



Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading

Eugene H. Peterson

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Eat This Book challenges us to read the Scriptures on their own terms, as God's revelation, and to live them as we read them. With warmth and wisdom Peterson offers greatly needed, down-to-earth counsel on spiritual reading. In these pages he draws readers into a fascinating conversation on the nature of language, the ancient practice of lectio divina, and the role of Scripture translations; included here is the inside story behind Peterson's own popular Bible translation, The Message."

Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading Details

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Jeff Wofford says

I want to like this book. I want to love it. Peterson is a superb writer, amongst the best, evocative, warm, with soaring prose, vivid illustrations, and no-nonsense application. There is substance here for driving people, including me, to read the Bible and read it deeply, “eating it” as the title hints.

But Peterson has a problem—a big one—which is that his theology is, if not heretical, then fuzzy-headed, ambiguous, and out of step with orthodoxy. I’m thinking of his identification of the persons of the Trinity as “faces” or “voices” and associating his view with Barth’s modalism (p. 27). If this were a solitary error we might—perhaps—dismiss it as a fluke (though it’s hard to think of a more serious one). In fact, though, Peterson’s way of thinking through much of the book reveals a tendency to error. He is not clear. The evocative, sweeping quality that makes the book so attractive also means it’s often hard to tell exactly what he’s saying. (What, for example, does he really mean, six or seven chapters in, by “eat this book”?)

I don’t know whether Peterson is or was a hippy, but this book has a hippy quality that undermines its trustworthiness and usefulness. He declaims Christian quietism; he declaims eisegesis; he declaims emotionalism; yet it bears all these marks—subtly, but worryingly. I can’t recommend it.

Ginger says

I deeply love language. There's no denying Eugene Peterson is a fantastic writer - gorgeous and clear prose. This was truly a book I wanted to take in as a fine meal. So much practical wisdom and contemplative inspiration.

But what really made the book shine for me, was his third section on The Company of Translators. While I appreciate his translation/paraphrase The Message as a devotional tool, I have always been firmly in the a word-for-word camp when it comes to translating the Scriptures. I believe I still do agree more with the merits of a word-for-word translation for in-depth study, but Peterson makes a strong case for why a paraphrase translation also serves an important purpose in the study of God's word in our lives.

A takeaway from this book for me is to do my next book study (the gospel of John) with more than one translation before me, to see all the nuanced refractions of the language.

This would be an excellent book to give to anyone who is of the outdated "King James Only" camp, as it rationally explains the strengths and weaknesses of each method of Bible translation/interpretation, while still expressing great affection for the KJV. Along with giving some fascinating archaeological history of how we got many of our English translations. This section alone was worth the price of admission, and I thoroughly enjoyed learning about the pastoring process that lead him to begin translating Galatians, and then the entire Bible in what we know have as The Message.

James Korsmo says

In *Eat This Book*, Peterson continues the work he began in his masterful *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* to construct a "spiritual theology." And in this book, he takes up "spiritual reading." Peterson guides into an intentional encounter with the Bible by focusing not just on the fact that we read the Bible, but in focusing on how.

Peterson's focus can be summed up by the guiding metaphor that gives the book its title: eat this book. The metaphor comes from the book of Revelation, where an angel tells John the Seer to eat the scroll he gives him containing God's word. Peterson molds this rather cryptic command into a well-shaped image of how we should take the Bible in when we read it. Scripture isn't for external study, for quantifying or dissecting, but it is first and foremost for taking in, digesting, and living.

Near the end of the book, Peterson contrasts two types of readings of the Bible, when he says that instead of treating the Bible as a "thing, an impersonal authority . . . to define or damn others" we should deal "with God's word in a personal, relational, and obedient way." This means acknowledging that it contains "words that mean, that reveal, that shape the soul, that generate saved lives, that form believing and obedient lives" (139-40). This is the journey he leads us on through this book. First recognizing that the Bible reveals a "strange new world," to use Barth's idea, and that we need to enter that world and be shaped by it. So he teaches us how to do that, by being carefully attuned listeners, obedient listeners.

I highly recommend this book. It has rekindled in me a passion for reading God's word, and helped remind me of how I should be doing it and why. We read God's word to be formed by it, and Peterson helps bring this home. Do not miss this book.

Beth Peninger says

Whoa. Just whoa. I honestly don't know what to say about this short but impactful book from Peterson. He says so many insightful things, so many soul examining things. His discourse on the replacement trinity was eye opening and challenging to American christianity, as it should be. American believers need to allow themselves to be challenged in how they interact with Christ and his word. Peterson provides the challenge in a grace covered conversation. I have the study guide for this book and will do it separately at some point. It will provide the much needed, in my opinion, reminder of how to read the word of God and interact with the One who authored my life.

Paul says

Delightfully challenged me to read Scripture more than analytically. Really good background on translation, the Message, and even on Aramaic. Strong arguments for the importance of relating the Story currently and contextually for each generation and people. So many good things and ideas to reflect upon.

John Angerer says

I will start by saying I loved this book, and Peterson's writing and influence abound in this book. It teaches more than it preaches and it is well researched and enjoyable.

However, I will say that it kind of left me hanging. Maybe I missed something in chapter 7, but Peterson

never truly instructs the reader HOW to practice Lectio Divina. I have been taught by a seminary professor how to practice this art of spiritual reading, and please send comments if I missed it and I will amend this review, the end of the book seems to be a big advertisement for Peterson's translation "the Message"...which I love to read and own, but that's not what I thought the book would teach, and I will say I am a bit disappointed.

