

The Motif "Food of Life" in Biblical and Extra-Biblical Traditions

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Introduction

As in most eras and societies, no subject reaches to the heart of everyday life in the biblical times than that of food.¹

This statement is equally true for us today, especially in the African sub-Saharan region where malnutrition rate is still very high and, where there is a glaring evidence of hunger in the midst of plenty. For people in this region and, indeed, for all human beings whatever concerns food is a matter of life and death. But the question is: What food truly satisfies the human hunger? The answer for the Christian, I suppose, is found in the Fourth Gospel (cf. 6:35,48) where Jesus calls himself "the Bread of Life." This claim of Jesus is unprecedented and goes far beyond what we know in the history of ancient and contemporary religions, including Judaism.

Nevertheless, it stands attested that food is also a leading motif in other ancient religions, which depict the deity as providing the produce of the earth by giving rain and dew, sunshine and fertility to crops, thus assigning indirectly divine origin to food. However, not every food in ancient culture is celebrated as having divine origin. Those crops that are said to be given by the deity receive special attention and are celebrated in epics as chief foodstuff of the people. In appreciation people give such crops back to the gods in sacrifice and in return are invested with immortality and eternal youth.

This study therefore seeks to understand the motif "food/bread of life" in the Biblical and extra-Biblical traditions through a comparative analysis, the scanty evidence notwithstanding. It is hoped that the result may shed more light on the overall understanding of the Johannine formula.

1. Concept of Food

Since the idea of food connotes varieties of items – meat, grains, fruit, vegetables – in Biblical tradition, it is important to identify from on set what will be considered as food for the purpose of this study. The Hebrew word *léhem* (Gk. *artos*) bread (grain, loaf) is seen as the primary and ordinary food in Biblical times (cf. Gen 3:19; 21:14; Ex 16:3; Dt 8:3; Am 8:11). It is so at the centre of every meal and banquet (Eccl 10:19) that Hebrew lexicon without reservations identifies bread and food with the same word *léhem* (cf. *NRSV*, Dt 23:5; Num 21:5; Ps 147:9; Prov 6:8; 30:25; Is 65:25; and Ps 37:25; Is 58:7). The fact that bread is a staple or primary food of the Biblical world and the ancient Near East in general does not

¹ J. Cassidy, "Food" in Madeleine S. & J.Lane Miller, eds., *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life*. New York³1982, 40-48, 41.

imply that it serves this purpose for every people everywhere. There could only be as many staple foods and chief crops as there are peoples. For the Igbo and some other nations of the West African sub-region, for example, *yam* the king of all crops will be food *par excellence*, followed by coco-yam, cassava, millet, banana etc. One major characteristic of staple food is that it is not emergency food. Just as bread so is yam not food of nomads. It is more than fruit, which can be plucked from a tree by the way side. It is food that involves the combined effort of heaven (rain, dew, sun), and the mother earth (Ps 104:13-14) and, above all, the work of human hands.

The essence of food is to sustain, preserve and strengthen life-force. Food is so important to life that it can be identified with life itself. For Johannine Jesus, "to eat" can mean, "to live" (Jn 6:51,57), contrary to the slogan of the Epicureans (cf. Is 22:13; 1Cor 15:32). Basden once observed that food is the clearest means to test out life in the Igbo who is sick. For to restrict his diet "is likely to make him believe that he is too ill to recover, so he just dies!"² The statement may be exaggerated, but it stresses the importance of food to life. It agrees completely with the maxim *afo di mkpa* (the stomach counts supreme).

Aristotle, the philosopher, made a remarkable observation that food nourishes by being converted into the substance of the individual nourished, and gives increase by reason of its quantity (cf. *De Anima*, ii; see also 1Sam 28:20; 1Kgs 19:5-8). It stands to reason, however, that the quality of life(-force) does not only depend on the quantity (*mass*), but more so on the nature and quality of food taken. It is believed that the food which derive from otherworldly is far more superior to the terrestrial food (cf. Ex 16:4; Neh 9:15; Ps 105:40; Wis 16:20; also Dt 8:3; Wis 16:25,26). The formula "food of life" presupposes that not all food can impart life. While some impart life others bring death (cf. Gen 2:17) or defilement as we see in the Old Testament register of food to be taken or not (cf. Lev 11; Dt 4). There are also food not destined for use in the ancient Near East (*ANET*, 10) as there are food taboos in African societies.

