*Babette’s Feast*

(1987)

Written and directed by Gabriel Axel, starring Stephane Audran.

Based on the 1958 story by Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen). Won

the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film (Danish) in 1988.

*Babette’s Feast* is a religious film in several different ways. First,

 the subject matter of *Babette’s Feast* is overtly religious. The story is about religious people and religious institutions. Two of the main characters are elderly sisters, the daughters of a long-deceased prophet-founder of an austere Christian sect. The sisters maintain a simple life of piety and charitable works and carry on their father’s memory by presiding over his small band of remaining disciples.

While the sisters content themselves with lives of piety their untiring work among the poor has been made possible with the help of a maid, Babette, who one stormy night arrived on their doorstep, a refugee from the French civil wars. While Babette lived with the sisters, she did the work of a domestic servant, preparing the split cod and ale-bread that were the villagers’ dietary staple. This element of the film gives us a particular understanding of piety and religious practice.

Second, the film takes an interesting turn when the sisters decide to honor their father on what would have been his one-hundredth birthday. At this moment, Babette asks the sisters if they would let her prepare the meal for the celebration. Babette has won an old lottery and will pay for the meal, something the sisters would not have done. The sisters tentatively agree.

The feast includes turtle soup, served with sherry; pancakes served with caviar and sour cream, served with champagne; quail in a coffin, served with a pinot noir; sponge cake with figs and candied cherries, served with champagne; and more. Early in the meal the small congregation seems grumpy and bickering. Gradually warmed by the fine wines, the guests begin to respond, not only to the feast itself, but to one another. Old quarrels are healed, and past sins are genuinely forgiven. When the meal comes to a close and the disciples leave, they are illuminated by moonlight in the village square where they spontaneously join hands in a circle and dance.

The feast gives the movie the opportunity to explore reality through the foundational myth of Christianity and through literary and visual symbols that derive from that tradition. Especially it contrasts two modalities of Christian apprehension: one which sees religiosity as primarily a matter of moral living, demeaning sensual engagement in the created world; the other which acknowledges the “sacramental” texture and depths of the created order and discovers therein the divine.

Third, the film, as a work of art, quite apart from its subject matter or its exploration of reality through the medium of Christian symbols is itself profoundly religious. This is meant in the sense that its artistry allows the viewer to apprehend reality contemplatively, to take a long, loving look at the real in such a way that the hidden, sacred dimension of reality is revealed. This is a characteristic the film shares with two of the other films in this series, *The Way* and *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . Spring.*

This review is adapted from the article “*Babette’s Feast*: A Religious Film,” by Wendy Wright (1947-2025), ***Journal of Religion & Film***: Vol. 1, Issue 2, article 2, 1997. May her memory be a blessing.