



10-1-2012

Babette's Feast and the Goodness of God

Thomas J. Curry
curryth@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Curry, Thomas J. (2012) "Babette's Feast and the Goodness of God," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol16/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by
DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of
Religion & Film by an authorized administrator of
DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact
unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Babette's Feast and the Goodness of God

Abstract

This article attempts to answer the preeminent question *Babette's Feast* invites viewers to consider: Why does Babette choose to expend everything she has to make her feast? Of the critical studies made of the film, few have considered analytically crucial the catastrophic backstory of Babette, the violence of which is implied and offscreen. Appreciation of the singularity of Babette's own personhood and the darker aspects of her experience, and not only how she might act as a figure of Christ, are key to understanding the motivating force behind her meal and its transformative effect: That through the feast Babette lays to rest the horrors of her past and takes refuge in God's goodness.

Keywords

Babette, Christ figures, Women, Food, Sacrifice, Evil

Author Notes

Thomas J. Curry, teaches at St. John's College, a Lasallian preparatory school in Washington, DC. He holds a BA in Religion from La Salle University, and an MA and PhD in Theology from Boston College. He also has a Certificate in Japanese Tea Ritual from Urasenke Gakuen in Kyoto, Japan, and is completing a Certificate in Nonprofit Management at Marymount University. Dr. Curry's research and teaching interests include systematic theology, film as mystagogy, Catholic identity and mission advancement.

O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him
(Psalm 34:8)

Introduction

Religion scholars and film critics alike have found nourishment in the cinematic and thematic delights of *Babette's Feast* since it debuted in 1987. Its 25th anniversary this year is an opportune time to take a fresh look at this remarkable film. In the last two decades, several essays have been published that interpret the film from various Christian positions. A common trend is to regard Babette's relationship to the puritanical community as allegorical to Christ's actions on behalf of the church and her feast a kind of Eucharist. These are undoubtedly valid readings of the film, since the visual tableaux suggests that director Gabriel Axel consciously makes the association between Christ and Babette, extrapolating her role in the eponymous novella by Isak Dineson (née Karen Blixen).¹ However, to deem Babette first and foremost as a Christ figure can serve to color everything we see and know of her in the film and runs the risk of neglecting the singularity of her experiences. Whereas Babette's lavishing all her lottery winnings on the feast may be an act of Christ-like renunciation, understanding the depth of her sacrifice requires knowledge of the significance the meal holds *for her*. As I will argue, the meal—its planning, preparation, and service—is a process through which Babette reconciles with the violent circumstances that led to her expatriation to Denmark.

This article is divided into two main parts. The first part attempts to demonstrate the thesis by way of careful intertextual analysis of the film's structure and montage, its

Christian iconography and painterly *mise en scène*, and the relation of its verbal text to Dineson's book. Building on this aesthetic analysis, the second part imputes theological possibilities to the film. For this I turn to Marilyn McCord Adams's reflections on theodicy in her volume *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*.² I present reasons why Babette might in fact *need* to give her feast and how its execution represents the vindication of God's goodness in defeating her personal participation in evil. When seen through Adams's theological optic, *Babette's Feast* is the story of one woman's faithful integration of her experience of violence into a life that is for her a great good.

Film Summary

Babette Hersant is a Parisian gourmet chef forced to flee the Commune uprising of 1871 during which her husband and son are killed "like rats" under the Marquis de Galliffet. Arriving fatigued and bewildered at an isolated village on the rugged seacoasts of 19th century Jutland, in desperation she begs two senior women to employ her as their servant. Martina and Philippa are kind-hearted, poor spinsters who sustain a now dwindling Lutheran sect founded by their late father.³ As shown in flashback, both have forfeited lives of love and prestige to remain in their father's charge. Philippa declined a potentially stellar career as an opera singer with a world-renowned baritone who desired to be her husband and manager. Martina's lover, a lieutenant in the Guard Hussars named Lorens Löwenhielm, renounced the affair because he felt foolish among such "pious melancholics." When the sisters tell Babette—a "papiste"—that they have nothing to pay her, she pleads, offering to work for no wages. If they cannot take her in,

Babette tells them she will “simply die.” In compassion they employ her knowing only, from a letter penned by her guarantor, Achille Papin (Philippa’s former lover), that she “can cook.”

Babette begins preparing the staple repast of the women and the homebound villagers under their care. She works as their house servant without complaint or vacation for fourteen years, and over the course of this time she has a marked effect on the community. With Babette’s taste for quality and business savvy, previously plain meals are now delicious and there is more money in the coffer. All of this allows Martina and Philippa time to attend to the pastoral needs of the septuagenarians, among whom there is much infighting due to old disputes and infidelities. Communal meals are as much filled with grumbling and verbal sparring as they are with prayers and hymns. However, “their bickering always stops when Babette enters the room to serve [them]. A disapproving glance or a clearing of the throat is enough to bring shame and silence. Her mere presence is a rebuke to unworthy words or thoughts.”⁴

Throughout the fourteen years, Babette remains solitary. Shown forlorn in her room or alone in a field, we sense that she harbors something dark. In Dineson’s novelette Babette appears more formidable than Axel’s portrayal. She writes of Babette’s “*dark eyes*,” “*quiet countenance*,” and “*strong hands*”; that her “*steady, deep glance had magnetic qualities; under her eyes things moved, noiselessly, into their proper places*.” Babette was a “*dark Martha in the house of two fair Marys*.”⁵ Yet the sisters are always respectful toward her and never pry into her past for the reason she had to expatriate in haste.

One day Babette wins 10,000 francs in the French lottery via a ticket that an old friend renews for her each year. Martina and Philippa share her joy, but fear that now she will move back to a better life in Paris. To their surprise Babette requests permission to prepare the memorial supper honoring the minister's one-hundredth birthday. Reluctantly, the sisters agree and Babette begins preparations for a multiple-course French dinner, the likes of which the poor parishioners could never imagine. When the imported victuals arrive the puritanical sisters are horrified: live quail, a massive turtle, bottles of alcohol. They are convinced that Babette, the mysterious “papiste,” has assembled fare for a witches’ Sabbath. Those invited to the commemoration make a secret pact that they will endure the dinner for Babette's sake and not comment on what is being served.

Twelve guests attend the dinner. One of them is Lorens Löwenhielm, Martina's former suitor. Now a distinguished general, he returns, perhaps expecting to show her up. Löwenhielm has obtained everything he set out to gain, and yet remains profoundly unhappy. He returns to see if he made the right choice in leaving Martina: to reject the vision he had of a purer life with her to focus entirely on his career. He anticipates a peasant's meal that he will deign to eat. Instead, what is served is elegant fare: potage à la tortue; caviar blinis; and a chef-d'œuvre of Babette's own creation, *Caille en Sarcophage*. Each course is complemented by the finest amontillado, champagne *Veuve Clicquot*, and burgundy from the Cistercian vineyard *Clos de Vougeot*, respectively. Whereas the camera records their clear enjoyment of the food, the group keeps their promise to “cleanse their tongues of all taste,” and not say a word. Since he was not in on the pact, Löwenhielm openly marvels at the spread. All the guests savor the same

food, though, as a nobleman, he alone knows the care, quality, and expense that went into every detail.⁶ Indeed, the group's decision not to speak takes on a double meaning: they simply do not know what they have before them. Löwenhielm himself is equally baffled at the apparent nonchalance of the parishioners with respect to what is being served, as if they had been eating like this every week for thirty years.

