



Eucharistic Symbolism in the Gospel of John

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IN JOHN 6:53-54 JESUS SHOCKS MANY OF HIS HEARERS, BOTH ANCIENT AND MODERN: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.¹

How are we to understand this apparent exhortation to cannibalism? Two very different ways of interpreting Jesus' words have been proposed. Some scholars have asserted that here we encounter an especially vivid metaphor. They reason that when Jesus says "eat my flesh" and "drink my blood" what he really means is "believe in me and the efficacy of my death for your salvation."² In quite a different move, other scholars refer Jesus' words to the practice of the Lord's supper in the early church. In this interpretation, it is assumed that original readers would have

¹This and all other translations of the New Testament are from the NRSV.

²For a clear presentation of this view, see C. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 98-99.

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A metaphorical reading of eating Jesus' flesh in John 6 is insufficient. It keeps the reader from seeing the connection between Jesus' self-giving and his divinity; it does not reckon with the communication of divinity to communicants; it does not allow for our participation in the life of God through the ascent of the incarnate Word.

recognized in verses 53-54 their own experience of communion with Christ in ritual and worship.³

In what follows I propose a series of objections to the metaphorical interpretation. At the heart of each of these objections is my conviction that the sixth chapter of John, particularly verses 51-65, makes more profound truth claims about God and the redemptive work of Christ than the metaphorical approach logically allows. At stake in the eucharistic interpretation of John 6 are the following items: the relation between Jesus' divinity and his ability to impart himself to others; Christ's redemptive work as communication of divinity; and, finally, the meaning for God of the mutuality of Christ and the church.

I. "HOW IS THIS ONE ABLE TO GIVE US HIS FLESH TO EAT?"

The first problem with understanding Jesus' exhortation to eat and drink as a metaphor of belief is that it keeps the reader from seeing the connection between Jesus' self-giving and his divinity. This connection is at the heart of John's understanding that the Son shares fully in the Father's divinity.⁴ A paradox winds its way through the whole of John 6: that which gives itself away for others to consume does not perish but persists, even increases. Think of the bread in 6:12-13:

When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over (περισσεύσαντα κλάσματα), so that nothing may be lost (ἀπόληται)." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

This is an anticipation of the true bread, Jesus, who is not diminished as he is consumed. An impossibility? Readers will remember Nicodemus's puzzlement in 3:4 concerning the possibility of rebirth (πῶς δύναται). Nicodemus did not factor in the Spirit, who makes the impossible possible. Neither do Jesus' interlocutors in 6:52 consider the divinity of Jesus as they puzzle over his power to give himself to be eaten: "The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can (πῶς δύναται) this man give us his flesh to eat?'" Yet the same Jesus who gives himself away to be consumed will also on the last day raise the ones who have consumed him (6:54). Only God has the power to raise the dead. Jesus can give his flesh to be eaten and yet continue to exist because he is God.

If eating Jesus only means to "believe in him" then there is no paradox in chapter 6—no being consumed yet persisting. Without the paradox, there is no need for Jesus' divinity, since belief alone does not threaten his flesh.

II. "LIFE IN YOURSELVES"

So far we have drawn attention to the role Jesus' divinity plays in allowing him to give his flesh to be consumed. I have argued that the emphasis the narrator

³A nuanced analysis along these lines is found in C. K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1982) 80-92.

⁴For the centrality of Jesus' equality with God in John's Gospel, see J. Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt: John's Christology in Social-Science Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 9-93.

places on Jesus' divinity would be pointless if eating Jesus' flesh simply meant believing in him. If he is not really to be consumed, he has no need to be divine. We move now to the related observation that a metaphorical reading fails to account for the Johannine theme of the *communication* of divinity to those who consume Jesus' flesh. Belief in the proposition that Jesus' death is efficacious for salvation, no matter how fervently held, does not have the power to communicate divinity from Jesus to the one who holds the proposition to be true. There must be something bodily going on between Christ and believers (starting with Christ and moving to believers!) in order that the life of God, which is fully present in the Son, becomes their life as well.

Such a communication of divine life is indeed the promise given by Jesus to all who eat his flesh and drink his blood. We see this in the naming of the benefit of this eating and drinking in 6:53-54: to have life in yourselves (*ζωὴν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς*) and to have eternal life (*ζωὴν αἰώνιον*). Both phrases describe in Johannine parlance the life of God. The Father is the only one to have life in himself, but he grants the same life to the Son.⁵ The Son gives it to those whom the Father draws to him.⁶ The means through which the life of God comes to believers in 6:53-54 is communion.

We need to define with more precision the nature of the divine life that comes to believers through the eating and drinking. This is necessary because the notion of "life" (whether it is God's life or the life of the world) remains vague throughout most of chapter six. Furthermore, if we do not refine the concept of life, there is a danger that John could be interpreted as advocating a view of the Lord's supper which turns it into the "food of immortality" plain and simple.⁷ Rightly offended by the magical overtones of this way of thinking about the Lord's supper, some interpreters reject the sacramental background altogether in favor of the metaphorical reading. In spite of its dangers, however, there is good reason to stay with the idea of communication of divine life through the bread and wine.

