‘My eucharist to the people of District 11’: Bread, sacrifice and thanksgiving in The Hunger Games

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Abstract
The imagery of bread in The Hunger Games provides an opportunity to read the novel within a Christian tradition alert to themes of suffering, sacrifice and solidarity. This article examines how the novel ‘re-enchants’ bread as both a site of ideological conflict and potential social healing, and draws out how this relates to the book’s place within consumer capitalism and young adult fiction. It also considers how a Christian interpretation might connect to current tensions around inclusion and identity.

Keywords
Bible and literature, blessing, dystopia, Eucharist, Hunger Games, popular culture and theology

Suzanne Collins’s dystopian novel The Hunger Games contains an overt critique of certain aspects of modern economic and popular culture. Her vision of a future in which impoverished young people fight to the death in a media-saturated arena, for the entertainment and edification of others, satirizes an increasingly unequal society encouraged to enjoy others’ suffering and misfortune via reality TV. In this article, however, I will focus on a particular strain of imagery that surfaces at pivotal moments in the novel, which clusters around bread, sacrifice and thanksgiving. While I am not arguing for a deliberate strategy on the part of Collins, it is possible to produce a sacramental reading of The Hunger Games which illuminates certain themes and emphases in the novel.

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My reading focuses on the imagery of bread in the novel, and the way Collins’s work seems to associate it with the hazardous moral and social universe her characters navigate. Bread is encoded into the fictional world which the novel constructs: the state within which the narrative takes place is called ‘Panem’. This has an obvious resonance with Juvenal’s sneering assessment of the way Roman politicians offered ‘bread and circuses’ to keep the population distracted and obedient, in the phrase ‘panem et circenses’. The Capitol, the central oppressive city-state in *The Hunger Games*, uses both the food supply and the spectacle of violence to keep its population cowed and compliant, and thus bread and violence are part of the central conceit signalled by the novel’s title. Bread is re-enchanted by this narrative, imbued with the symbolic freight of an earlier era: it is the source of life, and it is the means of political control. Bread is a substance around which ideological and physical struggles take place in *The Hunger Games*. Citizens are granted ‘a meagre year’s supply of grain and oil for one person’, if they put an extra token with their name on it into the lottery which selects those who will fight to death in the arena. The ingredients for bread are the stakes on which inhabitants of Katniss’s district gamble with their lives, in a grotesque game rigged by the state.

The mention of oil and grain, when read within a Christian framework, sets up a resonance with the story of Elijah and the widow:

‘For thus said the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.’ She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah. (1 Kings 17.14–16, NRSV)

Where the widow’s wish to provide for a stranger is hampered by her need to feed herself and her son, but then miraculously enabled by ‘the LORD’, the authorities in Panem use grain and oil to create terror and suspicion among their population. It is worth noticing that the first time we learn about the tokens and their significance is in the context of resentment between inhabitants of Katniss’s District, as they note resentfully which members of their community are at less risk from the lottery since they have not had to put in extra tokens simply to keep alive. The use of bread as a measure of food to allow survival for a particular stretch of time picks up an additional echo around the word ‘panem’: its use in the phrase ‘daily bread’ in the Vulgate version of the Lord’s Prayer. I do not read these resonances as deliberate citations or references implanted by Collins in her novel and intended to be ‘found’ by the reader; instead I think the biblical texts can be usefully laid alongside *The Hunger Games* in order to draw out the implications of the imagery more fully. Reading the novel with the resources of the Christian tradition is not an attempt to explain away its meanings in terms of pre-existing imagery which should control interpretation, nor to dissolve its specificity via abstract principles, but a way of paying even closer attention to the shape and implications of particular passages.
Collins’s use of bread as a central image in the novel re-enchants it, investing it with meaning and weight which it does not necessarily possess in modern consumer culture. Unlike the bread most widely available in our supermarkets, the bread in Panem has been handmade by members of the community who eat it, bringing their personal labour into closer connection with the lives (in both senses) of those around them. Every District has its own kind of bread, with a distinctive colour and texture, making it a marker of identity and locality as well as a staple foodstuff. These varieties of bread are signifiers of ways of life, as well as being the stuff of life. It should not escape us that this is very similar to the kind of re-enchantment that postmodern consumer culture attempts by marketing ‘artisanal’ and/or handmade breads from specific regions and cultures. This is one of the ways in which a consumer system which rests on expanding choice as one of its basic values negotiates the feeling of loss and dislocation which eventually follows from a sense of unlimited choice. The material conditions of life which have shaped the way bread (for example) is produced in a Spanish or Indian village are presented as more ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ than the world of the person choosing between those breads in the supermarket aisle, and that authenticity is offered as a commodity which the consumer can acquire by spending their money in culturally educated ways. Paradoxically, in a consumer system where the apparent lack of constraint upon choice erodes a sense of consequences, the material and physical constraints of others’ lives become a speciously attractive and marketable aspect of a product. ‘Difficulty’ and ‘tradition’ are framed as lifestyle markers, and bread – with its physical immediacy and its capacity to represent a simpler and more constrained diet – is an effective carrier for these meanings. Collins’s novel – and the subsequent film adaptation – is part of the consumer system even as it suggests a moderate critique of that system. Recognizing the way postmodern culture fetishizes ‘authentic’ elements of culture as marketable also highlights The Hunger Games’ place in a global media market. Perhaps the most ironic aspect of this was the marketing campaign for the films of the later books in Collins’s trilogy, which involves a sponsorship deal with the fast-food giant Subway. The re-enchantment which bread undergoes within the novel sits at odds with the use of the characters as advertising images for a company like Subway. Or perhaps it fits very logically with the postmodern marketing of signs of authenticity.

