

6:22–29

Proper Motives

6:22–23 . A large, culturally Greek-oriented city on the lake of Galilee, Tiberias was named for the emperor Tiberius and built by Herod Antipas on the site of a graveyard. This site effectively kept the most religious Jews out of the city and allowed Herod to dole out favors to allies without interference from other powerful Jews. It does not appear in the New Testament record apart from this mention and, like Sepphoris, the other large city of Galilee (also very Hellenized), does not seem to have been frequented by Jesus.

6:24–26 . The crowd wants to follow a prophet who will provide free food and political deliverance—another Moses. But they miss the central thrust of Jesus' mission (cf. 6:15).

6:27–29 . The dialogue between Jesus and the crowd plays on the term *work*; Judaism stressed righteous works, but Jesus singles out one work: faith in him (Jewish teachers praised Abraham's "work" of faith in God, but Jesus' demand is more specific). They then demand from Jesus a "work," which now means a sign (v. 30), as it sometimes does in Jewish literature. The "seal" (v. 27) means that God has attested Jesus; cf. comment on 3:33.

6:30–59

Jesus as the New Manna

This passage is a regular Jewish midrash, or homily, on Exodus 16:15 and Psalm 78:24, which Jesus quotes in John 6:31. Jesus paraphrases, explains and expounds in a manner characteristic of ancient Jewish teachers, yet his hearers fail to understand him. Ancient teachers sometimes made their lectures hard to understand to sort out genuine followers from the masses.

6:30–31 . The crowd still wants him to act as the new Moses they expect—on an earthly, political level. Many Jewish people expected manna to be restored in the world to come. Like other ancient writers, John was free to paraphrase his material in his own words; here the crowd cites Scripture as if they are rabbis in a debate (Ex 16:4, 15; cf. Ps. 78:24; John seems to know and use both Hebrew and Greek versions of these texts).

6:32–33 . One method of Jewish exposition was "Do not read this text as saying *x*, but rather *y*." Jesus says, "Not Moses, but God really gave this bread." His hearers would have to agree; that was technically how Moses had put it (Ex 16:4, 15; cf. Deut 8:3). Like many other interpreters of his day (see, e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls), Jesus is concerned to apply the biblical text to their present situation.

6:34 . They hear him on a different level from the meaning he intends (cf. 4:15), so he explains further. The ignorance of opponents or minor characters was often used as a foil to further a main argument throughout ancient literature (Plato, rabbis, novels, etc.).

6:35–40 . Jewish expositors had already often used manna as a symbol for spiritual food, God's law, or Torah/Wisdom/Word. The dead would be raised to eternal life "on the last day," the day of the Lord, when God would transform the world and inaugurate his eternal kingdom.

New Testament ***New Testament**. The common modern term for the early Christian literature finally declared canonical by the church and accepted by nearly all Christians today.

Hellenized ***Hellenistic**. Although the commentary usually uses the term "Greek," "Hellenistic" is the more accurate technical term for the cultural fusion of classical Greek culture with Near Eastern cultures carried out in the eastern Mediterranean by Alexander the Great and his successors. "Hellenistic" Judaism is thus Judaism heavily influenced by Greek culture, i.e., "Hellenized."

midrash **Midrash**. Jewish commentary or exposition on Scripture. The forms varied considerably but often included reading a text in the light of other texts, with careful attention to all nuances of details supposedly filled with divine significance. Because such methods of reading Scripture were common, early Christians could employ them in relating their message to other ancient Jewish Bible readers.

rabbis ***Rabbi**. Jewish teacher. Sometime after A.D. 70 the term became a technical one for those ordained in the rabbinic movement, which probably consisted primarily of Pharisaic scribes. (To accommodate customary usage this commentary sometimes applies the term to Jewish teachers of the law in general, although such common usage may have technically been later; it also applies the term to the teachings of Jewish legal experts collected in rabbinic literature.)

Dead Sea Scrolls ***Dead Sea Scrolls**. Writings from a strict Jewish sect (usually agreed to be Essenes) that lived in the Judean desert, near modern Khirbet Qumran. The writings include the War Scroll, the Community Rule, the Damascus Document, the Thanksgiving Hymns, the Genesis Apocryphon, the Temple Scroll and commentaries on and expansions of various biblical books.

