

# JESUS, THE TRUE BREAD FROM HEAVEN: INTERPRETING JOHN 6:25-51

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## **Introduction**

One who reads the Gospel of John for the first time marvels not only about the high Christology, or even a theology that is not easily understood, present right in the introductory verses. Then it is replete with elements that are Jewish, jargon to most people who do not have much background on the Old Testament. This is despite the fact that it almost sounds anti-Semitic in naming the adversaries of Jesus as “the Jews.” Naturally, this group is taken more as “Jewish authorities.”

However, what interests us more are those that form part of the Jewish elements or Jewish character of the Gospel. There are many points in the Johannine Gospel that name the Jewish festivities and along with them the different technical terms of this religion. The ministry of Jesus revolves around these feasts.

The purpose of this paper is to look at Jesus in the context of this Jewish culture of celebrations and see his words and actions in the Gospel passage that has as its backdrop a particular Jewish feast. How does Jesus fare against this background? What does he say and do in a particular given context? How does he blend with the Jewish traditions? What new thing has he to say?

We have narrowed down our study to Jn 6:25-51, and with a careful exegesis of the text, we will be able to answer our main questions. We will go through an outline of the whole Gospel in order to find the place of our text. Then we look at chapter 6 and see its structure, so that we find further a narrower context. Then we zero in on the structure of the chosen text and make its outline the division that we will use for the interpretation. We then make our observations and conclusions at the end.

*John 6:25-51 in the Gospel of John*

For a better understanding of the chosen passage I would like to situate it within the whole of the Gospel of John. I have made the following outline (a four-part outline that is a common consensus among scholars):

- I. Prologue: The Word Made Flesh (1:1-18)
- II. The Public Ministry of Jesus (1:19-12:50)
  - A. Beginnings: The Incipient Ministry (1:19-51)
  - B. Cana to Cana: From First Sign to Second Sign (2:1-4:54)
  - C. Book of Feasts: Jesus and the Jewish Calendar (5:1-12:50)
- III. From Last Supper to Glory (13:1-20:31)
  - A. The Formation of the Disciples: The Last Discourse (13:1-17:26)
  - B. Passion, Death and Resurrection (18:1-20:31)
- IV. Epilogue (21:1-25)

The pericope, Jn 6:25-51, apparently belongs to the latter part of the public ministry of Jesus, if we are to see the Cana to Cana events as the first part (after “Beginnings,” the introductory part of the ministry) of the public ministry of Jesus. However, it belongs to the first parts of the whole section of the Book of Feasts.

The Book of Feasts (which I have subtitled as “Jesus and the Jewish Calendar”) forms a lengthy section within the Gospel. It spans eight chapters (John 5-12). We find Jesus performing five more signs, after the first two that happened in Cana (2:1-4:54). We find Jesus speaking and acting in the context of different Jewish festivals: the Sabbath, the Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Feast of the Dedication.

The events in John 6 happen around the time of the celebration of the Jewish Passover (6:4). In this particular situation he is ministering in Galilee. He crossed the Sea of Galilee and was followed by a large crowd. He feeds the huge crowd from the five barley loaves and two fish. The disciples

went back to Capernaum by boat but were troubled by strong winds. They reach their destination after encountering Jesus walking on the water. In the synagogue at Capernaum Jesus gives a discourse, on him being the Bread of Life. I have divided John 6 in the following manner:

- I. The Loaves (1-15)
- II. The Lake (16-24)
- III. The Bread of Life (25-51)**
- IV. Flesh and Blood (52-59)
- V. The Response (60-71)

The discourse on the Bread of Life happens after two signs: the multiplication of the loaves and the walking on the water. The passage that we are interpreting forms the first part of that discourse. The chapter ends with the response of the Jews to what Jesus says in this section.

*The Structure of John 6:25-51*

Central to John 6, at least based on the outline I have proposed and on the number of the verses of the chapter, is 6:25-51. This whole section can be divided in the following manner:

- I. Food that endures for eternal life (25-27)
- II. God's work: that you believe in him whom he has sent (28-29)
- III. The bread from heaven giving life to the world (30-33)
- IV. Jesus as the bread of life (34-40)
- V. Jesus' flesh for eternal life (41-50)

To a certain extent, this is also the structure proposed by Francis J. Moloney in dealing with these verses: the "interventions from the crowd" giving shape to the rhythm of question and answer in the discourse.<sup>1</sup> He extends the passage

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<sup>1</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 207-208.

until verse 59. On my part, I have split verses 25-29 further to see the actual exchange of lines between Jesus and the crowd.

