

John

Lesson #7

The Body and Blood of Christ

(6: 1 – 71)

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Review

In Lesson #6 Jesus headed back to Jerusalem where he met a man at the pool of Bethesda who had been profoundly ill for 38 years. The man believed, as did others, that when the water stirred, the first person in the water would be healed. But someone always got there first!

The sick man had enormous faith: he had watched the water intently every day for 38 years, looking for the first ripple, *believing* that the water would heal him. But he had faith in the wrong thing. Notice how Jesus redirected the man's vision from looking at the water to looking at *him*. And when he did, the man was healed.

The healing took place on the Sabbath, and of course this stirred up immediate opposition from the religious authorities. Jesus countered not with a story, a witty retort or a brilliant one-liner—as he so often does in the synoptic gospels—but with a lengthy theological discourse, reinforcing Jesus' identity and his relationship with God the Father.

Preview

Lesson #7 begins John's "C Cycle" (6:1 - 20:31), the 3rd Passover, with a dazzling discourse on the Eucharist, a reflection on the body and blood of Christ. To set up the discourse, John begins with Jesus and his disciples crossing to the east side of the Sea of Galilee (the "other side") where Jesus teaches the crowds and multiplies the fish and the loaves. He then retreats to the mountains. Later that night, Jesus wants to return to Capernaum, but blocked by the lingering crowd, he walks across the water, meeting his disciples midway on the lake, where they take him into their boat.

The next day the crowd makes its way around the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, finding Jesus already at Capernaum. When they ask him how he got there, he counters by saying, *"Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled"* (or, "You don't care about me; you just want breakfast!"), 6: 26. He continues, *"Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you"* (6: 27).

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Preview, cont.

This leads Jesus to compare the manna in the desert, which God gave to sustain the Israelites during their 40 years in the wilderness, to the *genuine* bread—his body and blood, which God gives to sustain us during our pilgrimage through life. And Jesus does not compromise, invoking symbol or metaphor: *“Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true [i.e. “genuine”] food, and my blood is true [i.e. “genuine”] drink”* (6: 53-55).

In light of Leviticus 17, this is scandalous, and his disciples say so: *“This saying is hard [i.e., σκληρός, “hard,” “rough,” or “unyielding”]; who can accept it”* (6: 60). Jesus does not back down, however, insisting on a literal understanding of his words, refusing to dilute his statement to make it more palatable.

Preview, cont.

Jesus' discourse on the Eucharist introduces the first of seven "I am" statements, metaphors that lead us deeply into Jesus' identity:

1. "I am the bread of life" (6: 35)
2. "I am the light of the world" (8: 12)
3. "I am the gate for the sheep" (10: 7)
4. "I am the good shepherd" (10: 11)
5. "I am the resurrection and the life" (11: 25)
6. "I am the way and the truth and the life" (14: 6)
7. "I am the true vine" (15: 1)

