



Exodus 15:22-17:7

Immediately following the Song of Miriam, Moses and the Israelites depart from the Red Sea and enter the wilderness. This extended set of stories helps to move the Israelites geographically to Mount Sinai. The wilderness journey itself, however, takes on a larger significance in the ongoing development of God's people. Physical difficulties such as disease, and especially thirst and hunger, figure prominently within these stories. When difficulties confront the Israelites, they complain to the LORD, who responds by providing sustenance for the journey. This section begins and

ends with a testing. At the start of the journey, the LORD tests the Israelites to see if they will listen. If the people do what is right, the LORD promises to heal their diseases (15:26), the opposite of what happened to the Egyptians. The wilderness trial ends with the naming of the locations, Masah and Meribah, meaning "test" and "quarrel" respectively; because the Israelites test the LORD saying, "Is the LORD Really with Us or Not?" (17:7). Thus, the journey begins with the LORD testing the Israelites and ends with the people testing their God.

The Hardships of the People and the Provision of God

The tone for the wilderness journey is set early in the narrator's comments. After traveling for three days, the people find no water. They come to Marah and are unable to drink the water because it is bitter (Marah means "bitterness"). Hence, right from the beginning, the newly released Israelites encounter hardships as they try to leave their old way of life geographically and metaphorically. The people complain against Moses, signaling a recurring motif throughout the wilderness passages. The mediator responds by crying out to the LORD, who shows Moses a piece of wood. The bitter waters turn sweet after Moses throws the wood into the water. Thus, the incident at Marah serves as an initial sign to Israelites that God is with them and will provide for them.

The event represents a reversal of what the Lord did to the Egyptians. Like many of the plague stories and the event at the sea, God uses a human agent, in this case Moses, and the natural elements—water and a piece of a tree—to perform a great deed. However, rather than causing suffering or death, as was the case for the Egyptians, the sign at Marah provides the thirsty Israelites with sweet water to drink. God's provision is emphasized at the end of this first feeding story as the people come to the oasis at Elim, "where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees" (15:27).

Manna—Nourishment and Sign

The LORD'S provision for Israel's need is a dominant theme within the wilderness stories of the book of Exodus. God's provision of manna is especially important in this section and within other Israelite traditions (cf. Num 11; Deut 8:3; Josh 5:12; Neh 9:20; Ps 78:24; and Ps 105:40). Though some scholars have sought to rationalize the appearance of manna through natural phenomena, the biblical writers make it clear that the provision of this food is a divine act, even if natural elements are instrumental within the divine sign (quail and dew, vv. 13-14). Similar to the plagues in Egypt, the manna serves as a sign that has as its desired goal: "you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exod 16:6). Hence, manna, while providing nourishment for

the hungry Israelites, also serves as a sign—that the people might know that the same God who delivered them from Egypt will continue to sustain them in the wilderness.

The manna is a mysterious food. The people who gathered much had none left over, and those who gathered little did not run out (16:18). In other words, the manna provided sufficiently for everyone, whatever their need. Those who tried to leave some over for the following day, disobeying Moses' instructions (16:19), found that the food rotted and bred worms (16:20). Moreover, when the morning sun arose, the leftover manna on the ground melted. In preparation for the Sabbath, however, the people were instructed to gather twice as much. After the manna was prepared and stored, it would keep an extra day only for the day of rest. Hence, the manna was a mysterious and miraculous food that required the people's strict observance for it to feed them. In this way, the feeding stories point to both God's gracious provision and the people's need to observe the LORD's statutes. Within this setting, heeding the word of the LORD is not simply a matter of pious religious observance but is indeed necessary for the people to eat.

Water—Thirst-Quencher and Sign

The wilderness provision stories begin and end with a story about water. At the beginning of the Israelites' journey, the LORD turns the bitter waters of Marah into sweet water. In ch. 17, the Israelites again complain to Moses that they are thirsty. The conflict between Moses and the people, however, is more pronounced in this episode. Moses answers the people's complaint with a complaint of his own: "Why are you testing the LORD?" (v. 2). Moreover, when Moses again cries out to God, he adds, "What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me" (v. 4). Thus, the original testing of the people (15:25b) has developed to include the testing of Israel's leader. Moses concludes that the people have tested the LORD (v. 2), leading him to name this second place of water provision, Massah ("test") and Meribah ("quarrel"). The incident at Massah and Meribah, while also providing the people with water, differs from the LORD's provision at Marah. The first incident involved the transformation of the water from bitter to sweet. Here, however, the water miraculously appears from a rock. Hence, the LORD is able to provide for the people's thirst from an unlikely source, answering the people's test with a positive sign of God's presence and provision. Narratively, the audience receives an affirmative answer to the people's question that ends the story: "Is the LORD really with us or not?" (v. 7).

The wilderness is a demanding place for human life. Issues of survival, such as hunger and thirst, can test the fortitude of a people. In the Israelites' journey away from the life of slavery, these conditions challenge their sense of trust in the God who liberated them. The people's complaints point to the realities of a life in transition—the movement away from a life of oppression into the reality of becoming the people of God. In the midst of this challenging new life, the people are reminded continually of the LORD's gracious provision and nurture. Within the reality of God's presence, the inhospitable wilderness is transformed into a place of divine mercy and feeding.

Questions

1. What is the difference between a faithful lament and murmuring complaint?
2. When is it appropriate for God's people to cry out; and when does such language cross the line into divisive grumbling?
3. How does God continue to provide "daily bread" for God's people today?
4. The dominant images of God's provision in these passages relate to nourishment. How can we actively participate in God's ongoing provision for humanity in a world where famine and hunger persist?
5. Who are the hungry in our communities? How can they be fed?
6. What are your "wilderness" experiences? How has God been present for you and nourished you in times of transition?

