

THE MANNA ECONOMY

Moving inside the Exodus story we just heard, it is now just six weeks since God brought Israel out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. On that day Israel watched the hand of the LORD pile up the waters of the Sea, so Israel passed through on dry ground. Then the divine hand released the walls of water, and they collapsed on Pharaoh's army. All this just six weeks ago, and now ... what are the Israelites saying? "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, while we were sitting by the stew pots, eating till we were stuffed!" (v.3).

That one sentence is enough to tell us what happened to Israel during their generations in Egypt. Slaves though they were, they learned to rely on the deceptive abundance of Empire. The fertile Nile Valley was the green miracle of the Ancient Near East. The Nile provided food in abundance, and Pharaoh the god-king controlled the Nile—or so he thought. Pharaoh's agricultural agents took in so much food, he needed whole storage-cities to hold the surplus, and slaves to build the store-cities, Rameses and Pithom. So Israelites built those cities, serving Pharaoh's purposes well enough – that is, until by God's grace Israel, too, prospered from the bounty of the Nile. When the slaves "became fruitful...and multiplied" (Ex. 1:7), well *then* Pharaoh became frightened. To him they looked like so many "swarming" (1:7) insects, and so he ground them under a crushing workload and threw their boy-babies into the Nile. Then the people Israel cried out to God, and God's mighty hand took them out of Egypt.

Who could forget that: the horror and the deliverance? But the ex-slaves did forget. No sooner were they out of Egypt than the Israelites started longing for the slave economy that had been steadily killing them off: "If only we'd died happy, sitting by the stewpots, eating until we were stuffed! For you [Moses and Aaron] have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole congregation by starvation!" So now we see that deep in their hearts, Israelites had bought into the economic system of Pharaoh's Empire, whose basic principle is typical of every Empire: namely, maximize profit at the top, get as much as you can, share it with as few as you can, but convince everybody that they somehow benefit from the system. This economic system is familiar to all of us, I think.

Now listen to how God responds to Israel's forgetfulness: "Look, I am about to rain down for you bread from heaven, and the people shall go out and collect just enough for each day, so that I may test them, whether they will walk in my Torah (my Teaching) or not" (v.4). With this grace-filled instruction, God begins to outline for Israel a totally different kind of economic system. And this is worth noting: Here on the far side of the Red Sea, the very first thing God needs to get straight with Israel is the economics of eating. The Manna Economy is the precise opposite of the killing Economy of Empire. Israel gathering manna one day at a time – no storing the stuff; it gets wormy and rotten overnight – now contrast *that* with Pharaoh's vast cities of grain silos.

The key question of course, is where we think our food comes from. To the Egyptian slaves, the answer seemed to be that bread came from Pharaoh, who owned all those wheat fields along the Nile and took all the grain into his silos. But the manna economy rests on the non-negotiable

truth that bread comes from God; always and everywhere food is God's gift. That is why the manna economy incorporates within itself the practice of keeping Sabbath, a day for remembering that God is the Creator of heaven and earth (Ex. 20:11) and thus the source of every good material gift, food included. That is why the Israelites collect a double portion on Friday, and on Sabbath they stay home; they have time for gratitude, time to rest in God's sufficiency. These two simple practices—no hoarding the manna, keeping Sabbath—these are the practical means by which Israel is meant to remember that its life is totally and blessedly dependent on God.

However, the Israelites don't get it. Some of them try to store the manna. We can sympathize, can't we? They've been slaves; they are living on the edge in the wilderness. Who can blame them for wanting to have a little margin of security? Again, some of them go out to collect on Saturday – just to get a little extra. And God shows zero-tolerance for these infractions. For the first time God becomes angry with the Israelites, really angry: "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my teachings?" (16:28). From our perspective, God has tolerated much worse than this: all that whining, even that insulting innuendo of divine malevolence: "You have brought us out here to kill us...." But what pushes God over the edge is Israel's inability or refusal to live by the rules of the manna economy and thus acknowledge that all food is the daily gift of God. If they can't do that, then there will be no deal, no covenant, between God and Israel.

