

Exodus 16:1-18

The Book of Exodus tells its readers how God took pity on the Israelites, the means chosen to liberate them from the Egyptians, and their consequent journeys in the wilderness.

Some people have tried to find evidence within the Egyptian chronicles that the Israelites were present in Egypt in this period but the lack of written material from that era limits any discoveries. What has been found in general terms is that foreigners did serve in Egyptian households, there were building programmes using 'apiru' or nomadic invaders and foreigners did attain high service in important households. Rather than trying to prove historical fact, it is better to understand the Book of Exodus as 'historiography', that is, the remembered history of the Israelite people which is crucial to their identity as the people of God.

This Book is a mixture of very early oral material which has come from different traditions and has been assembled into the one book. The events are pivotal to their faith and just as we have four gospels telling us about Jesus, the Jews have different memories of the same events. We have four separate gospels, but in Exodus, the stories and traditions are all mixed in the same book which can make for some difficult reading.

Theologians have tried to identify some of the traditions within the Book. It makes sense that different communities, just as with NT communities, had different memories and emphases which had become important to them. So when the Scriptures are committed to writing there is a desire to incorporate all the diverse memories of people and their experience of God within their lives.

The Book of Exodus might be regarded as the beginning proper of the Israelite story. They are now more than an extended family, they are a “congregation”, a single body united by ties of kinship, and affiliation by choice on their way to becoming a nation. Israelite identity is very complex. Their founding family comes from what will become Babylonia (and later Iraq). They practice “internal” marriage, a euphemism for incest. Abraham marries his (half-)sister; his uncle Nahor marries a niece, Milcah. The desire to marry only within the family, sends Abraham’s servant in search of a blood relative, Rebekah. Her branch of the family is described as “Aramean”. In a generation marriage patterns change.

Judah and Simeon produce heirs with Canaanite women, Tamar and her unnamed sister-in-law, and Joseph marries and fathers children with an Egyptian woman, Asenath. Joseph’s half-Egyptian children Ephraim and Manasseh will essentially become tribes in their own right. The scholarly designation for the ethnicity of ancient Israel is for this and other reasons, “Afro-Asiatic”.

To this multicultural mix is added an unknown number of persons of unknown ethnicity and nationality who escaped Egypt with Israel. All of these people are in the process of becoming a single nation, ritual actions like circumcision and covenant ratification will cement them together. Religious and cultural practices will help to differentiate them from other nations with whom they will share land and (similar) language.

This people, a mixed group of rag-tag slaves, have witnessed God's great power over Pharaoh on their behalf. This is a revolutionary act. Slaves are ignored and irrelevant in the course of history. Gods do not act for slaves, but for kings and empires. Yet, this Yahweh has turned the world and its rules upside down.

It was a dramatic exit from Egypt with a rush of activity and a run to the wilderness. This God sealed the way behind them with the destruction of a pursuing army. There is only one way to go, forward into the unknown world. So they follow God and Moses.

But instead of celebrating their newly found freedom, the Israelites are faced with the reality of having no food. And being refugees in the wilderness, they are without the means to cultivate the food necessary to survive.

After experiencing the miraculous escape to freedom, it is easy to dismiss these former slaves as ungrateful and faithless. God has saved them, and here they are complaining. A form of the word "complain" appears six times in this narrative. Yet, the biblical text does not condemn the people; God hears them and responds to their needs.

In this period of wilderness wandering, the "entire congregation" grumbles repeatedly against Moses and Aaron. The word "entire" is used here as literary exaggeration for effect: every one grumbles the exact same speech. In some rabbinic readings only the non-Israelite elements murmur. The word "entire" is also a marker of inclusivity. No matter how they got there, they are becoming a singular people with a singular lament.

It may be tempting to condemn the lack of faith the Israelites display in the God who has demonstrated such great power in the plagues on Egypt and the parting of the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea). It may be helpful to remember that those miracles were now more than six weeks past. Also six weeks behind them was the oasis of Elim with fresh water and date-laden palm trees. Six weeks later, their promised land was nowhere in sight and their provisions were being consumed at

an alarming rate. And, the only thing the pillar of cloud and fire was leading them to was more sand.

