

JESUS LOSES THE CROWD

John 6:1-35 (ESV)

DISCUSSION:

1. John takes care to mention that it was almost time for the Passover. Why?

Not an accident. Jesus is the true Passover lamb. John surrounds this event with symbols that parallel Exodus—leading the people into the wilderness, control of the sea, miraculous bread, a fickle crowd....

2. Jesus obviously knew what he was about to do. Why do you think he asked his disciples for their advice?

To point out to them their powerlessness. Have you ever been in a situation totally out of your control? It's scary, but it's useful every once in a while to be reminded how little control you really have.

3. Jesus has the disciples participate in the miraculous feeding. Why do you think He does that? How do you think they felt: a) as he said the blessing? b) as they were picking up the leftovers?

I think it's to bring it home to them and help them to see Him for who He is. Since they were there passing out the baskets they will *know* it was a miracle ("hey wait a minute, this basket is just as full as it was when I started with this little group...and that little group...lightbulb!").

You can imagine the doubting Thomas' casting furtive glances at each other during the prayer (we are going to have a riot on our hands here guys...!). I can imagine them being absolutely flummoxed during the gathering of the leftover.

p.s.—some have intimated that this wasn't *really* a miracle, rather a great leader getting everyone to share. I'm with Wiersbe: baloney!

4. What do you learn about the people from their question in 6:28? How are we the same?

Just tell me the minimum requirements. What do I *have to do*?

5. What is the relationship between work and faith in John 6:27-29? Compare this passage with Eph 2:4-10 and James 2:14-26.

They intimately go together—even in Ephesians 2, the passage that everyone turns to to tell you that you are not saved by your works. Like last week's discussion of Judgment (John 4:28-29), being in Christ goes hand in hand with certain behaviors. Some have the idea that you can be in Christ and act however you want—not a biblical truth.

6. As long as the people came to Jesus only to get their physical needs met he knew their *deepest* needs would go unmet. What does Jesus want them to focus on (v. 27, 29)?

Him.

7. What 's the difference in loving Jesus for who He is versus loving him for what He can give us?

All metaphors have their limits, but maybe it's like this: When we just concentrate on what Jesus gives us (saving me from hell, getting me into Heaven) we are like toddlers on Christmas Day—more interested in the box than the toy. The box is really, really spectacular, but to be a child of the Most High God...wow!

8. How can our immediate needs or worries blind us from seeing our deeper spiritual needs?

Sometimes we are so hurting, desperate, hungry, scared, that we can't see further than right now. Like a scared kid trusting their parent, sometimes we just have to cling to Him and trust Him.

9. John contrasted Jesus with the bread the Jews sought: manna and the Law. What kinds of "bread" do modern people use to mistakenly satisfy their hunger?

Power, control, distracting entertainments, fulfillment in Kid's achievements / grandkid's achievements / business achievements. Sex, money, etc. etc. etc.

The longer you live the more you see these things come up empty and people end up miserable.

CHAPTER SIX

JESUS LOSES HIS CROWD

John 6

Since John's Gospel is selective ([John 20:30–31](#)), he does not record events in the life of Jesus that do not help him fulfill his purpose. Between the healing of the paralytic ([John 5](#)) and the feeding of the 5,000, you have many events taking place, some of which are mentioned in [Luke 6:1–9:10](#) and [Mark 3:1–6:30](#). During this period our Lord preached “the Sermon on the Mount” ([Matt. 5–7](#)) and gave the parables of the kingdom ([Matt. 13](#)).

The feeding of the 5,000 was a miracle of such magnitude that it is recorded in all four Gospels. A great multitude had been following Jesus for several days, listening to His teaching and beholding His miracles. Jesus had tried to “get away” to rest, but the needs of the crowd pressed on Him ([Mark 6:31–34](#)). Because of His compassion, He ministered to the multitude in three different ways.

Jesus Feeds the Multitude ([John 6:1–14](#))

The problem, of course, was how to meet the needs of such a vast crowd of people. Four solutions were proposed.

First, the disciples suggested that Jesus send the people away ([Mark 6:35–36](#)). Get

rid of the problem (see [Matt. 15:23](#)). But Jesus knew that the hungry people would faint on the way if somebody did not feed them. It was evening ([Matt. 14:15](#)), and that was no time for travel.

The second solution came from Philip in response to our Lord's “test question” ([John 6:5](#)): raise enough money to buy food for the people. Philip “counted the cost” and decided they would need the equivalent of 200 days' wages! And even that would not provide bread enough to satisfy the hunger of all the men, women, and children ([Matt. 14:21](#)). Too often, we think that money is the answer to every need. Of course, Jesus was simply testing the strength of Philip's faith.

The third solution came from Andrew, but he was not quite sure how the problem would be solved. He found a little boy who had a small lunch: two little fish and five barley cakes. Once again, Andrew is busy bringing somebody to Jesus (see [John 1:40–42](#); [12:20–22](#)). We do not know how Andrew met this lad, but we are glad he did! Though Andrew does not have a prominent place in the Gospels, he was apparently a “people person” who helped solve problems.

The fourth solution came from our Lord, and it was the true solution. He took the little boy's lunch, blessed it,

broke it, handed it out to His disciples, and they fed the whole crowd! The miracle took place in the hands of the Saviour, not in the hands of the disciples. He multiplied the food; they only had the joyful privilege of passing it out. Not only were the people fed and satisfied, but the disciples salvaged twelve baskets of fragments for future use. The Lord wasted nothing.

The practical lesson is clear: whenever there is a need, give all that you have to Jesus and let Him do the rest. Begin with what you have, but be sure you give it all to Him. That little lad is to be commended for sharing his lunch with Christ, and his mother is to be commended for giving him something to give to Jesus. The gift of that little snack meant as much to Jesus as the pouring out of the expensive ointment (John 12:1ff).

But did Jesus really perform a miracle? Perhaps the generosity of the boy only embarrassed the other people so that they brought out their hidden lunches and shared them all around. Nonsense! Jesus knows the hearts of men (John 2:24; 6:61, 64, 70) and He declared that the people were hungry. Surely He would have known of the existence of hidden food! Furthermore, the people themselves declared that this was a miracle and even wanted to crown Him King! (John

6:14–16) Had this event been only the result of mass psychology, the crowd would not have responded that way. John would never have selected this as one of the “signs” if it were not an authentic miracle.

It is significant that twice John mentioned the fact that Jesus gave thanks (John 6:11, 23). Matthew, Mark, and Luke all state that Jesus looked up to heaven when He gave thanks. By that act, He reminded the hungry people that God is the source of all good and needful gifts. This is a good lesson for us: instead of complaining about what we do not have, we should give thanks to God for what we do have, and He will make it go farther.

Jesus Leaves the Multitude (John 6:15–21)

Jesus compelled the disciples to get into the boat (Matt. 14:22; Mark 6:45) because He knew they were in danger. The crowd was now aroused and there was a movement to make Him King. Of course, some of the disciples would have rejoiced at the opportunity to become famous and powerful! Judas would have become treasurer of the kingdom, and perhaps Peter would have been named prime minister! But this was not in the plan of God, and Jesus broke up the meeting immediately. Certainly the Roman government would

have stepped in had a movement begun.

Did Jesus know that a storm was coming? Of course. Then why did He deliberately send His friends into danger? Quite the opposite is true: He was rescuing them from greater danger, the danger of being swept along by a fanatical crowd. But there was another reason for that storm: the Lord has to balance our lives; otherwise we will become proud and then fall. The disciples had experienced great joy in being part of a thrilling miracle. Now they had to face a storm and learn to trust the Lord more. The feeding of the 5,000 was the lesson, but the storm was the examination after the lesson.

