Welcome to our final session on the book of Exodus. So far, we’ve looked at Israel’s slavery in Egypt and the calling of Moses, through whom God would address his people’s desperate plight. Last time, we discussed the so-called Egyptian plagues, which, we said, were best understood as a divine intervention designed to curb and redress Pharaoh’s anti-creation measures that threatened not only the people of Israel but also God’s plan for his world. Tonight, we’ll be considering how God provides his people with food in the wilderness, a text that has important things to say about trust and rest.

Starving to Death? (Exod. 16)

So, let’s move on to Exodus 16, the last chapter we’ll be exploring. But before we do that, there’s something else I’d like to show you. You may recall that I said last time that the killing of the Egyptian firstborn, which the whole story of the first third of Exodus drives towards, when it finally happens, is mentioned almost in passing. All we get in Exodus 12:29-30 is a brief account of God striking down the firstborn and the ensuing wailing by the Egyptians.

This brevity is particularly interesting given that our storyteller, both before and after this event, goes into an amazing amount of detail about the festivals of Passover, Unleavened Bread and the consecration of the firstborn. Why would you do that? Wouldn’t you want to put the story left, right and centre and keep those boring instructions about the celebration of the festivals to a minimum, or at least reserve them for an appendix? Why allow all that stuff to interrupt such a great story? A closer look at the arrangement of Exodus 12–15, the chapters that connect our story with that of the plagues, might help us understand what’s going on:

Apart from some transitions and summaries (in orange), there are two blocks of storytelling (shown in black). In addition to that, there’s a lot of what I would call ‘liturgical material’ (in red), which instructs the readers about the celebration of the festivals, while
also including two victory songs to be used, perhaps, in their worship. The story, as you can see, is enclosed by liturgy, which also rather trumps it. If we were to look at an outline of the whole book of Exodus, for which we’d need a much wider screen, we’d find that it consists of a combination of story, liturgy and law, all of which are interwoven rather than being kept separate. What does that tell us?

To begin with, we’d have to conclude that the liturgical elements are rather important to our storyteller. But why is that? It’s essential for us to realise that we’re dealing with Israel’s foundational story. It’s the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law and the ratification of the covenant between God and the Israelites that finally constitute them as a people, thus fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham, ‘I will make you into a great nation’ (Gen. 12:2). These events were of exceptional importance, and the liturgy – the festivals and all that went with them – was designed to keep the people’s memory of the great events of the exodus alive.

As today’s story will illustrate, such regular jogging of their memory was more than necessary. But before we turn to Exodus 16, let’s briefly remind ourselves of some previous developments. Most importantly, there’s the Israelites’ amazing escape through the sea (Exod. 14). With an eye to what’s going to happen in our story, it’s worth emphasising that the text stresses God’s involvement and presence throughout. A particularly clear example of this is found in 13:21-22:

By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

And yet, when the Israelites see the Egyptian army approaching, they complain bitterly. There’s biting sarcasm in their words (14:11-12):

Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!

Despite their lack of faith, they were about to experience God’s amazing deliverance, with God fighting for them, while all they had to do was keep still (14:14).

After this, the people run into difficulties in the wilderness and again complain against Moses when there’s no drinkable water (15:22-25). When that’s resolved, they eventually get to Elim, where they find twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, which allow them to enjoy some much-needed rest and refreshment (15:27). And that’s where we pick up the story again.

**If Only We Had Died (Exod. 16:1-3)**

Having moved on from the oasis at Elim, the Israelites find themselves in the desert of Sin (v. 1). The name will turn out to be oddly appropriate, but that’s pure coincidence. The
Hebrew term סין (sin) has nothing to do with our word ‘sin’. What’s significant is that they’re back in the desert, in an undesirable place. Not only that, they’re in between places, as Sin is between Elim, with its fresh water and shade (15:27), and Sinai, the mountain of God. Walter Moerbe captures the dynamics of the story well, commenting that ‘other places (and, implicitly, times) may be fine; but here and now is awful’ (2007, p. 214).

But the wilderness is where the Israelites are, and it’s a place where many lessons can be learned. However, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out, ‘the people … needed forty years in the wilderness to learn the holy art of being lost’ (2009, p. 74). It’s also worth noting that what we’re about to witness happens only one and a half months after the miraculous exodus from Egypt, not long after the Israelites had experienced God’s massive display of power and care for them.

