

advantages to more modern methods of biblical interpretation. First, it values the work of imagination as an important tool of interpretation. Secondly, it is clear to all who read or hear a midrash that it is an *interpretation* of the text—not a declaration of doctrinal truth. A midrash does not make false claims of authority beyond the authority of the interpreter. In other words, there is a built-in humility to the method of midrash, which is certainly a virtue when interpreting Scripture.

#### A MIDRASH OF THE TEMPTATION STORY

Each of the synoptic Gospels marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry with a tour of Israel's symbolic universe set against the backdrop of an unnamed Middle Eastern desert. In biblical parlance, the desert is that place in Scripture where we go to figure out who is who and what is real. It is the place where souls are revealed.

After traveling forty long days and nights without food, Jesus rests. Exhausted and hungry, he meets the devil and so do we, for this is not Jesus' story alone. This is our story too. Jesus carries all of humanity into this meeting or, to be more precise, he carries the fullness of humanity into his divine appointment with the Tempter. We are rehashing a conversation that began in a garden so many ages ago and continues to this day.

The conversation centers around three symbols that have shaped the soul of Israel, and the world, since the beginning—the symbols of bread, temple, and crown. Each symbol is packed with meaning and a narrative history that represents a way of seeing the world and God. The bread is an economic symbol; the temple is a religious symbol; the crown is a political symbol.

Donald Kraybill, in his very helpful book *The Upside Down Kingdom*, sees Jesus' conversation with Satan as a confrontation

with the principalities and powers that have colonized the imaginations of the world.<sup>91</sup> We are not dealing here with merely personal temptations of the flesh or the pride of life—a perspective that has often dominated the teaching and preaching of a hyper-personalized Western culture. When considered symbolically, Jesus is naming the “principalities and powers”<sup>92</sup> of the world (to use the language of Paul). He is naming the economic, religious, and political realities that claim godlike powers for themselves and do great harm when allowed to govern by fear. As it turns out, these systems are the substructure of society. In fact, modern sociology teaches us that these are the systems by which every society and (specifically for our context) every city functions. Jesus is doing battle with the same principalities and powers that he ultimately exposes and defeats on the cross. Jesus meets with Satan to talk about things of ultimate significance—bread, temple, and crown are about reality itself.

#### BREAD—FROM SCARCITY TO ABUNDANCE

Imagine Jesus after a long fast and a lonely walk in the desert. He sees a barren landscape, a wasteland—no gardens, or streams, no milk or honey, only rocks and sand and the occasional desert fox. The scenery matches his interior. The land is as empty as his stomach and his stomach is as empty as his own story. Relative to the world stage, he comes from an insignificant people who have lived under the thumb of foreign oppression for most of its existence. Israel had been a slave state tossed between Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and now the Roman Empire. The glory days under David and Solomon are a distant and sometimes cruel memory. And so Jesus’ story mirrors the story of his people. He was conceived in scandal and born on the run in a place of no account. His birth inflamed

the paranoia of those in power, so his family fled to Egypt to survive persecution. He re-entered the “promised land” quietly, with little fanfare. The promised land looked anything but promising, much like the deserted place where Jesus is now—here he is, the “anointed one,” sitting on a pile of rocks in the middle of nowhere. He is filled with all the same longings and frustrations of his people whose spirits were being crushed under the weight of their failed dreams.

Wandering the desert for forty days must have brought to mind the many wanderings of Israel. Certainly Jesus would have recalled Israel’s forty years in the desert. Perhaps he would have also recalled Moses’ encounter with God at Mt. Horeb, an encounter that set all this wandering in motion so many years ago (Ex. 3:1). Mt. Horeb was the place of God’s self-revelation as the great I AM. Ironically, the Horeb means “desolate wasteland.” That God would reveal himself in a desolate wasteland could not have escaped the mind of Jesus. Perhaps Jesus was expecting God to show up and reveal himself in the wasteland that he now occupied. Not this time. Instead, the tempter appears. If the primary power of evil is derived from its ability to masquerade as good, we must assume that Satan’s appearance to Jesus was veiled in some kind of righteous exterior, for evil unveiled is powerless to persuade.

