



Exodus - Chapter Sixteen

I. Exodus 1:1-18:27 - The Exodus of Israel from Egypt (continues)

I.e Exodus 15:22-18:27 - The Journey (continues)

Summary of Chapter Sixteen

About four weeks after leaving Egypt the Israelites were journeying in the wilderness of sin between Elim and Sinai. Once again they started grumbling to Moses, this time about the lack of food. They were reminded by Moses and Aaron that they were, in fact, complaining to the Lord.

As the glory of the Lord appeared, the Israelites gathered before him. He promised them meat at twilight and bread each morning and, as promised, they had quail that evening and in the morning this strange flaky bread appeared on the ground. The Israelites were commanded to go out each morning and gather only enough bread that was needed for each family for each day. The bread melted as the sun grew hot and any surplus bread that the Israelites tried to keep overnight was eaten by worms and was foul. But on the sixth day they were commanded to gather enough bread for two days so they would not have to gather it on the Sabbath. This bread remained fresh for the two days. Everyone who did as the Lord commanded had enough food to eat.

There were those who disobeyed the Lord and went out looking for the bread on the Sabbath but there was none. The Israelites ate this bread, which they called manna, each day for the next forty years. In accordance with the Lord's instruction, an omer of manna was stored in a jar to be kept for perpetuity. This bread never went stale or became infested with worms!

I.e.ii Exodus 16:1-36 - Bread from Heaven

After setting out from Elim, Israel complains against Moses for lack of food; in response, the Lord graciously provides both manna and quail. The provision of manna includes instructions about gathering it that will shape Israel's life in the pattern of work and rest, as will be revealed more fully at Mount Sinai.

¹ The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ² The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

Exodus 16:1-2

On the fifteenth day of the second month. This marked one lunar month after leaving Egypt, since they left on the fifteenth of the first month (12:18).

The wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai. They came out from Elim, an oasis of rest and comfort (15:27). They headed towards Sinai, a place to meet with God and receive his law. In between Elim and Sinai was the wilderness of Sin. In the original text the name Wilderness of Sin has nothing to do with sin and could just as easily be translated Wilderness of Zin. Yet as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that this wilderness had a lot to do with sin.

Although the people complained against Moses and Aaron, Moses will make it clear that their complaint is really against, and is heard by, the Lord. They complained because they did not have enough food. The supplies they carried with them from Egypt began to run out, and they had to be sustained in the wilderness. Paul advises the Corinthians, and indeed the church today, against such complaints: *<<And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer>>* (1 Corinthians 10:10)

It would seem that starvation was more anticipated than experienced. In other words, they did not live through weeks and weeks of famine, nor did they see their family and friends die of malnutrition, or even have to kill all their livestock for food. Instead they started to feel hungry and anticipated starvation. They went from singing to complaining very quickly.

³ The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'

Exodus 16:3

The theme by the hand of the Lord describes how the Lord delivered Israel; refer also to 6:1, 7:4-5, and 13:3. When the people of Israel wish that they had died by his hand rather than being delivered by it, they show that they have not understood what his power on their behalf reveals about his person and the fulfilment of his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This incident is not the first time they have longed for what they had in Egypt, refer to 14:12, and it foreshadows another such incident during the period of wandering in the wilderness; as seen in: <<*The people quarrelled with Moses and said, 'Would that we had died when our kindred died before the Lord! Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place? It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink'*>> (Numbers 20:3-5).

When we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread. Israel selectively remembered the past and thought of their time in Egypt as a good time. They lost sight of God's future for them, and they also twisted the past to support their complaining. This thinking is common among those who complain. The Psalmists reveals the reality of the situation: <<*But they had a wanton craving in the wilderness, and put God to the test in the desert*>> (Psalm 106:14). Of course, the Egyptians themselves had known much more difficult times and God had provided for them too, through Joseph: <<*When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, 'Give us food! Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone'*>> (Genesis 47:15).

For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. This is another common practice among those who complain. They insisted that Moses and Aaron had bad or evil intentions. Of course, Moses and Aaron had no interest in killing the people of Israel, and this was a horrible accusation to make. Yet a complaining heart often finds it easy to accuse the person they complain against of the worst motives.

⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵ On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.'

Exodus 16:4-5

The provision of bread from heaven was meant to signify not simply the satisfaction of Israel's physical needs but also that their whole lives were to be

sustained by the Lord and governed by his word: In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. Moses makes this point clear to the next generation in Deuteronomy 8:3, and in response to the request for a manna-like sign shortly after he has fed five thousand, Jesus makes the same point about himself when he says: <<*I am the bread that came down from heaven*>> (John 6:41b), which he expands on in John 6:43-58.

