

I

EAT THIS BOOK

“I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.”

JOHN 6:48-50 NRSV

“To know much and taste nothing — of what use is that?”

BONAVENTURE

CHAPTER 2

The Holy Community at Table with Holy Scripture

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 don't form our personal spiritual lives out of a random assemblage of favorite texts in combination with individual circumstances; we are formed by the Holy Spirit in accordance with the text of Holy Scripture. 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.

The commanding presence of Holy Scripture as the formative text for the Christian has never gone unchallenged. Through the centuries people have found that they preferred other ways of going about this business of finding direction and guidance for living the Christian life. But the church community has consistently said "no" to them and kept a firm grip on this text, this authoritative Bible.

We have said "no," for instance, to working our-

selves up into visionary states of ecstasy in order to get in touch with God. Heightened emotional states are very attractive, particularly to adolescents. There is such a thrilling sense of immediacy to it; it feels so, well, *authentic*, so *alive*. The generic designation "enthusiasm" has been attached to this way of the soul that has attracted and continues to attract so many off on detours of self-gratification and into addictive cul de sacs. Our wisest teachers have always steered us away from them.¹ We say "no" to undertaking Herculean tasks of moral heroism in order to call up and display the divine potentialities within us. The challenge of heroics, especially moral heroics, pumps adrenalin into our bloodstream and frees us from the neighborhood mediocrities that mire us in the mud of the commonplace. We say "no" to going off to a mountain cave and emptying ourselves of all thought, feeling, and desire so that there is nothing left in us to separate us from immediate access to reality. There is something so pure, so simple, so uncluttered about it. The Zen koan displaces Christian Scripture.

But the "text" that seems to be most in favor on the American landscape today is the sovereign self. A friend told me recently of an acquaintance, a lifelong reader of the Bible, who realized one day that his life was not turning out as he thought the Bible said it would. He decided then and there, in his words, to "make my life my authority instead of the Bible." Most of our culture, both secular and religious, supports the man's decision. It has become characteristic of our

burgeoning, contemporary spirituality in its various manifestations to take the sovereign self as text. But the results are not encouraging: the groundswell of interest in spirituality as this new millennium has opened up does not seem to be producing any discernible outpouring of energetic justice and faithful love, two of the more obvious accompaniments of a healthy and holy Christian life. In fact, we have arrived at a point now when the term “spirituality” is more apt to call to mind dabblers in transcendence than lives of rigor, exuberance, goodness, and justice — the kinds of lives historically associated with this word.

Christians can hardly fail to take account of the popularity of these self-sovereign spiritualities, sometimes to be impressed by some of the spiritual pyrotechnics, occasionally even to ooh and aah over them. But mature reflection doesn’t provide encouragement to go in for them ourselves. In contrast to the self-serving and glamorous spiritualities, ours is a pedestrian way, literally pedestrian: we put one foot in front of the other as we follow Jesus. And in order to know who he is, where he is going, and how to walk in his steps, we reach for a book, *the* book, and read it.

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I want to counter this widespread practice of taking personal experience instead of the Bible as the authority for living. I want to pull the Christian Scriptures back from the margins of the contemporary imagin-

ation where they have been so rudely elbowed by their glamorous competitors, and reestablish them at the center as the text for living the Christian life deeply and well. I want to confront and expose this replacement of the authoritative Bible by the authoritative self. I want to place personal experience under the authority of the Bible and not over it. I want to set the Bible before us as the text by which we live our lives, this text that stands in such sturdy contrast to the potpourri of religious psychology, self-development, mystical experimentation, and devotional dilettantism that has come to characterize so much of what takes cover under the umbrella of “spirituality.”

There is an enormous interest these days in the soul. In the church this interest in the soul is evidenced in a revival of attention in matters of spiritual theology, spiritual leadership, spiritual direction, and spiritual formation. But there is not a corresponding revival of interest in our Holy Scriptures. Spiritual theology, spiritual leadership, spiritual direction, and spiritual formation require that we tend to the work of the Holy Spirit in our individual and corporate, public and political lives. But those who are enthusiastic about this work are frequently, even typically, disinterested in the Holy Scriptures, the book that is given to us by the Holy Spirit. It is a matter of urgency that interest in our souls be matched by an interest in our Scriptures — and for the same reason: they, Scripture and souls, are the primary fields of operation of the Holy Spirit. An interest in souls divorced from

an interest in Scripture leaves us without a text that shapes these souls. In the same way, an interest in Scripture divorced from an interest in souls leaves us without any material for the text to work on.

By and large the Christian community accepts the position that the Bible is the authoritative text by which God reveals himself. I don't intend to argue that here; it has been well argued and thought-out by our theologians and Scripture scholars. My task is to bring into awareness and focus what is on the other side of the coin, that this Scripture text, in the course of revealing God, pulls us into the revelation and welcomes us as participants in it. What I want to call attention to is that the Bible, all of it, is *livable*; it is *the* text for living our lives. It reveals a God-created, God-ordered, God-blessed world in which we find ourselves at home and whole.

