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Miracles and Murmurings in the Desert Exodus 13:17-19:2

Introduction

When a baby is born, it is not born with the capabilities of a full-grown adult. This analogy is applied to the newborn Christian in the New Testament (1 Pet 2:2; Matt 11:25). It also applies to the newborn nation. Israel became that newborn nation at Sinai, see Exodus 19:1-25. The tribes that went down into Egypt were delivered by the redemption of Yahweh through the tenth plague. Chapters 13:1 to 19:25 present nine episodes illustrating the growth pains of maturity that the Hebrew people experienced on their way to Sinai. They had been totally dependent upon the resources of the Egyptians. While it is true they were slaves, it was also true that they had a measure of security which the wilderness did not afford. The experiences which lead from Egypt to Sinai were the first taste of independence that the people received. They quickly had to learn that their total dependence was in Yahweh. He was not only the God of redemption but the God of everlasting salvation who would provide for them in the wilderness and beyond.

These nine episodes show that redemption is a continuing relationship and not a one-time experience. Redemption from Egypt immediately became redemption through in which Yahweh demonstrated His guidance, provision, deliverance, longsuffering, nurture, and growth to nationhood for the Hebrews. The purpose of these trials was to strengthen their faith in Yahweh's ability to lead, sustain, and protect them. They needed this to build their confidence and total dependence on Him. They would learn in these wilderness trials that God did not deliver them and drop them but that they were His chosen people.

Episode One: Pillar of Cloud and Fire, 13:17-22

When the people were released by Pharaoh, God did not lead them directly to Canaan. The reason is given (13:17). They were not ready, at this time, for a war of conquest. The coastal route would have been the most direct way to Canaan, but it was also well patrolled by marauders. Instead God led them by the way of the Red Sea. The sea mentioned is the *yam suph* or sea of reeds and could have been a general term referring to any of many bodies of water in the area. There are really only three possible routes which they could have taken. The coastal route was forbidden. The central route is possible but not likely. The southern route best fits the circumstances and the text of Exodus. When the Hebrews departed Egypt, they

took with them the bones and remains of Joseph as he had requested (*Gen 50:25*). *Joshua 24:32* says they were buried at Shechem after the conquest of the land.

As visible evidence of God's leadership and blessing, He sent a pillar of cloud which became a pillar of fire by night. Several natural explanations are given to explain this phenomenon, but it is clear that the presence of the cloud, whatever it was, was caused by the miraculous provision of God. The pillar which means "something standing" was probably a column shaped cloud. It served several functions:

1. It led the way before the Israelites (*13:21*). God used this to guide them in the direction He wanted them to go.
2. It also was a means of protection from their enemies (*14:19-20*).
3. It was associated with the tent of meeting. Sometimes it hovered over the tent (*40:34-38*); sometimes it engulfed the tent (*33:9*).
4. It also was associated with an angel of God who walked with the cloud before Israel (*14:19*).

Thus, the first episode was a lesson to demonstrate God's guidance and protection of the people in the wilderness. This was an important point. Not only were they leaving the security of Egypt's material provisions, i.e. food, water, and shelter, but also the protection afforded by Pharaoh's armies. They needed to know that Yahweh was both willing and able to take care of them.

Episode Two: The Red Sea, 14:1-15:21

Whatever the actual route, the Hebrews were led to a position adjacent to a body of water, which the text calls the "sea of reeds." This may not be a formal name but a general term for a body of water with a marshy perimeter. While there are several possible locations, the body of water known as the Red Sea is the probable location. And a place that fits the description of these events has been located on the northwestern coast of the Red Sea. There are several facts on which this conclusion is based:

1. The Hebrews were obviously adjacent to or to the west of a substantial body of water so that escape was impossible. Many of the smaller lakes and marshy spots in the area do not lend themselves to this situation.
2. The wind blew from the east all night, at least to the time of crossing between 2 A.M. and 6 A.M. A smaller body of water would not require such a force to bring the tide in or out and leave a path of dry land, *14:21*.
3. *Exodus 14:22* states "the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left," another affirmation that they were passing through a substantial body of water.

4. The body of water crossed was deep enough to drown the 600 horsemen and chariot horses along with any other soldiers who came. This too suggests a formidable body of water, Exod 14:7, 27-28.

