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The Blessed Bread of Life: A Biblical theology perspective and research of John 6:30-35,44-58

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The Blessed Bread of Life
A Research of John 6:30-35,44-58

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Intro

John 6 is a passage that can seem confusing, graphic even, through concepts of Biblical theology, exegesis and application; one can come to a greater understanding of the teaching of Jesus in this passage. The main theme of John 6:30-35,44-58 as Jesus defines Himself as the bread and blood in which we are to eat and drink of and the great importance that lies within eating and drinking of Him.

Context

The book of John has a great emphasis on revealing the deity of Jesus and the way to eternal life. We see this at the beginning of John through pointing the miracle of Jesus' incarnation, Him as Messiah and throughout with Jesus's seven "I am" statements. The latter half of John then points to the mission and ministry of His followers and eternal life. As will be seen in greater, Jesus frequently points back to Moses, the traditions and ways of old unto directing the people to see the new way that Jesus has brought. This creates an important tie between this gospel and the Old Testament.

The immediate context of John 6 comes the day after Jesus had miraculously fed the 5,000 (6:1-14). It is important to consider that the people at first discerned Him to be a prophet, like Moses (6:14), and perhaps to be the one Moses had prophesied of in Deuteronomy 18:15. Upon this realization the crowd was going to take Him by force and make Him the king to fulfill what they thought the Messiah should be (6:15). So, Jesus withdrew to a place to be alone before they could grab Him. This response from Jesus likely had a negative effect on the people's perception and understanding of the miracle that had just occurred. That night Jesus appeared to

His disciples by walking on the water during a storm and transporting them to the shoreline of Capernaum (6:15-21). Upon arriving in the morning to the shore in Capernaum they found that the crowd Jesus had fed the day before journeyed from Tiberius to Capernaum seeking Jesus (6:22-24). It would seem the people did not seek after Jesus because they knew Him to be the Messiah, instead they followed Him because they wanted more food (6:26). An unhealthy craving for the miraculous¹ is seen here. Their love for the miracles was filled and they believed in this over Jesus as the Son of God. They sought after a kingdom that was of the world, that gave them meat and drink and miraculous feasts like the Israelites in the wilderness (1896, Edersheim). Jesus begins His exhortation and teaching by telling them, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” (6:27). Jesus commands that the work they must do is to believe in Him, yet they test Him and ask for proof of miracles and again ask for food (6:28-30). In these passages an incredible contrast is presented, they believe, yet don’t seem to believe, they sought Him out, mostly of the wrong motive, yet still sought Him. “They were outwardly prepared for the highest signs and teachings, to which the preceding events had led up to. But they were not inwardly prepared for it and therefore, could not understand it” (1896, Edersheim). Jesus then authenticates every word He was about to speak by saying, “For God the Father has put his seal of approval on him” (6:27). This confirms that He is sent by the Father, a theme repeated in this passage, and that what He is speaking has confirmation and holds the truth in it.

¹ They were led by their Judaistic expectations and desires.

Body

This portion of this passage (6:30-31) reveals that the Jews expected the coming Messiah would renew the miracle of manna (μάννα). The verse before Jesus tells them to believe in Him, whom God had sent. They push back and ask Him for a sign so that they can believe in Him (6:30). Perhaps this is partially them attempting to discern whether Jesus truly was the Messiah as well as their continued desire to be fed. They quote Psalm 78:24, which points to the occurrences in Exodus 16:4-36 and Nehemiah 9:15, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.” As they request for the material things that will fill their bellies Jesus points them to Himself and their misunderstanding of the miracle of the manna. It must be noted that the Jews point back to such passages and expect such a return of this miracle seeing as there was also a great deal of disobedience amongst the Israelites and judgement from God mingled into the provision of manna (Exodus 16, Numbers 11, Kostenberger, pg.445). We then see an incredible contrast in language in this passage as Jesus goes from past language to continuous present. “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven” (6:32). In this one verse He shows that the manna miracle is something of the past, and even debunks their incorrect beliefs on the matter. Jesus states that it is a new type of “manna from Heaven”, and His Father is presently and will continually give this “true bread from Heaven”. In John 6:33-34 Jesus clarifies further by defining that this bread *of* heaven is now bread *from* heaven. This new bread is a Man, God in bodily form who comes down and “gives His life”, which points to the coming death of Jesus (6:33).