Food is essential for life-sustenance, and this is expressed in various ways. From personal experience of this writer, sick people and children who refuse food are persuaded by nurses and parents to eat hearty meal in the evening lest they eat in dream. And Is 29:8 confirms that the need for food spill over in dream. Such belief is also found in Akkadian tradition.³ The need for food gives occasion to exploiters to create artificial scarcity in the society, or offer adulterated foodstuff to consumers. Those who have power to provide food to others wield great influence over them as we find in the story of Joseph (Gen 41-44) and between Esau and Jacob with the one exchanging his birthright for food from the other (Gen 25:29-34). Jacob also exploits his father's hunger to obtain the blessing meant for his brother (Gen 27) and, ironically, the blessing partly concerns food and power (Gen 27:28-29).

In all cultures the power to control food supply and distribution is always in the hands of the wealthy few who are more concerned with personal gain than the well-being of the suffering poor (cf. Am 8:5-6). One can hear Amos cry out: "Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, ... but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!" (Am 6:4-6; cf. Is 22:13). All said, it is the poor who are condemned to hunger. I do not think we need the old Akkadian text, which says of the poor: "I have never had enough to eat" (*CAD*, 1/1:241,9). For I recall how the Igbo will exchange greetings with a neighbour at hard times. To the question "How are you?" He simply retorts: "Very well, only for hunger!" There is no doubt that Israel's poor must have

² G.T. Basden, *Niger Ibos*. London 1938, 270.

³ Cf. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (CAD)*, 1/1:249.

known such hunger experience that the Torah enjoins that the poor be provided food. They are given free hand to pick and eat ears of grain (Dt 23:24-25; 24:19-22; Ruth 2).

2. Notion of Life

“Life” defies simple definition. But in our everyday understanding it is the concrete existence of all creatures in their variety of manifestations – movement, activity, functioning, and need. However, Ringgren thinks that life can especially refer in sacrificial scenes to both the sum of all the vital forces and to various concrete forms of provisions (grain, food, milk, water, etc.).⁴ In the Old Testament tradition, life has a wide range of meanings, from good health or well-being (cf. Prov 3:17-18; Mal 2:5) to immortality (Is 65:22). Life does not only mean to stay alive, but also to enjoy a full rich and happy life. To promise life therefore is to promise the good things of life (cf. 2Kgs 18:31-32). This is why the Deuteronomic teacher has to urge Israel to choose life (Dt 30:19; cf. 4Esd 7:129) as *summum bonum*. This presupposes that possession of life involves freedom of choice. For the African, “life” ranks above all other things, *ndu bu isi* – life is supreme, says the Igbo. The Egyptians demonstrate the same belief by having life come first almost always in the fixed formula of listing of highest goods.⁵

Life was fundamentally regarded in the Old Testament as something temporal (cf. Ps 16:10-11; 56:12-13; Job 33:28-30). Later in its history, a total evolution expunged “life” of its temporalness, gave it a future connotation and transported it to the realm of the supernatural. Thus, life became “eternal life”, reserved for those who will enjoy a risen life in God’s presence (cf. Dan 12:2). By the New Testament period, life has become almost synonymous with eternal life, and can only be attained in Jesus Christ who does not only bestow eternal life (Jn 4:14; 10:28; cf. 6:27,68) but is himself life (Jn 14:6).

In ancient religions possession of life is fundamental to the nature of the deity. For the OT YHWH alone is essentially the living God (Josh 3:10; 1Sam 17:26,36; 2Kgs 19:4,16; Ps 42:3(2); 84:3(2); Is 37:4,17; Jer 10:10; Hos 2:1[1:10]). Hence it ascribes the source of life to God (Dt 32:39-40; Ps 35:10), and, thus, sees life as God’s blessing upon human beings. The foreign gods are mere lifeless images *’elil* (cf. 1Chr 16:26; Is 2:8; Ezk 30:13; Hab 2:18; Ps 96:5; also Ps 115:5; 135:16) and worthless things *hebel* (2Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5). The OT contention aside, the Egyptian Horus, the great sky-god, for instance, is called “creator of life for all” and Hathor, the sky-goddess, is known as the one “who guides the life of the living”.⁶ For the African mind a lifeless deity is no deity at all.

It must be pointed out that by attributing the source of life to Jesus the NT also accentuates Jesus’ divine nature.

3. Food and Life

The story of origin of human life shows that after life has been given by God it is to be sustained by eating of the tree of life, which could impart immortality (Gen 2:9; 3:22,24). For

⁴ H. Ringgren, “chāyāh” in G.J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT) IV*, Grand Rapids 1977, 324-344, 325.

