



The hidden manna
Deuteronomy 8.3

INTRODUCTION

While traveling in the wilderness of Sin, the children of Israel made this well-known complaint to Moses,

“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; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”¹

In response, the LORD promised that he would sustain them by providing “bread from heaven,”² which they could collect daily. So, the next morning, the children of Israel went into the desert surrounding the camp and found “a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground.”³ It was, we are told elsewhere “as coriander seed, and the colour thereof as the colour of bdellium.”⁴



Coriander Seed

¹ Ex. 16.³

² Ex. 16.⁴

³ Ex. 16.¹⁴

⁴ Num. 11.⁷

Upon their first discovery and inspection of this “bread from heaven,” the children of Israel stood in the desert, looked around them at the “small round things,” looked at each other, scratched their heads, and asked, “Manna? Manna? Manna?” “What is it? What is this stuff? What are we to make of this?” Perhaps, “What, we’re supposed to survive on this only?”

So, from this point on, we are told, the little round brown thing that looked like a seed was called “manna,” “what is it?” “the unknown thing.” Have you ever wondered why they never named it? Call it the “bread of heaven,” as God Himself does. Call it “angels’ food,” as the Psalmist does.⁵ But, name it *something*! I mean, you survive for 40 years by eating this... this... “whatever it is,” and you never give it a proper name? You eat it every day for just short of 15,000 days and you call it, “whatever”? How very strange!

How does something you can’t name and don’t understand nourish and save?

Speaking to the house of Israel many years later, the Lord reminded them, I “fed thee with manna, *which thou knewest not*, neither did thy fathers know.”⁶ This, their ignorance, is repeated more than once. They never did understand that which kept them alive. But, we are informed over and over, there are lessons to be learned from the manna.

The Lord provided manna “that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.”⁷ The Lord also provided manna “that he might humble thee, and that he might prove thee.”⁸ Israel was also to learn from God’s supply of manna that “it is he [God] that giveth thee power to get wealth.”⁹

It seems clear from the record that these lessons were never learned, just as the manna was never understood. Perhaps, “what is it?” was a proper name after all for that “bread from heaven.” The manna was not only not understood, we are told. It was not appreciated.

“And the people spake against God, and against Moses, ‘Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water;

⁵ Psalm 78.²⁵

⁶ Dt. 8.³

⁷ Dt. 8.³

⁸ Dt. 8.¹⁶

⁹ Dt. 8.¹⁸

and *our soul loatheth this light bread.*”¹⁰

I AM THAT BREAD OF LIFE

Given Israel’s ambivalence, even loathing toward the divinely provided and life-giving manna, we might be surprised when Jesus associates himself so completely with that unnamed, unknown, and unappreciated manna.

“The bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven.”

“I am the bread of life.”

“I am the bread which came down from heaven.”

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven.”¹¹

Now, it is possible, I suppose, that Jesus only adopted the association under “pressure” of a multitude’s implied challenge,

“Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”¹²

However, given the thoughtful and lengthy discourse that follows this challenge, it seems that Jesus was fully prepared for and enthusiastic about his association with manna. For a number of reasons, the association is most appropriate. In this homily, we will discuss just one of these associations: that of not being understood.

¹⁰ Num. 21.⁵

¹¹ John 6.^{33, 35, 41, 51}

¹² Jn. 6.³¹

WHO IS HE? WHERE IS HE FROM? WHERE IS HE GOING?

We have already seen that, though the Lord preserved the children of Israel for forty years by providing manna, the children of Israel never did comprehend the nature of manna. It remained a question mark as long as it lasted, and then on into the following generations. We have also seen that Jesus associates himself with manna in John 6. Part of that association is found in the fact of his not being understood. At the very beginning of his record, John makes the following observation about Jesus:

“The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness *comprehended it not.*”¹³

And again,

“He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and *the world knew him not.*”¹⁴

This theme is pursued throughout the book. John the Baptist declares,

“There standeth one among you, *whom ye know not.*”¹⁵

At one point, the Jewish religious leaders confess:

“We know that God spake unto Moses: *as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is.*”¹⁶

Even when some claim to know him, there is irony and error in their knowing.

“Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that he said, I came down from heaven?”¹⁷

¹³ John 1.⁵

¹⁴ John 1.¹⁰

¹⁵ John 1.²⁶

¹⁶ John 9.²⁹

¹⁷ John 6.⁴²

“Howbeit we know this man whence he is: but when Christ cometh, no man knoweth whence he is.”¹⁸

The inability to comprehend Jesus goes beyond who he is and where he is from.

“”Though I bear record of myself, yet my record is true: for I know whence I came, and whither I go; but *ye cannot tell whence I come, and whither I go.*”¹⁹

This incomprehension is not limited to “unbelieving Jews.” Though for different reasons and in different ways, incomprehension concerning Jesus extends even to those in his inner-most circle of disciples.

“Simon Peter said unto him, ‘Lord, *whither goes thou?*’

“Jesus answered him, ‘Whither I go, thou canst not follow me know but thou shalt follow me afterwards.’”²⁰

“Thomas saith unto him, Lord, *we know not whither thou goest*; and how can we know the way?”²¹

“Jesus saith unto him [Philip], ‘Have I been so long time with you, and yet *hast thou not know me, Philip?*’”²²

Clearly, Jesus, like manna, was beyond the comprehension of those among whom he lived and served, including his closest disciples. It is also clear that Jesus wishes to be understood and anticipates being understood.