Within this situation, the narrative connects bread with another layer of symbolism. Before we meet Peeta as readers, we are told a story about him seeing Katniss hungry, and (apparently deliberately) burning bread in his family’s oven. Having been blamed by his parents, he throws the bread away near her: ‘He began to tear off chunks from the burned parts and toss them into the trough... I stared at the loaves... did he mean for me to have them?’ She comments that

He didn’t know me. Still, just throwing me the bread was an enormous kindness that would have surely resulted in a beating if discovered... At school, I passed the boy in the hall; his cheek had swelled up and his eye had blackened.
Peeta’s action brings together several images in a jarring combination: bread here is the substance of both life and sacrifice. In order to feed Katniss, he has to partially spoil the bread, giving up the food via its destruction. It is difficult to resist the pun that he makes a ‘burnt offering’, tapping into the imagery of sacrifice in the Old Testament, but it is also a sacrifice in another sense, in that he undergoes suffering in order to provide bread for her. The bread she eats is bought with the bruises she sees on Peeta’s face, blackened like the burnt bread. This does not involve overt reference to the Bible, nor does it install an allegorical Christian structure (Peeta is not installed as a Christ-figure in the novel, despite the ‘purchase’ of life-giving bread via the marks on his body). It does, however, focus the book’s symbolism strongly upon bread. Bread becomes re-enchanted in Panem as a source of life, as a site of contested meanings, and as a medium of sacrifice.

These early narratives involving bread find a dramatic echo and development much further into the novel, after the death of Rue during the Games:

I open the parachute and find a small loaf of bread. It’s not the fine white Capitol stuff. It’s made of dark ration grain and shaped in a crescent. Sprinkled with seeds… This loaf came from District 11. I cautiously lift the still-warm loaf. What must it have cost the people of District 11, who can’t even feed themselves? How many would’ve had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf?… For whatever reason, this is a first. A district gift to a tribute who’s not your own.

I lift my face and step into the last falling rays of sunlight. 'My thanks to the people of District Eleven.'

The bread is again a medium via which sacrifice is carried out, as the people of District 11 are imagined going without their own food in order to provide this loaf. However, it also serves another function, or perhaps carries it out via this sacrifice: it breaks down a social barrier. Katniss’s thoughts insist that ‘It had been meant for Rue, surely. But instead of pulling the gift when she died, they’d authorized Haymitch to give it to me’, and that ‘this is a first. A district gift to a tribute who’s not your own’.

Where before bread had been used to divide people within their own Districts, and to make the Districts turn against each other, it is an opportunity here to identify and to unite people. This echoes emphases which many theologians have found in the Gospel narratives on the social significance of Jesus’ healing and teaching: abolishing social boundaries, bringing in the marginalized to the centre of the community and renewing Israel. The sacrifice made by District 11, which is linked by proximity to the violence done to a body (like Peeta’s burnt offering), subverts the official meanings of bread in order to assert a radical solidarity across social lines.

Katniss’s response to this sacrifice is equally startling, when read within Christian symbolism. She improvises a ritual of thanksgiving, using the available light to both frame her action and make her more visible to the people watching,
and declaring ‘My thanks to the people of District 11.’ She inwardly comments ‘I want them to know I know where it came from. That the full value of their gift has been recognized.’ I describe it as a ritual because it brings together implied meanings with physical action in a performative moment. Thanking – like cursing, betting and swearing – is one of the categories of speech classed as ‘performatives’ in J. L. Austin’s *How To Do Things With Words*, categories which enact the thing they mention. (To say you apologize is to carry out that apology; to say you bet a tenner it’ll rain tomorrow is to do so.) Katniss says that she thanks them, and in saying that she does so, but she attempts to give the moment weight by carrying out her thanks in action as well as words, by physically manifesting it as well as articulating it. This is a passage of the book where Katniss twice struggles to produce meaningful rituals out of the horror around her: once in the flowers and lullaby for Rue, and once in the thanksgiving here.

