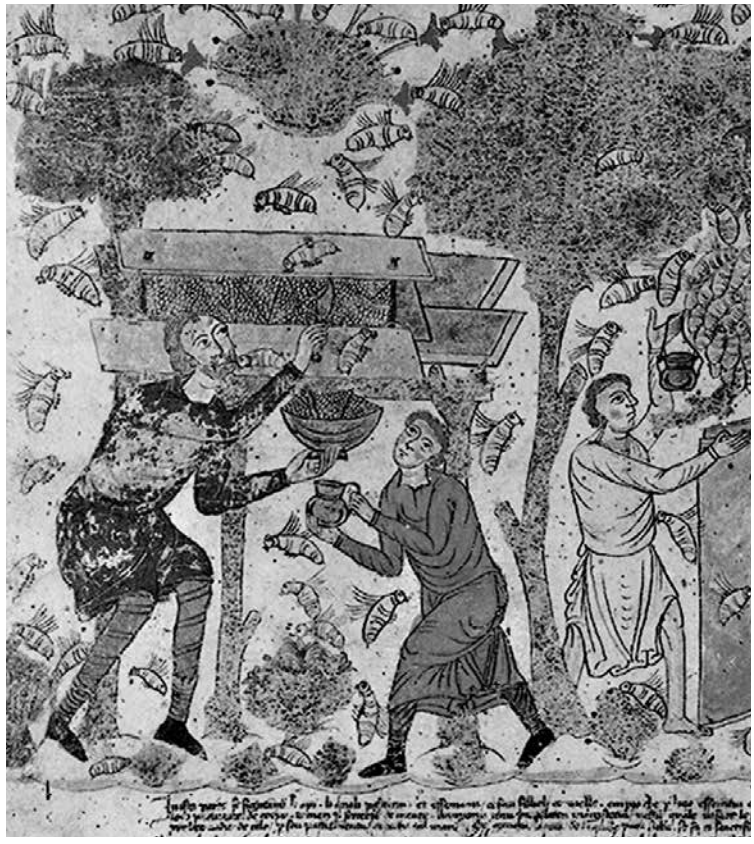
O Taste & See!

The Sweetness of Scripture Is Not Just for Beekeeping Monks

by Hans Boersma

Lectio divina, or divine reading, is nothing out of the ordinary. We tend to think of its four steps—reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation—as an esoteric practice, something monks engaged in long ago. The Latin term *divina* may intimidate us into thinking that *lectio divina* is something different from what we typically do in reading the Bible. But *divina* does not mean "esoteric"; it is more akin to our term *holy*. The Scriptures are holy—set aside for a unique purpose. For many centuries, believers referred deferentially to the Bible as the "divine Scriptures," meaning that it has a special place or function. It's a phrase we should retrieve. Scripture is divine in the sense that it has a special place within the church. And because Scripture is divine, our reading, too, should be divine.



True, for many centuries, monks engaged in *lectio divina* (and they do so, still). But that observation doesn't render the practice esoteric or elitist. Monks embark upon meditative reading of Scripture (*lectio divina*) for the simple reason that they love the Scriptures—much as every true believer does. Love of Scripture naturally leads to fervent, repetitive reading and prayerful meditation upon its words, always in the hope of seeing the face of God (contemplation).

In the seminars I have taught on *lectio divina*, I ask people to read a selected psalm three or four times. First, we read it once or twice just to familiarize ourselves with the words and to come to a basic grasp of the content of the psalm. In our next reading, we turn to a key word or phrase to reflect or meditate upon (asking ourselves how it functions within the psalm overall and within the entire biblical canon, and what it may have to say about Christ, the church, my own life). Then we can read it once more as we commit the result of our meditation to God in prayer. Finally, we rest in silent contemplation before the face of God.

The process itself makes clear that the Scriptures are a means of grace: for through this encounter with the biblical

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text, God aims to pierce us with his love. As I have reflected on the history of *lectio divina* over the past several years, it struck me how often medieval authors used the language of piercing to describe what God does in and through our reading of the Scriptures. (That's the reason why my recent book on *lectio divina* is titled *Pierced by Love*.) God intends to pierce us, often painfully so, in order to bring lovers of Scripture—not just monks—to him.

Divine reading, then, is experiential in character. God pierces us, and by piercing us transfigures us. Which means we should resist the modern preoccupation with a purely rational grasp of the one true meaning of the text. The words of the divine Scriptures cannot be mastered; they want to master us. God's purpose with them—that which sets them apart as holy or divine—is that they would change or transfigure us. Divine things aim to divinize. The four steps of *lectio divina* arise naturally, therefore, when Christians wrestle with the biblical text. *Lectio divina* simply means reading the Bible the way it's supposed to be read—as divine Scripture.

