

# Moses: earth's meekest man

## 14. Manna in the wilderness

John Mitchell

*Continuing their journey through the wilderness, the children of Israel were provided with their daily food by the miraculous provision of manna, which taught them to depend on their God to satisfy their daily needs, and points forward to the one who called himself "the bread of heaven", able to satisfy our spiritual needs.*

**C**ONDITIONS AT ELIM were so conducive to rest and recuperation that the children of Israel encamped for a whole month beside the oases before setting out once more on their journey to the Promised Land. The twelve wells, or springs, and seventy palm trees were like gems in the surrounding wilderness, with rich pasturage such as they had not enjoyed since leaving Egypt. Along with their animals they could fortify themselves against the harsher conditions that lay ahead, which possibly only Moses knew in detail from the time when he was a shepherd looking after the flocks of Reuel near the borders of Arabia.

### The hungry multitude

The realities of those conditions were not long in asserting themselves when the host finally moved on:

"The road from the seashore encampment led for some distance along the coast. Leaving the high chalky cliffs . . . with their blinding glare, the Hebrews would enter on the plain of El Markha, called in Exodus the wilderness of Sin, which runs along the strand—a desolate expanse of flints, gravel and sand, nearly destitute of vegetation, broken from time to time by equally desolate wadies opening on it from the interior. There is hardly any more dismal tract in the whole peninsula. Even in winter the heat is indescribable during the day".<sup>1</sup>

It would be a straggling company of men, women and children, together with their herds of cattle, that struggled along in the heat across such desolate terrain.

To make matters worse, the food the Israelites had brought with them from Egypt six weeks ago began to fail. And with no prospect of any means whereby they might replenish their supply, "the

whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron".\* They had only to glance westward across the sea to the fertile land they had left behind to be reminded of what they felt they had lost. In their misery they said, "Would to God we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we

sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full" (AV). All those years of servitude and hard labour from which they had been delivered, and all those miraculous interventions by God that they had experienced, were forgotten even before real pangs of hunger came upon them. "You have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death", they said.

Just how the complaints were registered, presumably by the tribal leaders, is not stated, nor where Moses and Aaron went to consult with the angel of the Lord. But what the text does make clear is that Moses and Aaron were affronted, not on their own account by the people's attitude and lack of faith, but on God's: "Who are we?", they asked. "You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD". And what was more, the Lord had certainly heard them.

### Food provided

First, the angel of God's presence explained to Moses how the crisis would be met: "I will rain down bread from heaven for you". It would not be mere bounty, or a kind of heavenly largesse, for alongside the gift would come the test of obedience: "The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow My instructions. On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days".

But before that there had to be a realisation of the gravity of God's displeasure at the people's

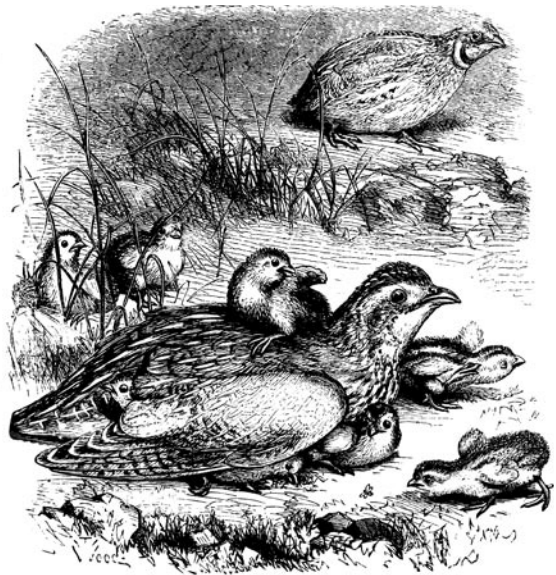
1. Cunningham Geikie, *Hours with the Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 209.

\* Quotations from Exodus 16 are from the NIV except where stated otherwise. Other quotations are from the AV except where stated otherwise.

lack of faith after all that He had done for them. Through Aaron, Moses told the people to “Come before the LORD”. Even as they assembled, they looked toward the wilderness, and saw the glory of the Lord appearing in the cloud: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, “At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.”’”

As the great congregation returned to their tents, additional shadows added to the fading light. From out of the last rays of the setting sun, flying low over the Red Sea, came a huge cloud of quail seeking landfall in the area of the camp. Tightly packed as they landed, and totally exhausted, the birds had neither strength nor space to avoid capture, and the people had only to club them and gather them up to garner the promised feast. Such migrations of quail were not unknown in the Middle East. What was unheard of was that they should cross the sea where they did. It was the hand of God, as explained by the psalmist: “He [God] let loose the east wind from the heavens and led forth the south wind by His power. He rained meat down on them like dust, flying birds like sand on the seashore. He made them fall inside their camp, all around their tents. They ate till they had more than enough, for He had given them what they craved” (78:26-29, NIV). It was celestial power that had brought the birds to the desired location at the exact time to fulfil God’s promise, and the proof of it was in every family’s pot as the camp fires glowed in the growing darkness. There could not have been an empty belly in all the camp of the Hebrews that night. Yet a still greater surprise awaited them in the morning.