As the feast unfolds, a clear transformation takes place. In the book, the food and drink “*agreed with their exalted state of mind and seemed to lift them off the ground, into a higher and purer sphere.*”⁷ In the film, Axel employs cinematic tools to capture this heightened state. By way of “close attention to facial expression, eye-movement, and gesture . . . [the] film records the shift from the community's initial resolve to think nothing of the food . . . through their unavoidable enjoyment of food, drink, and general conviviality, to a newfound enjoyment of each other, via a process of healing and reconciliation of the wounds of scarred relationships between them.”⁸ Prior to the feast the monochromatic tones of the bleak Jutland landscape and the austere furnishings symbolized something of the spiritual state of the parishioners.⁹ Now their ashen faces have mellowed and turned flush—slightly from alcohol but mainly aglow in the delight of renewed fellowship.

The effects of the extraordinary denouement are clear: Löwenhielm finds that joy is still possible and he and Martina depart from each other tenderly; the parishioners gather in a circle under the stars to sing a hymn of thanksgiving; the sisters are moved at the sacrifice Babette has made both in giving the feast and generously serving them for so long; and Babette finally reveals her true identity as the former head chef at the *Café Anglais* in Paris. She glows in the creative power of her artistry. Tonight has been a kind

of finale—a “last supper” of sorts: for having spent the entire 10,000 francs on the feast she has intentionally ended her professional career. She cannot return to France and will continue to serve Martina and Philippa. So contented, the melancholy she hid so well from the sisters is lifted. There is the sense that Babette has finally come to terms with something . . .

Aesthetic Analysis

Babette's Feast is a rich and multidimensional film that has been interpreted from several frames of reference—sociocultural, psychoanalytic, religious. However, among existing reviews one simple question remains underdeveloped: Why does Babette, a Parisian Catholic, decide to spend all of her lottery winnings on one dinner in memorial of the founder of a Protestant sect? Several possible answers have been suggested. One position is that the feast is a token of Babette's gratitude to the sisters for having given her asylum. The motivation “for her offering is sheer excess; it is, in the fullest sense of the word, a mystery provided for the benefit of others. It is sacrificial and unnecessary.”¹⁰ While doubtless extravagant and other-directed, the opinion that the feast is “unnecessary” and that Babette seeks nothing for herself needs to be measured against her own words:

Philippa: “Babette, you ought not to have given away all you had for our sake.”

Babette: “It wasn't just for your sake.”

Here she hints that the meal holds a deeper significance, one she does not disclose to the sisters. For whose sake, then, did she prepare the feast—and why?

A second position regarding the film's fundamental question is that Babette is a gastronome of the highest order who cannot help but create. Her coming into fortune gives her leave to do her utmost with the finest materials available. Babette pours everything she has and *is* into a final masterpiece. When she confesses to the sisters that all her winnings were spent on one meal, a shocked Philippa asks, "So you will be poor now all your life?"; whereupon Babette pauses, straightens up, and in a dignified air responds, "An artist is never poor!"

A third position comes from analyzing the themes of sacrifice and communion in *Babette's Feast*. The film's structure models salvation history, with the first part corresponding to the Old Testament (the pastor and his small sect can be likened to Israel), the second part corresponding to the New Testament (Babette is likened to Christ and the group to the Apostles), and the feast a foretaste of the eschatological banquet in the New Jerusalem (the eucharistic overtones of the dinner). In this sense, the feast is an act of self-donation memetic of Christ's kenosis.¹¹

The foregoing opinions concerning Babette's intentions are persuasive and authenticated in the film. Yet they do not go far enough. Too little critical attention has been paid to the significance her erstwhile life and experience as a political refugee play in her decision. Consequently, images in the film communicative of the fundamental catalyst behind her actions have been overlooked. Axel suggests this additional purpose with such cinematic subtlety that, admittedly, it is discernable only after multiple viewings and with knowledge of Axel's own artistic sources.

Although the preponderance of visual and textual indicators demonstrates that Axel *consciously* makes the association between Christ and Babette (an extension of

Dineson's treatment), I argue that reading Babette first and foremost as a type of Christ runs the risk of disregarding her own importance. Taken too far, analysis of the film can become simply a matter of "symbol-hunting"—assigning christic significance to everything Babette is, says, or does. Because she plays "the part of the artist and, at points, of the unseen and self-giving host in the pattern of Christ (though never exactly or woodenly so),"¹² as a corrective measure, more attention needs to be paid to how Axel honors the singularity of Babette while simultaneously identifying her with Christ.

My analysis will focus on three specific elements in the story that signify the unspoken inspiration behind the feast: (a) the personhood of Babette; (b) the film's Christian iconography; and (c) the dish *Cailles en Sarcophage*. Each symbol is meaningful in itself; and when each is interpreted in light of the others a thread of meaning can be detected that signifies Babette's deepest motivation. I shall consider four separate scenes (I-IV) that match Babette directly with a Christian image. Reviewers who regard her as a Christ-figure have given minimal attention to the scenes chosen for analysis. Since the film does not use the spoken word to make the identification between Babette and Christ (e.g., Babette never talks of Jesus, or her Catholic faith; she is not heard praying or singing at worship; nor does anyone from the community ever comment about her faith), one must look deeply into the visual tableau for the association. My approach is to describe as accurately as possible how the Babette/Christ association is *already* embedded in the imagery. Such a descriptive method obviates any possible claim to theological eisegesis. Indeed, it does more to bolster the "Babette = Christ-figure" verdict.

Scene I

We first see Babette in the initial minutes of the movie and it is important to get the sequence of the scene correct. While some commentators hold that the “moment” we are watching Babette is sometime prior to the feast, I suggest it comes *after* the formal dinner.¹³ If my timing is accurate, it means that the film’s opening scene is actually the farthest in time that the movie ever takes us. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the scene ends with a dissolve of Philippa and Martina to a composite fade-in of the sisters when they were young [Figs. 1 & 2]. Thus, the furthest point in the story’s time stretches back to its earliest point by way of the dissolve device. It is necessary to make this time sequence clear since it impinges on an accurate reading of the film’s final scenes.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

In this opening scene Babette is shown baking cookies and serving tea to the religious community who have gathered for prayer in the sisters' house. She wears a crucifix around her neck and the camera frames this prominently in close-up. The film's omniscient narrator asks how it is that two poor women on the western seashore of Denmark have come to have the service of a French maid. To explain, via the dissolve the montage takes us back some fifty years to the time when the founder of the community was still alive and when Martina and Philippa were young women. After the story of each lover is told, there is a flash forward thirty-five years to when, as older, unmarried women, they (and we) are *formally* introduced to Babette. She arrives at their hut during a night storm, an enigmatic figure wearing a windswept cape [Fig. 3].