Sometimes we are caught in a storm because we have disobeyed the Lord. Jonah is a good example. But sometimes the storm comes because we have *obeyed* the Lord. When that happens, we can be sure that our Saviour will pray for us, come to us, and deliver us. In writing the account of this event years later, perhaps John saw in it a picture of Christ and His church. Christ is in heaven interceding for us, but we are in the midst of the storms of life, trying to reach the shore. One day, He will come for us and we shall reach the port safely, the storms all past.

Actually, there were several miracles involved in this event. Jesus walked on the water, and so did Peter ([Matt. 14:28–32](#)).

Jesus stilled the storm, and instantly the boat was on the other shore. Of course, all of this happened at night so that only Jesus and His disciples knew what had occurred. Jesus had led His people into the green pastures ([John 6:10](#)), and now He brought them into the still waters ([Ps. 23:2](#)). What a wonderful [Shepherd](#) He is!

As you read the Gospel records, note that our Lord was never impressed by the great crowds. He knew that their motives were not pure and that most of them followed Him in order to watch His miracles of healing. “Bread and circuses” was Rome’s formula for keeping the people happy, and people today are satisfied with that kind of diet. Give them food and entertainment and they are happy. Rome set aside ninety-three days each year for public games at government expense. It was cheaper to entertain the crowds than to fight them or jail them.

We must never be deceived by the “popularity” of Jesus Christ among certain kinds of people today. Very few want Him as Saviour and Lord. Many want Him only as Healer or Provider, or the One who rescues them from problems they have made for themselves. “And ye will not come to Me, that ye might have life” ([John 5:40](#)).

Jesus Teaches the Multitude ([John](#)

6:22–71)

The purpose of the sign was that He might preach the sermon. Again, it was a ministry of “grace and truth” (John 1:17). In grace, our Lord fed the hungry people; but in truth, He gave them the Word of God. They wanted the food but they did not want the truth; and, in the end, most of them abandoned Jesus and refused to walk with Him. He lost His crowd with one sermon!

The next day began with a mystery: how did Jesus get to Capernaum? The crowd saw the disciples embark to go across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum, and then the men were lost in the storm. The crowd also saw Jesus leave the place and go by Himself to a mountain. But the next morning, here were Jesus and His disciples *together* in Capernaum! Certainly He had not walked around the lake, and there was no evidence that He had taken another boat. Other boats had arrived, no doubt driven in by the storm; but Jesus had not been in any of them.

No doubt some of the people who had been fed simply went away to their homes, while others stayed to see what Jesus would do next. Our Lord’s sermon probably began outdoors, and then the discussion moved into the synagogue (John 6:59). It would be impossible for a huge crowd to participate in the syna-

gogue service, though the overflow could remain outside and hear what was being said.

This sermon on “the bread of life” is actually a dialogue between Christ and the people, especially the religious leaders (“the Jews”). We see four responses of the crowd to the Lord Jesus in John 6: seeking (vv. 22–40), murmuring (vv. 41–51), striving (vv. 52–59), and departing (vv. 60–71).

Seeking (vv. 22–40). The disciples may have been impressed that so many people stayed through a storm in order to seek their Master, but Jesus was not impressed. He knows the human heart. He knew that the people originally followed Him because of His miracles (John 6:2), but now their motive was to get fed! Even if they were attracted only by the miracles, at least there was still a possibility they might be saved. After all, that is where Nicodemus started (John 3:1–2). But now their interest had degenerated to the level of food.

Jesus pointed out that there are two kinds of food: food for the body, which is necessary but not the most important; and food for the inner man, the spirit, which is essential. What the people needed was not food but *life*, and life is a gift. Food only *sustains* life, but Jesus *gives* eternal life. The words of Isaiah come to

mind: “Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?” (Isa. 55:2, NASB)

The people picked up the word *labor* and misinterpreted it to mean they had to *work* for salvation. They completely missed the word *give*. Steeped in legalistic religion, they thought they had to “do something” to merit eternal life. Jesus made it clear that only one “work” was necessary—to believe on the Saviour. When a person believes on Christ, he is not performing a good work that earns him salvation. There is certainly no credit in believing, for it is what God does *in response to our faith* that is important (see Eph. 2:8–10).

The crowd began by seeking Christ, but then started to seek a sign from Him. “For the Jews require a sign” (1 Cor. 1:22). The rabbis taught that, when Messiah came, He would duplicate the miracle of the manna (see Ex. 16). If Jesus was truly sent by God (see John 6:29, 38, 57), then let Him prove it by causing manna to fall from heaven. They wanted to “see and believe.” But faith that is based on signs alone, and not on the truth of the Word, can lead a person astray; for even Satan is able to perform “lying wonders” (2 Thes. 2:8–10). note also John 2:18–25; 4:48.

The quotation in John 6:31 is from Psalm 78:24, a psalm that records the

unbelief and rebellion of the nation of Israel.

In His reply, our Lord sought to deepen the people’s understanding of the truth. It was *God*, not Moses, who gave the manna; so they must take their eyes off Moses and focus them on God. Also, God *gave* the manna in the past, but the Father is *now giving* the true bread in the person of Jesus Christ. The past event is finished, but the present spiritual experience goes on!

Then Jesus clearly identified what the bread is: He is the true Living Bread that came down from heaven. But He came, not only for Israel but for the whole world. And He came, not just to *sustain* life, but to *give* life! Seven times in this sermon, our Lord referred to His “coming down from heaven” (John 6:33, 38, 41–42, 50–51, 58), a statement that declared Him to be God. The Old Testament manna was but a type of the “true bread,” the Lord Jesus Christ.

This dialogue began with the crowd seeking Christ and then seeking a sign, but listeners soon began to seek the “true bread” that Jesus talked about. However, like the woman of Samaria, they were not ready for salvation (see John 4:15). She wanted the living water so she would not have to keep going to the well. The crowd wanted the bread so they would not have

to toil to maintain life. People today still want Jesus Christ only for the benefits He is able to give.

In His reply to their impetuous request, Jesus used two key words that often appear in this sermon: *come* and *believe*. To come to Jesus means to believe on Him, and to believe on Him means to come to Him. Believing is not merely an intellectual thing, giving mental assent to some doctrine. It means to come to Christ and yield yourself to Him. At the close of His sermon, Jesus illustrated *coming* and *believing* by speaking about *eating* and *drinking*. To come to Christ and believe on Him means to receive Him within, just as you receive food and drink.

John 6:35 contains the first of seven great I AM statements recorded by John, statements that are found nowhere else in the Gospels. (For the other six, see John 8:12; 10:7-9, 11-14; 11:25-26; 14:6; 15:1, 5.) God revealed Himself to Moses by the name I AM (Jehovah) (Ex. 3:14). God is the self-existent One who “is, and ... was, and ... is to come” (Rev. 1:8). When Jesus used the name I AM, He was definitely claiming to be God.

2. Passover and the Exodus Motif (6:1–71)

The Festival Cycle now moves into the second stage. In this chapter the evangelist introduced his second major “inclusion,” which runs from the beginning of chap. 6 with the identification of Passover (6:4) to the conclusion of chap. 11 with the announcement that Jesus’ final Passover was near (11:55).

The scene also shifts from the pathetic paralytic and the hopeless Jewish traditionalists of Jerusalem in chap. 5 to the hungry Galileans of chap. 6. In this context reminiscent of Israel’s first generation, the crossing of the sea (6:1) and the coming of the crowd out to a lonely arid mountain region (6:3) formed a picture-perfect setting for considering how Jesus could be related to the stories of the exodus. Therefore it should be no surprise that the stories of Jesus in this chapter deal with a miraculous feeding and the control of the sea. Moses had been mentioned as a witness in the concluding arguments of the last chapter (5:45–46). Now the evangelist introduces the New Moses in the wilderness.