⁵ Cf. H. Ringgren, “chāyāh”, 325.

⁶ Cf. H. Ringgren, “chāyāh”, 325 nn.5, 6.

the NT, especially the Fourth Gospel, eternal life is attained by eating of the bread of life, Jesus himself.

The link between food and life goes back to creation. The God who bestowed life is also the God who supplies food to sustain life (Gen 1:29-30; cf. 2:15-16). The deity who bestows life also guarantees that the recipient of life be provided for. *Chi nyere nwata ji awom nyere ya mbazo o ji egwu ya*, says an Igbo proverb. The validity of this principle was communicated to Israel through constant presentation of the promised land in terms of its fertility, i.e. as a land that guaranteed regular food supply, a land that held great potential for life-sustenance (Dt 8:7-10). Consequently, the destruction of crops or of land that yields them is destruction of life itself. When such act is divine, then God has threatened a punishment (cf. Am 2:9; Dt 28:21,23; also Jer 28:53-57). In many cultures, especially in Africa, destruction of crops and/or farmland is tantamount to abomination that must not be left unattended. Hence Sacrifices must be offered to placate and cleanse the mother earth.

The close association of food with life is expressed in some ethos, including African, in which when life is lost food is neither prepared nor taken by the deceased person's family members (cf. 2Sam 1:12; 3:35; Jer 16:7-9; also 1Sam 31:13). Where food is taken at all it must be brought from outside by neighbours.⁷ The link is even more expressive in a custom known to the Old Testament as well as traditional African societies in which food is placed on the tomb/graves of the deceased persons with a strong desire that the dead continue to live or at least be kept alive in the minds of his family (cf. Bar 6:26; Sir 30:18; Tob 4:17).⁸

Another important aspect of food is not only that it preserves and strengthens life-force, it also fosters communal life and life-bonds. It is a wide spread belief that those who partake in shared meals will be unwilling to harm one another. Hence the tragedy of Judas Iscariot (Mt 26:23; Mk 14:20; Lk 22:21; Jn 13:26) and the pains of the suffering poor: "Even my bosom friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted the heel against me" (Ps 41:10[9]). Contrarily, those who do not wish to eat together are not intimately related (Gen 43:32) and therefore are not part of each other's life. We can therefore appreciate why food seals treaties and covenants among partners who are expected to protect each other's life (cf. Gen 26; 28-31; 31:51-54; Ex 18:12; Josh 9:3-27; see also Ex 24:1-22).

The great importance to which people of all cultures and times hold food and life makes the motif under study exciting. One can therefore understand why some special plants, food, water are said to impart immortality or at least total well-being to those who partake of them because they bear in them supernatural or divine gem.

4. Deity as Source of Food

The origin of food is as old as the origin of humankind and is divine, for food is conceived as the gift of the deity. This serves as the basis of any food motif in Biblical and extra-Biblical tradition.

⁷ Cf. C. Ifemesia, *Traditional Humane Living Among the Igbo: An Historical Perspective*. Enugu 1979, 66.

⁸ R. de Vaux interprets the practice as "at the very least, belief in a life beyond the grave." Cf. *Ancient Israel*. London 1973, 61.

4.1. Old Testament

The OT unequivocally ascribes the origin of food to YHWH not only in its primal form as fruits and vegetable (cf. Gen 1:29f; cf. 2:16), animal and fish (Gen 9:3) but also in its miraculous and dramatic form as manna, the food from heaven (Ex 16:14f). YHWH is depicted as the one who gives food to all humankind (Ps 136:25(26), especially the hungry (Ps 146:7). Some Old Testament personal names depict YHWH as the giver. They include: 'elⁿātān (God has given); N^tan'el (Given of God); J^hōnātān, Jōnātān (YHWH has given); N^tanjāh(ū), Mattanjah(ū) (Given of YWH); Mattijāh(ū) (Gift of YHWH). Igbo names like *Chinyere*, *Chinenye*, *Onyinyechi*, etc., with similar meanings add to the list. The belief that YHWH is a giving-God sustained the faith of Israel. Solomon whom God has given wisdom (1Kgs 5:12) recognised that all things come from YHWH (1Chr 29:14). YHWH gave Israel the land (Josh 21:43) and is celebrated as the source and provider of food and drink (Is 43:20; Ps 104:14-15,27 Ps 105:40-41; Neh 9:15; Eccl 3:13).

