

FINDING THE OLD TESTAMENT IN JOHN

John 6: Jesus is Messiah – It's That Simple

The Jewish Torah, those first five books of the Bible commonly called Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, make some bold explanations about God, humanity, life, death, and more. Revealed by God to Moses on Sinai, the Torah sets out the ugly predicament of sin's effect on humanity. Sin separates an otherwise vibrant and interactive walk between people and God. Sin produces death and robs people of the chance to enjoy God's eternity.

Paul explained to the Ephesians that God had seen that coming. God created with full awareness that things would fall apart, and that Jesus would be needed to sacrificially provide a means of straightening things out. Jesus would need to bring life to the walking dead. Paul didn't happen on his observation. It is apparent from reading the Torah. God made it plain to those who would read with open eyes.

God explained that one from the offspring of woman would step on the work of the tempter. God promised to bring his anointed one through the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God assured Abraham that though his descendants would wind up in Egypt for an extended time, God would rescue them and bring them back to the land promised to Abraham.

The story of that rescue forms greater detail into understanding and recognizing God's Messiah. Moses is God's key character in effectuating the rescue from Egypt. As God's chosen for the time, Moses receives God's revelation. Leads God's people through a generation in the wilderness, serves as prophet, and judge as well as leader. Then ultimately makes a prophetic promise that one will come forth from Israel greater than even Moses. One who will be "like Moses" in the sense that he will hear God's voice, will give God's law, will lead God's people, and will be used by God in miraculous ways to bring God's people into the true Promised Land, the land promised since the fall of Adam and Eve. The land of the Tree of Life.

Through the Old Testament prophets more details of this coming Messiah are given in magnificent detail. But for John chapter 6, the direct indicators of Jesus taking the role of one greater than Moses, of one anointed by God as Savior of the world, is found in the Passover narrative. John sets up the entire narrative events of John six underlining the importance of the Passover by inserting it awkwardly, almost, into the beginning of the narrative.

After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ **Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.** ⁵ Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd

was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”

Verse four, given in red above, is the important insertion. If you removed it, the narrative would read fine. The flow would smoothly detail, “³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁵ Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip...” Yet John plugs into that smooth narrative “. ⁴ **Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.**” It sticks out like a sore thumb. John wants it too. He doesn’t want his readers to miss the importance of this in understanding the signs that Jesus is the Messiah of which Moses wrote. Jesus is one “like Moses” yet even grander!

Consider afresh the basic storyline of the Passover.

THE STORYLINE BEHIND PASSOVER

Without going into great detail, the storyline is simple and fairly well known. After Moses brought nine plagues to wreak havoc on the land, Pharaoh still wouldn’t release the Israelites. So, Moses pronounced a tenth plague on the land and its people. About midnight, God was sending an angel of death throughout the land to take the life of the first born, from Pharaoh’s own son to the firstborn of a slave girl. Even the firstborn of the cattle would die (Ex. 11:4).

The only exception to this sweeping death would be for the Israelites who followed certain instructions of God. For these Israelites, the memorial feast was known as the “Passover” (Hebrew “Pesach”) for as God passed throughout the land striking the firstborn dead, he passed over the houses of Israelites who followed his instructions.

The Israelites were to kill an unblemished male lamb, take his blood, and place it on the doorposts as well as the lintel of the houses where the families gathered together to eat the Passover meal. God specifically noted that,

When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt (Ex. 12:13).

The plague took place, and Pharaoh finally surrendered. He summoned Moses and Aaron that very night and released the Israelites from their slavery. God instructed Moses that from that time on,

The first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine (Ex. 13:1).

The people left Egypt by a route God set. God led them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Before long, Pharaoh's heart hardened, and he sent 600 chariots in pursuit. The chariots caught up with the Israelites before the Re(e)d Sea where an apparent slaughter was set to take place. While the Israelites panicked, God held off the Egyptians long enough for an amazing miracle.

While the Israelites stared a horrendous and bloody death in the face, God instructed Moses to lift his staff, stretch out his hand, and divide the sea. The Israelites then walked across the sea on dry land. The Egyptians began pursuing once the Israelites were almost cleared of the sea. After the Israelites finished crossing, water refilled the dry area and the following Egyptians were swept into the sea, drowning.

The LORD then led Israel through the wilderness. When the Israelites ran out of water, God provided water. When the Israelites were short of food, God provided manna as bread and quail for meat. The story of the Exodus continues, but this section directly following the Passover is the marvelous background for understanding the events of John 6.

John 6

In John 6, Jesus has "gone away," but been followed by a large crowd, still wowed by the way Jesus was healing the sick. The people are hungry, and Jesus takes five barley loaves and two fish from a boy. Having the masses sit in the grassy area, Jesus blesses the food and has it distributed. The boy's lunch manages to feed the entire group numbering at least 5,000.

