

# An Expository Analysis of the Bread of Life Metaphor in John 6:35 and its Implication for Stomach Infrastructural Taxonomy in Nigeria.

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## KEY WORDS

| Starvation | Poverty | Socio-Political Agitations |  
| Criminal Activities | Stomach Infrastructure | Stomach Infrastructural Taxonomy |

## ABSTRACT

In all human travails, starvation appears to be the most worrisome. As a Yoruba adage “Bi ebi ba ti kuro ninu ise, ise buse”. Translated literarily, it means whenever food is removed from problem of poverty, that poverty is defeated. It is no longer news that Nigeria in the contemporary times has become an amphitheater of socio-political agitations, culminating in all sorts of criminal activities such as armed robbery, kidnapping, ritual killings, internet fraud, prostitution and all sorts of social vices. Looking inwardly, however, starvation cannot be ruled out as the basis for such socio-political unrest because “a hungry man is an angry man”. While the political class are found wanting in providing conducive environment for comfort by their promise and fail attitudes, others have been engaging in what they termed, “stomach infrastructures” in Nigeria. Since its inception in 2014, the rate at which stomach infrastructure is being rampantly engaged is no doubt becoming a taxonomy in Nigeria. This paper examines the historical background of the bread of life metaphor in John 6:35 and applies it in expository form for the contemporary Nigerian context. Findings reveal that Jesus’ audience had been subjected to acute poverty by the powers that be and were desperate to survive by all means. The paper concludes that giving peanuts to citizens from our collective patrimony might be doing more harm than good to the peaceful co-existence of the Nigeria nation..

## INTRODUCTION

Donald Guthrie, in his New Testament Introduction, devoted nearly one hundred pages to the many peculiar issues involved in the background to the Gospel of John (238). Like the synoptic Gospels (Scroggie:83), John contains the story of John the Baptist, call of the disciples, Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand etc. But unlike the synoptic Gospels’ John gives much treatment to words and phrases such as “Life, light, love, belief, truth and I am”. The bread of life metaphor is first of the seven I am symbolic sayings of Jesus in John’s Gospel.

The metaphorical I – am saying of Jesus provokes the reader to transcend his or her regular boundaries between linear time and eternity, between life and death and between

real and ephemeral. The metaphors transfer eternity into this life and the above into below. According to Olivia.

“To reach beyond or above the earth, we have to transcend time and space, our individual context and limited visual horizon. To overcome the obstacle of confined space we can rely on metaphors since their key faculty is to transport (1)”

### **Background to the Bread of life metaphor.**

Earlier, Jesus fed a hungry crowd of five thousand men with only five loaves and two fish. After all had been satisfactorily fed, twelve baskets of full of scraps were collected. It is little wonder that “They were intending to come and

take him” by force, to make him the King (John 6:15). The food they had just tasted from the power they had just seen was more than they could possibly understand.

When Jesus saw that the crowd was about to force him to be their King, He “withdrew again to the mountain by himself alone”(John 6:15). Mathew and Mark both recorded that Jesus first sent the Twelve Disciples away in a boat and then dismissed the crowd (Mt.14:22, Mk 6:45). But John simply stated that “Jesus ... withdrew again to the mountain by himself alone (John 6:15). Then, when evening came, his Disciples headed back toward Capernaum in a boat but not uneventfully. As they were crossing the lake in the darkness, a violent storm arose and threatened to sink their boat (John 6:16-18). With terror on their faces, they saw Jesus walking on the surface of the water, who upon entering their boat brought back an overwhelming relief on arrival at Capernaum.

The second day, the crowd which had followed Jesus earlier and had eaten of the loaves and fish began to look for him. Knowing that he was from Capernaum, home – base during his adult ministry, the crowd headed there in boats to find him. Upon arriving in Capernaum, they found Jesus spoke to a more physically determined crowd, an audience who were more desperate to feed their stomach much more than their soul.

