

The Manna Narrative of Exodus 16:1-10

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THE PURPOSE AND CONTEXT OF THE NARRATIVE:

Within the larger context of the exodus-related events lies a section dealing with the troubles of the journey. Immediately preceding this section is Moses' *Song of the Exodus*. Ex. 15:22 marks the transition from the praise of the foregoing to the murmuring, or more properly the breach of trust, that is to follow. The *wayyillonû* of 15:24 sets the tenor of the passage now to follow.¹ It begins at Marah over bitter water, continues into the Wilderness of Sin over the food, then on to Meribah over the lack of water, and to Rephidim and the confrontation with Amalek. Then follows the Jethro narrative and the appointing of "Judges." The backdrop is colored by murmuring but the purpose of the narrative is to prepare the reader for the forthcoming establishment of the covenant.²

The text before us is didactic in nature. The history is selective, not exhaustive, and arranged for propaedeutic reasons, therefore not even necessarily chronological,³ though, insofar as toponymy is concerned, it seems to follow a chronological progression. Indeed it appears that here, as Cassuto suggests, we have a didactic anthology arranged according to association of both content and language.⁴

The purpose, then, is to show that when the people arrived at *'eres kena'an* it was due entirely to the power and care of the Lord,⁵ as was

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¹Cf. Ex. 16:2; 16:7, 8, 9, 12.

²Ex. 16:35 would seem to indicate that whereas the detail of the narrative strongly suggests an eyewitness account—for example, detailed description of the manna, the description of Elim, the evidence of thorough acquaintance with distinctly Egyptian language, customs, protocol, belief, etc.—it was nonetheless recorded *after* the wandering to relate to the subsequent generations the mighty acts of God and the process of preparation for covenant. See A. S. Yahuda, *The Language of the Pentateuch and its Relationship to Egyptian*, 1933, esp. p. xxxii; Garow Duncan, *New Light on Hebrew Origins*, 1936, pp. 73-179.

³U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 1951, p. 187. Cassuto distinguishes classical Hebrew treatment from the typical sequential Greek approach to history, but goes on to argue that the "Pentateuchal arrangement is [not] arbitrary: There are rules and methods ... [one of which] is to arrange the subject matter on the basis of association—both thematic and verbal association."

⁴Note common themes of: 1) alleged lack of vital necessities, 2) "proving," 3) "murmuring."

⁵A theme reiterated in the Song of Moses, Dt. 32:10, cf. also Dt. 8:2 ff.

entirely consonant with His covenantal purpose.⁶ In other words, our section is a part of the “historical prologue” which typically sets out evidence of the benevolence of King to vassal in past relationships. The further development of the covenant is not within the scope of our discussion here. However, this much must be said: part of the covenant obligation is obedience and loyalty. This purpose must be driven home hard to the people. They must be made to see the ease with which they can violate the relationship as well as the vital import of maintaining that relationship. Thus this recounting of highlights of the past is provided to constrain the people to commitment and faithfulness.

Concomitant with this is the purpose of establishing the validity of an authorized leader and to strengthen that position of leadership. In this immediate case it is Moses, but then it is Joshua, the *šarîm* etc.⁷

As in the immediately preceding narrative where the actual event was secondary to the *hoq ûmisppat* so here the actual event is secondary to the *wîda'ttem kî yhwah hôsî' 'etkem me'eres misraim* of v. 6 and *lema'an 'anassenû* of v. 4.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The text before us, while proving enigmatic to the critics, has been analyzed into two main sources: viz. P.: vvs. 1-3, vss. 6-13a and J.: 4-5.⁸ Noth suggests that 4bB is to be regarded as a later Deuteronomistic gloss because of the occurrence of *nissah* and *tôrah* which he feels was added to connect with 17:2bB and 7.⁹

Furthermore, it has been suggested that v. 8 is corrupt: that is is a gloss inserted to explain vss. 6-7.¹⁰

The confusion surrounding the assignment of source divisions for this chapter is understandable. It just does not fit the logic of text. *yhwah* is used throughout our portion, including the so-called P sections, quite legitimately as fits the high order of religious manifestation accounted for in the text. The style of the so-called J section is not substantially different from the surrounding context so that such division is quite arbitrary and unwarranted.

As regards v. 8, it is indeed an explanation of vss. 6, 7. Rather than being an unnecessary gloss, it follows the formula *wayyo'mer ... wayyo'mer*; as in 3:14 where the second member elucidates the first.

wayyo'mer 'elohim 'el-moseh / 'ehyeh aser 'ehyeh
wayyo'mer koh to'mar libnê yisra'el / 'ehyeh selahanû alêkem

Thus it is “precisely because the sentence is only explanatory that it is

⁶Ex. 19:4.

