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A table of contents for *The Bible Student* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php

AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

(Continued)

Prof. F. F. BRUCE, D.D.

II. Jesus Reveals Himself to the World (John 1:19-12:50)

(c) MINISTRY OF JESUS IN GALILEE, JERUSALEM AND BY THE LAKE (John 4:45—6:71)

(iv) *The Feeding of the Multitude* (John 6:1-21)

Ch. 6, v. 1—*After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the sea of Galilee,*—‘After these things’ (cf. the opening words of Ch. 5) will most naturally refer to the healing of the man at Bethesda and its sequel, if we accept the traditional order of the chapters. It has been argued, indeed, that Ch. 5 should follow Ch. 6 instead of preceding it, as Ch. 7:1 more naturally follows on a Jerusalem incident such as we have in Ch. 5, while the mention in our present verse of Jesus’ crossing to the other side of the sea of Galilee more naturally follows on a Galilaean incident such as we have at the end of Ch. 4. This may be so chronologically, but we should not too readily assume that John must have adhered to chronological sequence. ‘The other side of the sea of Galilee’ is the eastern side; according to Luke 9:10 ff. the feeding of the multitude took place near Bethsaida, which lay some way east of the point where the Jordan enters the lake, in the tetrarchy of Philip (cf. note on John 1:44).

Which is the sea of Tiberias.—The lake received this alternative name from the city of Tiberias, built on its west shore by Herod Antipas between A.D. 17 and 22, and named in honour of the Emperor Tiberius. The lake was probably not called ‘the sea of Tiberias’ so early as the ministry of Jesus, but this had become a common name for it by the period when John was writing, towards the end of the first century; he therefore uses both the old name and the new. (In Ch. 21:1 he uses the new name alone.)

v. 2—*And a great multitude followed him, because they beheld the signs which he did on them that were sick.*—They belonged to the class described earlier in Ch. 2:23, who were impressed by

the signs that they saw, but yielded Jesus an adherence which was only superficial because they did not appreciate the inward import of the signs.

v. 3—*And Jesus went up into the mountain, and there he sat with his disciples.*—The 'mountain' is the higher ground farther north and east, overlooking the level plain east of the river and the lake. In such a spot Jesus from time to time sought solitude and rest with His disciples (cf. Mark 6:31).

v. 4—*Now the passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.*—This was the passover of A.D. 29; for this passover, then, Jesus evidently did not go up to Jerusalem, as He did for the preceding one (John 2:13) and the following one (John 11:55 ff). John's purpose in mentioning the passover may not only be to fix the time at which this incident took place; he may have thought the passover a peculiarly appropriate season of the year both for the incident and for the discourse which arose out of it.

v. 5—*Jesus therefore, lifting up his eyes, and seeing that a great multitude cometh unto him, saith unto Philip, Whence are we to buy bread, that these may eat?*—Mark tells us that He had compassion on the multitude, 'because they were as sheep not having a shepherd' (6:34); that is to say, they were leaderless, and hoped that He might be the leader whom they lacked. But as the event proved (v. 15), He was not prepared to be the kind of leader that they desired. There are several places in this Gospel where individual disciples are named, as against the general reference to 'his disciples' in the parallel accounts of the incident in the other Gospels. So here, John is the only Evangelist who particularizes the roles of Philip and Andrew in the discussion about ways and means of feeding the multitude. Since Philip belonged to the neighbouring town of Bethsaida (cf. Ch. 1:44), it was natural that Jesus should consult him about places where food might be bought.

v. 6—*And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do.*—The Evangelist adds this comment (a modern writer would make it a footnote), lest any of his readers should

imagine that Jesus did not know where bread might be obtained or how it could be supplied. The assurance, 'He himself knew what he would do', has often brought encouragement to believers when their Lord seemed to be leading them into perplexing situations from which they could see no way out.

v. 7—*Philip answered him, Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one may take a little.*—Since a denarius was acceptable as a day's wage for a casual labourer (Matt. 20:2), it would presumably buy a day's supply of bread for an average family. But Philip reckoned that even if two hundred denarii could be raised, that sum would not go nearly far enough to meet the present need. How 'denarius' should be translated nowadays is questionable. A.V. and R.V. 'penny' is completely misleading; A.S.V. 'shilling' is probably as near as we can get to it in our currency. R.S.V. leaves the name of the Roman coin unchanged, 'Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread . . .' but adds a footnote: 'The denarius was worth about twenty cents'. Mark also records that the figure of 200 denarii was mentioned (6:37), but does not say that it was Philip who mentioned it.

v. 8—*One of the disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, saith unto him,*—John, who was present himself, remembers vividly what the individual disciples said and did.

