

## Chapter 15

### Supplies in the Wilderness

THE VISIBLE hand of God in the deliverance of Israel did not cease with the overthrow of Pharaoh's host in the Red Sea. If it had, the work in hand would have been abortive. That work was not merely the exhibition of the existence and power of God in the eyes of all the earth, but the establishment of a nation for Himself, as the basis of His ultimate purpose with the earth and mankind. Had God ceased to show His hand, this work would not have been accomplished. It must have miserably failed. The delivered nation must have perished in the sterile country to which the march through the Red Sea had introduced it; or, failing that, the purpose must have been frustrated by the mutinous discontent of an assembly that disliked the new circumstances in which they were placed, and lacked sympathy with the object of those circumstances. More than once, they rose in rebellion, which nothing but the direct and destructive intervention of divine power prevented from being successful. More than once, they proposed a return to Egypt, which they would certainly have accomplished, if God Himself had not prevented it.

We have, therefore, to follow them from the shore of the Red Sea to Sinai, and from Sinai to the land of promise, and note the various further exhibitions of the visible hand of God, by which the inevitable failure of so weak a human instrumentality as Moses and the congregation of the Israelites was prevented, and Jehovah's name planted successfully in a national form on the mountains of the land of promise.

The very first case concerned the urgent question of supplies. Here was an enormous assembly of people. How was food to be forthcoming in a barren region like the eastern shore of the Red Sea? On this question alone the enterprise must quickly have collapsed in disaster, had nothing but natural resources been available. The difficulty began to press early. They had not been six weeks out of Egypt when the supplies brought from Egypt being exhausted, the whole congregation were threatened with famine. How Moses regarded this prospect we are not informed. He probably supposed that God would make a way for them out of the difficulty. At all events, the people were in no such mood of faith. They "murmured against Moses and Aaron." They indulged in the most bitter and faithless recriminations. "Ye have brought us into this wilderness," said they, "to kill this whole assembly with hunger." "Would God," said they, "we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt." Nothing, perhaps, makes a man more impatient or unreasonable than hunger; and here was a vast multitude with empty stomachs calling to mind, with loud regrets, the fleshpots and the bread supplies of Egypt. It was a most trying situation for Moses—a situation full of threatening peril in every way. There was no natural relief within reach. The situation must have ended in disaster if God had not helped miraculously. What other help could have availed to avert famine from 600,000 men, besides women and children? The help came with effective preliminary. Yahweh having informed Moses of His purpose to supply the assembly with bread from heaven, Aaron, by the command of Moses, addressed himself to the assembly, "Come near before Yahweh, for he hath heard your murmurings." Aaron's summons might have had little effect upon a hunger-stricken, discontented mob; but at that moment the pillar of cloud, which at a distance accompanied them, blazed forth with the glory of God. Their attention thus riveted, a voice from the cloud addressed

Moses, “I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel. Speak unto them, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread, and ye shall know that I am Yahweh, your Elohim.” Pacified with this message, reported to them, they awaited the arrival of evening, when the supply of flesh duly arrived, in the shape of a multitude of quails, which had been collected and drawn to the camp by a divine attraction, and deposited around about the camp within easy reach of the hungry multitude. For the bread they had to wait till the morning. When the morning came, the bread had come with the dew, but the people did not recognise it. “When the dew was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness, there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar-frost on the ground.” The people saw the small round thing; but they did not suppose it was the promised bread. “They wist not what it was” (Ex. 16:15). They asked, “What is it?” Moses informed them: “This is the bread which Yahweh hath given you to eat . . . Gather of it every man according to his eating, an omer for every man according to the number of your persons; take ye every man for them which are in his tents. And the children of Israel did so, and gathered, some more, some less.”

This was Israel’s first introduction to the manna, the solution of the famine danger, and the standing marvel of the nation’s history. It was a miracle—this supply of bread from heaven. It was a necessity. Nothing but a miracle could have saved the assembly from destruction by famine in a barren district. If some in our day have a difficulty in realising the possibility of such a mode of supply, it is because they do not sufficiently realise the wonderful nature of ordinary food supply. What is there less wonderful in the growth of grain in the fields? In a very important sense, every sackful of grain that goes to be ground by the miller has come clown from heaven. Where would the grain be if there were no sunlight, no showers, no fresh air? Or, suppose a farmer having sown his fields, were to cover the face of them with oilcloth, how many sacks of grain would he have to send to the miller at the end of the year? No! the stuff that goes to make his grain steals invisibly from the sky, day and night—he knows not how—and few men stop to think. All men are accustomed to it, and, therefore, it does not strike them as a wonderful thing. But it is a wonderful thing for all that—an annual miracle which men do not call a miracle because they are accustomed to it.

