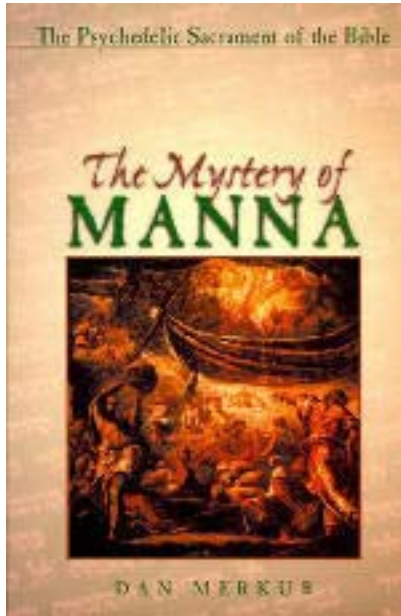


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Merkur, Dan

The Mystery of MANNA: The Psychedelic Sacrament of the Bible

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Dan Merkur argues that manna references in the Bible and later tradition hide a secret, or “mystery” (v). Cereal grains containing the psychoactive fungus ergot (*Claviceps purpurea*)—which can infest “the grains of barley, wheat, rye, and other cereal grasses” (11)—were used in preparing sacramental bread (see 8–9) to produce psychedelic visions in those consuming it (3, 26). Merkur’s theory thus belongs to a tradition of biblical interpretation that includes John M. Allegro’s *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (1970). Merkur, however, dismisses what he terms Allegro’s “cavalier allegation ... that manna was *amanita muscaria*, the fly agaric mushroom” (152 n. 5). He aligns himself, instead, with the ideas of R. Gordon Wasson, Carl A. P. Ruck, and Albert Hofmann (*The Road to Eleusis*, 1978), who argue that the “mystical visionary experience ... [of] the Greater Eleusinian Mystery ... was [induced by] a water-soluble extract of ergot” (v).

Merkur argues that the use of ergot in sacramental bread began some time before Solomon’s temple (7) and continued up to at least the thirteenth century C.E. (v). He identifies the earliest such ergot-contaminated bread as the sacramental “bread of the Presence” (or “showbread”) placed before Yahweh (6), and he interprets the earliest biblical manna traditions as “literary poeticizing” (6; see 8) of this sacramental bread (4). One should not hastily reject Merkur’s theory as absurd, for psychoactive plants have

played sacramental roles in religious traditions. Think of *soma* in ancient Vedic religion or of peyote in Navajo religion. Even eucharistic wine contains the intoxicant alcohol and can cause visions if consumed in great enough quantities. So instead of reacting dismissively, one should look carefully at Merkur's methodology and evidence.

Merkur attempts no complete survey of Jewish and Christian literature but instead limits his scope to "texts that openly discuss the mystery [of manna] in explicit statements" (v). Such statements, he maintains, "consist of a single clause, sentence, or motif that ... casual readers would overlook, misunderstand, or refuse to treat seriously" (v). The fragmentary nature of such references forces Merkur "to resort to hypothesis—call it theory, speculation, guesswork, as you wish—to cover the gap in the data" (1). Merkur thus forthrightly acknowledges that his theory rests upon spotty evidence, but he claims strong justification for his interpretation because of "two unequivocal references to the psychoactive properties of manna in the Hebrew Bible" (2).

Merkur cites Isa 30:20 (his translation) as one of these: "And my Lord will give you the bread of hardship and the water of affliction, and your Teacher will no longer hide himself, and your eyes shall see your Teacher" (4). Merkur interprets "Teacher" (מורה) as "God," for which he could—but does not—cite BDB (see BDB, 435 †II). Merkur also correctly notes, though without explanation, this passage's eschatological resonance (see v. 23: "in that day"). Indeed, some ancient religious speculation did come to portray a future provision of manna as an eschatological sign. Oddly, Merkur fails to mention this even though it would cohere with his interpretation of the bread in this passage as a reference to manna, especially if Isa 30:19–26 really is "an interpolation by a later editor" (4). The expression "bread of hardship" may sound rather peculiar as a manna reference, but Merkur deems it "consistent ... with the negative criticism of manna in Num. 11:4–9" (4). Be that as it may, by interpreting this bread as manna, Merkur acquires evidence sufficient for persuading him that verse 20 "refers explicitly to the psychoactivity of manna" because it associates manna consumption with "visions of God" (4).

