

Eat This Book

The Holy Community at Table with the Holy Scripture

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The Christian scriptures are the primary text for Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality is, in its entirety, rooted in and shaped by the scriptural text. We do not form our personal spiritual lives from a random assemblage of favorite texts in combination with individual circumstances; we are formed by the Holy Spirit following the text of the Holy Scriptures. God does not put us in charge of forming our personal spiritualities. We grow in accordance with the revealed Word implanted in us by the Spirit.

A friend told me recently of an acquaintance, a lifelong reader of the Bible, who one day realized that his life was not turning out as he thought the Bible said it would; he decided then and there to “make my life my authority instead of the Bible.” Most of our culture, both secular and religious, supports the man’s decision. Characteristically, contemporary spirituality takes the sovereign self as text. But the groundswell of interest in spirituality as our millennium draws to a close, does not seem to have produced any discernible outpouring of energetic justice and faithful love, two of the more obvious accompaniments of a healthy and holy Christian spirituality. In fact, we are at the point now that the term “spirituality” is more apt to call to mind dabblers in transcendence than the lives of rigor, exuberance, and goodness so long associated with the Word.

I am interested in pulling the Christian scriptures from the margins back to the center as the text for living the Christian life deeply and well and in recovering what Austin Farrer once named in his Bampton Lectures as the “forbidding discipline of spiritual reading” that ordinary people have characteristically brought to this text that forms their souls.¹ Forbidding because of the endless dodges we devise in avoiding the risk of faith in God; forbidding because of our restless inventiveness in using whatever knowledge of “spirituality” that we acquire to set ourselves up as gods. Forbidding, indeed. Our ancestors set this “forbidding discipline,” (their phrase for it was *lectio divina*),² as the core curriculum in this most demanding of all schools, the School of the Spirit, established by Jesus when he told his disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth...he will

take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-14; also 14:16; 15:26; 16:7-8).

Feeding on Scripture

Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the Holy Community as food nurtures the human body. Christians do not simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus’ name, hands raised in adoration of the Father.

The image given prominence by St. John the Theologian is a good place to start:

... I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, ‘Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth.’ So I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter (Rev 10:9-10).

The book (scroll) that John received and ate was the Word of God, that is, intelligible revelation; “book” suggests that the message that God gives us to live has meaning, plot, and purpose. We do not come to God by guesswork. The image of eating the book is set in opposition to an aloof objectivity that attempts to preserve scientific or theological truth by eliminating as far as possible personal participation. Eating a book takes it all in, assimilating it into the tissues of our lives. Readers become what they read. If Holy Scripture is to be something other than mere gossip about God, it must be internalized. Most of us have opinions about God that we are not hesitant to voice. But just because a conversation (or sermon or lecture) has the word *God* in it, does not qualify it as true. St. John is not instructed to pass on information about God, he is commanded to assimilate the word of God so that when he does speak it will express itself artlessly in his syntax just as the food we eat, when we are healthy, is unconsciously assimilated into our nerves and muscles

and put to work in speech and action.

St. John borrowed his image from Ezekiel, who had also been given a book and commanded to eat it (Ezek 2:8-3:3). Jeremiah also “ate” God’s revelation (Jer 15:16), a diet that issued in sentences of tensile strength, metaphors of blazing clarity, and a prophetic life of courageous suffering. If we are in danger (which we certainly are) of succumbing to the widespread intellectualizing and marginalizing of the Scriptures in regard to our actual day-by-day living, these three rough-and-tumble prophets—John, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah—responsible for the spiritual formation of God’s people in the worst of times (Babylonian exile and Roman persecution), can convince us of this gut-level necessity: Yes, eat this book.

The Christian community has expended an enormous amount of energy and intelligence and prayer in learning how to “eat this book” after the manner of John on Patmos, Jeremiah in Jerusalem, and Ezekiel in Babylon. We do not have to know all of it to come to the Table, but it helps to know some of it, especially since so many of our contemporaries treat it as a mere aperitif.

Scripture as Text: Learning What God Reveals

Our lives are important in spiritual formation—they are, after all, the stuff that is being formed—but they are not the text for directing the formation itself. Spirituality means, among other things, taking ourselves seriously. It means going against the cultural stream in which we are incessantly trivialized to the slave status of producers and performers, constantly depersonalized behind the labels of our degrees or salaries. But there is far more to us than our usefulness and our reputation, where we have been and who we know; there is the unique, irreproducible, eternal, image-of-God *me*. A vigorous assertion of personal dignity is foundational to spirituality.