Fig. 3

As the women lead Babette into their home, the camera pans right to follow them. The three of them pass in front of a corner cabinet where perched atop is a statue of Jesus. The statue remains in the background from the time Babette enters to when she is served tea, although we never see Babette's face *and* the statue together in the frame. Only Martina and Philippa are shown full face with the figurine [Figs. 4 & 5].



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

The sisters decide in gesture to offer Babette some tea. Martina takes out a teacup from out of the cabinet. Its porcelain color and sheen exactly match that of the statue. As the sisters comfort Babette and pour her tea, the statue remains in the background above them all. Indeed, the statue will figure into several scenes throughout the film.

The point of such a detailed study of this masterful scene is to demonstrate the care and precision that Axel brings to his direction. Without voice-over narration or dialogue, Axel associates not only Babette, but *also* Martina and Philippa, explicitly with Jesus Christ. This observation—that Martina and Philippa are also types of Christ—is missed when too much emphasis is placed on Babette and her redemptive role in the community.¹⁴ Axel plainly illustrates the sisters' Christ-like commitment to their father's mission in long-standing service to the community, which comes at a great personal cost to both. As said in the prologue, "They spent all their time and almost all their small income on good works." The charity the sisters show throughout the film constitutes the seven corporal works of mercy: they shelter the homeless (Babette); feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; visit the imprisoned (the homebound); tend to the sick; clothe

the naked (they knit socks for the shut-ins). And, as will be explained later, they even help bury the dead. These acts of mercy are inspired, as the statue symbolizes, by their Christian faith. At no time does either sister contribute to the testy rows that have become typical of the sect; instead, they bear these wrongs and patiently counsel the others to “seek Christ”¹⁵ and look “for the signs of his infinite kingdom.”¹⁶

Scene II

Still, considering that all the action in the story depends on Babette, the film’s focus is on her as the community’s “redeemer,” and not the sisters. This role is illustrated by her sacrifice of an affluent life to give the dinner at the founder’s centennial. The camera gives us an up-close view of the painstaking preparations:

Early in the morning of the day of the feast, Babette begins slaughtering, disemboweling, dismembering, skinning, plucking, and slicing. In the background, a fire crackles furiously. A monstrous tortoise breathes eerily while moving its head slowly from side to side. A flayed calf’s head, ghastly white, lies in a bowl, like a corpse laid out in a casket. A barrow full of bloody innards and flesh, feathers, shells, hide, skin, heads, and feet is wheeled away. The feathered quail, to which Babette had crooned affectionately “Ma petite caille” when carrying them in their cage from the boat, now lie limp and naked in a bowl. The viewer watches Babette, wielding a sword-like knife, ruthlessly decapitate one of the little bodies and slit its back, spoon stuffing onto the flattened carcass, gently fit the little body into its “coffin” of pastry, and delicately insert the severed head. These preparations evoke the horrific animal and human sacrifices of the Old Testament or those of the followers of Dionysus.¹⁷

Whereas this reading highlights the “carnality” and “violence” of what goes on in a kitchen manned by Babette as contrasted to the sisters’ “bland” preps, the interpretation itself needs a pinch of restraint. The meticulous preparations are surely also meant to demonstrate Babette’s proficiency as a culinary artist—not a butcher! Also absent from

this interpretation is the scene's christic significance, for Axel makes an *explicit* visual association between Babette's "fleshy" preparations and the figure of Jesus. After the parishioners have made the vow to remain silent about the food, in hushed voices they sing the hymn "Jerusalem, Jerusalem." While they are singing, the film cuts to a black and white print of Jesus at prayer that was shown hanging on the wall in the background moments before [Fig. 6].



Fig. 6

Immediately after this image of Jesus, the montage cuts to a shot of the aforementioned wheelbarrow filled with the bloody debris of animal cuttings [Fig. 7].



Fig. 7

Axel's visual identification would therefore suggest that the feast's preparation evokes the sacrificial violence of Jesus' passion more than Greek or Jewish cultic oblations. The scene illustrates the contrast between the sect's apprehension with the "flesh" with Babette's Catholic sensibilities—i.e., her security with the earthy and sanguine.¹⁸

Scene III

Axel makes yet another association between Jesus and Babette sometime after she has begun working for the sisters but before she comes into the prize money. In this scene we are brought further into Babette's melancholy. It also confirms that she has made a positive impact on the community and thus already begun her "redemptive" work. In a darkened room there is a table, a chair, and through a lone window above the table we look out over a field to the sun setting [Fig. 8]. The windowpane forms the shape of a cross against the illuminated background. We hear a bed-sick man continue his prayer ". . . forever and ever. Amen."



Fig. 8

The camera pans left to show the source of the prayer as he continues ("And thank you Lord for sending Babette to us,") and with a slow zoom-in we see him finish the prayer ("she helps our little sisters so they can devote themselves to those most wretched in Thy little flock."). He smiles and with hands still clasped he leans back into his dark bed [Fig.9].



Fig. 9

A jump cut to Babette, framed alone and motionless in her darkened bedroom, makes it clear that she is deeply troubled. We see a tear begin to well up in her right eye.



Fig. 10

Just before the tear flows down her cheek there is a dramatic jump cut to a full-screen close-up of the intersection of four windowpanes. It is raining outside and the glass is streaked with raindrops: An associative match with Babette's tears. Like the window shown in Figure 8, the wooden intersection forms a full-screen cross [Fig. 11].



Fig. 11

This scene has been interpreted in theological reviews as Babette “weeping over Jerusalem,” as Jesus does in Luke 19, suggesting that her sorrow is due to the community’s (“Israel’s”) infighting. For instance: “Axel makes it clear that Babette is aware of the precarious situation of the community. She prays about it, and in a gesture that recalls Jesus grieving over the hard-heartedness of Jerusalem, she weeps.”¹⁹

Yet here is an example of the analytical insufficiency that stems from viewing Babette exclusively through the Christ-figure optic. In imputing Babette’s lament to frustrations in the community, reviewers ignore that she herself has suffered incalculable personal tragedy. While there remains a certain legitimacy to reading Babette as “weeping over Jerusalem”—since the shot of Babette cuts to a prayer meeting during which the religious community is shown at the height of their bickering and hardheartedness—it is only against her tragic backstory that her grief can be fully measured. Dineson’s narrative provides this context in the letter from Achille Papin. It reads that Babette herself was

*arrested as a Pétroleuse—(which word is used here for women who set fire to houses with petroleum)—and has narrowly escaped the blood-stained hands of General Galliffet. She has lost all she possessed and dares not remain in France.*²⁰

Babette left Paris amid such chaos and in such haste that she could not arrange for the burial of her murdered husband and son. Although we do not receive such detail in the film, there is enough to know that everything that helped to define Babette was destroyed in the Communard revolt. Recall the line in Papin’s letter that her husband and son are killed “like rats.” The illustration shown at that moment [Fig. 12] is the only explicit martial “violence” in the movie.



