



Seeing Jesus John's Way: Manna from Heaven

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Jesus' words "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35) are some of the most familiar words of Scripture for many Christians. They are depicted in stained glass windows and inscribed on communion tables. For many they bring to mind the bread of communion and the spiritual sustenance provided to those who partake.

None of this is incorrect. However, John has something more specific in mind. Instead of a vague notion of spiritual bread, he points the reader to a specific bread: manna. Although largely ignored in recent years, this association has potential to enrich contemporary readers' understanding of the Gospel's message about Jesus and the Christian practice of the Eucharist.

MANNA AS METAPHOR

John uses manna as a metaphor for Jesus, that is, John uses the concept of manna as it was known in Judaism in his time as a way of understanding who Jesus is. A metaphor understands one thing in terms of another.¹ As an early Christian trying to make sense of the experience of Jesus and to articulate the meaning of his life, death, and resurrection, John draws on many concepts to shed light on the

¹My understanding of metaphor draws on conceptual metaphor theory. For an introduction, see the classic work: George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

By using manna as a metaphor for Jesus, John points backwards to understand Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as part of the Jewish story that begins with the exodus; John also points forward to the Eucharist, allowing those who partake of Jesus as manna to walk as Israelites and disciples whom God feeds with the bread of life.

identity of Jesus. Jesus is Word, light, shepherd, and vine, just to name a few. In each case, as in the case of the manna, John holds a positive view of the terms he finds in Jewish tradition, and he understands Jesus to carry them forward in a way that is faithful to that tradition.

Thus, in making an argument about John's use of metaphor, I am, in part, making an argument about John's relationship to Judaism. He values Jewish tradition and sees those who trust in Jesus as faithful to the God of Judaism. Although the connection between Jesus and manna becomes fairly obvious for readers once it is identified, Christians have a long history of interpreting John in opposition to Judaism. These habits stand in the way of understanding manna as a metaphor. Therefore, in discussing John's use of manna in chapter 6, I point to specific places in the text where readers have seen a contrast between Jesus and manna and offer alternative ways of reading them.

Jesus' words "I am the bread of life" (6:35) are part of his interpretation of the manna story that begins in 6:30–31. His words follow on the heels of the familiar story of the feeding of the 5,000 (6:1–15) and Jesus' appearance to his disciples walking on water (vv. 16–21). The crowd notices Jesus' disappearance and they follow him to the other side of the sea, where they engage him in conversation. Although they are the same people who have just experienced the multiplication of the loaves, they press Jesus for a miracle: "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" (6:30). At this point the crowd introduces the Scripture that becomes central to the conversation with Jesus until 6:58: "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (6:31). They cite the story of the manna from Exod 16.

Jesus' words in v. 32 and the whole conversation that ensues (vv. 32–58) interpret the cited verse of Scripture. These verses follow traditional Jewish forms of interpretation.² The indication in verse 59 that Jesus said these things while teaching in the synagogue underscores the appropriateness of the conversation. Jesus responds directly to the crowd's words, taking up the quotation of Scripture and interpreting it in a way that makes it relevant for the listener. As I argue below, Jesus' interpretation puts him into a relationship with the story of the manna, one that sheds light on the reader's understanding of Jesus and of the nature of discipleship.

Noticing that Jesus' words interpret the verse of Scripture helps the reader maintain a connection between Jesus and manna. In verse 32, Jesus' words create a contrast between two possible ways of understanding the quoted verse, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." Jesus offers two ways of understanding this verse, one of which is preferred: Do not read "Moses gave you the bread from heaven," but "my Father gives you the true bread from heaven." Both options directly parallel the grammar of the cited text. The syntax of v. 32 ("not X but Y") follows a com-

²This argument was originally made by Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (Leiden: Brill, 1965).

mon rabbinic practice of interpreting Scripture. The interpreter defines two alternative ways of understanding the words of the text before accepting one as the better option and going on to explain it.

Interpreters who understand Jesus as contrasting himself with the manna see verse 32 in a different light. They often suggest that the first half of v. 32, "Moses gave you the bread from heaven" represents the Jewish understanding of the story Jesus rejects. Such statements posit that the Jews of John's time would have understood Moses, not God, as the giver of manna. However, it is hard to imagine a Jewish person of Jesus' day who would not have been aware that God was the ultimate giver of manna. Jewish writings of the period seem quite aware of God's authority and Moses' role as one sent by God. Interpreters have assumed John's opposition to Judaism and have missed the connection John forges in this verse.