### *Interpretation of the Text*

**The Setting (25a)** The Bread of Life discourse opens with a scenario that links it with the preceding events. The day before, the crowd saw the sign that Jesus did: the multiplication of the loaves. A series of movements follow that event: Jesus withdraws to the mountain by himself, the disciples (when evening came) cross the lake towards Capernaum, Jesus walks on the water and joins the disciples who reach their destination, the crowd (the next day) looks for Jesus in Capernaum. In this particular scene that opens to the discourse, the people have found him on the other side of the lake, and hence, the situation of the whole discourse is introduced: *καὶ εὐρόντες αὐτὸν πέραν τῆς θαλάσσης*. The time setting that we see in verse 22 (the next day, that is, the day after the miracle of the loaves) remains; the place setting is Capernaum, on the other side of the Lake. Further on we see that the discourse took place in the synagogue in Capernaum (6:59).

**Rabbi, when did you come here? (25b-27)** The crowd asks: *Ῥαββί, πότε ὧδε γέγονας;* (v. 25). They refer to Jesus as “Rabbi.” This is the same title used by the two disciples of John when they asked Jesus where he lived (1:38). It was also employed by Nathanael (1:49), Nicodemus (3:2) and the disciples (4:31, 9:2; 11:8) in addressing Jesus. It is not uniquely used for Jesus though, in John’s gospel. At least once it is applied to John (the Baptizer) by his disciples (see 3:26). Clearly, it is a title of respect in a master-disciple relationship, even as we say that in the case of Nathanael at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, it is his disposition to be under the wings of this teacher; in the case of Nicodemus, his openness to listen and learn from Jesus, albeit in the night; in this case of the crowd at Capernaum, the willingness to listen to this teacher (all the more so that the place setting is the synagogue).

The question “When did you come here?” (πότε ὧδε γέγονας;), or more literally, “When have you been here?” is said to be a cross between “When did you get here?” and “How long have you been here?” Certain scholars like Brown have surmised that this could have a deeper theological meaning, as probing into the origins of Jesus, which seems a proper introduction to the discourse about him being the “bread from heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus introduces his response with the revelatory words Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν – “in all truth I tell you.” This is the same situation at the beginning of the gospel when he tells his disciples that they will see the heavens open and the angels of God ascending and descending over the Son of man (1:51). He uses the expression thrice in his conversation with Nicodemus, once after every question posed by the latter (3:3,5,11). With the expression Jesus begins his discourse after the cure of the sick man at Bethesda (5:19). In this particular discourse, in the chosen verses, we find the revelatory expression three times (vv. 26, 32 and 47). We also find this when Jesus reaffirms this in affirming the possession of eternal life in eating his flesh and drinking his blood (6:53). Three times too he says it when he spoke to the Jews about his origin, culminating with the absolute “I am” (see 8:34, 51 and 58). Then there are other passages where we find Jesus using this expression like the discourse on the good shepherd (10:1,7); the declaration that the hour has come (12:23); his explanation of the washing of the feet (13:16) and relationship with him (13:20); his prediction of Peter’s disowning him (13:38); his affirmation that whoever believes will perform deeds like his own (14:12); his announcement of his going and coming again (16:20,23). In the epilogue, Jesus uses these revelatory words as he predicts the disposition of Peter at his martyrdom (21:18). Common to all these is the solemnity of the pronouncements when he introduces them with Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν.

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible vol. 1. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 261, 263.

Even with this introduction, Jesus does not answer the question of the crowd and instead reads into their intention: that they are looking for him not because they saw “signs” (σημεῖα) but because they ate their fill of the loaves. This topic about signs is developed throughout the first parts of the Fourth Gospel. Jesus did many signs (see 20:30) and many came to believe through them. Seven signs, are however, given importance: the first sign of turning water to wine at Cana (2:1-11), the cure of the royal official’s son (4:46-54), the cure of a sick man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-15), the miracle of the loaves (6:1-15), walking on the water (6:16-21), cure of the man born blind (9:1-41) and the raising of Lazarus (11:1-44). More often than not, there is a movement on the part of those who see signs: from non-belief to belief. The classic example is the disposition of the disciples of Jesus after the first sign at Cana (2:11). However, in the Gospel of John, faith on account of signs only is not the perfect kind of faith.

Jesus tells the crowd then not to work for “food that perishes” (τὴν βρῶσιν τὴν ἀπολλυμένην) but for “food that endures for eternal life” (τὴν βρῶσιν τὴν μένουσαν εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον). The term βρῶσιν is found only in one other part of the Gospel: at the Samaritan town when he tells his disciples that he has food to eat that they do not know about (4:32). Otherwise, another form for “food” is used: βρῶμα, or other expressions connected with eating. There is contrast provided here for food that perishes, against that which endures for eternal life – a theme that dominates the whole of the Gospel of John. This “food that perishes” is reminiscent of the “bread from heaven” (Ex 16:4), “the bread that the Lord has given” (Ex 16:15) to the Israelites in the time of Moses. It was food that perished if stored for the next day (see Ex 16:20).

