

The First Temptation: Israel, Jesus and Sabbath Economics

by Ched Myers

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THE CHURCH TRADITIONALLY inaugurates Lent by reflecting on the “wilderness temptations” of Jesus. This story is articulated in Mt 4:1-11 and Lk 4:1-13 (probably Q tradition). In preparation for his mission, Jesus follows a mysterious yet compelling calling to desert solitude. He fasts, lives in the wild, and wrestles with spirits.

(Right: Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoy, “Christ in the Wilderness,” 1873.)



While Jesus' wilderness sojourn may seem strange to our modern ears, it would be quite intelligible to indigenous peoples the world over. Lost to contemporary urban cultures, the “vision quest” tradition survives still among most land-based tribal peoples. Among Aboriginal people it is referred to as the “renewal of the Dreaming”; for the California Yuki it is dancing and the sweat lodge; the Pueblo people of New Mexico follow the ancient traditions of the kiva; and the Sioux call it *hanblechia*.

The vision quest is a ritual passage into selfhood, somewhere between what Joseph Campbell calls the “initiation ceremony” and the “hero-journey.” Shamans, writes Christopher Vecsey, “with the help of guardian spirits travel to the land of the dead in order to restore the lost or stolen or diseased souls...out of love for their community.” This is both a very real *exterior* adventure beyond the margins of society and an *interior* passage of cleansing. Yet the journey to/in the “spirit world” is also a sojourn through mythic time, in order to encounter the story and destiny of one's self and one's people.

That Jesus' journey lasted “forty days” is clearly intended to invoke Israel's forty-year Exodus wanderings in the wilderness after Egypt. But what exactly is the connection? Jesus is somehow *interiorizing* the historic experience of his people, mystically re-tracing the footsteps of his ancestors in order to discover where they went wrong. Jesus believes that his people have lost their bearings, and that course-correction can only come through a kind of “re-visioning” of the fateful choices that led liberated Israel back into captivity. This vision quest seeks a *radical* diagnosis that moves beyond symptoms to the *root-causes* of the historical crisis of Israel.

To begin this formidable task, Jesus must return to his people's "myth of origins": the Exodus wilderness. Israel's distinctive identity commenced when they were sprung by Yahweh from Pharaoh's imperial straight jacket: "I will bring My people out of Egypt" (Ex 3:10). Similarly, in the gospel story Jesus' distinctive identity has just been confirmed at his wilderness baptism by John: "You are My child, the Beloved" (Lk 3:22/Mt 3:17). Jesus is then driven by the Spirit deeper "into the wilderness" where he, like his ancestors, must struggle to discover what this vocation means.

The three temptations in this tale represent a fundamental test of this primal identity. "If you are the child of God..." taunts the Devil in refrain (Lk 4:3,9). This is the question Jesus—and the Church that is invited to follow in his footsteps in Lent—must answer: Are we as a people still defined by the Exodus journey, or have we abandoned it? Literally hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible the community is exhorted to remember their liberation from slavery; indeed, their God is known as the One "who brought you up out of Egypt" (some 25 times in Deuteronomy alone). This memory is meant to function as a warning to the people not to practice the former lifeways of imperial captivity (Lev 18:2-3), or what Walter Wink calls the "Domination System." Israel must "never return that way again" (Dt 17:16).



Jesus' vision quest is no mere contemplative retreat. He must face the central issues with which the people of God *always* struggle in their journey of faith and liberation. The three temptations name the archetypal characteristics of the Domination System: the economics of exploitation, the politics of empire, and the symbolism of omnipotence. These issues have not changed for the church in our time. (Left: Rembrandt van Rijn, "Satan tempting Christ to change stones into bread," ca. 1632-33.)

The wilderness is the indeed the best place to examine the many ways we have internalized the pathologies of empire. The undomesticated space of nature reveals how domesticated we have become. In this wilderness mirror we can see more clearly how Satan has lured us into the other narratives that constantly compete with the biblical one for our allegiance. And the myths of Pharaoh and Caesar, of the National Security Council and the television news, of Wall Street and Hollywood, are seductive indeed. They promise prosperity,

power, and prestige — but deliver only captivity. Jesus knows he can resist these imperial delusions only by staying grounded in the old Story. Hence his counter-refrain: "It is written..." (Lk 4:4,8,12).

THOUGH THE SECOND TWO TEMPTATIONS are narrated in different order in the Matthean and Lukan traditions, both versions agree on the first. Surrounded only by the barren rock of the Judean desert, Jesus hungers, just as his ancestors did (Lk 4:3/Mt 4:3). The realities of the Exodus wilderness, outside of the "imperial incubator," are harsh for domesticated people. Anxiety about bread was also Israel's first temptation:

The whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron..."Would that we had died at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our fleshpots and ate our fill of bread! But you have led us into this desert to die of famine!" (Ex 16:2-3)

Having internalized imperial appetites and desires, the people cannot imagine life apart from their dependence upon the very system that enslaved them. This is ever truer for us today. As Wendell Berry puts it: "The great obstacle is simply this: the conviction that we cannot change because we are dependent upon what is wrong. But that is the addict's excuse, and we know that it will not do."