And I want to begin with the metaphor *Eat this book*. I want to recover the metaphor along with all its implications for the Christian community in which I live. I want to impress this command on the imagination of the Christian generation of which I am a part so that it takes an honored place in the company of great gospel commands that are clustered in the forefront of awareness among all who follow Jesus. Most of us carry around a handful of essential commands that keep us on track: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart.... Love your neighbor.... Honor your father and mother.... Repent and believe.... Remember the Sabbath.... Be not anxious.... Give thanks at all

times.... Pray without ceasing.... Follow me.... Go and tell.... Take up your cross...." Add this to your repertoire: Eat this book. Not merely Read your Bible but *Eat this book*.

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Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don't 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, feet washed in company with the Son.

The metaphorical imperative arrives among us backed by the authority of St. John the Theologian ("the Divine" in the King James Version).

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." And 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)

Does that get our attention? St. John is a commanding figure. He was pastor of marginal, politically and economically powerless Christians in a society in which their commitment to following Christ branded them as criminals of the state. His task was to keep

their identity focused and their lives Spirit-filled, their discipleship ardent, their hope fresh against formidable odds — the living, speaking, acting *Jesus* front and center in their lives. He didn't settle for mere survival, throwing them a plank to hang onto in the storm; he wanted them to *live*, really live — outlive everyone around them. This is what prophets and pastors and writers do, and it is never easy. No easier now than it was for John.

It was in the course of the apocalyptic extravaganza that John is so famous for — these wildly boisterous, rambunctious, and celebrative visions that came to him one Sunday morning as he was worshipping on the prison island of Patmos — just as he was approaching the midpoint in the sequence of vision-messages, that he saw a gigantic angel, one foot planted in the ocean and the other on the continent, with a book in his hand. From this comprehensive land-and-sea pulpit the angel was preaching from the book, a sermon explosive with thunder. This was a sermon no one would sleep through! John started to write down what he was hearing — he'd never heard a sermon like this one — but was then told not to. A voice told John to take the book from the huge angel, this God-Messenger preaching from his world-straddling pulpit. And so he did, he walked up to the angel and said, "Give me the book." The angel gave it to him, but then said, "Here it is; eat it. Eat this book. Don't just take notes on the sermon. Eat the book." And John did it. He put away his notebook and pencil. He picked

up his knife and fork. He ate the book.

The imagery, as is all the imagery in St. John's Revelation, is complex, a fusion of images from Moses and the Prophets and Jesus. This vision of the preaching angel is full of reverberating resonances. But what appears most immediate and obvious is that the mighty angel is preaching from the Bible, the Holy Scriptures. The book that John ate was the Bible, or as much of the Bible as was written at that time. The word "book" (Greek *biblion*, which arrives in our language as "Bible") suggests that the message God gives to us has meaning, plot, and purpose. Writing a book involves ordering words in a purposeful way. These words make sense. We do not come to God by guesswork: God reveals himself. These scriptural words reveal the Word that created heaven and earth; they reveal the Word that became human flesh in Jesus for our salvation. God's word is written, handed down, and translated for us so that we can enter the plot. We hold these Bibles in our hands and read them so that we can listen and respond to these creating and saving words and get in, firsthand, on the creating and saving.

The act of eating the book means that reading is not a merely objective act, looking at the words and ascertaining their meaning. Eating the book is in contrast with how most of us are trained to read books — develop a cool objectivity that attempts to preserve scientific or theological truth by eliminating as far as possible any personal participation that might con-

taminate the meaning. But none of us starts out reading that way. I have a granddaughter right now who eats books. When I am reading a story to her brother, she picks another off of a stack and chews on it. She is trying to get the book inside her the quickest way she knows, not through her ears, but through her mouth. She doesn't make fine distinctions between ear and mouth — any opening will do to get it inside her. But soon she'll go to school and be taught that that's not the way to go about it. She'll be taught to get answers out of her book. She'll learn to read books in order to pass examinations, and having passed the exams, put the book on the shelf and buy another.

But the reading that John is experiencing is not of the kind that equips us to pass an examination. 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. The angel does not instruct St. John to pass on information about God; he commands him 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.

Words — spoken and listened to, written and read

— are intended to do something *in* us, give health and wholeness, vitality and holiness, wisdom and hope. Yes, *eat* this book.

St. John, as mentioned earlier, wasn't the first biblical prophet to eat a book as if it were a peanut butter sandwich. Six hundred years earlier Ezekiel had been given a book and commanded to eat it (Ezek. 2:8–3:3). Ezekiel's contemporary, Jeremiah, also ate God's revelation, his version of the Holy Bible (Jer. 15:16). Ezekiel and Jeremiah, like John, lived in a time in which there was widespread pressure to live by a very different text than the one revealed by God in these Holy Scriptures. The diet of Holy Scripture for all three of them 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 setting-aside of the Holy Scriptures and the replacing of them with the text of our own experience — our needs and wants and feelings — for authoritative direction in our actual day-by-day living, these three rough-and-tumble prophets — John, Ezekiel, Jeremiah — responsible for the spiritual formation of God's people in the worst of times (Babylonian exile and Roman persecution) ought to be able to convince us of their 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.² We don't 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. The strong angel's command is also an invitation. Come to the Table and eat this book, for every word in the book is intended to do something in us, give health and wholeness, vitality and holiness to our souls and body.

¹. See Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961 [first published in 1950]).

². James Houston gives an account of this "energy and intelligence and prayer" in *The Act of Bible Reading*, ed. Elmer Dyck (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), pp. 148-73.