The people respond in a manner similar to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:15 when they ask Jesus to always give them this bread (6:34). It is hard to discern the exact

genuineness of their response. Some speculate that the wording is similar to the Samaritan woman who simply wanted this material “living water” so that she no longer needed to go to the well to draw water. They again wanted for a materialistic, earthly filling, a permanent supply of food to meet their physical needs (Morris, 1995). Jesus again responds in grace and clarity, He removes all their wrong preconceived ideals and continues by use of the Johannine signs². John 6:35, He tells them in greater detail, this manna is not like that of the past, that which God has now provided for them to eat of is Jesus Himself.

We then see the first of seven “I am” statements from Jesus. The seven “I am” statements found in the Gospel of John are profound as we see Jesus’s own self-declaration of His divinity. These “I am” statements points to Exodus 3:14, “God said to Moses, ‘I am that I am’ and He said, ‘you must say this to the Israelites, “The I am has sent me to you”³. These “I am statements are Jesus revealing He is in fact Yahweh. Throughout the rest of John 6, Jesus repeatedly says, “I am the Bread of Life.” Thus, He reveals another aspect of His ministry and mission here in verse 35, He is the ultimate fulfillment and nourishment, life comes from Him alone. Why even compare Himself to bread? During this time bread was a base and main food. Bread is filling, it contains both vitamins and nutrients essential for releasing energy⁴, Jesus thus becomes this source of spiritual nutrition and sustenance.

The Jews, most likely understanding this context and use of “I am”, begin to grumble and argue that He is just the son of Joseph (6:41-42). Jesus rebukes them and tells them to stop

² John’s signs and miracles in the gospel that reveal Jesus’ divine glory.

³ This moment of God defining Himself to man birthed the title of God as Yahweh, which is the third personal form of the same verb, “He is”

⁴Bread made from wheat flour contains amounts of iron as well as a source of nutrition.

grumbling (6:43). Jesus now begins to teach in an even stronger form; He says that they can only come to Him if His Father draws them (6:44). In the verse previous and in this one we see Jesus point to man's own inability to nourish himself, find true life and even come to Yahweh. Jesus reveals the incredible dependance man must have upon Him, one cannot have life, cannot even come to Him without Him. It is seemingly in contradiction to verse 29 and 40 where Jesus commends that they believe in Him, but now He shows they cannot even do this of our own volition. We also see Jesus repeating this language of being "sent" by the Father. This form of "sent" (πέμπω) is an active verb meaning to send, to dispatch on business, to transmit or thrust forth (stepbible.org). Jesus came with a mission; to be the Bread of Life as revealed here. And the outcome of them coming to this Bread of Life is to be raised up in the last day.

Jesus refers to the prophets and covenant of old by quoting Isaiah 54:13 (6:45), "All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children". Isaiah 54 is a covenant of peace to the people of Israel, this original prophecy is written in future tense, it a promise of restoration and redemption. God is promising and longing to bring the blind and deaf (Isaiah 43:8) to be a part of this new covenant of peace. This passage in Isaiah points to a day that will come when a new king will reign, a Messianic king, that will bring redemption, justice peace and salvation (Kostenberger, pg. 449). In Judaic tradition the phrasing of being "taught by God" was a Messianic reference (Kostenberger, pg. 449). Those He was teaching were having a negative response to His words so, He uses this passage of Isaiah to show that it is more than just knowing the Torah, but about coming to Him; thus revealing this prophecy is now fulfilled in Jesus. Commentators find that verse 46 can point back to the hearing of God's word and law at Mount Sinai, but the people were not allowed to look upon God (Exodus 33:20). The people

would die if they looked upon Yahweh. Jesus shows that just because they have heard the word of God and had been taught through the Torah about God, it does not mean they have fully seen God or even fully know Him. Now we see how truly special and intimate this relationship is between the Father and Jesus, whom He sent. Jesus is now the only living human embodiment of one who has seen and heard God. No one but Jesus has this vision, understanding or relationship with God, therefore all the more reason to come to Him. And for a third time Jesus says, “I tell you the truth,” (6:47). This phrase means Jesus is speaking with absolute certainty, and again points to verse 27, confirming God has set this seal of truth upon Him. We see the overall theme of this teaching summarized here, Jesus’s ultimate mission and desire is for eternal life.

His “I am” statement about being this bread of eternal life is repeated once again in verse forty-eight. This conversation of the manna and this bread was initiated by the people but Jesus shows that manna, that bread was simply a foreshadowing, a partial image of the eternal Bread of Life to come. The manna given to the Israelites in the wilderness did not save them, they all tasted of death eventually. However, God has now sent a Bread from heaven and if they taste and eat of Him they shall not die, but have eternal life (6:49-50). There is required a decisive action from the people to take and eat.

