

John 6:1-21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 11 January 2020

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[0 : 0 0] John chapter 6 verses 1 to 21. After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up his eyes then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat? He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little. One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many? Jesus said, Have the people sit down. Now there was much grass in the place.

So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated, so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost. So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world. Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. But he said to them, It is I, do not be afraid. Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. At the beginning of John chapter 6, we read of Jesus' fourth and fifth signs.

The first of these is the feeding of the five thousand, the second the walking upon the waters. The feeding of the five thousand is a story found in each of the four gospels. As such, it's one of a few that finds its way into each of the accounts. Reading stories found in multiple gospels, especially when found in both the synoptics and John, we should note the differences in the ways that they are told and situated within the larger frames of the gospels. The different framing of such stories can help us to see different facets of them. While they can usually be easily harmonized, sometimes there are ways in which certain details of the stories are thrown into sharper relief. For instance, in John's account here, the story begins with a crossing of the Sea of Galilee, or the Sea of Tiberias. Jesus is followed by a large multitude, a crowd that have seen the signs that he's been doing. He goes out to a mountain, and there he sits down with his disciples. And all of this is around the time of the Passover, the Feast of the Jews. By this point, all of the alarm bells that alert us to typology should be ringing loudly in our heads. Around the time of the Passover, crossing over the sea, followed by a great multitude, going into the wilderness, going up a mountain, and then feeding people with bread.

This is the story of the Exodus. It's an Exodus pattern, and it's all taking place at the time of the Passover. When seeking to provide for the crowd, Jesus first of all asks Philip where to buy bread.

[3 : 41] This is the only one of the Gospels that records Philip being asked this question. And it makes sense, because Philip comes from the area of Bethsaida, in which this miracle was performed. Such details can give us a greater sense of the historicity of the biblical text.

Philip, of course, cannot provide food, but he presents the scale of the problem. Even 200 denarii of bread would not be enough for each person to get a little. Jesus needs to feed such a great number of people with his disciples, and there's no immediate source or means by which they're to do so.

At this point, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, brings forward a boy with five barley loaves and two fish. One can imagine that this is done almost with some embarrassment. What use is one boy's packed lunch for such a multitude? Jesus instructs his disciples to get the people to sit down, and it is observed at this point there is much grass in that place. It's an interesting and strange detail to mention. I suggest that this is a detail that makes sense when we read further on in the Gospel. It will help us to understand why this is mentioned here. I think it's because Jesus talks about leading people out so that they might find good pasture as the good shepherd, that the much grass is mentioned here. Like Moses first led his flocks to Mount Horeb, where he met with the Lord in the burning bush, and then led the flock of the people as the shepherd of Israel. So the Lord leads the people out as a shepherd into the wilderness, and now he's going to provide them with the food that they need. The men are instructed to sit down. There are about five thousand of them in number.

It's interesting that it's just the men that are counted. You'd think if you're feeding people, you'd count the men, the women, and the children. But yet it's just the men. The numbering of the men alone might be associated with the counting of a military. When Israel was being numbered in the wilderness, they were numbered by the men of fighting age. When Israel left Egypt, they went out in ranks of five or fifty, entering into the promised land in the same way. Counting the people in such a manner and dividing them into groups as we see in the other Gospels is a sort of military arranging of the company. We see something similar in the story of chapter 18 of Exodus, as Moses, according to the advice of Jethro, divides the people into various groups under the leadership of elders. The feeding of the people with the manna is mentioned only a couple of chapters before this, so perhaps there's a joining together of these two events within the account of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus' feeding of the five thousand will also lead to a discourse concerning manna.

The division of the people is also under the leadership of his disciples. Jesus' blessing and breaking the bread and distributing it to his disciples, who distribute it to the multitude, is a good picture of what will happen later on in the story of the church.

