

Flesh from Heaven: The Text of John 6.52 and its Intertext

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Most modern commentaries and translations of the Gospel of John take John 6.52 to read: ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ There is, however, an important variant reading here that lacks the $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ (thus: ‘How can this man give us flesh to eat?’), which has received very little attention. This article contends that the shorter reading creates yet another example of Johannine dramatic irony, as the contempt of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι for Jesus’ teaching echoes the unbelief of the wilderness generation who were ‘given flesh to eat’ along with the manna. The article tentatively concludes that this intertextual reading advances the ‘internal probability’ of the shorter text.

Keywords: Bread of Life discourse, intertextuality, John 6.52, textual criticism, typology

1. A Textual Question

There is an important textual variant in John 6.52 that has received little attention in studies of John 6. NA²⁸ reads:

Ἐμάχοντο οὖν πρὸς ἀλλήλους οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι λέγοντες· πῶς δύναται οὗτος ἡμῖν δοῦναι τὴν σάρκα [αὐτοῦ] φαγεῖν;

Then the Jews were arguing with one another, saying, ‘How is this man able to give us [his] flesh to eat?’

Once confident that $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ was a later addition, more recent editions of NA are less sure. The NRSV and many popular translations include the $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ in their translation of the text to produce the following:

NRSV: The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

NET: Then the Jews who were hostile to Jesus began to argue with one another, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

NIV: Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

ELB: Die Juden stritten nun untereinander und sagten: Wie kann dieser uns sein Fleisch zu essen geben?

ZUR: Da gab es Streit unter den Juden, und sie sagten: Wie kann uns der sein Fleisch zu essen geben?

LB: Da stritten die Juden untereinander und sprachen: Wie kann dieser uns sein Fleisch zu essen geben?

What is true of the translations is also true of the Johannine commentary tradition. Most exegetes include the $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ in their reconstruction of the text – often with little discussion¹ – or they exclude the $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ but submit that the meaning is little affected.² Rudolf Bultmann wrote: '[if] $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ should be omitted, it still gives the right sense. The suggestion that the people are horrified by Jesus' exhortation to anthropophagy ... can hardly be found in the text.'³

While Bultmann is probably right that the characters in v. 52 are not protesting an invitation to anthropophagy in general,⁴ the purpose of this article is to

- 1 Cf. e.g. B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2 vols.; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, repr. 2004) 1.239–40; M.-J. Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Jean* (Paris: Gabalda, 1948⁸) 182–4; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1955) 246; R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, repr. 1957), 153, 162–3; R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium: Kommentar zu Kap. 5–12* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1971) 89–90; E. Haenchen, *Johannes Evangelium: Ein Kommentar* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980) 326–7; M. C. Tenney, *The Gospel of John* (EBC 9; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 77; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 158–9; G. R. O'Day, *John* (NIB 9; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994) 605; L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 333–4; F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998) 220, 4; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999²) 94; D. M. Smith, *John* (ANTC; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999) 157–8; A. J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 215–17; M. M. Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015) 150, 154.
- 2 E.g. H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John* (trans. W. Urwick; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, rev. edn 1884) 216–17; F. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (2 vols.; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886) II.36; J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to John* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928) 1.209; A. Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1948) 178; P. N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in Light of John 6* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, repr. 2010) 207–8: 'Whatever the original reading, the question is ambiguous. It could be a reference to the Christian observance of the eucharist, or it could simply reflect the confusion of the Jews over what Jesus was predicting about his mission.'
- 3 R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971) 235 n. 5. Cf. Bruce, *John*, 159.
- 4 Cf. G. Bornkamm, 'Die eucharistische Rede im Johannes-Evangelium', *ZNW* 47 (1956) 161–9, at 169. Contra E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947) 297.

challenge the prevailing opinion that there is no noticeable difference in meaning between the alternate readings of ‘his flesh’ or ‘flesh’. I will argue that the shorter reading (‘How can this man give us flesh to eat?’) heightens the dramatic irony of the scene as the question from Jesus’ interlocutors evokes the grumbling of the Israelites in the wilderness who were ‘given flesh to eat’ even as they challenged Moses and doubted God’s ability to provide.⁵ I will then turn to the text-critical question of John’s *Ausgangstext* to consider what, if anything, this reading may contribute to the reconstruction the text of John 6.52.

2. The Traditional Reading of John 6.52

Most Johannine critics, who either include the $\alpha\lambda\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ in 6.52 or believe it is implied, contend that οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι here protest the absurdity of Jesus’ statement in 6.51. On the heels of the explosive assertion that ‘the bread which I will give is also my flesh on behalf of the life of the world’, argument erupts and a question emerges which one could paraphrase thus: ‘What a ridiculous contention! Of course this man cannot give us his own flesh to eat!’⁶

There is an alternative interpretation that, should the text read ‘flesh’ only, the question concerns not how Jesus could provide them ‘his flesh’, but rather ‘flesh’ in general. But this is very unlikely. As is typical of Johannine dialogue, misunderstanding characters do not utterly ignore what Jesus is saying, they rather understand what Jesus is saying within a particularly carnal or mundane frame of mind.⁷ Nicodemus’ query to Jesus in 3.5 (‘How is a man able to be born, being old? Surely he is not able to enter into his mother’s belly a second time and be born?’) responds directly to Jesus’ assertion in v. 3 that ‘unless someone is born ἄνωθεν, he is not able to see the kingdom of God’. So too, it was Jesus’ offer of ‘living water’ (4.10, 13–14) that prompted the request from the woman at the well that Jesus ‘give’ her ‘living/fresh water’ ‘so that I may never be thirsty’ (4.15). The gospel is full of such cases,⁸ which provide a clear formal parallel to 6.52.⁹

5 The proper translation of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι as ‘the Jews’ or ‘the Judeans’ is not important for this article.

