

Holy, Horrid, and Hilarious Meals of the Bible

Part 4: Ba-manna Bread

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Scripture: Exodus 16:1-24; Numbers 11:4-9

I. Man-Hu

Manna. What is it? Actually, manna (*man-hu* in Hebrew) literally means "What is it?"

No one knows for sure what manna is. In Exodus, manna is described as a "fine, flake-like thing" like frost on the ground. It melted in the heat of the sun and was like a coriander seed in size, but white in color. According to Exodus, manna tasted like wafers that had been made with honey. (Exodus 16:31) In the Book of Numbers, manna is said to arrive with the dew at night. The Israelites would grind and pound it into cakes which, when baked, tasted something like cakes baked with oil. (Numbers 11:8)

While the Bible says that manna was a food that miraculously came down from heaven, being provided directly by God, scholars have looked for a more mundane explanation. Over the years, scholars have speculated that manna may really have been things like (a) resin from the tamarisk tree, or (b) a form of lichen, (c) plant lice, (d) the crystallized secretion of certain insects, or even (e) hallucinogenic mushrooms. Each of these explanations is about as "trippy" as the biblical claim that manna was food that simply rained down from heaven.

When I encounter supernatural claims in the Bible, I first look for a more mundane explanation that doesn't break Natural Law, just as many Biblical scholars do. That's because I believe God created Natural Law in the first place. The universe is so finely tuned that if any one of the most basic forces of the universe – like gravity, or the electrical charge of an electron – were tweaked by just a hair in either direction, weaker or stronger, there would be no universe and certainly no life within it. So I don't think God is eager to break the very laws of Nature that God established in the first place to promote life.

Yet, naturalistic explanations often demand as much suspension of judgment as miraculous ones. Would the Israelites really have confused lichen growing on a tree for heavenly food? And would there really have been so much lichen that the whole group could eat it each and every day?

No, in cases like this, where neither a natural, nor a supernatural explanation is satisfying, I treat the story as part of the Bible's powerful "mythological imagination," and look not for what may or may not have happened long ago in a land far away, but for lessons the story is trying to teach me that are just as current here and now as they were back then. To put it another way, I treat the story like one of Jesus' parables – teaching us deep truths about life whether the story "happened that way" or not.

This is how I treat the story of finding manna in the wilderness. I find the idea of God miraculously raining down some sort of divine food as improbable as the attempts to explain what it "really" was (e.g., lichen, plant lice, or hallucinogenic mushrooms, etc.). When I go looking for parabolic meaning, however, suddenly the story comes alive and speaks directly to me.

I find a number of lessons in this story. For instance, the simple note that people were commanded to collect only enough manna for one day and that those who tried to collect more found the leftovers rotten and filled with maggots the next day, remind me of several important lessons. Lessons like:

(1) If you think you can outsmart God, think again!

(2) If you think that God's commands are arbitrary, meant simply to impose God's will on obedient followers and demean them, this story reminds us that God's commands are there to protect us, not demean us. Like fish, manna goes bad fast in the hot sun. Is God being arbitrary or demeaning to tell people to wait for the fresh stuff?

(3) The idea of eating only enough for the day reminds me that trusting in God is an invitation God makes to us on a day-by-day basis, kind of like when Jesus invites us to pray, "Give us *this day* our *daily* bread ...". Relationships between people don't exist when there is no trust, and our relationship with God is no different. The idea that the Israelites depended upon God to fulfill God's promise of sustenance, and found that God was continually faithful to that promise, reminds me that trust in God – and relationship with God – is built over time. It's not a once-and-for-all kind of thing. *Trust* is like manna from heaven.

(4) Finally, the story of consuming all of the manna each day without saving any for the next reminds me that each day should be “consumed” to its fullest. If there is joy in your day, take some time to stop and recognize that joy has entered you and enjoy it! If sadness has entered your day, why not take some time to acknowledge the sadness and process it rather than putting it off for another day? And on a physical level – but no less spiritual – if food is set before you during the day, why not take the time to really savor that food rather than wolfing it down between appointments? *Carpe diem!* Seize the day! Don’t live your life in the future. Live in the moment.

II. Ba-Manna Bread

The Bible says that the amount of manna each person could collect each day was an “*omer*.” How much is an *omer*? Well, according to Wikipedia, an *omer* is 1/10th of an *ephah*. An *ephah* was the equivalent of the Sumerian *mina*, which is defined as 1/16th of a *maris*. The *omer* was thus equal to about 12/100ths of a *maris*. The *maris* was defined as being equal to the quantity of water equal in weight to a light royal *talent*, which is approximately 30.3 liters, making the *omer* equal to about 2.3 liters.

Personally, I prefer the way the rabbis measured an *omer*. They said it was equivalent in capacity to 43 eggs. So an *omer* of manna was quite a bit for a day. Imagine eating 43 eggs’ worth each and every day, for years on end, until the Promised Land was in sight!

It is little wonder, then, that according to the Book of Numbers, the Israelites eventually got tired of manna. “If only we had meat to eat!” they cried. I can imagine them trying to find different ways to prepare manna to make it interesting. Manna pancakes. Manna muffins. Manna dumplings. Manna burgers. Ba-manna bread. Oy vey! There’s only so many ways you can prepare any food. After their thousandth loaf of ba-manna bread and their millionth manna muffin, the Book of Numbers tells us that many of the Israelites started looking back longingly even on their time as slaves in Egypt:

“We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic, but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing but this manna to look at.” (Numbers 11:4-6)

Apparently, traveling aboard the Manna Express to the Promised Land wasn't all it was cracked up to be. At least, it wasn't while the journey was still very much underway.