Jesus transitions His teaching to alluding towards His coming death on the cross. He says this bread is His very flesh but that it is something He will be giving, He has not yet given of His flesh (6:51). The process of eating and drinking, as exposed here through Jesus’ language, point to the sacrifice of suffering unto an atonement that must take place to bring this eternal life. The Jews begin to argue amongst themselves, perhaps showing some were for what Jesus was saying, others against, with a myriad of other views and opinions mingled in. Overall, we can see

that few, if any, understood what Jesus was saying (6:52). Jesus response again confirms Himself and what He says for the fourth time, “I tell you the truth” (6:53). Jesus goes further in telling them to not only eat His flesh but they also must drink His blood. This very concept was horrifying the to the Jews as according to Genesis 9:4 they were not permitted eat or drink of blood (Morris, 1995). What they were missing is that the words “flesh and blood” often refer to the whole person (Matthew 15:17, 1 Corinthians 15:50, Hebrews 2:14), revealing the wholeness of what He has given in this spiritual food (Kostenberger, pg. 451). This “eating and drinking” of His “flesh and blood” are spoken in a verb tense that promotes a “once and for all action, not a repeated eating and drinking” (Morris, 1995). This “once and for all” act is the way to the eternal life Jesus spoke of in previous verses. There is an incredible correlation found here to the offerings the Israelites were commanded to give to God, as seen in Leviticus. The grain offering (Leviticus 2) was one that accompanied a burnt offering or a peace offering to the Lord. The reasoning for this was to supplement the meat with bread (Numbers 15:1-10), this created a complete gift of food to God. Not only this but it brought atonement for the people when accompanying a burnt offering (Leviticus 1:4), or was as a sin offering for those who could not provide one for themselves (Leviticus 5:11-13). When we view was Jesus is saying here in John in this sense, He is now the drink offering (His blood) and the food offering (His body, the bread) that creates a complete sacrifice for atonement. Leading into the ultimate peace offering⁵ sacrifice. Peace offerings allowed the fat to be burnt before God but the people then consumed the meat in a meal before Him, it was always offered last because it showed that all was right between God and man (Leviticus 3). Seeing these verses in correlation together adds an even

⁵ a peace offering sacrifice enacted communion with God and man.

deeper meaning to what Jesus was saying and did on the cross, it also confirms the old law and way was over and He brought a new covenant.

The eating and drinking of His flesh and blood refers to His death that is to come and it is Christ's graphic and vivid way of stating that it requires more than a knowledge of tradition, the Law and Torah, but it requires a full intaking of Christ into the innermost parts of one's being. Such an ingestion would require a death, a pouring out of this flesh and blood on Christ's end. This is a beautiful revelation of how to enter into such an intimate relationship with Jesus, as was originally intended in creation, is stated by His allusion to His death that was coming shortly. Often Jesus alludes to His death in a more negative sense, but here Jesus shows the full scope of what He was doing, His flesh and blood bring eternal life and allows the one who eats and drinks to be raised up with Him (6:54).

This passage now changes the form of the word "eat" and continues in this new context through verses 56, 57 and 58. The word "eat" here now means (τρώγω), to feed on, to partake of a meal and like that of a noisy eating (stepbible.org). This creates an even more startling understanding of what Jesus is saying. The one who eats of Him in this manner will have Him residing within and He in them (6:56), this passage also uses similar language as to the high Priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17:21, 23, 26. Revealing that what Jesus will do on the cross will make a way for us to enter into a unique, intimate relationship with Him.

Jesus begins His closing remarks again by revealing Himself and His mission as being sent by the Father (6:57). The very life and mission of Jesus is intertwined with His Father, He has no life apart from His Father and to do His Father's will is His very food (John 4:34, 6:57). We see the overall analogy even clearer than before, to feed on Jesus in a continuous tense shows

the command to take on Christ within. In taking in this Christ we will then have life that can only come through Him. This is another landmark passage confirming that the old covenant in the Old Testament has died and the new covenant and therefore, new Bread, Jesus has come by His incarnation, life and death. The only way to have this life is to eat and let Him dwell deep within, if one does not eat or drink of Him, they will not have this eternal life. This is the very essence of John 6 in correlation to John 15:4, to abide in Him and let Him abide in you.