Despite all the insistence on remembrance in those detailed and repeated instructions for the Passover, the feast of unleavened bread and the consecration of the firstborn (12:1–13:16), the exodus experience apparently makes no difference. It’s as if the people have forgotten all about it. As Moerbe notes, it’s ‘not a good advertisement for the power of Israel’s memory’ (2007, p. 215). All they can think of is their current need, which seems to have erased not only their memory of what God had just done for them but also the promise that he was going to give them a good place to live, ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’ (e.g. 3:8). Walter Brueggemann captures the problem well, pointing out that ‘the immediacy of food overrides any long-term hope for freedom and well-being’ (1994, p. 812). Food, or rather the lack of it, is all they can think of, and so their ‘food crisis … leads to a faith crisis’ (thus Fretheim, 1991, pp. 181, 183).

As soon as life becomes difficult, the people once again complain against Moses and Aaron (vv. 2-3). In fact, their complaining quickly turns to accusation, and they don’t think too well of their leaders: ‘you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death’. Well, obviously. Faced with their current crisis, they also misremember Egypt, not as a place of oppression from which they’d been crying out in pain (1:13-14; 2:23), but as a place of plenty where they’d had meat galore and as much food as they could wish for. Commentators are usually quick to point out that such plenty, had it been available in Egypt at all, would probably not have been enjoyed by slaves. In John Goldingay’s words, ‘time has given a rosy glow to their life in Egypt compared with the reality’ we find described in the book of Exodus (2010, p. 70).

Somewhat oddly, our story seems to assume that the Israelites were without the numerous livestock that they possessed when leaving Egypt a month and a half ago (12:38). Or are we to think that, like all good pastoralists, they were loath to slaughter their animals (thus Cole 1973, p. 130)? Or perhaps some were fine, while those without cattle
lacked food. Bread, in any case, would have been missed by everyone, and so they all ended up complaining (see Cassuto, 1967, p. 189).

**I Will Test Them (Exod. 16:4-5)**

But God is more than happy to provide. Bread, he says, is going to fall from the skies like rain (v. 4). That way of putting it is probably not accidental. After all, rain is what’s lacking in the wilderness, but God will make it happen. Only this is going to be a rain of bread, as that’s what the Israelites most urgently need. However, God’s provision is a test in that the people would be given their food one day at a time, and they weren’t to gather any more than what they needed to get through the day. Except, that is, for the sixth day, when they were to gather twice as much (v. 5). God, it appears, wants to know whether they would do as they’d been told. Moberly describes the test ‘as formative, as contributing to the shaping of Israel into the people that God wants them to be’ (2007, p. 217). God gives them all they need, but he intends that they learn, grow and mature through the experience of being dependent upon him on a daily basis.

**You Will Know That It Was the LORD (Exod. 16:6-8)**

Earlier on, God had displayed his power so Pharaoh and the Egyptians could come to a fuller knowledge of him. Now, despite that astonishing display of power, he’s got to do something similar for his own people. Twice in these verses Moses makes that point. ‘In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt’ (v. 6), and ‘You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning’ (v. 8). Apparently, the Israelites still doubted that God had truly been involved in the events that had led to their escape from Egypt; and so the miraculous provision of meat and bread – indeed, they’re promised all the bread they could wish for – is intended to improve their knowledge of God. Seeing the glory of the LORD (v. 7) in this case appears to refer to those food provisions, in which God’s glory can be observed.

In v. 2 we were told that the Israelites were grumbling against Moses and Aaron. In vv. 6-8, Moses refers to their grumbling no less than four times; and that’s not the end of it either, as we shall see. Twice he says that God has heard the people’s grumbling (vv. 7, 8), and that’s why they will now see his glory; that’s why they will get meat and bread to eat. God thus meets the people’s complaining graciously (Moberly, 2007, p. 217). Moses, on the other hand, seems a little fed up with them. ‘Who are we that you should grumble against us?’ (v. 7), he asks, pointing out that their grumbling ultimately is against God anyway (v. 8). But, as Goldingay suggests, perhaps criticising their human leaders required less courage than criticising God (2010, p. 69).
Starving to Death? (Exod. 16) (Karl Möller)

