

24 Marah. And the people murmured against Moses, saying, “What shall we  
 25 drink?” And he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree,  
 and he flung it into the water, and the water turned sweet. There did He set  
 26 him a statute and law, and there did He test him. And He said, “If you really  
 heed the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in His eyes, and  
 hearken to His commands and keep all His statutes, all the sickness that  
 I put upon Egypt I will not put upon you, for I am the LORD your healer.”

27 And they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and sev-  
 enty date palms, and they encamped there by the water.

1 CHAPTER 16 And they journeyed onward from Elim, and  
 all the community of Israelites came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is  
 between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month of their  
 2 going out from Egypt. And all the community of Israelites murmured

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and who has just led the people between walls of water, is now called upon to provide them water to drink in the wilderness.

25. *There did He set him a statute and law, and there did He test him.* Nearly everything about this gnomic sentence is uncertain. Since the only plausible candidate for setting statutes and laws is God, He would logically be the subject of the verb in the parallel clause, though some have claimed it could be Moses. “Him” might be Moses or a collective reference to Israel. The meaning of “statute and law” is obscure because, at least in this episode, no legislation is stipulated. The phrase might merely refer to the idea that it became a set practice in the wilderness that, as in this incident, Israel’s urgent needs would be filled by God, if only Israel trusted in Him. The “testing,” then, would be the testing of Moses’s, or Israel’s, trust in God’s power to provide for the people’s needs, though that is far from clear. In the famous parallel incident in Numbers 20, Moses will fail the test by angrily striking the rock in order to bring forth water.

26. *If you really heed . . . and do what is right in His eyes.* The language sounds like Deuteronomy, but William H. C. Propp is prudent in calling this “quasi-Deuteronomic diction,” and associating it with the Wisdom overtones of the episode. Wisdom literature, as he goes on to observe, is much concerned with medicine. Here, God concludes by promising He will shield Israel from all the sicknesses that visited the Egyptians. The allusion to the first plague at the beginning of the episode associatively points to the others.

27. *twelve springs of water and seventy date palms.* After the scary incident at Marah, in which it seemed there was only brackish water, the next stage of the journey is more encouraging, for the Israelites arrive at a real oasis, with an abundance of springs and fruit-bearing trees. Twelve and seventy are, of course, formulaic numbers, perhaps here particularly echoing the twelve tribes and the seventy elders of Israel.

CHAPTER 16 2. *murmured.* The Hebrew verb *wayilonu* is distinctive of the Wilderness narrative. The various contexts in which it occurs suggest it means something

against Moses and against Aaron in the wilderness. And the Israelites said to them, “Would that we had died by the LORD’s hand in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out to this wilderness to bring death by famine on all this assembly.” And the LORD said to Moses, “Look, I am about to rain down bread for you from the heavens, and the people shall go out and gather each day’s share on that day, so that I may test them whether they will go by My teaching or not. And it will happen, on the sixth day, that they will prepare what they bring in, and it will be double what they gather each day.” And Moses, and Aaron with him, said to the Israelites, “At evening, you shall know that it was the LORD Who brought you out of the land of

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like “complain” (its meaning in modern Hebrew) or “express resentment.” Some modern translations opt for “grumble,” which may be too low as diction, and there is no good reason to relinquish the time-honored “murmur.”

3. *Would that we had died by the LORD’s hand in . . . Egypt.* In the admirable efficiency of the dialogue, their formulation suggests that the LORD is about to kill them in the wilderness, so He might as well have done the job back in Egypt, where at least they would have died on a full stomach.

*fleshpots.* The Hebrew indicates something like a cauldron in which meat is cooked, but the King James Version’s rendering of “fleshpots” (“flesh” of course meaning “meat” in seventeenth-century English) has become proverbial in the language and deserves to be retained.

*when we ate our fill of bread.* Bread and meat here are the two staples. God will provide both—quail in the evening and manna in the morning. By this point, in the second month of the departure from Egypt, the supply of unleavened bread that the Israelites brought with them in their precipitous flight might well have been exhausted. Commentators have puzzled over the nostalgia for meat because the Israelites have taken large flocks with them. Perhaps, as a people whose principal wealth is their flocks, they are loath to make heavy inroads into their livestock for the purpose of food on the journey. In any case, there seems to be a note of panic in the claim that they are on the point of death from starvation. That note would be plausible for a population of newly freed slaves who had been accustomed to having all meals provided by their masters and who now find themselves in the arid moonscape of the Sinai desert.