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When Jesus' words are understood as an interpretation of Scripture, it appears instead that Jesus is not rejecting the Jewish version of the manna story but interpreting the story in light of present experience. Like other interpreters of his time, he reads the story in a way that makes it relevant for the hearer. The second half of v. 32 initiates Jesus' interpretation. "He gave them bread from heaven to eat" means "my Father gives you the true bread from heaven." Jesus' interpretation defines or alters elements of the cited Scripture. He clarifies the subject: "he" is "my Father." He also changes the verb tense. The past tense, "gave," becomes present tense, "gives." The indirect object changes from the Israelites of the past, "them," to "you," the crowd to whom Jesus speaks. Taken together, the changes signal Jesus' desire to interpret the manna story as something that affects the present moment of the listener. It is not simply a miracle story of long ago but a present experience.

Jesus' interpretation also includes a change in the direct object. The "bread" of the manna story is Jesus. But Jesus does not immediately reveal the identity of this current manna. He leaves the question open: "for the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (v. 33). The Greek words "that which" are grammatically masculine because the word bread (*artos*) is a masculine noun. Because of this the sentence could also be read, "the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Later readers can understand the ambiguity in the sentence as a preview of what comes next in the conversation.

Jesus' words in verse 35 make explicit the connection between Jesus and manna: "I am the bread of life." The text cited in verse 31 is still in view. Jesus identifies himself as the bread of the Scripture, the manna God is currently giving to the people. Manna is not a substance of days gone by, but something available now in Jesus.

JESUS IS MANNA

In using manna as a metaphor for Jesus, John draws on elements of the manna story that were familiar to people at that time. The description of verse 32 points to salient pieces of the manna story that are also applicable to the life of Jesus as John understands it: manna comes down from heaven (cf. John 3:13, 31) and gives life to the world (cf. John 1:4; 8:12). Here I discuss in greater detail two of the elements of the manna story from Exodus that John draws on in characterizing Jesus as manna.

Manna gives life in the wilderness

The idea of “bread from heaven” was already available in John’s time to talk about the manna story. The phrase “bread from heaven” appears in Exod 16:4 and in other places the manna story is retold (e.g., Ps 78:24; Neh 9:15). The story of the manna involved a situation of real hunger. The bread God provided physically sustained the Israelites for the forty years of their journey in the desert. The context of Jesus’ words in John provides a similar situation. People follow Jesus across the sea, where a source of food is not readily available. Jesus provides for their needs. As manna, Jesus is a food that people need for survival.

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John’s focus remains on the “bread” of the Scripture quotation, yet the language he uses to interpret the verse broadens out beyond the manna to the wider story of the exodus. The introduction of “thirst” in 6:35, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty,” makes sense because of the familiar content of the manna story. Survival in the wilderness required both food and water (Exod 15:22–27; 16:1–3; 17:1–7; Num 11:4–9; 20:2–13), and they were often remembered together as part of the wilderness story (e.g., Ps 78:17–31; 105:40–41). The interpretation evokes the idea of the sustenance God provided in its broadest sense.

The sustenance God provided through the manna was not only physical survival. Manna did physically sustain Israel, but it did something more as well. It formed recipients as those who walk in God’s ways. Very early on, manna became a metaphor for seeking life with God by following God’s word. The idea comes from the narrative of Exod 16. The Israelites had to collect the manna in a particular way, gathering only as much as each person needed, except on the day before the Sabbath. On that day, they could gather twice as much as was needed, and the left-over portion would not rot, as it did on other days. No manna appeared on the Sabbath (Exod 16:16–27). Partaking of this life-giving food required Israel to follow God’s word.

This idea became part of the way the manna story was remembered. The

familiar words of Deut 8:3 are one expression of this idea: “[God] humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” In Jewish tradition, eating manna is living by God’s word.

By the time John uses manna as a metaphor for Jesus, manna is already a metaphor for God’s word or God’s wisdom. It is what God gives to nourish and sustain human life. This element of the manna story shows up in John’s use of the manna as a concept to understand Jesus. Jesus says, “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (6:45). Like manna, people come to Jesus by following God’s word, and only those who understand God’s word will do so (cf. John 5:46).

