CONCORDIA
COMMENTARY

A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture

JOHN
1:1–7:1

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Introduction

a more hostile, environment than what we read in the circumstances surrounding Stephen and the “great persecution” (δίωγμὸς μέγας, Acts 8:1) of the church in Jerusalem in ca. AD 35.\(^{159}\)

Conclusion

None of these arguments for a late dating of John are persuasive. Were it not for the (relatively late) external patristic tradition that John wrote in Ephesus and lived there until the days of Trajan, such a date and such a provenance would perhaps have never been conceived. On the other hand, there are significant aspects of the Gospel which make a pre-AD 70 date for the Gospel quite probable. Indeed, it is my opinion that when one considers the internal evidence of the Gospel of John, no commanding reason to assume Ephesus or a date in the latter years of the first century AD exists.

Internal Aspects of John’s Gospel That Suggest an Early Date

1. Emphasis on John the Baptist. The Baptist is mentioned twice in the Prologue of John’s Gospel (Jn 1:6–8, 15). Such mention reveals that the witness of John is thematically important for the Gospel. On two occasions John is depicted as rejecting the title of “Christ” for himself (Jn 1:20; 3:28; cf. Jn 1:8; Acts 13:25). Whether these passages are a polemic against Baptist movements of a later date may well be doubted. It is true enough that some followers of the Baptist persisted, but that sects remained that were vigorous enough to elicit significant polemic from a Christian evangelist at the end of the first century is quite unlikely.\(^{160}\) The emphasis of the Gospel upon John as witness to Jesus is best interpreted as reflecting a period of time when John’s baptism was still a lively option and Christian Baptism with water and the Spirit was yet relatively

\(^{159}\) We might also mention the death of James the brother of John (Acts 12:2–3) and that of James the Just (AD 62) reported by Hegesippus (Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. 2.23.8–18). There is no evidence that after AD 70 Jewish Christians continued to visit the synagogue. The period between AD 70 and 135 is difficult to assess. There was, no doubt, increased hostility between Jews and Jewish Christians. Yet, there is evidence of continuing mission activity of the Jerusalem community toward the Jews. According to one rabbinic story, a Jew who had partaken of the Eucharist among the Christians of Capharnaum and later renounced the Christian faith was yet advised by the rabbis that he could not live in Israel. See Schlatter, “Die Kirche Jerusalems vom Jahr 70 bis 130,” 102–3, citing Qoh. Rab. 1.8.

\(^{160}\) Cribbs notes that both Matthew and Luke speak of the Baptist in lofty, honorific terms (Mt 11:11; Lk 7:28). This indicates that “when they wrote their gospels, they were not aware of any threat to the Christian movement from the disciples of John the Baptist” (“Reassessment,” 53). In Ephesus Paul was confronted by “about twelve” persons who had been baptized into John’s baptism (Acts 19:1–7). These hardly represent a Baptist sect of any vigor or cohesion in Ephesus. Rather, they appear quite willing to receive the Holy Spirit from the hands of Paul, that is, for the baptism of repentance which John gave to be made fully Christian. It may be noted as well that Apollos, “a native of Alexandria,” also “knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:24–25). He does not seem to be in any way associated with those persons whom Paul met in Ephesus. The impression is not that there was a “Baptist movement” in Alexandria or Ephesus, but that within Jewish circles, persons who had received only John’s baptism could be encountered in various places.
When Was the Gospel of John Written?

recent as an alternative. If so, then the Gospel’s emphasis on the Baptist implies a Palestinian milieu during the very early years of the Christian church.

2. Jesus is depicted as “the Way.” At the beginning the Christians referred to themselves as “the Way” (ἡ ὁδός, Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). There is evidence that this self-designation became the common way of referring to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures. When Klopas and another man on the way to Emmaus were met by the risen Lord, they were discussing “the things concerning Jesus” (Lk 24:19: τὰ περὶ Ἰησοῦ). They recounted that Jesus had been crucified and that certain women had reported the angels’ message that Jesus was alive. In view of their distress, Jesus refers to them as “men without comprehension” (ἀνόητοι, Lk 24:25) because they do not believe what the prophets have spoken. Then “beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures [ἐν πάσαις ταῖς γραφαῖς] the things concerning himself [τὰ περὶ ἑαυτοῦ]” (Lk 24:27). When Jesus revealed himself and then departed from the men, they said to one another, “Did our hearts not burn within us as he was speaking to us on the way [ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ], as he opened to us the Scriptures [τὰς γραφὰς]?” (Lk 24:32). Then, upon returning to Jerusalem to report the events to the other disciples, “they exegeted the things on the way” (τὰ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ, Lk 24:35). Such parallelism is hardly accidental. When Jesus speaks “on the way,” he is opening the Scriptures and interpreting them in the light of his own person and work (also Lk 24:44–48). “The things” about Jesus (his recent ministry, death, and resurrection) in the conversation “on the way” are revealed to be “the things” in the Scriptures, and the eyewitnesses then report to the other disciples that Jesus’s self-revelation took place “on the way.” Similarly, Apollos is said to have been “catechized in the Way” (ἡ κατηχημένος τὴν ὁδόν), and so he taught accurately “the things concerning Jesus” (τὰ περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, Acts 18:25; cf. Acts 18:26). Possibly other occurrences of the term “the way” (ἡ ὁδός) also echo the idea of the early preaching of Jesus on the basis of the OT writings.

There is every reason to think that the designation of the Jesus movement as “the Way” was both early and had its context in the proclamation of the earliest church at Jerusalem. In view of the conviction, as all four Gospels testify,

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161 According to Acts 11:26, believers in Jesus were first called “Christians” at Antioch. The uncommon designation “Christian” (Χριστιανός, christianos) appears only three times in the NT (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16). It is possible that the name “Christian” was given to the followers of Jesus as a sort of party label. The suffix -ιανος, -ianos, could label one as of a certain loyalty, as with, for example, Ἡρωδιανός, herodianos, for a “Herodian” (Mt 22:16; Mk 3:6; 12:13). In the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, “Christian” is evidently the common designation of Christians for themselves (Ign. Eph. 11:2; Ign. Magn. 4:1; Ign. Rom. 3:2–3).

162 Acts 8:35–39; 9:17, 27; 18:25, 26; 25:3; 26:13; see also Acts 16:17. While the phrases κατὰ τὴν ὁδὸν, “along the way” (Acts 8:36; 25:3; 26:13; the same phrase means “according to the Way” in Acts 24:14), and ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ, “on the way” (Lk 24:32, 35; Acts 9:17, 27), can, of course, refer only to the road or highway, one should at least note that in these instances of both prepositional phrases, the term “way” is used in the context of teaching Jesus from the Scriptures. To miss the double entendre is probably to miss the real point!
that John the Baptist was the voice foretold by Isaiah which would prepare “the way of the Lord” (Mt 3:3; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4; Jn 1:23), it is likely that the disciples of Jesus thought of Jesus as the Way very early indeed. In the Gospel of John, therefore, it is not coincidental that Jesus designates himself to be “the Way” (ἡ οδός, Jn 14:6). The work of Jesus was to bring about a new exodus in which the glory of the Lord would be revealed, the salvation of God would be manifested, and the way of life under the rule of God would be established (Is 40:1–11). That Jesus is entitled “the Way” in John suggests an early date and context for the Gospel.

3. The titular use of “the Christ/Anointed One” (ὁ χριστός). The purpose statement of the Gospel tells us that it was written to convince the readers/hearers that the Christ/Anointed One is Jesus (Jn 20:30–31). Apart from two instances (Jn 1:17; 17:3), χριστός is always a title in John’s Gospel. The titular use (e.g., “Jesus is the Christ/Anointed One,” Jn 20:31) rather than the nominal use (“Jesus Christ,” Jn 1:17; 17:3) and the fact that John’s Gospel alone preserved its Hebrew/Aramaic form (in Greek transliteration, Μεσσίας, Messias, “Messiah,” Jn 1:41; 4:25) are indicative of both an early usage and one directed to a Jewish audience. On the one hand, as we have noted, according to the Acts of the Apostles the demonstration from the Scriptures that the expected Anointed One is Jesus was a constant element in early Christian discussion with the Jews (see Acts 5:42; 9:22; 17:3; 18:5, 28). On the other hand, this message never occurs in the mission to the Gentiles. Within Gentile contexts, early Christian preaching proclaims Jesus as the “Lord” (Acts 10:36; 11:20; 16:31; 20:21). Jesus as Lord is also the emphasis in the preaching of Paul (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; 16:22; 2 Cor 4:5; Phil 2:11).

4. Similarity with the early accounts in the Acts of the Apostles. We have already noted the primitive use of the titular “the Christ/Anointed One” (ὁ χριστός) in John’s Gospel and that the two titles used in the Gospel’s purpose statement (Jn 20:31: ὁ χριστός, “the Christ/Anointed One,” and ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, “the Son of God”) were the focus of early Christian apologetics in the synagogues (Acts 9:20, 22). Moreover, assuming the identity of the beloved disciple to be that of John the son of Zebedee, it is striking that the coupling of Peter and the beloved disciple in John’s Gospel parallels that of Peter and John

163 For the context of John’s Gospel, it may not be without importance that the oracles of Is 40:1–11 are addressed to “Jerusalem” (Is 40:2).
165 See point 1 in “Why Was the Gospel of John Written? Purpose and Major Themes” above.
166 Cribbs notes that “the declaration that ‘Jesus is the Messiah’ never occurs in Paul, and the titular use of ‘Christ’ only rarely, and then only in passages whose Palestinian background has been quite firmly established” (“Reassessment,” 49).
167 See point 3 immediately above and point 1 in “Why Was the Gospel of John Written? Purpose and Major Themes” above.
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in Acts. Barnett observes that the summary statement concluding the first nine chapters of Acts mentions the same regions in which Jesus taught, as reported in the Gospel of John: “Therefore, the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was multiplied” (Acts 9:31). Such correspondences suggest that the early Jerusalem church was the point of origin for the Gospel of John.  

Most striking, however, is the fact that “except for the Gospel of John and the first (Jewish-Christian) part of Acts, no New Testament writing considers Jesus the eschatological Prophet who prepares the way for God.” On the basis of Deut 18:15, 18 the Jews expected the coming of a prophet like Moses. This expectation characterizes the earliest Christian Christology in the initial chapters of Acts (see especially Acts 3:22–26; 7:35). Outside of Acts 1–9, however, an explicit Moses typology for Jesus is found only in John’s Gospel. This Gospel depicts Jesus as a second Moses by the abundance of exodus allusions (Sinai; paschal lamb; bronze snake; manna; water from the rock) and by the theme of “signs” (in summary, Jn 20:30), which comes from the OT narrative of the exodus and the wilderness sojourn. Cribbs has further drawn attention to the correspondence between John’s portrayal of Jesus and the portrait of Moses in the Pentateuch and in various Wisdom texts. To take but one example from each, first, in the Pentateuch, God states that he will teach Moses what to speak (Ex 4:12), and Moses spoke and did as the Lord commanded him. Such statements concerning Moses find close parallels in the Gospel’s depiction of Jesus in Jn 8:28 and in Jn 14:31. Both Moses and Jesus give the commandments of God. Second, according to Sirach, a Wisdom book, God gave to Moses “the law of life and knowledge” (Sirach 45:5). According to John, while the Law “was given through Moses,” Truth came through Jesus (Jn 1:17), who is himself Life and who gives the knowledge of God (Jn 14:6–7).