Israel's acknowledgement of YHWH as source and provider of food finds its most practical expression in the mandate concerning food blessing found in later Judaism. Though the *Berakhot* 6 gives the various formula that one recites before eating, it assigns unique blessings to bread and wine, the staple foods of the Israelites, the *Tosefta Berakhot* (4.1) gives justification for this practice. It reads:

- A. One may not taste anything until he recites a blessing [over it]
- B. As it is written, "The earth and all therein is the Lord's" [Ps 24:1] ...
- F. As Scripture states, "The Lord has made everything for its purpose" [Prov 16:4, read as "Everything that God has made [should be used] for his sake, for his glory"].⁹

According to this text, the reason and justification are based on Ps 24:1 and Prov 16:4 respectively. The blessing over food then is an acknowledgement that everything including the earth's produce belongs to God and therefore may not automatically be consumed by any one without blessing. The blessing can be construed as a sort of permission to make use of divine gift – earth's produce. In other words, the blessing's effect is to release the object (food) from status of divine property and permitting a person to eat of it.¹⁰

The OT has its own food dynamics or should it be called food politics. Granted that YHWH provides for Israel in spite of its rebellion, there is always a tension between periods of abundance and scarcity of food supply. The Rabbinic writers see Israel's reception of the "miraculous" food and drink as a reward for accepting the Torah (Ex r(abbah) 25 on 16:4). Hence only the chosen can partake of it (cf. Ps 78:25). Food supply is to reach its peak in the messianic age when life attains its fulness (Am 9:11; Hos 2:21-23; Ezk 47:12; Joel 4:18 (3:18); cf. also 1QS 6:4-6; 1QSa 2:11-22). On the contrary, lack of food supply or the destruction of land that produces food (Is 5:5ff; Hos 2:9) is a sign of YHWH's punishment for sin (Dt 28:47-57). Because of sin the sole provider of food, YHWH, may partly relinquish supply to arduous human labour (Gen 3:19).

Concerning the origin of food the Old Testament does not envisage any adversary to YHWH. He alone has the prerogative to supply food to all living things. YHWH has no need

⁹ Cf. T. Zahavy, *The Mishnaic Law of Blessings and Prayers. Tractate Berakhot*. Atlanta 1987, 80.

¹⁰ See B.M. Bokser, "Ma'al and Blessings over Food: Rabbinic Transformation of Cultic Terminology and Alternative Modes of Piety", in *JBL* 100 (1981) 557-574, 563.

of human food (cf. Ps 50:12-13; Hos 6:6), the foreign gods on the contrary are said to depend on human food/sacrifice (cf. *ANET*, 69).

4.2. Ancient Near East

Cultures other than Israel's will refute the claim that YHWH is the sole provider of food. The Akkadian epic "Atrahasis" makes it clear that the pagan gods also apportion food and fruits to human beings and withhold or reduce food supply in punishment. Thus Enlil the Babylonian wind- and storm-god complained to the great gods:

I cannot stand this human uproar,
I cannot sleep!
Reduce their food supply
Let plants become scarce
Adad! Withhold the rain!...
Let harvest be reduced,
Let Nisaba, divine patron of grain,
retard growth¹¹

"Adapa" is another Akkadian story, which portrays Anu the Sumero-Akkadian sky-god and his divine assembly as providers of food, the food of life. Offering Adapa the bread and water of life Anu and the divine assembly implore him:

"Eat our life-giving bread. Drink our life-giving water.
You mortal, will become immortal."¹²

Thinking it was bread of death Adapa on the counsel of Ea, the wise earth- and water-god, refused the offer of bread of life and, so forfeited the possession of immortality.¹³ What is interesting here is that in ANE the idea of life is often connected with the notion of an object, possession of which as it were guarantees life. And this corroborates the above-mentioned Biblical motif.

In Egyptian tradition, the Hymn to the Aton celebrates him the Sun-god not only as the one who orders nature and extends life-giving rays to the earth, but also the source and provider of food and human needs. We read:

In Syria-Palestine, Ethiopia and Egypt,
You assign each a place
You allot to each both needs and food,
You count out to each the days of life....¹⁴

The supreme god Ptah is known as the one "from whom everything come forth, foods, provisions, divine offerings, all good things."¹⁵ While Horus the great sky-god is described as the "Lord of nourishment, Rich in Food, Creator of Life for all", Hathor is called the "Lady of

¹¹ *Atrahasis*, II.i:10-20; trans. V.H. Matthews and D.C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from Ancient Near East*. New York 1997, 36; cf. J.B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, (*ANET*). Princeton 1969, 104.

¹² *Adapa*, B:66-70, esp. 67-68; trans. V.H. Matthews and D.C. Benjamin, *Parallels*, 44; *ANET*, 101.