The good news is you can easily find the steps for Lectio Devina online, or you can go to your pastor/priest/minister and they likely will be able to instruct you in the practice.

Steve Watson says

Last year Eugene Peterson blessed me with some comments he purportedly made and then within a few days revoked the blessing. It was a sad moment in the public life of this elder statesman of faith, struggling with the 21st century. The blessing was Peterson's commonsense, kind view on the inclusion of gay people within the pastoral life of churches, including the performing of same sex weddings. Like reading Tony Campolo's public endorsement of this move in pastoral life, I felt comfort and peace in knowing another humble, thoughtful, soft-hearted evangelical leader I respected had reached the same minority position I had. In Peterson's case, however, either because he was misunderstood or - more likely, in my opinion - under pressure from public opinion and threatened book bans - he revoked his statement. Which saddened me.

Though *The Message* has often been a valuable translation for me since its publication in the 90s, I haven't read Peterson at all since last summer's dust up. I'm glad for the chance to return to some of his work. I found the reflections on translation fairly riveting. I was aware of the late nineteenth and twentieth century discoveries of Koine Greek and Ugaritic literature and their significance for the culture and language of the Bible, but I very much enjoyed his account of these discoveries and their meaning.

I also liked Peterson's review of lectio divina. When I was given a copy of *The Message*, it contained a bit of cardboard packaging that set in bold letters - Read. Think. Pray. Live. Back then, I had no idea that referred to Peterson's understanding of the four steps of lectio - lectio, oratio, meditatio, and contimplatio. I appreciated Peterson's deep dive on this. A line that really stood out was this one: "God does not make speeches; he enters conversations and we are partners to the conversation." (107) It's a thought about prayer that matches the insights gained from comparing the Old Testament to Canaanite religious literature. God is not far-off and disinterested in mere human affairs. Our transcendent God is only really apprehended and known to us in God's immanent interaction with us.

I liked Peterson's continual working of the "Eat the book" phrase from Revelation that John picked up from Old Testament prophetic. Wise and memorable, particularly in conjunction with that great insight on Isaiah that came from his dog growling over his bone. Love that picture of chewing on what God has to reveal to us.

Otherwise, the opening section of the book bored me. Peterson sounded like a cranky old man to me sometimes and his tangents didn't grab me. I'm sorry that this is an unsupported, grouchy statement, but that's all I have energy for at the moment.

Ivan says

Aside from the occasional mystical flair, this is Eugene Peterson at his best. Reading the Bible is more than

academic exercise, an information download; it's entering into the live of the text in communion with the living God.

Alicia Snyder says

Despite a few doctrinal and denominational quirks, this book is worth reading. Full of rich metaphors and word pictures, Eugene Peterson encourages us to read the Bible for what it is, not for what we would like it to be.

The Bible is not "disembodied fragments of truth and insight, dismembered bones of information and motivation." Instead, it is a meta-narrative, an overarching story that gives meaning to our daily, down-to-earth lives.

"You can't reduce this book to what you can handle; you can't domesticate this book to what you are comfortable with. You can't make it your toy poodle, trained to respond to your commands."

"The reality that God reveals to us in his word is very different, quite other--Other!--than anything we could ever have dreamed up. And thank goodness, for if we keep at this long enough, prayer by prayer, we find ourselves living in a reality that is far larger, far lovelier, far better. But it takes considerable getting used to."

Grant says

Why do we read Scripture?

Is it to absorb information? Perhaps we are intellectual sponges soaking up the liquids that authors have pooled together and bound up in paperback volumes.

We are not interested in knowing more but becoming more.

This is Peterson's answer to my opening question. He calls it participatory reading, reading in order to live. Peterson approaches reading in the same way he approaches theological truth generally; he is not interested so much in abstract ideas or disembodied facts, but in flesh and blood witnesses and transformed lives.

We read Scripture in order to live.

We read in order to be shaped and changed by the text, not merely as seekers of information. The Bible is not a textbook for life – we do not read a list of principles with accompanying applications. That is too impersonal for our personally intimate and incarnate God. No, the Bible is a living text, a text that is not merely written to us but about us – we are invited in as participants in this life-with-God adventure.

For Peterson, reading and living must go hand in hand. The Bible is not a book that must first be read before entering the life-with-God adventure, for there are no pre-requisites to living life with God except responding to his divine invitation. Yet neither is this a book that can be read as an after-thought to living life with God – it is too vital and much too formative to be put aside until a later stage. We should not put off reading Scripture until a later "stage of maturity" or a time when we are "ready", for we are always living, and how we live in the meantime matters.

In my experience, many people tend to view the Bible as a presentation of moral codes, telling us to "live up to this". Or seemingly more common lately in the so called post-religious movement that embraces "spirituality" but not "religion", the Bible tends to get viewed as some nice stories of inspiring people, as if

saying “live like this”. Peterson’s portrayal of Scripture would reject both of these and instead frame the Bible as an invitation to life with God – God’s way of beckoning us to “live into this”.

Biblical reading, then, is participatory reading. It is active reading. It is not reading to observe events that occurred in times past, but reading with an awareness that God is calling out to us: come and live! The life-with-God involves internalising Scripture into our imaginations, our actions, thoughts, prayers and community life, because the Bible was written to be lived.

