

The Word of God as Food: Implications for Eucharistic Theology

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the biblical portrayal of the word of God as something that can be eaten. This imagery provokes some thoughts on the relationship between the word of God and the Eucharist. The paper responds to the question posed in the *Lineamenta* of the XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2008) on “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church”. According to the *Lineamenta*, it was the felt close relationship between the Eucharist and the Word of God that motivated the choice of the theme “Word of God” for the Synod as the previous Synod was on the Eucharist. The question then is: In what ways can one better explain the close relationship between the Eucharist and the Word of God? This question becomes pertinent when one considers many aberrations in the understanding of the Eucharist as reflected in both theology and practice. Sometimes both are treated as two parallel or independent contexts of God’s presence such that some people tend to deemphasize the word of God and lay a rather exaggerated emphasis on the Eucharistic Host and the devotions connected with it.

An attentive study of the biblical understanding of the word of God as food provokes a number of problematic posers for the prevailing Eucharistic theology and practice. This is the very task that the present paper has set itself.

The portrayal of the word of God as food appears in a number of biblical texts. These texts have, no doubt, influenced faith and life in various ways, but their different interpretations have not gone far enough to expose their deeper implications. Three significant texts for this discussion are Ezek 2:8-3:10; Jer 15:16 and Prov 9:1-18. The text of Jeremiah is most probably older than that of Ezekiel, but for the purposes of the present discussion, the text of Ezekiel is better examined first. The chosen texts are not exhaustive, but they provide the relevant ingredients for the discussion.

2. The Eating of the Scroll in Ezek 2:8-3:3

In this strange text, Ezekiel is commanded by the vision to open his mouth and eat the scroll placed before him and then to go and prophesy to the house of Israel (Ezek 2:8-3:1). The text is within the narrative of the visions that frame the prophetic call of Ezekiel in 1:1-3:15. The central event of this call narrative is the eating of the scroll. The event is initially introduced in the very opening words of the book, in 1:2-3: “On the fifth day of the month, the fifth year, that is, of King Jehoiachin’s exile, the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar. There the hand of the Lord came upon me.” After this introduction, what follows is the account of the vision while the mentioned word of the Lord is actually spoken out in 2:1-8 ending with the command to eat the scroll. In 2:9 the prophetic narrator continues from the element introduced in 2:3 regarding the hand of the Lord that came upon him. This hand is now reported as giving the scroll to the prophet to eat. Dale Launderville summarizes the whole section thus: “Ezekiel’s call (1:1-3:15) was like a rite of passage. He was overcome by the vision of YHWH enthroned above the four living creatures (1:28) and was revived by ‘spirit’ (*rûah*, 2:2) so that he might listen to Yhwh’s commission. The scroll that he consumed gave him a message from Yhwh that he was to speak (2:8-3:3).”¹

Ezekiel opens his mouth and eats the scroll and it tastes as sweet as honey in his mouth (3:2-3). What interests us most in the present paper is the significance of eating the scroll. Why must the prophet

¹ Dale Launderville, “Ezekiel’s Throne-Chariot Vision: Spiritualizing the Model of Divine Royal Rule”, *CBQ* 66 (2004) 368.

eat the scroll? Is it not enough to read and understand the text of the scroll? Any implication for the Christian Eucharist?

2:8: The text begins in v. 8 with two significant commands: hear (*šema'*) and eat (*'ekôl*). Both words (hearing and eating) are in parallel, but what the prophet is commanded to hear is not the same as what he is commanded to eat. The words of the scroll are not spoken out to the prophet. The hearing has only to do with the order to eat the scroll. So, the emphasis is on eating the scroll. "Open your mouth and eat that which I am giving to you!" The word used for eating here is the normal Hebrew form *'akl*, and it is not used metaphorically, even though the whole episode belongs to the genre of metaphor. The scroll is actually meant to be eaten as one would eat normal food.

