

THE PROVISION OF THE LORD EXODUS 15:22-16:7

Once the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was complete, they set off into the wilderness presumably enroute to Mount Sinai which is the place where God told Moses at the time He called him into His service the Hebrews would worship Him (Ex. 3:12).

Exodus 15:22 ²²Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness [מִדְבָּר] and found no water.

This verse is the basis for some dispensationalists claiming the crossing must have been north of the Gulf of Suez in order to go into the Wilderness of Shur, but I see no reason to think the Wilderness of Shur can't extend a bit further south. Further, we noted last week that some geographers think the Gulf extended further north than it does today which means they would have been in Shur even if we consider the southern boundary to be further north. Also, Numbers 33:8 indicates the Wilderness of Shur was also known as the wilderness of Etham which does extend to the south. Edersheim believes the area in question had a "low range of bare limestone hills ... rising like a wall," hence the name *Shur* meaning wall.¹ I've looked at dozens of maps during the course of exegeting this book, and I can tell you one certain thing: no one knows with absolute certainty exactly where many of these biblical places actually were located

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *Bible History: Old Testament* (1890; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 191.

and their name may not be known now as it was then. Many maps have them in one place and many others have the same named place located somewhere else. We can't make dogmatic statements about geography as it existed in this area 3,500 years ago. We may be close, but we do not exactly know with precision where many of these biblical places are located.

Keil and Delitzsch confirmed my belief that the Wilderness of Shur could accommodate a Gulf of Suez crossing. They said the Wilderness of Shur "stretches from the Mediterranean to the head of the Arabian Gulf or Red Sea, and then along the eastern shore of the sea to the neighbourhood of the Wady Gharandel."² This wadi is thought to be the location of Elim which is further south of the crossing. My conclusion is the location of the Wilderness of Shur probably extends much further south than many contemporary theologians suppose and that does not preclude a crossing at the Gulf of Suez.

Wilderness, מִדְבָּר, means a desert, wasteland, or barren wilderness devoid of habitation where there are no means of sustenance at all, however, it can also refer to open land that is suitable for grazing at least at certain times of the year. The Sinai is mostly a barren wilderness then and now, but we do have to allow for the fact there are areas that can sustain nomadic livestock herders and it may have been more productive 3,500 years ago than it is today. There are areas within the Sinai where people can live and sustain themselves.

² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (1866-1891; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 1:358.

What we do know is at the time depicted in this narrative, Israel travelled east of the place they crossed the sea into what was known as the Wilderness of Shur or Etham but quickly turned south/southeast on a route parallel to the Gulf of Suez on the east side of that Gulf in the Sinai. They travelled three days and found no water along the way before stopping at a place called Marah.

Exodus 15:23 ²³When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter [מַר]; therefore it was named Marah [מַרָּה].

They found water of some sort at Marah, but it was not fit to drink; it was brackish. Bitter, מַר, means having an astringent, pungent, disagreeable taste in the mouth. The name of the place, מַרָּה, is obviously derived from the fact this water was bitter. It probably contained various minerals and/or salts that simply rendered the water foul to the taste and therefore undrinkable. The text doesn't say the water was dangerous to drink; it says it was bitter. Today, there is a place in this area named Ain Hawarah that has an oasis containing bitter water. If this oasis is the biblical one, it is small, only 6-8 feet in diameter, and has only a couple of feet of water in it which would not be enough to provide water for the Israelites. However, it has filled with sand over the years and we do not know how big it was 3,500 years ago. The Bedouins consider this oasis to contain the worst water in the area.

Then, of course, the Israelites did what they seemed to do so well and that was get angry with Moses for their situation. They seemed to have a tremendous capacity for, if not completely forgetting about, then at least disregarding and

minimizing the amazing work they had just seen the Lord do in their presence on their behalf. This was a test for them and they didn't handle it very well.

Exodus 15:24 ²⁴So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?"

It escaped the notice of the people that God had led them to this very place because they were following the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Moses didn't get them into this predicament; he didn't take them there. He was following God's lead. In reality, even though it is not specifically voiced, they are not only rebelling against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, but they are rebelling against God and doubting that He will care for them. The issue of the bitter water at Marah was designed to be instructive.