This internalisation is what prompts Peterson’s seemingly obscure title: Eat This Book. It is the very instruction given to the apostle John by the angel of God in Revelation. Eating is a metaphor for digestion, for contemplation and meditation. Eating is not a moment but a process, and an active one at that where the body directly engages with the object and brings it into itself. Peterson approaches the Bible this way, encouraging us to eat it.

Most of the book then is a lesson in the healthy eating of Scripture. It is a guide to digestion. For we all know there are right and wrong ways to eat food; ways that will assist in proper digestion and ways that will lead to indigestion, obesity, or constipation.

Peterson presents these healthy eating habits seamlessly, but I will break them into two categories in an attempt to summarise them into half a page rather than 150 pages.

Firstly, he presents two attitudes to eating, attitudes to reading Scripture that are proper for embarking on life-with-God. The first is humility. In an age of textual analysis dominated by critical theory and other academic snobbery this attitude is an especially strong reminder. Scripture is to be read on God’s terms, not on our terms. Scripture gets us in on God’s story, after all, and not vice versa; the Bible is not to be used to manipulate God into validating our story.

Although Peterson does not draw the connection, I am aware of the implications of ‘proof text’ preaching in this regard. It is so easy, and in my experience sadly so common, to approach biblical truth with our own minds and then look to the Bible to validate those ideas. The truth is that you can probably pluck statements of Scripture to support all kinds of un-Godly actions and attitudes. This comes when we abandon a posture of humility and instead approach the Bible as a tool to be used.

Tools are impersonal, but our God is deeply personal. Scripture is his spoken words to us, and exegesis – attempts to draw out the implications of the text – means submitting to the text and the God who wrote it. Peterson points out that proper biblical exegesis sees us loving God enough to stop and listen carefully to what he says. This is humility.

The next attitude is obedience, for obedience opens up our lives to the text. The most important question for Peterson is not “what does it say?” but “what does it mean and how can I live it?” The question is not an academic “what does this mean?” but an active, participating, humble “what can I obey?” For what good is wisdom if not obeyed? What good is truth if not lived?

Peterson then goes on to illustrate these attitudes in action. He uses the words meditation and contemplation to describe the lived application of these attitudes to reading Scripture. Meditation takes us from the words of the text to the world of the text. Meditation opens our imagination to the lived nature of Scripture. In doing so it plunges us into the story as participants – we move from outsiders to insiders of the text.

Contemplation means living what we read, no more and no less. Can you see the humility in this? It means living the Scriptures without imposing our own grand ideas on it. It also means having the courage to lift our eyes to the grandness of God’s story, rejecting to settle for anything less. Contemplating Scripture acknowledges that there is no word of God that is not intended to be lived by us, and in this it is a way of

obedience to God.

Meditation and contemplation, humility and obedience; these words are bursting with meaning and depth, but don't be overwhelmed. They are simply words reminding us that Scripture is not about knowing more but becoming more. Reading Scripture is not reserved for scholars or academics, pastors or ministers, or even "mature" or "wise" believers.

Reading Scripture is something we can all do.

In fact, it is something we all must do, for we must all eat.

We must all eat this book.

<http://reflector06.blogspot.com.au/20...>

Laurie says

Peterson uses "eat" as a metaphor for consuming the Word so that it literally nourishes and becomes part of us intrinsically through reading, praying, living it in its entirety.

Key quotes:

By keeping company w/ the writers of Holy Scripture we are schooled in a practice of reading & writing that is infused w/ an enormous respect - more than respect, awed reverence - for the revelatory & transformative power of words.

There is only one way of reading that is congruent w/ our Holy Scriptures, writing that trusts in the power of words to penetrate our lives & create truth & beauty & goodness, writing that requires a reader who, in the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, "does not always remain bent over his pages; he often leans back & closes his eyes over a line he has been reading again, & its meaning spreads through his blood."³

lectio divina, often translated "spiritual reading,"

All writing that comes out of this School anticipates this kind of reading: participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms & images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love.

Reading is an immense gift, but only if the words are assimilated, taken into the soul - eaten, chewed, gnawed, received in unhurried delight.

We don't form our personal spiritual lives out of a random assemblage of favorite texts in combination w/ individual circumstances;

we are formed by the Holy Spirit

I want to counter this widespread practice of taking personal experience instead of the Bible as the authority for living.

It is a matter of urgency that interest in our souls be matched by an interest in our Scriptures - & for the same reason: they, Scripture & 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.

Christian reading is participatory reading, receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms & images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love.

It is entirely possible to come to the Bible in total sincerity, responding to the intellectual challenge it gives, or for the moral guidance it offers, or for the spiritual uplift it provides, & not in any way have to deal w/ a personally revealing God who has personal designs on you.

the three-personal Father, Son, & Holy Spirit is replaced by a very individualized personal Trinity of my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, & my Holy Feelings.

The new Holy Trinity. The sovereign self expresses itself in Holy Needs, Holy Wants, & Holy Feelings. The time & intelligence that our ancestors spent on understanding the sovereignty revealed in Father, Son, & Holy Spirit are directed by our contemporaries in affirming & validating the sovereignty of our needs, wants, & feelings.

this rival sovereignty is couched in such spiritual language, & we are so easily convinced of our own spiritual sovereignty, that it does catch our attention.

