

## Why Did Jesus Refer to Himself as the “Bread of Life”?

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If someone were to ask us why Jesus called Himself the “Bread of Life,” we would probably answer that He had His presence in the Eucharist in mind. However, is that a complete answer to this question? It seems that it is not, because Jesus did not say, for example, that He was the “Lamb of Life.” After all, it was the blood of lambs which was used to mark the homes of the Israelites in Egypt in order to protect them from death. Thus the question remains: why did Jesus call Himself the “Bread of Life”? Why did He want to be truly present among us under the appearance of bread?

### 1. *Lechem*: “Bread” in the Hebrew Bible

The word “bread” (*lechem*) appears for the first time in the Masoretic Text in the Book of Genesis, right after the description of the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. At that point, God tells Adam words that in a literal translation from the Hebrew sound as follows: “Cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you... By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat” (Genesis 17b, 18, 19a).<sup>1</sup> From these words we can conclude that from the moment of the fall of the first man, bread became something difficult to obtain, requiring effort, and even related to pain and suffering for him and his descendants. It is significant that the Hebrew word *lechem* is composed of the same three letters of which the verb *lacham* (“to fight”) is composed. Although these two terms come from two different word families, the identical makeup

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1 In Genesis 3 : 19a, the Hebrew word *lechem* (“bread”) could refer not only to bread, but to all nourishment. Cf. *Sefer Bere’shit. Parshiyot Bere’shit – Lekh lekha*, meforash bi-yede Y. Kıl, Jerusalem 1997, p. 96. Nevertheless, the word *lechem* appears in this place for the first time in the Hebrew Bible.

of the root (*l-ch-m*), from which the words *lechem* as well as *lacham* originate, could mean that initially the Hebrews associated bread with something that one had to fight for with great difficulty.<sup>2</sup> In this context, it is intriguing to note that during the last supper Jesus said the following words after He changed bread and wine into His Body and Blood: „But now one who has a money bag should take it, and likewise a sack, and one who does not have a sword should sell his cloak and buy one” (Luke 22 : 36). In other words, Christ discusses His upcoming passion in the context of difficulty, anxiety, and even struggle. This is a struggle that the forces of evil direct against Christ in order to destroy the Kingdom of God. These same forces of evil acted in Eden against Adam and Eve, although there the first man lost the struggle and heard that from that point on the pursuit of bread would cost him great difficulty and suffering.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The Bread of Melchizedek

The toil and suffering related to the pursuit of bread resulting from original sin are not, however, the last reference to bread.<sup>4</sup> The word *lechem* (“bread”) appears in the Hebrew Bible for the second time in the description of the meeting between Melchizedek and Abraham. Melchizedek was a pagan priest who greeted Abraham with bread and wine in order to bless him (see: Genesis 14 : 18–20). This is the first time in the Bible that bread is presented as a sign of blessing. Furthermore, one should note that Melchizedek was also the

2 Cf. W. Dommershausen, מַלְכֵדֶק, [in:] *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. by G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, H.-J. Fabry, transl. by D. E. Green, Grand Rapids 1995, vol. 7, p. 521–522.

3 It is significant that in the Book of Deuteronomy 16 : 3 unleavened bread is called *lechem oni* (“the bread of affliction”) during the Jewish paschal meal. Also interesting is the reference to thorns, which will be the fruit of the cursed land after the fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3 : 18), which occurs directly before the words about bread consumed “by the sweat of your face” (Genesis 3 : 19). The Greek word *akantha* was said by Jesus only twice: in the statement that thorns do not give birth to grapes or figs (cf. Matthew 7 : 16; Luke 6 : 44) as well as in the proverb about the sower whose work was undoubtedly tied to the reaping of bread from the ground (Matthew 13 : 7. 22; Mark 4 : 7. 18; Luke 8 : 7. 14). In addition to these examples, there are two others in which the word *akantha* appears: in the Letter to the Hebrews in an implied reference to the cursed land as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin (Hebrews 6 : 8), as well as in the Gospel according to St. John in reference to the crown of thorns that Roman soldiers placed on Christ’s head (John 19 : 2).

4 Shortly after God’s words about the toil and suffering that man would undergo as a result of the pursuit of bread we hear that the Creator did not turn His back on Adam and Eve, but instead clothed them (cf. Genesis 3 : 21). This important detail confirms the fact that God did not turn His back on man.

king of Salem, which in the future would become Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> This means that although the first Biblical reference to bread was related to a curse, the second one was not only related to a blessing, but also to bread originating in the future Jerusalem. It was there that that Son of God would later sacrifice His Body, giving It to people as the Bread of Life.