There is a sense in which we can never take ourselves too seriously. We are serious business, indeed. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps 139:14). But it is possible to conceive of ourselves too narrowly for there is far more to us than our genes and hormones, our emotions and aspirations, our jobs and ideals; there is God. Most, if not all, of what and who we are has to do with God. If we try to understand and form ourselves by ourselves, we leave out most of ourselves.

So the Christian community has always insisted that the Holy Scripture that reveals God’s ways to us is the basic text for our formation as human beings. As we read this book, we come to realize that it is not primarily informational, telling us things about God and ourselves, but formational, shaping us into our true being.

It is the very nature of language to form rather than inform. When language is personal, which it is at its

best, it reveals; and revelation is always formative—we don’t know more, we become more. Our best users of language, poets and lovers and children and saints, use words to *make*: make intimacies, make character, make beauty, make truth.

So we begin by attending to this text, attending to both the language and the spirit infusing the language. Words are never mere words—they convey spirit, meaning, energy, and truth. Exegesis is the discipline of attending to the text and listening to it rightly and well.

But exegesis is rigorous, disciplined, intellectual work. It rarely feels “spiritual.” Men and women who are “into” spirituality, frequently give exegesis short shrift, preferring to rely on inspiration and intuition. But the long and broad consensus in the community of God’s people has always insisted on a vigorous and meticulous exegesis: Give long and close and learned attention to this text! All our masters in spirituality were and are master exegetes.

A word, or sentence of words, is a marvelous thing. Words reveal. We are presented with reality, with truth that makes our world larger, our relations richer. Words get us out of ourselves and into a responsive relation with a large world of time and space, things and people.

A word, or sentence of words, is also a most mysterious thing. Words conceal. Words can be used to falsify and mislead. All of our experience with language is “after Babel.” Much of our experience with language is with its misuse. We cannot assume that any word that we assume we know is identical with that same word when it occurs in the text. And it is disconcerting to find that a word that is used one way on page 26 is used in quite a different way on page 72.

Language is also constantly changing, in constant flux. If a word was used one way last week, it cannot be depended upon to be used the same way next week. And we have two and three thousand years of “weeks” separating us from the biblical text.

Because of all this, exegesis must not be slighted. The scriptural text is complex and demanding. The primary witnesses to God’s revelation are the Old and New Testaments: Torah and Prophets and Writings from the Old Testament; Gospels, Letters, and Apocalypse in the New. Written in Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek, languages that have, as all languages do, their own peculiar way of inflecting nouns, conjugating verbs, inserting prepositions in odd places, and arranging words in a sentence. Written on parchment and papyri. Written with pen and ink. Written in Palestine and Egypt and Syria and Greece and Italy.

Not all of us have to know all of this in order to read Holy Scripture formationally. Exegesis is not in the first place a specialist activity of scholars, although we very

much need these scholars working on our behalf. We are not, after all, deciphering hieroglyphics as some would have it. Exegesis is simply responding adequately (which is not simple!) to the demand that words make on us, that *language* makes on us. The Reformers insisted on what they called the “perspicacity” of Scripture, that the Bible is substantially intelligible. It is essentially open to our understanding without recourse to academic specialists or a privileged priesthood:

...those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due course of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them (*The Westminster Confession* I. vii).

But that doesn’t mean that much care is not required. Each book has its own way about it, and generally a careful reader begins to learn how to read a book by slowly and carefully poking around in it for a very long time until a way is found. A careful reader (an exegete!) will proceed with caution, allowing the book itself to teach us how to read it. For it soon becomes obvious that our Holy Scriptures are not composed in a timeless, deathless prose, a hyperspiritual angel language with all the quirks and idiosyncracies of local history and peasant dialect expunged. There are verbs that must be accurately parsed, cities and valleys to be located on a map, and long-forgotten customs to be recovered.

This is an enormous inconvenience, particularly to those of us who feel an inclination and aptitude towards the spiritual. It is almost impossible for those of us who have picked up the word spiritual from hanging around church parking lots or off the internet not to feel that our attraction to the spiritual confers a slight edge of privilege to us, exempting us from the bother of exegesis. We sense that we are insiders to the ways of God; we get intuitions that confirm our ideas and insights. After that happens a few times, we feel we’ve graduated from tedious recourse to lexicons and grammars. We are, after all, initiates to the text who cultivate the art of listening to God whisper between the lines. It isn’t long, as newspaper columnist Ellen Goodman once put it, before we’re using the Bible more as a Rorschach test than a religious text, reading more into the ink than we read out of it.³ It isn’t long before we’re using the word spiritual to refer primarily to ourselves and our ideas, and only incidentally and by the way to God.