The new spiritual masters assure us that all our spiritual needs are included in the new Trinity: our need for meaning & transcendence, our wanting a larger life, our feelings of spiritual significance - &, of course, there is plenty of space to make room for God, as much or as little as you like. The new Trinity doesn't get rid of God or the Bible, it merely puts them to the service of needs, wants, & feelings.

No, says the heavenly voice - I want those words out there, creating sound waves, entering ears, entering lives. I want those words preached, sung, taught, prayed - lived.

"I am trying to teach my mind to bear the long, slow growth of the fields, & to sing of its passing while it waits."

The story that is Scripture, broadly conceived, is the story of following Jesus. The Christian community has always read this story as not just one story among others but as the meta-narrative that embraces, or can embrace, all stories. If we fail to recognize the capaciousness of this form, we will almost certainly end up treating our biblical text anecdotally as "inspiration" or argumentatively as polemic. The vast & embracing world of revelation to which our spirituality text gives witness is a narrative form that is badly served when we either atomize or privatize it. We obscure the form when we atomize Scripture by dissecting it, analyzing it like a specimen

Every detail of Scripture is worth pursuing endlessly; no scholarly attention expended over this text is ever wasted. But when the impersonal objectivity of the laboratory technician replaces the adoring dalliance of a lover, we end up w/ file drawers full of information, organized for our convenience as occasions present themselves.

We also obscure the form when we privatize Scripture, using it for what we are wont to call "inspiration."

We are personally commanded & blessed, rebuked & comforted, warned & guided. But personal is not the same as private. Privacy is possessive & isolating. The private is what is withdrawn from the common good for individual control or use or enjoyment; it is stealing. When we privatize Scripture we embezzle the common currency of God's revelation. But Scripture is never that - the revelation draws us out of ourselves, out of our fiercely guarded individualities, into the world of responsibility & community & salvation - God's sovereignty. "Kingdom" is the primary biblical metaphor for it.

The Bible, the entire Bible, is "relentlessly narrational."⁶ And we cannot change or discard the form without changing & distorting the content.

attentive readers of the Bible have understood that its many voices & points of view are all contained in the narrative form & are given coherence by it.

Instead of attempting to iron out the wrinkles of inconsistency & disharmony, we have to listen for resonances, echoes, patterns - the swarming complexity of lived truth, not pinned-down & labeled facts.

We also find ourselves in the story.

The Scriptures, simply by virtue of their narrative form, draw us into a reality in which we find ourselves in touch w/ the very stuff of our humanity; what we sense in our bones counts.

It is a story large w/ the sense of God, a world suffused w/ God, a world permeated w/ God's spoken & unspoken word, his unseen & perceived presence, in such a way that we know that it is the world we were made for, the world in which we most truly belong.

many of us have picked up the bad habit of extracting "truths" from the stories we read: we summarize "principles" that we can use in a variety of settings at our discretion; we distill a "moral" that we use as a slogan on a poster or as a motto on our desk.

It takes the whole Bible to read any part of the Bible. Every sentence is embedded in story & can no more be understood accurately or fully apart from the story than any one of our sentences spoken throughout the course of the day can be understood apart from our relationships & culture & the various ways in which we speak to our children & parents, our friends & enemies, our employers & employees - & our God.

Exegesis is the discipline of attending to the text & listening to it rightly & well.

The text as story carries us along, we are in on something larger than ourselves, we let the story take us where it will. But exegesis is focused attention, asking questions, sorting through possible meanings. Exegesis is rigorous, disciplined, intellectual work.

isn't long, as newspaper columnist Ellen Goodman once put it, before we're using the Bible more as a Rorschach test than as a religious text, reading more ink into the text than we read out of it.¹¹ It isn't long before we're using the word "spiritual" to refer primarily to ourselves & our ideas, & only incidentally & by the way to God.

Exegesis is the care we give to getting the words right. Exegesis is foundational to Christian spirituality.

The more mature we become in the Christian faith, the more exegetically rigorous we must become.

recommend reading commentaries in the same way we read novels, from beginning to end, skipping nothing.

Exegesis is the furthest thing from pedantry; exegesis is an act of love. It loves the one who speaks the words

enough to want to get the words right. It respects the words enough to use every means we have to get the words right. Exegesis is loving God enough to stop & listen carefully to what he says.

Marianne Moore used the metaphor of a steamroller (in her poem, "To a Steamroller")

dominant mind-set among pastors & scholars at the time (the 1930s) who were contemptuous of all the lively detail & intricacy of the words & sentences in our Holy Scriptures, & instead forced them into the service of a doctrine or a cause: "You crush all the particles [read "words"] down into close conformity, & then walk back & forth on them," steamrolling the text into a road that is all surface, usable, practical, doctrinal. And dead.

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, w/ all the help we can get from grammarians & archaeologists & historians & theologians, letting ourselves be formed by it.

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

"Every what is linked to a how," writes Walter Brueggemann; "we cannot generalize or summarize, but must pay attention to the detail"⁶

We are given this book so that we can imaginatively & believingly enter the world of the text & follow Jesus. John Calvin in his treatment of Holy Scripture is commonly cited in this regard: "all right knowledge of God is born of obedience."⁸

the significance of the modifier "spiritual" in "spiritual reading." It meant participatory reading. It meant that I read every word on the page as an extension or deepening or correction or affirmation of something that I was a part of.

use the word "liturgy" to refer to this intent & practice of the church insofar as it pulls everything in & out of the sanctuary into a life of worship, situates everything past & present coherently as participation in the revelation written for us in Scripture.