2:9-10: The scroll that the prophet is commanded to eat has inscriptions on both sides, and on the scroll are written these words of doom: lamentation, mourning and woe. A scroll is an ancient writing material made of papyrus or animal skins. Writings on scrolls are usually on one side, but the fact that the present scroll has writings on both sides is an indication of the grievous nature of the impending disaster.² The real content of the scroll is not mentioned, and the three significant words on the scroll (lamentation, mourning and woe) are better understood as references to the effect of the message rather than its content.³

3:1-2: An interesting feature of this text is the relationship between the eating of the scroll and the mission to prophesy. The aim of eating the scroll is to proclaim its message. According to Luis Alonso Schökel, the prophet's task is not to burden the people with the reading of the scroll but to digest and assimilate it himself and proclaim its message to them.⁴ The eating should not be seen as having a magical effect but an act with expressed orientation. Without the proclamation, the eating becomes irrelevant. As Alonso Schökel puts it, "There is nothing mechanistic about the prophetic activity; it is vital, dynamic and interior."⁵ A significant point to glean from this text is that the eating of the word of God is oriented towards the prophetic proclamation of its message.

3:3: The prophet actually eats the scroll and finds it very sweet, sweeter than honey. The gift of this scroll recalls the gift of the manna in the desert. In Exod 16:31, it is reported that the manna from heaven tasted like wafers made with honey. In a similar way, the present scroll is said to taste sweeter than honey in the mouth. The sweet taste of YHWH's word is also alluded to in other texts (such texts as Jer 15:16; Ps 19:10; 119:103). From these other texts, one gathers that the sweetness of the scroll is derived from the fact of its divine provenance.⁶ According to Leslie Allen, the words signify that the prophetic mission will bring hostility and rejection to the prophet but the privilege outweighs the hardship.⁷ In other words, the burden though hard will be sweet to carry.

This text provokes a number of ideas that can pose serious challenges to the prevailing Eucharistic theology. The passage deals with the commissioning of Ezekiel as a prophet. The eating of the scroll serves as the initiation ritual for the prophet. This initiation equips him with the main ingredient for his mission, and this ingredient is the word of God. By eating the word, he symbolically undergoes a direct encounter with the word, and this empowers him to proclaim the word.

3. The Eating of the Word in Jer 15:16

² Herbert G. May – E. L. Allen, "The Book of Ezekiel", *The Interpreters Bible*, 6 (ed. George Arthur Buttrick: New York, Abingdon, 1956) 78-79.

³ See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 24; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel. Chapters 1-24* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 125.

⁴ Luis Alonso Schökel, *The Inspired Word. Scripture in the Light of Language and Literature* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 93.

⁵ Schökel, *The Inspired Word*, 93.

⁶ May – Allen, "The Book of Ezekiel," 79.

⁷ Leslie Allen, "Ezekiel 1-19" (WBC 28; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1994).

In Jeremiah, one finds the same idea of eating the word and getting endowed with the power to proclaim the word. It is well represented in Jer 15:16: “When your words came I devoured them: your word was my delight and the joy of my heart; for I was called by your Name, Lord God of Sabaoth.”

This text is based on the account of Jeremiah’s call in Jer 1:9 where YHWH is said to have stretched out his hand and touched the prophet’s mouth and then said: “There, I have put my words into your mouth.” The text recalls Deut 18:18 where YHWH says to Moses: “I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.” William L. Holladay argues that these words of Deut 18:18 gave inspiration to the text of Jer 1:9,⁸ even though it is presented there as Jeremiah’s own experience.

Jeremiah recalls this experience later on and links his eating of the word of God with his prophetic call, as he says in Jer 15:16: “When your words came I devoured them: your word was my delight and the joy of my heart; for I was called by your Name, Lord God of Sabaoth.” This text so resembles that of Ezekiel that some interpreters try to see some literary dependence between the two texts⁹ or even a type of historical and relationship between the two prophets.¹⁰ Following Holladay, one traces a process of literary relationship from Deut 18:18 to Jer 1:9 and from Jer 1:9 to Jer 15:16, which in turn influenced Ezek 2:8-3:3.¹¹

Eating the word is, thus, a rite of prophetic initiation. It is an experience that symbolically ties together the mission of the prophet.

4. The Banquet of Lady Wisdom in Prov 9:1-6

¹Wisdom has built herself a house. She has hewn her seven pillars; ²she has slaughtered her beasts, drawn her wine; she has laid her table. ³She has despatched her maidservants and proclaimed from the heights above the city, ⁴“Who is simple? Let him come this way.” To the fool she says, ⁵“Come and eat my bread, drink the wine which I have drawn! ⁶Leave foolishness behind and you will live, go forwards in the way of perception’.”

This text presents Wisdom as having built herself a house with seven pillars, prepared a banquet, and dispatched her maidservants to call the simple to the banquet. The text belongs to the larger context of Proverbs 8-9, which introduces the figure called Wisdom who is presented as a female figure. Thus, we may refer to her as “Lady Wisdom”.