The circumstances of Israel did not admit of this mode of supply: and, therefore, another was resorted to, for the resources of divine wisdom and power are inexhaustible. The stuff to be eaten was supplied ready-made—manufactured in the air, and let fall on the ground. Could an inquisitive experimentalist have brought the process to the test of his tubes and retorts, and solutions, he would have found nothing different from other created modes and substances, except the proportions of the elementary chemicals, as the production of a special food required. God is as much the artificer in what is made by process of nature as in what is miraculously produced. The only difference is in the way the power is applied. In the natural sphere, things have been endowed with self-acting affinities, as the very existence of such a sphere requires; in the extra-natural, the same results are produced by the direct manipulation of created ingredients when circumstances call for the exercise of such a power.

Israel grew accustomed to the manna, as men in general are accustomed to the wonderful ways of nature. The most wonderful miracle conceivable ceases to be a miracle in the common estimate, when it is continuous; to men of a wise heart (they are not as plentiful as mulberries), the ways of nature are always as wonderful as the most striking miracle. Nevertheless, there is a difference between ways of nature and miracles: the ways of nature are phenomena resulting from established dynamical conditions, which are mechanically inter-active: miracles are the same results produced by the divine volition which originally established the ways of nature.

There are times for the exercise of this volition, and there are times for the operation of natural conditions. We are not at present contemporary with the former; because we are contemporary with the latter, fools imagine there are no other than natural operations, This folly will shortly be blown off the face of the earth by the coming breeze of divine work resumed. The advent of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the overthrow of armies, will show men everywhere that the God of Israel is a living and a true God, the maker and possessor heaven and earth.

In their anxiety to get God out of the Mosaic narrative, some have tried to explain the manna by some kind of farinaceous stuff occasionally to be found blowing about in the wind in eastern climes. The best answer to these fabulating critics is to ask them if they would be willing to try the experiment of subsisting on such stuff. Let them allow themselves—a very small party, a dozen, say—to be turned adrift in the Sinaitic Desert, without food, and forbidden to resort to any ordinary supplies for six months; and if, at the end of the time, their bones are not bleaching in the sun, they will at least be able to form a good idea of the likelihood of a million people being able to make shift in such circumstances.

No, no! natural supply is entirely out of the question. If it were not excluded by the results of practical test (to which our fabulist critics would not be willing to submit), it is utterly disproved by one or two things plainly appearing in connection with the supply of the manna. First, a double supply fell every sixth day, and none at all every seventh day; so that Israel might be enabled to keep the Sabbath law, which prohibited all manner of work on the seventh day ([Ex. 16:29](#)). On the sixth day, every man gathered the bread of two days, and on the seventh day none was to be found ([Ex. 16:5–27](#)). If it was a natural supply how came it to be so very discriminating as to perform those two remarkable feats of intelligence—come in double quantity of Saturday, and stay away altogether on Sunday—to use modern phrase? Secondly, on ordinary days, the manna was to be consumed on the day it was gathered; if it was kept over to the second day, “it bred worms” ([Ex. 16:19–20](#)); but when kept over from Saturday to Sunday, “It did not stink, neither was there any worm therein” ([Ex. 16:24](#)). Thirdly, all the while Israel were in the wilderness, even forty years, the supply of manna continued regularly, but as soon as they entered the land of Canaan, and came within reach of natural food, the manna ceased ([Ex. 16:35](#); also [Josh. 5:12](#)). If the supply was natural, how came the manna to possess such extraordinary sagacity as to keep good on Sundays but spoil on other days? How came it to keep on coming down for forty years, so long as it was wanted, and then stop?

And then our friends turn stupid. They profess to have just grounds for being sceptical as to these details. They say, “How do we know that such things happened?” O, foolish people, how inconsistent you are! You admit the manna on the authority of Moses, but deny the details which stand on the same authority. You had better throw the manna overboard altogether. It will be less trouble. Give the lie to Moses fiat on all points: deny the exodus: deny the deliverance of Israel: yea, deny Israel’s part in the history of the world altogether: and say the scattered Jews are Calmucks, or improved Esquimaux. This would be a dignified attitude compared with the contemptible charlatanry, which, under the pretence of superior discrimination, picks out just what it chooses to believe, and rejects everything that won’t fit in with its theory, though standing on precisely the same authority.

“How do we know?” Ah, there is a very full answer, though this class of critic is impervious to it. We know it in too many ways to be said in a breath. Settle the case of Christ, and you settle all, even if the rest seemed a little unsettleable on its own ground, which it is not. Christ tells us of the manna, and of Moses, and of the wilderness, and of the Scriptures ([John 6:32, 49; 5:47; 10:35](#)). If Christ rose from the dead, here is a settler to all your cavils, even if they could not

otherwise be disposed of. And that Christ rose from the dead, is a matter proved by the evidence, to such as can estimate the force of evidence. Consequently, the manna is proved, and all connected with it; and Israel's otherwise inexplicable subsistence in a barren wilderness accounted for.