4. *I am about to rain down.* This promise of divine benefaction may have a double edge because previous uses of this verb, *mamtir*, have been associated with God’s showering destruction on humanity—in the Flood story, the Sodom story, and the Plagues narrative.

*so that I may test them.* The most plausible construction of this phrase is the one proposed by Rashi—that Israel will have to observe the restrictions regarding leaving over manna for the next day and not attempting to gather it on the sabbath. The underlying conception of the deity in ancient Israel, beginning with the Garden story, is of a God who offers humankind a great abundance of gifts but always stipulates restrictions to be observed in their enjoyment.

6. *it was the LORD Who brought you out.* The people in their murmuring had directed their complaint against Moses and Aaron, saying it was the two brothers who brought them out



7 Egypt. And in the morning you shall see the LORD's glory as He hears your murmurings against the LORD, and as for us, what are we that you  
 8 should murmur against us?" And Moses said, "When the LORD gives you meat in the evening to eat and your fill of bread in the morning, when the LORD hears your murmurings that you murmur against him—and what  
 9 are we?—not against us are your murmurings but against the LORD." And Moses said to Aaron, "Say to all the community of Israelites, 'Draw near  
 10 before the LORD, for He has heard your murmurings.'" And it happened as Aaron was speaking to all the community of Israelites, that they turned toward the wilderness, and, look, the LORD's glory appeared in the cloud.  
 11,12 And the LORD said to Moses, saying, "I have heard the murmurings of the Israelites. Speak to them, saying 'At twilight you shall eat meat and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread, and you shall know that I am  
 13 the LORD your God.'" And it happened in the evening that the quail came

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from the land of Egypt (verse 2), while in the same breath accusing God of intending to kill them all. Now, the miraculous provision of meat at evening will make it clear to the people that all these events are directed by God.

7. *in the morning you shall see the LORD's glory.* There has been some puzzlement among interpreters about the evening and morning clauses and what actually is referred to in the latter. The evening-morning sequence may be a reminiscence of the first Creation story: in both, an omnipotent God providentially conducts the progress of events, though here, in contrast to the poised harmony of the Creation story, there is palpable tension between the celestial and the terrestrial realms. Seeing the LORD's glory may well be a threat as well as a promise because the manifestation of God's numinous presence in the pillar of cloud (verse 10) might easily be rather terrifying to the people.

8. *and what are we?—not against us are your murmurings.* The Hebrew syntax, which is reproduced in this translation, has a jagged and discontinuous look, and may be intended, as Benno Jacob suggests, to mimic Moses's sense of perturbation in responding to the people's accusation directed at him and Aaron.

9. *Draw near before the LORD.* Since the preposition used here implies "presence," the location indicated is most probably the cloud that will be mentioned in verse 10 which is invested with God's glory.

12. *I have heard the murmurings of the Israelites.* This statement cuts two ways: "to hear" in biblical idiom can mean "to heed" (i.e., "to obey"), but God may at the same time be expressing annoyance with the people, for He has heard their unreasonable complaint and their accusation that all along He meant to destroy them.

13. *quail.* As with the plagues, generations of commentators have exerted considerable effort to explain all these events in naturalistic terms. Large flocks of migratory quail, it is contended, are sometimes found in the Sinai, and the manna is identified as a sugarlike secretion of desert aphids. One may concede that some kernels of actual memories of improvised sustenance during the Wilderness wanderings might be preserved in these stories, but the point that the narrative makes is to convert them into miraculous occurrences. No migra-



up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. And the layer of dew lifted, and, look, on the surface of the wilderness—stuff fine, flaky, fine as frost on the ground. And the Israelites saw, and they said to each other, “*Man hu*, What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you as food. This is the thing that the LORD charged: ‘Gather from it each man according to what he must eat, an *omer* to a head, the number of persons among you, each man for those in his tent you shall take.’” And the Israelites did thus, and they gathered, some more and some less.

