

EXODUS 15-18

PRESENCE IN THE WILDERNESS

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INTRODUCTION

At best, the episodes of the wilderness experience in Exodus 15–18 are a patchwork of traditions arranged for didactic and theological purposes. Together they form a composite portrait of Israel's earliest days as a redeemed people learning to live under the LORD's care. In these narratives, the editors highlight the rare moments of Israel's trust and faith, brief flashes of confidence in the God who delivered them. Far more often, however, the stories are marked by disobedience, complaint, and testing. The first generation murmurs against Moses, questions the LORD's provision, and repeatedly reveals the fragility of its trust. These chapters thus serve as an honest depiction of Israel's spiritual infancy—redeemed, yet still struggling to believe—and they prepare the reader for the larger wilderness pattern that will unfold throughout the Pentateuch.

THE WILDERNESS TRADITION

The wilderness is a powerful metaphor in Old Testament theology, offering a nuanced and evolving view of the desert. On one hand, it is a place of dryness and barrenness, lacking fertility and standing as the antithesis to the garden of Genesis. In this sense, the wilderness is where the divine command to be fruitful and multiply cannot be fulfilled. Its lifelessness was seen as a curse, associated with the dwelling place of evil spirits and symbolizing the absence of blessing and the perceived withdrawal of divine presence. On the other hand, the wilderness becomes a place of refinement and transformation. It is where distractions fall away, where one is purified and prepared for an encounter with the LORD and for a mission. Moses's first encounter with the divine presence at Horeb takes place in the wilderness, and Jesus's time in the desert likewise prepares him for his ministry.

In Exodus, the wilderness embodies both dimensions. Israel's faithfulness and disobedience, their entire relationship with the LORD, is reflected in the wilderness narrative. Just as the wilderness was the setting of Moses's first encounter with God's holiness, it becomes the place of Israel's first encounter as well. The greatest theophany in the Old Testament—the revelation at Sinai—occurs only after Israel's wandering and preparation. Yet the wilderness is also the setting of Israel's greatest failures, as the people complain against Moses and express a desire to return to Egypt, rejecting the very purpose of their redemption. This pattern becomes thematic: revelation followed by disobedience, followed by renewed revelation.

The events of the wilderness are remembered throughout the Old Testament because they are foundational to Israel's identity. Although the sacred author often portrays Israel as a "stiff-necked" people (Exod 32:9), these stories depict a newborn nation still learning who they are in relation to themselves and to the LORD. They are an origin story of a people not yet fully aware of who they are in relationship to themselves or to the LORD. Confusion about their destination and their future is natural for a people newly freed from bondage. Yet through all their wavering, God remains faithful, and Israel remains God's chosen and beloved.

Among Old Testament writers, the psalmists dwell most extensively on Israel's wilderness experience. They do not shy away from Israel's sin nor from God's transformative presence. Psalms 78 and 106 are sharply critical of the people who refused to acknowledge the LORD's saving work; Psalm 78 alone devotes nearly ninety lines to Israel's rebellion. As the psalmist summarizes:

"Yet they sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert.
They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved."

Other psalms—105, 135, and 136—retell the signs and wonders of God in Egypt and the wilderness, focusing solely on divine faithfulness and saying nothing of Israel's disobedience. In general, however, the psalmists show little nostalgia for the wilderness. It is remembered as the archetype of sin and rebellion, illuminated by the LORD's saving work and serving as a warning for future generations.

The prophets, by contrast, see the wilderness in a more hopeful light. Hosea envisions it as a place of renewal and reconciliation, where Israel can shed its idolatries and become the LORD's bride once more. The 8th century prophet Hosea says of the wilderness:

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.
And there I will give her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt."
(Hosea 2:14-15)

Hosea sees the wilderness as a place of hope where the idolatries of the world might be shed so that Israel may once again become the LORD's bride. A century later, Jeremiah recalls the wilderness as a time of purity and intimacy between the LORD and Israel, saying:

"Thus says the LORD, 'I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.'" (Jeremiah 2:2)

As Jeremiah remembers the wilderness, he stresses an ideal relationship in which Israel responds with the same faithfulness that the LORD had shown Israel. Even later still, second Isaiah draws on the wilderness motif to describe Israel's preparation for a second exodus from Babylon captivity:

"A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" (Isaiah 40:3)

The prophet also foresees the transformation time when the LORD will transform the wilderness of Israel, making "her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord. (Isaiah 51:3). The Christian reader will notice an echo in the story of John the Baptist, "the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness'" (Matthew 3:3).