Yet the God who liberates captives also offers the gift of sustenance: "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you" (Ex 16:4a). But the "manna" represents not a *miracle*, but a *test*: to see whether Israel will follow instructions on how to realize Yahweh's alternative economy (Ex 16:4b). (*Right: Tintoretto, "The Miracle of the manna," 1577.*) What are these instructions?

1. Everyone should gather just enough bread for their needs—an ethos that proscribes both "too much" and "too little" (16:16-18);
2. The manna cannot be stored up—a prohibition against the economics of surplus accumulation (16:19-21);
3. The people must keep the Sabbath—a communal discipline that privileges *being over doing*. (16:22-30):



The manna is thus a symbol reminding Israel that the purpose of economic organization is to guarantee enough for everyone. This will only occur if material sustenance *circulates* rather than *concentrates*, and if limits are set on production and consumption.



This old biblical tale represents an archetypal expression of subsistence economics and “gift cosmology,” and closely reflects the ethos of indigenous peoples the world over. (Left: Detail of a rock-painting thought to depict trance experience of San hunter-gatherers. Linton, Eastern Cape, South Africa.)

Indeed, 99% of human history on this planet has been characterized by what

anthropologists call “generalized reciprocity”—a symbiotic relationship with the ecological economy of nature. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins described these traditional lifeways as “the original affluent society” in his landmark 1972 book, *Stone Age Economics*.

Perhaps the story of the manna in the wilderness preserved an ancient memory of what it means to be human. Moreover, the notion of Sabbath, which first appears here in Torah’s narrative, sought to reconstruct Israel’s consciousness of dependence upon the land and the “divine economy of grace,” which had been shattered by their experience in captivity. Imperial Egypt typified the ambitions of human civilization to re-engineer the Creation by exploiting nature and controlling the forces of production. In contrast, Sabbath regulations mean to interrupt this process by prescribing weekly restraints on human labor (Ex 31:12-17).

This Sabbath vision is further developed in a seventh year cessation of cultivation, in order that our artificial human economy, with its addictive-compulsive tendencies, does not destroy the economy of nature (Ex 23:10-11). During this period the true “Commonwealth” is restored, and those disadvantaged in the built economy (e.g. the poor and the undomesticated animals) have rights to the fruit of the land. This ethic is predicated on the notion that Israel’s experience of oppression in Egypt must never be reproduced (Ex 23:9; see Lev 25:42). The same concept is reiterated in Torah’s “principle of the remainder,” in which the edges of every field *belong* to the “poor and the sojourner” (Lev 19:9f).

This logic culminates in a “Jubilee” every 49th year (Lev 25). The Jubilee was intended as Israel’s hedge against the inevitable tendency of human societies to concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the few, creating hierarchical classes with the poor at the bottom. In agrarian societies such as biblical Israel (or parts of the Third World today), the cycle of poverty began when a family had to sell off its land in order to service a debt, and reached its conclusion when landless peasants could only sell their labor, becoming bond-slaves. The Jubilee aimed to dismantle such inequality through the:

- release of community members from debt (Lev 25:35-42; see Dt 15:1-11);
- return of encumbered or forfeited land to its original owners (Lev 25:13,25-28);
- freeing of slaves (Lev 25:47-55; see Dt 15:12-18).

The rationale for this restructuring of the community’s wealth was that because the earth belongs to God (Lev 25:23) and its fruits are a gift, the people of the Covenant should justly distribute them instead of seeking to own and hoard them. These and other biblical expressions represent what I call the vision of “Sabbath Economics.”

The manna story represents the first “test” for liberated Israel, and its economic principles remind them of the inevitable connection between social inequality and the culture of slavery. This primal lesson was to be passed on: “Keep an omerful of manna for your descendants, that they may see what food I gave you to eat in the desert” (Ex 16:32). But it was forgotten, and in the settled life of Israel in Canaan the orthodoxy of the nations prevailed: “surplus-extraction” and “capital accumulation” inexorably took the place of equitable distribution.

The resulting social stratification became the central complaint of Israel’s great 8th century prophets: “The spoil of the poor is in your houses; what do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?” (Isaiah 3:14f). The imperatives of commercial profit had eclipsed the principles of justice: “We will make the *ephah* small and the *shekel* great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling sweepings of the wheat” (Amos 8:5f). And fidelity to international markets had replaced allegiance to God’s economy of reciprocity and grace: “I will go after my lovers; they give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink” (Hosea 2:5). (Right: Russian icon of Hosea, 18th cen. Transfiguration church, Kizhi monastery, Karelia.)