5. The use of “disciple” for those who follow Jesus. In the Gospel of John the immediate followers of Jesus are called “disciples” (μαθηταί) and never “apostles (ἀπόστολοι). In this respect John differs from the Synoptic Gospels.

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170 See Glasson, Moses in the Fourth Gospel. By the end of the first century AD and into the second, the “prophet like Moses” Christology is represented only in certain heterodox Jewish-Christian sects.
171 See πίστις, “sign,” in Ex 3:12; 4:8, 9, 17, 28, 30; 7:3; 8:19 (ET 8:23); 10:1, 2; 12:13; 13:9; 31:13, 17; Num 14:11, 22; Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 11:3; 26:8; 29:3 (MT 29:2); 34:11.
173 See, e.g., Ex 7:6, 10, 20; Lev 8:4; Num 3:42; 17:26 (ET 17:11); 27:22.
174 Furthermore, compare Deut 18:18 with Jn 12:49; 14:24.
176 See “apostles” in Mt 10:2; Mk 6:30 (cf. Mk 3:14); Lk 6:13; 9:10; 11:49; 17:5; 22:14; 24:10. The sole instance of “apostle” in John is the oblique reference “neither is an apostle greater than the one who sent him” in Jn 13:16.
This way of designating Jesus’ followers may well reflect an early period before the more formal designation for the Twelve (and others) became more common. Morris observes that John may have used “his disciples” to distinguish those of Jesus from those of other rabbis, or, we might add, from those of John the Baptist (see Jn 3:25–30).

6. The intensive participation of the Romans in the trial of Jesus reflects a pre-70 situation. Concluding his discussion of the trial of Jesus in John’s Gospel (Jn 18:12–19:16), Dodd writes the following:

[The trial is a “persuasive account” which is] pervaded with a lively sense for the situation as it was in the last half-century before the extinction of Judaean local autonomy. It is aware of the delicate relations between the native and the imperial authorities. It reflects a time when the dream of an independent Judaea under its own king had not yet sunk to the level of a chimera, and when the messianic idea was not a theologumenon but impinged on practical politics, and the bare mention of a ‘king of the Jews’ stirred violent emotions; a time, moreover, when the constant preoccupation of the priestly holders of power under Rome was to damp down any first symptoms of such emotions. These conditions were present in Judaea before A.D. 70, and not later, and not elsewhere.

More than the Synoptic accounts, the Gospel of John implies an involvement of the Romans with the temple authorities in the matter concerning Jesus (see Jn 11:47–53). Indeed, Roman participation in the apprehension of Jesus is explicit. A Roman cohort under the command of a Roman tribune, accompanied by temple police, arrests Jesus (Jn 18:12). As Jewish and Christian hostility became more dominant later, the tendency was to mute the role of the Romans in the process concerning Jesus. The role of the Romans in John’s Gospel suggests at the least a vivid memory of the facts, and this, in turn, implies a telling close to the events themselves.

7. There is no hint of a mission to the Gentiles. The Synoptic Gospels report that the ministry of Jesus encompassed regions outside of Palestine. In the Gospel of John, however, the ministry of Jesus is wholly within the land of Israel. According to Luke, from the very

177 Morris, Studies in the Fourth Gospel, 289.
178 Dodd, Historical Tradition, 120.
179 The tendency to minimize the culpability of the Romans while emphasizing the role of the Jews increased as the demographics of early Christianity became more Gentile. The tendency may perhaps already be perceived in the Gospel of Luke. Pilate is depicted as a weak, vacillating man. Yet, he wishes to release Jesus (Lk 23:20). For an early second-century retelling of the passion which concentrates on Jewish culpability, see the Gospel of Peter (ca. 120–140).
180 In this I concur with Barnett, “Indications of Earliness,” 69–70.
181 In various ways Matthew reflects an interest in the Gentiles: the inclusion of Gentiles in the genealogy of Jesus (Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, Mt 1:3, 5); the Magi (Mt 2:1–12); those from east and west who will eat with Abraham (Mt 8:11); and the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19–20). For a summary of the evidence for an interest in the Gentiles in the Synoptics, see Robinson, “Destination and Purpose,” 118–22.
start Jesus was regarded as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Lk 2:32). But as Robinson has noted, in John’s Gospel “Jesus is not presented as a revelation to the Gentiles. The purpose of the Baptist’s mission is simply that ‘he [Jesus] might be revealed to Israel’ (i.31).”

Indeed, “the remarkable fact is that there is not a single reference to ‘the Gentiles’ in the entire book,” as we have noted. The theological interest of John’s Gospel is concentrated in the prophetic hope and expectation of a redemption and ingathering of Israel.

This point is reinforced by van Unnik’s observations about the importance of Jesus as “the King of the Jews/Israel.” Along with “the Messiah/Christ” (Jn 1:41) and “the Son of God” (Jn 1:34, 49), the title “the King of Israel” is introduced already in Jn 1:49. That the evangelist attaches significance to this title is demonstrated by three facts. First, at the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, John’s account alone adds to the quotation of Ps 118:25–26 the words “indeed the King of Israel” (Jn 12:13; cf. Jn 12:15). Second, Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus focuses exclusively on the question whether he is the King of the Jews (Jn 18:33–39; 19:3, 12–15). Third, although all the Gospels report the titulus of Pilate, John alone reports that the Jews were displeased with Pilate’s inclusion of “the King of the Jews” (Jn 19:19) and suggested an alternative: “Do not write, ‘the King of the Jews,’ but, ‘this man said, “I am the King of the Jews” ’” (Jn 19:21). Thus, indirectly we learn that Jesus had claimed the title for himself! But this title would be meaningless for a Gentile audience. Within a period of heightened messianic expectation such as that before AD 70, however, this title would have had especial meaning for a Jewish audience.

As Robinson acknowledges, the absence of any interest in a Gentile mission does not mean that at the time of the writing of the Gospel there was no Gentile mission. However, for the writer of this Gospel, “concentration on the presentation of Jesus as the truth and fullness of Israel was the all-absorbing task of Christian apologetic. Of no conceivable milieu was this true after 70 except in isolated pockets of Ebionite Christianity which still saw Christianity as tied to the Jewish manner of living.”

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182 Robinson, “Destination and Purpose,” 120.
183 Robinson, “Destination and Purpose,” 118. In addition Robinson claims that in the entire Gospel there are no Gentile figures except for Pilate and the Roman soldiers, who are necessary for the story of the crucifixion. It is possible that Robinson exaggerates at this point. He assumes that “the Diaspora among the Greeks” (Jn 7:32–36), the “other sheep” (Jn 10:16), the “dispersed children of God” (Jn 11:52), and the “Greeks” (Jn 12:20–24) are all Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews. I think that he is correct.
184 See point 4 in “The Centrality of Jerusalem” in “Where Was the Gospel of John Written?” above.
185 See point 3 in “The Centrality of Jerusalem” in “Where Was the Gospel of John Written?” above.
187 Robinson, Redating, 274–75; also Barnett, “Indications of Earliness,” 71–72. It is perhaps relevant to note that on the one occasion when the Gospel refers to circumcision (Jn 7:22–23), the focus is wholly on Jewish practice and there is no mention of an exception for Gentiles (as
8. There is no suggestion in John’s Gospel of the events of AD 70. In our discussion concerning the provenance of John’s Gospel, we have already mentioned the centrality of Jerusalem and the temple. Our argument there was that John’s presentation makes the most sense if Jerusalem and the temple were still standing. If that argument is valid, then obviously a dating of John’s Gospel before AD 70 is indicated.

A Final Comment on the Date of the Gospel of John

In summary, Morris reports an anecdote told by the great Aramaic scholar C. C. Torrey:

At the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis in New York City, in December, 1934, I challenged my New Testament colleagues to designate even one passage, from any of the Four Gospels, giving clear evidence of a date later than 50 A.D., or of origin outside Palestine. The challenge was not met, nor will it be, for there is no such passage.

Although Robinson presumes conjectural development of the tradition of John’s Gospel, he gives his “very rough and tentative timetable” as follows: AD 30–50 for the “formation of the Johannine tradition and proto-gospel in Jerusalem”; AD 50–55 for the “first edition of our present gospel in Asia Minor”; and AD 65+ for “the final form of the gospel, with prologue [1:1–18] and epilogue [chapter 21].” For Robinson’s timeline, Gal 2:6–9 assumes particular importance. There Paul reports that the “men of repute” at Jerusalem (James, Cephas, and John) “gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.” Robinson makes the interesting suggestion that this report is of “a new concordat for missionary policy.”

188 See point 2 in “The Centrality of Jerusalem” in “Where Was the Gospel of John Written?” above.
189 Charles Cutler Torrey, *Our Translated Gospels: Some of the Evidence* (New York: Harper, 1936), x, quoted by Morris, *John*, 25, n. 81. (In this book Torrey argues that all four Gospels were originally in Aramaic and later were translated into Greek, but that view has proved unconvincing.) Croteau notes Torrey’s comment about the dating, but, I think, dismisses it too easily ("An Analysis of the Arguments for the Dating of the Fourth Gospel," 51, 74, n. 39). Torrey is not making an “argument” that the evidence of the Gospels demands a date prior to AD 50. Torrey is making the claim that there is no evidence that demands a date after AD 50.
190 Robinson, *Redating*, 307. Robinson dates 2 John, 3 John, and 1 John (listed in that order) to AD 60–65. Cf. also the conclusion of Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 291, about the Gospel of John: “It seems to me that there is nothing that demands a date later than AD 70, though I doubt whether we can go much beyond that.”
The decision was made “to go out from Jerusalem in a fresh wave of expansion, which now was to affect not simply Peter and Paul (with Barnabas) but James and John as well. Paul and Barnabas were to go to the ἔθνη [‘Gentiles’], Peter, James and John to the διασπορά [Jewish ‘Diaspora’].” At the beginning of the 50s, therefore, John first started missionary work among Jewish congregations in Asia Minor and “was out of Jerusalem, like Peter, when Paul returned there in 57, only James and the local elders appearing to be in the city (Acts 21.18).”

It is finally impossible to demonstrate whether there was an earlier form of the Gospel and then a later edition or editions. What seems to me equally impossible is to assume multiple editions which stretched out over a long period of time. To be sure, historical reconstructions are not without their speculative elements. However, aspects of Robinson’s thesis seem to me to have merit. Yet, I am much less certain than he is of stages in the composition of John. I see no reason to distinguish between a hypothetical “proto-gospel” in Jerusalem (AD 30–50) and a supposed “first edition” of our Gospel in Asia Minor (AD 50–55). I would propose that the Gospel of John was composed in Jerusalem during the 40s and taken with John to Asia Minor in the early 50s.

Who Was the Author of the Gospel of John?

Like the Synoptic Gospels, John is formally anonymous. It makes no direct and explicit claim concerning the identity of the person whose witness is given by way of this Gospel. Yet, very early on it was claimed that this Gospel was written by one whose name was John. Hengel reminds us that the title, εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Ἰωάννην, “the Gospel according to John,” belongs to

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191 Robinson, Redating, 304–5. See also the extended argument by Robinson in Priority, 45–67. Although he notes that “in the ancient tradition of the church there is simply no alternative to Ephesus as the place of writing,” on the basis of the letters of John (1 Jn 2:7, 24; 3:11; 2 Jn 6), he concludes that “the Ephesian Gospel is asserted to have a Palestinian origin” (46–48).

192 It may be that during its composition, the Gospel underwent reworkings by its author. What seems unlikely is that there were various editions due to different theological and cultural contexts, resulting in a historical and theological pastiche, elaborated over an extended period of time.