Like the life provided to Israel by eating manna and following God’s commands, Jesus also brings life. John often indicates the spiritual nature of this life by specifying that it is “eternal life” (e.g., 6:40, 54). When John uses the words “eternal life,” he is not referring to the afterlife. It is easy to transpose this idea from the other Gospels. When Matthew uses the words “eternal life,” the context indicates that he has a future heavenly life in mind (e.g., Matt 25:46). However, John consistently speaks of eternal life as something that begins in the believer’s present. Take for example John 3:16—those who believe *have* eternal life. Most English translations obscure the present tense of the verb somewhat by translating “may have eternal life.” This leaves open the possibility that the life begins in the future. Yet the Greek verbs are in the present subjunctive. The present tense indicates that this is a present and ongoing state. The subjunctive mood shows contingency. In this case, the first clause of the sentence shows what “eternal life” is contingent upon: it is available for those who believe. Thus, John’s sense of eternal life is not that it is something limited to a future life after death.

For John, “eternal life” describes a quality of life that believers have because they trust in Jesus. Only God is truly eternal; humans are mortal. The experience of belief makes it possible to share in the life of God. John’s understanding of life certainly includes the future. Jesus says, “I will raise them up on the last day” (6:44, 54), pointing forward to the day of resurrection. Yet for John eternal life begins in the present and continues into the future, even on the other side of death.

Manna is a theologically rich concept that brings with it notions of life, death, and following in God’s ways. John uses all of these concepts to understand Jesus. As one who brings “life,” John speaks metaphorically of the nature of the life of faith. Those who believe have a different sort of life than the life of mere survival and existence without faith. As manna, Jesus makes available a life that goes beyond sustenance.

Manna as an occasion for grumbling

John’s language in this passage also draws on the character of the Israelites in the manna story to suggest something about the disciples’ relationship to Jesus.

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, the crowd gathered around Jesus has seen signs and wonders and yet does not believe. Israel had experienced God's great act of salvation in the plagues against Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 7–15). Yet the Israelites did not fully trust God to care for them, and they "grumbled" or "complained" against God (Exod 16:2, 7, 8; Greek: *diagonguzō*). Jesus also says to the crowd that they "have seen me and yet do not believe" (John 6:36). Their earlier demand for a sign (v. 30) exemplifies this lack of belief. John characterizes the crowd as the Israelites in the exodus story.

The crowd's grumbling about Jesus' words expresses their disbelief. The crowd goes on to "complain" about Jesus words (vv. 41, 61). John uses a similar Greek word here, *gonguzō*, to suggest the grumbling mistrust of the Israelites. It is not only "the Jews" who complain about Jesus, but his disciples do so as well. Like the Israelites who have seen God's wonders and yet desire to go back to Egypt, even Jesus' closest disciples turn away from him (6:66) and one of the twelve will betray him (6:71). The disciples' grumbling shows that like Israel, they do not fully trust in God.

THE EUCHARIST IS MANNA

Thus far, John has indicated that Jesus is manna. He is a present gift of God, bringing physical and spiritual nourishment to those who respond to God's word. All of that is very important, but John does not stop there. He adds another layer of interpretation to the first, one that speaks directly to the experience of later Christians who encounter Jesus as bread.

In verse 51, Jesus introduces a new interpretation of the Scripture that the crowd introduced in verse 31, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." Now Jesus says this about the manna: "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v. 51). The method of interpretation is very similar to that of v. 32. Jesus has again changed the subject, verb tense, and direct object of the Scripture. The "he" of the passage is now Jesus, "I." The tense is not past or present but future, "will give." And the direct object is stated immediately. This bread is "my flesh." There is no longer an indirect object ("you"). It has been replaced by a purpose clause: "for the life of the world." Taken together, readers have rightly understood this verse as a reference to the later Christian practice of the Eucharist.

Although the eucharistic overtones are obvious for later readers, their connection to the manna story has largely been forgotten. During the Reformation, two factors overwhelmed the connections to manna. One was the controversy over the nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Interpreters were drawn to the language about eating the body and drinking the blood (vv. 53–56) as evidence for arguments for or against transubstantiation. A second important issue in the Reformation was the critique of Catholicism as rewarding works rather than enabling faith. Reformers like Calvin and Luther read the story of the manna as a rejection of Jewish practices, which they understood as symbolic of the legalism of the

church in their own day. Although earlier interpreters like Thomas Aquinas had seen the manna as a kind of “spiritual bread” parallel to what God offered in Jesus, this pattern changed with the Reformation. Eventually, both Catholic and Protestant readers began to see John 6 as a rejection of manna in lieu of something better: Jesus.