A ritual of thanksgiving over bread, with overtones of sacrifice and the memory of a violent death, has powerful resonances in Christian symbolism. When Katniss publicly declares her ‘thanks’, she uses a word which in New Testament Greek appears as ‘eucharistia’ and is paralleled with ‘blessing’ in the accounts given of the Last Supper by 2 Corinthians and the Gospel of Matthew. It does not seem too tenuous to describe Katniss’s use of the bread as both thanksgiving and blessing in this passage, particularly in the context of Andrew Davison’s account of the latter activity:

A blessing recognizes the goodness of God’s creation. This links blessing to a central task of Christian discipleship, namely learning to see the world from a Christian perspective…Whatever else it involves, such a perception of the world, in a Christian way, includes beholding it with a sense of wonder and apprehending it in such a way that we recognize it as a gift. Those dispositions, in turn, elicit praise from us, and thanksgiving.

In recognizing the bread as a gift with enormous value, identifying it with the sacrifice of those who gave it amidst the violence of Rue’s death and performing her act of thanksgiving (while elevating her posture), Katniss brings several strains of imagery and symbolism together in this moment. As I mentioned above, I am not suggesting that Collins wrote this book as an exploration of eucharistic themes within a dystopian future, nor that she ‘hid’ a Christian ‘message’ inside her novel. There is nonetheless a powerful strain of imagery which maps so strongly over familiar symbols and themes within the Christian tradition, that it demands attention. Both the images and the meanings which they seem to convey provide a coherent set of connections within a Christian reading.

It is worth considering the implications of these meanings for the novel as a whole. I briefly discussed the book’s place within a globalized entertainment and experience market above, and the way the merchandising deal with Subway cast an ironic light on the narrative re-enchantment of bread as a symbol of
authenticity and local culture. The impact of the bread in social terms can also be placed within the context of contemporary political and religious culture. The theme of ‘inclusion’ has been fraught with anxiety in secular and religious discourse over the last 20 years, on topics ranging from cultural difference within developed nations to the ministry of gay people within established denominations. The dramatic breaking down of social barriers which Katniss’s acceptance of the gift enacts is unproblematically framed as a good thing in the novel, and the simplicity of this act may reflect a fantasy of cross-group solidarity in which identities are clearly (and distinctly) marked and crossing group boundaries can be recognized as an unqualified good. Obviously the simplification of social identities via the District system reflects the tendencies of science fiction towards thought-experiments and using alternative worlds to literalize metaphorical concepts, and this intersects with the young adult genre within which Collins cast her novel. We can see an emphasis on secure identities and how individuals find them helpful or problematic across young adult (YA) fiction, from the Sorting Hat of the Harry Potter universe to the characteristic groups of the Divergent series. Nonetheless, it makes sense to read these events within the pervading anxiety of political and religious institutions which are ostensibly committed to ‘inclusion’ and the breaking of social barriers as a central value, but which are mired in debates (and splits) between members over what inclusion would involve, and which aspects of difference are ‘social barriers’ rather than moral questions or fundamental categories. The Hunger Games imagines a world in which cultural identities are total, strongly determined by obvious local cultures, and which can be transcended by symbols of social inclusion. The narrative movement of Katniss’s adventures, especially in the later books, does not necessarily present a simplistic view of human relationships or their capacity to be unproblematically transformed by gifts of bread, but the imagery I have outlined here is a powerful thread within the novel.

Thus, when read with the resources of the Christian tradition, The Hunger Games’ imagery of bread echoes themes and emphases of the Gospel narratives, as well as picking up more general biblical themes of sacrifice, suffering and thanksgiving. The novel also relates these themes to questions of social inclusion and solidarity, at times using its dystopian setting to present a fantasy of identity and inclusion which could be recognized and achieved in relatively simple terms. My reading has focused on both the function of these images and themes within The Hunger Games, and how they relate to the conditions within which the novel is read, specifically the ongoing controversy over social identities and the postmodern valorization of ‘difficulty’ and ‘tradition’ as markers of value which can be sold back to consumers. The complexity, and even ambivalence, of the novels’ meanings within a Christian framework should not be taken as proof that this is an imposition of a tenuous interpretative structure on a simple YA book. I have not attempted to ‘baptize’ Collins’s dystopia, but to show how much richer the novel appears when placed within the reading traditions of Christianity.
Notes

1. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (London: Scholastic Fiction, 2012), p. 17.
2. I am grateful to the students in my ‘Literature and Popular Culture’ seminar during 2014–15 for pointing out the connection with Subway and its advertising.
3. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 37.
4. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 38.
5. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 288–9.
6. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, p. 289.
7. And, in a remarkable image, this bread has fallen from the sky. It is the bread of heaven, in the words of the hymn, tracing the connection between the bread of life and the manna of the wilderness.
8. J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975 [1962]).
9. Andrew Davison, *Blessing* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2014), p. 6.

Author Biography

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