

5. The last section of chapter six forms a kind of epilogue to the Bread of Life discourse. It recounts Jesus' interaction with His disciples after the episode in the Capernaum synagogue (6:60-71). It forms a fitting close to the whole context as it punctuates the profound impact of Jesus' instruction on His hearers; even His own disciples – perhaps even some from among the Twelve (cf. v. 67) – were taken aback by His claims concerning Himself and His mission in the world. According to John, many of them, like the Jewish rulers in the synagogue, were perplexed and even offended by what they heard and grumbled among themselves. Far from being enlightened by Jesus' instruction, they found themselves stumbled by it (6:60-61). John didn't specify any particular point of offense, noting only that they struggled with what they considered a "*hard word*," a phrase which John likely intended to encompass the discourse as a whole. (*Logos* refers to the content of speech more than the words themselves which are the components of speech.) But certainly these disciples, like the Jews, were offended by Jesus' statements about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. Jesus' response suggests that they also shared the Jews' offense with His claim to have come out of heaven.
- a. So also these individuals were unwilling to voice their objections to Jesus. They, too, grumbled among themselves (ref. again 6:41, 52), but He was aware of it and spoke to their complaint just as He had done with the Jews (6:61-65). Again, Jesus' reply points to them taking offense at His assertions about His heavenly origin. They wouldn't have had a problem with Him claiming that His Father sent Him; Israel's messianic doctrine included the idea that Messiah, like the prophets, would come to Israel through Yahweh's commission and in His name. What tripped them up was the notion that He *literally* came into the world out of heaven. This is evident from Jesus' response: "*What, then, if you should behold the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?*"

John's grammar framed this question as posing a potential scenario, although by this time Jesus must have been aware that His messianic mission would conclude with His return to His Father. In fact, He wasn't implying that His future ascension was only a possibility, but neither was He suggesting that this group of disciples might perhaps be present when that event took place. Rather, He posed this question in this way to challenge their unbelief: "*You puzzle over the fact that I came from My Father; what are you going to think when I return to Him? If you can't accept how it is that I came to be in the world, how are you going to believe when I ascend back to heaven?*"

Wrapped into this question are the realities of Jesus' death and resurrection, but John gives no indication that Jesus mentioned them at this time. Indeed, the four gospel accounts give the impression that Jesus didn't introduce these ideas until late in His earthly ministry, and then only to His inner circle of the Twelve (cf. Matthew 16:13-21; Mark 8:27-31, 9:30-32; Luke 9:18-22, 18:31-33; etc.). Here He was only indicating that His work in the world would take Him full circle; He had come out of heaven from His Father and He was going to return there when He'd accomplished the purpose for which the Father sent Him. In context, that purpose was to give life to the world (ref. again 6:32-33, 38-40, 48-58).

Jesus intended His question to further provoke these disciples and the way He phrased it was a key part of the provocation: They stumbled over the idea that Jesus had come down out of heaven; how could that be true of any man? That claim was hard enough to swallow, but now He was intimating that He was going to *return* to the heavenly realm as the human “son of man.” A couple of observations about the title *son of man* help to illuminate the significance of Jesus’ question and what He was asserting.

- 1) First, the gospel accounts indicate that this title was Jesus’ most common form of self-designation, but it was a title which He alone used; none of the four evangelists have even one instance of someone else referring to Jesus as the Son of Man. (The only exceptions outside of the gospels are in Acts 7:56 and Revelation 1:13 and 14:14.)
- 2) The title highlights Jesus’ humanness, but with two very specific and inseparable emphases: *incarnation* and *messiahship*. The latter is more general and highlights the fact of Messiah as the covenant son of David and Abraham and so also the promised seed of Eve. If Jesus was the Messiah, then He was a bona fide son of Adam – He was a son of *man* (ref. Luke 3:23-38; cf. also Hebrews 2:5-18). The idea of incarnation is central to John’s use of the title. It occurs 12 times in his account, each time in a context in which Jesus was directly or indirectly speaking of His connection with heaven, either as descending from that realm (whether in His Parousia or His incarnation), ascending back to it, or exercising heaven’s authority and judgment on the earth (ref. 1:51, 3:13-14, 5:27, 6:27, 53, 62, 8:28, 9:35, 12:23, 34, 13:31). In the first occurrence, Jesus as the Son of Man has the angels descending and ascending on Him, signifying that He came from heaven in order to conjoin heaven and earth in Himself. He is man, but as the human sanctuary of God – God’s dwelling place on earth. The Son of Man is thus the God-Man as the incarnate Logos (1:14), but precisely as *Yahweh* returned to Zion and true *Israel* (the true Abrahamic seed). And as such, the Son of Man is the *Messiah* – the human Servant through whom Israel’s God had pledged to restore life, not only to Israel, but to all of Adam’s race and the whole creation (cf. Matthew 10:23, 13:37-43, 16:13-28, 20:18-32; Mark 2:1-11, 8:31-38; Luke 9:51-56, 12:8-10, 18:31-33, 22:66-71; etc.).

Jesus was indeed a “son of man” in the *general* sense of being a human being (ref. Psalm 8:4, 80:17, 144:3; Isaiah 51:12, 56:2; Jeremiah 49:17-18, 33, 51:42-43). But He was also a *particular* “son of man.” By the first century the rabbis were associating the “son of man” figure of Daniel’s prophecy (7:9-14) with the Messiah and this is how people would have understood Jesus’ use of the title. John enlarged the messianic connotation of “son of man,” emphasizing that Jesus the Messiah is the incarnate Logos: the messianic Son of Man who doesn’t merely receive the kingdom from Yahweh, but came from Yahweh as His human embodiment in order to gather mankind into His life – the life of the Father.

