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God's Abundance against the Fear of Scarcity

Walter Brueggemann

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PART ONE

Fundamentals of Biblical Grace

Chapter 1

Food Fight I

Scarcity, Anxiety, Accumulation, and Monopoly

Monopoly: Accountability for the Food Fight

The hunger crisis and food insecurity that so many face may lead one to believe that resources must be scarce, limited, and insufficient. The Bible, however, repeatedly tells stories of God graciously providing abundance that overcomes the threat of scarcity. And yet the Bible repeatedly tells stories of abundance because the logic and appeal of scarcity does not disappear with the arrival of abundance. Even when God graciously provides all that is needed in the wilderness, for example, people still find themselves hungry for something more, something else, or something different. Though the issues are enormously complex, and I do not imagine that we will find clear resolution of the food issues in a probe of biblical texts, a focus on hunger may permit us to think afresh and faithfully on these urgent questions. Why hunger?

- Because everyone has to eat; “bread” is our most elemental requirement;
- because food *production* raises environmental issues, for a diminished environment will not and cannot “bring forth” as intended;
- because food *consumption* leads to a cluster of issues around “consumerism” and the mad pursuit of more commodities, in the futile hope that they will make us safe and happy;
- because food *distribution* raises economic questions between haves and have-nots, about who gets what, on what terms, and by whose decision;

- because there is an overlap between “hunger for food” and “spiritual hunger,” and the connection and tension between the two is crucial for our common life.¹

In short “hunger” touches the great practical questions of our contemporary world and drives us back to theological wonderment.

I

Given the theme of “hunger,” I suggest that we understand our situation as a “food fight.” The struggle for food between those who have advantage, resources, markets, and leverage and those who lack those advantages is a long-term fight that is waged in many modes. Given these many modes, however, the great struggles are finally about “bread,” with the term “bread” standing for all the dimensions of wealth, control, status, and the capacity to be an agent in one’s own history.

The Bible itself is a venue for that long-term food fight, that is, a struggle between competing ways to think about food and hunger. The fight for food is a fight between ideologies about food, or theologies about food, or explanatory narratives about food. That tension in the Bible itself is a counterpoint to the tension we ourselves know about. Each of us is variously involved in a food fight concerning the legitimacy of our own hungers and the pressure of the hungers of others that impinge upon our cache of food. In the midst of that struggle, which is grandly biblical and acutely personal, we carry on an inquiry about what is right and what is true, what is permitted and what is required.

In these first two chapters I will trace these two ideologies (theologies, explanatory narratives) of food to consider how that food fight may matter to local congregations. By connecting a sequence of texts, I want to show that there is continuity and a coherent logic to each of these ideologies, and that they are in profound tension with each other.

Here is my thesis for the first of these trajectories that I will line out: One stance in the food fight is a system of food production, distribution, and consumption that is based on the conviction that

the world is a closed system of limited resources. The accent is upon scarcity. The emotive result is anxiety about not having enough. The practical consequences consist in practices and policies of accumulation that aim at monopoly.

The purpose of a monopoly of food resources and supplies is the offer of a “final solution” to the food crisis. The defining terms of this ideology, then, are *scarcity*, *anxiety*, *accumulation*, and *monopoly*. The enactment of this ideology consists in consumerism (which in health may lead to obesity and in policy may lead to agribusiness that seeks to compel all the production possible), protected by a strong military that secures and guarantees the perpetuation of the entire system.

II

In the Old Testament Pharaoh is the agent, symbol, and metaphor for a food system that is rooted in anxious scarcity and enacted in accumulation on the way to monopoly. It is plausible that Pharaoh in the book of Exodus is a nameable (but unnamed) historical figure; scholarship has used great energy trying to identify him. But beyond whatever he may have been historically, Pharaoh functions as the recurring agent of anxious scarcity, which makes the exodus narrative endlessly contemporary and always transferable to a new context. Pharaoh’s endless mantra is “Make more bricks” (Exod. 5:4–19). The bricks are in order to construct more storehouse cities (Exod. 1:11). And the function of the storehouse cities is to accumulate more food, more grain, until Pharaoh controls all of it. He is presented in the narrative as one who wants, with an insatiable appetite for more! A series of texts tell the story of this great accumulator:

