

## Bible Study # 27 Exodus 16.1–21 03–10–2021

This whole chapter dedicates its attention to the food that God provided for Israel. It also contains an account of the grumbling of the people against Moses and Aaron, that they rightly regarded as grumbling against the Lord (v. 8). The attitude of Israel to their experiences in their desert journey is picked up in some of the historical psalm.

They accepted the miraculous provision of water, but queried whether food would be provided: They said: ‘Can God spread a table in the desert? ... Can he also give us food? Can he supply meat for his people?’ (Ps. 78:19-20; cf. Jude 5). This attitude was one of unbelief and disobedience (Ps. 78:21-22). In spite of receiving ‘the bread of angels’ and ‘meat’ from heaven, the people kept on sinning (Ps. 78:32).

While the people forgot God, He did not forget them, ‘for he remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham. He brought out his people with rejoicing, his chosen ones with shouts of joy’ (Ps. 105: 42-43). The characters of God and of Israel are both delineated here with clarity.

The chapter opens with a note relating how Israel left Elim and came to the Desert of Sin. This location is mentioned again in Exodus 17:1 and Numbers 33:11-12, but it cannot now be identified with precision. The name may be derived from ‘Sinai’ but that cannot be confirmed.

An additional note gives the time of this move as the middle of the second month after leaving Egypt. The exodus from Egypt had earlier been set as in the month of Abib (13:4). Abib roughly equates to March, and so this event was approximately six weeks later.

At the Desert of Sin Moses and Aaron were faced with rebellion on the part of the people as a whole (‘all the congregation of the children of Israel’). A collective grumbling took place because of the lack of food. They wished that the Lord had killed them in Egypt.

Reminiscing, they recalled the times they had eaten abundantly all that they wanted, while their present experience was going to mean their death through famine. God’s response was to promise a continuing supply of bread from heaven. Each day the people were to go out and collect sufficient for that day.

The testing of the people was twofold. On the one hand, they had to trust God for the gift of food. On the other hand, they had to trust that after gathering a day’s supply, they could be assured that on the next day similar provision would occur. Conformity to God’s law was what was required. They also had to continue to observe the Sabbath by gathering sufficient food for it on the sixth day. The Sabbath was a creation ordinance (Gen. 2:2-3) that was kept even before it was formally incorporated in the prescriptive law for Israel (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15).

The Lord’s message was communicated to the people by Moses and Aaron. What was to happen about provision of food would be evidence that it was the Lord indeed who redeemed them from slavery, and a demonstration of His glory.

Evening and morning supplies were evidence that He had heard their grumbling and was responding to their need. Moses and Aaron were insignificant as compared with the Lord, and hence they indicated that by their question: ‘Who are we, that you should grumble against us?’ (v. 7).

The message of verses 6-7 was given again by Moses. Evening and morning a copious supply of meat and bread would completely meet their wants. This was God’s response to their grumbling, and the words make plain what Moses and Aaron had already implied (v. 7).

Moses instructed Aaron call the entire community to gather before the Lord. The terminology, ‘draw near before the LORD’ (yhwh), is part of the language of worship and service, and as ‘before the LORD’ (yhwh) appears in Leviticus 9:5 and 16:1 in connection with sacrifice. He had not finished speaking to them when they looked towards the desert and saw a revelation of God in the form of divine glory appearing in the cloud.

This visual manifestation of God was accompanied by words of explanation. Once more, God declared His knowledge of the grumbling of the Israelites. The response was that he was making provision for their physical needs by providing meat in the evening and bread in the morning. This was emphatic confirmation that it was indeed the LORD (yhwh), who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and now was meeting their daily needs.

Verses 13–14 record the actual provision of food, though some of the Hebrew vocabulary is rare. Hence, English translations can differ quite significantly. First, the same Hebrew verb is used twice at the start of both verses. In verse 13 it means ‘to go up’, while in verse 14 it means ‘to disappear’, as in Genesis 17:22 and 35:13.

Secondly, the word translated quail only appears here and in Numbers 11:31-32 and Psalm 105:40. Thirdly, the word usually translated ‘layer [of dew]’ more often denotes ‘falling’, as in the expression ‘falling of seed’ (semen; Lev. 15:16, 32; 22:4), though here in this context ‘layer’ seems quite appropriate.

Fourthly, the word translated, ‘fine flake–like thing’ appears twice in verse 14, ‘fine flake-like thing’, ‘fine as the hoarfrost’ (nasb). Its use in reference to dust in Isaiah 40:15 suggests an English word like ‘fine’ rather than the more common ‘thin’. Fifthly, the word translated by the NIV as ‘thin flakes’ only appears here in the Bible. Sixthly, ‘hoar frost’ is also a rare word, only occurring here and in Psalm 147:16 and Job 38:29.

Even with all these unusual features the main sense of the verses is clear. God provided for his people both meat and bread. The latter was ‘food from heaven’ (v. 4; Ps. 78:24; John 6:33) and the ‘bread of angels’ (Ps. 78:25). There is no point in trying to identify some natural phenomenon to account for this gift of God. Further description of it is given in verse 31.

The sight of the manna in particular caused questioning among the Israelites. It was an unknown phenomenon and so they asked each other, ‘What is it?’ Moses’ answer to the question was that it was food given by the Lord. He also relayed to the people the Lord’s instruction regarding gathering the manna. According to the head count, they were to gather just as much as each one needed. The amount for each person was to be an omer, which was approximately two litres. The same measurement is given in verses 18, 32, 33, and 36.

The Hebrew for the question, ‘What Is it?’ is mān’ hû’ when transliterated into English. As you read it you can see how the original question became the name of this unknown substance—manna.

The people followed the instructions that Moses gave, and this meant that some gathered more than others. Some gathered a lot while others gathered little. But then the point is made emphatically that what was gathered was exactly appropriate to the needs of the individual so that there was no waste at all.

Paul quoted verse 18 when writing to the church at Corinth (2 Cor. 8:15) to reinforce the point that this served as an illustration of how Christians should share with one another when the need arose.

The Lord’s instruction was that the people were to go out each day and only gather enough for that day (v. 4). However, even after Moses told them not to retain any of it overnight, this warning was disregarded. What was retained became infected with maggots and stank, and the people’s disobedience incurred Moses’ anger. The manna did not last all day, for when the sun was really hot, it melted away.

We will continue tomorrow with Exodus 16.22–36.