It also should come as no surprise in such a context that the evangelist

announces it was Passover time (6:4). Those who are familiar with the Passover Haggada even today should recall in the introduction to the Seder ceremony, before the important pronouncing of the “three words” and the “Halleluya,” that two of the great “benefits” or historic remembrances therein rehearsed are the control of the sea and the feeding of manna.⁵⁵ For Christians who do not usually live with the experience of the Passover Seder, it is crucial to recognize that the celebration of Passover focuses not merely on the lamb but on the entire exodus rescue experience. Passover epitomizes God’s claiming and releasing of his people as well as his preservation of the people by supplying them with food and rescuing them from the threatening sea. Passover is a multifaceted identifying celebration, and the evangelist knew it well.

Those familiar with the Psalms will also recognize that the two mercies of water control and food supply were very significant to the psalmist (cf. Ps 78:13–30). In Israel’s history, stories of

⁵⁵ See H. Fisch, ed., *Haggada* (Jerusalem: Koren, 1965); cf. P. Borgen, “Observations on the Midrashic Character of John 6,” *ZNW* 54 (1963): 232–39.

food and water are indelibly attached to faith. From the tree of life in the garden, the rescue of Noah in the flood, and throughout their pilgrimage these two symbols are repeatedly reweven into the fabric of God's dealings with his people. It is understandable then that Paul, thinking like a Jew, also linked these two symbols in his warnings to the Corinthians about their relationship with God (1 Cor 10:1-4).

Accordingly, when the early Christians began to tell their stories about the Lord, the miracles of bread and water control likely would have become some of their early favorites. Thus when Mark first set the Gospel stories down in a written form, it was quite natural for him, a son of Israel, to emphasize the connection between the feeding of the five thousand and a water event in a related context (cf. Mark 6:30-52). That pattern was observed by both Matthew (14:13-33) and John (6:5-21),⁵⁶ who likewise were

⁵⁶ For a discussion of the relation of the Johannine feeding story to the other accounts see E. Johnston, "The Johannine Version of the Feeding of the Five Thousand—An Independent Tradition?" *NTS* (1962): 151-54. For a discussion of the unity of John 6 in the overall

Israelites. But Luke, the Gentile among the evangelists, apparently did not think it necessary to follow that pattern (9:10-17). While it may seem only pure chance that in this case the two incidents are brought together by three of the evangelists, it is interesting to ponder whether or not a cultural heritage had anything to do with the differences in Luke.⁵⁷ More-

writing of the Gospel see P. Borgen, "The Unity of the Discourse in John 6," *ZNW* 50 (1959): 277-78; R. Kysar, "The Source Analysis of the Fourth Gospel—A Growing Consensus?" *NovT* 15 (1973): 134-52, and D. Deeks, "The Structure of the Fourth Gospel," *NTS* 15 (1968): 125-27.

⁵⁷ The same pattern does not hold for Mark's second story of the feeding of the four thousand. A water miracle is not present, but it is intriguing that the story concludes with the mention of their moving to the boats (Mark 8:10), and the subsequent discussion about a sign includes a note about a loaf in the boat (8:14) and the implications of feeding (cf. Matt 15:32-39; 16:5-12). The stilling of the storm miracle does not fit this joint pattern in any of the Synoptics, though Mark's walking on the water scene does have a brief note that the wind ceased (Mark 6:51), and that text is linked to a feeding scene. The stilling of the storm is not in John.

over, it is strategic to recognize that for a Jew the control of water and the concept of eating are forever linked in Passover. ⁴⁸

(1) *The Setting (6:1–4)*

¹Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ²and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. ³Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴The Jewish Passover Feast was near. ⁴⁹

6:1–3 The evangelist begins the chapter by setting the context for the story. He introduces it with the same vague words as he did at **5:1**—*meta tauta* (lit., “after these things”; cf. also **7:1**), a general logical connective that should not be pushed to carry a specific temporal significance. The setting is near the Sea of Galilee, the Hellenistic name for the lake. In later Roman times it became known as the Sea of Tiberias following the completion by Herod Antipas in ⁵⁰ A.D. 20 of the city with that same name on the west shore. The city was so named in honor of the Roman emperor, the patron of Antipas.⁵⁸ Luke

⁵⁸ The double name in the text at **6:1** has given

(5:1) refers to the sea as Gennesaret from the Hebrew name Kinnereth/Chinnereth meaning “lyre” or “harp,” which some have thought, with Josephus, was derived from the shape of the lake but may have originated from the nearby Canaanite town Tell El-‘Oreimeth, which was lyre-like in shape.⁵⁹

The “other side” of the sea (**6:1**) where the feeding occurred would likely be the more barren hillsides to east of the lake, directly across from Tiberias, and not the traditional site visited by pilgrims at Tabgha on the northwest shore. The crowds that followed Jesus to this area were impressed by the signs he performed on the sick, and they were willing to follow him even into remote areas.⁶⁰ The hills in this region would provide an ideal place for Jesus to climb and sit down

rise to several variant readings that omit one or other of the names or both. The presence of both names is at least arguable from the MSS. The name Tiberias was undoubtedly applied to the lake in a derivative way out of custom.

⁵⁹ For a discussion of this issue see W. Buehler, “Galilee, Sea of,” *ISBE* 2.391–92.

⁶⁰ The use of the plural in **6:2** does not need to be restricted to the two healings the evangelist described at **4:50** and **5:8**. The Gospel admittedly contains only a selection of signs (**20:30**).

with his disciples (6:3).

Jesus frequently chose a mountain setting for his ministry (cf. especially Matthew's Gospel, e.g., [Matt 5:1](#), the Sermon on the Mount; [15:29](#), Jesus' healing ministry; [24:3](#), Jesus' eschatological address), perhaps because mountains were regarded as a crucial symbolic place of divine encounter (cf. also [Matt 4:8](#); [14:23](#); [17:1](#); [21:1](#); [28:16](#)). Moreover, sitting was a symbol of authority (cf. [Matt 23:2](#); [25:31](#)). The history of Israel was mountain oriented from the near sacrifice of Isaac at Moriah ([Gen 22:3](#)), to the call of Moses and the giving of the law at Sinai ([Exod 3:1](#); [18:3](#), [12–25](#)), to the place chosen for the temple on Mount Moriah ([2 Sam 24:18–19](#)) and the trial of Yahweh with Elijah at Mount Carmel ([1 Kgs 18:20–21](#)). The people of Israel knew the importance of mountain experiences. Their God was a high and exalted God ([Isa 6:1](#)). To come to the God of the mountain was therefore to come with fear and expectation. It is also significant to remember that in the minds of the Jews one always went up to Jerusalem, not merely in the geographical sense (e.g., the Psalms of Ascent, [121–134](#); [Acts 21:15](#); [18:22](#)).

6:4 The time of this text was Passover, the strategic historical time when God

saved his people from slavery in Egypt. But Passover for John was also the time when God had provided the ultimate rescue through the Savior of the world (cf. the confession at [John 4:42](#)). The comparison with Moses was clearly intended as the evangelist brought together a number of themes in this chapter.⁶¹

(2) *The Feeding of Five Thousand (6:5–13)*

5 When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” **6** He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

7 Philip answered him, “Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”

8 Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, **9** “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

10 Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in

⁶¹ Cf. Meeks, *The Prophet-King*, esp. pp. 22–26 and 87–99.

that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them.¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

¹²When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.”¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle that appears in all four Gospels. Accordingly, this story has been subjected to minute comparative analysis by a number of scholars. Some have found in the various accounts what they consider to be keys that help to unlock theories of tradition and literary development. Brown has provided an excellent summation of the comparative elements of the stories, and there is little reason to recapitulate his study here.⁶² It is sufficient for the purposes of this commentary to note that while there are definite literary differences in the various Gospels, the flow of the various accounts is quite

⁶² See Brown, *John*, 1.236–50.

Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996).

compatible.⁶³ In the Johannine version the evangelist’s emphasis prepares the reader for the important dialogue that is to come.⁶⁴

6:5–9 The feeding story in this Gospel is initiated with a probing question concerning resources for food. According to [Mark 6:35–37](#), it was the disciples who raised the issue of the crowd being fed, to which Jesus replied, “You give them something to eat” ([6:35–37](#)). John only records Jesus’ question to Philip, the company intermediary and logician: “Where shall we buy bread ...?” (v. [5, 7](#); cf. other places where he is mentioned at [1:43–46](#); [12:21–22](#); [14:8–9](#)). Then the

⁶³ I do not mean to imply by this statement that the issue is a simple one. Nor do I intend to approach the matter as Carson by giving a few statements about crowd movement and implying that there are no unresolved issues in the texts (*John*, 269). But I do believe the story lines of the Gospels are compatible, given the purposes of the different evangelists. Beyond that see my brief comments on the relationship of John to the Synoptics in the Introduction.

⁶⁴ For an overview of the structure of this chapter see D. M. Smith, *The Composition and Order of the Fourth Gospel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 141–52.

accounts essentially converge, with Philip's reply in [John 6:7](#) being credited to the disciples generally in [Mark 6:37](#). Of the three passages in John where Andrew's name appears, in two of them (including the present) he is mentioned along with Philip ([6:8](#); [12:22](#)), and in the third context Andrew's introduction is just prior to Philip's (cf. [1:40](#), [44](#)). In this story the evangelist made sure he interpreted Jesus' question for the reader. It was not a question for information but a question to probe whether or not Philip understood who Jesus was ([6:6](#)).

Philip's answer proved the point because, rather than focusing on Jesus, Philip's mental computer began to work like a cash register, and all he could think about was the total cash that would be needed to provide just a little bread for each person. It was fast approaching the better part of a year's wages ([6:7](#)).⁶⁵ To be

⁶⁵ Taking into account nonworking days and stated feasts, a year's work would have netted about three hundred denarii (cf. [John 12:5](#)), a denarius being a day's wages. Philip's quick estimate was that at least two hundred denarii would be required, which is why the NIV uses "eight months" at this point. The NRSV's "six months" makes little sense here. The hopelessness of Philip's quick response probably


fair to Philip, Jesus' question was a leading one, and Philip's mind followed the easy path. But the answer was not what Jesus was seeking. For Philip, however, the answer was hopelessness.


Andrew, the helper, tried to solve the problem in another way. He began immediately to search for picnic resources in that barren place, but his search also ended in failure, according to his thinking. All he found was a boy in the crowd who had a lunch with barley loaves (the bread of the poor⁶⁶) and two small, dried fish (emphasis on small, [6:9](#)). Andrew's answer was also hopelessness.

[6:10–13](#) Despite the disciples' sense of hopelessness, Jesus told them to prepare the men/people (*tous anthrōpous*) for a meal ([John 6:10](#)). Mark indicates that they were organized into groups of hundreds and fifties ([Mark 6:39–40](#); cf. "groups of about fifty each" in [Luke 9:14](#)). When they sat down on the grass, it was clear that there were about five thousand

would have been something like "the better part of a year's wages would hardly get them started."

⁶⁶ Barley was the rough grain used by the poor whereas the preferred grain was wheat; cf. [Rev 6:6](#).

“men” (*hoi andres*) present. Matthew (14:21) indicates that the number did not include women and children. If that is the case, the number present at this event could have reached ten, fifteen, or twenty thousand people—an incredibly large gathering. 

Then according to John, Jesus “gave thanks” (*eucharistein*, 6:11; the Synoptics have “blessed,” *eulogein*) and distributed the food. Dodd and others have argued that John’s use of *eucharistein* at this point implies a eucharistic (sacramental) understanding of the text.⁶⁷ But Audet and others have reminded readers that the Hebrew *barak* (“bless”) probably stands behind both Greek words and that such linguistic distinctions probably were not significant until the  second century.⁶⁸

After it was reported that the crowds had eaten their fill, a significant note was added in this Gospel concerning the col-

lection of the remaining fragments. The Synoptics merely state that twelve baskets of fragments were taken up (cf. Mark 6:43), but John adds that Jesus commanded the disciples to gather the leftover pieces “in order that nothing might be lost” (6:12). The NIV has “wasted” here, but the Greek verb *apolluein* is theologically a far more significant word in this chapter than is implied by the NIV rendering. The concern in this chapter involves “lost” or “perishing” food (6:12, 27) and people (6:39). Indeed, later Jesus will mention in his prayer that none had been “lost,” except the son of doom (17:12). Preservation of the church (probably here symbolized in the twelve baskets) was an important concern for this evangelist (cf. a similar concern in 1 John 2:19; 2 John 8).



Excursus 6: Numbers

The number twelve here raises the question of numbers in the Bible, particularly in the Gospel accounts of miraculous feeding. The numbers seem to be theologically significant. In the accounts of the feeding of the five thousand (Matt 14:13–21; Mark 6:31–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:5–14), the number of resources available to Jesus was equal

⁶⁷ Cf. C. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 204–05.

⁶⁸ J. Audet, “Esquisse Historique du Genre Littéraire de la ‘Bénédition’ Juive et de l’ ‘Eucharistie’ Chrétienne,” *RB* 65 (1958): 371–99. Cf. J. Dunn, “John VI—A Eucharistic Discourse?” *NTS* (1971): 328–38, and R. Brown, *John*, 1.233–34.

to seven (five loaves plus two fish). In the feeding of the four thousand ([Matt 15:29–38](#); [Mark 8:1–19](#)), the resources were again seven loaves plus a “few” fish. Here the author ceases counting after the number seven has been reached. Significance thus seems to be placed on the theological symbolism of the number seven. The same type of symbolic meaning seems to be implied for the number of baskets remaining after the feeding is completed. In the feeding of the five thousand, twelve baskets are gathered; and in the feeding of the four thousand, seven baskets are left.

Generally speaking, modern scholarship tends to avoid most numerological discussions because of the weird and outlandish results that sometimes have been proposed. But there are times when numbers in the Scriptures do have meaning, and it is important for interpreters of the Scriptures to have some sense of their possible implications. Nevertheless, I give this information here with a strong warning that one should not attempt to find theological significance for every number but only when it seems clearly appropriate. ✎

Certain numbers often seem to have particular associations: for example, one for the uniqueness of God; two

or three for witnesses (e.g., [Deut 17:6](#); [1 John 5:8](#)); three for triads in Paul like faith, love, and hope ([1 Thess 1:2](#)), for divine revelation as the messengers to Abraham at Mamre ([Gen 18:1–2](#)), and for expressions of the divine ([Rev 1:4–5](#); [2 Cor 13:14](#))⁶⁹; four for the world (which phenomenologically is viewed as flat and has four sides) and is represented by four living creatures ([Rev 4:6–8](#)), four horsemen, winds, and angels (e.g., [Rev 6:1–8](#); [7:1](#)), and four rivers of the garden of Eden ([Gen 2:10–14](#)).

The combinations of four and three (the world and the divine) are important.⁷⁰ Three and four when added equal seven, which is regarded as a reference to fullness or perfection. The multiplication of three and four equals twelve, which is the representative number of the people of God. Five and ten often are regarded as signifying

⁶⁹ A writer sometimes may use the number three for a symbolic contrast to the divine. Such appears to be the case with the three evil figures of [Rev 12–13](#).

⁷⁰ The combination of the triangles on the base of a square that form a pyramid is intriguing. Consider the ideological implications of the Egyptian pharaoh who was buried in such a man-made mountain. He was regarded as a type of god-man.

human or mortal completeness.⁷¹ Six (standing between five and seven) often carries a dangerous note.⁷² Eight, nine, and eleven do not generally carry much symbolic weight.