The northwestern end of the Red Sea fits very well as a venue for the circumstances described in Exodus chapters 14 and 15.

God warned the Israelites that Pharaoh's heart was so hard that he would pursue them and would attempt to destroy them (14:1-5). He selected 600 charioteers and launched his offensive (14:6-9). Understandably, the reaction of the Hebrew people was one of fear and uncertainty (14:10-12). It is not surprising that such fear brought on the first of a succession of murmurings and complaints. Their reaction was to wish they had never left Egypt. They accused Moses of bringing them to a grave in the wilderness (14:11). It would have been better to serve the Egyptians than to die at their hands in the wilderness, in the opinion of the Hebrews.

The attitude of fear and complaint among the Hebrews expressed in 14:11 is a surprise when it is considered in light of the miraculous deliverance provided by God. His demonstration of power through the plagues and the Passover left them unmoved when this next crisis came. Benard Ramm, in his book *His Way Out*, G/L Publications, Glendale, CA: 1974, pp. 88-89, suggests at least three reasons why the Hebrews may have expressed this attitude. While these reasons do not justify their position they do help us understand the possible reasons behind their thinking.

1. It is likely that not all who came out with them were Hebrews. Exodus 12:38 says a mixed multitude left Egypt. These people could have been the source of the murmurings. Also, it should be noted that not all the Hebrews were equally men of faith.
2. Since the Hebrews had no written Scripture at this point in their history, thus, they had no sense of the history of redemption. Their murmuring came as a result of a lack of understanding and trust.
3. These people were slaves, which means they were not well educated. They lived on a meager existence and felt threatened by impending disasters of all kinds. Uncertainty was a way of life for them.

Moses' answer was glorious. He said, "The Lord will fight for you and you won't have to do a thing" (14:14). God's salvation is the answer to man's need. Moses makes clear the implications of the salvation that God has and will continue to provide.

1. It is Yahweh's salvation, not man's salvation. The Hebrew text uses the emphatic form of the verbs in verses 17 and 18 to stress that God wants them to know that He alone has provided and continuously will provide redemption.
2. This salvation was addressed to all Israel. It was offered to everyone who would respond by faith, including the fellow travelers of the mixed multitude.
3. God's redemptive work covers every area of life. He did not redeem them from slavery to Pharaoh to let them die for want of any army, or for want of food or water.
4. Both physical and spiritual redemption is costly, and God is willing to pay the price. Moses would later be able to point to these trials and God's provision as a basis for recognizing and understanding His grace, see Deut 8:1-20.
5. Redemption is offered without price. It is free to those who receive it.
6. God provides an eternal salvation. It is not a here today gone tomorrow thing. God saved them to be His people and would not desert them in time of need.
7. God's salvation is itself a further revelation of His love and character. It is also a warning of God's justice and judgment (14:18).

God gave them protection as the pillar of fire stood between Pharaoh's armies and the Hebrews (14:19-20) but he also gave a command that they should move forward under Moses' leadership (14:15). To do so required an act of faith. To march forward was to march into the sea. But here once again God was to receive glory. Moses stretched his hand over the sea, and the strong east wind blew all night and the waters were divided so that Israel crossed on dry ground (14:21-22). They moved during the morning watch; sometime between 2 A.M. and 6 A.M. When Pharaoh and his armies followed, the waters returned and they were drowned. According to Psalm 77:17-19, there was also a sudden thunderstorm which helped to prevent the chariots from moving forward so the Egyptians did not cross. The final result was the salvation of Israel and the strengthening of the faith of the people (14:31).

Page Kelly, former professor of Old Testament at Southern Seminary, clarifies six points that are made in the narrative of the Red Sea crossing. First, the Israelites were hopelessly trapped between the sea and the army of Pharaoh. Second, Yahweh was there on Israel's side. Third, God's power opened up a way where there was no way and provided escape through the sea. Fourth, at the same time God destroyed Israel's enemies in the sea. Fifth, Israel experienced a great deliverance (14:30). Sixth, because of this victory Israel believed on Yahweh (14:31) and other nations also acknowledged his power (14:4, 17-18; 15:14-16) see Page H. Kelly, *Exodus*, Nashville: Convention Press, 1977, p. 33.

