

# **Going hungry... and getting hungrier - Famine**

**ARCH 0770**  
***Food and Drink in  
Classical Antiquity***

# Famines are not 'natural'

- Amartya Sen (Nobel Prize)
  - *NONE* need starve/none *NEED* starve
  - 'not enough food?' palpable nonsense...
- Starvation is the characteristic of some people not having enough food to eat. It is *not* the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat...'
- so is it basic availability? or the *distribution* of food that matters?

# Entitlement theory:

why do people starve when food is available?      who lives?   who dies?

## What is 'entitlement' ?

basic ability of individuals to **command**  
the food resources they need to survive

what they **own** *versus*

what they want to **acquire**

‘Starvation statements are about the  
relationship of persons to the  
commodity...’ (Sen)

# Entitlement relations

what you command and how: how do you *get* things (money or things) which you can *give* for food?

- trade
- production with resources you control
- own-labor (paid for in money or goods)
- inheritance
- crime
- others?

‘entitlement bundles’ : ALL the things that allow you to lay claim to food commodities

# **Exchange entitlements**

**what would be available to each person,  
what they could ‘get’ , given the size of their  
‘bundles’**

- **employment opportunities and their duration**
- **how much you make (wages)**
- **prices for what is being sold to you**
- **prices of what you sell**
- **taxes**
- **social benefits you may deserve... e.g.  
politicians/scholars/priests get fed**

**if your entitlement bundle has a good exchange value —  
all well and good...**

In times of trouble, what can happen?

Consult... Athens, Rome, Ireland, Ukraine, China and —

***The Chronicle of Ps-Joshua the Stylite,*  
reporting famine at Edessa (modern  
Turkey/Syria) in AD 499-500**



**Chapter 38. In the month of Adar [March] of this year the locusts came upon us out of the ground, so that, because of their number, we imagined that not only had the eggs that were in the ground been hatched to our harm, but that the very air was vomiting them against us, and that they were descending from the sky upon us. When they were only able to crawl, they devoured and consumed all the Arab territory and all that of Rasain and Tella and Edessa. They ate up and desolated these districts and utterly consumed everything that was in them... Presently, in the month of Nisan [April], there began to be a dearth of grain and of everything else, and four modii of wheat were sold for a dinar. In the months of Khaziran [June] and Tammuz [July] the inhabitants of these districts were reduced to all sorts of shifts to live. They sowed millet for their own use, but it was not enough for them, because it did not thrive.**

**Before the year came to an end, misery from hunger had reduced the people to beggary, so that they sold their property for half its worth, horses and oxen and sheep and pigs. And because the locusts had devoured all the crop, and left neither pasture nor food for man or beast, many forsook their native places and removed to other districts of the north and east. And the sick who were in the villages, as well as the old men and boys and women and infants, and those who were tortured by hunger, being unable to walk far and go to distant places, entered into the cities to get a livelihood by begging; and thus many villages and hamlets were left destitute of inhabitants. They did not however escape punishment...; for the pestilence came upon them in the places to which they went, and even overtook those who entered into Edessa; about which I shall tell presently to the best of my ability, though no one, I think, could describe it as it really was.**



Chapter 39. Now, however, I am going to write to you about the dearth, as you asked me... Wheat was sold at this time at the rate of four modii for a dinar and barley at six modii. Chickpeas were five hundred numia; beans, four hundred; and lentils, three hundred and sixty; but meat was not as yet dear. As time went on, however, the dearth became greater, and the pain of hunger afflicted the people more and more. Everything that was not edible was cheap, such as clothes and household utensils and furniture, for these things were sold for a half or a third of their value, and did not suffice for the maintenance of their owners, because of the great dearth of bread. At this time our 'mayor' set out to visit the emperor in order to request him to remit the tax.

The governor, however, laid hold of the landed proprietors, and used great violence on them and extorted it from them, so that, before the bishop could persuade the emperor, the governor had sent the money to the capital. When the emperor saw that the money had arrived, he did not like to remit it; but in order not to send our father away empty, he remitted some to the villagers... whilst he freed the citizens from the obligation of drawing water for the Greek soldiery.

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Chapter 40. The governor himself too set out to visit the emperor, girt with his sword, and left Eusebius to hold his post and govern the city. When this Eusebius saw that the bakers were not sufficient to make bread for the market, because of the multitude of country people, of whom the city was full, and because of the poor who had no bread in their houses, he gave an order that everyone who chose might make bread and sell it in the market. And there came Jewish women, to whom he gave wheat from the public granary, and they made bread for the market.