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Recognizing the historical influences on recent interpretation may help make it possible to see the connection John creates between manna and the bread of the Eucharist. By reinterpreting the same verse from Scripture, John makes another connection between manna and Jesus. God's gift of manna remains available to later believers in a tangible, physical way. It is the bread of communion.

John reiterates the connection to manna again in the closing verse of this section (v. 58). He echoes the language of verse 33: “This is the bread that came down from heaven.” In doing so, he brings the reader's attention back to the interpretation of Scripture that has been at the heart of the conversation. John suggests that the manna of communion is different from the manna of Exodus in one sense. It is “not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever” (v. 58). The death of the Israelites who experienced the exodus is a familiar part of the exodus story. Their disbelief eventually leads God to decree they will die in the wilderness and will not enter the promised land (e.g., Num 14:30; 20:12; Deut 1:35–37). John's contrast between the two kinds of manna is not meant to diminish or reject the manna story by pointing to the death of the ancestors. Instead, he raises up a familiar part of the story. In doing so, he creates a contrast that is consistent with what he has said already of the “life” brought by Jesus as manna. This life is eternal. Those who eat of it “never die” (cf. vv. 50, 51, 54, 58). Again, John is not expecting believers to go on living forever, but instead uses “life” to communicate something about belief. Believers participate in the life of God. Their participation in that life begins in the present: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life” (v. 54). Again the verb is present tense. Manna is a life-giving substance for those who partake of it.

ELABORATING THE METAPHOR: EXPERIENCING JESUS AS MANNA

Although the language of “bread of heaven” enters occasionally into eucharistic liturgies, it very rarely seems to affect the participants' conceptions of the Eucharist in the way John indicates here. Contemporary Christians are more likely to have a robust notion of communion as a sacrifice or as a meal of remembrance than to understand themselves as recipients of manna. Although I would not wish to replace these other meanings of communion, John offers a theologically rich idea that may enliven our current experience and understanding.

John offers a wide variety of metaphors for Jesus and never tells the reader specifically how to understand them. Jesus says, “I am bread,” but the reader is left to decide what that means and how it applies to Jesus. Better interpretations of the metaphor are those that adhere to the story of the manna and the language that John uses to evoke it. Not every detail seems relevant to understanding Jesus. Exodus tells us that the manna looked like coriander and tasted like wafers made with honey. But John does not allude to these elements of the story. Nevertheless, readers may draw many possible conclusions as they use the manna story to think about Jesus. Here I offer three suggestions that I find meaningful in applying the manna metaphor to eucharistic practice.

First, John’s manna metaphor suggests that the Eucharist is a food by which God sustains people in the wilderness. The metaphor invites participants to understand themselves as those who have experienced God’s salvation, yet who reside in a difficult and dangerous place. Safety seems uncertain. There are many potential threats. In that context, God provides manna. The manna God provides in the Eucharist is a life-giving food, a miraculous gift through which they may come to find life abundant, even in the wilderness.

Second, the manna metaphor asks participants to imagine themselves as the grumbling Israelites. Although we have seen signs and wonders, we do not fully trust in God. We long for Egypt, and often consider turning back to the things that once enslaved us. Our devotion to God is threatened by powers that stake claims on our identity. We turn readily to the idols of the world—idols like the allure of wealth, beauty, and popularity, the false promises of racism and sexism. Through all this, God is faithful. God feeds us with manna.

Third, eating this eucharistic manna teaches participants to follow in God’s word. Jesus commands obedience: “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (v. 53). And those who follow the command are drawn to the life that comes from living according to God’s word. Like the ancestors who collected manna according to God’s command, they learn to live by the word of God as they partake of the bread of life.

John’s concept of the manna points backwards into Jewish tradition and draws from one of its most beloved stories of slavery and salvation. He understands Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as part of that same story. John also points toward the future practice of later Christians. As those who partake of Jesus as manna, they come to inhabit the story as well, to walk as Israelites and disciples of Jesus whom God feeds with the bread of life. ⊕

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