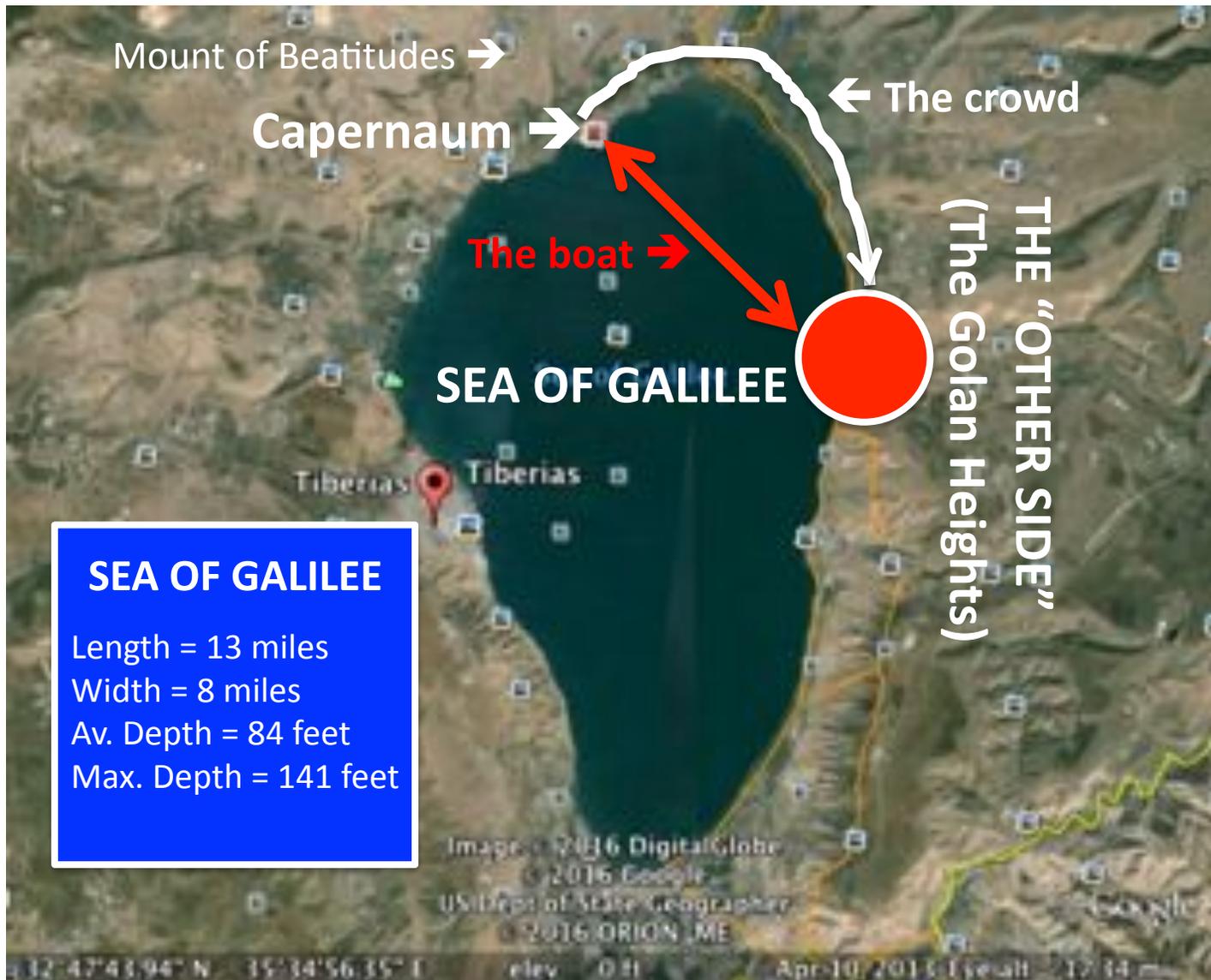
“After this, Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee [of Tiberias]. A large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. The Jewish feast of Passover was near. When Jesus raised his eyes and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, he said to Philip, ‘Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?’ He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, ‘Two hundred day’s wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little [bit].’ One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?’ . . .

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“Jesus said, ‘Have the people recline.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in that place. So the men reclined, about five thousand in number. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining and also as much of the fish as they wanted. When they had had their fill, he said to his disciples, ‘Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted.’ So they collected them, and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves that had been more than they could eat. When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, ‘This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world.’ Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.”

(6: 1-15)

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Sea of Galilee from the Mount of Beatitudes, with the “other side” in the distance.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Sunrise on the Sea of Galilee.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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**Eric Feather, *Christ Feeding 5,000* (mixed media), 2012.
Reproduced by permission. See the artist's excellent work at: ericfeather.com.**



The “feeding of the 5,000” occurs in each of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the synoptics, Jesus sails by boat to the “other side” of the lake for privacy and prayer after he learns of John the Baptist’s murder; he needs solitary time to confer with God and to plan his next moves. The crowd follows by land and out of sympathy, Jesus teaches and feeds them.

Here, John uses the “feeding of the 5,000” story as the 4th of 7 “signs” to introduce his *“I am the bread of life”* (6: 35) statement (the 1st of 7 “I am” statements) and to set up Jesus’ discourse on the Eucharist.

Let’s have a close look:

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“After this, Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee [of Tiberias]. A large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. The Jewish feast of Passover was near. When Jesus raised his eyes and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, he said to Philip, ‘Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?’ He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, ‘Two hundred day’s wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little [bit].’ One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?’ . . .

“Jesus said, ‘Have the people recline.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in that place. **So the men reclined, about five thousand in number.** Then **Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them** to those who were reclining and also as much of the fish as they wanted. When they had had their fill, he said to his disciples, ‘Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted.’ So they collected them, and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves that had been more than they could eat. When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, **‘This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world.’** **Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.**

(6: 1-15)

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- **“After this . . .”** In John the “feeding of the 5,000” occurs after Jesus heals the man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. Apparently, after the healing and the discourse that follows, Jesus travels back to Galilee; in the synoptics, he has been there all along. John arranges his material for a *narrative purpose*, not for synchronized chronology (as we saw previously by John placing Jesus’ “cleansing of the temple” episode at the start of his ministry, not at the end, as the synoptics do).
- **“The Jewish feast of Passover is near.”** We begin John’s “C Cycle” (6:1 - 20:31) as Jesus’ 3rd and final Passover approaches.
- **“He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do.”** In John, Jesus has full knowledge of people’s motives and thoughts, and here he expresses concern about the people eating to test his disciples.