Chapter 15:1-18 records the grand response of Moses who composed a victory song declaring God's triumph. There are three stanzas in the hymn that declare the theme of each. The first stanza (15:1-5) declares the strength of Yahweh and His

power in contrast to Pharaoh. The second stanza (15:6-10) contains two central ideas. It declares the power of God over the elements and the power of God over the enemy. Stanza three (15:11-18) declares the transcendence of God above all gods of the world. It declares His holiness, His mercy, and His judgment. The third stanza closes by declaring the eternal reign of Yahweh as king (15:18), see John Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, pp. 174-75.

Verses 19-21 form the epilogue, restating the reason for the victory hymn. Miriam, called the prophetess, also joined with a song of her own (15:21). This prose of summary concludes the poetic hymn of victory and closes the second episode of redemption.

Episode Three: The Waters of Marah, 15:22-27

After a Red Sea magnitude of deliverance one would expect no more complaints. But the murmuring commences once again when the next crisis surfaced. The times following great victory are always very dangerous. After every great conquest we must take care for it is then that the smaller discomforts are felt again. The issue at this point was not so much the need for water as the failure to depend on God.

The Hebrews went out into the wilderness of Shur, and of course water was a basic need as is the case everywhere in the Middle East (15:24). The place names which are given can no longer be identified with geographical sites with any degree of accuracy. The wilderness of Shur is thought to be located in the northwest Sinai Peninsula. When they came to a place called Marah (15:23), which means "bitterness," they could not drink the water there so they murmured and complained. By prayer Moses obtained wisdom from God. He took a tree and cast it into the waters and they were made potable.

The lesson is clear. The first rule of survival is dependence on the Lord (15:26). God was reminding them of the plagues, signs, and wonders of Egypt. He promised that "none of these diseases would come on them" as long as they maintained the conditions which He set up in the "ordinance." These are four conditions stated:

1. They were to diligently hearken to the Lord's voice. The word "hearken" (*sham'a*) means "to hear with a mind to obey." It means more than listening. It involves a willingness to do that which is heard. The Hebrews were to be open to the will of God.
2. They were to do that which was right in God's eyes. God was to be the sole judge of that which was right and wrong.
3. They were to give ear to His commandments.
4. They were to keep or guard His ordinances.

All four of these conditions stress absolute, unquestioned obedience to the Lord. As long as they were obedient, He promised to be their healer. It is a great illustration of the relationship between faith and works. Our salvation is by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9), but this in no way relaxes the moral and spiritual demands that God makes of us (John 14:15; 1 John 2:3). If we are motivated by the love of the Father, we will seek to keep His commandments.

Israel's lesson again was to be that of obedience and total dependence on God. He had redeemed them from Egypt. He would also supply all their needs according to the riches of His grace (Phil 4:19). Certainly the miracle of grace should silence all our murmurings. From the miracle of Marah, the Hebrews were led to Elim (15:27) where they enjoyed the abundance of twelve wells and seventy palm trees.

Episode Four: Quail and Manna, 16:1-36

The next crisis was how to feed the multitudes? Some estimates of the number of those who left Egypt run as high as two to three million. Even if the number were dramatically reduced to only a few hundred thousand, the crisis for food in the desert would have been a crucial one. This was a great test of Moses' ability to lead the people. He had the overwhelming task of calling forth faith in God's ability to supply every need. Moses' answer to the murmurings was not to come to his own defense but to simply declare the word of the Lord (16:6). God promised a miraculous supply of meat and bread (16:4-5).

Each day quail came to the camp in the evening (16:13) and could be gathered for food. These birds regularly fly routes between southern Europe and Arabia. There would have been plenty for the Lord to use as a supply for their needs. These quail are especially numerous in the spring at the time just after the Exodus began in March to April. In a later account, the quails became a plague (Num 11:4-9, 31-33), but at this point they were a great blessing.