Conclusion

What now are we to do with such revelation of what Christ has done and given? The religious Jews here knew in their heads the right things to say, they knew the Torah, but did they really know Yahweh? To eat of Him is a decisive action to enter into incredible fellowship, it is about remaining in Him and abiding. To eat and drink denotes an intake and digestion of Him, this is far more than just a moment of contact or even a mere revelation of Him, it is far more intimate than that. This is the closest possible relationship we, the eater, enter into. There is a strong theme throughout John's gospel about abiding in fellowship and relationship with Him. When we enter into this state of abiding with Him it is not temporary, but a permanent one that lasts for all eternity. Through Jesus's "once and for all" action on the cross, through His atonement of our sins we can now enter into right relationship, to dwell in Him and He in us.

Particularly in western cultures, we have grown so familiar with Jesus. We have heard of Jesus so much it has become "well-known" and our hearts have remained unmoved all too often. It is far too easy to know all kinds of facts about Him, much like the Jews in John 6, we can know all the traditions, the right things to say and do. But there is a great difference between

knowing Him in your head and letting Him actively live within. To ingest Christ, to let Him abide and remain is an all-consuming choice, it is highly disruptive. It is disruptive to what we have known in the past, what culture has taught us, it disrupts our comfort and even our own opinions. But this is a holy disruption, for the fellowship, the intimacy, the communion, the glorious relationship we are given even here on this side of eternity far outweighs any of it. To abide in Him is to speak His word, to have the mind of Christ, His very attitude (Philippians 2:5), to do as He would do, to live with your mind set on things above (Colossians 3:2), to be set apart (Romans 12:2, 1 Peter 2:9, Galatians 2:20). This Christ-like living, this lifestyle, upholding all of what the Bible calls us to must flow from the intimacy of eating and drinking Him. Fruitfulness in life, in ministry and mission must flow from intimacy. Intimacy is the key, John 6 shows us this is what Christ died and gave us. I think of Leonard Ravenhill as I read this passage, “at the end of Leonard Ravenhill’s life he was asked the age old question, if you could go back and do it all again, would you do anything different? He replied, “no, I spent all the time with Him that I could” (Gilmour, 2012). The proof of our love and intimacy with Him does not often come from how much theological knowledge we have in our heads, not in how much time we spend in meetings, on mission or doing a thousand other things in His name. The image of our love is seen in the time we spend with Him, it is seen in lives spent abiding in Him and therefore, yielding to Him, surrendering, listening, laying down our very lives for a Man most worthy. It means turning attention away from television, social media, frivolous and fruitless activity and meeting our gaze with His. Oh, to be dominated by this life, this Bread from Heaven, to learn to crave Him, this bread and blood from Heaven above all else. This is salvation, this is what He

has extended and offered, the Father has already drawn us in by Jesus' life and death (6:43), the invitation is there and it is up to us to choose it.

I recall several years ago, I had a dream from the Lord. God had begun revealing a great deal about His call on my life for the refugee and the vulnerable in the Middle East. In this dream I was walking through a refugee camp. There were tents as far as my eyes could see, but worse still, there were women, men and children as far as I could see. They were all battered, beaten up, bruised, sickly and weeping. They all came clamoring after me, grabbing at me, I was so overwhelmed by the graphic image of suffering that felt so real in this dream, I began to weep, overwhelmed. How could I even begin to help them? I felt a gentle hand upon my shoulder and turned and saw Jesus behind me. I begged Him to help, there was nothing I could do. Jesus began to walk in front of me and beckoned me to follow Him. The people began grasping after Him. He stopped in the middle of the masses with most beautiful smile, He looked eyes with me and began taking off pieces of His flesh, He began filling cups with His blood. He gave His flesh and blood to the masses, they began to eat and drink of Him. It is clear to me that the Lord spoke to me through this dream that it truly is not I who can help meet any of their needs. The only way to function, to do this calling is to lay aside my ideas, my plans, my striving and abide in Him. Secondly, I became aware that these people were pleading for material things from me in the dream, in my own work with refugees they do plead for the earthly things. Jesus was showing me to look past these pleas, to understand that truly His eternal life is the only thing that could meet the needs of those traumatized from war zones, those living in horrific camps. Salvation, His life and death, His bread, body and blood are the only solution to such a crisis, all other things will always fade away. This lesson applies, whether a refugee, whether a child in Syria or

Yemen or a young person in America bombarded with a thousand distractions. The message is the same, to be dominated by Him, to fully ingest Him, to abide, I in Him and He in me.

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