- “five barley loaves and two fish . . .”
Barley is the first crop harvested in the spring, and it is offered at the “feast of first fruits,” reinforcing John’s assertion that the 3rd Passover is near.
- “So the men reclined, about five thousand in number.” The word “men” is ἄνδρες, a masculine plural noun, suggesting that the number of people fed would be much greater if women and children were present, as well.
- “Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them . . .” In John, Jesus distributes the bread and fish; in the synoptics, Jesus blesses the bread and fish and the disciples then distribute them. In John, Jesus performs the miracle directly; in the synoptics, indirectly.
- “This is truly the Prophet . . .”; that is, the Prophet that Moses said would come in Deuteronomy 18: 15.



- “Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king . . .” Once again, Jesus has full knowledge of people’s motives and thoughts, so “he withdrew again to the mountain alone.”



The “feeding of the 5,000” in John continues the high view of Jesus that John first established in his prologue; that is, that Jesus is God enfleshed, and as so, he is omnipotent.

In the synoptics, however, Jesus is conflicted, driven to a solitary place to pray after John the Baptist’s murder. The crowds following him are an annoyance, especially in Mark’s gospel. He desperately needs to be alone, but he takes pity on the crowd. In John, the “feeding of the 5,000” is another of the seven “signs” that Jesus performs, testifying to his identity, to his oneness with God.

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**I see! So, the synoptics
emphasize Jesus'
humanity, while John
emphasizes his divinity.**