### EVALUATION OF MOTIVE AND PRIORITIES

Samuel M, Ngewa (A scholar and a pastor who lectures at the Nairobi Evangelical graduate school of Theology, Kenya), divides the dialogue between Jesus and the crowd into six “scenes” (108). The six scenes are, the approval of God (John 6:25); the work of God (John 6:28);

the bread of God (John 6:30); the will of God (John 6:34); the son of God (John 6:42); and the everlasting enjoyment of God (John 6:52). Five of the scenes were introduced by a question from the crowd. For the purpose of this work, we shall follow up to scene four

The first salvo fired from the crowd was “Rabbi, when did you come here” (John 6:25). This question appears reasonably gentle and innocent. If the motive for the question came from a sincere heart, one is likely to see it coming from loving friends. According to Boice, “The people sought to use him (Jesus) as they saw fit because he gave them what they wanted (in this case bread), (453-5). From Jesus’ response in John 6:25, the question appears a subtle bribe to get more. Jesus was not moved by the crowd’s platonic greetings. With an abruptness that brings to mind the way he responded to Nicodemus (Jn.3:3), Jesus immediately came to term with the crowd: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes but for the food which endures to eternal life.....(6:26 – 27)”. Going by the observation of Ngewa:

Jesus contrasted what is prohibited with what is commanded. The former involves “Food that spoils”, while the latter refers to food that endures to eternal life. The crowd were to stop working for the food that will go bad, and instead work for the food that will last... (109)

With Jesus prohibition, awkward positive command and an emphasis on Jewish law, the crowds want to know all that is necessary to please God. “What must we do to do the works God requires? Surburg opines that, “the Rabbis taught that observance of the law was the only way to obtain life after death (65). They were actually expecting Jesus to give

them a list of work that would curry God's favour. Rather than releasing a comprehensive list as being demanded, Jesus gave only one, that is, "to exercise faith in Him" (6:29). We must not forget the original demand was what was required to gain eternal life. Jesus' response was therefore without prejudice to doing good works. What he was trying to correct was the Jewish concept that one has to do A,B and C to obtain eternal life.

The question in scene three was meant directly to authenticate the identity of Jesus if they were to have faith in him, "What miraculous sign will you give that we men see it and believe you? (John 6:30). To strengthen their case, a comparison analysis of what Moses did in the wilderness was dangled at Jesus (John 6:31-32). In Exodus 16, Moses had given their ancestors manna from heaven after a list of codified set of law. If Moses could do that, what can you do for us to believe you? Jesus, having corrected the crowds' misunderstanding of Moses (John 6:32), responded that God was now giving them something better and greater than the manna of Moses, the "true bread".

In scene four, there was a change of "Modus operandi". After Jesus had described true, life-giving bread in John 6:33, there was no need for any further question, the crowd made a request, "Sir, from now on give us the bread (John 6:34). This kind of response from the crowd could be liken to the Samaritan woman in her conversation with Jesus (John 4:15). As the woman asked for living water, the crowd asked Jesus to give them some of the bread of which he spoke. Jesus then used their request as an opportunity to teach the deeper meaning of life.

## THE METAPHORICAL BREAD

Of the seventy one verses in John 6, the whole lot is thematically dominated by food (Scott:1176). In the first "I am saying of Jesus" (6:35), the author establishes his major point through three cycles of repetitive teaching (vs. 35- 40; 41-51 and 52-59). Each cycle contains closely related or identical truths about the certainty, extent and subject of salvation as well as a variation on the bread of life motif (Porter:2)

The unique focus of the first of the three cycles of teaching in the discourse (vs 35 40) is on the father's will in the salvation of man. This cycle teaches that salvation is certain and complete for who have been given by the father to the son. In verse 36 however, Jesus mainly reveals that those in the crowd, seeking for physical bread did not believe him. To this, Pink opines that "It should be noted that this crowd of Jews had in fact asked this bread from Christ (vs. 34, "sir, give us this bread always). But the request alone was not enough. Christ knew they did not believe in Him (328).

We must not forget that it was the request of the crowd that prompted Jesus' response "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believe in me shall never thirst" (vs. 35). The claim to satisfy hunger and thirst is a follow up to a messianic theme from the Old Testament (Kostenberger, 210). In Isaiah 49:10 and 55:1, both speak of a time when hunger and thirst shall be a thing of the past. Jesus is hereby declaring himself to be the fulfillment of the prophecy. But according to Richards

... the crowd was in fact motivated by materialistic rather than spiritual concerns. What counts with the crowd is the now, not the hereafter, biological life, not spiritual life..... Their point (in asking for sign,

6:30) is that Moses provided manna for 40 years. If Jesus were to continuously provide bread, they would certainly believe in Him (234).

Jesus was indeed claiming to be the only permanent satisfaction for the human desire for life. But the attainment of this satisfaction must hinge on belief (Jenney, 316). The destination of this term however varies between the people's use of it (vs. 30) and Jesus' use (vs. 35). According to Tenney, "To them" belief meant acceptance of his competence on the basis of miracles; to him it meant commitment, not on the basis of the miracles but on trust in his person (315). The slowness of the crowd to understand brought about the emphasis "I am the bread of life" (6:35). Keener observes that.

