

AN APPROPRIATE COMMUNION TEXT? THE BREAD OF LIFE DISCOURSE OF JOHN 6 WITHIN ITS HISTORICAL SETTING

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Abstract: In this paper I seek to place John 6 within its historical to consider if and how the text can be applied in the communion service of the church. [Edited from a paper by Russ Dudley]

Jesus' "Bread of Life" discourse in John 6 has multiple historical dimensions and has fed many theological discussions. My goal is to inform those who share thoughts at the Lord's Table, providing an accessible but brief background study that I hope will be helpful in determining how to apply the text appropriately and if and how it can inform communion meditations.

The historical context is the feeding of the 5000, after which (according to John 6) a large number of Jews who were anticipating the coming of the Messiah identify Jesus as The Prophet and try to take him by force to make him king. In the context of John's Gospel, one may wonder why the content of this teaching from Jesus near the climax of his ministry caused many of his followers to reject him and no longer follow. The theological question concerns the relationship of this text to the Lord's Supper. Over the centuries, the church has seen the parallel: "eat my flesh and drink my blood" certainly seems to suggest the bread and wine of the Supper.

Although the Supper seems to be reflected in the John 6 discourse, a careful study of the text and context shows that such an understanding of the text likely surpasses its basic, original meaning when understood in the historical setting. While we recognize Johannine words and concepts, the discourse is clearly Jesus' response to the militant messianic goals of the crowd. Is Jesus' response in this historical setting referring to the Supper? Does Jesus seek to correct messianic misunderstandings by setting forth Lord's Supper theology? What is the message of this discourse?

The wording that grabs our attention distracts us from the historical context. What happens if we try to interpret John 6 in its historical setting? First, considering the context historically the 5000 were not taking the Lord's Supper. They were not Christians, and Jesus had not yet instituted the Supper. At best, this is foreshadowing. Jesus' 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. This suggests that something else is here.

Second, two factors furnish historical keys: the revolutionary messianism that was prevalent among Jews in the first century, and the common Jewish expectation that The Prophet would restore the gift of manna. The discourse gleams in the light of first century Jewish messianic expectations. J. B. Lightfoot notes, "The key to the understanding of the whole situation is an acquaintance with the national expectation of the greater Moses." John's account of the Feeding of the 5000 says 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."

Third, Josephus' many descriptions of messianic uprisings show that Judea was filled with messianic claims. Anyone could make himself king as the head of a band of rebels, then cause the destruction of the community while causing little trouble to the Romans. The greatest disaster was upon the Jewish people themselves. If John had not added the note regarding the revolutionary intentions of the crowd, this dynamic could still be inferred historically from the setting of the Synoptic accounts of the Feeding.

Fourth, the messianic atmosphere of Galilee in the time of Jesus is well-known. Less well-known is that the common Jewish expectation of the day held that, like Moses, The Prophet—the New Moses—would restore the gift of manna. 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 the popular first century Jewish expectation of the New Moses made him into a glorified militaristic national deliverer. This forced Jesus to dis-identify himself not from the first Moses, but from the crowds' this-earthly agenda for the New Moses. In light of the New Moses expectation 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.

The manna traditions are mostly rabbinic, and thus post-Christian, 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 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. Other rabbinic texts reflect the same expectation of the return of the manna, though most are considerably later than the NT period.

What happens if we read the Bread of Life discourse as history? Jesus is confronting and judging ancient Jewish militaristic messianism, not promising the coming of the Lord's Supper with its related blessings. Can the entire discourse be explained against this historical background?

1. *Manna, Moses and The Prophet.* 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. Finding Jesus in the synagogue, they ask him a leading question: "Rabbi, how did you get here?" (v. 25) Jesus' 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."

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 a this-worldly messianism the 5000 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. That is not communicated overtly in the passage. There is an isolated statement with little context: 'Our fathers did eat manna in the wilderness.' The inference is unexpressed; but the expectation which explains all (left to be inferred) would be mentally supplied by men brought up among the ideas of the time. We have to get to it with the aid of criticism and research. When we have grasped it we unlock the meaning of the whole chapter.

Jesus 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, beyond the manna in the wilderness, to Jesus, the true Bread of Heaven. They want bread from heaven: because they have a this-earthly materialistic agenda for the kingdom of God on earth. 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 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)

It seems fair to hear Exodus 3 in John’s “I AM” sayings. “Before Abraham was, I AM” (8:58) followed by “The Jews therefore took up stones to stone him” (8:59), is a strong argument for the case. 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, 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,” (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” (v. 41), though that is not a direct quotation from Jesus, but is put together from his words reported in 6:31, 32, 33, 35. To the Jewish messianists, Jesus says that as the true Messiah he has far more 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 John loads the word *signs* 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 when they see the sign of the loaves and fishes they identify him as The Prophet and attempt to make him their messianic king (vv. 14-15).

John treats this as ironic: they see the signs but do not pursue—nor desire—their meaning. Hence the confrontational nature of Jesus’ first words to the crowd that pursues him to the synagogue in Capernaum: “I am solemnly telling you, you seek me not because you saw signs, 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 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 (ch. 5). 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 focuses blindness versus sight, light versus darkness, belief versus disbelief. The dynamic is spiritual. (Consider the Jews in 2:19-22; Nicodemus in 3:3-12; the Twelve in

4:31-38; the Jewish leaders in 9:40-41). John 6 contains 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:

The key lies in the historical setting. Jesus speaks to 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). The 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.” 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 (vv. 27, 40, 54, 68); Jesus is the Bread of Life, the true bread coming down from heaven and giving life to the world, living bread (vv. 31,33,35,48,51); Jesus has the words of eternal life (v. 68); he speaks the words of the living Father and he gets his life from the Father (v. 57); the person who eats the living bread will live forever (vv. 51,57,58); it is the Spirit that makes alive (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 Greek verb used four times in vv. 54-58 is puzzling. It is used as a synonym for eat, 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. The text 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. Can the words that John places on the lips of Jesus be explained historically? If we understand them against their historical setting, they are another parable, another dark saying of the historical Jesus. These words are intentionally obscure, intentionally harsh, and 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 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 a life of self-sacrifice.

Scandalized, the crowds leave him for good, precisely as 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. He finds it necessary to work with the few rather than the many: perhaps the few will listen. 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 with the parables, Jesus intends 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)

6. "Will you also go away?" The final scene is Jesus' exchange with Peter, which functions as the Johannine equivalent of Peter's confession. 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) Peter has the words right, 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. 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

Once the historical setting of John 6 is understood, both the usefulness and the limitations of applying the text to the Lord's Supper may be evaluated. What I have shared (edited from Dudley) is nothing new. Many New Testament scholars have seen and written about the same thing. However, in the church, for whatever reason, we have bypassed the historical meaning of this particular text in favor of an interpretation the text would hardly suggest were it not for the wording.

May I preach? Freed from Lord's Supper applications, this discourse of Jesus powerfully confronts its audiences, both ancient and modern, with our attempts to coopt Jesus for our own purposes, to filter him through our own 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.

If you ask me, then, whether he is speaking of the Lord's Supper here, I should say, 'No.' If you ask me where I can learn the meaning of the Supper, I should say, 'Nowhere more than here'." C.H. Dodd says it well: 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 on the Bread of Heaven, the living bread. They invite us to draw our daily life from the life of God.

That brings me to a final concern. Reading John 6 with Lord's Supper eyes may tend to limit the challenge to Sunday worship around the Table. That is not the meaning of John 6. Let us not limit our feeding to a weekly Supper in a weekly assembly!