

# **BREAD FROM HEAVEN OR BREAD OF HEAVEN? THE BREAD OF LIFE DISCOURSE OF JOHN 6 WITHIN ITS HISTORICAL SETTING**

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## History and Theology in John 6

Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life in John 6 has been both a historical puzzle and a theological battleground for centuries. The historical question is why after this watershed episode Jesus' ministry turns from public to private, and why the events of John 6 result in the masses of his Galilean followers rejecting Jesus and no longer following him; the theological question is what relationship the discourse has to the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist.

As in all of the Fourth Gospel, the chapter recounts historical events in the life and ministry of Jesus, but the author overlays them with layers of theological interpretation. Historically there is the gathering of the Five Thousand, Jewish messianists who after seeing the sign identify Jesus as The Prophet and are ready to take Jesus by force and make him king. Theologically there is the Bread of Life discourse, which to the church over the centuries has been fraught with resonances of the Blessed Sacrament: "Eat my flesh and drink my blood" cannot fail to suggest the bread and the wine of the Eucharist.

I do not deny that John<sup>1</sup> intends for overtones of the church's practice of the Supper to resound in this discourse, but in this paper I will argue that in the history of interpretation the theological, liturgical, and sacramental use of this text has eclipsed its meaning within its historical setting. Clearly the chapter contains much characteristically

Johannine theological interpretation—but how much real messianic history underlies it? Very much, I will argue: despite its characteristically Johannine language, virtually every word of the discourse can be interpreted as the historical Jesus’ direct response to the militant messianism of the Galilean crowds.

### The Theological Question of the Eucharistic Reading of the Last Supper Traditions

The theological controversy centers on the eucharistic understanding of John 6. *Eucharist*, of course, is simply transliterated from Greek. The noun form ἡ εὐχαριστία, *thanksgiving*, and the verb form εὐχαριστέω, *I give thanks*, have come to describe the Lord’s Supper because εὐχαριστοῦμεν, “We give thanks,” was the first word the early Christians habitually used when they celebrated the Supper. Very early—at least as early as Ignatius and the *Didache*—the eucharistic thanksgivings for the bread and the cup became formulaic prayers beginning with the words Εὐχαριστοῦμέν σοι, πάτερ ἡμῶν, “We give thee thanks, our Father.”<sup>2</sup> *Didache*, Ignatius, and Justin Martyr all use ἡ εὐχαριστία as a technical term for the Lord’s Supper.<sup>3</sup> In modern times the church habitually reads all the passages eucharistically, and NT scholars often do so also—Jeremias has written a famous book about *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*. “The eucharistic overtones of 6:51-58 are universally recognized,” says Culpepper.

Suggestions of the developing technical sense of the εὐχαριστία- terms may be found inside the NT, though at the same time the fact that the Synoptic writers and Paul use εὐλογία and εὐλογέω in tandem with them shows that for them ἡ εὐχαριστία is not yet a fixed technical term. In fact, no NT writer uses ἡ εὐχαριστία as a technical term. Of the fifteen occurrences of ἡ εὐχαριστία in the NT,<sup>4</sup> none has anything to do

with the Lord's Supper; all refer simply to prayers of thanksgiving *per se*. As a technical term for the Lord's Supper it can be found in Christian writers of the second century, but not the first. In the NT any suggestion of early Christian eucharistic practice has to be found in the usage of the verb εὐχαριστέω, invariably in the participial form εὐχαριστήσας or εὐχαριστήσαντος. In the words of institution at the Last Supper, Mark and Matthew both report Jesus blessing the bread, then giving thanks for the cup: λαβὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἄρτον εὐλογήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς . . . καὶ λαβὼν ποτήριον εὐχαριστήσας ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς . . . (Mk 14:22-23//Mt 26:26-27).<sup>5</sup> Paul shifts the blessing over the bread to εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν, but then he drops the term from the blessing over the cup: ὡσαύτως καὶ τὸ ποτήριον μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι λέγων, Τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἔμῳ αἵματι (I Cor. 11:24-25). Paul uses the phrase τὸ ποτήριον τῆς εὐλογίας, “the cup of blessing,” in I Cor. 10:16—so there Paul's terminology is εὐλογία rather than εὐχαριστία. The most that can be said is that in Mark, Matthew, and Paul the technical use of ἡ εὐχαριστία is anticipated in the use of the participle εὐχαριστήσας, but is nowhere near fixed.

