

The Gospel of John

Chapter 6 – The Bread of Life

Introduction

The Prologue of the Gospel of John affirms that God's former gift through the Law of Moses is perfected in Jesus: "*From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*" (Jn 1:16-17). John is not proposing conflict but rather that the truth and gifts in Jesus, extend and surpass the gifts of God through Moses. It is in this context that St. John will begin his explanations of the deeper giftedness and revelation of God in the person of Jesus. Chapters 5-10 present its materials in the framework of the "Feasts of the Jews." The feasts are a means for St. John to show continuity as well as the way forward. John's community has been separated from their former way of life in the synagogues (*cf.* 9:22, 12:42, 16:2) and thus also separated from their traditional celebrations. In this context John's community of Christians with their Jewish roots has to rethink their celebrations.

Jewish Feasts. The celebration of a Jewish feast is called *zikkaron* (from *zakar* the Jewish verb "to remember"), a memory that recalls God's active presence to Jewish people in the past, rendered present in the liturgical celebrations of the feast. Thus considering anew their *zikkaron* was a means to understand their present. The words of John 5:1, "*there was a feast of the Jews,*" thus establish John's order to chapters 5 through 10:

- the Sabbath (5:1-27), the fundamental worship of God;
- Passover (6:1-72), celebrated for seven days in the first month of the year;
- Tabernacles (7:1-10:21), celebrated for seven days in the seventh month of the year; and
- Dedication (10:22-42), celebrated for eight days in the ninth month of the year.

Thus John not only tells the stories of Jesus' presence at the feasts but also articulates the Christian understanding of how God is present to God's people in the perfecting gift that is Jesus. What was once only in the Jewish Temple is now done in a way that all the nations may celebrate.

John 5: Jesus and the Sabbath. John begins with the most prominent of all Jewish feasts, the Sabbath. On this Sabbath, Jesus heals a man lame for 38 years (*cf.* the time of wandering in the desert during the Exodus). In John 5:10 Jesus' actions of curing on the Sabbath are challenged leading to Jesus' persecution. Verse 17 forms Jesus' response: "*But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is at work until now, so I am at work.'*" Verse 18 outlines the way in which the hearer of those words understood them: "*For this reason the Jews tried all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the sabbath but he also called God his own father, making himself equal to God.*" The "Jews" understood, rightly, that Jesus claimed the same authority and prerogatives as Yahweh – the power over life and death (5:21, 24-26) and the authority to judge (5:22, 27). Jesus reinterprets the Sabbath traditions on the basis of his relationship with the God of Israel, his Father, while the "Jews" judge he has blasphemed and deserves to die. The one acting with the power and authority of God comes into conflict with the human custodians and exponents of God's law. In the end of John 5, Jesus calls his witnesses: John the Baptist, his words and deeds, his Father who sent him, and Moses – the one the "Jews" considered to be the trustworthy mediator between Yahweh and humanity.

“From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (Jn 1:16-17).

As St John continues to unfold his theological insights into the meaning of Jesus, the figure of Moses will repeatedly appear as the Gospels portrays Jesus as greater than Moses – that is, the very Son of God. And so we begin the our consideration of John 6 – The Bread of Life.

Chapter 6:1-4

¹*After this, Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee (of Tiberias).* ²*A large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick.* ³*Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples.* ⁴*The Jewish feast of Passover was near.*

This brief introduction lays out the “Who? Where? When? And Why?” It also reintroduces the scene of people coming to Jesus because of the signs that he performed. Such a reason is a start, but of itself it is not sufficient. Such signs are only invitations to be drawn deeper into the story of Jesus. As in Chapter 5, the reader is invited to see Jesus as something greater than Moses, and to discover that he will be the new Passover, the means by which all things are redeemed in God.

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6:2 large crowds. The large crowd, (vv. 2 & 5, see also vv. 22 & 24) contains “disciples” who do not believe! (6:64) and who will not longer follow Jesus (6:66). It also includes “the twelve” (6:67, 70, 71 -- the first time the term is used in reference to disciples), who will not go away.

they saw the sign he was performing. Other characters have come to Jesus because of the signs he did (*cf.* 1:49-51, Nathanael; 3:1-11, Nicodemus; 4:16-26, the Samaritan woman)

6:3 up on the mountain. It is on up on the mountain that Moses received the Law (*cf.* Ex 19:20, 14:1-2; Isa 34:2-4)

6:4 Passover was near. Coming immediately after Jesus’ reinterpreting Sabbath theology and practice, this mention of Passover sets the theological perspective of what follows. John’s account of Jesus’ discourse following the miracle connects these events with Passover and remembering the Exodus. God provided the people with manna in the wilderness (Ex 16:1-36; Num 11:7-9; John 6:31, 49), yet the people complained (*gogguzo* in LXX) about it (Num 11:1-6), so that God will not allow any of the complainers into the promised land (Num 14:26-30). Similarly, there is a whole lot of complaining (*gogguzo*) after Jesus has fed this crowd (John 6:41, 43, 61), and some will not (cannot?) listen to his words of eternal life.

Chapter 6:5-15

The Miracles of the Loaves and Fishes

⁵*When Jesus raised his eyes and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, he said to Philip, “Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?”* ⁶*He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do.* ⁷*Philip answered him, “Two hundred days’ wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little (bit).”* ⁸*One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him,* ⁹*“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?”* ¹⁰*Jesus said, “Have the people recline.”* ¹¹*Now there was a great deal of grass in that place. So the men reclined, about five thousand in number.* ¹¹*Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining, and*

also as much of the fish as they wanted.¹² When they had had their fill, he said to his disciples, “Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted.”¹³ So they collected them, and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves that had been more than they could eat.¹⁴ When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, “This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world.”¹⁵ Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.

Francis Moloney outlines this passage with the following:

- Verses (Vv.) 5-9: a problem posed by Jesus that can not be solved by the disciples.
- Vv. 10-13: a miracle takes places through the words and actions of Jesus.
- Vv. 14-15: the aftermath of the miracle.

The problem. Unlike the parallel accounts in the other gospels, upon seeing the crowds, Jesus takes the initiative as he is sensitive to the people's material needs as well the spiritual needs. But he is also sensitive to preparing his disciples for their mission. Philip's response was limited to the material bread need to solve the problem (v.7). Philip and the other apostles had been present when Jesus spoke of the nourishment he had from his unconditional acceptance of the will of the one who sent him (4:32-34). Yet they do not seemed to have fully grasped God's revelation and have not learned from Jesus' attempts to draw them beyond the limitations of the their own expectations (1:35-51). Through the words and deeds with the Apostles and the miracle he is going to work Jesus also teaches the disciples to trust in him whenever they meet with difficulties in their future apostolic endeavors. He teaches them that they should engage in using whatever resources they have even if they are clearly inadequate. He will supply what is lacking.

The miracle. Although Jesus orders the Apostles to feed the people, the main act is performed by Jesus alone. In a solemn, liturgical style, St John describes the scene as Jesus takes (*elaben*) the loaves, gives thanks (*eucharistēsas*) and distributes (*diedōken*) them to the people (6:11). Once the people had their fill, Jesus commands the disciples to gather (*synēgagon*) the fragments (*ta klasmata*) that nothing be lost (*hina mē to apolētai*). The passage is replete with Eucharistic language (*elaben, eucharistēsas, diedōken*) as seen in the earliest writings of the Church (the *Didache*, *1 Clement*, and the letters of Ignatius.) Jesus has fed the multitudes in a way the first Christians celebrated (*zikkaron*) Eucharist in a way they strongly connected to Passover. The Passover and Eucharist are blended in a way that recalls the gift of manna. The people gathered the manna each day, eating until they had their fill (*cf.* Ex 16:19-20). Jesus' gift to the people must not be lost and the disciples are to see to its preservation. An abundance of *klasmata* is still available. Unlike the manna given in the desert, here by the lake, the *klasmata* is still available.

