
Manna And Quails In The Context Of Hebrews' Relationship With God

Exodus 16 and Numbers 11 both recount the story of the manna and quails. Though these two chapters concern the same story, they offer different details and variable facts. The two stories differ especially in their characterization of the Hebrew people, God, and the relationships between them. Exodus focuses on the Israelites' relationship with God as a chosen people, while Numbers represents Israel's earthly concerns and estrangement from God. The juxtaposition of these two seemingly conflicting stories in the Bible represents the duality of the Israelites' relationship with God: on one hand, they are a "chosen people" especially close to God, while on the other hand they are a "stiff-necked" people, characterized by fickleness and a lack of faith (Ex. 32.9).

Exodus's and Numbers' accounts of the story of the manna and quails share many similarities. In both versions, God answers the Israelites' complaints and provides food for them. This indicates that God does have a special relationship with the Hebrews over other peoples. Similarly, in both stories Moses acts as a representative of the Hebrew people to God; the attitudes of all the Israelites are often embodied in Moses, and his interactions with God become representative of God's relationship with the entire nation of people. These similarities provide a framework for the stories against which the differing details and facts of each account can stand out.

Though both chapters recount the same story, each does so with a different focus. In Exodus, the author only makes a brief reference to the quails, saying that they "came up and covered the camp" (16.13). The account in Exodus focuses much more on God's gift of manna. The manna is described as "bread from heaven," indicating that God created it expressly for the Hebrews (Ex. 16.4). Similarly, Moses describes the manna as "the bread that the Lord has given [the Hebrews] to eat," again suggesting a gift and an intimate connection between God and the people (Ex. 16.15). In Numbers, however, the account focuses more on the quails, devoting only three verses to the description of manna. God did not create the quails in Numbers specifically for the Hebrews; he merely brings them in "from the sea" (11.31). This implies a less intimate connection between God and the Israelites than in Exodus, when God creates something anew and sends it down "from heaven" (16.4).

The different focuses of the two stories further establish the different portrayals of the relationship between God and the Israelites when read in a metaphoric way, as well. Numbers noticeably omits many details about the manna; it is primarily concerned with the earthly food,

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the quails, as opposed to the “bread from heaven” described in Exodus (16.14). Numbers’ focus on the Israelites’ desire for the earthly may be interpreted as representative of the Hebrews’ earthly desires, while Exodus’s focus on the heavenly can be said to represent the Israelites’ Godly interests. Moreover, the manna in Exodus takes on a higher religious meaning in that God turns it into a test of whether the people observe the Sabbath or not (16.4). In this way, the manna serves to literally strengthen the Israelites’ role as God’s chosen people through a reinforcement of the law.

The way that the Israelites themselves are characterized in each book also elucidates their dual relationship with God. In both stories, the people “complain” against God and Moses (Ex. 16.2, Num. 11.1); in Exodus, however, the complaint seems more warranted. In Exodus, the complaint comes from a complete lack of food, expressed in the line, “you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (16.3). In Numbers, however, the complaint arises out of the lack of luxurious food, such as “fish,” “cucumbers,” “melons,” “leeks,” and “garlic” (11.5). Numbers makes it clear that the Israelites had manna to eat, but were unsatisfied with it: “there is nothing at all but this manna to look at” (11.6). On a symbolic level, the Hebrews’ rejection of “heavenly” food for the earthly quails may represent their fickleness and their frequent rejection of God’s laws for earthly pleasures. In addition, the complaining in Numbers portrays the Israelites as greedy and unthankful, suggesting that this account represents the Israelites’ times of estrangement from God.

Numbers further expands upon the Hebrews’ greediness through a detail that differs with Exodus. Numbers notes that in gathering quails, “the least anyone gathered was ten homers” of meat (11.32). Numbers also recounts that they “spread them out for themselves,” a further suggestion of greed (11.32). This is a stark contrast to the account in Exodus, in which each person gathered merely one omer of manna. Furthermore, Exodus states that one omer is sufficient to feed one person: “Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person” (16.16). Though the text does not make it clear whether or not the Hebrews in Numbers and in Exodus were gathering and storing food to last for different periods of time, the language in Numbers, specifically the use of the phrase “for themselves,” implies their greed.

