

The God of the Bible Confronts the Politics of Hunger

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The title of this article alerts us to half of the biblical story. The verb "confronts" has an "in your face" quality; it judges, condemns, calls to repentance and change. What this title lacks is a sense of God's revolutionary action and of God's power to effect change; it lacks good news; it falls short on the word *mission*.

There should be two titles for this article:

1. The God of the Bible confronts hunger and its politics.
2. The God of the Bible reverses hunger and its politics.

I. The God of the Bible confronts hunger and its politics

Hunger, malnutrition, and famine form a descending scale of problems connected with insufficient food. The Holy Land was a land of marginal agricultural productivity in biblical times. Abram and Sarai (Gen 12:10), as well as Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 26:1), actually left the land in search of food. Joseph became famous by predicting and then managing seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine that involved at least Palestine and Egypt. The Israelites nearly starved in the wilderness until they were nourished by heavenly bread. Naomi and Elimelech, parents-in-law of Ruth, left the land of milk and honey and their home town called Bethlehem (roughly: "grain elevator") to go to Moab to search for food.

Who can forget the famine at the time of Elijah, when the prophet was sustained by bread-bearing ravens twice a day (1 Kgs 17:1-7) and by the bottomless jar of meal and cruse of oil of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:8-16)? The Prodigal Son's negative cash flow was complicated by the famine in the whole country (Luke 15:14). Famine was among the worst consequences of siege warfare. The author of Lamentations screams out at the destruction of Jerusalem: "The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food in the destruction of the daughter of my people." The Bible recognizes that hunger is an extraordinary circumstance that may justify extraordinary behavior: "People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his hunger when he is starving" (Prov 6:30).

Why are hunger and famine so common in the Bible? War, especially siege-warfare, was one of the major causes of

hunger back then. While our current hunger problem is also affected by wars and the imbalances caused by the defense industry, our wars often play a more indirect role in precipitating hunger than when an enemy brought a siege against a city for months or even years in order to starve it out.

Another major cause of famine or hunger was drought and the relative infertility of the soil. Damascus receives ten inches of rain in an average year, Jericho four, and the Dead Sea area two. The relatively well-watered area of Galilee in the north receives 28 inches per year, Jerusalem 24.2. By way of comparison, Chicago has an annual rainfall of about 33 inches. The steppe and desert regions of Palestine have woefully inadequate and unpredictable rain. From Beersheba on south rainfall is less than 8 inches per year. While the Israelis have harnessed modern irrigational technology to reclaim many acres for agriculture, their efforts have led to the drying up of the south portion of the Dead Sea. Palestine remains a semi-arid land.

A third cause for famine in the Bible is the judgment of God. Actually, divine agency is often connected with the first two causes: enemy attacks that produced famine (Jer 14:12; 18:21) or lack of rain (1 Kgs 17:1). Deut 28:53-57 contains a theological interpretation of famine as a covenant curse that will be actualized in the Babylonian invasion. There we read of cannibalism during siege warfare and of well-bred people withholding food from their brothers and sisters, their spouses, and their children in order to keep themselves alive. Jeremiah never tires to speak of the sword, famine, and plague that God will send against Israel. The writer of the Apocalypse sees famine as part of eschatological judgment: "I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were

given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth."

We also cannot neglect the social causes of hunger and famine in the Bible. In the advanced agrarian economy of the monarchial period, a cleavage developed between the ruling elite and the peasantry. By the time of Amos (ca. 760 BCE), one to three percent of the population owned 50 to 70 percent of the land. Hence the rules of supply and demand were not as important as the arbitrary, self-serving decisions of the elite. While land in early Israel was distributed on an egalitarian basis and was passed on by inheritance, the king and the elite class gradually added patrimonial domains to their own by a process called latifundialization. Land rights were granted by the king to his favorites, and lands were bought and sold to increase production. The landholding elite exacted charges for each factor (water, seed, work animals) needed to produce a crop (Amos 5:11) and created a peasantry so indebted to them that they lost their freedom or even lost their land. Because merchants monopolized the food supply, they could exploit the poor (Amos 8:6). Production was aimed not so much at meeting the subsistence needs of the peasants but at satisfying the needs of the rich (Amos 6:6) and producing cash crops. The elite were the problem, and their economic activities produced poverty and hunger for others (Amos 2:6-8). Amos would hardly be surprised by what is happening with corporate farms in large parts of the United States or by the economic disparities in Mexico and the Philippines.