In Luke's account of the Last Supper it is one step nearer to fixed: Luke gives the words of institution over both the first cup and the bread with εὐχαριστήσας (Lk. 22:17,19). However, with Luke's second cup he omits the term and, like Paul, moves to τὸ ποτήριον ὡσαύτως μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι (Lk 22:20). Then there is the uniquely lukan account of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus: on the one hand the two report back to the eleven in Jerusalem that “he was known to them in the breaking of the bread,”<sup>6</sup> ἐγνώσθη αὐτοῖς ἐν τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου [Lk. 24:35b), but on the other hand Luke uses εὐλογέω rather than εὐχαριστέω to describe the actual blessing over the

bread: λαβῶν τὸν ἄρτον εὐλόγησεν καὶ κλάσας ἐπεδίδου αὐτοῖς (Lk. 24:30b). So again Luke’s evidence for the technical usage in his account of the Last Supper is not decisive, and in fact his evidence in the Emmaus tradition argues against the technical usage: Luke’s comment that “he was known to them in the breaking of the bread” and his description of Jesus blessing, breaking, and passing out the bread unavoidably resonate with the Last Supper, but surely if the name of the Last Supper had already been fixed as ἡ εὐχαριστία Luke should have used εὐχαρίστησεν rather than εὐλόγησεν.<sup>7</sup>

### The Eucharistic Reading of John 6

Unless it is in the bread of life discourse of the Gospel of John, no NT writer uses any form of εὐχαριστέω as a sort of code term for the Lord’s Supper, as the argument for the eucharistic interpretation of the texts requires. John’s account of the miracle of the feeding says that Jesus gave thanks over the loaves, then passed them out: ἔλαβεν οὖν τοὺς ἄρτους ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ εὐχαριστήσας διέδωκεν τοῖς ἀνακειμένοις· ὁμοίως καὶ ἐκ τῶν ὀψαρίων ὅσον ἤθελον (6:11).

Of all eucharistic terminology in the NT, the most remarkable is John’s use of the participial phrase εὐχαριστήσαντος τοῦ κυρίου, “after the Lord had given thanks”: “Boats came from Tiberias near the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks” (6:23). Placed where it is, the terminology is either gratuitous, or very purposeful—it leaps out at the reader, as it seems, by the author’s design. A variant textual tradition here omits the phrase, but the reading is very well-supported.<sup>8</sup> Accepting it as original, we can hardly avoid believing that John wants his audience to hear in it an echo of the early church’s eucharistic practice.

It has, in fact, proven impossible for the church not to interpret John 6 as discussing the Lord's Supper. "I am the living bread that has come down from Heaven; if anyone eats this bread he shall live forever, and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world," says Jesus, adding "unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you do not have life in yourselves" (6:51,53). Some high-church traditions hear Jesus speaking of a Blessed Sacrament in which he takes the physical elements of bread and wine and "transubstantiates" them into his actual flesh and blood: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal . . . for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink" (6:54-55). These groups then see the Real Presence of the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist, though the "accidents" of bread and wine appear unchanged. Other groups say no, the elements of the Supper do not transubstantiate literally into the body and blood of Jesus: rather they are "consubstantial" with the body and blood. That is, the bread and wine are still real and unchanged substances even as they mingle with the body and blood of Jesus. Luther explained this by the analogy of iron put into the fire: the iron takes the fire into itself and becomes red-hot, but it remains real iron. It could perhaps go without saying that the popular-level, precritical exposition of John 6 in churches both Catholic and Protestant is likely to assume the Eucharistic view. Catholic interpreters will tend to see the transubstantiation of the elements by the Real Presence, while Protestants will tend to speak of the consubstantial nature of the elements—all on the authority of an ahistorical reading of John 6.

To the two alternatives, transubstantiation and consubstantiation, dissenters have posed a third choice: it is neither of the two; the elements of the Lord's Supper are not mystical, but simply symbolic. The Supper does not transubstantiate and does not

consubstantiate; rather, it just symbolizes the body and blood of Jesus. May we call this purely symbolic approach to John 6 non-substantiationist? So the theological question is how literally the Bread of Life discourse should be interpreted. Transubstantiation is the most literalistic reading, consubstantiation the next most, and the symbolic interpretation is an effort to avoid the problems of the two: but all of them presume that the discourse is about the Lord's Supper. Is it?

### John 6 in its Historical Setting

Setting the church's theological use of the text aside for the moment as a distraction from the historical question, I will now argue a case for interpreting John 6 within its historical setting. Whatever else one says about the tradition, historically the Five Thousand were not taking the Lord's Supper—they were not Christians, and Jesus had not yet instituted the Supper: His hour had not yet come, the Father had not yet lifted up the Son to glorify him, the Lamb of God had not yet been sacrificed. Something else was going on. Two factors furnish historical keys: 1) the revolutionary messianism prevalent from the days of Judas the Galilean (ca. 6-9 AD) to the Great Jewish War (AD 66-72); and 2) the common Jewish expectation that The Prophet would restore the gift of manna. Virtually every word of the chapter gleams in the light of first-century Jewish messianic expectations, as J. B. Lightfoot noticed near the end of the nineteenth century: "The key to the understanding of the whole situation is an acquaintance with the national expectation of the greater Moses."