193 The relation of the Epilogue, John 21, to the rest of the Gospel is a highly controverted topic. There are some reasons to regard it as a later addition. However, there are also very good reasons to regard it as part of the original composition. My own view is that the latter option is the superior one.

194 This view would at least allow for the tradition that John lived in Asia Minor until the time of Trajan. The “tentative hypothesis” of Cribbs also seems reasonable to me: the Gospel of John “could be an interpretation of the life of Jesus written by a cultured Christian Jew of Judea during the late 50’s or early 60’s” (“Reassessment,” 55). To be more specific in date seems difficult. I doubt that the circumstances between the synagogue and the nascent Christian community in Jerusalem changed significantly during the years AD 40–60. But if greater specificity were required, I would say that John’s Gospel is earlier rather than later in that period. The martyrdom of James in AD 44 by the Jews in Jerusalem suggests the kind of environment that would find Jesus’ words in Jn 16:1–2 wholly relevant.
John 6:1–15

Jesus Feeds Five Thousand

Translation

6 1After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, that is, of Tiberias. 2And a great crowd was following him, because they were seeing the signs which he was doing on those who were afflicted. 3And Jesus went up on the mountain and was sitting there with his disciples. 4Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near. 5When Jesus raised his eyes and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, he said to Philip, “From where are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?” 6He said this to test him, for he knew what he was going to do. 7Philip answered him, “Bread [purchased] for two hundred denarii would not suffice for them, that each might receive a little.” 8One of the disciples, namely, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, 9“There is a small child here who has five barley loaves and two fish. However, what are these in view of so many?” 10Jesus said, “Make the people to lie down.” Now there was much grass in that place. So the men lay down, in number about five thousand. 11Then Jesus took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he distributed it to those lying down, and [he did] likewise from the fish. [They ate] as much as they wanted. 12And when they were filled, he said to his disciples, “Gather together the fragments which are left over, so that nothing might perish.” 13And so they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with the fragments from the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. 14When the people saw the sign which he had done, they began to say, “This is truly the prophet who is to come into the world!” 15Therefore, when Jesus became aware that they intended to come and seize him by force to make him king, he again went up, by himself, onto the mountain.

Textual Notes

6:1 μετὰ ταῦτα ἀπῆλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς—The connecting μετὰ ταῦτα, “after these things,”1 is indefinite and has no chronological specificity. Accordingly Brown translates it as “later on.”2 It serves to connect thematically. Thyen wishes to connect Jn 6:1 more closely to “Jerusalem” (Jn 5:1–2) and translates the phrase as “after these [speeches].”3

πέραν τῆς θαλάσσης τῆς Γαλιλαίας τῆς Τιβεριάδος—The two successive genitives in the name of the sea, “of Galilee, of Tiberias,” are awkward. Some manuscripts omit either τῆς Τιβεριάδος (336 bc pc) or τῆς Γαλιλαίας (N 0210 1242* 1344 2174); others place εἰς τὰ μέρη between the two genitives, giving the sense “across the Sea of

2 Brown, John, 1:231–32; the NEB translates it as “some time later.”
3 Thyen, Johannevangelium, 333: “nach diesen (Reden).”
Galilee toward the regions of Tiberias” (D Θ 892 1009 1230 b e j t\textsuperscript{1} Chrysostom). All clearly are attempts to eliminate a difficult reading.\textsuperscript{5}

The name “Tiberias” (Τιβεριάς) occurs only three times in the NT, all of them in the Gospel of John (Jn 6:1, 23; 21:1). Jn 21:1 also refers to the sea as “the Sea of Tiberias.” Around AD 18–20 Herod Antipas founded the city of Tiberias in honor of the emperor Tiberius. Because it was built on an ancient burial site, the Jews regarded it as ritually impure. In the middle second century Tiberias was declared ritually pure by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and by the end of that century it had become a center of Jewish scholarship with the “Great School” and its dean, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi. It is possible that “Sea of Tiberias” became a common, semi-official name for the sea. Luke calls it “the Lake of Gennesaret” (Lk 5:1). More commonly in the NT it is named “the Sea of Galilee” (e.g., Mt 4:18; Mk 1:16).\textsuperscript{5}

6:2 ἠκολούθει δὲ ὁ ὄχλος πολύς—The imperfect verb ἠκολούθει suggests that the multitude “was following” Jesus over a period of time. Does this suggest that a period of time in Galilee had elapsed between John 5 and John 6? See the commentary.

ὅτι ἐθεώρουν τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐποίει ἐπὶ τῶν ἀσθενοῦντων—The verse continues with two more imperfect verbs (ἐθεώρουν ... ἐποίει; see also ἐκάθητο in Jn 6:3). Although the grammatical subject of ἐθεώρουν is the singular ὄχλος, “crowd,” the verb is in plural form (“they were seeing”) to emphasize the individuals in the group.\textsuperscript{6}

6:3 ἀνῆλθεν δὲ εἰς τὸ ὄρος Ἰησοῦς—The definite article with “mountain” (τὸ ὄρος) may suggest that a particular and known mountain is meant. Brown notes that in the Synoptic Gospels Galilee is the location of “the mountain” on important occasions (Mt 5:1; 28:16; Mk 3:13). He comments: “The Gospels may have simplified several localities into one which, as ‘the mountain,’ was thought of as a Christian Sinai.”\textsuperscript{7} However, “the mountain” may simply refer to the high country on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee.\textsuperscript{8}

καὶ ἐκεῖ ἐκάθητο μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ—It was usual for rabbis to sit down to teach (cf. Mt 5:1; Mk 4:1; 9:35; Lk 4:20). Are “his disciples” the Twelve? Jn 6:60–71 would suggest that a larger group is intended.

6:4 ἦν δὲ ἐγερθεὶς τὸ πάσχα, ἡ ἑορτὴ τῶν Ἰουδαίων—In the various Gospel accounts of the multiplication of loaves, only the Gospel of John mentions the festival of Passover. This is not merely a chronological datum. It signals the essential thematic content of the multiplication of the loaves and of the following Bread of Life Discourse (Jn 6:26–58).

\textsuperscript{4} Metzger favors the simple reading τῆς Γαλιλαίας, although the reading is marked with the letter B, indicating “some degree of doubt” (Textual Commentary, 211; see also xxviii). According to Brown, the phrase εἰς τὰ μέρη “may be original.” He translates with “the Sea of Galilee [to the shore] of Tiberias” (John, 1:231–32).

\textsuperscript{5} The rabbis (Str-B 2:467–77) and Josephus (J.W. 3.57; 4.456) speak of the Sea of Tiberias.

\textsuperscript{6} See Wallace, Greek Grammar, 400–401, who calls it a constructio ad sensum.

\textsuperscript{7} Brown, John, 1:232; similarly, Thyen, Johannesevangelium, 336. Tradition located this mountain on the northwest shore of the Lake of Galilee, on the Mount of the Beatitudes.

\textsuperscript{8} So Robinson, Priority, 202, 203. The NEB translates the phrase as “the hill-side.”
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6:5 ἐπάρας οὖν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ θεασάμενος ὅτι πολὺς ὀχλός ἐρχεται πρὸς αὐτόν—These two participial clauses have adverbial aorist participles (ἐπάρας … θεασάμενος) that answer the temporal question “when?” hence, “when Jesus raised … and saw …”

λέγει πρὸς Φιλίππον—The historical present λέγει, “said,” recurs in Jn 6:8, 12. Since Philip was from Bethsaida (Jn 1:44), situated not too far away on the north end of the lake, Jesus perhaps regarded him as a good source for local information.

πόθεν ἐγορόσωμεν ἁρτοὺς ἵνα φάγωσιν οὖν;—As we have noted, in John’s Gospel the adverb πόθεν, “from where?” assumes Christological significance and expresses the question of Christ’s origin. The question of his origin provokes the conflict in Jn 6:41–51. In this context πόθεν serves to connect the story of the multiplication of the loaves with Jesus’ claim to be the Manna “from heaven” (Jn 6:31–33, 38, 41–42, 50–51, 58).

In the Gospel of John this is the first instance of the noun ἁρτος, whose singular and plural (as here) are rendered as “bread.” It appears five times in this passage and a total of twenty-one times in this chapter, then in Jn 13:18 and in the meal after the resurrection in Jn 21:9, 13. For its usual composition, see the second textual note on Jn 6:9.

The “hortatory” subjunctive ἐγορόσωμεν, “shall we buy bread,” serves to urge or command someone to join with the speaker (Jesus) in an action upon which he has already determined (“he knew,” Jn 6:6). Does this invitation to join with Jesus in his action already intimate the later celebration of the Lord’s Supper in which the church joins with Jesus in the Sacrament which is his?

6:6 τοῦτο δὲ ἔλεγεν πειράζων αὐτόν—The participle πειράζων, “testing,” expresses purpose and so is telic.

αὐτὸς γὰρ ἠδει τί ἐμέλλειν ποιεῖν—The verb ἠδει is pluperfect with a simple past meaning, “he knew,” from οἶδα, a perfect form with present meaning. For Jesus’ “knowing,” see oἶδα also in Jn 5:32; 6:61, 64 and γνῶσκον in Jn 6:15 as well as Jn 1:48; 2:24–25. The verb μέλλω, “be about to,” takes the supplementary infinitive ποιεῖν, “to do,” to complete its thought, as similarly in Jn 6:15 (see the first textual note there).

6:7 ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ [ὁ] Φιλίππος· διακοσίων δηναρίων ἁρτοῖς ὁκ ἀρκοῦσιν αὐτοῖς—A denarius equaled one day’s pay for a common laborer (cf. Mt 20:2). The

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10 See the textual notes and the commentary on Jn 2:9; 3:8; 4:11; πόθεν recurs in Jn 7:27, 28; 8:14; 9:29, 30; 19:9.
11 The adverb πόθεν occurs also in the Synoptic accounts of the feeding of the four thousand (Mt 15:33; Mk 8:4). However, there it introduces the disciples’ question to Jesus. In John πόθεν introduces Jesus’ question to the disciples (Jn 6:5). He knows what he will do!
15 See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 586.
genitive case can serve to indicate quantity, including the price paid for something,\(^\text{17}\) hence, bread purchased “for two hundred denarii” (δίκοσίων δηναρίων).

ἱνα ἵκαστος βραχύ [τι] λάβη—This use of ἵνα plus the subjunctive (λάβη) likely indicates both purpose and intended result.\(^\text{18}\) The purchased bread “would not be sufficient” (οὔς ἄρκούσιν, Jn 6:7a) to provide enough “that each person might receive [λάβῃ] a little.”

6:8 λέγει αὐτῷ εἰς ἑκ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ, Ἀνδρέας ὁ ἀδελφὸς Σίμωνος Πέτρου—As elsewhere in this Gospel, Philip is associated with Andrew (Jn 1:44; 12:21–22), who is stated here to be “the brother of Simon Peter.” For the compound name “Simon Peter,” see the first textual note on Jn 1:40.

6:9 ἐστιν παιδάριον ὅδε—The noun παιδάριον (only here in the NT) is a diminutive of the noun παῖς, “child; servant,” and indicates a “small child,” often one who is servant or slave. The usual diminutive is παιδίον, as in Jn 4:49; 16:21; 21:5. Gehazi, servant of Elisha, is called a παιδάριον.\(^\text{19}\)

ὁς ἔχει πέντε ἄρτους κριθίνους—The term ἄρτος (usually refers to a cake of wheat bread, in contrast to a barley cake (μᾶζα). The adjective κριθίνος indicates that this bread was from “barley.” Barley was less expensive than wheat and was used as food for cattle and for the very poor.