This food will be given by the “*Son of man*” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, 6:27). This is an expression that appears at least eleven times in the Gospel of John, with glorification as an end or consequence for this Son of man (12:23, 13:31). This Son of

man, whose flesh gives life (6:53), has been granted the power to judge (5:27), has come down from heaven (3:13) and will ascend to where he was before (6:62), will be lifted up (3:14, 8:28; 12:24), is the subject of angels ascending and descending (1:51).

It is on this Son of man “that God the Father has set his seal” (6:27). The evangelist uses the word ἐσφράγισεν, which is from σφραγίζω, meaning “to seal; seal up; mark (with a seal).”<sup>3</sup> This also denotes “to attest” or “to certify.” God attests to the words and deeds of the Son of man. In another part, the same verb is used: anyone who accepts “the testimony [of him who comes from above] is attesting that God is true” (3:33).

*What must we do to perform the works of God? (28-29)*

The words about working for food that endures for eternal life prompt the crowd to ask: “What must we do to perform the works of God?” (6:28). “Works of God” (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ) as plural appears twice in John, the other being in Jn 9:3. The noun may be used by an author in the singular form (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ) without a clear shift in meaning, as in the response of Jesus: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” At other times, the verb form of “work” is used. In Johannine literature, the works of God are seen in the work of Jesus, the one who reveals Him. To believe in the one whom God sends is itself a work of God.<sup>4</sup> This is an important statement for in it is included the most prominent theme in John: πιστεύω (“to believe”). Now, even if there is not a clear shift in meaning from ἔργα to ἔργον, Jesus puts emphasis into something important: it is not a set of works that one does which is important, but a single work – to believe in the one sent by God.

*What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? (30-33)* The crowd now demands a sign. They follow this up with “What work are you performing? Our

<sup>3</sup> A Concise Dictionary of New Testament Greek, 2003, s.v. “σφραγίζω,” 153.

<sup>4</sup> The Anchor Bible Dictionary vol. VI, 1992, s.v. “Works of God,” 972.

ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" This may be astounding, that the Jews are asking for a sign. Did they not just the previous day witness a sign that Jesus performed? Jesus does not argue with them regarding this point, because he himself provides the answer in the opening scene: "you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (v.26).

Jesus takes in point the reference to the manna eaten by their ancestors. It is indeed a well know tradition, culled from the Torah: the Israelites receiving "bread from heaven" (Ex 16:4). The text from the Psalms is "he rained down manna to feed them" (Ps 78:24). The Israelites were grumbling against God and Moses for leading them out of Egypt to suffer thirst and hunger. It is baffling because they have just celebrated victory from slavery, with God giving them this gift. The Lord heard the cry of the Israelites and gave them water (Ex 15:22-27) and sent them food – meat (the quails) and bread (manna). The manna is "bread from heaven" or "the bread that the Lord has given" (Ex 16:15).

It was happening all over again. The crowd was grumbling for a sign after having experienced liberation from hunger. Now Jesus responds by clarifying to them – in fact using once again the revelatory Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν – that it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven, but it was his Father who did, adding to τὸν ἄρτον ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ the adjective τὸν ἀληθινόν ("true"). Now he does not merely say "the bread that the Lord has given," but "the bread of God" (ἄρτος τοῦ θεοῦ, 6:33). And Jesus says that this bread of God comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

*Sir, give us this bread always. (34-40)* Now comes the petition. They want this bread because it is different. It is not anymore mere "bread from heaven" but it is "true bread from heaven." It is not just "bread that the Lord has given," but "the bread of God." Add to that the caption "gives life to the world."

Jesus responds to this request by saying: "I am the bread of life" (Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς). He identifies himself to be the bread to which he was referring: true, of God, giving life. He tells the crowd that whoever comes to him will never be hungry and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty. The motif of thirst appears in several passages in John's Gospel: in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (4:13-15), in his cry on the great day of the festival of shelters: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me" (7:37) and in his cry on the cross (19:28). That of "hunger," at least for the word πεινάω, on the other hand, appears only once in John although the scene of the multitude before the miracle of the loaves plus the effect on the people who were fed is enough to conclude that there was hunger on the part of the crowd. However, the entire statement "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" indeed smacks of Prov 9:5: "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed." Bread is identified with wisdom.