Along with the Israelite people, the characterization of Moses specifically elucidates the two-sided nature of the Hebrews’ relationship with God. In both chapters, Moses’ attitudes are representative of the attitudes of the people. In Numbers, Moses speaks out against God, asking, “Why have you treated your servant so badly?” and, “Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for [the people]?” (Num. 11.11, 11.22). Moreover, in Numbers, Moses is the one who initiates conversations with God, indicating his boldness. Like the rest of the Israelites, he complains against and questions God’s abilities and motives. In Exodus, God is always the first to initiate conversation with Moses, suggesting Moses’ subservience to God. Also, the Israelites’ admission that they “did not know what [the manna] was” when they first see it

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mirrors the humbleness with which Moses interacts with God (16.15). This humble attitude greatly contrasts the Israelites' attitude toward manna in Numbers, in which they derisively refer to it as "this manna" (11.6). Moses shares many of the attitudes of the rest of his people, and these attitudes reveal the nature of their relationship with God.

In addition to Moses, God himself is another character whose attributes determine the nature and tone of his bond with Israel. God is characterized in Numbers in a similar way to the Israelites; he is wrathful towards them, as evidenced by God's desire to sicken the people with meat and by the "plague" at the end of the chapter (11.33). However, his wrath against the Israelites appears to be justified in that their "craving" is portrayed as negative and greedy (11.4). Indeed, as evidenced in Numbers' description of Moses as "displeased," God as "angry," and the people as "weeping," the relationship between God and the people in Numbers is marked by dissatisfaction (11.10). In Exodus, though some of the Israelites upset God by gathering manna on the Sabbath, God does not get angry with them and there is no ensuing punishment as there is in Numbers (16.28). Exodus' lack of punishment for the Hebrews who ignored the Sabbath suggests a more positive relationship between the Hebrews and God than represented in the account in Numbers.

God is further characterized by a comparison of his motives toward the people in both stories. In Exodus, God provides food to the Israelites so that they might "have [their] fill of bread" (16.12). God's motive in providing the manna and quails in Exodus is to nurture the people, furthering the idea that this story represents the Hebrews as God's chosen people, who receive special provisions. In contrast, God provides food to the Israelites in Numbers so that it might become "loathsome" to them (11.20); the food in Numbers becomes a punishment rather than nourishment. God's volition in giving food to the Israelites reveals his attitudes toward them in each account: God's positive motives in Exodus reveal his ability to care for his chosen people, while his negative motives in Numbers represent the Israelites' estrangement from God.

The two accounts of the manna and quails reveal God's motives and his relationship to the Israelites on a symbolic level, as well. Both versions of the doublet state that God delivers food for the Israelites via some form of weather: in Exodus, God "rain[s] bread from heaven," while in Numbers, "a wind...brought quails from the sea" (Ex. 16.4, Num. 11.31). Water in the Bible is usually associated with nourishment and refreshment, alluding to God's motive to quell the Israelites' hunger. In general, however, wind is a disruptive force that causes movement and chaos, the mood of which is mirrored in the miraculous slaughter of the "people who had the craving" at the end of the chapter in Numbers (11.34).

Further symbolism concerning God's attitudes and motives can be found in the conflicting time frames of the two accounts. In Exodus, God gives the Hebrews the manna and the quails at the same time: "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread"

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(16.12). Yet, in Numbers, God gives the manna long before he brings in the quails, evidenced in that the people complain that manna is the only thing to eat (11.6). The idea that the manna and quails are presented together in Exodus suggests harmony and accord, while the separation of the two foods in Numbers indicates disruption and division. In a larger sense, when the manna and quails are given in relation to each other comes to represent the nature of the Hebrews' relationship with God.

The two versions of the story of the manna and quails, though built around the same framework, contain different details. These differences serve to elucidate the seemingly paradoxical nature of the Hebrews' relationship with God. In Exodus, the story portrays a caring and merciful God, interested in nurturing his chosen people, while Numbers portrays a wrathful God concerned with punishing those people who have "rejected" him (Num. 11.20). The notion that these two stories coexist in the Bible serves to characterize the both the Israelites and God in a larger way: though the Israelites are a fickle nation whose faith frequently wavers, they remain God's chosen nation throughout the Bible, which highlights God's ability for steadfastness to the covenant and to his people.

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