1. At the very beginning of the Israelite story in Genesis 12, in the second paragraph concerning Abraham and Sarah, Pharaoh already appears. Indeed, Israel cannot tell its story of covenantal alternative without reference to Pharaoh, who is the indispensable durable counterpoint. In Genesis 12:10, it is reported that a famine caused Abraham to go to Egypt for food. The matter is not explained. It is an assumption of the narrative that when everyone else is out of food, Pharaoh still will have food. Pharaoh of course has food because the

Nile River is endlessly productive, and because Pharaoh is a genius at administrative authority and knows how to work the irrigation system and make the trains run on time. But beyond that, he is a monopolizer who has the capacity to defy even a circumstance of famine.

The narrative is terse but nevertheless reports that Pharaoh was attracted to Sarah, beautiful wife of Abraham, and “the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house” (12:15). From the outset women have been a bargaining chip in the food fight among powerful men. The fact that the narrative resolves the treatment of Sarah does not detract from the plot line concerning the avarice of Pharaoh, who assumed, given his food monopoly, that he was entitled to whatever he could possess.

2. A long time later in the narrative, in Genesis 41, it is reported that Pharaoh had two nightmares. The first dream concerns seven sleek and fat cows that were devoured by seven cows that were thin and ugly (41:1–4). The second bad dream concerned seven ears of grain that were plump and good. And seven ears of grain that were thin and blighted swallowed up the seven good ears (vv. 5–7). Like every dream, these dreams are vivid and concrete, and we are to notice the contrast:

Cows: sleek and fat / ugly and thin;
Ears of grain: plump and full / thin and blighted.

The contrast bespeaks indulgent well-being and parsimonious stress. In the nightmares, moreover, the thin stuff prevails and defeats the good stuff. The verbs, “ate, swallowed,” are verbs of food ingestion. So these are food dreams.

Pharaoh was troubled in the morning. He could vividly remember the dreams; but he did not understand them. He consulted with his intelligence community, perhaps even the credentialed therapist of his realm. None could tell him the meaning, though none doubted that the dreams had a meaning. It is remarkable, moreover, that the narrator knows the dream. How could an Israelite narrator know the dreams of Pharaoh? Well, because covenantal folk know about the nightmares that accumulators invariably have. They know that accumulators live, always, on orange alert. The narrator notices, but does not underscore, the irony that the one with the most is the one who has the most acute dreams of loss.

3. Pharaoh had to reach outside his entourage in order to get an interpretation of the dreams. Perhaps all of his advisors were so narcotized by the monopoly in which they lived that none could penetrate the hidden messages of the dreams that witnessed against the monopoly. It is like asking the chair of a great bureaucracy to pause over a poem that is likely to be misread as a memo. But Pharaoh finds an interpreter. He finds Joseph, a young Hebrew who was a jailed outsider, regarded as an enemy of the state. He is cleaned up, shaven, given proper clothes, and brought before Pharaoh, the accumulator (41:14). Pharaoh patiently tells Joseph his dreams, using the terms of contrast, “fat and sleek, poor, ugly, and thin,” “full and good, withered, thin, and blighted.” The terms are repeated, but with two additions. Now the cows are “poor” and the stalks of grain are “withered.” In the retelling, the extremities of the bad in the dreams are underlined.

Joseph knows immediately, because, says he, it is “not I” but God who will interpret. The dreams are about the coming famine that will be “very grievous” (v. 31). The irony is that the one with everything has a nightmare about loss. The peasants who had little likely had no such dream, because they had not enough to lose.

4. The nightmare, now interpreted, is grounded in anxiety and leads to new policy. Anxiety drives policy! Imagine a great superpower that is anxious about loss in a way that leads to new policy! Pharaoh seeks an administrator to manage the nightmare crisis that is coming. Joseph recommends that Pharaoh find someone who is “discerning and wise” (v. 33). Unsurprisingly, Joseph himself is the only candidate for the post. Before he is nominated, Joseph presents a plan to Pharaoh about how to manage the scarcity to come. It is like the worst-case scenario of planning procedure in the war office. Pharaoh is taken with the plan and appoints Joseph:

You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you. (Gen. 41:40)

The narrator pauses, even in the midst of the crisis, to celebrate the appointment (see vv. 42–45). It is a big deal that this Israelite will take care of the nightmare of food scarcity that has already propelled the great accumulator toward monopoly.