The causes of hunger today are many: poor rainfall, poor land, poor distribution of food, poor-ness in general. Our rich country has many who suffer from malnutrition. Famine or hunger in the world results as often as not from war, oppressive govern-

ments, the indifference of the rich, overpopulation, the politics of the prosperous, exploitation by multinational and colonialist powers, and other priorities of the "system." While the average citizen of the world consumes some 400 pounds of grain a year, each of us in America consumes a ton. Only about 200 pounds of that is ingested directly; the rest is filtered through an animal first, wastefully. Even where famine is country-wide today, it is not in our experience world-wide. Politics sees to it that some countries have more than enough while others starve.

Whose problem is hunger?

On one level the Bible clearly places the onus for dealing with hunger on the individual. Job's friend Eliphaz accuses Job of great wickedness, of having no end to his iniquities: "You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry." Job, of course, will have none of this charge. In his famous Oath of Clearance he justifies himself with the following forceful words: "If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eye of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the orphan has not eaten of it... then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket." Job's rugged self-curse makes it crystal clear not only that he considers himself innocent, but that care for the poor and feeding of the hungry area central part of our ethical requirement.

But the problem of hunger in the Bible is also seen as the result of societal breakdown or the loss of what we would call law and order. In a messianic passage in Isaiah 32, the prophet complains that the fool babbles on stupidly about Yahweh and leaves the craving of the hungry unsatis-

fied. Such foolishness will be no part of the messianic age: "The fool will no more be called noble, nor the knave said to be honorable. For the fool speaks folly, and his or her mind plots iniquity: to practice ungodliness, to utter error concerning the Lord, to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink."

But responding to famine is God's problem as well. The Psalmist writes: "The eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death, and keep them alive in famine" (33:18-19). Psalm 107 testifies that God's steadfast love issues in such "wonderful works" as satisfying those who are thirsty and filling the hungry with good things. God turns deserts into pools of water, parched lands into springs of water. There he lets the hungry dwell.... They sow fields and plant vineyards and get a fruitful yield. God is the one, Psalm 146 relates, who executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, and sets prisoners free (vv. 5-7).

Since hunger is God's problem, it is also the problem of his human viceroys. In the non-canonical Testament of Joseph, the patriarch Joseph matches his complaints with God's actions: I was sold into slavery, and the Lord of all made me free.... I was beset with hunger, and the Lord himself nourished me. I was alone and God comforted me; I was sick and the Lord visited me; I was in prison and my God showed favor to me. This passage shows the priority God gives to emancipation of slaves, relief from hunger, healing of the sick, and deliverance from prison. But surely we are all struck by how similar this passage sounds to the last judgment scene in Matthew 25. In Matthew, the praiseworthy deeds of social concern are done to Christ via acts of kindness done to people in the community; in the Testament of Joseph God himself does

these same acts of social concern to his faithful child Joseph. From these two passages we learn that relief of hunger is a number one priority with God (Testament of Joseph) and hence it is also a number one priority for those who are created in God's image (Matthew).

Whose problem is hunger? The prophets at times designate hunger as curse for disobedience. It would be a cruel joke, of course, to explain famine in today's world as punishment due to the sins of hungry people. Rather, the world's hunger is largely the result of our individual and corporate greed, our inequitable distribution of wealth, education, and natural resources, our rape of the environment, our foolish expenditures for the tools of warfare, our messed up social priorities, and our slowness to do justice.

Famine is often visited on those least responsible for it. Hunger and starvation stem from an economic structure that is out of joint; they result from the sins of the rich; they are part of God's rightful judgment on us. And yet the curse that we have coming has been contradicted, overruled, vetoed, and repealed by Godself, as we sing in the words of the Christmas carol: "He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found." Famine as curse has been vetoed for us and for our world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's merciful forgiveness reaches out to all those prodigal daughters and sons who have seen the error of their ways and have resolved to change them.

But there is a sense in which the judgment of famine is still an impending curse for us. In Deuteronomy we read: "Because you did not serve Yahweh your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, when you had the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies... in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and in want of all

things. We of the Western world, who have basked in the abundance of the land, not always with the joy and gladness that comes from serving God, but often with the reckless abandon of those bent on acquiring more, we Westerners can also take warning from Deuteronomy: We may soon not serve ourselves or even God, but we may find ourselves serving an enemy. We will be the ones to know hunger and thirst.

