

Example of a Textual Analysis (but without footnotes): John 6

John 6 opens with the feeding of the multitude in Galilee (6:14), set within the context of the Jewish feast of Passover when the gift of the manna is celebrated (6:4). This is one of the few places in John's Gospel where the narrative runs closely to that of the Synoptic Gospels: the feeding miracle, as in Mark (cf. 6:30-44; 8:1-10), is followed by the narrative about Jesus walking on water (cf. 6:45-52). In the Johannine discourse itself, in which the image of bread becomes central, there are a few remote links with Mark 8:14-21 (see 8:17: 'Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?'), while further agreements with the Markan order include a request for a sign (John 6:25-34; Mark 8:11-13), and the confession of Peter towards the end of the chapter (John 6:60-69; Mark 8:27-30). The nature of the relationship between John 6 and Mark 6 (and 8) continues to be debated: there have been recent attempts to demonstrate that John has deliberately brought together into a coherent whole what is scattered throughout Mark 6-8, although it is more likely, given that they rarely bear close verbal resemblance to each other over more than a handful of words, that they are they drawn from a common tradition.

The sign itself functions in an analogous role to the central image of the discourse. Jesus challenges those who are witnesses to the feeding of the multitude to move from a physical to a spiritual understanding of his words and deeds. In the long and complex discourse that follows (6:25-59), which is actually a series of brief discourses, we encounter the first of the Johannine 'I am' or *egô eimi* statements accompanied by a metaphor (6:35, 48, 51). Jesus is the true bread from heaven, the one who offers life to the world through his descent from heaven (see 6:33, 38) and, as is made clear towards the end of the discourse, through his death (6:51). The feeding sign and the discourse about bread therefore cohere in one basic symbol - eating the bread of life. For believers, life is to be found only in 'feeding' on him.

The Feeding of the Crowd (6:1-15)

The sign centres on the issue of faith. The scene is set with the coming of the crowd who follow and 'move towards' Jesus (6:2, 5), attracted to him because of 'the signs that he was doing for the sick' (6:2). This is a typically Johannine explanation, reminiscent of 2:23-25 and the reason for Nicodemus' approach in 3:2 (cf. 4:46-53; 5:1-9). The disciples are already grouped with Jesus, but they are subjected to a testing of faith: Jesus, knowing what he will do (cf. 12:30), presents Philip with the problem of how to feed the approaching crowd. In the Synoptic Gospels it is the disciples who express concern about

the crowds. Philip and Andrew respond in purely natural terms, referring to the financial burden of feeding such a large crowd (6:7, 8-9). The sign will take on symbolic value in the discourse itself, but one aspect in particular is already prefigured in the feeding sign: it is Jesus himself rather than his disciples who feeds the crowds (6:11: 'Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated'; cf. Mark 6:41; 8:6). Only in John, moreover, does Jesus command the disciples to gather up the leftover fragments, so that nothing may be lost or perished (verse 12; cf. 6:39; 18:9). This recalls the Exodus, when the people would gather the manna each day and eat it until they had their fill (see Exod. 16:8, 12, 16; cf. John 6:12 - when they were filled). However, in the wilderness Moses commanded that the manna should not be stored for the next day because it perished (Exod. 16:19-21). But the bread given by Jesus will not perish - the disciples are to preserve the gift offered by Jesus. This is food that only Jesus can give and it is a feeding that endures.

John's description of the crowd's response to the feeding is distinctive; they show a basic understanding of him as the prophet who is coming into the world (6:14; cf. 4:19, 44), probably the prophet like Moses of Deut. 18:15, 18-19. It is therefore neither full misunderstanding nor full understanding. Similarly their desire to crown him king involves some insight but only partial understanding. They have used the right categories (note emphasis on kingship in John 18-19), but the verb 'to snatch' suggests force. According to Josephus' accounts, there were in first-century Palestine prophets who gained a large following in the desert by promising signs like Moses (*War* 2:261-263; *Ant.* 20.169-171). Interpreting Jesus' miraculous activity along these lines can account for Jesus' withdrawal to the mountain by himself.