The revolutionary messianism that brought on the Great Jewish War is well known. John's account of the Feeding states explicitly that after seeing the sign of the

bread the crowds said, “Truly this is The Prophet who is coming into the world,” and that “Jesus . . . knew that they were going to take him by force in order to make him king”:  
Οἱ οὖν ἄνθρωποι ἰδόντες ὃ ἐποίησεν σημεῖον ἔλεγον ὅτι Οὗτός ἐστιν ἀληθῶς ὁ προφήτης ὁ ἐρχόμενος εἰς τὸν κόσμον. Ἰησοῦς οὖν γνοὺς ὅτι μέλλουσιν ἔρχεσθαι καὶ ἀρπάζειν αὐτὸν ἵνα ποιήσωσιν βασιλέα . . . (6:14-15). Compare Josephus’ many contemporary descriptions of messianic uprisings under various “deceivers and imposters,” from Judas the Galilean to Eleazar ben Gion (or ben Simon), Simon ben Gioras, and other Zealot leaders of the Great War:

And so Judaea was filled with brigandage. Anyone might make himself king as the head of a band of rebels whom he fell in with, and then would press on to the destruction of the community, causing trouble to few Romans and then only to a small degree, but bringing the greatest slaughter upon their own people.<sup>9</sup>

If John had not added his note regarding the revolutionary intentions of the Galilean crowd, they could still be inferred historically from the setting of the Synoptic accounts of the Feeding; this is especially visible in the Gospel of Mark’s account, as Hugh Montefiore has demonstrated.

The incendiary atmosphere of Galilee in the time of Jesus is well-known; less well-known is the fact that the common Jewish expectation of the day held that, like Moses, The Prophet—the New Moses—would restore the gift of manna. As T.F. Glasson has shown, the treatment of Moses in the fourth Gospel is remarkable: “the law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17); “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (5:46); “It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my father who gives you the true bread from heaven” (6:32); “Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law” (7:19); “because of this Moses gave you circumcision, not that it is from Moses, but from

the Patriarchs . . .” (7:22). Friedrich observes that John’s comparisons between Jesus and Moses amount to “antithetical typology.” On the one hand the first Moses bore faithful witness to Jesus; on the other hand the popular first-century Jewish expectation of the New Moses made him into a glorified militaristic national deliverer. This forced the historical Jesus to disidentify himself not from the first Moses, but from the crowds’ this-earthly agenda for the New Moses. In light of the “Mosesism” (if I may coin the term) of many messianic Jews in the time of Jesus, the meaning of the Bread of Life discourse in its historical setting becomes clear and sharp.

Above all others it is E.P. Sanders who has taught us that methodological caution is necessary with the use of rabbinic traditions. The manna traditions are mostly rabbinic, and therefore by definition post-Christian era, but that of 2 Baruch is almost exactly contemporary with the Gospel of John. In these traditions The Prophet, the New Moses, would feed the people of God miraculously, as did the first Moses. A startling text in 2 Baruch portrays a glorious age to come in which the messianic banquet includes the return of the gift of manna from Israel’s ideal past under Moses:

But when, O Lord, these things will surely come of which you spoke to me before, let me also know this, if I have found grace in your eyes: Is it in one place or in one part of the earth that these things will come or will they be noticed by the whole earth?

And he answered and said to me: That which will happen at that time bears upon the whole earth. Therefore, all who live will notice it. For at that time I shall only protect those found in this land at that time. And it will happen that when all that which should come to pass in these parts has been accomplished, the Anointed One will begin to be revealed. And Behemoth will reveal itself from its place, and Leviathan will come from the sea, the two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation and which I shall have kept until that time. And they will be nourishment for all who are left. The earth will also yield fruits ten thousandfold. And on one vine will be a thousand branches, and one branch will produce a thousand clusters, and one cluster will produce a thousand grapes, and one grape will produce a cor of wine. And those

who are hungry will enjoy themselves and they will, moreover, see marvels every day. For winds will go out in front of me every morning to bring the fragrance of aromatic fruits and clouds at the end of the day to distill the dew of health. And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it in those years, because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time.

And it will happen after these things when the time of the appearance of the Anointed One has been fulfilled and he returns with glory, that then all who sleep in hope of him will rise.

Other rabbinic texts reflect the same expectation of the return of the manna, though most are considerably later than the NT period:

Rabbi Berekiah said in the name of Rabbi Isaac: As the first redeemer was, so shall the latter Redeemer be. What is stated of the former redeemer? And Moses took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass (Ex. IV, 20). Similarly will it be with the latter Redeemer, as it is stated, Lowly and riding upon an ass (Zech. IX, 9). As the former redeemer caused manna to descend, as it is stated, Behold, I will cause to rain bread from heaven for you (Ex. XVI, 4), so will the latter Redeemer cause manna to descend, as it is stated. May he be as a rich cornfield in the land (Ps. LXXII, 16). As the former redeemer made a well to rise, so will the latter Redeemer bring up water, as it is stated, And a fountain shall come forth of the house of the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim (Joel IV, 18).

Those who fear God will inherit true and eternal life, themselves living forever in the fertile garden of paradise and feasting on sweet bread from the starry heaven.

In this age you shall not find it [the manna] but in the age to come you shall find it.

Despite the lateness of this line of tradition, Martyn argues that it gives a fair representation of earlier Jewish expectations. Speaking in particular of the passage from *Qoheleth Rabba*, he says “Here the Moses-Messiah typology is set out in full clarity. While Rabbi Isaac (ca. 300 C.E.) does not cite Deuteronomy 18:15,18, we are probably correct in viewing his words as the full flowering of the influence which that passage exerted on Jewish thought in the first centuries of the common era.”

