

The Giving of the Manna in Exodus

We can, with precision, date the origin of sabbath-observance among men – and then only by the Jews. It started at the same time as the giving of the manna in the wilderness soon after the exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt. This is when the sabbath for man began (Ex. 16:22-26). Indeed, not only did this occasion mark the origin among men of the sabbath, the seventh-day rest, but it was the first time the word *sabbath* was ever used in the history of man.

Let me trace it out. The events surrounding the giving of the manna show that the Hebrews were totally unacquainted with the sabbath before this time. When the people grumbled about their lack of food and longed for Egypt again, God promised Moses he would provide bread for them. He explained what they should expect – including the double gathering on the sixth day – and spelled out his purpose. It was ‘that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not’ (Ex. 16:1-5). And, as he said, so it happened; the manna fell, and the Israelites gathered it, even though they had never seen it before and did not know what it was. Remarkably, they found the quantity they gathered was just enough for that day’s need. And so it went on until, on the sixth day, to their amazement they gathered double the amount. Their amazement drove them back to Moses to tell him what had happened – ‘the rulers of the congregation came and reported this to Moses’ (Ex. 16:13-22). The Hebrews were utterly flummoxed by the double portion; they didn’t have a clue why they had gathered the extra manna, nor what they were supposed to do with it. What was it all about? Why should the Lord give them double on the sixth day? If they kept it, wouldn’t it breed maggots as on all the other days?

Moses explained: the seventh day, the next day, was to be a ceasing day, ‘a sabbath rest’, and there would be no manna to collect that day, so that the Hebrews could – and should – rest. The extra collected on the sixth day would not – unlike any kept overnight on other days – breed maggots.

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Clearly, it was all a novelty to the Hebrews. So much so, at least some of the people failed to grasp the point the first time, or else they were guilty of rank disobedience, and they broke God's law, in that they did not keep the portion for the seventh day but tried to gather it on the seventh day, the sabbath. Consequently, Moses had to go over it once more from first principles, and tell them that the seventh day was to be a day of rest (Ex. 16:23-27).

The whole business was so new, the Israelites called the bread 'manna' for that very reason. 'What is it?' they asked. They simply did not know what it was. They had never seen it before. Nobody had. 'And Moses said to them: "This is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat"'. 'And the house of Israel called its name manna' (Ex. 16:15,31); that is, they called it: 'What?'

And just as Moses had to explain the ins-and-outs of the manna, so with the sabbath. They had never met either before. Nobody had. The two – the manna and the sabbath – were inextricably linked, and both were equally unknown to the people (Ex. 16:15-31). Years later, Moses twice reminded the Hebrews that God had given them 'manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know' (Deut. 8:3,16). The same might well be said of the sabbath. Thus, they ate bread which they had not known before, and rested on a ceasing day which they had not known before. It constituted one episode.

In fact, when we read that just as 'the children of Israel ate manna forty years, until they came to an inhabited land; they ate manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan' (Ex. 16:35), I get the impression that unless God had set the sabbath in stone on Sinai, it would have ceased when the manna did. But, of course, at Sinai the sabbath *was* set in stone. The giving of the manna was not. So, while the manna was a temporary expedient to meet Israel's need in the wilderness, the sabbath was not. The sabbath was a permanent part of the old covenant for the Jews, and lasted, with that covenant, until Christ.¹

¹ Thus the sabbath was also temporary.

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Nevertheless, the two, manna and sabbath, were inextricably linked in Exodus. And not only there. Centuries later, on their return from captivity, the Levites took the Israelites over the same ground, making exactly the same point: the sabbath and the manna were given by God at the same time in the desert (Neh. 9:13-15).