The task of liturgy is to order the life of the holy community following the text of Holy Scripture.

First it gets us into the sanctuary, the place of adoration & attention, listening & receiving & believing before God. There is a lot involved, all the parts of our lives ordered to all aspects of the revelation of God in Jesus.

Then it gets us out of the sanctuary into the world into places of obeying & loving, ordering our lives as living sacrifices in the world to the glory of God.

presents us w/ everything there is, the world & our experience in it, Christ & all his angels, the Devil & all his angels, heaven & hell, salvation & damnation, congregations & empires, war & peace - everything visible & invisible - & makes an act of worship out of it. He then shows how everything in that world of worship spills into the world. There are no nonparticipants. No one is standing around watching. What St. John does so masterfully in the Apocalypse, we continue to do liturgically in the holy community under the shaping of the Holy Spirit as it is given textuality in Holy Scripture.

As we worship God, revealed personally as Father, Son, & Holy Spirit in our Holy Scriptures, we are not doing something apart from or away from the non-Scripture-reading world; we do it for the world - bringing all creation & all history before God, presenting our bodies & all the beauties & needs of humankind before

God in praise

Liturgy prevents the narrative form of Scripture from being reduced to private, individualized consumption.

It is obedient, participatory listening to Holy Scripture in the company of the holy community through time

making sure that we are taking our place in the story & letting everyone else have their parts in the story also, making sure that we don't leave anything or anyone out of the story. Without sufficient liturgical support & structure we are very apt to edit the story down to fit our individual tastes & predispositions.

Frances Young uses the extended analogy of music & its performance to provide a way of understanding the interrelated complexities of reading & living the Holy Scriptures, what John experienced as eating the book. Her book *Virtuoso Theology* searches out what she names as "the complex challenges involved in seeking authenticity in performance."⁹

Lectio divina is a way of reading the Scriptures that is congruent w/ the way the Scriptures serve the Christian community as a witness to God's revelation of himself to us.

If in my Bible reading I lose touch w/ this livingness, if I fail to listen to this living Jesus, submit to this sovereignty, & respond to this love, I become arrogant in my knowing & impersonal in my behavior.

"How do you read?" (pos anaginoskeis, Luke 10:26). How do you read this, not what have you just read?"

"Go & do...." Live what you read. We read the Bible in order to live the word of God. Lectio divina cultivates this personal, participatory attentiveness & thus trains us in the discipline of reading Scripture rightly. At every turn of the page it poses Jesus' question to us: "How do you read?"

listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22 NRSV). Listening is what we do when someone speaks to us; reading is what we do when someone writes to us. Speaking comes first. Writing is derivative from speaking. And if we are to get the full force of the word, God's word, we need to recover its atmosphere of spokenness.

Lectio divina is a way of life that develops "according to the Scriptures."

It is not just a skill that we exercise when we have a Bible open before us

It is the task of lectio divina to get those words heard & listened to, words written in ink now rewritten in blood.

lectio divina. A way of reading that guards against depersonalizing the text into an affair of questions & answers, definitions & dogmas.

A way of reading that intends the fusion of the entire biblical story & my story.

A way of reading that refuses to be reduced to just reading but intends the living of the text, listening & responding to the voices of that "so great a cloud of witnesses" telling their stories, singing their songs, preaching their sermons, praying their prayers, asking their questions, having their children, burying their dead, following Jesus.

Lectio divina comprises four elements: lectio (we read the text), meditatio (we meditate the text), oratio (we pray the text), & contemplatio (we live the text).

their relationship is not sequential. Reading (lectio) is a linear act, but spiritual (divina) reading is not -

in actual practice they are not four discrete items that we engage in one after another in stair-step fashion. Rather than linear the process is more like a looping spiral in which all four elements are repeated,

Lectio divina is a way of reading that becomes a way of living.'

why not say it plainly? Tell it to us straight? Denise Levertov in her poem "Poetics of Faith" tells us why: "Straight to the point" can ricochet, unconvincing, circumlocution,

Language is debased when it uses metaphor as decoration to cover scrawny thoughts, putting lace cuffs on bare-wristed prose.

Northrop Frye summarizes Plato's concern this way: "The ability to record has a lot more to do w/ forgetting than w/ remembering: w/ keeping the past in the past, instead of continuously recreating it in the present."9 Meditatio is the discipline we give to keeping the memory active in the act of reading. Meditation moves from looking at the words of the text to entering the world of the text. As we take this text into ourselves, we find that the text is taking us into itself. For the world of the text is far larger & more real than our minds & experience.

There is always more to anything, any word or sentence, than meets the eye; meditation enters into the large backgrounds that are not immediately visible, that we overlooked the first time around.

Meditation is the aspect of spiritual reading that trains us to read Scripture as a connected, coherent whole, not a collection of inspired bits & pieces.

The practice of dividing the Bible into numbered chapters & verses has abetted this "sibylline complex." It gives the impression that the Bible is a collection of thousands of self-contained sentences & phrases that can be picked out or combined arbitrarily in order to discern our fortunes or fates. But Bible verses are not fortune cookies to be broken open at random.