THIS TRADITION OF SABBATH ECONOMICS lies just under the surface of Jesus' first temptation. Satan's challenge to turn stones into bread invokes the old primal wilderness anxiety about sustenance, and ridicules the divine economy as foolishness. Why not exploit the land for profit? Surplus accumulation promises security, at least for the wealthy—that is the temptation to which Israel succumbed. Can Jesus renew the Exodus “Way” by making a different choice at this archetypal crossroad?

He does, countering with the first of three citations from Deuteronomy, the book of “remembering.” Jesus specifically recalls the lesson of the manna:

God has humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna...in order to make you understand that *one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh* (Dt 8:3 = Lk 4:4/Mt 4:4).

In his subsequent ministry, Jesus will rehabilitate the vision of Sabbath economics in the two central petitions of the Disciples Prayer: “Give us enough bread for today, and release us from debt as we release others from debt” (Lk 11:3f).

He will also continue the tradition of prophetic challenge to economic inequality in Israel. In Luke’s narrative, Jesus’ storytelling most often singles out the wealthy for critique (Lk 12:16-21; 16:1-31), and his two most important object lessons concern one rich man who refuses the call to discipleship (18:18-27) and another who embraces it as the way of redistribution (19:1-10). He calls his disciples to “re-communitize” their assets (18:28-30), and warns them against the dominant money system, which he refers to simply as “Mammon,” the single greatest competitor to God for our loyalties (16:10-13). Against the power of Mammon Jesus pits the memory of manna, which he reenacts in his feeding of the poor in the wilderness (Lk 9:10-17). There,

while his disciples' cannot see past market constraints (9:12f), he demonstrates the economics of sharing: “And all ate and were satisfied” (9:17). (Right: Giovanni Lanfranco, “Feeding of the Multitudes,” 1620-23.)

Indeed, in Luke Jesus’ central metaphor for the Kingdom is the banquet table, which is to be set first and foremost for the marginalized and excluded (14:7-12).

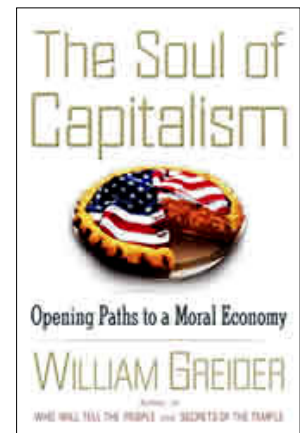


Thus does Jesus stand firm against the seduction of idolatrous economics, thereby “renewing the Dreaming.” Can the church do likewise today in a world under death sentence by the gulf between rich and poor?

To be sure, our scriptural stories of liberation have been profoundly compromised by own abandonment of Sabbath Economics. It is because of the inevitable *dis-membering* of the tradition that the Hebrew scriptures emphasize the discipline of *re-membering*. As the Deuteronomic refrain puts it: “Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you” (Dt 8:2). This is what literary critic Eric Auerbach called *mimesis*: the Story itself invites its listeners to “re-enact” the liberation narrative in their own context, in every epoch. Conversely, the Deuteronomist warns that when people of faith do not practice *mimesis* they simply become like “the nations around them” (Dt 8:19f). We might call this *mimosi*s, defined by Webster’s as a condition whereby people simulate the pathologies that surround them.

The economic meltdown of the last year suggests to us that we are reaping the rewards of *mimosi*s. As William Greider wrote in his 2004 *The Soul of Capitalism: Opening Paths to a Moral Economy*:

“The operating principles of capitalism have become dangerously obsolete. The house of economics is due for major renovation, if not a complete tear-down... We need a new narrative... The economy of more has turned upon itself, tearing the social fabric and weakening family and community life, piling up discontents alongside the growing plenty.”



This represents what we might call an “evangelical opening” for the gospel in these difficult times. Lent invites Christians to battle *mimosi*s by practicing *mimesis*, to undertake afresh a vision-quest that will examine the fateful choices our people have made. And our tradition reminds us that the first temptation is *always* economic. We, too, have embraced the delusions and seductions of Mammon, economically dominating yet captive to “affluenza.”

Repentance means a collective turning from a disastrous historical direction. It is time to remember the primal lesson of the manna. We may discover that older wisdom just might show us the way out of our present conundrums.

© **Ched Myers, 2009.** Myers works with Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries in southern California (www.bcm-net.org). He has explored the themes here in greater depth in *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Tell the Word Press, 2001). A companion volume by Matt Colwell explores the practical implications of this material: *Sabbath Economics: Household Practices* (Tell the Word Press, 2007).