[6 : 25] In taking the loaves, giving thanks and distributing them to those who are seated, what we can see is a playing out of the pattern of the Eucharist, or the pattern of the supper. We do not have an institution of the Lord's Supper within John's Gospel, but what we do have are a number of supper themes, particularly within this chapter. I've already mentioned the possibility of a panel structure for the seven signs of John's Gospel, with the first, second and third signs paralleled with the fourth, fifth and sixth signs. If the first sign is paralleled with the fourth sign, then we have a parallel between the turning of the water into wine and the provision of bread at this point, which would certainly be a suggestive parallel. Jesus is providing both wine and bread.

Once everyone has eaten his fill, Jesus instructs the disciples to gather up the leftover fragments. They gather them up and fill twelve baskets with the fragments from the five barley loaves.

Interestingly, each one of the Gospel accounts mention the fact that there are twelve baskets of fragments gathered up. This is clearly an important part of the story, and Jesus talks to his disciples about it afterwards.

The number twelve, in addition to being a number associated with Israel, corresponds with the numbers of the disciples themselves. Each one of them has a basket corresponding with them. Seeing this great sign, the people proclaim him to be the prophet who has come into the world. Once again, there are themes of the Exodus. The prophet is the one like Moses. Moses spoke of a prophet to come who would be like him, and now here is a man doing all of these Exodus-type deeds. Recognising this figure like Moses, the people want to make him into a king.

Yet they fundamentally misunderstand the sort of mission that Jesus is undertaking. Should he submit to them, their agenda for his mission would be completely at odds with the mission given to him by his father.

[8 : 11] Yet, of course, there are ways in which Jesus' action is one of a king. Here, for instance, we might recall David on the run from King Saul, coming to Ahimelech the priest at Nob, and requesting food for him and his servants.

He gives a surprisingly specific number. Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here. In this story, Jesus, the son of David, is given five barley loaves, which is what they have on hand.

Perhaps the people themselves recognise some echo of this story in the actions of Christ. Seeking to evade the crowd, Jesus goes off alone to the mountain. The disciples, however, go into a boat around the same time of evening, and start out towards Capernaum.

Jesus had not yet come to them, and the sea becomes rough, and a strong wind is blowing. We might think about the wind over the water of the original deep, or the wind in the crossing of the Red Sea.

The disciples then see Jesus coming to them on the sea. As he nears the boat, they're frightened. Once again, this is a sign. What might the sign be? In some respects, we might see this as an anticipation of the resurrection.

[9 : 17] In the other Gospels, we have some sort of anticipation in the way that Jesus sleeps in the boat during the storm. Outside, there's an earthquake. All of these things are greatly troubling the disciples. And then Jesus rises up and brings peace and calm.

That's the event of the resurrection presented in the symbol. Here, I think we're seeing something similar, but in a less clear form. Jesus is the one who brings peace. When they are in trouble in the boat, he's the one who presents himself.

It is I. Be not afraid. This statement, it is I, or I am, is a statement of his divinity in part. And so they take him into the boat, and immediately they're at the land to which they were going.

I believe that this is a story that anticipates other events that will happen later on. It's also a statement for the church. The church is in many respects like a boat that's gone out to sea.

When we think about the disciples that Jesus calls in the New Testament, the most prominent among them are fishermen. In the Old Testament, things are dominated by shepherds. In the New Testament, it's dominated by fishermen.

[10 : 17] The church is a body that has gone out to the sea of the Gentiles. And in the storms and the unsettled situation of that Gentile world, God still is in control. We see this in the story of the shipwreck at the end of Acts, for instance.

Just as we see in the story of Jonah, which is concerned about a mission to the Gentiles. So in the New Testament, there are stories of shipwrecks, storms at sea, struggles at sea.

These are stories that have to do, I believe, with a Gentile mission. The church, which is originally a part of the land, has been set forth upon the sea. And I think this is partly what the sign of this passage is supposed to represent.

We can see in the feeding of the 5,000 a mosaic theme, a theme of exodus. Things that might remind us of the Lord's relationship with Israel. Here, however, we see the Lord's power over the waters.

Perhaps this is representing the extension of the mission to Gentiles. A question to consider. If you were to ask one of the people in this chapter why they were thinking of making Jesus king by force, how do you think they would have answered you?

[11 : 23] Thank you.