The predicament of having no water to drink is reminiscent of the judgment on Egypt when their water was spoiled by means of their water turning into blood and they had no water to drink. What is taking place here is what we would call a teachable moment; there is going to be a lesson embedded in this incident. Yahweh is going to perform another sign in their presence in order to get their attention and create the desire in them to decide to wholeheartedly follow Him.

Exodus 15:25–26 ²⁵Then he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree [אֶרְבֵּי]; and he threw *it* into the waters, and the waters became sweet [מֵתוֹק]. There He made for them a statute and regulation, and there He tested them. ²⁶And He said, "If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the LORD, am your healer."

This incident was a test, נִסָּה, for them. A test is an attempt to learn the true nature and quality of something often in conjunction with adversity and hardship. In this case, there was a training element involved. The point to be learned was despite whatever the Israelites faced, God was leading them and was going to provide for them. Would they rely on Him or not? This was an opportunity for them to verify and exhibit their faith and they didn't do it very well. This incident was specifically designed to provide an object lesson revealing God's provision for them as they journeyed to the land of promise.

Moses was commanded to throw a specific tree or piece of wood into the waters of this spring and they would become sweet or drinkable. Tree, עֵץ, may refer to a tree or to a piece of wood. If Moses threw a tree into the water, it couldn't have been a large tree so it may have been a piece of wood or a branch instead. Two Jewish translations, the TANAKH and the *Complete Jewish Bible* both translate this word as "wood" rather than as "tree." Sweet, מֵתֵק, simply means the water became pleasant tasting. Throwing the tree or piece of wood into the water was a symbolic action representing the fact God was working among the Israelites and in and of itself this tree or wood did nothing; this was a work of God that was able to turn the entire spring into drinkable water and keep it that way for a period of time sufficient for the entire group of Israelites and their livestock to drink. Some theologians claim there is a tree in the area that can be put into the water which draws the salts out, a process which supposedly takes hours, rendering it potable which sounds a bit suspicious and others

deny any such thing exists. Even it did exist, it would take a lot of wood to make enough water fit to drink for the entire Israelite population and their livestock.

God was telling them that if they would be obedient to follow all He revealed to them and commanded them to do, they would not experience the kinds of judgments the Egyptians experienced. This was a conditional promise; if they were obedient, they would not suffer the plagues of Egypt. At this point, the command is not specifically about obeying the Mosaic Law; it didn't exist. It was simply about being obedient to the revelation they had received to that point in time. They were to look upon Him who had performed so many mighty acts in their presence as the One who would provide for them. The lack of water to drink was an example. This was one of the judgments against Egypt, blood into water rendering it undrinkable, and the Israelites were experiencing it themselves, but the difference was they didn't have to experience it. They had a God who would turn this bitter water into drinkable water and He would not subject them to such difficult circumstances if they would simply obey His commands and keep His statutes.

Later, God would once again promise to keep them from experiencing the judgments the Egyptians experienced and if they would keep His commandments, He would keep His covenant with them and bless them. Among the blessings was the promise to keep them from suffering the diseases of the judgments against the Egyptians.

Deuteronomy 7:15¹⁵“The LORD will remove from you all sickness; and He will not put on you any of the harmful diseases of Egypt which you have known, but He will lay them on all who hate you.

Conversely, in the recitation of the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28, one of the curses for disobedience was the infliction upon them of the diseases of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 28:60⁶⁰“He will bring back on you all the diseases of Egypt of which you were afraid, and they will cling to you.

The Old Testament picture here is “do and be blessed.” This is the first time in the Old Testament this concept was expressed in terms of the blessing and the cursing of Israel as a nation. At that point in time, they didn’t understand all these things, but they certainly could understand what it meant to be faithful and obedient to the One who delivered them from bondage in Egypt.

Of course, the humanist rationalists have an antiscientific explanation for this miracle. I have mentioned a scientist named Humphreys several times. He is the skeptic who thought the Red Sea crossing was in the Gulf of Aqaba because the winds there could be funneled down to the water to part them as the Bible describes, sort of. This means he places the locations and the events under discussion in what is now Saudi Arabia and not in the Sinai Peninsula.

