

OpenTheo

March 9th: Exodus 16 & Matthew 17:24–18:14

March 8, 2020



Alastair Roberts

Manna in the wilderness. Causing little ones to stumble.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Exodus 16. They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

And the people of Israel said to them, Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt! When we sat by the meal pots, and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. Then the Lord said to Moses, Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people will go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.

So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, At evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against the Lord. For what are we that you grumble against us? And Moses said, When the Lord gives you in the evening meat to eat, and in the morning bread to the full, because the Lord has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him, what are we? Your grumbling is not against us, but against the Lord.

Then Moses said to Aaron, Say to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, Come near before the Lord, for he has heard your grumbling. And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. And the Lord said to Moses, I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel.

Say to them, At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God. In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp.

And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, 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 to eat.

This is what the Lord has commanded. Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.

And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.

Each of them gathered as much as he could eat. And Moses said to them, Let no one leave any of it over till the morning. But they did not listen to Moses.

Some left part of it till the morning, and it bred worms and stank. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, each as much as he could eat.

But when the sun grew hot, it melted. On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers each. And when all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, This is what the Lord has commanded.

Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. Bake what you will bake, and boil what you will boil. And all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning.

So they laid it aside till the morning, as Moses commanded them. And it did not stink,

and there were no worms in it. Moses said, Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the Lord.

Today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it. But on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none.

On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. And the Lord said to Moses, How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws? See, the Lord has given you the Sabbath. Therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days.

Remain each of you in his place. Let no one go out of his place on the seventh day. So the people rested on the seventh day.

Now the house of Israel called its name Manna. It was like coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey. Moses said, This is what the Lord has commanded.

Let an omer of it be kept throughout 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 a jar and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the Lord to be kept throughout your generations. As the Lord commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the testimony to be kept.

The people of Israel ate the manna forty years, till they came to a habitable land. They ate the manna till they came to the border of the land of Canaan. An omer is the tenth part of an ephor.

In Exodus chapter 16, the hypernaturalism that has been a feature of the story of the Exodus to this point continues. It begins with a complaint about the lack of food. They look back with longing upon the food of Egypt.

There is a food crisis, but there is an attendant faith crisis. Would they rather be in the service and employ of Pharaoh, where they have reliable food and they can build up and accumulate food day by day, and not have any concern about not having food for the next day? Or would they rather trust upon God, their Deliverer, the one who cares for them, and rely upon his provision? God is continuing to test his people. Note that the point of the Exodus is not just the mere deliverance of people from oppression.

It's a revelation of God's character for the end of proper relationship with him. It's not just about deliverance. God is testing his people to see whether they will trust him in a difficult situation.

Will they trust him when they need to depend upon him? And there is a discipline of trust that they must learn, that will be taught in large part through the giving of the manna,

which occurs in this chapter. The pattern of the Sabbath will be established and revealed along with the gift of the manna. It involves a relationship between God's foundational work in the creation itself and Israel's dependent work upon God's foundational work in the providence that he exercises within his creation, and Israel's dependent work as they depend upon the good gifts of creation to gather what they need for themselves.

It's going to be a sign of reliance upon the God who works in all things. And the introduction of the Sabbath at this point is also important as a contrast to the lack of rest in Egypt. They are going to serve a new master.

They need to depend upon this master, to trust this master, not to see themselves as at odds with this master. They complain, but Moses makes clear that they are complaining against God himself. God is the one who brought them out of Egypt.

He is the one who established the Exodus. Moses is his servant. It wasn't Moses who achieved this, it was God.

And it's an impugning of God's character to suggest that he wouldn't provide for the people that he has delivered. The glory of God appears in the cloud at this point, and something about the appearance of the cloud presumably changed to indicate that God was gloriously present within it. At the evening, God provides quail as food, and in the morning he provides manna.

The focus is particularly upon the manna, but that evening-morning pattern might draw our mind back to creation itself. God is providing over six days, and then on the seventh he is going to give rest. He is establishing the creation pattern that we see back in Genesis chapter 1, and he is teaching his children to operate with the same pattern.