Every biblical text must be read in the living presence of Jesus.

"Bible searching & searching prayer go hand in hand. What we receive from God in the Book's message we return to Him w/ interest in prayer," writes P. T. Forsyth.13

Spiritual reading requires a disciplined attention to exactly the way the text is written; it requires a meditative & receptive entering into the world of the text; & it requires response.

Prayer is language used in relation to God. It is the most universal of all languages, the lingua franca of the human heart. Prayer ranges from "sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26) to petitions & thanksgivings composed in lyric poetry & stately prose to "psalms & hymns & spiritual songs" (Col. 3:16) to the silence of a person present to God in attentive adoration (Ps. 62:1).

he gives us, his human creatures, the gift of language; we not only can hear & understand God as he speaks to us, we can speak to him - respond, answer, converse, argue, question. We can pray.

We are most ourselves when we pray. But prayer is not a human-based activity. Psychology doesn't get us very far in either understanding or practicing prayer. Whether we are aware of it or not (& often we are not), it begins & ends & has its being in the company of the Trinity.

The Scriptures, read & prayed, are our primary & normative access to God as he reveals himself to us. The

Scriptures are our listening post for learning the language of the soul, the ways God speaks to us; they also provide the vocabulary & grammar that are appropriate for us as we in our turn speak to God. Prayer detached from Scripture, from listening to God, disconnected from God's words to us, short-circuits the relational language that is prayer.

Christians acquire this personal & relational practice of prayer primarily (although not exclusively) under the shaping influence of the Psalms & Jesus.

Jesus prays for us "he always lives to make intercession for [us]" (Heb. 7:25). The verb is in the present tense. This is the most important thing to know about prayer, not that we should pray or how we should pray but that Jesus is right now praying for us (see also Heb. 4:16 & John 17). Jesus, the Word that made us (John 1:3; Col. 1:16), is also among us to teach us to direct our words personally to God. Mostly he did this by example; Luke cites nine instances: 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 11:1; 22:31, 41, 44; 24:30. But we have only a slim accounting of his actual prayers. Some are inarticulate (Mark 7:34; 8:12; John 11:33; Heb. 5:7). Some are quoted verbatim (Matt. 11:25; 26:39; 27:46; Luke 23:46; John 11:41; 12:27-28; 17:1-26).

The reality that God reveals to us in his word is very different, quite other - Other! - than anything we could ever have dreamed up.

Leslie says

The only thing I've read by Eugene Peterson is *The Message* and I've been working my way through his companion devotional *The Message: Solo - An Uncommon Devotional*, which is founded on the exegetical method of *lectio divina*, although after reading *Eat This Book* I hesitate greatly to call *lectio divina* a "method". For eating the book that is the bible is a truly beautiful metaphor that Peterson pulls right out of the bible itself, out of the book of Revelation, to help us understand a different approach to reading this amazing and holy book, one whereby we enter into the millennial-arching story of God's undying, passionate and tender love for his adulterous people and his ingenious self-sacrificial plan to win us back, rather than using it for our own purposes. He shows us how this bible is alive -- indeed how language itself, written and/or spoken, has creative power -- and how it can form our flesh and blood existence in and for God if we only let it. Although I had "known" this in my head, Peterson's book moved it down and planted it in my heart and the bible has come alive to me in a way I've never experienced before, where I see God revealing himself, see my own story in the stories of the bible's heroes and villains, and feel things more deeply or indeed, for the first time, as I enter into the stories with God and with all the holy community, as Peterson calls all Christ-followers. There also seems to be a developing intuition and skill in me of reading and seeing what isn't there explicitly in words but which deeply informs the narrative. "Let him who has ears to hear" is a phrase oft used by Jesus and Peterson thinks this is just what he means, and my hearing grows keener with each moment I spend in God's living word. Incidentally - or maybe not so incidentally - so does my intimacy with God, and my joy, and peace.

Another aspect I really enjoyed about *Eat This Book* is Peterson's obvious expertise of what he speaks. It appealed deeply to my intellect and desire to learn new things, not just in the spiritual sense but in a thinking, critical sense. Peterson is an excellent writer and I enjoyed his prose tremendously; they reminded me of the solid, common sense writings of C.S. Lewis and Oswald Chambers although they are not gilded with those writers' post Victorian pre-WWI whimsy and poetry. Peterson stays solidly in the modern age, but his prose built a lovely bridge between my renewal-seeking mind and my tender heart for God.

His writing around the mystery of language, spoken, written, or biblical or in our daily lives was particularly moving and meaningful to me as a person who has traveled and lived all over the world and speaks multiple

languages. As a linguist (a study I often dream of pursuing) his treatise on how language develops neurologically, culturally and historically made my gray cells sing. A veritable cranial chorus began when he explored biblical language and I perceived yet again, but newly somehow, the genius and mystery and glory of the God I love there. It was like meeting a long-time lover again for the first time, and even now as I write this review, I'm in danger of spinning off into praise and adoration, so enraptured was and am I by this "intellectual" subject that makes my heart sing!

Finally, Peterson shows us how The Message came to be, how his own experiences as a pastor in a small town church and his own formation by eating the bible led him to the translation of the holy scriptures - and catch this - back into the every day language of its first hearers and readers.

Don't miss this book. I borrowed it from the library but it will soon have a permanent place in my library - a privilege which few books garner these days.