“Jesus saith unto him [Thomas], ‘If ye had know me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him [and by implication, Jesus], and have seen

¹⁸ John 7.²⁷

¹⁹ John 8.¹⁴

²⁰ John 13.³⁶

²¹ John 14.⁴

²² John 14.⁹

him.”²³

“This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou has sent.”²⁴

Notwithstanding such hopes, it is equally clear that Jesus will never be fully understood or appreciated by mortals in general. It is not the “unbelieving” only who do not comprehend him, who cannot wrap their finite brains around a being and an Atonement that is infinite. It is also all of us who believe. He is simply beyond our capacity to understand. He is the ultimate and eternal “Manna?” which neither we nor our fathers have fully comprehended.

I have always loved the humble of confession of the hymnist,

“I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me,
Confused at the grace that so fully he proffers me.”²⁵

What right-minded person, having encountered him, can be anything but stupefied by his incredible grace, love, generosity, good-will, etc., etc., etc.? I have spoken before of Ammon and his confusion at God’s mercy.

“Therefore, let us glory, yea, we will glory in the Lord; yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full; yea, we will praise our God forever. Behold, *who can glory too much in the Lord? Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy, and of his long-suffering* towards the children of men? Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.

Who could have supposed that our God would have been so merciful as to have snatched us from our awful, sinful, and polluted state?”²⁶

²³ John 14.⁷

²⁴ John 17.³

²⁵ LDS Hymnal, #193

²⁶ Alma 26.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

No matter what we may say of him; no matter how elevated our language; no matter how exalted our estimations of him, it will not be enough. We will have underestimated him. We will have said too little about him. He will always and in all things be more than we supposed him to be. Paul, too, reminds us of his incomprehensible greatness. In praying for the Saints, he pleads that they “may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, *which passeth knowledge...*”²⁷

In attempting to describe God’s mercy, the Psalmist declares,

“For as the heaven is high above the earth,
so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.”²⁸

Go measure that, if you can!

CONCLUSION

For forty years—fourteen thousand and sixty days—the children of Israel were fed, nourished, energized, and enlivened by the unknown and mysterious manna. Their ignorance caused God no problems. It did not diminish the life giving power of manna.

We LDS people speak about knowing this, knowing that, and knowing the other. It sounds, at times, like we have it all figured out. All mysteries have been removed. But, truth is, we are as clueless and uncomprehending about the Lord Jesus Christ and his infinite Atonement as were the children of Israel about manna. When it comes to him and his Atonement, we have not even scratched the surface. We see him and his Atonement “through a glass, darkly.”²⁹ We consistently underestimate him and the extent of his willingness and ability to save and exalt. But such misunderstandings do not lessen his ability to save. They do not lesson our potential to be exalted. We can live on this Manna for ten thousand times ten thousand years, notwithstanding our ignorance.

Unless, of course, we become guilty of the Israelite sin, not of ignorance, but of abhorrence;

²⁷ Ephesians 3.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

²⁸ Psalm 103.¹¹

²⁹ See 1 Corinthians 13.¹²

unless we become so accustomed to this simple manna that we come to “loathe” it, deciding that there must be something more. “Our soul,” complained the Israelites, “loatheth this light bread.” Then,

“They tempted God in their heart
by asking meat for their lust.
Yea, they spake against God; they said,
‘Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?’”³⁰

As a consequence of such loathing

“He caused an east wind to blow in the heaven:
and by his power he brought in the south wind.
He rained flesh also upon them as dust,
and feathered fowls like as the sand of the sea:
And he let it fall in the midst of their camp,
round about their habitations.
So they did eat, and were well filled:
for he gave them their own desire;
They were not estranged from their lust.
But while their meat was yet in their mouths,
The wrath of God came upon them,
and slew the fattest of them,
and smote down the chosen men of Israel.”³¹

Of course, we do not “loathe” the Lord in any traditional sense. But such substitution as that made by the Israelites—wanting meat rather than manna, lusting after our own desires, good and evil—is a kind of loathing, a betrayal. We might be tempted to reply as did Israel, “What, we’re supposed to survive on this only?” Today, our substitution may take the form of our wanting something in the form of the illusory “good” of evil—the “care of this world,

³⁰ Psalm 78.¹⁸⁻¹⁹

³¹ Psalms 78.²⁶⁻³¹

and the deceitfulness of riches.”³² Or it may be the illusory “better” of something good—the putting at the center, at the foundation something other than the Lord Jesus and his Atonement. This we must never do. There is no central point around which our lives revolve other than him. As Paul reminds us,

“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”³³

Nearly two thousand years later, the prophet Joseph Smith will remind us,

“The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.”³⁴

Now, appendages are certainly wonderful things. I do not wish to live without an arm or leg! But I could. The life that is in me comes from another source. It comes from that strange manna; that unknown, unknowable, incomprehensible “living bread which came down from heaven,” “which [we] knewest not, neither did [our] fathers know.” Nevertheless,

“If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”³⁵

³² Matthew 13.²²

³³ 1 Corinthians 3.¹¹

³⁴ Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 121

³⁵ John 6.⁵¹