He is teaching them to act as their father acted. He is treating Israel as his firstborn son, to the training to work in the pattern of their father. Manna is provided in a way that requires and necessitates radical dependence.

There is an omer given per head, a particular quantity that is enough to feed them, but no more than that. They have this omer given to them of a substance that is mysterious. What is it? They don't know what it is.

It's not clear. It's not something that fits into their regular categories. It has a honey-like flavour, and maybe we're supposed to see here a foretaste of the land that will be given to them, a land flowing with milk and honey.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 10, Paul can speak about this as all eating the same spiritual food. There is something about what is given to them in this manna that anticipates something of the land that they're going to enter. It also maybe points to a feeding upon God in a deeper sense.

We have the manna of the Lord's Supper. The point of the manna is to give us a foretaste of the kingdom that we will enter into in the future. Later on in the story of the Exodus we read of the grapes of Eshcol, some grapes that are taken from the land and brought into the wilderness so that people can taste something of the good gifts and fruit of the land before they enter into it.

And here maybe they're having a foretaste of a greater land that they will enter into at some point in the future. Some commentators upon the book of Exodus have suggested that there is a naturally occurring phenomenon that could account for the gift of the manna. And I would not dismiss that out of hand.

We've seen throughout the story of the Exodus that there is a hyper-naturalism to the story. God uses natural means to achieve his supernatural purposes. We are not looking for an explanation within the blind events of nature, of a nature that's autonomous, works on its own principles and has no relationship to a creator.

Rather the point is that there are natural processes that the creator God will use for his purposes to achieve his ends for his people. And so experiencing the gift of the manna, the point is not necessarily that God can overrule and provide beyond the provision of nature. The point is that the God of nature can provide for everything that they need.

If he's the God of nature, he does not need to provide from some other source. He has great storehouses. He's the God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills.

He can find a way to bring his bounty to them. And they need to learn to depend upon him. Manna can't be accumulated.

It can't be preserved. You can't gather an excess for trade. It must depend day by day upon provision.

And they must depend on extra provision on the day before the Sabbath. An extra sense of trust that must come in at that point. On the day before the Sabbath you're not just relying upon the regularity of a natural pattern.

You must depend upon the God who establishes those patterns. You must depend upon God to provide over and above what the regular pattern of nature would presume you would be receiving. There's no assurance beyond the character of God.

You cannot have guarantees that release you from the burden of trust. It isn't given in proportion to labour. Those who try and gather a lot end up with just as much as they need.

Those who gather little and struggle, maybe, have just what they need too. They must work to gather it. But it's like the workers on the vineyard in Jesus' parable.

They are provided with exactly what they need and no more. They must be willing to depend upon God completely for provision. We should see connections between the testing of Israel here in the wilderness and the Egyptians being judged with the plagues.

There's hyper-naturalism at work in both places. God rained hail upon Egypt and now God rains bread from the heavens upon the children of Israel. The locusts came up upon and covered the land of Egypt.

The quail come up upon and cover the wilderness. In Numbers 11 the wind brings the quail like the wind brings the locusts. And so there is a symmetry.

The symmetry between the God who is in control of nature and can tear nature apart and use nature as a weapon against his enemies and the God who is the Lord of nature and can use nature to serve his people, to protect them, to feed them, to give them everything that they need. There are other food tests that we can see in the Old and New Testament that have a similar pattern. Maybe we could think of 1 Kings chapter 19 as Elijah is in the wilderness and he's provided for by God.

Or the story of Elijah where he's given the ravens to give him food. God can use even these birds of prey and carrion to provide for the prophet who's in need. A similar thing in Jesus in the wilderness.

He must be tested concerning food. Is he going to trust God? Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. God is the one that we trust.

God is the one that provides. And as a result we can depend upon God in these situations of extremity but also in these situations of the day to day provision. This is the pattern that the story of the manna provides.

It's a lesson that's supposed to be taken into the future of Israel's life. Not just as something that is left in the past in a wilderness experience that they grow beyond as they enter into the land. Manna is a pattern for God's provision more generally.

