.⁴ If the tradition itself represents early Jewish biblical exegesis, Paul’s passing allusion is less an attempt to explain the story as simply a decision to retell it. Along these lines, Enns suggest that

[Paul] is simply talking about the biblical story in the only way he knows how, in accordance with the way he (and apparently his audience as well) had received it. In other words, the exegetical tradition of the ‘moveable well’ actually represents the way in which Paul understood the provision of water in the wilderness narratives of the Old Testament.⁵


² Most scholars date the composition of Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum (hereafter LAB) just before, or in the years soon after, 70 C.E. For the fullest defense of a post-70 date, see Howard Jacobson, A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum (Leiden: Brill, 1996) I: 199–210. In my Do You Not Remember? Scripture, Story and Exegesis in the Rewritten Bible of Pseudo-Philo (JSPPsup 37; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 34–40, I contend that the evidence is insufficient to resolve the question.


⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 32. Cf. James L. Kugel, The Bible as it Was (Cambridge: Harvard, 1997) 28, on the authors of rewritten Bible: “sometimes the reteller himself may not even be aware where the biblical text leaves off and the interpretation begins, since he is