Such a reading of Isa 30:20 presupposes his interpretation of Exod 16:6–10. Since this Exodus passage serves as Merkur's strongest biblical evidence for manna's psychoactive properties, one should examine Merkur's version carefully (verse numbers reinserted for convenience):

[6] So Moses and Aaron said to all the children of Israel, "At evening you shall know that Yahveh made you go out of the land of Egypt, and in [7a] the morning you shall see the glory of Yahveh.... [8b] When Yahveh gives you

'Meat to eat in the evening,
and bread to the full in the morning,'

because Yahveh has heard your murmurings which you murmur against him—for what are we? Your murmurings are not against us but against Yahveh.” [9] Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the children of Israel, ‘Come near before Yahveh, for he has heard your murmurings.’ ” [10] And it was as Aaron had spoken to the whole congregation of the children of Israel. They looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of Yahveh appeared in the cloud. (Exod. 16:6–7a, 8b–10; p. 2)

Note the deletion of 16:7b–8a:

“[7b] because he has heard your murmuring against Yahweh—and who are we, that you murmur against us?” [8a] And Moses said...

Merkur considers 7b a scribal duplication of 8b and presumes 8a a later editor’s corrective insertion (151 n. 2). Deleting 16:7b–8a enables Merkur to link 7a’s main clause “you shall see the glory of Yahveh” directly to 8b’s subordinate clause “When Yahveh gives you / ‘Meat to eat in the evening, / and bread to the full in the morning.’ ” Merkur asserts that this “makes excellent sense” (151 n. 2). Whatever the merits of this text-critical argument, the deletion certainly helps him interpret the passage as meaning that on the morning that the Israelites ate manna, they had visions of Yahweh’s glory (2–3). This interpretation receives further support through Merkur’s past-perfect translation in verse 10: “And it was as Aaron had spoken to the whole congregation of the children of Israel. They looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of Yahveh appeared in the cloud.” The translation “had spoken” can imply a lapse of time to the next morning, thereby supporting Merkur’s theory that by eating manna, the Israelites had a vision of Yahweh.

Unfortunately for Merkur, his interpretation has serious problems even if one allows deletion of 16:7b–8a. Although his past-perfect reading in verse 10 helps him place the revelation of Yahweh’s glory upon the morning when the manna first descended, a more probable translation of וַיְהִי כַדְבַר אֱהָרֹן reads, “And it was as Aaron was speaking” (see BDB, 224 I 2a (I) (a) a and 454 3 b), which would fix the revelation of Yahweh’s glory upon the day prior to the giving of the manna. Moreover, verses 11–15, which Merkur does not cite and which immediately follow verse 10’s reference to Yahweh’s glory, make Merkur’s reading impossible anyway:

[11] And Yahweh said to Moses, [12] “I have heard the murmurings of the sons of Israel. Tell them, ‘In the evening, you will eat meat, and in the morning, you will be satiated with bread, and you will know that I am Yahweh, your God.’ ” [13] And it came to pass in the evening that quail went up, and they covered the

encampment, and in the morning, there was a layer of dew around about the encampment. [14] And the layer of dew went up, and there appeared upon the face of the desert small scale-like flakes, small like hoarfrost, upon the earth. [15] And the sons of Israel saw and said one to another, “What is it?”—for they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “This is the bread that Yahweh has given to you to eat.”

Given this continuation of the passage cited by Merkur in verses 6–10, the vision of Yahweh’s glory described in verse 10 thus occurred on the day *before* the gift of the manna. Therefore, verse 7’s promise of seeing Yahweh’s glory “in the morning” can only refer to the manna miracle itself in the sequence of events as described in the extant text—and Merkur provides no text-critical analysis to resolve this crucial problem for his interpretation. Consequently, Merkur’s “unequivocal” evidence for the psychoactive properties of manna in the Hebrew Bible vanishes. Space does not permit my analysis of Merkur’s “evidence” for manna’s putative psychoactive properties in Philo of Alexandria, the New Testament, rabbinic midrash, Pseudo-Hierotheos, medieval rabbinic authorities, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the Holy Grail legend, or the Kabbalah, but suffice it to say that his readings of the manna references in these texts suffer similar debilitating weaknesses.

Moreover, scientific evidence casts serious doubt upon Merkur’s ergot theory. First, his favored barley (see 19, 47–48, 68), being self-pollinating, is not especially susceptible to ergot infestation. Second, even in the rare event of infestation, bread made from ergot-contaminated flour is so excruciatingly poisonous that it is unlikely to have lent itself to ingestion for producing hallucinogenic visions. On ergot’s deadliness, and the unlikelihood of its use even in the Eleusian mysteries (where a less toxic, “water-soluble extract of ergot” has been hypothesized), see Ivan Valencic, “Has the Mystery of the Eleusinian Mysteries been Solved?” *Yearbook for Ethnomedicine and the Study of Consciousness* 3 (1994): 325–36 (Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 1995). Given the terrible deadliness of ergot-contaminated flour, I hope that no one reading Merkur’s book will use any to make bread in the ill-advised hope of experiencing a “vision of the glory of God” (1)—*particularly* since Merkur concludes with words implicitly “advocating ... the biblical mystery ... [as a] ‘perpetual obligation’ (Lev. 24:8)” (146).