6 Cf. J. Zumstein, *Das Johannesevangelium* (KEK 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016) 272.

7 For a good discussion, see J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 412–20.

8 See also 1.38–9 (‘what do you seek’); 2.19–22 (the temple of his body); 4.32–3 (food to eat which the disciples do not know); 7.34–5 (‘Where does this man intend to go?’); 8.21–2 (Jesus is ‘going away’); 11.11–12 (Lazarus falling asleep).

9 Not only do these questions respond directly to something Jesus said or did, several also begin with $\pi\omicron\omega\varsigma$ (3.4, 9; 4.9; 6.42; 7.15; 8.33; 12.34). Cf. C. K. Barrett, ‘“The Flesh of the Son of Man” John 6.53’, *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 37–49, at 40–1. Here Bultmann, *John*, 235 n. 4, is forced to admit that his ecclesiastical redactor (for vv. 51–8) ‘clearly models himself on the Evangelist’s technique’.

We should also consider here the structure of the Bread of Life discourse itself.¹⁰ As commentators frequently note, there is a logical progression to the discourse as Jesus introduces new and ever bolder ideas to his audience(s).¹¹ What is important to stress for our purposes is that the discourse advances by having Jesus' audience(s) *respond to the things he says* – and that with increasing hostility (culminating with 'many of his own disciples' turning back in v. 66). Consider:

- In vv. 26–7, Jesus tells his hearers to 'work [from ἐργάζομαι] for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give' (not yet identifying himself explicitly with that food). To this his hearers ask, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?'
- Then, in vv. 29–33, Jesus starts to turn the focus to himself, but still obliquely. He speaks of 'bread from heaven' which the Father 'gives you' (δίδωσιν, present tense). Still the audience does not fully get the point, and asks, 'Sir, give us this bread always' (v. 34).
- To this request, Jesus states the point flatly (v. 35): 'I am the bread of life' (and then elaborates to v. 40). In response, οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι 'grumble', pointing to Jesus' family they know (vv. 41–2).
- Jesus continues to elaborate on his identity as 'the bread of life' (v. 48), and then adds a new detail: 'the bread which I will give is also my flesh' (v. 51).¹²

¹⁰ At this point our concern is the final form of the text as it stands, and the diachronic unity of the whole is not essential to the argument. For excellent discussions of that question, see P. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of the Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (NovTSupp 10; Leiden: Brill: 1965) 25, 86–98, 185–92; J. Beutler, 'The Structure of John 6', *Critical Readings of John 6* (ed. R. A. Culpepper; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 115–28; S. Petersen, *Brot, Licht, und Weinstock* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 201–11; Anderson, *Fourth Gospel*, 72–89.

¹¹ See e.g. Westcott, *St. John*, I.221; Bernard, *John*, 202, 6, 8; J. Beutler, 'Zur Struktur von Johannes 6', *SNTSU* 16 (1991) 89–104. It seems to me that Bultmann's argument (*John*, 218–20) for the redactional nature of vv. 51–8 overlooks the progressive nature of the discourse. Note Beasley-Murray, *John*, 87 ('a unity in progression'). The perplexing question of the character audience in ch. 6, which seemingly changes (ὁ ὄχλος, οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, πολλοὶ ... ἐκ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ), goes beyond the scope of this essay. For discussion, see P. Borgen, 'John 6: Tradition, Interpretation and Composition', *From Jesus to John: Essays on New Testament Christology in Honour of Marinus de Jonge* (ed. M. C. de Boer; JSNTSup 84; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993) 268–91; C. Bennema, 'The Identity and Composition of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John', *TynB* 60 (2009) 239–63, at 256–8.

¹² Translators rarely make clear in v. 51 the καὶ ... δέ construction (e.g. the NRSV: 'and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh'). This appears frequently in the LXX where the καὶ is best taken as 'also', thus 'and ... also'. Cf. e.g. Gen 31.6; 44.9; 2 Kgdms 3.15; 1 Esd 1.49; 8.22; Jdt 2.13; 1 Macc 12.23; 16.3; 2 Macc 7.13; 4 Macc 2.4; Wis 7.3; 11.20; 15.18; etc. Such is also true of John 8.16; 15.27 and 1 Tim 3.10; 2 Pet 1.5; 1 John 1.3; John 1.12. Thus John 6.51 should be translated 'and the bread that I will give ... is also my flesh'. Jesus unpacks a further implication of his teaching. On point here was H. Olshausen, *Biblical Commentary on the New Testament* (trans. A. C. Kendrick from the 4th German edn; 3 vols.; New York: Sheldon,

Quite naturally, then, his hearers *respond* to v. 51, as they have throughout, with a critical comment: ‘How can this man give us flesh/his flesh to eat?’ This progression, we should note, continues on after 6.52, as Jesus elaborates again in v. 53 speaking of the flesh ‘of the Son of Man’ and of the necessity of ‘drinking his blood’ (see from vv. 53–8).¹³

The point of the preceding is to make a basic but important point – and that in support of the traditional interpretation of John 6.52 – that regardless of the presence of $\alpha\lambda\tau\omicron\tilde{\upsilon}$ in v. 52, some who hear Jesus identify ‘the bread’ from heaven with ‘his flesh’ in v. 51 protest in v. 52 the absurdity of that assertion. They make the predictable Johannine move of misunderstanding Jesus’ teaching in a literalistic manner.¹⁴

To draw such a conclusion, however, does not entail that we agree that the presence of $\alpha\lambda\tau\omicron\tilde{\upsilon}$ is negligible for interpretation. And the reason is straightforward: the Fourth Gospel’s fondness for dramatic irony.¹⁵ As critics of John have known for some time, it is essential to distinguish in John between what characters in the story think they are saying and what the readers of John hear and understand in those utterances.¹⁶ At nearly every turn in the gospel, we find a disjuncture between the knowledge of the characters and the knowledge of the implied readers, as John’s characters do or say more than they know or can understand. That is certainly true for the Bread of Life discourse. The brilliant ambiguity of Jesus’ statement in vv. 32–3 (‘it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the

Blakeman & Co., 1857) $\Pi.417$ (‘not exactly a transition to something altogether different, yet an advance in the subject of discourse’).

