



Editorial



Matthew van Duyvenbode

Matthew van Duyvenbode is Head of Advocacy at Bible Society. He is particularly interested in the Bible and popular culture, Patristic readings of Scripture, and the Bible and Christian Spirituality. He is Secretary to the Scripture Working Group at the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and sits on the Executive Committee of the Catholic Biblical Association of Great Britain.

A recent survey of 27,500 children conducted by the British Nutrition Foundation found that almost a third of primary school pupils thought that cheese came from plants. According to *The Times*, who reported the survey, almost one in five of the same constituent thought that chicken was the principal ingredient in fish fingers, whilst one in ten of their secondary-aged counterparts believed that tomatoes grew beneath the earth.¹

Meanwhile, food justice has also been making the headlines recently with the interagency 'Enough food for everyone IF' campaign.² The campaign seeks to address the essential issues which cause global hunger – from greed and corruption to land and lifestyle. And the increased visibility of Foodbanks in British culture conveys that the problem of food justice is not restricted to those overseas.

It seems pertinent, then, to dedicate an edition of *The Bible in Transmission* to a biblical and theological reflection on food. As life is punctuated by mealtimes, so the biblical text returns again and again to food – whether in bite-sized chunks or as a gastronomic theological banquet.

In our first piece, Norman Wirzba identifies some unifying characteristics in the way that the Bible presents God's relationship to the earth, and, in turn, humanity's proper response to this presentation. In challenging the reader to think theologically about food, Wirzba summarises, 'Food is God's love made delectable.' Exploring this theme through the creation narratives of Genesis, Wirzba invites a fascinating train of thought by reflecting on the significance of the soil – picking the image up later in his article as 'receiving and eating

another's life and death' when we eat of the soil. This sacrificial theme, of course, culminates in Jesus' own description as the 'bread of life' in John 6.35ff.

The connection between Christ and sacrifice is picked up more extensively in the Mexican Dominican, Angel F Mendez-Montoya's article on 'Eating and the Eucharist: A Transformation of Desire'. Mendez-Montoya comes from a Catholic perspective, but works in his writing to explore the implications of the Last Supper in a generous manner, describing the breadth of traditions and approaches as a 'polyphonic aesthetic event'.

In a fascinating diversion, Mendez-Montoya examines how a privatised understanding of what is happening at the breaking of bread has led to a separation between *liturgical space* and *everyday public space*. Calling for radical inclusion, the piece challenges the ecclesial participant to consider the public dimension of their eating – most obviously for the poor, the hungry and the dying.

Mendez-Montoya is clear to emphasise the deep connection between eating and relationships – relationships between persons, between humanity and the earth, and between God and God's people. Drawing on the rich Eastern Orthodox tradition of *theosis*. Mendez-Montoya's understanding of the transformation of desire, so that in receiving the physicality of God's desire to be *with* us, we, in turn, become invited into the divine life, and thus become transformed in our own desires.

This notion of desire and *theosis* is continued from a very different perspective in Nathan MacDonald's piece

on food and identity in the Old Testament. Using the provocative example of the recent horsemeat scandal, MacDonald is keen to show that what a community or people eat *matters*.

Using a range of material from the Old Testament, MacDonald ably demonstrates how food relates to identity – in terms of separation, purity, a desire for land and food, and in terms of a countercultural modesty in exile. Arguing that it is a contemporary misreading to underestimate the significance of the food act in the creation account, MacDonald's article demonstrates the range of ways that 'faith Jews could hope to bring their lives in line with the creator's commandments'.

In Hannah Bacon's 'God and Thinness', the theme of food and sinfulness is made more explicit by reading the practice of the modern weight-loss industry alongside the scriptural text. Bacon has spent some time examining the attitudes and patterns of behaviour in slimming groups, and draws some fascinating and quirky parallels with the notion of sin and redemption.

Examining how one group has adopted this language (albeit using the spelling 'Syn'), Bacon likens the challenge of healthy living to virtuous decision-making, the shame of weight-gain to a struggle between the "old" ("deviant") and "new" ("good") self, and the groups themselves as an opportunity to engage in a public confession of Syn.

The argument might feel slightly over-constructed if Bacon wasn't able to draw on the patristic writings of Basil of Caesarea, Tertullian and Augustine to demonstrate the longstanding connection between Eve, appetite, desire and sinfulness. But Bacon doesn't leave her argument ineffective – offering instead the female Sophia as the epitome of the generous hostess at the lavish banquet. Providing a contrast to the ascetic belief that suppression of appetite is the way to salvation, Bacon cites Proverbs 9 to conclude that 'eating leads to life and a future rather than death as is the case in Eden'.

Looking to the future in light of the past is also one of the concerns of Colin Tudge in his article examining 'The Church, the Bible and Enlightened Agriculture'. Exploring the history of agricultural development in the light of the crucial economic and environmental issues which face the global community, Tudge believes that Christianity and all the Abrahamic religions have a 'powerful agrarian tradition' to advocate for in the face of an unjustified bias towards new industrial techniques.

Tudge's article is informed by challenging statistics, and the thrust of his argument is that the drive for new industrial techniques is ultimately illogical and unjust. Using examples from the book of Genesis, he demonstrates ably that the kind of agricultural work that was undertaken in the biblical narrative was actually comparatively modern in its scope and efficiency. As his argument develops, the article focuses more on the role of the Church in addressing what he perceives to be the unjust system which has forgotten the advantage of enlightened agriculture.

Gordon Gatward agrees that 'our future depends on agriculture and all those involved in it', but seeks to make a contrasting case to Tudge's. Gatward is more convinced about the kind of solutions offered by Sir John Beddington. Gatward's concern, though, is that theological debate is offered around some of the emerging ethical issues surrounding emerging agricultural technologies.

Rather than citing scriptural examples of agricultural practice, Gatward wants to allow the biblical text to reawaken the challenge that 'how we live, what we decide and what we do affect the lives of countless others. This includes the resources available to them and their climate and environment.' In a powerful exhortation to the reader, Gatward concludes by citing Deuteronomy 8, imploring humility before God as an underpinning principle in tackling these immensely challenging questions.

Precisely because the questions surrounding food justice are so daunting, we asked two writers to share how they are trying to work towards a fairer system in practice. Pascale Palmer from the Catholic overseas development agency, CAFOD writes about the latest campaign 'Hungry for Change' – part of the broader 'Enough Food for Everyone IF' coalition. Palmer gives an overview of the challenges that individuals and groups supported by CAFOD face in tackling food injustice. Recognising that it was the scandal of hunger which led to the foundation of CAFOD in the 1960s, Palmer emphasises that the same issue needs tackling today.

Meanwhile, Chris Sunderland writes from his own experience in trying to help his hometown of Bristol to be a sustainable food city. Using examples such as the Bristol Pound, which is intimately connected with food businesses, and church-based initiatives to tackle hunger through food provision, Sunderland explores the complexities of food justice on a local level. In an insightful manner, this article gently encourages churches that are beginning to tackle the very practical issue of food provision to expand this into 'a deeper attempt at transformation'.

The issue of food is of undeniable cultural significance. The variety of articles featured in this edition of *The Bible in Transmission* illustrate that it is, indeed, fertile theological soil for growth. This is also highlighted by the first of our 'Universities and Colleges' page, whereby academics from the different Higher Education institutions we're working with at Bible Society suggest some further reading on the topic featured. We hope that you find their recommendations helpful, and that this edition of *Transmission* will provoke both deeper thinking and further action.

NOTES

1. 'Cheese grows on plants, say children', *The Times* 3 June 2013.

2. See enoughfoodif.org