The devil speaks first. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread” (Matt. 4:3). On the surface this seems less like a temptation and more like a reasonable invitation, perhaps even inspired by God. What is the harm in turning stones into loaves of bread, especially after a long fast? How much more so, in light of the fact that so many of his brothers and sisters also suffer from empty stomachs? Not long after this temptation, doesn’t Jesus do this very miracle

of providing bread? Why not now? One can hear the wheels in Jesus' head turning much like the sound of his stomach grumbling: *Why not?* Along with Jesus we can envision the stones turning to bread. No longer would the bellies of starving children distend and bloat. No longer would the world starve for food or wonder if there was a God who loved them.

We often like to emphasize the Son's love for the Father, but we must not forget his love for the world. He had walked for thirty years among his own people and seen their misery, and he had a growing sense of his own power to alleviate suffering. Self-respecting adults cannot watch children suffer without wanting to alleviate their pain, especially if they have the power to do something about it. The consuming presence of suffering drowns out our most noble theories and theologies. Like a grumbling stomach, the only way to quiet its deafening noise is to satisfy its desire, and to do so *now!* It is not hard to imagine Jesus being overwhelmed by the vision of scarcity before him. What kind of God allows his people to starve? When seduced by a worldview of scarcity, the mystery of God's abundance is not easy to see.

In this anguish, the Spirit that led Jesus into the wasteland of temptation compels him to look deeper. Jesus takes another look at the barrenness that surrounds him and listens more carefully to his own stomach. Here, deep in the soil of relentless scarcity, Jesus discerns the seeds of his Father's abundant and fruitful love. It takes some time, but eventually he begins to smile when he sees the peculiar farming techniques of his Father who wildly, extravagantly, and perhaps even irresponsibly throws the precious seed of his love on all kinds of soil—the good, bad, and ugly. The indiscriminate and unconventional nature of the Father's farming technique is almost laughable. What kind of

farmer scatters precious seed with such liberty and recklessness? Jesus also sees 120 gallons of the finest wine flowing from six stone jars of stagnant dishwater. He remembers the table God sets for humanity—a table with room for all, especially those who least deserve a seat. He smiles because God’s abundant love allows him (and us) to re-imagine the whole of God’s economy as one of reckless abundance. When one sees all of humanity (even one’s enemy) as a friend, the possibilities for generosity multiply thirty, sixty, even one hundredfold. In such light, generosity begets generosity and five loaves become 5,000. Radical generosity lays down life itself, against which nothing, not even death, can prevail. As Dostoevsky imagined in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in his famous chapter called The Grand Inquisitor, had Jesus thought less of God and less of humanity’s capacity to act on what he saw, perhaps Jesus would have caved into the temptation and enslaved us with miracles. Instead, Jesus replies to the Tempter, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4).<sup>93</sup> Jesus resists the myth of scarcity and declares God’s Word reliable in the face of deprivation. God is friend, not foe. God can be trusted. There is enough!

There are many authors who have debunked the myth of scarcity that Jesus confronts in the desert, but none so succinctly as Mary Jo Leddy who writes,

The economics of God’s love is not based on a law of scarcity but rather rooted in the mystery of superabundance. The personal or political decision to declare that there is not enough is the beginning of social cruelty, war, and violence on a petty or vast scale. On the other hand, the choice to affirm that there is enough for all is the beginning of social

community, peace, and justice. The option to assume that there is enough frees the imagination to think of new political and economic possibilities.<sup>94</sup>

Jesus' fidelity to the "mystery of superabundance" moves humanity from the bondage of scarcity born of fear to the freedom of God's abundance, born of love. There is enough bread for all, if we can only see and embrace it.

#### TEMPLE: FROM SACRIFICE TO MERCY

No symbol made greater claims on the imagination of Israel than the temple. What bread was to the body of Israel, the temple was to its soul. The temple was the center of religious life, and it embodied Israel's hopes and dreams. It was a reminder of their status as the "chosen ones." At the sacred center of the temple was the Holy of Holies—the very dwelling place of God, located in the city of God. It was the center of Israel's universe, and this center continually transformed and re-invented Israel's faith from deep within, far deeper than any could imagine.

The temple's beauty was a testimony to God's glory, but the economics of scarcity had infiltrated Israel's religious life over the years. Ironically, it produced a lucrative temple industry. The temple was the largest single economic engine of Jerusalem, one that Jesus ultimately rendered useless. The economics of scarcity had produced a religion of scarcity and it followed the same deadly logic. As is always the case with scarcity, violence was its governing principle, hidden under layers of rules and regulations that masked the fear that sustained it. This was the sacrificial system of the temple—it was a highly regulated and sophisticated system of violence that had been given sacred meaning and justified by virtually every religious authority, except a handful of prophets.