The figure of Lady Wisdom in this section of Proverbs has been interpreted from multiple perspectives, and sometimes some of these interpretations are based on presupposed ideas and do not pay enough attention to the actual text. Some see her as the representation of a deity, a goddess, and the argument is often based on the fact that one finds a similar phenomenon in the surrounding cultures. For instance, in Ancient Egypt, the word *Maat* stands for truth and is represented as the goddess of truth and order. In Babylonia, the goddess, Ishtar, is regarded as the creatress of wisdom. While such is the fact in many ANE writings, one does not have enough evidence to argue that the writer of Proverbs was thinking along that line. Some scholars even argue that Wisdom is presented here as a personification of YHWH himself. Other interpretations identify it as the Messiah (the Christ) while others see it as a direct reference to a real female personality, the person of the mother of the messiah, the Virgin Mary. None of these interpretations does enough justice to the complex use of the term in Proverbs. Such interpretations are often very influential, and consequently they continue to bias the understanding of the use of the term itself.

Since Lady Wisdom is not the representation of a divine figure, it becomes imperative to pay good attention to the text so as to understand what the author means in the use of this imagery. In 8:1, Lady

⁸ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah* (2 vols; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986, 1989) 1, 36; Idem, “Had Ezekiel Known Jeremiah Personally?” *CBQ* 63 (2001) 32.

⁹ So Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel I* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 136.

¹⁰ So Holladay, “Had Ezekiel Known Jeremiah Personally?”, 32.

¹¹ See Holladay, “Had Ezekiel Known Jeremiah Personally?”, 32-34.

Wisdom is also identified as Understanding. This implies that the use of the term “understanding” in the book is also with reference to her. Ordinarily, one would understand “wisdom” and “understanding” as abstract ideas. How does one explain this personification of abstract ideas? Who is this personified Wisdom? Is she really a person?

We adopt the opinion of the scholars who interpret the banquet of Lady Wisdom in 9:1-6 as actually a reference to the body of instructions acquired from the school of wisdom.¹² The banquet motif has been recognized as common in both the biblical literature and in the literature of the ancient Near East, a typical example being the famous epic of Keret, where the invitation to a banquet is presented in a form similar to that in the present text of Proverbs.¹³ These parallels notwithstanding, there is always the responsibility of interpreting each text with its own context. In the present context of Proverbs, the teaching of wisdom is to be understood as the banquet of wisdom. The maidservants are implicitly the wisdom teachers. Along the same line of interpretation, the house with seven pillars is seen as representing the seven main collections that constitute the book of Proverbs. There are really seven collections if one subtracts Chs 1-9 and 31:10-31 both of which were composed later on to frame the book.

Those invited to the banquet of Lady Wisdom are referred to as the simple. The Hebrew word here is *pethaim*, plural of the form *pethi* meaning “simple, open-minded”, being derived from the verb *patah* (“be open, spacious”). The simple here is understood as the one who is not yet endowed with wisdom, one who is open to learning, and thus can be taught. The invitation is aimed at helping the simple to abandon the simple-minded approach to life and come to learn the practical ways to a successful living. That is why the simple/fool is called upon: “Leave foolishness behind and you will live, go forwards in the ways of understanding” (9:6).

The implication of this text is that the banquet functions as a continuous process of initiation to becoming wise. Eating the banquet is a metaphor for getting instructed in the ways of wisdom. Thus, the point is not actually on eating but on learning and living according to the principles learnt. Here, one finds a thread that links the text to the Eucharistic theology. Eating is used as a metaphor for learning. The school of wisdom is a banquet of knowledge.

5. Implications for Eucharistic Theology

This paper has been trying to articulate the nature of the relationship between the word of God and the Eucharist. It confronts the implications of the fact that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is encountered as food in the Eucharist. In the Christian setting, the Eucharistic bread and wine function as the sacramental symbols of the continued presence of Christ in the community. The argument becomes very simple: Jesus is the Word of God, and he is present also as the Eucharistic Bread; thus, the Eucharistic Bread re-presents the Word of God. In other words, it is the Word of God that is sacramentally eaten in the Eucharist. This statement may appear simple, but its theological implications are immense. The question then is: What is the essence of this eating?

i. OT Perspective: In the texts of the Old Testament, examined above, the word of God is presented as food, and the eating of this food functions as a symbol for a more spiritual assimilation of the word as well as an initiation to the mission of being a dispenser of the word. The real challenge here is to see the

¹² See G. Baumann, *Die Weisheitsgestalt in Proverbiën 1–9. Traditionsgeschichtliche und theologische Studien* (FAT 16; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1966) 207-209; Roland E. Murphy, “Proverbs” (WBC 22; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1998).

