

# 8

## **SUMMARY**

These chapters deal with the crises that beset a people who had no experience living in the desert: hunger, thirst, danger from enemies, and uncertainty about Moses' ability to keep them safe. We shall see that these experiences in the wilderness taught Israel some lasting lessons about God and themselves. One of those experiences, the gift of manna, will take on new meaning in the Gospels, as the background to the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand.

## **BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES**

Exodus 15:22-18:27

Numbers 11

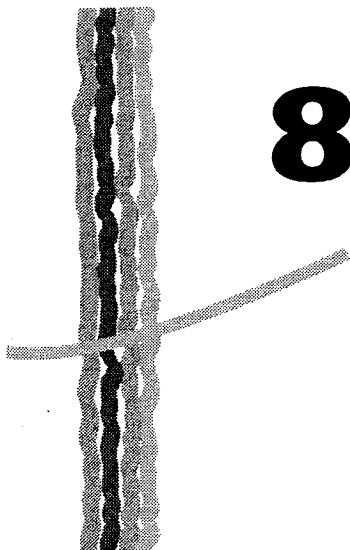
Numbers 20:2-13

John 6

## **WORD LIST**

Allegory

Typology



## WILDERNESS: A NEW AND DANGEROUS LIFE

### *On the Way to Sinai*

This session traces the movement of Israel from the Sea into the wilderness. Read **Exodus 15:22-18:27**. Once they had crossed the Sea, the people found themselves in the desert of the Sinai peninsula. It is a hostile place, and people who had spent all their lives amid the lush vegetation of the Nile delta were scarcely prepared for life in the desert. Moses' abilities as a leader were sorely challenged. There was no organization or discipline of the kind that would be needed for a march like this. As slaves, the Hebrews had been used to taking orders from their Egyptian taskmasters. Now they were free—why should they listen to Moses? Not all of them were even Hebrews, for Exodus 12:38 tells us that when Pharaoh let them go, a “mixed crowd” took advantage of the opportunity to escape with them. Moses was thus trying to cope with groups of ex-slaves, of various backgrounds. Eventually at Sinai they will all become “Israel,” as they accept the covenant relationship.

A map of the Sinai peninsula in the Old Testament period will identify a few of the place names that occur in the wilderness itinerary, but several of those identifications are likely to be accompanied by question marks. There are caravan routes through the desert, leading from one oasis to another, but it is not possible now to connect many of the biblical names with specific places. The major issue is the location of Mount Sinai itself.

The most favored location is Jebel Musa (“Mount Moses”) in south central Sinai, the location of St. Catherine's monastery, built in the fourth century A.D. Since Moses' sojourn

in the wilderness was in Midian, however (Exodus 2:15; 3:1), and Midian is in north Arabia, some think Mount Sinai should be located there. (Note that the same mountain is sometimes called Horeb, as in Exodus 3:1; 1 Kings 19:8; and sometimes Sinai, as in Exodus 19:1-2). A third location has been proposed near Kadesh Barnea, in the northern part of the Sinai peninsula, since the Israelites spent most of the wilderness period there (Numbers 13:26; 20:1). There are no high mountains in that area, however. Jebel Musa at least looks impressive enough to have been the mountain where the covenant relationship was established, but the identification of the mountain is really of no importance for understanding the meaning of that crucial encounter between God and the Hebrews.

### ***“Murmuring in the Wilderness”***

This is the traditional way of referring to the complaints that the people brought to Moses. In Numbers, the complaints lead to outright rebellion, but they are relatively restrained in Exodus. In Exodus 15:22 and following we are told briefly of the people’s movements through the wilderness of Shur and the wilderness of Sin, and of encampments at Marah, Elim, and Rephidim (15:23,27; 17:1). Three stories of complaints are recorded. At Marah (which means “bitter”) the water could not be drunk, but Moses sweetened it with a plant of some kind. The second incident occupies all of chapter 16, so it obviously played an important role in Israel’s memory of the wilderness period. The Bedouin know how to survive in the desert, but people who are not used to those harsh conditions are likely to die there (see 16:3).

The point of the whole story of the manna is that somehow God provided for an entire generation of people who did not know how to provide for themselves. As you might expect, there have been numerous efforts to explain that mysterious substance (Exodus 16:14,31; Numbers 11:7-9). Its name suggests we are not likely to succeed, for “manna” is derived from the question, “What is it?” which the people asked when they first saw it (16:15).