In the second temptation, the devil takes Jesus to the top of the temple overlooking Jerusalem where he says to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.”<sup>95</sup> The tempter reminds Jesus that the angels will protect him if he does, and no harm will come to him. Jesus is promised immunity. In our reading of the text, the devil sees the temple system for what it is—a system governed by the principle of violence that we have just described. It makes sense that he would see it for what it is, because it is a system he takes great pride in and has a vested interest in sustaining. He sees a den of thieves profiting off the fears of the people. He sees a sacrificial system steeped in violence, maintained and justified by a complicated system of rules and regulations. He sees and enjoys all of this.

Together, the devil and Jesus witness the controlled chaos below. They see the same thing. One is pleased, the other is angry. Jesus’ anger creates an opening for the devil, who tries to seduce Jesus with the logic of violence itself. And so he tempts Jesus to “throw” himself into the middle of the violent mess below and do something about it. He tempts Jesus to clean up a violent system with violence.

The word for “throw” (*ballo*) actually means to “throw” or “cast” in a violent way.<sup>96</sup> It is imbedded in the name “devil” (*diabolos*). The word *diabolos* means to cast alongside or to cast apart. It means to divide or separate and to do so forcefully or violently. This is what the devil does, he divides and separates through violence. It is the essence of the diabolical mind. So, the essence of this temptation is an invitation to violence. It is the oldest trick in the book, dating all the way back to Cain and Abel. Put more softly, Jesus is being asked to condone a temple system that is governed by violence. The problem of course, as Einstein pointed out, is that “a problem cannot be solved by the

same consciousness that created it.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, though it remains one of the most seductive of all temptations and carries within it a convincing logic, violence cannot cast out violence any more than Satan can cast out Satan. Humanity has tried, and failed.

Jesus looks down at the temple courts teeming with activity. He sees people buying and selling God’s favor as well as each other’s. He smells burnt flesh and raw blood floating up on the prayers of the people. He sees those who can afford the price of admission and those who cannot. Anger burns, and the logical wheels of violence begin to turn. Why not throw myself into this violent mess with an act of merciful vengeance and put an end to a system gone mad? Weren’t the prophets of old permitted as much? Jesus is tempted to strengthen himself with the thought he will be protected in such a battle. After all, he is God’s anointed, and he has been promised victory. If God protected Cain in his violence, how much more will God protect Jesus in his? *Why not put God’s forgiveness to the test with an act of violence? Why not throw myself into the sacred center of my own house and deal with it on its own terms. I will not only turn over the tables of injustice, I will tear the whole damn thing down to its foundations with my bare hands. Vengeance is mine!*

Moved by the Spirit, Jesus takes another look. He discerns the faint outlines of the lie. Violence cannot cast out violence, and Satan cannot cast out Satan (Mark 3:23). The whole sacrificial system testifies to the lie. Yes, it contains violence for a while but it can never bring peace. Jesus remembers the prophets of old who declared God’s heart to a people trapped in cycle upon cycle of violence:

To this one I will look,

To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who



trembles at My word.  
“But he who kills an ox is like one who slays a man;  
He who sacrifices a lamb is like the one who breaks a  
dog’s neck;  
He who offers a grain offering is like one who offers  
swine’s blood;  
He who burns incense is like the one who blesses an  
idol.  
As they have chosen their own ways,  
And their soul delights in their abominations.  
(Is. 66:2-3, NASB)

Mercy rises within Jesus’ heart there at the top of the temple and he is struck by a new reality—that what lies beneath him is a people who do not know what they are doing. They are like sheep without a shepherd. They delight in their abominations because they have lost touch with their deepest and truest delight, and God’s. They don’t know what else to do. They have confused their own need for blood with God’s. Once again, Jesus hears a still small voice rising from within, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6, NIV).