καὶ δύο ὀψάρια—The neuter noun ὀψόν denotes cooked, prepared food. In Athens the word assumed the meaning of prepared fish and was a delicacy. The diminutive form here, τὸ ὀψάριον, occurs in the NT only in John’s Gospel and always with the meaning “(dried) fish” (Jn 6:9, 11; 21:9, 10, 13). The Synoptic parallels to this story use ἰχθύς, the usual word for “fish” (δύο ἰχθύας: Mt 14:17, 19; Mk 6:38, 41; Lk 9:16; ἰχθύες δύο: Lk 9:13).

ἀλλὰ ταῦτα τί ἐστιν εἰς τοσούτους;—The neuter plural ταῦτα refers to the loaves and fish, but since neuter plurals are commonly regarded as singular collectives,\(^\text{20}\) the indefinite pronoun and verb (τί ἐστιν) are singular: “but these—what is it for so many?”

6:10 εἶπεν ο Ἰησοῦς· ποιήσατε τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἀναπεσεῖν—The verb ἀναπίπτω means “to lie down, to recline.” In the context of a meal it means “to recline at table.”\(^\text{21}\) Chrysostom recognized this: “He bade them at once to recline, as though the table were prepared and ready.”\(^\text{22}\)

Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 122, calls it the “genitive of price or value.”

\(^\text{17}\) Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 122, calls it the “genitive of price or value.”

\(^\text{18}\) For the use of ἵνα plus the subjunctive for “purpose-result,” see Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 473–74. Cf. BDF, § 393.2.

\(^\text{19}\) LXX 2 Ki 4:12, 14, 25, 41; 5:20. Its plural denotes young slaves in LXX 1 Sam 25:5. The word also appears, for example, in LXX Ruth 2:5, 6, 9, 15, 21; *Mart. Pol.* 6:1; 7:1.


\(^\text{22}\) Chrysostom, *Homily* 42 (FC 33:429).
synonym ἀνάκειμαι. In Jn 6:10 most translations render the aorist infinitive ἀναπεσεῖν as “to sit down,” apparently because it seems more appropriate to the occasion, but ἀναπίπτω does not mean “to sit down” (as καθίζω does mean). True to the meaning of the verb ἀναπίπτω and to the eucharistic overtones of the passage, we have translated the infinitive as “to lie down.”

恁 δὲ χόρτος πολὺς ἐν τῷ τόπῳ—For the significance of the “much grass,” see the commentary.

ἀνέπεσαν οὖν οἱ ἄνδρες τὸν ἀριθμὸν ὡς πεντακισχίλιοι—Whereas Jesus’ command to make “the people” recline used the generic τοὺς ἀνθρώπους (Jn 6:10a), all four Gospels count the size of the crowd by the number of “men” (ἀνδρεῖς here, as in Mk 6:44; Lk 9:14; see especially Mt 14:21: ἄνδρεῖς … χωρὶς γυναικῶν καὶ παιδίων, “men … excluding women and children”). Based on the “five thousand” (πεντακισχίλιοι) men, Carson estimates that the total number of persons may have exceeded twenty thousand.23

6:11 ἔλαβεν οὖν τοὺς ἄρτους ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ εὐχαριστήσας διέδωκεν τοῖς ἀνακειμένοις—The similarity of language to that of the Lord’s Supper is evident (see Mt 26:26–27; Mk 14:22–23; Lk 22:19). The Synoptic accounts use the verb εὐλογέω, “to bless,” in the feeding of the five thousand (Mt 14:19; Mk 6:41; Lk 9:16), while in the feeding of the four thousand they use εὐχαριστέω, “to give thanks” (Mt 15:36; Mk 8:6; cf. εὐλογέω in Mk 8:7), as John does here (the aorist participle εὐχαριστήσας). No substantial difference in meaning exists between the two verbs (see Mk 8:6, 7). In light of ἀναπίπτο, “to lie down” (see the first textual note on Jn 6:10), the participle ἀνακειμένοις means “to those who were lying down,” not “to those who were seated.” In the NT ἄνακειμένος usually refers to reclining or lying down at a meal,24 and it always does so elsewhere in John (Jn 12:2; 13:23, 28).

A significant array of manuscripts read “he distributed [the bread] to the disciples and the disciples to those who were lying down” (N² D Θ Ψ f¹3 b e j ac² bo2). This reading is, however, probably a gloss introduced from Mt 14:19; 15:36. Moreover, the accepted reading has very strong support (Ψ66 Ψ73 Ρ A B L N W f¹ 33 565 579 1241 sy-c ph sa bo).

ὀμοίως καὶ ἐκ τῶν ὄψαρίων ὁσὸν ἠθέλον—The prepositional phrase ἐκ τῶν ὄψαρίων indicates source, “from the fish.” The phrase ὁσὸν ἠθέλον, “as much as they wanted,” is an ellipsis for which another verb needs to be supplied.25 The context (ἐνεπλήσθησαν, “they were filled,” in Jn 6:12 and τοῖς βεβρωκόσιν, “by those who had eaten,” in Jn 6:13) implies “they ate.”

6:12 ὡς δὲ ἐνεπλήσθησαν, λήγει τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ—The feeding narrative ends with instructions of Jesus to his disciples. His work is accomplished; their work follows on (cf. Jn 20:21).

23 Carson, John, 270.
25 In such an ellipsis “usually the context makes clear what verb is wanting” (Robertson, Grammar, 1202). Cf. BDF, §§ 479–81.
6:13 συνήγαγον οὖν καὶ ἐγέμισαν δώδεκα κοφίνους κλασμάτων ἐκ τῶν πέντε ἄρτων τῶν κριθίνων—The aorist indicative συνήγαγον, “they gathered up,” corresponds to the aorist imperative of the same verb (συνάγω) in Jesus’ instructions (συναγάγετε, Jn 6:12). A κόφινος was a large and thick “basket,” which probably could vary in size, for transporting loads. After ἐγέμισαν δώδεκα κοφίνους, the plural κλασμάτων is a verbal genitive of content, “they filled twelve baskets with fragments.”

6:14 οἱ οὖν ἄνθρωποι ἰδόντες ὃ ἐποίησεν σημεῖον—Although there were five thousand “men” (ἀνδρείς, Jn 6:10), all the “people” (ἄνθρωποι) saw the “sign” (σημεῖον). There is strong witness for a plural reading: they saw the signs (τὰ σημεῖα) which he had done (𝔓⁷⁵ B 091 pc a). It is, however, not to be accepted. It is most likely a scribal assimilation to Jn 6:2, and the plural reading destroys the connection to the miracle of the feeding and the filling of the twelve baskets.

6:15 Ἰησοῦς οὖν γνοὺς ἕτεραν ἄλληθρος ὁ προφήτης ὁ ἔρχεται καὶ ἀρπάζει αὐτὸν ἵνα ποιήσωσιν βασιλέα—The verb μέλλω, “intend to, be about to,” takes two supplementary infinitives, ἔρχεσθαι καὶ ἀρπάζειν, “to come and to seize (by force),” to complete its
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In place of the subjunctive purpose clause ἵνα ποιήσωσιν, “in order to make,” Codex Sinaiticus (סופ) has a third supplementary infinitive, the more formal καὶ ἀναδείκνυναι, “and to proclaim him King.”

ἀνεχώρησεν πάλιν εἰς τὸ ὄρος αὐτὸς μόνος—The story of the feeding both begins and concludes with Jesus “going up on the mountain” (see ἀνήλθεν … εἰς τὸ ὄρος, Jn 6:3). Here some manuscripts read that Jesus “fled” (φεύγει) onto the mountain (Soph lat Diatessaron, Tertullian, Augustine); syє has both readings: “he left them and fled again.” According to Metzger, φεύγει is “a typical Western reading introduced in several witnesses to enliven the narrative.”

Commentary

Introduction to John 6: The Passover Was Near (Jn 6:1–4)

Other than the passion narrative no portion of John’s Gospel corresponds so closely to Synoptic accounts as does the story of the feeding of the five thousand and the following account of Jesus walking on the water. In fact, the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels (Mt 14:13–21; Mk 6:32–44; Lk 9:10–17; Jn 6:1–15). Yet, only the Gospel of John, with explicit intent, associates the feeding with the Passover (Jn 6:4).

The transition from John 5 to John 6 is loosely made. The connective “after these things” (Jn 6:1) is indefinite and with difficulty admits of chronological or geographical specificity. However, the very looseness of the connection allows all the more for a thematic integration of what follows with what has just preceded. Jesus has told the Jews that Moses wrote of him; to believe the writings of Moses is to believe the words of Jesus (Jn 5:46–47; cf. Jn 5:39). That is to say, the stories of Torah are prophetic prefigurations of the story of Christ. Thus, John 6 begins with what seems to be a Christological summary of the exodus story: Jesus crosses the sea (Ex 14:10–15:21); the people follow him (Ex 15:22); they see the signs which he did (Ex 15:23–25; cf. Deut 4:34–35; 7:17–19; 29:2–3 [MT 29:1–2]); he goes up on the mountain (Ex 19:1–20:17). The feeding of the five thousand with what appears to be insufficient food corresponds to the story of the manna from heaven (Ex 16:1–35). Jesus is he who gives food that does not fail (Jn 6:13; cf. Jn 6:27). By means of the discourse on

30 See Wallace, Greek Grammar, 598–99.
31 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 212.
32 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 212.
33 Matthew and Mark associate the feeding of the five thousand (Mt 14:13–21; Mk 6:32–44) with Jesus’ walking on the sea (Mt 14:22–32; Mk 6:45–51). Luke has no account of Jesus’ walking on the water. Nor in the double tradition of the feeding of the four thousand (Mt 15:29–38; Mk 8:1–9) is there mention of the appearance of Jesus on the waters. Although some commentators insist that John is dependent upon the Synoptic accounts (especially Mark), Brown’s thorough analysis demonstrates that “the evangelist did not copy from the Synoptics but had an independent tradition of the multiplication which was like, but not the same as, the Synoptic traditions” (John, 1:236–50, here 1:239); see also Dodd, Historical Tradition, 196–211; Robinson, Priority, 190–94; Thyen, Johannevangelium, 331–33.
the Bread from heaven (Jn 6:26–58) Jesus presents, as it were, a Christological midrash on the manna story and brings that story to its corresponding eschatological fulfillment: the true manna eaten unto eternal life is the flesh of the Passover Lamb who has come down from heaven. Moreover, through the discourse on the Bread from heaven the crowd will be confronted by the question whether in the writings of Moses they find that eternal life which is in fact Jesus himself (Jn 5:39–40, 45–47).