¹³ A similar motif of man's lost opportunity for gaining immortality is found in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tab. XI.279-289; cf. *ANET*, 96.

¹⁴ *Hymn to the Aton*, strophe 7, trans. V.H. Matthews and D.C. Benjamin, *Parallels*, 259; cf. *ANET*, 370.

¹⁵ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature I*. Los Angeles 1975, 55.

Foodstuffs.”¹⁶ In Greek mythology, Demeter, the goddess of agriculture is called the “Mother of Food”, for she is “the giver of grain”.¹⁷

This brief excursus has demonstrated that the pagan gods are very much regarded as sources and providers of food by their adherents as YHWH by the Israelites. The Adapa story adds more specifically that this God-given food can give life and guarantee immortality. There is no doubt that African societies have various stories to tell about the origin of food. Let us now consider the one I suppose has some bearing to our theme.

4.3. African food stories

Different stories in various African cultural groups demonstrate a strong belief in the divine origin of food. For instance, the first man and woman of **Lolobi** of the Ewe of Ghana were fed from the table of *Oaah*, the Supreme deity until they learnt to till the ground and produce their own food. The **Ga** of Ghana celebrate corn as the staple food that was given to the first man and woman by the great God *Alaa-Naa-Nyoyma*. Thus, corn becomes “the chief meal during the *Ga* great festival of Homowo.”¹⁸ For the **Wolof** of Senegal, it was the sky and creator God *Bur u Assaman* who provided food for the man and woman he created just as the **Igala** of Nigeria trace the origin of millet, yam and other food plants to the Supreme Being *Ojo*. Rice is celebrated among the **Mende** of Sierra Leone as staple food given by *Ngewo*, the creator God to the first man. As the man learnt farming he stopped depending directly on *Ngewo* for food.¹⁹ In another story of the **Mende** both human beings and animals lost the God-giving food and, consequently, immortality by violating divine law.²⁰

The **Igbo** of Nigeria have a detailed story, which explains the origin of the chief crop yam. It reads thus:

When there was nothing to eat, and no one could sleep, so Eze Nri (King of Nri) began to consider what should be done to remedy the situation. One day a child-king went to Chukwu's (Supreme God's) place for firewood. Chukwu took a piece of yam and gave it to the child to eat (yams were at that time unknown to man). When the child got home it lay down and slept. The parents of the child thought it was dead and lamented, but when the child woke it explained matters to its father. The child was sent for more yams. He brought some home and the King and his wife both ate. The king himself then resolved to go and fetch the yams from Chukwu. But Chukwu made a drastic demand from the King. He was to cut off the heads of his son and daughter and bury them in his garden. When Eze Nri objected, Chukwu promised to send *Dioka* from the sky to carve the *ichi* (face marks) on the foreheads of his eldest son and daughter. Afterwards the king cut off the heads of his son and daughter and buried them in separate graves. He was to wait twelve days (three native weeks) and then go and look. Behold in twelve days *ome ji* (yam tendrils) were observed to be growing at the head of the son and coco-yam (*ede*) at the head of the daughter. In the sixth month, the Eze Nri dug up fine large yams from

¹⁶ H. Ringgren, “chāyāh”, 325.

¹⁷ W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge 1987, 20.

¹⁸ Cf. B. Abanuka, *Myth and the African Universe*. Enugu:Snaap Press, 1999, 86; cf. also 85.

¹⁹ Cf. B. Abanuka, *Myth*, 86f.

²⁰ Cf. B. Abanuka, *Myth*, 68.

his son's grave and coco-yam from the place where he has buried his daughter. He cooked both and found them sweet.

On one occasion one of the children of the village came along seeking fire. Eze Nri gave a piece of cooked yam to the child who ate it, went home, and promptly fell asleep. The child's people were surprised and, when he awoke, asked him to relate what had happened. He replied that he did not know what it was that Eze Nri had given him to eat. So the process was repeated, and it happened again as at the first instance. Then the people asked for *ji* and *ede*. The King demanded a great price from the people and then handed out a supply at the same time giving instructions how to plant the crops. From that time *ji na ede* spread throughout the world.²¹

This etiological myth is unique among the stories I have so far examined. Like other stories, it traces the origin of the chief crop (food) yam to the deity. Unlike other stories, the Supreme Being Chukwu gives this food to human beings through the intermediation of the king. The story also shows how the yam crop grew out of human persons to ensure continuous nourishment for the living. The story prepares the ground for the New Testament perspective on the motif, "food of life" and its identification of Jesus with it.