⁷See Ex. 14:15, 26, 31; 16:20; 17:2, 5, etc.

⁸E. S. Brightman, *Sources of the Hexateuch*, 1918, who notes, “there is no consensus regarding the analysis of Ex. 16” but the division as above is propounded by C. H. Cornell, B. Bäntsch, H. Gressman, R. Kittel, R. Smend and C. Steuernagel.

⁹*Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch*, 1948, p. 32, n. 109.

¹⁰R. Clements, *Cambridge Bible*; S. R. Driver, *Cambridge Bible*; Noth, Dillman.

incomplete and its first part is not expressly stated.”¹¹ The intent of Moses is to emphasize that all he was telling the people would come to pass. The apparent problem with vs. 12 seems satisfactorily answered by the fact that the Lord had made a promise to Moses in vs. 4 to satisfy the felt needs. Thus Moses could reasonably infer the position stated in vs. 8 and in vs. 12 the Lord ratifies Moses’ statement.

Quite apart from the documentary hypothesis approach to sources, a question does arise when our passage is compared with the Numbers 11 account. Obviously the Numbers 11 account takes a different perspective and is an account of a mood which developed over a period of time whereas Ex. 16 recounts the initiation of these means of provision and puts them in the setting of the historical prologue to the covenant. Thus the concatenation of two aspects of the provision. The general indication seems to be that the events did not originate simultaneously. Obviously the Numbers account is an eyewitness account and the detail is included to identify for later generations something they had not personally experienced.

Clearly, then, these 10 verses belong to the Exodus narrative from the first and belong in the narrative precisely where they are located.

As regards problems of grammar and syntax, we have the following problems:

The meaning and vocalization of *wayyillonû* (*Qere*) [*wayyallînu*, *Kethib*] in vs. 2: *lîn* or *lûn* is a term often used in a legal context and also with definite covenantal significance.¹² It carries the meaning of a breach of the trust demanded in the covenant, or disloyalty. It refers then to an unjustified complaint [see below]. With regard to vocalization, it is a Hiphil according to the consonants and should be pointed *yallînu* from *hillîn* for *hellîn*. In vs. 7 the opposite of vs. 2 occurs where we have *tillônû*, pointed by the Massoretes as *tallînû*.¹³ The Niphal and Hiphil have, in this case, the same basic significance, viz., “disloyal, breach of covenant, murmur.”

The meaning of *lehem*: The juxtaposition of the *sîr habbasâr* and the action of *b’aklenû lehem lasôba’* demonstrates a parallel in meaning. Often translated “bread”, it also carries a wider significance of “food” and even “meat.”¹⁴

As to the question of the location of 7b (*besam’û...*) after vs. 8, or more properly, the question of the relationship of vs. 8 to the surrounding verses, see above. Verse 8a is an elucidation of vs. 6 and 8b

¹¹U. Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 192.

¹²Note Ex. 15:24; 16:2, 7, 8, 9, 12; 17:3; Num. 14:2, 27, 29, 36; 16:11; 17:6, 20. Cf. especially Josh. 9:18.

¹³G. K. (Gesenius Kautsch) 72, i, ee, “in the perfect Niph’al and Hiph’il a *w* is inserted before the affirmatives beginning with a consonant” in 1st and 2nd persons. This is 3rd. In Niph’al and Hiph’il the “” and *w*” often takes a short vowel in the preformative and a dagesh forte in the following consonant.

¹⁴Cf. Arabic *lahm* = flesh. See Judges 13:15, 16 where *lehem* is a *gedî izzâm*—kid of the goats. I Sam. 14:24-28 where *lhm* is *dbš*—honey. In Ugaritic also *lhm* means “food,” cf. UT 5:IV:36; 52:6; Krt:83,174 and may mean “flesh.” C. Gordon, *UT*, p. 427, #1366.

of vs. 7 and thus quite logically falls exactly where it is presently located.

Again, it is clear that vss. 9-12 are a further development of the theme of vs. 5 and vss. 6-8. S. R. Driver, *et al.*, suggests that vss. 9-12 should precede vs. 6 so that the command would precede the message.¹⁵ The problem can be satisfactorily answered without emending the text. Cassuto suggests the text stand as is, explaining that Moses draws certain inferences on the basis of the Lord's response recorded in vss. 4-5 and thus he states his conclusion, *viz.* vss. 6-10. Then the Lord confirms Moses' preceding statement, vss. 11-12.¹⁶ This is a reasonable explanation which at the same time avoids unnecessary emendations.

