

Numbers 33:9

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And they removed from Marah, and came unto Elim: and in Elim were twelve fountains of water, and threescore and ten palm trees; and they pitched there.

Analysis

From Bitterness to Abundance

This verse records Israel's movement from Marah to Elim during the wilderness wanderings—a journey from bitter disappointment to abundant provision. The name Marah (marah, מַרָּה) means "bitter," commemorating the bitter waters Israel encountered there (Exodus 15:23). The Lord miraculously sweetened those waters, providing a crucial lesson about His power to transform hardship into blessing.

Elim presents a dramatic contrast: twelve fountains (shitem esreh ayanot mayim, שְׁתִים עֶשֶׂר אָנָוֹת מִים) and seventy palm trees (shivim temarim, שְׁבָעִים תְּמָרִים). The number twelve may correspond to Israel's twelve tribes, suggesting abundant provision for all God's people. Seventy, often representing completeness or fullness in Scripture, indicates comprehensive blessing. Fountains (not mere wells) suggest continuously flowing, fresh water—a precious commodity in the Sinai wilderness. Palm trees provided shade, dates for food, and evidence of sustained water sources.

The phrase "they pitched there" (vayachanu-sham) indicates an encampment—time to rest after testing. This pattern of trial followed by provision characterizes Israel's wilderness experience and prefigures the believer's journey: after Marah's bitter trials come Elim's sweet refreshment. God doesn't merely sustain His people through difficulty but leads them to places of abundant rest and provision.

Historical Context

The Wilderness Journey's Early Stages

Numbers 33 provides a comprehensive itinerary of Israel's forty-year wilderness journey from Egypt to Canaan's border. Verses 8-9 record events occurring shortly after the Red Sea crossing (Exodus 15), making this one of the journey's earliest stages. Israel had just witnessed God's miraculous deliverance from Egypt and the drowning of Pharaoh's army, yet within days they encountered bitter water at Marah, prompting complaints against Moses.

Elim's location remains uncertain, though traditionally identified with Wadi Gharandel in the Sinai Peninsula, about 63 miles from the Red Sea crossing site. This wadi contains springs and tamarisk trees (possibly the "palm trees" of the text). The encampment at Elim allowed Israel to recover from Marah's disappointment and prepare for the next stage toward Mount Sinai.

This geographical and spiritual pattern—testing at Marah, rest at Elim—taught Israel to trust God's provision. Each stage of wilderness wandering prepared them for Canaan's conquest and occupation. The detailed record in Numbers 33 served later generations as both historical record and spiritual instruction: God guides His people through wilderness seasons, providing both trials that test faith and rests that restore strength.

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. What spiritual significance do you see in God leading Israel from bitter waters (Marah) to abundant provision (Elim)?

2. How do the twelve fountains and seventy palm trees symbolize God's comprehensive provision for His people?
3. What does the pattern of trial-then-rest teach us about God's purposes in our difficult seasons?
4. How should the memory of God's past provision (like Elim) sustain us during present trials (like Marah)?
5. In what ways does Israel's wilderness journey prefigure the Christian life between conversion and heaven?

Interlinear Text

וַיַּעֲזֹב	וְיָמֵן	מִמִּן	וְיָבֹא	וְיָמֵן	וְיָבֹא	וְיָמֵן	וְיָבֹא	וְיָמֵן
And they removed	from Marah	and came	and in Elim	and in Elim	and in Elim	and in Elim	and in Elim	were twelve
H5265	H4785	H935	H362	H362	H362	H362	H362	H8147
וְיָמֵן	וְיָמֵן	וְיָמֵן	וְיָמֵן	וְיָמֵן	וְיָמֵן	וְיָמֵן	וְיָמֵן	וְיָמֵן
fountains	of water	and threescore and ten	palm trees	and they pitched				
H6240	H5869	H4325	H7657	H8558				H2583
שָׁם:								
H8033								

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 15:27 (Parallel theme): And they came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees: and they encamped there by the waters.