5. The move from nightmare to policy is reported in Genesis 47:13–26, wherein Joseph introduces draconian food policies. The peasants, without food of their own, had successively to bargain away their money, then their livestock, then their land, and finally their bodies. In exchange for food from the great accumulator, they became Pharaoh’s slaves. That is how we reach the slave narrative of the book of Exodus. Slavery as a given in the book of Exodus is the outcome of the food policies of monopoly in the book of Genesis. The force of monopoly is so acute that by the end of the narrative, the newly recruited slaves, victims of the food policy of Pharaoh, are grateful for their own enslavement. They say, “You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh” (v. 25). The ideology of Pharaoh is now all-encompassing. Even the slaves echo it back to the big house. And the narrator adds laconically:

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. . . . The land of the priests alone did not become Pharaoh’s. (vv. 20, 26)

The narrator does not call attention to the irony that the implementation of the food policy of monopoly that eventuated in slavery is accomplished by an Israelite! Leon Kass characterizes the narrative achievement as the full “Egyptianization” of Joseph.² Pharaoh’s ideology of monopoly is so totalizing that none could resist it, not even an Israelite who might have known better. Everything yields to the force of monopoly!

Thus Pharaoh in his massive power, supported by an ideology of supreme authority, could imagine himself autonomous and free to do what he wanted. He lived in great arrogance, not imagining that his power to control had any limit. In the belated criticism of Pharaoh in the Bible, the limit on monopolizing power is voiced in poetic prophetic utterances. For example, Isaiah can imagine that the Nile that made Pharaoh’s breadbasket is at the behest of YHWH, the Creator, who will curb Pharaoh’s self-indulgence by drying it up (see Isa. 19:5–7). But of course such prophetic imagination lies well beyond Pharaoh . . . or Joseph. They are practical men who move from their nightmare of scarcity, and by their immense social force they imagine they can fend off the threats about which they dream in their haunted nights.

III

It is easy enough to establish Pharaoh as the “bad guy” in the Israelite narrative. He was an easy target that evoked no sympathy in Israel. But remarkably, Pharaoh’s ideology of scarcity, anxiety, accumulation, and monopoly could not be kept at pharaonic distance. It entered right into the midst of Israel’s own life in a way that skewed and distorted Israel’s covenantal faith.

1. As the tradition stands, they could see it coming. They could anticipate the force of this ideology in their own midst. It may be that such foreboding is “after the fact,” when they saw the impact of that ideology on their common life. But even if it is a retrospect, it is presented as a foreboding. In Deuteronomy 17:14–20, the only Torah commandment on kingship, Moses warns against the power of accumulation, because accumulation aimed at monopoly contradicts covenant:

[Your coming king] must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses . . . And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. (vv. 16–17)

The recurring favorites of all accumulators are “horses, women, silver, and gold.” But all of that is only “food” writ large, an effort at self-securing, never to lack.

The alert of the Torah is matched by Samuel’s speech anticipating the coming of monarchy in Israel:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots . . . and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. (1 Sam. 8:11–17)

The operative word is “take.” The subject is taxation and the draft. But the undercurrent is that the king will have an insatiable appetite. The accumulator will seize your grain and flocks (food) and reduce all to slavery. The horrified anticipation is that organized greed will skew all social relationships in the interest of aggrandizement, and the confiscation will run from food to the military, an undifferentiated package in a world of organized appetites.

2. In retrospect, these anticipations in Deuteronomy 17 and 1 Samuel 8 were in fact responses to the regime of Solomon, who radically shifted the society of Israel away from a covenantal economy to an economy of accumulation, in which the strong could take from the weak in the service of an uncurbed appetite for more. In the horizon of Israel, Solomon becomes the great embodiment of *scarcity*, *anxiety*, *accumulation*, and *monopoly*. Who would have thought that Israel’s covenantal commitments were so readily vulnerable to the incursion of Pharaoh’s ideology? Well, Solomon even becomes Pharaoh’s son-in-law (1 Kgs. 3:1; 7:8; 9:24; 11:1). It takes no imagination to think that Solomon set out to prove to his in-laws that he was competent in their great game of greedy self-indulgence. And so Solomon is portrayed in 1 Kings 3–11 as the full practitioner of the ideology of accumulation:

First Kings 4:1–6 reports on the king’s bureaucracy, an organization of power that some interpreters believe was appropriated from Egyptian models. The last named official, Adoniram son of Abda, was secretary of labor, but here it is “forced labor,” coerced labor in the service of the crown. The term, recurring in Solomonic reports, echoes Pharaoh’s labor policy. The regime has reduced free members of society into service to the crown, most especially for the construction of self-aggrandizing monuments to monopoly: the temple (1 Kgs. 5:13–18), his fortifications, his palaces, and his storehouses (9:15–23). That latter report ends: “These were the chief officers who were over Solomon’s work; five hundred and fifty, who had charge of the people who carried on the work” (9:23). It must have been a huge workforce to require 550 supervisors, a vast program that claimed the resources and people-power of society, all in the service of royal anxiety.

The project costs lots of money. Thus in 1 Kings 4:7–19 we have an organizational chart finely detailing Solomon’s tax-collecting

apparatus. It is clear that there were no exemptions from taxation that transferred wealth from peasants to urban elites. Moreover, two of the tax officials, Ben-abinadad (v. 11) and Ahimaaz (v. 15), were Solomon's sons-in-law. Thus the report suggests a close network of urban elites who were committed to a common process of accumulation.

3. The payout of forced labor (4:6) and tax arrangements (vv. 7–19) is the report concerning the royal appetite for food:

Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of choice flour, and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl. (vv. 22–23)

It is remarkable that in the midst of all the grand royal schemes, the narrative pauses over food. The appetite of the regime is broad and deep. The economic base for such provision was not only taxes and cheap labor but also tribute from foreign lands (protection money) and tariff revenue, all in the interest of accumulation. The outcome is an ostentatious self-exhibit that came to mark every part of the urban confiscation that depended on the produce of the disempowered peasants.

The extravagance of food is a kind of symbol in the script of Solomon for systemic accumulation on every front. Thus:

- The exhibition of wealth is replicated in the temple that overflows with extravagant gold (1 Kgs. 6:19–22; 7:48–51).
- The accumulation of songs and proverbs posit Solomon as a patron of the arts with a monopoly on beauty and wisdom (4:29–34).
- The trade in arms (horses and chariots) suggests that he had a monopoly on the flow of arms due to his strategic geographic location (10:26–29).
- He enjoyed lavish tribute from foreign powers, all offered in deference and submissiveness, to his international enhancement (10:14–25).
- Eventually he is condemned for his accumulation of women (700 princesses and 300 concubines), women being one more accoutrement to an over-the-top extravagance, perhaps trophy wives for exhibit.

On exhibit is this imagined superpower in its capacity to turn everything and everyone into a collectible commodity, in order to capture the imagination of Israel and of the other powers as well, notably the Queen of Sheba (10:1–10). This presentation of Solomon, I believe, does not witness to personal greed. Rather, it attests the power of the ideology of accumulation that entranced Israel. In such an arrangement, inevitably the hunger of the peasants, the real food hunger of the disadvantaged, disappears from the screen of policy and practice. Outside of this ideological venue, there is no one left to notice. The logic of accumulation is secure:

- If there is scarcity, get all you can.
- If there is not enough, do not share.
- If others want some, they are a threat to be repelled.

IV

The deep critique of the ideology of accumulation is voiced by the prophetic tradition that sounds with immense emotive force and rigorous theological authority. The prophetic tradition repeatedly takes aim precisely at the ideology of scarcity and anxiety that produced accumulation aimed at monopoly.

1. A somewhat soft form of critique is the narrative of Elisha, who proceeded to solve the food problem of ancient Israel without engagement with or even acknowledgment of the ideology of accumulation.

- In the narrative of 2 Kings 4:1–7, Elisha provides the widow mother with enough oil to pay her creditors and save her son. She is, moreover, dependent upon her village neighbors to help her catch the oil that will save her life and the life of her son. We should not miss the framing of the narrative as an instance of the food fight between creditors and debtors. The creditors—surely the urban elites—are about to enslave her son for her debt, a practice as old as Pharaoh and as recent as Solomon. Elisha, without pedigree or credential, enacts abundance that defies the ideology of scarcity and negates the credit system of the accumulators. Perhaps the most “miraculous” aspect here is in fact the common mystery of “abundance” that is accepted among the peasants.