The LORD Has Heard Your Grumbling (Exod. 16:9-12)

So now the people are told to come before God, who has indeed heard their grumbling, as both Moses (v. 9) and God himself (v. 12) confirm yet again. And so they'll get meat in the evening and bread in the morning. Meat and bread – but it’s the bread that plays the key part in our story. The meat comes up repeatedly as well (see vv. 8, 12), but it’s just mentioned, without any further embellishments, whereas the bread is said to rain down from heaven (v. 4). Moses again stresses that the Israelites will get all the bread they want (v. 8), while God adds that they’ll be filled with bread (v. 12). In other words, they won’t have any more reason to complain; and the whole point is that they may know ‘that I am the LORD your God’, says God.

Have you noticed, though, that we’ve formed some impressions that are now in need of revision? That’s always the case when we read stories. As we go along, we interpret and make assumptions, our understanding developing gradually. And so, when we looked at v. 7, I said that it was in the food provisions that the people would see the glory of the LORD. That seemed to me what the text was saying. When we get to v. 10, however, we learn about an actual appearance of God. Having come before God, the people look towards the desert where they see ‘the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud’. Moberly thinks, not at all unreasonably, that they may have been looking towards Mt Sinai and seen God’s presence there or appearing from there (2007, p. 218).

What’s That? (Exod. 16:13-15)

Then the decisive moment arrives. Or perhaps it’s better to speak of two decisive moments, for there was to be meat in the evening and bread in the morning. And so, beginning, in typical Jewish fashion, in the evening, they first get quail. So far so good. In fact, they get plenty of it. The quail cover the whole camp, so that must have been very good. Then they get a layer of dew around the camp in the morning. Dew? Well, never mind, it disappeared quickly anyway, leaving them with ‘thin flakes like frost’ (v. 14). Which leads the people to do exactly what we would have done. ‘What’s that?’ they ask, having absolutely no clue as to what to make of it (v. 15). ‘Well’, says Moses, ‘that’s the bread that God has provided’. Were they impressed? We’re not told, but there’s a story much later on, in Numbers 11, where the Israelites are mightily fed up with getting nothing but manna, as that peculiar substance came to be known.

The quail play no further part in the story and seem to have been a one-off gift, as is also suggested by a story in Numbers 11 that has the people longing for meat again. The manna though, like it or not, they’d be eating during the whole forty-year period in the wilderness (v. 35). ‘The new way of living which Israel is to learn’, comments Moberly, ‘involves accustoming themselves to the strange and unfamiliar’ (2007, p. 219). Yes, and also to that which may seem less than ideal. They were, after all, still in the wilderness,
still on the way to that promising land that was to flow with milk and honey. For now, though, and for quite some time to come, pure survival, the spiritual discipline of hanging on in there, was all that mattered.

This Is What the LORD Has Commanded (Exod. 16:16-18)

Now for the test. Will the people follow God’s instructions (see v. 4)? ‘This is what the LORD has commanded’, says Moses, ‘gather as much of the stuff as each of you needs’ (v. 16). This suggests they would each gather different amounts, which is confirmed in the next verse, where we’re told that ‘some gathered much, some little’. As for the divine test, the people are doing well so far, for our storyteller informs us that ‘the Israelites did as they were told’. However, the wording of v. 18 is somewhat odd:

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\text{And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed.}
\]

If the omer is a precise measurement, as the comment in v. 36 that an omer is one tenth of an ephah suggests, then what does it mean to say that measuring the amounts of manna by the omer indicated that those who gathered a lot had no more than they needed while those who gathered little still had enough? Moberly suggests, either God superintended the process to guarantee parity or what had been gathered was pooled and distributed in a way that ensured that everyone’s needs were met (2007, p. 219).

In either case, the point is clear, and it’s an important one: no matter how much the people had been able to gather, everyone had exactly what they needed, no more and no less. As Brueggemann comments: ‘the wondrous reality about the distribution of this bread is that their uncompetitive, non-hoarding practice really does work, and it works for all’ (1994, pp. 813-14).