13 See Olshausen, *Biblical Commentary*, $\Pi.418$ (‘only increases the pungency of his language’); Barrett, ‘Flesh’, 43.

14 See H. Leroy, *Rätsel und Mißverständnis: Ein Beitrag zur Formgeschichte des Johannesevangeliums* (BBB 30; Tübingen: Inauguraldiss., 1968) 121–4; R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996) 156–7, 162–3.

15 Cf. P. D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985); G. MacRae, ‘Theology and Irony in the Fourth Gospel’, *The Gospel of John as Literature* (ed. M. W. G. Stibbe; Leiden: Brill, 1993) 103–14; R. A. Culpepper, ‘Reading Johannine Irony’, *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (ed. R. A. Culpepper and C. C. Black; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 193–207.

16 See e.g. G. A. Phillips, ‘“This Is a Hard Saying: Who Can Be Listener to It?” Creating a Reader in John 6’, *Semeia* 26 (1983) 23–56; M. Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (JSNTSup 69; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992) 242–75, 350–75; Anderson, *Fourth Gospel*, 194–7, 210–20; C. W. Skinner, ‘Misunderstanding, Christology, and Johannine Characterization: Reading John’s Characters through the Lens of the Prologue’, *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (ed. C. W. Skinner; LNTS 461; Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2014) 111–28.

world') and its misunderstanding in v. 34 ('Sir, give us this bread always') can only be grasped if the reader recognises, as the characters do not at this point, that Jesus is talking about himself. Here and elsewhere in chapter 6, what characters in the narrative intend as honest engagement with Jesus' teaching is actually 'heard' by John's readers as evidence of how far they are from the truth.

3. 'Give Us Flesh to Eat' and Intertextuality

My contention about John 6.52, therefore, is that while we assume *the characters* in the narrative are protesting Jesus' assertion that 'the bread is also my flesh' (from v. 51) regardless of the presence of ἀὐτοῦ, *readers* of John hear something slightly different in that question if we exclude the ἀὐτοῦ (thus: 'How can this man give us flesh to eat?'). In particular, I believe that the question 'How can this man give us flesh to eat?' is more evocative of the Exodus and Wandering of Israel in the wilderness than is 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?', even though, in both cases, the characters are clearly talking about Jesus' flesh. This is a matter of dramatic irony in John. The question and protest function for the reader to secure the typological role of these characters as disobedient Israel in the wilderness.

This typological role has, of course, already been well established by what precedes in John 6. The feeding of the multitude, walking on the water and teaching about 'bread from heaven' all assume the Exodus and Wandering as their subtext, and consistently the audience(s) are cast in the mould of their disobedient ancestors while Jesus appears both as a prophet like Moses and one greater than Moses.¹⁷ In light of this undisputed fact, it is surprising that so few commentators reflect on the possible continuation of this intertextuality when Jesus begins speaking of his 'flesh' in v. 51. An exception here is Brant Pitre's recent historical study, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, which also expressed surprise at this lack of attention. When faced with a sudden linkage between the 'the bread (from heaven)' and Jesus' 'flesh' in 6.51, Pitre observed: '[a]lthough the point is often overlooked by commentators, in the original biblical account, a double miracle is described: God gives the Israelites both "bread from heaven" and "flesh" from heaven in the form of quail'.¹⁸ Pitre points specifically to Exod 16, which

17 See A. Feuillet, *Johannine Studies* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1966) 53–117; W. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (NovTSupp 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967) 90–9; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 97–8; M. Hengel, 'The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel', *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel* (ed. C. A. Evans and W. R. Stegner; JSNTSup 104; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994) 380–95, at 388; G. R. O'Day and S. E. Hyler, *John* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 78.

18 B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 200. Pitre is not wholly alone. Westcott, *St. John*, 1.240 and Moloney, *John*, 224 both cite Num 11 parenthetically in

narrates both the manna and the quail respectively, suggesting that Jesus' sudden linkage of the 'bread' with 'flesh' is 'not completely unprecedented'.¹⁹

Pitre does not make much more of the point, and his interest is not in the question from οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in v. 52 but rather Jesus' own utterance in v. 51. One wonders, though, if Pitre would have found further confirmation of his reading of 6.51 had he attended to the textual question of v. 52. For Pitre maintains the standard reading of v. 52 ('How can this man give us his flesh to eat?') without any discussion. If we consider v. 52 without the αὐτοῦ, however, we can revisit the same chapter of Exodus that Pitre pointed to, and initially here v. 8:

And Moses said, 'When *the Lord gives to you all in the evening flesh to eat and bread in the morning to be satisfied, because the Lord has heard the grumbling that you speak against him -what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD*'. (Exod 16.8)

Here we have the shared phrase 'flesh to eat', mention of 'giving', and a pronominal indirect object ('to you' or 'to us'). We can outline the parallels in the following way:

John 6.52	Exodus 16.8
give (infinitive from δίδωμι)	give (MT: infinitive construct from נתן; LXX: articular infinitive from δίδωμι)
to us (ἡμῖν)	to you (MT: לכם; LXX: ὑμῖν)
flesh (σάρκα)	flesh (MT: בשר; LXX: κρέα)
to eat (φαγεῖν)	to eat (MT: לאכל; LXX: φαγεῖν)

The connections are extensive: (i) an infinitive form of 'give'; (ii) a plural pronominal indirect object; (iii) 'flesh' as a direct object; (iv) the infinitive 'to eat'. One apparent difference between John and the Septuagint is that the Septuagint has opted for κρέας rather than σάρξ, no doubt because the 'flesh' in question is more accurately specified in Greek as a kind of 'meat' for human consumption.²⁰ But the Hebrew term is בשר, which the Septuagint often takes as σάρξ.²¹ We will return to this issue below.

context but provide no comment. Anderson, *Fourth Gospel*, 202-3 discusses the miracle of the flesh in his analysis of 6.31.

