

Introduction: The Bible through the Eyes of the Hungry

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One of Jesus' more famous sayings appears in the scene of his temptation in the desert (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). After fasting for "forty days and forty nights" (v. 2), Satan tempts Jesus to "turn these stones into bread" (v. 3). Jesus retorts that the human person lives "not by bread alone . . . but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (v. 4).

This pious sentiment, when combined with a phrase from Jesus' defense of the woman who anointed him ("the poor you will always have with you"; Mark 14:7 and parallels), has led to disastrous consequences in Christian attitudes toward poverty and injustice. After all, many Christians have been able to argue, Jesus himself said that poverty is an inevitable factor in human society. Why should we trouble ourselves about it? So what if someone is hungry? The Christian's duty is not to feed them but to bring the word of God to

the poor. As long as they hear the gospel, Christians have done their job.

Why “By Bread Alone”?

While somewhat overstated, perhaps to the point of caricature, this synopsis makes clear the essential problem of the proof-textual use of these two sayings. Jesus refused bread for himself; he did not deny it to someone else. Indeed, one need only compare the stories of his miraculous feedings of the multitudes to see that he was remembered for quite the opposite (see, e.g., Mark 6:33-44; John 6). To choose to fast is one thing; to stand idly while others go hungry is quite another.

As for the second passage, Jesus did not enjoin the disciples to do nothing, since there will always be poor among us. Rather, his defense of the prophetic woman’s action served to ridicule the onlookers’ hollow objection to her use of the oil for his messianic anointing (Mark 14:8; Matt. 26:12). The Johannine version makes explicit what may be implicit in the synoptic version of this scene: the protest was motivated by avarice (John 12:6), not by concern for the poor. Jesus’ words were not a rebuke of the concern being voiced, but its intensification: the poor are *always* in need, and thus constitute a ceaseless claim on the faithful. His words invoked the words of Torah: “*Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’*” (Deut. 15:11; emphasis added). Elsewhere in the New Testament we find a repetition of Third Isaiah’s claim (Isa. 58:6-10) that those who are faithful to God “share [their] bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into [their] house” (Isa. 58:7; cf. Matt. 25:31-46; James 2:15;17).

While we would not want to argue that “bread alone” is sufficient to a biblical understanding of salvation, we have chosen this title as an explicit corrective to the distortion of the biblical message by self-proclaimed Christians who espouse a radical laissez-faire economic policy (à la Ayn Rand), who value a hyperindividualism over the common good, and who foster antipathy toward the poor. This extreme social Darwinism has been coated with a thin veneer of piety, with proponents arguing that the poor need “not bread alone,” but the gospel (alone). Yet how can one speak of “gospel” when it has been eviscerated of the good news Jesus preached and enacted? The open table, healing works, and other aspects of Jesus’ liberating praxis cannot be dismissed as tangential or irrelevant to his proclamation of the in-breaking reign of God. In harmony with the message of “the Law and the Prophets,” Jesus affirmed the inseparability of honor for God and love of neighbor—a love to be expressed in concrete actions to remedy the plight of the poor and foster the common good.

The Genesis of the Project

By Bread Alone is a collaborative work that grows out of the Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics (FBH) Task Force of the Catholic Biblical Association of America (CBA). Scholars have contributed articles in this volume that focus on the important and urgent issue of hunger so as to explore, understand, and articulate a feminist perspective that is biblically based and socially relevant. This collection of essays is modeled after an earlier project of the Task Force that culminated in the publication of *Earth, Wind, and Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation*, edited by Carol Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan, published by Liturgical Press in 2004.

The present project began in 2008 at the Seventy-First International Meeting of the CBA at Fordham University, New

York City, when Kathleen O'Connor led a communal exegesis of Isaiah 58, on fasting and true religion. This exercise involved three movements: (1) the twenty-two participants, all feminist biblical scholars, first dialogued with one another about their present contexts in personal, national, and global terms; (2) this was followed by a critical analysis of the biblical text; and (3) a reexamination of our contemporary contexts in light of the communal exegesis. The communal aspect is significant because the diverse background of the participants adds richness and texture to the interpretation, and most importantly, it involves the *praxis*¹ of the critical dimension of a feminist perspective. The experience proved to be insightful and profitable and the members of the Task Force decided to engage in a similar exercise in the following years.

