How to Eat Your Bible: Performance and Understanding for Mennonites

Trevor George Hunsberger Bechtel, Loyola University, Chicago, IL

> "You, son of man, listen to the words I say; do not be a rebel like that rebellious set. Open your mouth and eat what I am about to give to you." I looked. A hand was there, stretching out to me and holding a scroll. He unrolled it in front of me; it was written on back and front; on it was written "lamentations, wailings, moanings." He said, "Son of man, eat what is given to you. eat this scroll, then go and speak to the House of Israel." *Ezekiel 2.8-3.1*

It is not common practice, in our highly textual society, to begin a presentation with an exhortation to eat paper. Granted, Ezekiel's paper would have been very different from ours today. Our acid-free paper is meant to last. Our perfect binding accepts no fault. Our typography readably fixes words in linear order for the ages. Ezekiel's scroll held three words and it was meant to be consumed.

It is, however, more common to begin essays with reflections on what we are doing when we try to understand these papered words. The ethics of this practice has been given some attention, particularly as it relates to biblical interpretation, with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's presidental address to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1987, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation."[1]

In that essay Schüssler Fiorenza suggests all objective, value-free, biblical interpretation is in fact male interpretation. It is interpretation by a certain group for that same group. Scholars who want biblical interpretation to be ethical must be good biblical scholars, but they must also

> engage biblical scholarship in a hermeneutic-evaluative discursive practice exploring the power/knowledge relation inscribed in contemporary biblical discourse and in the biblical texts themselves.[2]

I am in total agreement with Schüssler Fiorenza that in order to ethically interpret the biblical text we need to be, in Daniel Patte's words, both critical and accountable.[3] But in seeking to understand the Bible with the same voracity as Ezekiel did, do we not need to do more than simply interpret it ethically?

My thesis is that we need to perform the biblical text in order to understand it. In what follows I want to merge biblical understanding and ethical practices, and I want to argue that performance is the best way to think about the space where they meet. My argument will be necessarily circular, but I hope to show that it is dialogical as well. I will do this by looking at Schüssler Fiorenza's approach to the Bible in *Rhetoric and Ethics* and John Howard Yoder's approach to the Christian body in *Body Politics*. In conclusion I will show that this approach to performance is not unlike the approach to the Bible that the Anabaptists had.

Schüssler Fiorenza creates a detailed analytic compass through which she becomes more confident about being able to interpret the biblical text without creating damaging readings. To this end she is deeply invested in uncovering the rhetoric of interpretation in both the present and the past. Her work is complex and plural, but let me suggest its breadth by summarizing the compass that orients this process.

This compass begins with the "Subject of Interpretation." Since the compass is always pointed at the interpreter and at the text, our orientation here consists in asking questions about gender, race, class, social location, and operative community and theological frameworks. From the subject we move to the subject's "(Unreflected) Presupposition" — worldviews, unconscious assumptions, power relations, convictions, and dreams — unarticulated biases no-one can escape. From here we move more formally to "Intellectual Frameworks and Models" — those understandings of scholarship, scientific investigation, interpretation history or theology which

frame our academic work — and to "Methods and Methodology," the control and critical selection of and among various intellectual frameworks. Schüssler Fiorenza does not want to be limited to only the religious disciplines; the ethical interpreter also needs to address diverse disciplines such as anthropology, philosophy, social theory, communications. At this point the interpreter can propose an "Area of Research" and begin to understand their "Basic Questions and Interpretive Metaphors." All of this work is directed toward those questions inside a hermeneutics of transformation – questions of "Values, Goals, and Visions" which determine at last both the meaning and ethical valences of a text and an interpreter. It is important to highlight that the apex of the interpretive process is transformation and social change.

I believe Schüssler Fiorenza's very thorough work offers the best approach to biblical scholarship yet conceived. Most valuably, she deliberately decenters the objective mooring of biblical scholarship. Biblical scholarship becomes more performative when language and rhetoric are the determining questions rather than the supposedly objective questions of science.

However, I am dubious about the possibility of generating biblical understanding with Schüssler Fiorenza's compass, which admittedly provides a comprehensive orientation and detailed and interwoven checks and balances to guarantee ethical interpretation of the text. But this very breadth of vision makes any reading of scripture difficult.[4] It becomes the almost exclusive domain of scholars — and scholars with lots of time to get their moorings. Secondly, in the diversity of points on the compass lies an openness or, more starkly, a demand to use non-biblical resources to guarantee the ethicalness of our interpretation. Although scripture is never free from the culture in which it was first composed, and although we can never free ourselves from our own presuppositions and prejudices, I still remain doubtful about the attempt to use outside criteria to ensure ethical interpretation. Take the idea of social change as an example. Certainly Jesus attempted to effect certain social changes. Certainly some of the most memorable performances of scripture in history are also part and parcel of social change. But should social change be the apex of the interpretive process? From our standpoint it certainly seems as if it should — lots of things need changing. But social change — in and of itself — does not necessarily bring about the Kingdom of God. How can we be sure that these criteria will be any more ethical than those we discover when we take the text into our bodies?

We take the text into our bodies when we attempt to understand it by performing it in our lives or by seeing it performed in other people's lives. In making this argument I am setting a distance between biblical *interpretation* and biblical *understanding*, as well as between ethical *theory* and ethical *practices*.

Biblical understanding is contingent upon ethical practices and vice versa. You have to eat your Bible to understand it; you have to take it into your body and see what you become.

What does this look like? I think that John Howard Yoder has glimpsed the pattern of this life in his *Body Politics*.[5] Here Yoder introduces five practices of the Christian Body before the watching world. Although not comprehensive, these practices are idiomatic of what the church — the Kingdom of God — can offer to discussion in the public square. The five practices are:

1. mutual accountability, or forgiveness, or binding and loosing
2. baptism into a voluntary community
3. the sharing of a common meal, or the Eucharist
4. the valuing of diversity, or the Multiplicity of Gifts
5. Open Meeting, or the discerning of the spirit in the giving of truth in a conversation

The practices which constitute the Christian Body make visible to the world the truth of the Kingdom of God. Each is thoroughly biblical, but each only takes up its meaning inside the life of a Christian community. We only *understand* the Bible when we perform it in our lives or see it performed in other people's lives. Someone who has interpreted the Bible but not performed it is like an actor dressed in costume, holding appropriate props and standing on an elegantly decorated set but unattached to — or worse, unaware of — the play going on all around them. Mennonites are particularly prone to looking like this actor.

However, nothing in Yoder's five practices forces us out into the public square. Yoder admits as much in *For the Nations*. He acknowledges that his work has been viewed as sectarian and states that some of his friends have encouraged this misreading. Stanley Hauerwas is perhaps the most notorious example — consider the title of his book *Against the Nations*. In *For the Nations* we are reminded that everything about the five practices is public. Yoder lifts up these practices and shows their relevance as public truth.[6] This

is how the Christian Body looks to a watching and waiting world. But what if the world isn't watching?

I am committed to Yoder's vision in *Body Politics.* But I prefer to recast these practices as "performances," or alternatively to use these practices to imagine new Christian performances that would engage the watching world. Yoder's primary goal is always to give an argument that the church must be the church. Of course the church cannot be the church for the church; the church must be the church for the world. We must be aware of our audience even when they aren't watching us. We know that our body is a controversial one. We should expect it to get attention if it's moving — even if that attention is negative.

Conclusion

Let us turn to sixteenth-century Anabaptism, which was rife with examples of performance. From the scripturally dependent confessions of faith used to test consensus rather than fix doctrine[7] to the oral/aural nature of Anabaptist communication,[8] or from their anticlericalism and egalitarianism[9] to their strong spirit-centered hermeneutical communities, Anabaptists emphasized the internalizing and living out of scripture as central to the Christian life.

A few stories suffice to demonstrate early Anabaptism's performative character. Arnold Snyder tells this story taken from the life of Fridolin Sicher:

> [Sicher] reported that he could not even go out for a walk on Sundays without bumping into huddled crowds of people doing their 'readings.' Furthermore, gross commoners with no culture or learning began to read. 'I myself have heard,' he wrote, 'an illiterate person preach or 'read,' which is something I cannot understand.' Sicher concluded that either these readers were full of grace like St. Peter and the apostles, or the devil was behind their activity. Sicher clearly leaned toward the latter explanation.[10]

