

The mouth of the Lord has spoken (Isa. 58:13–14).

Commemorating the provision of manna

(Exodus 16:31–36)

The biblical author now inserts some editorial comments regarding the provision of manna throughout the remainder of the wilderness wanderings. He first gives a further description of the nature of the manna. An explanation of the length of time during which manna was eaten then follows. Finally, Moses comments upon the manna as a symbolic reminder of God's goodness to Israel in the wilderness.

16:31. And the house of Israel called its name manna; it was white like coriander seed and its taste like wafers in honey.

This editorial section opens by recounting and adding to previous material from chapter 16. First, it mentions the naming of the manna which was related earlier in verses 14–16. The main difference is that now the Hebrews are called, literally, 'the house of Israel'. That title appears in the Bible for the first time here. But it is not out of place: the idea of 'house' being used of a group of people is not new to Exodus (see 2:1). In addition, the designation is common in the Torah (Exod. 40:38; Lev. 10:6; 17:3, 8, 10; Num. 20:29). So the Septuagint's translation 'the children of Israel' is misplaced.

Secondly, the verse provides another description of the manna (see verse 14). It agrees with the account of Numbers 11:7–8, but more detail is provided here.

16:32. And Moses said, 'This is the word which Yahweh commanded, "Take an omerful of it to keep throughout your generations, so that they might see the bread with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you from the land of Egypt."'

Yahweh directs the Hebrews to preserve one omer of manna—the amount of a daily ration—for future generations to see. This has a didactic purpose. It is to serve as a vivid reminder, a memorial, of God's aid to the Israelites in their time of need. As Coats remarks, 'The manna stands here as a symbol of a positive relationship between God and his people during the wilderness period.'

The form of the verb 'to eat' is a Hiphil causative, and thus it takes an active meaning—'to feed' someone with something.

At the beginning of the Lord's command there is no verb; it literally says in the Masoretic Text, 'the fulness of an omer'. The lack of a verb caused the Septuagint and Targum translators to read the noun 'fulness' rather as an imperative verbal form, 'Fill!' The latter reading makes the passage clearer in meaning.

16:33. And Moses said to Aaron, 'Take one jar and put in it an omerful of manna and place it before Yahweh to keep throughout your generations.'

The verse opens with the command (imperative form), literally, 'Take one jar.' Indefinite nouns in Hebrew are normally left unmarked, but occasionally indefinite nouns can carry the adjective 'one' (for further examples, see Judg. 9:53; 13:2; 1 Sam. 1:1; 7:9, 12).

This is the only occurrence of the Hebrew word translated 'jar'. The Septuagint translates it as 'vessel'. It may be related to an Aramaic word which means 'basket'. In any event, the word signifies some type of receptacle.

Moses' order does not date from the time when the manna was first given. The wording, 'place it before Yahweh', implies that a priesthood exists and that a sanctuary is in operation—a point that is confirmed by the next verse. Such circumstances did not exist until after the law was provided on Mount Sinai.

Repetition of the phrase, 'to be kept for the generations to come', from verse 32, is for emphasis. It underscores the purpose of the ritual: it is to teach future generations of Israel how God provided for his people.

16:34. As Yahweh commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the Testimony to keep.

Moses now dictates that his brother (later to be the high priest) set the jar of manna before 'the Testimony'. That term is often used in the Torah of the tabernacle containing the ark of the testimony (see Exod. 38:21; Num. 1:50, 53; 10:11). This reference to it has long been recognized as anachronistic,

because neither the tabernacle nor the ark has yet been built. Early commentators regard the verse either as anticipatory or prophetic. In reality, it is Moses simply inserting this material when he wrote the book of Exodus to show that the Israelites did fulfil the commands God gave them at the time of the provision of the manna.

This is the third time the Hebrew infinitive 'to keep' appears, and it occurs in three verses in a row. This is for emphasis, in order to accentuate the preservation of the manna as a teaching tool for Israel's posterity.

16:35. And the children of Israel ate the manna forty years until coming to an inhabited land; they ate the manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.

This editorial remark takes the reader even further into the future to the point at which the manna ceased to be provided for Israel. Joshua 5:12 defines that moment: 'And the manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land, so that the sons of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate some of the yield of the land of Canaan during that year.'

The period of forty years in the wilderness is historical, but also perhaps symbolical. Often the number 'forty' signifies a period of adversity and trial (see Gen. 7:12; 1 Sam. 17:16; Matt. 4:2). The testing of Israel is a central concept of the wilderness wanderings and God's provision of manna (see 16:4).

16:36. And the omer is one tenth of an ephah.

See commentary on 16:16.

Application

This section underscores God's great and continual provision for the house of Israel. It is not a one-off provision, but 'a continual feast', to quote Matthew Henry. Manna rained from heaven for forty years, and that demonstrates, in Henry's words, 'how constant the care of providence is'. And the manna never failed, even in the light of the people's ingratitude. Despite Israel's great sins of murmuring and rebellion, 'God's special bounty', as Calvin calls it, came daily and yearly. Therefore, a memorial pot of manna was to be set in the tabernacle; it was there to witness to the magnitude, the glorious nature and the graciousness of the miracle.

The church should take great encouragement from this story. As the apostle Paul comments, 'These things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come' (1 Cor. 10:11). We must always remember and believe that God is providentially caring for his church, supplying her with great bounty! And, therefore, we need to trust in him at all times and in all circumstances.