19 Pitre, *Last Supper*, 201.

20 Cf. Wis 16.1-4, which is even more precise here: τροφήν ἡτοιμάσας ὀρτυγομήτραν. On the potential differences between κρέας and σάρξ, see J. M. Braaten, 'Barley, Flesh, and Life: The Bread of Life Discourse and the Lord's Supper', *CTQ* 78 (2014) 63-75, at 72-3.

21 Gen 2.23; 6.12; Lev 13.18; Deut 5.26; 2 Sam 19.13; etc.

As strong as these connections are, I would resist placing John 6.52 under the influence of any one line from Exodus. The reason is that what we find in Exod 16.8 is a more or less standard description of the miracle of the flesh from heaven which can also be found elsewhere in the biblical text. In fact, there is a common syntactical form in the description of the miracle of the ‘bread’ and the ‘flesh’, as evident already in John 6. Jesus’ hearers cite to him what has been written (ἄρτον ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς φαγεῖν, v. 31), joining ‘give’ (from δίδωμι), ‘bread’ (direct object) and ‘to them’, and the infinitive ‘to eat’, obviously under the influence of the biblical text.²² For the miracle of the flesh, we have not only Exod 16.8 above, we have Ps 78/77.20 (‘Is he able to give bread, or to provide meat for his people?’),²³ Num 11.13 (‘Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, “Give us meat to eat!”’ (LXX: πόθεν μοι κρέα δοῦναι παντὶ τῷ λαῷ τούτῳ ὅτι κλαίουσιν ἐπ’ ἐμοὶ λέγοντες δὸς ἡμῖν κρέα ἵνα φάγωμεν)), and 11.18 (“Oh that someone would give us meat to eat! For we were well-off in Egypt.” Therefore the LORD will give to you meat to eat’ (LXX: δώσει κύριος ὑμῖν κρέα φαγεῖν)). What is especially intriguing about these passages is that they express questions and doubts about God’s ability to provide, just as, from the perspective of the narrator, the characters in John 6.52 do. In sum, it may not be – and probably is not – the case that we are dealing with an allusion to one specific passage from Exodus in John 6.52, but we rather find here a well-known and repeated trope in the story of the Wandering. The rest of John 6 evokes the larger saga of Wandering Israel by drawing on stock images and phrases from the Pentateuch and Psalms, and some doubt that any particular passages from the Pentateuch are in mind. John 6.52 is probably the same.

The use of the Old Testament in the larger context of John 6 only further supports this intertextual reading of v. 52. I make three points. First, we should note that the whole of John 6 telescopes climactic scenes from the Exodus and Wandering saga (in John’s order here): the feeding in the wilderness, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the disputes of the people with God and Moses. Therein it is

²² Borgen, *Bread from Heaven*, 28–99 argued that the Scripture cited in 6.31 explains the particular language selection and syntax of the rest of John 6, as the Johannine discourse conforms to a homiletical and haggadic convention as found in Philo and the Palestinian midrashim. On v. 52 he wrote (90): ‘It is ... obvious that v. 52 is a paraphrase of parts from the Old Testament text cited in v. 31b’ (which he thinks is Exod 16.4). He pointed specifically to the ἡμῖν, δοῦναι and φαγεῖν. Borgen has convinced many, although the identity of the Scripture cited in 6.31 remains hotly debated. Options include Exod 16.4, Ps 78/77.24 and Neh 9.15, with some proposing an intentional or unintentional conflation. For differing views, see G. Richter, ‘Die alttestamentlichen Zitate in der Rede vom Himmelsbrot Joh 6,26–51a’, *Studien zum Johannesevangelium* (ed. J. Hainz; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1977) 88–119; A. Montanaro, ‘The Use of Memory in the Old Testament Quotations in John’s Gospel’, *NovT* 59 (2017) 147–70, at 168–9.

²³ Notice also here the verb ‘be able’ (Heb: יָכַח; LXX: δύναμαι), as also in 6.52 (πῶς δύναται ...).

clear that the persistent aim of the text is to refocus images and figures from that story around the person and work of Jesus, just as already with the wisdom and word of God (1.1–14), the glory of God (1.18–9), the Passover lamb (1.36) and the temple (1.51; 2.19).²⁴ In John 6, for instance, Jesus is the one who feeds and satisfies the people (6.12), who is the prophet like Moses (6.14), who declares ἐγὼ εἶμι while subduing the waters in the wind and the darkness (6.17; cf. Exod 14.21),²⁵ and whose teaching is true manna from heaven. Readers have already learned in the conversation with Nicodemus that Jesus identifies himself with the bronze snake in the wilderness (3.14–5) – a point perhaps subtly re-evoked in 6.40²⁶ – and in 6.35 Jesus may claim to be the rock in the wilderness that quenches thirst (καὶ ὁ πιστεύων εἰς ἐμὲ οὐ μὴ διψήσῃσι πόποτε), which was a traditional interpretation in early Christianity (see 1 Cor 10.1–4).²⁷ A Christological appropriation of ‘the flesh’ from heaven here would be entirely fitting in context, if not expected, given the persistent exploitation of key events and symbols of the Exodus and Wandering. The progression of the discourse itself would also mirror the sequence of the Numbers narrative where the Israelites are first given bread and then flesh (11.1–25).²⁸

24 R. B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016) 284 (on John’s frequent use of such ‘images and figures’).

25 Applicable to John as well are the comments on Matthew by W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–97) II.506.