But even so, the poor were in straits, because they had not money wherewith to buy bread; and they wandered about the streets and porticoes and courtyards to beg a morsel of bread, but there was no one in whose house bread was in superfluity. And when one of them had begged [a few] pence, but was unable to buy bread therewith, he used to purchase therewith a turnip or a cabbage or a mallow and eat it raw. And for this reason there was a scarcity of vegetables, and a lack of everything in the city and villages, so that the people actually dared to enter the holy places and for sheer hunger to eat the consecrated bread as if it had been common bread. Others cut pieces off corpses, that ought not to be eaten, and cooked and ate them...

Chapter 41. The famine was sore in the villages and in the city; for those who were left in the villages were eating bitter-vetches; and others were frying the withered fallen grapes and eating them, though even of them there was not enough to satisfy them. And those who were in the city were wandering about the streets, picking up the stalks and leaves of vegetables, all filthy with mud, and eating them. They were sleeping in the porticoes and streets, and wailing by night and day from the pangs of hunger; and their bodies wasted away, and they were in a sad plight, and became like jackals because of the leanness of their bodies. The whole city was full of them, and they began to die in the porticoes and in the streets.

Chapter 42. After the governor Demosthenes had gone up to the emperor, he informed him of this calamity; and the emperor gave him no small sum of money to distribute among the poor. Still, however, they were not able to live, because they were tortured by the pangs of hunger, which wasted them away. The pestilence became worse about this time, namely in the month of the first Kanun [December], when there began to be frost and ice, because they were passing the nights in the porticoes and streets, and the sleep of death came upon them during their natural sleep. Children and babes were crying in every street. Of some the mothers were dead; others their mothers had left, and had run away from them when they asked for something to eat, because they had nothing to give them.

Dead bodies were lying exposed in every street, and the citizens were not able to bury them, because, while they were carrying out the first that had died, the moment they returned they found others. By the care of lodging house keeper, the brethren used afterwards to go about the city, and to collect these dead bodies... The stewards of the [Great] Church established an infirmary among the buildings attached to the Church of Edessa. Those who were very ill used to go and lie down there; and many dead bodies were found in the infirmary, which they buried along with those at the lodging house.



Chapter 43. The governor blocked up the gates of the colonnades attached to the winter bath, and laid down in it straw and mats, and they used to sleep there, but it was not sufficient for them. When the grandees of the city saw this, they too established infirmaries, and many went in and found shelter in them. The Greek soldiers too set up places in which the sick slept, and charged themselves with their expenses. They died by a painful and melancholy death; and though many of them were buried every day, the number still went on increasing. For a report had gone forth throughout the province of Edessa, that the Edessenes took good care of those who were in want; and for this reason a countless multitude of people entered the city.

The bath too that was under the Church of the Apostles beside the Great Gate was full of sick, and many dead bodies were carried forth from it every day... And when the graves of the lodging house and the Church were full, the governor went forth and opened the old graves, which had been constructed by the ancients with great pains, and they filled them. Then they opened others, and they were not sufficient for them; and at last they opened any old grave, no matter what, and filled it. For more than a hundred bodies were carried out every day from the lodging house and many a day a hundred and twenty, and up to a hundred and thirty..

In the month of Shebat [February] too the dearth was very great, and the pestilence increased. Wheat was sold at the rate of thirteen kabs for a dinar, and barley eighteen kabs. A pound of meat was a hundred numia, and a pound of fowl three hundred numia, and an egg forty numia. In short there was a dearth of everything edible.

Chapter 44. There were public prayers in the month of Adar [March] on account of the pestilence, that it might be restrained from the strangers... In the month of Nisan [April] the pestilence began among the people of the city and many biers were carried out in one day, but no one could tell their number. Many of the rich died, but not of hunger; and many of the grandees too died in this year. In the months of Khaziran [June] and Tammuz [July], after the harvest, we thought that we might now be relieved from dearth. However our expectations were not fulfilled as we thought, but the wheat of the new harvest was sold as dear as five modii for a dinar.

Chapter 45. The year 813 [AD 501-2]. After these afflictions of locusts and famine and pestilence about which I have written to you, a little respite was granted us by the mercy of God ....

What would YOU do if you were....