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Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995),

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## **Avoiding Impurity**

There is abundant evidence suggesting that both during Jesus' life and at the time the New Testament was written the flash point of Jewish religious orthodoxy was the dietary laws. These prescriptions were an elaboration of the passages in the book of Leviticus whose original function had been to regulate the selection, preparation, and consumption of animals used for ritual sacrifice. The dietary laws to which the Pharisees and other orthodox Jews carefully adhered prescribed meticulous ritual washings deemed necessary to avoid contamination, and they carefully regulated how food was to be prepared and eaten and with whom it might be safely shared. Scrupulosity about defiling contact with sinners and the fear of ingesting unclean food combined to make the sharing of meals a particularly touch issue. For observant Jews of the time, it was a perilous thing to share a meal with those about whose moral and religious status they were uncertain. Conscious intention had nothing to do with the all-important matter of avoiding impurity. Contact with sinners or the ingestion of forbidden or unsanctified foods would defile one and make it necessary to submit to ritual cleansings, regardless of how inadvertent the exposure to the impurity might have been. The safest course, under the circumstances, was to avoid all contact with outcasts and sinners and with pagans and nonobserving Jews. For those who strove to observe every detail of the elaborate dietary regulations, meals shared with anyone other than one's most intimate kin and co-religionists were occasions fraught with moral and religious dangers. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 212.

In the first century, Greek and Roman influence in Palestine was pervasive, and mingling with non-Jews became a fact of life for Jews living in the cities of Judea and Galilee. Consequently, orthodox Jews found the task of adhering to the dietary proscriptions more challenging, while at the same time they felt adherence to these customs more than ever essential for the preservation of Jewish cultural identity. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 212. It is only by understanding the *moral* significance of sharing meals for the Jews of Jesus' time, therefore, that one can fully appreciate what was one of the distinguishing features of his ministry: table fellowship. Again and again, the Gospels show Jesus and his disciples sharing meals, and Jesus' eagerness to share these meals with "sinners" and the "outcasts" may have been the most conspicuous feature of his ministry. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 213.

By simply sitting at table with those widely regarded as morally contemptible, Jesus earned the scorn of the Pharisees and other strict observers of Jewish custom. By sharing

meals with those considered by the religiously righteous to be outcasts and sinners, Jesus challenged “the central ordering principle of the Jewish social world.” As Geza Vermes put it, Jesus “took his stand among the pariahs of the world, those despised by the respectable. Sinners were his table-companions and the ostracized tax collectors and prostitutes his friends.” The meals Jesus shared with the outcasts were not, therefore, simply the occasion for the delivery of his message. They *were* the message. They served as “prophetic signs” meant to manifest the meaning of Jesus’ ministry. They involved what Borg speaks of as a “radical relativizing of cultural distinctions.” It is in this context of Jewish dietary concerns that one can best understand the miracle of loaves and fishes. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 213.

### **The Miracles of Loaves and Fishes (and other miracles)**

For a miracle to have genuine religious significance it must transform the human heart and that it was a transformation of the heart that Jesus brought about in those he deeply touched. Curing a crippled leg is not as miraculous as curing a hardened heart or a despairing soul. Great miracle of Jesus’ ministry was reconciliation – with God and with others. This is the starting point for understanding the miracle of the loaves and fishes, and the other miracles as well. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 213.

Jesus’ audience would have been almost exclusively made up of Jews, and most religious-minded Jews of the time would have taken the precaution of bringing with them enough bread or dried fish to insure that they would not be forced to eat food whose ritual purity was in doubt. But taking the precaution of bringing a supply of ritually clean food would have been only one hurdle, and perhaps not the largest one. For eating these provisions while in the company of others of uncertain moral and religious character would have placed one in jeopardy of moral contamination from sinners and pagans. The fact that Jesus had a reputation for attracting and tolerating the socially marginal would have added to the anxiety of observant Jews in this regard. Not knowing the moral and religious status of those sitting nearby would have made many reluctant to bring out whatever provisions they had with them. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 214.

In all the accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude, it is Jesus who takes the initiative and invites the people to sit down and prepare for a meal. Sharing a meal together was *his* idea, not theirs. It was not primarily the lateness of the hour that made the unexpected sharing of a meal necessary, but rather that Jesus decided to drive home the points he had been making in his preaching by inviting his audience to sit down then and there for the purpose of sharing, a meal with those around them. The point of the feeding was not food; it was the breaking down of religious and social barriers that Jesus had been challenging as spiritually inconsequential in his preaching. It was hands-on-learning. It was practice for living in the kingdom. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 214.

All the Gospel accounts speak of Jesus praying a blessing before the miracle occurred. In other words, he didn't just go to the few loaves and dried fish and cause them to multiply; he gave thanks to God in words *to which the people listened carefully*. It was *then* that the miracle occurred. Jesus opened their hearts, and they, in turn, opened their satchels, and the greatest miracle of all occurred. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 214.

Jesus preached of a God of love and forgiveness and then invited those who heard his message to sit down together and live for a moment in the "kingdom" about which he was preaching. Changing the human heart and liberating those trapped in religious superstition is simply a greater miracle than pulling loaves and dried fish out of a basket. The feeding of the multitude was a *real* miracle. The miracle was a new kind of community, one generated by prayer and inclusion, a "new generation." Transitory as it may have been, it remains a model for a new community, one on which all human culture will one day have to be based. The social bond that gave the community that Jesus inspired as its coherence had one conspicuous feature: the breaking down of religious prejudice. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 215.

### **Exorcisms**

Nothing deserves the name of miracle that does not renovate the human heart, and anything that does, deserves the name.

In New Testament times, to be diseased – whether physically or mentally – implied sinfulness. The good prospered materially and were rewarded with robust health, while the sinners, outcasts, and religious backsliders were fated to suffer for their apostasy and wickedness. The logic of the underlying moral principle easily worked in reverse. A physical affliction was thought to be a divine punishment, perhaps for some sin that remained undetectable but that could be deduced from the fact of the affliction. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 215. A person in poverty or in ill-health or mentally ill or psychologically distraught was thought to be marked by sin. Those with psychological or physical disorders suffered from a social stigma that may have been a greater source of distress than the physical or mental affliction and that almost certainly placed the afflicted one in at least some social jeopardy. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 216.

The diagnosis of demonic possession indicates that those who have arrived at this diagnosis are slipping into the grip of the uncanny forces of primitive religion, forces whose eventual manifestation will be accusatory and violent. When Jesus expelled the demon from the madman of Gerasene, the demon revealed his real name: *Legion*. The real demonic force under whose sway the "possessed" one begins to fall the moment his community designates him as "possessed" is the mob, which will eventually form to rid itself of the contaminated one. What is demonic is not the person suffering from his or that distress. What is demonic is the *diagnosis* of demonic possession. In healing the one possessed, Jesus effectively overrule the diagnosis or cancels its social consequences. He disarms the satanic (accusatory) power by restoring the dignity and social standing of those most in danger of becoming scapegoats. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1995), 216.

Jesus' whole life, ministry, and death had the effect of restoring to their senses those who had eyes but could not see and ears but could not hear. If the healing of disease or the curing of afflictions involves a suspension of the "laws" of nature, softening the human heart or refashioning the human self requires that social and psychological reflexes relied upon and reinforced "since the foundation of the world" be overridden.