## Reading the Bread of Life Discourse as History

We are now in the position to read the Bread of Life discourse in its historical setting. Against this background, we hear the *ipsissima vox Jesu* speaking words not in promise of the Christian Blessed Sacrament, but in confrontation and judgment against ancient Jewish militaristic messianism. Like a good tree, a good hypothesis is validated by bearing good fruit. The thesis I am advancing (so I argue) will bear the fruit of allowing every word of the Discourse to be explained against its historical background, but I must leave that to the commentaries to do in detail. Here I will discuss the salient points of the text, enough, I hope, to make my case.

1. *Manna, Moses and The Prophet; Mosesism:* Messianic expectations in Jesus' day included belief in the return of the heavenly manna, which Lightfoot argues furnishes the key to the Bread of Life discourse: "The key to the meaning of the conversation [in John 6] is the fact that the Jews expected a miracle similar to the gift of manna in the wilderness, as an accompaniment of the appearance of the great deliverer. This expectation throws a flood of light on the whole discourse."

The Bread of Life discourse begins with the crowds pursuing Jesus to Capernaum the day after the Feeding (vv. 22-24). Finding Jesus in the synagogue, they ask him a leading question: "Rabbi, how did you get here?" (v. 25). Jesus' immediate response is confrontational: "I am solemnly telling you, you are not seeking me because you saw signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food which abides for life eternal, which the son of man will give to

you: for the father has set his seal upon him” (vv. 26-27). They have indeed seen the sign of the loaves and fishes, but they have not looked where it points; for John, physical signs point beyond themselves to deeper spiritual truth; in their this-earthly messianism the five thousand have seen Jesus as no more than the nationalistic redeemer they expect in the New Moses. Against the background of first-century messianism their response is transparent: “What shall we do to do the works of God?” (v. 28). This is nothing less than a request for Jesus to lead them. To paraphrase, “Give us our marching orders, and we are ready to follow.” “This is the work of God,” says Jesus, “that you believe on the one whom he sent” (v. 29). They have seen the sign but do not believe it, do not understand it, do not receive it with faith: the work of God that they must learn to do is to see the sign, and to see Jesus himself, through spiritual rather than physical eyes.

They cannot see the point. They ask, “What sign then are you doing, so that we may see and believe you? What will you work? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, just as it is written, he gave them bread out of heaven to eat” (vv. 30-31). Their belief that the new Moses will bring with him the new manna drives their request. They saw Jesus do this the previous day. In the synagogue at Capernaum they ask for manna again—not merely to have more manna, but to have in Jesus the New Moses:

But the fact is not communicated in the passage itself. There is only a bald, isolated statement, which apparently is suggested by nothing, and itself fails to suggest anything: ‘Our fathers did eat manna in the wilderness.’ Then comes an aposiopesis. The inference is unexpressed. The expectation, which explains all, is left to be inferred, because it would be mentally supplied by men brought up among the ideas of the time. We ourselves have to get it by the aid of criticism and research from rabbinical authorities. But, when we have grasped it, we can unlock the meaning of the whole chapter.

Jesus now becomes increasingly confrontational with them: “I am solemnly telling you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven; for the bread of God is he who has come down from heaven and gives life to the world” (vv. 32-33). He confronts their Moses expectation. Moses pointed beyond himself, and beyond the manna in the wilderness, to Jesus, the true Bread of Heaven. They want bread from heaven: that is, they have a this-earthly materialistic agenda for the kingdom of God on earth; but wanting bread from heaven can be very different from wanting the Bread of Heaven. Wanting something from God can be very different from wanting God himself.

2. *“I AM”*; *“I am the Bread of Life”*: Perhaps, as Westcott thinks, they sense that Jesus has more to give them than they are asking: “Lord, give us this bread always” (v. 34). But it may be enough to say that here they ask Jesus to carry out the work of the New Moses. Jesus responds at length with the first of his “I am” discourses:

I am the Bread of Life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. But I told you that you have both seen me and yet do not believe. Everything that my father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will not cast out, because I have come down from heaven in order to do not my own will but the will of the one who sent me. This is the will of the one who sent me: that I shall not lose anything of that which he has given me, but rather I will raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my father: that everyone who sees the son and believes in him should have life eternal, and I will raise him up on the last day.

(vv. 35-40)

The relationship between the Fourth Gospel’s “I AM” discourses and the “I AM” of the Burning Bush is highly contested. It seems fair, however, and it appears well in keeping with John’s theological bent, to hear suggestions of Exodus in John’s “I AM” sayings. “Before Abraham was, I AM” (8:58—πρὶν γενέσθαι Ἀβραάμ, ἐγὼ εἰμι),

followed by “The Jews therefore took up stones to stone him” (8:59), is the strongest argument for the case. However, the fact that one paragraph later John allows the man born blind also to say ἐγώ εἰμι (9:9) weakens the case. In 6:20 when he walks to them on the water by night, Jesus reassures his terrified disciples, Ἐγώ εἰμι· μὴ φοβεῖσθε, “It is I; do not be afraid”—another non-technical use of Ἐγώ εἰμι. Perhaps it is enough to say that John hears resonances with the Yahweh of the Book of Exodus in the “I AM” sayings, but he does not always make “I am” into a technical term.