Jesus Walks on the Water (6:16-21)

As in Mark's Gospel, John follows the account of the feeding of the five thousand with a briefer narrative about Jesus walking on the sea. The status of this scene as a 'sign' is sometimes doubted because Jesus' self-manifestation is restricted to the disciples. This should not, however, detract from the significance attached by John to this event as a bridge, both geographically and christologically, to the discourse that follows. This narrative, for example, graphically heightens the motif of initial separation from Jesus; having already noted the late timing of the disciples' crossing (it was evening), John then adds the theologically motivated remark that it was 'dark' and that Jesus had not yet come to them (verse 17) to anticipate the imminent drawing near of Jesus. The epiphanic character of Jesus' act of walking on the sea (cf. Job 9:8 LXX; Ps. 76:17-20 LXX) centres on his revelatory declaration, 'Do not fear, *egô eimi*', an expression which, in its bipartite

form, features prominently as Jesus' divine claim in John's Gospel (8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:4-8). In the prophecies of Isaiah in particular this declaration (*ani hû'*) is linked to Yahweh's promise that he will deliver his people in a way reminiscent of the Exodus: 'When you pass through the waters I will be with you' (43:2; 51:10). It serves as an assurance of God's personal presence with his people. He will 'make a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters' (43:16) in order to guide them to their destined land.

What is distinctive about the Johannine narrative is that it takes the form of a sea-crossing rather than a sea-walking account, as shown by the outcome of Jesus' appearance to the disciples. The motif of stilling the storm is absent from the Johannine account (Mark 6:53; Matt. 14:34), but it does emphasize the disciples' sudden arrival on the other side (6:21): 'Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going'. It is as a result of Jesus' word and his presence with the disciples that they are delivered to safety; he walks on the sea and creates a way for the disciples to reach the other side. Moreover, it is stated that the arrival on the land occurs immediately after the disciples express their desire to 'receive' Jesus into the boat (*labein*), a term frequently used in this Gospel to convey a response of faith (cf. 1:12; 5:43; 13:20), and one which stands in stark contrast to the crowd's desire to take Jesus by force to make him king (6:15). This brief account thus illustrates not only the crossing across the sea, but a movement towards faith and understanding - a theme taken up in the discourse that now follows.

Discourse on the Bread of Life (6:22-59)

The crowds 'seek' Jesus (6:24; a term used elsewhere in John for the first movement towards discipleship), but Jesus, in 6:26-31, challenges them to a new understanding of why they are seeking him. This leads to a long discourse about the bread they have eaten and their perception of the feeding; they seek him because they have eaten their fill of the loaves (the food that perishes; cf. 6:12) and, as a consequence, they seek another sign to prove his miracle-working credentials. This demonstrates that the feeding is nothing more than a miracle for them; they have not understood that the feeding 'signifies' Jesus' role as the bringer of salvation, the food that endures for eternal life (6:27; cf. 6:40, 56). Jesus' reference to the nourishment that leads to life also needs to be considered in the light of the synagogue context of this discourse (6:59), since in Jewish tradition it was the Law that provided life for those who lived by it (see Sir. 17:11: 'he allotted to them the law of life'; 45:5: 'the law of life and knowledge'). While Jesus claims that it is the Son of Man who provides life-giving nourishment, the crowd seem to overlook this claim by asking how they may have direct access to 'the works of God' (6:28), traditionally understood

with reference to the Law. John redefines the term 'work' as faith in him, the one 'work' that they are unwilling to do (cf. 6:41, 52, 66)

Verse 31 introduces the theme of the manna. The crowds appeal to their own religious traditions and identify themselves with 'their ancestors': 'Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness'. Of course this identification is later ironically reinforced, when Jesus states that their ancestors ate the manna and died (6:49). The crowds continue to try to place Jesus within a Moses model, expecting him to provide them with bread from heaven on a regular basis. For this purpose they quote Scripture: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat', citing a text which they invite Jesus to fulfil. The quotation occurs nowhere precisely in this form. There are various possibilities, including Exod. 16:4, 15; Ps. 78:24 (77:24 LXX); Neh. 9:15; Wisdom 16:20, although in all likelihood it is a combination of the Exodus and Psalm passages. While Ps. 77:24 LXX has 'bread of heaven' (*arton ouranou*), John 6:31 has 'bread from heaven' (*arton ek tou ouranou*) as does Exod 16:4 with reference to manna. This is a necessary feature to ensure that the scriptural passage contains a reference to Jesus as the Son of Man who comes down from heaven (*ek* here denotes origin). Conflations of this kind were often undertaken in Jewish and early Christian exegesis and are attested elsewhere in John (e.g. 19:36).