The wilderness narratives contain a variety of story traditions about Israel's journey between Egypt and the promised land. These traditions have been woven together with didactic and theological aims. The dominant motif is Israel's complaint and rebellion, addressed by Moses's leadership and the abundant grace of the LORD. In the end, the wilderness is the place where salvation and transformation begin, where the divine presence is revealed, and where Israel first learns what it means to be the chosen people of God.

GOD'S PROVISION IN THE WILDERNESS (Exodus 15:22-17:7)

Bitter Water Turned Sweet (Exodus 15:22-27)

The first wilderness story centers on the theme of water. As the stark realities of the desert set in, Israel directs its complaint against Moses, who in turn intercedes with the LORD. The LORD then provides through the faithfulness of his servant. This threefold pattern—complaint, intercession, provision—will recur throughout the wilderness narrative. It may seem curious that the God who intervened so dramatically in Egypt does not simply provide for Israel's needs unprompted, but the reason soon becomes clear: the LORD is laying the foundation for Israel's life in covenant. The physical elements essential for human survival—water, bread, and the like—become secondary to trust and obedience. In the economy of God's kingdom, the

essentials will be given, but they are to be received through faith in the abiding presence of the LORD.

The first test in the wilderness arises from a genuine and urgent need. It is not an initiation rite or a vindictive display of power, but a means by which the LORD stretches the people in trust so they may learn what it means to live in the fullness of blessing. The LORD has already been revealed as the warrior king in Egypt; now the divine purpose shifts to forming Israel into obedient sons and daughters.

The bitter waters of Marah echo the first plague in Egypt, for in both cases “they could not drink the water” (Exod 7:24; 15:23). After Moses cries out, the LORD “showed” him a piece of wood (Exod 15:25). The verb “to show” shares its root with *Torah* (“teaching” or “law”), suggesting a deliberate wordplay that links divine instruction with divine provision—a theme woven throughout the wilderness narrative.

The healing of the waters, turning them from bitter to sweet, leads to a new revelation: “I am the LORD, your healer” (Exod 15:26). This disclosure of God’s name is now tied to divine character, introducing the wilderness wanderings with a fresh theme: the warrior God of Egypt is also the God who heals and restores. Yet the healing is conditioned on obedience. The people are given statutes and ordinances in anticipation of Sinai, and the sacred authors intentionally connect the healing of the waters with the healing that comes through adherence to the divine word. This framework will shape Israel’s journey to the promised land: when they “diligently listen” to the LORD, they experience wholeness; when they choose disobedience, they encounter judgment.

Manna, Quail, and Rest (Exodus 16:1-36)

Exodus 16 contains the episode of the manna. Manna becomes one of the most enduring symbols in the Bible, preserved in Israel’s memory and even stored in the tabernacle. In its present form, the narrative contains two layers of tradition. The first is the ancient story of God providing bread from heaven for the people in the wilderness. The second is a theological reflection that interprets the deeper significance of the event. Other biblical texts offer their own perspectives. In Deuteronomy, for example, manna was both a gift and a test, meant to teach Israel reliance on God’s word

“He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”
(Deuteronomy 8:3)

The Wisdom tradition interprets manna as a sign of divine generosity even in judgment:

“Instead of these things you gave your people food of angels, and without their toil you supplied them from heaven with bread ready to eat, providing every pleasure and suited to every taste.” (Wisdom 16:20)

In Exodus, however, the manna narrative is shaped primarily as an explanation of the Sabbath. For the sacred authors, the distribution of manna is secondary to establishing a rhythm of life grounded in the divine order of creation. The bread becomes a test of trust—whether Israel will rely on God’s daily provision without hoarding—and a means of determining whether they will enter Sabbath rest.

The episode begins, once again, with the murmuring of the people. In Exodus 16:7–9, the word “murmur” appears six times. As at the Sea (Exod 14:10–14), the complaint strikes at the heart of God’s redemptive purpose. Yet God does not respond with anger. Instead, the LORD promises to rain down manna, giving Moses instructions before the gift appears.

What actually fell has long been debated. Psalm 78 and Wisdom call it “angel food,” a description of its origin rather than its physical properties. Botanists have observed a natural phenomenon in the Sinai region in which insects feeding on the Nile Tamarisk and White Hammada secrete a sweet substance that hardens into white flakes. Bedouin peoples collect this material—called *man na rinth*—before it evaporates and make it into cakes. Terrence Fretheim emphasizes the importance of locating God’s providential care within ordinary creation.¹ Without denying the extraordinary, the narrative invites readers to see divine blessing in everyday gifts. The lavish provision of manna is thus set against Israel’s discontent, revealing the LORD of creation through ordinary means.

