

The Book Eaters

There is one point in the book of Revelation where the apostle John eats a book. Yes, you read that correctly: John really does *eat a book*:

Revelation 10:8: “And the voice which I heard from heaven spake unto me again, and said, Go and take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel which standeth upon the sea and upon the earth.

9 And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, Give me the little book. And he said unto me, Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey.

10 And **I took the little book out of the angel’s hand, and ate it** up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter.

11 And he said unto me, Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings.”

Strangely enough, John is not the only person in the Bible who did this. God told Ezekiel to do exactly the same thing:

Ezekiel 2:8: “But thou, son of man, hear what I say unto thee; Be not thou rebellious like that rebellious house: open thy mouth, and eat that I give thee.

9 And when I looked, behold, an hand was sent

unto me; and, lo, a roll of a book was therein;
10 And he spread it before me; and it was written within and without: and there was written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe.

3:1 Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, eat that thou findest; eat this roll, and go speak unto the house of Israel.

2 So I opened my mouth, and he caused me to eat that roll.

3 And he said unto me, Son of man, cause thy belly to eat, and fill thy bowels with this roll that I give thee. Then did I eat it; and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness.

4 And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them."

There are quite a few similarities between these two accounts. In both cases God commanded that the prophet eat the book. In both cases it tasted as sweet as honey, but in both cases it produced bitterness (Ezekiel reports this in verse 14). After the prophets ate the book, in both cases they were told that they would have to prophesy. The only difference seems to be the audiences that were involved: whereas John was told to prophesy to many nations, Ezekiel was just sent to the house of Israel.

So what is the point of these bizarre passages? I think that this commentary explains it well:

This symbolical action of eating the roll teaches that, (1) the words of Ezekiel would not be his words but the Word of God; (2) the written word of God would become the very life of the prophet; (3) the eating of the roll by Ezekiel indicated his acceptance of the commission God was here giving him; and (4) that he would need to digest it, assimilate it into his very being, and

speak nothing else, absolutely, to the people except as God would direct him. As Feinberg stated it, “He who gives forth the Word of the Lord must feed on it himself.”

(from *Coffman’s Commentaries on the Bible*)

Incidentally, God asked Ezekiel to do all sorts of odd things – ranging from building a model of Jerusalem and attacking it (Ezekiel 4:1-2), to shaving his head and setting the shavings on fire (Ezekiel 5:1-2). Ezekiel did everything that God asked him, but Israel still refused to hear anything that God had to say. As a result the nation was destroyed and the Israelites were carried away into exile. Rejecting the messages of God has consequences.

Fortunately, God no longer commands us to eat books or set our hair on fire – but we are still called to heed His messages. God used a very unusual method to give His words to Ezekiel and John, but the message of judgment that He gave them was quite serious. We would do well to listen to what God has to say.

