

## **Yahweh's provision (Exodus 16:8–20)**

The Lord again responds to Israel's unfaithfulness by abundantly providing for them. At issue is not a lack of water but an acute desire for food. In this section, God answers the people's grumbling by appearing to them in the cloud, and then miraculously giving them bread and meat. The scene demonstrates God's wonderful care for his people, in spite of their wicked ways.

16:8. And Moses said, '[It will happen] when Yahweh gives you in the evening meat to eat, and in the morning bread to satisfy you, because Yahweh has heard your grumbings which you are grumbling against him. And what are we? Your grumbings are not against us but against Yahweh.'

Verse 8 is basically a repetition of the previous verse—in both ideas and vocabulary. On that basis, modern scholars have claimed that it is the result of dittography (unintentional repetition of words—e.g., a scribal error), or of textual conflation (a composite reading of a text), or that it is a literary gloss (an expanded commentary or interpretation). Thus, numerous commentators want to eliminate verse 8 from the text.

Repetition, however, for the purpose of emphasis is an essential Hebrew literary device. Reiteration drives home the point of this passage: that is, Israel's grumbings are hazardous because they are ultimately directed against God Almighty! The prophets, although initially on the receiving end of the complaints, are merely the instruments of God's work—it is really against him that Israel is rebelling. The use of the negative at the end of the verse is not denying the fact that criticism has been levelled against Moses and Aaron, but rather it 'is ironic, achieving criticism by emphasizing that murmuring against God's messenger is murmuring against God'.

16:9. And Moses said to Aaron, 'Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, 'Come before Yahweh because he has heard your grumbings.'

Aaron continues to serve as Moses' spokesman. Originally a role given to Aaron in the dispute against Pharaoh, his public speaking was also sometimes addressed to the Hebrews (see 4:16).

'Come before Yahweh' is a formula often found in the Torah, and here it obviously refers to the Israelites approaching the glory cloud. Because the expression is later used in regard to Israel's drawing near to the sanctuary (Num. 16:17), Childs argues that it signifies the Tent of Meeting in the present verse. His reconstruction is incorrect because the tabernacle was not built until after the law was given at Mount Sinai (25:1–9).

16:10. And it came to pass while Aaron was speaking to all the congregation of the children of Israel that they turned to the wilderness, and behold the glory of Yahweh appeared in the cloud.

The verb 'turned' ('looked', NIV, NKJV) when followed by the preposition 'el (to) means 'to turn and look'. Apparently the Hebrews are acting according to the command that Aaron had conveyed to them in verse 9: they are coming before Yahweh whose theophonic presence is in the cloud leading the people through the wilderness.

'Cloud' has a preposition and a definite article attached to it, giving it the meaning 'in the cloud'. It is thus referring to the very cloud that had been leading them (13:21–22; 14:19–24). For a study of the glory cloud throughout Scripture, see the work of Meredith Kline.

16:11–12. Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'I have heard the grumbings of the children of Israel. Speak to them, saying, 'At twilight you shall eat meat and in the morning you shall be satisfied with bread.' And you will know that I am Yahweh your God.'

Yahweh declares that he will make the people 'satisfied' by supplying meat and bread for them. That is the same word the grumblers had used in verse 3 to describe their circumstances in Egypt. It is only Yahweh and his provisions that will truly satisfy.

Regarding the use of the dual form 'twilights', see commentary on 12:6.

The phrase, ‘You will know that I am Yahweh,’ has become idiomatic in the exodus account. It is used of the Egyptians (see 7:5, 17; 8:22; 14:4, 18), and of the Hebrews (see 6:7). One of the major points of the entire text of Exodus is the recognition of Yahweh as God over all.

16:13. And it came to pass in the evening that quail came up and covered the camp and in the morning a layer of dew was around the camp.

Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*) is for food whenever it is mentioned in the Bible. The habits of quails as we know them today fit the biblical picture. First, the bird flies mostly at night. Secondly, after migration the birds are so exhausted that they can be caught with bare hands. Lastly, during migration they make use of favourable winds: in the description of the provision of quail in Numbers 11:31 it says, ‘Now there went forth a wind from the Lord, and it brought quail from the sea ...’

Although large flocks of quail live in the Sinai Peninsula (mainly on the Mediterranean coast), the miracle of the provision of quail in Exodus and Numbers is primarily in the timing and extent of the events. The amount of quail in and around the Hebrew camp was astounding: the birds were ‘beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits deep on the surface of the ground’ (Num. 11:31). Psalm 78:27 concurs by relating that ‘He rained meat upon them like the dust, even winged fowl like the sand of the seas.’

16:14. And the layer of dew went up, and behold upon the surface of the desert thin flakes like frost on the earth.

In the morning a layer of dew covers the ground. Soon the sun evaporates the dew and another layer of a substance is revealed. The exact nature of the substance is difficult to determine: the text describes it as ‘thin/fine/small’. In addition, it is called ‘flaky’, a participial form from the verb ‘to scale/peel’ which occurs only here in the Masoretic Text. The Septuagint did not even try to translate the latter verb, but simply inserted ‘white coriander seed’ (based upon the description of the substance in Num. 11:7).