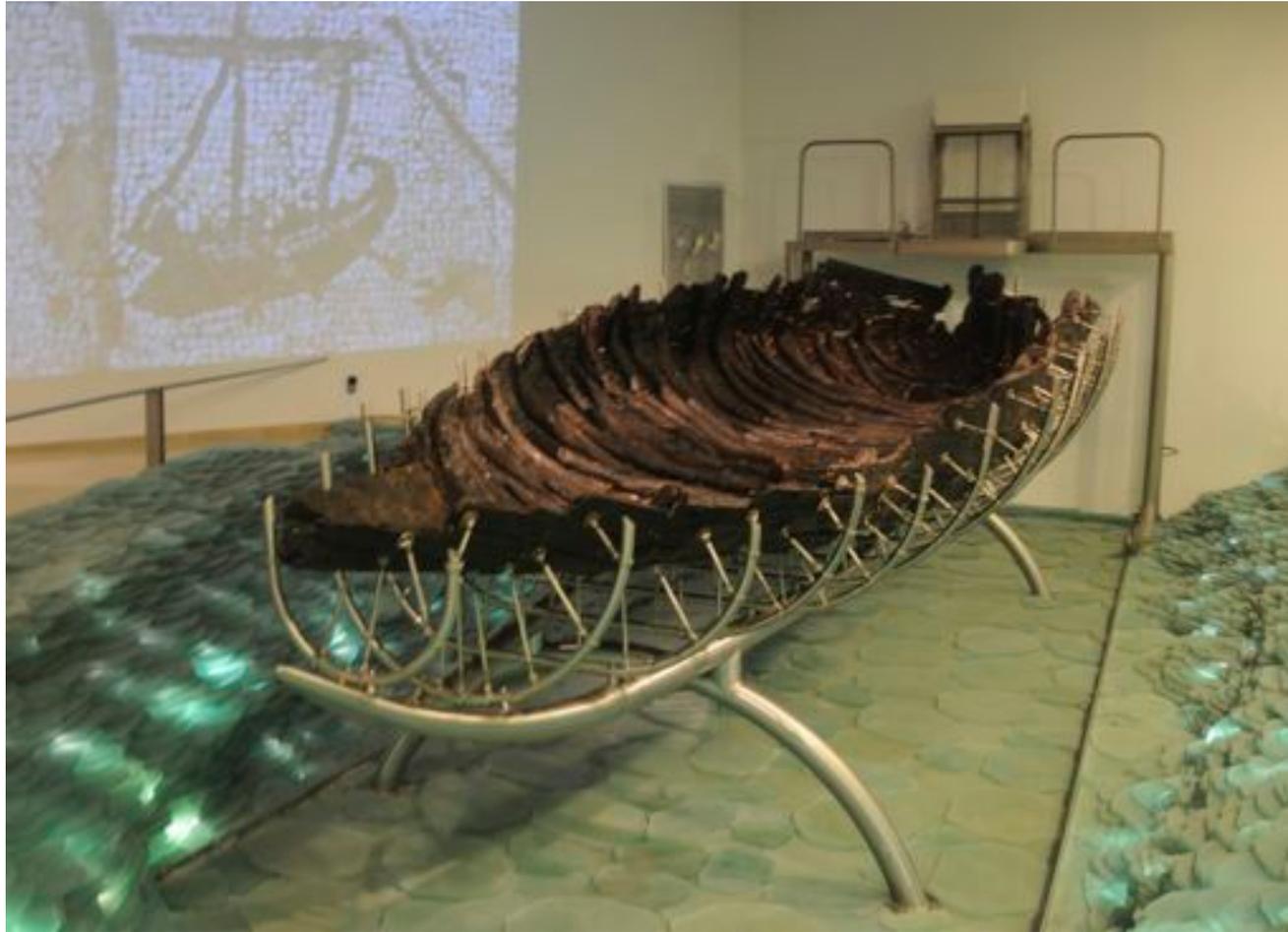
**Very good
observation!**

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“When it was evening, his disciples went down to the sea, embarked in a boat, and went across the sea to Capernaum. It had already grown dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea was stirred up 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 began to be afraid. But he said to them, ‘It is I. Do not be afraid.’ They wanted to take him into the boat, but the boat immediately arrived at the shore to which they were heading.’

(6: 16-21)

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The “Jesus Boat” is a 1st century fishing boat discovered in 1986 on the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is 27 feet long, 8 ½ feet wide, typical of the fishing boats at the time of Jesus.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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**Amédée Varin, *Christ Walking on the Sea* (etching and engraving), 1866.
