



# Companionable Bread

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“BREAD IS THE STAFF OF LIFE BECAUSE WE KNEAD IT” (AND OTHER PUNS)

**B**read seems to invite a particular sort of punning based on its metaphorical role as the source of material survival. American and British English use both *bread* and *dough* as slang for money, as do the Russians when they use *babki* (the plural for a sweetened, leavened bread which literally means “grandmothers”) to describe a critically important sum of money. The British also use *bread* directly to describe one’s material means of support, as in “If you open your shop next door to Emily’s, you will be taking the bread out of her mouth.” The Germans and the French use *Knete* and *fric* (dough) as synonyms for money and wealth, respectively, while Costa Ricans refer to pocket change as *harina* (flour). From France, we English speakers get the term *bribe*, which originated in the fourteenth century as the term applied to the morsel of bread given to beggars.

Even the supreme author of the divine narrative could not resist leavening the story of our salvation with a crumb of bread-based punning. The New Testament begins with the birth in *Bethlehem*, literally the City of Bread, of the individual known as the “bread of life.” The Lord’s Prayer itself puns, that is to say, it exploits a possibility of meanings in its petition for “daily bread.” While “bread” it-

*Do U.S. trade and agricultural policies promote “companionship” (the “sharing of bread”) with other nations and peoples, or are they ways to exercise control over the bread supply to the detriment of others? The question does not permit an easy answer, but even raising it is important in our consideration of our role in an imperfect world.*

self is understood in its common meaning, the term used for “daily” (*epiousios*) is unusual, appearing only in the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer as recorded in Matthew and Luke, not anywhere else in the New Testament, nor within the body of classical Greek literature. Literally meaning “of extra substance” or “supersubstantial” in the Vulgate, *epiousios* is a *hapax legomenon*, found only within the context of the Prayer. With no other contextual reference, its meaning remains unclear. Are we asking for God to provide for our daily needs, granting us, as Luther writes in his *Small Catechism*, “everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body,” or are we asking, as Diarmaid MacCulloch argues, for bread that feeds us in the coming kingdom?<sup>1</sup> Or both? The Eucharist itself provides its own punning. On the one hand, here is bread, made from wheat grown from hybridized seed, fertilizer, earth, and pesticides, traded by multinational grain companies, milled and acquired through markets, secured by government-enforced property rights, with caloric content to meet our physical needs; on the other hand, here is the body of Christ, shared abundantly with all of us. As dispensed in the Eucharist, bread assumes a variety of meanings.

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Punning aside, bread is an interesting and perhaps revealing choice as metaphor for those material goods that satisfy our physical needs. While humans can survive barely minutes if deprived of oxygen, and for but a few days if deprived of water, we can live for weeks without food. Yet, when someone asks for space by saying, “Give me air!” no one understands him to be asking for some material good upon which his very survival depends, even as no one believes his neighbor’s life is threatened when she complains that she “could really use a drink.” While inferior to both air and water in terms of its place in the hierarchy of material human needs, bread, dough, and even flour are used as symbols of that which satisfies the most basic of human requirements. Perhaps this is because, unlike both air and water, which exist through no exertion on our part, bread comes into being at least in part through human will and effort. Our use of bread as metaphor for our material needs reflects our reliance on ourselves as masters of our destiny.

This observation is hardly new. When God tells the Israelites that he will break their “staff of bread” (Lev 26:26), he is understood to be threatening them with the destruction of those sources of material survival upon which they depend. The first published reference to bread as the “staff of life” comes from John

<sup>1</sup>See Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 347, and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2009) 89.

Penkethman, who writes in his 1638 treatise, *Artachthos or A New Booke Declaring the Assise or Weight of Bread*,

Let Butchers, Poultrers, Fishmongers contend,  
 Each his own Trade in what he can defend;  
 Though Flesh, Fish, White meats, all, in fitting season  
 Nourish the body, being used with reason,  
 Yet no man can deny (to end the strife)  
 Bread is worth all, being the Staffe of life.<sup>2</sup>

Here again, in contrast to the other “white meats” whose creation is largely independent of human exertion, bread achieves the preeminent position as “worth all.” All punning aside, bread is our staff of life because we knead it, we shape it, we bake it, and create it from flour and water. Bread is our creation; it owes its existence to us in a way that air, water, flesh, and fish do not.