However, Some Paid No Attention (Exod. 16:19-21)

However, the test isn’t over yet. ‘Don’t keep any of the manna overnight’, says Moses (v. 19). But, of course, as one would expect: some paid no attention (v. 20). You always get those who pay no attention – and, if we’re honest, it could so easily be us. Some decided to keep a little of the manna – just in case; just to be on the safe side. You never know whether tomorrow, or the day after that, there’s going to be enough manna, do you? So much then for Brueggemann’s idea of the Israelites’ non-hoarding practice. But, if truth be told, many of us would have to admit that we’d find it just as difficult to suppress the urge to hoard the things that come our way. And yet, as Terence Fretheim urges (1991, p. 186),

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\text{the increasing gap between rich and poor in modern societies is certainly in part due to the hoarding of manna. It witnesses to a failure to recognize that all that we have is due to God’s goodness, not our ability to gather manna better than anyone else.}
\]
And so, Brueggemann turns out to be right after all; to not hoard is precisely what the Israelites are about learn. It’s their only option, as the manna doesn’t keep. If left overnight, it attracts maggots and begins to smell. ‘The heavenly bread’, as Moberly puts it, ‘is resistant to one of the most basic of human urges: to save up and hoard’ (2007, p. 220). Isn’t this also what Jesus had in mind when he taught his disciples to pray: ‘Give us today our daily bread’ (Matt. 6:11)? Like the Israelites, we, too, are invited and ultimately have no choice but to trust God to meet our daily needs, day after day, and always one day at a time. It’s a spiritual practice that’s meant to develop into a pattern of living.

In our story, having initially angered Moses with their hoarding instinct (v. 20), the people do learn. As I said, they really had no other choice. With the manna going off overnight, they settle into a routine of gathering as much as they need, morning by morning (v. 21). And they had to be disciplined as well. The gathering had to be done first thing in the morning, or the desert sun would cause the manna to melt away. Moberly refers to this as the discipline of daily living, and he suggests that ‘the need to start each day with collecting fresh manna’ speaks of the more general need to begin ‘each day through deliberate engagement with God’ (2007, p. 224).

**The LORD Has Given You the Sabbath (Exod. 16:22-30)**

Then something extraordinary happens. Actually, quite a few extraordinary things happen in the next few verses, but let’s start at the beginning. They’ve been collecting manna for a few days now, and then, on day six, they find that they have twice as much as usual (v. 22). All excited, they come and tell their leader. ‘Well’, says Moses, ‘that’s exactly what God said’ (v. 23), as indeed we all know from v. 5. But while we’ve been told that this is what God had said to Moses, we don’t know whether Moses had passed the information on to the Israelites.

And that allows for two possible readings at this point. Either Moses had told them, in which case the leaders come to let him know that they had indeed collected twice the usual amount and to await further instructions, seeing as the manna doesn’t keep (thus Moberly, 2007, p. 221). Or the people had not been informed and are genuinely puzzled by what’s going on (thus Childs, 1974, p. 290). Either way, Moses now explains the Sabbath principle (vv. 23, 25-26), which hadn’t been mentioned earlier on.

The idea is that the people keep a day of rest, ‘a holy Sabbath to the LORD’. And for that to be possible, they need to keep the surplus from the sixth day overnight. But we know, as indeed do they, that this can’t be done. Or so we thought, for this time the manna miraculously doesn’t go off (v. 24). Moses explains that this is how it’s going to be from now on: six days each week the people are to gather their food, but on the seventh day there wouldn’t be any (v. 26).
Yet again, some wouldn’t take Moses’ word for it. And so, they go out looking for manna, but they can’t find any (v. 27). This time, it’s not Moses who gets angry. God himself intervenes, wondering how long the Israelites will refuse to keep his instructions (v. 28). As a community, therefore, they hadn’t quite managed to pass God’s test (see v. 4). It’s necessary, therefore, for the Sabbath principle to be repeated and underlined: ‘on the sixth day [God] gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no-one is to go out’ (v. 29). That’s rather emphatic and worth noting. Again, having no other choice, the people eventually do get into the rhythm, always resting on the seventh day (v. 30). With no manna to be found, what was there to do but to enjoy the day.