Numerous attempts have been made to define scientifically the nature of the food. For example, Bodenheimer remarks: ‘Accordingly we find that manna production is a biological phenomenon of the dry deserts and steppes. The liquid honeydew excretion of a number of cicadas, plant lice, and scale insects speedily solidifies by rapid evaporation. From remote times the resulting sticky and often times granular masses have been collected and called manna.’ Such explanations are not sufficient, and they do not precisely fit the biblical descriptions. It is unwise to remove the miraculous element: manna is ‘bread from God’ (Exod. 16:15), ‘food from heaven’ (Ps. 78:24), and the ‘bread of angels’ (Ps. 78:25).

16:15. When the children of Israel saw [it] they each said to his comrade, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread which Yahweh has given to you to eat.’

When the Hebrews see the flaky substance, they ask ‘mān hû’, literally, ‘What is it?’ The word Mān is unique in Hebrew—the normal way of asking ‘What?’ is mǎh (used later in the verse in the phrase, ‘what it was’). Mān is an ancient dialectic variant found in Canaanite literature, such as in the texts at Ugarit. The term ‘manna’ (see 16:31) for the bread is based upon the Hebrew mān, ‘what?’ Thus, the present incident describes a popular etymology—that is, the first use of the word, and where it came from. Other similar etymologies are common in the Old Testament.

16:16. ‘This is the word which Yahweh commands: “Gather for yourselves each man according to what he eats; you shall take an omer for the number of persons in each tent.”’

Moses now gives more detailed instructions regarding the gathering of the manna. First, the prophet says the Hebrews are to pick up manna, literally, ‘a man according to his eating’. This is precisely the command given at the Passover sacrifice: the lamb was to be divided according to what each man could eat (Exod. 12:4). The point of these two directives is that no one should hoard any food. A natural desire because of hunger would be to take much and store some of it for future use. God is forbidding hoarding: Israel must trust him daily for their sustenance.

An ‘omer’ normally signifies ‘a sheaf’ (Lev. 23:11–15; Deut. 24:19; Ruth 2:7, 15), and it can be used figuratively of food in general (Job 24:10). In this verse, ‘omer’ is a measurement of weight or capacity. It is

one-tenth of an ephah; an ephah is one-tenth of a homer; and a homer equals 48.4 gallons. Thus, an omer is approximately half a gallon.

16:17–18. The children of Israel did so, and some gathered much and some little. And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Every man gathered what he could eat.

At this point, the text indicates that the Hebrews do as they are commanded. And God adequately and precisely meets the needs of the people: no one has too much or too little.

16:19. Then Moses said to them, ‘Let no one leave any of it until morning.’

The Hebrew prophet lays a further stricture on the people. He uses a negative (‘äl) followed by a jussive, which in the Hebrew language constitutes a negative imperative. They are commanded not to save any of the manna from day to day. The Israelites are to gather it in the morning and use it throughout the day, but that is all. Thus they must constantly have faith that God will provide for them each and every day.

16:20. But they did not listen to Moses. And some of the people left it until morning. And worms grew [in it], and it smelled. And Moses was irate with them.

Some of the people apparently had too great a concern for the next day: what shall we eat tomorrow? So they disobeyed God’s command by keeping some of the manna until the following morning. As a result, there was a plague on the manna. The nature of the plague is not certain, although the word used commonly refers to ‘worms’. The manna thus became contaminated and smelled. This seems to be a deliberate allusion to the first plague on Egypt in which the Nile was contaminated and smelled (the same word is used in both places—see 7:18).

The verb translated ‘grew’ (NIV, ‘it was full of [maggots]) is problematic. Brown, Driver and Briggs understand it as meaning ‘to be wormy’ (p. 942). However, it may simply stem from the common root that means ‘to rise/grow’.

Moses responds to the Hebrews’ disbelief and disobedience with anger. There is no stronger verb in Hebrew to reflect wrath/anger than the one used here. The Hebrews are again living by sight and not by faith; Moses is therefore highly indignant.

### **Application**

The reason that God gives manna to the children of Israel is not merely to feed them. A much greater purpose is being served. Moses later comments that ‘He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord ... 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’ (Deut. 8:3, 16).

The primary intent of the provision of manna was to teach God’s people to depend upon God and upon his Word. Man’s survival is dependent upon the Lord, and him alone. The reader should consider Jesus’ response to Satan’s temptation that he should turn stones into bread! (Matt. 4:4).

Manna is also a type and foreshadowing of Jesus. In John 6, the crowd asks for a sign from Jesus so that they might believe, a sign like the manna in the wilderness: ‘They said therefore to him, “What then do you do for a sign, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread out of heaven to eat’ ” ’ (vv. 30–31).

In response, Jesus claims that he is the true bread of heaven that has been sent by the Father to quench people’s thirst and hunger: ‘Jesus therefore said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.” They said therefore to him, “Lord, evermore give us this bread.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” ’ (vv. 32–35).