Timbrel Jacknitsky says

A LOT to chew!

MaryEllin says

Every book I read on understanding the Bible better does, in fact, help me to understand the Bible better. I was surprised that this book by Eugene Peterson, creator of the eminently readable Bible translation "The Message," would tax my powers of concentration as it did. I confess it took me a long time to get through it, including a long fallow period during which I quite necessarily stepped away to rest my brain. I would not recommend "Eat This Book" as the first book one reads to help one understand the Bible, but rather as the third or fourth. By then, you'll be better prepared for Peterson's scholarly insights into Biblical translation, and historical and archeological context, and lectio divina.

Michele Morin says

If you want to live well and to share wisdom with your children and your neighbors about how they can also live well, the Bible will chart a sound course.

If you are looking for inspiration or comfort or if you are preparing a speech, you will certainly want to lift some of the soaring phrases from the Psalms or a stirring descriptive passage from Isaiah to adorn your thinking.

If you are curious about the future or have strong ideas about politics, you'll find gasoline-words in the Bible to support your position and to throw on any conversation to keep the flames dancing high.

It's clear that we can add the Bible to our rhetorical tool-belt and never once be singed by its fiery truth. However, this is not the reason the Word has been given, and in *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, Eugene Peterson has written a practical guide for those who want to approach Scripture in the manner suggested to the Apostle John in his Revelation:

The voice out of Heaven spoke to me again: "Go, take the book held open in the hand of the Angel astride sea and earth." I went up to the Angel and said, "Give me the little book." He said, "Take it, then eat it."

Ingesting the Truth

John was not the first man in history to eat a book. Apparently, Jeremiah and Ezekiel also ingested truth, and like John, their words reveal the metabolized essence of having been in the presence of God.

In an era in which English-speaking people can select from a menu of Scripture texts, the challenge is for us to begin reading them—and then, to take the next step and begin "reading the Scriptures formatively, reading in order to live." (xi) To illustrate the kind of reading he's advocating, Peterson employs the delightful imagery of a dog working with fortitude on a bone superimposed upon an image from the book of Isaiah of a "lion growling over its prey." Apparently, that Hebrew word for "growling" is usually rendered as "meditate," as in Psalm 1 where the righteous meditate on the Law of the Lord "day and night."

As readers of Truth, we are called to take the Word into our being in a way that changes us. In John's case, we can see from the text that eating the Bible was not an entirely pleasant experience. His stomachache is an important reminder that we may not find everything to our liking as we try to digest the hard truths of Scripture or the parts that seem strange to us.

Scripture in Service to My Needs, Wants, and Feelings

This full-bodied entering into a text, essentially chewing on it, is the kind of reading that takes time and a lot more thought and focused attention than most of us are currently investing in our spiritual reading, and yet it is the words of Scripture, the sentences and paragraphs and trains of thought through which God has chosen to communicate His holiness, His wisdom, and His love to mankind.

Peterson floats a very plausible theory that readers of Scripture have replaced the inspired text with a new text of "the sovereign self." Rather than taking the Truth of God's Word into our jaws, and ultimately into "the tissues of our lives," (20) we have replaced Father, Son, and Spirit with a new Holy Trinity.

The New Holy Trinity, Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book* If my needs become non-negotiable, if my wants have taken on the weight and urgency of a need, and if my feelings have become the sum total of who I am, then the Real Trinity and their communication to me through the Bible become nothing more than a tool in "service of [those] needs, wants, and feelings." (33)

Rather than "privatizing" (46) Scripture by controlling and fragmenting its message, the believer is called to personalize its words and then to submit to their revelation of God's character and will. The truth is that we are gathered into the narrative of Scripture; our story is enfolded into the overarching story of God's people; and the "stories" that we share to illustrate a point are best seen as elements of one huge and coherent narrative.

Approaching the Bible with this in mind effects the way we read, teach, and apply its truth. I appreciated the clarity Peterson brought to five specific topics:

1. The Reader as Exegete

Exegesis is a pretty intense term for "the discipline of attending to the text and listening to it rightly and well." (50) In her role as exegete, the reader will pay rigorous attention to the words and their intent, proceeding with caution in order to get it right.

“Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen carefully to what He says.” (55)

2. The Obedient Reader

Peterson compares his reading of Scripture to his reading of a running magazine. When he was actively involved in running as a habit, he never tired of reading about it. However, when a pulled muscle interrupted his running routine, he noticed that his reading came to a halt. In the same way, spiritual reading is “participatory reading.” If we are not participating in the reality of the Bible, we will not have as much interest in reading. Our reading should be formed around this question: “What can I obey?” (71)

“All right knowledge of God is born of obedience.” ~John Calvin (69)

3. Let the Reader Beware!

As the residents of Narnia warned that Aslan is “not like a tame lion,” Peterson warns that the Word of God will not be tamed by the reader. It is a living Word, and it was first spoken into a particular context, a specific time and place and language. It was not given to make our lives more convenient or more manageable.

“We want to get in on the great invisibles of the Trinity, the soaring adorations of the angels, the quirky cragginess of the prophets, and . . . Jesus.” (87)

4. Reading as a Way of Living

Peterson’s thoughts about lectio divina with its four components (reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating) rescue the concept from the ethereal and impractical by acknowledging that “they are not four discrete items that we engage in one after another in stair-step fashion. Rather than linear, the process is more like a looping spiral in which all four elements are repeated, but in various sequences and configurations.” Tying all our spiritual disciplines back to the Truth of Scripture grounds us in a true living out of their essence rather than a self-conscious performance mentality.