### 3. Manna

#### 3.1. Manna in the Desert

The most significant example of bread that had become a blessing is the manna. During their journey through the desert, the Israelites started to complain that they were hungry, and they started longing for food that they had at their disposal everyday in Egypt was born in their hearts (see: Exodus 16 : 2–3). Meanwhile, God said through Moses that He would give them bread from heaven (see: 16, 4). However, this was not to be the ordinary bread that they had hitherto been accustomed to. This is confirmed by the Psalms, in which we read that: “mere mortals ate the bread of the Mighty” (Psalm 78 : 25).<sup>6</sup> For this reason, when this bread appeared for the first time, the Hebrews who wanted to take it asked: *man hu?* Or, “What is this?” (Exodus 16 : 15). Only Moses explained to them that it was bread that God had sent them from heaven. Thus the Israelites called this bread *man*, or “what.”<sup>7</sup>

#### 3.2. Manna in the Jewish Tradition

In the Jewish tradition, one can come across the opinion that God created the manna on the same day that He created the angels.<sup>8</sup> The angels’ duties included the grinding of the manna so that in the future it would become food for the righteous who would be found in Heaven.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the Jewish tradition

5 Cf. T. L. Brensinger, *Jerusalem*, [in:] *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. W. A. VanGemeren, Grand Rapids 1997, vol. 4, p. 772–773.

6 St. Jerome translates it as: „panem angelorum manducavit homo”.

7 Cf. L. Kohler, W. Baumgartner, J. J. Stamm, ׀, *Wielki słownik hebrajsko-polski i aramejsko-polski Starego Testamentu*, Warszawa 2008, vol. 1, p. 561.

8 Cf. PRE 3. This view emphasizes the fact that God has particular plans with respect to the manna even before He created the world. Thus the manna was especially revered in Jewish thought.

9 Cf. Hag 12b.

proclaims that the manna will appear again in the future, in the time when the Messiah would come.<sup>10</sup> Why? This is because the Messiah will be the new Moses, which means that the Messiah will bring a new manna, just as Moses did in the desert: “Just like the first redeemer [Moses] will bring the manna, so will the last one [the Messiah]. Just as was said of the first redeemer: ‘So Moses took his wife and his sons, and started back to the land of Egypt, with them riding the ass’ (Exodus 4 : 20), it has also been said of the last redeemer: ‘See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, Meek, and riding on an ass’ (Zechariah 9 : 9). Thus just as the first redeemer [Moses] brought the manna, as has been said, the last redeemer [the Messiah] will also bring the manna.”<sup>11</sup>

The second apocalyptic Book of Baruch is not a part of the canon of Sacred Scripture, although it was read by Jews in the first century. In it, one can find the following words: “And it shall come to pass at that self-same time that the treasury of manna shall again descend from on high, and they will eat of it in those years, because these are they who have come to the consummation of time.”<sup>12</sup> This sentence confirms that during Jesus’ time, the Jews awaited the second coming of the supernatural manna.<sup>13</sup> Knowing these traditions, Jesus clearly referred 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. [...] Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; [...] I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever” (John 6 : 32, 49, 51).

Jesus speaks of Himself as the new manna, or the new bread coming from heaven. It was His Body that became the fulfillment of the Jewish expectations with respect to the manna.

### 3.3 Manna and the Blessed Sacrament

Following the details described in the Book of Exodus about the manna, it is impossible to not notice how this Old Testament bread became the harbinger of the Bread of Life given by Christ in the Eucharist. First of all, the manna

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10 A detailed analysis of the Jewish tradition with respect to the manna can be found in B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist. Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper*, New York 2011, p. 86–92.