Jewish expositors had already often used manna as a symbol for spiritual food, God's law, or Torah/wisdom/word. The dead would be raised to eternal life on the last day, the day of the Lord, when God would transform the world and inaugurate his eternal kingdom (280).

In essence, Jesus is saying, "I am the true life – giving bread we have been talking about. This bread, as explains by Ngewa, is characterized by life, and as a result gives life. It shares what it is with those who eat it. Jesus later describes this bread as living bread (John 6:51) (113). The Jews wanted a perpetual supply of the bread with the understanding that this bread would be much more superior to the manna their forefathers ate. As much as their assumption was right they never realized that this bread was not meant for the stomachs alone but much more for their souls.

## STOMACH INFRASTRUCTURE IN NIGERIA

Advanced learner's dictionary describes infrastructure as the basic systems and services that are necessary for a country or an organization such as buildings, transport, water and power supplies for administrative purposes (615). Onwuka, while contributing to debate on the cable news on February 15, 2022 at 9:10am opines that "Stomach infrastructure quietly crept into our political life in Ekiti state when PDP's (People Democratic Party) candidate, Ayodele Fayose mobilized voter with food items (13). As a result of endemic poverty, the PDP candidate reduced the vulnerable electorate to the gridlock of stomach infrastructure and successfully defeated the then – incumbent APC's (All Progressive Congress) governor Kayode Fayemi. And until now, politicians are handing over to Nigerians the dividends of democracy in the form of cash by exploiting poverty to mobilize voters with food items such as bags of rice, semovita and even gari are usually customized, packaged strategically with the image of political candidates and the parties they represent.

In his own contribution, Tunji Olaopa writing on the issue in the Guardian News Paper on June 5, 2019 said, Fayose may be shamefully exploiting the base existential needs of the electorate to further his own political ambition, it was indeed an unconscious reference to a book written by French political scientist Jean – Francois Bayart, titled "Politique du ventre" translated in English as "The politics of the Belly". According to him,

The argument of the groundbreaking work is that given the patrimonial and hence corrupt, nature of power, African politics extends the metaphor of eating and the

belly into a solid framework of clientelist vertical relationship - between clients and patrons - that consumes national resources.

As far as Jeans was concerned, this type of politics is actually an effective governance model that is autochthonous to Africa, defined by the collusion of the legal and the illegal, the merger of the public and the private enterprises, the prominence of corruptive tendencies like bribery to facilitate transactions, and the private aggrandizement of public funds and resources. In the Nigeria context, all of the above speaks to the necessities of surviving a hostile socio - political environment, and using politics as a means to do so. Because of the need for the citizens to survive the endemic poverty outside of the capacity of the government, greedy politicians weigh in with palliatives that are just temporary and are not even infrastructure at all.

On November 5, 2022, the Vanguard news papers reported that Governor Wike of River state announced the second batch of one hundred thousand (100,000) political advisers to help his administration “finish well”. The governor who had earlier appointed the first batch of one hundred thousand of such on November 3, 2022 brought the number to two hundred thousand. And with thirty thousand Naira monthly allowance (30,000), about 42, 127 billion Naira is expected to be spent between the time of appointment and May 29, 2023 when the governor is expected to finish his tenure. The huge amount includes the 50,000 each of another 59 constituency and local government area liaison officers so appointed.

Governor Wike said the appointments fulfill his declaration on the Rebids I flyovers when it was inaugurated that he would begin to implement his policy of stomach infrastructure, saying the engagement will put money in the

pockets of rivers people. On the duties of the appointees, they were to interface with rivers people to know what they are saying their assessment of government projects and policies, whether positive or negative, and feedback to his office through the constituency and ward liaison officers. There are three things that raise concern. The time of the implementation (at the twilight of his eight years tenure), the acceptance of 30,000 (the minimum wage with the rate of inflation in the country) and the usefulness of their duties to the socio - economic development of Rivers state (whistle blowing).

In spite of the adoption of stomach infrastructure by various politicians, poverty has refused to be placated in the country. A report from Sami Tunji in the punch Newspaper of 18th November 2022, titled Nigeria’s poverty exceeds World Bank projection, five states lead, the National Bureau of statistics disclosed that 133million Nigerians are presently multi-dimensionally poor. The poverty index offers a multivariate form of poverty assessment, identifying deprivation across health, education, living standards, work and shocks. Quoting the stician - general of the federation and CEO of the Nigeria Bureau of statistics, Semiu Adeniran, the 133 million poor Nigerians exceeded the 95: 1 million projected by the World Bank in 2022.