In a particularly influential study of the discourse that follows, Peder Borgen (*Bread from Heaven*) has proposed that the discussion becomes an extended midrashic exegesis upon the scriptural passage quoted by the crowds. Borgen proposes that the discourse interprets the text in 6:31 by following a homiletical form (= sermon) widely attested in later rabbinic texts (although the broad pattern is used by Philo, *Leg all.* iii.162-168; *Mut.* 253-263): the purpose of 6:32-48 is to draw out the meaning of the first part of the quotation ('He gave them bread from heaven', drawn from Exod. 16:14) by breaking it up and substituting new words for those that appear in the text, whereas 6:49-58 comments on the word 'to eat' in the quotation. There is no doubt that the discourse does hinge on redefining the crowds' understanding of eating bread from heaven, although it is open to question whether John 6 is adhering closely to a fixed homiletical pattern, particularly as the proponent of the manna motif in the discourse is not Jesus, but the unbelieving crowds who do so to bolster their own appeal. Jesus, in fact, proceeds to oppose their interpretation of the scriptural text. The suggestion that a fixed pattern is being followed also disregards the narrative context of the discourse, whose various elements are important indicators of transformation as the discourse develops. In other words, it is not simply intended as a Jewish midrash on the meaning of the manna narrative, because a true exegesis of scripture must lead beyond the scriptures to the one to whom they point – Jesus as the true bread given in the present (6:35).

Jesus' immediate response, however, is to clarify the crowds' understanding of the scriptural quotation (6:32-33), and he does so in the following ways: i) God is the giver of the bread and not Moses, as Moses himself acknowledged (Exod. 16:4, 6-8). Although not expressly stated, it is likely that Moses is understood by the crowds as the subject of the verb *edôken* ('he gave') in the quotation; ii) it is a present rather than a past action; iii) the recipients of life are the world rather than 'our ancestors' who came out of Egypt. The main point, of course, is that manna is not the true bread from heaven. In fact verse 34 provides another example of the Johannine device of double-level meaning. The statement can be rendered as: 'the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world' (but also as 'that which comes down from heaven; because the noun 'bread' (*artos*) is masculine, the verbal form can refer to the bread or to the Son of Man. But unlike manna, only the Son of Man, the true heavenly bread can give 'life' (*zôê*). The crowd however persists in its literal understanding and asks for this bread, hoping, like the Samaritan woman, for a permanent supply of food/drink (6:34; cf. 4:15).

The crowd's request enables Jesus to respond with the central metaphorical utterance of the discourse: 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty' (6:35). This represents the theological focus of the scene, while the purpose of the rest of the discourse is to elucidate this claim in three stages (6:36-40, 43-51, 53-58). Jesus is not bread to satisfy the physical hunger of those who approach him, but to mediate the gift of eternal life to those who are hungry and thirsty (verse 40). The influence of wisdom language and imagery can be detected in the use of eating and drinking as symbols of coming and believing (Wisdom 16:20-21; Sir. 6:19; 15:3; 24:19-21; cf. Isa. 55:1-2). Wisdom, however, promises that those who eat and drink from her will hunger and thirst for more (Sir. 24:21: 'Those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more'), but Jesus emphasizes that the one who comes and believes in him will find rest from the never-ending search for Wisdom. The response of the crowds is increasingly one of alienation (6:41-42, 52), and a clear marker of this is provided in 6:36: 'you have seen me and yet do not believe'.

Hence in verse 41 the crowds are designated 'the Jews' for the first time, and begin to murmur against Jesus' self-revelation. The use of the verb 'murmur' in the NRSV (*gongudzô*) deliberately evokes the memory of Israel's complaint in the wilderness (LXX Exod. 16:2-3, 7-9, 12). The response of the crowds therefore indicates continuity with their ancestors who also refused to believe as a result of the manna miracle. The basis of their objection to Jesus is that they know his earthly origins, which they regard as an obstacle to faith: 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I have come down from heaven"'.

Jesus, for the first time in this Gospel, appeals to scripture himself as part of his argument that no one can come to him unless they have heard and learned from the Father. He quotes from Isaiah 54:13, 'And they shall all be taught by God', a passage that promises divine instruction to all the inhabitants of a restored Jerusalem ('And I shall make all your sons taught by God'). Once again, divine instruction through the Law represents the Jewish perspective on Jesus' claim, not only because manna was identified in wisdom traditions with the gift of the Law (e.g. Sir 24:23), but the verse quoted by Jesus (Isa 54:13) also came to be understood in later rabbinic traditions as denoting God himself teaching the Torah in the eschatological future (PesR 32:3-4; PesK 12:21). However, Jesus tells the crowds that to be truly taught by God they must come to him, for only he has seen the Father and descended from above (6:46; cf. 1:18). What is also striking is that the reference to 'your sons' in Isaiah's quotation becomes a reference to 'all' in John 6:45 ('all will be taught by God') Not only does this modification make the prophecy applicable to all who are open to hearing and learning through Jesus, but it relates to the clash in the perception of origins within the dialogue. The crowds cannot see beyond the category of earthly origins, because they focus on their own ancestors in the wilderness and on their knowledge of Jesus' human parentage; this kind of earthly category would be perpetuated by the inclusion of Isaiah's reference to 'your sons' (of Jerusalem). John's definition of the lineage of believers in terms of divine rather than physical birth (cf. 3:3) means that only those of heavenly origin can be truly taught by God.