I will test them. The blessing of bread from heaven came with the responsibility of obedience. This responsibility would test Israel and measure their obedience. The test came on the sixth day, when they were to gather twice as much, so the seventh day could be received as a day of rest. Further promises of such blessing would come when the law was given: <<*I will order my blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will yield a crop for three years*>> (Leviticus 25:21).

The people shall go out and gather enough for that day. God promised to send bread from heaven, but he did not promise to drop it into their mouths. They still had to go out and gather what they needed for every day.

⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, ‘In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?’ ⁸ And Moses said, ‘When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him – what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.’

Exodus 16:6-8

Although the plagues are described to Pharaoh as taking place so that the Egyptians would know ‘that I am the Lord’, refer to the comment made on 7:5, the Lord first said that the signs would serve a similar purpose for Israel, refer to 6:7 and 10:2, and their complaints against Moses bear evidence that they are still in need of coming to know and appropriate that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

Moses repeatedly stresses that the people’s complaining is both against the Lord and heard by him, regardless of how they choose to describe their situation.

Since the people are responding to the Lord’s power as if it is disconnected from his person, Moses says that they shall see the glory of the Lord, which is a manifestation of his presence known as *Shekhinah*; refer to 24:16-17 and 40:34-35.

God reveals his glory on many occasions, including: <<*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle*>> (**Exodus**

40:34), <<And Moses said, ‘This is the thing that the Lord commanded you to do, so that the glory of the Lord may appear to you’>> (Leviticus 9:6), <<And when the congregation had assembled against them, Moses and Aaron turned towards the tent of meeting; the cloud had covered it and the glory of the Lord appeared>> (Numbers 16:42), <<And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord>> (1 Kings 8:10-11), <<And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’>> (Isaiah 6:3), <<But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea>> (Habakkuk 2:14).

When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening. At v.4 God promised to give bread from heaven in the morning. Here he also promised to give meat to eat in the evening.

⁹ Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, “Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.”’ ¹⁰ And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. ¹¹ The Lord spoke to Moses and said, ¹² ‘I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, “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.”’

Exodus 16:9-12

The glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses. It’s difficult to know if everyone heard the Lord speak to Moses, or if Moses alone heard this. Certainly, everyone knew God spoke to Moses because of the display of glory, but it is not known if they could hear what the Lord said to him.

Certainly those on the Road to Damascus with Paul saw the light and heard the sound but could not understand the words: <<Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’ The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one>> (Acts 9:3-7).

I have heard the complaining of the Israelites. Since Moses already knew this based on vv.4-5, these words give more weight to the idea that God said this publically, more for the benefit of Israel than for the benefit of Moses.

¹³ In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.

Exodus 16:13-14

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp. In a miraculous way, God provided Israel with plenty of meat in the wilderness. This was a significant display of the grace and mercy of God. When Israel complained God could have answered with judgement or discipline, and he gave them meat instead.

The quails mentioned here migrate regularly between southern Europe and Arabia across the Sinai Peninsula. They are small, bullet-headed birds, with a strong but low flight, usually roosting on the ground or in the low bushes at nightfall. When exhausted, they would be unable to take off again. The birds are good for eating, and were a favourite delicacy of the Egyptians.

A fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. The bread from heaven came with the dew each morning, as some kind of residue from the dew. It was small, round and fine as frost on the ground. Therefore, it was not easy to gather. It had to be swept up from the ground. The purpose for giving the bread from heaven was not only to provide for the material needs of Israel, but also to teach them eternal lessons of dependence on God. This is demonstrated in passages like: *<<He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were 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>>* (Deuteronomy 8:3). When God puts someone in a place of need, he wants to do more than meet the need. He wants to teach eternal lessons. Feeding Israel through the bread from heaven was an example of God's way of cooperating with man. Israel could not produce the manna and God would not gather it for them. Each had to do their part.

Verse 31 further describes the bread from heaven as like coriander seed, which is about the size of a sesame seed, and sweet like honey. Numbers 11:7 says it was the colour of bdellium or gum resin, a pearl-like colour. It was either baked or boiled (v.23). Numbers 11:8 says that they ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pots, and made cakes of it; and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil.

Jewish legends supposedly reveal what this bread from heaven tasted like. 'One only had to desire a certain dish, and no sooner had he thought of it, than manna had the flavour of the dish desired. The same food had a different taste to everyone who partook of it, according to his age; to the little children, it tasted like milk, to the strong youths like bread, to the old men like honey, to

the sick like barley steeped in oil and honey.’ But they also wrote that manna was bitter in the mouth of Gentiles. Jewish legends also supposedly reveal how they could sweep it up off the desert floor and not have dirt in it. These legends say that when God sent manna, he first sent a north wind to sweep the floor of the desert and then a rain to wash it clean. Then the manna descended on clean ground. None of this, of course, is revealed in the biblical texts.

It is difficult to precisely identify what this substance was. Some researchers identify it with what the Arabs today call *mann*, which is formed when a tiny insect punctures the bark of the tamarisk tree, drinks the sap, and exudes a clear liquid that solidifies as a sugary globule when it hits the ground. When the sun comes up, it melts quickly and disappears. Although the bread from heaven may have been similar to the modern day *mann* in the Sinai Peninsula, it was not the same thing. The modern day *mann* never appears in great quantities, it does not last year round, and it is confined to a small geographic region.

¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

Exodus 16:15

For they did not know what it was. God provided for them, but they did not recognise it: <<*He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good*>> (Deuteronomy 8:15b-16). When God’s provision comes, one often does not recognise it. God met the needs of Israel but he did it in a way they did not expect.

It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. The name ‘manna’ appears to be related by similar sound to the expression ‘What is it?’ God gave them what they needed in order to survive in the wilderness. This included both their physical and spiritual needs: <<*You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst*>> (Nehemiah 9:20).

¹⁶ This is what the Lord has commanded: “Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.” ¹⁷ The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. ¹⁸ But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. ¹⁹ And Moses said to them, ‘Let no one leave any of it over until morning.’

Exodus 16:16-19

Gather as much of it as each of you needs. The bread from heaven was to be gathered on an individual or a family needs basis. God did not command the creation of a tribal manna gathering and distribution centre. Every household had to provide for itself, and a rich family could not hire a poor family to do their work for them.

An omer to a person. An omer could be as much as a gallon, especially in the later history of Israel. But at this early point in Israel's history it may have meant only a cupful. It is an imprecise measure.

Gathered much, gathered little. Paul cites this text to encourage the Corinthian Christians to give generously for the poor Jewish Christians in Judæa: <<*As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little'*>> (2 Corinthians 8:15); there is no point in hoarding the good gifts of God.

²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them.

²¹ Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

Exodus 16:20-21

An integral aspect to Israel showing that they will walk in the law of the Lord (v.4) is whether or not they will listen to Moses, whom the Lord has chosen to lead them. Obedience, or the lack of it, can be demonstrated in many ways.

Bred worms and became foul. God only intended it to last for the one day, except for the sixth day, so he ensured that it would be destroyed if not consumed within the intended timeframe.

Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed. The bad experience of their disobedience led them reluctantly to obedience. It should be noted that the provision was based on need and not on desire.

But when the sun grew hot, it melted. Apparently the bread from heaven had to be gathered and prepared early in the morning. This was God's gracious way of ensuring a good work ethic within the nation of Israel.

Introduction to Exodus 16:22-30

The instructions for gathering manna for six days and resting on the seventh as a holy Sabbath (v.23) begin to shape Israel in the pattern of regular work and rest that the Lord will reveal further to Moses through the fourth commandment: <<*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour*

and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it>> (Exodus 20:8-11); refer also to 31:13-17. This pattern embodies trust in the Lord's provision for something Israel has no part in producing; later, when Israel has settled in the land and is depending more on its own labour, the regular Sabbath rest will be seen as an expression of divine mercy.

²² On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, ²³ he said to them, 'This is what the Lord has commanded: "Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning."'²⁴ So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. ²⁵ Moses said, 'Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. ²⁶ For six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.'

Exodus 16:22-26

On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food. God promised to provide twice as much on the sixth day, and he did. Perhaps this came as somewhat of a surprise to the people of Israel, because they felt they had to report it to Moses, i.e. the congregation came and told Moses.

Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord. This was the first time God spoke to Israel about the Sabbath. God essentially forced them to honour the Sabbath by not providing any bread from heaven on the Sabbath day, i.e. today you will not find it in the field. It also provided a much needed break from work and travel, and a time for family and community relationship.

The contrast between the manna that people saved until morning on other days (v.20) and what they kept for the Sabbath, i.e. the manna would become foul and be infested with worms, illustrates that the manna's condition is controlled, as their lives should be, by the word of the Lord.

²⁷ On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. ²⁸ The Lord said to Moses, 'How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions?' ²⁹ 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.’³⁰ So the people rested on the seventh day.

Exodus 16:27-30

How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? God, of course, knew that the people would be disobedient, just as Adam had been in the Garden of Eden. The question is therefore rhetorical. It would be Israel that would pay the price for their disobedience: <<*Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons, for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High*>> (Psalm 107:10-11), and: <<*You brought your people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs and wonders, with a strong hand and outstretched arm, and with great terror; and you gave them this land, which you swore to their ancestors to give them, a land flowing with milk and honey; and they entered and took possession of it. But they did not obey your voice or follow your law; of all you commanded them to do, they did nothing. Therefore you have made all these disasters come upon them*>> (Jeremiah 32:21-23).

On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. Despite what God said, some went looking for bread from heaven when he said there would be none. Some will only learn by personal experience. God’s word was true and they found none. This was a powerful lesson, teaching Israel to trust what God said before they had proven it true in experience. People today still look for life and fulfilment in places in which God has said there would be none.

³¹ The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey. ³² Moses said, ‘This is what the Lord has commanded: “Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, in order that they may see the food with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.”’ ³³ And Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the Lord, to be kept throughout your generations.’ ³⁴ As the Lord commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the covenant, for safe-keeping.

Exodus 16:31-34

The house of Israel called it manna. Manna means ‘what is it?’ and is related to the question posed by the Israelites in v.15.

It was like coriander seed, white. This refers to the small size of the particles of the bread from heaven. It meant that it had to be humbly, carefully gathered.

The taste of it was like wafers made with honey. God gave Israel good tasting food. He did not give them tasteless gruel or pasty porridge. Since it could be baked like bread or cake, eating manna was like eating sweet bread every day.

These verses contain instructions about keeping a jar of manna and placing it before the Lord, which is described as being carried out when Aaron placed it before the covenant. The covenant refers to the two tablets of the Ten Commandments, refer to 31:18 and 34:28-29, that will be placed in the ark (25:16), which at this point in the narrative has not yet been built; refer to 25:10-22 and 37:1-9. Its presence in the ark is later confirmed in the NT: <<*In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant*>> (Hebrews 9:4).

³⁵ The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan. ³⁶ An omer is a tenth of an ephah.

Exodus 16:35-36

The reference to the fact that Israel ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan indicates that at least this verse was written after Israel had finished its wandering in the wilderness, which is confirmed by: <<*The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year*>> (Joshua 5:12). As important as it was for God to provide this bread from heaven, it was also important for God to stop providing it. It was essential that Israel be put again in the position to receive God's more normal provision, through hard work, which in itself is a blessing of God.

An omer is a tenth of an ephah. This clarification does not help the reader fully determine the amount of an omer today. However, this explanation would have been meaningful to early readers and is alluded to elsewhere when the laws for sacrificial offering were introduced: <<*But if you cannot afford two turtle-doves or two pigeons, you shall bring as your offering for the sin that you have committed one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour for a sin-offering; you shall not put oil on it or lay frankincense on it, for it is a sin-offering*>> (Leviticus 5:11), <<*This is the offering that Aaron and his sons shall offer to the Lord on the day when he is anointed: one-tenth of an ephah of choice flour as a regular offering, half of it in the morning and half in the evening*>> (Leviticus 6:20), <<*And he shall bring the offering required for her, one-tenth of an ephah of barley flour. He shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain-offering of jealousy, a grain-offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance*>> (Numbers 5:15b).

This manna, this bread from heaven, is a powerful picture of Jesus himself. After the feeding of the 5,000 Jesus had a discussion with people who wanted him to keep on feeding them with his miraculous power. They wanted Jesus to provide for them just as Israel was provided for with manna in the wilderness. This is what Jesus said in reply: <<*Then Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world'*>> (John 6:32-33).

Jesus is the bread from heaven and he has to be received in a similar way that Israel received the manna. The recipient needs:

- To be aware of their need, i.e. be hungry for Christ.
- To receive Christ for himself, family by family.
- To seek Christ every day.
- To seek Christ humbly, perhaps even on their knees.
- To seek Christ with gratitude, knowing that they do not deserve it.
- To taste Christ, taking the gift inside, into their innermost being.