

John 6:51–58

⁴¹ *The Jews murmured about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven,”* ⁴² *and they said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”* ⁴³ *Jesus answered and said to them, “Stop murmuring among yourselves.* ⁴⁴ *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day.* ⁴⁵ *It is written in the prophets: ‘They shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me.* ⁴⁶ *Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.* ⁴⁷ *Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.* ⁴⁸ *I am the bread of life.* ⁴⁹ *Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died;* ⁵⁰ *this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die.*

[The following is the gospel text for the Feast.]

⁵¹ *I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”* ⁵² *The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?”* ⁵³ *Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.* ⁵⁴ *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.* ⁵⁵ *For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.* ⁵⁶ *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.* ⁵⁷ *Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.* ⁵⁸ *This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.”*

Context

Our passage is part of a larger discourse (6:26–59). The best way to understand this discourse is to recognize that it centers on one biblical text, “*He gave them bread from heaven to eat*” (v. 31), and is therefore a conscious demonstration of the truth of 5:39, 46–47 that the Scriptures illuminate the person of Jesus. The pivotal text is a loose, by-memory combination of several possible Old Testament quotations:

Exod 16:4: “I will now rain down *bread from heaven* for you”;

Neh 9:15: “*Food from heaven* you gave them in their hunger”;

Ps 78:24: “He rained manna upon them for food and *gave them heavenly bread*”;

Ps 105:40: “... and with *bread from heaven* he satisfied them.”

All or some of these associated texts have been combined by the Fourth Evangelist into the one amalgam of verse 31. The discourse is broken by the short interruptions of verses 30–31, 34, 41–43, 52, which, by introducing live dialogue, help to keep the audience’s interest while at the same time pointing out the precise difficulties felt by both the Jews of Jesus’ time and of John’s own later period.

This discourse on a biblical text — what the Jews would call a *midrash* — follows a phrase-by-phrase order. It will treat in order: *He gave; bread from heaven; to eat*. Let’s observe this happen.

- a) ***He gave*** (vv. 26–34). In this first section, the emphasis lies on the giving. Jesus will give (vv. 27, 34), not as Moses gave (v. 32) a perishable manna food of mortality, but as the Father, source of eternal life, gives (v. 32). Thus far, Jesus appears as the giver of bread and therefore as the new and superior Moses.
- b) ***bread from heaven*** (vv. 35–47). The insistence now shifts to the bread from heaven that Jesus not only gives but actually is (vv. 35, 38, 41, 42). It is important to note here that the operative verb is “believe.” Jesus as bread from heaven is accepted and consumed through

the belief required in verses 35, 36, 40, 47. What this means is that this is a faith nourishment. Jesus is bread from heaven, feeding all believers, in the same sense that Old Testament wisdom nourished all who accepted it (Prov 9:1–5).

- c) **to eat** (vv. 48–59). In this final section, the vocabulary changes radically. The significant words are “flesh,” “blood,” “eat,” “drink.” Note the constant repetition of “eat” in vv.49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 58. “Feed on” (an even more physical verb in the Greek than “eat”) occurs in v.57. These verbs become overwhelmingly insistent, as does the constant reference to flesh and blood, food and drink. The meaning of the discourse has changed. Where in the preceding section Jesus nourished through wisdom-revelation those who believed, the verb “believe” has now completely disappeared and is replaced by “eat,” “feed on.” This is language which clearly speaks of sacramental nourishment, of the food and drink that one eats and feeds upon, of the Eucharistic nourishment provided by the flesh and blood of the Son of Man (v. 53). The “Son of Man” phraseology tells us that this is not the physical flesh and blood of the earthly Jesus and that we are asked to eat and drink but the spiritual, Spirit-filled flesh and blood of the heavenly Son of Man. Verse 58 ties the discourse together by referring back to the central phrase of verse 31.