4.4. New Testament Perspective

The New Testament clearly presumes the divine origin of food. It does no longer ask the question about the provider of food. The answer is evident in the prayer that Jesus taught in which the Father is presented as the provider of food (Mt 6:11; Lk 11:3). But the NT tradition makes Jesus share and continue the unique function of YHWH as food provider (Jn 6:27), which Jesus himself acknowledges as the prerogative of YHWH (Jn 6:31-32). The Fourth Gospel mirrors Jesus Christ through the quality of food that he gives as having a superior affiliation to YHWH than Moses (Jn 6:50-51,58). It is indeed to underscore the nature of this food that Jesus makes his self-revelation: "I am the bread (food) of life" (Jn 6:35,48; cf. v. 41). This statement is far more intensive than Jesus' claim that his flesh is food (Jn 6:51-58), for the provider equates himself with the object he provides.²²

Though Jesus' identification with the food of life may be peculiar to the Fourth Gospel, Philo of Alexandria is right to point out that such motif may have had its origin in the OT. Rather than an identical formula, for I have found none elsewhere, the author of the Fourth Gospel seems to have been influenced by three categories of expressions existing in the OT. The first is the *ego eimi* formula **I AM + N** (common noun) widely used in the OT for self-introduction of individuals²³ and self-revelation of YHWH²⁴ and other divine beings (cf. Tob 12:15). The second expression has bread as property of another noun in the formula

²¹ The story is reconstructed from three sources: G.T. Basden, *Niger Ibos*, 389, W.T. Northcote, *Anthropological Report on the Ibo-speaking Peoples of Nigeria* I. New York 1969, 137, also 50; E. Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion. A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria*. Enugu ²1999 31. Metu extends the story considerably to account for the origin of other foodstuffs and the remuneration Eze Nri received from Chukwu for carrying out divine command (*ibid.* 31-32).

²² Outside the uniqueness of the formula there is that tendency in the Fourth Gospel to make Jesus identify himself with an object, idea, event etc. cf. Jn 8:12; 10:7,9,11,14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1,5.

²³ Cf. Gen 23:4; 24:34; 27:32; 45:3,4; Ruth 3:9; 2Sam 1:8,13; Jonah 1:9; etc.

²⁴ Cf. Gen 26:24; 31:13; 46:3; Ex 3:6,14; 20:2; cf. Lev 19; Hos 11:9; Is 45:18,22; 46:9; 48:12; etc.

Bread (Food) of + N²⁵ and the third has life as possessor of another noun in the formula **N + of Life**.²⁶ However, the author must have arrived at his present formula “I am the bread of life” out of his experience of Jesus not as overseer of the food that YHWH supplies like Moses, but as the one endowed with power to continue the work of the father as food provider.

5. Understanding the Motif “Food of Life”

Any attempt to understand the self-revelation of Jesus as “bread of life” in Johannine scheme must not be made in isolation. One has to take cognisance of the general understanding of the motif in other traditions available to us. From what is said earlier ancient cultures consider “food of life” as material food with divine origin, and it has the power to impart immortality or eternal life. It is a special offer made to a mortal to enable him/her share life in the assembly of the gods (divine). Food of life was never celebrated as an expression of ideal past or glorious future but a practical means to solving acute human problems like mortality, hunger and general restlessness.

A very essential element in the motif is freedom of choice. Food of life can be accepted or rejected; the one who accepts it gains life; the one who rejects or refuses (disbelieves?) it forfeits immortality. The Akkadian and Igbo evidence illustrate this: Adapa refused the food of life and remained mortal while the Eze Nri accepted Chukwu’s demand, very challenging as it were, and acquired for himself, his people “Ndi Igbo” and the entire world the food that satisfies human hunger and assures the well-being of humankind (the goal of salvation!)

5.1. In the Fourth Gospel

Understanding the motif “food of life” in the NT, especially in the Fourth Gospel, is not an easy task as demonstrated by the withdrawal of some disciples from following Jesus on the ground that his claim was a “hard saying” (cf. Jn 6:60). The author of the Fourth Gospel must have programmed Jesus’ self-revelation as “Bread of Life” to reverse the trend in the OT and early Judaism (cf. Ex 34:28; Am 8:11; Dt 8:3), noticeable at that time in the early Christian community in which material and natural food was thought to oppose divine word. “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (cf. Mt 4:4; Lk 4:4 and Mk’ omission of the text). The prophets saw their vocation figuratively as eating the word of God (Jer 15:16; Ezk 2:8; 3:3 cf. Rev 10:8-11). To be added is the Wisdom motif (Prov 9:1-5; Sir 24:19-27; Wis 16:26; cf. Is 55:1-3) in the NT which places wisdom above all as is evident in the case of Mary and Martha (Lk 10:38-42). That means it is more honourable