11 Cf. QohR 1, 9.

12 Cf. 2 Ba 29, 3. 6–8.

13 Cf. B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist...*, op. cit., p. 91.

was bread from heaven, while the Lord Jesus also comes to the world from heaven and takes on a human nature in order to be God-with-us. Also, when the Israelites gathered the manna in the desert, those who gathered more did not have too much, while those who gathered less did not have too little (see: Exodus 16 : 17–18). In this way, nobody was hungry; every family had enough manna to eat. The same thing happens with the Blessed Sacrament. The Lord Jesus is fully present in every consecrated Host, regardless of its size. Regardless of where in the world they are, all who receive Holy Communion receive the same Christ in His entirety and without any differences. In addition, the manna from heaven appeared in the desert during six days of the week. There was more of it on Fridays so that it would suffice for the Israelites for the Sabbath, because gathering anything was forbidden on the Sabbath as a result of the prohibition of working on the Lord's Day (see: Exodus 16 : 29). All this reminds us of the situation during the Easter Triduum when the host that is consecrated on Holy Thursday is stored for Good Friday and Holy Saturday, especially as *viaticum* for the dying. Moreover, the manna tasted like honey (Exodus 16 : 31). Previously, God had described the Promised Land as one overflowing with milk and honey (see: Exodus 3 : 8). Therefore, since the manna tasted like honey, it was something like a "foretaste" of the Promised Land. Similarly, Holy Communion is also a foretaste of our Promised Land, or Heaven.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, after forty years in the desert God stopped sending the manna to the Israelites as soon as they entered the Promised Land (see: Exodus 16 : 35; Joshua 5 : 10–12). When the Hebrews entered the Promised Land, they could eat the fruits of the new land and there was no longer any need to consume the manna. The case with Holy Communion is similar. Just like the manna was no longer needed in the Promised Land, in the same manner, there will be no Holy Communion in Heaven, our celestial promised land, because we will be fully reunited with Christ.

There is one more important aspect of the manna that deserves mention. Moses told the Israelites that the manna would no longer serve as food alone. The Manna was to be stored in the Ark of the Covenant so that the Israelites could always look at it and be reminded of what God had done for them (see: Exodus 16 : 32–34). Is this not a reminder of a very important dimension of the Eucharist, which is the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament? Jesus does not limit His presence to the Mass. He remains in the tabernacle, which had

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14 Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 18.

been foreshadowed by the storage of the manna in the Ark of the Covenant. To quote St. Augustine: “No one eats that flesh without first adoring it.”<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Bread of the Presence

The manna was not the only foreshadowing of the Eucharist. The bread of the Presence also foreshadowed it. What was this bread? According to the instructions God gave to Moses, one had to place twelve loaves of bread on a gilded wooden table in the tabernacle (see: Leviticus 24 : 5). These loaves of bread were to symbolize God’s covenant with the twelve tribes of Israel (see: Leviticus 24 : 8). A candle was to constantly burn, day and night, on the table with these loaves of bread (see: Leviticus 24 : 1–5). Meanwhile, a pitcher filled with wine was to be placed by the table (see: Numbers 15 : 5–7; 28 : 7). Wine was to be used for the so-called liquid sacrifice, to be consumed along with the bread of the Presence in the tabernacle by the priests during the great sacrificial feast.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, in Hebrew, the bread of the Presence is called *lechem hapanim*. This term may have different meanings: the bread that is found on the surface (*panim*) of the table next to the Ark of the Covenant; the bread enclosed inside (*bifnim*) the tabernacle; and bread whose shape is reminiscent of a small chest with openings.<sup>17</sup> There is, however, one more interpretation in Judaism that calls attention to the literal meaning of the term *panim*, which is “face.” Thus the most appropriate translation of the term *lechem hapanim* is “the bread of the face.”<sup>18</sup> This was the bread which was placed before God’s “face” in the tabernacle, and thus the Israelites believed that like the manna, this bread had supernatural properties.<sup>19</sup>

15 Cf. Benedykt XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 66.

16 The priests of the Old Covenant offered two types of sacrifices: bloody animal sacrifices as well as bloodless sacrifices, usually consisting of bread and wine. The bread of the Presence, which was partly burned and partly consumed by the priest on every Sabbath, also served this purpose. Whereas bloody sacrifices were offered up during the week, a bloodless sacrifice, partly composed of the bread of the Presence, was offered on the Sabbath, the holiest day of the week. God told Moses that of all the burnt sacrifices, that of the bread of the Presence would be the holiest (cf. Leviticus 24 : 8–9). Cf. B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist...*, op. cit., p. 120; 123–125.

17 Cf. 'A. Ḥakham, *Sefer Shemot: parashiyot mishpatim – peḳude*, Jerusalem 1991, p. 130–131.

18 Cf. B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist...*, op. cit., p. 120–121.

19 Cf. 'A. Ḥakham, *Sefer Shemot...*, op. cit., 130–131; B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist...*, op. cit., p. 129.