Follow up to the above staggering reality the editorial board opinion of the punch Newspaper of 21st November 2022, titled Nigeria is losing the battle against poverty, said,

... The just released National Bureau of statistics’ 2022 multidimensional poverty index shows that 133 Million Nigerians, representing 62.9 percent of the population, are living in poverty, plagued by insecurity, energy insufficiency and monetary penury. Buhari and other regime actors should stop living in denial, and fashion new realistic strategies to stop the poverty rampage.

It said further that

The states should prioritise the provision of rural infrastructure, design autonomous, self – reliant economic programmes emphasizing private investment, agriculture, SMES, Job creation and exports.

### EXPOSING FALSE MOTIVES

This paper would not be complete without putting into scrutiny three actions of Jesus' crowds vis-à-vis Nigeria political class and victims of stomach infrastructures. The actions under review are found in John 6:2,15 and 24. This presupposes that the bread of life metaphor cannot be treated in isolation of the entire chapter 6 of the gospel of John.

In John 6:2, three imperfect tenses are used to describe the actions of Jesus' crowd's. These are "was following", "they were seeing", and "he was doing". The "following" was not an instantaneous one. Probably, the crowd had been following Jesus even before he crossed the Sea of Galilee. The reason for their vigorous following is given as because "they were seeing" what they were seeing were the miraculous signs that Jesus was doing. The picture of their action in the verse may be painted like, "Jesus doing> the crowd seeing> the crowd following" (Ngewa:100). In his own words, Bruce McLarty opines that:

Verse 2 contains three verbs in the Greek imperfect tense which indicate continuous action. In other words, the meaning of the passage is "a great multitude kept coming because they continued to see what Jesus continue to do (41).

As it is, verse 2 only sets in motion the original intention of the crowd in "doing, seeing and following", which is anything but genuine.

Ngewa captures this well by saying that, "their (crowd) motivation was not as good as if they were following Jesus out of love, but nevertheless they longed to be with him" (100).

In John 6:15, we are told that, "Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him King by force, withdrew again to mountain by himself". Why on earth would they want to force Kingship on a non contestant? That answer may not be known unless the background to this action is digested.

A detailed inclusion by John after the crowd's action "seeing and following" is that "the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand" (6:4). The cleansing of the temple had also taken place when the Passover of the temple was also at hand" (2:13a). This little detail might appear minor, it could lead to why so many people came to see and hear Jesus that day.

The Passover season in first – century Israel was a time when Patriotic passions ran high. Each year the Jews would gather in Jerusalem and wait to see if the Messiah would arrive that year to overthrow their Roman rulers and restore the free independent Kingdom of Israel. Consequently, when Jesus excited the people of Galilee by performing miracles and the Passover was approaching, the Jews were filled with strong expectations that Jesus might be the King of Israel they had been expecting for many years. McLarty said:

When the five thousand men (John 6:10) followed Jesus that day, they were not just casual listeners who came because of curiosity. Instead, they were hot – blooded Jewish fighters who were ready to follow the Messiah into battle. Farmers dropped their hoes and shopkeepers closed their business in order to go to the far side of the Sea of Galilee to hear Jesus (42).

Continue further, McLarty observed that:

... let us imagine what the five thousand

were thinking that day. Once they declared Jesus to be their King, what could they expect to happen? Having just eaten their fill of Jesus’ miracle food, they probably expected Jesus to find a sword somewhere and multiply it to equip this ragtag army of farmers and shopkeepers (42).

Such intention of forcing him to be their King was not to be taken lightly. If they had succeeded in making Jesus their King, the powers of Rome would have seen their actions as a declaration of war. It would have ended abruptly God’s plan of salvation through Jesus. After all, in order for one King to be enthroned, another must be dethroned.

Beside the miraculous signs, the crowd revealed another false intention by searching for Jesus in John 6:24. They were desperate enough to ask a flattering question, “Rabbi, when did you get here? (6:25) Frederickson describes the question as a petulant (127). It was so petulant to a level of bad tempered and unreason able, especially because you cannot do or have what you want (Wehmeier: 871). We will appreciate this when we observed that Jesus did not greet the crowd with tender words of appreciation and acceptance but immediately rebuked them in John 6:26 – 27. Simply put, the crowd was not after Jesus’ welfare nor were they interested in the value of what he was saying. They were after their stomach.