### KNEADING BREAD: CULTIVATION, COLONIZATION, AND CONTROL

In tending our creation, we ourselves have changed. Cultivating sufficient quantities of grain to meet our demands requires political and economic innovations and interventions that have shaped and defined our societies. As a political activity, bread production in ancient Sumeria and Egypt required political organization to administer and enforce the system of *couvée* labor employed to maintain the canals used to irrigate the wheat crop. Bread production justified the Greek and later the Roman colonization of Egypt, whose own taste for the substance was so pronounced that the Greeks referred to Egyptians as the *artophagoi*, or bread-eaters. Wheat production in Egypt during the Greek occupation was of such intensity that a single irrigation project in the Fayyum employed 15,000 men and covered 20,000 hectares.<sup>3</sup> The grain dole, or *annona*, was used by Roman emperors from the Gracchi (133 B.C.) through to Aurelian (275 A.D.) to gain popular support and to provide a modicum of price stability in the grain markets. Wheat production has been credited with facilitating the development of property rights to both land and water, with promoting trade among distant peoples, and with creating incentives for such financial innovations as the futures market.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as Aaron Bobrow-Strain writes, “The story of bread is the story of how social structures shape what we eat, and how what we eat shapes social structures.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>John Penkethman, “Explanation of the Frontespiece,” in *Artachthos or A New Booke Declaring the Assise or Weight of Bread*, in *A true relation or collection of the most remarkable dearths and famines, which have happened within this realme since the coming in of William the Conquerour* (London: W. Warden, 1748), at <http://archive.org/details/truerelationorco00penk> (accessed July 20, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>Dorothy J. Thompson, “Irrigation and Drainage in the Early Ptolemaic Fayyum,” in *Agriculture in Egypt: From Pharaonic to Modern Times*, ed. Alan K. Bowman and Eugene Rogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999) 107–122.

<sup>4</sup>See Frank Hole, “Investigating the Origins of Mesopotamian Civilization,” *Science* (August 1966) 605–611, and Gyoung-Ah Lee, et al., “Plants and People from the Early Neolithic to Shang Periods in North China,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 104/3 (2007) 1087–1092.

<sup>5</sup>Aaron Bobrow-Strain, *White Bread: A Social History of the Store-Bought Loaf* (Boston: Beacon, 2012) 6.

The social structures shaped by bread are themselves directed towards the attainment of a single goal: control.<sup>6</sup> Control of the wheat and barley supply has provided motivation for the domestication and improvement of the grains themselves, from the primitive strains of 10,000 years ago to the hybridized stock that exists today. Control of the bread supply drives farmers and their governments to change the flow of rivers, drain wetlands, and exhaust aquifers in their attempts to provide bread's cereal constituents sufficient water in due season. The colonization of entire continents and the genocide of native peoples have been accomplished in the name of securing sufficient land suitable for cereal production. Massive tax and subsidy programs have been levied and supported by governments across space and time in attempts to meet national goals of adequate control of the bread supply. Riots and revolutions have been instigated by a desire to control access to the supply of bread. The prophet Ezekiel recognized the corrupting potential of our desire for bread, saying that, "You have profaned me among my people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread, putting to death those who should not die and keeping alive those who should not live" (Ezek 13:19). Our attempts to be our own masters tempt us to sin.

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***Bread is indeed needed, and we cannot be faulted for using our powers of mind, government, and technology to secure an adequate supply of this food. But our desire to be masters of the bread supply puts us in danger of being blinded to our dependence on God.***

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Yet given its importance in both our society and our diet, one can hardly fault our species for attempting to secure an adequate, predictable supply of bread. Even today, with all the food options available to consumers, cereals supply 46% of per capita caloric consumption. Wheat alone supplies 18% of the human community's daily calories; in modern Egypt, the descendants of the *artophagoi* rely on (mostly imported) wheat for 34% of their daily calories.<sup>7</sup> Bread is indeed needed, and we cannot be faulted for using our powers of mind, government, and technology to secure an adequate supply of this food.

But our desire to be masters of the bread supply puts us in danger of being blinded to our dependence on God as the ultimate provider of our daily bread. Bread, and not God, becomes the staff on which we lean. While secular authority can and, following John Stephenson, arguably should be used by the government "to patch up and preserve a non-ideal reality," our attempts to control our individual or national access to the bread supply threaten to raise idols whose worship

<sup>6</sup>Here we would like to acknowledge the contribution of the Rev. Randall Wilburn of Amherst, MA, who shared this insight with one of the authors over brunch on May 19, 2013.

