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I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE. IMAGERY IN JOHN 6:32-51

ABSTRACT

John 6 is one of the most discussed chapters in the Gospel according to John, because of the Eucharistic nature of the language in 6:51c-59. The complex nature of the metaphors and imagery used in these verses, as well as the richness and power of the ensuing communication, are often overlooked. This article explores the literary nature of the text and focuses on the dynamics of metaphor, the interaction between the figurative and literal sections in the text, as well as the strong influence of the socio-religious context of the text on its interpretation and understanding.

1. INTRODUCTION

John 6 is one of the most discussed sections in the Gospel according to John (Thyen 1978; Hinrichs 1988:52-53). It focuses on Jesus feeding a large crowd both physically (John 6:1-21) and spiritually (John 6:22-59) by the Sea of Galilee (John 6:1, 59). The chapter concludes with a discussion between Jesus and his disciples on their loyalty towards him (John 6:60-71).¹ In John 7 a new cycle of events illustrates different reactions to Jesus.

In the reception of John 6 the Eucharistic overtones of John 6:51c-59 dominate the discussion.² In spite of this overwhelming focus on the Eucharistic elements in the discussions, many scholars are intrigued by the message of salvation through the acceptance of Jesus as the living one who came from heaven, as well as the unique manner in which this message is conveyed by means of complex metaphorical language. This article first analyses the literary features of the text and then relates these to its socio-cultural ecology in order to illustrate the influence of this ecology on the interpretation of the metaphorical aspects in the text.

1 On the structure, see Beutler (1997:115ff.); Popp (2004:576); Scholtissek (2000: 195-197). Bultmann (1978:161) characterises the multiplication of the bread as a "symbolisches Bild für den Gedanken der Offenbarungsrede".

2 See Schnelle (1998:121-122) for relevant literature as well as the dominance of the Eucharistic material.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE LITERARY FEATURES OF THE IMAGERY IN JOHN 6:26ff.

The development of ideas as well as the interrelationship between literal and figurative levels of text in this pericope are so complex that it is advisable to read the following analysis with reference to the text itself.

First, attention should be paid to the *development of the argument*. Jesus multiplies the bread and walks on the water in John 6:1-21. This section is followed by one of the major discussions in the Gospel.³ The issue of food/bread is the focus of this discussion in Jesus's remark in John 6:26 that the Jews only followed him because they received food from him and had their fill. They obviously want more. Realising this, Jesus introduces the figurative level of discourse into the discussion by comparing two types of food: ordinary perishable food (literal level)⁴ and food that lasts eternally (figurative level).⁵ Two realities (i.e. a literal and a figurative) are drawn into dynamic analogous interaction that will challenge the reader to rethink his/her position towards Jesus, the Father's gift from above (Marsh 1968:294; Van der Watt 2000:218-220). By contrast to ordinary food, the food that the Son of Man will give (from heaven) lasts and leads to eternal life — this is incongruent to a natural experience of food. These words draw the first part of the imagery: There are two types of food, namely literal food and figurative food.

The discussion continues in John 6:28-29 with the crowd asking Jesus what they should do to get this food. Jesus answers: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (τοῦτο ἐστὶν τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα πιστεύητε εἰς ὃν ἀπέστειλεν ἐκεῖνος).⁶ The phrase ἐστὶν τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ usually refers to obeying the law. In this instance Jesus reformulates the understanding of doing the will of God in terms of faith in the Agent of God. This lends an ethical dimension to this discussion (Carson 1991:285). While doing the will of God, the people of God were assured of their covenantal relation with him; faith now becomes the defining factor in their relationship with the Father and Son. Working for the bread of God differs from working for ordinary bread (Barrett 1978:287; Schenke 1998:131), not only on a figurative level, but also on a religious-ethical level. Working (=

3 Statistically John 6 contains the most references to life in the Gospel.

4 See Weder (1985:336); Westcott (1958:100); Köstenberger (2004:207).

5 For definitions of terminology, see Van der Watt (2000:1-24); Zimmermann (2004: 61-87).

6 It should be noted that Jesus gives bread in v. 27 and in v. 35. Yet, at the same time, he is also the bread of life. There is clearly a shift in emphasis. See Pancaro (1975:465-466).

tenor)⁷ involves faith in the one who was sent by God (= vehicle; v. 29). A similarity between working and believing lies in the active involvement of a person. This introduces the second important element of the imagery: *faith*. When the imagery is developed further, faith is linked to eating (which could not be exactly described as “working”). In this way faith is linked to two different aspects of the unfolding imagery. It is metaphorically linked to the ethical action of “working” and the soteriological action of “eating”.

At this point the two elements that will dominate the remainder of the discussion are introduced: Bread/food (Jesus) and eating (faith).

Jesus now identifies the Father as the giver of the bread *from heaven*⁸ (John 6:32; see Ex. 16:4LXX) with the following words: “For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven⁹ and gives life to the world” (John 6:33; ὁ καταβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ζωὴν διδοὺς τῷ κόσμῳ). By means of this complex metaphor the bread is personified as the one who comes from heaven and who gives life to the world (See Kysar 1984:42; Lindars 1987:258; Cullmann 1953:95). The tenor of this metaphor, Jesus, is still veiled. Upon the request of the crowd for this bread (John 6:34), Jesus then identifies himself as the bread (John 6:35: “I am the bread of life” — ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς; see Barrett 1978:291-292), and so Jesus becomes the giver of life in a secondary manner: “Er gibt das Lebensbrot also, indem er es ist” (Bultmann 1978:168; Hinrichs 1988:52-53; Carson 1991:284). With these words Jesus reinterprets the manna tradition by explicitly Christologising it. The dynamics of metaphor are now established: The giver of the true Bread is the Father, the manna is substituted with a person, the Son, and saturation is eternal¹⁰ since it leads to eternal life.

In verses 36-40 the literary tone shifts to a literal description that focuses on the themes of the mission of Jesus and faith. Jesus does the will of the Father. The result of this work leads to life through faith in Jesus. These verses explain how the Father sent Jesus to bring life to this world and how a person

7 Brown (1971:261) views this as a “sense of striving after or working toward”. Kysar (1997:177) distinguishes four different uses of ἔργον in the Gospel. See Rinke (1997:125-128) on deeds in John. Riedl (1973:311-343) also discusses its use in detail.

8 Becker (1979:205) points out that heaven is “der Ort Gottes” and therefore shows that bread has special qualities.

9 Odeberg (1968:235-238) discusses the religious background of the “food from heaven”. See also Bultmann (1978:165-166). This gives this narrative definite symbolic overtones.

10 According to Barrett (1978:286), the food itself is “abiding” since “its result is to produce eternal life in the believer”. See also Brown (1971:261); Painter (1997:78).

can partake of this salvation. Although the Father-Son language and the mission language in these verses are metaphorical, the bread imagery is not present. This “literal section” serves as a framework for a better understanding of the message conveyed by Jesus *inter alia* by means of the bread imagery. The author(s) thus guide(s) the readers in their understanding of the imagery. This is not an “open” metaphorical interpretation as many would like it to be; rather the confines offered in the text itself limit the scope of metaphorical application.

The bread imagery is briefly mentioned in verse 41 by the crowd who, referring to Jesus’s words that he is the bread that came down from heaven, question his self-identification. Typical Johannine misunderstanding occurs when they claim that they know Jesus’ parents and that his high claims can therefore not be true (Kelber 1996:149). However, Jesus confirms his high claims by referring to his special relation to the Father (John 1:18; 5:19ff.). If they are people who are taught by the Father, they will associate with Jesus. He knows the Father, because he has seen him and people who were “taught by God” should recognise this (John 6:45). Establishing his identity in this way, Jesus repeats his claim metaphorically that he is the bread of life and that whoever believes in him will have eternal life (John 6:47-48). The combination of metaphorical material (bread of life) and literal remarks (knowing the parents, quoting from Scriptures, using misunderstanding, etc.) serve to unfold the broader communicative picture. By combining the metaphorical language with the literal explanations, the author guides the reader towards a correct understanding of his metaphorical expressions. By constantly ensuring that the reader does not run away with the imagery, the author controls his metaphorical communication by indicating the ways in which the metaphors should be interpreted.

In verses 49-50 Jesus returns to the basic imagery and the analogy continues. The author again contrasts the two levels of reality, based on what was established in the preceding discussion. On a literal level, the truth is that the fathers in the desert ate manna and died. The bread Jesus gives has the opposite effect. Jesus brings figurative bread: Whoever eats the bread (person) that comes from heaven will not die. Obviously the reader knows by now that this bread is Jesus. A slight change in formulation, however, highlights another important element of the imagery. The bread is not referred to as the living bread, but the bread that lives (John 6:51: “I am the living bread” — ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ζῶν). In this instance the emphasis shifts from the bread giving life to the bread that lives. Jesus does not only give eternal life, he also lives for ever. Whoever eats of that bread will not die, but live for ever.

These remarks paved the way for the subtle change in John 6:51c-58 (Scholtissek 2000:202-206). Still part of the food imagery, the metaphorical expressions turn to food and drink that are metaphorically represented as

flesh and blood.¹¹ With the strong metaphors as background the metaphorical nature and thematic framework of this language are unquestionable. The language relating to food continues with a different emphasis — the references are no longer to Jesus as bread, but to his flesh and blood (Brown 1971: 272ff.).¹² Up to this point (in Chapter 6) the person of Jesus was associated with bread. The metaphor now shifts to flesh (σάρξ) and blood (αἷμα).¹³ This is, however, not a “clear” shift to a new set of metaphors or imagery. The metaphors are mixed since there are still references to bread and eating by the fathers, etc. (John 6:58). The idea of eating is linked to σάρξ. The meaning of eating has been metaphorically established as believing in John 6:48 and 51. It does not mean physical eating, but figuratively taking the flesh of Jesus into oneself as one would eat bread. In John 6:55 the σάρξ is called the true bread. This is also a metaphor. Flesh (tenor) is bread (vehicle) and indicates that as bread satiates the hungry, the flesh of Jesus satisfies the spiritually needy. Reminiscent of Eucharistic language this section emphasises that close union with Jesus will ensure lasting life (John 6:58).¹⁴

The communicative range of this imagery is comprehensive: The *identity* of the bread is personified as Jesus: He is the bread of life and also gives the bread of life. The *origin* of this bread is God, the Father. The bread is *acquired* through faith and the *result* is that such a person will never die but will receive eternal life and live for ever. This message is conveyed by means of a complex set of metaphors that are gradually developed and unfolded through these verses into a cohesive network based on language of food and drink.

A *detailed* analysis of the use of *various complex metaphors* in the unfolding of the message will now be discussed.

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- 11 Boers (1988:115) emphasises that food and drink are part of the image of nourishment.
 - 12 Pancaro (1975:458-459) summarises five divergent interpretations of “bread of life”: (i) Revelation of Jesus in the entire discourse; (ii) Eucharistic bread in the entire discourse; (iii) Revelation of Jesus in vv. 35-50 and eucharistic bread in vv. 51-58; (iv) Both revelation of Jesus and eucharistic bread in the entire discourse; (v) First, the revelation of Jesus and, secondly, the Eucharist in the first part (vv. 35-50) and only the eucharistic bread in vv. 51-58.
 - 13 See Merkel (1980:250-251); Becker (1979:106); Painter (1997:78). Menken (1997: 197) states that metaphorically the flesh and blood of Jesus achieve figuratively what food and drink ought to achieve literally. Kysar (1997:174-176) emphasises the radicality of the metaphor.
 - 14 These verses are discussed in detail in Johannine literature and will not receive further attention in this article.

6:33	ὁ γὰρ ἄρτος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστὶν ὁ καταβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ζῶην διδοὺς τῷ κόσμῳ
6:35, 48	ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς
6:41	ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ ἄρτος ὁ καταβάς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ
6:50	οὗτος ἐστὶν ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβαίνων, ἵνα τις ἐξ αὐτοῦ φάγη καὶ μὴ ἀποθάνῃ
6:51	ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ζῶν ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς
6:51, 58	ἐάν τις φάγῃ ἐκ τούτου τοῦ ἄρτου ζήσκει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα

There are several copulative metaphors (John 6:33, 35, 41, 48, 50, 51). The first complex metaphor in John 6:33 consists of several individual metaphors (“The bread of God, that which comes down from heaven, gives life to the world”), the first of which is a genitive metaphor “the bread of God” (ἄρτος τοῦ θεοῦ). Genitive metaphors must be interpreted “in reverse”, i.e. God has bread (interpreting the genitive possessively; Bultmann 1978:168 calls it a “Gen. qual.”).¹⁵ God having bread is incongruent. God being transcendental and spiritual does not have ordinary bread as human beings have. Bread should therefore signify something that corresponds to bread. In John 6:26-27 the link to the manna as something that *satisfies hunger* was made and this helps with the interpretation of the metaphor. God gives something that satisfies spiritual hunger. In terms of analogy, there is a similarity in that ordinary bread and the bread of God satisfy a type of hunger; there is also a difference in the way ordinary bread satisfies hunger and this differs radically from the way in which God’s bread achieves this purpose (Macgregor 1928:138; Westcott 1958:100).

“The bread of God” is “he who came down from heaven and who gives life” is also a copulative metaphor. The bread is personified and reflects the two qualities of the manna people expected according to Scriptures (John 6:30-31): It comes from heaven and it brings life. His identification with the promises of Scripture is maintained and this is indeed the σημεῖον people expected. At this stage it remains a submerged metaphor, referring to Jesus. The incongruent link between a person, Jesus, and an object such as bread highlights the metaphorical nature. This is not ordinary bread, since it is linked to a person. The common denominator between Jesus and bread is that both satisfy hunger by giving life. However, the life Jesus gives is eternal, while ordinary bread cannot do this (as is explicitly stated in John 6:49). Therefore, as bread and manna satisfy hunger and give life, Jesus satisfies spiritual hunger and gives eternal life; indeed, “die Vermittlung des Göttlichen, unvergänglichen

15 See Brooke-Rose (1958:146); Gräbe (1984:29); Barrett (1978:291).

Lebens ist das entscheidende Charakteristikum dieses Gottesbrotes" (Schnackenburg 1977:57). The link between the manna and the true bread from heaven reveals another dimension. The bread of life discourse is thus embedded in a traditional and symbolical meta-narrative of the eschatological manna that is expected from God as a token of his care. The idea of bread from heaven is not a novel or newly conceptualised one, but is linked to an existing and symbolical narrative of God's care of his people in the desert. This determines the framework of this narrative.

In John 6:35 Jesus identifies himself directly with the bread of life by means of a key metaphor,¹⁶ namely ἐγώ (tenor) εἶμι ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς (vehicle), a metaphor that is repeated in John 6:48.¹⁷ "Bread of life" (ὁ ἄρτος τῆς ζωῆς) is a genitive metaphor, which might be understood as: The life (tenor) is (comes through) bread (vehicle). In line with a systematic analysis of metaphors, the genitive metaphor should first be analysed. The relationship between life and bread should be determined first. Essentially there are two possibilities for understanding this metaphorical relation: a) Bread gives or produces life;¹⁸ or b) the bread itself lives. The latter appears to be the more problematic option. However, since the copulative metaphor involves Jesus as a person, bread is personified, which means that within the confines of the metaphor it is plausible for the bread (= Jesus) to live. The possibility that the bread lives is directly articulated in John 6:51.

Closely linked to the copulative metaphor in John 6:35 are two other metaphors in John 6:41 ("I am the bread that came down from heaven" — ἐγώ εἶμι ὁ ἄρτος ὁ καταβὰς¹⁹ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) and in John 6:51 ("I am the living bread that came down from heaven" — ἐγώ εἶμι ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ζῶν ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβὰς). In John 6:41 the reference to life is replaced by a reference to Jesus coming down from heaven. These are not the words of Jesus but of the crowds and combine the statement in John 6:33 where the bread of God comes from heaven with the statement in John 6:35 where Jesus states that he is the bread of life. The bread of life (Jesus) is thus explicitly identified with the one who comes from heaven. In this way two previously se-

16 Against Schenke (1998:134) who remarks that this is not a metaphor. He maintains: "Jesus erfüllt, was Lebensbrot eigentlich meint". Painter (1997:93) calls this "symbolism". See Zimmermann (2004:126-130).

17 Becker (1979:210) calls this a general metaphor.

18 "[D]ie ζωή ober ist als die Lebensschaffende Kraft zu verstehen" (Bultmann 1978: 168). See Brown (1971:269); Moloney (1997:138).

19 The aorist participle (καταβὰς) emphasises that Jesus is among them. See also Moloney (1997:140).

parate metaphors are combined and interrelated by using a part of each metaphor. In this way the different themes of these metaphors are effectively combined, thus establishing a larger metaphor network. Various elements of the imagery are thus thematically linked.

In John 6:51 a subtle change is made to the “I am the bread” metaphor by linking the object “bread” directly to a participial phrase “to live”: ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ ἄρτος ὁ ζῶν. This implies that it is the bread that lives. In the previous expression (John 6:35) the reference appeared to be to the bread that gives life (see also John 6:33), but now the fact that the bread itself *lives* takes the imagery even further.²⁰ The bread gives life, because it is itself living. The bread will remain with the people forever, not only by giving them life, but also by *living* with them (John 6:27). This is further elaborated by adding that this living bread came from heaven. This expression confirms that the true bread from heaven is among the people here and now.

In this way Jesus is systematically confirmed in the manna tradition as the one who will satisfy the spiritual needs of people since he not only comes from God to give life (John 6:33), but is also the living one himself (John 6:51). The imagery therefore refers not only to the ability to sustain life, but also to “produce” it. Bread is needed for life. The Bread of Life should, however, be able to sustain those who eat it even in the face of death and beyond. The analogy between earthly and heavenly bread lies in the ability to sustain life; the difference lies in the inability of ordinary bread to sustain life in the presence of death (Blank 1981:361; Rusch 1978:388), while the Bread of Life sustains life eternally (Bultmann 1978:168; Keil 1997:111).²¹ The eater of this Bread will live forever (John 6:58). This idea is then metaphorically linked to Jesus (I ἀμὲν ἐγὼ εἶμι).

The second crucial element of the imagery is how one gets this life. Obviously it comes by eating the bread (John 6:50, 51: “Whoever *eats* of this bread will live forever” — ἐάν τις φάγη ἐκ τούτου τοῦ ἄρτου ζήσεται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα; See Menken 1997:195). The personification of Jesus as the bread is firmly established in John 6:50-51 which states that the bread should be “eaten”. Bread that is not eaten cannot satisfy hunger. Jesus as the bread of life should also be eaten (see John 6:50, 51, 53, 56, 57, 58).²² The metaphor

20 Barrett (1978:297) sees it incorrectly as a synonym of the expression in 6:35.

21 Barrett (1978:286) emphasises the fact that the Bread “produces eternal life in the believer”. The important point is, however, that it does not only produce such life, but also sustains it.

22 Menken (1997:195, 196) argues that eating and drinking could be understood in a literal sense, if that which is partaken of, i.e. eating and drinking, are Eucharistic elements. This would imply that this section should be understood more literally. He does, however, prefer a metaphorical reading.

of “eating” is used because “bread” (food) is used in a metaphorical sense. Together these words form part of the bread imagery and semantically belong together. However, the way in which Jesus is “eaten” is not the same as the way in which ordinary bread is eaten. Jesus’s remark in John 6:35 makes this metaphor explicit: He who comes to Jesus and believes will not hunger or thirst again. “Eating the bread of life” means “believing in Jesus” (See Lindars 1987:259; Barrett 1978:291; Koester 1995:99).²³ By doing this, a person’s spiritual hunger will be satisfied. Metaphorically, *eating* can be substituted by *believing* (John 6:40, 47). As eating presupposes contact between the bread and the eater thereof, faith results in the relationship between Jesus and the believer. It involves “understanding who Jesus is and accepting his claims” (Kysar 1997:176).

A third underlying theme is the *everlasting nature* of the life. This is emphasised at the beginning and the end of this imagery (John 6:27, 50-51) and is confirmed by the use of contrasts: The fathers ate and died (John 6:49), but whoever eats the living bread will never die. Ordinary bread (including the manna) does not have the power to sustain life in the face of death (vv. 49, 58), something which the Bread from heaven can and will do (vv. 50, 58).

These metaphorical expressions together form a comprehensive network of images of the Father giving bread from heaven to hungry people who eat it and will be eternally satisfied and thus never die.

3. THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ECOLOGY AND SYMBOLIC FRAMEWORK OF THE METAPHOR NETWORK

The context of the imagery is clearly identified. Words such as “manna”, “Moses”, “hunger” and “bread from heaven” immediately call to mind the Exodus narrative in Exodus 16 where God provided manna for his hungry people (the ancestors of the people Jesus is talking to) in the desert (John 6:31-32; see Keener 2005:680). Thus the manna was regarded as a symbol of the miraculous way in which God cared for his people in need. If Jesus is from the God of Moses and stands in this tradition, a similar sign is expected from him (John 6:30, 34).

23 Barrett (1978:297) points out that this imagery provides a vivid picture of what it means to receive Christ by faith. The metaphorical circumlocutions found in 6:53-58, which identify the flesh of Jesus with food, and which command that this flesh be eaten, are not discussed in this instance, since they do not relate directly to the discussion on eternal life. Kysar (1997:174-177) aptly describes the metaphorical relation between eating and faith. Faith leading to eternal life is also stated explicitly in 6:40 and 47. Beutler (1997:126-127) also indicates the importance of faith in this narrative.

Metaphorically speaking, “hunger in the wilderness” — in other words, the deep need of the people in a treacherous environment — forms the basic associative framework against which the gift of food should be understood (Koester 1995:95; Ricca 1966:80-81; Morris 1974:359; Bauder 1976:267).²⁴ A brief examination of the way in which hunger is portrayed in some ancient writings will determine the associative and emotive depth of the metaphor.

In the writings of the Greek philosophers hunger is described as something very unpleasant (See Bauder 1976:264; Braumann 1976a:274-277). It is linked to pain, discomfort and even sickness (Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* 3.5 and Epictetus *Dis.* 2.23), as Socrates remarks in Plato’s *Philebus* (par. 351): “Hunger, for example, is a dissolution and a pain” (par. 349) and “[T]hirst again is a destruction and a pain”.²⁵ Plato (*Rep.* III.101) mentions: “The saddest of fates is to die and meet destiny from hunger”. Hunger is indeed a “killer” of both animals and people, and was obviously feared (Epictetus *Dis.* 2.23, 4.1.5 and 4.10.5).²⁶ Epictetus (*Dis.* 3.24.5) maintains that a person who is not suffering from thirst and hunger is indeed fortunate. It is not suggested here that the author of John had these references in mind when he wrote this text, but these references give us some idea of the way in which hunger was viewed in ancient Mediterranean societies. Even in the Old Testament hunger and thirst are judged very negatively (Deut. 8:3; 28:48; 32:24; Job 30:3; Jer. 38:9; Lam. 4:9; See Bauder 1976:265; Braumann 1976b:271), and this tendency persists in the New Testament (Lk. 15:17; 2 Cor. 6:5). Hunger and thirst counted among the terrors of the end times (See Mt. 24:7; Mk 13:8; Lk. 21:10; Rev. 6:8; 18:8).

Hunger is also considered a basic human desire which human beings share with wild animals (See, for instance, Plato *Sym.* par. 155). Socrates remarks in Plato’s *Philebus* (par. 410): “Did we not place hunger, thirst, and the like, in the class of desires?”. In some cases hunger and thirst, as desires, are linked to evil that can befall anyone (Plato *Lysis* par. 349). This is the reason why a person might do wrong in order to obtain food (Epictetus *Dis.* 3.26). There is also little doubt that the lack of food, which results in famine, causes destruction, as Aristotle (*Meteorology* 1.14) relates. It was something to be feared.

Another factor that should be taken into account is that the ancients attributed famine to the wrath of the gods who were supposed to guarantee

24 See Bultmann (1978:164-166) for ideas relating to food in the ancient world. Barrett (1978:286) states that physical food is not despised, but “at the highest it is a parable of the life God gives”.

25 See also Plato’s *Phaedo* par. 365, *Gorgias* par. 780-790 and *Rep.* IV.358-361, where hunger and thirst are linked to the unpleasantness of pain. See also Cicero *Off.* II.v., Aristotle, *Topics* I.15.

26 In Plato *Euthyphro*, par. 30, we read that cold, hunger and chains can kill a person.

the provision of food (Neh. 9:15; Ps. 34:10; Is. 49:10; Ezek. 34:29; Rev. 7:16; See Bauder 1976:265). In the Old Testament (Deut. 32:24; 2 Sam. 24:13; Isa. 5:13; Ezek. 5:15-16) hunger and thirst were viewed as judgement from God. On the other hand, all food was understood as a gift from God in the writings of the Old Testament (See Deut. 14:4). It was therefore in times of hunger and thirst that God showed himself to be their Saviour from need (Ex. 16:3-5; 17:3-7; 1 Sam. 2:5; Ps. 107:36-38; 146:7; Isa. 65:13; Braumann 1976a:274-275). Similar motives are found in, for instance, John 4 (implicit in John 4:2-34) and 6. In John 6 the Father does not only provide the manna (John 6:32), but also the Bread of life (John 6:35-40). In this way God provides what was needed.

There is also the emphasis on bread as a basic food that is needed for life. Malina and Rohrbauch (1998:127) describe the basic role of bread in ancient Mediterranean societies. Suffice it to say that, as Shelton (1988:81-82) also argues, wheat products (porridge or bread) were the basic ingredients of every meal and often the only dish in ancient times (see Sir. 29:21). It not only served as a source of sustenance, but also as a form of utensil (taking sauce or meat out of the common bowl) or as a serviette (wiping one's hands).

The symbolic framework of the imagery will now be discussed. As was mentioned earlier, the Exodus narrative, with references to Moses,²⁷ manna, and the wilderness, forms the backdrop for the imagery used in this instance. Stibbe (1993:87-88) draws attention to the references and allusions to the Exodus narrative underlining the socio-historical framework which the author of this Gospel had in mind. Stibbe found four direct references (in John 6:31, 49, 58) and seven (or nine) indirect references (for instance, in vv. 3, 4, 5, 9, 16, 41 — plus 43) to the Exodus events. The framework of the imagery is therefore to God's people in the wilderness who are hungry up to the point of death, and who expect assistance from God (Ex. 16:1-7). In this context there is a serious lack of food in the wilderness and hunger is threatening the existence of these people. This is the reason for the metaphor of bread as the basic ingredient of every meal. In the context of real hunger the reference to Jesus as Bread of Life obtains its true metaphorical impact. Bread is not a luxury but a necessity when hunger overpowers one in the desert. The manna in the wilderness, which saved a starving people, is compared to the Bread of Life (6:31-33 and further) intended for those in spiritual need. The attraction of the Bread of Life is that the person who eats it will never go hungry and will never be thirsty (6:35).

The crowd asked for a sign equivalent to the sign in the desert when their ancestors received manna. Manna consequently became the *symbol of God's*

27 See Menken (1996:54-65) on the role of Moses.

care, as aptly pointed out by Pancaro (1975:455-458; see also Kropatschek 1976:269; Carson 1991:285-286). Manna has definite symbolic qualities in the Old Testament and in the Jewish tradition. It is related to Jewish eschatological expectations. It is even symbolically related to the Torah and Wisdom by some scholars (Keener 2005:281ff.; Dodd 1978:137; Moloney 1997:138-139; Thompson 1997:227; Painter 1993:276).²⁸ Within this symbolic framework, Jesus assures the people that the Father will again supply food in their need. This time it is not manna, but a person (John 6:33 — ὁ γὰρ ἄρτος τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστὶν ὁ καταβαίνων ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ζῶν διδοὺς τῷ κόσμῳ). This is a crucial link in establishing the metaphorical nature of this passage. The manna is thus *personified*, thus preparing the way for the copulative surface metaphor (ἐγὼ εἰμι expression) in v. 35. Jesus metaphorically functions as the true manna, the true bread from heaven, and must be understood in that perspective with all the symbolic overtones associated therewith. This seems to be a symbolic fulfilment of the promises found in, for instance, 2 Bar. 29:6-8: At the end of time manna will fall in abundance to end all hunger (Braumann 1976b:272; Keener 2005:281-282). According to Strack and Billerbeck (1978:481), manna was indeed expected from the Messiah.²⁹

Another element of the imagery that should be noted is the use of the “I am...” expressions (Plummer 1929:156; Morris 1974:365; Carson 1991:289).³⁰ “I am the bread of life” could be grouped together with other similar expressions in the Gospel. The Gospel of John is known for the seven *ego eimi* (I am) sayings with predicates (like 6:35;³¹ 10:7, 11; 11:25) and several absolute *ego eimi* sayings (without explicit or implicit predicate; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19). The *ego eimi* sayings with predicates (Koester 1995:96; Bultmann 1978:164-167)³² include “I am ... the bread of life” (6:35, 41, 48, 51); “light of life” (8:12); “the door of the sheepfold” (10:7, 9); “the good shepherd” (10:11, 14); “the

28 Pancaro (1975:455-458) shows that manna has definite symbolic qualities in the Old Testament and in Jewish tradition, particularly as it relates to Jewish eschatological expectations. Barrett (1978:288, 290, 293) also discusses the different aspects of manna in Jewish-Hellenistic literature. See also Bultmann (1978:165); Schulz (1978:104); Brown (1971:265); Kropatschek (1976:269).

29 Carson (1991:286). Ricca (1966:80) reminds us that “die Offenbarung Jesu als Messias” is the central concept of this chapter, as emphasised by the ἐγὼ εἰμι expressions.

30 Bultmann (1978:167-168) discusses in detail the interpretative possibilities of ἐγὼ εἰμι. According to him, we find “offenbar die Rekognitionsformel” (168) here. Becker (1979:207-209) focuses on the concept of a messenger who identifies himself. Schnackenburg (1977:57) prefers the Old Testament as a background in this instance.

31 This is a “Selbstprädikation”, according to Becker (1979:208).

32 See Barrett (1978:292) for a discussion on the “Offenbarungsformeln”.

resurrection and life" (11:25); "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:7); "the true vine" (15:1, 5). It is most common to link these sayings (plus the absolute sayings) to either Ex. 3:14, Deut. 32:39, or to the "I am" sayings in Deutero-Isaiah (for instance, Is. 43:10, 25; 45:18-19; 46:4; 48:12, 17; 52:6). Jesus is thus identified as the Lord of history and Saviour of Israel. These sayings imply divinity. By using them Jesus implies divine authority and perhaps identity. The point is that the "I am" sayings may refer to the divine character of Jesus (See the reaction to the words "I am" in 18:6). Within the context of the mission of Jesus another aspect may be considered, namely recognition and identification of an envoy. The way in which God or the prophets made themselves known at their destinations was to identify themselves with the words "I am so and so". This would have been the answer to questions such as "Who are you?". Jesus also identifies himself in this world by saying "I am ...". The predicates such as life, light, truth, the good shepherd, etc. are descriptions that identify him in terms of his divine origin. This intensifies the divine undertones of the words "I am". The words "I am" therefore not only identify Jesus as divine agent, but also as a divine person.

The idea of *working for food* is a metaphor for a well-known ancient reality. An estimated 80% of all people in the ancient Mediterranean world were living below the bread line and many of them were dependent on day-to-day jobs for their survival (Davies 1992:197).³³ There are several references, even in the New Testament, to people who are hired for a day or a short period of labour. Their daily task was to look for (work for) bread every day. Not working means starvation and *vice versa*. Working for food is thus a primary concern in this context.³⁴ On the metaphorical level, work is linked to faith: Their (spiritual) starvation can be avoided by believing in Jesus.³⁵

4. SOME MAJOR LINES OF INTERPRETATION OF THIS PASSAGE

This narrative, reflection, and discussion on the multiplication of the bread and fish in John 6 are among the most discussed sections in the Gospel. John 6:51c-59 received by far the majority of this attention, because of the Eu-

33 Shelton (1988:6-7) refers to the rigid social stratification which meant the wealthy, powerful few stood over and against the multitude of poor people.

34 Culpepper (1983:196) argues that the bread imagery has more fixed symbolic references (it is identified with the Passover wisdom, the Torah and Eucharist) than water. Thus the "I am" phrase is linked to bread and not to water.

35 Moloney (1997:136-137) distinguishes between Jesus and the Law, which was understood to provide life to those who lived according to the Law (in the Jewish context).

charistic language in this section. This section, however, does not fall within the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that John never mentions the Eucharist. Nevertheless, in John 6:51c-59 we have the command to eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood. Clearly this can be considered sacramental (Eucharistic) language. If John was pro-eucharist, why did he not mention the Eucharist directly? If he was anti-eucharistic, why did he include 6:51c-59? Opinions vary on John from not being interested in the sacraments (anti-sacramentarian), a later editor adding references to sacraments in order to escape criticism by other Christian groups, John deliberately changing established views on sacraments, because they were over-emphasised, to the view that he was a sacramentalist: He took sacraments for granted and saw no need to mention them explicitly. Each of these views endeavours to argue from the textual material mentioned above. Some argue that the spiritual aspect of the sacraments is emphasised in the Gospel; others argue that in line with ancient practices of vilification, John wanted to do the opposite: He used Eucharist language in John 6:51c, but does not directly refer to any ritual practice by name in order to downgrade the activity as such. He wanted to shift the emphasis from the actual cultic activity to the meaning and significance of the sacrament itself. It is not the ritual, but rather Jesus that makes the difference. This debate is still ongoing. Most scholars would accept that there are sacramental overtones in the Gospel, but differ on the reasons why these overtones are not developed in more detail.

A noteworthy treatment of John 6, apart from the Eucharistic section, is that of Borgen (1965) in which he argued that in John 6 use is made of typical Jewish midrashic methods and that it is structurally and thematically developed along those lines (see also Keener 2005:679ff.). He argues that John 6 reflects a typical homiletical pattern compared to similar texts in Old Testament and Jewish sources.

Another line of interpretation emphasises the eschatological nature of the presence of Jesus. The link with the apocalyptic gift of manna at the end of time lends an even deeper dimension to the imagery employed in this section. Jesus is described as the Bread of Life who guarantees that a person will no longer experience hunger, and in this way Jesus actually made the end of time promises of God come true. The imagery acquires an extra dynamic in this eschatological light. It is no longer a matter of bread. It is a matter of satisfying this need, hunger, for ever by means of the eschatological gift from God (Neh. 9:15 gives an eschatological promise; see also Rev. 2:17; 2 Apoc. Bar. 29:8).

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is no parallel to the bread of life discourse or imagery in the New Testament, although the narrative of the multiplication of the bread and the Eucharist language in 6:51c-59 are shared with the Synoptics (Mt. 14:13-21; Mk 6:32-44; Lk. 9:10b-17). This is the author(s) of the Gospel's unique way of describing the eschatological identity of Jesus as well as the way in which people may share in the eschatological gifts of God. However, within the contextual framework of the Gospel itself, John 6 makes a significant contribution. Intratextually this passage may be closely linked to John 15:1-8, both passages reflecting and discussing the concept of the immanence of believers and Jesus. This imagery is thematically linked by means of terms indicating the close union between Jesus and his followers. Staying in Jesus and Jesus staying in the believer indicate this close, intimate relationship. If one eats, one obtains life, or close union, with Jesus (the eater stays in Jesus and Jesus in him/her). This implies that another way to say that a person has life is to say that the person is in Jesus and Jesus is in him/her. This serves as important interpretative material for the imagery of the vine (John 15:1-8) where the branches stay in the vine.

Contextually John 6 should be read with the preceding John 5 where the identity of Jesus as the Son who works as his Father works is challenged by his opponents. He defends himself by indicating by means of education imagery that he was educated by the Father to give life and judgement (John 5:19-30) and calls an imaginary "court" with witnesses in his favour to testify to his identity (John 5:31ff.). When his identity as the giver of life is established, the question arises as to how this life is made available and how one can get this life. Of course, God gives the Bread of Life that can be obtained through faith. This message is masterly presented in the bread of life discourse (John 6). This brings any reader to the essence of who Jesus is and what he has to offer.

This pericope confronts the reader with a strong Christological appeal. It contextualises Jesus within the rich symbolism of the manna tradition and expectations, and invites the reader to partake in this heavenly gift of God. It establishes the eschatological presence of God among his people and also serves as a powerful expression of the intimate relationship between Jesus and believers.

In short, this pericope challenges readers to position themselves in their relationship to Jesus, the eschatological bringer of life, and to partake in what Jesus has to offer to them through believing in him.

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