

Sheila E. McGinn, Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan, and Ahida Calderón Pilarski, eds. *By Bread Alone: The Bible through the Eyes of the Hungry*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014. 224 pages. \$29.

You never know what will come out of a conference address! In 2009, Kathleen M. O'Connor gave her presidential address to the Catholic Biblical Association of America (CBA), in which she lifted up Dorothy Sölle's "hermeneutics of hunger" (described by O'Connor as "an interpretive stance that engages the religious content of Christian traditions and feeds the world's physical and spiritual hungers") to respond to the then-recent challenge of Catholic bishops to Catholic biblical scholars to pair their strong historical-critical exegetical work with equally strong (but in the bishops' opinion, often lacking) theological work.<sup>1</sup> Without the latter, said the bishops, the Bible risks being seen as a historical curiosity, rather than a living voice in our present times. Sölle sought to counter feminist theology's "hermeneutic of suspicion," to make room for "a sense of hope" alongside critiques that expose the powers of oppression. O'Connor bluntly calls for a hermeneutic of hunger as an expansion beyond historical-critical approaches. Using Genesis 11 (the tower of Babel) as her text, O'Connor demonstrated how a hermeneutic of hunger might open up the text in new and living ways.

The Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics Task Force of the CBA latched on to O'Connor's address, as it tied in with a communal exegetical project they had begun to undertake in 2008. In 2010, they focused this undertaking on hunger. Thus, the idea of *By Bread Alone* was born, which grew into this collection of essays that follow O'Connor's example.

After a forward, an introduction by the editors, and O'Connor's 2009 address, nine additional essays are presented (four each drawn on the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, and one on the *Gospel of Thomas*). Each takes up a particular biblical passage related in some fashion to hunger, and brings Sölle's approach to bear. By the end of the book, we have heard the voices of Isaiah and Jeremiah (along with their take on the Torah authors), Hebrew poets, gospel writers Mark and Luke, Paul the proclaimer, and a host of modern voices. We have taken up topics like the link between fasting and feeding the poor, climate change, hunger as a weapon of war, the importance of social location, urban food deserts, the social concept of honor/shame, the social notion of sacrifice, the imperative to address hunger, patron-client relationships, and the relationship between religious belief and politics. Along the way, we hear the hungry not only in the Ancient Near East but also in Saskatoon and Zacatecas; we journey not only in the ancient empire of Rome but also the modern empire of the United States.

The results are precisely what the Synod of Bishops might have hoped for—substantive biblical exploration that seeks to understand what God was doing in ancient times so that we might see what God might be doing in today's world. They also are what O'Connor might have hoped for, as a group of her CBA colleagues embraced her challenge.

As one would expect in an anthology, the specific authors take different tacks. Some explicitly draw on Roman Catholic documents, while others may do so implicitly or not at all. Some delve more deeply into the ancient world and some live more vividly in the modern world, but all of them seek to move between the two, letting the ancient stories speak anew in the present. Given this back-and-forth, *By Bread Alone* is a wonderful book not only for biblical scholars but also those in practical fields, and especially homiletics.

Of particular interest to readers of *Homiletic* would be Lauress L. Wilkins' essay, "War, Famine, and Baby Stew: A Recipe for Disaster in the Book of Lamentations." Wilkins makes the most direct connection between her exegesis and contemporary preaching. She notes, for instance, that "the biblical texts that speak most clearly [to war and war-related hunger], namely,

Lamentations 1-2 and 4-5, rarely are preached from Catholic pulpits. . . . This oversight practically guarantees that the laments that would most strongly challenge those who promote aggressive military operations in the name of patriotism and national security are muted in Catholic preaching” (86).

This is not to say that the other essayists are not of interest to preachers and scholars of preaching—far from it! Taken together, they invite readers of all stripes to follow in O’Connor’s footsteps, walking with the hungry in two worlds and hearing God’s voice speaking in each place.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” *Instrumentum Laboris*, (Vatican City, 2008)  
[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20080511\\_instrlabor-xii-assembly\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20080511_instrlabor-xii-assembly_en.html)