It should come as no surprise that the monastic tradition often turned to the biblical language of the Scriptures being "sweeter than honey" and ended up comparing the entire monastic enterprise to an exercise in beekeeping. Our reading of Scripture—or, at least, the attentive, meditative reading of Scripture I have in mind here—seemed to monks like eating honey. The twelfth-century Carthusian prior Guigo II, for example, explains the aim of *lectio divina* with the metaphor of sweetness. In *The Ladder of Monks*, a lovely exposition on the practice of divine reading, he explains that the final rung of the ladder, *contemplatio*, gives us an initial sense of the eschatological face-to-face vision of God. As Guigo puts it, "The mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness." The theological reason for the metaphor of sweetness seems obvious: just as our experience of happiness participates in the happiness of God, so our experience of sweetness gives us a share in the sweetness that is God himself.

To be sure, when medieval monasteries turned to the practice of beekeeping, they did so for a variety of reasons: once it fermented, honey could be enjoyed also in the form of alcoholic mead, while the wax was used to make candles. In this article, however, I will restrict myself to the link between apiculture (or beekeeping) and the practice of *lectio divina*. As we will see, the metaphor of the sweetness of God's words led to a constellation of themes all centered on the practice of beekeeping. Monastic writers, especially those within the Cistercian tradition, delighted in the sweetness of honey as the aim of divine reading. Trained in the practices both of beekeeping and of spiritual reading, medieval monks came to see the former as symbolic of the latter: bees offered instruction on how meditative reading deepens one's participation in the sweetness and the wisdom of God himself. The ancients regarded *lectio divina*'s deliberative, ponderous reading of Scripture as akin to eating—specifically, the eating of honey from the comb.

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Eating the Scroll

The identification of Scripture with a honeycomb was irresistible in part because the Psalms explicitly link the two. David praises God's ordinances, saying they are "sweeter than honey and the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10). (Throughout this article, I use the Douay-Rheims translation, though my numbering of the Psalms follows most contemporary translations.) Likewise, Psalm 119 exclaims, "How sweet are thy words to my palate! more than honey to my mouth" (verse 103). Christ is the rock (1 Cor. 10:4), and if God's people sucked honey from the rock, then—so a mind trained by the practice of *lectio divina* would conclude—to suck honey must mean to internalize the teachings of Christ. For Christian readers, the theme of Scripture as honey was grounded directly in the biblical text.

Few biblical passages are as suggestive for exploring the metaphor of eating as God's instruction to the prophet Ezekiel: "'Son of man, thy belly shall eat, and thy bowels shall be filled with this book, which I give thee,' and I did eat it: and it was sweet as honey in my mouth" (Ezek. 3:3). This passage gained prominence and depth through John the Seer's evoking it in Revelation 10:9–10. The language of eating a scroll identifies God's words as food, while the reference to honey invites exploration of the sweet character of the Scriptures.

St. Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) goes out of his way in his homily on this text from Ezekiel to explore every aspect of God's injunction to the prophet. No aspect of the biblical text may be lost, for "the crumbs of it compose the simple life and large pieces build a keen understanding" (*Homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* 1.10.2). Figure 1, a twelfth-century image from a Bible kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, depicts Ezekiel seated inside the letter *E*. God's hand feeds him the scroll, which in Latin reads, "Eat this book, and go speak to the children of Israel" (Ezek. 3:1).

Figure 1. Ezekiel eating the scroll (Ezek. 3:3)

St. Gregory begins his homily, which he preached around 592 or 593, by establishing that Scripture is our food and drink. He appeals to Amos 8:11, "I will send forth a famine into the land: not a famine of bread, nor a thirst of water, but of hearing the word of the Lord." Noting that Scripture is both food and drink, the pope distinguishes them by suggesting that we can simply drink the "plainer sayings," whereas more obscure passages must be chewed (studied) and swallowed (understood).

The biblical text comments straightforwardly, "And I opened my mouth, and he caused me to eat that book" (Ezek. 3:2). Gregory, however, recognizes that he cannot possibly take this literally, and so he explains that the mouth is actually a reference to the heart—in line with Psalm 12:2, which Gregory translates, "Deceitful lips are in his heart, and in his heart hath he spoken evils." So, when God opens the mouth of our hearts, he opens our understanding and fills our thoughts with the sweetness of the Scriptures.