Jesus looks again at the meticulously designed religious system with all its rules and regulations and discerns another law at work. It is the law that rules his own heart. It is the inviolable law of love. Jesus discerns within himself the desire for mercy. It is mercy, not vengeance that will dismantle the temple. It is mercy that sits behind the veil, and it is mercy that will lovingly subvert the system from within. It is in and through this mercy that Jesus sees a new temple. He imagines a day when he will finally declare, “It is finished.” Having been exposed for what it is, the entire temple cult will collapse under its own weight.

Jesus pulls back from the temple ledge. Could it be that he is

reminded that God's patience with a violent humanity and his slowness to anger is no excuse to test that patience with his own act of violence. He quotes the ancient text, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matt. 4:7). Jesus refuses to throw himself into the temple trap and test God's love with his own act of violence. He opts for another way—the way of mercy—a way that would one day turn the temple inside-out and become the hope of all those who have ever cried out, "Lord have mercy."

#### CROWN: FROM DOMINATION TO DOXOLOGY

The crown is the symbol of the political system, which is concerned with the stewardship of power. While this symbol is not named directly in the temptation narrative, it is clear from the context that we are dealing with the temptation to power. In a monarchical system, the crown is the ultimate symbol of power. As such, it is something of a summary of the previous temptations. The economic, religious, and political systems are of one piece—each needs the other to survive. There is no bread and temple without the crown, and there is no crown without the bread and temple. They are interconnected. As Eugene Peterson says, each temptation deals with the "exercise of power,"<sup>98</sup> but none of them so boldly as the final temptation.

Throughout the temptation narrative, we witness Satan's systematic efforts to get Jesus to use his power, not for harm but for "good." This is the way temptation works. The good that the devil seeks is twisted to be sure, but as we have said before, this is the only way forward for the tempter. We are dealing here with Lucifer, the "light bearer." His entire existence is derived from God's goodness. There is no inherent badness in him. At best, he is a parasite of goodness—twisting and perverting it. At worst, as Augustine said, he is the absence of goodness. Satan

exists the way darkness exists, which modern science tells us is not the opposite of light but the absence of light. It is therefore the tempter's ability to twist and manipulate that which *is* in order to call forth that which *is not*. This is what makes the temptations so tempting.

“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor . . . All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Matt. 4:8). Jesus stands atop the world, looking down on all the kingdoms. From this great distance, the devil shows Jesus their “splendor.” The word “splendor” or “glory” is a key word in this text. The word is *doxa*, literally meaning “praise.”<sup>99</sup> At such lofty heights, their glory evokes a deep primal praise—a kind of holy doxology. It all looks quite good and praiseworthy. The kingdoms are good gifts that deserve a good king. It is hard to see the underbelly of those kingdoms and the moral principle of death by which they operate at such a distance. It is even harder to see the devil as anything other than the light-bearer of God at this point—perhaps the better angel of his own nature has finally come to set him straight.

Jesus ponders the potential of wearing the crown—the potential for good, not evil; the potential for life, not death. *Who better to wear the crown and steward power than a benevolent king who genuinely cares for creation?* Could it be that in the thin air of these great heights Jesus is disoriented and begins to reconsider his position on the bread and the temple? *What if I am wrong? What if there really is not enough to go around? What if a certain kind of violence really can bring peace? What if there is some truth to all this? Why not seize the crown? If they want a king, why not at least give them a good one? If anyone can handle power, wouldn't it be the one who is all powerful? And given*

*the cruelty of this world, why not dominate it with goodness and bring it to its knees for its own sake? After all, will not one day every knee bow and every tongue confess that I am Lord? And if I am Lord, the angel of light that stands before me is here to remind me that it is my duty to bow to the truth of all I am seeing now.*

What we are witnessing here is not only a call to kingship, but a call to “worship.” In fact, the word for worship in this text is the same word for “splendor” or “glory” that was used earlier, *doxa*. The devil is offering a kind of twisted doxology, a distorted form of praise—Jesus is being tempted to praise a kind of power that violates his own nature. From the outside looking in, it all looks quite innocent. Jesus is tempted to take his rightful place as king, but to do so in a way that gives praise to a false kind of power. He is being tempted to abstract power from relationship, imposing his will from the outside, taking control and using force to get what he wants, and because what he wants is good it seems quite reasonable. It is the temptation to define power in terms of might. This is what it means to take the throne in a way that gives praise to Satan. As Walter Wink reminds us, “Whatever the power of the Spirit means, bullying force isn’t part of it . . . the power of God is often exercised in personal ways, creating, saving and blessing. It is never an impersonal application of force from without.”<sup>100</sup>