Plato **Plato**. A student of Socrates whose idealism and dualistic worldview became influential in subsequent Greek thought. He flourished in the fourth century B.C.

law ***Law**. "Torah" (the Hebrew word behind the Greek word translated "law") means literally "instruction" and "teaching," not just regulations. It was also used as a title for the first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch, the books of Moses) and

6:41–43 . They continue to hear him on the wrong level, even though he clearly refers to eternal life and not literal bread. Their “grumbling” alludes to the grumbling of Israel in the wilderness against the first Moses.

6:44–46 . Most Jewish people believed in both human choice and God’s sovereignty. The argument here stresses that those in relationship with the Father will recognize Jesus; those who do not recognize him do not know the Father either.

6:47–51 . Jesus contrasts the new and old manna in good midrashic style, like a good Jewish expositor.

6:52 . Again they interpret him too literally. Jewish people had many forbidden foods, but all the Greco-Roman world abhorred cannibalism (which some abominable cults and some barbarians reportedly practiced occasionally). Romans later misinterpreted Christian language about the Lord’s Supper: “eating the body and blood of their Lord” sounded like cannibalism to outsiders and thus aroused more persecution against the church .

6:53 . Eating the flesh of the Passover lamb was required (Ex 12:8); but drinking the blood of the lamb (or of any creature) was always forbidden (Lev 17:10–11). A thoughtful interpreter, however, might have also recalled the expression “the blood of grapes,” meaning wine (Gen 49:11), which was essential to the Passover meal.

6:54–59 . On the literal level (cannibalism and drinking blood) obeying Jesus’ statement should have merited judgment, not salvation; thus they are confused.

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6:25–59 Discussions about the bread of life

The people were baffled how Jesus had reached the other side of the lake (25), and their question shows the purely human level on which they were thinking. Jesus’ answer to their question goes deeper. He pointed out their failure to realize the significance of the *signs* ; they saw only food, not the real meaning of Jesus’ act. They were convinced of their ability to meet what was required, but Jesus had to remind them that *eternal life* is a gift. The *seal* is God’s mark of authentication. Whoever holds the seal acts on God’s behalf. Hence the importance of Jesus as God’s agent, who is here called the *Son of Man* , a title which draws attention to his humanity. The statement in v 27 must have seemed strange, for the people were seeking to avoid labour, but in these words Jesus was graciously declining their quest for merely physical food. Clearly v 28 implies that they thought in terms of working to earn merit, but Jesus at once reminded them of the need for faith, not works.

The question in v 30 reveals the shallowness of their thought, for what further sign did they expect than the feeding of a multitude from negligible supplies? The reference to the *manna in the desert* (31) provides the clue to the working of their minds. They were probably thinking this provision was superior to that which Jesus had provided because of the sheer quantity of it. Their concept of *sign* seems to have been limited to a reproduction of the desert experience of the Israelites. This was tantamount to expecting that the Messiah must outdo Moses to impress them. The reference to *bread from heaven* is most likely a quote from Ps. 78:24 , although there are other parallels. Jesus took up the theme (32), first denying that Moses provided the heavenly bread and then identifying the bread with himself. As compared with the manna, which was limited to the Israelites and for a prescribed time, Jesus as the bread

sometimes for the whole Old Testament. This commentary uses the translation “law” because it is familiar to readers of most translations, even though the English term’s semantic range is much narrower than the Jewish concept.

eternal life ***Eternal life**. In Jewish texts, the term literally means “the life of the world to come,” bestowed after the resurrection from the dead; taken from Daniel 12:2 , it became a standard concept in most of early Judaism and was sometimes abbreviated “life.” Some New Testament passages speak of it as a present as well as future gift, because Jesus’ resurrection has inaugurated salvation for the present.

kingdom ***Kingdom**. This term means “rule,” “reign” or “authority” (not a king’s people or land, as connotations of the English term could imply). Jewish people recognized that God rules the universe now, but they prayed for the day when he would rule the world unchallenged by idolatry and disobedience. The coming of this future aspect of God’s reign was generally associated with the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. Because Jesus came and will come again, Christians believe that the kingdom has been inaugurated but awaits consummation or completion. “Kingdom of heaven” is another way (Matthew’s usual way) of saying “kingdom of God.” “Heaven” was a standard Jewish way of saying “God” (as in Lk 15:21).

church ***Church**. The Greek term used in the New Testament reflects the terms often used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word for the “congregation” (*qahal*) of Israel: “church” (assembly) and “synagogue” (gathering). Although some scholars have suggested that Jesus could not have spoken about the church during his earthly ministry, the Dead Sea Scrolls used the Hebrew term for God’s community; hence Jesus could use this word in talking about his future community (Mt 16:18 ; 18:17). The term was in common use in Greek culture for “assemblies,” especially citizen assemblies in cities. (The popular modern surmise that the Greek word for “church,” *ekklēsia* , means “called-out ones” is thus mistaken; that sense is actually more appropriate for “saints,” i.e., “those separated [for God].”)