- In 2 Kings 4:42–44, Elisha again participates in the ongoing food fight by feeding a hundred people with some food left over. The narrative is terse and without explanation. Elisha clearly performs in a way that is outside of and in contradiction to the accumulation system.

2. When we move from narrative to poetry, the critique of the accumulation system is much more prevalent and poignant. I will begin with two texts from Amos.

- In Amos 6:4–7, Amos pronounces a “woe” on those who are “at ease in Zion.”³ He begins with an inventory of self-indulgences among those who have too much time on their hands:

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils.

Amos 6:4–6

The poem turns on the conjunction “but” in verse 6:

but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.

The critique is not of their self-indulgence, but of the resultant indifference to social reality. The social crisis that Amos sees (that they do not see) is that “Joseph” (i.e., Israel) is a failed community. As every prophetic poet knows, the practitioners of self-indulgence at the expense of others are characteristically the last to notice that what they regard as a blessing is in fact a deep pathology that will in the end destroy what they most value. The self-indulgent are so dulled and incapable of social awareness or social criticism that they do not reckon with reality.

The payout of the oracle is the “therefore” of verse 7:

Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

The ones most secure will be the most threatened. And the accumulation of excessive goods will offer no protection from the incursions of history that sound here as divine judgment.

- In 8:4–8 Amos addresses those whose wealth is linked to dishonest exploitation of the poor. He does not here mention tax or credit arrangements, only the use of dishonest weights in commerce. But the outcome, says he, is the same. The land will “tremble,” likely at the pounding of the invading Assyrian army. It is not incidental that the poetic unit ends with reference to the rise and fall of the Nile River. While the reference is to the reliability of the river, the evocation of Egypt is a reminder in Israel that nobody, not even the land of Egypt, escapes the reality of God’s governance. This God is not finally mocked by the monopoly of the market as wealth is transferred from the poor and needy by commercial means.

3. Isaiah 3 offers a long poem about the opposition of YHWH to a culture of accumulation. As in 1 Samuel 8, the governing verb is “take away” (Isa. 3:1, 18). The poem anticipates the loss in Jerusalem of all the commodity finery so valued in the city. In the poetry, the God of covenant stands in opposition to commodity accumulation. To accent the point, the prophet delights to detail the accumulation of goods that will be lost:

In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarfs; the headdresses, the armllets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; the signet rings and nose rings; the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; the garments of gauze, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veils. (vv. 18–23)

The inventory alludes to exhibitionism in Jerusalem:

Because the daughters of Zion are haughty
and walk with outstretched necks,
glancing wantonly with their eyes,
mincing along as they go,
tinkling with their feet.

Isa. 3:16

All of that will be lost, because the God of covenant will undo the accumulation system. The prophet knows, as does the foundational covenantal tradition, that such commodity accumulation depends

finally upon social exploitation. The indictment concerns abuse of the vulnerable poor:

It is you who have devoured the vineyard;
 the spoil of the poor is in your houses.
 What do you mean by crushing my people,
 by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord GOD of hosts.
 Isa. 3:14b–15

The “poor” constitute that segment of the population that is turned, through exploitation, into dispensable commodity. But it cannot stand! That food system, says the poet, has no future.

4. Finally I mention a remarkable text in Ezekiel. In his emotive critique of Jerusalem in its self-indulgent infidelity, Ezekiel likens the Holy City (and its self-indulgent population) to ancient, remembered Sodom. He contrasts Jerusalem to Sodom:

Your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. (Ezek. 16:48)

The affront of Sodom, says he, was self-indulgence:

This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me. (vv. 49–50)

For that, Sodom was destroyed; and Jerusalem is worse! In the horizon of Ezekiel, the defining sin of Sodom, and by inference of Jerusalem, is pride expressed as excess of food that precluded care of the poor and needy. The argument is the same as elsewhere. Arrogant autonomy, expressed as excessive consumption, generated indifference to the poor and needy. Such indifference, which makes perfect sense in the ideology of accumulation, is unbearable in the world that YHWH governs. The oracle ends with severity:

You must bear the penalty of your lewdness and your abominations. (v. 58)

It is impossible to appreciate the cumulative effect of prophetic poetry unless we see that it joins issue with an ideology that is, in their judgment, in deep contradiction to the true character of Israel

and certainly to the true intent of YHWH, who presides over Israel and the food supply.