As with his other explanations of the supernatural acts of God, he got rather fanciful and very elaborate in his explanation denying them. He located this well of bitter water in a place where the water is usually very good. He claimed the well is named *al Mahila* meaning “the salt well.” They get this name be-

cause the occasional thunderstorm washes salt minerals off the nearby cliffs and deposits them in the well which becomes salty until the minerals settle out. He claimed this happened right after the Israelites crossed the Gulf of Aqaba when a strong wind blew the waters God had previously parted back into place. Because strong winds are associated with thunderstorms, there must have been a storm that dumped enough rain on the adjacent mountains to wash these mineral salts into the otherwise potable well. A few days later, when the Israelites found this sweet well to be bitter, they named it Marah. Notice all the presuppositions this guy has to invent in order for his theories to make any sense at all.

What is his explanation for the sweetening of the bitter water? In this area, the Acacia tree grows and it makes very good charcoal. Charcoal is widely used as a water filter to purify water and make it potable. There must have been some acacia charcoal in the campfire pits from the Arab camps surrounding the well, and Moses threw that charcoal into the water which purified it. Since the water was normally fit to drink, probably only a small amount of salt washed into the well and only a small amount of charcoal would have purified it. Since there were so many Israelites, they would have depleted the well in short order and dug more sweet water wells in the area in order to provide water for all the people and animals.³

³ Colin J. Humphreys, *The Miracles of Exodus: A Scientist's Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories* (New York: Harper One, 2003), 267-273.

This explanation obviously does not begin to match the account as the Bible presents it and he has to resort to a lot of otherwise unknown presuppositions and information to make it work.

From Marah, they journeyed to Elim which was just a bit further south.

Exodus 15:27 ²⁷Then they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms, and they camped there beside the waters.

This oasis is said to exist today, and probably does; however, the modern site is based on the fact that it has palm trees and twelve springs which may or may not indicate the same location, but the presence of twelve springs is a pretty solid indication this location is correct simply because finding exactly twelve springs in any one location in the Sinai desert in more than one place is probably unlikely. Most people believe it is located at what is today called the Wadi Gharandel. The level of detail in this verse suggests the book was written by one who was there—Moses. Trees and springs can come and go for various reasons, and it would be highly unlikely it has stayed exactly the same over the last 3,500 years. Anyone writing Exodus centuries later wouldn't find it exactly the same assuming they even went to that location. This helps to authenticate Moses as the author of Exodus.

It is not known how long they stayed at Elim, but they eventually left there to continue on.

Exodus 16:1 ¹Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation [ἡ ἑβραϊκή, συναγωγή] of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt.

Replacement theologians use this verse, among others, to claim the church is in the Old Testament in the form of Israel and they base this on the use of the word “congregation.” This word, *הָעֵדָוָה*, refers to a group of people the nature of which depends on the context. It means congregation, assembly, a band, entourage, a pack, and a community. It is often used in the Hebrew text to refer to Israel as a group and that is how it is used here. It does not necessarily carry with it any religious meaning whatsoever. The Septuagint translation of this word is *synagogue*, *συναγωγή*, but in Greek that word can refer to a gathering place or a place of assembly with no religious connotation. Since theology trumps the Bible for Replacement theologians, they make the claim it refers to the church. That’s why I caution you when using lexicons. They are obviously invaluable, but most of them are edited by Reformed theologians who replace Israel with the church. They are most susceptible to error in terms of Soteriology and Israelology. For example, Zodhiates’ entry says, “The congregation of Israel was designated by *sunagoge* or *ekklesia*, church.”⁴ Another lexicon’s entry gives the meaning of, “community, assembly, i.e., a socio-religious group as a congregation as a united gathering”⁵ erroneously inserting religion into the definition. The point is, there is no basis for using this word as a pretext for inserting the

⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, s.v. “*συναγωγή*,” *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), 1333.

⁵ James Swanson, s.v. “*הָעֵדָוָה*,” *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

church into the Old Testament, but they do that anyway because for them theology trumps Scripture.

According to Numbers 33:10, they remained alongside the Red Sea for a few more days as they made their way further south.

Numbers 33:10 ¹⁰They journeyed from Elim and camped by the Red Sea [יַם סוּף].