The interpretive task is to show how the very notion of divinity is transformed in the evangelist's discourse. There is a movement in the text away from thinking about God in terms of substance and towards relationality. It is this transformed divinity that is communicated through the supper. Admittedly, the underlying logic of "consuming" does take the reader in the direction of thinking of Jesus as a substance. Yet, in an abrupt shift away from the theme of consumption, which dominates the preceding discourse (the believer is related to Jesus as a person is related to bread), in verses 56-57 we encounter two striking expansions of what it means for the Son to live:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them (*ἐν ἐμοὶ μένει καὶ γὼν ἐν αὐτῷ*). Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the

⁵John 5:26: "For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself."

⁶E. g., John 3:15-16, 36; 5:24-25, 40; 6:51, 57-58; 11:25-26; 14:19.

⁷See Barrett, *Essays*, 84-85.

Father (ζῶ δι' τὸν πατέρα), so whoever eats me will live because of me (ζήσει δι' ἐμέ).

The first of these expansions (ἐν ἐμοὶ μένει κάγῳ ἐν αὐτῷ) might be described as mutual indwelling between Christ and the communicant; the Son has no other life than the one lived in complete mutuality with believers. The second expansion (ζῶ δι' τὸν πατέρα...ζήσει δι' ἐμέ) describes the believer's life dependent on the Son in analogy to the dependence of the Son's life upon the Father; just as the Son lives in dependence upon the Father so the believer lives outside of himself or herself in the Son.

Clearly, in light of these two expansions we can say that the life that is communicated is not divine substance that makes the one who eats and drinks immortal. There is not the sense here of ingesting something that would create an infinite perpetuation of a centered and bounded self. Rather, when the Son of Man is consumed, the kind of life which has its origin outside of itself is communicated, and eternal life attaches to the complete mutuality of the Son's being in the communicant and the communicant's being in the Son.

The communication of this expanded divine life does not happen, however, simply in the mind or "faith life" of the believer, but depends upon his or her consumption of the Son of Man. To put it negatively, it is very difficult to see how assent to a christological dogma alone accomplishes for believers all that Christ promises in 6:56-57, the mutuality of Christ and believers and the dependent immortality of the believer's life in Christ.

III. "WHERE HE WAS BEFORE"

So far we found fault with the metaphorical interpretation for not allowing the reader to see the necessity of Jesus' divinity and the character of the divinity communicated to the communicant. We can take the critique of the metaphorical approach one last step. It removes the scandal caused by the bread which not only descends from heaven but also *ascends*. In 6:60-62 we discover that the ultimate scandal of Jesus' words resides not in the incorporation of the life of the Son in the believer through eating and drinking (although this is indeed scandalous enough to generate the modern metaphorical interpretation!). What Jesus assumes to be completely repulsive to his hearers is the ascent of this body-and-blood-giving Son of Man to the his origin, God:

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult (σκληρός); who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend (σκανδαλίζει) you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

The ultimate scandal comes when the Son of Man takes into God his practice of giving away his body and blood for the life of the world. The unanswered question of verse 62 artfully implies that the offense of eating and drinking Jesus pales in comparison with the scandal of the Son of Man ascending to God. If, however, the first offense has been removed by substituting "believing" for "eating," then it

would make little sense to think of Jesus' ascent as even more scandalous, unless one were prepared to demythologize his return to the Father as well.

The phrase “where he was before (ὅπου ἦν τὸ πρότερόν)’’ recalls the opening verse of the Gospel where God and Word live in complete mutuality and unity. The association of this phrase with John 1:1 encourages the reader to ask why the return of the incarnate Word to the place of mutuality and unity with God is something scandalous. It is so because it is something new for God and new for the world, something which transgresses the boundaries between God and world.

In what way is it new, and in what way does it transgress boundaries? When the Son of Man ascends to where he was before, that is, to his original conversation with God, he takes with him those who eat his flesh and drink his blood. This must be so because Jesus has promised that they will remain in him and he in them (6:56). Since there can be no Jesus apart from the one who remains in communicants and in whom they remain, the ascent of the Son of Man is simultaneously the opening to communicants of God’s life with the Word. While the new situation is like it was “in the beginning,” nevertheless the ascending Son expands the community of persons in conversation, for now the incarnate Word, abiding in us and we in him, is with God and is God.⁸

This essay has identified three shortcomings of the metaphorical interpretation of Jesus’ exhortation in John 6 to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Belief in a proposition about Jesus’ saving death simply does not do the mighty work which John 6 describes as God’s action in Christ for us. It hides the deep connection between Jesus’ divinity and his perpetual self-giving; it does not reckon with the communication of divinity to communicants through Jesus’ body; and finally, it does not allow for our participation in the life of God through the ascent of the incarnate Word. The price for removing the offense from Jesus’ exhortation to eat his flesh and drink his blood is too great to pay. 

⁸Cf. John 17:20-21: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”