V

The monopolizers keep supplying the prophets with a multitude of case studies. At the beginning there is Pharaoh, who needs more bricks. In Jerusalem there is Solomon, who eats too well. Then, at the other end of the Old Testament, is Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon, who destroyed Jerusalem. Like Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar became a metaphor and a cipher for all monopolizers, yet another embodiment of the food fight.

1. Jeremiah anticipates his coming army, even though, in the poetry, he does not specifically name him. The poet imagines the coming of the army of Nebuchadnezzar that will be strong, strange, huge, and powerful, sweeping all before it. The great devourer is sent by YHWH against YHWH's own city (see Jer. 5:15–16). And then the poet describes what this army, like every invading army, will do to the land:

They shall eat up your harvest and your food;
 they shall eat up your sons and your daughters;
 they shall eat up your flocks and your herds;
 they shall eat up your vines and your fig trees.

Jer. 5:17

The poem uses the word “eat” four times. Talk about a food fight! The great superpower will confiscate all the food sources of the vulnerable city,

- from harvest to food,
- from sons to daughters,
- from flocks to herds,
- from vines to fig trees.

That is what superpowers do, in their appetite for control, to vulnerable subject states.

2. No wonder Isaiah chides Babylon for acting as if it were autonomous:

You said, "I shall be mistress forever." . . .
 [You] say in your heart,
 "I am, and there is no one besides me." . . .
 [Y]ou said, "No one sees me." . . .
 "I am, and there is no one besides me."
 Isa. 47:7, 8, 10

When a superpower imagines that it is autonomous and not accountable, then it can eat all the food, take all the resources, gobble up all the treasures, exhaust all the reserves, and never answer. It belongs to the strong in the food fight, says Jeremiah, to "have no mercy" (Jer. 6:23). When food is managed without mercy, abuse, suffering, and slavery are sure to eventuate.

3. I cite one other Babylonian text that is a little quirky but perhaps illuminating. Now the king is Belshazzar, son of Nebuchadnezzar; he is a stand-in for his father, who is a stand-in for Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who is a stand-in for all monopolizers. The narrator reports:

King Belshazzar made a great festival for a thousand of his lords, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand. (Dan. 5:1)

Of course, that is what the strong in the food fight do. They give feasts. They invite all the powerful, in order to exhibit their success. The dinner is ostentatious, not unlike lavish government dinners, and then:

Belshazzar commanded that they bring in the vessels of gold and silver that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem. (v. 2)

The point of lavish enjoyment from the temple vessels is to scandalize the Jews who watched their holy vessels used for such fluff. The narrative teems with self-indulgence and mocks the pretense. And then in verse 5, finally, it is reported:

Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the wall of the royal palace, next to the lampstand.

The words are in code, and none of the intelligence community of the sated empire can decode them. But the appearance of the writing itself

terrifies the king (Dan. 5:6–7, 9). The queen tries to ease the king’s anxiety by summoning Daniel, the Jew, who knew the codes of hidden wisdom. Daniel refuses royal rewards; but he reads the wall to the king:

You have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven! The vessels of his temple have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them. You have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know; but the God in whose power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honored. (v. 23)

It follows, on the wall, that the kingdom will end. The narrative concludes tersely, “That very night Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed” (v. 30). The banquet is interrupted. Those who indulge at the expense of the peasants cannot eat in peace. Such indulgence is short-term, because alongside the peasants there is the great God, who eventually will not be mocked. Belshazzar must, yet again, learn the lesson of his greedy father, Nebuchadnezzar (see vv. 20–21). The lesson is repeatedly offered to the perpetrators of the food fight. Those monopolizers regularly learn too late.

VI

Eventually our study of food comes to Jesus, who clearly violated the rules of the food system by eating with publicans and sinners (Mark 2:16).⁴ And the rules of eating are, of course, the rules of power. Thus when policy-makers opine that businesses are private and should serve whom they want, it is understood as an endorsement of a power arrangement that seeks to be beyond challenge. Jesus violates the rules and thereby presents himself as an enemy of those rules and those power arrangements. I cite three texts from Luke.

