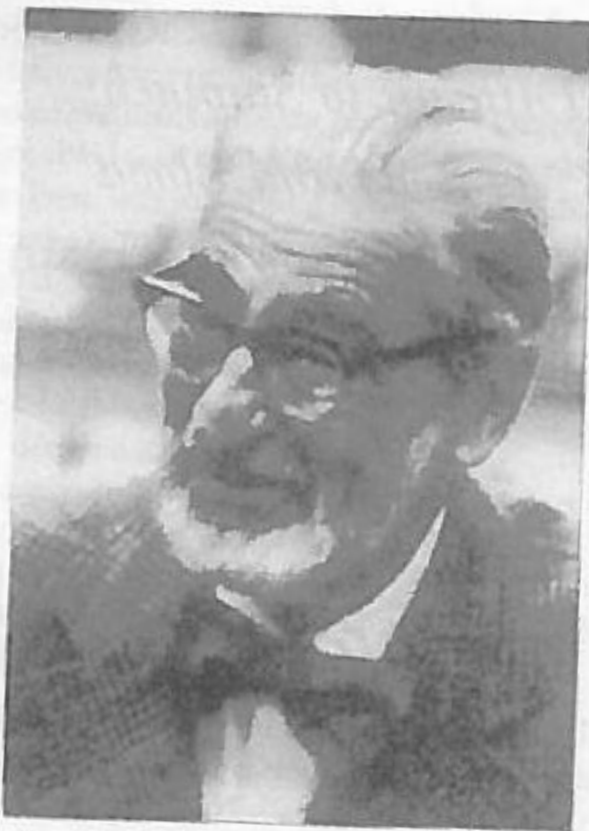


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*Difficult to Stomach:  
"My Body and Blood"  
and Green Eggs and Ham*

When Hamlet gives the "players" some advice about the art of acting, he tells them that their job is to "suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (3.2). Now Dr. Seuss's stories do a masterful job of suiting their actions to their words, their words to their actions. But it's very often the case that his stories also "suit the action to the Word." And by "the Word" here I mean that his stories very often suit or "fit" the Word of the Christian message in marvelously surprising and closely analogous ways. They can be seen and understood as brand-new parables of the kingdom.

And it's for this reason that they give me, and people like me, the opportunity to "suit the Word to the action"—that is, to attempt to explain the Word of God in words and images that are easier for folks to grasp and understand—like Dr. Seuss's words and images, for example. We don't want to do violence either to the Dr. Seuss story or to the Word of God. But whenever it's possible, and it very often is, we want to suit the Dr. Seuss story to the God story, the God story to the Dr. Seuss story, to go back to Hamlet's way of putting it.



Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel. Photo courtesy of Robert Short

Could Dr. Seuss have intended these things? Sure, he could have. There are many things we know about Theodor Seuss Geisel that might suggest that he wasn't always as innocent of putting things between the lines as he so frequently claimed. But then just about all artists make this kind of claim. "I have no hidden messages; I do no between-the-lines preaching!" they tell us. But what should we expect them to say? As artists, their job is to communicate indirectly, or artistically, not directly or bluntly, as with us plain, blunt preachers. Dr. Seuss has gone on record saying things like:

I get away with preaching by disguising the message.<sup>1</sup>

But that still doesn't mean his "message" is anything like the message that I see his stories being so well suited to. Ted Geisel was a well-educated man. He came from a middle-class Con-

necticut family, German Protestant in background, and in 1925 graduated from Dartmouth, where he studied English literature. Later on he pursued graduate studies in literature at Oxford and then at the Sorbonne, in Paris. While at Oxford he tried to talk the Oxford University Press into publishing a new edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which he himself would illustrate. One of the drawings he proposed was "to show the Archangel Uriel sliding down a sunbeam with a long-necked oilcan in his hand, to slick his passage."<sup>2</sup> No wonder they didn't understand him at Oxford! Nevertheless, Dr. Seuss's early and not too slick passage from Oxford notwithstanding, his ambition was still for a professorship in English literature and so to become a "Dr." in the PhD sense. And it was only his strong addiction to eating that forced him to change directions and choose a career that provided at least enough revenue to put food on the table.