On the lips of the historical Jesus the “I AM” sayings are confrontational. “I am the light of the world” (8:12); “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14); “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25); “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6); “I am the vine” (15:1,5)—in all these words the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel makes himself the critical issue. With “I am the bread of life,” Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς (v. 35), Jesus declares that the point of the sign is not the miracle: not the manna, not the bread from heaven, but himself, the Bread of Heaven. The crowds report him to be saying “I am the bread that has come down from heaven,” Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος ὁ καταβὰς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ (v. 41), though that is not a direct quotation from Jesus, but is a pastiche put together from his words reported in 6:31, 32, 33, 35. To the rabble of Jewish messianists, Jesus says that as the true Messiah he has far more to give them—but also far other to give them—than they are expecting. They have asked him to give them the manna and to be the New Moses; he offers them more than manna or Moses: he offers them the Bread of Heaven.

3. *Signs, Spiritual Blindness; Belief and Disbelief*: It is a commonplace of NT scholarship that John freightloads the word *signs*, σημεῖα, with heavy theological weight.

The fourth Gospel is often called “The Gospel of Signs.” In John 6, the crowds follow Jesus because they have seen the signs of healing that he did (v. 2), and then when they have seen the sign of the loaves and the fishes they identify him as The Prophet and attempt to make him their messianic king (vv. 14-15). As John treats it this is ironic: they see the signs but do not pursue—nor desire—their meaning. Hence the confrontational nature of Jesus’ first word to the crowd that pursues him to the synagogue in Capernaum: “I am solemnly telling you, you seek me not because you saw signs (σημεῖα), but because you ate of the loaves and were filled . . . ” (v. 26). They cannot see the point, which is that the physical sign points beyond itself to its spiritual signifier, so they ask Jesus to repeat the sign of the manna: “What then are you doing as a sign (σημεῖον), in order that we may see and believe you; what are you doing?” (vv. 30-31).

The Bread of Life Discourse follows. As elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel, so here: the sign is followed by a theological discourse exploring its spiritual significance. After the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda John gives a discourse on the Son glorifying the Father by doing his works (5:19-47); after the healing of the man born blind, John gives the Good Shepherd Discourse (chs. 9-10); after the Resurrection of Lazarus, John gives the Resurrection and the Life Discourse (ch. 11). The point lies not in the signifier but the signified. The signs point beyond themselves.

The Fourth Gospel constantly exploits the ironies of blindness versus sight, light versus darkness, belief versus disbelief. The dynamic is spiritual: “The Jews” understand “destroy this temple and I will raise it up in three days” as speaking literally of the physical temple (2:19-22). Nicodemus, teacher of Israel though he is, understands “born again” physically, not spiritually (3:3-12). The Twelve understand “food to eat, of

which you do not know” materialistically, not metaphorically (4:31-38). The Pharisees understand blindness and sight literally—and hence they remain morally and spiritually blind. When they ask “We are not also blind, are we?,” Jesus warns them, “If you were blind you would not have sin; but now you say ‘We see’: your sin remains” (9:40-41). “Christ not only makes the blind to see . . . but also makes those who see blind.”

John 6 exploits the same ironies. The crowds see the sign of the loaves and fishes, but do not perceive its significance. It is not because they *saw* the sign that they pursue Jesus, but merely because they ate the loaves and were physically satisfied. They ask for physical manna, for the physical miracle repeated. They stumble over “eat my flesh and drink my blood” because they interpret it as grossly physical; they cannot see the spiritual point; then they desert Jesus rather than looking further or deeper.

4. “*All that the Father gives to me will come to me*”; “*I will raise him up at the last day*”; *Life Eternal*: As with the eucharistic language, so with the predestinarian language of John 6, the key lies in the historical setting. Jesus speaks to hot-blooded Jewish revolutionaries who will not listen and will not understand, because they cannot. They cannot because they will not: their interests lie elsewhere. Although they have seen, they have not believed; it is only those who believe whom the Father has given to the Son and who come to him; it is these who will not perish but will be raised up at the last day (6:36-40). It is only those whom the Father draws who will come to the Son; these are the ones who are taught by God: these are the ones who listen to the Father, learn from him, and come to the Son (6:43-46). While the language is predestinarian, the historical reality is much simpler: the rabble of Jewish messianists are not able to listen, not able to hear, not able to see. They want neither Jesus nor the life that he offers: they

want merely something from Jesus. Unless and until the Father draws them to desire the Son himself, they will never come to him.