This manna was "like coriander seed, white: and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey." It was cooked in various ways ([Ex. 16:31](#); [Num. 11:8](#)). The taste of it was like the taste of fresh oil. The people tired of it, which was natural. They said, "Our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all beside this manna before our eyes." Their discontent was so strong that "the people wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat?"

"Moses heard the people weep throughout their families, every man in the door of his tent; and the anger of the Lord was kindled greatly; Moses also was displeased" ([Num. 11:4, 10](#)). There is something about this that yields one or two considerable reflections. There is a self-manifest truth about it; for had invention been at work in accounting for Israel's subsistence in a barren land, invention would have done the right and the creditable thing, while about it, and would have given us a picture of God, in His partiality for Israel, supplying in lavish abundance, every good thing, by stupendous miracle, from day to day—roast viands of all sorts, fruits, and confections, and every desirable dainty, consumed in a chorus of thankful praise. Whereas here is the meagrest fare compatible with life, and a chronic discontent in the whole assembly. What is the meaning of it? The first meaning is, it happened; for nothing but its happening could account for such a narrative. Its second meaning we get in answer to the question, "Why did God, who could have fed them much otherwise, put His people upon such prison rations?" Moses answers this question in his rehearsal at the close of the forty years: "Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness ... He *humbled thee and suffered thee to hunger*, and fed thee with manna which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know, that *he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of Yahweh*" ([Deut. 8:2, 3](#)).

A spiritual result was aimed at in this ascetic rigour. Israel was made to know experimentally that men have not been brought into existence merely to indulge their appetites; that these appetites are but means; that they are only in their place when they are ministrant to the ultimate end of being; that this ultimate end is to serve the Lord with gladness in the worship of His greatness, and in the exercise of mercy and truth to fellow-man. In this employment of created life, God, the Creator, receives pleasure, and man, benefit. The taste for such an employment of life is liable to be blunted, and finally destroyed, in the possession of abundance. Israel, luxuriating in plenty, would never have learnt the lesson which prepared their second generation for entering the land of promise as an accepted worshipping nation. In poor, but sufficient living, they came to perceive that not bread alone, but the words and worshipping of Jehovah were a staple in truly civilised life; that bread alone made a man a barbarian, and left him without hope for the beyond; while the words of Jehovah, added to scanty fare, added nobility to his humility, and super-added the hope of that higher life from which Adam was excluded in Eden; after which, there is a lingering aspiration in every normally-constituted human breast; but of which nature "bread alone" contains no promise; and which is only to be obtained by the word of Jehovah known, received, rejoiced in, and obeyed.

These principles have a present application. They were intended for such—as Jesus makes manifest in his quotation of these very words, in answer to the suggestion of his tempter that he should eat when it was wrong for him to eat. They furnish a general key to the, at first sight, inscrutable fact that Christ calls his brethren from among the poor and not the rich, and subjects

them to suffering in their present experience, instead of according them the gratifications of prosperity. They are a valuable aid to us in our endeavours to obey his command to “Labour not to be rich,” and (if God commit riches to our trust) that we “make to ourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness;” by using it liberally in the divine service (the dissemination of the truth and the help of the poor) as “good stewards of the manifold grace of God,” instead of following the example of the world around who hoard everything away in faithless store for themselves or their families.

The manna supplied one need, but there was another. When the congregation, journeying from the Wilderness of Sin, pitched in Rephidim, “there was no water for the people to drink” ([Ex. 17:1](#)). Here was a new difficulty. The people, not yet tamed by the discipline which afterwards subdued them, became unmanageable on the subject. They gathered round Moses and upbraided him: “Wherefore is this, that thou hast brought us forth out of Egypt to kill us, and our children, and our cattle, with thirst?” Moses reasonably appealed to them, “Why chide ye with me?” It was not he who had brought them into that predicament, except as an obedient instrument. As he said on the subject of their discontents about food: “What are we? Your murmurings are not against us but against the Lord!” ([Ex. 16:8](#)). But a headstrong people, goaded by want, are impervious to the appeals of reason. Moses did not know what to do in midst of their turbulence, and in the face of their manifest need of water. He “cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people? They be almost ready to stone me.” And if Moses had had no other than his own resources, he never could have got out of the difficulty. How can mortal man provide water in an arid wilderness? And how can leadership be maintained in the absence of the commonest wants of nature? As already remarked, the whole affair must have ended in blank disaster if it had been a human enterprise. But it was not a human, but a divine enterprise. “The Lord said unto Moses Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thy hand and go. Behold I will stand before thee there upon the rock of Horeb, and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel.” This marvel was repeated further on in another place, with evil results to Moses.