Fig. 12

Babette has lost everything, save her Catholic faith and skill as a chef. On the Jutland peninsula, she has no family or close friends, no money, and must learn Danish.²¹ In this new language and because Babette is in hiding she cannot adequately communicate her suffering. As a Catholic in an isolated Protestant village, she is without a supportive pastoral and sacramental system by which she may properly grieve. There, among the poor and simple, her talent as a gourmet chef is wasted, or so it seems at first. And this art, one of the only things salvaged from her recent chaos, Babette initially keeps secret out of fear that she will be misunderstood.²²

Scene IV

The final scene for consideration links the previous three and conveys what is perhaps Babette's deepest motivation for giving her feast. Because the montage is protracted to a greater degree than the previous scenes, a description of what is shown

will suffice. The details of this particular scene are of utmost importance for gaining insight into the motive and meaning of Babette's feast. After Babette has cashed in her lottery ticket, she and Philippa place the prize money in a wooden box. Babette thanks the sisters for all their help and leaves the room. The camera follows Babette as she walks up an exterior staircase to a spare garret. On the soundtrack, there is plaintive piano music. There is a cut to a wide shot inside the room. Babette sits down in profile holding the winnings in her lap. For a full four seconds the camera holds this image of Babette in deep contemplation [Fig. 13].



Fig. 13

The sequence then cuts to a close-up of her bedside. Hanging on the wall just above her pillow are a photo of a man (we presume it is her husband) and a timepiece (perhaps her husband's, suggestive of the time passed since his death) banded by a ribbon in the colors of the French flag [Fig. 14].



Fig. 14

This follows with a jump cut to Philippa playing piano (the ambient music we hear all along) followed by another jump cut to Babette walking alone on the seashore.



Fig. 15

She stops to look out upon the ocean. There is an axial cut toward the sea as the camera follows what Babette is looking at: a lone white bird passing over the sunlit, clear blue waters [Fig. 16].



Fig. 16

There is a cut back to Babette, who does a prompt about-face away inland, toward where she marches [Fig. 17].



Fig. 17

Axel indicates through composition, timing, and Babette's purpose of step that she has made a decision: which we learn will be to spend her entire fortune on the memorial feast.²³ At first the sequence does not appear to communicate more than what it shows, namely that Babette seems to have weighed the many possibilities that her wealth now affords her and has chosen to give everything away in a single dinner.

However, a deeper reading of the scene provides a clearer indication of *why* she makes her decision. If we return to the four-second still shot of Babette in her room, the subject, framing, and lighting are highly reminiscent of James McNeill Whistler's austere portrait *Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist's Mother* [Fig.18]. Axel's painterly design of his compositions has been well documented. In interviews, he indicates that several artistic works guided the cinematography, particularly those of Vermeer and Rembrandt.²⁴ "In *Babette*," he says, "there is hardly a story. It's just a series of portraits."²⁵ Though no critical attention has been paid to the possibility of Whistler's influence on this particular scene, knowing Axel's profound artistic acumen there can be little doubt of his quotation of *The Artist's Mother* here. Axel, of Danish extraction, spent his formative years in Paris, during which time he spent much of his time visiting the city's art museums. Whistler's portrait hangs in the *Musée d'Orsay* on the left bank of the Seine.



Fig. 13 (as above)



Fig. 18

But how is this quotation of Whistler a visual clue to the mysterious intention behind Babette's decision? The date Whistler painted his *Artist's Mother* was 1871, which was also the year of the Paris Commune. In the film, this is the exact year Babette's husband and son are murdered. This could be purely coincidental (although this is unlikely given Axel's comprehension of art history and his own extreme attention to detail) or it might be precisely the bit of information that confirms why Babette offers to cook the memorial dinner. The montage—from Babette sitting deep in thought, to the photo of her husband and the pocket watch tagged with *Le Tricolore*, to her “kairos” moment on the beach: together these indicate that the feast is her way of coming to terms with the untimely death of her husband and son and her fugitive escape from Paris. The dinner is a memorial to her family as much as it is to the sect's founder. Babette “was unable to bury her husband and son properly or to say goodbye to friends and place that made up her world in Paris. With no time to absorb her losses before plunging into an

ascetic life likely to magnify any preexisting sense of loss, Babette is forced to forestall or suspend mourning in order to survive.”²⁶ The feast is thus not only a profound gesture of gratitude, nor merely a venue for her artistry: *it is her way of burying the grief that has been in suspension for fourteen years.* What is more, Axel adapts the time period over which Babette serves the sisters, from twelve years in Dineson’s book to fourteen. No explanation has been given for the change, but Catholics may make the numerical connection to the fourteen Stations of the Cross. The idea of Babette “carrying” her grief harks back to the scene of her weeping: along her own *via dolorosa*.

Burying the Dead

This interpretation, that the planning, preparing, and serving of the dinner is the sacrament by which Babette will finally put to rest all that was taken from her—family, country, career—is corroborated by the symbolism of the dish *Cailles en Sarcophage* and its distinct connection to death and burial. It is now possible to better appreciate the “brutality” of the kitchen preps: The plucking and skinning of quail intimates the death of her family at the hands of Gaston Galliffet. Yet, whereas the Marquis’s savagery led only to death, here Babette’s “violence” leads to art and new life. The dish of her own creation at the *Café Anglais* consists of a single quail tucked into a pastry “sarcophagus” and “reshaped into a form that mimics the appearance of the living bird; and the name itself reminds the partaker of the sacrifice of life that makes the meal possible.”²⁷ When the ingredients for the feast arrive by boat, Babette picks up the cage of live quail and lovingly greets them, “*Alors, mes petites cailles!*”²⁸



Fig. 19

In French, the word *caille* or “quail” is also a term of endearment “used to refer to a loved one, as in the expression *ma petite caille*, translated as ‘my beloved, my darling, or my dearest.’”²⁹ Thus, the quail that Babette “brings from France, kills, and then meticulously entombs in their sarcophagi are not just birds, but her loved ones. The quail function as the fleshly embodiment of her husband, her son, the French aristocracy, and her cherished life in France.”³⁰



Fig. 20

In his speech, Löwenhielm identifies the quail dish and, unwittingly, the true identity of Babette. He states that in Paris he was once invited by General Galliffet to dine at *Café Anglais*. There Galliffet spoke of the head chef—“surprisingly, a woman”—as having “the ability to transform a dinner into a kind of love affair that made no distinction

between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite.” Galliffet continued that there was “no woman in Paris for whom he would shed blood except this chef.” Ironically, this same general would in time repress the Communards and shed the blood of Babette’s husband and son. The “love” meals that Babette made in Paris have taken on a new meaning here in the *agape* feast of the religious community: as they celebrate their founder, she grieves through and memorializes the ones she loved. There is a sense (made more explicit in the book) that Babette is also putting to rest the memories of those *bourgeoisie*, like Galliffet, who could appreciate her artistry. Though she fought against them, still, they were the people who gave her an identity. This detail also explains in part Babette’s fourteen-year suspension of grieving: her losses conflict with each other. Her need to mourn her family conflicts with the desire to mourn the French aristocracy who were the *sine qua non* of her vocation:

*“You see, Mesdames,” she said, at last, “those people belonged to me, they were mine. They had been brought up and trained, with greater expense than you, my little ladies, could ever imagine or believe, to understand what a great artist I am. I could make them happy. When I did my very best I could make them perfectly happy.”*³¹

Though ultimately barbarous, the Parisian aristocracy recognized her talent and provided the material means by which she could practice her art. Consequently, to mourn her husband and son

would mean recognizing that the society for which she lives and that gave her life and love as an artist was oppressive and murderous. To mourn the loss of this society and of her position as a culinary genius within it would be to express her love for those who mourned her husband and son and wronged the poor. Caught in an impossible, unspeakable double bind where mourning is tied to shameful love, Babette’s solution . . . is to mourn no one: to keep secret the drama of her loss, and to exclude from language any expression of her suffering.³²

This analysis, however, should not eclipse other issues behind the protraction of her grief: her loss of community (the need to grieve with survivors who also knew the deceased); the loss of her church (Catholic obsequies; a supportive pastoral system). Nevertheless, on this level, *Babette's Feast* is a story "about overcoming an inability to mourn. It dramatizes the effects of a blockage to mourning and writes the prescription or recipe for transcending that blockage. The preparation and consumption of food serve as the medium of transcendence, as the means by which a shameful loss is swallowed and the process of digestion begins. The feast also functions as a vehicle for articulating a fundamental connection between artistic creation and bereavement . . . and the creation of art as a life-saving act."³³

Theological Analysis

But how, from a theological, and not only aesthetic or psychoanalytic, perspective, can the feast be interpreted as connecting the aforementioned themes of communion, artistic creation, and bereavement? What Christian sense can be made of the link between Babette's grief and her exquisite meal? Beyond the benefit it has for the community, why is the feast "life-saving" for Babette? To answer these questions the final portion of the analysis brings the film into conversation with certain ideas on theodicy presented by Anglican theologian/philosopher Marilyn McCord Adams in her text *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*.³⁴ Prima facie, *Babette's Feast*, a G-rated movie, might not seem concerned with suffering and the question of evil. Yet *Babette's Feast* is quite "dark."³⁵ Adams's book serves to uncover the darker

consequences of Babette's expatriation and the role her faith plays in the decision to make the feast—points deserving more critical attention. Seen from Adams's perspective, Babette is one who has indeed experienced horrendous evils; correlatively she has experienced God's goodness. To understand this interpretive possibility, I will first define the concepts and logical thrust of Adams's argument and then apply her theodicean insights to the film.³⁶

“Horrendous” Evils

Adams's monograph treats the fundamental dilemma in Christian thought of reconciling undeserved suffering—the problem of evil—with faith in an omnipotent, good, and loving God. Adams surveys the literature on theodicy by analytic philosophers and finds that her peers typically (a) identify evil with atrocious acts of collective trauma, and (b) develop theories abstracted from real-life referents. As a countermeasure Adams's theology of evil emphasizes the acute personal consequences of individual participation in evil: “I do not equate horrors with massive collective suffering because I want to focus on what such evils do to the individual persons involved”³⁷ She explores the more insidious nature of the experience of evil, where its disastrous effects are not always immediate and where its full impact often goes undiagnosed. Evil is “horrendous” insofar as it can potentially snuff out all value achieved in a person's life. Participation in such experiences (as either agent or victim) constitutes reason to doubt whether an individual's life can be a great good to him/her on the whole and whether “the participants' life can be worth living, because it is so difficult humanly to conceive how

such evils could be overcome.”³⁸ They radically thwart if not practically destroy the well-laid plans made in the life of an individual prior to his or her actual participation, leaving one in the despairing position that perhaps no underlying meaning may be found in anything whatsoever. What makes horrendous evils “so pernicious is their life-ruining potential, their power *prima facie* to degrade the individual by devouring the possibility of positive personal meaning in one swift gulp.”³⁹

God’s Goodness

How does a good, omnipotent, and gracious God at once permit human beings to act evilly and vindicate or “make good,”⁴⁰ the lives of those thrust into evil’s vortex? Although Adams maintains the doctrine that God is not obliged to humanity, it would be “cruel for God to create (allow to evolve) human beings with such radical vulnerability to horrors, unless Divine power stood able, and Divine love willing, to redeem.”⁴¹ There must be ways the incommensurately good God defeats a person’s participation in horrendous evil and gives that person’s life a “positive meaning through organic unity with a great enough good *within the context of his/her life*.”⁴² This last point is a salient feature of her theology, namely that for God to be good to a person, God must guarantee that individual a life that is a great good to him or her and one in which any participation in horrors is defeated within the context of his or her life. God’s goodness is pledged immediately and cannot be understood only as a post-mortem benefit. For Adams the idea hinges on the notion “that God works continually—both during our lives and after

our deaths—to give our lives new and fuller meanings far beyond what we could orchestrate for ourselves.”⁴³

Meaning-making

But precisely *how* does God guarantee a life in which horrendous evils are not only balanced off but endowed “with positive meaning, meanings at least some of which will be recognized and appropriated” by the participant?⁴⁴ Adams grounds her theory that God communicates “goodness” to persons thrust into evil’s whirlwind on the Christian teaching that God has *already* vanquished evil by personally entering directly into its vortex. God “was not content to join Godself to material creation in relations of loving intimacy with created persons. God’s desire for it was so great, that God decided to enter it Godself, to unite a particular human nature to the Divine person as God’s very own nature, to become a human being.”⁴⁵ God incarnate identifies with all human beings who undergo catastrophic horrors, not only with the victims (of which He was one) but also with the perpetrators. Christ crucified “cancels the curse of human vulnerability to horrors. For the very horrors, participation in which threatened to undo the positive value of created personality, now become secure points of identification with the crucified God.”⁴⁶ The cross symbolizes the divine call for empathy with the afflicted, an entrance into the damaged person’s predicament in order to “‘taste and see’ just how bad it is.”⁴⁷ Godself has drunk the cup of suffering, guaranteeing divine solidarity with all creation; for now nothing that the world suffers can separate it from God’s covenantal, atoning, and intimate love-made-flesh (Rom. 8:31-39). Emphasized here is the insufficiency of

mere earthly goods for shaping shattered lives into wholes of positive significance. Only *divine* goodness thoroughly defeats horrendous evil and its power to stalemate human meaning-making efforts. Applying St. Anselm's notion of atonement, Adams writes:

the soteriological job of meaning-making is God's identification with human beings and God's own participation in horrors, this value cannot be obtained by sending someone else, however exalted. It is *God's* becoming a human being, experiencing the human condition from the inside, from the viewpoint of finite consciousness, that integrates the experience into an incommensurately valuable relationship.⁴⁸