Other intriguing combinations are forty (four tens), which becomes almost the equivalent of “many”; three sixes (666), the ultimate in evil; a thou-

⁷¹ The number five is derived from the number of digits on each hand, and both hands become a symbol of an enclosed completeness. This number ten is employed as a representative of God’s completeness in the giving of the law and the number of men required for a synagogue to be established. The numbers ten and twelve are combined (120) and represent the usual number of men necessary for establishing a local Sanhedrin. In this respect note the intriguing statement in [Acts 1:15](#). Also note how seven and ten (seventy) are related to the Great Sanhedrin (plus the high priest) and to the name given to the Greek OT ([LXX](#)).

⁷² In later literature a person with six digits on one hand would immediately be recognized as a villain (e.g., the villain in *The Princess Bride*). When six is combined with the symbol of “left” (in Latin “sinister”), it was indeed a clear evil sign. Ancients regarded the left as negative or sinister (cf. the sheep and goats of [Matt 25:33–41](#)).

sand (three multiples of ten), the general big number; twelve thousand (12 × 1,000), the big religious number; and 144,000, the ultimate religious number. The number in Greek often translated “ten thousand” probably is best rendered “myriads” and would be equivalent to our numbers “trillion” or “zillion” or even larger.

These symbolic meanings are often missed by many of today’s contemporary secularized people who rebel at some symbolic distinctions such as right and left (for good and evil) or black and white. But the ancient world frequently used such symbols to convey theological or philosophical perspectives. The danger is for some interpreters to find symbolic meanings in everything, as was done in the medieval *quadriga* (the fourfold method of interpreting biblical texts).⁷³ ❗

⁷³ For a discussion of the medieval *quadriga* see R. Grant with D. Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 85–86, or W. Pauck’s analysis in his edition of Luther: *Lectures on Romans, Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), xxiv–xxxiv. The four senses of Scripture that led medieval exegetes to all types of speculation are literal, allegorical, typological, and anagogical (or moral).

Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996).

In the present text the numbers seven, twelve, and five thousand must first be understood as descriptive of concrete reality. Next, one can be sure of any intended symbolic meaning only if the biblical text supplies an explanation of some symbol, as is the case for example with the explanation of the different soils in the parable of the sower ([Mark 4:13–20](#)) or with the lifted-up bronze serpent being identified with the crucial events in the life of Jesus (see discussion at [John 3:14](#)) or with the manna in Moses' day and the bread in the present text that symbolically points to Jesus ([6:32–35](#)). Beyond that, one can have only a suspicion that a symbolic meaning may also have been present. Given such controls, it is not inappropriate for the contemporary reader to ponder whether the number seven could have brought to the evangelist's mind that Jesus had the fullness of all he needed for the sign, or that the twelve baskets may have reminded him of God's people being kept safe, or that the five thousand people may have been seen as much more than many hands full. So also the thirty-eight years of the paralyzed man may have struck a cord of familiarity concerning Israel's hopeless wilderness wandering (see the discussion at [John 5:5](#)).

We do not know with certainty

whether such meanings were present in the mind of the evangelist, but it would fit our understanding of the Gospel of John as a symbolic book. In the study of this book my concern is not merely with contemporary reader response techniques (where the emphasis is on the reader instead of the evangelist). The results of that style of biblical study can be as subjective as medieval exegesis, where the meaning found in a text is more a reflection of the reader's intentions than the author's. My concern here is to attempt to determine whether the evangelist was attempting to imply meanings. This type of interpretation certainly also carries a subjective concern, but I believe such can be minimized by employing interpretive guidelines and limitations. 🗒

(3) Confession and Transition (6:14–15)

¹⁴ After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

6:14–15 The story of the feeding ends in v. 14 with the evangelist's notation that the people recognized the sign[s].⁷⁴

Because of that recognition, they concluded that Jesus was “the Prophet who is to come into the world” (6:14). This statement has all the earmarks of a confession like that of the Samaritan affirmation (4:42) in which there is a faith assertion that Jesus was the expected one (*ho erchomenos*, “the coming one”) who was to be like the prophet Moses (cf. Deut 18:15).

The dialogue that occurs after the sign seems to call both the sufficiency of the sign (cf. 6:30) and the meaning of the sign (6:26–27) into question. Some consider that there may be different perspectives present in the story and in the latter commentary on the story.⁷⁵ Although such is possible, it seems rather unlikely

⁷⁴ It is not clear whether the original was σημεῖον (singular) or σημεῖα (plural). The singular is supported by the majority of the witnesses, but the plural is supported by \mathfrak{P}^{75} and B, two significant early manuscripts. The difference is a confession based on the present sign or one based on a series of signs. The former fits the context better, but a case can be made for both readings. Metzger is of the opinion that the plural is the result of influences from 2:23 (TCGNT, 211).

⁷⁵ Cf. Borgen, “Unity of the Discourse,” 277–78.

that the evangelist would in this way be attempting to distinguish the people of v. 14 from the people who followed Jesus the next day (6:22) and took issue with him (6:25–34).

The verse that follows (6:15) provides an interesting interaction. Apparently in the crowd there were not merely quietistic followers but political activists who were not content with confession but were set on revolutionary king-making actions. The word “prophet” here can imply one type of respect; “king” can imply quite a different one. In fact John would accept both designations for Jesus, and more.⁷⁶

He certainly would have recognized Jesus as king, which is apparent in texts like 12:13; 18:37; 19:19–22. But Jesus’ understanding of his role as king was different from that of the revolutionaries (esp. 18:36). Jesus did not need an earthly crown, and he certainly did not come to lead a military expedition. So instead of acceding to their desires, he headed for the hills⁷⁷ and left them with their unful-

⁷⁶ Cf. M. de Jonge, *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 57–58, and Meeks, *The Prophet-King*, 87–91.

filled political expectations. One might wonder whether the later hostility in this chapter (6:41, 60) was the result of unrequited commitment and hope in the feelings of the revolutionaries. In part that may be true, but the hostility that emerges goes far beyond a psychological reaction and to the very heart of what Jesus' mission was all about.

(4) *Walking on the Sea* (6:16–21)

¹⁶When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷ where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. ¹⁸ A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. ¹⁹ When they had rowed three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." ²¹ Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were

⁷⁷ Undoubtedly the hills here are on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee known as the Syrian Highlands or Golan Heights, the scene of repeated conflicts even in recent years.

Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996).

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heading.

The story of Jesus walking on the water appears in Mark (6:45–52) and Matthew (14:22–32) as well as here in John. There are a few differences from the Synoptic narratives, such as the disciples thinking at first that Jesus appeared to be a ghost. There is also an important variation in the transition statement in Mark and Matthew, where Jesus' activity in the hills is identified as that of praying (cf. *Matt 14:23*; *Mark 6:46*).⁷⁸ Whereas those Gospels focus on the aspect of Jesus' departure as a desire for spiritual retreat, John's focus is on Jesus' effort to avoid involvement in political revolution.

6:16–19a The pericope begins with a note concerning evening or darkness. Such a notation in John usually is not merely chronological (cf. *3:2*; *13:20*) but also theologically instructive. Darkness may describe not only the setting but also the disciples' theological situation as they entered a boat and headed from the east side across the lake to Capernaum on the northwest side (6:17). During this journey they encountered a severe storm on the lake, and in spite of all their rowing

⁷⁸ J. Heil, *Jesus Walking on the Sea* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 76–82.

efforts, they only appear to have covered about “three or three and a half” miles (6:19).⁷⁹

The Sea of Tiberias or Galilee is a deep gouge in the Jordan rift surrounded by hills so that winds frequently sweep down and stir the waters into a frenzy. Even today the situation is similar. Power boats periodically are warned to remain docked as the winds whip the water into foamy white caps. Imagine then what it would be like to be in wooden boats propelled by sails and oars. It is a small but treacherous lake that Josephus indicated was about 4.6 miles by 16.1 miles.⁸⁰ Contemporary measurements, however, would put the maximum size at about 6.9 miles by 12.6 miles, though recent heavy water usage in modern Israel has reduced it slightly from those dimensions. 