The selection of the topic for this project, *Hunger*, however, was inspired by Kathleen O'Connor's 2009 Presidential Address to the members of the CBA, entitled "Let All the Peoples Praise You: Biblical Studies and a Hermeneutics of Hunger." In her presentation, O'Connor introduced and dealt briefly with the concept of a hermeneutics of hunger, and because of its relevance to the project, we dedicate the next section of this introduction to it. In 2010, a portion of the Task Force's meeting at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, was dedicated to the planning of what came to be called the Hunger Project.

The Issue of Hunger and the Hermeneutics of Hunger

In her 2009 presidential address to the CBA, Kathleen O'Connor called its members to consider the importance of expanding the interpretive horizons of biblical studies to include a hermeneutics of hunger.² This concept was developed by Dorothee Sölle in her book,

1. We will provide a description of this concept in the next section.

The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance (2001).³ In this introduction we elaborate briefly on some key ideas at the background of Sölle's hermeneutics of hunger as it, together with O'Connor's address, inspired the contributors of this project to pursue the critical and communal analysis of selected biblical passages on the topic of hunger.

The process of communal exegesis done by the FBH Task Force began with a series of dialogues about contemporary contexts in personal, national, and global terms. This step in the interpretive process reflects not only a critical aspect of a feminist perspective, but it also constitutes a key stage in a hermeneutics of hunger. According to Julia Prinz, this hermeneutical key is part of what Sölle refers to as a *double-contextualization*. This stage foregrounds the idea that the biblical text can be experienced as revelatory and transformative only when its reading is contextualized in the reader's sociopolitical situation. "The biblical text cannot speak into a vacuum but needs to have an historical subject to be able to create an experience."⁴ In addition to the historical subject undergoing the experience, the biblical text itself also must be contextualized through critical analysis focusing on its own sociohistorical dimensions. Prinz observes that "Sölle does not question the method of historical criticism . . . itself, but critiques its omission of any transition into the socio-political reality of the corresponding time of the exegesis. The lack of this transition is for Sölle the core of problematic exegesis, which perpetuates social injustice and silently legitimizes human atrocities."⁵

2. Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Let All the Peoples Praise You: Biblical Studies and a Hermeneutics of Hunger," *CBQ* 72, no. 1 (2010): 1–14; reprinted herein as chapter 1.

3. Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

4. Julia D. E. Prinz, *Endangering Hunger for God: Johann Baptist Metz and Dorothee Sölle at the Interface of Biblical Hermeneutics and Christian Spirituality*, Religion-Geschichte-Gesellschaft, Fundamentaltheologische Studien 44 (Berlin: LIT, 2007), 23.

5. Prinz, *Endangering Hunger for God*, 22.

The choice of words here is far from capricious: Sölle's insight about the importance of such double-contextualization emerges out of her confrontation with Auschwitz.⁶

The present volume takes up the challenge of addressing this double-contextualization of text and reader.⁷ It includes some contributions that are the product of the communal exegesis described above (see Maloney and Beavis) as well as several other essays aimed at exploring the sociohistorical context(s) of selected biblical texts, with an eye to the socioeconomic-political context of the hungry—both those mentioned or intimated in the texts and those in our own times. The basic purpose of all the essays is to help the contemporary, first-world reader develop a different field of vision for the biblical texts—one that *sees* and *hears* those who hunger, both those mentioned or intimated in the texts and those in our own world today. We view this as a necessary first step to engaging the revelatory text as it speaks to, for, and with those who hunger and thirst for food, water, shelter, clothing, freedom, respect, meaning, integrity, and all the fundamental needs of a fully human life. We hope to help readers shift the interpretive center of gravity to begin reading in solidarity with the hungry.

A hermeneutic of hunger provides “an interpretative stance that engages the religious content of Christian traditions and feeds the world's physical and spiritual hungers.”⁸ Embedded in this perspective are two interpretive mediations that allowed O'Connor to establish a connection between a hermeneutic of hunger as applied to mysticism (in the work of Sölle) and the work done in the field of biblical

6. Prinz describes thoroughly the three important momentums (personal-political awakenings) in the life of Dorothee Sölle that shaped her understanding and proposal for a hermeneutics of hunger. See Prinz, *Endangering Hunger for God*, 1–50.