26 Here Jesus suddenly introduces the faculty of ‘sight’, linked with ‘belief’ (πάς ὁ θεωρῶν τὸν υἱὸν καὶ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτόν), which recalls the conversation with Nicodemus and the interpretation there of Num 21. Cf. Köstenberger, *John*, 213 (‘the thought is similar to 3:13–14’). Cf. also Wis 16.5–7.

27 So J. L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) 631. See also T. F. Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel* (SBT 40; Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1963) 50; O’Day, *John*, 601.

28 Although Borgen, *Bread from Heaven*, 38 argues that the citation in 6.31 provides the subtext for what follows (including v. 52), and does not contend that ‘flesh’ in v. 51ff. has any scriptural resonance (nor does he argue against it; the topic is not considered), he insightfully notes that it was common for homilies and haggadic treatments to include ‘subordinate quotations’ in their unpacking of the main text in question. While Borgen uses this convention to account for the citation of Isa 54.13 in John 6.45, it could also explain the introduction of ‘flesh’ language at the end of the discourse. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, it should be noted that the very sources Borgen cites to advance his position also evidence a progressive exegesis whereby a larger pericope or narrative is considered in sequence. Borgen considers Philo, *Leg.* 3.162–8 as an extended reflection on Exod 16.4 with ‘subordinate quotations’ from Exod 12. But why he stops at 168 is not clear, since 169 (through 176) continues to explore a later passage in Exod 16 (v. 13), as well as related passages in Num 11. The same is true of Borgen’s use of Philo, *Mut.* 253–63, since this section examines Gen 17.19 (with ‘subordinate quotations’ from the feeding stories and elsewhere) and then moves on to Gen 17.20. The point: Borgen’s arguments about homiletical or haggadic convention in John 6 would also support our case for the intertextuality of 6.52. For similar sequential retellings of the

This reading not only befits the Fourth Gospel's christological appropriation of Scripture, it also, as a second point, befits the characterisation of Jesus' audience(s) in this scene. As already mentioned briefly above, one consequence of the Exodus and Wandering subtext to John 6 is the typological shaping of its characters: Jesus appears as one akin to and yet greater than Moses, and his hearers (including his disciples) as the disgruntled Israelites. Concretely:

- (i) The miraculous feeding narrative in 6.1–15 – which becomes the narrative spine and reference point for the commentary of the Bread of Life discourse that follows (cf. 6.26) – obviously places the recipients of this miracle in the same position as the Israelites whom God fed in the wilderness.²⁹
- (ii) As Jesus walks on the water – which, as mentioned above, probably evokes the crossing the Red Sea in several ways³⁰ – the disciples 'fear' (ἐφοβήθησαν) just as do the people in Exod 14.10 (ἐφοβήθησαν), 31.³¹
- (iii) In 6.27–8, Jesus' exhortation to 'work for the food (τὴν βρῶσιν)³² that endures' not that which 'perishes', as well as his declaration that 'my father gives you the true bread from heaven' (6.32), assumes that his hearers in the present parallel 'their fathers' (see 6.31) of old in the wilderness.³³ The same is true of 6.39 (πάν ὃ δέδωκέν μοι μὴ ἀπολέσω ἐξ αὐτοῦ), as the 'destruction' (from ἀπόλλυμι) of members of the Wandering community who abandoned the covenant is stereotypical in the Pentateuch (see e.g. Exod 19.24; 30.38; Lev 7.20; 17.10; Num 16.33; 17.12; 21.6; etc.), and in its reception (1 Cor 10.10; Jude 1.5, 11).³⁴

Wandering and feeding stories, aside from Ps 78/77.12–34, cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 3.11–35 (he considers the quail and manna together, following here Exod more closely than Num); LAB 10.7.

²⁹ Notice the clearly intentional use of ἐμπλήρημι in 6.12 ('they were satisfied'), which Deut 8.10 and Ps 78/77.27–8 use for the wilderness feedings. Note also Jesus' desire that the disciples pick up the remains so that none be lost and Exod 16.19–21.

³⁰ See R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB 29; 2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1966–70) 1.255–6.

³¹ Cf. O'Day, *John*, 596; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 89; Hays, *Gospels*, 301.

³² See here Ps 78/77.30; 1 Cor 10.3 (πάντες τὸ αὐτὸ πνευματικὸν βρῶμα ἔφαγον).

³³ Cf. Westcott, *St. John*, 1.224; Barrett, *John*, 235–41; Thompson, *John*, 146–52; Hays, *Gospels*, 322.

³⁴ The syntax here is suggestive. John 6.39 reads: ἵνα πάν ὃ δέδωκέν μοι μὴ ἀπολέσω ἐξ αὐτοῦ. The μὴ ἀπολέσω ἐξ αὐτοῦ is odd, and indeed Bezae attempts to smooth it out as ἀπολέσω μηδέν. But John's syntax is biblical. Cf. Exod 19.24 ('let not the priests and the people force their way to come up to God, lest the Lord destroy some of them (μήποτε ἀπολέσῃ ἀπ' αὐτῶν)'); 30.38 ('whosoever shall make any in like manner, so as to smell it, shall perish from his people (ἀπολείται ἐκ τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ)'); Lev 7.20 ('and any soul that eats of the flesh of the sacrifice of the peace-offering which is the Lord's ... shall perish from the people (ἀπολείται ἡ ψυχὴ ἐκείνη ἐκ τοῦ λαοῦ)'); etc. Relevant too is John 17.12, which links Jesus with the 'messenger of the Lord' in Exod 23.20 as he says 'I guarded (ἐφύλαξα) them, and not one of them was lost (καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐξ αὐτῶν

- (iv) Throughout the discourse, the notion that the people remain unbelieving in the face of Jesus' 'signs' parallels exactly the characterisation of the Wandering Israelites according to multiple sources. Note Num 14.11 ('And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?"), 22; Ps 78/77.17, 32, 56; Ps 106/105.1–13. Consider also the paraphrase in Josephus, *Ant.* 2.327 ('(the people) forgot all the signs (σημείων) that had been wrought by God for the recovery of their freedom, and this so far that by their unbelief (ὑπὸ ἀπιστίας) they desired to throw stones at the prophet, while he encouraged them and promised them deliverance').
- (iv) Three times Jesus' hearers 'grumble' (γογγύζω) at his words (6.41, 43, 61), which, as almost all commentators note,³⁵ is a transparent allusion to the 'grumbling' of the wilderness generation (cf. Exod 17.3; Num 11.1; 14.27, 29; Ps 106/105.25; etc.).