6:19b–21 In the midst of the disciples’ frustrating attempt to make headway on the sea, Jesus came calmly walking on the water. The exodus symbolism would be hard to miss, especially following the

⁷⁹ The distance of between 25 and 30 stadia is approximately between 2.9 and 3.5 miles. The NIV “three or three and a half miles” is exceedingly close.

⁸⁰ See Josephus, *War* 3.506.

bread sign. But the other aspects of the story are equally intriguing because the coming of Jesus to the disciples contains a number of the well-known elements present in Old Testament theophanies (appearances of God/the Angel of the Lord). There is the familiar mark of fear or dread verging on the expectation of death as a result of encountering God (e.g., [John 6:19](#); cf. [Isa 6:5](#); [Exod 3:6](#); [Rev 1:17](#); [Judg 6:22](#)).⁸¹ There is also the assuring word, “Don’t be afraid,” which gives the sense that the divine is not ready to require the devotee’s life ([John 6:20](#); cf. [Judg 6:24](#); [Rev 1:17](#) and the variants in [Exod 3:5](#); [Isa 6:7](#)). The sense of relief at survival sometimes is present or implied in acceptance (cf. [Isa 6:7](#); [Judg 6:24](#); [Rev 1:18](#)). One aspect not present here in John is that the recipient usually receives a commission in that context (e.g., [Exod 3:10](#); [Judg 6:14, 25](#); [Isa 6:8](#); [Rev 1:19](#)). But in the Gospel of John the real commission

⁸¹ For my many examples of theophany and the issue of fear, see E. Thornton and G. Borchert, *The Crisis of Fear* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988). For my analysis of the Markan storm stories see “What Was God Doing in the Storm?” in *Following Jesus*, ed. H. Gloer (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1984), 7–11.

awaits the final Christophany of [John 20:23](#).

The important element in the theophany is the identification of the appearing figure (e.g., [Exod 3:6, 14](#); [Judg 6:21–22](#); [Isa 6:5](#); [Rev 1:18](#)). In the present story the words are *egō eimi* (“I am”). Many have debated whether the *egō eimi* here is merely a self-identification statement, “It is I” (cf. [NIV 6:20](#)).⁸² The reason for the present review of the theophany pattern is to suggest that the identification cannot be other than a divine identification statement. Moreover, given the use of “I am” (*egō eimi*) throughout this Gospel, it seems to me that the connection with the identification of God’s name at [Exod 3:14](#) argues strongly for “I am.”

As indicated in the introduction to chap. 6, these two stories involving an eating event and the control of water provide an excellent reflection of a Passover perspective. But these two stories when set together also provide an interesting introduction to the first of the “I am” theological statements of Jesus. The feeding event supplies the theological


vehicle, “bread,” and the greeting or address of Jesus in the water story supplies the familiar “I am” formula. When the two are combined, the theological assertion becomes “I am the bread of life” ([6:35](#)).

This story line concludes not only with the disciples’ joy at the recognition of Jesus but also with the note that the disciples’ goal of reaching land was “immediately” achieved ([6:21](#)). The implication is definitely that a divine intervention has occurred. The rationalistic suggestion of Bernard that Jesus was merely walking along the shore and that the disciple’s boat was hugging the shore line completely fails to recognize the implications of the divine-human encounter in this story.⁸³ It reminds the reader of the rationalistic arguments in the early quest for the historical Jesus that sought for any solution except the miraculous. Instead, Jesus in this story is represented like the God of the Old Testament, who brings his people from a stormy sea to a safe haven ([Ps 107:23–32](#)).

(5) *The Search for Jesus (6:22–25)*

⁸² Contrast the discussion of P. Harner, *The “I Am” of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 47–48.

⁸³ J. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 1.186.

²²The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. ²³Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. 

²⁵When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

[6:22–25](#) The familiar Johannine connective “the next day” (*tē epaurion*, [6:22](#); Cf. [1:29](#), [35](#), [43](#); [12:12](#)) initiates the transition to dialogue and unites the sea story with the bread story. This transition is emphasized by mentioning “the place where the people had eaten the bread” ([6:23](#)).⁸⁴ In a few short sentences

⁸⁴ The words “after the Lord had given thanks” in [6:23](#) preview some of the debate that exists over this chapter. Brown (*John*, 1.258) regards the use of εὐχαριστεῖν here as “almost liturgical,” and he considers the use here of “the Lord” as “not Johannine.” Moreover, he

the evangelist thus has masterfully united all the elements of the two previous stories so that there are no loose ends as he

doubts whether the words were originally part of the text since they are omitted from Codex Bezae. It is difficult to accept Brown’s argument that the use of “the Lord” is non-Johannine since it is present in other contexts having the same basic meaning (e.g., [4:1](#); [11:2](#)) and since “Lord” is used in conversation texts by Jesus’ followers (e.g., [6:68](#); [13:13–14](#); [14:5](#), [8](#), [11](#)). But the liturgical issue is more crucial. The term “Lord” is consistent with a postresurrection perspective, but that is true of the entire Gospel. Moreover, it was later that εὐχαριστεῖν was identified with the liturgy of the Supper, and I would resist any reading into John of second-century understandings of the Eucharist. I doubt if “give thanks” here necessitates a liturgical sense. Of the possible “western noninterpolation” type of argument concerning the omission of the statement in Codex Bezae, such is certainly possible; but I am not yet persuaded. See further E. Kilmartin, “Liturgical Influence on John 6,” *CBQ* 22 (1960): 183–91; A. Stoeger, “Die Eucharistie bei Johannes,” *BK* 13 (1960): 41–43; and G. MacGregor, “The Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel,” *NTS* 9 (1962): 114–16. Contrast O. Brooks, “The Johannine Eucharist: Another Interpretation,” *JBL* 82 (1963): 293–300; and J. Dunn, “John VI,” 328–38. Cf. particularly A.

Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996).

moves the reader to reflect on Jesus as the Bread of life.⁸⁵

Although the geography is a little vague, it is not too difficult to reconstruct the movement of the people in these verses. Some people apparently remained overnight on the eastern side (“the other side,” 6:22)⁸⁶ of the lake below the Golan Heights. They undoubtedly expected to reenounter Jesus, who they knew had remained behind when the disciples left in a boat for Capernaum (6:16). In the morning others joined the waiting ones by crossing over the lake from Tiberias on the western side. When Jesus was not to be found on the eastern side where the

Corell, *Consummatum Est* (London: SPCK, 1958), 63–67, who thinks that “almost all scholars now agree that the Eucharistic theology of the Fourth Gospel is to be found in its sixth chapter” (ibid., 63). See my extended comments on 6:51–59.

⁸⁵ For a discussion of the textual issues in the verses see Metzger, *TCGNT*, 212, and M. Roberge’s two-part article, “Jean VI, 22–24. Un problème de critique textuelle?” *LTP* 34 (1978): 275–89; *LTP* 35 (1979): 139–51.

⁸⁶ Since the major city around the lake was Tiberias, reckonings of direction would be taken from Tiberias, thus the reference “to the other side.”

Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996).