The geography of the statement “Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee” (Jn 6:1) is not clear. It may be, as Robinson says, that between John 5 and John 6 there is “one of the most blatant Johannine aporiae or failures of connection.” At the end of John 5 Jesus is in Jerusalem. Then in Jn 6:1 Jesus seems to be crossing the Sea of Galilee from the western side of the lake to the eastern side. If this is the case, the signs of healing which the crowd has seen (Jn 6:2) refer to the healing of the nobleman’s son in Galilee (Jn 4:46–54), the one healing serving as a pars pro toto. Under such a view a sojourn of Jesus in Galilee seems to be missing. This is a possible scenario. However, it may also be, as Cyril of Alexandria argued and more recently Thyen as well, that the origin of Jesus’ travel (ἀπῆλθεν, “went away,” Jn 6:1) was Jerusalem. Jesus has left Jerusalem to escape the plots of the Jews (Jn 5:16, 18) and for that reason was absent from Jerusalem during the upcoming Passover (Jn 6:4). In Thyen’s view the crowds could be “Galilean pilgrims” who have followed Jesus to Jerusalem and now again back to Galilee. The plural “signs” (σημεῖα, Jn 6:2), therefore, could refer to the healing of the son of the “royal official” (Jn 4:46–54) and to the healing of the paralytic (Jn 5:2–9). This more extended time frame would also account for the imperfect “was doing” (ἐποίει, Jn 6:2). Whatever the case may be, Thyen rightly notes that in John’s Gospel the verb “follow” (ἀκολουθέω, Jn 6:2) assumes an almost technical meaning, and so the crowds are indicated to be disciples of Jesus. It may well be, then, that the “many of his disciples” who later leave Jesus because of his hard saying (Jn 6:60–61) are already to be found in this crowd.

34 It is important to note that the sending of manna and quail (as well as other exodus signs) served to preserve Israel in its state of freedom from the Egyptians (cf. Ex 16:3). The signs are not mere wonders. They are works of God, who, through the signs, continues to reveal himself as the God who redeemed Israel so that Israel might be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Ex 19:4–6).

35 Robinson, Priority, 194.

36 This assumption has led recent commentators to assert a transposition of John 5 and John 6. See the introduction to Jn 5:1–7:1.

37 Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary 6.1 (ACT 1:177–78); Thyen, Johannevangelium, 335–36.

38 Thyen, Johannevangelium, 335. Unlike Jesus’ previous journey to Galilee through Samaria (Jn 4:4), Thyen assumes that on this journey Jesus took a route through Perea and the Decapolis to Gaulanitis on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. This would mean that the entire journey was on the east side of the Jordan River.

39 Thyen, Johannevangelium, 335–36.
The location of the feeding is not certain. As we learn from the fifth-century pilgrim Egeria (ca. AD 440), tradition located the site on the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee at a place called the Seven Springs (Heptapegon). This site, however, has no real historical value. We may accept the conclusions of Robinson’s detailed argument: “The place of the feeding lay across the sea not only from Capernaum [on the northwest side] but also from Tiberias [on the southwest side]. … It would fit well with the Synoptic evidence if it lay further up the east coast [from En Gev] between Kursi and the plain of Bethsaida.” That is, the feeding most likely occurred on the northeast side of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus ascends “the mountain” and was sitting there with his disciples (Jn 6:3). Robinson cautions against attempting to identify “the mountain” since “there are not, properly speaking, ‘mountains’ within striking distance of the Lake.” He recommends the translation of the NEB, “the hill-side.” The whole passage, however, is replete with exodus allusions, and the mention of Jesus’ sitting with his disciples (ἐκάθητο, Jn 6:3) and the repeated mention of “the mountain” at the end of the feeding narrative (Jn 6:15) make it most likely that in “the mountain” the reader is to recognize an allusion to Sinai. As we noted above, the feeding of the five thousand and the following Bread of Life Discourse (Jn 6:26–58) illustrate Jesus’ claim that Moses wrote of him (Jn 5:39, 45–47). The posture of sitting was the posture of teaching. The implication may be that Jesus was teaching the Torah to his disciples. If so, the mention of the Passover immediately following (Jn 6:4) may give us a clue to the object lesson. It may also illumine the cryptic words of Jn 6:6, that Jesus knew what he was going to do. Jesus was to do as Moses did, and much more.

The duplicate naming of the sea is difficult: “the Sea of Galilee, of Tiberias” (Jn 6:1). In our opinion it is a literary clue to the second mention of the Sea of Tiberias in this Gospel, in Jn 21:1. The feeding of the five thousand and the post-resurrection meal of Jesus with his disciples are to be read together. The feeding of the five thousand, with its eucharistic overtones, finds its ecclesial

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40 See Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels*, 196–200. The Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes is still to be visited there. See also Schneider, *The Church of the Multiplying of the Loaves and Fishes*.


42 Brown (*John*, 1:232, 257–58) and Koester (*Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 55, nn. 34–35) argue that the feeding was near the city of Tiberias on the southwest side of the lake. This seems to me much less likely.

43 Robinson, *Priority*, 202. Matthew and Mark also mention “the mountain” in association with the feeding of the five thousand (Mt 14:23; Mk 6:46), and Matthew also mentions it in association with the feeding of the four thousand (Mt 15:29).

44 For Jesus as the new Torah, the commandment of love, see especially “In the Beginning Was the Gospel (Jn 1:1a)” in the commentary on Jn 1:1–18, as well as “Section 3 (Jn 1:14–18)” in “Introduction to the Prologue.” For Christ as the incarnate Torah of God, see “The Life Was the Light of Men (Jn 1:4b),” “The Light Shines upon All (Jn 1:9),” and “His Own Did Not Receive Him (Jn 1:10–11)” in the commentary on Jn 1:1–18.
continuation after the resurrection in the communion meal which the Lord has with his disciples. For example, compare “bread” and “fish” in Jn 6:9 to the same in Jn 21:9, 13.45

Given the indefinite temporal connection that begins the narrative (μετὰ ταῦτα, “after these things,” Jn 6:1), the definite chronological notice that “the Passover was near” (Jn 6:4) is striking. Mention of the Passover in association with the feeding of the five thousand is unique to John, and here its intrusion into the narrative is sudden, with emphasis, and without apparent purpose. All this induces one to recognize that mention of the Passover is the fundamental clue to the meaning of the feeding, to the Bread of Life Discourse of Jesus which follows (Jn 6:26–58), and to the climactic words of Jesus concerning the eating of his flesh (Jn 6:53–58).46

Indeed, mention of the Passover places the feeding of the five thousand into the central theme of the entire Gospel: the death of Jesus is the eschatological Passover which frees the sinner from death and darkness and brings him into eternal life and light. Already at the beginning of the Gospel story Jesus is identified as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29; cf. Jn 1:36), and that title finds its end in the death of Jesus as the Lamb whose bones shall not be broken (Jn 19:36; cf. Ex 12:46; Num 9:12). As we have noted, outside the Prologue (Jn 1:1–18) “the Lamb of God” is the first title given to Jesus and may, therefore, be considered determinative for the interpretation of all that Jesus says and does. As Thyen has rightly noted, mention of the Passover in Jn 6:4 indicates that one must read all that follows from the perspective of the Passover and that in the feeding of the five thousand the one who feeds the people is none other than the Lamb of God himself.47 Twice else-

Thyen (quoting Wilhelm Wilkens) speaks of “now the Passover was near” (ἦν δὲ ἐγγὺς τὸ πάσχα) as “the Pascha structural formula” and of the Gospel of John as a “Passover-Gospel” (Johannesevangelium, 336, quoting Wilhelm Wilkens, Die Entstehungsgeschichte des vierten Evangeliums [Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1958], 9ff.).

45 That Jesus is preparing a Eucharist for the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias is suggested by the mention of the fish (ὀψάριον) and the bread (ἄρτος) in both Jn 21:9 and 21:13.
46 Cf. Goppelt, *Typos*, 190–91: “The time designated in 6:4 indicates that John viewed the Lord’s Supper as the antitype of the Passover, and, for any reader who is familiar with this idea, it indicates that John is disclosing his interpretation of the Lord’s Supper.”
48 Mention of the Passover, therefore, is a significant structural element of the Gospel of John. Thyen (quoting Wilhelm Wilkens) speaks of “now the Passover was near” (ἦν δὲ ἐγγὺς τὸ πάσχα) as “the Pascha structural formula” and of the Gospel of John as a “Passover-Gospel” (Johannesevangelium, 336, quoting Wilhelm Wilkens, Die Entstehungsgeschichte des vierten Evangeliums [Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1958], 9ff.).
Jesus Feeds Five Thousand

“From Where Are We to Buy Bread?” (Jn 6:5–9)

Raising his eyes and seeing the large crowd coming to him, Jesus says to Philip, “From where are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?” (Jn 6:5). The connections in the passage ought not be overlooked. It is Passover (Jn 6:4); a great crowd is coming to Jesus (Jn 6:2); and Jesus assumes the initiative by introducing the thematic word “bread” (ἄρτος), which will govern the narrative through Jn 6:58.49 An exact parallel occurs in John 12. There also it was near the Passover (Jn 11:55), certain Greeks come to see Jesus (Jn 12:20–22), and Jesus immediately speaks of his “hour” and of his “being glorified” (Jn 12:23) and interprets this in terms of the parable of the “grain of wheat” falling into the earth (Jn 12:24). This parallelism shows that in initiating the feeding of the five thousand Jesus is intimating his death. This becomes clear by Jesus’ words in the discourse “the Bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives his life for the world” (Jn 6:33). The feeding of the five thousand, then, is a parable of a future meal in which the people will partake of Jesus’ death. The feeding is a proleptic enactment of the words of Jesus reported in the Synoptics: “This is my body. … This is my blood” (Mt 26:26, 28).50 Moreover, the feeding is symbolic of that future meal of the new Israel gathered in and made one by the death of Christ (cf. Jn 4:21–42; 10:11–16; 12:32–33). Christology is ecclesiology is sacramentology.51

Unlike the Synoptic accounts, wherein the disciples initiate the action of feeding by asking Jesus to send the people away (Mt 14:15; Mk 6:35–36; Lk 9:12), here Jesus initiates the action.52 He asks Philip “from where” (πόθεν) bread might be purchased so that the crowd might eat (Jn 6:5). This adverb is Christologically freighted and shows that already at this point Jesus is thinking of himself as the Bread of God who comes down “from heaven” (Jn 6:33).53 The Last Supper shimmers through. There, too, Jesus will be both host and food.

We are told that Jesus asked Philip “to test him, for he knew what he was going to do” (Jn 6:6). This comment has caused difficulties for commentators. Many have thought that the question was intended to prepare Philip (and the

49 It is perhaps helpful to remember that in the original Greek manuscripts there were no chapter and verse divisions, nor any paragraph separations which might tempt us to think that a new theme was being introduced. In those manuscripts there was continuous narrative, allowing the mention of Passover and the following verses to be more easily interpreted together. Here the printing of the RSV is helpful, unlike that of NA27, which makes Jn 6:5 begin a new paragraph.

50 Cf. Brown, John, 1:247. Cullmann, Early Christian Worship, 94: “John 6.1–13 shows what a Johannine story looks like, in the writing of which the evangelist without any doubt was thinking at once of the once-for-all event and of the Eucharist” (emphasis removed). In my opinion this judgment of Cullmann is correct and important to keep in mind.

51 For a summary of the eucharistic allusions in the story of the feeding of the five thousand, see the excursus “The Multiplication of Loaves as a Eucharistic Symbol” following this pericope.

52 On the basis of this difference Chrysostom assumed that the accounts of the Synoptics and the account of John were of distinct events (Homily 42 [FC 33:425–26]).