When Ezekiel goes on to state, "Thy belly shall eat, and thy bowels shall be filled with this book," Gregory explains that both belly and bowels speak of the heart. His evidence is Jeremiah's cry of lament, "My bowels, my bowels are in pain" (Jer. 4:19), and, especially, Jesus' own comment that from the believer's "belly" rivers of living water shall flow (John 7:38). In both cases, explains Gregory, the Scriptures allude to the understanding of the heart or of the mind.

Gregory ends his reflections on eating God's words with a warning in two directions. First, his listeners must realize that God's food will satisfy and his drink inebriate only if our minds are transformed and we no longer seek the earthly things we used to love: "For it is said of the elect through the Psalmist: 'They shall be inebriated with the plenty of Thy house' [Ps. 36:8]" (*Ezekiel* 1.10.7). And preachers must recognize that they can edify others only if their own lives are in line with the Scriptures that they preach. Gregory takes Ezekiel's comment that the scroll was "sweet as honey in my mouth" (Ezek. 3:3) as meaning that the preacher, having learned to love God in the bowels of his heart, now knows "how to speak sweetly about Him" (*Ezekiel* 1.10.13). God's words, explains Gregory, have served as sweet honey in his own mouth first, so that he now truly "dyes the pen of his tongue in his heart" (*Ezekiel* 1.10.13).

Chewing, Sucking & Swallowing

St. Anselm, too, captured the process of *lectio divina* through the metaphor of eating honey. He encourages the reader of his *Meditation on Human Redemption* to reflect on the salvation that Christ has procured:

> Consider again the strength of your salvation and where it is found. Meditate upon it, delight in the contemplation of it. Shake off your lethargy and set your mind to thinking over these things. Taste (*gusta*) the goodness of your Redeemer, be on fire with love for your Saviour. Chew (*mande*) the honeycomb of his words, suck (*suge*) their flavour which is sweeter than sap, swallow (*gluti*) their wholesome sweetness. Chew by thinking, suck by understanding, swallow by loving and rejoicing. Be glad to chew, be thankful to suck, rejoice to swallow.

Anselm uses four imperatives related to eating: taste, chew, suck, and swallow. The first, taken from Psalm 34:8 ("O taste, and see that the Lord is sweet"), covers the entire process. Each of the other three focuses on one aspect of eating from the honeycomb: chewing, sucking, and swallowing. The chart below summarizes Anselm's uses of the honeycomb metaphor.

METAPHOR	MEANING	RESPONSE
Chew	*Think*	*Be glad*
Suck	*Understand*	*Be thankful*
Swallow	*Love*	*Rejoice*

Chewing the text is hard work. The rational mind is at work, thinking about what the text is saying, trying to figure out how the words function in the context of the passage, the book as a whole, and the entire canon; trying to understand the genre, the structure of the passage, and so forth. For Anselm, *lectio divina* involves hard work. (As an aside: much the same is the case for Bernard of Clairvaux, who comments: "Food tastes sweet in the mouth, a psalm in the heart. But the faithful and wise soul will not neglect to tear at the psalm with the teeth of its understanding. If you swallow it whole without chewing it, the palate will miss the delicious flavor which is sweeter than honey from the honey-comb"; *Select Works*, Sermon 74.5). We must take our time chewing the text itself. What is more, we should be glad to engage in this laborious activity of thinking about what the text might mean.

Anselm moves from chewing to sucking, and with that, from thinking to understanding. He does not specify how he wants us to distinguish between thinking (*cogitare*) and understanding (*intelligere*), but he likely has in mind that whereas in thinking we rationally analyze the literal meaning, in understanding we arrive at the reality of the spiritual meaning. Understanding gives us spiritual insight, which reaches beyond mere discursive analysis or argumentation.

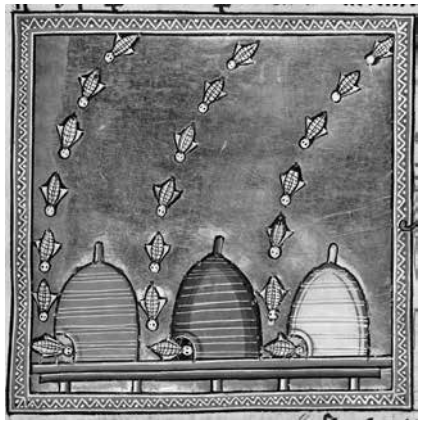
Anselm must have found the language of sucking attractive as a metaphor for spiritual understanding. The waxy hexagonal cells of the honeycomb would need to be chewed, but the honey inside could be sucked out of the comb. The sucking imagery implies a more ready flow from text to reader than the language of chewing. The reader is now able directly to drink in the spiritual reality that had been hidden within the text. Just as God had made the Israelites suck (*sugeret*) honey from the rock (Deut. 32:13; cf. Ps. 81:16), so too, he makes the biblical reader suck the honey as he arrives at a spiritual understanding of the text.