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feeding took place (6:23, not the traditional site of Tabgha near Capernaum),⁸⁷ the people crossed over to Capernaum (apparently a home of Jesus’ friends or relatives; see 2:12) on the northeastern side of the lake. ¶

When they “found” Jesus (6:25, cf. the theme of “found” in 1:41, 45; 5:14; 7:34; 9:35), they addressed him as Rabbi (contrast their earlier desire to make him king; 6:15) and asked one of those questions (i.e., “whence?” “whither?” “how?” and “when?”) that for the evangelist always implied far more than the speaker(s) intended. They usually become focal introductions for revelations about Jesus. ¶

(6) *Two Discourses on Bread, Sign, and Eternal Life (6:26–40)*

²⁶ **Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.**

²⁷ **Do not work for food that spoils, but**

⁸⁷ A number of MSS suggest that Tiberias was near the site of the feeding, but the best reading would indicate that the designation “the other side” was the eastern side, near the feeding site.

for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

²⁸Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?”

²⁹Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

³⁰So they asked him, “What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? ³¹Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

³²Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

³⁴“Sir,” they said, “from now on give us this bread.”

³⁵Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. ³⁶But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. ³⁷All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever

comes to me I will never drive away.

³⁸For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

6:26 In typical Johannine fashion the evangelist indicates that Jesus did not address the immediate statement or question but pursued the conversation at a much deeper level (cf. [1:48](#); [2:19](#); [3:3](#); [4:10](#)). They had asked him about chronology, and he confronted them with the basic reason for their chasing after him. The familiar double *amēn* (“truly,” which the NIV again renders “I tell you the truth”) formula once more announces the presence of a crucial idea from Jesus. The people were chasing him because they liked his physical food supply, not because they saw his signs (*sēmeia*).⁸⁸ The

⁸⁸ Note at this point the discussion of F. Grob, “*Vous me cherchez, non parce que vous avez vu des signes ...*” *Essai d’explication cohérente de Jean 6/26*,” *RHPR* 60 (1980): 429–39.

KJV erroneously reads “miracles” here (6:26). The people certainly saw the miracle (in fact, their stomachs digested it) but they failed to recognize the sign in the miracle. *The meaning of “sign” in this Gospel is that it points beyond the physical, concrete reality to the reality of revelation.* It provides insight into who Jesus is.

6:27–29 The double *amēn* statement is immediately followed by an explanatory statement of what the people should have been pursuing. Instead of rushing after pieces of bread (and fish, physical food), which perish (“spoils”; cf. 6:12), the people’s effort (work) should have been directed to a food that endures (6:27). To make sure no one thought he was in the food preserving business, Jesus immediately defined what he meant by preservation, namely, eternal life. He also provided a footnote concerning the source of this life. The son of man, who was authenticated (sealed) by the Father, is clearly identified as this source (6:27; cf. 3:33–36). The question in this section is thus focused on the recognition of the authentic sign—Jesus, the Son of Man, the one who had been marked/sealed/certified (*sphragizein*) as genuine by the Father. He is the one who gives eternal life, the food that does not

perish (6:27). The reader will observe in Jesus’ words once again several familiar Johannine themes including eternal life (cf. 3:14; 5:21; 20:31), dependence on the Father (cf. 5:19–22; 17:6), Son of Man (cf. 1:51; 5:27),⁸⁹ Jesus as source (cf. 6:51; 8:12; 15:4), and saving from perishing or avoiding lostness (cf. 3:16–17; 4:42; 10:28). The result is that the reader is being led with the people in the story to ask the existential question: “What must we do?” (6:28).

But that question did not end there because it was asked not by contemporary generalists but by Jews who were oriented to “do the works God requires” (6:28).⁹⁰ The expression, literally, “working works,” is a typical emphatic Hebraism that has been preserved perfectly in

⁸⁹ “Son of Man” was the favorite self-designation of Jesus in the Synoptics. It could have been a substitute for “I,” a designation for human being as Ezekiel, or an expected messianic figure suggested in Dan 7:13. Jesus seems to have used that rather vague designation and infused it with his own concept of God’s appointed deliverer. For further remarks see the discussions at 1:51; 5:27.

⁹⁰ For an analysis related to misconceptions of working see U. von Wahlde, “Faith and Works in Jn vi 28–29: Exegesis or Eisegesis?” *NovT* 22 (1980): 304–415.

Greek. Its occurrence suggests that the conversation is most probably the kind that would have taken place in a synagogue (note the reference to the synagogue at 6:59)⁹¹ among those who were bent on gaining precise definitions of legitimate, God-honoring work that would provide the devotee with God's assured affirmation. The response of Jesus, however, was not what the questioners were seeking. In his answer Jesus turned the concern of the Jews on its head and defined the assuring work not as usual labor but as believing in him—the one who was on a mission from God (6:29).

The interplay between working and believing is crucial to the concept of salvation in John. On the one hand, a person cannot earn acceptability with God by working for it. On the other hand, acceptability with God cannot be on the basis of “belief” in a mere theological formulation about God. Thus the noun “faith” (*pistis*) does not occur in John's Gospel.⁹² He chose instead to use only the verb “be-

⁹¹ J. Thomas, “Le discours dans la synagogue de Capharnaüm. Note sur Jean 6, 22–59,” *Christus* 29 (1982): 218–22.

⁹² Note, however, the untypical use of πίστις at 1 John 5:4.

lieve” (*pisteuein*), and he almost equated it with “obey” (cf. 3:36). Acceptability with God is a relationship God gives (6:27), therefore, and both believing and obeying are parallel ways one acknowledges dependence on God. As the Son always responded appropriately to the Father, people are to respond to the Son, who was sent by the Father (6:29). That is precisely the way John understood the call of Jesus to the Jews here.

6:30 But how was a work-oriented Jew, who had always sought acceptability with God through work, going to react to such a call from Jesus to believe in him? The obvious way was to question the one who gave such advice and ask for proof of his claim. That reaction is exactly what happened when the people asked for a sign. But the demand for a sign was phrased in work-oriented language, namely, “What work are you doing?” (*ergazē*; the NIV has “what will you do?”).

6:31–33 The Jews then emphasized their own perspective by pointing back to the Mosaic sign of Manna in the desert. This reference inspired yet another double-level insight (cf. two temples, 2:19; two births, 3:3; two winds/spirits, 3:8; two waters, 4:10). Here the focus is on two breads. It is framed, as Borgen has argued, somewhat like a Midrashic inter-

pretation of [Exod 16:15](#) and other similar texts.⁹³

Jesus was ready to counter their response. They had called for a sign like that of receiving manna from Moses, and in support they had used a scriptural proof text: “He gave them bread from heaven to eat” (cf. [Exod 16:15](#)). In response Jesus challenged them through another double *amēn* saying because they had misused Scripture ([6:32](#)). This double *amēn* saying reminds us that we need to be careful in quoting Scripture because we, like the Jews, can misunderstand the main point of a text. The subject of that text was not Moses but the Lord. Moses was not the provider of bread. So Jesus turned their statement around and announced that the Father was active not merely in the past with Moses but was in their midst giving (present tense) them in Jesus the “true bread from heaven.”

This statement is exceedingly important because it asserts the continuing activity of God in Jesus and because it is again bristling with Johannine themes. Here are included themes of truth, gift,

⁹³ Borgen’s work, *Bread from Heaven*, is especially useful at the point of supplying insights into Midrashic interpretive models. See also his “Observations on the Midrashic Character of John 6,” 232–40.

and dependence on the Father. But v. [33](#) ties the entire matter together by emphasizing that the gift of bread comes down from heaven and provides life to the world. The term “heaven” here is a typical Jewish circumlocution for God (e.g., [Luke 15:18](#)), and the emphasis on coming down to the world is a clear Johannine reference to the incarnation (cf. [1:9](#), [14](#); [3:16](#)). The entire statement thus is a reaffirmation of the purpose of this Gospel, namely, the giving of life to all who believe ([20:31](#)).