53 See the third textual note on Jn 6:5.
others) for the demonstration of Jesus’ omnipotent majesty. It is better, however, to keep the OT narrative of the manna in mind. In asking Philip “from where” food was to be acquired Jesus was testing to see whether Philip understood the present circumstances in terms of such a narrative. In Ex 16:4, the Lord tells Moses, “Behold, I am raining down for you bread from heaven … so that I may test whether [the people] will walk in my Torah or not” (LXX: ἄρτους ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ … ὅπως πειράσω αὐτούς). Jesus, however, knew what he was going to do, because Jesus was acting according to OT example. Just as God provided Israel with food in the wilderness so that they would not die (Ex 16:1–35), so now Jesus will provide the crowds with the food necessary for their sustenance, even eternal life (Jn 6:27, 54; cf. Jn 3:16). And in doing so, he will reveal his true identity: “Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God” (Ex 16:12)! Philip, however, seems not to understand. He responds to Jesus that wages earned for two hundred days would not suffice to give each person of the crowd even a morsel (Jn 6:7). Andrew, here said to be “one of the disciples” (Jn 6:8) and again identified as the brother of Simon Peter (as in Jn 1:40), adds his voice to the skepticism of Philip. There is a small child who has five barley cakes and two small fish, but “what are these in view of so many?” (Jn 6:8–9). The claim that there is insufficient food certainly heightens the reality of the following miracle, but the primary purpose is to emphasize that Jesus will be the sole source and provider of the food.

Various OT stories have been adduced as background. Commentators often put forward the story of Elisha’s feeding of the hundred men as most reminiscent of our passage (2 Ki 4:42–44). There are parallels: barley bread (LXX: ἄρτους

54 So Bruno of Segni, Commentaria 6.5–6 (PL 165:493): “By testing Philip he wanted to hear what he was thinking about his omnipotence.” Befuddlement in what the passage means is evident also in the comment of Theodore of Mopsuestia that to test Philip means “to provide him with proof” (Commentary 6.6 [ACT 60]). According to Schnackenburg, “the question is only a teaching device” (John, 2:15). A teaching device, yes, but not “only.” The Passover was near. Does Philip understand the implications of that?

55 We should note also that Israel was commonly commanded to have trust in God on the basis of God’s earlier redemptive acts (Deut 4:34–35; 7:17–19; 29:2–3 [MT 29:1–2]).

56 It is doubtful that the point concerns Jesus’ omniscience, against Carson, John, 269: “John adds this comment to forestall any reader from thinking that Jesus was stumped.”

57 We may see here another association between the feeding of the five thousand and the death of Jesus. In Jn 8:28 Jesus says that when the Jews have lifted up the Son of Man, then they “will know that I AM” (τότε γνώσεσθε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι); cf. the quotation of Ex 16:12 above (LXX: καὶ γνώσεσθε ὅτι ἐγώ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν).

58 Here also John’s account differs from the Synoptic Gospels. In Mark the two hundred denarii was thought to be sufficient (Mk 6:37).

59 We note that the words of Philip concerning the two hundred denarii may well suggest that this sum of money was in the possession of the disciples. Also, since the noun for “small child” (παιδάριον) often suggests a servant or a slave (see the first textual note on Jn 6:9), it may be that the appearance of the small child is not mere happenstance but an indication that the child accompanied Jesus and the disciples as one who served them.
κριθίνους); a boy or servant (παιδάριον); a claim that the proffered food would be insufficient; and a surplus of food after the men had eaten. Yet, despite the obvious similarities, it is difficult to see what thematic contribution this parallel makes to the present context. Cyril of Alexandria suggests Num 11:21–23. There God promises to give Israel meat to eat, to which Moses retorts, “Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them and suffice for them?” This has the advantage of being from the narrative of the exodus, but it says nothing of barley or of a small child.

Unlike the Synoptic narratives (Mt 14:17; Mk 6:38; Lk 9:13), John’s account expressly says that the bread which the small child has is “barley bread” (ἄρτους κριθίνους, Jn 6:9, 13). Why the specification? Despite the mention of barley bread in 2 Ki 4:42–44 it is quite doubtful that John thought that text so crucial that he derives the reference to barley from it. Much more to the point is Hoskyns’ observation that “reference may be to the bread commonly used during the passover season.” In addition, given the numerous eucharistic allusions throughout the story and the fact that five barley loaves and two fish became a primary eucharistic symbol very early in the church, it is not irrelevant to note that the early church may well have used barley bread in its eucharistic meals.

60 The terminology for the “barley bread” in LXX 2 Ki 4:42 is ἄρτους κριθίνους as in Jn 6:9, 13. In LXX 2 Ki 4:43 the servant is called a λειτουργός, but in earlier passages a παιδάριον (LXX 2 Ki 4:12, 14, 25, 41), the term used in Jn 6:9. Those who refer to 2 Ki 4:42–44 include Hoskyns, Fourth Gospel, 1:325; Brown, John, 1:246; Moloney, John, 199; Thyen, Johannesevangelium, 338; typical is Ridderbos, John, 211: the similarity “can hardly be regarded as accidental.”

61 Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary 6.8–10 (ACT 1:183).

62 Brown notes that Ruth 2:14 has also been cited as background for the mention of barley, but he rightly says that “this association with Ruth is too tenuous” (John, 1:246).

63 Hoskyns, Fourth Gospel, 1:325.

64 See McHugh, “Num solus panis triticeus sit materia valida SS. Eucharistiae? (I Cor 5,7).” On the basis of Paul (1 Cor 5:7) and Jn 6:9 McHugh concludes that it cannot be demonstrated whether Jesus instituted the Sacrament with barley bread or whether the first Christians ate it with barley bread. But in his opinion the use of such bread cannot be excluded. He shows that before the Council of Florence (AD 1439) there was a great diversity of opinion concerning the proper kind of bread and that the canonical law demanded nothing except that the bread be made from a grain. Only after the Council of Trent (AD 1545–1563) did the Roman Church demand that the bread of the Eucharist be of wheat. According to Cyril of Alexandria, “the five barley loaves signify the fivefold book of the all-wise Moses, that is, the whole law.” Since barley is a coarser food, it symbolizes “the letter and the narrative.” On the other hand, Cyril believes the two fish refer to “the food that comes from the fishermen, that is, the most delicate writings of the Savior’s disciples.” These two fish are “the apostolic and evangelical preaching” (Commentary 6.11 [ACT 1:186]). Similar is Augustine, who, however, thinks of the two fish as representing the offices of priest and king (Tractate 24.5.1–2 [FC 79:234–35]).
“Make the People to Lie Down” (Jn 6:10–14)

Jesus commands his disciples to “make the people to lie down” (Jn 6:10). It is as though Jesus were inviting guests to recline at table. We are told that “there was much grass [χόρτος πολύς] in that place” (Jn 6:10). Synoptic accounts also mention that the people reclined “upon (green) grass” (ἐπὶ τοῦ χόρτον, Mt 14:19; ἐπὶ τὸ χλωρὸ χόρτο, Mk 6:39). For Theodore of Mopsuestia this is merely a helpful chronological detail: “It was Nisan, when the earth is usually adorned with growing grass.” However, while in the Synoptics mention of the grass is but part of the general command that the people lie down, in this Gospel the evangelist’s mention of the grass is stressed in the form of a separate sentence after the manner in which earlier he had stressed the nearness of the Passover (ἡ δὲ, “now … was,” in both Jn 6:4 and Jn 6:10b). The description of the place as having “much [πολύς] grass” gives to it the character of paradise, a place of rest and safety (cf. Gen 1:30).

With good reason, therefore, commentators have perceived in Jesus’ command, “make the people to lie down,” an allusion to Ps 23:2 (LXX Ps 22:2): “in a place of green grass [LXX: τόπον χλόης], there he has made me to dwell.” Jesus will feed the crowd from the barley and fish “as much as they wanted” (Jn 6:11). This reminds one of the opening verse of the psalm: “the Lord tends me as a shepherd, and I shall want nothing” (LXX Ps 22:1 [MT/ET Ps 23:1]). The idea returns in Jn 10:9, where the Good Shepherd is also the door to the “pasture”: “I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and go out and find pasture.”

The distribution of the bread and fish (Jn 6:11) is expressed in terms closely paralleling the scene of the Last Supper in the Synoptics (Mt 26:26–27; Mk 14:22–23; Lk 22:19): “take” (λαμβάνω); “give thanks” (εὐχαριστέω); and John’s “distribute” (διαδίδωμι), which is comparable to δίδωμι, “give,” in the Synoptics. Then the people “were filled” (ἐνεπλήσθησαν, Jn 6:12); see the manna in Ex 16:12, “you will be filled with bread,” and as recalled in

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65 Perhaps it cannot be said that the verbs ἀναπίπτω (Jn 6:10; also Mk 6:40) and ἀνακλίνω (Mt 14:19; Mk 6:39) are unsuitable for people reclining on the open hillside. However, these verbs for “recline at table” certainly reinforce the eucharistic aspects of the entire scene. See the first textual note on Jn 6:10.

66 Theodore of Mopsuestia, Commentary 6.10 (ACT 61); similarly, Robinson, Priority, 202; Carson, John, 270.

67 Synoptic accounts note that the place was “desolate” or “deserted” (ἐρημῶς, Mt 14:13, 15; Mk 6:32, 35; Lk 9:12). John makes no such assertion, nor does he mention the division of the people into groups (Mk 6:39–40; Lk 9:14). As Schnackenburg notes, this “strengthens the impression that the evangelist is not interested in presenting a ‘wilderness scene’” (John, 2:16).

68 Commentators who cite Ps 23:2 include Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary 6.10 (ACT 1:185); Schnackenburg, John, 2:16; Wilckens, Johannes, 96; Thyen, Johannesevangelium, 339.

69 The Good Shepherd psalm was often interpreted in terms of the Eucharist; see “table” in Ps 23:5 (LXX Ps 22:5).

Ps 78:25 (LXX Ps 77:25): “man ate the bread of angels; [God] sent them food in abundance” (LXX: εἷς πλησιμονήν, “unto filling”). Jesus then commands his disciples, “Gather together the fragments which are left over, so that nothing might perish” (Jn 6:12). The language of gathering reflects the command of Moses to the people that they should gather the manna (LXX Ex 16:16: συναγάγετε ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ). However, the association here of “gathering” the “fragments” indicates that eucharistic language colors the narrative: κλάσματα, literally, “broken pieces,” is derived from the verb κλάω, “to break,” which the Synoptics use for Jesus’ breaking of the bread in the institution of the Lord’s Supper (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19; cf. Lk 24:30).71 The verb συνάγω, “to gather,” and its cognate nouns σύναξις and συναγωγή, “gathering,” became common terms for the gathering of the faithful for the Lord’s Supper, and τὰ κλάσματα can be used for “fragments” of “broken bread” in the Eucharist. The association is clear in the Didache: “And regarding the Eucharist. … And regarding the broken bread [τὸ κλάσμα]. … This broken bread [τὸ κλάσμα] was scattered upon the mountains and when gathered together [συναχθέν] became one.”72

When the fragments are gathered so none would “perish,” there was much left over, twelve basketsful (Jn 6:12–13). This detail has nothing to do with the idea of abundance.73 The point is that the food given by Jesus remains so that it is available for future believers who may also partake in the feeding which Jesus gives (see the commentary on Jn 6:27, 32). The perspective incorporates the future of the church. The leftovers are to be gathered “so that nothing might perish” (ἵνα μή τι ἀπόληται, Jn 6:12). The language echoes Ex 16:19–20, where Moses commands the people not to leave over any uneaten manna until the next

71 In this point the Synoptic accounts of the feedings more exactly follow the Last Supper than does the Gospel of John, as Matthew mentions the “breaking” (κλάω) of the bread in the feeding of the five thousand (Mt 14:19; see also Mt 15:36), as does Mark in the feeding of the four thousand (Mk 8:6), while John does not use it in the feeding of the five thousand. Yet this hardly argues against the eucharistic character of John’s narrative, against Carson’s claim (John, 270). All three of the Synoptics refer to the “fragments” or “broken pieces” in the feeding of the five thousand (κλάσματα, Mt 14:20; Mk 6:43; 8:19; Lk 9:17), as does John (Jn 6:12, 13) and as Mark does also for the feeding of the four thousand (Mk 8:8, 20).