Inconvenient or not, we are stuck with the necessity of exegesis. We have a written word to read and to attend to. It is God’s Word, or so we believe, and we had

better get it right. Exegesis is the care we give to getting the words right. Exegesis is foundational to Christian spirituality. Foundations disappear from view as a building is constructed but when builders don’t build a solid foundation, their building doesn’t last long.

Because we speak our language so casually, it is easy to fall into the habit of treating it casually. But language is persistently difficult to understand. We spend our early lives learning the language, and just when we think we have it mastered, our spouse says, “You don’t understand a thing I’m saying, do you?” We teach our children to talk and just about the time we think they might be getting it, they quit talking to us; and when we overhear them talking to their friends, we find we can’t understand more than one out of every eight or nine words they say. A close relationship doesn’t guarantee understanding. A long affection doesn’t guarantee understanding. In fact, the closer we are to another and the more intimate our relations, the more care we must exercise to hear accurately, to understand thoroughly, to answer appropriately.

Which is to say, the more “spiritual” we become, the more care we must give to exegesis. The more mature we become in the Christian faith, the more exegetically rigorous we must become. This is not a task from which we graduate. These words given to us in our Scriptures are constantly becoming overlaid with personal preferences, cultural assumptions, sin distortions, and ignorant guesses that pollute the text. The pollutants are always in the air, gathering dust on our Bibles, corroding our use of the language, especially the language of faith. Exegesis is a dustcloth or, better, a scrub brush scouring the words clean.

Exegesis is the farthest thing from pedantry; exegesis is an act of love. It means loving the one who speaks the words enough to want to get the words right. It is respecting the words enough to use every means we have to get the words right. Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen carefully. It follows that we bring the leisure and attentiveness of lovers to this text, cherishing every comma and semicolon, relishing the oddness of this preposition, delighting in the surprising placement of this noun. Lovers don’t take a quick look, get a “message” or a “meaning” and then run off and talk endlessly with their friends about how they feel.

Not that there are not so-called exegetes who do just that—treat the Bible as if it were a warehouse of information, oblivious to the obvious—that it is given to us as a text intended to form a whole life to the glory of God. A hundred and fifty years ago when such arid and depersonalized knowledge was a pall on the spiritual life of England, George Eliot created the character of Causubon (in her novel *Middlemarch*) to pillory this sacrilege of intellect. Her contemporary Robert Brown-

ing trumped her in his poem “A Grammarian’s Funeral,” mocking the pretentious but lifeless old exegete who “decided not to Live but Know.”

He “settled *Hoti’s* business – let it be! –
Properly based *Oun* –
Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic *De*,
Dead from the waist down.”⁴

In our own century, Marianne Moore used the metaphor of a steamroller (in her poem, “To A Steamroller”) to expose this heavy-handed and spiritless violation of text:

The illustration
is nothing to you without the application.
You lack half wit. You crush all the particles
down
into close conformity, and then walk back and
forth on them.

Sparkling chips of rock
are crushed down to the level of the parent block.
Were not “impersonal judgment in aesthetic
matters, a metaphysical impossibility,” you

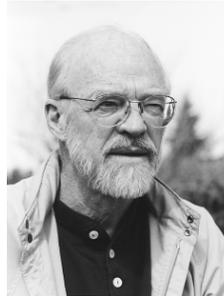
might fairly achieve
it. As for butterflies, I can hardly conceive
of one’s attending upon you, but to question
the congruence of the complement is vain, if it exists.⁵

Exegesis does not mean mastering the text, it means submitting to it; not taking charge of it and imposing my knowledge on it, but entering the world of the text and letting the text “read” me. Exegesis is an act of sustained humility: There is so much about this text that I don’t know, that I will never know. Christians keep returning to it, with all the help they can get from grammarians and archaeologists and historians and theologians, letting themselves be formed by it.

Spirituality without exegesis gets sappy and soupy. Spirituality without exegesis becomes self-indulgent. Without disciplined exegesis, spirituality develops into an idiolect in which I define all the key verbs and nouns out of my own experience. And prayer ends up limping along in sighs and stutters.

⁴ Robert Browning, *The Poems and Plays* (New York: The Modern Library, 1934), p. 169.

⁵ Marianne Moore, *The Complete Poems* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 84.



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This is a portion of the longer article by the same title.
© 1999 *Theology Today*. Originally published in *Theology Today*
56 (1999): 5-17.

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¹ Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre, 1948), p. 36.

² See my reworking of the classic discipline in “Caveat Lector,” *Crux* 32 (March 1996), pp 2-12.

³ Ellen Goodman, *The Baltimore Sun*, June 15, 1979.