But the point is that Dr. Seuss certainly *could* have intended all sorts of subtle things that we don't see on the surface of his stories. Schooled in literature, he knew how literary artists—including the writers of the Bible—had always done this kind of thing. But was Dr. Seuss himself intent on communicating something to us on a much deeper level, something that we don't usually recognize in his stories? He once said,

There is no particular message in these books, unless it's one of eternal hope.<sup>3</sup>

He also said,

I've been accused of being the greatest moralist since Elsie Dinsmore, but I don't believe it. If you write any sort of drama . . . the reader can impute a moral into it.<sup>4</sup>

So, then, I suggest we take him at his word and leave it at that. Or rather, leave the job of "in-putting" morals to preachers like me. One way or another, Dr. Seuss has suited the action to the Word. My job, as a preacher, is very intentionally to suit the Word to Dr. Seuss's "actions." So please,

If the shoe fits, wear it.

Or to put it another way,

If the parable preaches, hear it.

Now *Green Eggs and Ham* is probably the most popular of all of Dr. Seuss's stories. Parents the world over read it to their children until they're green in the face. I know this from the experience of having turned somewhat green myself a couple of times. And then these children read it to their children, and so on and on and on. Actually, I don't think I need to read it any more. I think I now have the whole thing memorized, like Zoe in *Baby Blues*.

### Baby Blues

Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott



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But there are many, many much worse things that could be built into our heads like this. T. S. Eliot was no doubt right in saying that mostly nowadays our "headpieces are filled with straw." But I consider *Green Eggs and Ham* far more substantial than straw. And that's primarily because there's so much about *Green Eggs and Ham* that parallels what Jesus and the New Testament have to say. Dr. Seuss or Mr. Geisel has told us:

More ministers use [*Green Eggs and Ham*] in their sermons than any other book of mine. They find the damndest things in it.<sup>5</sup>

I'm just one of those ministers. I find the damndest things in *Green Eggs and Ham*.

For instance, look at how much Jesus and Sam-I-am have in common. Both of them are dead set on getting someone to eat something, something that they know can be very, very difficult to swallow. Now of course Jesus knew that everyone had to have something to eat in order to stay healthy and strong; he knew that everyone at least had to have bread, for example, which is probably the most common food in the world. But Jesus also knew that people don't "live by bread alone" (Matt. 4:4). He knew that people—all people—need something more than just plain old bread, or food, to make it through this life in the best and most perfectly fulfilled way. Jesus knew that all people also need him, need Jesus himself, to make it through life as they were originally designed to do. And so, then, Jesus said that he himself was that other food that all people need. In the prayer of Jesus, when we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we're asking God to give us not only the bread or food that makes our bodies strong, but we're also asking God to give us Jesus, that other kind of bread that makes our spirits strong. Jesus knows that our spirits would never be satisfied one little bit without him. And this is why he could say,

I am that living bread which has come down from heaven: if anyone eats this bread he shall live forever. Moreover, the bread I will give is my own flesh; I give it for the life of the world.

(John 6:51 NEB)

Does this mean we're supposed to eat the flesh of Jesus? Yuck! That doesn't sound like anything anyone would like. And yet, Jesus can make it sound even yuckier:

I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood possesses eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. My flesh is real food; my blood is real drink.

(John 6:53-55 NEB)

Well, yuck and double-yuck!! We're supposed to eat Jesus' flesh *and* drink his blood? That sounds worse than green eggs and ham! As a matter of fact, a lot of people, when they originally heard Jesus say this, were just as turned off as Sam's friend was. Whether it's green eggs and ham or Jesus' flesh and blood, this doesn't sound like anything we're going to like:

Many of [Jesus'] disciples on hearing it exclaimed, 'This is more than we can stomach!'

(John 6:60 NEB)

But, of course, Jesus didn't mean that we're to eat his physical flesh or drink his literal blood. The flesh and blood Jesus, the man, no longer lives among us in the world but with his father in heaven. Jesus meant that we should believe in him. Because only when we believe in him does his spirit live in us. We're to believe that it was only in the flesh and blood Jesus that God revealed himself once and for all for all humankind. And this is why Jesus could say,

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall never be hungry, and whoever believes in me shall never be thirsty.