There is a remarkable contrast between the stories of complaint in Exodus and those in **Numbers 11**. In Exodus, God’s response is one of caring for the people. They have serious needs—food and water—and God acts to provide for them. But in Numbers, God also judges the people for their rebellious spirits, and they suffer for their complaints. The difference is probably to be explained by the fact that the stories we are reading now

come before the covenant relationship was established at Sinai. These people are innocents, knowing little, and God treats them mercifully. After Sinai, however, God has explained the divine intention to them, has assured them they are chosen to be a special people, has taught them how to behave, and has said they will be led to the promised land. The book of Numbers records a period when they ought to know better, and so they are held responsible for their behavior. Compare the gift of manna in Exodus 16 with the complaints about having to eat manna every day in Numbers 11.

There is a similar contrast in two stories dealing with the lack of water which is the third complaint. In Exodus 17:1-7, Moses struck a rock with his rod and water burst forth. In **Numbers 20:2-13**, however, he made more of a show of it, apparently as if he had the personal power to bring water from a rock. As a result, even Moses was judged, and God told him he would get to the borders of the promised land, but no further.

Wilderness thus remained in Israel's memory as a place of dramatic contrasts. On the one hand, it was a place where God guided them and cared for them in spite of every danger. Read Deuteronomy 8:2-4 and Psalm 105:39-41 and note the recollections of God's goodness. On the other hand, they had strong traditions about the rebelliousness of their ancestors and knew the desert to be a place where death is near at hand every day. So, they also recalled the wilderness when they felt themselves to be as sinful as that earlier generation, knowing they also deserved judgment. Read Psalm 106:13-15; Ezekiel 20:10-17.

The importance of the gift of manna in Israel's memory of the wilderness period is emphasized by the fact that they remembered one of the Ten Commandments being given before they reached Mount Sinai (Exodus 16:22-30). The people found that every sixth day they were able to gather twice as much manna, so that they did not have to work on the seventh. Moses explained this by telling them the seventh day was the Lord's gift to them, indeed a commandment, that it should be a day of rest for them.

The Sabbath was something unique to Israel. No such regular rest day has been found in any other ancient culture. As a result, it was highly prized as a gift that marked off Israel as a people in whom God showed special interest. This accounts for the great care with which the Sabbath was observed in later Judaism. Some Christians have assumed that because the Sabbath is so important in the Old Testament, they also should not work on Saturday (the seventh day). Others have transferred the restrictions on work to Sunday, the day of Christ's

resurrection, which in early times became the favored day for Christian worship. The New Testament, however, insists that Christians do not live under the law, but accept Jesus Christ as their means of access to God, rather than law (see Mark 2:23-28). The concept of a regular day of rest is an important one for human welfare, which our own society may be neglecting to its peril. The New Testament, however, does not require Christians to observe the Sabbath. See Colossians 2:16-17.

### ***“Bread from Heaven” in the New Testament***

The manna is referred to in passing several times by New Testament writers (1 Corinthians 10:3; 2 Corinthians 8:15; Revelation 2:17), and plays an important role in two events of Jesus’ life. The first is his temptation. As Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness; Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days after his baptism by John the Baptist (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13), and there he was tempted three times. The issue was clearly Jesus’ need to understand what he had been sent to earth to do. Was he to fulfill the Jewish hope for the coming of the Messiah—the righteous king who would establish peace and justice on earth? He decided that was a temptation he must resist. God had sent him for another purpose. The first temptation alluded to a Jewish belief of the time, that when Messiah came he would once again supply his people with the heavenly manna. So the tempter said, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” (Matthew 4:3). In response, Jesus quoted scripture from Deuteronomy 8:3: “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ” In the wilderness he came to understand that his ministry was not to be the kingship his people hoped for.

All four Gospels do record the feeding of the five thousand as a messianic sign, however (Matthew 14:3-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15). The people are not in the wilderness, but Mark emphasizes that they are in a “deserted place,” intending to remind us of Israel in the wilderness. Jesus did not just provide food in a random way, but ordered the people to sit down in neat groups of hundreds and fifties, and the disciples then served them. Thus he had everyone’s attention, and that very careful way of distributing the food must have been deliberately intended as a sign: “With my presence in your midst, God is beginning to provide the blessings you have hoped for.”

John adds a new interpretation to the miracle. Read **John 6**. We have noticed earlier that he does not record the Last Supper the night before Jesus died, but that does not mean he

is uninterested in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as it was celebrated in the early church. In this chapter he introduces a lengthy interpretation of the sacrament with reference to the bread that fed the five thousand (John 6:25-65). Jesus refers to the manna in verses 31-32,49 but does so in order to make a contrast between the bread that sustains the life of the body and spiritual bread, the gift of eternal life that comes through him. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (6:51).

The idea of eating Jesus' flesh was highly offensive in his lifetime, as John records (6:52, 60,66), and could scarcely have been understood until after the Last Supper, which is clearly what John refers to. In this chapter, he has thus brought together the manna once provided in the wilderness, the Jewish hope for the renewed gift of manna when Messiah comes, the feeding of the five thousand as a sign that God was beginning to fulfill his promises, and the bread of the Lord's Supper—the Christian's way of participating in the redeeming death of Christ.

### ***Israel at War for the First Time***

The wilderness section of Exodus records another kind of danger in 17:8-16. Review that passage now. The Amalekites were a nomadic group who have a very bad reputation in the Old Testament. Even after Israel was established in the promised land, they suffered from occasional attacks from these wandering raiders, until finally Saul and David succeeded in subduing them (Judges 3:13; 6:3,33; 7:12; 10:12; 1 Samuel 14:48; 15:2-32; 2 Samuel 8:12). We are not told why they attacked the Israelites in the wilderness; perhaps it was just because they were passing through their territory. An important detail is added to the story in Deuteronomy 25:17-18: "Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God." It probably was this attack on those who could not keep up—the elderly, lame, and children—plus the continuing danger from Amalek in later times, that led to the severe threats that were made against the Amalekites.

The unusual story of Moses with his hands upraised sitting on the hill top has led to a variety of interpretations which make it a useful illustration of the different ways Christians have

used the Old Testament. I do not recommend most of them, for it will be seen that in the effort to make the passage relevant to the Christian life they introduce ideas that are not really in the text. In conclusion, I shall suggest a reading that is in keeping with the way we have used the rest of Exodus.

1. Ethical Examples: The *Preacher's Homiletical Commentary* (1892) suggested a five-point sermon that could be preached on this text: a). We must do battle with evil. b). We must combine prayer with utmost exertion. c). We are often impeded by weakness. d). We should keep a record of our victories. e). All should be ascribed to the glory of God. A half century later, the *Interpreter's Bible* (1952) found one lesson: the possibility of intercessory prayer, although note that the text doesn't say whether Moses was praying. Augustine made a quite different use of the passage, as part of his development of a theory of the "just war."
2. Allegorizing: The allegorical approach to interpretation of scripture claims that in addition to the literal meaning, every text has a spiritual meaning, which can be determined by our ingenuity. This enables one to find good doctrine everywhere, but unfortunately it is often being imported, rather than really being found. Here are examples: The stone Moses sat on really means Christ, the rock on whom our faith is founded. Aaron and Hur have been given three different meanings, since allegorizing allows one to make a passage mean anything one likes, if one is clever enough. For some, they represent the two Testaments. Others make Moses' heavy hands symbolic of the burden of the law (since Moses is the lawgiver), while the burden is made light by Aaron (representing Christ) and Hur (representing the Holy Spirit). Still others played with the names, finding the Hebrew word for mountain in the middle of Aaron's name and a vague similarity between Hur and the word for fire. Thus, our prayer (Moses' arms) is supported by high and heavenly meditation (Aaron=mountain) and fervent charity (Hur=fire). Finally, many, even into modern times, have assumed Moses held his arms horizontally from his sides, thus making the sign of the cross, which brought victory. But the text does not tell us how he held his arms.
3. Typology: This method takes the meaning of the original event more seriously than allegorizing does, so it is a more responsible way of reading scripture. The event is taken to be a "type" of a later, greater event to come in the future, which will be similar to the earlier one that foreshadowed it. Thus Moses as an intercessor is called a type of Christ, since both interceded for their people, although Christ's intercession

was by far the more effective. Joshua has been called a type of Christ, as well, since they had the same name (Jesus is the Greek form of the Aramaic Jeshua, which is Joshua in Hebrew). Joshua led the people into the promised land, as Christ opens the way to heaven, and Joshua succeeded Moses as gospel succeeds law. Amalek was often taken as a type of the devil, the perennial enemy who must be defeated.

4. **Literal-historical:** This approach does not attempt to draw a great deal of theology or ethical lessons from a text unless the words, read literally, really say that. It would seem that the simplest explanation of the victory over the Amalekites would appeal to the power of Moses' presence. As long as he could be seen on the hilltop, with his arms upraised in blessing or encouragement, the amateur fighters below were able to prevail. But when he showed signs of weakness morale went down and they began to lose. An early Jewish text (*Mekilta*) already said that Moses' upraised hands encouraged Israel to exert themselves fully. As to the historical meaning of the passage: It represents the first of many threats to the physical existence of Israel. The theology in it is to be found in the people's conviction that God intended them not to die out, but to live on. This is thus a part of the concept of Israel as the chosen people, which we shall consider in the next session when we deal with Exodus 19.