The Red Sea, יַם סוּף, obviously refers, because of their current location, to the Gulf of Suez and that fact is confirming this was a common name for the Red Sea at that time. This fact negates the argument that יַם סוּף must refer to the marshy area between the Nile River delta and the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez.

We do not know how long the Israelites stayed in any one place and we don't know if there were other places they camped that are not mentioned in the biblical narrative because they are over six weeks into their journey which would not have taken that long to travel to this point if they went quickly and directly there.

Almost immediately after enjoying the miraculous provision of water at Marah, the Israelites started complaining again but this time their complaint was about the lack of food. It wasn't just a few people doing the complaining, it was the "whole congregation." That probably doesn't mean every single person was complaining, but it does mean a significant number of people were mad at Moses, and it doesn't take very many people to get everyone riled up. They still

didn't grasp the full import of what was going on in their lives in terms of their relationship with Yahweh. They should have realized the God who miraculously convinced Pharaoh to "let My people go" and the God who miraculously delivered them from subjugation and perhaps annihilation at the hands of the Egyptian army and the God who miraculously turned bitter water to sweet so they could avoid dying of thirst could provide for their need for food during this journey He put them on.

Exodus 16:2–3 ²The whole congregation [עֲדָתָא] of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly [קָהָל] with hunger."

Forty-five days into their freedom from slavery, the Israelites were looking back on the time of their slavery as though it was a wonderful, blessed, abundant existence. They probably had a decent food supply in Egypt because they lived in the Nile River delta and could produce their own food after their work-day providing slave labor to the Egyptians, but no matter how you understand it, bondage is not a life situation worthy of fond recall. This claim is certainly an exaggeration designed to pressure Moses and/or God to provide a solution to their problem. This is taking place at what is only the beginning of their identity as a nation. This is somewhat understandable at the beginning because they were just beginning to learn, but it never seemed to change. Is it any wonder that God referred to the Israelites as a stubborn and stiff-necked people throughout their history?

Deuteronomy 9:6 ⁶“Know, then, *it is* not because of your righteousness *that* the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people.

Jeremiah 17:23 ²³“Yet they did not listen or incline their ears, but stiffened their necks in order not to listen or take correction.

Again, from a human point of view, their concern over the lack of food and water, is understandable. People die from dehydration and starvation and in cases of the complete absence of these necessities, death can come quickly particularly for the very young and the very old and the desert climate enhances the danger as well. Whatever provisions they brought with them must have been gone by that time and people were getting hungry. They couldn't eat all their livestock because they needed to be able to keep replenishing that source of sustenance and they couldn't do that if they ate all of them and probably not everyone owned livestock anyway. They wanted meat and bread. As the narrative advances, we will note that God provided them with meat and bread.

When people get hungry, they get grouchy and if it goes on for a long enough period of time, they get desperate and under the influence of severe deprivation they will do desperate things they would never otherwise do. If you want to know what starvation can do to the minds of desperate, starving people, read some of the accounts of the Ukrainian people who were starved to death by Joseph Stalin before World War II in order to cause them to submit to communism or the accounts of the Bataan death march and their internment. We also have to remember the Israelite's knowledge of Yahweh wasn't much; they had a lot to learn about their God. We can look back on them and be crit-

ical, but we aren't thirsty and starving and we have the completed canon of Scripture to further our knowledge of God. They didn't have that. What they had experienced to that point was the personal, visible, miraculous intervention of Yahweh directly into their lives and they still had a hard time exercising faith. We've all experienced God's miraculous works in our lives in justification salvation and many of us in other miraculous ways as well, but not in the visible, public manner exhibited in the Exodus. While their grumbling over being hungry is understandable here at the beginning when they didn't know much, the larger problem is their complaining and rebelling never stopped throughout their history as a nation.

The people claimed they would have been better off dying at the hand of the Lord in Egypt as opposed to dying of starvation in the Sinai. It doesn't seem likely they really thought they were better off as slaves in Egypt and that they would have rather the Lord killed them off in Egypt. What they wanted was their problems solved—fast. According to the Psalmist, the Israelites were joyful when they first left Egypt; they had no doubts about going at the beginning. They were glad to be leaving Egypt when Moses led them out.

Psalm 105:43 ⁴³And He brought forth His people with joy, His chosen ones with a joyful shout.