Jesus then returns to the central symbol of the discourse (6:48), speaking of the life-giving effect of the bread from heaven, but a new element is introduced in verse 51 where the reference to 'flesh' serves as a veiled allusion to Jesus' death: the one who comes from heaven and gives life to the world (v. 35) is also the one to give his flesh over to death (note future tense: 'and the bread that I *will give* for the life of the world is my flesh'). The act of eating has not so far figured explicitly in the discussion, but now Jesus states that his flesh must be eaten. This is viewed as offensive by the Jews but is grossly misinterpreted by them: their reference to cannibalism is as absurd as Nicodemus' notion of an adult experiencing second physical birth.

Jesus' intention is to challenge 'the Jews' to a symbolic understanding of 'eating the flesh'. He intensifies the metaphorical language by introducing the motif of drinking his blood, something expressly forbidden in the Torah (Lev. 17:10-14). The description of flesh as 'true food' and blood as 'true drink' points the reader away from the literal sense of these terms to the Johannine understanding of truth. The language of flesh and blood recalls the body and blood of the eucharist (cf. Mark 14:22-25; I Cor. 11:23-26). This has

led many to ask whether verses 52-59 belong to the discourse (Rudolf Bultmann's solution was that they represent an addition by a later ecclesiastical redactor). The metaphorical language does, however, serve an important function in the discourse. The reference to eucharist demonstrates how the bread of life operates: it expresses the union of the believing community with Jesus, a mutual indwelling that communicates life (note verse 56: 'those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them). Thus eating and drinking is an image of relationship with God through Jesus, in which God nourishes the life of believers. This is encapsulated in verse 58, which brings together the elements of the scriptural quotation in verse 31: 'This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.'

Final Response: Rejection/Faith (6:60-71)

In the final scene of John 6, those who initially appeared to be on the way to discipleship now choose the path of unbelief. If the path of discipleship has been followed to a point, only a small minority is now left (a schism or division has occurred - *krisis*). Thus in verse 61 'many of his disciples' are said to be scandalized by Jesus' difficult teaching, because the feeding, as unfolded through the discourse, challenges them to adopt a new kind of faith: a belief in Jesus as the source of life through his own life *and* death. But what should be made of verse 63 where Jesus speaks of the uselessness of the flesh: 'It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life'. This verse is one of the main reasons why vv. 51-58 is often rejected as an original part of the discourse, since in this particular section 'flesh' is used six times to denote that which is essential to life. The reference in that context, however, was to the flesh of Jesus (cf. 1:14 - christological), whereas he now speaks of a 'fleshly', limited, understanding of his words and deeds (anthropological), one that should be rejected in favour of his words as spirit and life.

There is a definitive break due his 'difficult teaching' and many withdraw and no longer go about with him. The references to the eucharist may shed light on this, particularly in view of the emphasis in John's Gospel on the importance of confessing Jesus at the cost of being expelled from the synagogue (cf. 12:42-43). It is possible that Eucharistic participation in the eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of Jesus (6:52-53) was the dividing point in worship between those who do not believe and those who believe but do not confess Jesus publicly for fear of expulsion. Participation in this rite would constitute a public confession (a hallmark of discipleship), a decision for or against the revelation of God in Jesus.

The narrative does not end with rejection, but with the Twelve's commitment to discipleship (vv. 67-70a). They have believed the words of the discourse (verse 68) and understood its true significance. In the final part of the scene Simon Peter confesses his faith on behalf of the Twelve (6:68-69), vaguely reminiscent of his confession at Caesarea Philippi as described by Mark (8:27-30). He correctly interprets Jesus as the one who possesses the words of eternal life, and does so on the basis of his origins (the Holy One of God). Nevertheless even within this inner circle of the Twelve, there is still the possibility of rejection. The response of Judas Iscariot belongs to those who have abandoned the way of discipleship (vv. 60-66), and the identical expression for withdrawal and stumbling will be used again, this time of Judas, when he encounters Jesus in the garden of his arrest.