6:34 The people missed the point because they were intent on continually filling their stomachs. This misunderstanding prepared the way for the first of the “I am” discourses in this section of the dialogue.

6:35 Their request for a continuing supply of bread drew from Jesus a two-pronged answer. First, he asserted (in this *egō eimi* saying with a complement⁹⁴) that he was in fact the Bread of life about

⁹⁴ Heretofore *ἐγὼ εἶμι* has not been used with any predicate nominatives (e.g., [4:26](#); [6:20](#)). After this point a complement will often be added in a series of symbolic images of how Jesus is to be conceived as relating to human beings (e.g., Light of the world, [8:12](#); [9:5](#); Door, [10:7](#), [9](#); Good Shepherd, [10:14](#)). In [18:5](#) the identifying *ἐγὼ εἶμι* is again used.

which they were conversing. Moreover, filling stomachs with baked dough might have been their concern, but it certainly was not his primary concern. Second, if they came to him for his bread, they would not have to be concerned about the continuity of supply. Jesus was not talking about a temporary matter. His concern was eternal (*aiōnion*) life (6:40). The means for gaining such bread of life was not by visiting a baker but by coming to Jesus. The logic expressed at 6:35 indicates that coming to Jesus is parallel to believing in him, just as obeying him stands parallel to believing in him at 3:36.

The discussion up to this point had been focused on bread, but in the second part of 6:35 the focus is widened to include parallel images of eating and drinking. This combination was familiar to the Jewish people because the exodus stories contained miracles of both food and drink (e.g., *Exod 16:15* and *15:24–25; 17:6*). This combination of eating and drinking was not merely an expression of general life-sustaining activity (e.g., *Luke 5:30; 12:19*); it also was related to religious worship as in the golden calf episode (*Exod 32:6*). In *1 Cor 10:1–9* Paul united in one brief passage the manna, the water from the rock, and the golden calf with eating and drinking, and in so doing he

illustrated how deeply ingrained these images were in the thought patterns of Israel. Moreover, eating and drinking were part of the eschatological imagery of God's people (e.g., *Isa 49:10; 55:1–2*; cf. *Rev 21:6; 22:2*). So it is no surprise that the images were adopted by Jesus as a symbolic representation of one's relationship to him (cf. the Wisdom tradition of *Sir 24:21*) and as an ordinance of the Christian's hope of experiencing the coming of the Lord (*1 Cor 11:26*).

6:36–39 But just as the physical experiences of eating and drinking did not guarantee life, so mere physical seeing of Jesus did not guarantee believing (cf. 6:40). The interplay of the themes of seeing and believing, as Cullmann has indicated,⁹⁵ is one of the major theological ideas of John. This theme, which highlights human response, is brought to a conclusion in the Thomas story (20:29). The emphasis on the human dimension of the relationship with Jesus, however, must not be isolated from the divine dimension of salvation, which is highlighted in the statement of the Father's role in salvation (6:37). The coming of disciples to Jesus is here described as a gift of the Father. For

⁹⁵ O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship*, trans. S. Todd and J. Torrance (Chicago: Regnery, 1953).

all the Christological emphases in this Gospel, it remains uncompromisingly theocentric. Those who argue for an exceedingly high (and therefore late) Christology in John often fail to note sufficiently this theocentricity.

Because coming to Jesus involves a divine dimension, believers who are enabled to come can have a sense of confidence and assurance that they will neither be cast out by Jesus (*ekballein*, 6:37) nor misplaced or lost by Jesus (*apolluein*, 6:39; cf. also 6:12). There is at v. 37 (also v. 39) a fascinating use of the neuter singular *pan* (“all”). It may be used here as a collective and may suggest that the general intention of God’s gift is that people will indeed come. The use of the masculine singular *pas* (“everyone”) at v. 40 could then suggest that each individual authentic coming to Jesus would certainly not be rejected. Such an interpretation would keep the tension between the divine and human dimensions of salvation. It would also affirm the positive intention of God’s will (6:38) and at the same time recognize the role of the human will and the general negative unwillingness on the part of people to accept Jesus, even though they had a direct physical encounter with him (6:36, 40).

Despite being rejected by many, Jesus was not to be regarded as being weak and lacking the power to preserve his followers. This text is undoubtedly one of the strongest assurance texts in the Gospel and is clearly parallel to 17:12, where Jesus indicates that while he was on earth he “protected” and “safeguarded” all those who were given to him (cf. Rom 9:6), except the devil man Judas (John 6:70–71; 17:12). The great Christian doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is not based merely on human effort but on the confidence that God is active both in the saving as well as in the preserving of those who commit themselves to serve God in Christ.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ The subject of the preservation of the saints has been a strongly debated issue in Christian theology. As I have indicated in my comments at 3:16–18, the tendency among Christians is to choose either an overemphasis upon God or humanity and lose the dynamic tension in the biblical texts concerning this matter. In maintaining the tension the interpreter must always maintain the commitment to the fact that it is God who does the saving but that human responsiveness to God’s actions is not inconsequential. For representative points of view see R. Yarbrough, “Divine Election in the Gospel of John,” in *The Grace of God and the Bondage of the Will*, ed. T. Schreiner et al.

Jesus' mission is the miraculous work of salvation and the provision of resurrection hope (6:39–40). The expectation of the Christian is none other than eternal life, a life with Jesus that has a positive eschatological expectation inherent in it. The expression “last day” (*eschatē hēmera*) is used for the first time here in John. Its use in John is restricted to the Festival Cycle (cf. 6:40, 44, 54; 7:31; 11:24) and the saddle chapter, which serves as a transition to the Farewell Cycle (cf. 12:48).⁹⁷ In the context of conflict with the Jews, the idea of the “last day” reminds one of the Jewish theme of hope in the coming Day

(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 47, and G. Osborne, “Soteriology in the Gospel of John,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. C. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Academic, 1989), 243–60. Cf. also my *Assurance and Warning*, 86–152. Contrast D. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981).

⁹⁷ Apart from the combination expression “last day” (ἔσχατη ἡμέρα as in 6:9), the word ἔσχατος is not used in John, except in the non-Johannine insertion at 8:9. Concerning John's eschatology the reader is reminded of the two-sided perspective in this Gospel articulated at 5:25–29. Cf. my statements at that point and my rejection of Bultmann's denial of a futuristic eschatology.

of the Lord (cf. *Zech 14:1–9*), but there is also present the dirgelike refrain of the Old Testament that for many in Israel the Day of the Lord would not bring the realization of hope but of judgment (cf. *Isa 2:12*; *Joel 1:15*; *2:11*; *Amos 5:18–20*; *Zeph 1:14–15*).

6:40 As this section is brought to a conclusion, there is an interesting word shift in v. 40. In the preceding verses Jesus referred to himself in the first person whereas in the middle of v. 40 the third person “the Son” is used, followed by a return shift in the final clause, “I will raise him up at the last day.” Bultmann, Fortna, and others have argued that such shifts signal that there are seams in the argument, indicative of the fact that several sources have been brought together. Indeed, Bultmann would argue that vv. 41–46 belong before vv. 36–40.⁹⁸ But from a purely logical sequence the argument is unconvincing. The word shift should remind readers that this Gospel, which was written many years after the resurrection of Jesus, contains statements

⁹⁸ See Bultmann, *John*, 221, 229–34. Contrast the more balanced perspective on the Johannine discourses in B. Lindars, “*Discourse and Tradition: The Use of the Sayings of Jesus in the Discourses of the Fourth Gospel*,” *JSNT* 13 (1981): 5–14.

Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996).

that are similar to confessional words. Accordingly, this verse, which serves as a kind of summation to vv. 35–39, has some of the earmarks that suggest it could have become a brief part of an early confessional statement about Jesus.