

Eat My Flesh and Drink My Blood

The Context of the Lord's Words in John 6

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One of the most distinctive teachings of Romanism draws on a paragraph in John 6 that refers repeatedly to the flesh and blood of the Lord Jesus:

Jhn 6:51 I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is **my flesh**, which I will give for the life of the world. 52 The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? 53 Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, **Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood**, ye have no life in you. 54 Whoso **eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood**, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. 55 For my **flesh** is meat indeed, and my **blood** is drink indeed. 56 He that **eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood**, dwelleth in me, and I in him.

Romanism understands these verses as a description of the ceremony that the Lord instituted the night before his crucifixion. It cites them to support its doctrine of transubstantiation, claiming that the elements of the Lord's table really become the flesh and blood of Christ. This doctrine in turn is integral to many other distinctive teachings of the Roman institution, including the need for ministering priests and the worship of tangible objects.

The Roman interpretation raises some interesting questions about context. The Lord spoke these words at the passover before his crucifixion (John 6:4), a full year before he instituted the Lord's table, so his hearers had no way of interpreting them in light of that ceremony. Furthermore, when he did institute the ceremonial meal, he referred to his *body* and his blood, never his *flesh* and his blood. If he had intended his disciples to apply the words of John 6 to the later ceremony, we would expect him to be consistent in the central terminology that he uses.

Let's consider the context of these verses in John's gospel. Two features of this context deserve our attention: its organization around the different groups of people with whom Lord interacts, and themes that it repeats both internally and from other parts of the gospel of John.

The Organization of John 6

Throughout his gospel, John contrasts different responses to the Lord.

Jhn 1:11 He came unto his own [place], and his own [people] received him not. 12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

The book emphasizes the Lord's visits to his own place (that is, Jerusalem). It also emphasizes the different responses to him by his own people (the Jews, who did not receive him) and those who did receive him. In John 6, three Greek terms spell out this distinction among people:¹

- The Jews (Ἰουδαῖος *Ioudaios* G2453) are those who “received him not.”

1 A fourth term, ἄνθρωπος *anthrōpos* G444 “person,” appears five times in the chapter. The last three (6:27, 53, 62) are in the Lord's title “son of man,” while the first two (6:10, 14) are in the arrangement and execution of the feeding. This term does not introduce a distinctive section of the Lord's teaching, as the other three do.

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- The disciples (μαθητής *mathētēs* G3101) are those who “received him.” Jesus.
- The multitude or people (ὄχλος *ochlos* G3793) are people whose commitment is not stated.

Figure 1 shows where these terms occur in John 6. Each dot represents one of these three words, referring to the people (green), the disciples (blue), and the Jews (red). The height of a dot shows how close an instance of the word is to other instances of the same word. Thus a peak marks a concentration of one of the three terms.

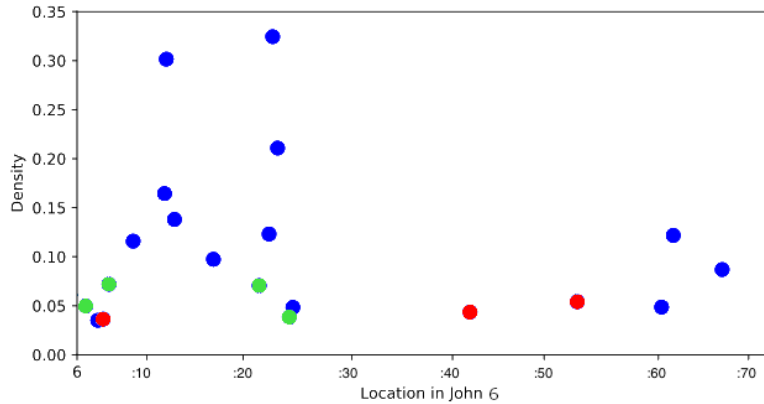


Figure 1: People (green), Disciples (blue), and Jews (red) in John 6. Ticks show ten verse intervals.

The chapter begins by naming all three groups:

Jhn 6:1 After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias. 2 And a great **multitude** *ochlos* followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased. 3 And Jesus went up into a mountain, and there he sat with his **disciples** *mathētēs*. 4 And the passover, a feast of the **Jews** *Ioudaios*, was nigh. 5 When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and saw a great **company** *ochlos* come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?

Having introduced his main characters, John uses them to mark sections of the chapter. The first blue peak (6:8-21) describes the disciples as they feed the 5000, and then return to Capernaum. The rest of the chapter, containing the Lord’s teaching based on the miracle, is often called “the bread of life discourse,” but in fact it is three separate discourses, each responding to a question by one of these three groups, and probably given in different locations.

Group	Reference	Location
Multitude	6:22-40	By the shoreline (6:25)
Jews	6:41-59	In the synagogue (6:59)
Disciples	6:60-71	Private conversation (6:60-71)

- In 6:24-40, the *people* by the lakeshore seek more physical food, but the Lord tells them how to get spiritual food.
- In 6:41-59, the *Jews* in the synagogue murmur against him, and he tells them to eat his flesh and drink his blood.
- In 6:60-71, the *disciples* are shaken, and in a private conversation the Lord reassures them, but warns them of false belief.

22-40, Discourse with the Multitude

The instances of “people” in 6:22-24 describe the multitude as they observe that the disciples (second blue peak) have returned to Capernaum without the Lord. The people start the conversation with the Lord:

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Jhn 6:24 When the **people** therefore saw that Jesus was not there, neither his disciples, they also took shipping, and came to Capernaum, seeking for Jesus. 25 And when they had found him on the other side of the sea, they said unto him, Rabbi, when camest thou hither?

The Lord discerns that their real question has to do not with his location, but with their lunch.

Jhn 6:26 Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. 27 Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed.

He goes on to describe the spiritual food that God has provided for them.

Jhn 6:35 And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. 36 But I said unto you, That ye also have seen me, and believe not. 37 All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. 38 For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. 39 And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. 40 **And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.**

John 6:40 concludes by describing the blessing he offers: everlasting life, and a share in the resurrection. The condition for this blessing is twofold: see the Son, and believe on him.

The Lord's response to their question ends with 6:40. Then the multitude drops into the background, and the Jews engage him, apparently after moving into the synagogue (6:59).

41-59, Discourse with the Jews

The introduction to this section twice describes the Jew's comments as "murmuring."

Jhn 6:41 The Jews then **murmured** at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven. 42 And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith, I came down from heaven? 43 Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, **Murmur** not among yourselves.

The verb "murmur" is important. In the first discourse, the people introduce the theme of the manna that God gave Israel in the wilderness, and the Lord compares his provision with that manna (6:31-32). During that wilderness wandering, not only did God give his people manna, but the people repeatedly "murmured" or complained against the Lord, leading to the Lord's chastisement. The Jews throughout John are "his own people" who "received him not," and their murmuring puts them in the position of the sinful Israelites in the desert.

At first, the Lord repeats to the Jews a condensed form of what he told the multitude in 6:40:

Jhn 6:47 Verily, verily, I say unto you, **He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.**

Those who believe are promised everlasting life. He goes on to compare himself, again, with the manna in the wilderness:

Jhn 6:48 I am that bread of life. 49 Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. 50 This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die.

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But the Jews insist on taking the metaphor literally. They, not the Lord, introduce the notion of eating his flesh:

Jhn 6:52 The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

All four of the Lord's statements about eating his flesh and drinking his blood appear in this discussion with the murmuring Jews. That discussion ends in 6:59, where we learn that it took place in the synagogue.

Jhn 6:59 These things said he in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum.

The setting, in the synagogue, emphasizes the importance of the audience involved.

At this point, the Jews fade away, as the multitude did in 6:41, and the disciples take up the conversation.

60-71, Discourse with the Disciples

The disciples, overhearing what the Lord has said to the Jews, are confused.

Jhn 6:60 Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?

The disciples, unlike the Jews, have decided to follow the Lord, but they are not immune to the temptation to murmur. They are confused by the language about eating the Lord's flesh in the discussion with the Jews. The Lord clarifies his meaning:

Jhn 6:61 When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you? 62 What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?

They need to remember that his flesh will not remain with them indefinitely. He is going to ascend to heaven, returning to the Father who sent him. He goes on:

Jhn 6:63 It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

We might paraphrase, "My friends, don't be confused about metaphors about flesh. What matters are the words that I speak to you. They are what will give you life, when you hear and believe them."

After thus clarifying the real source of life, he goes on to reveal the presence of false followers, some of whom then leave him:

Jhn 6:64 But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. ... 66 From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.

Their apostasy stimulates Peter's response on behalf of the twelve:

Jhn 6:68 Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. 69 And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.

Peter's words repeat the major themes of 6:40, 47: eternal life comes through belief in Christ.

Repetition in John 6

All three of these discourses emphasize a theme that is common throughout the book of John: how to have eternal, or everlasting, life (both English words translate the same Greek term).

To the multitudes, he says

Jhn 6:40 And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and **believeth** on him, may **have everlasting life**: and I will raise him up at the last day.

He makes two such statements to the Jews in 6. The first is an abbreviation of what he told the multitude:

Jhn 6:47 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that **believeth** on me **hath everlasting life**.

Then, after they strive with one another over his words (6:52), he gives another version, replacing believing with eating and drinking. Note the close parallel with 6:40.

Jhn 6:54 Whoso **eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life**; and I will raise him up at the last day.

Now consider the disciples. They are confused (6:60). What gives eternal life? Belief (6:40, 47), or eating flesh and drinking blood (6:54)? The Lord tells them to focus on his word, not on his flesh:

Jhn 6:63 It is the spirit that quickeneth; **the flesh profiteth nothing**: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

And Peter summarizes the lesson that the faithful disciples took away from the experience: belief brings eternal life.

Jhn 6:68 Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of **eternal life**. 69 And we **believe** and are sure that **thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God**.

Note the substance of Peter's belief. He says nothing about believing what the Lord told the Jews about his flesh and blood, but simply affirms the Lord's core claim to be the Messiah. This is the message he heard when he first met the Lord:

Jhn 1:40 One of the two which heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found **the Messiah**, which is, being interpreted, **the Christ**.

It is the message that the Samaritans embraced:

Jhn 4:42 [The Samaritans] said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that **this is indeed the Christ**, the Saviour of the world.

It is the message that Peter repeated later at Caesarea Philippi:

Mat 16:16 And Simon Peter answered and said, **Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God**.

Peter's faith rests on the clear teaching of 6:40, 47, not the Lord's mysterious statement to the Jews in 6:54.

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This is not the first time the Lord has told people how to have eternal life. Once before, he told the Jews (identified in 5:18), in words very similar to 6:40,

Jhn 5:24 Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and **believeth** on him that sent me, **hath everlasting life**, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

John himself repeatedly emphasizes that believing on the Lord Jesus brings eternal life:

Jhn 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever **believeth** in him should not perish, but **have everlasting life**.

Jhn 20:31 But these are written, that ye might **believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have **life** through his name.

How can we Have Eternal Life?

So how can we have eternal life? Do we receive it by believing in God's revelation of himself through his Son, and particularly in the words that the Son spoke? Or do we receive it by physically eating his flesh and drinking his blood at the Lord's table?

Rome teaches that 6:51-56 show how we are to believe in the Lord Jesus. In its view, the Lord gave these words to explain what he would do a year later in the last supper, and we must understand that supper as involving the mystical transformation of bread and wine into the flesh and blood of the Lord Jesus (even though neither the gospel accounts of the supper, nor Paul's summary of it in 1 Corinthians 10-11, ever mentions "flesh"). But this conclusion is far from necessary, or even natural. Four considerations weigh against it.

First, a direct link to the supper is questionable, both chronologically and in view of the difference between "flesh" in John 6 and "body" in the passages describing the supper. One might think that the last supper explained John 6 to the disciples. But they would not have understood the Lord's statements at the supper, "this is my body" and "this is my blood," to refer to his literal crucified and risen body, for the simple reason that his death was still a day away. The great sacrifice was offered on the cross the next day on Calvary, not the evening before in the upper room. The Lord is instituting a memorial, not a sacrifice:

1Co 11:24 And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: **this do in remembrance of me**. 25 After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, **in remembrance of me**.

These elements are enduring symbols of the key elements of his sacrifice, and they would have recalled the language of John 6 through this lens.

Second, the violent imagery of 6:51-56 not only offended the Jews, but also some of the disciples (6:60). When the Lord realized their murmuring (6:61), he told them not to take him literally:

Jhn 6:63 It is the spirit that quickeneth; **the flesh profiteth nothing**: the **words** that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

Peter's summary in 6:68-69 follows this instruction from the Lord, focusing on the spiritual truth, not the physical image.

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Third, the use of figurative language to describe faith is not limited to the discourse in 6:41-59 with the Jews. The feeding of the 5000 suggests the images of eating and drinking. Earlier, the drawing of water from Jacob's well suggested a similar figure when the Lord said to the woman of Samaria,

Jhn 4:13 Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: 14 But **whosoever drinketh** of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into **everlasting life**.

Taken in isolation, this incident would suggest a missing sacrament, in which something (perhaps baptismal water? Or water from Jacob's well?) is mystically transformed into spiritual drink that brings everlasting life to those who consume it. As far as I know, nobody has taken this route. We all understand the Lord to be using a figure of speech in John 4. The literal meaning is demonstrated by the response of the Samaritans, not by drinking, but by believing:

Jhn 4:42 And said unto the woman, Now **we believe**, not because of thy saying: **for we have heard him ourselves, and know** that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.

"We have heard him." The life-giving water, for them, was the words that he spoke, and belief in him as he revealed himself brought life to their souls. In the same way, in the context of the miraculous meal in 6:1-14, eating and drinking Christ is a natural figure for receiving him and his teaching.

A fourth consideration is perhaps the most compelling. The only instance of this language about eating the Lord's body and drinking his blood comes in these words to the Jews. They have already attacked him over the Sabbath rules (John 5) and here take the role of the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness by murmuring against him (6:41, 43). Everywhere else in the fourth gospel, both the Lord and John say simply that everlasting life comes through belief. Are we to believe that the Lord reserves this most precious and crucial detail about what happens at the Lord's table for the ears of the rebellious Jews, and we must go into their old covenant synagogue (6:59) to learn the true meaning of the central ceremony of the new covenant? If this is true, he is indeed casting his pearls before swine (Matt 7:6).

It is far more natural to understand the Lord's words to the Jews as a polemical move. Twice (5:24; 6:47) he has taught them the gospel in its simple and plain sense: eternal life comes by believing in him. They continue to find fault, so now he cloaks his teaching in symbols. His words are indeed true symbolically, at multiple levels, and some of this symbolism draws directly on the OT sacrificial laws.² But the main function of the flesh-blood language in 6:51-56 is not to reveal more clearly what is involved in the not-yet-established Lord's table. It is rather to make the truth more confusing to those who have rejected the plain teaching.

This role of John 6:51-56 matches the role of the parables in Matthew 13.³ The earlier chapters of Matthew contain no parables. The meaning of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) is straightforward. Matt 8-10 goes on to describe the Lord's teaching and healing ministry. After this ministry, in Matthew 11, John's disciples bring the question that everyone is asking:

Mat 11:2 Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, 3 And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?

2 See notes on John 6 at <https://cyber-chapel.org/sermons/john/notes/John6.pdf>

3 See notes on Matthew 13 and judicial blinding at <https://cyber-chapel.org/sermons/matt/notes/Matt13.pdf>

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After confirming his credentials, the Lord issues his invitation:

Mat 11:28 Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

How will people respond? The next chapter shows that the Pharisees, the most zealous Jewish leaders, repeatedly reject him. Then, in Matthew 13, he suddenly starts teaching in parables. The disciples ask him why he has changed from literal to figurative speech. Notice his answer:

Mat 13:10 And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? 11 He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, **but to them it is not given**. 12 For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, **from him shall be taken away even that he hath**. 13 Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. 14 And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: 15 For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

He speaks in parables, not to reveal the truth, but to hide it, fulfilling the mission of Isaiah to rebellious Israel. Isaiah was commanded to “make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes” (Isa 6:10) because of their rebelliousness (Isaiah 5). The Jews have rejected the Lord’s clear teaching in Matthew 5-11. So, fulfilling Isaiah’s example, he speaks in parables to reject them. The true meaning of these parables is often not evident in the symbols, but presented by the Lord privately to his disciples.

John 6 is precisely parallel.

- The Lord has taught the simple truth of everlasting life through faith in him to the Jews.
- They have rejected it.
- So now he cloaks it in a symbolic form to make it less accessible, rejecting them.
- The disciples stumble over this symbolism, but the Lord leads them back to the simple, literal meaning: receive me by believing my words, and you will have everlasting life.

It is interesting that Augustine of Hippo, whose writings are the basis of much Roman doctrine, also concludes that the discourse with the Jews is to be understood metaphorically, though he bases his conclusion on somewhat different logic:

If the sentence is one of command, either forbidding a crime or vice, or enjoining an act of prudence or benevolence, it is not figurative. If, however, it seems to enjoin a crime or vice, or to forbid an act of prudence or benevolence, it is figurative. " Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man, " says Christ, " and drink His blood, you have no life in you. " [John 6:53] This seems to enjoin a crime or a vice; it is therefore a figure, enjoining that we should have a share [*communicandem*] in the sufferings of our Lord, and that we should retain a sweet and profitable memory [*in memoria*] of the fact that His flesh was wounded and crucified for us.⁴

4 Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.24 (Book 3, Chapter 16).

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Some will point out that even though the Lord spoke 6:51-56 to the rebellious Jews, they are still his words, and essential to salvation:

Jhn 6:63 It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: **the words that I speak unto you**, they are spirit, and they are life.

Indeed, we must believe the words of the Lord Jesus—even those he spoke to his enemies. But we must understand them *in the sense in which he intended them*. Earlier, speaking again to the Jews, he used another figure:

Jhn 2:19 Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

He was standing in the temple at the time, and the Jews naturally understood his statement to refer to the physical building. But John goes on to explain that he meant his words to refer to his body. The literal meaning understood by the Jews was patently false. Forty years later, the Roman general (later Caesar) Titus did destroy the physical temple, and neither the Lord Jesus nor anybody else has ever raised it up, much less in three days. But the Lord did not intend his words to be understood physically. He intended them as a metaphor, addressed to Jews who were already showing their hostility to him. They did not understand them, but his disciples did understand and believe them—later, when he rose from the dead. And the meaning they assigned the words was the figurative sense intended by the Lord.

The Lord's words to the murmuring Jews in John 6:51-56 are precisely parallel. Yes, they are the words of the Lord Jesus. Yes, we must believe them. But we must believe them *in the sense in which the Lord intended them*. His policy of couching his teaching in metaphor and parable when speaking to his adversaries warns us not to insist on a literal interpretation. But his words lead us to a wide range of Old Testament symbols that should deepen our appreciation of his redemptive work, and our appropriation of it, when we gather “in remembrance of” him.