To the participant, horrendous evils are not *prima facie* meaningful; but in the light of the incarnation, they are *not meaningless* because such experiences are partially constitutive of the most meaningful relationship of all, even if participants are unable at first to appropriate this dimension of meaning. This is summarized in one of Adams's strongest statements:

I do not say that participation in horrors thereby loses its horrendous aspect: on the contrary, they remain by definition *prima facie* ruinous to the participant's life. Nevertheless, I do claim that because our eventual postmortem beatific intimacy with God is an incommensurable good for human persons, Divine identification with human participation in horrors confers a positive aspect on such experiences by integrating them into the participant's relationship with God. Retrospectively, I believe, from the vantage point of heavenly beatitude, human victims of horrors will recognize those experiences as points of identification with the crucified God, and not wish them away from their life histories.⁴⁹

Aesthetics as God's Currency

Adams turns to the category of aesthetics to explain how God aids the personal integration of horrendous experience into a life that is worth living. She claims that existing theodicies have too often ignored the possibility that aesthetic values are not only instrumental, but essential in the overcoming of horrific involvement. Her intent is to

“sabotage” the trend in thinking that aesthetic goods have nothing important to contribute to the problem of suffering and its overcoming in an individual life. Aesthetic properties are the “currency” by which God benefits human beings who have participated in horrendous evils (indeed, “horrendous evils” is itself an aesthetic category). Furnishing a person with satisfying relationships to aesthetic goods is “one way for God to be *good* to us.”⁵⁰

To secure her supposition in tradition, Adams turns to moments in the history of Christian theology when interpretive modes operated aesthetically rather than strictly conceptually. There is the drama of scripture: Creator God as artist and orderer of chaos; the liturgical structure of creation with its Sabbath rest; its narrative tension (“multiple insurmountable obstacles, slapstick humor, and skin-of-the-teeth comic reversals”⁵¹); the radiance of *shekinah* glory; the psalmist’s sensuous invitation to “taste and see”; the manifestation of God’s divine word as *light* in the world. There are the aesthetic references infused into Christianity via Platonism: the great chain of beauty; divine wisdom’s endowing creation with symmetry, harmony, proportion, weight, and number; the soul’s reflection of divine beauty; its journey to “pull itself into an ever more sharply focused image of God.”⁵² There is the aesthetic value of Christ as *center*. Using Bonaventure’s symbol of the “medium” (middle/center/means) to sum up the meaning of the incarnation, Adams writes that Christ is “the *medium* of creation, in the sense of being the Exemplar through Whom all things were made (cf. John 1:1-2). Thus, all creatures are Godlike by being like the Son to Whom they owe their form and structure . . .”⁵³ Finally, she points to the paradoxical beauty of the cross, upon which hangs the corpus of the one who defeats repulsive sin by himself becoming *prima facie* un-beauteous.

Adams adduces that salvation history—the story of God’s overcoming of horrendous ruin—operates at the level of *narrative*. Similarly, the aesthetic category of narrative plays a role in the meaning-making required to make for a positive life-worth-living. When “horrendous evils leave participants floundering, what is needed is not ontological reflection but plot invention!”⁵⁴ Simple as it may sound, because all suffering is *situated* its overcoming demands a response tailored to the particular circumstances of the individual sufferer. The person reshaping the materials of her life into a meaningful whole can scarcely

be aloof, since she is the person being molded; she is working to become herself. Nor can she confine herself to a posture of analytical observation . . . nor one of aesthetic contemplation. She is both painter and canvas, her actions—to adopt and pursue goals, to relate herself to others, to change directions in such a way as to redeem failures—add content and determine form. Like the expert artist, however, she may bring theoretical knowledge to bear, step back and analyze where she has got up to now, appreciate what she has so far become, the better to know how to continue, to discern what she wants to do, how she want to develop next.⁵⁵

What Adams terms “self-invention”—reshaping the pieces of a life shattered by the horrendous—is a collaborative project involving a wide variety of persons: family, intimate friends, psychotherapists, spiritual directors. Christians, Adams explains, would add to this list the Holy Spirit: “the personal environment that first pulls us into focus as spiritual beings capable of connecting with one another’s spirits, even of romancing with God.”⁵⁶ Overcoming participation in evil is a process whereby the Spirit “functions as agency-enabler and –developer,”⁵⁷ the one who leads persons practically destroyed by horrendous evils to see that their lives are already great goods *to God*. The quintessential meaning-maker gives the suffering eyes to see where, on the brink of ruin, they can gather leftover shards of meaning and how to reassemble them into a life worth living.

Far from being merely therapeutic in this restorative process, aesthetic values (including but not limited to the traditional arts) symbolize a profound way in which God guarantees loving goodness to persons:

[Like] the elegant composition of Picasso's *Guernica* or Grünewald's crucifixion, or the rhythms of color and stroke in Van Gogh's *Starry Night* or Francis Bacon's cadaverous forms, cosmic order houses horrors in a stable frame with the result that we can face them and hear the outrageous truths that they tell. This truth-telling capacity endows horrors with a positive symbolic value that cannot be taken away from them; like the blood of Abel, they cry out from the ground.⁵⁸

Babette's Experience of God's Goodness

Babette's multiple catastrophes constitute her concrete participation in horrendous evils. There are the events that make their effect immediately: the Communard uprising; the death of spouse and child; exile; termination of her *métier*. Then there are the remnants of evil's whirlwind, the long-term consequences of those events that lead Babette into deeper anguish and isolation: loss of language, kinship, and status; privation of church and sacrament; protracted grief due to her inability to “bury the dead”—literally and symbolically. Given this massive interruption in Babette's life, from Adams's perspective the disproportion of these experiences relative to human meaning-making capacities furnish reason to doubt that Babette can fit them into a life that would be worth living. Indeed, there is every reason to think that Babette is on the cusp of absolute despair when she arrives at the village: if the sisters do not take her in, Babette says she “will simply die.”

Yet what unfolds in the film is one woman's integration of her participation in evil into a life that is for her a great good. God's Spirit empowers Babette to defeat the

vestiges of evil through aesthetic qualities. In the end, her life proves meaningful, even if her horrendous experiences remain inconceivable, because she takes up her experiences and confesses them with integrity through aesthetic goods, i.e., the feast itself and every element that goes into its conception and creation. The planning, preparing, and serving of the dinner is Babette's gleaning the fragments of her shattered past and assembling them in such a way as to finally put her anguish to rest. The dinner vanquishes her participation in the horrendous and is her means of transcending the evils she has sustained.