And they measured it by the *omer*, he who took more had no extra and he who took less had no lack, each according to what he must eat did they gather. And Moses said to them, “Let no man leave over from it till morning.” But they did not heed Moses, and some men left over from it till morning, and it bred worms and stank, and Moses was furious with them. And they gathered it morning after morning every man according to what he must eat, and when the sun grew hot, it melted. And it happened on the sixth day, that they gathered a double portion of bread, two *omers* for each, and all the chiefs of the community came and told Moses. And he said to them, “That is what the LORD has spoken. A day of rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD is tomorrow. What you bake, bake, and what you cook, cook, and whatever is left over leave for yourselves to be kept until morning.” And they left it until morning as Moses had charged, and it did not stink, and there were no worms in it. And Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is

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tion of quail, after all, would repeat itself every evening, and no edible granules secreted by aphids would mysteriously cease every seventh day.

14. *flaky*. The Hebrew *meḥuspas* is in dispute (in later Hebrew it means “rough”). Umberto Cassuto links it to the root *h-s-f* “to lay bare,” and to a Ugaritic cognate and proposes that it means “revealed.”

15. *Man hu*, *What is it?* The scholarly consensus is that this is still another instance of folk etymology. The general assumption is that there was a non-Hebrew term, *man*, for this particular food-substance, perhaps related to an Arabic root that means “to feed.” *Man*, in this bit of dialogue, is an archaic form of *mah*, the Hebrew for “what.”

16. *omer*. This dry measure would have been a bit more than two quarts.

20. *some men left over from it till morning, and it bred worms and stank*. The refractory nature of the people—or perhaps one should say their anxiety and their greed—is manifested even in their response to this bounty from God that has come to answer their complaints. In this case, it turns out that the prohibition announced by Moses is actuated by a perfectly practical consideration: the manna will not keep overnight (except, miraculously, on the sabbath).



a sabbath to the LORD, today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, and on the seventh day, the sabbath, there will be none then.” And it happened on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather and they found nothing. And the LORD said to Moses, “How long do you refuse to keep My commands and My teachings? See, for the LORD has given you the sabbath. Therefore does He give you on the sixth day bread for two days. Sit each of you where he is, let no one go out from his place on the seventh day.” And the people ceased from work on the seventh day. And the house of Israel called its name manna, and it was like coriander seed, white, and its taste was like a wafer in honey. And Moses said, “This is the thing that the LORD commanded: a full *omer* of it to be kept for your generations, so that they may see the bread with which I fed you in the wilderness when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.” And Moses said to Aaron, “Take one jar and put in it a full *omer* of manna and set it before the LORD to be kept for your generations.” As the LORD had charged Moses, Aaron set it before the Covenant to be kept. And the Israelites ate manna forty years until they came to settled land, the manna did they eat until they came to the edge of the land of Canaan. And the *omer* is one-tenth of an *ephah*.

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26. *Six days you shall gather it, and on the seventh day, the sabbath.* The sabbath—the word means “cessation time”—has not yet been enjoined in the Ten Commandments, but it is assumed by the story (with the Creation story behind it) to be part of the very structure of nature. Thus the double portion of manna gathered on the sixth day is preserved through the seventh, and no manna is to be found on the seventh day.

*there will be none then.* The literal meaning of the Hebrew is: “there will be none in it.”

28. *How long do you refuse.* “You” in the Hebrew is plural, so although God is addressing Moses, He is levying His accusation against the people for whom Moses serves as spokesman.

29. *where he is.* Literally, “under him,” that is, in his place.

31. *the house of Israel.* This locution (instead of “the people of Israel” or “the children of Israel [Israelites]”) is unusual. Cassuto proposes that it is meant to indicate that the Israelite posterity of the original desert-wanderers preserved this name of manna for the wilderness food.

32. *for your generations.* Here the translation of *dorot* as “ages” in several modern versions is a little misleading because the point is that the ‘*omer* of manna is to be kept in order to be seen by posterity. The miraculous, and surely unhistorical, character of the memorial device is patent, for the evanescent manna is the last thing one could imagine to survive through the centuries, however tightly sealed.

34. *before the Covenant.* This phrase is clearly an ellipsis for “before the Ark of the Covenant.” The problem is that the Ark of the Covenant, in which the two tables of the Law are kept, does not yet exist. The injunction here, then, must be read as an anticipation of the time when the Ark will be an established fact and a sacrosanct cultic focus.