Now, what is at stake for us in this long and detailed story about Israel's ideal food economy? In fact, the Manna Economy is no less confrontational for us than for the Israelites fresh out Egypt. It may in fact be more confrontational for us than any previous generation, because we are

enmeshed, all of us, in a global food economy whose size and power are unprecedented in history, and whose basic principles are exactly opposed to those of the Manna Economy. The Manna Economy is governed by actual human need; its rhythms are God-centered, punctuated by Sabbath. By contrast, we get our food via a system of ceaseless industrial-scale production. It is a system of huge rotting surpluses in one place and starvation in another. Everywhere it shows a dangerous disregard for the earth as God's own creation. Across the globe, industrial agriculture is a machine spinning crazily out of control, effecting massive erosion of our land, drastic draining of rivers and underground water supplies, widespread poisoning of water systems. Some 38 percent of the world's agricultural land is now degraded<sup>1</sup>; half of Iowa's original six feet of topsoil has gone south. We are robbing the future, but let's put a face on that: we are robbing the young, children and grandchildren and their children. Damage on this scale will be repaired only in geological time.

We who live in big farming states know and see clear evidence that even now the suffering of land and people and animals is immense, beyond calculation. Farm workers suffer from chemical poisoning, food-factory workers from massive injuries on the ever-accelerating production lines. Factory-farmed animals are psychotic from toxins and confinement; their effluents poison air, water, and perhaps even the crops on which the still-raw manure is too often sprayed. In contrast to the manna economy, in which everyone has enough and no one has too much, this is a system of glut and dearth, in which a few giant multinational corporations get immensely rich, while the vast majority of farmers, in this country and around the world, are

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<sup>1</sup> Wes Jackson, "Right Livelihood Award Acceptance Remarks," Stockholm, December 8, 2000.

driven out of business, off the land, into desperation and increasingly into violence against their families and themselves.

In our present situation, the manna story presses us to consider how we as Christians might assume some responsibility for how our culture eats. If indeed our food economy is part and parcel of our life with God and one another, then the first thing necessary is to learn more about the real cost of our food. Does the food that is cheap at the supermarket or MacDonald's entail inhumane treatment of people and animals, permanent loss for the soil, depletion of safe seed and water supplies? Does its chemical history make you nervous about your long-term health, and even more your children's? Will our children look back at this generation and accuse us of reckless waste of their own food security?

The book of Exodus tells us that Pharaoh ultimately destroyed his own empire by his blind refusal to acknowledge the God who is Creator of all. Through ten devastating plagues, Pharaoh pitted his puny and deluded power against the true God, who answers his delusion by turning its dusty soil into lice and the life-giving waters of the Nile into blood. Pharaoh is a fool who uses his power ultimately to destroy his own kingdom. After the seventh plague, Pharaoh's own courtiers shook their heads in broken-hearted wonder: "Do you not yet know that the land of Egypt is history?" (10:7).

As a member of the reckless generation, I am haunted by those words. Do we not yet know that a large swath of the Gulf Coast is history? That some 500 mountains in

Appalachia and their valleys are history? That the High Plains Aquifer, the Colorado River, countless of our rivers and streams are on their way to being history?

So the biblical story condemns us for our grossly destructive practices, and this is very bad news. But the reason for bringing the story into this pulpit, into our worship, is that it also encourages us, guides us in putting our food production practices on the church's agenda. The Bible asserts repeatedly, from the first chapter on, that eating is part of our life with God. The manna story gives us permission—more, it gives us a mandate to bring food into our faith life, to talk, as the people of God, about how we are eating. The principles of the manna economy—take only what you need, remember that all food comes from God—these are to be the permanent principles of every godly economy. That is why, when the Israelites get to the Promised Land of Canaan, a jarful of manna is set in the sanctuary, right in front of the Ark of the covenant, as a keepsake for all generations. Eating faithfully is a covenantal act; indeed it is the fundamental act of every healthy community. The Bible cares about eating and agriculture, because they are the first place that justice establishes itself in our lives, or departs from us.

It is that simple understanding that underlies these remarkable lines from Psalm 85, the work of a poet who surely comes from the Israelite Heartland, knows the social realities of food production, and knows also that always and everywhere, food comes from God:

Surely [God's] salvation is near to those who fear him,  
that Glory may dwell in our land.  
...Righteousness and peace kiss;  
faithfulness springs up from the earth,

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Yes, the Lord gives what is good,  
and our land yields its bounty. (Ps. 85:10-13)

May it be so for us, in this land and throughout the earth, generation to generation. Amen.