

# John's Feeding of the Five Thousand: A Corporeal Depiction of the 'Bread of Life' *Exegesis Paper on John 6:1-15*

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## Introduction

The story of the feeding of the five-thousand is situated firmly at the centre of the Gospel of John's so-called 'Book of Signs', which makes up the first half of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup> This paper takes the majority view that the Gospel was written likely in the years 90 to 95 CE. The author is thus most likely not the apostle John, which view has been adopted by tradition and is still held by some.<sup>2</sup> Matters of authorship are not particularly relevant to this paper, except to note that by convention the author will be referred to as 'John', by which we do not mean the Apostle necessarily, but whoever composed the text – either individual or group.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is a well-known miracle story, and one of five miracles of Jesus feeding multitudes attested in the canonical gospels. It is found in all three synoptic gospels also and is paralleled by a miracle of the feeding of the four thousand in the gospels of Matthew and Mark.<sup>3</sup> In the Fourth Gospel it is surrounded by miracles and teachings, and notably it is set before the 'Bread of Life' Discourse later in the chapter. The image of the feeding of the five thousand with bread becomes a temporal link to the spiritual bread that Jesus refers to in his discourse. The echoes of eucharistic imagery are difficult to ignore<sup>4</sup>, and may reflect a more developed church structure. It is certainly possible that this shows the beginning of a solidifying of cultic and ritual practices in the late first century.<sup>5</sup> The text by itself is a marvellous story of Jesus' spiritual power. Just as the five thousand were well fed on earth, with an abundance of leftover food, so too will the faithful be well-fed in the

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Robert Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids, USA: Baker Academic, 2004), 10.

<sup>2</sup> *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "John, the Gospel Of."

<sup>3</sup> Ivor Buse, "The Gospel Accounts of the Feeding of the Multitudes," *The Expository Times* 74, no. 6 (1963), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001452466307400603>.

<sup>4</sup> Yngwie Brilioth, "The New Testament Basis," in *Eucharistic Faith and Practice: Evangelical* (London: SPCK, 1965), 57-58.

<sup>5</sup> Dom Gregory Dix, "The Classical Shape of the Liturgy - li. The Eucharist," in *The Shape of the Liturgy: New Edition* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 137.

Kingdom. The people whom he has fed see something of this in Jesus, forcing him to escape to avoid being made king.<sup>6</sup> His time to rule is not yet here, yet the feeding is a symbol of the abundance that is to come.

The message of the miracle is a profoundly Christological one on several levels, and the following paragraphs will make the argument that John wants his readers to identify Jesus as a kingly figure and a Mosaic figure. John's Jesus is unlike any other king, and is greater even than Moses. He can feed the hungry with an abundance of food. However, the bread that feeds the multitude and sustains their mortal life is an earthly, corporeal symbol of the heavenly food that will sustain their eternal life. Greater even than the provision of bread is his provision of the Bread of Life – his own body, through which the faithful gain eternal life.

### Jesus, King & Prophet

The setting of John's telling of the feeding of the five thousand is near the Sea of Galilee. It follows a discourse on the nature of Jesus and his authority in John 5:19-47. Prior to that, Jesus answers accusations of healing on the Sabbath. It is such healings that cause crowds to follow him from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other in John 6:2. Brant makes the observation that John is depicting Jesus in some ways as an imperial figure – that tales of feeding multitudes, and walking on water, are tropes in stories of the emperors.<sup>7</sup> While we cannot comment at length on any links to aspects of Roman Imperial fiction, there are multiple attestations of Jesus healing multitudes in the earlier synoptic gospels, so it seems likely that this was a common story told about Jesus. It is in fact the only miracle which is

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Jeanes, "Eucharist," in *The Study of Liturgy and Worship: An Alcuin Guide*, ed. Juliette Day and Benjamin Gordon-Taylor (London: SPCK, 2013), 135.

<sup>7</sup> Jo-Ann A. Brant, "John 6:1-71: Bread and Circuses," in *John, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament*, ed. Mikael C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert (Grand Rapids, USA: Baker Academic, 2011), 113.

common to all four canonical gospels.<sup>8</sup> What does resinate in Brant's observations is the idea that John intends his readers to place Jesus into an imperial context by invoking the name of the Emperor Tiberius when 'Sea of Galilee' would have been a perfectly appropriate name in its own right.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the emperors, Jesus shows no interest in money. As a gracious and perfect host, Jesus provides more than the required quantity of food.<sup>10</sup> He does not use money to purchase the food – it is multiplied by his spiritual power – irrespective of which it would be simply too costly for Jesus and his disciples to afford. In Philip's words 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' (John 6:7 NRSV). Jesus' response is almost sly and potentially smarmy – he already knows what he is going to do (John 6:6). Unlike a worldly emperor, Jesus is able to provide for all his people, to such an extent that there are copious leftovers. For John, Jesus is so much more than an emperor, and greater than any terrestrial king.

The irony is clear in verse 15 when Jesus rejects the efforts of the people to make him a king. In the synoptics, there is no reference to this episode. John's focus is on a Jesus who is neither the messiah the people expect, nor the emperor they are used to seeing. John makes it clear that in attempting to make Jesus a king, the people demonstrate a profound lack of insight into Jesus' character and mission, or in Thompson's words, they 'have not understood who Jesus is.'<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Feeding of the Five Thousand," in *The Gospel According to Saint John, Black's New Testament Commentaries* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2005), 214.

<sup>9</sup> Brant, in *John*, 115.

<sup>10</sup> Craig S. Keener, "Giver of the New Manna: 6:1-71," in *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2003), 668.

<sup>11</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson, "Jesus, the Bread of Life: Signs at Passover," in *John: A Commentary*, ed. C. Clifton Black, M. Eugene Boring, and John T. Carroll, *The New Testament Library* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 142.