The meaning of *hekîn* of vs. 5 includes the measuring of the stuff [Cf. vs. 18, *wayyamoddû* ("and they measured.")], and the preparation of it [Num. 11:8]. Vss. 5 and 22 are to be understood in exactly the same sense, *viz.* that on the sixth day each would gather and prepare a double portion. Vs. 5 is not an indication of a supernatural multiplication by the Lord.

Note the parallelism between *wiyda'ttem* of vs. 6 and *ûr'item* of vs. 7. The "seeing" of vs. 7 was not visual perception of the Lord, or whatever *kebôd* is, as in vs. 10, but it was an experimental perception of the receipt of the miraculous gift of the meat and bread.¹⁷

There are a number of discrepancies with the LXX over the use of *yhwh* or *'lhym*,¹⁸ but the MS evidence is not strong.¹⁹ The use of *yhwh* fits the description of the religious manifestation of God to Moses and to the people.²⁰

In vss. 7, 8 one would expect the predicate to be emphatic in an interrogative sentence and thus placed first. However, as Genenius²¹ shows, there is a great deal of flexibility in subject-predicate order. And these two clauses, *wenahnû mah* in vss. 7, 8, are reversed for sake of emphasis: who are WE. Though this is contrary to expectation, it is perfectly legitimate.

The positive identification of Elim and the Wilderness of Sin is problematic. The main problem seems to be the suggested route of the Exodus itself. Thus, if a Northern route is opted for, then Elim and Sin and "Mt. Sinai" itself will be proposed as Northern sites. However, on the basis of the statement of Ex. 13:17, and in light of what we know of

¹⁵Cambridge Bible; Clements, *Cambridge Bible*; McNeile, *Exodus*.

¹⁶Cassuto parallels this development to that in Ch. 8 where Moses appends the revealed message to Pharaoh with a time limitation to which the Lord consented and acted accordingly, *Exodus*, p. 193.

¹⁷Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch II*, p. 65.

¹⁸See vs. 7, 8.

¹⁹Only A for v. 7a.

²⁰From 3:15 on the name *yhwh* is almost always used in connection with Moses.

²¹Gesenius, 141.1.

Egyptian fortifications in N. Sinai,²² it seems most improbable that the Israelites took a Northern route as Aharoni suggests,²³ although he dismisses the problem of the military presence by an unlikely trek along the ridge just off the northern shore of the Sinai peninsula. Grollenberg's suggested route²⁴ seems much more likely. It takes the Israelites South on the W. side of the peninsula. Here there are oases. Grollenberg suggests for Elim an oasis along the Wadi Gharandel and for the Wilderness of Sin, the Debbet er-Ramleh, a c. 30 mile horn-shaped protrusion of desert land into the mountains. These sites seem to best fit the chronological and geographical information of Ex. 16:1.

A number of apparent problems exist in the content of the narrative itself.

What was the significance of the complaint (vss. 2, 7, 8, 9)? It is clear from the text here²⁵ that on the surface the complaint centered around food. This raises some immediate questions. In Moses' speech in Dt. 2:7 he states in retrospect *lo' hasartta dabar*—"you have not lacked a thing." This remark seems to fit the facts of the case. In Ex. 12:38 the text states that they left Egypt with *so'n ubaqar miqneh kabed me'od*—"flocks and herds and a great many cattle."²⁶ There would seem to be represented here an ample means of subsistence.²⁷ Indeed, there would be times during those 40 years when perhaps food became a bit meager, yet, as Clements²⁸ notes, the complaint is absurd and illogical since the food of the labor gangs must have been very meager.²⁹

Then when the complaint is directed against Moses and Aaron, they reply that the complaint is really against the Lord. Moses and Aaron are only messengers of the Lord. The disloyalty is actually against *yhw*

²²The statement of Ex. 13:17 itself gives full implication of an awareness of the situation that existed throughout the periods of Egyptian power in the area, *viz.* the existence of a line of fortifications stretching along N. Sinai toward Canaan. See *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 2nd ed. ANET², 1955, "Sinuhe," p. 18, Nefer-Rohu, P. 446.

²³Y. Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, 1966, pp. 178 ff. Cf. *Carta Atlas of the Bible*, 1964, p. 40.

²⁴*Atlas of the Bible*, 1965, p. 48, plate g.

²⁵See also Num. 11.

²⁶Cp. Num. 32:1—Reuben and Gad "had an exceedingly large number of livestock ... Dt. 3:19 ... "I know that you have much livestock...."