¹³ In the epic, the king, Keret, summons his wife, Hurriya, with these words: “Hearken O lady Hurriya! Prepare the fattest of thy stall-fed ones; open a jar of wine. Summon my seventy peers, my eighty barons, the peers of Khubur the Great, Khubur the Grand. She prepares the fattest of her stall-fed ones. She opens the jar of wine. Into her presence she causes his peers to come, Into her presence his barons she causes to come: the peers of Khubur the Great, Khubur the Grand” (*ANET*, 146). See discussion in M. Lichtenstein, “The Banquet Motif in Keret and in Prov 9”, *JANESCU* 1 (1968/69) 19–31.

Eucharist not merely as a rite having a magical effect but as an initiation rite for prophetic mission. It is a ritual experience that ties together the main elements of the Christian mission. It is a memorial meal that reminds the partakers that they are commissioned to proclaim that which they have eaten.

ii. Johannine Perspective: In John's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the Incarnate Word of God. It is this Word that is identified as the Bread of Life in the great discourse of John 6:22-71. According to this text, people are looking for Jesus because they expect to eat material bread from him. Jesus points to another bread: the Bread of Life, which he identifies with himself (6:35). He shifts the emphasis from material eating to believing in himself (6:35, 40). In the two verses (vv 35,40), Jesus makes it clear that the sole condition for eternal life is belief in him, but in vv. 50-51, the same eternal life is anchored on eating the bread of life. It is the opinion of most scholars that here in verses 50-51, eating the Bread of life is used as a metaphor for believing in the person of Jesus, who is the Word of God.¹⁴ This Johannine position agrees in principle with this response of Jesus to the tempter in the Synoptic accounts: "Human beings do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4; cf. Luke 4:4). The synthesis of every word that comes from the mouth of God is Jesus himself. He is the Word which gives true nourishment to all. So the real spiritual food is the Word of God.

iii. Institution of the Eucharist: The relationship between the Eucharist and the word of God is clearly expressed in the words of its institution. Most scholars agree that the oldest account of the institution of the Eucharist is that found in the Pauline text of 1 Cor 11:24-26:

And after he had given thanks, he broke it, and he said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in memory of me.' And in the same way, with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.' Whenever you eat this bread, then, and drink this cup, you are proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes.

The most significant idea in this text is "proclaiming (*katangellete*) the Lord's death until he comes", and this incorporates the whole paschal mystery together with the hope of the parousia.¹⁵ The verb here is *katangellein* which is consistently used in the New Testament to express the act of preaching or proclaiming the "goodnews". The point of the text is that the Eucharist is a memorial meal proclaiming the goodnews. This "goodnews" is the main content of the Word of God in the New Testament. The main Christian mission is to preach this Word which is concretised in the person of Jesus Christ. All these buttress the point that the Eucharist is in essence the ritual proclamation of the Word of God.

iv. Patristic Perspectives: The intrinsic relationship between the Word of God and the Bread is very much present in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, but because of the many controversial issues involved in the history of the development of Eucharistic theology, the deeper implications of the relationship have not really received much theological refinement.

John Chrysostom speaks elaborately on the relationship between the Johannine bread of life and the Word (*Logos*), as in this discourse: "He called Himself 'living bread' because He welds together for us this life and the life to come. Therefore, He added: 'If anyone eats of this bread he shall live forever.' Surely, 'bread' here means the teachings of salvation, and faith in Him, or else His Body, for both strengthen the soul."¹⁶

¹⁴ See more recent discussion in J. Painter, "Tradition and Interpretation in John 6," *NTS* 35 (1989) 421-450; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids 1990) 276-280, 295-299; Maarten J. J. Menken, "John 51c-58: Eucharist or Christology," *Biblica* 74 (1993) 1-26.

¹⁵ On this point, the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, "The command of Jesus to repeat his actions and words 'until he comes' does not only ask us to remember Jesus and what he did. It is directed at the liturgical celebration, by the apostles and their successors, of the *memorial* of Christ, of his life, of his death, of his Resurrection, and of his intercession in the presence of the Father" (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church. Pocket Edition* [ed. Geoffrey Chapman; Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994/1995] 1341).

