

God Provides

January 25, 2009

Purpose: To help us understand that we must trust God daily to provide for our basic human needs

Key Bible reference: Exodus 16

Key Verse: Exodus 16.4

Biblical Background: Exodus 16 reflects the work of the priestly editors with a few traces of earlier sources. The mention of "the glory" (the standard priestly way of describing God's presence) in 16:7 and 10 and the emphasis on the sabbath in 16:22-30 both strongly suggest a priestly background. Also suggestive of a priestly background is the relationship between Exodus 16 and Numbers 11:4-34, which appears to be an E tradition about food in the wilderness. The Numbers 11 passage refers only to Moses; while the Exodus text emphasizes the role of Aaron, ancestor of Jerusalem's priests—another sign that the Exodus 16 tradition should be assigned primarily to P.

Exodus 16:1-3. Again, the Israelites complain of their lot and long for Egypt. Before condemning them too quickly, however, we should remember their situation. At this point they are well into the Sinai wastes, land that today is still hostile and forbidding. Although the text does not indicate they were facing an immediate food shortage, we would expect the people to be concerned as supplies brought from Egypt ran low. In their worry the Israelites turn on Moses and Aaron.

The word translated "complained" here in the NRSV is traditionally rendered "murmured." It is found only in the wilderness traditions, almost always in P material. Apparently, this word is a technical, priestly way of referring to the people's mistrust of Moses and Aaron and, by extension, the Lord. In situations of need and frustration, the people complain against Moses and Aaron and long for a return to Egypt. What is remarkable in this instance is the Lord's compassionate response to their complaint, as we will see below.

Verses 4-5. Most scholars see these verses as an earlier bit of tradition (probably E) picked up by the priests, since these verses do not quite fit into their context. Nothing is said of the people's previous complaint in these verses, and Aaron is not mentioned at all. Still, in the text before us, Exodus 16:4-5 serves to introduce the provision of the manna—not only as a source of food for Israel, but as a test of Israel's obedience. The Lord will provide "bread from heaven" (verse 4)—but just enough for one day at a time. Only on the sixth day is more given: twice as much, so the people will not have to gather on the sabbath.

Verses 6-12. Moses and Aaron refuse to accept the responsibility the people's complaining lays on them. "Your complaining is not against us but against the LORD" (verse 8), they say—and the Lord intends to do something about it. As Aaron is speaking, the congregation looks toward the wilderness; and all of them see the glory of the Lord, present in the cloud (verse 10). God responds to the people's complaint in person! And through Moses, the Lord replies to their outcry: "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God" (verse 12).

Verses 13-21. That evening, the camp is covered by a flock of quail. The quail are also mentioned prominently in the E text of Numbers 11, though in a very different way. In Exodus 16, quail are given together with the manna as another way that the Lord provides food for Israel. But in Numbers 11, the provision of quail is a judgment against the Israelites, who have complained of having nothing but the manna to eat. The Lord sends the Israelites so much quail they become sick of it, and a plague breaks out among the people (Numbers 11:18-34). By seeing the quail not as punishment but as provision, the P tradition in our passage again bears witness to the grace and goodness of God.

The next morning there is a heavy dew, which lifts to reveal "a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground" (Exodus 16:14). The Israelites ask, "What is it?" (Hebrew *man hu*); to which Moses replies, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat" (verse 15). According to this text, the marvelous food provided by God got its name from the people's question. The "manna" is, literally, "whatsit!" Deuteronomy 8:3 makes a theological point of the manna's unknown quality: "He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors was acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."

The NRSV translation of the Book of Deuteronomy suggests that this famous phrase could perhaps better be translated, "One does not live by bread alone, but by anything that the LORD decrees." The strangeness of the manna was itself a test: Would Israel submit to living on whatever the Lord provided, even this "whatsit"? Someone has said that it was a brave soul who first ate an oyster, but what about those who steeled themselves to eat this white stuff left by the rising dew? Still, the Israelites pitched in, gathering the manna as the Lord commanded.

According to some, the manna has a natural explanation. At the end of May and through the month of June, a tree that grows in the west Sinai peninsula (*tamarix gallica mannifera*, called the *turfa* by Bedouin tribes) produces a sweet, sticky substance from its twigs and leaves. This substance is still gathered and used as food by the nomads who live in the region. Notice, though, that for the writer of Exodus 16, the manna and quail are not at all ordinary. They are God's miraculous provision for God's beloved people. What matters most is the perception of the community that preserved this tradition and passed it along to future generations; We were hungry, we cried out to the Lord, and the Lord answered us.

The manna is provided for all the people of Israel, equally. Everyone who gathers gets just enough; no one has more than anyone else. The manna remains on the ground only long enough for each family to gather what it needs. Then it melts away in the morning heat (verse 21). There is no opportunity for anyone to corner the manna market! Indeed, those who attempt to hoard the manna quickly learn their lesson; overnight, "it bred worms and became foul" (verse 20).

Verses 22-30. The exception to this rule was that every week, on the sixth day, sufficient manna could be gathered for two days; and the leftover manna did not rot overnight. In this way, the sanctity of the seventh day, "a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD" (verse 23), was preserved. Once again, the miracle is also a test of Israel's obedience; and, once again, some fail. They go out on the morning of the sabbath prepared to gather more manna, only to find that there is none. Through his prophet Moses the LORD says, "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The LORD has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not

leave your place on the seventh day" (verses 28-29). For Israel's priests, sabbath rest is a privilege to be enjoyed and celebrated. The sabbath is God's gift to Israel; to refuse this gift is to deny God.

Verses 31-34. These verses seem to presuppose a later situation, after the building of the sacred ark of the covenant (described in Exodus 37:1-9). The ark was an elaborately decorated box that contained the covenant (Hebrew *eduth*)—that is, the text of the treaty or agreement established between God and Israel on Sinai. Aaron placed a jar of manna into the ark, next to this sacred document, to remind future generations how the Lord fed the people of Israel in the wilderness (verses 32-34). Thus the ark reminds Israel to keep the Lord's covenant and also reminds them why: The Lord delivered them from bondage and cared for them in the wilderness; the Lord has been faithful to them; they also must be faithful to the Lord.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to trust you to provide for our needs; and guide us that we might attend to the needs of others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Credits

Our *Year Through The Bible* curriculum has been adapted from "Complete Bible Lessons for Adults," edited by Delia Halverson. The plans in that product were adapted from *Adult Bible Studies* 1992 – 1998 (ISSN 0149-8347), which were published quarterly by Cokesbury, The United Methodist Publishing House, 201 Eighth Ave. South, PO Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202-0801.

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.