The doctrine of the resurrection is inherent within Jesus' proclamation of Life Eternal: "and I will raise him up at the last day," *καὶ γὰρ ἀναστήσω αὐτὸν [ἐν] τῇ ἐσχάτῃ ἡμέρᾳ* (vv. 39,40,44,54). However, the life that the crowds want is not of the same quality as the Life Jesus gives. The fourth Gospel's emphasis on Life Eternal is well-known; for this, John 6 is one of the crucial texts. Jesus offers them Life Eternal, *ζωὴ αἰώνιον* (vv. 27-40,54,68); Jesus is the Bread of Life, *ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς*, the true bread coming down from heaven and giving life to the world, *ζωὴν διδοὺς τῷ κόσμῳ*, the living bread, *ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ζῶν* (vv. 31-33,35,48,51); Jesus has the words of eternal life, *τὰ ῥήματα ζωῆς αἰωνίου* (v. 68); he speaks the words of the living Father, *ὁ ζῶν πατήρ*, and he gets his life from the Father, *καὶ γὰρ ζῶ διὰ τὸν πατέρα* (v. 57); the person who eats the living bread will live forever, *ζήσεται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα* (vv. 51,57-58); it is the Spirit that makes alive, *τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν τὸ ζωοποιοῦν* (v. 63)—as throughout the Fourth Gospel, in the Bread of Life discourse Life, or Life Eternal, is far more than a quantity; it is the quality of the Life of God. But in a sense, it is also more than a quality: it is a life-giving power. To the militaristic messianists in the synagogue in Capernaum, the historical Jesus offered the choice between life and death: they did not choose life because they did not desire the Life of God, Life Eternal. They wanted something else from him.

5. *"Eat my flesh and drink my blood"; "This is a hard saying; who is able to listen to it?"; the scandal of Jesus' words:* In vv. 51-58 we are faced with the most difficult words of the discourse:

Unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal . . . For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. . . . he who eats me shall live through me. . . . He who eats this bread shall live forever.

(vv. 53-58)

The verb τρώγω, used four times in vv. 54-58, is puzzling. It is used as a synonym for ἐσθίω, but it may suggest the gross physicality of mastication; the lexica give “chew” and “gnaw” among possible glosses; Morris thinks it suggests “noisy feeding,” as in “munch” or “crunch.” Westcott thinks that it describes the pleasure of eating, which is why John chooses the (continuous) present tense. The image is horrifying, and the language Jesus uses is harsh.

It goes further. The idea of eating human flesh was horrifying to the Jewish people, but it was not unheard of, especially under siege conditions; but the idea of drinking any type of blood, let alone human blood, was especially abhorrent. Some interpreters are able to argue that “drink my blood” was so abhorrent as to be unthinkable, and therefore the words can have no historical referent, but must be Johannine (or, for Bultmann, post-Johannine) eucharistic theologizing. On this argument, clearly they are created to fit the *sitz im leben* of the Christian sacraments.

Can the words that John places on the lips of Jesus be explained historically? Dodd speaks of “the kind of oracular ambiguity which this evangelist loves.” But the words are more than a creation of the evangelist or of the church: If we understand them against their historical setting, they are another parable, another dark saying—the darkest of all—of the historical Jesus. These words are intentionally obscure, intentionally harsh, intentionally offensive: this *because* Jesus knows that the crowds will not understand

them. “The people are not supposed to understand what is meant.” In saying these words Jesus knows he must lose the crowds of Galilean messianists—and he is willing to lose them, because they are not listening and because they are “a danger to themselves and everyone else.” They are attempting to force him to carry out the messianic agenda they expect of the New Moses. Rather than becoming their revolutionary hero-king, Jesus chooses to be the bread of life and give his flesh for the life of the world, with all the imagery of blood and sacrifice that entails. He offers them himself not as a warrior-messiah, but as the suffering servant-messiah. In asking them to eat his flesh and drink his blood, he asks them to identify themselves with a king and a kingdom that rule by the life of self-sacrifice.

Scandalized, the crowds leave him for good, precisely (so I believe) as the historical Jesus expected of them. In this watershed scene in the Gospels, Jesus turns away the crowds of followers who have been crushing and pressing in upon him, and works for his final year of ministry in relative seclusion with the Twelve alone. He finds it necessary to work with the few rather than the many: perhaps the few will listen.

The most learned pagan critic of Christianity of all, Porphyry, perfectly illustrates the scandal of Jesus’ words in the Bread of Life discourse, which he understands literally, though he knows that less-than-literal explanations like the allegorizing of Origen are available. Other explanations notwithstanding, says Porphyry, the words are ludicrous and should never have been spoken:

A famous saying of the Teacher is this one: ‘Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you will have no life in yourselves.’ This saying is not only beastly and absurd; it is more absurd than absurdity itself and more beastly than any beast: that a man should savor human flesh or drink the blood of a member of his own family or people—and that by doing this he should obtain eternal life!

Tell us: in recommending this sort of practice, do you not reduce human existence to savagery of a most unimaginable sort? Rumor herself has not heard of such a weird twist on the practice of impiety. The shades of the Furies had not made such practices known even to some barbarians. Even the Potideans would not have stooped to such a thing had they not been starving. Thyestes' banquet became [a feast of flesh] due to a sister's grief, and Tereus the Thracian ate such food against his will. Again: Harpagus was tricked by Astyages into eating the flesh of his beloved—also against his will. Yet no one of sound mind has ever made such a dinner!

No one learned this sort of foulness from a chef. True, if you look up Scythian [practices] in the history books, or delve into the habits of the Macrobian Ethiopians, or if you will venture out to sea lands dotted through the world, you will certainly find people who feed on roots or eat reptiles or mice—but they stop short of eating human flesh.