1. It is no wonder that in the Magnificat, the song of Mary that is the theme song of Luke, Mary sang of food:

He has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

Luke 1:53

Mary anticipates that the narrative to follow in Luke will be witness to a food revolution whereby the old rules of food are overthrown so that all may share.

2. In Luke 14, Jesus teaches his host at dinner:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14:12–14)

Jesus redefines the social process of eating in an inclusive way. And then he tells his parable of the great banquet. When the honored guests are too busy to attend, the master of the table wants the household filled with those who are on the “streets and lanes” (v. 21), that is, the street people not usually qualified for such a bountiful table.

3. In Luke 12, Jesus tells a parable about a rich man who prospered in agriculture. He frames the story as a warning about greed. And then we watch as the prosperous man wants to store more and more. But his food production is so abundant that he finally can say:

“What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.” (Luke 12:17–18)

And then he said to himself:

Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry. (v. 19)

This is a guy who has made it in the food world. He builds bigger barns, bigger silos, bigger granaries, and bigger vaults. In wanting more storehouses for his monopoly of food, he sounds like Pharaoh, who built storage cities, as did Solomon (1 Kgs. 9:19). They are all of a piece, those who secured a disproportionate share of the world’s food supply.

And then in the parable, “But God said to him” (Luke 12:20). The interruption of such self-congratulations sounds like the word of

YHWH to Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” It reads like the handwriting on the wall to Belshazzar. And like that story, this story ends with the guy dead that night. Food monopolizers are all, sooner or later, interrupted by this inscrutable master of all food.

And then Jesus turns the parable of Luke 12 into an instruction for his disciples in the next verse:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. (Luke 12:22)

Do not participate in the anxiety system that is grounded in a mistaken notion of scarcity. Do not be anxious, because your heavenly Father, the Food Manager, knows what you need. Then Jesus observes birds and lilies that are not anxious, because they trust the Creator who gives them their food supply. After birds and lilies, we get this familiar zinger that is so familiar that we may not notice that it is a zinger:

Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. (v. 27)

Not even Solomon! Not even the great accumulator! Not even Pharaoh! Not even Nebuchadnezzar! Not even Belshazzar! Not any of the accumulators can get outside the anxiety that is intrinsic to the scarcity system.

So, to review, the crisis of scarcity, anxiety, accumulation, and monopoly:

- touches *food consumption* and asks about commoditization;
- touches *food distribution* and the redistribution of food at the Creator’s behest;
- touches the environment that overproduces in order to add to the monopoly.

It makes one wonder if the monopolizers had any capacity for an internal life, what they did about their hunger for meaning, whether they noticed the neighbor when they gathered at the table. It keeps ringing in our ears: “Not even Solomon in all his glory” . . . in all his self-indulgence.

The biblical text traces the career of the monopolizers. But it does more than that. It attests that there is another way to do food. When our granaries and our bodies store surpluses, our bodies and the body politic suffer. It can be otherwise: We can meet at the table in another way. We watch and notice while it is taken, blessed, broken, and given. And there is always more than enough, sometimes twelve baskets, sometimes seven baskets; it is shared and ample. No need to accumulate!

Questions for Reflection

1. Where do you see anxiety about scarcity in society today, particularly around food production, consumption, and distribution? In what other areas of current culture do you see people and policies affected by the crisis of scarcity, anxiety, accumulation, and monopoly?
2. In reflecting on Pharaoh's dreams, Brueggemann points out "the irony that the one with the most is the one who has the most acute dreams of loss" (p. 6). Can you think of other examples of accumulation leading to anxiety about loss that then spurred unhealthy practices and attitudes? How do you understand Joseph's role in Pharaoh's anxiety and the resulting food policies that lead to the impoverishment and enslavement of Israel?
3. We read about the "power of the ideology of accumulation that entranced Israel" and Solomon, turning "everything and everyone into a collectible commodity" (p. 12). How is that power at work today? What current prophets and poets do you know of who are speaking about these issues?
4. What other stories about Jesus can you think of that demonstrate his revolutionary way of approaching food and the power structures entangled with it?

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