<sup>7</sup>United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization FAOSTAT, at <http://faostat3.fao.org/home/index.html#DOWNLOAD> (accessed August 14, 2013).

causes us to forget our own calling as children of God.<sup>8</sup> Relying on ourselves as bread providers has allowed us to justify a host of actions—from environmental degradation to colonization and genocide—that conflict with our divine calling. Contrary to divine will, bread has been and continues to be used as a weapon and as a source of power and domination. Far from promoting “companionship”—literally, the sharing of bread—our desire to exercise control over the bread supply has given rise to every human failing.

#### SHARING BREAD: CHRIST AND COMPANIONSHIP

Jesus’s earthly ministry explicitly recognizes the potentially corrupting power of our desire to control the bread supply. In calling himself the “bread of life,” Jesus deliberately confronts this desire to control access to and supply of the source of human sustenance, and in doing so, he sets himself up as a target of the secular authorities whose power is in part derived from their ability to control the bread supply. In teaching us to pray for our daily bread, Jesus instructs us to recognize that this source of our sustenance, in this kingdom and the next, comes from God, not our own efforts, and we are therefore obliged to treat it as a gift shared with all. As the bread of life, Christ continues to threaten those whose own power comes from wielding control over bread, even as he continues to remind us that our true source of life comes from God and God alone.

Christ’s insistence on replacing the material staff of bread with the spiritual staff of life recalls a biblical tradition that recognizes bread as something other than a source of calories. A host of biblical narratives emphasizes the bread of companionship, not the bread of control. Eating bread together is a sign of community (Exod 2:20; Ruth 2:14); God’s people are called upon to share their bread with the hungry (Isa 21:14; 58:7); and breaking bread together has been used to call believers into a united community from the Last Supper itself through the Acts of the Apostles to the modern church. In Christ, companionship trumps control as motivating goal of the proper consumption and production of bread.

#### RAISING BREAD

To what extent can we promote this companionship, this sharing of bread? Is companionship antithetical to a free market system in which, as Adam Smith famously noted, we expect our dinner not from “the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker...but from regard to their own self-interest”?<sup>9</sup> To what extent do our own domestic farm programs, which last year alone (2012) provided over a billion dollars in subsidies to wheat farmers, promote companionship with our neighbors in other countries, and to what extent do our subsidies control and cripple our neighbors by allowing our wheat exports to be priced so low as to discourage

<sup>8</sup>John R. Stephenson, “The Two Governments and the Two Kingdoms in Luther’s Thought,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34/4 (1981) 321–337.

<sup>9</sup>Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Penguin, 1999) 112.

wheat production in importing countries? To what extent does our production of bread emphasize companionship with creation, and to what extent does our bread production emphasize our quest for control?

We lack definitive answers to these critical questions. The free market system, fueled as it is by self-interest, seems at first antagonistic to companionship, yet, coupled with democratic political institutions, this system has nonetheless allowed an improvement in overall quality of life that is virtually undeniable, even if it lacks perfection. While our farm subsidy programs have been recognized by the World Trade Organization as contributing to reduced incomes for developing world farmers, these same subsidies contribute to reduced wheat prices in importing countries, meaning that the world's poor have greater access to bread. Hybridized wheat varieties have increased yields, yet have been linked to the increased incidence of celiac disease.<sup>10</sup> Wheat production may well deplete water supplies in those water-rich nations able to cultivate the crop, but that same wheat, when exported, essentially exports the water used in its production (in a ratio of 1 million tons of wheat to 1 billion cubic meters of water) to those water-poor counties that would otherwise lack sufficient water resources to maintain their populations.<sup>11</sup> Judgment as to whether our attempts to control our bread supply promote companionship or conflict remains suspended.

But perhaps that is how it always is in this fallen world, this second kingdom. Any attempt we make to patch things up—to protect our farmers from the vagaries of weather, disease, and pests; to increase our yields to feed a hungry world; to provide sufficient water for our crops; to protect self-sufficient peasant producers in developing nations from losing in a competition with corporately supplied, subsidized foreign imports—is going to be imperfect, even as we ourselves are imperfect. Acknowledging this, we move forward, seeking companionship and not control. ⊕

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<sup>10</sup>See Hetty C. van den Broeck, et al., "Presence of celiac disease epitopes in modern and old hexaploid wheat varieties: wheat breeding may have contributed to increased prevalence of celiac disease," *Theoretical and Applied Genetics* 121/8 (2010) 1527–1539.

<sup>11</sup>See Daniel Renault, "Value of virtual water in food: Principles and virtues," in *Virtual Water Trade: Proceeding of the International Expert Meeting on Virtual Water Trade*, ed. Arjen Y. Hoekstra (Delft, Netherlands: IHE Delft, 2003) 77–91.