All the murmuring about being better off in Egypt was at best Pollyanna revisionist history or bargaining tactics to obtain what they wanted and at worst

it was rebellion against God. It was probably all of the above, but we are going to see that the predominate problem was rebellious hearts.

Assembly, *קָהָל*, means an assembly, a community, a congregation, a crowd, a company, or throng; it is a synonym for congregation. Context is the controlling factor in determining meaning. Replacement theologians maintain the use of this word also means the church is Israel in the Old Testament. They make the same erroneous argument for this word they make for the word translated congregation, and the biblical counter-argument is the same.

God's response was another miraculous provision manna which He called bread from heaven.

Exodus 16:4–7 ⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction. ⁵“On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the sons of Israel, “At evening you will know that the LORD has brought you out of the land of Egypt; ⁷and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, for He hears your grumblings [תִּלְבוֹת] against the LORD; and what are we, that you grumble [לִיָּד] against us?”

Whether the Lord responded to Moses on His own initiative or whether He responded in answer to Moses praying to Him for help in solving this situation is not stated. What is known is that He did respond to the situation.

Besides feeding the Israelites, this was another test to determine whether or not the people would obey God's instructions for living during their journey to Canaan. The issue was obedience, trust, faithfulness and those kinds of things.

Would they be faithful to the command of God and gather only what He told them to gather when He told them to gather it?

This was not just a temporary solution to their food problem; they were going to be sustained by manna throughout their wilderness experience including the forty years of temporal discipline imposed for their refusal to enter the land. Not only were they going to be physically sustained by this miraculous provision of food, but their clothing and their footwear would not wear out during all those years of wandering in the desert wilderness and God never left them.

Nehemiah 9:19–21 ¹⁹You, in Your great compassion, Did not forsake them in the wilderness; The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day, To guide them on their way, Nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in which they were to go. ²⁰You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth, And You gave them water for their thirst. ²¹“Indeed, forty years You provided for them in the wilderness *and* they were not in want; Their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell.

Raining bread from heaven was a metaphor for the miraculous provision of this bread. Later we will discover they called it manna, but for now, it is the bread from heaven. They didn't have to plant it or cultivate it or harvest it except to pick it up off the ground in order to have this bread; all they had to do was gather it according to the instructions their Provider gave them and then prepare it for the table.

Yahweh gave Moses instructions for gathering the bread from heaven. This too was a test for them. The question was, would they follow the directions God gave them through Moses, or would carnal instincts kick in and drive them to disobey Him and attempt to game the system the Lord set up for them by

disobeying His instructions? In other words, would they try to provide for themselves by gathering more than they were told to gather and hoarding it, or would they rely on Yahweh to provide this bread every day just as He said He was going to do?

They were to gather the bread from heaven daily and on the sixth day they were to gather twice that amount in order to have enough for the seventh day. Details of exactly how this was to be done would follow.

These miracles display the glory of the Lord and the people were going to have the knowledge that He was the one who brought them out of Egypt reinforced.

The Lord, of course, knew they were grumbling against Him. Moses' question was acknowledging the fact that he and Aaron were powerless to do the deeds only God can do to help the Israelites in their time of need.

There is a difference in definition between the words used for grumbling against the Lord and grumbling against Moses and Aaron. Grumbling, תִּלְבֹּנוֹת, means grumbling or murmuring; it refers to complaints expressing dissatisfaction implying a failure of proper relationship and possibly a failure of faith. The faith element, or, more accurately, the lack of faith element, comes into play by grumbling against the Lord. This word is used seven times in the Old Testament and each time it refers to grumbling against God. All seven uses of the word occur in Exodus and Numbers and are used in connection with the Exodus. Grumble, לִיָּן, means to grumble against or blame; it refers to making a complaint

against another person whether proper or improper. This word is used thirteen times in the Old Testament translated “grumble.” In two of those times it is used to refer to grumbling against the Lord and the remaining 11 times against Moses or against Moses and Aaron.

If you’ve ever been the target of unfair or untrue accusations of wrongdoing or the target of malicious gossip, you know how difficult that can be to endure. Here are two men, serving the Lord, trying to lead a very disgruntled, difficult multitude of people through some very harsh circumstances and they are forced to deal with the difficulties of leading this people.