What this discourse has done, therefore, is to deliver a rich and multi-faceted exposition of the Jesus-as-Bread-of-Life theme. Jesus is first of all the *giver* of the bread, a new Moses. He is also the *bread of wisdom and revelation* who nourishes all who come to him in faith. He is, finally, the *Eucharistic* source of eternal life for all who eat and drink the flesh and blood of the heavenly and glorified Son of Man. Because John uses this Eucharistic material in this Bread of Life homily, it will not be too surprising — yet surprising enough — that the Eucharist will not be mentioned at the Last Supper. Its material has been transferred to this incident. John has also succeeded, with this transfer, to unite in this one chapter the essentials of Christian Eucharist, the word and the bread — the revealing word of vv.35–47 and the sacramental bread of vv.48–59.

Commentary

The verses from Scripture (above) also show vv.41-50 as part of the context – simply to remind the reader that Jesus’ discourse is controversial and has raised grumblings among the people.

Jesus gives his flesh to eat

The question that emerges from the dispute among “the Jews” is a rejection of Jesus’ outrageous suggestion: “*How (ōs) can this man give us his flesh to eat?*” (v. 52). But it allows Jesus to conclude his discourse on his perfection of the Mosaic gift of bread from heaven through his gift of himself as the true bread from heaven. Unable to go beyond the physical, “the Jews” by their question misunderstand Jesus’ promise. Jesus insists on a gift of flesh and blood for life by stating negatively (v.53) and positively (v.54) that whoever eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Jesus, the Son of Man, has eternal life now and will be raised up on the last day. The midrashic play on the verb “to eat” provided by the Exodus passage in v. 31 has reached its high point. “Flesh” and “blood” emphasize that it is the incarnate life and very real death of the Son that are life giving food. Only the physical body of a human being produces flesh and blood. The argument of vv. 25-51 continues into vv. 52-59, especially in Jesus’ words that point to the resolution of a series of promises (cf. vv. 12-13, 27, 35, 51c). Jesus will provide a food for the life of the world, and that food is his flesh and blood. As the ancestors of Israel were nourished by the gift of the Torah, Jesus will nourish the whole world with the gift of himself. The people of Israel were nourished by eating the manna, perennially recalled in the nourishment provided for them by their total receptivity to and absorption of the Law. Now “the Jews” are told of the absolute need to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man. Unless they eat the flesh and drink the blood (*ean me phagete . . kai piete*) of the Son of Man they have no life (v. 53);

whoever eats the flesh and drinks the blood (*ho treigōn . kai pinon*) of Jesus has eternal life (v. 54). The shift from the more respectable verb “to eat” (*phagein*) to another verb that indicates the physical crunching with the teeth (*trōgein*) accentuates that Jesus refers to a real experience of eating. Hints of the Eucharist continue to insinuate themselves into the words of Jesus (see below). Flesh is to be broken and blood is to be spilled. Violence has been in the air since Jesus’ behavior on the Sabbath led “the Jews” to initiate a process that would lead to his death (5:16-18).

Jesus now associates the separation of flesh and blood in a violent death as the moment of total giving of himself. Jesus, the Son of Man, will give of his whole self for the life of the world (6:51c) by means of a violent encounter between himself and his enemies (1:5, 11; 2:18-20; 3:14; 5:16-18) in which his body will be broken and his blood will be poured out (6:53-54). This is the ongoing presence of Jesus in the gathered *klasmata* (vv. 12-13), the enduring gift that the Son of Man will give, the food that will not perish (v. 27) but will forever satisfy all hunger and thirst (v. 35).