v. 9—*There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two fishes: but what are these among so many?*—John is the only one of the four Evangelists (for all four relate this incident) to mention that the five barley cakes and the two fishes belonged to a small boy (Gk. *paidarion*) in their company; he had presumably brought them for his day's 'lunch'. The 'loaves' were flat barley cakes baked on a gridiron or on hot stones. While the other Evangelists use the ordinary word for fish (*ichthys*), John calls them *opsaria*, indicating that they were two small (perhaps salted) fish to be eaten as relish along with the barley cakes. (He uses the same word for the fish which the Lord prepared in Ch. 21:9 ff.) But in view of the multitude, this tiny meal was hardly worth

mentioning; so, at least, Andrew and the other disciples thought. But they were enough for the Lord's purpose.

v. 10—*Jesus said, Make the people sit down. Now there was much grass in the place.* Mark, whose narrative is most detailed here, notes that they sat down 'on the green grass' (6:39); the plain here (the Butaiha) is very fertile, and in March or April the grass would not yet be parched with the heat of high summer.

So the men sat down, in number about five thousand.—The word translated 'men' is *andres*, meaning men as distinct from women and children; it is found in all four Gospels, and Matthew emphasizes the point by adding the phrase, 'beside women and children' (14:21). Mark adds that, in accordance with Jesus' direction to the disciples, the men were seated in groups of fifty and a hundred, like rows of flowers or vegetables. He who knew what He would do had no need to panic when confronted by this huge catering problem; He proceeded about His work with perfect orderliness.

v. 11—*Jesus therefore took the loaves; and having given thanks, he distributed to them that were set down; likewise also of the fishes as much as they would.*—The verb rendered 'having given thanks' is Gk. *eucharisteō*, from which we have the term Eucharist (the 'thanksgiving') so commonly used of the Holy Communion. But this in itself would not require a eucharistic significance for the feeding; the verb is perfectly common and untechnical in Greek. If our Lord used the common form of thanksgiving on such an occasion, He would have said: 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth'. According to the Synoptic Evangelists, He gave the bread to the disciples, who in turn distributed it among the crowd. Philip had tried to reckon how much would have to be spent for each person to have a little; but in fact they were able to eat 'as much as they would'. When the Lord gives, He does so with no niggardly hand. As in the other Gospels, the multiplication of the bread and fish is implied rather than asserted.

v. 12—*And when they were filled, he saith unto his disciples, Gather up the broken pieces which remain over, that nothing be lost.*—

When the Lord supplies His people's need, there is abundance but no waste. These words convey a most practical and literal lesson. To waste food which we do not need, when so many still exist at starvation level, is an insult to the Divine Giver. When we have digested this natural lesson, there may be a spiritual one for us to learn as well. However abundantly the Lord bestows His grace, He has always enough and to spare for others; He is never impoverished by the generosity of His giving. So too His people, when they imitate His liberality, will prove the truth of the proverb; 'There is that scattereth, and increaseth yet more' (Prov. 11:24).

v. 13—*So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with broken pieces from the five barley loaves, which remained over unto them that had eaten.*—On this occasion, then, much more was gathered up after all were satisfied than there had been available before the meal began. Some have seen in the number 'twelve' a significant coincidence with the number of the apostles; it is more probable that the number signifies that the Lord not only supplied the need of these 'lost sheep of the house of Israel', but had sufficient left over to supply the need of all the twelve tribes of the nation. Augustine pointed out that the feeding of the five thousand symbolizes our Lord's self-communication to the Jews, while the feeding of the four thousand symbolizes His self-communication to the Gentiles. Later commentators have pointed out in this connection that the word translated 'basket' in all four accounts of the feeding of the five thousand (*kophinos*) is one that appears elsewhere in classical literature in a Jewish setting; a different word (*spyris*, 'creel') is used in the two places where the feeding of the four thousand is narrated (Matt. 15:37; Mark 8:8).

v. 14—*When therefore the people saw the sign which he did, they said, This is of a truth the prophet that cometh into the world.*—We have already had occasion to comment on the popular expectation of the 'prophet like unto Moses' of Deut. 18:15 ff. (cf. John 1:21; 4:19). These people argued that as their forefathers had been fed miraculously in the wilderness in the days of Moses,

so the One who had now fed them miraculously must be the second Moses, the great prophet of the end-time whose advent so many in Israel awaited. This was their interpretation of the 'sign' which they had seen performed in their midst, and as far as the interpretation went it was right, but they did not penetrate to its inner meaning, but showed that their hopes were confined to the external and material order. When the inner meaning of the sign was later explained to them, most of them were offended by it.