72 Did. 9:1–4; see the fuller quote of Did. 9:4 in the commentary immediately below, including the Greek. See also Did. 14:1: “On the Lord’s Day of the Lord, having gathered together, break bread and give thanks/celebrate the Eucharist” (κατὰ κυριακὴν δὲ κυρίου συναχθέντες κλάσατε ἄρτον καὶ εὐχαριστήσατε); Ign. Pol. 4:2: “Let the gatherings be more frequent” (πυκνότερον συναγωγαὶ γινέσθωσαν); also 1 Clem. 34:7; Ign. Eph. 13:1. Although the verb εὐχαριστεῖται (“give thanks”) was used in various contexts, it could mean “celebrate the Eucharist,” as in Did. 14:1. Its cognate noun εὐχαριστία (“giving of thanks; Eucharist”) became almost a technical term for the “eucharistic food”; see Ign. Phld. 4: “Therefore be diligent to make use of one eucharistic food [σπουδάσατε ὡς μᾶς εὐχαριστίας χρήσατε], for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and one chalice for the union of his blood”; cf. Ign. Smyrn. 8:1. Justin Martyr informs us that the “eucharistic food” was called εὐχαριστία (I Apol. 66.1 [PG 6:428; cf. ANF 1:185]).

73 Ridderbos severely overemphasizes this idea: “The great theme of the miracle story is the eschatological abundance that Jesus supplies” (John, 214).
morning lest it grow worms and rot. In the Gospel of John, however, the language refers back to Jn 3:16, where we are told that God gave his only Son into death so that whoever believes in him “might not perish” (μὴ ἀπόληται) but have eternal life. That statement was made with the background of the raising of the serpent in the wilderness (Jn 3:14, referring to Num 21:4–9). From this perspective also the feeding of the five thousand is associated with the death of Jesus. Corresponding to this is the later statement of Jesus “when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself” (Jn 12:32). This statement is, as it were, the positive flip side of Jn 6:12. To the “so that nothing might perish” corresponds the word “will draw all [πάντας] to myself.” Jesus crucified will become the instrument and the focus to which all will be drawn, and as such Jesus crucified will become the living center of the church’s unity. The twelve baskets, filled full with the remaining fragments (Jn 6:13), therefore represent the new Israel, which will be gathered in from the sin and darkness of their diaspora. The language of gathering, it is important to note, was central to the proclamation of the prophets that at the end of time God would gather his scattered people into the land of promise, having cleansed them from their sin and idolatry, and there he would dwell with them. See, for example, Ezek 36:24: “and I will gather you into your land” (LXX: καὶ εἰσάξω ὑμᾶς ἐν τὴν γῆν ὑμῶν), into the new Jerusalem whose name is “The Lord Is There” (Ezek 48:35), and also Is 11:12. Since John’s account of the feeding uniquely mentions the Passover (Jn 6:4), it is important to remember that the eschatological salvation event was often seen as a paschal event. Interesting in this regard is the LXX rendering of Jer 31:8 (LXX Jer 38:8), which says that the final gathering in of Israel will be on the Pascha Festival. With good reason, therefore, Moule called attention to the similarity of John’s account of the feeding and the eucharistic prayer of Did. 9:4:

74 Some commentators think that the gathering of the fragments merely refers to the Jewish custom of gathering up the remains of a meal (Ridderbos, John, 213; Carson, John, 271; cf. Str-B 4:625–26). How the rich evocations of the present passage allow for this banality is difficult to imagine.

75 LXX Jer 38:8: ἵδον ἐγὼ ἐκατ’ ὠντος ἀπὸ βορρᾶ καὶ συνάξω ὠντος ἀπ’ ἑσχάτου τῆς γῆς ἐν ἑορτῇ θαυμάκε. The theme of ingathering is also central to the Feast of Tabernacles, whose imagery will guide the following chapters of the Gospel. One may say that in the Gospel of John the Feasts of Passover and Tabernacles are together the essential background for the interpretation of Jesus. For Tabernacles and the prophetic promises of ingathering, see point 3 in “The Centrality of Jerusalem” in “Where Was the Gospel of John Written?” in the introduction. See also “John 4:4–42: Structure and Message” in the commentary on Jn 4:1–15; “They Shall Worship in Spirit and Truth (Jn 4:22–24)” in the commentary on Jn 4:16–30; and “So That He Who Sows and He Who Reaps Might Rejoice Together’ (Jn 4:34–38)” in the commentary on Jn 4:31–42.

76 Moule, “A Note on Didache ix. 4.” Ignatius thought of the Eucharist as the “standard” (σύσσημον) to which and around which the Jews and Gentiles would gather (Ign. Smyrn. 1:2; see σύσσημον in LXX Is 5:26; 62:10, translated with σύσσημον in LXX Is 5:26; 62:10).
As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and, when gathered together, became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.

As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and, when gathered together, became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.

The “sign” (σημεῖον, Jn 6:14) which the people saw and which conjured up in their minds the idea of the promised prophet and king was not only the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, but the sign included, and perhaps was even most especially, the filling up of the “twelve baskets” (Jn 6:13). That was a sign that in the coming of Jesus the eschatological ingathering of Israel was beginning. It is not irrelevant to note that in the Gospel of John the “signs” have no significance unto themselves. They are symbols of the ultimate sign of Jesus’ identity as the God of Israel: the cross. A reference to the ingathering theme of Tabernacles seems uppermost. However, this does not exclude the view that the “twelve baskets” represent the twelve apostles. It is, to be sure, to them that Jesus gives the command to gather in the fragments (Jn 6:12). Indeed, it will be the mission of the apostles—and after them, the preachers of the church—to bring about the ingathering of those scattered in the world by sin and death (see Jn 17:9, 20; 20:21). Those brought in and gathered will be cleansed by the living water of Baptism and nourished unto eternal life by the Bread from heaven which remains (Jn 6:27).

If we keep in mind that the feeding of the five thousand is not merely a miracle story, demonstrating Jesus’ omnipotence, but is a story told under the rubric of the Passover, then we may perceive that the eating of the barley bread and fish (Jn 6:9–11) is an event symbolic of the eating of the Passover Lamb of God who was yet to be slaughtered. The flesh (and blood) of that Lamb could never be consumed so that nothing remains. The flesh of that Lamb remains (Jn 6:27) and so is always, in the symbolic world of the story, filling the twelve baskets full. The ecclesial and sacramental meaning is this: to the end of the age the flesh of Christ will be the Spiritual food for eternal life to all who believe. The Israel of the eschatological exodus is that Israel which feeds on the flesh and drinks the blood of the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29, 36) who came down from heaven (Jn 3:13, 31; 6:33–58) and so in that eating and in that drinking has communion with the Father in the Lamb who is none other than the incarnate Word (Jn 1:1, 14).
They Intended to Seize Him to Make Him King (Jn 6:15)

The Gospel of John alone records the crowd’s reaction to the miracle of the feeding and the filling of the twelve baskets. The Synoptic reports give no hint of this popular response to Jesus’ sign. Robinson notes “the political and paramilitary dimensions of this messianic meal.” He wonders whether the five thousand “men” (ἔνδρες, Jn 6:10) does not imply that there were only males, and he points to the parallel in Acts 21:38, where Paul’s Greek (Acts 21:37) frees him from the suspicion that he was the Egyptian who had recently started a revolt and had “led a force of four thousand men of the assassins [ἄνδρας τῶν σικαρίων] out into the wilderness.” Be that as it may, messianic pretenders in the first century were a constant feature of the political tension between the Jews and their Roman occupiers. That the crowd intended to make Jesus “king” is perhaps clarified by the report of Josephus that the country “was a prey to disorder, and the opportunity induced numbers of persons to aspire to sovereignty [βασιλεία].” Moreover, the nearness of the feeding miracle to the Passover (Jn 6:4) would have elicited nationalistic feelings associated with the hope that a second Moses would arise to free Israel from its contemporary pharaohs. It may well be that mention of “the prophet” in Jn 6:14 refers to the expectation that God would raise up a Moses-like prophet to usher in the messianic age (Deut 18:15–18). Moreover, it was thought that a second gift of manna would accompany the coming of the Messiah.

In addition, that the people wanted to make Jesus “king” may point as well to ideas of David as the ideal king who fed his people with lavish banquets (2 Sam 6:18–19 || 1 Chr 16:2–3).

Thus, it is wholly possible that the crowd’s reaction presented Jesus with a temptation, similar to that recorded in the Synoptics (Mt 4:8–10; Lk 4:5–8; cf. Mk 1:13) but not in John, to submit to the idea of a political, nationalistic understanding of his messianic mission.

81 In which case, according to Robinson (*Priority*, 204), Matthew misses the point by saying that there were five thousand men “besides women and children” (Mt 14:21).
82 Robinson, *Priority*, 204. Concerning the Egyptian, see also Josephus, *J.W.* 2.261–62. Carson also wonders whether the five thousand men (Jn 6:10) were not “a potential guerilla force” (*John*, 270).
83 Josephus, *J.W.* 2.55 (LCL); see also Josephus, *Ant.* 17.271–85.
84 Robinson quotes from *b. Roš Haš.* 11a: “During the month of Nisan they were redeemed and in the month of Nisan they will be redeemed again” (*Priority*, 204, n. 39); that manna would accompany the coming of Messiah, see *2 Bar.* 29:8; *Mek.* on Ex 16:25; *Eccl. Rab.* 1.9.
85 See the argument of Daly-Denton, *David in the Fourth Gospel*, 138–43. Her claim that John’s feeding scene “recalls” the banquet on the occasion of David’s anointing as king, when thousands ate and drank with him for three days (1 Chr 12:38–40), however, recalls as well to our minds the fact that not everything that “recalls” is in fact relevant.
86 This may be the case whether or not one accepts the idea that the mention of the five thousand “men” (Jn 6:10) has paramilitary implications.
alone (Jn 4:15). While it is true that this sets the stage for the following report that the disciples left for the other side of the sea without Jesus (Jn 4:16–17), it hardly has only this literary intention. As Wilckens notes, Jesus’ retreat to the mountain also has Christological significance: “On this mountain Jesus is as the Son alone with the Father, with whom he is one (Jn 10:30). As this miracle of the feeding was initiated with his unity with the Father [cf. Jn 5:17–47], so all that Jesus now does as the Son sent from the Father proceeds from this unity.”

The eucharistic discourse (Jn 6:26–58) that follows has the function of interpreting the messianic meaning of Jesus’ coming from the Father. It is not to set up a political order or to reestablish Israel’s freedom as an independent monarchy that he has come, but he has come to give his life as the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29, 36) and in that giving to give the forgiveness of sin and eternal life (Jn 3:15). The freedom of Israel then exists in this, to partake of the flesh of Christ, who is Life (Jn 1:4; 14:6) and who is Freedom from sin (Jn 1:29; 8:32–36).

87 From this perspective the reading of some manuscripts that Jesus “fled” to the mountain makes good sense. See the second textual note on Jn 6:15.