Along with the quail meat, God sent the manna. It is difficult to say exactly what the manna was. The Hebrew name, *man hir*, may be rendered "What is it?" This may indicate that not even the Hebrews knew exactly what it was. It is described as a small, round, flat, fine, flake-like thing (16:14) like coriander seed and tasted like honey wafers (16:31). It took about two quarts to supply the needs of one person for one day (16:16). It was to be gathered each day with everyone taking only enough for that day (16:4-5, 18-19). If it was allowed to stand overnight it bred worms and was unfit for human consumption (16:20). Also, if it was not gathered in the early morning it melted when the sun grew hot (16:21). The manna could be baked or boiled and preserved for use on the Sabbath. No manna was to be gathered on the Sabbath.

Today a substance which the Bedouin tribesmen call *mann* is found in the area. It is produced by insects which feed on the sap of the tamarisk tree. The Bedouins boil, strain, and use it like honey. Many features of the modern *mann* do not fit the manna of the Bible: (1) great quantities available for multitudes; (2) automatic adjustment to the needs of the people; (3) failure to appear on the Sabbath; (4) use in cake form; (5) breeding of worms if kept overnight; and (6) use as a main staple of food for forty years.

There were more important lessons which the Hebrews learned from the provision of the quail and manna.

1. The need for daily dependence on the Lord. Truly they had to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt 6:11).
2. The need to depend on the providence and love of God's ability and willingness to supply. As the old hymn says it, "God will take care of you!"
3. The manna was given as a test of obedience (16:4). The Hebrews had to learn that God's laws must be obeyed. When they did not follow directions for its use, they learned that they would reap the consequences (16:19-21).
4. Manna was to be kept as a testimony to be placed in the ark (16:32-36). It was a constant reminder of the providential watch care of God.
5. Providence in our lives is a mixture of the natural and supernatural. This is exactly what we have in this episode. The Bible warns us to be careful lest we entertain angels unaware (Heb 13:2), a reminder to be aware of His supernatural provision and intervention on our behalf.
6. Perhaps the most significant application of this episode is the one made by Jesus in John 6. He called himself the "bread from heaven" (6:33). He used the episode of the manna to say that while that bread only sustains life for a fixed duration of time (6:58), He is the bread of life everlasting (read John 6:31-35, 48-58).

Episode Five: Water from the Rock, 17:1-7

With the food problem apparently solved, the question of water again came to the forefront. The Hebrews moved from the wilderness of Sin to Rephidim where there was no water. What good is all the food in the world with no water? By miraculous supply, God once again provided a basic need. Unlike the later episode (Num 20:1-13) Moses was told to strike the rock (17:6).

Paul wrote of the episodes which are related in Exodus. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, he referred to the pillar of cloud, the quail and manna, and the water from the rock. He identifies the rock, with the living water flowing from it as Christ (1 Cor 10:4). Moreover, he adds that these were provided as examples or types, Greek *typos*, (10:6) that we should not make the same mistake of lusting only after the material

provisions. Christ, and He alone, is both the bread of life (John 6:48) and the water of life (John 4:14).

Episode Six: War with Amalek, 17:8-16

Another crisis that had to be faced was the peril of constantly meeting enemies. This is the first episode involving armed conflict after the exodus from Egypt. Israel needed to know that they had a measure of security and were able to protect themselves against marauding bands that roamed the wilderness.

The Amalekites were a band of nomads who lived in the desert south of Judah (Gen 14:7). They were associated with the Edomites. According to Genesis 36:12, Amalek was a grandson of Esau. Numbers 14:43-45 lists the Amalekites among those people Israel had to oppose in order to move north from Kadesh Barnea. Like many nomadic groups the Amalekites ranged over a wide area.

We do not have given the reason that precipitated this battle. It has been suggested that perhaps Rephidim was a traditional stop for them and when they found the Hebrews camped there they attempted to remove them. Joshua appears for the first time as the general of Israel's armies (17:9-10). He led the armies into battle. As long as Moses held up his hands, they prevailed. When Moses' hands grew tired and he let them down, the Amalekites prevailed. Perhaps the hands of Moses were lifted in prayer. Whether this is the case or not, it is obvious that the people were to see that the victory was by the power of God. God alone was Israel's banner (17:15). *Yahweh - nissi* means "God is my banner."