The rules of Satan’s politics are simple—take by force and get by grabbing. The end justifies the means. When seen from the perspective of motives, it looks benevolent, but in the end it is self-serving. Only when it is exposed do we see what Wink calls “the Domination System,” with Satan as its “world-encompassing spirit.”<sup>101</sup> We see a system that requires absolute allegiance, requiring subjects and laws and force. In religious parlance, it requires a twisted form of forced “worship,” not freely-given

praise, as Galadriel knew in *The Lord of the Rings* when, in response to Frodo offering her the one ring, she says, “All will love me and despair!”<sup>102</sup> Such a system sees itself as sovereign before which there can be no other, and it maintains its godlike status through fear and force. This is why William Stringfellow can say that the *only* moral authority of such power is “that which is disclosed as its last authority, which is death.”<sup>103</sup> The power of domination has mastered the ability to hide its real purposes, but when fully disclosed, it is not a call to open and freely-offered praise, it is rather a call to enslavement and death. Such forms of worship are fallen forms that require the sacrifice of all for their own survival.

Empowered by another Spirit, Jesus takes a second look at the “splendor” below. Another praise comes forth, a new doxology. It is not the doxology of coercion, but of freely-given praise. He remembers it as a nursery song his mother used to sing to him as a child. A reminder that another power is at work in the world, a deeper and more potent power, a new kind of kingdom—one that brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly—one that fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty (Lk. 1:51-53). It is a song for the Servant-King.

This nursery song brings him back to reality. He envisions a power made perfect in weakness, not strength. He envisions a power that pours itself out and divests itself of any and all coercion. He envisions a power that divests itself of the principalities of this world and in doing so makes “a public example of them, triumphing over them” (Col. 2:15) by exposing them for what they are. He envisions a power that not only transforms life, but also death itself. Such power is foolishness to those who only know the power of force and might. It is a stumbling block

to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the very power of God, a power that makes salvation possible.

The glittering gems on the crown being offered are seen for what they are—a crown of thorns. Satan’s twisted view of power is exposed. The whole world is turned upside-down. The cross ascends and Jesus is “lifted up.” Jesus, along with the rest of us, can now see Satan’s plea for what it is—a call to bow down to death itself. Jesus declares, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him’” (Matt. 4:10).

Interestingly it is only in this last temptation that Jesus addresses the devil as “Satan,” whose name means “accuser.” Jesus sees the accusation for what it is—that God is not God, nor is God worthy of praise. Lies, lies, lies, it is all a lie. “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil” (Is. 5:20, NASB). This is the work of Satan. But God is good. There is enough. He is the God of peace who is worthy of our praise.

Having emptied himself of the voice of the accuser, Jesus allowed himself to receive attentive care from the angels (literally “messengers,” in contrast with the one who accused and manipulated). The very next sentence in Luke 4:14 reads, “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee.” It is a beautiful image. Having re-imagined the symbolic universe in the wasteland of Israel, Jesus is free to preach and teach Good News to his people. For the next three years, Jesus demonstrates to the world what, up to then, had only been known by “hints and guesses.”<sup>104</sup> Jesus reveals God’s economy by offering new bread in new ways—he declares there is enough! Jesus reveals God’s religion and builds a new temple—he puts an end to the sacrificial system, steeped in violence and declares mercy for all. Jesus reveals God’s politics—he demonstrates the presence of a

new kingdom, a new power in the land. He is the Anointed One, empowered to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, bring freedom for the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor for all. All of life is re-imagined in Christ.

As Brueggemann reminds us, because of this we too can re-imagine the world. We are called to an artful dance of gospel subversion:

[To] get up and utter a *sub-version* of reality, an alternative version of reality that says another way of life in the world is not only possible but is peculiarly mandated and peculiarly valid. It is a *sub-version* because we must fly low, stay under the radar, and hope not to be detected too soon, a *sub-version* because it does indeed intend to *sub-vert* the dominant version of and to empower a community of *sub-versives* who are determined to practice their lives according to a different way of imagining."<sup>105</sup>

All of this is fueled by what Mary Jo Leddy calls "radical gratitude"<sup>106</sup> that fills the heart of Jesus and beckons him to the cross where all of life is re-imagined once and for all.