These observations provide good reason to confirm Schnackenburg's contention that the mention of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι 'arguing' (μάχομαι) among themselves in 6.52 picks up the same Israel-in-the-wilderness typology.³⁶ That would mean we find this typology at play not only in the larger context of John 6, but introducing the very verse under investigation in this article.

We should note as a third and final point that this intertextual reading of 6.52 is stylistically and thematically on point for John 6 as a whole. The recipients of the Bread of Life discourse clearly think that Jesus is making outrageous claims about himself, and they evidently believe that they are well justified in questioning and criticising him. But the story is told in such a way that readers of John 'hear' in such actions and words a rerun of Israel's prior disobedience and dissent in the wilderness. Such is precisely the case in 6.30, where Jesus is asked the question, 'What sign are you doing that we might see and believe in you?' This question at once adopts the 'signs' terminology from the Exodus and Wandering (as the questioners immediately in 6.31 refer to the miracle of the manna), even as it makes plain to the reader the inability of the characters to see what is happening

ἀπώλετο) ...' Cf. C. A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1998) 275–80.

35 Cf. Glasson, *Fourth Gospel*, 101–2; Köstenberger, *John*, 213 ('obvious parallels'); etc.

36 See R. Schnackenburg, 'Zur Rede vom Brot aus dem Himmel: Eine Beobachtung zu Jo 6,52', *BZ* 12 (1968) 248–52; *idem*, *Johannesevangelium*, 89–90. Cf. R. Kysar, *John* (ACNT; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 107; G. S. Sloyan, *John* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) 72; Köstenberger, *John*, 215.

right before their eyes.³⁷ So too, in 6.52, οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι respond to Jesus' seemingly contemptible assertion that 'the bread from heaven' is also his 'flesh' (v. 51), but the question ('How can this man give us flesh to eat?') merely utters again the infamous ἀπιστία of the wilderness generation. For they also had wondered, 'Is (God) able to give bread or provide meat for his people?' (Ps 78/77.20).³⁸

4. The Text of John 6.52

The case for an intertextual reading of John 6.52 without the ἀὐτοῦ is strong. But the discussion above, which treated the text synchronically, inevitably raises a diachronic question about the *Ausgangstext* of John 6.52.³⁹ Bruce Metzger summed up the nature of our textual problem as follows: 'external evidence for and against the presence of ἀὐτοῦ is so evenly balanced, and ... considerations of internal probabilities are not decisive'.⁴⁰ Does that judgement hold in light of the above arguments?

The external evidence is indeed 'balanced'. The putative uncials that lack the ἀὐτοῦ include Sinaiticus and Bezae. Vaticanus, however, includes it. Unfortunately, our verse falls within the missing 6.50–8.52 in Alexandrinus, so that important codex is of no help. Our few papyri are also divided, though this is not as well known. P⁶⁶ includes the ἀὐτοῦ,⁴¹ but P⁷⁵, which is fragmentary at

37 Cf. Hays, *Gospels*, 321–2. On the association of σημεῖον with Moses and the Exodus, see D. C. Allison Jr., *The Intertextual Jesus: Scripture in Q* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000) 53–7; J. Lierman, *The New Testament Moses: Christian Perceptions of Moses and Israel in the Setting of Jewish Religion* (WUNT 11/173; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 56–63.

38 In addition to Ps 78/77, Num 11 repeats twice Moses' incredulity at the prospect of God providing flesh for the people. In Num 11.13, Moses asks God, 'Where am I to get flesh for this people?', and in v. 21 Moses responds to God's assertion with further disbelief. Josephus' interesting retelling of this in *Ant.* 3.298 maintains the incredulity but whitewashes Moses: 'Hereupon Moses, although he was so basely abused by them, encouraged them in their despairing condition and promised that he would procure them a quantity of meat, and that not for a few days only, but for many days. This they were not willing to believe [from ἀπιστέω]; and when one of them asked where he could obtain such vast plenty of what he promised, he replied, "Neither God nor I, although we hear such opprobrious language from you, will stop our labours for you; and this soon appear also.'" See also Philo, *Mos.* 1.196.

39 On the compatibility, and even necessity, of such synchronic and diachronic approaches, see J. Ashton, 'Second Thoughts on the Fourth Gospel', *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies* (ed. T. Thatcher; Baylor: Baylor University Press, 2007) 1–18.

40 B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994²) 183. Cf. Brown, *John*, L282.

41 G. Fee, *Papyrus Bodmer II (P66): Its Textual Relationships and Scribal Characteristics* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1968) 51 notes that 'there is a tendency in P66 to add the possessive pronoun', citing 4.53; 13.22; 18.11; 20.17, 30. He also rightly observes that 'each instance must be evaluated on its own merits'.

6.52, almost certainly could not have included the $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ due to space considerations.⁴² F. J. A. Hort's wise principle that 'knowledge of documents should precede final judgments on readings' does not take us nearer to one side or the other here.⁴³

The judgement that 'internal probabilities are not decisive' most likely stems from the wise and widely held opinion that the protest in v. 52 is in response to Jesus' assertion about $\eta\ \sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi\ \mu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$ in v. 51, regardless of the presence of $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ in v. 52. But if the above arguments are correct, the dramatic irony of v. 52 without the $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ provides ample reason to re-evaluate the 'internal probabilities' of the text.⁴⁴

To be sure, the arguments of the above sections could possibly cut either way here. Of the critics who opt for the shorter reading of v. 52, many do so on the grounds that there would be no reason to omit $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ if it stood in the text.⁴⁵ But we could have just provided one. It is reasonable to envisage a copyist coming upon 6.52 and cutting the $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ to make the question conform even more closely to the dense intertextuality of the scene as well as its dramatic style.