The term “glory of the LORD” (*kevod Adonai*) appears here for the first time in Scripture (Exod 16:7, 10). It refers to the manifestation of God, visually linked to the cloud in the wilderness. The appearance of divine glory precedes the outpouring of meat and bread. Robert Alter notes that the language of evening and morning deliberately echoes Genesis 1, with the Creator bringing abundance out of scarcity and offering rest on the seventh day. True to the divine word, quail arrive in the evening and a dew-like substance appears in the morning. As with manna, quail may have a natural explanation—migratory birds exhausted and easily caught—but the narrative frames both as divine provision. Unlike manna, quail is a one-time gift, not mentioned again until Numbers 11.

In Exodus 16:16, the narrative shifts to three commandments attached to the gifts, all didactic laws meant to teach Israel to trust in the daily rhythms of life:

¹ Fretheim, *Exodus*, IBC, 181-182

First, Exodus 16:16–18 concerns the daily collection of manna. An *omer*—a tenth of an *ephah*—is estimated at twenty-two liters (about 5.6 gallons). Each person thus collected more than half a gallon of manna per day, a sign of divine abundance. “Those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage. They gathered as much as each of them needed.” (Exodus 16:18). God provides what is sufficient for the day and his gift will satisfy the needs of the people.

Second, Exodus 16:19–21 instructs the people to leave nothing that they had gathered for the following day. The LORD promises daily bread so that Israel will look to God each day for sustenance. Later, Deuteronomy warns that the abundance of the land may lead to false security—a prescient prophecy given the later history. The command is not a condemnation of prosperity but a reminder that in want or abundance, Israel must rely on the LORD.

Third, Exodus 16:22–26 summarizes the first two commands and explains the Sabbath rest. The Sabbath is linked to God’s rest at the end of creation. Genesis 2:1–3 consecrates time, establishing the Sabbath as a memorial to the LORD. A double portion of manna is provided before the Sabbath so that the people may cease from work and enter sacred rest.

The relationship between food, trust, and rest is central to understanding the Sabbath as a pattern of life for the newly formed people. In Genesis 1:1–2:4, creation moves from chaos to order and comes to a climax in rest and the sanctification of time. The movement signifies completeness and goodness. Likewise, in Exodus, Israel is a new creation moving from the chaos of slavery to the order of covenant life, which will reach its climax in rest in the promised land. Abraham Heschel captures this beautifully:

“The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”²

The gift of the Sabbath was also about community formation. The mutual sharing of Sabbath rest and the unspoiled bread of heaven strengthened the people on their journey. Even after manna ceased when the people entered the land, the paradigm of six and one would remain as the people aligned themselves with the order of creation.

² Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, 10.

Shared rest and unspoiled bread strengthen the people on their journey. Even after manna ceased when Israel entered the land, the pattern of six days and one remained as the people aligned themselves with the order of creation.

The manna and quail stories were likely originally simple accounts of divine provision. Later priestly authors reshaped them around the primacy of the Sabbath. The theological significance of bread, rest, obedience, and the holiness of time are woven together to illustrate Israel's movement from servants of Pharaoh to servants of the LORD.

Water from the Rock (Exodus 17:1-7)

The murmuring motif appears for a third time as the narrative again returns to the theme of water. The wilderness episodes thus far have highlighted Israel's basic needs—food and water—and each has been marked by a complaint against Moses, with the people longing for Egypt where, despite their bondage, their basic needs were met. The physical hardship and liminality of the wilderness obscure Israel's vision of a future with the LORD in the land of promise. The problem in the narrative is not that Israel wanted water; their need was legitimate. The tension arises from the manner of their complaint—quarreling and contending with Moses and with God rather than trusting in the LORD's provision. The names Massah and Meribah (“test” and “quarrel”) in Exodus 17:7 are etiological, explaining the events rather than identifying fixed geographical locations.

Strikingly, the LORD appears to Moses before the rock at Mount Horeb, locating the gift of water at the mountain where God first revealed the divine presence to Moses and where the covenant law will later be given. This creates a theological link between revelation, law, and life, symbolized in the waters that flow from the rock. The psalmist later reflects this connection:

They feast on the abundance of your house
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life
in your light we see light. (Psalm 36:8-9; cf. Ps 1:1-3)

Bread and water sustain the body, and in Israel's sacred tradition they also prefigure the Torah, which gives life to the heart, mind, and spirit. The association between divine presence and life-giving waters reaches a climax in the prophets. Ezekiel envisions water flowing from the temple, bringing life wherever it goes (Ezek 47:1). Joel and Zechariah see water pouring forth from the mountain of the LORD to refresh and cleanse the earth. Isaiah describes the LORD as a river of abundance (Isa 33:21) and depicts the Spirit as water poured out upon the people (Isa 44:3–4). Water, the mountain of God, the temple, and the divine presence become central symbols of renewal and salvation in Old Testament theology.

