

THE FORMATION OF THE BREAD OF LIFE DISCOURSE

(John 6)

In New Testament times it is clear that manna was considered a type of the Eucharist.¹ That this should be so is readily explained by the stress upon the relationship: manna—Messiah, in contemporaneous Judaism.² This relationship of course finds its best scriptural expression in Jn. 6, where the manna of the desert plays an important rôle in the course of the development of what appears to be a eucharistic catechesis. Thus the all-important function of Christ on the day of the miracle of the loaves is to give bread: he takes the initiative (v. 5); he gives the bread himself (v. 11). Furthermore Christ is pictured as giving this miraculous bread at the time of the Passover (v. 4) when according to Jewish speculation the Messiah would come and deliver the heavenly manna.³ The messianic enthusiasm of the crowd seems to have been aroused precisely because they saw in Jesus' miracle the long-awaited return of the manna.⁴ The murmuring crowd which appeared the next day to demand a sign calls to mind Israel wandering in the desert and thus completes the Exodus motif of the chapter.

But if Jesus is pictured as the Messiah who gives bread in a miraculous way, nevertheless it is unmistakably pointed out that this bread is a type of the future gift which Jesus *will give* (vv. 27, 51c). As a type it is gathered up lest it be lost (v. 12) and remains incorrupt though it nourished the whole crowd (v. 13).⁵ A further hint that this bread miracle is only a type may be derived from the consecrated phrase of vv. 11 and 23, which looks forward to the action of Christ at the Last Supper. Thus John describes the multiplication of the loaves in terms of a eucharistic banquet organised and directed by Jesus and served by him.

Other evidence that the author of the Fourth Gospel was already in the spirit of the Last Supper when he wrote this pericope may be drawn from v. 51: 'And the bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world,' which recalls the words attributed to Christ at the time of the institution of the Eucharist.⁶ Again, the dissociation of the two

¹ 1 Cor. 10:3ff.

² J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Oxford 1955), pp. 152-9; C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge 1953), p. 335; B. Gärtner, *John 6 and the Jewish Passover*, *Coniectanea Neotestamentica* xvii (Lund 1959), pp. 18-25.

³ B. Gärtner, *op. cit.*, p. 19

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 21

⁵ D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London 1956), p. 43

⁶ 1 Cor. 11:24; Lk. 22:19

phrases: 'to eat my flesh' / 'to drink my blood,' is a clear reference to the double consecration of the Last Supper (vv. 53-8). Even the mention of the fact that the discourse on the bread of life took place in a synagogue at Capharnaum has eucharistic overtones (v. 59). We are justified in supposing that the author of the Fourth Gospel dates this discourse on Friday evening or Saturday morning. In which case the multiplication of the loaves must be placed on Thursday, the day which, according to johannine chronology, Christ celebrated the Passover meal.

With the importance of the relationship between manna and Eucharist established, it would not be surprising if the bread-of-life discourse was a midrash, an exegesis of the text of Scripture which is put in the mouths of the Jews and which refers to well-attested Jewish speculation about messianic manna (v. 32). Yet this point has not been emphasised in the past.¹ Recently, however, P. Borgen has called attention to it.²

According to Borgen the discourse of Jesus following Jn. 6:31, i.e. vv. 32-58, is a midrash of the reference to the manna miracle with the quotation from Scripture: 'Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."' R. Bultmann claims that vv. 51b-58b are an interpolation made in the interest of eucharistic doctrine. A close study, however, of vv. 32-52 reveals that the words 'bread,' 'from heaven' and 'He gave' are quite sufficiently developed. But the word 'to eat' occurs only from v. 49 onward. Now if we suppose that vv. 53-8 are an interpolation, then the word 'to eat' has not received a development comparable to the rest of the words of Ps. 78:24. The conclusion, therefore, is drawn that vv. 52-8 are not an interpolation but that vv. 26-58 form a unified whole, for only in vv. 53-8 does the word 'to eat' receive adequate treatment.

In the light of this observation it seems best to say that the plan of the discourse is ruled by the words of Ps. 78:24. The development of the exegesis follows the general form: revelation—objection—further revelation, as X.-L. Dufour has pointed out.³ In this form the objection yields up in abbreviated fashion the theme of the revelation surrounding it and points to a further revelation (vv. 28, 30-31, 42, 52).

¹ The detailed investigation of H. Schürmann, for example, did not hit upon this point as a proof of the unity of the discourse. cf. 'Jn. 6, 51c—ein Schlüssel zur johanneischen Brotrede,' *Biblische Zeitschrift* II (1958), pp. 244-62; 'Die Eucharistie als Repräsentation und Applikation des Heilsgeschehens nach Jn. 6, 53-8,' *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* LXVIII (1959), pp. 30-45, 108-18.

² P. Borgen, 'The Unity of the Discourse in Jn 6,' *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* I (1959), pp. 277-8

³ X.-L. Dufour, 'Le mystère du Pain de Vie,' *Recherches de Science Religieuse* XLVI (1958), pp. 496-500

This method is also employed in Jn. 3 and 4, and points out the incapacity of human reason before the revelation of the Word.¹ Reason rejects revelation which it cannot explain or justify.

Regarding however the questions asked in vv. 28, 30-1, 42, 52, it should be noted that although a question method is used which finds its parallel elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel, still it remains possible that the question arrangement in *this passage*, if not the method itself, was inspired by the four questions which the four sons asked in the Jewish Passover Haggadah.²

First of all there are four distinct inquiries, each of which is placed between revelations made by Christ. Secondly, each inquiry has a special character.

The question of v. 28 seems to be a simple *halakhic* question concerning a point of law. It parallels the question of the wise son in the Jewish Passover Haggadah and stands apart from the questions of vv. 30-1 which suppose the revelation of v. 28.

The questions of vv. 30-1 ask for a sign like that which proved Moses' power of mediation, namely the manna. The reference to Ps. 78:24 indicates that the Jews interpret this verse as referring to the sign which the Messiah will give to prove his authenticity. These questions, then, are of the *haggadha* type, involving precisely the interpretation of Ps. 78:24, and thus parallel the question presumed to be asked by the child who is too young to be able to ask a question in the Jewish Passover Haggadah.

Having stated that he is the bread of life and that faith, a gift of the Father, is required to understand this, Jesus finds himself confronted with a question aimed more at ridicule than anything else (v. 42). This is a *boruth* question which finds its counterpart in the question which the wicked child asks in the Jewish Passover Haggadah. It makes light of the interpretation which Jesus gives to the words 'bread from heaven.'

In vv. 43-51 Jesus reiterates the necessity of faith to comprehend his interpretation and introduces the notion of *eating* which is found in the verse of Ps. 78 under consideration.

The question of v. 52 again hinges on the understanding of the exegesis of Ps. 78:24 with the emphasis on the word 'eat.' The notion of eating, introduced by Christ into the discourse, makes concrete the idea of participation and leads to the practical question of how this may be applied to daily life. This question of the Jews is a *derekh 'eres* question which finds its counterpart in the interrogation of the sincere child asked in the Passover Haggadah. The fact that the Jews 'disputed among themselves' concerning the revelation which

¹ *ibid.*, pp. 498, 500-1, 504

² B. Gärtner, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-8

Jesus had made in the previous verse seems to indicate that the question is to be understood as a sincere one.

So from the nature of the questions asked, it remains possible that the author of the Fourth Gospel is following the Passover Haggadah arrangement.¹ This possibility is enhanced by the fact that vv. 31-58, which begin with the *haggadha* question concerning the interpretation of scripture, seems to be formally a midrash of Ps. 78:24, a text concerning a Passover theme important for a Jewish Christian Passover ritual modelled on the Jewish Passover Haggadah.²

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REFLECTIONS ON THE SOURCES OF THE PENTATEUCH³

Permit me to introduce my subject by a fictional illustration. If it should happen that three thousand years hence archaeologists should endeavour to piece together the history of our times, what would they make of the discovery of a school library? If the first writing to be discovered was Shakespeare's *Othello*, or worse still More's *Utopia*, would it upset their theories about late medieval Europe? I should think that it would shatter a fair number of historical dogmas until they realised that they were dealing with dramatic fiction in the one case and fantasy in the other.

Something similar holds for biblical studies. It is impossible to begin the interpretation of a text until one has decided what type of literature it is, how it came to be written and how were the contemporary readers expected to understand it. Inspiration does not lift a writer out of space and time. God works through men as He finds them. Only when we have understood the intention of the writer can we appreciate the inspired message. For instance, if the ancient hagiographer intended the division of creation into six days

¹ Other possible points of contact between the Jewish Passover Haggadah and Jn. 6:26-58 are the use of the liturgical formula EGO EIMI and the parallel between Jn. 6:35 and the words of the Father when he raises the Seder dish at the beginning of the Passover meal. cf. B. Gärtner, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

² Concerning the probability of the existence of such a Christian Passover ritual and the further probability of a connection between Jn. 6 and such a ritual, see B. Gärtner, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-38. Lately, moreover, G. Ziener has argued convincingly that a Christian Passover Haggadah probably served as a basis of John's Gospel (cf. 'Johannes-evangelium und urchristliche Passafeier,' *Biblische Zeitschrift* II (1958), pp. 263-74.

³ The substance of a paper read to the Newman Association in February 1960