I would submit, however, that that scenario is less probable than the alternative that $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$ was added to clarify its connection to v. 51, with the consequence that the intertextuality of the question was partially muted. The rationale is twofold.

First, while the proposed intertextuality is possible on the basis of the Septuagint alone, it may assume some knowledge of the Hebrew. As noted above, John's use of $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi$ in v. 52 would not mirror the Septuagint – which reads $\kappa\rho\acute{\epsilon}\alpha\varsigma$ in the relevant narratives – but it is a fair translation of בשר which the Septuagint itself often provides. The evangelist's use of $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi$ is probably influenced by eucharistic language at use in his own time,⁴⁶ as it is, in my estimation, difficult to avoid some eucharistic connotation to Jesus' words in 6.51–8.⁴⁷ We also

42 I am indebted to Wieland Willker's Online Textual Commentary for this point, available at <http://www.willker.de/wie/TCG/>. For his reconstruction, see <http://www.willker.de/wie/TCG/prob/Jo-6-52-P75.pdf>.

43 B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, repr. 2003) 31.

44 For methodological suggestions here, see J. K. Elliott, 'Using an Author's Consistency of Usage and Conjectures as Criteria to Resolve Textual Variation in the Greek New Testament', *NTS* 62 (2016) 122–35.

45 See e.g. M. J. J. Menken, 'John 6,51c–58: Eucharist or Christology', *Critical Readings of John 6*, 183–204, at 200–1.

46 So J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (trans. N. Perrin from the 3rd German edn; London: SCM, 1966) 198–201, who argues that the Aramaic underlying $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi$ is בשרא . See also Beasley-Murray, *John*, 94. For $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi$ and $\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\alpha$, see Ignatius, *Rom.* 7.3; *Philad.* 4; Justin Martyr, *1 Ap.* 66.2.

47 This eucharistic reading is not, however, essential to the argument here, nor does it settle the numerous debates about vv. 51–8. Some excellent studies include M. Roberge, 'Le discours sur

find in v. 52 the use of *μάχουμα*, a Johannine hapax. This term, as Schnackenburg notes, is not present in the relevant narratives of the Septuagint, but it is taken in the Septuagint to translate *ריב* which often appears in the Wandering narratives, e.g. Exod 17.2 ('The people quarrelled (*וירב*) with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink"), 7; Num 20.3, 13; etc. There is more in the immediate context. Brant Pitre has also made the important argument that there is a biblical subtext for Jesus' controversial teaching that those who fail to drink 'the blood' (*τό αἷμα*) of the son of man will 'not have life' (*οὐκ ἔχετε ζωὴν*) in themselves (v. 53): it is the repeated biblical notion that 'the life' of some living thing is found 'in the blood'.⁴⁸ He points to Lev 17.11 as an exemplar: 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives.' This insightful reading has much potential, yet Pitre fails to make plain to his reader that the connection is stronger if we use the Hebrew, which repeatedly has *נפש* in the *דב* (whereas the Septuagint has *ψυχή* in the *αἷμα*). John's use of *ζωή* here, one of his preferred theologoumena, agrees not with the Septuagint but is an understandable take on the rich semantic domain of *נפש*. Lastly, we should recall that throughout the Gospel of John exegetes have frequently appealed to the Hebrew to make sense of John's exegesis.⁴⁹ A few of the more notable examples can be mentioned here: (i) the citation of Isa 40.3 ('the voice' proclaiming 'the way of the Lord') in John 1.23;⁵⁰ (ii) Jesus' pronouncement about himself in 7.38 ('rivers of living water will flow from his belly') and Isa 12.3;⁵¹ (iii) the citation of Isa 6 in John 12.40;⁵² (iv) the citation of Ps 41.10 in John 13.18;⁵³ (v) the entry to Jerusalem that engenders questioning from Greeks who 'wish to see Jesus';⁵⁴ (vi) the allusion to Zech 12 in John 19.37.⁵⁵ None of these examples

le pain de vie, Jean 6,22–59. Problèmes d'interprétation', *LTP* 38 (1982) 265–99; P. Stuhlmacher, 'Das neutestamentliche Zeugnis vom Herrenmahl', *ZTK* 84 (1987) 1–35; Menken, 'Eucharist or Christology'.

48 Pitre, *Last Supper*, 204–5, 230–1. Also noted by Bernard, *John*, 209.

49 M. J. J. Menken, *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Textual Form* (CBET 15; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996) 206 n. 1: the view that John sometimes makes recourse to the Hebrew 'is more or less standard nowadays'.

50 See C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1952) 40; Barrett, *St. John*, 28–9.

51 Cf. Menken, *Quotations*, 187–204; J. Marcus, 'Rivers of Water from Jesus' Belly (John 7:38)', *JBL* 117 (1998) 328–30 (on a linkage between 'wells' (*מעיי*) and 'salvation' (*ישועה*) with 'belly' (*מעיים*) and 'Jesus' (*ישוע*) respectively).

52 Barrett, *St. John*, 431; Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 515–23.

53 Menken, *Quotations*, 123–38.

54 C. A. Evans, 'Obduracy and the Lord's Servant: On the Use of the Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel', *Early Jewish and Christian Exegesis* (ed. C. A. Evans and W. F. Stinespring; *Homage* 10; Atlanta: Scholars, 1987) 221–36, at 232–6.