Compare the intentions of the above crowd to the political crowds in Nigeria, does the stomach infrastructures translate to the acceptance of the political gladiators? The answer is a resounding no. The Nigeria electorates are very much aware that the stomach infrastructures are designed as a deception at the beginning of campaigns and towards the tail ends of political tenures. The former is strategist to win elections and the latter to own applauds and dig a booby trap for the incoming administration, especially when it

is from the hitherto opposition candidates.

By this strategic deception, it is not going to be an exaggeration to prove that the famous quote by Mario Cuomo, the 52nd Governor of New York State in the United States is being manifested in the Nigeria Politics. Mario once opines that, “Politicians campaign in poetry, but they govern in Prose” (Jide Ojo: np). Nigeria politicians are always aware of the parlous state of financial resources available before throwing their hats into the political ring to contest, only to get elected and bring up mega excuses on why things cannot be done as promised during campaigns, hence the need for stomach infrastructures which they think is the most important need of the electorates.

Collection of such fraudulent gifts was therefore not an acceptance of the political elites. Inwardly, they knew the gifts are not purchase from private earnings. They are sourced from what should ordinarily belongs to all of us together. Moreover, if they refused to collect, they may never get anything again.

## CONCLUSION

The paper understudies the bread of life metaphor in John 6:35. Jesus had provided, miraculously, food for hungry crowds in the course of his ministry. The crowds before the appearance of Jesus, had both political and religious leaders, who apparently neglected the basic needs of the citizens. With the sudden emergence of another leader who appears to understand the plight of the people, attempt was made to make Jesus their King ostensibly for their continuous enjoyment of daily needs. They were however shocked to hear that the food they were after cannot lead to satisfaction except they have in their lives, the giver of the food and not the food itself.

Comparatively, Nigeria leaders were trying to provide a kind of succor to the lingering problem of hunger in the land. The kind of succor is called stomach infrastructure. These are in two phases, political and spiritual stomach infrastructures. Unlike Jesus' sincerity of agitation of permanent succor for the people, Nigeria's own leaders were temporary and for selfish reasons. Any provision of infrastructure that will stand the test of time must look towards the people being self – reliant. It is better to teach people how to fish than to give people fish to eat. While the latter is not lasting, the former would be able to stand the test of time. This is what would ease the peace and socio-political development in the country. It has also been observed that the surging crowd had been following Jesus before gathering to eat from the miraculous bread and fish. Were they lazy or busybody men? The Palestinian land was agro-based economy. Though the Israelites were under the imperial Rome, we have no evidence to believe that they were restricted from their nomadic and farming businesses. How then were they able to see what Jesus was doing before following him if they had means of livelihood?

Several passages both in the old and the new testaments of the Bible warn people against laziness and indolence. Proverbs 6:6-11 is particularly interesting. Lazy people are described as sluggard and compared to ants that in spite of being leaderless, were industrious enough to have and still store up provisions against future scarcity. Individuals with gift of speech and brains, as huge as a whole anthill, were being sarcastically advised to bend over, peer down and learn from the lowly ants without which will result into poverty, crime and arm begging.

In an agrarian environment such as Israel

and Nigeria, the bible does not accept “lack of nothing to do” as excuses for depending on others to live a fulfilled life. The writer of Ecclesiastes 9:9-10 and 11:5-6 admonishes his readers to enjoy the gift of God in the midst of life's perplexities; encourages them to be fully engaged in earthly occupation with utmost zeal and concentration in and out of seasons. The counsel here is for them to make efforts and leave the rest to God.

Of course, compassionate leaders, who will give exemplary directions, are needed in every society. Leaders like Jesus whose only goal is the wellbeing of his followers cannot but be sought for. The wisdom gotten from the ants in proverbs 6:6-11 is enough to persuade everyone that without leaders, one can still live a fulfilled life. Three leadership synonyms-commander, overseer and ruler-are used to emphasise the leadership lack of the ants, yet, this does not stop them from diligently pursuing their daily activities for the sake of now and future.

It is this kind of leadership spirit that apostle Paul invoked when warning the Thessalonian Christians against idleness and meddlesomeness in 2 Thessalonians, 3:6-10, culminating in his command, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat”. We will recall that Paul had earlier warned them in I Thessalonian 2:9 and 4:11 which apparently had not been taken seriously. Coming hard on them this time around, Paul qualifies idleness as living at someone else's expense and meddling in someone else's affairs (2 Thessalonian 3:6-8a). Paul points out how they lived by example, working with their own hands, and refusing to be a burden, though they had right to do so, as their leaders. As an African proverb states, “The hen eats where she scratches and the sleeping hawk does not catch fish”.

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