One must note that the "bread of the Presence", or the "bread of the Face," is a foreshadowing of the real presence of the Son of God under the appearance of bread and even under the appearance of wine, because loaves of bread placed in the tabernacle always had to be held along with vessels containing wine. Whereas in Genesis Adam, the first man, heard that he would eat bread in the sweat of his face (see: Genesis 3 : 19), the holy loaves of bread (*lechem hapanim*), which were to become signs of the Covenant, or the sign of new life given to the Israelites after they had left Egypt, were placed in the tabernacle in the desert (and later in the Jerusalem Temple). Furthermore, the Talmud, which is a Jewish commentary on the oral rabbinical tradition written down in the Mishnah, claims that when the Israelites undertook their annual pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem in obedience to God's command<sup>20</sup> in order to offer their sacrifice there, the priests took the bread of the Presence from the holiest place in the House of God and raised the loaves up high, so that the people could see them from afar, while calling in a loud voice: *reu chibatchem lifnej hamakom*: „Come and see; this is your love in front of God's Presence."<sup>21</sup> The priests referred to this "bread of the face" (showbread) by the word "love," since it pointed towards God and His covenant, which He entered into with the Israelites because of His love for them.<sup>22</sup>

The above Talmudic message brings to mind the displaying of the Host during Mass or in the monstrance during Adoration. In addition, the Eucharist is God's most valuable gift to us, as the fruit of the death and resurrection of the Son of God. Thus during the last supper Jesus did not consume the paschal lamb, nor did He give it to His apostles for consumption. Instead, He gave them His Body and Blood under the appearances of bread and wine. Jesus decided to make use of the elements that were placed first in the tabernacle in the desert and later in the Jerusalem Temple. He fed the apostles with the new manna, the new bread of the Presence, as a sign of His love and His new Covenant.

Now it is easier to understand why it was so important for Christ to be born in Bethlehem (*Bejtlehem*), or the "house of Bread." When the Son of God was born in Bethlehem, this little town became the new House of God, the new

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20 "Three times a year all your men shall appear before the Lord, the LORD God of Israel" (Exodus 34 : 23). The Hebrew words of this order can also be translated as: "Three times each year your men will see the Lord's face."

21 Cf. TbMen 29a.

22 Cf. B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist...*, op. cit., p. 130-131.

Temple: from God's point of view, from that moment on, the Temple was no longer in Jerusalem, because it was Jesus who was now the New Temple.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Elijah

After Moses, who has come to play a large role in Jewish consciousness as the prophet who brought manna from heaven to the wandering Israelites, another figure related to bread was the prophet Elijah, who lived in the ninth century BC. We read in the First Book of Kings that during the prophet's escape from king Ahab and his wife Jezebel "ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the stream" (1 Kings 17 : 6). The Israelites had found themselves in a similar situation in the desert several centuries before: in the morning, God sent them the manna, and in the evening He sent them meat (see: Exodus 16 : 12). Thus we can say that in a way, Elijah experienced what the Hebrews had experienced much earlier on the road to the Promised Land. It was not surprising, then, that the Jewish tradition ties the figure of Elijah not only to the desert manna, but also to the new manna that the Jews were expecting in the messianic times. According to this tradition, not only would the new Messiah appear as the new Moses, but he would be accompanied by Elijah, who would show the manna that had hitherto been hidden before the world. It is also worth noting that it was Moses and Elijah who appeared next to Christ during His transfiguration on Mount Tabor. St. Luke writes that these Old Testament figures spoke to Jesus about His "departure" or "exit" (Luke 9 : 31), which in the Greek text is described by the term *eksodos*. This detail, which simultaneously refers to Christ's death and to the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, along with the information that Jesus' face shone (Matthew 17 : 2) fits into the overall image encompassing the reality of the "bread of the face" in the tabernacle.

Elijah's relationship to the manna is significant, because the name of this Old Testament prophet is heard on Golgotha. It is there that one can hear the following words from those staring at the crucified Christ: "This one is calling for Elijah. [...] Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to save him" (Matthew 27 47, 49); "Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, „Aha! You who

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<sup>23</sup> Strictly speaking, from the time of the Incarnation the Temple becomes superfluous. Jesus says of Himself: "I say to you, something greater than the temple is here" (Matthew 12 : 6).



would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross" (Mark 15 : 29–30). By means of these derisive words, these people demanded that Elijah take Jesus off the Cross and thus bring His body to the ground. One can conclude, then, that the crowd unknowingly confirmed the expectations of the above mentioned Jewish tradition, which predicted that Elijah would participate in the distribution of the manna in the Messianic times.<sup>24</sup> Jesus on the Cross is this new manna; it is His Body which we receive at Mass, as the fruit of His holy Sacrifice on Golgotha.