²⁷The wadis provide sufficient pasturage and the oases sufficient water. Also there is no reason to believe the Israelites never encamped but rather kept constantly on the move those 40 years hence the possibility of limited agriculture—see Davidson, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1863, I., pp. 326, 327. Note also that in addition to their livestock they had considerable quantities of negotiable precious metals all of which would set them on an adequate trading base with the other nations with whom they came in contact.

²⁸*Cambridge Bible, Exodus*.

²⁹A description of the diet: fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic, is contained in Num. 11:5.

himself.³⁰ And the seriousness of the breach is seen in that this particular event is set just forty-five days out of Egypt. Forty-five days from the tremendous events surrounding the Exodus. It was, in fact, a vote of no confidence. Thus it is set in this context in order to demonstrate for generations to come the faithfulness of *yhwh* and the utter dependence of the people upon Him. Thus we conclude that the complaint was both unjustified and misdirected.

The charge against Moses (actually against *yhwh*) of conspiracy to mass murder in vs. 3 is again an unjustified charge. It occurs in direct contradiction to the promise and purpose of *yhwh* as stated in 3:7 and 15:26, but it is also indeed a recurring theme.³¹

The purpose of the testing (vs. 4): In the previous chapter (15:25ff) there is the establishment of a statute and a subsequent test with express and implied results, both positive and negative. The same is true of 16:4, though not expressly stated as yet.³² Linked together now are a felt need, a promise of provision by the Lord, some accompanying instructions and a test of commitment and good faith—here in terms of *obedience* and *trust*. Obedience to a law and trust that God would still provide for the future—in this case the next day.

It is the means of this test that brings us to our next problem, *viz.* The Sabbath. How can this be legitimately used as a test case when the Sabbath legislation has not yet been handed down (Ex. 20:8ff)? A look at the Decalog statement makes it clear that this is an article of covenant which has its roots in the creation ordinances.³³ That is to say, it is in all probability not novel to Ex. 20, but is there a reaffirmation of what was contained in the covenant made with the patriarchs and invoked when the people were instructed NOT to gather on the Sabbath.

McNeile notes³⁴ that the phrase *qirbû lipnê yhwh* (v. 9) is equivalent to "to come to the door of the tent," i.e., Tabernacle, hence, he concludes this passage must originate *after* the Tabernacle was erected³⁵ rather than early on in the trek. This would, of course, have a bearing on the Sabbath question. It is true that *lipnê yhwh* indicates a closeness here of a covenantal relationship. It is used, for e.g., in Lev. 9:5 and 16:1 in connection with sacrifice,³⁶ and the tabernacle is obviously in the background. Yet the real significance is not the Tabernacle, but the Lord who was worthy of this covenantal commitment. Now surely it cannot be stated that there was no sacrifice to *yhwh* before the Tabernacle, for

³⁰Cf. 16:7, 8b, 9b. *wenahnû mah*—"who are *we* (see above)—you've addressed the wrong person."

³¹See 14:11, 13, 31.

³²Cf. vs. 20ff.

³³Cf. Gen. 2:2, 3.

³⁴*Exodus*, 1908, pp. 95ff.

³⁵Cf. Ex. 25 ff.

³⁶Nadab and Abihu here. Cp. Lev. 10:1 ff.

there clearly was. Nor can it be stated categorically that no one—nor the nation—could “come before the Lord” or “offer before the Lord” prior to the erection of the Tabernacle, for they clearly did.³⁷

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The Numbers account differs with the Exodus passage in a number of details.

First, the setting of the book of Numbers begins in the second month of the second year after the Exodus which puts it almost 24 months after the event as chronologically annotated in Ex. 16:1. It was after the erection of the Tabernacle.³⁸ The account adds an unidentifiable toponym, Taberah. The Numbers narrative does not seem to be that of a murmuring over “no bread” but rather “we’re tired of the bread we’ve been getting.” Thus on these points it could be a reference to a complaint later on.³⁹ The provision of the manna is not represented as being either short-term or seasonal.

Thus far, then, it would seem Ex. 16 and Num. 11 are two different stories.

When we arrive at Num. 11:16ff we find ourselves with another variation from the Exodus account. Exodus indicates both the manna and quail were given each day, the former in the morning and the latter in the evening, from the 15th of the second month. Yet the Numbers account indicates that the quail did not come until some two years later and was cause for severe tragedy when they were provided.⁴⁰

A precise chronological reconciliation seems impossible. They may very well each be records of separate events. Indeed, the details of each would so indicate. Yet, as it has been noted, strict chronological order is not necessarily practiced in these didactic portions. It seems that the reasonable approach to the text in light of the data that is available is to treat each as separate and valid accounts of events that occurred throughout the period of the wanderings; to accept the integrity of the text and avoid unnecessary emendation.