Taking all of this together, Jesus associated Himself with Daniel's "son of man" figure who appears before Yahweh to receive His kingdom and its authority and dominion. But this coronation appearance in the heavenly realm was an *ascent* preceded by a *descent* from heaven to earth. The Son of Man was going to return to Yahweh to receive the kingdom, but as having come from Him to accomplish the triumphal work on earth by which that kingdom could be secured and endowed to Him as *Christus Victor* – Lord over all (cf. Matthew 20:18 with Acts 1:1-11, 2:22-36, 7:48-56; Ephesians 1:18-23; Philippians 2:5-11; etc.).

Jesus responded to these offended disciples, first by posing a question to them and then by asserting the actual reason for their offense (6:63). This follows the same pattern as His previous response to the Jews in the synagogue (cf. vv. 43-45). In the case of the Jews, Jesus explained their offense and unbelief in terms of not being taught by their covenant God; here He attributed it to the fact that these disciples were seeking to know Him according to the flesh. There are two primary dimensions to this statement and its meaning:

- 1) The first is the antithesis Jesus drew between *flesh* and *Spirit* with respect to the impartation of life. The implication is that "flesh" and "spirit" are the two possible means by which people can seek to discern and obtain eternal life, but only the latter has any ability or power in this regard.
- 2) Thus Jesus' words confused and offended these disciples because they sought to understand them by "the flesh" (*flesh* here signifies man in his natural condition) which has no ability to discern or appropriate that which pertains to life. Life falls within the purview of the Spirit, so that Jesus' words, which are "spirit and life," are discernable only to those who share in life by the Spirit. And what is true of the incarnated "word" is true of the inscripturated word (ref. again 5:39-40; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:12-16).

Jesus' statement thus makes two critical contributions to the context: First and foremost, it introduces the Holy Spirit into the dynamic of Jesus as "living bread" and the acquisition of eternal life by eating His flesh and drinking His blood; secondly, it connects the Spirit's life-giving work with Yahweh's work of teaching and drawing men (ref. vv. 64-65). Hence Jesus' meaning: *The Father who sent the Son into the world to give life to it is the One who draws men to Him as the Bread of Life. And He does so by teaching them – that is, by enabling them to know Him by the Spirit of Life who enlivens men to the truth of the Living Word and the words He speaks, words which themselves are "spirit and life."*

- b. John punctuated the truth of Jesus' antithesis between flesh and Spirit by noting that this episode was a turning point in His ministry; afterward many of His disciples withdrew and followed Him no longer (6:66). However convinced they had been that this man was the Messiah, that day in the synagogue changed their minds; they couldn't reconcile their messianic convictions with Jesus' claims. His words were "spirit and life" and they were hearing them with fleshly minds.

When Jesus observed so many of His followers walk away from Him in frustration and disillusionment, He challenged His inner circle of disciples – the Twelve – regarding their intentions (6:67). *Were they also stumbled by what they heard? Were they, too, planning to forsake Him?* Not surprisingly, Peter was quick to respond. Others of the apostles may have also spoken up, but if they did, John chose only to record Peter’s reply. At the same time, he recorded Peter’s words in a way that implies he was speaking on behalf of the whole group: “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God*” (cf. Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34). Whatever they failed to grasp from His teaching that day, Jesus’ inner circle at least understood that eternal life is bound up in Him as Yahweh’s Messiah so that leaving Him meant forsaking the hope of life (6:68-69).

- c. This episode in Capernaum provides another poignant example of the unbelief which characterized the nation of Israel as they came face-to-face with their Messiah. Moreover, it highlights that unbelief at three different levels: the *Jewish authorities* who opposed Jesus for political and personal reasons, *disciples* of Jesus who embraced Him as Messiah, but according to their own misguided expectations, and finally the *inner circle* of His twelve chosen apostles. This wasn’t the first time John addressed the unbelief of the rulers and the wider circle of Jesus’ followers (ref. 2:23-25, 3:1-10, 5:10-18, 6:14-15); indeed, he’d even exposed it among the Twelve (6:1-21). *But this context adds a new dimension to the disciples’ unbelief by introducing the fact that one of Jesus’ chosen apostles would ultimately betray Him* (6:70-71).

This development further underscores the contextual emphasis on the division which existed among Jesus’ followers. As it was with the larger body of disciples, so it was with His inner circle of the Twelve: Some were genuine in their embrace while others were not. Granted, all of Jesus’ disciples were marked by a lack of insight and understanding and they all faltered in one way or another. All came short in their faith and stumbled, but some continued to hold fast to Jesus as the Messiah and maintained their devotion to Him while others fell away.

The Twelve were divided just as the multitude, but with a notable difference. In the case of Jesus’ wider circle of disciples, those whose faith was ungrounded eventually departed from Him. But Judas continued with Jesus until the very end. To all appearances he was a faithful disciple just like the other eleven. Thus when Peter spoke on behalf of the group, he doubtless believed he was speaking for Judas. Perhaps at that time Judas even added his conscious “amen” to Peter’s affirmation. But Jesus knew better; He knew Judas would betray Him. Indeed, He knew it even at the time He chose Him to be one of His apostles (v. 64). But that eventuality – and even Judas’ identity as the betrayer – remained obscure; for now Judas appeared as one of the faithful Twelve. Thus Jesus spoke of him as a *devil* – not a man demon-possessed or directly motivated by Satan, but one who, in his false devotion, was effectively a liar, deceiver and slanderer (cf. 8:31-44); a man who would prove a fit vessel for satanic deception and manipulation (ref. 13:1ff).