55 Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, 65; Menken, *Quotations*, 177.

requires us to believe the evangelist or final editor himself was in touch with the Hebrew, only that John's tradition shows some interaction with it.⁵⁶

Of course, none of this means anything definitive for the text of John 6.52, as later copyists could also have been aware of the Hebrew *Vorlage* of σάρξ. But if we are dealing here with 'internal probabilities', it seems to me more probable to infer that knowledge of the Hebrew created the intertextually evocative and dramatic question, 'How can this man give us flesh to eat?', rather than to infer that αὐτοῦ was later dropped to generate an intertextuality that the Greek Old Testament alone would not as readily suggest. The very need for this article at all provides the logic: for clearly most exegetes in the history of interpretation have not been put in mind of the Exodus and Wandering by the typical wording of 6.52 as 'How can this man give us *his flesh* to eat?'

This argument, which really concerns the most likely historical context for the purported intertextuality of v. 52, is related to the second point that considers John's tradition. It is this: the shorter reading of v. 52 not only appears fitting synchronically in John, its intertextuality would probably be something inherited from pre-Johannine tradition. The sustained interaction with the Exodus and Wandering in John 6 is closely paralleled in synoptic tradition, although many of the details differ.⁵⁷ Many have noted the similar events and sequence of events that appear in both John 6 and Mark 6–8. Raymond Brown outlined them as follows:⁵⁸

Multiplication for the 5,000	John 6.1–15	Mark 6.30–44
Walking on the sea	6.16–24	6.45–54
Request for a sign	6.25–34	8.11–13
Remarks on 'bread'	6.35–59	8.14–21
Faith of Peter	6.60–9	8.27–30
Passion theme; betrayal	6.70–1	8.31–3

In those chapters Mark includes the following: the feeding occurred εἰς ἔρημον τόπον (6.31), the people sat down 'in hundreds and fifties' (6.40; cf. Exod 18.21), Jesus tells his disciples to 'be courageous!' (θαρσεῖτε) while walking on the water (Mark 6.50; cf. Exod 14.31), the Pharisees 'test' Jesus by seeking a 'sign' from heaven (Mark 8.11; Exod 7.9; Deut 8.2; etc.), Jesus warns his disciples about 'hardness of heart' (Mark 8.17; Exod 7.2, 13; 9.12; etc.), 'yeast' (Mark 8.15; Exod 12.15), and upbraids them for 'not remembering' (Mark 8.18; Exod 12.14). All of these

56 Cf. W. D. Davies, 'Aspects of the Jewish Background of the Gospel of John', *Exploring the Gospel of John*, 43–64, at 44.

57 See brief discussion in Beasley-Murray, *John*, 87–8.

58 Brown, *John*, 1.238.

details are clearly evocative of the Exodus and Wandering, and they function to paint Jesus, his mission and his opponents in scriptural colours just as we found in the Gospel of John. Yet not a single one of these details is found in the Fourth Gospel. We could identify unique (yet similarly functioning) Exodus and Wandering motifs in these sections of Matthew and Luke as well, including the ‘this generation’ sayings.⁵⁹ Whether or not John is dependent on the synoptics – that question is irrelevant for our purposes – we clearly have here four gospels that preserve, reshape and elaborate on a larger tradition of retelling the feeding story/stories and the aftermath in ways that evoke the Exodus and Wandering of Israel.⁶⁰ Of particular interest is the tendency to have characters make statements or ask questions that evoke that subtext. In the feeding of the 5,000 in Mark, for instance, the disciples remain incredulous at the prospect of feeding the crowd (6.37), and in the feeding of the four they ask (8.4), ‘How is one able to feed these people here with bread in the wilderness?’ (πόθεν τούτους δυνήσεταιί τις ὧδε χορτάσαι ἄρτων ἐπ’ ἐρημίας;). On this passage, Joel Marcus noted the similarity to questions/complaints of the Israelites in Exod 16: ‘[t]he disciples ... play the role of the murmuring Israelites here ... [and] in the next passage the Pharisees will do so’.⁶¹ The shorter reading of John 6.52 would evidence the recycling of a larger trope in gospel tradition.

Again, then, it seems to me probable that John 6.52 read ‘How can this man give us flesh to eat?’, as that is both thematically and stylistically of one piece with pre-Johannine gospel tradition. At some later point the τὴν σάρκα became τὴν σάρκα αὐτοῦ as an assimilation to the ἡ σὰρξ μου of v. 51. This hardly constitutes a demonstration – which, in the absence of further external evidence, is impossible – but it does constitute a heretofore overlooked argument for the ‘internal probability’ of the shorter reading of John 6.52.

5. Conclusion

In what way do Jesus’ hearers respond to his sudden assertion in 6.51 that ‘the bread’ (which he has already identified with the heavenly manna) ‘is also’ ‘his flesh’? Do they ask, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’, or ‘How can this man give us flesh to eat?’ This article has argued that the shorter reading creates a

59 See Anderson, *Fourth Gospel*, 187–92. On the ‘this generation’ sayings, see Allison, *Intertextual Jesus*, 57–9.

60 See P. Kieffer, ‘Jean et Marc: convergences dans la structure et dans les détails’, *John and the Synoptics* (ed. A. Denaux; BETL 51; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992) 109–26; R. T. Fortna, ‘Jesus Tradition in the Signs Gospel’, *Jesus in Johannine Tradition* (ed. R. T. Fortna and T. Thatcher; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 199–208.

61 J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (AB 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 488. Cf. D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (trans. G. Eliot from the 4th German edn; London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1902) 517–18.

greater sense of dramatic irony as the protest echoes the incredulity of the wilderness generation at God's ability 'to give to them flesh to eat'. On this basis, it is possible to make a text-critical argument for the superior 'internal probability' of the shorter reading. In all, the shorter reading deserves greater attention in Johannine commentaries and in exegetical studies of John 6, as it could enrich our understanding of the symbolism, intertextuality and rhetorical style of the Bread of Life discourse.