(John 6:35 NEB)

There's an old saying that goes, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating." In other words, we're never going to know whether we like something or not until we try it. Just like Sam's friend, he didn't really know he didn't like green eggs and ham until he'd tried them. You probably remember what happened; he finally gives in:

If you will let me be,  
I will try them.

And then:

Say!  
I like green eggs and ham!



But you know, it's a strange thing—just like people aren't going to try something as yucky as green eggs and ham until they have to, people aren't going to believe in Jesus until they have to. And this is because no one in this world originally believes in Jesus. We all start out believing in something else. So this something else has got to be let go of or washed away before we can believe in Jesus. No one can really believe in Jesus until they become aware of their need. No one is going to clean up their lives very much until they first find themselves in hot water, about like Sam-I-am's friend who finally almost drowns trying to avoid eating green eggs and ham. And this is why the New Testament tells us that baptism is a way of describing what we've all got to go through before we can really believe in Jesus:

Have you forgotten that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death? By baptism we were buried with him, and lay dead, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead in the splendor of the Father, so also we might set our feet upon the new path of life.  
(Rom. 6:3-4 NEB)

Only when we're forced to do it, when we really need to do it, will we really try Jesus. It's not until we get ourselves into a big enough stew that we'll actually swallow a food that all of us just naturally don't think we care for. No, by nature we just don't think we like them at all—Jesus and green eggs and ham. If only they looked more appealing or appetizing.

But just as we don't think we like green eggs and ham because of the way it looks, Jesus is likewise careful not to provide us with any showy things about himself to appeal to us. Otherwise, he realizes, we're going to end up more devoted to the "show business" than to him. Just as we turn up our noses at green eggs and ham because it looks so ridiculous and yucky, Jesus doesn't dress himself up as all provable reasonableness or flashy supernatural solicitings either. He wants us to swallow him, not them. But then when we do swallow Jesus, the food from heaven, we're just like Sam-I-am's friend, shouting, "Thank you! Thank you, Sam-I-am!"



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And so *Green Eggs and Ham* ends in the very same way that it begins, with that crazy name that only Dr. Seuss could have thought of: “Sam-I-am.” Or maybe this name isn’t so crazy after all. “Sam” is short for Samuel, and Samuel is the Old Testament name that means “name of God.” And what is God’s name in the Old Testament? It’s “I AM.” God’s name in the Old Testament is “I AM”!?!? That’s right. You may remember how it happened:

Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. . . . Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

(Exod. 3:13–14)

But then how is all of this related to Jesus? Well, I think the tentative or incomplete nature of God’s answer here to Moses is pretty obvious: “My name is ‘I AM.’” But now, God, what do you mean by that? Who am you? What am you? Where am



you? Well, it was precisely to complete God's revelation of himself and to answer these still unanswered questions that Jesus came into the world. This is why in the Gospel of John, Jesus can hardly say often enough who "he am":

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life . . . the light of the world . . . the gate for the sheep . . . the good shepherd . . . the way, the truth, and the life . . . the resurrection and the life . . . the true vine . . ."

That, exactly, is who and where and what God "am"—he *am* Jesus the Lord. And so it's just this Sam-I-am himself in the fullest and most complete sense who offers us all something we don't think we're going to like to swallow—until we try it. It's just this Sam-I-am himself who says to us,

I am the bread of life. . . . I am that living bread which has come down from heaven.

(John 6:48, 51 NEB)

So to follow him is to swallow him. And if we do follow/ swallow Jesus, we'll always say—always—and again and again:

Thank you!  
Thank you,  
Sam-I-am!

### Notes

1. Quoted in Diane Roback, "Coming Attractions," *Publishers Weekly*, February 23, 1990, 126.
2. E. J. Kahn Jr., "Children's Friend," *New Yorker*, December 17, 1960, 61.
3. Quoted in David Dempsey, "The Significance of Dr. Seuss," *New York Times Book Review*, May 11, 1958.
4. "Ted 'Dr. Seuss' Geisel," in Digby Diehl, *Supertalk*; (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 169.
5. Roback, "Coming Attractions."