The aftermath. Upon seeing this sign, the people profess, “*This is truly the Prophet...*” As with the disciples, Nicodemus and the Samaritan women, a sign has led to a limited faith. They are looking for a prophet who will satisfy their expectations and see Jesus as a Moses-like prophet (*cf.* Deut 18:15-18). For St John, the point of this scene is that Jesus is the Moses-like prophet who feeds his people with a new bread. This new bread is Jesus' word of revelation received in faith as well as his Eucharistic bread. But the crowd's understanding is clouded by their messianic expectations because their hopes are tainted with politics and power. They do not see the full depth of the messianic kingdom; only the outward signs.

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6:5 “*Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?*” This is the question that Moses asks of

YHWH is the desert (Num 11:13), but Jesus' concern was rhetorical. The question is meant to test the faith of the apostles to believe something greater than Moses was here with them.

The Greek word *pothen* comes from *pou* = "where?" + *then* = "(motion) from (a place)." It is translated with "from where?" or "whence?" or "where?". The "from where" of Jesus' gifts is an important Christological question in the fourth Gospel (e.g., 2:9; 4:11); if one knows the source of Jesus' gifts, one comes close to recognizing Jesus' identity (cf. 4:10)

The instances of *pothen* in John are:

- 1:48 Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."
- 2:9 When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew),
- 3:8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."
- 4:11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"
- 6:5 When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"
- 7:27 Yet we know where this man is from, but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from."
- 7:28-29 Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me."
- 8:14 Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going.
- 9:28-29 Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciples, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."
- 9:30-33 The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. [We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."
- 19:9 He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer.

The first five instances concern the origin of things: knowledge, wine, wind, water, food. The next six instances concern the origin of Jesus/Messiah. The "origin" of Jesus and his deeds is a theme throughout the gospel. From chapter 1, we, the readers know that Jesus -- the Word -- was with God and was God. Jesus comes from God. He acts with the power of God -- to know the unknowable, to transform water to wine, to transform five loaves and two fish into an abundant feast.

6:6 he himself knew what he was going to do. This aside is a key to understanding the miracle

story and the following discourse. Jesus knew (*ēdei*; pluperfect of *oida*, “to know”, thus Jesus’ knowing is ongoing) and is in control of all that is happening.

6:7 *Two hundred days’ wages worth of food would not be enough...* Philip’s words echo the account of Elisha’s feeding of 100 men in 2 Kings 4:42-44.

6:9 *five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?* Only John has the word “barley” (*krithinos*). Brown (John) writes: “Wheat bread was more common; barley loaves were cheaper and served for the poor. Luke 11:5 seems to indicate that three loaves were looked on as a meal for one person.” The offering of bread was a meager offering of poor bread. Only John has this particular word for “fish” (*opsarion*) in the NT. To again quote Brown: *Opsarion* is a double diminutive of *opson* (cooked food eaten with bread); the meaning became more specifically “fish,” especially “dried or preserved fish.”. Perhaps related to the poor bread, this was not fresh fish that was presented.

Returning to Philip for a moment, Numbers 11, which talks about the people's grumbling and the gift of manna uses a form of the word (*opsos*) in v. 22 (v. 23 also quoted): “Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?” The LORD said to Moses, “Is the LORD's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.” Moses sounds a lot like Philip.

6:14 *the people saw the sign.* The signs (*semeion*) will prove to be insufficient. This crowd has seen signs of his healing (v. 2). They will participate in the sign of the feeding, which leads them to proclaim that Jesus is “truly a prophet” (v. 14), but the crowd looks for Jesus, not because the “sign” has led them to faith, but because they ate their fill (v. 26). Apparently the signs that they have seen are not enough to lead them to believe (v. 30).

6:15 *Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king.* The Greek contains an almost violent word (*harpazein*) to indicate that the people were about to force their will upon Jesus to make him a secular, royal king.

Chapter 6:6-21

Walking on the Waters

¹⁶ *When it was evening, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ embarked in a boat, and went across the sea to Capernaum. It had already grown dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.*

¹⁸ *The sea was stirred up because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they began to be afraid. ²⁰ But he said to them, “It is I. Do not be afraid.” ²¹ They wanted to take him into the boat, but the boat immediately arrived at the shore to which they were heading.*

After dispersing the crowds, Jesus orders the disciples into the boat (v.16) and goes to the mountain (v.15). During the night a storm overtakes the boat and places the disciples in life-threatening danger. When all seems lost, Jesus comes to save them, bestriding the waters of chaos like YHWH in the OT (Ps 77:19 and Job 9:8). The disciples first believe that they are seeing a spirit/ghost but Jesus replies as YHWH in the OT with the divine 'It is I; do not be afraid'. The divine '*ego eimi*' means as it was meant in Ex 3:14 - I am here to save you. The lesson to learn is our continuing dependence on Christ as believers and disciples will be caught between faith and doubt. Despite our doubts, our cry of faith will always bring the saving hand of Jesus.

Christian tradition has seen the saving hand of Jesus as found in the boat symbolizing the Church, which will have to cope with many difficulties and which Our Lord has promised to help through all the centuries (cf. Mt 28:20). St Thomas Aquinas comments:

“The wind symbolizes the temptations and the persecution the Church will suffer due to a lack of love. For, as St Augustine says, when love grows cold, the sea becomes rougher and the boat begins to founder. Yet the wind, the storm, the waves and the darkness will fail to put it off course and wreck it” (*Commentary on St John*)

There is a question as to why the water miracle should be situated at this point in a chapter that otherwise speaks exclusively of bread. What is it a sign of? No answer is completely satisfactory, but the following have been offered:

- (a) The Old Testament Passover miracles were manna bread plus the crossing of the Reed Sea, and water springing from the rock. Exod 14–16 ties together in tight sequence the account of the Reed Sea crossing and the gift of the desert manna. This traditional Exodus coupling of water and bread, found also in Ps 78:13–25, may have encouraged the first Jewish Christians to attach the Christian water-sign to that of the bread. They are so found in Mark 6, Matt 14, and now in John 6.
- (b) John is simply extending his theme of life-giving word by presenting Jesus as life-giver in time of famine and of storm.
- (c) The storm scene is intended as a sign of Jesus’ divine status (the “It is I” of verse 20 masks the profound I AM of the original Greek) and his ever-helping presence, “do not be afraid” (v. 20).

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6:20 *It is I.* In addition to the profound revelation of the divine “I AM” this phrase also points to the OT theme of YHWH’s unique authority over the chaos of the seas (e.g., Ex 14-15; Deut 7:2-7; Job 9-8; 28:16; Pss 29:3, 65:8, 77:20, 89:10, 93:3-4; Isa 43:1-5, 51:9-10). It is as Lord that Jesus comes across the waters, revealing himself at a new level from the sign of the miracles of the loaves and fish.

6:21 *They wanted to take him into the boat.* The translation shows both their willingness (*ēthelon*) and their reception (*lambanein*) of Jesus. The verb *lambanein* is used in John’s gospel as an indication of authentic reception of Jesus (e.g., 1:12-13)

Chapter 6:22-24

A Second Introduction

²² *The next day, the crowd that remained across the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not gone along with his disciples in the boat, but only his disciples had left.* ²³ *Other boats came from Tiberias near the place where they had eaten the bread when the Lord gave thanks.* ²⁴ *When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus.*

In verses that match vv.1-4, the narrator establishes the “Who? Where? When? and Why?” of the next section, the Bread of Life Discourse. An atmosphere of hustle and bustle is created as the people crowd into boats to follow their miracle worker. The Eucharistic theme is carried from the

feeding scene into the passages that follow; the idea of the preserved *klasmata* remains open, and the “next day” brings the scene and events closer to the celebration of Passover.

The Discourse on the Bread from Heaven (6:25-59)

Introduction

There is an extremely rich interplay of theological themes which pervade this section. It is perhaps John 6:31 which provides the key to understanding this passage: “*He gave them bread from heaven to eat.*” Each section of this Discourse is formed by a repeated play on the words of v.31, yet it is the five interventions from the crowds that sets the rhythm of questions and answers giving ultimate shape to the text.