It all points one way: in the wilderness, the Hebrews were being *introduced* to the sabbath. God was giving them his law to see if they would keep it or not (Ex. 16:4); *giving* them his law, initiating them into an entirely new commandment and regime, *giving* them a totally new day and experience, certainly not reminding them of something they knew very well. They had to be told – not reminded! – that the seventh day was the sabbath: ‘On the seventh day, which is a sabbath’ (Ex. 16:26). From all this, it is inconceivable that the Hebrews had experienced centuries (even millennia) of sabbath-keeping. Everything points to the fact that it was an entirely new experience for them. The context gives an invincible proof² that the sabbath was until that time completely unknown to the Israelites.³

Note the ‘for’ in: ‘Eat it today, *for* today is a sabbath’. In other words, not only do we now come across the first mention of the sabbath for man – indeed, the first mention of it in all Scripture – but we see Moses giving Israel the explanation of the new day they had just begun. As for the command which they disobeyed, in trying to gather manna on the sabbath, this was not some imaginary command (of which we never read) dating from Genesis 2, but the command just issued. They ignored the command of God, and went out to collect it: ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you... on the sixth day... it will be twice as much as they gather daily... [The

² My tautology is deliberate.

³ As for those who try to argue that God was restating the sabbath because the Jews had forgotten it in Egypt, they should note how God, through Ezekiel, complained that Israel desecrated the sabbath in the desert (after Sinai) (Ezek. 20:13-26). If they had forgotten it while in Egypt, and so desecrated it, why did God not raise the point in Exodus 16?

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seventh day] is a sabbath... Today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath,⁴ there will be none' (Ex. 16:4-5,25-26). Here is the command in question. And this – not some supposed Genesis-command – the one just given by Moses, is the commandment the people broke.

There are other noteworthy features in this episode. In his explanation of the sabbath, Moses did not refer to creation. He did not refer to God's rest on the seventh day. He did not say: 'As you well know, God commanded Adam to keep this day'. Nor did he refer to that which is supposed to have been ingrained by a weekly practice over centuries. He did not say: 'This is the day men have been keeping since creation'. Nor did he say: 'This is the day which all men should have been keeping since creation'. He did not 'remind' the Hebrews that this was the day their fathers had kept for nearly 2000 years. All this is of the highest significance. To judge by sabbatarians, it was the very thing Moses should have done – the obvious thing. When they asked him what it was all about, he should have dismissed the quibbling Jews – he *would* have dismissed them⁵ – retorting that they were wasting his time with such a daft question, pointing out that ever since creation their ancestors – indeed, all men – had been keeping (or failing to keep) the sabbath! Obviously they had not. Everything about the episode cries out that this signalled the introduction of the sabbath among the Jews. Exodus 16, not Genesis 2, marks the origin of sabbath-observance among men.

Finally, and by way of introduction to what follows, note the events of Exodus 15:25-26, just before Elim (Ex. 15:27), whence the Israelites set out for 'the Desert (or Wilderness) of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai' (Ex. 16:1). Let me quote the passage:

⁴ Do not miss the repeated explanation – it was all so new to them.

⁵ Moses was not averse to rebuking the Israelites for their stupidity (and worse), telling them home truths. See Ex. 17:2; 32:21,30; Num. 14:41, for instance.

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There [at Marah] the LORD made a decree and a law for them, and there he tested them. He said: 'If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you' (Ex. 15:25-26).⁶

This has all the appearance of a kind of preface to what was going to happen in the Wilderness of Sin and, supremely, at Sinai; namely, the giving of the law – in particular, the sabbath. This is strengthened by what we read of events the closer Israel got to Sinai: 'They entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said':

This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites (Ex. 19:2-6).

The rest of that chapter is taken up with this very emphasis: God is going to give his law, his covenant, to Israel; Israel must obey; and the people respond to God by promising obedience.

All this serves to confirm the fact that the Wilderness of Sin leading to Sinai really does mark both the time and the place of the giving of the law (including, of course, the sabbath) to Israel. And this is of the highest significance in the debate over the sabbath, something far more than a mere fact of history.

⁶ See also Ex. 18:15-16,20.