¹⁶ St John Chrysostom, *Homily 46 [John 6.41-53]* (trans. Sr. Thomas Aquinas Goggin) in *The Fathers of the Church. A New Translation*, 33 (ed. Roy Joseph Defarrari; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1957) 465.

The issue is presented from another but equally significant perspective in the theology of St Augustine: “That Bread which you see on the altar, consecrated by the word of God, is the Body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what the chalice holds, consecrated by the word of God, is the Blood of Christ.”¹⁷ What is implied in Augustine’s teaching here is that without the word of God there is no consecrated bread. In other places, Augustine identifies the Word of God as Bread. Quoting the opening verse of John’s Gospel, Augustine says, “‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; and the Word was God.’ O food and Bread of angels! The angels are filled by Thee; they are sated, yet they do not draw away from Thee. They live by Thee; they are wise in Thee; they are happy because of Thee.”¹⁸ In this sermon, Augustine addresses the Word (*Logos*) as the Food and Bread of Angels. This imagery is further amplified in another sermon: “In order to be in the Virgin’s womb, did the Word leave heaven? And how would the angels live, if the Word should leave heaven? Yet, in order that man might eat the Bread of angels, the Lord of the angels became man.”¹⁹ Here, Augustine equates the Word with the Bread eaten by angels which has now become the food of human beings.

In a similar manner, St Jerome equates the Word of God with the Body of Christ: “The Lord’s flesh is real food and his blood real drink: to nourish ourselves with his flesh and to drink his blood in not only the Eucharist but also the reading of Sacred Scripture. In fact, the Word of God, drawn from the knowledge of the Scriptures, is real food and drink.”²⁰

v. Synthesis: What can be gleaned from all these is that it is not enough to eat the sacramental bread. One must see the eating as a continuous initiation to mission and a reminder of the obligation to get nourished with the Word. Any Eucharistic theology that does not make the Word of God central does not really understand the real meaning of the Eucharist. Interestingly, the Fathers of Vatican II Council stress this relationship in these words: “The two parts which in a sense go to make up the Mass, viz. the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship.”²¹ The two parts of the Mass are so interrelated that they form only one table and not two: “The Eucharistic table set for us is the table both of the Word of God and of the Body of the Lord.”²²

Sometimes the Eucharist has been treated in such a way as if it could stand alone without the Word of God which it re-presents. The problem really is that the Eucharist has not always been interpreted in its close relationship with the Word of God. The consequence is the apparent dichotomy between the cult of the Eucharist and the reading of the Word. Despite the liturgical practice of reading the Scriptures at the beginning of the Mass, people still tend to see the Scriptural reading as one of those preliminary rites preceding the main rite which is the Eucharist. The fact is that both are often treated as if they were radically independent ways of encountering the presence of Christ.

6. Conclusion

The *Lineamenta* of the Synod, at the end of Chapter 1, challenges all its readers with the following question: “What is the relation between the preceding Synod on the Eucharist to the present one on the Word of God?” This question is a pointer to the scarce theological emphasis on the relationship between the Word of God and the Eucharist, despite the fact that some Church Documents point to it. This paper responds to this lack by arguing on two main fronts: 1. that the Eucharistic meal needs to be better understood and celebrated as a rite intrinsically linked to the Word of God, being by its nature the

¹⁷ St. Augustine, *Sermons* 227 (trans. Sr. Mary Sarah Muldoney) in *The Fathers of the Church. A New Translation*, 32 (ed. Roy Joseph Defarrari; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959) 196.

¹⁸ St. Augustine, *Sermon* 196, in *Fathers of the Church*, 46.

¹⁹ St. Augustine, *Sermon* 225, in *Fathers of the Church*, 191.

²⁰ St. Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, 313: CCL 72, 278. Quoted in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, 35, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, No. 26, 25 June 2008, 9-10.

²¹ Vatican II Document: The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 56; see also Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 21; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1346.

²² Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1346; *Dei Verbum*, 21.

sacramental expression of the spiritual nourishment which the Word gives; 2. that the Eucharist is better interpreted as a rite of initiation to prophetic mission. In other words, the Eucharist celebrates that which the Christian is called to witness in the world, and this is Jesus Christ, the Word of God, whose main teaching is the love of God and humanity.