In Leviticus chapter 23 verses 10 to 11 it's recalled in the practice of the sheaf or the omer that's offered. And it's the same term that's used in the Hebrew. In chapter 23 verses 10 to 11 we read.

Speak to the people of Israel and say to them. When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf or the omer of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. And he shall wave the sheaf or the omer before the Lord so that you may be accepted.

On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. As in the case of the manna preserved before the testimony, this ongoing practice of presenting the first fruits, the

first fruits that are weighed in the omer or the sheaf that is the same measurement of the manna provided each day, Israel was recalling God's fundamental provision in the wilderness as a constant lesson to be recalled in its life in the agricultural system of the land. They depend upon God there too.

It's less obvious, it's less apparent, but it's no less true. They depend upon God for daily provision. And in offering up that first fruit, that omer, they are recalling the lesson that they learnt concerning the manna in the wilderness.

A question to consider. In 2 Corinthians chapter 8 verses 13 to 15, Paul writes. So that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness.

As it is written, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Paul here quotes from the story of Exodus chapter 16, referencing the words concerning the manna, but he's applying it to the practice of Christian charity. How does his argument work and what can it teach us about the principle of the manna as it relates to our practice as the people of God? Matthew chapter 17 verse 24 to chapter 18 verse 14.

When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two drachma tax went up to Peter and said, Does your teacher not pay the tax? He said, Yes. And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others? And when he said, From others, Jesus said to him, Then the sons are free. However, not to give offence to them, go to the sea and cast a hook, and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel.

Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself. At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes.

And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.

It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell

of fire. See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven the angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. The narrative concerning the temple tax at the end of Matthew chapter 17 is a peculiar one.

The tax in question seems to be the temple tax because of the amount that was paid, and also because the logic of Jesus' arguments suggests that God is the one who is levying this tax in some way. It is a tax that is rooted in the teaching of Moses. In Exodus chapter 30 verses 11 to 16 there is a law concerning this tax that is given.

Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this, half a shekel, according to the shekel of the sanctuary. The shekel is twenty geras. Half a shekel is an offering to the Lord.

Everyone who is numbered in the census from twenty years old and upward shall give the Lord's offering. The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than the half shekel. When you give the Lord's offering to make atonement for your lives, you shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and you shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the Lord, so as to make atonement for your lives.

This is later used for the temple, for instance in 2 Kings chapter 12 verse 4 or in 2 Chronicles chapter 24 verses 4 to 7. After this Joash decided to restore the house of the Lord and he gathered the priests and the Levites and said to them, Go out to the cities of Judah and gather from all Israel money to repair the house of your God from year to year and see that you act quickly. But the Levites did not act quickly. So the king summoned Jehoiada the chief and said to him, Why have you not required the Levites to bring in from Judah and Jerusalem the tax levied by Moses, the servant of the Lord and the congregation of Israel for the tent of testimony? For the sons of Athaliah, that wicked woman, had broken into the house of God and had also used all the dedicated things of the house of the Lord for the bales.

Jesus responds to the levying of the temple tax with a teaching about sons and strangers. The sons are those who belong to the house and what is within the house belongs to them. They will inherit.

Jesus has also taught earlier about the way that the priests are exempt from the law of the Sabbath. As they are engaged in divine service, the law concerning the Sabbath does not apply to them in the same way and that his disciples were in a similar position. The

sons have an access and a privilege that outsiders do not.

Jesus is the son and the people who are his people share in that privilege of sonship. He could exploit his status, he could insist upon exemption, but he doesn't. He submits to the tax so as not to cause scandal.

However, through the miracle of the fish with the coin, he does so in a way that demonstrates his freedom and his liberty. He is provided for by his Father through the creation itself in a way that symbolizes the Gentiles. He need not insist on his rights as he serves a Father who loves to provide and will not abandon his children.

There are also far, far more important things than money and picking a fight over money is not really fitting. Paying an unnecessary or even oppressive tax doesn't worry the free sons as much as slaves and the strangers scrabbling for security. Our urge often is to insist upon our rights, our privileges, our exemptions, our status.