v. 15—*Jesus therefore perceiving that they were about to come and take him by force, to make him king, withdrew again into the mountain himself alone.*—If this was the second Moses, He would surely do for them what Moses had done for their ancestors, and lead them to the promised land—the promised land in this case being national independence. Their attempt to make Him king does not necessarily imply that they recognized Him on this occasion as the Davidic Messiah; in John 1:20 f., 25; 7:40 f., the prophet seems to have been distinguished from the Messiah in popular expectation (as he also was in the community of Qumran.) Of course, we should not assume that the rank and file of the people kept the various aspects of the eschatological hope neatly distinguished in their minds. Jesus had already shown His power to banish disease; now He had shown His power to banish hunger. If He would only exert that power to secure their liberation from Rome, nothing could stand in His way. Here, surely, was the Leader for whom they had been waiting. With Him as their Captain and their King, victory and freedom were as good as won! If, then, He would not take the initiative and present Himself to them as their Leader, they would compel Him to do so. But Jesus recognized in this intention of theirs the very temptation which He had repudiated when the tempter had urged Him to turn the stones into bread. He knew that this was not the way in which He was to fulfil His Father's will and deliver His people. So He went off to the mountainous country where He had previously resorted with His disciples, and thus avoided the crowd's unwelcome attentions.

v. 16—*And when evening came, his disciples went down unto the sea;*—According to the Synoptic account, He made them sail back across the lake while He dismissed the crowd (Mark 6:45).

v. 17—*and they entered into a boat, and were going over the sea unto Capernaum.*—According to Mark 6:45, He made them 'go before him unto the other side to Bethsaida'. This presents a problem, as Bethsaida was on the same side of the lake where the multitude had been fed, and only a short distance away. Some commentators have felt obliged to postulate two places called Bethsaida, one on the west side of the lake and one on the east side. The reading of Mark 6:45 may, however, have originally been 'to the side opposite Bethsaida'. It was certainly to Capernaum that they went, as verses 24 and 59 indicate.

And it was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.—As we learn from the Synoptic narrative (Matt. 14:23; Mark 6:46), He was spending the time in prayer; and what John has just told us shows how urgent an occasion for prayer it was.

v. 18—*And the sea was rising by reason of a great wind that blew.*—'The atmosphere, for the most part, hangs still and heavy, but the cold currents, as they pass from the west, are sucked down in vortices of air, or by the narrow gorges that break upon the lake. Then arise those sudden storms for which the region is notorious' (G. A. Smith). To add to the disciples' difficulty, 'the wind was contrary unto them' (Mark 6:48).

v. 19—*When therefore they had rowed about five and twenty or thirty furlongs, they beheld Jesus walking on the sea, and drawing nigh unto the boat.*—A 'furlong' (Gk. *stadion*) was rather less than our modern furlong; they had rowed about three miles. From the neighbourhood of Bethsaida to Capernaum would be about five miles. Some commentators suggest that John means that they had been hugging the shore all the time, and that Jesus was walking by the sea. To be sure the phrase *eπi tēs thalassēs* can have this meaning where the context requires it (as in John 21:1); but the same phrase is used in the Synoptic account of the present incident (Matt. 14:25 f; Mark 6:48 f.) where it certainly means 'on the sea', for Matthew and Mark tell us that the boat

was 'in the midst of the sea'. It is not John's practice to tone down the miraculous element in the gospel narrative.

And they were afraid.—There would have been no cause for fear if they had seen Him walking *by* the sea; it was the sight of Him walking *on* the sea that made them cry out, thinking that it was an apparition (Mark 6:49).

v. 20—*But he saith unto them, It is I; be not afraid.*—The present tense (*mē phobeisthe*) means 'Stop being afraid'. His disciples now as then know that nothing banishes fear so quickly as the assurance of His presence.

v. 21—*They were willing therefore to receive him into the boat.*—i.e., as soon as they realized that it was really their Master and no apparition.

And straightway the boat was at the land whither they were going.—As soon as He entered the boat, the wind fell (Mark 6:51). It was 'about the fourth watch of the night' (Mark 6:48) that He came to them—i.e., not long before dawn. Probably dawn was breaking as they came safely shore at Capernaum.

(To be continued)

'This hath He done and shall we not adore Him?
This shall He do and can we still despair?
Come, let us quickly fling ourselves before Him,
Cast at His feet the burthen of our care,

Flash from our eyes the glow of our thanksgiving,
Glad and regretful, confident and calm;
Then through all life and what is after living,
Thrill to the tireless music of a psalm.

Yea thro' life, death, thro' sorrow and thro' sinning,
He shall suffice me, for He hath sufficed:
Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,
Christ the beginning, for the end is CHRIST.'