

## “FOOD FOR THOUGHT: MANNA”

Psalm 78:10-25; Exodus 16:1-21

August 18, 2024

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Here is yet another food-related story that has an important place within the Biblical tradition. The story of the manna is also told – albeit rather differently – in Numbers chapter 11 (worth reading for comparison), and it’s referenced elsewhere in the Bible - for example, in Psalm 78, as we heard. There (and in many sermons and commentaries!) the people of Israel don’t come off too well. They’re complainers, ungrateful, oblivious to all that God has done for them.

As the story is told in Numbers, even God gets quite angry with the people, and they do in fact come across as whiny and difficult. In that more complex version of the story, God provides the manna at first (the quail will come later) but after a short time the people start to say, “If only we had some meat! We remember how in Egypt we had fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks... but now it just manna, manna, manna, nothing to look at but this manna all the time.” It’s a little bit funny, but mostly because it sounds so familiar.

Which is probably a reason to be a little cautious in our judgement about this story: after all, haven’t we stood (or watched a family member stand) in front of a full refrigerator saying “there’s nothing to eat”? Haven’t we complained about what we don’t have more than we’ve rejoiced in what we do have? Haven’t we blamed God when things haven’t gone according to our plan? Haven’t we often been oblivious to what God has done for us?

I guess it’s just human nature to see the past through a lens of nostalgia – especially if what’s happening in our “now” is causing us stress or anxiety. Our minds go back to something that feels familiar, or simpler... or to happy memories (editing out the not-so-great parts, of course).

It isn’t very surprising that the people of Israel did this. Yes, they have just come out of slavery in Egypt, with some pretty powerful divine intervention – parting the sea, good drinking water in the desert. But here they’re only six weeks into this desert journey, led by Moses and Aaron, who are new at this leadership thing. They’re still in the process of “becoming” as a people, as a community of faith. Remember that they haven’t yet come to Sinai and the covenant with God represented in the 10 commandments.

They don’t know where they’re going. Or how long it’s going to take. (Probably best they *didn’t* know!) Right now, they’re in an unfamiliar place (not the most hospitable of places, either.) So, yeah, they are anxious. And most pressing of their anxieties is that food seems in short supply. In the hierarchy of human needs, not much is more important than food, so naturally this concern eclipses just about everything else in their minds. Suddenly, they aren’t sure that Egypt was really all that bad. “At least we had shelter. We had food. We knew where we were.” They almost forget that in Egypt, they were slaves.

They have a new reality now, but they haven’t fully adjusted to the life of freedom, which is a bigger world, but a more unknown one, that at this moment seems riskier than the old reality.

One commentator describes this story as “a crisis of food [that] becomes a crisis of faith.” (Fretheim). I love that way of understanding the story; I think it helps us see why this story was so important, so formative, so often referred to. And why it still feels like an iconic story. Because don’t those other crises often become crises of faith? As we ask questions like “what are we going to do?” and “what’s going to happen to us?” we also ask “where is God?” Which is essentially what the hungry people of Israel wanted to know.

This Exodus version of the story doesn’t suggest (as Numbers does) that their questioning and complaining makes God angry; in fact, here we see that God responds pretty quickly by saying to Moses, “I’m going to rain bread from heaven on you” (and also promising meat, which comes in the form of quail). But it’s interesting to see that just as much as the people are prepared to challenge God... God challenges them right back. They want to know where God is; God wants to know where they are. God provides food – generously, abundantly; but will they understand where it comes from, what it means, how they’re supposed to receive and use it? will it move them toward gratitude, trust, and faithfulness?

The people came out and saw a “fine, flaky substance” on the ground, and they said “manna?” which in Hebrew means “what is it?” Moses replied, “It’s the bread the Lord has given you to eat.” But apparently their initial reaction stuck, and they went on calling it manna. I guess maybe they never did know exactly what it was!