And Jesus challenges that. We can depend upon God. God will provide for us and even in certain circumstances we can allow ourselves to be defrauded, to have someone take our tunic or to make us walk the second mile because we know that God is the one that we depend upon.

God is the one who will reward us. God is the one who we look to for provision. Our urge to insist upon our rights then is placed into a distinctively unworthy category.

This is not what we are about. We are people who are willing to pay what is required from us. Indeed, we are happy to go over and above, to be those who are imposed upon.

If we can avoid causing scandal, if we can avoid placing obstacles before people, we will go ahead and do that. We will be people who do not force our own rights, do not insist upon our privileges. The money taken from the caught fish by Peter the fisherman pays for the tax.

Peter has been commissioned as a fisher of men and as I've observed in the story of the Gospels more generally, the fish are very much associated with the Gentiles. This provision of our Father is one that can be provided through the creation itself, through fish. It can be provided through the Gentiles.

It can be provided through all these different people that we would not expect. But God is the Lord of all and we can depend upon Him. He is a good Father that we look to and we can trust and as a result, we do not feel that we need to fight all these unnecessary and unseemly fights about money.

God will provide all our needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus. And Jesus talks here and in the passage that follows about stumbling blocks. These are obstacles that we set up.

These can be things like hypocrisy or abuse, division or hatred. Those things which attending our teaching that is good can cause people to fall astray, to be those who reject the Word of God on account of something in us or something that we have done. Because we have not adorned the way of Christ, rather we have been those that have been an obstacle within it, that have discouraged people from putting their trust and their lives in Jesus' hands.

And as we do that, we are judged with the sharpest judgment that Jesus has in the Gospels. There are many occasions where there is necessary offense and obstacles. Jesus often speaks about Himself and His mission as an obstacle, as a stone in the way, a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.

He is someone who presents all sorts of obstacles for the people who are unfaithful, things that purposefully make the way of unrighteousness or unfaithfulness or disbelief less pleasant or easy. He is someone who presents all these riddles and difficulties and problems and frustrations. And yet we are not to provide those sorts of things unnecessarily.

The Temple Tax isn't one of the ways that the Jewish leaders are undermining the Law of God. There will come a time when the Temple is overthrown, but for now, faithfulness requires honouring it. You don't want to cause scandal in this thing.

It's not the most important thing. Refusal to pay the Temple Tax would cause people to stumble. It would give the wrong message.

It would be something that might cause people to turn astray from Christ, not to listen to Him. They would see Him as someone who is opposed to what the Temple represents in its fullest sense, rather than as the one who is fulfilling its true meaning. And so Christ is prepared to forgo His privileges as a Son, to forgo His advantages and His status and His exemption, to be one who does not cause stumbling, who does not cause some weaker brother, some weaker person, to turn away from the path of righteousness or to reject the message of the Kingdom.

There are so much more important things than insisting upon our rights in such situations. This theme of scandal continues into the next chapter. And the question there is who is the greatest? The disciples are jockeying for position, and this is a typical human desire.

We want to be exalted over others. And Jesus' response to them is to show a child. The Kingdom of God does not work in the same way.

The Kingdom of God is not about competitive jockeying for honour and privilege and status. The child challenges us to humble ourselves, not to be people who vaunt ourselves over others, who have a strong sense of our superiority. We are not players of

the competitive game of honour that utterly consumes other people's attention and concern.

Rather, we recognise our dependence and our unworthiness, and to resist the pursuit to exalt ourselves over others, we must take that posture of the child. Greatness comes through loving service of others, putting others ahead of ourselves. Greatness also requires a welcoming and a receiving of the weak, a valuing of the weak and a concern not to be an obstacle or stumbling block to them, even in those things where we do have rights that we could appeal to.

We are warned in the strongest of possible ways against putting an obstacle in the way of the weakest. Children are highlighted here. They are representative of the wider group of weak, independent people.

But they are important in their own right. They are not just symbols of something that they are not. Receiving children means paying attention to and honouring the people who cannot give us anything in return, who might threaten our status rather than raising it.