When the sun rose to dispel the heavy dew, and faces began to appear in the doorways of the tents, it was as though the landscape and the season itself had changed. Everywhere the ground glistened as if covered over with hoarfrost. “What is it [*Mann hu*]?”, the people asked. “It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat”, said Moses. “This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer [probably about four pints] for each person you have in your tent’”. The remarkable thing was, however, that, though some in their inexperience gathered more, and others gathered less, the amounts when measured by the omer were the same. It was all an extended miracle to emphasise the hand of God.



Quails

From *Bird Life of the Bible*, J. G. Wood

### Conditions attached

But there were conditions attached to it. “No one is to keep any of it until morning”, said Moses. That was the first test of obedience, as the Lord had said: “I will test them and see whether they will follow My instructions”. And immediately some failed to observe the commandment, perhaps thinking they would save themselves having to gather afresh on the next day. They kept part of it until morning, but it became full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them. Then there were those who were slow off the mark and were disappointed, for when the sun grew hot the manna melted away and was gone.

There was an exception to the daily manna, which again emphasised its miraculous provision. Each day it was gathered and lasted only for that day, except on the eve of the sabbath, when it was inexplicably preserved so that the people did not have to go out on the sabbath to collect it. Instructed by Moses, they therefore gathered twice as much, that is to say, two omers per person, to tide them over the following day. “This is what the LORD commanded”, said Moses. “Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning”; which they did, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. Then, on the sabbath, Moses warned, “You will not find any of it on the ground today”. Nevertheless some of the people went out on the sabbath day to gather it, and found none.

Again they had been disobedient and had incurred the Lord's displeasure, and Moses, poor Moses, had to bear the brunt of it. It was as if, cast in the role of their leader, he was in some way reckonable for the people's behaviour, and there is no doubt he found it hard to bear. None of us likes to bear the blame for what others have done, and Moses was no exception. His feeling was to grow, until later in the journey it burst out in protest to God at what he felt was an unfair burden. His own conduct had been blameless, yet he was answerable for the wrongdoing and disobedience of others. It would take a Prophet greater than he to reach perfection in this regard, as the Scripture says: "if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable [Gk. grace] with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps" (1 Pet. 2:20,21).

But the word came to Moses for the people from God, "How long will you refuse to keep My commands and My instructions? Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day He gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out'. So the people rested on the seventh day". Here the principle of the sabbath was instituted in relation to the bread of heaven several weeks before it was laid down as a rule of life as between labour and rest at Sinai.

### The significance of the manna

The manna was significant and wonderful, as well as practical as the staple diet of the Israelites for forty years until they reached the border of the Promised Land. It was practical in that it was versatile and sustaining, whether baked on the stone or boiled in the pan, and its taste, like that of wafers made with honey, was palatable. Of the nutritional value of the manna no account is given, but the health of the people throughout their journeyings bears testimony to it.<sup>2</sup>

And then there was the spiritual side. That it was miraculous is evident from the way in which it was given in a form never to be repeated in the whole history of mankind. Yet more wonderful, however, was what it represented, for there is such a thing as spiritual food as well as physical, and the manna typified both. God does provide His children with their daily bread in all ages. Therefore our Lord told his disciples to "take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? . . . for your heavenly Father

knoweth that ye have need of all these things" (Mt. 6:31,32).

So much for the physical. But, as with the manna, unless "our daily bread" (v. 11) is eaten with faith it can be sustaining only for the duration of the life that now is. It was because the Israelites did not mix their manna with faith that the vast majority of them died in the wilderness. The bread of heaven, as embodied in the Lord Jesus, did not profit them at all. In the end, at their spiritual nadir, they loathed it (Num. 21:5). So there is a parallel to be drawn between the manna in the wilderness and "our daily bread" in what is called the Lord's Prayer. Indeed, some have translated it "bread for the coming day" (like the manna that had to be collected every morning); and yet others have treated it as "the living bread", that is, the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

So there is far more significance to the manna in the wilderness than is at first apparent. When our Lord told the Jews, "Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead" (Jno. 6:49), he was not referring just to their physical end, but also to their spiritual, and warning his contemporaries that, unless they recognised the true bread of heaven, namely himself, they would share a similar fate. Sadly, most of them, including some of his own disciples, walked no more with him because our Lord's saying concerning his body and blood was too hard for them to accept.

And throughout history the tension between those who believe and those who do not has continued. So as to emphasise the spiritual meaning of the bread at the memorial meeting, the early ecclesia wisely separated the taking of the emblems from the communal meal at which some remained hungry and some were even drunk. Later the Church went further and instigated the ringing of bells to intimate the moment when, as

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2. Many attempts have been made to identify the manna with secretions that are exuded by shrubs and trees still growing in the wilderness, but all such fail on several counts. Such exudations would never have been sufficient to feed a population the size of the Israelites; they were seasonal; and none have the property or the versatility of what God provided. Like the tree that sweetened the waters at Marah, the manna was unique. Hence the command to Moses to keep an omer of it, again miraculously preserved, and lay it up before the testimony so that future generations might see how God fed their fathers in the wilderness (Ex. 16:33,34).
  3. See Webster and Wilkinson's Greek Testament notes on Matthew 6:11, and Joachim Jeremias' *The Prayers of Jesus*, pp. 85 *et seq.*

they taught, the bread was transubstantiated into the actual body of our Lord, whereas, in fact, the acceptance of the spiritual, as it was in the case of the manna, could only come about as an act of

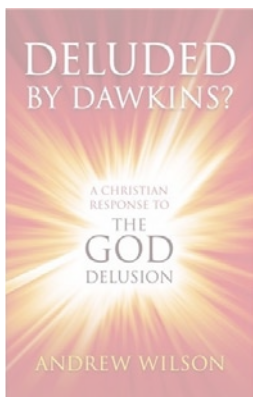
faith in each individual heart. The “flesh” of the Son of man can be assimilated in no other way.

([To be continued](#))

# Exposing the delusions of Dawkins

Stephen Green

**P**ROFESSOR Richard Dawkins is well known for his atheism and for his science. His book *The God Delusion* was published in 2006 and became, like other books of his, a best-seller. It is noted for its aggressive attack on belief in God. In this review we look not at the original book, but at two answers to it that have come from Christian sources. The first is *Deluded by Dawkins?*, written by Andrew Wilson, and the second is *The Dawkins Delusion?*, written mostly by Alister McGrath, both being published earlier this year.\*



## *Deluded by Dawkins?*

Andrew Wilson's *Deluded by Dawkins?* is a short work of around 25,000 words, adopting a simple and readable approach, making it a good candidate for use by readers of the *Testimony* personally, and possibly to recommend to friends who have been influenced by *The God Delusion*. This author is able to overcome the

diffuse character of the original book when looking for serious argument. (Dawkins' book is ten chapters long and stretches over 400 pages, with greatly varying relevance to the main theme of God's existence.)

One way Andrew Wilson does this is by analysing and tabulating the arguments so that the reader can access them more easily. He categorises Dawkins' arguments in four ways according to his personal judgement: A (Agreed), I (Irrelevant), U (Unsubstantiated) or D (Disagreed). In the same table he adds a short comment against each entry to give more information. This table he finds very useful for highlighting those arguments which might be worthy of more thorough answers, which he gives in subsequent chapters. Only eight entries out of sixty-three bear the D

code, on which he writes in parenthesis, “Put less kindly, the fact that Dawkins has cluttered his book with unsubstantiated assertions, truisms and irrelevance does not, in principle, mean that his central hypothesis is wrong” (pp. 31-2).

Wilson also points out that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is totally ignored by Dawkins:

“Most seriously, Dawkins spends the best part of the book either making points that are not directly relevant to the question of whether or not there is a god . . . or attacking bad reasons to believe that there is, while the most definitive argument that Christians have used since A.D. 30, the resurrection of Jesus, is not even discussed . . . From the point of view of Christian preaching, both in the Bible and throughout church history, the resurrection is the elephant in the room, the one giant that has to be felled if Christianity is to be buried (1 Cor. 15:14)” (p. 18).

This is, of course, a really major weakness in *The God Delusion*. For many Christians the resurrection of Jesus is a basic element of their faith. And the Bible itself makes it fundamental to the true faith (1 Cor. 15:12-17). It is hard to imagine any favourable reasons why Dawkins has made this omission. Perhaps, because he assumes miracles to be impossible, he did not wish to involve himself in research and discussion that would take the Bible seriously or show too clearly a weakness in his case. Wilson points out that there is historical evidence for the resurrection both inside and outside of Scripture, and the resurrection can therefore be used as evidence of the existence of God and the authority of Christ.

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\* Andrew J. Wilson, *Deluded by Dawkins? A Christian Response to The God Delusion*, 112 pages (Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, 2007); Alister McGrath with Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine*, 78 pages (SPCK, 2007).