## 6. "Daily" Bread in the Lord's Prayer

The word "bread" appears only once in the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6 : 11; Luke 11 : 3). What is this "daily bread" that Christ speaks of? The word "daily" means something that is very basic and necessary for normal functioning. But was this what Jesus meant? The problem is that today we do not have access to Christ's original Hebrew and Aramaic words. We only have the Greek text of the Gospel, in which we can find the Greek word *epiousios*, or "give us this day our *epiousios* bread." Moreover, this term appears neither in Greek literature nor in the entire Bible, with the exception of the Lord's Prayer in the above-mentioned Gospels.

St. Jerome, who translated the Bible from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into Latin, wondered how to translate the Greek word *epiousios*.<sup>25</sup> He noticed that this term was composed of two words: *Epi*, – "above," "beyond," or "most" – as well as *ousia* – "substance." Using his knowledge of both Greek and Hebrew, Jerome understood that the Son of God spoke of bread that was at the same time common and supernatural.<sup>26</sup> That was also how those who heard the Lord's Prayer from Jesus Himself must have understood it. They would probably have noticed the connection between the words "our daily bread" and manna, which was both common, since it appeared in the desert

24 Elijah's disciple, Elisha, miraculously multiplied bread for a hundred people (1 Kings 4 : 38–44). There is a clear similarity between this event and the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves by Christ (Mark 6 : 30–44).

25 Cf. B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, op. cit., p. 93–97; B. Reese, *Give Us This Day Our "Supersubstantial" Bread*, "Adoremus Bulletin" 13 (2007) nr 5, <https://adoremus.org/2007/07/15/give-us-this-day-our-daily-quot-supersubstantial-quot-bread/>.

26 Cf. *Matthew 1–13*, ed. by M. Simonetti, Downers Grove 2001, p. 135 (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament, 1a).

everyday, and supernatural, because it had supernatural properties. Thus one can conclude that Christ's words about "daily bread" in the Lord's Prayer referred to the new manna, which, in accordance with His foreshadowing, was to be His Body.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

When Adam hears about bread that he must obtain "by the sweat of [his] face," amidst thorns, and amidst toil and suffering, God had already foreseen a new type of bread for the world: the Bread of Life. This bread was foretold not only in the Garden of Eden, but also by Melchizedek's bread; by means of the manna in the desert as well as the bread of the Presence in the tabernacle and in the hopes that the Jewish tradition had placed in Moses and Elijah. Naturally, Jesus knew of all this. When He said that He was the Bread of Life, he made this expression part of God's design, which was gradually unraveled over the centuries. Since the beginning of creation, bread was present in God's plan as a form for the Body of the Son of God. This divine plan reached its culmination in the Eucharist.

## Abstract

### Why Did Jesus Refer to Himself as the "Bread of Life"?

Why did Jesus refer to Himself as the "Bread of Life"? Obviously, He intended to give us the gift of Himself in the Eucharist. But why did He choose the form of bread? Beginning with the first use of the word "bread" in the Masoretic Text of the Book of Genesis and the etymological meaning of this term, one can see how God was preparing His Chosen People for the real Presence of His Son in the Most Blessed Sacrament. The bread offered to Abraham by Melchizedek as a gesture of blessing, the manna in the desert as bread from heaven, the bread of Presence in the tent of meeting and in the Jerusalem temple as a unique manifestation of God's Covenant and love for His People, as well as the messianic expectations of Jewish tradition are all realities expressing the unfolding plan of God

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27 Having the intention to maintain the two meanings of the word *epiousios* – "daily" and "supernatural" – St. Jerome did this in the following way. He translated the sentence: "Give us this day our *epiousios* bread" in the Gospel according to St. Matthew as "Give us this day our *cotidianum* bread." Whereas in the Gospel according to St. Luke he translated the same sentence as: "give us this day our *supersubstantialem* bread." Furthermore, in the third century St. Cyprian of Carthage noticed that the Bread that Jesus speaks of in the Lord's Prayer had two dimensions: common and supernatural. Cf. M. Simonetti, *Matthew 1–13*, op. cit., p. 135.

in reference to the Body of Christ, present in the Eucharist. This plan reached its climax during the Last Supper in view of the future ultimate Sacrifice of the Lord on the Cross.

**Keywords:** bread; Bread of Life; bread of the Presence; Blessed Sacrament; Elijah; Eucharist; Covenant; manna; Melchizedek; Moses; show-bread; temple; sacrifice.

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