¹Keener, C. S., & InterVarsity Press. 1993. *The IVP Bible background commentary : New Testament* . InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Ill.

continually gives *life to the world* (33). But v 34 shows that the hearers could not rise above the level of material provision. In the next section Jesus affirmed his claim to be the true bread.

V 35 records the first of the great 'I am' sayings of Jesus, and the following verses (35–51) are an expanded commentary on it. It is a direct response to the people's demand for bread, for it was necessary for them to understand that Jesus was speaking of spiritual not physical food. The meaning of the phrase *bread of life* is bread which gives life, but such bread is available only to those who believe in Jesus, a condition which the hearers had not fulfilled (36). If Jesus' mission depended on the faith of the people, does this suggest a failure? V 37 gives the answer. The final result is in the Father's hands. *Whoever comes* shows an emphasis on the individual response. The emphatic negative statement *I will never drive away* is to be understood as an assurance that Jesus will preserve them. There is no possibility of any disagreement between the Father and the Son, as vs 38–39 show. What the Father gives the Son will receive— *I shall lose none* . Note that the *all* in v 39 is neuter (as in v 37) and sums up everything given by the Father to the Son. The two references to the *last day* (40) show that Jesus was thinking ahead to the end of the age, when all will be consummated.

At this point in the discussion Jewish objections came to the fore. The sticking point was *the bread that came down from heaven* (41). They could not reconcile this with their knowledge of Jesus' humble origins (42). Jesus rebuked their grumbling rather than answered their objection (43), although when he pointed out the necessity for the Father to take the initiative, he was virtually telling them that they were out of step with the Father (44). They needed a spiritual revelation to understand Jesus' words. This was further underlined by an appeal to the prophets (45). The passage quoted is Is. 54:13 , which describes the triumph of the Servant in his kingdom. It endorses the view that the initiative is with God. Yet God's revelation comes only through Jesus, since he alone has seen God (46). The need for faith is again stressed. V 47 echoes the language of 3:15 .

The theme of the *bread* is again introduced, and Jesus' own claim is repeated (48). The superiority of the heavenly bread over the manna is that the former leads to life whereas the latter could not prevent death (49–50). In the important statement of Jesus in v 51 , he claimed to be the *living bread* , which although synonymous with *bread of life* brings out more vividly the contrast with the manna. But there is a further extension of thought in the identifying of the bread with the *flesh* . There is also a difference from the earlier statement in that it is now Jesus himself who gives, whereas before it was the Father. The word *flesh* refers to the human life of Jesus. It was totally misunderstood by the Jews (52). It differs from the word used at the Lord's Supper ('body' instead of 'flesh'), which shows that this statement is not to be read in the light of the Supper but vice-versa. The word *world* in v 51 should be understood as the world of people.

It was because the Jews put a literal interpretation on the words of Jesus that he gave a further explanation in vs 53–58 . It is difficult to believe that the Jews could not see through to some metaphorical meaning. Their objection appears to be little more than ridicule. It is not so surprising that the Jews did not penetrate to the spiritual meaning of Jesus' words, for understanding was possible only through faith, which it has already been noted they did not possess. The eating and drinking of the *flesh* and *blood* of Jesus is clearly an act of faith (53). The metaphorical language can be understood only in the light of the coming sacrifice of Jesus. Dependence on what Jesus has done is, therefore, vividly described in terms of eating and drinking. The result of such dependence is seen in vs 56–57 , in a mutual indwelling. Jesus' dwelling in believers means that he identifies himself with them, but their dwelling in him means that they continue to depend on him. This whole discussion closes with another comparison between the manna and the heavenly bread. V 58 is in fact an echo of v 49 . John leaves until the end of the discussion any reference to where it took place. Since the discussion arose out of the miracle of the feeding, it is not possible to say what part of it preceded the entry into the *synagogue* . John does not consider it relevant to explain, but it is not impossible that the whole discourse took place inside. Some synagogue services would have allowed for this.

²Carson, D. A. 1994. *New Bible commentary : 21st century edition*. Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. (4th ed.) . Inter-Varsity Press: Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA