have a church; what you will have is a gathering of crooners, of fashion victims or of well-meaning enthusiasts. For those who want to grow as Christians, more profound questions about the church need to be answered before such ephemera are addressed.

I was blessed: even after asking these questions, the number of churches on my list of potentials remained rather high and so I did what, with all things being equal, I felt was right: I went to the church where, in addition to the above, my children felt comfortable and my wife and I could sing the psalms we love in the simplicity of unaccompanied four part harmony. But make no mistake: even for a dyed-in-the-wool presbyterian traditionalist like myself, word, sacraments and discipline are of far more importance than the outward aesthetics of the worship service. Aesthetics do not make a church; word, sacrament and discipline do.

Introduction

The Gospel of John may be remote from the context and time of William Wordsworth but M. Stibbe's comparison is noteworthy:

> Both authors have created texts in which the diction is demotic, simple and accessible ... Yet, at the same time, both authors have managed to create meanings which are 'half hidden from the eye'.

Perhaps the modern problem in reading John is not so much a half hidden meaning as an only half-open eye that fails to see beyond the apparently obvious, the literal, and a superficial reading. John 6 presents precisely such a challenge to the exegete and critical scholar with its combination of midrashic exposition of Exodus motifs and metaphorical language. Here the eyes of scholars down through the centuries have seen sacramental, non-sacramental, and anti-sacramental theology in the text and any attempt to continue the discussion joins this legacy of division.

Questions of method

This article seeks to examine the context, language, and structure of the John 6 discourse and to show that as a literary text it focuses theologically on the person and death of Jesus, at the expense of dealing with a sacramental theology. However in terms of hermeneutics and how we approach the text the matter is complex. All scholars ultimately align themselves with a school of thought on John which influences and guides the approach to the text. The methodological options in current Johannine studies are many and any look at the history of exegesis of John 6 shows that whether the text is read sacramentally or not can often be the result of other ideological concerns. My alignment is to a view of the text as sacred

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2 C.R. Koester illustrates that the concern for theological plausibility and use of the literary context have been standard features in non-sacramental interpretations of the text as far back as Clement of Alexandria, Origen and, later, Eusebius (‘John Six and the Lord’s Supper’ LQ 4. 1990, 420).
3 Koester provides an illuminating outline of this history. On the issue of method in the interpretation of John, see the brief survey in S. Mooyer, *Your Father the Devil? A New Approach to John and ‘the Jews’,* 8–31 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997 at p. 13).
Scripture within the evangelical Protestant tradition and this background of ‘low-sacramentalism’ ensures that Jesus’ words in 6:53–56 leap from the page and in their literal sense, far with theological sensibilities. This means that to argue the John 6 discourse is emphatically Christological, not Eucharistic could be deemed by some as simply an attempt, with eyes closed, to make the text mean what it does not say. I hope to show that it is not.

Such methodological issues are represented in the views of two scholars from opposing sides of the debate, P.M. Casey and J.D.G. Dunn and their work provides a way in to the discussion. Casey is one of the most recent scholars to argue vigorously for a highly sacramental understanding of John 6. He rejects Dunn’s much earlier non-sacramental reading as ‘methodologically unsatisfactory’, and his own work is based on a confident assertion of a real Sitz im Leben for the document – a Johannine community in fierce conflict with the ‘Jews’ – and as such his interpretation of this passage is closely related to his views on the text’s weak historicity and anti-Jewishness. Dunn and Casey are at one in the view that the John 6 discourse should be considered as a whole, but Casey berates Dunn’s non-sacramental understanding of the earlier part of the passage by arguing that ‘we should ... not interpret the earlier part of the discourse in isolation from the end of it’. Casey also criticises Dunn for starting with 6:63, which he interprets literally, and takes to exercise a controlling influence over the previous exposition. Casey’s own view is that 6:51–58 is a climax in the eucharist but that this sacramental theology has been ‘expounded in stages’ throughout the earlier sections of John 6.

The starting points for both scholars are so different that it is hard not to feel there is something of a methodological impasse here; nevertheless, some criticisms of Casey’s critique suggest themselves. It is just as valid to argue that we should not interpret the end part of the discourse in isolation from the earlier part of it, as Casey would agree. However in terms of context and flow of argumentation this is a more sure-footed interpretive key and one which poses problems for a eucharistic interpretation of 6:51–58 if these verses, however they are interpreted, are not first read back across 6:1–50. Indeed, Casey’s view that v. 63 exercises a controlling influence for Dunn over the previous exposition is no different from his eucharistic understanding of vv. 51–58 ensuring that he sees the eucharist expounded in stages before v. 51. Even on Casey’s own terms of allowing the end part to control the meaning of the earlier part, Dunn seems to have achieved this more thoroughly by going further than v. 58 and considering the significance of v. 63. Casey’s criticism of Dunn’s literal understanding of this verse is the result of his own literal understanding of ‘eat’ and ‘drink’ in v. 53. We shall see that the choice of what is literal and what is metaphorical is not an arbitrary hermeneutical move, but can actually be governed by the structure and content of the text itself. Casey’s work reflects the replacement of the content, structure and details of the text as decisive ingredients in the hermeneutical circle of interpretation with the details of conjectural community disputes and a pre-supposed sacramental reading of 6:51–58. His work offers almost no discussion of the metaphorical language of the passage, or implicit references to the death of Jesus as crucial to its meaning.

6:1–24: Jesus, Moses and faith

Chapter 6 can be seen to fall into at least three main parts; verses 1–15; 16–24; and 25–71, although separate sections can be discerned within these parts – particularly vv. 25–71. We will give most attention to vv. 51–58 and the questions that this section evokes, but the context of the preceding parts of the chapter is vital. Some commentators view it as part of a larger section in John 5–12, with the portrayal of Jesus in relation to Judaism, particularly the figure of Moses, a key feature. For Lindsar it is 5:46 that sets the agenda for chapter 6, and this is taken up by other writers. For Stibbe a true reading of the narrative here must ‘penetrate the hidden “Mosaic” of Jesus’ words and actions’. Perry, following Fortna and Martyn respectively, in seeing Messianic and Prophetic function in the ‘signs’, argues that Jesus is midrashically described in 6:1–21 in a manner reminiscent of Moses. Jesus crosses a sea (v. 1), he is followed by a multitude that has witnessed signs performed by him (v. 2), goes up a mountain (v. 3), and then feeds the multitude with miraculous bread (v. 11). This view is substantiated by the intensely detailed exegetical study of P. Anderson who argues that the underlying Christology of John 6 is the Prophet-like-Moses typology based on Deuteronomy 18:15–22.

We shall see that the reference to signs in 6:1 is significant, but we should also note that the purpose of the two miracles stories which open the chapter is to ‘reveal Jesus’ identity and contrast different types of faith ... by contrasting the misguided response of the crowd, with the genuine response of the disciples’. This introduces faith as a vitally important concept in the passage. The record of the two miracles in 6:1–24 has prompted much discussion. Given that the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle common to all four gospels and the story of Jesus walking on the water also has Synoptic parallels the discussion has tended to focus on the nature of the tradition and dependency.

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2 Casey, Is John’s Gospel True?, 48, 46
3 M. Stibbe, John, 81 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), Stibbe suggests that the whole narrative of John 6 is replete with both transcontextual and intertextual echoes of the Exodus story; he draws attention particularly to Exodus 12 and Numbers 11 (87–88).
6 Koester, ‘John Six and the Lord’s Supper’ 426
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In favour of an independent tradition, there are a number of features in the Johannine version of the feeding miracle which make it appear very likely that John was not working over the Markan account to give it a eucharistic interpretation: John’s omission of ‘looking up to heaven’ and of the ‘breaking of the bread’, the description of the bread as ‘barley loaves’, the reason given for the collecting of the remaining pieces of food. 12 Further, we observe that for ‘fish’ John does not use the word ‘ichthus’ which very early came to have sacramental significance, and so Johnston argues:

John’s word did not serve to bring the story any closer to the [sacramental] discourse because the discourse is argued in terms of bread and wine, and not fish. 13

The eucharistic interpretation of ‘gave thanks’ in 6:11 is unlikely, given that Matthew and Mark use it for the feeding of the four thousand and not for the Last Supper, while John uses it again in 11:41, a passage wholly devoid of eucharistic overtones. For him, as for many commentators, the action simply corresponds to the Jewish custom at the meal table. 14 It follows from this that if we allow 6:51-58 to wait their turn in the discourse and not read them back across vv. 1-15 with a pre-supposed meaning, it is hard to see eucharistic import in the Johannine account of the feeding miracle.

6:25-50: Finding the hermeneutical keys

In coming to look at the main section of John 6:25-71, we should note how both vv. 27 and 31 have exercised significant roles for different scholars as hermeneutical keys to the chapter. 15

P. Borgen focuses on the significance of v. 31, pointing out that the discourse by Jesus following that verse is meant to be an exegesis, a midrash, of the reference to the manna miracle with its quotation from OT Scripture: ‘Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven”’. 16 The whole section can be seen to be a midrash by the fact that the direct reference to the manna miracle in v. 31 is repeated in vv. 49 and 58 and the rest of the discourse unfolds as an exposition of each part of the quotation: vv. 32-33 corresponding to ‘he gave them’; vv. 34-48 to ‘bread from heaven’; and vv. 49-59 to ‘to eat’.

From this, verses 25-66 can be identified as homiletic in the sense that they call forth a response to the exhortation of vv. 27. However, Anderson wishes to stress that with this in mind the verse should be seen as the central exhortation in the chapter. Seeing it as the pivotal fulcrum of chapter 6, he argues that from dialogues to
discourses vv. 28ff. develop homiletically the Johannine version of the “two ways” introduced in verse 27. The first is the way of life which involves seeking the truth, walking in the light, knowing the Father, believing in the Son, beholding his glory. The other is the way of death in John, which involves disobeying the truth, remaining in darkness, not knowing the Father, and thus neither recognising the Son nor beholding his glory. The two ways in John are described in revelational and epistemological terms. 18 Within this context Anderson does not regard v. 31 as the starting point of the homily. Instead, following the 6:1 reference to Jesus’ signs, he argues that the ‘main text’ of the John 6 exhortation is not an OT quotation, but the narration of Jesus’ ministry. He regards the tradition in verses 1-24 as having acquired something near the degree of authority possessed by the Jewish scriptures. Thus the ‘midrash’ in chapter 6 is actually the words and words of Jesus: the invitation to choose the life-producing Bread over other kinds of “bread” is the exhortative fulcrum of John 6. 19 It follows from this that the rhetorical device used by the crowd in quoting Psalm 78:14, itself a midrashic conflation of Exodus 16:4, 15 and Numbers 11:7-9, functions only as a secondary text, employed as a rhetorical trump within the development of another theme. 20 In painstaking detail he traces the function of the Psalm 78 midrash to argue this theme: in John 6 the interpretation of the manna motif by the Johannine Jesus shifts the locus of import from that which is given to the one who gives ... the significance of Jesus’ ministry is not that he provides barley loaves for the crowds but that he is sent from above, and the nourishment he provides has been attested by the Father (v. 27). 21

The importance of this cannot be underestimated: the emphasis here on Christology and on the one who gives, not what is given, is vital when we come to consider whether in vv. 51ff. the emphasis is on the eucharistic elements or the person of Jesus himself in his death.

Several other features of this section deserve attention. Very importantly, v. 35 picks up the theme of faith again and, presenting himself as ‘the bread of life’, Jesus claims to be able to both satisfy hunger and quench thirst. We should note the metaphorical language: further, we should note how the metaphor functions: in what sense does one come ‘to bread or ‘believe’ in it? The emphasis throughout the whole of the chapter is on the need to believe in Jesus 22 and that Jesus himself is central throughout. The contrast with the manna is that eating it did not prevent death (v. 58), but coming to Jesus and believing in him will result in eternal life. 23 If Jesus, as ‘bread’, is not to be interpreted literally then we need to exercise care in understanding the language related to what one does

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14 Dunn, John vi, 332-33


16 Anderson, The Christology of the Fourth Gospel, 200

17 Anderson, The Christology of the Fourth Gospel, 197, 257

18 Anderson, The Christology of the Fourth Gospel, 202

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with that bread—coming to Jesus and believing in him does not satisfy literal hunger or literal thirst. Verses 26–27 already work to dispel any continuing preoccupations in the narrative with material bread and contrast material food that perishes with ‘the food that endures to eternal life’. The point is that here the structures for the discourse are being put in place: if literal bread is able to be developed metaphorically, so the language of literal eating provides the scope for eating to be used metaphorically to refer to the process of eating that spiritual bread. John 6:35 recalls earlier themes the gospel introduced in clearly non-sacramental contexts and also later in 7:37–38; similarly OT texts spoke metaphorically of hunger and thirst, eating and drinking in connection with hearing God’s Word (Amos 8:11) or partaking in divine wisdom.

With their clear correlation of faith with the gift of eternal life vv. 40 and 47 are also important. Verse 47 introduces a section leading up to v. 51 which is a Christological development of the manna motif as it relates to v. 47 and is full of the mixing of metaphors. In v. 47 believing yields eternal life; in vv. 50–51 eating the bread yields eternal life. Here, it will not do to argue, as is often done with vv. 40, 54, that the two things are necessary for eternal life (i.e. belief in Jesus and eating the sacrament), because this section binds together as identical both the thing to be eaten and the person to be believed so that it does not speak of believing and eating. It depicts believing as metaphorical eating because the subject of belief is being described metaphorically. ThusAnderson’s key observation: ‘As believing is to Jesus, eating is to this life-producing Bread which comes down from heaven.’

6:51–58: Eating flesh and drinking blood

In coming to look closely at the main section of the text, verses 51–58, one of the key exegetical issues to be faced immediately is the importance and function of v. 51c: ‘This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world’. Many scholars who argue for a sacramental understanding of the passage rest part of their case on seeing v. 51c as introducing a new section, given the introduction of the word ‘flesh’ which, it is argued, shifts the imagery from believing to partaking of the Lord’s Supper. However, this is to be questioned on a number of grounds.

C.K. Barrett, for instance, argues that division here is not satisfactory as it means Jesus breaks off after one short sentence, the Jews ask their complaining question and the discourse then resumes with a reiteration of the reference to ‘flesh’. As further evidence, he examines the function of objections and complaints both in John 6 and elsewhere in the document to conclude that this seems to be the author’s way of breaking up his discourses. Anderson develops this more stringently by noting the three-fold structure of the characteristic ending of each of Jesus’ discourses in chapter 6. Jesus concludes each discourse in vv. 27, 32f., 40, 51, 58, and 63f, with a three-fold sentence which sums up the former discussion and leads into the next discourse:

Jesus’ discoursants, therefore, play a pivotal role in the progression of the narrative. By raising a question or making a comment, they prepare the reader/hearer for the subsequent teaching of the Johannine Jesus.

It is in this sense that the whole of verse 51 should be regarded as a unitive conclusion to the discourse in vv. 43–51 which addresses the question of the ‘Jews’ in vv. 41f: v. 51c is a concluding, not opening clause. Dunn is thus correct to insist that although introducing a new theme, v. 51c belongs to the preceding context and so in consequence it should be understood metaphorically—its primary reference being the redemptive death of Jesus. We should note how ‘flesh’ in verse 51c is a reference to Jesus himself and note how the metaphor is being developed: the way in which the ‘bread’ of v. 47–51 will give life is in the ‘bread’ giving himself, his flesh, in death. The ‘bread’ is the metaphorical way of referring to the literal ‘flesh’; but in v. 51 this metaphor is connected with metaphorical eating. If verse 51c develops the image of the ‘flesh’ by expanding the sense of the image to include Jesus’ death, and verses 53ff. in turn simply further develop the ‘flesh’ motif, we must ask why the ‘eating’ should then change from metaphorical to literal?

From this it follows that vv. 53ff. are crucial. M.J.J. Menken’s essay highlights four main reasons why vv. 51c–58 are seen in an eucharistic manner, with the supposed changes in content between vv. 51c–58 and what precedes them essentially the heart of this interpretation. The arguments are as follows: One, up to v. 51b Jesus himself is the bread that came down from heaven, whereas in v. 51c ff. Jesus’ flesh and blood are the bread from heaven. Two, in v. 32 the Father gives the bread from heaven whereas in v. 51c Jesus will give the bread. Three, up to v. 51c the eating of the bread can only be understood in a symbolic way; in vv. 51c–58 however, both of

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22. cf. 4:14, 31–34
23. Koester, ‘John Six and the Lord’s Supper’ 427. Dunn makes similar points but is again chided by Casey for ignoring ‘the cultural context of these terms’ and for considering them ‘in isolation from known aspects of Christian culture’ (48). With methodological differences again on clear display, the question is raised as to why the cultural/Christian context for these terms as a hermeneutical device should be elevated above the Johannine text context for these terms? Should we not start with how the text itself uses these terms before looking at what might stand behind the text?
24. See Prov. 9:5; cf. Sir. 15:3; 24:21
25. Anderson, The Christology of the Fourth Gospel, 207. The identicity in vv. 47–51 between the thing to be eaten and the person to be believed is vital in moving forward into vv. 53ff. where, without vv. 47–51, it would be easy to read back two separate but necessary sacrificial objects: in v. 40 (the Son) and in v. 54 (the sacramental elements).
27. Anderson, The Christology of the Fourth Gospel, 132
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With their clear correlation of faith with the gift of eternal life vv. 40 and 47 are also important. Verse 47 introduces a section leading up to v. 51 which is a Christological development of the manna motif as it relates to v. 47 and is full of the mixing of metaphors. In v. 47 believing yields eternal life; in vv. 50–51 eating the bread yields eternal life. Here, it will not do to argue, as is often done with vv. 40, 54, that the two things are necessary for eternal life (i.e. belief in Jesus and eating the sacrament), because this section binds together as identical both the thing to be eaten and the person to be believed so that it does not speak of believing and eating. It depicts believing as metaphorical eating because the subject of belief is being described metaphorically. Thus Anderson’s key observation: ‘As believing is to Jesus, eating is to this life-producing Bread which comes from down from heaven.’

6:51–58: Eating flesh and drinking blood

In coming to look closely at the main section of the text, verses 51–58, one of the key exegetical issues to be faced immediately is the importance and function of v. 51c: ‘This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world’. Many scholars who argue for a sacramental understanding of the passage rest part of their case on seeing v. 51c as introducing a new section, given the introduction of the word ‘flesh’ which, it is argued, shifts the imagery from believing to partaking of the Lord’s Supper. However, this is to be questioned on a number of grounds.

C.K. Barrett, for instance, argues that division here is not satisfactory as it means Jesus breaks off after one short sentence, the Jews ask their complaining question and the discourse then resumes with a reiteration of the reference to ‘flesh’. As further evidence, he examines the function of objections and complaints both in John 6 and elsewhere in the document to conclude that this seems to be the author’s way of breaking up his discourses. Anderson develops this more stringently by noting the three-fold structure of the characteristic ending of each of Jesus’ discourses in chapter 6. Jesus concludes each discourse in vv. 27, 32f., 40, 51, 58, and 63f. with a three-fold sentence which sums up the former discussion and leads into the next discourse:

Jesus’ discussants, therefore, play a pivotal role in the progression of the narrative. By raising a question or making a comment, they prepare the reader/hearer for the subsequent teaching of the Johannine Jesus.

It is in this sense that the whole of verse 51 should be regarded as a unitive conclusion to the discourse in vv. 43–51 which addresses the question of the ‘Jews’ in vv. 41f. v. 51c is a concluding, not opening, clause. Dunn is thus correct to insist that although introducing a new theme, v. 51c belongs to the preceding context and so in consequence it should be understood metaphorically — its primary reference being the redemptive death of Jesus. We should note how ‘flesh’ in verse 51c is a reference to Jesus himself and note how the metaphor is being developed: the way in which the ‘bread’ of vv. 47–51 will give life is in the ‘bread’ giving himself, his flesh, in death. The ‘bread’ is the metaphorical way of referring to the literal ‘flesh’; but in v. 51 this metaphor is connected with metaphorical eating. If verse 51c develops the image of the bread by expanding the sense of the image to include Jesus’ death, and verses 53ff. turn simply further develop the ‘flesh’ motif, we must ask why the ‘eating’ should then change from metaphorical to literal?

From this it follows that v. 53ff. are crucial. M.J.J. Menken’s essay highlights four main reasons why v. 51c–58 are seen in an eucharistic manner, with the supposed changes in content between vv. 51c–58 and what precedes them essentially the heart of this interpretation. The arguments are as follows: One, up to v. 51b Jesus himself is the bread that came down from heaven, whereas in v. 51c ff. Jesus’ flesh and blood are the bread from heaven. Two, in v. 32 the Father gives the bread from heaven whereas in v. 51c Jesus will give the bread. Three, up to v. 51c the eating of the bread can only be understood in a symbolic way: in vv. 51c–58 however, both of

22 cf. 4:14, 31–34
23 Koester, ‘John Six and the Lord’s Supper’ 427. Dunn makes similar points but is again chided by Casey for ignoring ‘the cultural context of these terms’ and for considering them ‘in isolation from known aspects of Christian culture’ (48). With methodological differences again on clear display, the question is raised as to why the cultural Christian context for these terms as a hermeneutical device should be elevated above the Johannine text context for these terms? Should we not start with how the text itself uses these terms before looking at what might stand behind the text?
24 See Prov. 9:5; cf. Sir. 15:3; 24:21
25 Anderson, The Christology of the Fourth Gospel, 207. The identicality in vv. 47–51 between the thing to be eaten and the person to be believed is vital in moving forward into vv. 53ff. whereas, without vv. 47–51, it would be easy to read back two separate but necessary salvific objects: in v. 40 (the Son) and in v. 54 (the sacramental elements).
the Greek words that are used for eating in vv. 51c–58 have to be understood literally. Four, in the first part of the discourse, the issue is Jesus’ heavenly provenance whereas from v. 51c onwards, it is his corporality and humanity. We will give most attention to considering the first three points.

First, we must notice how the change from ‘bread’ to ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ in verse 53ff. actually functions. The change can only be a relative one given that there is again a change at vv. 56–57 with ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ in turn being replaced by the first person singular. This ‘I’ is again identified in v. 58, to close the circle of the discourse, as ‘the bread that came down from heaven’. This double shift suggests that “flesh” and “blood” do not indicate the eucharistic elements, but qualify Jesus’ person. This is made even clearer by considering the significance of the terms ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ in their context. Menken’s argument that ‘flesh’ denotes man in his frailty and mortality and is thus applicable to the dying Jesus is furthered by the final clause of verse 51c. This has the preposition, commonly used in John together with a following genitive to indicate ‘for’ whom or what Jesus’ death has a salvific effect. As well as this the word ‘for’ is connected frequently, as in verse 51c, with the verb ‘to give’ referring to Jesus’ giving himself. Koester argues that when flesh and blood are combined they constitute a living being (1:13; cf. Matt. 16:17). So partaking of Jesus’ flesh and blood means partaking of his whole person (thus the ‘me’ of v. 57); but the consumption of blood in addition to flesh indicates that the blood will be shed. Menken wishes to distinguish the Johannine usage of ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ from the Matthew 16:17 sense but still holds that ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ in this instance evoke the referent of a human being who suffers a violent death.

This means that in v. 51c we have not a direct change of picture but an identification of Jesus’ flesh and blood with the bread from heaven as an intensification of the image: Jesus is the bread from heaven as a human being who suffers a violent death. Thus Dunn is justified in developing the sacrificial connotations of ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ in vv. 51c ff.

John 6:54 promises that the one who eats and drinks of Jesus has eternal life; this promise is identical to that of vv. 40 and 47. We have stressed above the necessity of identifiability between ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ and the person of Jesus. It follows from this that we either have a theological contradiction between v. 54 and vv. 40, 47 or the relationship must be explained on other grounds. D.A. Carson states the case that this handling of the text suggests: The conclusion is obvious: the latter [v. 54] is the metaphorical way of referring to the former [v. 40]. It is not hard to see that eating and drinking are synonymous with believing in the context of the discourse – here belief is developed to include belief in Jesus’ death – but this has met with some objections on historical-critical grounds. Casey argues that, even symbolically, the Johannine language of drinking blood is ‘stunningly anti-Jewish’ and sees the whole discourse functioning as part of the Johannine community’s re-writing of the historical Jesus to exclude ‘the Jews from salvation’. On the one hand however, in his trenchant criticism of Carson, Casey misreads Carson’s statement of what is metaphorical. It is the drinking blood which is the metaphor and not ‘looking to’ or ‘believing’. On the other hand, if even the symbolic language of drinking blood is ‘so alien to Judaism’ as to be ‘culturally ludicrous’ it is hard to see what sense we are to give to Jesus’ recorded words at the Last Supper where the disciples are told that, symbolically, they have drunk Jesus’ blood.

Secondly, this understanding of Jesus giving himself for the life of the world is important. If the ‘bread’ of v. 51c has already been qualified as Jesus himself, this makes it impossible to see the bread which I shall give as referring to the eucharistic bread, or even to a disjunction with the bread that the Father will give. In Johannine Christology, ‘God’s giving of Jesus reaches its goal in Jesus’ giving of himself’. So the transition from Jesus as bread to Jesus as the giver of bread remains within a Christological framework: this binds together both the incarnation and the death of Jesus as salvific events in Johannine thought with the idea that Jesus gives what he is.

Thirdly, it follows from this that if ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ refer to Jesus’ person in his death, not the eucharistic elements, then the verbs ‘eat’ and ‘drink’ in v. 53 have to be understood in the same metaphorical way as ‘eat’ in vv. 50–51b is used in reference to Jesus’ person. The fact that in v. 51 ‘bread’ is used as a metaphor for ‘flesh’ validates Menken’s key observation:

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30 Menken, ‘John 6:51c–58’, 9–10. Menken argues that there is a developing specificity throughout the discourse, a movement of increasing unambiguity, of the identification of Jesus with the thing that gives life: the climax is that he is the bread of life in his death. He points to other discourses in John with a comparable movement towards ending in a reference to Jesus’ death and its salvific meaning (see 12).
31 Koester, ‘John Six and the Lord’s Supper’ 429
32 Dunn, ‘John v1’, 331
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It is important to see verse 55 within the context of the whole discourse where Jesus contrasts himself as eternal life-giving bread with the manna which could not prevent death. In this sense, the adjectives of ‘true food’ and ‘true drink’ mean that Jesus’ flesh and blood achieve more than what food and drink can achieve: eternal life. A metaphorical understanding of ‘eat’ is in keeping with the sense of v. 56ff, with the notion of ‘remaining’ in Jesus. If what is meant in v. 51ff. is literal eating and drinking we would expect the sequence in v. 56 to be more akin to the inverted ‘I remain in him, and he in me’. The fact that ‘eating’ and ‘drinking’ leads to the remaining in Jesus makes them seem much more plausible as metaphors for faith in his life-giving death.

The idea of dependence is developed in v. 57: just as the Son lives because of the Father, so believers live because of Jesus. Koester points out that in v. 57 ‘the verb “eat” in the second half of the verse if parallel to “sent” in the first half: both terms characterise a life-giving relationship’. The ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ are again represented as a unity in the person of Jesus with a return in v. 58 to the metaphor of ‘bread that came down from heaven’. Both Jesus and the manna had come down from heaven but the scene could not be said about the bread of the eucharist. In speaking here, as in vv. 47–50, of a bread that is received by faith and not the mouth, Jesus concludes the discourse by bringing it back to the beginning – the place where he chided those who focused on material, not spiritual, food.

The remainder of the text has been subjected to all manner of treatments in scholarship. These range from the significance of vv. 51–58 as anti-docetic, anti-Jewish, or even both, in relation to a variety of conjectural community disputes represented in vv. 60–71. The argument for the interpretation of John 6 that I have presented has followed a different methodological route, but some points in these verses emerge as important.

The focus on receiving Jesus by faith is sustained throughout this concluding section, with a contrasting response between that of the crowd and the disciples serving as a parallel to the responses to the two miracles in vv. 1–21 which introduced the chapter. There are repeated references to the Son of Man throughout the discourse and the idea is present again in v. 62 so that the overall concept is of the unity of descent and ascent. These ideas are important for Dunn who argues that is vv. 62–63 together which meet the objection of both v. 60 and the as yet unanswered objection of v. 52. Jesus has said that life comes from eating the flesh of the Son of Man who descended from heaven:

He now explains more fully that this will be possible because the Son of Man will ascend to where he was before, and as the climax and result of his ascension and glorification will give the Spirit. Thus for Dunn the ‘life-giving consumption of the Son of Man really refers to the reception of the Spirit of the exalted Jesus. For it is the Spirit who gives life’. It follows from this reading that Dunn is justified in seeing v. 63 as highly significant. If John is referring to the eucharist in vv. 51c–58 then v. 63 must have a similar reference, but one which tells against the view of the sacraments as communicating eternal life. Verse 63 is a rebuke of such literalism. Importantly, Anderson sees the verse as linked to the positing of the two ways in v. 27: ‘It is a reference to the two ways of seeking (v. 27), the two kinds of bread (vv. 30–33), and the choice of either adhering to or rejecting the cross of Jesus.

Conclusion

The concluding section of verses 60–71 deserves much further attention, and indeed this article is simply an attempt at a first movement in interpretation and leaves a whole range of questions untouched. However, I have tried to show that even if John 6 uses eucharistic terminology like ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ the issue which the text raises is how the terminology is used, and to show that it is used to point to the significance of Jesus’ death, not the sacramental elements. As such, within this framework, the first part of this article’s title is capable of being read literally or metaphorically. Literally, it is false – in John 6 literal eating is not the way of true belief. On the other hand, the discourse functions to show that eating is a metaphor for believing and in this sense the metaphor is perhaps better inverted: in John 6 believing is eating. Barrett suggests that John may have been written at a time when the Christian eucharistic rite was believed to secure, ex opere operato, eternal life for the recipient. If this is the case then Anderson’s comment is fitting, that in using eucharistic terminology in chapter 6:53ff., the evangelist is not emphasising the importance of the eucharist but pointing to an abiding belief in the ‘flesh and bloodness’ of the incarnation, which is the true end of all eucharistic rites and Christian discipleship.

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