7. Although the contributors of this volume understand the significance of a double-contextualization “as a single process” in a hermeneutics of hunger, the work presented here comprises merely a first step in this direction. A subsequent volume will continue this challenge.

8. O'Connor, “Let All the Peoples Praise You,” 1.

studies. In the first mediation one can relate the aims of mysticism with the theological dimension of biblical texts; the latter comprises the relationship between academic exegesis and the theological content of traditions informed by biblical texts. The second mediation is methodological. The hermeneutics of hunger incorporates methodological insights that may assist in repairing common hermeneutical breaches in the process of biblical interpretation.

This introduction elaborates briefly on these two mediations to show the relevance of a hermeneutics of hunger to contemporary biblical interpretation and to highlight the ways in which the essays in this volume respond to O'Connor's call to biblical scholars to expand their interpretive horizons. We hope the interpretive lens of a hermeneutics of hunger will enable contemporary biblical scholars and readers to engage some of the pragmatic and theological dimensions of hunger as they appear in the biblical text.

An engaged interpretive stance has similar dynamics to what mystics call the *unio mystica* (mystical union). The mystical tradition interprets fulfillment of every commandment as a moment of mystical union. When the will of a person "can become identical with the will of God," actions are "an expression of this unity."⁹ Sölle was able to unveil and restore this key aspect of mysticism by bringing into her analysis a hermeneutics of hunger.

I. Reading through a Hermeneutics of Hunger: Mysticism and the Theological Dimension of Biblical Texts

Sölle provides three central ideas to understand the correlation established in the first interpretive mediation (that is, the correlation of the aims of mysticism and the theological dimension of biblical

9. Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 54.

texts): (1) the location of mysticism in religion, (2) the definition of mysticism, and (3) a criterion to determine genuine mysticism.

1. Sölle begins by asserting that “all living religion represents a unity of three elements that . . . we may call the institutional, the intellectual, and the mystical.”¹⁰ Just as mysticism finds its essential location at the center of a *living* religion, the theological dimension of biblical texts finds its proper central place when the process of biblical interpretation is interconnected with a religious tradition. Furthermore, according to Sölle, this clarification of the appropriate location of mysticism—that is, within a living religion—sets the foundations for its definition, which is our next point.
2. Mysticism involves *cognitio Dei experimentalis* (the knowledge of God through and from experience). Sölle explains that this definition elicits two possible ways of understanding God, the ordered way and the extraordinary way. While the former points to a kind of knowledge that is dogmatically legitimated and hierarchically directed, the latter rests on experiment and experience, which cannot be fully institutionalized. Sölle argues that people can rediscover the permanent reality of religious experience by refocusing on the extraordinary way;¹¹ a hermeneutics of hunger supports this core element. After presenting four contrasting and valid interpretations of Genesis 11 (grounded on scientific historical-critical approaches), O’Connor alludes to these extraordinary ways of understanding God when speaking about the theology of this biblical passage: “This God speaks to unsettle, to breed confusion, and to overthrow the dominance of one tongue, one way to speak,

10. *Ibid.*, 1.

11. *Ibid.*, 45.

one way to understand our neighbors. This is the ‘unsettled and “unsettling” God’ who removes the shields of protection erected when everyone must think, speak, and act alike.”¹² O’Connor clarifies that, although historical-critical studies are essential to academic exegesis, scholars and readers alike need to understand that all texts are culturally situated, linguistically multiple, and of polyglot nature. When biblical texts are critically read from different readers’ *social locations*,¹³ contrasting and extraordinary theological reflections may result. Prinz affirms Sölle’s critique of these dynamics: “If the historical-critical method ‘frees’ people of the political responsibility through reading the biblical text . . . then [it] denies the biblical text its function as the ‘Word of God’ that inherently creates and recreates humanity and humanness.”¹⁴ How, then, to recognize what belongs to the theological dimension? The third idea addresses this point.

3. In the process of rediscovering the permanent reality of religious experience that emerges through experiential modes of understanding God, Sölle offers one key criterion for identifying a genuine mysticism. The same criterion also may be used to rediscover the theological dimension of biblical texts. The genuineness of mysticism is rooted in its ethical dimension. This ethics rests in the affirmation that we are all creatures of God, and that God desires fullness of life for all.¹⁵ Sölle continues, “Whatever destroys this basic experience . . . suspends this commonness of God, hence, also destroys the very writings of ontology and ethics that genuine mysticism searches for and

12. O’Connor, “Let All the Peoples Praise You,” 13, citing Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

13. More information about this concept and its connection to *praxis* can be found in the section on methodology.

14. Prinz, *Endangering Hunger for God*, 21–22.

15. Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 54.

lives out.”¹⁶ This criterion is central to any engaged conversation about the theological dimensions and meanings of biblical texts. O’Connor observes that feminist interpretation, a leading inquiry in this kind of conversation about the meaning of texts, has learned, and teaches that “interpretation is both illuminated and obscured by the interpreter’s cultural contexts.”¹⁷ Every generation must reengage this critical conversation with the biblical texts so that the fullness of life for all becomes a reality in their own time.

These three preliminary ideas set the background and vision to understand the methodological contribution that a hermeneutics of hunger brings to the conversation, and we devote the next section to that contribution.

II. Hermeneutics of Hunger: Methodological Insights

Sölle describes a hermeneutics of hunger as an interpretive stance differentiated from a hermeneutics of suspicion.¹⁸ While the hermeneutics of suspicion provides the foundation for ideological critique,¹⁹ the hermeneutics of hunger seeks to recover a mode of understanding that allows for a sense of hope. “Suspicion is an element that critical consciousness cannot relinquish . . . [but] must not another hermeneutic be articulated in a world where hope itself is exiled? . . . Is suspicion our only lens? Is critical consciousness the only consciousness we have?”²⁰

16. Ibid.

17. O’Connor, “Let All the Peoples Praise You,” 2.

18. Sölle seems to imply that a hermeneutic of suspicion is the only lens used in feminist interpretation, which does not do justice to the work done in feminist studies in the last three decades. While a hermeneutic of suspicion was central to feminist interpretation in its early stages, it is important to distinguish feminist inquiry as an epistemological process from the different stages of its application in the history of feminist interpretation.

19. Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 46.

20. Ibid., 27.

A hermeneutics of hunger incorporates a key epistemological insight from liberation theology, the “hermeneutics of the poor [which] is one of hunger for bread and liberation.”²¹ From this theological-hermeneutical locus, hunger provides a common ground as one observes the realities of hunger in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. In places where readers experience *physical hunger*, the Bible has served as “the answer to what oppression, illness, lack of education, and apathy inflict on human beings” and has driven people to seek a place where “their dignity and their right to have a life are being respected.”²² In contrast, in places where *spiritual hunger* predominates, people may find themselves trapped in a constant search for meaning, falling into the “bottomless emptiness” generated by consumerism. Depression and isolation “transport women and men into a kind of anorexia where any kind of nourishment is nauseating.”²³ In such circumstances, a hunger for meaning is reflected in the “yearning to live a different kind of life.”²⁴ A hermeneutics of hunger then provides a theological locus where liberation and life are possible, and where people can recover the lived reality of a religious experience of God. “The hermeneutic of hunger is in search of nourishment.”²⁵

At the core of this search is a methodological clue—a double-contextualization rooted in the critical analysis of the sociohistorical contexts of both reader and text(s). Sölle explains that the “hermeneutic of hunger elicits inquiry not only into the testimonies of mystical wisdom and ecstasy but also into their context.”²⁶ This twofold contextualization grounds the inquiry process and assures

21. *Ibid.*, 48.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 51.

26. *Ibid.*, 50.

its cohesiveness. “Contextuality is counterweight to a rambling pluralism of methods; it connects us back to the real actuality of the witnesses and protects our relation to the mysticism we have come to see against a false worldlessness.”²⁷ Contextuality serves as a comparative criterion when evaluating the plurality of methods in academic exegesis. In addition, “contextuality brings together the relation between others’ mystical experience and one’s own search, as well as the others’ and one’s own praxis.”²⁸ This last characteristic clarifies the relevance of O’Connor’s invitation to develop a hermeneutical conversation that mediates the reality of “what the text meant and what it might mean now in specific places, among particular peoples.”²⁹ Such a *praxis* constitutes a radical call to scholars and readers because understanding the readers’ social locations involves more than mere description of their social contexts; it requires the readers’ “involvement in their own situation, to such an extent that they begin to perceive and confront the victims of the socio-political dimensions on their locations.”³⁰

The imagery of hunger—a fundamental, unavoidable, and pressing human need—conveys the urgency of a call that embraces all of humanity and the whole creation. As Sölle explains when discussing the subtitle of her book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, “The ‘and’ between mysticism and resistance must be understood more radically . . . for one cannot think what one does not do. You cannot perceive or observe God’s love by looking at others. . . . I can see God’s love only when I become part of it myself.”³¹

27. *Ibid.*, 51–52.

28. *Ibid.*, 52.

29. O’Connor, “Let All the Peoples Praise You,” 2.

30. Prinz, *Endangering Hunger for God*, 45.

31. Sölle, *Silent Cry*, 6.

Introducing the Essays

The following collection of essays comprises somewhat of an experiment, an initial attempt at developing a hermeneutics-of-hunger approach to the biblical texts. Leading off with Kathleen O'Connor's 2009 CBA presidential address, the collection follows the canonical order with discussions of selected texts from Genesis, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Sirach, the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and *Thomas*, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Thessalonians.

The five essays from the Old Testament provide strong evidence for the importance of *re*-focusing on the topic of hunger from the eyes of the hungry. This responds to Kathleen O'Connor's call to biblical scholars to recognize and engage the world in front of the text. In her essay, O'Connor focuses on Genesis 11, the tower of Babel story, to show the contrast between the use of historical-critical method detached from the world in front of the text *versus* the multiplicity of meanings that emerges when including the contributions of scholars from various cultural perspectives who responsibly take their contexts into account. Laura Manzo's essay looks into the theological meaning of feeding the poor in Isa. 58:1-9a; she argues that this passage provides a vision of justice and a call to create a community of inclusion, humility, and generosity. Carol Dempsey explores the reference to "the great drought" in Jer. 14:1-9 and its connection to the theme of hunger and water scarcity; Dempsey relates the text's ancient historical context to contemporary times, addressing environmental and ecological implications inherent to the critical issue of hunger then and now. Laress Wilkins studies the rhetorical function of war-related hunger in the book of Lamentations, focusing especially on its impact on women and children; her final remarks show that many of these oppressive practices continue very much unchanged today. Finally, Bradley

Gregory explores the social and theological influences in Ben Sira's view of hunger and poverty, arguing that the vision in Sirach aligns with the earlier Hebrew traditions that emphasize God's love for the poor and the necessity of social justice.

The five contributions for the New Testament offer a degree of variation in the volume, with two of the authors emphasizing the perspective of the world in front of the text. Mary Ann Beavis's essay describes a communal exegesis on Mark 6:33-44 that she led with the members of the CBA Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics Task Force. In setting the grounds for the communal reflection, Beavis interrelated two feeding stories—this one in the Gospel of Mark and a present-day story of Station 20 West in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Linda Maloney's contribution also incorporates a reflection that she shared in the context of a communal exegesis with the FBH Task Force. Maloney offers a pastoral reading of the parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:1-10), raising many questions about the interpretive implications of this parable for today's context(s).

The last three essays offer innovative findings that we hope will continue to spark stimulating conversations on the dynamics of hunger in ancient and contemporary times. Susan Elliott's essay analyzes the parable of the Woman's Empty Jar (of meal) in the *Gospel of Thomas* Logion 97, and concludes with a multilayered interpretation of the parable. Malou Ibita applies "point-of-view" analysis to the story of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. 11:17-34, providing readers with a window into the perspective of those who hunger. In the final contribution to this volume, Sheila McGinn and Megan Wilson-Reitz use linguistic analysis, sociohistorical criticism, and intertextuality to analyze 2 Thess. 3:6-15. They challenge the dominant interpretation of *ataktoi* as referring to "the lazy poor," instead arguing that it more likely refers to upwardly mobile social climbers who are being reproached for obedience to the cultural

practices of the Empire instead of following the subversive norms of the reign of God.

We offer this collection of essays as an invitation to join in this communal exegesis of the revelatory text, focusing on the lived realities of hunger, ancient and contemporary. Hunger was and is a real, concrete issue affecting humanity and all of creation. Only through people's praxis (from reading to action, and vice versa) might we truly be able to address and nourish the physical and spiritual hungers of this world that God has committed to our care. As Christine Vladimiroff so simply and yet eloquently stated in the preface, the task at hand is to read the Scriptures by conforming our hearts to those for whom a bit of bread is an experience of God.