Reading the text carefully reveals insights that help us picture the food. The bread was "barley," a poor grain of the lower classes. The loaves were likely small pancake size loaves, and the two "fish" were likely small pickled fish to be eaten as a side dish to the loaves. Jesus is able to take the food and miraculously provide for the masses.

This miracle is but one of John's clear ties to the Exodus. John didn't make up this fulfillment of the exodus events. Jesus explained the exodus to the people so that the people might be able to see who Jesus was and what God was doing.

Jesus taught the people that God had always been the supplier of manna, not Moses. Jesus added the fuller explanation of what happened.

Jesus then said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven (Jn. 6:32).

Then Jesus made the most important point of all. Jesus explained that as the Israelites had needed manna to live in the harsh wilderness, so the believer needs a true godly nourishment and provision if people are to survive and make it to God's true Promised Land. In this sense Jesus explained,

I am the bread of life; whoever believes in me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst (Jn. 6:35).

Jesus wanted the people to see that God's provision of manna was not simply as a foreshadowing of Messiah, but a lesson of how we are to relate to the Messiah. Jesus the Messiah fulfills but also exceeds the prophetic foreshadowing. The manna was God's *daily* provision for the wandering Israelites (save the Sabbath). Every day the Israelites had to get their supply of manna. But not so with Jesus, the true bread of life. Anyone who "consumed" Jesus would not hunger or thirst again. Jesus fully gives life for all time, not for twenty-four hours!

Jesus explained this more fully later in the John 6 passage noting,

Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you... This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever (Jn. 6:49-58).

John wants his readers to understand this greatness of Jesus. Before leaving the feeding of the five thousand, it is also important to note a second way the passage evokes promises and narratives of the Old Testament. The reference to "barley loaves" is not simply there because of an indicator that the boy was not wealthy.

The "barley" reference was not given in the other gospel accounts of this miracle. Each gospel writer includes this story, but with the details that fit into each gospel's narrative purpose. So as Matthew and Mark related the story of the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus had just heard the news of the beheading of John the Baptist. Jesus had withdrawn into a private place of prayer and fellowship with God when the great crowds sought him out with their pains and difficulties, seeking his healing touch. Jesus had compassion and healed them while also meeting their practical need for food. Luke provided the story as well, but in typical Luke fashion, he documented where the events transpired (outside Bethsaida).

John's recitation brings out not only the Passover parallel, but also one with Elisha. In II Kings 4, three stories provide lessons that one might recall after reading of the barley loaves. The first story is a marvelous example of God meeting the real earthly needs of his people with miraculous provision and bounty. It begins with a recently widowed woman of faith about to lose her children to slavery to cover debts left by her departed husband. The widow sent to Elisha for help. Through Elisha, God miraculously supplied the woman with oil that could be sold to take care of the debts *and* leave enough extra money for the woman and her children to live. Not unlike Jesus feeding the five thousand, God shows his caring in earthly provisions and miraculous multiplication.

This marvelous story of provision is followed by a second touching story centering on healing. A wealthy woman from Shunem had always faithfully provided superb hospitality to Elisha in his travels. She not only saw he was well fed and provisioned, but she even kept a prepared a room for him so that he had his own place to stay as he came and went. On one of his visits, Elisha sought a way to thank the Shunammite woman for all she was doing. The woman had no need for money, but she was without a son. It occurred to Elisha's servant that a son would be the most marvelous way to repay the woman for her kindnesses and hospitality. Elisha summoned the woman and announced that about the same time the next year, she would be giving birth to a son. She thought it impossible but rejoiced and lived to see it come true just as promised.

The story then shifted to a later time when the child had grown older. The child was in the fields with his father when he began having a horrible headache. The child was taken home to his mother in whose lap he died. The Shunammite woman laid her son on Elisha's bed and went herself to find Elisha. Once she got to Elisha she fell at his feet, hugging him about the ankles. Elisha's servant tried to get her to stop what he saw as unseemly behavior, but Elisha scolded his servant, recognizing that the woman was in great distress.

Elisha probed and got the story behind the woman's misery. She told Elisha not only of her son's demise, but also reminded him that the son was a gift, not something she had ever thought of. The loss of that gift had damaged her deeply. Elisha sent his servant ahead with instructions to lay Elisha's staff on the boy, but the actions did nothing. Hearing the ineffectiveness of that effort, Elisha went himself and in privacy prayed to the Lord. Elisha did what he could and finally the hand of the Lord restored the Shunammite woman's child to life.

II Kings chapter four ends with a story that finishes the echo from the work of Jesus in John six. Elisha is given twenty *barley* loaves and orders that the loaves be given to 100 men to eat. The servant complains that Elisha's math has gone awry. Twenty barley loaves would never suffice feeding 100 men. Elisha tells the servant to obey and do what Elisha said. The servant does so and the men are miraculously fed, with food left over.