The Passover context must not be forgotten. As once Israel ate of the manna in the desert and was nourished by adherence to the Law given at Sinai, so now the world is summoned to accept the further revelation of God in the broken body and spilled blood of the Son of Man. In this way all will have life, now and hereafter (vv. 53-54). These claims are further developed through vv. 55-57. Earlier parts of the discourse are recalled as Jesus insists that his flesh really is food (*alethes estin brōsis*) and his blood really is drink (*alethes estin posis*). This play on words recalls Jesus’ promise of the *brōsis* (food) that the Son of Man would give (v. 27), and his claim that over against all other bread from heaven, and especially the gift of the Law from heaven, the Father gives “the true bread from heaven” (v. 32: *ton arton ek tou ouranou alethinon*). Jesus is the true bread from heaven (v. 35). On the basis of the entire discourse Jesus lays claim to his flesh and blood as authentically (*aletheis*) food and drink. The midrashic explanation of v. 31 continues: through a total absorption (*trōgein* is again used) of the revelation of God made available through the bloody death of Jesus, believers will come to a mutuality in which they live in Jesus and Jesus lives in them (v. 56). This mutual indwelling (*menein* is used; cf. 15:4-7) flows from the union that exists between the Father and the Son (v. 57). Jesus’ words play on the verb “to live” (*zōein*). He refers to the Father as “the living Father” (*ho zōn pater*) who has sent his Son who has life in him because of the intimacy between the Father and the Son. If the one who sends is “living,” then the one who is sent lives because of the one who sent him (*kagō zo dia ton patera*). He thus has authority to pass on life to those who accept the revelation of the Father in the Son (v. 57). The idea of the reception of the revelation of God in and through the Son is not new (cf., for example, 3:11-21, 31-36), but the imagery has been changed by the Passover context. No longer does Jesus speak of “belief in” (cf. 3:12, 15, 18, 36), but of “the one who eats me” (v. 57b: *ho trōgdn me*). The expressions are parallel. As throughout the Gospel, unconditional commitment to the revelation of God in and through Jesus leads to life here and hereafter: the one who eats the flesh of Jesus will live because of him (v. 57b: *akeinos zēsei di’eme*). As Jesus lives because of the Father (v. 57a), the believer lives and will live because of Jesus (v. 57b).

The discourse closes as it opened, comparing the bread that Israel’s ancestors ate in the desert and the bread that comes down from heaven (v. 58; cf. vv. 30-33). All former gifts from heaven have been surpassed. Playing upon the two possibilities of life—physical life that the manna could not provide, and eternal life that the true bread of life does give (cf. vv. 49-50)—Jesus points to the death of Israel’s ancestors and promises everlasting life to those who eat of the true bread from heaven. A new possibility has entered the human story. The Law was a gift of God (cf. 1:17), but it has been surpassed by Jesus, the bread from heaven (v. 35), promising his abiding presence (v. 56), communicating the life of the Father to all who consume this true bread (v. 57). On the occasion of the celebration of Passover Jesus announces that there is another bread from heaven that eclipses all the original bread offered to the ancestors of Israel (v. 58). “This he said in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum”

(v. 59). Jesus has not moved. The discourse ends where it began: at Capernaum (vv. 24, 59). The narrator closes the discourse with a comment that reminds the reader that Jesus is in a Jewish center of worship during Passover time, uttering a message that presupposes, fulfills, and transcends a Jewish Passover tradition.

The Eucharist

This section is written at two levels. At one level it is an on-going commentary on the verb “to eat” (cf. v. 31) summoning up a rich tradition of Eucharistic language: “bread,” “food,” “flesh,” “blood,” “to eat,” “to drink,” “will give,” “for your sakes.” The discourse, from v. 25 down to v. 59, presents Jesus as the true bread from heaven, replacing the former bread from heaven, the manna of the Law. The believer must accept the revelation of God that will take place in broken flesh and spilled blood (vv. 53-54), a never-failing nourishment (v. 35) that the Son of Man will give (v. 27). But at the end of the first century Johannine readers, and the Christian readers of subsequent centuries, have every right to ask: where do we encounter this revelation of God in the flesh and blood of the Son of Man? The author’s insinuation of eucharistic language into the final section of the discourse provides the answer: one encounters the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ in the eucharistic celebration. The use of the word *klasmata* to refer to the bread consigned by Jesus to his disciples (vv. 12-13) has lurked behind the discourse, reminding the reader of such celebrations.

The author is working at two levels. The main thrust of the discourse is to point to Jesus as the revelation of God, the true bread from heaven, perfecting God’s former gift, the bread of the manna. However, the word *klasmata* in vv. 12-13, the promise in v. 27 of a future gift of food that the Son of Man would give, the reference to the satisfying food and drink in v. 35, and the further promise in v. 51c of the gift of the flesh of Jesus for the life of the world keep the eucharistic question alive. The midrashic unfolding of the verb “to eat” (cf. v. 31) in vv. 49-58 naturally led to the use of eucharistic language to explain the meaning of these verses in the living faith of the early Christian community.