In this story God is both attentive and apparently exasperated. God's response to her whiny children will be familiar to many parents. Even so, God appears to take the complaint in stride, raining food from the sky. But this will be a test. Will the Israelites obey instructions they may not understand? Blind obedience is not always a virtue in our world. In fact, when such allegiance is placed in religious figures, it can be dangerous, even deadly. However, in the world of the Israelites, unquestioning obedience was prized.

What would we do in their place? These folks are wandering in some of the most arid and barren real estate on the planet. To survive, the people will need to learn to depend on God for everything. The first step in their process of becoming a self-determining people is to learn to trust this God. Just as a baby learns to trust that her parents will feed her, the people need to learn trust. Their bodies may be free from slavery, but it will take much more to free their minds and hearts.

Central to this account of manna from the heaven is the belief in a God who will continue to take care of the Israelites. God is not only the "Deliverer God" who liberates those who are in bondage, but God is also the God who provides for the people in the wilderness all the way to the Promised land. So God is portrayed as a God who hears the complaints of the people. God is a God who sees that the people are hungry, and most importantly, God is a God who acts to give the hungry Israelites whatever they need.

This is a God who responds to needs of the people. The extravagance of God's gifts can easily be overlooked today. "In the evening, quails came up and

covered the camp." We are used to eating meat unless consciously choosing otherwise. But in this ancient world, "the average family ate meat only on festive occasions". In this non-producing, arid land, the people not only received meat, but did so on a daily basis.

The second gift is equally generous. At first glance, it does not appear like much. Twice the word thin, "as thin as frost", is used to describe this mystery. When the people saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" or "manhu" in Hebrew. Like God's unfathomable name, this gift will remain a question, not a certainty. This manna/manhu cannot be owned. If you gather a little, there is enough, and if you greedily gather up a great amount, there is still just enough, and if you gather just the right amount, it is the right amount.

This Yahweh is turning the rules of the world upside down! So what of the Protestant work ethic? Hard work equals more for me and mine. Not in God's world. Like the parable of the workers in the vineyard, God's world is one of equality for all. God reminds them (and us) that work, even in the Kingdom, is not why God gives us our daily bread. The people receive a message about the way they should learn to act as a people of God.

This emphasis on being completely satisfied by God's provision of food has been instrumental in the rabbis' use of a nursing image to talk about the manna being as sufficient as a mother's milk is to her baby. The rabbis even imagined the manna changing flavours so as to offer some variation, inspired by the notion that the taste of mother's milk would be impacted by what the mother eats. The point of this creative expression is that God graciously offers all that the Israelites need. We are reminded in this Exodus story that there is a close association between the

gracious gift of the manna and the glory of God that appears as a sign of God's presence. It is in God's gracious blessings that we experience that God is with us.

It is easy to see God's gifts here as belonging to a long ago people who are dependent on God. It is a nice story but probably has very little to do with us today. But, their lesson is our lesson. Part of understanding the biblical story as part of our story is to learn the lessons presented by the story.

We tend to think that farmers and smart people assure our food supply. Yet, despite all of our ingenuity, it is God who has made a planet where the seeds awaken to feed the world. Just because something is part of our ordinary lives does not mean it is not miraculous.

Whether we see it or not, we depend on God for our daily bread, just as this wilderness generation did. This world is full of a great variety of plants and animals that feed us all in a complex ecosystem. We are the ones who have made systems where food is more available in some places than others. God's plan is a table for all – a definition that turns our world upside down.

Once we understand the context, this story is not one where we should stand in judgment of our ancient brothers and sisters, but one where we stand in their shoes and look around to see how God wishes us to order the world. God provides, and we are to take what we need. Greed and trust are incompatible. God still provides a world rich in resources, and we should marvel at this overabundance of God's gifts. Possibly, we react to the people's "complaining" because we know that we should never think of complaining considering all the gifts and blessings we have.