As John weaves into his narrative on Jesus, the Old Testament stories of Moses and manna, of Elisha and multiplication as well as healing, John does even more. John inserts into the Bread of Life discourse and events a stunning story of Jesus. John 6:16-20 reads,

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

This insertion into a storyline that directly draws from the exodus and the manna in the wilderness cannot be missed for what it shows. Moses was God's great man whom God used to rescue the people from Pharaoh's army at the Re(e)d Sea. The people were doomed, trapped by the sea until God spread the waters apart, dried the land, and allowed the people to pass on dry land.

Fast forward from the Exodus story and see Jesus. His people are on a boat endangered of drowning in the Sea of Galilee. Jesus does not part the waters. He WALKS ON the water to rescue them!

John used these events to show without any question that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was the one like Moses. Jesus was the coming Elisha. Jesus was God's answer to the problems of sin set forth in the Torah. Jesus meets physical real needs of the day, and eternal everlasting needs of tomorrow.

John wants his readers to contrast their reactions to those of Jesus' contemporaries. Those hanging around Jesus saw him as the promised prophet:

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" (Jn. 6:14).

But their solution wasn't to make Jesus the king of their hearts. They sought to make him the king in lieu of the Roman power structure:

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself (Jn. 6:15).

This makes earthly sense. After all, if there is someone who can heal the sick and wounded, give food where there is none, can you imagine what kind of king or general that person could be? Go into battle, knowing if you get injured, you get immediate and complete healing. Go knowing you will always be fed and you have no worries over supply lines and food. This would be a splendid king!

But Jesus was after the people's hearts. Jesus was on a mission much greater than simply being an earthly king. Jesus knew this and discussed it openly with the people. Jesus encouraged the people to see their spiritual needs which were greater than their physical needs.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that

endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” (Jn. 6:25-27).

The people in dialogue showed some interest in Jesus’ admonition, and the continuing dialogue had an interesting grammar shift. Note the shift between the people’s question and Jesus’ answer:

Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”
Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (Jn. 6:28-29).

The people were asking about “*works*” – plural. Jesus replied in the singular. There is *one* work of God they should pursue – faith. The people needed to put their faith in Jesus as Messiah. The people needed to believe in Jesus as their confidence and rightness before God. The people needed to entrust themselves to Jesus as the basis for their standing before God. This was the eternal life of which Jesus spoke. It is the consistent message Jesus gave to Nicodemus. It is the instruction Paul took and spread in his gospel message. It is the solution to the problem set out in the Torah. Jesus finished the dialogue leaving no question about the issue:

For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (Jn. 6:40).

The reaction of the people was sad and shocking. The people began John six following Jesus because he worked miracles. They received his healing. They ate food he miraculously provided. They wanted to make him king. Then when he tried to turn their hearts to faith they got fussy. They wanted Jesus and God on their terms. They didn’t like his idea that they actually needed Jesus. They were willing to choose Jesus in the ways they wanted him, but that had nothing to do with their real needs in life. When Jesus pointed that out, he did so in language that pointed out their need to feast upon Jesus, to imbibe Jesus, to let Jesus become part of who they were. This was weird to them. It wasn’t what they wanted. They found Jesus repelling, and they left him. The crowds were big when Jesus was showing them what they wanted. The crowds dwindled when Jesus showed them what God wanted.

This left Jesus with his few followers. At the end of John six, Jesus asked his twelve disciples, “Do you also want to leave?” To this Peter replied, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” (Jn. 6:68-69). Yet even with this affirmation, Jesus and John pointed out the presence of Judas Iscariot.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand”* (Jn. 6:4).

I love the way the Bible all knits together. Jesus is Messiah. If he isn't then we should be looking for someone JUST LIKE HIM, for he fit the Old Testament prophetic words to perfection.

2. *“The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were frightened. But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” Then they were glad to take him into the boat”* (Jn. 6:18-21).

“They were glad to take him into the boat.” I can “Amen!” this. I have had storms in life, and I will undoubtedly have many more. In those storms, I gladly take Jesus, the God who walks on water, into my stormy boat. Let Jesus speak into my storms and still the raging seas.

3. *“They were about to come and take him by force to make him king... After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.”* (Jn. 6:15, 56).

I read this story and wonder who I am. Am I a hanger on who wants Jesus for the thrills? Am I a sightseer, enjoying watching up close, but never entering into the faith that saves? Am I someone who likes Jesus on my terms? Am I someone who turns away when Jesus says or does something I don't like or understand? Or I am someone who is sold out to Jesus? Someone who has no other place to go? I know what I want to be. God give me the grace to do the work (singular) of God and believe in your Son!