

Thru the Bible: Gospel of John 6

Review: Overview of the 'Book of Signs' (John 2-12): 7 Signs – 7 Discourses – 7 "I Am" Statements

Tabgha Mosaic

Introduction: The Feeding of the Five Thousand (John 6): This is one of the few stories that appears in all four gospels and so, must have been a very important tradition with significant implications for understanding who Jesus was. While it was undoubtedly passed on in oral tradition before the first written Gospel account in Mark a generation later, it is interesting that so many of the details are paralleled in all four versions: Jesus retreating to a lonely place across the Sea of Galilee; five loaves and two fish; 5000 men in the crowd; 12 baskets of bread left over, Jesus' command for the people to sit, etc. When comparing gospel stories ("Horizontal Reading"), it is always important (and interesting) to note the distinctives in each gospel.



The Setting (6:1-4): John gives much more detail than the Synoptic gospel writers on the time and place for the feeding miracle:

- The mention of the Sea of Galilee/Tiberius:
- The motive of the crowd in following Jesus: "Because they saw the *signs* of healing"
- Jesus going up on *the mountain*:
- The time of the Jewish *Passover*.

The Dialogue with the Disciples (6:5-9): Only John's version gives a voice to specific disciples in a discussion about how to feed such a large crowd at the end of the day in such a remote location. It would be natural for Jesus to ask Philip about where to find enough bread for the people, since he is from the nearby town of Bethsaida. But John immediately adds that Jesus asked this "*only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do*" (6:6). It is then that Andrew presents the young boy with "five barley loaves and two fish" (6:8-9).

The Feeding Miracle (6:10-13): In a scene reminiscent of Psalm 23 "*He makes me lie down in green pastures... You prepare a table before me*" Jesus had the people sit down in the grass, offered a prayer of thanksgiving (a "blessing" in the Synoptics) and distributed the multiplied loaves and fish to the hungry crowd of men, women and children, "as much as they wanted" (6:11). Then, in a direct contrast to the example of Moses and the manna in Exodus 16, "*Let no one leave any of it over until morning*" – Jesus instructs his disciples to gather up the leftovers, with the rationale "*Let nothing be wasted*" (6:12), a detail unique to John's version.

"Blessed be thou,
Yahweh our God,
King of the world who
causes bread to come
forth from the earth"
**Traditional Jewish
Berakah [blessing]**

The Response of the Crowd (6:14-15): Whereas in the other three gospels the feeding story ends with the mathematics of the crowd size (Mt. and Mk.) or the number of baskets left over (Lk.), John includes this unique tradition of the crowd's response to the 'miraculous sign' (6:14). They rightly recognize that Jesus is the fulfillment of their long awaited prophetic hopes, and wrongly assume he will be the one to replace Herod and Caesar as a powerful messianic king, who will finally restore Israel to its rightful place over the nations (**note Acts 1:6**). Ironically, they want to "take him by force to make him king" (6:15). How does Jesus respond to that? He simply walks away!

Appreciating the biblical and religious background to the feeding story: One of the most important aspects of bible study is the recognition of OT biblical texts and allusions which underlie many passages and stories in the NT. The main background to the feeding of the 5000 is the Exodus story of Moses and the Passover, as well as the following provision of manna in the wilderness. John picks up many phrases and themes from that narrative (and more) and expects his (Jewish) readers to recognize them.

1. The Passover Celebration (Pesach): Also called the 'Feast of Unleavened Bread' – it was one of the three major Jewish pilgrim festivals, held in the Spring to mark the beginning of the *barley* harvest. While it historically celebrates God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt, in Jesus' day they would be longing for a new freedom from the yoke of the Roman Empire.

2. The Manna in the Wilderness: All three synoptic gospels mention that the feeding story takes place in the *eremos*, the Greek term used to designate a desolate or wilderness region. Just as God provided 'bread from heaven' for the multitude of Israelites following Moses in the desert, so Jesus feeds the crowd who have followed him to a remote region. There are a variety of parallels between the two accounts:

- **God as healer:** "I am the LORD who heals you" (Exod. 15:26)
"They saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick" (John 6:2)

- **The theme of testing:** “I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not” (Exod. 16:4); compare John 6:6; 60ff.
- **The amount of food:** “They gathered as much as each of them needed” (Exod. 16:18);
Jesus distributed “as much as they wanted” (John 6:11)
- **The Israelites complaining:** “The whole congregation of the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron” (Exod. 16:2)
“The Jews began to grumble about him [Jesus]” (John 6:41)

3. The Prophet like Moses: In John 1:21 The Jewish leaders ask John the Baptist whether he is “the prophet” – to which John tersely answers “I am not.” After the feeding miracle the people are convinced that Jesus himself is the expected “prophet like Moses” promised by Yahweh in Deut. 18: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet **like me** [Moses] from among your own brothers. Listen to him...I [the Lord] will put my words in his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him” (18:15, 18).

What’s more, at the very end of Deuteronomy, written after the death of Moses, the final editor notes, “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel **like Moses**...he was unequalled for all the **signs** and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform...and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel” (34:10-12; note Acts 3:20-22; 7:37).

“And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it in those years because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time”

2 Bar. 28:8

“As the first redeemer caused manna to descend...so will the second redeemer cause manna to descend”

Eccl. Rabbah 1.9

4. The Prophet like Elisha: John’s readers/hearers would also be reminded of a similar episode in the life of the prophet Elisha, who, when offered 20 loaves made of barley, said: “Give it to the people and let them eat.” But his servant said, ‘How can I set this before a hundred people?’ So he repeated, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’ He set it before them, they ate, and had some left.” (2 Kings 4:42-44).

Application:

1. Jesus and Human Political Aspirations: Even today, many American Christians have been lured into an unholy alliance between Christian faith and power politics, leading to an unbiblical form of nationalism. This is often connected to the idea of America as a “Christian nation” – which is both bad theology and bad history. Jesus is indeed king - as Nathaniel declares in the very first chapter, “you are the king of Israel” (1:49), but, as Jesus himself states to the ruling power of his day, “My kingdom is not of this world” (19:36). All four gospels emphasize the “upside-down” nature of Jesus’ kingdom and that true discipleship follows a theology of the cross, not one of glory.



2. Jesus and Doggie Bags: In light of the Gospel’s focus on God’s love for his creation - the “world” (Gr. *cosmos*), and the implications of the incarnation for future physical renewal, Jesus’ command “Let nothing be wasted” can help us develop a “theology of consumption” in a culture that has normalized luxuries. The subtle snare of consumerism was a problem for Christians even in the Reformers’ day, as John Calvin notes below:

“There is almost no one whose resources permit him to be extravagant who does not delight in lavish and ostentatious banquets, bodily apparel, and domestic architecture; who does not wish to outstrip his neighbors in all sorts of elegance...and all these things are defended under the pretext of Christian freedom...But when they are coveted too greedily, when they are boasted of, when they are lavishly squandered, things that were of themselves lawful are certainly defiled by these vices” **Institutes 3.19.9**

Resources for further study:

<https://www.christianpost.com/news/did-the-first-amendment-make-america-a-christian-nation.html>

Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (2012). See chapter 8: “The City on the Hill”

Cal Thomas and Edward Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Zondervan, 1999)

Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (2010)

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*, 4th Ed. (Zondervan, 2014)

Online Synopsis of the Four Gospels: https://bible.org/assets/pdf/White_ntsynopsis.pdf