- Verses 25-29: “*Rabbi, when did you get here?*” (v.25). This is a minor question which Jesus uses to tell the people to search for food that endures to eternal life: belief in the one who God has sent.”
- Vv. 30-33: “*What signs can you do?*” (v.30). Jesus is asked for credentials that surpass Moses’ gift of the manna. Yet Jesus points to another bread from heaven, the true bread of heaven.
- Vv. 34-40: “*Sir, give us this bread always.*” (v.34). Jesus presents himself as the true bread from heaven, the only one able to make God known and give eternal life.
- Vv. 41-51: “*Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’*” (v.42). Jesus discusses his true origins.
- Vv. 52-59: “*How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?*” A final question leads Jesus to instruct “the Jews” on the need to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man.

The discourse unfolds around these questions and answers, each section developing a thought around the single theme of the bread from heaven.

John has already employed this “question and answer” format in the passages dealing with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well. In each case the dialogue offers the hearer a choice of understandings of the words (or misunderstanding). Nicodemus hears the words that Jesus says – you must be “born *anōthen*” (validly understood as “born again” or “born from above.”) Nicodemus asks if he needs to start over with his life (again) but the intent is to be born from above in the waters of Baptism and the life of the Spirit. At first, the Samaritan woman wants to know about how to get the promised water with a bucket but comes to understand Jesus speaks of the waters of eternal life. Thus, as we reflect upon the various sections of the Bread of Life Discourse we must be attentive to the deeper meanings of the Johannine text.

Chapter 6:25-29

Why are you here?

²⁵ *And when they found him across the sea they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”*

²⁶ *Jesus answered them and said, “Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled.”* ²⁷ *Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him the Father, God, has set his seal.”* ²⁸ *So they said to him, “What can we do to accomplish the works of God?”* ²⁹ *Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you*

believe in the one he sent.”

In v.25 the people ask “*Rabbi, when did you get here.*” The address, “Rabbi” shows that the people continue to see Jesus in their own terms and that they have perhaps “demoted” that understanding since the last time they were with Jesus (v.22) they wanted to make Jesus king. In an almost trivial way, the focus of the physical questions stems from the fact these people saw the disciples leave the miracle site without Jesus; they did not see Jesus on the way - thus, how/when did you get here? Jesus does not reply to the physical question, but speaks to real question that is on their mind – why they are here. With the double “Amen,” Jesus solemnly tells them they are not really motivated by the enthusiasm of their witness of the sign but rather because they have been filled with the bread. They are following Jesus on a purely natural level – but they still do not yet understand Jesus' origins, mission or meaning.

Jesus tells them they are not to work for food that fills their stomachs, not to work (*ergazesthe*) for the food that perishes, but to work for the food that endures. This echoes the encounter with the Samaritan women when the disciples return: “³² *But he said to [disciples], ‘I have food to eat of which you do not know.’*” ³³ *So the disciples said to one another, ‘Could someone have brought him something to eat?’* ³⁴ *Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work’*” (Jn 4:32-34). There is form of nourishment that transcends earthly bread and this must be the goal of the people’s search; it is for this that they must work (v.27). This bread will lead to eternal life and is given by the Son of Man.

The idea of eternal life has been introduced by St John already – this same idea has been echoed in the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4; the water that wells up to eternal life). As well in the words “*so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*” (Jn 3:14-15). The very one who is the only revealer from God (3:13) to make God known (1:15). It is the acceptance or refusal of that revelation that brings about judgment (5:27). There will come a moment in the Fourth Gospel when the revelation of God in the lifting up of the Son will provide a food that will endure for eternal life.

This idea of nourishment that provides true life is held in Israel’s belief that the Law provided life for those who lived by it, or in the idiomatic, those who labored (*ergazesthai*) upon the Law. Clear in the mind of the faithful Israelite is the “work” associated with the Law given by Moses. Jesus tells them that the real nourishment welling up to eternal life will be given by the Son of Man.

The crowd attempts to bypass Jesus asking in v.28, “*What can we do to accomplish the works of God?*” The question depends upon the Jewish belief that that the Law, given through Moses, allows direct access to God, thus doing works of the Law was to do things that please God. Jesus tells them that such a way to God is but a shadow of the possibility he offers them. The only way to do the work of God (*ton ergon tou theou*) is to believe in the one who God has sent (v.29). Jesus asks them to look beyond the bread which man can eat and earn by the work of his hand; to look for the mystery and meaning of his person and to seek him in the true sense. Jesus tells them to turn to him (v.28) as the one approved by God and endowed with the power of God for he brings the very-sustaining life of the Father to those who believe in him. Such faith in Jesus is not something that they can achieve or work for because it is the work of God (v.29) in the hearts of the believer.

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6:25 Rabbi. This was the term that Nicodemus used (John 3:2) when he came as the spokesman of those in Jerusalem who were impressed by Jesus' signs (2:3)

When did you get here. Literally "When have you been here" – a question that is a cross between "When did you get here" and "How long have you been here."

6:27 food that perishes (*apollumenēn*). This may be an echo of v.12 where the fragments were collected so that nothing might be wasted (*apollumi*) – a word also appearing in John 3:16, 10:28 and 18:9. It may also well contain a reference to the manna collected in the desert which "perished" daily. This echo becomes clear in (v.32).

work...for the food that endures for eternal life. Not in the sense of the effort of human endeavor alone, but in the sense of striving after, yearning.

on him the Father, God, has set his seal. In Jn 3:33 we read that by accepting Jesus' testimony the believer has certified (lit. "set his seal upon") that God is truthful. Here God sets His seal (*sphragizo*) upon the Son, not so much by way of approval, but more by way of consecration (*hagiazō*, Jn 10:36)

6:28 to accomplish the works of God... Literally "work the works of God." There is a subtle shift in the meaning of "work" from v.27 to v.28. In v.27 the people are told not to work in the form of "work for" food produced by human hands. In v.28 "to devote oneself to" provides a good parallel to the rabbinic tradition of "working on" or "devoting oneself" to the Torah.

6:29 This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent. The people's response has focused on works they can do. Jesus puts the emphasis on faith

Chapter 6:30-33

True Bread from Heaven

³⁰ So they said to him, "What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do?" ³¹ Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³² So Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

The people understand that Jesus is telling them that they must believe in him as the One sent by God (v.30) and so they employ the notion of the confirmatory sign or miracle (v.31). The benchmark is Moses, the great prophet of YHWH. So if Jesus tells them to devote oneself to the bread which gives eternal life, the people understand the reference as "bread from heaven." In both the wisdom and midrashic literature, this expression was associated with the Law as well as with the manna in the desert.

The response to ask for a manna-sign is understandable – they understood Jesus to claim, what they interpreted as, the promised messiah, a prophet-like-Moses. The Jewish eschatological expectation was that the Messiah would come on the Passover and cause manna to descend from heaven as in the first Exodus (*cf. Midrash Mekilta, Midrash Rabbah, Midrash Tanhuma* and others). Their messianic expectation, the time of Passover and the recent miracle of the loaves all culminate in their challenge. Their faith remains mired in the natural beliefs about the expected Davidic Messiah. Their faith is limited to longing for some sign greater than the one Jesus has already given them that will remove the doubt seeded by the leaders of Israel regarding

the person of Jesus. Thus they ask what sign Jesus can do.

Again a double “Amen” warns the listener that they have not understood their own tradition of Moses and yet continue to hang their hope on Moses. Jesus acknowledges what Moses gave was “bread from heaven” but its source was God; however wonderful, Jesus is speaking of something greater – true bread from heaven. The use of true (*alēthinos*; v.32) sets this bread over against all other breads, even the bread given to Israel through Moses. The true bread gives life to more than just Israel, but to the whole world.

These people know that the manna - food which the Jews collected every day during their journey in the wilderness (*cf* Ex 16:13) - symbolized messianic blessings. St Paul explains that the manna and the other marvels which happened in the wilderness were a clear prefiguring of Jesus Christ (*cf* 1 Cor 10:3-4). This is why they asked Jesus for a dramatic sign (v.31) like the manna. But there was no way they could suspect that the manna was a figure of a great supernatural messianic gift which Jesus was bringing to mankind - the Holy Eucharist. In this dialogue and the first part of the discourse (Jn 6:35-47), the main thing that Jesus is trying to do is bring them to make an act of faith in him, so that he can then openly reveal to them the mystery that he is the bread “which comes from heaven and gives life to the world” (Jn 6:33).

NOTES

6:31 manna. Ex 16:14 describes manna as “fine flakes like hoarfrost on the ground.” The etymology of the word is from the folk Hebrew *man hū*’ or “what is it?”

as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” There is no exact OT quotation which matches the words. However, it seems the St John has taken a loose, by-memory combination of several possible Old Testament quotations:

- Exod 16:4: “I will now rain down bread from heaven for you”;
- Neh 9:15: “Food from heaven you gave them in their hunger”;
- Ps 78:24: “He rained manna upon them for food and gave them heavenly bread”;
- Ps 105:40: “... and with bread from heaven he satisfied them.”
- Wisdom 16:20: “you nourished your people with food of angels and furnished them bread from heaven, ready to hand, untoiled-for”

All or some of these associated texts have been combined by into the one amalgam of verse 31

6:32 true bread from heaven. The contrast between manna as physical nourishment and the power of God is not a new idea presented here. Moses (Dt 8:3) tells the people that even during the Exodus they did not really understand the meaning of manna. Yes it physically nourished them, but more than that it pointed to the Word of God as the true source of eternal life (*cf.* Wis 16:20, Neh 9:20)

6:33 For the bread of God is that (he) which comes down from heaven. The Greek *ho katabainōn ek tou ouranou* could mean “that which comes down from heaven” and refer to the Torah, or “he that comes down from heaven” and refer to Jesus. It is possible that the ambiguity is intended in that the people have to choose the good of Moses and the Law or the best of God which is Jesus.

Chapter 6:34-40

True Bread from Heaven

³⁴ So they said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” ³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. ³⁶ But I told you that although you have seen (me), you do not believe. ³⁷ Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, ³⁸ because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it (on) the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him (on) the last day.”

This Johannine dialogue is an exchange with Jesus where the people are provided an opportunity to respond on several levels. The dialogue between Jesus and the crowd (Jn 6:27-34) is particularly reminiscent of the episode of the Samaritan woman. On that occasion Jesus was speaking about water springing up to eternal life; here, he speaks of bread coming down from heaven enduring to eternal life. There, the woman responds, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” (Jn 4:15). She too wonders about who Jesus is compared to the patriarchs of Israel’s history. She asks Jesus if he is greater than Jacob; here the people want to know if can compare with Moses.

“The Lord spoke of himself in a way that would make himself seem superior to Moses, for Moses never dared to say that he would give food which would never perish but would endure to eternal life. Jesus promises much more than Moses. Moses promised a kingdom, and a land flowing with milk and honey, good health and other temporal blessings....plenty for the belly, but food which perishes; whereas Christ promised food which never perishes but which endures forever” (St Augustine, *In Ionannine Evangelium*, 25:12)

In previous section (vv. 25-33), the emphasis lies on the giving. Jesus will give (vv. 27, 34), not as Moses gave (v.32) a perishable manna food of mortality, but as the Father, source of eternal life, gives (v.32). Thus far, Jesus appears as the giver of bread and therefore as the new and superior Moses. In this section (v.35 and following) the insistence now shifts to the bread from heaven that Jesus not only gives but actually is (vv. 35, 38, 41, 42). It is important to note here that the operative verb is “believe.” Jesus as bread from heaven is accepted and consumed through the belief required in verses 35, 36, 40, 47. What this means is that this is a faith nourishment. Jesus is bread from heaven, feeding all believers, in the same sense that Old Testament wisdom nourished all who accepted it (Prov 9:1–5).

The Word of God and the Law were understood as a gift of God come down from heaven. Jesus presents himself as the perfection of the gift of the Law (*cf.* 4:34, 5:36) especially as Jesus responds unconditionally to the will of the Father who sent him (6:38). The intention of the Law (as covenant) was to lead people into relationship with God. Such is the mission of Jesus – but here Jesus will lead so that none will be lost (v.39) from eternal life.

NOTES

6:34 *always*. The Greek *pantote* carries connotation of on-going, repetitive, and continual.

6:35 *I am the bread of life*. Another of the Johannine *egō eimi* expressions. This bread has been spoken of as coming down from heaven; thus when Jesus expresses the divine *egō eimi*, one hears an echo of Jn 3:13 wherein the Son of Man is the only one who has come down from the

Father.

comes to me...believes in me. There is a parallelism here (and Jn 7:37-38) that echo Sirach 24:21, “He who eats of me [Wisdom] will hunger still; he who drinks of me will thirst for more.” Sirach means that people will never have too much Wisdom and will always desire more; Jesus’ words are such that people will never hunger or thirst for anything other than Jesus’ own revelation.

will not hunger...will never thirst. The use of the Greek *pōpote* is a subtle correction to the people’s response of always (*pantote*) having bread. This shifts the emphasis to the never-failing gift of Jesus as expressed in the double negative *ōu me... pōpote*,

6:37 Everything that the Father gives me. The Greek uses the neuter singular *pan* which is best translated as “everything,” perhaps indicating all of creation. Some translations insert “Everyone” however the masculine plural *pantes* would be consistent with Johannine vocabulary.

6:38 not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. This same contrast is found in the Synoptic description of the agony in the garden (Mk 14:36 and Lk 22:42)

6:40 everyone who sees the Son and believes in him. The Greek *theorein* (see) carries a deeper sense than just the physical. It often also carries the sense of the spiritual. The understanding of “seeing” (*theroein*) makes it parallel with the use of believing (*pisteuōn*)

Further Reflection: “Coming to Jesus”

In Jn 6:35-40 Jesus spells out the need of faith in himself, a faith that is an active movement of coming to him. The section opens with “*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.*” Set in close parallel, to come to Jesus and to believe in Jesus mean the same thing. Those who believe in Jesus will find rest from the never ending search for Wisdom: “He who eats of me [Wisdom] will hunger still; he who drinks of me will thirst for more.” (Sirach 24:21)

But the words are in the future tense. Some time in the future Jesus will provide never-failing food and drink. Jesus’ claim thus far is clear: the revelation of God in and through Jesus will surpass the revelation of God in and through the Law – but when will this happen? This implied question recalls other unresolved promises. When will the *klasmata* gathered by the disciples (v.13) be consumed? When will the never-perishing food provided by the Son of Man (v.27) be given? It seems that there will be a time in the future when a food will be provided by the Son of Man that will explain the *klasmata* and provide the never-failing food and drink to those who believe (vv.13,27,35).

All interpreters of this text concur on the parallelism of the “coming” and “believing.” The distinction is on how one interprets “the bread from heaven” or “the bread of life.” There are several basic viewpoints which we will briefly outline before continuing with our study of Jn 6.

A Sapiential Understanding. In this view, the whole discourse (vv.35-50 as well as vv.51-58) refer to the revelation by and in Jesus or his teachings. This is rooted in the fundamental reaction to Jesus’ presentation of himself as bread in vv.35-50 is that of coming (vv. 35,36,40,47) or belief (vv. 35,37,44,45). Only once is “eating” mentioned (v.50). It is in the following discourse (vv. 51-58) that eating appears over and over. In v.45 Jesus emphasizes this sapiential aspect in that those who come/believe are “taught by God.” This accent is further highlighted by the OT

presentation of the divine word and wisdom are often presented under the symbolism of bread/food. Such a presentation is made clear in a passage such as Amos 8:11-13: “*Yes, days are coming, says the Lord God, when I will send famine upon the land: Not a famine of bread, or thirst for water, but for hearing the word of the Lord. They shall wander in...in search of the Word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.*”

A Sacramental Understanding. If vv.35-50 are primarily sapiential, then this view argues that there are also secondary Eucharistic undertones. In the discourse Jesus identifies himself as the bread of life. In the encounter with the Samaritan woman Jesus spoke of giving the living water, but did not identify himself with the water, yet here he identified himself as the bread of life. The mention of manna would have had Eucharistic associations for the early Christian audiences. St Paul makes this connection in 1 Cor 10:1-4. There is strong evidence for the undertones here, which will become primary in vv.51-58. (This is discussed in detail later)

A Division. What separates understanding of the whole of Chapter 6 (especially vv.34-58) is whether to hold the interpretive key as belief alone (sapiential) in the Word of God and the person of Jesus as salvific (vv.37-40) or to, in addition, see that the Gospel speaks of both the sapiential and the sacramental.