Such a nutritional famine would not be the ultimate judgment on us. Amos rang the charges on those who failed to repent when he wrote: "I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me." But he also indicated that the worst was still to come: "I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of Yahweh." Such a radical famine would make God's voice inaudible, God's promises incomprehensible, our salvation dead.

II. The God of the Bible reverses hunger and its politics

This article addresses readers who confess themselves to be sent into the world on God's mission in order to offer life and salvation to all the world's people. You seek to secure for all people daily bread and the bread of life.

God's program to reverse the malady of hunger and its politics starts with the beatitudes: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matt 5:6). Those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness* have spiritual concerns. They desire either the righteousness God displays, that unerring fidelity of God to God's people, his salvation and deliverance, or they desire that their own

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lives might be conformed to the will of God. TEV translates: Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires. Whichever interpretation is correct, the passage is religious in the connotation it gives to hunger and thirst.

Luke's version of this beatitude differs remarkably: "Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied" (Luke 6:21). The Lukan version is earthy, physical—almost caloric. It promises eschatological reversal to those who suffer from physical hunger: You shall be filled! To think eschatologically is not to escape, but it is to hope and so to cope. It is to hold God to God's promises to feed the hungry and to attempt to be an agent to make those promises become reality.

I believe both evangelists are right. Both needs—the need for saving vindication (or obedience) and the need for plain, ordinary food—are part and parcel of the good news that comes from the lips of Jesus.

Such a bi-focal vision is not absent from the Hebrew Scriptures. Religious conviction and religious practices without social consequences lead to confusion, frustration, and failure. According to Isaiah 58

the community was faithful in its religious practices, sought God every day, delighted to know God's ways and to discover how they might enter into relationship with him, but they were, nevertheless, very perplexed when they cried: "Why have we fasted and you, God, did not see it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you took no account of it?" (v. 3) The truth emerges in divine confrontation: They had turned their fast into a time for quarreling and fighting. God asks sarcastically, "Did I want a fast in which people displayed their humility? Did I want people to bow their heads like a rush and to spread sack cloth and ashes upon themselves? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?" (v. 5)

The caricature of their ritual practices exposes how empty they really are. What kind of liturgical renewal did God desire? "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?"

Helping to restore a person's freedom is more pleasing to God than the practice of parading one's own self-mortification. Actions directed only toward God—fasting, head bowing, and the like—are to be replaced by actions directed toward one's fellow human beings. Real "fasting" means to set prisoners free, to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, and to change one's total lifestyle by loosing the bonds of wickedness.

It is not fasting in itself that is here condemned, but a fasting that is unrelated to service, a liturgy that is unrelated to life. A concern for spiritual food that ignores daily bread for the hungry is only self-concern, a self-conscious attempt to manipulate God. Our fasting, our abstinence from bread, must mean bread for the hungry.

When we juxtapose Deuteronomy and the book of Acts, we see another example where the focus on physical need blends with liturgical action. In Deuteronomy 15:4 we read one of the strangest, most outrageous laws in the entire Bible: "There will be no poor among you." This law was surely more observed in the breach than in the keeping. Archaeology in the Holy Land has shown that after an initial period of equality in Israel—when all houses were of the same modest size __ class distinctions began to arise. These iniquities led to the well-known social critique of Amos who excoriated the rich for oppressing the poor. The outrageous law against poverty and hunger in Deuteronomy is a direct deduction from the fact that all Israel had been set free from slavery in the Exodus, that all who had once been poor and downcast, that all who had experienced such liberation, would naturally say, "Never again." This outrageous law is modified by a "realistic" v. 7, which instructs the community how to treat the poor when they do appear.

Verse 7 modifies the old outrageous law, but it does not rescind it. For when Jesus of Nazareth came—whose death in Luke's Transfiguration account is referred to as his Exodus, whose death means freedom, and whose Spirit established a new community—he empowered the new community to actualize the law of Deuteronomy. The early church was an eschatological, Deuteronomic community according to Acts 4:34: "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet." This religious community, which continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, in fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers, also held all material things in common. Among them there were no poor. The living bread they broke among

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themselves was matched by the daily bread they shared.