Jesus continues to tell the crowd that they indeed have seen him but do not believe. It is the Father who is the central point of reference for all: everything that the Father gives Jesus will come to him and these he will not drive away. Here Jesus is explicit about his origin: he has come down from heaven – not to do his own will, but the will of him who has sent him. His will is that Jesus loses nothing of what was given to him. This will later be referred to in the prayer of Jesus (17:12) and in his arrest (18:9). On the last day, Jesus will raise up what was given to him. He provides a parallel, or better yet, a repetition: "This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." This is a clear reechoing of 3:16. That love for the world comprises the will of the Father. The end of it all is eternal life, a raising of those who have fallen.

*Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say "I have come down*

*from heaven? (41-51)* ὁ ὄχλος (“the crowd”) is now changed into οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι (“the Jews”), which of course, refers to the Jewish authorities. They begin complaining about Jesus because of his claim that he is the bread from heaven which they were asking for. This origin is something they cannot accept because they know his relatives. How can this be reconciled with his claim that he has “come down from heaven?”

Jesus asks them to stop complaining and reiterates ideas from his previous statements: “No one comes to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.” He quotes Isaiah who said: “All your children shall be taught by the Lord” (Is 54:13). He explains this further through snippets of truth: those who have heard and learned from the Father come to Jesus; the one who is from God has seen the Father. He introduces another revelatory statement using the Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν, perhaps the *coup de grace* in this whole section: “I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (47-51).

Jesus repeats certain expressions and ideas: that he is the bread of life (the bread that gives life), that the manna in the wilderness did not preserve the life of their ancestors, that the bread (of life) comes from heaven, and that whoever eats it will not die but live forever. There is a contrast now between the “bread from heaven” that they have always known and this new “bread of heaven.”

However, the clincher comes in the form of a new element within the discourse, one that is developed in the next section that comes (which is not part of this interpretation) is that this bread that Jesus gives is his “flesh” (ἡ σὰρξ). σὰρξ is a popular concept in the New Testament and appears most frequently in the Pauline letters. Among the gospels, it is most frequent

in the gospel of John, with twelve occurrences. In several passages, it connotes what is human, or proper of humanity (1:13, 3:6, 8:15, 17:2). In one instance it is contrasted to spirit (6:63). The famous passage of the incarnation goes: *Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν*. Word became flesh. However, half of the occurrences of *σὰρξ* are concentrated in the bread of life discourse where Jesus speaks of his flesh as food and his blood as drink.

The Jews question the assertions of Jesus for they fail to understand because they do not believe. Or is it that they fail to believe because they do not understand? At the end of the day, they did not understand because they did not believe. They did not believe because in the first place, they did not see the sign.

### **Conclusion: Jesus the Bread from Heaven**

The Passover motif of John 6 does not make a lot of impact at first. The setting is far from Jerusalem, the center of the celebrations. Then it gradually merges with the Passover traditions of Israel.

There is a striking resemblance between what happened in the celebration of the first Passover and this particular episode of the Gospel. This resemblance is even better extended to the two persons: Moses and Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

As we entered the scenario of John 6 (which we do not interpret fully in this work), we see Jesus giving bread to the people. Moses fed the people with the manna from heaven. The people subsequently do not appreciate this sign because they were interested only in having their fill. The Israelites a short while after the Exodus failed to see the grandeur of the freedom they have experienced. We read of murmurings from

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<sup>5</sup> Some of these comparisons may be found in Gale A. Yee, *Jewish Feasts and the Gospel of John* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1989). However, I have developed many of these ideas from mere analysis of the text and cross-references.

both the Israelites at the time of Moses and the crowd at the time of Jesus.

Moses interceded that God may give bread (manna). Jesus says that it is his Father who gives the bread from heaven. The manna at the time of Moses perishes; the bread of life does not. Those who ate manna died; those who ate the bread of life will live forever. Furthermore, the invitation of Jesus to come eat and drink comes close to the invitation to a banquet in the book of Proverbs. Jesus goes beyond the Exodus experience and personifies wisdom.

There is an even bigger claim here. In order to emphasize what Jesus has brought to Jewish religious traditions, let us take one expression that is used in both Exodus and John: "the bread from heaven." In Exodus, it refers to manna. In John it refers to Jesus, "the true bread from heaven."

The whole passage happens in the context of the Passover or Exodus which is filled with all these elements. The coming of Jesus is a new Exodus, a new Passover because he is the new Moses and the new bread from heaven. Elements from other passages and even from other chapters would bring this logical conclusion further. Yet this passage is sufficient to make the conclusion that indeed, Jesus and his words and actions can stand parallel to the religious traditions of Israel. In fact, he perfects them, ameliorating them. He brings them to fulfillment.