And so, what does this saying mean? Even if it carries some hidden meaning, that does not excuse its appearance, which seems to suggest that men are less than animals. No tale designed to fool the simple-minded is crueller or more deceptive [than this myth of the Christians].<sup>10</sup>

One is reminded of the charges against the Christians as guilty of atheism, cannibalism, and incest. Understood—or purposefully misunderstood—literalistically, “Eat my flesh and drink my blood” lent itself to this cavil. Addressing the Twelve as the crowds are murmuring and beginning to desert him, Jesus says, “It is the spirit that makes alive; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (v. 63). Just as he did with the parables, the historical Jesus has intended his words to be understood spiritually, not literally. The crowds have not passed the test; will the Twelve? “Will you also go away?” (v. 67).

7. “*Will you also go away?*”: The final scene of the drama of John 6 is Jesus' exchange with Peter, which functions as “the Johannine equivalent of Peter's confession at Caesarea in the Synoptics.” The drama is high, and Peter is portrayed at the height of his faith and loyalty: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have known and have believed that you are the holy one of God” (vv. 68-69). The words could easily be explained as a Johannine theological invention: Peter gets the

message of eternal life; Peter speaks, and leads the Twelve by his strong faith—note the perfect tenses, καὶ ἡμεῖς πεπιστεύκαμεν καὶ ἐγνώκαμεν—and makes his Christological confession, ὅτι σὺ εἶ ὁ ἅγιος τοῦ θεοῦ. Yet, as in Matthew and Mark, the text ends by taking an ugly turn: “Did I not choose you the Twelve? And one of you is a devil!” (v. 70). As a Johannine theological invention, the final rebuke of the disciples functions as an anticlimax: if John invented this one, then he botched the job. But it works well as historical reporting; it compares to the “Satan-“ saying that immediately follows Peter’s confession in the first two Gospels: Peter has the words right, and Peter’s love and loyalty are welcome, but neither Peter nor the rest of the disciples understand Jesus well; they are all still attempting to force him through their agenda, and Judas will indeed betray him. While the text looks like a very independent Johannine theological treatment, in its own way its historical credentials are good. Rather than glorifying Peter or the Twelve at the climactic point of his messianic confession, John allows the climax to function as a rebuke, and another call to faith.

#### Conclusion: History, Then Theology, in the Bread of Life Discourse

It is a commonplace of biblical scholarship that the author of the Fourth Gospel writes not bald history, but theological history, though the proportions of history to theology are debated. This has been obvious to interpreters at least since Clement of Alexandria: “Last of all, John, noticing that the physical things had been set forth in the [other] Gospels, being urged by his companions and inspired by the Spirit, wrote a spiritual Gospel.”<sup>11</sup> The author of the Fourth Gospel self-consciously explains that he has told the story of Jesus selectively and pointedly: “Jesus did many other signs in the

presence of his disciples which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and so that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:30-31). The very language-choices of John’s Gospel are theologically freighted, so that scholars can point to characteristically Johannine theological terminology. On the view that this Gospel dates late in the first century, of course the writer’s language choices cannot be held to exacting standards of verbatim historical reporting. John adapts his presentation of the historical words and works of Jesus for theological purposes.

Once the historical setting of John 6 is understood, both the usefulness and the limitations of eucharistic readings of the discourse may be reevaluated. The thesis I have argued is nothing new: J.B. Lightfoot stated it clearly over a century ago, and any number of NT scholars have followed it up since then. But the current trend of cutting-edge Johannine scholarship seems to be moving away from interest in the historical setting of the Fourth Gospel toward literary-critical and theoretical approaches. This bypasses the historical meaning of the text in order to pursue other objectives. It is remarkable how closely, say, structuralist, reader-response, or other literary-critical analyses of John 6 can resemble the precritical *Sensus Plenior* exegesis of the Church. Crossan’s “Structuralist Analysis of John 6,” especially in view of his construct of Christian origins, is an amazing piece of virtual allegory. In a sense, both the precritical and the postcritical types of approach overlay their idea of the deep meaning, or the spiritual meaning, of the discourse onto the text. This applies even to a scholar of the stature of Rudolf Bultmann, whose amazingly fertile theological treatment of John is *a priori* ahistorical—which will come as no surprise to those who understand his

theological system. One is tempted to say, as does Jeremias, that the dividing line is the question of the incarnation, whether or not the scholar believes that “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” Bultmann believes that historical questions are irrelevant to faith; Crossan thinks that the body of Jesus was probably eaten by dogs and carrion birds. On the other hand, Culpepper believes in the empty tomb, and his new advances in literary analysis of the gospels can be very helpful, so the point here is not to resist all new critical methodologies. The creative impulse of cutting-edge scholarship no doubt fills a needful place, but so does the reverent and careful scholarship that begins by asking serious historical questions, even if they appear less imaginative. Perhaps I should point out that many interpretive fads have come and gone; those that live earn their life by taking the text—including the historical realities underlying the text—seriously.