British Museum, London.**



To understand the “walking on water” episode, we need to understand the scene’s setting. The synoptics give add to our details:

- It is late at night, the 3rd watch, between 3:00-6:00 AM (Mark 6: 48);
- The boat is “*being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it*” (Matthew 14: 24);
- It is halfway across the lake, 3 or 4 miles (the lake is 8 miles wide);
- It is shortly before Passover, which means there is nearly a full moon, rising in the east, behind Jesus, backlighting him.

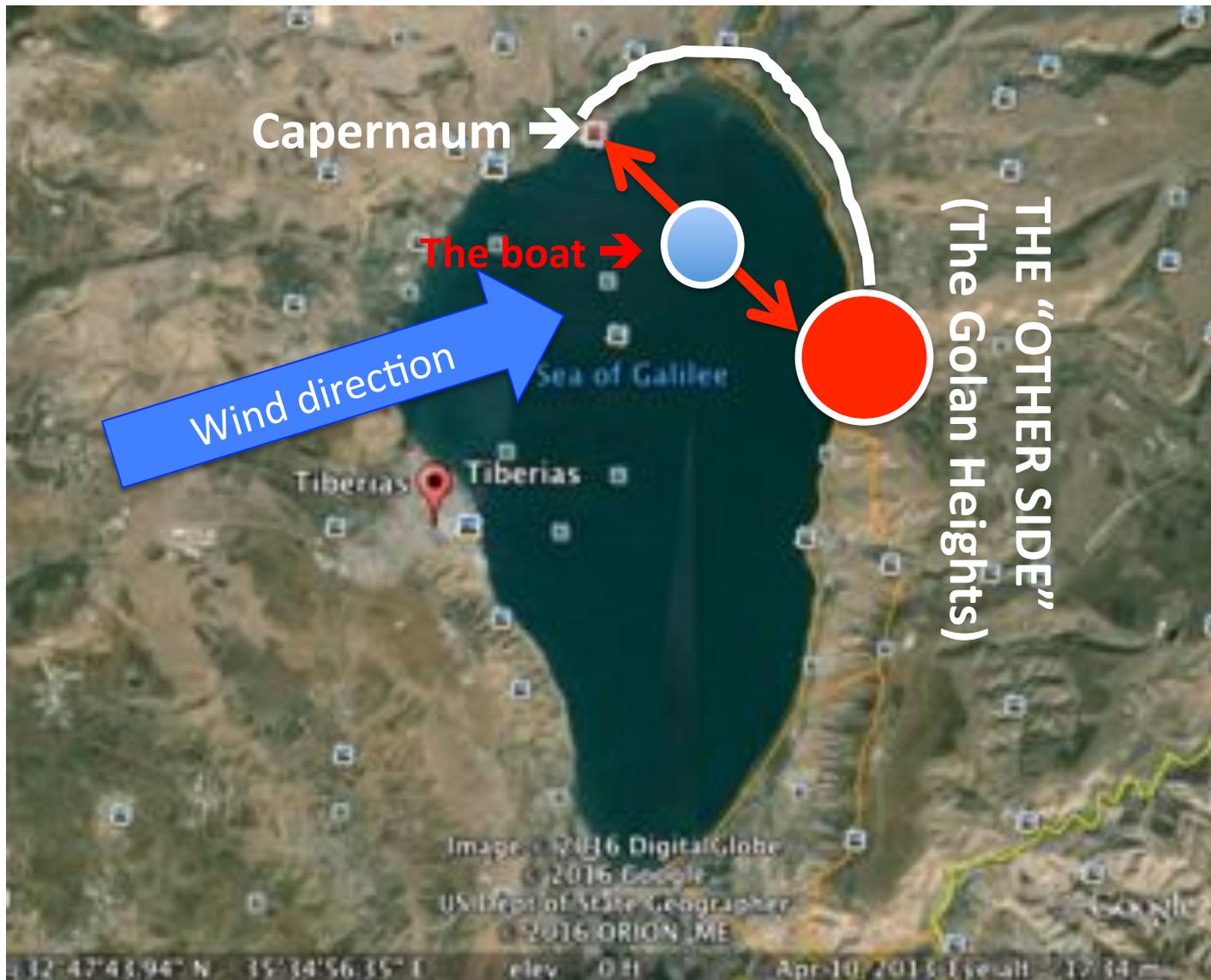
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Full moon rising at dusk in the east over the Golan Heights on the Sea of Galilee.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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***Full moon casting light across the Sea of Galilee from the east,
backlighting Jesus as he walked east to west.***

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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We lose the details of the scene in John, including Peter's attempt to walk on the water; Peter's "beginning to sink"; Jesus reaching out to rescue him; both Jesus and Peter getting into the boat; and the other disciples' astonishment at what they've seen.

John casts his story in a patina of mystery, an unexplainable, supernatural event, the 5th of 7 "signs":

"When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they began to be afraid. But he said to them, 'It is I. (literally Ἐγώ εἰμι, "I am," the name of God in Exodus 3: 14) Do not be afraid.' They wanted to take him into the boat, but the boat immediately arrived at the shore to which they were heading."

(6: 19-21)

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“The next day, the crowd that remained across the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not gone along with his disciples in the boat, but only his disciples had left. Other boats came from Tiberias near the place where they had eaten the bread when the Lord gave thanks. When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. And when they found him across the sea they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you get here?’ Jesus answered them and said, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you . . .

“For on him the Father, God, has set his seal.’ So they said to him, ‘What can we do to accomplish the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent.’ So they said to him, ‘What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the desert, as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ So Jesus said to them, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’”

(6: 22-33)

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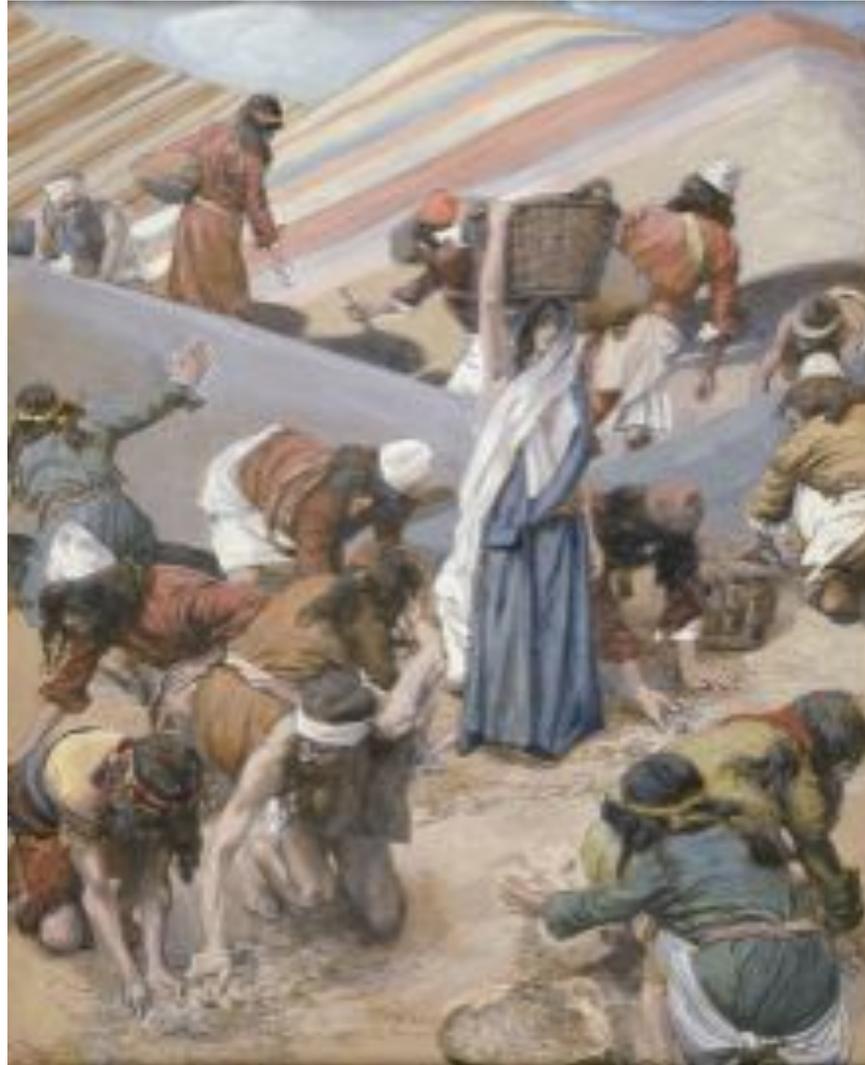
- The crowd knows that Jesus hadn't left with the disciples in the boat the night before, so they head back to Capernaum, where they find Jesus. *"When did you get here,"* they say. Jesus sees straight through them, saying in effect: "I fed you last night, and now you want breakfast!"
- Jesus knows that faith based on "signs" alone, like his feeding of the 5,000, is superficial, as we've seen with the crowds in Jerusalem in the Nicodemus story. Jesus, instead, prompts them to search for *"the food that endures to eternal life"* (6: 27).
- Yet, the people *still* want a "sign," as Moses gave a "sign" in the desert by providing daily manna, the "bread from heaven."



The wilderness between Elim and Sinai, where God provided the manna.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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**James Tissot. *The Gathering of Manna (couache on board)*, c. 1896-1902.
Jewish Museum, New York.**

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- This leads Jesus to clarify that it was God who gave the “bread from heaven,” not Moses; just so, he will give them true bread from heaven, the bread *“which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world”* (6: 33).
- This is the “true” bread (ἀληθινός, as in “authentic” or “genuine”).

“So they said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’ Jesus said to them, “**I am the bread of life**; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. But I told you that although you have seen [me], you do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it [on] the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him [on] the last day.’”

(6: 34-40)

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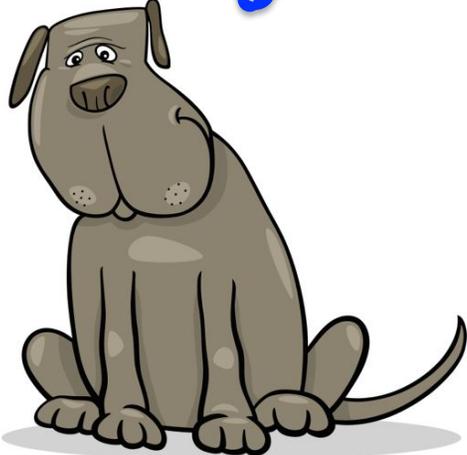


Here John introduces the 1st of 7
“I am” statements, metaphors that
lead us deeply into Jesus’ identity:

1. “I am the bread of life” (6: 35)
2. “I am the light of the world” (8: 12)
3. “I am the gate for the sheep” (10: 7)
4. “I am the good shepherd” (10: 11)
5. “I am the resurrection and the life (11: 25)
6. “I am the way and the truth and the
life” (14: 6)
7. “I am the true vine” (15: 1)



Humm. Seven “I am” statements—literally Ἐγὼ εἶμι, the name of God, that we saw in the “walking on water” story—that pair with the 7 “signs” in John.



I just knew that was going to happen!

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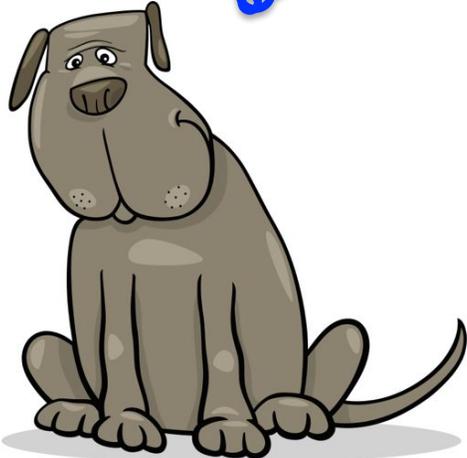
And notice the theological importance of what Jesus says:

- “Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me . . .” **God** initiates each person’s redemption, not us; and Christ will never reject anyone who comes to him.
- “This is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him [on] the last day.” Jesus said to Nicodemus, as Moses raised the serpent in the wilderness and whoever looks to it shall be saved, so shall Christ be raised on the cross and whoever looks to him shall be saved—and that person will be raised to eternal life on the last day.