In summary and evaluation we can say this:

1. The New Testament makes extensive use of the ethical teachings of the Old Testament, and that is of great importance to Christians. We shall think more about that in connection with the giving of the law at Sinai. But that does not mean we should try to find ethical examples everywhere. Often what people *did* is what they should not have done. To look for ethical examples in Exodus 17:8-16 seems to expect more than the text ever intended.
2. There are some true allegories in the Old Testament, especially in Ezekiel (chapters 15,16,17,19,23,27). They should be read for their symbolic meaning, for that is what was intended. The New Testament writers seldom allegorize, although you can find an example in 1 Corinthians 10:4. But to claim everything has a symbolic meaning is to make scripture say things that it really doesn't say.
3. Typology is more legitimate, and is used in the New Testament. Hebrews speak at length of priesthood and sacrifice as types of Christ and his work, acknowledging the value of the original institutions and saying that Christ and his work are like them but far surpassing them in value.



4. The literal-historical approach assumes that the authors of scripture said exactly what they intended. It focuses on understanding as exactly as possible the meanings of the words and sentences, the historical setting of the passage, and the effects the passage had on the lives of believers in later times. It will admit that some texts don't contain much theology, and that others were important at one time but are not as important any more, since circumstances have changed. For example, the Amalekites are ancient history now, and this passage says nothing directly to us except to remind us of the difficulties our ancestors faced and of their belief that God intended them to persevere. It is not unimportant for us, however, to be reminded of how dangerous life has been for other believers.

### *A Little Lesson in Leadership*

Chapter 18 is a unique passage. Its main subject is leadership, which we have already dealt with in session 4, but along the way it introduces several interesting questions. We first encountered Moses' father-in-law in Exodus 2:18-22, but there his name was Reuel and now it is Jethro (as in 3:1; 4:18). This is certainly the same man, for he is identified in both chapters as the father of Zipporah (2:21; 18:2). Jethro is identified in 18:1 as a priest of Midian, and from what follows it becomes clear that he is a worshiper of Yahweh (see verses 10-12). Were there other groups, then, besides the Israelites, who worshiped Yahweh in early times? There is some evidence suggesting that may be so, but those groups have left no history of themselves, so we do not know what became of them. Some of them may have become absorbed into Israel later on; others may have reverted to paganism. At any rate, we have encountered a remarkable scene in 18:12, with Moses and Aaron acknowledging the priesthood of Jethro.

Jethro's wisdom was also acknowledged. Quarrels were arising every day in the midst of this undisciplined group, and Moses tried to take it upon himself to settle all of them (verses 13-16). Jethro recognized that this would not work for long, for it was occupying all of Moses' time and it was wearing him out. Moses had access to God in a way others did not, so determining what God wanted people to do was his essential task (verses 19-20). Other duties could be delegated, so Jethro proposed that the people be organized into groups, each group with a leader who would be responsible for their daily troubles (verses 21-23). This was done, and Jethro returned to Midian, having made his first and last contribution to the life of the people of Israel. This chapter thus forms an interval in the story of the

wilderness period, and the narrative now quickly moves the people to Sinai, where the covenant relationship between them and God will be sealed.

No matter where people lived in Israel in later times, the desert was not far away. The memory of the wilderness period thus remained vivid. Its dangers reminded them both of God's care, and of their rebelliousness. It was a natural setting for the temptation of Jesus, but one of the wilderness stories—concerning the manna—enabled the New Testament writers to make important claims for Jesus as the Messiah.

## **For Further Study and Reflection**

### ***Memory Bank***

Review the gift of manna in Exodus 16 and Jesus' words about the Bread of Life in John 6.

### ***Research***

1. Two prophets made a new use of the wilderness tradition. Read Hosea 2 and Ezekiel 20:33-44. Notice that they predict a new exodus, bringing the people back from exile, with a new period in the wilderness, which will be for discipline, purging and correction.
2. Look for the article on "Sabbath" in a Bible dictionary for information on the history of this important institution. You might also look for the "Lord's Day", or Sunday, in order to learn more about the adoption of the first day of the week as the Christian day of worship.

### ***Reflection***

1. Read Deuteronomy 8, a sermon with the wilderness and settlement in the promised land as its text. What is the main point of the sermon?
2. Do you have a weekly day of rest when you spend most of your time quietly, doing relaxing and refreshing activities? If not, does it seem desirable? Could you find a way to manage it?