If John is showing Jesus is not the emperor, the king, or the messiah that people are expecting, in what way does John relay the image of a 'new Moses'? What is immediately resonant with the Hebrew Bible is the act of providing bread. John expands on this in the ensuing discourse: Moses provided manna for the people of Israel in the wilderness, but Jesus provides the bread of life. This must be the context that John has Jesus refer to in John 6:58, of the bread that his hearers' ancestors ate in the desert and still died. The connection to the manna has been noted for centuries. According to Cyril of Alexandria: 'The only begotten of God the Father is the true manna, the bread from heaven, given to all rational creatures by God the Father.'<sup>12</sup> Even the presence of Jesus on the mountain has echoes of Moses on Mount Sinai.<sup>13</sup> Jesus crosses the sea, which may be a reference to Moses' parting of the Red Sea.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that John intends us to see Jesus as a Mosaic figure, however despite Moses' provision of the manna, the people still perished. Jesus on the other hand offers physical bread, but in the discourse that follows, John has Jesus explain that the real bread is Jesus' body, and by its consumption, Jesus offers life. Jesus is like Moses, but for John he is in many ways 'greater than Moses'.<sup>15</sup>

John seems to be illustrating that Jesus' offering of life, and of salvation, is an act that is superior even to Moses' salvation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.<sup>16</sup> The question of the nature of this salvation is a theological one, but there does seem to be a connection for John

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<sup>12</sup> Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *6:1-15 the Feeding of the Five Thousand: A Fourth Sign, John 1-1* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 225.

<sup>13</sup> Brant, in *John*.

<sup>14</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, "Interpreting the Fourth Gospel: John 5-12," in *The Gospel and Letters of John, Interpreting Biblical Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Keener, in *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 670.

<sup>16</sup> Keener, in *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*.

between Jesus' multiplying the bread and offering himself as the bread of life, and the sacrament of the eucharist – whatever form that took in the late first century.

## Jesus the Bread of Life

Ultimately, the pericope of the Feeding of the Five Thousand in John's Gospel cannot be understood without the full context of the chapter, culminating in the Bread of Life discourse. According to Keener: 'More than with some of the previous narratives, the discourse that follows the feeding of the five thousand interprets and applies it, bringing out the Christological meaning of the event.'<sup>17</sup> In a manner reminiscent of the conversation with the Samaritan women at Jacob's Well (John 4), John shows Jesus offering a spiritual parallel to an earthly need. Jesus is the bread of life, and Jesus can provide water that will never leave drinkers thirsty. (John 4:14).

There are unavoidable eucharistic overtones to the feeding. The bread is taken, Jesus offers thanksgiving (εὐχάριστος – *eucharistos*), and it is distributed to the people. Keener<sup>18</sup> and others<sup>19</sup> argue that such a sacramental reading should be tempered by the lack of reference to the breaking of the bread. While it is not explicitly mentioned that the bread is broken by Jesus in this instance, it is in fact broken, as the disciples are instructed to collect 'fragments'

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<sup>17</sup> Keener, in *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 663.

<sup>18</sup> Keener, in *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*.

<sup>19</sup> Edmund Little, "Jesus, Sacrificial Victim and Divine King: The Feeding of the 5000 in John's Gospel," *Stimulus* 17, no. 2 (2009).

of bread in John 6:12 (NRSV). Moloney<sup>20</sup> agrees with the eucharistic connection<sup>21</sup>, and it is noted by Culpepper<sup>22</sup> also.

John's point is truly driven home when Jesus explicitly states that: 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.' (John 6:53-55 NRSV). There are echoes of the words of institution – 'this is my body ... this is my blood'. Speculation about the nature of the Eucharistic sacrament, its stage of development by 90-95 CE, are outside the scope of the present paper, however it is clear that this is what John has in mind, even if the meaning is somewhat deeper for John than just the ritual act.<sup>23</sup>

Brant explains that it would be unusual to distribute bread without a blessing.<sup>24</sup> That this is worthy of John mentioning (6:11) indicates the significance of the act. John does not include an institution narrative in his Gospel<sup>25</sup>, but he offers so much more – a defined, Christological rationale for the ritual. It is a sign of the salvation of Christ's followers, but a difficult one which causes followers to leave (John 6:60). It is linked temporally with the Passover, at which time Jesus would institute the eucharist (in the synoptics) be killed, and have his body, his flesh, offered as bread, that: 'Whoever eats of this bread will live forever'. (John 6:51 NRSV).

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<sup>20</sup> Francis J. Moloney, "li. Jesus and the Passover (6:1-71)," in *The Gospel of John*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina Series* (Collegeville, USA: The Liturgical Press, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Francis J. Moloney, "The Eucharist as Jesus' Presence to the Broken," *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 2, no. 2 (1989), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1030570X8900200203>.

<sup>22</sup> Culpepper, in *The Gospel and Letters of John*.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen W. Need, "Jesus the Bread of God the Eucharist as Metaphor in John 6," *Theology* 105, no. 825 (2016), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0040571x0210500305>.

<sup>24</sup> Brant, in *John*.

<sup>25</sup> Culpepper, in *The Gospel and Letters of John*.



## Conclusion

John has taken what seems to be a common tradition about Jesus and uses it to make some profound Christological statements. Jesus is a king, but not like the emperors. Jesus is a new Moses, but far greater. Above all, Jesus is himself the bread of life, and the act of multiplying the bread stands to demonstrate this. There are clear eucharistic resonances among them the acts of taking, blessing, distributing and breaking the bread. Finally, John attaches a salvific significance to Jesus' offering of his flesh as bread, that those who eat and drink can live forever.

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