5. Reading in the Company of Translators

The story behind Eugene Peterson’s translation of The Message Bible links every teacher, preacher, and student of the Word to the role of translator. Against the backdrop of historical translations from Hebrew into Aramaic, Greek, and all the various English translations, Peterson found himself having to translate again, from the pulpit, into “American English.” The formal process that resulted in The Message Bible took ten years and formed his thinking about the importance of remembering the humble origins of the Bible in its original writing. Since the days of Tyndale’s translation which was intended for “the boy that driveth the plough,” many traditional and more modern translations left Tyndale’s plow boy in a cloud of dust with a kind of language that obscured the Spirit-given perspicuity of the text.

Dealing with God is Not Optional

God intends to speak with clarity to His people through a written Word. Therefore, in reading His Word in the way He intends, dealing with God is not optional. Participatory reading, reading that is formative, hands over all preconceived ideas about God and eats, chews, gnaws and receives, with humble delight the wild and untamed words of Scripture so that reading and living become one offering and one way of being with God in this world.

Many thanks to William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company for providing a copy of this book to facilitate my review, which, of course, is offered freely and with honesty.

L.A. says

Another message from the guy who gave us The Message.

And the message is, basically, eat the book. Or, to put it more candidly, don't just read the freaking Bible. If you're serious about it, absorb it. Live it. As a metaphor, it works, especially when you consider the book itself has examples where God's servants are asked to do pretty much exactly that (both Ezekiel and the speaker of Revelation are commanded to eat scrolls).

When he's not explaining his metaphor and discussing, at length, what Bible reading should and shouldn't be, Peterson tells the story of how he got into translation in the first place; it wasn't intentional. In fact, it started with him being pretty pissed off at his congregation, and determined to make them understand the social justice message Galatians demanded of them. And then it just took off from there. There are some interesting tidbits about Greek and Aramaic for those who love words, and many readers will be surprised at how some of the things they think they know are actually wrong, thanks to bad translations.

This book's appeal is limited to believing Christians who are also Bible nerds, but The Message is a pretty popular translation, so odds are good that if it circs well at your library, Peterson's philosophical works might as well. Still, for most, this book -- in fact, this whole series -- is an ILL, but if you have it, don't weed it. At least, not right away. Try displaying first, and if it doesn't pan out, send it on its merry way. It's the sort of book that will find its reader right when said reader needs it most. Recommended for seminary libraries and very large public library collections, with the aforementioned caveats.

Heather Neroy says

This book is pretty dry & reads like a text book for most chapters. I'm a very literal person so the metaphors really took a certain part of my imagination to somewhat grasp. (I say somewhat because I'm still not completely sure I could explain to you, in a convincing way, how we are to "eat" the Word of God). However over my head it seemed, I'm taking away the key message. Lectio Divina is a totally different way of scripture study then I'm used to but since practicing it these past few months, I am really enjoying it. I also loved the last 2 chapters about how Mr Peterson came to write the translation of the Bible "The Message".

Elaine says

I admire Eugene Peterson. I visited with him once backstage at a U2 concert, not realizing at first who I was talking to. Later, when I found out who it was, I was more excited to have met him than the possibility of meeting Bono. Peterson was there because Bono had been reading The Message and wanted to spend time with this man who put the Bible in a language any American (or in Bono's case, Irishman), could understand.

The final portion of Eat This Book describes why Eugene Peterson decided to join the ranks of "God's secretaries" and get the Bible into the current day's vernacular. I was tempted to skip this part of the book, thinking I'd find it uninteresting, and found it as good as the first half of the book.

The first half encourages the reader to do more than just read the words on the pages of the Bible but instead to assimilate them into the actions of our lives. I loved the chapter on the Bible as story. "When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but our

stories in God's." (pg. 44).

Finally, I love the description of lectio divina, which involves four parts: lectio (reading), meditatio (meditate), oratio (pray), and contemplatio (live).

This book makes it hard to keep reading it because it inspires you to take a fresh look at Scripture, so I was always putting this book down to pick up the Bible (a good thing). I'm glad I made myself finish the book though. The end was as good as the beginning.

Marcás says

This is the kind of satisfying poetic text we've come to expect from Pastor Peterson's prolific pen. Here he argues that we commonly read the bible in a disembodied and literalist form which does a disservice to it's witness on us.

He wants to place the emphasis moreso on reading the world in the Bible's terms; a good and necessary change of direction which takes more seriously God's involvement; the Theos in Theology as well as the Logos.

His call and response impetus reflects the structure of the scripture and invites us to re/discover new forms of reading. This is encouraged practically in community by reviving and recapitulating Lectio Divina and the liturgy, more properly understood.

Ariel Lobdell says

I was surprised I didn't love this more, as I love all I've heard from Eugene Peterson. There were some impactful ideas and imagery about reading the Bible to transform my reality, and they were beautifully stated - just overly stated, although I know he was just driving his point home - which he did. It'll stick with me. I so enjoy his metaphors and masterful way of writing, but I do think he could have applied some more specifics, practicalities, and tangible supports. I found the latter sections on Lectio Divina and the last part about "the company of translators" particularly intriguing and more compelling than the whole of the first half, myself.