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A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical black line on the left side of the page. He has a thoughtful expression, with his hand to his chin.

That is a repeated theme in John's gospel, a theme that he hammers home again and again!

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog sitting down, looking up towards the man. It has a thoughtful expression.

He just has to say it once to me!

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“The Jews murmured about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven,’ and they said, ‘Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Stop murmuring among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day. It is written in the prophets: ‘They shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.’”

(6: 41-46)

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The “Jews,” of course, vehemently object to Jesus’ language, to his saying that he has “come down from heaven,” and that he has “seen the Father.”

They know Jesus’ mother and father; they know him—a young man who grew up in Nazareth, a no-account little village in Galilee. How can he possibly say that!

But he is about to say something far more objectionable!



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“Amen, amen, I say to you, ‘I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this [pointing to himself] is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.’ The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink . . .

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.’ These things he said while teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.”

(6: 47-59)

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When Jesus says:

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world . . . unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you . . .”

he speaks very literally, and the “Jews” know it; there is simply no other way to read it.

In light of Leviticus 17—the prohibition on ingesting blood—this is shocking; indeed, it is scandalous!

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Yes, it is. Leviticus 17 is absolute in its prohibition, for blood contains the *nefeš*, the “life,” of a creature.

The Hebrew Scriptures are so uncompromising on this point that the very idea of consuming blood was abhorrent to a Jew, and it still is today.



We should parse Jesus' words very carefully:

- Jesus draws an analogy between God providing the manna in the wilderness in Exodus 16 (“bread from heaven”) and himself, the genuine “bread from heaven” in John 6.
- In the wilderness, the manna sustained and nurtured the Israelites daily during their 40-year pilgrimage from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land.
- In the same way the genuine “bread from heaven,” the body and blood of Christ, nurtures us daily during our pilgrimage of life, from being born in slavery to sin to attaining the freedom of eternal life in heaven.

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- Jesus does not present his body and blood as metaphor or simile, but as true. [*“My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.”*] The Greek word translated “true” is ἀληθινός [*al-ay-thee-nos*’], meaning real, authentic or genuine; it is a statement connecting a visible fact to its underlying reality. To read Jesus’ words otherwise is an exercise in rhetorical tautology.
- The reaction of Jesus’ audience in John 6: 60-71 supports such a literal reading:

“Then many of his disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’” (6: 60)

The Greek word “hard” is σκληρός [*sklay-ros*’], meaning rough, offensive or scandalous.

As a result of this, many [of] his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.” (6: 66).

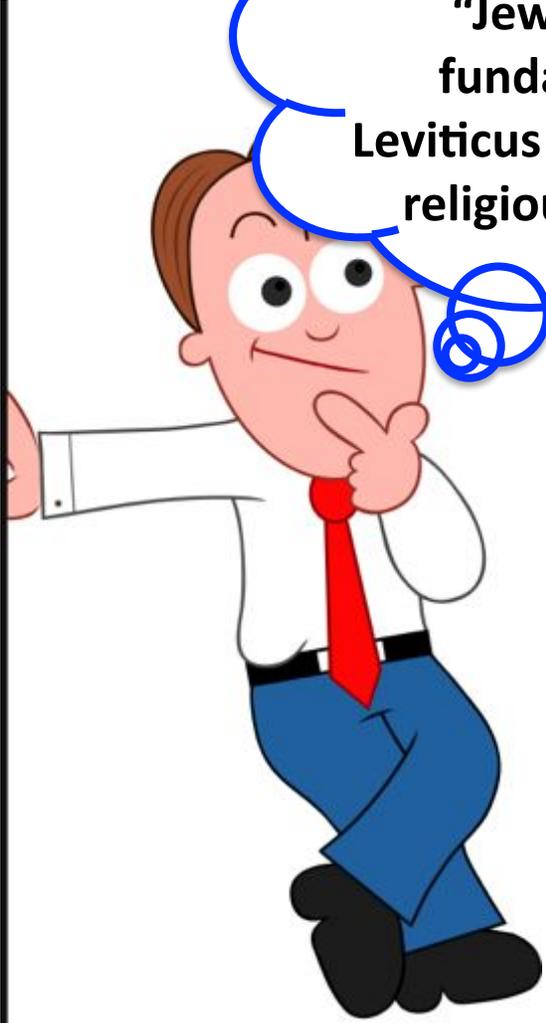


As a result, we read:

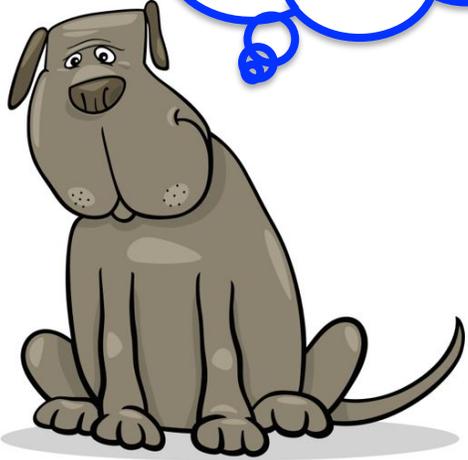
“Jesus then said to the Twelve, ‘Do you want to leave?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy one of God.’”

(6: 66-69)

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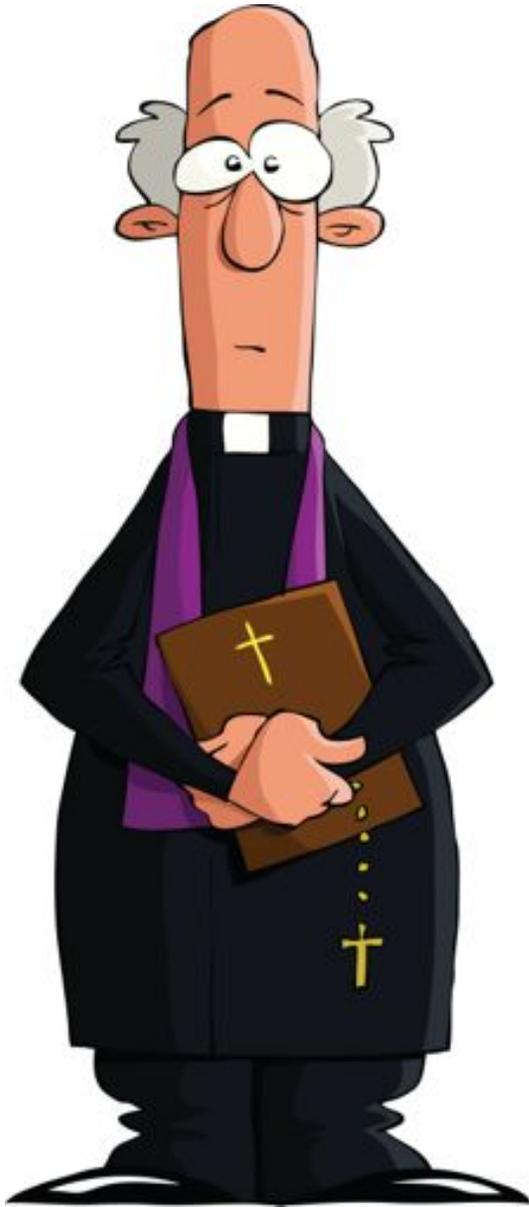


Given Leviticus 17, I can certainly understand the reaction of the “Jews.” What Jesus says is fundamentally at odds with Leviticus 17 and with 1,500 years of religious and cultural tradition.



Even Jesus’ Apostles were ready to get up and leave!

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And that's what the Roman Catholic Church has taught from the beginning until today:

“The mode of Christ’s presence under the Eucharistic species is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all the sacraments as ‘the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend.’ In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist ‘the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.’

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, ¶1373.)



Ercole de' Roberti. *The Israelites Gathering Manna* (tempera on canvas, transferred from wood), c. 1490. The National Gallery, London.

(This is a predella panel, paired with "The Institution of the Eucharist".)

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**Ercole de' Roberti. *The Institution of the Eucharist* (egg on wood), c. 1490.
The National Gallery, London.**

Questions for discussion and thought

1. How does the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 differ in John from the same story in the synoptic gospels?
2. How does the story of Jesus walking on the water differ in John from the same story in the synoptic gospels?
3. How does John use the feeding of the 5,000 to set up Jesus' "body and blood" discourse?
4. What is the 1st of Jesus' 7 "I am" statements?
5. How do Jesus' listeners react when he tells them that *"unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in you"*?

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