²⁵ They include: bread of adversity (Is 30:20); bread of mourners (Ezk 24:17,22); food of angels (Wis 16:20; Ps 78:25; 4Esdras 1:19); bread of tears (Ps 80:6); bread of toil (Ps 127:2); bread of wickedness (Prov 4:17; cf. 23:6); bread of idleness (Prov 31:27); bread of learning (Sir 15:3); bread of sighs (1QH 5:33) etc.

²⁶ See, tree of life (Gen 2:9; 3:22,24; Prov 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4); breath of life (Gen 6:17; 7:15,22; 4Esdras 3:5); restorer of life (Ruth 4:15); light of life (Job 33:30; Ps 56:14); path of life (Ps 16:11; Prov 2:19); fountain of life (Ps 36:10; Prov 10:11; etc.); way of life (Jer 21:8; Prov 6:23); days of life (Eccl 8:15); statutes of life (Ezk 33:15); covenant of life (Mal 2:5); commandments of life (Bar 3:9).

to eat (ruminate over) the word of God than to eat material food. Indeed, if anything is to be masticated it is the word of God!

However, the bread (food) of life, which Jesus is and, which whoever eats it will not die (Jn 6:48-50), is not antidote to physical death but eternal death or rather loss of salvation occasioned by unbelief (Jn 6:35-36). R. Aquiba (*M. Sanhendrin* 10:3) has observed in his comment on the manna that unbelief shuts one out from everlasting life. Because of unbelief the fathers who ate the bread from heaven died in the wilderness (cf. Num 14:35). In other words, unbelief can change the bread of life into the food of death (cf. *Adapa* story).

When it comes to understanding Jesus' claim, there are divergent views. From early Christian period Jesus has been associated with food and life. But this association is largely limited to Jesus' flesh/body²⁷ and does not extend to his person. Hence Hilary insists "his flesh is truly food" (*De Trin.* viii) and Ignatius has no doubt that the bread of God is the flesh of Christ (*Rom.* vii,3). Augustine in his *Tractate* 25,14 on Jn 6:15-44 dwells on spiritual rather than Eucharistic interpretation.²⁸ He conceives "Bread of Life" as eternal sufficiency in which there is no want (6:35) or as the bread in which Jesus alone offers by his doctrine and spirit, that nourishment by which the soul is saved into eternal life. However, Chrysostom comes quite close to Jesus' total identification with food in the Fourth Gospel when he states in the homily: "When we desire it, he lets us feel him, and eat him, and embrace him" (*Hom. 46 on John*).

5.2. As Metaphor

The formula "Food of Life" can well be understood as metaphor because it expresses more than its literal and regular sense.²⁹ The OT is already familiar with such a metaphor relating to food. For instance, the "bread from heaven" is at one time taken in its face value as manna, material food and in the metaphorical sense as divine word, instruction or revelation (cf. Dt 8:3; Wis 16:20, 26; Neh 9:20; Mt 4:4; cf. Prov 9:5; Is 55:10-11; Am 8:11-13; Sir 15:3). The two senses are obviously found in the NT. Bread is used as symbolism of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt 16:11-12). And Jesus could have been the one loaf with the disciples in the boat (Mk 8:14).

In the Fourth Gospel, food/bread has also two levels of meaning. It stands for divine word or revelation to be received in faith not by eating (cf. Jn 6:32-34; cf. Mt 4:4), a meaning probably influenced by the OT. We have already seen that from the fruit of early Christian reflection, bread (Eucharistic Bread) is equated with the flesh of Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 6:51-58). Chrysostom in *Hom. 46:1* on Jn 6:48 equivocated in his interpretation to accommodate the two levels of meaning. Here bread is seen as either Jesus' saving doctrines and the faith, which is in him or his own body.³⁰ Whichever, Chrysostom sees the two aspects of Jesus' presence as important and complementary since both "serve the soul". This is the sense in

²⁷ This is based on Jesus' saying at the Last Supper (cf. Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19; 1Cor 11:24 also in Jn 6:51-58 where flesh receives another kind of discussion).

²⁸ The same approach is taken by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius on the interpretation to the discourse on Jn 6:35-58. Cf. R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, [AB 29], New York 1966, 272.