God's gift of daily bread to the needy is often balanced by his removal of bread and power from the rich, the arrogant, and the godless. Already in the Song of Hannah we read: Those who were full have had to hire themselves out for bread while those who were hungry have now grown fat. God gives food and children to his faithful, but subtracts those blessings from the faithless.

In Isaiah 65 the prophet addressed a community wracked by controversy and division. He told them that a great role reversal was coming, backed up by God's word: Behold, my servants shall eat, but you—the proud, priestly aristocracy—shall be hungry; behold, my servants shall drink, but you—the proud, priestly aristocracy—shall be thirsty; behold my servants shall rejoice, but you—the proud, priestly aristocracy—shall be put to shame (v. 13).

Mary echoes the Song of Hannah in the *Magnificat* as she celebrates the God who honored her low estate by making her the mother all people call blessed. "God has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich were sent away empty."

God is not just a bread giver, supplying food to the have-nots. God reverses the politics of hunger and confronts it. In the words of Jesus: Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied (Luke 6:21), and Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger (Luke 6:25).

Living bread and daily bread

God gives bread. We remember the Manna he gave in the wilderness, so aptly called the bread of heaven in the Psalms. We remember the cruse of oil that never failed and the barrel of flour that never emptied out when God sustained Elijah during a famine. We remember how the prophet Elisha fed one hundred people with just a few first fruits, loaves of barley, and ears of grain (2 Kgs 4:42-44). We remember how that story had its own reprise when Jesus took five barley loaves and two small fish and multiplied them for the thousands.

Why did Jesus feed the 5,000? Because he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). John tells us that the immediate response of the people was to hail him as the new Moses, the new manna-giver: "This is indeed the prophet who was to come into the world" (John 6:14). They recognized in Jesus the prophet like Moses promised so long before (Deut 18:15), even if they immediately erred by wanting to take this bread giver and turn him into a king by force (John 6:15).

Why did Jesus feed the 5,000? Because another promise had been given to an Israel in exile that someday they would experience rivers in the desert, the end of physical handicaps, and a whole new creation (Isa 49:13). God had promised: "They shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall smite them, for he who

has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water he will guide them." The one who fulfilled this word of promise, who himself displayed God's compassion, was that bread giver, Jesus of Nazareth.

What did he feed them? Well, bread of course—barley bread at that, the usual diet of the poor—and some fish. But not only that. That caloric food symbolizes eucharistic bread as well. Scholars have long noticed that Jesus in feeding the 5,000 repeats or anticipates the actions of the Eucharist: he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to his disciples, and then gathered it up again. The Didache echoes John's Gospel in its references to the breaking, the giving thanks, the gathering, the multiplication on the mountain, and the reference to Jesus as king. Remember that famous prayer: "We give thanks to you, Our Father.... As this fragmented Bread was scattered on the mountains, but was gathered up and became one, so let the church be gathered up from the four corners of the world into your kingdom."

Jesus gave bread that was full of calories, but he also gave living bread, bread that gives life. He said: "Moses gave you the bread of heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the real bread from heaven" (John 6:32). This bread gives life to the world. "Lord," they begged, "give us this bread all the time." Manna or barley bread is physical nourishment, but God has the power to grant spiritual nourishment as well. Jesus is the bread that comes down from heaven; people eat of him and never die (v. 50).

Jesus gives bread full of calories, and spiritual bread that provides spiritual nourishment, but he also gives bread of the Eucharist, according to vv. 51-58. "The bread that I shall give—make no mistake about it—is my own flesh for the life of the world. Let me firmly assure you that if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and

drink his blood you have no life in you.... My flesh is real food, and my blood real drink."

The feeding of the 5,000 provides food for the hungry, it conveys bread that brings life, it is the sign, symbol, and anticipation of the Lord's supper.

We have come full circle. The Beatitudes celebrate—and promise—the satisfying of spiritual and physical hunger. A text from Isaiah 58 speaks of the real meaning of liturgical fasting: dealing bread to the hungry. God's gift of food to the hungry may mean deprivation to the arrogant and faithless rich.

Daily bread/living bread. The church needs both; it has both to share in its mission. We think of two biblical prayers:

The eyes of all wait upon you, Lord, to give them their meat in due season.

and

Lord, give us this [Eucharistic] bread all the time.

The church has one mission in which it—in God's name—confronts and tries to reverse the politics of hunger by dealing God's bread to all the hungry, to all the starving—those with bloated stomachs and those with bloated hearts.