The Eucharist renders concrete, in the eucharistic practice of the Christian reader, what the author has spelled out throughout the discourse. The Eucharist is a place where one comes to eternal life. Encountering the broken flesh and the spilled blood of Jesus, “lifted up” on a cross (vv. 53-54), the believer is called to make a decision for or against the revelation of God in that encounter (vv. 56-58), gaining or losing life because of it (vv. 53-54).

A Final Thought

There are many commentaries (e.g. Kruse) that insist on a metaphorical interpretation of “eat” and “drink” and are thus unable/unwilling to move beyond “eat” and “drink” as metaphors for belief. There are some commentators (e.g. LaGrange) who insist there is no metaphor, that the entirety of Jesus’ discourse is sacramental/Eucharistic. As Fr. Raymond Brown and Fr. Francis Moloney point out, the truly Catholic position is “both-and.” What begins in John 6:22-50 as metaphor for belief, is ultimately answers in John 6:51-58 as Eucharist.

Notes

John 6:51 the bread that I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh: Many elements in v. 51c reflect eucharistic traditions found elsewhere in the NT and in the early Church. The Johannine celebration of the Eucharist lies behind the use of key expressions: *ho artos* (bread), *sarx* (flesh), *ego dōsō* (I will give), *hyper* (for the sake of). These explicit eucharistic links are seen by most commentators as the introduction to vv. 51c-58, a discrete section within John 6 that deals with the Eucharist. It may be true that the “backbone of vss. 51-58 is made up of material from the Johannine narrative of the institution of the Eucharist” (Brown, Gospel 1:287), but behind the eucharistic language the interpretation given continues to support the more overarching message of Jesus’ self-gift for the life of the world. His body (“flesh”) will be given over in crucifixion for the life of the world.

John 6:52 *The Jews quarreled among themselves*: The quarreling (*emachonto oun . . . hoi Ioudaioi*) continues the theme of the “grumbling” from Exodus 16.

John 6:53 *Amen, amen, I say to you*: The presence of the double “amen” in v. 53 makes this the third use of the expression to introduce Jesus’ response to the misunderstanding interruptions that mark the beginning of each section (cf. vv. 26, 32). It is an indication of the staged unfolding of the argument. ***eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood*:** see “Additional Notes” below

John 6:54 *those who eat my flesh*: The use of *trōgein* for the action of “eating” is found throughout vv. 53-58 (cf. vv 54, 56, 57, 58). The claim that the verb is used to express the physical experience, “to munch,” “to crunch” is sometimes questioned. Those who reject this physical meaning point to the presence of *phagein* in the immediate context (cf. v. 53), and thus claim that the verbs are interchangeable. This does not respect the fact that the verbs *phagein* and *esthiein* are found in a number of places and contexts in the Fourth Gospel, but *trōgein* is found only in 6:54-58 and 13:18. Both of these passages have eucharistic background. It is often suggested that the vigor of this language combats emerging docetic ideas about Jesus.

John 6:55 *true food...true drink*: The Greek used for true is *alēthēs* – as opposed to the Greek *alēthinos*. This latter word (meaning “the only real”) is used to distinguish the heavenly reality from its earthly counterpart – and in scripture to distinguish the NT reality from its OT counterpart. *Alēthinos* would thus be out of place as Jesus is not contrasting his flesh with any natural or OT counterpart. Rather, Jesus is insisting on the genuine value of his flesh and blood as food and drink.

John 6:57 *the living Father*: The concentration on the theme of “life” and its communication from Father to Son to believer produces the expression “the living Father” (*ho zōn pater*).

John 6:58 *bread that came down from heaven..whoever eats this bread will live forever*: As Brown and Moloney [230-32] point out, there seems to be very little middle ground – scholars either believe the entire John 6 is metaphoric or they believe it is Eucharistic/sacramental. As they point out, many commentators write along their denominational beliefs, but scholars, despite their denominational professions, hold that John 6:51-58c is unavoidably Eucharistic.