Last night at the Holland Center, I attended the River City Mixed Chorus' production of *Sing Truth to Power*, a concert dedicated to one of the most influential but least known (because he was gay) civil rights activists Bayard Rustin. During the concert, a quote was put up on the screen that was taken from the Black Lives Matter movement but could have been taken right from the middle of Israel's journey to the Promised Land. The quote read, "This is not a moment, but a movement."

Moments are easy. Movements are hard.
Moments are for sprinters. Movements are for long-distance runners.
Moments are for visitors. Movements are for citizens.

The mythological imagination behind the story of Israel longing for the "good old days" of slavery in the middle of their journey to freedom reminds me that freedom is never free. Freedom requires an enormous investment of blood, sweat, and tears – a far greater investment than most people imagine up front when freedom is but a dream. That's why true freedom is never attained in a moment, but through a movement.

This is the lesson Israel's struggle for freedom in the wilderness teaches us. It is the lesson that the civil rights movement and "Black Lives Matter" teaches us. It is the lesson that the struggle for LGBTQ equality teaches us. It is the lesson that the movement for gender equality teaches.

I dare say that it is the lesson that the movement for interfaith cooperation teaches us, and will be teaching us for some time to come. You don't change centuries of animosity, strife, and mutual condemnation between three of the world's great religions by forming a Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha, Nebraska (or anywhere else). You form a Tri-Faith Initiative and you prepare yourself for a long journey through the wilderness. It's a journey full of promise and hope, punctuated by "Red Sea crossings" and Mt. Sinai meet-ups with God, but it's also a journey in which God's spiritual pilgrims can expect to do a lot of wandering aimlessly in the scorching sun, hungry, and crying out to God for relief.

As our story reminds us, even when God does answer, nourishing body and soul with divine sustenance, even then one can expect times when one longs for the

“good old days.” In our case, it’s not slavery in Egypt we’ll look back on with rose-colored glasses years from now, but something far more comfortable. We’ll look back on a time before we were ever approached by the Tri-Faith Initiative to become the Christian partner. At a time when we worshipped in a building we had loved for generations, in a good and pleasant neighborhood we’d served. A time before the Cross came down and the stained glass windows were right where they are now. And everyone was supremely happy and content (at least that’s how we’ll envision it).

Perhaps you are already looking back with rose-colored glasses before we have even moved. And why wouldn’t you? Think of it this way: We may have experienced our version of an exhilarating and miraculous Red Sea crossing when we voted by a super-majority to become the Christian partner in the Tri-Faith Initiative, but then what did we get? Like Israel, we immediately went from a Red Sea triumph into the wilderness. Two hundred pledging households left us. We were asked to give sacrificially toward a \$26 million capital campaign, and then raise our pledges substantially to help make up for the 200 lost pledges (and we can expect to be asked to do so again this fall).

We have also experienced the wilderness when our more religiously or politically conservative friends, neighbors, family members, and colleagues confronted us, or dismissed us altogether as hopeless dreamers at best or minions of Satan at worst. We have had families wonder if their children will be safe on a Tri-Faith campus. And we have existed in an awkward, in-between stage where we know we are not exactly who we once were but are not fully who we will become, either. Even our more exciting developments can feel like wilderness experiences. Currently, for instance, there are far more Countrysiders who want to be involved in some meaningful way with the work of the Tri-Faith Initiative than we have work to be done. This will change, of course, but for now, many of our present and new members are spinning their wheels, wanting to be helpful.

As we look ahead, it’s not all love and roses, either. In the future, we can expect to be paying more attention to the Israel-Palestine conflict than we may ever have wanted to. We can expect to be rattled harder than the average person when a terrorist attack hits the news, or when anti-Semitic signs are posted in Dundee, or when a woman wearing hijabs is accosted in Hy-Vee by people telling her she should “go back where you came from,” claiming, “you’re not wanted here.” We can expect *more* people claiming we’re going to hell, or minions of the devil, or blogging about us in unflattering ways, or even protesting us – not less.

Can you already feel those rose-colored glasses slipping over your nose, looking back to the glories of yesteryear? Do you already long for the days before the Tri-Faith Initiative folks approached us? You know, the days when “everyone” was happy and content, “no one” ever complained about anything or left our church for “greener” pastures ... the days when we had “plenty” of money to fund our budget, “everyone always” felt safe and secure here, and we had “no” significant challenges ...

These reminiscences are as much of an illusion as the reminiscences of the wilderness-wandering Israelites remembering fondly their days in Egypt. Yet the story reminds us that that yearning happens nonetheless, even among the most faithful of people.

Yet the story also reminds us that, even in the hardest of times, we are carrying the miracle of God to fruition. We are, each and every day, getting closer to the Promised Land and bringing the world along with us as we do. The story reminds us that even when we get sick and tired of the hard work, it is the hard work *of God* we are complaining about, not the hard work of slavery.

Finally, the story reminds us that “biblical times” are not just ancient times. We here today are living with the same joys, temptations, yearnings, and opportunities to be faithful or unfaithful as our ancestors were as they followed God’s call from bondage to freedom. And we are reminded that, deep at the heart of what we are doing, we are not just experiencing a “moment” of Spirit, but a “movement” of Spirit – a movement that not only blesses us, but blesses our children, and our children’s children all the more.