It’s surprising how much of what is written about manna echoes that very question, “what is it?” Further on in Exodus 16 it’s described as being “like coriander seed, white” and tasting “like wafers made with honey” - which doesn’t tell us much. But so many commentaries and sermons about this story focus on providing a naturalistic explanation for a food source in the desert – it’s a form of lichen, it’s a secretion of certain insects, it’s a resin that falls from a tree. I don’t deny that there might be such an explanation, but whether there is or isn’t is sort of beside the point of the story. Miraculous “bread of heaven” or sustenance provided through what we’d call a “natural” phenomenon... either way, this is God’s gift. The question is whether the people will receive it as such, and remember who provided it.

“What is it?” the manna? It’s more than food – it’s grace, love, providence, promise,... the presence of God.

This is a story about faith and trust, about keeping faith in times of crisis, and in the day-to-day, and in the long haul. About learning to trust God in the midst of fears, change, and uncertainty about the future. It’s more than just one episode in the history of the people of Israel; it’s a story that speaks to challenges that will arise for them over and over and over again, as a people who belong to - but sometime struggle with – God, and find trust difficult.

I think it speaks to us about many of the same things.

It invites reflection on our anxieties and how they can impact our faith by coloring our perceptions, causing us to forget that God has been with us, making us overlook signs of God’s presence, pulling us backwards instead of forward, limiting us instead of freeing us. It acknowledges how hard it can be to trust God, and calls us to identify what stands in our way. It pushes us to consider where we might let go of our grip on anxiety and how we can move toward trust. Perhaps just one day at a

time, just one need at a time, just one fear at a time, just one deep breathe at a time. But we *can* choose trust.

I don't think this story suggests that all our fears or worry is unfounded, or that it's easy to have trust that God will stick with us, help us, or open a way where we don't see a way. I also don't think it's meant to scare us into never complaining, never wondering where God is in our distress. The Israelites expressed their complaints and doubt, and survived to tell about it (not to mention: God did provide the manna, in response to the people's voicing of their fears and complaints). But maybe this story gives us some food for thought about when to raise up a complaint and when we might turn instead to gratitude (which is so often and so easily eclipsed by complaints).

This story reminds us not to forget ALL the ways – so many ways – God has brought us out of bad situations, provided what we need (in surprising ways, at times), and freed us to new possibilities. We do, in fact, have reasons to trust God.

This story asks us to pay attention, to recognize God's presence, God's gifts, God's provision for us even in the most daily and ordinary ways. What if we could look at any good thing in our lives and say, "what is it? this is the thing I need ,which God has given me"?

This story challenges us to consider: What does abundance mean? What's the difference between a "need" and a "want"? How much is "enough"? What are we asking when we pray to have our "daily bread"?

Here we have a vision of community in which God's abundance is not for hoarding but provides (or can provide) plentifully for all. If we read on a little further in Exodus 16, we learn that this provision is not just about adequate food: On the sixth day of the week, the people discover that they *can* gather manna for two days, and it will keep unspoiled for the next day, to allow everyone in the community – everyone – a day of sabbath rest.

What if we believed, as God seems to do, that sabbath rest shouldn't be a privilege for some but is a necessary provision for all? Would we be more intentional about receiving that gift ourselves? more determined that everyone have a right to rest and renewal? The concept of sabbath reflects this story's larger theme: the practice of sabbath rests on, and helps us learn, trust – trust that we can give our work and worrying and striving and routine a rest... and that it will be ok. The world will go on, our people will be fine, we will still eat, God will provide.

The story of God's gift of manna in the wilderness reflects the message of the whole exodus story (maybe of the whole of the scriptures): the story of God's people is a story of people learning that God is the loving and patient provider of all good gifts: freedom, food and water, deliverance, protection, rest, presence, guidance, forgiveness, vision. Gifts in abundance, mostly undeserved. Sometimes we are slow to take it in. But the story goes on, our journey goes on, and one hesitant step at a time, one taste of grace and then another and another... and we begin to trust that the manna will be there, every day. Amen.

Resources: *Exodus* (Interpretation Commentary) by Terrence Fretheim  
Essays on Exodus 16 in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.