

Sin in the wilderness of Sin

(Exodus 16:1–7)

We have seen that near the end of chapter 15 God had supplied abundantly for the needs of the Hebrew people. They had grumbled because of bitter water, but God made the water sweet. In the final verse of that chapter we viewed a people who must have been quite content at the site of Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy date palms. All was well with Israel—or was it? Unfortunately, the writer brings us back to the refrain of the wanderings—the faithlessness of Israel.

16:1. And they journeyed from Elim and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they came out from the land of Egypt.

According to Numbers 33:10, after the Hebrews left Elim they then returned to camp by the yām sūph (Red Sea). In other words, the people had passed through the Red Sea, had encamped at Marah and Elim, and now they set up camp at a more southerly place next to the Red Sea. This southern route was one of the principal roads for Egyptian mining expeditions during the Middle and New Kingdoms (c. the twentieth to twelfth centuries B.C.). We know that Semites participated in these expeditions. The Hebrews who had been in Egypt for four centuries would most certainly have known of this route.

A clash between the escaping Israelites and Egyptian mining expeditions was not inevitable. Egyptian activity at the mines occurred primarily during the months of January to March, while the Hebrews were traversing the territory after April. According to Exodus 13:4, Israel left Egypt during the month of Abib (around March), and according to the present verse they reached the mining area a month and a half later.

16:2. All the congregation of the children of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron in the wilderness.

This complaint is more severe and more widespread than the grumbling of which we read in 15:22–26. First, the outcry of the people is not now merely directed at Moses (as on the earlier occasion), but against his brother as well. Secondly, in 15:24 it was the generic ‘the people’ who lodged a complaint. Here ‘the entire congregation of the children of Israel’ deplore and protest against the present conditions. Finally, whereas the incident in chapter 15 begins with a description of a need followed by murmuring on the part of the people, this passage does the opposite. The author ‘begins with the grumbling and thus casts the complaint immediately in a negative light’. Unbelief and sedition are becoming habitual for the Israelites.

16:3. And the children of Israel said to them, ‘Would that we had died by the hand of Yahweh in the land of Egypt when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full—because you have brought us forth to this wilderness to kill all this assembly with hunger.’

Although the assault is directed at Moses and Aaron, in the final analysis the Hebrews are grumbling against Yahweh. They doubt God’s care for them and thus cast aspersions on his power. These facts result in hostile opposition to his leaders in whom he has invested authority. This is a very serious act of open rebellion. In fact, verse 3 narrates treasonable words: ‘Would that we had died by Yahweh’s hand!’ The very hand that had destroyed the Egyptians (15:6) and that had delivered Israel is now blamed because it did not destroy Israel!

Their complaint is spelled out. The Hebrews crave two things: meat and bread. They argue that Egypt was better than what they have now. There they ate meat and bread ‘to the full’, a term that reflects the idea of satisfaction. Really? How well do they remember Egypt? Is this honestly how Pharaoh treated them? This point goes to the very heart of the exodus story: was Pharaoh’s servitude easier to bear and more comforting than that of Yahweh? (Ironically, the Israelites are now groaning under Yahweh’s service as they did under Pharaoh’s.)

The discourse of the Israelites actually begins with the interrogative ‘Who?’ However, when that particle is followed by an imperfective verb it expresses a wish. Thus it is correctly translated, ‘Would that ...’ (cf. Num. 11:29).

16:4. And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion in its day—in order that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not.’

When the Hebrews groaned under the slavery of Egypt, Pharaoh took straw from them to make their lives harder. Yahweh responds to the complaining by abundantly providing for them. He promises to ‘rain bread from heaven’. This is another miraculous sign that God is with his people; it is a concession to a people who live by sight.

However, it is not a gift that arrives with no strings attached. God is going to test the Hebrews in order to refine their characters into obedience. Deuteronomy 8:16 declares, ‘In the wilderness he fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and that he might test you, to do good for you in the end.’ It is to teach God’s people to depend upon him.

The test for Israel is stated in general terms at the close of the verse. The question is, will Israel ‘walk in my law’ (literally, ‘go in my Torah’) or not? One of the specific laws is also revealed: the Israelites are to go out to the fields daily and bring in enough bread for daily consumption.

16:5. ‘It shall be on the sixth day that they shall prepare what they bring in, and it shall be twice what they gather daily.’

The second specification of the law is that five days a week the Hebrews are to gather bread for each day, but the sixth and seventh days are to be different. On the sixth day they are to collect a double portion of bread, so that they will have enough for the next day as well. Work on the seventh day is not allowed.

Sabbath laws predate the giving of the Sinaitic legal code. That is not a problem because they reflect the creation account of Genesis 2:1–3. Sabbath is a creation ordinance.

No concept of Sabbath rest has been found in ancient Egypt. That fact underscores the differences between Yahweh and Pharaoh: the God of the Old Testament is compassionate and caring towards his people. Pharaoh was merely a burdensome taskmaster. That is why the recitation of the Sabbath law in the version of the decalogue recorded in Deuteronomy stresses its purpose as commemorating Israel’s deliverance from slavery (Deut. 5:15).

16:6–7. And Moses and Aaron said to all the children of Israel, ‘At evening you will know that Yahweh brought you forth from the land of Egypt; and at morning you will see the glory of Yahweh, because he has heard your grumblings against Yahweh. And what are we, that you grumble against us?’

Two physical signs will be given to Israel so that the people will cease their grumbling and see the foolishness of their ways. The first sign is that the Hebrews will receive food that very evening—probably the meat mentioned in verse 8 (cf. the use of ‘evening’ in both verses). A second sign will occur in the morning: ‘the glory of Yahweh’, the Shekinah glory, will make an appearance before the people. In verses 9–10 the presence of Yahweh manifests itself in the cloud that had been leading the Hebrews through the wilderness. It is also in the morning that bread is miraculously given to the people (16:13).

Moses and Aaron rightfully discern the hearts of the people. The Israelites’ fight is with Yahweh because it is he who is leading them out of Egypt. They are venting their anger at the two prophets unjustifiably, and thus they are hiding their unbelief in, and unfaithfulness to, Yahweh.

Application

The Hebrews were worrying about not having any food and wishing that they had died in Egypt. They remembered, perhaps falsely, that in slavery they had food in abundance. Now they had nothing. They were very anxious about their lives. These were people who could have benefited from Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said, ‘For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?... Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own’ (Matt. 6:25, 34).

Are we not like the Hebrews? We often find ourselves in difficult situations, and we grow anxious and we look back, full of regrets and wishing things had turned out differently. In reality, such attitudes display a keen lack of trust in the sovereignty of God and in the idea that his plan is being worked out in heaven and upon earth. Certainly we should regret our sin and repent of it, but we should also realize that God's will is coming to pass and it can happen in no other way.

In addition, we need to understand that God will test us as he tested Israel. And such trials may have great benefits for us as Christians, such as increasing our trust and dependence upon God, or bringing us back to the godly way of living and thinking, or they may be for a myriad of other reasons. So let us not rebel when things become difficult, but let us rather go to God in prayer and serve him with all our hearts, souls and minds.