Together Axel and Adams have helped us to see that ordinary materials truly become *graced* goods to Babette, ingredients that in their assemblage become symbolic vehicles by which she may grieve through her loss and accord others a new sense of freedom. Her own artistic masterpiece, *Cailles en Sarcophage*—itself a “cadaverous form”—is the “stable frame” which gives order and shape to her own horrors. The entire feast can now be understood as a vehicle for endowing the terrors of her past with a positive valence, however devastatingly they have made their impact. The quail dish in particular at once signals her need and readiness to finally put her “little darlings” to rest and her resolution *not* to let the evils of her life have the final say.

Babette is now twice the artist she has always been. As co-creator with the living God, she labors to shape the casualties of her life into wholes of positive significance. And whereas participants in horrors often have the resources of friends and family, psychotherapists and spiritual directors, as collaborators in such meaning-making, Babette has none of these. Her faith, however, gives her confidence in the Lord as collaborator. When she requests permission of the sisters to prepare the memorial dinner,

flanked by the porcelain statue of Christ, Babette gently embraces her crucifix necklace as a sign of faith—a prayer for strength as she walks her own *via crucis* [Fig. 21].



Fig. 21

The symbolism suggests that for Babette God has become a "meaning-maker of extraordinary resourcefulness . . . a constant but often unrecognized teacher and collaborator, able to help [her] pick up and rearrange the pieces to make something new."⁵⁹ Even more, Babette's efforts "to cooperate with God's ideas, and thereby contribute [her] best to cosmic beauty, is a way for [Babette] to love God back."⁶⁰ By virtue of God's personal participation in horrors, symbolized here by the cross, God confers dignity on even the most ignominious experience: After all, "an artist is never poor." God's Spirit, present in traditional forms throughout the film—water, wind, dove, fire—empowers her to defeat the vestiges of evil through her artistry; and through her action the heartache and past sins of the community are also atoned. The process by which Babette declines a life of pleasurable ease and decides to lavish her winnings on the community affirms her own free allowance of the Spirit to shape her life.

Conclusion

It is now possible to interpret the film's final scenes as filtered through our discussion. Axel uses visual bookends to express the narrative arc of Babette's story. Recall the scene of her entry into the village square amid a maelstrom of rain, wind, and lightening. In the film's penultimate scene, after the meal, the parishioners gather peacefully under a starry sky and form a prayer circle around a well.



Fig. 3 (as above)



Fig. 22

Axel places the camera in the same position between the huts [Figs. 3 & 22]. The elements are the same (the quad, water, light), only reassembled to express the transformation that has taken place: the Spirit's rejuvenation of so many once distressed souls. Axel likewise confirms the Spirit's stilling of Babette's woes in the film's final shot of a single candle lit on a windowsill. This image harks back to the image of Babette alone in her room, where the tears that welled up in her eyes were only visible because of the candle next to her. Deriving its meaning in part from what comes later in the film, the flame can suggest two things: (a) her inner disposition—her soul ablaze with anguish; and (b) the presence of the Holy Spirit, who stands quietly with her in her grief. Axel recapitulates this image at the film's end with the candle on a windowsill. Without warning the flame suddenly goes out and a waft of white smoke rises from the wick [Fig. 23].



Fig. 23

Babette's anguish is extinguished, her spirit finally at peace. Her feast, which might now be understood as a prayer that the cumulative load of sorrow be lifted, has been answered and rises as gratitude toward heaven.

Though it may be the final shot, it is not the end of the story. The observant viewer knows this to be true since the film's very first scene comes sometime after the feast and thus after the film's final shot of the candle. However, Axel suggests that the story continues in another sense. For outside the window it is beginning to snow (yet another water symbol). Winter has set upon the village. It has also set upon the lives of the elderly parishioners. Just as Babette buried her dead at the feast, in the coming years they will have to bury each other. The simulacrum *Caille en Sarcophage* thus foreshadows the entombment of the sect's own "dearly beloved." Given the film's unqualified and consistent "eschatology," as sounded in the many hymns the group sings, the sisters' pastoral counsel, and Löwenhielm's speech, we know the transformation wrought by the feast is only the beginning of a redeemed life for its participants. The feast and its effects should not distract from the final redemption that the community will achieve only in the beatific glory of the "New Jerusalem" they've longed for through song. And although the feast may have been Babette's artistic coda, her artistry also remains incomplete. Summoning the words of her own lost love, Philippa makes this belief plain in the final line:

But this is not the end, Babette. I'm certain it is not. In Paradise, you will be the great artist that God meant you to be. Ah, how you will delight the angels!

¹ Isak Dineson, "Babette's Feast," in *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

² Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000.

³ As the film states, they are named after Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon—Luther's student and successor.

⁴ Edward McNulty, "Babette's Extravagant Love," in *Christianity and the Arts*, Vol.6, Spring 1999, pp. 37-38.

⁵ Dineson, p. 31 and p. 33. Hereafter all quotations from Dineson's short story will be italicized in the body of the article to distinguish them from quotes from the film's text.

⁶ Löwenhielm can be likened to a minister presiding over a service. He wears different "vestments," quotes the words of the sect's founder in something like a sermon, and, throughout, interprets the meal. In this sense he is also a stand-in for Babette, who, though "unseen," is nonetheless experienced in the meal. Taken a step further Löwenhielm is a kind patristic mystagogue: a learned bishop who initiates the awestruck ("speechless") neophytes into a fuller meaning of their sacramental experience. As Dineson writes, there were "*moments when it seemed to [Löwenhielm] that the world was not a moral, but a mystic, concern*" (Dineson, p. 45.)

⁷ Dineson, p. 50.

⁸ Clive Marsh, "Did You Say 'Grace'?": Eating in Community in *Babette's Feast*," in Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Malden: Blackwell, 1997, p. 209.

⁹ The film portrays the quarrels among the community with a distinct touch of humor; yet, this should not belie that past actions of certain members are quite grave: stealing, slander, adultery. Dineson's story relates it as such: "*The sins of the Brothers and Sisters came, with late piercing repentance like a toothache, and the sins of others against them came back with bitter resentment, like a poisoning of the blood*" (Dineson, p. 34). What haunts the community is their "*worry about the possible terrible consequences through all eternity*" (Dineson, p. 35).

¹⁰ Bryan Stone, "The Communion of Saints: *Babette's Feast*," in *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*. Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2000. p. 161.

¹¹ See Philippians 2:1-8.

¹² Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003, p. 265.

¹³ For instance, Lloyd Baugh interprets the film's four-minute prologue differently (see Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997, p. 138). He believes Axel has placed us *in medias res*, sometime after Babette has begun her work for the sisters but nevertheless *before* the feast—and not, as is suggested here, sometime *after* the feast. The interpretation that the scene occurs *after* the meal makes better sense, however, for three reasons. First, because it foreshadows Babette's decision to remain in the community, symbolizing her continuing presence after the meal (a possible eucharistic parallel). Second, we notice that the prayer meeting included in the scene is well-attended and that the members are participative and civil to one another, symbolizing the abiding effect of the feast. Indeed, as Babette enters the room to serve the group she gives them all a gentle, knowing smile. This contrasts to a later scene (yet earlier in the film's time) whereupon entering the room to serve (only) tea she reproaches the bickering group: "Well, now! May we have some peace and quiet?" Third, Babette is shown making cookies for the community, something we do not see elsewhere in the picture. Could this not be a sign that after the feast the members become more open in their eating practices? Could the fact that sweets are now acceptable not symbolize that the integration of spiritual and sensual at the feast has had a lasting impact? Taken together, these changes, however subtle, suggest that this opening scene is actually the farthest in time that the movie ever takes us.