The reading alluded to in this passage would not need to be reading as we know it. Often Anabaptists would hear the "letter" of scripture read aloud, remember central passages, and by living in accordance with these principles would claim to be true interpreters of the Word. In Anabaptist circles this sort of spirit-led interpretation was given more authority than the written word so that literacy gave no privilege in interpretation. The situation was "impossibly egalitarian: those who had the Spirit . . . could claim access to the 'Word' *even without*

being able to read the letter."[11] Snyder contends that "not only can we assume that dialogue was possible but we must consider it virtually impossible to avoid."[12]

A further example of the lengths Anabaptists went to in order to imbibe scripture is found in this quotation about an early Anabaptist:

> [Anabaptists] tried to memorize large sections of the Scriptures, not in order to become literalists in a negative sense but in order to really know what the call to faithfulness meant for them. One of them confessed: 'I hope to be able to learn one hundred chapters of the Testament by heart.'[13]

If Anabaptism was as strongly oral as Snyder asserts, then implications arise for our topic. The performative approach to Christianity created a world in which truth was easily accessible (accessible from a written text like the Bible even without the ability to read), the intellectual property of the peasants as much as of the learned, and subject to continual discussion. Balthasar Hubmaier collects these performative emphases in this wonderful quotation:

> Whichever Christian on earth can teach me better should show me such with Scripture for God's sake. I will wholeheartedly follow him with great thanksgiving as he follows Christ. Truth is [unkillable].[14]

I dwell here on how Anabaptists took scripture into their bodies, on a rhetorical interpretation that also had a strong moral compass but was not guaranteed by any outside criteria. I could have as easily told martyr stories or stories illustrative of Yoder's five practices. I also could have told the stories of Hilary of Poitiers, Catherine of Sienna, or Teresa of Avila. For that matter I could have told the story of Oscar Romero, the uncle I never knew — martyred in Africa before I was born, or Marcie Boniferro who walks the night streets of Toronto extending God's love to the women and men trapped there. Each of these stories embodies a vulnerability and narrates the taking of significant risks. I've focused on more textual stories because they show how Anabaptist internalizations of the biblical story occupied space in the sixteenth century. Then we were noticed because, I think, we were trying to perform. Performance is a good metaphor for the Christian life because any performance is for an audience. At some point, no matter how hard we have practiced, how good we think we have become, or how good others tell us we are, we need to step out onto the stage and attempt a performance. We need to be vulnerable. We need to take risks. Performance moves beyond both

Schüssler Fiorenza's rhetorical-ethical interpretation and Yoder's practices, because it incorporates attention to the text and practices, but holds them together and then moves out from behind the curtain onto the stage.

Who will become our audience today, and how will we perform for them?

Notes

[1] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107.1 (1988): 3-17.
[2] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 30.
[3] Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).
[4] Schüssler Fiorenza does admit the importance of common sense interpretations. See especially *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 53. However, I take the overall force of her argument to exclude the possibility of these readings, if not theorectically then practically.
[5] John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 2001).
[6] John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). See especially the Introduction.
[7] C. J. Dyck, "Foreword," in H.J. Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope and One God* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 16.
[8] C. Arnold Snyder, "Orality, Literacy and Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65 (1991): 374.
[9] C. Arnold Snyder, *An Introduction to Mennonite History and Theology* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1992), 83.
[10] Snyder, "Orality," 374.
[11] Snyder, *Introduction*, 83 (emphasis his).
[12] Snyder, "Orality," 374.
[13] C. J. Dyck, "Hermeneutics and Discipleship," in Willard Swartley, ed. *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 32-33.
[14] H. Wayne Pipkin and John Howard Yoder, ed., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1989) 76. The editors of the English translation had difficulty moving the German "*Die Wahrheit ist untödlich*." into an agreeable English. H. Wayne Pipkin, who translated this document, chose "immortal," while Yoder prefers "unkillable." The slogan in its context in this document is revealing about Hubmaier's approach to the truth. While the truth is given an absolutism in this quotation, Hubmaier's confidence in his appraisal of it is humble and open to critique. Yoder's defense of his translation is particularly telling, regarding how the slogan is absolutist but not abstract: "According to the preference of editor Yoder, the less elegant and more literal translation sometimes renders best the nuance of the parallel to the cross and resurrection of Christ. The point is not that truth is timeless or never dies, but that it rises again, that it cannot be kept down."