The episode concludes with the piercing question, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Exod 17:7). The question exposes Israel’s lack of trust and underscores the narrative’s central concern: God’s abiding presence. Although the LORD has revealed divine glory, the people still cannot perceive it, unable—or unwilling—to recognize God’s presence in the previous acts of deliverance. Yet the question also looks forward, anticipating the fuller revelation of the divine presence at Sinai and in the tabernacle. The story at Massah and Meribah thus becomes both a warning and a preparation, revealing Israel’s struggle to trust and the LORD’s unwavering commitment to be present with the chosen people.

THE TWO FOREIGNERS (Exodus 17:8-18:27)

Amalek (Exodus 17:8-16)

After the episode of water from the rock, the narrative introduces the first of two foreign adversaries when the Amalekites attack Israel in the wilderness. Joshua appears here for the first time, and the text highlights his leadership on the battlefield—perhaps anticipating his later role in the conquest narratives. Yet the success of Joshua and the army depends entirely on Moses, whose raised hands determine the outcome. The scene underscores that Israel’s victories are not achieved through military strength but through the LORD’s presence mediated by Moses.

From a literary and narrative standpoint, the episode appears ancient. It should not be understood as “holy war” in the later, technical sense, since Israel’s role is defensive rather than aggressive. The provocation behind Amalek’s attack is unknown, but the hostility between Israel and Amalek reaches back to the patriarchal period. The Amalekites were descendants of Esau, who lost his birthright to Jacob (Gen 36:12, 15–16), so the assault can be read as an expression of longstanding tribal enmity. The concluding statement—“war... from generation to generation” (Exod 17:16)—is ambiguous but likely reflects this enduring hostility rather than predicting perpetual conflict. It is an anachronistic note that situates the episode within Israel’s broader historical memory.

There is also a theological dimension. Amalek becomes emblematic of those who show no regard for the sovereignty of the LORD or for the LORD’s chosen people. In this sense, the conflict symbolizes the opposition between divine purpose and those who resist it. The battle narrative thus serves not only as an account of Israel’s first military encounter but also as a reminder that Israel’s security rests in the LORD, whose power is revealed through Moses’s intercession and whose presence determines the fate of the nation.

Jethro (Exodus 18:1-27)

The second foreigner to enter the narrative is Jethro (Exod 18), Moses's father-in-law first introduced in Exodus 2. Up to this point in the wilderness narrative, Israel has murmured and complained, and divine benevolence has met their needs and protected them. Israel is being shaped into a community with new rhythms of life—trust, obedience, and dependence on the LORD. Now they must also learn the practice of reflection and praise, which is essential to this rhythm. Curiously, this practice is introduced not by Moses or by Israel but by Jethro, a foreigner who initiates Israel's first act of worship and sacrifice in the wilderness, celebrating all the good works the LORD has done. The opening portion of the scene also includes a reunion between Moses, Zipporah, and their sons, a narrative detail that clarifies the family's whereabouts and ties up an earlier thread.

The placement of this episode immediately after the battle with the Amalekites creates a striking contrast: two foreigners approach Israel—one brings hostility, the other brings blessing.³ As historical commentary, the juxtaposition reflects Israel's relationships with neighboring peoples during the early monarchy, when these traditions were likely shaped. The conflict with Amalek mirrors hostile relations, while the peaceful encounter with Jethro and the Midianites—whom Mark Scarlata interprets as a covenant or treaty-ratification meal—reflects amicable relations with the Kenites (also known as Midianites). The Midianites themselves were descendants of Abraham through Keturah, who, though not of the chosen line, was blessed and settled in the east (Gen 25:1–6). The scene thus gestures toward the wider integration of Abraham's descendants into the orbit of God's covenantal purposes.

Jethro's blessing continues the next day when he observes Moses administering justice. The lack of structure and the delays in judgment reveal a system ill-prepared for the people who are about to receive the law at Sinai. A significant chronological tension appears here: in Deuteronomy, Moses recalls the distribution of authority as something that happened after receiving the law, whereas in Exodus 18 Moses refers to statutes and laws he has not yet received. The narrative is not concerned with strict chronology but with theological instruction.

More curious still is that the entire reorganization of Israel's judicial system is initiated not by God but by Jethro. In Numbers 11, a similar scene is divinely commanded, but here a human agent—without any explicit reference to speaking God's word—offers counsel that Moses accepts. Jethro's experience as priest of Midian brings wisdom, blessing, and order to Israel's civil structure, establishing a pattern of governance that will endure into the monarchy. The episode thus highlights the surprising ways God uses outsiders to bless Israel and shape its communal life, even as the people prepare to receive the covenant at Sinai.

³ Umberto Cassuto