

John 6:41-71: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] John chapter 6 verses 41 to 71. So the Jews grumbled about him because he said, I am the bread that came down from heaven.

They said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say I have come down from heaven? Jesus answered them, Do not grumble among yourselves.

No one can come to me unless the father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets and they will all be taught by God.

Everyone who has heard and learned from the father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the father except he who is from God. He has seen the father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven. So that one may eat of it and not die.

[1 : 03] I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? So Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Not like the bread the fathers ate and died.

Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever. Jesus said these things in the synagogue as he taught at Capernaum.

[2 : 09] When many of the disciples heard it, they said, This is a hard saying. Who can listen to it? But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, Do you take offense at this?

Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life. The flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

But there are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him. And he said, This is why I told you, that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.

After this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, Do you want to go away as well? Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God. Jesus answered them, Did I not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?

[3 : 22] He spoke of Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him. Jesus here continues his discourse with the Jews following the feeding of the five thousand, and his representation of himself as the manna.

The Jews merely know Jesus according to the flesh. They see him as the son of Mary and Joseph, and can't truly conceive of who he is. Again, it's important to remember here that the Jews in this passage, as elsewhere in John, are typically the Judean leaders.

It's not the descendants of Abraham more generally, it's not the people of the land, it's the Jewish leaders, the leaders of the Judean people, not necessarily the people in Galilee, but the people at

the heart of the nation around Jerusalem.

John doesn't directly reference the virgin birth, but I imagine that many of the readers of John would have been familiar with the other gospel accounts, and this would have brought it to mind. The Jews do not know Jesus' ultimate origin, and so they cannot accept the fact that he has come down from heaven.

The language of, I have come, is found in the other gospels as well. We see it in Matthew chapter 5, for instance, in parts of Mark, and the language is the language that we see used of angels, of angelic messengers, that are sent by God to bring a particular message to the people or on a particular mission.

[4 : 47] It's language that suggests a pre-existence in heaven before the earthly mission. Jesus uses such language on a number of occasions in John's gospel, highlighting the fact that his earthly life was not the beginning of his mission, was not the beginning of his existence and identity, something that is underlined from the very beginning of the gospel.

The Jews, in response to this, grumble, like the children of Israel in the wilderness. Israel grumbled before receiving the manna, but they grumble at the offer of that to which the sign of the manna pointed.

Jesus speaks of the father drawing people to himself, much as the Old Testament prophets speak of God drawing Israel to himself in the wilderness, or after the exile, that he's going to restore this people, and in an act of love, he draws his bride to himself in the wilderness.

Jesus connects that drawing of the father with the prophetic statements concerning the restored people of God, whom God would teach, enlighten, and graciously draw to himself.

And this has often come up in debates about free will and predestination. But in scripture, and particularly in John's gospel, these things aren't seen to be in conflict. You can maybe think of it in terms of love.

[5 : 59] Love both liberates and binds the will. When you are in love, there's nothing that you felt more willing about. But yet at the same time, that will is so forceful and directed that you feel bound by it.

And in the same way as God reveals his glory and the truth of Christ to people, they are drawn to him, not as a matter of external compulsion, but of internal will, that they wish to come to him because their eyes have been opened to see who he is.

Jesus presents himself as the great prophet, the great teacher from God foretold by Moses. And the work of the father through his ministry is bringing the prophecies of God teaching the people, the prophecies that we find concerning the new covenant in places like Jeremiah chapter 31.

He's bringing these things to pass. Jesus is giving his flesh like manna for the life of the world. And this occurs in the gift of his body at the cross. He speaks in the most startling language, eating his flesh and drinking his blood in a way that would have provoked both the taboo of cannibalism and the consumption of blood, which Israel was forbidden to do.

Some suggest a connection with Passover themes. Jesus is the Passover lamb and he offers the flesh of the Passover lamb to eat. And as Israel spoke of the blood of grapes being drunk at Passover, so his blood would be enjoyed as a form of participation in the benefits of his sacrifice.

[7 : 31] Elsewhere, we see similar language of eating bread and drinking wine in places like Proverbs chapter 9 as wisdom lays her feasts and gives herself as food to people.

There are allusions to sacramental themes throughout this passage. You can see at the very beginning, the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus breaks the bread, gives thanks. He distributes it.

It's language that would bring to mind the celebration of the Eucharist. You can think also about the manna, bread that has come down from heaven, the bread of God. That's the language used of the sacrifices in the Old Testament.

The priests are the ones who offer the bread of their God. The tree of life language, eating and living forever. The fact that Jesus becomes flesh matters greatly.

He gives his body for the life of the world. It's the actual physical, material sacrifice of his body on the cross that is the means of his self-donation. John doesn't have an account of the institution of the supper.

[8 : 31] The language here focuses particularly upon Christ's death as the moment in which these things are donated and in connection with which these things will be enjoyed.

Earlier on, he talked about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness and in the same way, Christ will be lifted up so that all that look to him will be saved. Now, Christ again is presenting his gift of himself in his death as the means by which people will have life.

And here, the language is not so much looking as the language of eating and drinking, of participating in his sacrifice. Here, I think, John is drawing upon sacramental themes and I believe he wants us to connect this with the celebration of the Eucharist.

But in a way that expresses the fact that the Eucharist is always about the reality of Christ's death, the gift of his body in that. It's not the mere physical eating that is the important thing.

It's the gift of Christ's life in his sacrifice. Jesus' identity is the one who comes down from heaven and this will be proven as he returns that.

[9 : 41] We are supposed to subsist on Christ's flesh, eating it continually. This is the way that we abide in him. Now, that, I believe, is something that is in the symbol of the Eucharist.

This is actually participated in. But the spirit is the one who gives life, not the flesh. Christ's words are the gift of life. This isn't about some sort of magic. And the danger of trust in the flesh or religion and these sorts of things are things that John is very alert to and Jesus, as he teaches within John's gospel, highlights.

So when we're thinking about the Eucharist, I believe it's important to see it as a form of Christ's gift of his body, a means by which we participate in his body and his blood.

But we must do so in a way that foregrounds not a fleshly act of eating, but the work of the spirit and the work of the word.

And this is something that, I believe, that the Protestant tradition has been very concerned to do, not to empty the Eucharist of its reality, that this is a true participation in Christ's body and blood, but to do so in a way that heightens the emphasis upon the spirit as the one by which these things are donated and enjoyed and that Christ's word is that which makes the sacrament effective.

[11 : 04] It's not some sort of magic. Jesus ends by speaking about Judas as a devil and Peter is a faithful disciple. Peter is the one who recognizes that Jesus' words are the words of eternal life.

There's no one else to go to. This is the means by which you will have salvation. This is the means by which you will enter into the life that is the life of the age to come.

One final question. John's gospel emphasizes that Moses is a witness to Christ, the greater prophet that was to come. The Jews' supposed allegiance to Moses, yet rejection of Christ, is deeply ironic for this reason.

Can you think of other places in the gospel where Moses is presented as a witness to Christ?