The Hebrews developed a unique concept of warfare. Their warfare was a holy warfare. These battles were God's battles (17:16). The battles were led by those God empowered to carry on in His name (see also Judg 6:34; 11:29). The battle never depended on the size of the forces (Judg 7:1ff; 1 Sam 14:6) but on God who gave the victory. The victory and all the spoils of such wars were God's alone (Josh 7:1-26). The object of war was peace, Hebrew *shalom*, and the usual purpose of these battles was defensive. Israel needed to learn that their strength and security were in Yahweh, the God of creation.

Episode Seven: Jethro's Endorsement, 18:1-12

It is a matter of debate as to whether or not Jethro was a worshipper of Yahweh before he met Moses. His inclusion in the decisions and his relation to Moses suggests that he was a Yahweh worshipper. Whether he was a worshipper of Yahweh before Moses met him, it is clear that he was a devout worshipper of God thereafter. This episode seems almost prophetic of the ministry to which Israel was to be called as it is later expressed in the encounter with God at Sinai. There they were

commissioned as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6). Thus, here in this episode in Jethro, Moses learned that all God had done and was doing, was designed to call forth faith from the faithless. When Moses rehearsed all God had done for Israel, Jethro responded with a great declaration of faith. "Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all gods" (18:11). Then Moses, Jethro, and the elders of Israel worshipped and fellowshiped (18:12).

Episode Eight: Judges Appointed, 18:13-27

Justice became an extremely important issue, and the administration of justice became a very time consuming task for Moses (18:13-16). Jethro provided excellent advice for Moses in this vital area. He saw that the responsibility for personal administration of justice for so many people was too much for one man. He urged Moses to search out qualified men and appoint them to minister such judgments over smaller groups. Moses could teach these men the necessary ordinances to allow them to judge correctly in disputed matters (18:20). Four qualifications are given for those who would serve as judges:

1. They should be men who could do the work, "able bodied."
2. They must be God fearing men who had faith in Yahweh.
3. They had to be men of their word who could be trusted.
4. They had to be men of integrity who were above corruption.

Moses accepted Jethro's advice. As a result, the cases that could be handled by the judges were taken care of, and the harder cases were brought to Moses.

Episode Nine: Encampment as Sinai, 19:1-2

The last of the nine episodes brings Moses full circle to the mountain where he received his call from the Lord. The Hebrews moved from Rephidim to Sinai. This was the last step leading up to the significant days of encampment before the mountain. Moses gave three details of this encampment in Exodus 19:1-2. First, he mentioned the time, which was three months after the exodus from Egypt. This would have been June or July. Second, he mentioned the area where they camped, which was the wilderness of Sinai. Third, he gave the location of the camp as "before the mountain," which means they encamped on the east side of Mount Sinai.

The first significant point about this encampment is that it is a direct fulfillment of the promise God gave to Moses when Moses began to struggle with his call and said, "Who am I that I should go?" Remember God's promise to him? God said, "Certainly I will be with you; and this shall be a sign unto you that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt you shall serve God upon this mountain" (3:11-12). It was clear to Moses that they were there before the mountain only because of God's redeeming and sustaining grace. Moses had come full circle from a

member of Egypt's royal family, to a sheep herder with Jethro, to a leader of the Hebrews now returned to the very place where he received his call from God. It is here that God would give His great revelation of what came to be known as the Law of Moses. This revelation of grace and justice would impact the world for all time.

Conclusion

These nine episodes were great lessons for the Hebrews in the ability of God to sustain them. They learned that God could meet every need. Note for example:

1. The pillar of cloud showed them God's guidance and protection.
2. The Red Sea taught them that God could deliver again and again.
3. The waters of Marah taught them to depend on His healing power.
4. The quail and manna taught them God could provide.
5. The water from the rock taught them God could satisfy.
6. The defeat of Amalek taught them God was their security.
7. The endorsement of Jethro taught them of their redemptive responsibility to share the works and word of God.
8. The selection of judges taught them that God demands justice.
9. The encampment of Sinai demonstrated God's faithfulness with Moses and the Hebrews. He was the God who keeps His promises (3:14).

These episodes in the wilderness served two important purposes. First, they taught Moses and the Hebrews about God and His methods. Second, these episodes helped them to learn about themselves. They learned important lessons to prepare the way for the deliverance and receipt of the law.