

I must preface these remarks by confessing that in my life I do not recall ever having missed a meal involuntarily, or an in-between meal pick-me-up, or a bedtime snack. I know what it is like to be hungry in the dramatic and hyperbolic sense of “famished, can’t wait for dinner.” But I have no idea what it is like to be undernourished, suffering from acute hunger in the clinical sense.

Among the hardest tasks for people like me who have not suffered through hunger, is to imagine what life is like for people who have. Let us also speak in terms of power. Among the hardest tasks for people who have not suffered a catastrophe like the decline and fall of a civilization, do not know what it is like to be conquered, is to imagine what life is like for the people who have had such experiences.

This difficulty also applies to the interpretation of the bible. The bible was written largely by, and for, the conquered, the hungry peoples of the world.

Hegemony

Sometimes we who have had an education are accused of being high-minded, using big words, not speaking the language of the people. Certainly this accusation has merit, I have been reading some books about the Old Testament that are guilty almost to a

comic extent. Nonetheless, I am going to introduce and discuss a new word anyway, I might as well own it.

The word of the day is “hegemony.” That is a big word. In the Google dictionary there are two pronunciations offered, “hejamoney,” with a long O, and “hejemony,” like Hermione in the Harry Potter stories. Even the intellectual elites don’t agree on something as superficial as how to say the word.

The meaning, however, is clear; it means dominance, leadership. It refers to the sphere of influence of those who have power. You can at least say you learned a new word today, if you didn’t already know it. To be honest, I had to look it up. To have hegemony is to be in control. To suffer the hegemony of someone else is to be under their control.

Crisis

For those who suffer under the hegemony of another, it is a catastrophe, because life is dramatically influenced by the failure of those in power to enact justice, or even just to care, and sometimes to purposefully harm. The story the Bible tells is essentially about the crisis of hegemony.

What I mean by all this that the story of Israel is a movement from one crisis of power to another. First there was the long Egyptian situation. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants all lived under the

influence of the Egyptians, which was the great empire of their time. Located nearby, they suffered Egyptian hegemony, and even when they weren't enslaved, they were impacted by it.

When Egyptian dominance faded came liberation, and the Israelites became responsible for their own government. Though never the most powerful nation in the world, Israel did come into enough power to be corrupted by it. So after the crisis of Egypt came the crisis of monarchy, then the crisis of divided monarchy, then the loss of power altogether.

The names of the empires that oppressed what was left of Israel, the Judeans, roll by like the centuries: the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. The Bible is a book for those who suffer power, mostly the power of others, sometimes power over others. Either way, it has proved to be problematic.

How does one live under the power of others and not be crushed by it? How does one exert power over others and not crush them? We do well to acknowledge that the present world lives under the hegemony of the United States of America, creating a difficulty in understanding much of the Bible.

The Roman Crisis

For Jesus it was the Roman Empire that exerted power. It is safe to say that in the time of Jesus, the Roman attitude to the Jewish minority was one of indifference. They didn't care much about them except when they were threatened, and then not so much as a threat, but a nuisance.

It is in the context of Roman hegemony that the gospel, and the miraculous feeding is best understood. I had never really thought about why so many people were out there on the countryside without food. I thought maybe they just forgot to pack a lunch.

We should know that this small multitude in this solitary place was there because they had been left out the economic bounty of the Roman system. They were not there to be entertained. They may not all have been homeless, but we are best to see them as in need of help.

In other places the gospels present them as sick and in need of healing, possessed and in need of liberation, dying and in need of raising, and certainly hungry and in need of food.

Gospel Assertions

It is the enigma of the gospel that one of the central happenings on the way to crucifixion was a miracle of feeding.

Perhaps the healings and the miraculous feeding have nothing to do with why Jesus was executed, but they at least did nothing to work in his favor enough to prevent it. Jesus fed the multitude, later he was executed.

On the other hand, one cannot escape the possibility that in part, Jesus was executed *because* he fed the people and healed them. Seen in this way, the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 was an act of defiance, a disruption of the social order, and threat to the peace maybe even an act of treason. One wonders, of course, how it could be a crime to feed hungry people or heal the sick.

In reality this is not a problem, after all, it is illegal to give aid and comfort to the enemy, and this wouldn't be the first or the last time in history that the Jewish "people of the land," or at least some of them, had been considered enemies of the state.

One of the conclusions we must draw from this story is in terms of justice. God is on the side of the poor, the refugee, the hungry, the sick. We should be on their side too. This conclusion stands behind Christian humanitarian efforts around the world.

While we are drawing conclusions, we should notice the conversation between Jesus and his disciples. They wanted to ignore or dismiss the problem of hunger by releasing the people and let the crowd fend for itself. Jesus said, "no, you feed them."

One must also consider the powerful nature of the event, thousands were fed with 5 loaves and two fish. The miracle is the overcoming of the negative circumstances.

We are meant to know that the worldly circumstances are irrelevant; it can be a time of war or peace, feast or famine, power or weakness, plenty, or in this case, want; *we all live under divine hegemony.*

And that power works for us, not against us. God nourishes, strengthens, makes health happen. It also instructs us that when we share, there is more than enough to go around.

With this miracle, Jesus gently guides us to recapture the wonder of God's creation; that God created the earth and gave it to the people; to set it as a hopeful standard of high humanity to reach for, whether we are among the hungry or the fed, the sick or the well, the powerless or the powerful.

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