²⁹ For more details on the basic notion of metaphor, see the author's work, *The imagery in the Prophecy of Hosea: A Literary and Exegetical Survey of Hosea's Metaphors and Similes*. [Ägypten und Altes Testament 41] Wiesbaden 1999, 7.

³⁰ Chrysostom however holds that "bread of life" refers to Christ's Godhead and not his Body (cf. *Hom. 45,2* on Jn 6:35).

which the Fathers of Vatican II want the faithful to understand bread of life when they stated: "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord, in so far as she never ceases, particularly in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ."³¹ Here again the two senses are highlighted. To be remarked is that from the beginning of the Fourth Gospel Jesus Christ is presented as divine word made flesh (cf. 1:1-14).

5.3. In the African context

We have already seen that Africa is not left out in the development of the motif under study. Our ancestors, through etiological stories hinted incognizant at one of the greatest salvific works of God that was accomplished in Jesus Christ. In other words, the belief in a God-given crop (food) that is life-giving and life-sustaining is embedded in African tradition. The challenge is what we do with the motif to enhance our understanding of the Eucharistic meal and make its celebration more meaningful. Since bread is neither staple food nor part of main meal in many African societies, the current effort at westernisation and globalisation notwithstanding, we need, therefore, to get back to the sources. The bread of the Eucharist needs proper explanation to make it comprehensible to an African recipient; our catechesis must make good use of the stories in our tradition to communicate how dependent a Christian is on the Eucharist.

Jesus Christ has demonstrated how bread, the staple food of his own culture can be put to maximum liturgical use. He went as far as personifying himself with bread because of its two basic characteristics: *availability/affordability* and *divine origin*.³² Much can be achieved today even liturgically with our own staple foods. Christian communities in Africa can use, each its own staple food if not for the Eucharistic celebration but for *agape* meal after it. For the Igbo surely it is the chief crop yam that can serve this need. Fortunately, it can be prepared in various ways – cooked, roasted, fried etc. - for liturgical purposes. Such paraliturgical celebrations have their merit. Apart from demonstrating physically the communal sharing characteristic of African family, it offers those who may not have participated in the Eucharistic meal the opportunity to partake in shared meals in order to foster communal life and life-bonds with other members of the community.

The motif "food of life" has also an environmental and ecological interest for Africa. The belief of our ancestors in divine origin of food imposes on the present generation the obligation to preserve the environment in which the God-given crops thrive. Because of the unrestrained deforestation of land, degradation of the environment, and destruction of the ecology of many African societies some of the staple crops, which our ancestors cherished and celebrated in annual festivals are no longer yielding their full capacity. Indeed, a good number of these crops are at the verge of extinction. The cultivation of yam, and reaping the yield of this chief crop of the West African sub-region is no exception.

³¹ The Second Vatican Council Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* 21.

³² The same criteria apply to Jesus' choice of wine, for it was YHWH who gave Noah the green plants (Gen 9:3) from which he cultivated the first vineyard (Gen 9:20).

6. Conclusion

From this study, one can arrive at a few conclusions. There is a consistent development of thought on the motif “food of life”. The more ancient traditions conceived the motif as relating to concrete material food that imparts immortality. Wisdom motif in Biblical tradition, Judaism and early Christianity spiritualised the material food and replaced it with the immaterial, divine word, or revelation, which promises eternal life. The development of the motif reached its climax in the Fourth Gospel where “Food of Life” is personified in Jesus Christ who is invariably presented as both true food (Eucharistic Bread) and divine word. And only the two together can truly satisfy human hunger. The way to contend this hunger is one great challenge facing the Church, especially the African Church. Hitherto great attention has been paid to one aspect of “food of life”, the Eucharistic bread, without a corresponding effort towards the dissemination of the divine word or emphasis on personal scriptural reading. To check the seeming imbalance more time has to be devoted to evangelism, proclaiming the divine word, not just as part of the Eucharist, but as food that promises eternal life on its own merit. More African Christians should have unhindered access to the word of God by making the Bible available in the local languages. Moreover, to enthrone the Holy Bible or at least the Book of the Gospels in our Churches, side by side with the Bread of the Eucharist, will be expressive sign of the complementary role both play in satisfying human hunger.

We can see that the mixed motif in the theme “food of life” offers us a wide range of options to discovering Jesus Christ both in the way we eat the food of life and in the way we celebrate it. Our inculturation concerns must make us appreciate our own God-given staple foods and put them not only into catechetical and liturgical use, but also guarantee their survival by preserving our environment.