Additional Notes on the Eucharistic Theme of Jn 6:51-59

Where the principal focus of the previous section is the bread of life as the divine revelation given to men by and in Jesus, John 6:51 adds a clearly Eucharistic theme - ‘*I am the living bread come down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.*’ While some argue the words are metaphor, the Jews clearly understand. Jesus is referring to eating of his flesh. He recounts this action verb several other times between vv. 51-58, while adding the drinking of his blood to the command. This is no metaphor for accepting his revelation, already adequately expressed. “To eat someone’s flesh” appears in the Bible as a metaphor for hostile action (Ps 27:2, Zech 11:9). In fact, in the Aramaic tradition, the “eater of flesh” is the title of the devil. The drinking of blood was looked upon as a horrendous thing forbidden by God’s Law (Gen 9:4, Lev 3:17, Dt 12:23, and Acts 15:20). Its symbolic meaning was that of brutal slaughter (Jer 45:10). In Ezekiel’s vision of apocalyptic carnage (Ez 39:17), he invites the scavenging birds to come to the feast: ‘*You shall have flesh to eat and blood to drink.*’ Thus if Jesus’ words in v.53 are to have positive, favorable meaning, they refer to the Eucharist.

In v.51, we have a parallel with v.35, which is the beginning of the revelation form of the Bread of Life Discourse, except that in v.51 Jesus speaks of the “living bread”, a term more suitable for the Eucharist. In this same verse we see the connection of the living bread-the flesh-come down from heaven. Recalling John 1:14 where the entrance of the Word among us was spoken of in terms of becoming flesh; and it is this same flesh that is to be given to man as living bread. In the same passage

John invokes the Incarnation and then closes with the death of Jesus, a Eucharistic theme. Where in v.32 it is the Father who gives the heavenly bread (revelation), in v.51 where the bread becomes identified with the flesh of Jesus, he must give it himself. Jesus must lay down his life of his own accord and that voluntary death makes Eucharistic participation in his flesh possible. At the beginning of the Gospel we hear that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sins (Jn 1:29); now in context of a discourse set at Passover time we hear that Jesus becomes the Paschal lamb and gives his flesh for the life of the world.

In v.52 we see a misunderstanding that parallels vv. 41-42. Strangely, Jesus does not take any pains to explain away the Jewish repugnance at the cannibalistic thought of eating his flesh; rather in v.53 he emphasizes the reality of "feeding" on his flesh and adds the even more repugnant note of drinking his blood. Versus 55-56 promise the gift of life to one who feeds on this Eucharist, but the Eucharistic promise follows the main body of the Discourse (vv 35-50) which insists on the necessity of belief in Jesus. The juxtaposition of the two forms of the discourse teaches that the gift of life comes through belief in Jesus. The Eucharistic life-giving is not through unbelieving "feeding".

In Hebrew and Aramaic of Jesus' day, there really was no word for "body." John's use of "flesh" (whereas the other Eucharistic accounts use "body") is perhaps closest to the language of Jesus. The earliest writers of the church, e.g. Ignatius and Justin Martyr use the language of "flesh" in their discourses and letters regarding the Eucharist. Clearly the first Christian communities recognized the Eucharistic theme of John's verses.

The two themes of the Discourse, faith and Eucharist, cannot be separated for neither faith nor the Eucharist are directly the focus of attention, but rather both are unified in the person of Jesus who offers a living relationship through faith and Eucharist. The sacramental experience does not replace faith in Jesus, but expresses and confirms it. For John, Eucharistic faith is to believe that the same, risen, Incarnate Jesus continues to give himself to believers in a personal communion and to exercise his life-giving mission. Whoever participates in the exercise of faith and Eucharist 'remains in me and I in him'.

While the synoptic gospel writers record the institution of the Eucharist, the theological gospel writer is the one who explains what the Eucharist does for the Christian - the personal communion with Jesus and thus with the Father.

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