A Beekeeping Culture

Once Scripture is understood as a honeycomb, numerous other aspects of the world of beekeeping also offer typological potential. Henri de Lubac and Fiona Griffiths both offer discussions of the various associations that beekeeping evoked for monastic readers (see de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis* 2.162–177; and Griffiths, "A Bee in the Garden of the Lord," in *The Garden of Delights*, 91–105). They point to at least four areas of significance:

• *Spiritual Reading*
Bees produce honey inside the wax of the honeycomb.

Just so, medieval authors explained, the outward letter of the Scriptures contains a hidden, spiritual meaning. The popular twelfth-century theologian Honorius of Autun draws this comparison: "The honeycomb is honey in the wax; honey in the wax is the spiritual understanding lying hidden in the letter, but the honeycomb is dripping, while sweet allegory is flowing from the letter" (*Expositio in Cantica canticorum* 4.11). The practice of *lectio divina* involved a search for spiritual or allegorical truths by means of meditation; the process was a search for the sweet taste of biblical honey. Beekeeping was akin to monastic reading.



• *Organization*

Bees' communal life in a hive made them a cherished symbol of the monastic community. Bees seemed to live together peaceably within a hierarchical structure, much as monks are wont to do. A picture from *The Aberdeen Bestiary* (ca. 1200) depicts the orderly life of the bees: looking perfectly identical, they descend in military-style formation on their hives (see image).

The Aberdeen Bestiary highlights the bees' organized life together:

> Expert in the task of making honey, they occupy the places assigned to them; they construct their dwelling-places with indescribable skill, and store away honey from a variety of flowers. They fill their fortress, made from a network of wax, with countless offspring. Bees have an army and kings; they fight battles.

St. Ambrose, who would become the patron saint of bees, heaps similar praise on them. He commends them for having the same abode, for living within one native land, for sharing the same food and activities, for electing a king and serving him while remaining free, for their architectural skills, and for their division of labor. Ambrose even substitutes the bee for the ant of Proverbs 6:6–8: "Scripture rightly commends the bee as a good worker: 'Behold the bee, see how busy she is, how admirable in her industry, the results of whose labors are serviceable to kings and commoners and are sought after by all men'" (*Hexameron* 5.21.70). Beehives were model monasteries.

• *Learning & Wisdom*

Bees take nectar from flowers and store it in the cells of the hive, which functions akin to a memory palace in which monks store the biblical information gathered in meditation. The notion of the hive as a memory palace of sorts goes back to Seneca, who in the first century suggested that we imitate bees, "taking the things we have gathered from our diverse reading, first separate them (for things are better preserved when they are kept distinct), then, applying the care and ability of our own talent, conjoin those various samples into one savor" (*Letters on Ethics: To Lucilius* 84.5).

Not surprisingly, considering the medieval interest in both memorization and beekeeping, monks similarly connected memorization to the beehive as a storage facility. To monks, murmuring lips resembled the buzzing of bees (Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, 73). The repetitive murmuring would eventually give each biblical verse its secure place within the mental beehive. Bees, therefore, functioned as symbols of wisdom and learning, both in classical culture and in later Christian tradition. The ninth-century Benedictine theologian Rabanus Maurus, for instance, comments, "Divine Scripture is a honeycomb filled with the honey of spiritual wisdom" (*De universe* 22.1). Bees instilled wisdom in monks.

• *Virginity*

Since bees were thought to reproduce without sexual intercourse, they were models for monastic purity and celibacy. Ambrose, relying on Virgil, offers the following description of the asexual reproduction of bees:

> The act of generation is common to all. Their bodies are uncontaminated in the common act of parturition, since they have no part in conjugal embraces. They do not unnerve their bodies in love nor are they torn by the travail of childbirth. A mighty swarm of young suddenly appears. They gather their offspring in their mouths from the surface of leaves and from sweet herbs. (*Hexameron* 5.21.67)

The notion that bees procreate asexually was commonplace in the Middle Ages. The twelfth-century French theologian Hildebert of Lavardin, for example, writes, "The virgin is a little bee, who makes wax and procreates without coitus" (see Griffiths, "Bee in the Garden," 101). Bees taught monks about virginity.

The world of bees sheds much light on the monastic life. Spiritual reading, cooperation within hierarchical structure, memorization of Scripture, and chastity were all realities that the monks could appreciate by observing the bees. Monasteries were like beehives, while the monks themselves were like bees, participating in the sweetness and wisdom of God through prayerful meditation upon the biblical text.