

The Gospel of John

Session Eleven: The Feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus Walks on Water Commentary

John 6:1-21

6:1–71 The feeding of the crowds (cp. Mt 14:13–23; Mk 6:30–44; Lk 9:10–17) is yet another of Jesus’s messianic “signs” (see Jn 2:11), aligning Jesus with God’s provision of manna to wilderness Israel through Moses (6:30–31). In response to the people’s demand that he perform a sign greater than Moses’s signs at the exodus, Jesus claimed to be the “bread of life” that provides spiritual nourishment for all who believe in him (eat and drink of him). This controversial statement proved to be a watershed moment in Jesus’s ministry, because many of his followers abandoned him at this point (vv. 60–66). But the Twelve, through Peter their spokesman, reaffirmed their allegiance (vv. 68–69).

6:1 After this again indicates the passing of an indefinite period of time (5:1). Half a year may have passed since the previous event. Sea of Tiberias (cp. 21:1) was an alternate name for the Sea of Galilee. Herod Antipas founded Tiberias, the largest city on the Sea of Galilee, in honor of his patron, the Roman emperor Tiberius (AD 14–37). The name gained currency toward the end of the first century.

6:2 Generally, John portrays the crowds as following primarily on account of his miracles, and as mired in confusion and ignorance.

6:3 Mountain may not refer to a specific mountain. It could designate the hill country east of the lake, known today as the Golan Heights (Mt 14:23; Mk 6:46). Like other rabbis, Jesus sat down to teach (Mt 5:1; Mk 4:1; 9:35; Lk 4:20), although teaching is not mentioned here.

6:4 This is the second of three Passovers mentioned by John, and the only one Jesus spent in Galilee (see 2:13).

6:5–6 The huge crowd apparently walked several miles around the north side of the lake and caught up with Jesus and the disciples. Philip would be the natural choice for Jesus’s question since he, like Andrew (v. 8) and Peter, was a native of nearby Bethsaida (see 1:44). Jesus’s question echoes Moses’s query in the wilderness: “Where can I get meat to give all these people?” (Nm 11:13). Other parallels between Jn 6 and Nm 11 are the people’s grumbling (Nm 11:1; Jn 6:41, 43); the description of the manna (Nm 11:7–9; Jn 6:31); the reference to the eating of meat/Jesus’s “flesh” (Nm 11:13; Jn 6:51); and the overabundance of the provision (Nm 11:22; Jn 6:7–9).

6:7 Two hundred denarii was roughly eight months’ wages, since one denarius was about one day’s pay for a common laborer (12:5; Mt 20:2).

6:8–9 Boy may refer to a child, a teenager, or even someone in his early twenties. The same word is used in the Septuagint (an ancient Gk translation of the OT, abbreviated LXX) to refer to

young Joseph in Gn 37:30 and Daniel and his friends in Dn 1. Barley was common food for the poor (the well-to-do preferred wheat bread); the fish were probably dried or preserved, perhaps pickled. In a similar account, Elisha fed one hundred men with twenty barley loaves (2Kg 4:42–44).

6:10 The men numbered about five thousand, plus women and children (Mt 14:21), totaling perhaps as many as fifteen thousand people. Plenty of grass may allude to the messianic age (10:9–10; Ps 23:2). Mark (Mk 6:39–40) mentioned that the grass was green, which points to springtime.

6:11 A common Jewish thanksgiving prayer was, “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

6:12 Jesus’s words echo Ru 2:14: “She ate and was satisfied and had some left over.” Jesus took the same care in providing for those whom the Father gave him (Jn 10:28–29; 17:11–12, 15).

6:13 The number of baskets may allude to Jesus’s symbolic restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel.

6:14 The reference to the Prophet who is to come into the world alludes to Dt 18:15, 18 (see Jn 1:19–21; 7:40–41).

6:15 On Jesus’s withdrawal to the mountain, see v. 3.

6:16–24 Jesus’s walking across the Sea of Galilee may echo Job 9:8 (LXX) where God is said to walk on the water.

6:16–17 The disciples were on the eastern side of the lake, and they ventured to row the six or seven miles back across the sea to Capernaum on the western side.

6:19 They had rowed about three or four miles. If the feeding of the crowd occurred on the eastern shore, the shortest distance to Capernaum would have been five to six miles.

6:20 It is I may have overtones of epiphany (cp. Ex 3:14; see Jn 6:35, 48). The statement may allude to Ps 77:16, 19, describing God’s manifestation to Israel during the exodus.

6:21 The reference to the boat reaching the shore at once may allude to Ps 107:23–32 (esp. vv. 29–30).¹

¹ *CSB Study Bible*. Edited by Trevin Wax. (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).