One of the interesting points is that Sabbath observance, which is described as a divine commandment (‘this is what the LORD commanded’, v. 23), is here introduced before the giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. But that’s not all; the issue of the Sabbath will feature again at the end of God’s meeting with Moses on Mt Sinai (31:12-17), and it comes up repeatedly in the laws that have been included in the book of Exodus (see 20:8-11; 23:12; 34:21; 35:2-3). Getting back to our story, it’s worth repeating that the people are portrayed as already observing the Sabbath before Moses came back down from Mt Sinai with the famous stone tablets. Indeed, according to the biblical account, the principle of the Sabbath rest goes back all the way to the creation story in Genesis 1–2 where the Sabbath is the first holy thing in all of creation. ‘God blessed the seventh day and made it holy’, we read in Genesis 2:3. The very first thing to be made or called holy therefore wasn’t a people or a place but a day.

If its appearance at the end of the creation story indicates the Sabbath’s importance, then so do the repeated references in Israel’s law and most especially the inclusion of the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments. Perhaps we can appreciate why Barbara Brown Taylor finds it ‘hard to understand why so many people put “Thou shalt not do any work” in a different category from “Thou shalt not kill” or “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”’ (2009, p. 139). Our storyteller, I suspect, would agree. But then, why is the Sabbath command so important? Does it really matter whether we work for six days or for seven? Shouldn’t it be up to us to decide whether we wish to rest or not?

The biblical writers give us several reasons for why Sabbath observance is important. The Exodus version of the Sabbath commandment (20:8-11) makes the link with creation that we just noted: ‘in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy’. God himself rested and set the seventh day apart, which is what making it holy means. This suggests that the Sabbath is simply part of God’s creational design (see Fretheim, 1991, p. 185). But there is a second version of the Sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy 5:12-15, which gives us another reason: ‘Remember that you
were slaves in Egypt and that the **LORD** your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the **LORD** your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. No-one was to do any work, not even their male and female slaves. Since the Israelites knew what slavery was like, they were to make sure that everyone, including their slaves, would enjoy regular times of rest and refreshment.

And rest is what the Sabbath is about, nothing else. At least, that’s what our texts suggest, as Fretheim so rightly notes, pointing out that the Sabbath ‘is presented to the people (v. 23), not as a day of worship, but as a day of solemn rest’ (1991, p. 185). God, it would seem, is concerned that his people find rest and refreshment, regardless of whether they use that time to worship him or not.

In our story in Exodus 16, the idea of the Sabbath is also linked to the earlier point that, no matter how much the people had managed to gather, everyone had exactly what they needed, no more and no less. This encourages us, as Taylor puts it, ‘to resist [our] culture’s killing rhythms of drivenness and depletion, compulsion and collapse’ (2009, p. 134). Indeed, she calls the Sabbath ‘the great equalizer’ (p. 132) and suggests (p. 131) that

by interrupting our economically sanctioned social order every week, Sabbath practice suspends our subtle and not so subtle ways of dominating one another on a regular basis. Because our work is so often how we both rank and rule over one another, resting from it gives us a rest from our own pecking orders as well.

**Keep It So You Can See (Exod. 16:31-36)**

Interestingly, it’s only at this point in the story that we learn that God’s special bread from heaven is called manna, so I must apologise for jumping the gun a bit in my retelling. Apart from the name, we also find out more about its looks and taste. That our storyteller should leave it so late to tell us is rather interesting as well, for up to this point, all we knew was that it had the shape of thin flakes that were like frost on the ground, whatever that means, and that the Israelites didn’t know what to make of it either (vv. 14-15). Now we learn that it had the colour of coriander seeds and that it didn’t taste that bad: ‘like wafers made with honey’ (v. 31).