If you spend time paying attention to and valuing and considering the needs of and protecting children, it's not necessarily going to give you status. Often, the people who are engaged in that sort of activity lose status. They are not seen as powerful power brokers in society.

They are not seen as the sort of people with influence and weight. The way that we treat children and the weak is absolutely key. It's a critical indicator of the life of the Kingdom.

We are being called to follow Jesus' example here. Jesus surrenders his rights for the sake of people who have nothing to offer, nothing to commend themselves to his attention, no status that he can benefit from. And Jesus teaches this again and again in his teaching, that we are to be people who give attention to those who can give us nothing in return, to invite the people who are the outcasts to our feasts, to invite those who have no honour to return to us, to pay attention to the child, to the outcast, to the stranger, to the widow, to the orphan, to the people on the margins of society.

And Jesus stresses the importance of dealing most radically with the obstacles to the weak and to the children. This is a connection to Jesus' earlier teaching on adultery in the Sermon on the Mount. The importance of dealing radically with sin in order to protect not just ourselves but others from stumbling.

If there is something that is causing us to sin, we must pluck it out even if it is our eye or our hand. The fact that there are angels in God's very presence who are interceding for the weak is something that reminds us that they may appear weak, but God, who has more power than any other, pays attention to them. He has charged some of his angels

to take special concern for them, to ensure that they are never overlooked or forgotten.

This is a recurring theme in the wisdom literature and in the law. God sees the orphan and the widow, the weak unnoticed by God himself. The one who gives to the poor and cares for the poor lends to the Lord.

And there is a danger that we have of a Christianity that is unmindful of the weak, that allows the weak to be collateral damage for the achievements of the strong. In Revelation 18, verse 21, there is the recurrence of this image of a millstone and something being cast into the sea. In that passage it is the fate of Babylon the Great.

Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence and will be found no more. Why does this city receive such a terrible fate? Because they have abused the weak, because they have preyed upon the children of God, because the people that God attends to, those marginalized people, those people who are dependent upon his care, those people who have no power or honor or glory of their own to offer, they have been abused and mistreated. And God will judge all who act in such a manner.

Jesus here gives the lost sheep parable that is more familiar to us from Luke chapter 15. Christ isn't a savior who tolerates collateral damage. A few weak people sacrifice for the sake of the strong.

No one in the kingdom of God doesn't matter. The good shepherd will leave ninety-nine strong sheep for the one that is lost. The weak, ill-favored, blemished sheep, whatever sheep it is, even if it has nothing to commend it, is of concern to the good shepherd.

This challenging passage has a peculiar and powerful relevance to many situations in our own time where we are prepared, perhaps, to sacrifice for the sake of the benefit of the powerful people who are made in the image of God, people who are these lost sheep that God cares for, children who have angels in God's very presence who are interceding for them. God cares about the weak, but so often our concern for the strength of our communities, for the power of particularly gifted preachers or teachers or authorities, we're willing to sacrifice a few weak people for that. And Christ teaches that this is utterly opposed to the principle of the kingdom.

The principle of the kingdom is that the child is in the center, the weak, the dependent, the one without honor, the one without status. And if we are those who will sacrifice them for our gain, our gain as the strong or the powerful or the influential, we have utterly rejected his kingdom. Rather, we are to aspire to be like them, to be those who give up the gains of status that others play, to give up that concern with honor and supremacy and to be those who put others before ourselves.

A question to consider. The sort of unnecessary obstacles that we set up for other people

walking the way of the kingdom is a chief concern of Christ in this passage. And maybe we should think about the inverse of these obstacles, the ways in which we can make the way of the kingdom a lot easier to walk for people.

We don't want to make the way of the kingdom easier than God has made it, but we do not dare to make it harder. What are some very practical ways in our various situations that we can make the path of the kingdom easier for others to walk? Also, how can this teaching of Christ in this chapter be related to Paul's teaching concerning the strong and the weak in places such as his letters to the Corinthians and the Book of Romans?