### **ADDENDUM**

May I preach for a moment? Freed from its captivity to eucharistic interpretations, this discourse of the historical Jesus powerfully confronts its audiences, both ancient and modern, with our attempts to co-opt Jesus for our own purposes, to filter him through our own this-earthly agenda. Wanting something from God can be very different from wanting God himself; wanting bread from heaven can be very different from wanting nothing more than the Bread of Heaven. “I am the bread of life,” says Jesus; “your forefathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, so that if anyone eats of it he will not die” (6:48-50). “If you ask me, then, whether he is speaking of the Eucharist here, I should say, ‘No.’ If you ask me where I can learn the meaning of the Eucharist, I should say, ‘Nowhere more than

here’.” In the words of C.H. Dodd, the Bread of Life Discourse invites us to “union with Christ by mutual indwelling.” In their original setting the words of Jesus recorded in John 6 did not in any way address the Lord’s Supper; in another sense, perhaps no text in the NT more profoundly addresses the meaning of the Supper: for the words of Jesus invite us to feed ourselves daily upon the Bread of Heaven, the living bread; they invite us daily to draw our life from the life of God.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Here *John* stands for the author without prejudging the complicated question of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel. I consider the “Johannine Circle” hypothesis possible for the Fourth Gospel as we now have it.

<sup>2</sup> *Didache* 9.2,3; 10.2; Ignatius *Philadelphians* 4, *Smyrneans* 8.1; Justin *First Apology* 65-66.

<sup>3</sup> *Didache* 9.1,5; Ignatius *Philadelphians* 4, *Smyrneans* 8.1; cf. Ignatius *Ephesians* 13.1; Justin *First Apology* 65-66. See also the uses of the verb εὐχαριστέω as “to celebrate the Eucharist” in *Didache* 10.7, 14.1 and Ignatius *Smyrneans* 7.1. It should be noted that Ignatius also uses both the noun and the verb with their non-technical meanings of “thanksgiving” and “give thanks”: Ignatius *Ephesians* 13.1, 21.1.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 24:3; I Cor. 14:16; II Cor. 4:15, 9:11,12; Eph. 5:4; Phil. 4:6; Col. 2:7, 4:2; I Thess. 3:9; II Tim. 2:1, 4:3,4; Rev. 4:9, 7:12.

<sup>5</sup> Byzantine texts of Mt. 26:26 (A K W Γ Δ *f*<sup>1.13</sup> 28. 565. 1010. 1241 *pm syr*<sup>h</sup>) often substitute εὐχαριστήσας for εὐλογήσας, but the reading is assimilationist and εὐλογίας is far better attested (P<sup>45</sup> & B C D L Z Θ 074. 0160. 33. 700. 892 *pm syr*<sup>s.p.hmg co</sup>). The tendency in the textual tradition would always work toward the sacramentalist reading, so that it is easy to account for an original εὐλογίας becoming εὐχαριστίας, but difficult to explain going the opposite direction.

<sup>6</sup> Here, and throughout the paper, the English translations are my own. No doubt they are influenced by the various English translations I have used—KJV, ASV, RSV, NIV—but in every case I have done a fresh rendering from the Greek text.

<sup>7</sup> The lack of augments in the aorist indicatives of both terms is a puzzle, but with the exception of ηὐχαρίστησαν in Rom. 1:21, most modern texts of the Greek Testament, including Westcott-Hort, Souter, Nestle-Aland and UBS, print these without augments. Is this a mistake influenced by assimilation to the participial form that is overly-familiar from the eucharistic formula?

<sup>8</sup> Omitted by D 091 *it*<sup>a,d,e</sup> *sy*<sup>c,s</sup> *arm geo*<sup>1</sup>; included in most major MSS of all text-types: P<sup>75</sup> & A B L W Δ Θ Ψ 0141 (*f*<sup>1</sup> 205 τοῦ κυρίου εὐχαριστήσαντος) *f*<sup>13</sup> 28 33 157 180 565 579 597 700 892 1006 1010 1071 1241 1243 1292 1342 1424 1505 *Byz* [E F G H N ] *Lect* (*it*<sup>b, f, ff2, j, l, q, r1</sup> *quem benedixerat/-xit Dominus*) *vg* (*it*<sup>(aur), c</sup> *vg*<sup>mss</sup> Augustine *gratias agentes Domino*) *syr*<sup>h, pal</sup> (*eth*) *slav* Didymus<sup>lem</sup> Cyril<sup>lem</sup> // εὐχαριστήσαντος τοῦ Ἰησοῦ *l* 672 *l* 950 *syr*<sup>p, hmg</sup> *cop*<sup>pbo</sup>. On the strong probability of the authenticity of

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the reading, see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1978), 212.

<sup>9</sup> Josephus *Antiquities* 17.285 (Loeb); cf. *Antiquities* 18.53 and Acts 5:37; Josephus *Jewish War* 258-59, 2. 261-263 and Acts 21:38; Josephus *Jewish War* 6.312-15; Tacitus *Histories* 5.13; Suetonius *Life of Vespasian* 4. The whole history of Josephus' *Jewish War* is driven by Jewish revolutionary messianism, which continued down to the Bar Cochba rebellion of AD 132-35.

<sup>10</sup> Cited from R. Joseph Hoffmann, ed. and trans., *Porphyry's Against the Christians* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), 49-50; cf. Macarius *Apocriticus* 3.8.12, from which Hoffmann has reconstructed his text of Porphyry.

<sup>11</sup> As reported by Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14; cited from Daniel J. Theron, *Evidence of Tradition* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1957), 45.