The larger body of detailed material regarding both the manna and the quails fall outside the limits of our discussion here. However, it may be worthwhile to note certain comparisons, both within the Canon and without.

Biblical references:

Num. 11:7-9—

The manna was like corander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. The people would ... grind it ... and make cakes with it; and its taste was like cakes baked with oil. And when the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall with it.

³⁷Gen. 8:20; 31:54; 46:1; Ex. 18:12; 24:4ff, etc., etc.

³⁸Num. 7.

³⁹Note that according to Josh. 5:12, the Israelites subsisted on manna as a staple in their diet until they entered cis-Jordan and ate of the produce of the land there.

⁴⁰*Kibrôt-hatta'awah*: the graves of greediness, 11:34.

It is common among scholars to identify this "manna" with the substance produced by the *tamarix mannifera*, one or the other of two genera of coccidae that parasitize the tamarisk tree of the Negev and Sinai. This substance, however, composed as it is of glucose, fructose and pectin, is very sweet. It is lacking in protein and thus would be a poor staple for a diet. It is most seasonal—found only for several weeks in June.⁴¹ This sort of phenomenon has been widely reported,⁴² but in reality, as K. A. Kitchen notes, "None of these phenomena satisfy the biblical data."⁴³

Josh. 5:12 simply indicates the duration of this miraculous provision.

Psalm 78:23, 24, a song of God's guidance of and provision for his people in spite of their unfaithfulness refers to the raining down of manna upon them to eat—food from heaven, the bread of angels (*lehem byrym*—literally bread of strong ones).

Psalm 105:40—*lehem samayim*

Nehemiah 9:20—a recounting of the people's unfaithfulness in the face of God's faithfulness and it is said "Thy manna Thou didst not withhold from their mouth...."

Extra-biblical data:

Hesiod,⁴⁴ and Aristotle⁴⁵ both say "honeydew" comes from heaven.

In the Rig Veda⁴⁶ honey (madhu) is said to be poured from the clouds.

W. H. Rosche⁴⁷ has demonstrated that this honeydew is exactly what the Greeks called ambrosia and nectar in solid and liquid forms respectively—the food of the gods.⁴⁸

Wisdom of Solomon 16:20 remarks on the taste, that it suited "every taste."

Again, it seems there is little resemblance between the nectar and ambrosia of the classics and the coriander/bdellium stuff of the people in the wilderness, but at least the comparison may be instructive.

SUMMATION

It seems, in summary, that the integrity of the text stands intact and emendation is both unnecessary and dangerous in view of the absence of

⁴¹S. Bodenheimer, "The Manna of Sinai," *Biblical Archaeologist* X, 1 (1947), pp. 2-6.

⁴²S. Algeria: A. R. Short, *Modern Discovery and the Bible*, 3rd edition, 1952, p. 152; and in Netal: H. S. Gehman, *Westminster Bible Dictionary*, 1944, p. 375a.

⁴³N.B.D., p. 790b.

⁴⁴*Theogony*, 581.

⁴⁵*Historia animalium*, v. 22, 4.

⁴⁶I, 112, 11.

⁴⁷*Nektar and Ambrosia*, 1883, pp. 13-33, cited by Gaster in *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament*, 1969, p. 243.

⁴⁸Cf. *Iliad* 19.352; *Odyssey* 5.199; 9.359; Hesiod, *Theogony*, 639,796; *Homeric Hymns: Hermes*, 248; *Demeter* 49; *Aphrodite* 231, etc.

any additional substantive data.

Most of the problems are reconcilable and where they apparently are not, it seems to be a case of insufficient evidence in which case a wise scholar will suspend final judgment while continuing to search for more data.

After the "historical prologue" in Dt. (1-4) comes the section of the Deuteronomic treaty containing the stipulations. Here it is said,

All the commandments that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to your fathers. And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your hearts, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.⁴⁹

Indeed the nature of the text is not strict history, but didactic narrative. The purpose of the text is not to record a step-by-step itinerary but rather to drive the people to the realization of all that was involved in their covenant relationship with *yhwh* and to teach them the necessity of loyal obedience under the terms of the covenant.

Also worthy of note is that in comparison with Numbers 25, pre-covenant rebellion was not generally punished by death, whereas post-covenant violations were. Therefore, one must distinguish events *before* covenant from those *after* covenant. These pre-covenant events are important to show the kinds of relationships necessary to prepare for the covenant. These are lessons, not legislation, and, therefore, not punishable by death.

Also note that *qrbw l'pny yhwh* is a legal expression to be understood as "to stand before the judge," cf. vss. 33, 34.

⁴⁹Dt. 8:1-3.