Chapter 6:41-51

Jesus' Origins

⁴¹ *The Jews murmured about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven,”* ⁴² *and they said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”* ⁴³ *Jesus answered and said to them, “Stop murmuring among yourselves.* ⁴⁴ *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day.* ⁴⁵ *It is written in the prophets: ‘They shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me.* ⁴⁶ *Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.* ⁴⁷ *Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.* ⁴⁸ *I am the bread of life.* ⁴⁹ *Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died;* ⁵⁰ *this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die.* ⁵¹ *I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”*

Like the people in the desert who refuse to believe Moses (cf. 15:24; 16:2, 7:17:3). In Jn 6:41-50, the crowd reject (“murmured about him”) the bread from heaven. After all, the crowd knows his father and mother - how can he claim to come down from heaven? Jesus has made claims that can be understood only in terms of his origins: a descent from his Father above. Just as Moses tells the Israelites that their complaints are not against Moses but against God, so too, Jesus reproaches the people in the same way. He points to the Father as the one who sent him, who draws believers to Jesus, and who will judge the people based on their response to Jesus.

But Jesus does not let their lack of faith pass without comment. “Coming to” Jesus in faith is not only the will of the Father but it is also his work, for the Father draws believers to faith in Jesus. Consequently, to believe in Jesus is to be open to God. Moreover the prophets (Is 54:10-13 and Jer 31:33) had spoken of a new covenant when God would teach his people through a new law which would be more than an external message (“I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts”). In listening attentively to Jesus, one hears the Father for he is the source of

the teachings of the Messiah. God then draws the believers to faith in Jesus in two ways: (a) through the message of Jesus and (b) as an interior teacher where he makes the message of Jesus an interior law of the heart. Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophetic promise and the fulfillment of the Law.

The Mosaic comparison are coming to an end. Moses pointed to the heavenly bread and even Moses is dead. Now Jesus points to a new bread, true bread that comes down from heaven. Jesus points to himself as says “*I am the bread of life*” (v.48) “*the bread that comes down from heaven.*” (v.49). There is an intensifying concentration on the person of Jesus. And now he makes a further promise, “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.*”

The true bread that has come down from heaven will make God known in an unconditional gift of himself for the life of the world. When will this be? How will it happen? As in earlier statements that point to a future encounter between the darkness and the light (1:5), the hour of Jesus (2:5) and his being “lifted up” (3:14), much is still shrouded in mystery. But there are already clear hints that Jesus will be slain by “the Jews” in their rejection of him at the Temple in 2:13-23 and their plot to kill him in 5:18. The mystery does not lie in the fact that Jesus will die at the hands of “the Jews.” The Johannine community and all subsequent believers have known that before reading the Gospel. But how does Jesus’ experience of death provide nourishment for the life of the world?

NOTES

6:41 *murmuring.* This language echoes the attitudes of the Israelites in the Exodus (Ex. 16:2,7,8) – continuing to raise the Moses/desert motif for the reader.

6:44 *unless the Father who sent me draw him.* In the rabbinic sources the expression “to draw” is used to describe a bringing close to the Torah and thus to conversion. This same theme appears later in Jn 12:32 “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.”

6:45 *the prophets.* No specific prophet is recalled nor exact verse cited. Perhaps this is a reference to the golden age foretold by Isaiah: “All your sons shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the peace of your children.” – if only they will listen. This teaching has an external aspect in that it is embodied in the person of Jesus who walks among them, but also an internal aspect in the sense that it is God who acts in their hearts (*cf.* “I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts” – Jer 31:33)

6:48 *I am the bread of life.* (see the note on 6:35 above).

6:51 *the bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh:* Many elements in v. 51c reflect eucharistic traditions found elsewhere in the NT and in the early Church. The Johannine celebration of the Eucharist lies behind the use of key expressions: *ho artos* (bread), *sarx* (flesh), *ego dōsō* (I will give), *hyper* (for the sake of). These explicit eucharistic links are seen by most commentators as the introduction to vv. 51c-58, a discrete section within John 6 that deals with the Eucharist. It may be true that the “backbone of vss. 51-58 is made up of material from the Johannine narrative of the institution of the Eucharist” (Brown, Gospel 1:287), but behind the eucharistic language the interpretation given continues to support the more overarching message of Jesus’ self-gift for the life of the world. His body (“flesh”) will be given over in crucifixion for the life of the world.

Chapter 6:52-59

Eating the Flesh and Blood of Jesus

⁵² *The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?"*

⁵³ *Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. ⁵⁴ Whoever eats † my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever." ⁵⁹ These things he said while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.*

Jesus gives his flesh to eat (vv. 52-59). The question that emerges from the dispute among "the Jews" is a rejection of Jesus' outrageous suggestion: "How (ōs) can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (v. 52). But it allows Jesus to conclude his discourse on his perfection of the Mosaic gift of bread from heaven through his gift of himself as the true bread from heaven. Unable to go beyond the physical, "the Jews" by their question misunderstand Jesus' promise. Jesus insists on a gift of flesh and blood for life by stating negatively (v. 53) and positively (v. 54) that whoever eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Jesus, the Son of Man, has eternal life now and will be raised up on the last day. The midrashic play on the verb "to eat" provided by the Exodus passage in v. 31 has reached its high point. "Flesh" and "blood" emphasize that it is the incarnate life and very real death of the Son that are life giving food. Only the physical body of a human being produces flesh and blood. The argument of vv. 25-51 continues into vv. 52-59, especially in Jesus' words that point to the resolution of a series of promises (cf. vv. 12-13, 27, 35, 51c). Jesus will provide a food for the life of the world, and that food is his flesh and blood. As the ancestors of Israel were nourished by the gift of the Torah, Jesus will nourish the whole world with the gift of himself. The people of Israel were nourished by eating the manna, perennially recalled in the nourishment provided for them by their total receptivity to and absorption of the Law. Now "the Jews" are told of the absolute need to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man. Unless they eat the flesh and drink the blood (*ean me phagete . . kai piete*) of the Son of Man they have no life (v. 53); whoever eats the flesh and drinks the blood (*ho treigōn . kai pinon*) of Jesus has eternal life (v. 54). The shift from the more respectable verb "to eat" (*phagein*) to another verb that indicates the physical crunching with the teeth (*trōgein*) accentuates that Jesus refers to a real experience of eating. Hints of the Eucharist continue to insinuate themselves into the words of Jesus (see below). Flesh is to be broken and blood is to be spilled. Violence has been in the air since Jesus' behavior on the Sabbath led "the Jews" to initiate a process that would lead to his death (5:16-18).

Jesus now associates the separation of flesh and blood in a violent death as the moment of total giving of himself. Jesus, the Son of Man, will give of his whole self for the life of the world (6:51c) by means of a violent encounter between himself and his enemies (1:5, 11; 2:18-20; 3:14; 5:16-18) in which his body will be broken and his blood will be poured out (6:53-54). This is the ongoing presence of Jesus in the gathered *klasmata* (vv. 12-13), the enduring gift that the Son of Man will give, the food that will not perish (v. 27) but will forever satisfy all hunger and thirst (v. 35).

The Passover context must not be forgotten. As once Israel ate of the manna in the desert and was nourished by adherence to the Law given at Sinai, so now the world is summoned to accept the further revelation of God in the broken body and spilled blood of the Son of Man. In this way all will have life, now and hereafter (vv. 53-54). These claims are further developed through vv. 55-57. Earlier parts of the discourse are recalled as Jesus insists that his flesh really is food (*alethes estin brōsis*) and his blood really is drink (*alethes estin posis*). This play on words recalls Jesus' promise of the *brōsis* (food) that the Son of Man would give (v. 27), and his claim that over against all other bread from heaven, and especially the gift of the Law from heaven, the Father gives "the true bread from heaven" (v. 32: *ton arton ek tou ouranou alethinon*). Jesus is the true bread from heaven (v. 35). On the basis of the entire discourse Jesus lays claim to his flesh and blood as authentically (*aletheis*) food and drink. The midrashic explanation of v. 31 continues: through a total absorption (*trōgein* is again used) of the revelation of God made available through the bloody death of Jesus, believers will come to a mutuality in which they live in Jesus and Jesus lives in them (v. 56). This mutual indwelling (*menein* is used; cf. 15:4-7) flows from the union that exists between the Father and the Son (v. 57). Jesus' words play on the verb "to live" (*zōein*). He refers to the Father as "the living Father" (*ho zōn pater*) who has sent his Son who has life in him because of the intimacy between the Father and the Son. If the one who sends is "living," then the one who is sent lives because of the one who sent him (*kagō zo dia ton patera*). He thus has authority to pass on life to those who accept the revelation of the Father in the Son (v. 57). The idea of the reception of the revelation of God in and through the Son is not new (cf., for example, 3:11-21, 31-36), but the imagery has been changed by the Passover context. No longer does Jesus speak of "belief in" (cf. 3:12, 15, 18, 36), but of "the one who eats me" (v. 57b: *ho trōgdn me*). The expressions are parallel. As throughout the Gospel, unconditional commitment to the revelation of God in and through Jesus leads to life here and hereafter: the one who eats the flesh of Jesus will live because of him (v. 57b: *kakeinos zēsei di'eme*). As Jesus lives because of the Father (v. 57a), the believer lives and will live because of Jesus (v. 57b).

The discourse closes as it opened, comparing the bread that Israel's ancestors ate in the desert and the bread that comes down from heaven (v. 58; cf. vv. 30-33). All former gifts from heaven have been surpassed. Playing upon the two possibilities of life—physical life that the manna could not provide, and eternal life that the true bread of life does give (cf. vv. 49-50)—Jesus points to the death of Israel's ancestors and promises everlasting life to those who eat of the true bread from heaven. A new possibility has entered the human story. The Law was a gift of God (cf. 1:17), but it has been surpassed by Jesus, the bread from heaven (v. 35), promising his abiding presence (v. 56), communicating the life of the Father to all who consume this true bread (v. 57). On the occasion of the celebration of Passover Jesus announces that there is another bread from heaven that eclipses all the original bread offered to the ancestors of Israel (v. 58). "This he said in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum" (v. 59). Jesus has not moved. The discourse ends where it began: at Capernaum (vv. 24, 59). The narrator closes the discourse with a comment that reminds the reader that Jesus is in a Jewish center of worship during Passover time, uttering a message that presupposes, fulfills, and transcends a Jewish Passover tradition.

The Eucharist in John 6:51c-58. This section is written at two levels. At one level it is an on-going commentary on the verb "to eat" (cf. v. 31) summoning up a rich tradition of

eucharistic language: "bread," "food," "flesh," "blood," "to eat," "to drink," "will give," "for your sakes." The discourse, from v. 25 down to v. 59, presents Jesus as the true bread from heaven, replacing the former bread from heaven, the manna of the Law. The believer must accept the revelation of God that will take place in broken flesh and spilled blood (vv. 53-54), a never-failing nourishment (v. 35) that the Son of Man will give (v. 27). But at the end of the first century Johannine readers, and the Christian readers of subsequent centuries, have every right to ask: where do we encounter this revelation of God in the flesh and blood of the Son of Man? The author's insinuation of eucharistic language into the final section of the discourse provides the answer: one encounters the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ in the eucharistic celebration. The use of the word *klasmata* to refer to the bread consigned by Jesus to his disciples (vv. 12-13) has lurked behind the discourse, reminding the reader of such celebrations.

The author is working at two levels. The main thrust of the discourse is to point to Jesus as the revelation of God, the true bread from heaven, perfecting God's former gift, the bread of the manna. However, the word *klasmata* in vv. 12-13, the promise in v. 27 of a future gift of food that the Son of Man would give, the reference to the satisfying food and drink in v. 35, and the further promise in v. 51c of the gift of the flesh of Jesus for the life of the world keep the eucharistic question alive. The midrashic unfolding of the verb "to eat" (cf. v. 31) in vv. 49-58 naturally led to the use of eucharistic language to explain the meaning of these verses in the living faith of the early Christian community.

The Eucharist renders concrete, in the eucharistic practice of the Christian reader, what the author has spelled out throughout the discourse. The Eucharist is a place where one comes to eternal life. Encountering the broken flesh and the spilled blood of Jesus, "lifted up" on a cross (vv. 53-54), the believer is called to make a decision for or against the revelation of God in that encounter (vv. 56-58), gaining or losing life because of it (vv. 53-54).

NOTES

52. ***The Jews then disputed among themselves:*** The disputing (*emachonto oun . . . hoi Ioudaioi*) continues the theme of the "grumbling" from Exodus 16.

53. ***Amen, amen, I say to you:*** The presence of the double "amen" in v. 53 makes this the third use of the expression to introduce Jesus' response to the misunderstanding interruptions that mark the beginning of each section (cf. vv. 26, 32). It is an indication of the staged unfolding of the argument.

eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood:

54. ***those who eat my flesh:*** The use of *trōgein* for the action of "eating" is found throughout vv. 53-58 (cf. vv. 54, 56, 57, 58). The claim that the verb is used to express the physical experience, "to munch," "to crunch" is sometimes questioned. Those who reject this physical meaning point to the presence of *phagein* in the immediate context (cf. v. 53), and thus claim that the verbs are interchangeable. This does not respect the fact that the verbs *phagein* and *esthiein* are found in a number of places and contexts in the Fourth Gospel, but *trōgein* is found only in 6:54-58 and 13:18. Both of these passages have eucharistic background. It is often suggested that the vigor of this language combats emerging docetic ideas about Jesus.

57. **the living Father:** The concentration on the theme of "life" and its communication from Father to Son to believer produces the expression "the living Father" (*ho zōn pater*).

Additional Notes on the Eucharistic Theme of Jn 6:51-59

Where the principal focus of the previous section is the bread of life as the divine revelation given to men by and in Jesus, Jn 6:51 adds a clearly Eucharistic theme - 'I am the living bread come down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.' While some argue the words are metaphor, the Jews clearly understand. Jesus is referring to eating of his flesh. He recounts this action verb several other times between vv. 51-58, while adding the drinking of his blood to the command. This is no metaphor for accepting his revelation, already adequately expressed. "To eat someone's flesh" appears in the Bible as a metaphor for hostile action (Ps 27:2, Zech 11:9). In fact, in the Aramaic tradition, the "eater of flesh" is the title of the devil. The drinking of blood was looked upon as a horrendous thing forbidden by God's Law (Gen 9:4, Lev 3:17, Dt 12:23, and Acts 15:20). Its symbolic meaning was that of brutal slaughter (Jer 45:10). In Ezekiel's vision of apocalyptic carnage (Ez 39:17), he invites the scavenging birds to come to the feast: 'You shall have flesh to eat and blood to drink.' Thus if Jesus' words in v.53 are to have positive, favorable meaning, they refer to the Eucharist.

In v.51, we have a parallel with v.35, which is the beginning of the revelation form of the Bread of Life Discourse, except that in v.51 Jesus speaks of the "living bread", a term more suitable for the Eucharist. In this same verse we see the connection of the living bread-the flesh-come down from heaven. Recalling Jn 1:14 where the entrance of the Word among us was spoken of in terms of becoming flesh; and it is this same flesh that is to be given to man as living bread. In the same passage John invokes the Incarnation and then closes with the death of Jesus, a Eucharistic theme. Where in v.32 it is the Father who gives the heavenly bread (revelation), in v.51 where the bread becomes identified with the flesh of Jesus, he must give it himself. Jesus must lay down his life of his own accord and that voluntary death makes Eucharistic participation in his flesh possible. At the beginning of the Gospel we hear that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sins (Jn 1:29); now in context of a discourse set at Passover time we hear that Jesus becomes the Paschal lamb and gives his flesh for the life of the world.

In v.52 we see a misunderstanding that parallels vv. 41-42. Strangely, Jesus does not take any pains to explain away the Jewish repugnance at the cannibalistic thought of eating his flesh; rather in v.53 he emphasizes the reality of "feeding" on his flesh and adds the even more repugnant note of drinking his blood. Verses 55-56 promise the gift of life to one who feeds on this Eucharist, but the Eucharistic promise follows the main body of the Discourse (vv 35-50) which insists on the necessity of belief in Jesus. The juxtaposition of the two forms of the discourse teaches that the gift of life comes through belief in Jesus. The Eucharistic life-giving is not through unbelieving "feeding".

In Hebrew and Aramaic of Jesus' day, there really was no word for "body." John's use of "flesh" (whereas the other Eucharistic accounts use "body") is perhaps closest to the language of Jesus. The earliest writers of the church, e.g. Ignatius and Justin Martyr use the language of "flesh" in their discourses and letters regarding the Eucharist. Clearly the first Christian communities recognized the Eucharistic theme of John's verses.

The two themes of the Discourse, faith and Eucharist, cannot be separated for neither faith nor the Eucharist are directly the focus of attention, but rather both are unified in the person of Jesus

who offers a living relationship through faith and Eucharist. The sacramental experience does not replace faith in Jesus, but expresses and confirms it. For John Eucharistic faith is to believe that the same, risen, Incarnate Jesus continues to give himself to believers in a personal communion and to exercise his life-giving mission. Whoever participates in the exercise of faith and Eucharist 'remains in me and I in him'.

While the synoptic gospel writers record the institution of the Eucharist, the theological gospel writer is the one who explains what the Eucharist does for the Christian - the personal communion with Jesus and thus with the Father.

Chapter 6:60-71

The Crisis Created by the Word of Jesus

60. Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"

61. But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, "Do you take offense at this?" 62. Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending where he was before? 63. It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64. But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe, and who it was that would betray him. 65. And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." 66. Because of this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him.

67. Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" 68. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; 69. and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." 70. Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" 71. He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him.

Introduction to 6:60-71. The form of a discourse disappears as a twofold response to Jesus' words is recorded:

- (a) Vv. 61-66: "Many of his disciples" find Jesus' word hard (v. 60), and Jesus addresses their difficulties (vv. 61-65), mentioning a future betrayal (v. 64). However, "many of his disciples" no longer go with Jesus (v. 66).
- (b) Vv. 67-71: The Twelve, represented by Peter, confess belief in the word of Jesus (vv. 68-69), but Jesus foretells that even from among these believing disciples one will betray him (vv. 70-71).

The possibility of acceptance or rejection of the word of Jesus has been canvassed regularly, from the Prologue (cf. 1:11-13) onward (cf. 3:11-21; 31-36), and various examples of how one might respond to the word formed the core of the journey from Cana to Cana (2:1-4:54). As Jesus' discourse on the bread from heaven concludes, some of the disciples who had seen him on the waters, heard his self-revelation of *ego eimi*, and had come safely to land (cf. vv. 16-21) leave him (vv. 60-66). Others are told that failure is always possible, even among those who believe (vv. 67-71).

Disciples no longer go with Jesus (vv. 60-66). The disciples have reached a crucial moment. They have been the privileged recipients of Jesus' self-revelation on the stormy sea: "It is I; do not be afraid (*ego eimi, me phobeisthe*)" (v. 20). They, more than the other

characters in the story, the crowd and "the Jews," have been shown (vv. 5-13, 16-21) and told (vv. 25-59) who it is who speaks to them. But they regard Jesus' discourse as unacceptable, harsh, offensive (60b: *skleros*). They find that it is not possible to "listen" (*akouein*) to this word.

Jesus challenges them with a further word directed specifically to them. Do they take offense at what he has said? He has claimed to make God known in a way that transcends the revelation of God in the gift of the Torah; he is the true bread from heaven. Thus he suggests to his disciples that they may be looking for further support for his claim to be the definitive revelation of God. Jesus' unfinished question, "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending where he was before?" (v. 62), is high rhetoric. Understood is the conclusion: "would that satisfy your doubts?" The question presupposes all that has been said so far about the Son of Man, but especially Jesus' words in 3:13: "No one has ascended into heaven, but one has descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

Throughout the discourse of vv. 25-59 Jesus has pointed to himself as the bread that has come down from heaven (vv. 32-33, 35, 38, 51). When "the Jews" questioned his origins (vv. 41-42) he affirmed that he is from God (vv. 46-47). The Son of Man has come from heaven (3:13), but perhaps the disciples would like to see him ascend to heaven, matching the ascent of traditional revealers, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and Enoch. Within the Passover context it is particularly the Jewish tradition of the ascent of Moses to receive the Torah (cf. *Exod. Rab.* 28:1; 40:2; 41:6-7; 43:4; 47:5, 8; *Dent. Rob.* 2:36; 3:11; 11:10; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 20:4) that lies behind this half-asked question. But Jesus transcends all that Moses said and did. To make God known Jesus has no need to ascend from earth to heaven (v. 62a). He comes from there; he has been there before (v. 62b), and on the basis of his previous union with God (1:1: *pros ton theon*; cf. 17:5) his words have ultimate authority.

The disciples fail because they are attempting to assess Jesus' words and actions by the superficial judgment of human expectation. Such an approach to Jesus is "fleshly," and "the flesh is of no avail" (v. 63b). Jesus warns the disciples against a "fleshly" lack of courage and understanding when they are faced with his words (cf. Isa 40:6-8). The words of Jesus are spirit and life (v. 63c), but the disciples want Jesus to conform to their expectations (v. 62). He rejects their pretensions as worthless, as only the spirit gives life (v. 63a), not the superficiality of the flesh (v. 63b). What matters is the life-giving power of the Spirit, made available to the disciples in and through the revelation of God in and through the word of Jesus (v. 63). But Jesus is aware that no matter how much has been revealed to the disciples some do not believe, and one among them would betray him (v. 64). The relationship between Jesus and the disciple is crucial, but the initiative of God is the ultimate explanation for the disciple who comes believingly to Jesus and never turns away (v. 65).

The disciples have seen the miracle of the loaves and the fish (vv. 515), witnessed Jesus' coming across the waters announcing ego. *eimi* (vv. 16-21), and heard the discourse on the true bread from heaven (vv. 25-59). But many of them (*polloi . . ek tōn mathētōn*) have found the word of Jesus impossible (v. 60), and because of this rejection of the word of Jesus "many of his disciples" (*polloi ek ton mathētōn*) drew away from him (v. 66). The true disciple is the one to whom discipleship is given by the Father and who believes in the Son (vv. 64-65). It is not in formation that makes a disciple, but a Spirit-filled response to the Father made known in the word of Jesus. Behind this negative response to the word of

Jesus lies the experience of early Christians, and Christians of all times. The word of Jesus is the essential nourishment of the community, its spirit and life. However, many are unable to accept this, and would prefer that Jesus conform to their ideas. Some members of the community would rather have had Jesus conform to the Mosaic pattern of a heavenly revealer. When he refused to accommodate their expectations they "drew back and no longer went with him" (v. 66).

Belief and the possibility of failure (vv. 67-71). Nevertheless, another response is possible, and Jesus challenges the Twelve, a restricted group within the larger crowd of disciples. He asks if they too would like to leave him, to return to the world of their own securities (v. 67; cf. vv. 62-63). Simon Peter answers for them all, indicating that the Father does not fail to draw believing disciples toward Jesus (cf. v. 65): "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words (*rhēmata*) of eternal life" (v. 68). Reflecting the unconditional openness to the word of Jesus that marked certain characters in the Cana to Cana journey (cf. 2:5: the Mother of Jesus; 3:29: John the Baptist; 4:42: the Samaritan villagers; 4:50: the royal official), Simon Peter tells Jesus that Jesus is the only possible focus for the Twelve (v. 68a). The Father has drawn them to him and they recognize that his earlier statement to the larger group of disciples is true: "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (v. 63; cf. v. 68b).

Peter's confession goes further. Looking back across the story thus far, his next words tell of the experience of the Twelve: "we have believed and we have come to know" (*hēmeis pepisteukatnen kat egnōkamen*) (v. 69a). They have arrived at belief in Jesus and are living from that faith and knowledge. Thus in the name of the Twelve Peter can confess, "You are the Holy One of God" (v. 69b). For the first time in the narrative a character has expressed faith in Jesus for the right reason: his origins. The holiness of Jesus comes from the fact that he is of God. But even among this group failure is possible. Jesus responds to this confession of authentic belief by announcing that there will be a betrayer, Judas Iscariot (vv. 70-71). Jesus has chosen the Twelve but there is a larger design in God's leading some to Jesus (cf. v. 64), and each believer is free to accept or refuse this gift. The fragility of the human response remains, even among believers. More than a confession of faith is called for. If there is a betrayer, then there will be a betrayal. The shadow of a violent death, which has fallen across much of the celebration of the Passover (cf. vv. 12-13, 15, 27, 51, 53-54), again emerges as the account of Jesus' activity on the occasion of the feast comes to a close (vv. 70-71). The confession of Simon Peter is excellent . . . so far! How will this expression of faith survive in the difficult moments that will bring this story to an end? How will the believers respond to the "lifting up" of the Son of Man (cf. 3:14) that will provide a food that will endure to eternal life (6:12-13, 27, 35, 51, 53-54)?

Conclusion to 6:1-71. The Passover provides the essential chronological, literary, and theological background to John 6. Jesus does not deny the Jewish Passover memory of the gift of the manna, present in the nourishment provided by the Law that makes God known in Israel. But the revelation of God in the Law is not the end of God's action in history. "The Jews" and many of the disciples are unable to go any further than the Mosaic traditions in their response to God. For them Moses, the manna, and the Law exhaust all possibilities. At the end of the first century, deprived of their traditional priesthood, cult, and Temple, "the Jews" focus on the gift of the Law, but the Johannine community is asked to accept Jesus'

claim: "I am the bread of life" (6:35; cf. vv. 41, 48, 51). There is no longer need to celebrate the former gift of the bread from heaven given through Moses. Such a tradition was a sign and a shadow of what has taken place in and through Jesus Christ. Christians are asked to accept that Jesus is the true bread from heaven, the one who gives life to all who believe in him. Jesus is the perfection of the Mosaic gift of the bread from heaven: he is the true bread from heaven.

As the final verses of this section of the Gospel reveal (cf. vv. 60-71), this Christian reinterpretation of the Mosaic traditions brought pain and division to the Johannine community. Not only were "the Jews" outraged by the words of Jesus; so were "many of the disciples" (vv. 60, 66). It is one thing for a Christian community to establish a theology and a christology that respond to the crises created by faith in Jesus Christ (cf. 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). It is another for everyone in the community to accept these notions and to live by them. Many could not accept that Jesus' words were spirit and life (v. 63), and thus "drew back and no longer went about with him" (v. 66).

NOTES

60. ***This is a hard saying***: The Greek adjective *skleros* does not mean "difficult" in an intellectual sense. The expressions "unacceptable, hard, offensive" best capture its meaning.

62. ***What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending where he was before?***: This clumsy sentence requires completion. It contains a question beginning with "if" and therefore requires completion. Interpreters must supply the completion, and there are three main solutions.

- Some suggest that if the disciples were to see Jesus ascend to where he was before, their difficulties would be greater.
- Others say that the use of *anabainein* refers to the cross, and similarly suggest that the offense would be greater.
- A third group claims that if they were to see him ascend where he was before their problems would be diminished, as they would know that he had authority to make such statements.

This commentary's interpretation is a development of this third option, linking it to Jewish speculation that surrounded the ascensions of the great revealers of Israel (cf. notes on 1:18 and 3:13). If the disciples were to see Jesus ascend—just as they believed the greater revealers from Israel's sacred history, and especially Moses, had ascended—then would they be prepared to accept his "hard word"?

63. ***the flesh is of no avail***: Some suggest that there is an unresolvable tension between the positive use of "flesh" (*sarx*) in vv. 51c-58 and the negative evaluation of "flesh" in v. 63. In the Fourth Gospel one must distinguish between the *sarx* of Jesus and the *sarx* of human beings. *Sarx* is used thirteen times in the Fourth Gospel, and its use is consistent. The *sarx* of Jesus tells the story of God (1:14, 18), and is essential for life (cf. 6:51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56). But the *sarx* of human beings is confined to the human sphere, that which is "below" (1:13; 3:6; cf. 8:23), and is the source of judgment limited by the superficial criteria provided by the physically observable (8:15; cf. 7:24). In 17:2 "all flesh" (*pasês sarkos*) is used to render

a Hebraism that means "every created thing." There is no contradiction between the use of *sarx* in vv. 51-58, where Jesus speaks of his own flesh, and v. 63 where he speaks of the *superficiality* of the limited human expectations the disciples have of Jesus (v. 62): "the flesh is of no avail."

Many non-Catholic interpreters believe that this line removes the basis for belief in the Real Presence in the Eucharist. But St John has already provides us the context for interpreting Jesus' remarks. In Jn 3:6-13, Nicodemus can not understand how a man can be borne from above. By way of explanation, Jesus calls upon the ascension into heaven of the Son of Man; for it is the ascended Son of Man who can give the Spirit. So also in Jn 6:63, the Spirit is mentioned immediately after the reference to the ascension of the Son of Man. The contrast between Spirit and flesh in v.63 is the same contrast found in Jn 3:6. Jesus is not speaking of Eucharistic flesh but of flesh as he spoke of it in Jn 3:6. There, the natural principle in man, which can not give eternal life, is useless. The Spirit is the divine principal from above which alone can give life. In v.63 Jesus once more affirms that man cannot gain life on his own. Jesus' role is to communicate to man the principles of eternal life so that those who believe in Jesus receive the life-giving Spirit.

In a sense the non-Catholic interpreters are correct in what they affirm, but they are wrong in what they deny. The Eucharist is of no avail to the non-believer who has not been blessed by the Spirit to believe the mystery of the Eucharist. It is only through faith in the resurrected Jesus that the Holy Eucharist has meaning.

67. **the twelve:** There are only two places in the Fourth Gospel where this group of disciples is mentioned, here and in the description of Thomas as "one of the Twelve" (20:24). The group plays no significant role in the Gospel's theology of discipleship, but the grouping of "twelve" within the larger following of Jesus is by now traditional. The author uses it here to differentiate between "many of the disciples" (vv. 60, 66) and a smaller group who have come to authentic belief in the word and person of Jesus.

69. **"we have believed, and have come to know":** Both verbs are in the perfect tense (kernels *pepisteukamen kai egnokamen*). Peter tells of belief and knowledge that began in the disciples some time in the past, and that is still part of their association with Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel the verbs "to believe" and "to know" can be almost synonymous.

You are the Holy One of God: This title appears in only one other place in the NT (Mark 1:24; cf. 1 John 2:20). Within the Johannine context it is the "of God" part of the confession that is crucial.

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