¹⁴ It is surprising how little critical attention is paid to the sisters as Christ-figures. This is certainly due to the inordinate attention given to Babette in this capacity. It is as if they are treated in reviews the way they are treated by parishioners: their presence is taken for granted!

¹⁵ In this way they also practice the seven spiritual works of mercy: they instruct the ignorant; counsel the doubtful; comfort the sorrowful; bear wrongs patiently; forgive injuries; pray for the living and the dead. The seventh—to convert the sinner—is shown to a greater degree in the book. For there the sisters are

reluctant to invite a Catholic into their home; yet they nonetheless look forward to trying to convert her to their Lutheran faith.

¹⁶ Suggestions that the parishioners are “world-denying” must be counterbalanced by the actions of Martina and Philippa and the fact that certain hymns bespeak Christian incarnational doxology: “Oh, Lord allow thy kingdom to descend upon us here, so that the spirit of mercy may wipe out all trace of sin. Then we shall know in our hearts that God lives here with us. And that Thou art dwelling with those that trust in Thee.” Cf. note 18, below.

¹⁷ Wanda Avila, “The Discovery of Meaning in *Babette’s Feast*.”
http://www.cgjungpage.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=710&Itemid=40.

¹⁸ Throughout the film *Babette*, more than any other character, is shown in natural settings: in a rainstorm; on the shore; in a field picking herbs; on a carriage riding along a rugged path. In this way, *Babette* is like the “rough and ready” Jesus of Mark’s gospel. Yet Axel balances this portrayal, as *Babette* also resembles Luke’s picture of Jesus, who attracts the fragile, elderly, sinners, and women to his ministry. Like Jesus, *Babette*’s actions grant “liberty to captives” (Luke 4: 17-19).

¹⁹ Baugh, pp. 139-140. There is no explicit indication in this scene that *Babette* “prays” over her situation.

²⁰ Dineson, p. 29. Nothing in the film version of the story suggests that *Babette* was a revolutionary. But at the end of the novella, she admits to the sisters, “Yes, I was a *Communard*. Thanks be to God, I was a *Communard*! . . . I stood upon a barricade; I loaded the gun for my menfolk!” (Dineson, p. 58).

²¹ The novella takes place in Norway, not Denmark. Dineson’s *Babette* does *not* learn to speak Norwegian. Thus, Axel’s decision to have *Babette* learn Danish must be considered. The choice is hardly incidental, as it links to the “incarnational” motif. Much as Christ “descends” to earth as a “foreigner” and who must learn the language of the people, *Babette* is able to get closer to the villagers because of the Danish she speaks.

²² This gradual revelation of who *Babette* truly is can be likened to the “messianic secret” in Mark’s gospel.

²³ Baugh calls this *Babette*’s “kairos” moment (Baugh, op. 140).

²⁴ Donna Poulton, *Moving Images in Art and Film: The Intertextual and Fluid Use of Painting in Cinema* (diss.), Brigham Young University, 1999, 179 pp. Poulton devotes an entire chapter to the artistic influences on the film *Babette’s Feast*; however, she does not reference Whistler. In fact, Poulton reads this particular scene as reflecting Vermeer’s style in his *Lady Weighing Gold (Woman Holding a Balance)*. Whereas Axel’s composition of *Babette* in her room more directly matches Whistler’s portrait, there is good reason to think he may have had both paintings in mind.

²⁵ Poulton, p. 74.

²⁶ Esther Rashkin, *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture*. New York: SUNY Press, 2009, p. 31.

²⁷ Brown, p. 268.

²⁸ It is difficult to hear what *Babette* says exactly to the caged quails. The subtitles translate the French as “My little quails.” Rashkin claims she says, “Allo, mes petites cailles” (lit. “Hello, my little quails”). However, one might also hear “Alors, mes petites cailles,” which might be rendered, “So, my little darlings . . .” This latter possibility makes the line almost a kind of prelude to *Babette*’s swan song. It is as if she is conspiring with the quail for one final performance. My thanks to Dino D’Agata for noting this possible interpretation.

²⁹ Rashkin, p. 34.

³⁰ Rashkin, p. 35.

³¹ Dineson, p. 68.

³² Rashkin, p. 32.

³³ Rashkin, pp. 26-27. Although Rashkin writes specifically of the book she does make several references to the film.

³⁴ Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000.

³⁵ Although the film includes something of the extraordinary circumstances of classic noir films, its style precludes its placement under that heading.

³⁶ I have attempted to summarize the salient points of Adams's theory; my treatment is by no means exhaustive.

³⁷ Adams, p. 28.

³⁸ Adams, p. 26.

³⁹ Adams, pp. 27-28.

⁴⁰ Adams, p. 29.

⁴¹ Adams, p. 157.

⁴² Adams, p. 31.

⁴³ Adams, p. 79.

⁴⁴ Adams, p. 205.

⁴⁵ Adams, p. 165.

⁴⁶ Adams, p. 165.

⁴⁷ Adams, p. 185.

⁴⁸ Adams, p. 168.

⁴⁹ Adams, pp. 166-67.

⁵⁰ Adams, p. 147.

⁵¹ Adams, p. 137.

⁵² Adams, p. 140.

⁵³ Adams, p. 141.

⁵⁴ Adams, p. 185.

⁵⁵ Adams, p. 186.

⁵⁶ Adams, p. 104.

⁵⁷ Adams, p. 104.

⁵⁸ Adams, p. 151.

⁵⁹ Adams, p. 134.

⁶⁰ Adams, p. 79.

References

- Adams, Marilyn McCord. *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000.
- Avila, Wanda. "The Discovery of Meaning in *Babette's Feast*." Accessed September 27, 2012.
http://www.cgjungpage.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=710&Itemid=40.
- Baugh, Lloyd. *Imaging the Divine*. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997.
- Brown, Frank Burch. *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003.
- Dineson, Isak. "Babette's Feast," in *Anecdotes of Destiny and Ehrengard*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Marsh, Clive. "Did You Say 'Grace'?": Eating in Community in *Babette's Feast*," in Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Malden: Blackwell, 1997.
- McNulty, Edward. "Babette's Extravagant Love," in *Christianity and the Arts*, Vol.6, Spring 1999.
- Poulton, Donna. *Moving Images in Art and Film: The Intertextual and Fluid Use of Painting in Cinema* (diss.), Brigham Young University, 1999, 179 pp.
- Rashkin, Esther. *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture*. New York: SUNY Press, 2009.
- Stone, Bryan. "The Communion of Saints: *Babette's Feast*," in *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*. Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2000.