By contrast, God hears the complaints and acts. God acknowledges the

insecurity and anxiety of the congregation and perceives its connection to their material, embodied needs. God's response is concrete and "down to earth" and promises to re-form the once-enslaved people in the daily and weekly rhythms of provision, labour, satiety, and rest. In the Exodus story, the reference to the culmination of labour and a double-portion of bread "on the sixth day" hints at a connection to the creation narrative – the day of rest by God and God's people.

The congregation will be shaped by the mundane, day-to-day work by which they respond to the divine gift that supplies their lack. They will be created and re-created in routines of contingency, dependence, trust, and generosity. They are promised that by observing this routine they will come to know God as the one who freed them from slavery and sustained them each day in the wilderness.

It is significant that the first issue to arise after the experience of liberation from slavery is the question of how to establish a sustainable economy in a place called wilderness.

However, it is important to recognize that God's provision of food occurs in a context of depravity. The fact that the Israelites are finding themselves in the wilderness with no food – reminds us of the reality of food shortage and famine – that for many people all over the world may be a life-threatening reality – quite often due to no fault of their own.

The recent effects of climate change, war, terror and globalization on the everyday reality of many people in places like Darfur, Nigeria, Sudan, and Syria challenge us to recognize that far too many people today do not experience the proverbial manna from heaven.

In his provocative contribution, “The Truth of Abundance: Relearning Dayenu”, theologian and author Walter Brueggemann takes on the “myth of scarcity” that one sees in the greed and the hoarding practices of the imperial policies of the Pharaoh of Egypt that is reminiscent of the economic monopoly of contemporary superpowers that we see play out in, for example, “greedy CEO salaries”, in “so-called welfare reform”, and one may add tax reform, which all speak of “the drive to privatize wealth away from care for the public good”.

In contrast, Brueggemann challenges us to relearn the “lyric of abundance” that believes that there is more than enough food to go around in God’s good creation. However, vitally important for this vision of dayenu – translated as “there is enough in God’s goodness” – is that each and every one of us must make sure that all members of the community take just what they need. No more, no less.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta shares this story: “Some weeks back I heard there was a family who had not eaten for some days – a Hindu family – so I took some rice and I went to the family. Before I knew where I was, the mother of the family had divided the rice into two and she took the other half to the next-door neighbours, who happened to be a Moslem family. Then I asked her: ‘How much will all of you have to share? There are ten of you with that bit of rice.’ The mother replied: ‘They have not eaten either.’ This is greatness.” All members of the community take just what they need. No more, no less.

The manna story warns against hoarding, against greed that capitalizes on this “myth of scarcity”. Instead it encourages sharing that is exemplified also in the stories that tell of Jesus taking five loaves and two fishes, and after he had blessed the food, he broke it and gave it to feed a multitude of hungry people.

John's gospel attaches all of its Eucharistic teaching, which involves a symbolic eating of the flesh of Jesus, and a symbolic drinking of the blood of Jesus, to the story of the feeding of the multitude. He goes to even greater lengths to identify Jesus with the bread that fell from heaven in the Exodus story. John has Jesus say: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven". He goes on to contrast the bread that he offers with the manna in the wilderness. "The bread I give you", John's Jesus says, "is my flesh, and it will enable you to live forever".

This inherently Eucharistic act continues the notion of the absolute sufficient nature of God's provision of food first evident in the story of the manna in that the twelve baskets of bread left over after feeding the multitude of people symbolizes "abundance that overrides all of the fearful anxiety of the world". Similarly, we are called to embody God's provision of food by feeding those near and far who are in need, precisely because we have been fed by God.

We can imitate Pharaoh, and refuse to hear, or we can imitate God, and acknowledge and respond to complaints that are borne of hunger, lack, and crippling anxiety.

With these realities in view, what are the daily practices and rhythms of life that will ensure food security, fair wages, equal opportunity, and rest for all members of our communities? Today, as we give thanks to God for all our blessings, let us also give thanks for the opportunities we are given to respond to those complaints borne of hunger and need in our communities, near and far.

Amen.