Perhaps some additional comments on the manna – and indeed the quail – can help us to reflect on some of the implications of this story. When we looked at the account of the Egyptian plagues, we saw that some readers attempted to understand them as natural phenomena that were used by God in his endeavour to lead his people to freedom. Something similar has been suggested for God’s provision of the Israelites with manna and quail (see Fretheim, 1991, p. 182). Beginning with the former, it’s been observed that the description of the manna corresponds intriguingly closely to a phenomenon that occurs naturally in the Sinai Peninsula. Apparently, there’s a type of plant lice that puncture the fruit of tamarisk trees so they can consume their juice. The lice then excrete a yellowish-
white substance that can be flake- or ball-like. It decays quickly, disintegrates when the
day gets warmer and attracts ants. This substance, which is rich in carbohydrates and
sugar, has a sweet taste and is still gathered by natives today, who call it manna and make
some kind of bread from it. As for the quail, we know that migratory birds that fly in from
Africa or are blown in from the Mediterranean can be so exhausted that they can be
captured by hand or even come to the ground themselves (on this, see also Durham, 1987,
p. 224).

What are we to make of this? Fretheim would like us to take the naturalness of the
manna and quail seriously. He suggests that ‘it is precisely the “natural” that is seen as a
gift from God’ (1991, p. 181). Others disagree. Moberly thinks that God’s grace reconsti-
tutes the ordinary and everyday (2007, p. 224), while John Durham speaks of ‘the miracu-
ulous actions of a God who proves his Presence by providing for his people’s need’ (1987,
pp. 224-25). I’d like to come back to Fretheim’s perspective, however, because he has
some interesting thoughts on the naturalness of God’s gifts, which we would do well to
consider before making up our mind. Fretheim notes (1991, p. 182) that

if the provisions of God in the wilderness are all subsumed under the extraordinary or miracu-

lous, then the people of God will tend to look for God’s providential care only in that which
falls outside the ordinary. The all too common effect of this is to absent God from the ordinary
and everyday and to go searching for God only in the deep-sea and mountaintop experiences.
Consequently, the people of God will not be able to see in the very ordinariness of things that
God is the one who bestows blessings again and again. The result will often be that, when the
miraculous can no longer be discerned in one’s life, there will be a profound experience of the
absence of God altogether.

What then are we to conclude? You may recall that, when we looked at the Egyptian
plagues, I saw good reasons to reject naturalistic explanations, because they didn’t seem
to fit with the thrust of the story. In this case, though, I’m not sure that we should stress
the miraculous to such an extent that we lose sight of the natural.

This isn’t to overlook what Fretheim, too, calls the story’s ‘extraordinary elements’,
such as the apparent levelling out of the people’s collection according to need, the preser-
vation of the manna for two days at the end of each week, and its non-availability on the
Sabbath. All this clearly implies God’s involvement in what’s going on, and yet I’m inclined
to follow Fretheim in finding God at work, not only in the extraordinary and the miracu-
lous, but in the natural and the everyday as well. After all, in contrast to the plagues nar-
native, which clearly wishes to highlight God’s miraculous intervention against Pharaoh
and the Egyptians, the story of the manna and the quail is told in a more matter-of-fact
kind of way, leading Fretheim to conclude that, at the very least, ‘the miraculous ... has
been downplayed’ (1991, p. 182).

Coming to the end of our text, we once again encounter the theme of remembrance.
As in the case of the provisions for Passover and the feast of unleavened bread (Exod. 12–
13), there’s a concern that the people remember how God provided for them during their

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time in the wilderness. It’s particularly important, as Fretheim points out, that ‘the genuine memories of the bread from God’ replace ‘the idealized and unwarranted memories of Pharaoh’s food’ (1991, p. 187) that had led to the people’s complaint against Moses and Aaron at the beginning of our story. In fact, this is so important that the provisions that are now to be made are called a divine commandment (v. 32). However, this time, God isn’t calling for another festival. Instead, an omer of manna is to be preserved for future generations (v. 33). How that was possible, given that the manna was prone to go off, we aren’t told.

We do learn, however, that it is to be placed ‘before the Lord’ (v. 33) or ‘in front of the Testimony’ (v. 34), which is the same thing. These phrases have caught the eyes of commentators because they seem to assume the existence of the Ark of the Covenant, to which the term here translated ‘Testimony’ often refers (see Propp, 1999, p. 599). The problem is that the Ark doesn’t exist yet, even though, like the Sabbath commandment, it was to be introduced very soon. Perhaps our storyteller is looking ahead to the time when an omer of manna could be placed in front of the Ark, much like Israel’s victory song in 15:17 is looking ahead to the Jerusalem temple.

And that takes us to the end of our four sessions on the book of Exodus.

Sources