88 Wilckens, Johannes, 97.
Excursus

The Multiplication of Loaves as a Eucharistic Symbol

The story of the feeding of the five thousand (Jn 6:1–15) precedes and, in fact, introduces the discourse of Jesus on the Bread from heaven (Jn 6:26–58). In the Gospel of John it is not uncommon for a miracle to give a concrete representation of the significance of a teaching of Jesus. For example, the healing of the blind man gives visible and physical form to the claim of Jesus that he is the Light of the world (Jn 9:1–7), and the raising of Lazarus presents the truth of Jesus’ claim that he is the Resurrection and the Life (Jn 11:23–27). In a similar manner the feeding of the five thousand reveals in a preliminary and symbolic way the meaning of Jesus’ claim that he is the Living Bread from heaven, the true Manna, and that whoever eats of this Manna is gathered together into the new Israel and receives eternal life.

One should note that the feeding of the five thousand introduces a discourse that climaxes in a strongly realistic passage which speaks of an eating of the flesh of the Son of Man and of a drinking of his blood (Jn 6:53), an eating and drinking that gives eternal life and is, as it were, the surety of the future resurrection (Jn 6:54). It is not the habit of this evangelist to move from that which is real and physical to that which is merely metaphorical and spiritual.¹ That the eating of the barley bread and fish was an actual eating suggests, in itself, that the eating and drinking which climaxes the discourse is also a real eating and a real drinking. If we keep this in mind, we might expect to find details and elements reflecting the Eucharist in the telling of the feeding of the five thousand. This is, in fact, what we find.

1. The feeding of the five thousand is presented as a paschal meal. Unique to John’s telling of the feeding of the five thousand, and introduced without any apparent reason, is the statement of Jn 6:4: “Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near.” It hardly suffices to interpret this as a mere chronological detail. Mention of the Passover is a significant thematic clue.² It indicates that the feeding of the multitude, which Jesus himself performs, cannot be dissociated

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¹ The claim of Jn 1:14 that the Word, who is in the beginning and is with God, became flesh is not only a statement of salvific fact. It is also a supremely hermeneutical comment which guides our understanding of the following narratives. Most especially, it forestalls all attempts to think of the revelation in terms exclusively of teaching. Jesus is the Word enfleshed, and so his teaching is about, and is solely about, the significance and meaning of the incarnated reality of his person. The “I” of all claims has as its referent the Λόγος ἔνσαρκος, “enfleshed Word.” But, as we have noted throughout this commentary, the meaning of the incarnation lies in the death of Jesus as the gift of the Father, given for the life of the world (cf. Jn 3:14–17).

² For the paschal and eucharistic setting of John 6, see also “Introduction to John 6: The Passover Was Near (Jn 6:1–4)” and the rest of the commentary on Jn 6:1–15.
from Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29) and who, in the narrative of this Gospel, will die when the lambs are slaughtered (Jn 19:14). Thus, the feeding of the multitude is rendered into a Passover meal, indeed, a Passover meal in which Jesus is the Paschal Lamb. Symbolically, therefore, the feeding of the multitude foretells of another Passover which will be established in the death of the Lamb and given out to sinners in the Christian Passover meal, that is, in the Eucharist.

2. The feeding is a “sign.” The feeding of the multitude and the gathering together of the fragments is called a “sign” (σημεῖον, Jn 6:14). A “sign” never has its own autonomous significance. It is not a mere show of power. In the account of the exodus, “signs” were demonstrations that God was redeeming Israel and that the God who had redeemed Israel from bondage remained with Israel and fully intended to lead Israel to the land which he had promised. So also in the Gospel of John, “signs” are demonstrations that the God who had redeemed Israel was now, in Jesus, bringing Israel into the promised land of his own Life. The life lived in the land of promise was itself a symbol of that life to be granted and lived in him who is Life (Jn 1:4; 3:16; 5:26; 14:6). “Signs,” therefore, point backward to a previous redemptive act (here the Passover in Egypt) and forward to a greater, more complete redemption (here in the Passover of Jesus’ death). But as the sign of the manna in the desert entailed a real eating of the manna (Exodus 16), so in John’s Gospel the new Manna from heaven, namely, Jesus, will be eaten realiter.

3. The central position of Jesus. In the Synoptic accounts of the feeding of the five thousand the disciples initiate the action, and they are the ones who distribute the food to the multitude. In the narrative of John’s Gospel, the account severely accents the centrality and initiative of Jesus. He is the one who initiates the action and distributes the food to the multitude, and he commands the fragments to be collected (Jn 6:5, 11, 12). Jesus is depicted as the Host of the meal even as he is in the Synoptic narratives of the institution of the Eucharist (Mt 26:26–30; Mk 14:22–26; Lk 22:17–20).

4. The scene is that of a banquet. The use of the verbs ἀναπίπτω (Jn 6:10) and ἀνάκειμαι (Jn 6:11), both translated as “lie down,” suggests a banquet scene of persons reclining at table. In the NT the use of ἀνάκειμαι, which almost always occurs as a participle, usually does reflect a banquet scene. Elsewhere in the Gospel of John a participle of this verb always indicates those who recline

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3 See the first textual note on Jn 2:11 and “‘He Manifested His Glory’ (Jn 2:11)” in the commentary on Jn 2:1–11.


5 Mt 14:15–19; Mk 6:35–41; Lk 9:12–16.

6 See the first textual notes on Jn 6:10 and Jn 6:11.
at a banquet table (Jn 12:2; 13:23, 28). Jeremias has noted that “at the pass-over meal it was a ritual duty to recline at table as a symbol of freedom.”8 It is possible that behind the image of reclining is Psalm 78, which recounts the repeated disobedience of Israel in the wilderness. According to Ps 78:19–20 (LXX 77:19–20), the people wonder, “Will God be able to prepare a table in the wilderness? … Is he also able to give bread?” Ps 78:24 will be quoted in Jn 6:31 and serves as the guiding OT text for the discourse on the Bread from heaven (Jn 6:26–58).

5. The terminology of the Eucharist is employed. According to Synoptic accounts of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, four actions are highlighted: (1) “to take bread” (λαμβάνω and ἄρτος); (2) “to bless” (εὐλογέω); (3) “to break” (κλάω); and (4) “to give” (δίδωμι).9 This same set of four actions describes the Synoptic accounts of the feeding of the five thousand (Mt 14:19; Mk 6:41; Lk 9:16). The narrative of the feeding in John’s Gospel differs in three particulars: first, John does not mention the “breaking” of the bread (κλάω); second, John uses the verb “give thanks” (εὐχαριστέω, Jn 6:11) instead of the verb “bless” (εὐλογέω); third, John uses “distribute” (the compound verb διαδίδωμι, Jn 6:11) instead of “give” (the simple verb δίδωμι). The breaking of the bread in John is, however, indicated by the mention of the “broken pieces” or “fragments” in Jn 6:12 (κλάσματα, a noun derived from the verb κλάω, “break”). The use of the intensive “distribute” (διαδίδωμι) suggests the distribution of the bread to each person (cf. Acts 4:35). The verb “give thanks” (εὐχαριστέω) is virtually synonymous with “bless” (εὐλογέω) and also appears in the Synoptic institution narratives. Matthew and Mark use “give thanks” (εὐχαριστέω) for the chalice (Mt 26:27; Mk 14:23).10 Luke and Paul use the verb for the bread (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24).11 Moreover, “give thanks” (εὐχαριστέω) is used both by Matthew and Mark in their account of feeding the four thousand (Mt 15:36; Mk 8:6). The verb, of course, can be used apart from eucharistic contexts (Rom 1:8, 21; 1 Cor 1:4). However, when used alongside and together with the other verbs and the noun “bread” (ἄρτος), it seems evident that in Jn 6:11 the terminology of the Eucharist is employed.12

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8 Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 48–49. Reclining at table was not the usual posture, “for at the time of Jesus the diners sat down” (48). Melito of Sardis contrasts this “reclining on a soft couch” to the placing of Jesus in a grave and coffin (On the Pascha 80 [OECT 45]).
9 Mt 26:26–27; Mk 14:22–23; Lk 22:19.
10 Matthew and Mark use “bless” (εὐλογέω) for the bread (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22).
11 “Giving thanks” is indicated also for the chalice by the word “likewise” (ὡσαύτως, Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; see the verb also in Lk 22:17 for an earlier cup of wine).
12 Theophylact writes that “taking the loaves he gives thanks, showing that it is necessary to give thanks to God before a meal” (*Enarratio* 6.10–13 [PG 123:1288]). Some modern commentators also adopt this minimalist viewpoint. Koester, for example, writes that “giving thanks was common practice at ordinary Jewish and early Christian meals” (“John Six and the Lord’s Supper,” 426–27). But the Jews hardly needed reminding that a prayer of thanksgiving to God before mealtime was necessary, and it is baffling that the multiplication of loaves, which introduces the Bread of Life Discourse (Jn 6:26–58), can be likened to an “ordinary”
6. **Bread and fish.** Very early on in Christian iconography bread and fish became the primary symbol of the Eucharist. It seems evident that the symbol is derived from the story of the feeding of the five thousand, as all four Gospels refer to the five loaves and two fish (Mt 14:17–19; Mk 6:38–41; Lk 9:13–16; Jn 6:9). If so, then very early on the feeding of the multitude was itself regarded as a prefiguration of the Eucharist. The earliest representation of this in early Christian art is the so-called *Fractio panis* ("breaking of bread") in the *Capella Graeca* of the catacomb of Priscilla. This painting is commonly dated to the first decades of the second century. The bread is necessary as counterpart to the manna. But quite early the fish became a symbol of Christ himself and seems to have been from the beginning associated with the Eucharist. Since in the OT story of the manna there is nothing which would suggest a fish, it is probable that the evangelist recognized in the five loaves and two fishes the symbol of the Eucharist.

7. **Gathering of the fragments.** This is hardly incidental to the meaning of the whole. Jesus is not an environmentalist, demanding his disciples to keep the park clean for other visitors. The terminology of ingathering (συνάγω, Jn 6:12) reflects the prophetic hope of the future gathering in of dispersed Israel. Such an ingathering would be accompanied by a cleansing from Israel’s transgressions and idolatry and would reconstitute Israel as an obedient people who faithfully worship the Lord of Israel alone as the one true God. In the Gospel of John this promised ingathering will be accomplished in and by the death of Christ (Jn 12:32–33; see also Jn 10:16). To partake of that which is given and proffered by Christ in his death is at the same time to be gathered in, into the Body of Christ, and there to participate in the blessing which Christ gives and is (cf. 1 Cor 10:14–22; Eph 4:4–6).

8. **There was much grass.** The Synoptic Gospels indicate that the location of the feeding was “desolate” or “deserted” (ἔρημος, Mt 14:13, 15; Mk 6:32, 35; Lk 9:12). This, along with the lateness of the hour, are given as reasons for the need to feed the people. Nothing of the sort is mentioned in John’s Gospel. It indicates that there was “much grass in that place” (Jn 6:10). It may well be that this mention of much grass intends to give to the episode the character of a festive outdoor banquet, the image of a new paradise where food and drink, that is, all that is required for life, is plentiful.

13 See especially the thorough review of the evidence by Morey, “The Origin of the Fish-Symbol.”
14 See further “‘Make the People to Lie Down’ (Jn 6:10–14)’ in the commentary on Jn 6:1–15.
15 Interestingly, Mark uses the language of a “symposia” (συμπόσια, συμπόσια ἐπὶ τὸ χλωρὸ χόρτο, Mk 6:39) when he reports Jesus’ command to recline the people on the green grass!