On the day after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus accuses
the crowd of looking for him not because they have seen signs
but because they have been filled with bread. Jesus then urges
them to work not for the bread which perishes but for the bread
which lasts unto eternal life, which the Son of Man will give.
The crowd responds by asking (6:28): “What do we do to do
the works of God?” (Τί ποιούμεν ἵνα ἐργαζόμεθα τὰ ἐργα τοῦ θεοῦ;). Jesus responds (vi 29): “This is the work of God, that you believe
in the one he sent.” (Τοῦτο ἐστιν τὸ ἐργὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα πιστεύητε
eis ἐν ἀπέστειλεν ἐκείνος.)

The common interpretation of the crowd’s remark and of Jesus’s
answer emphasizes the supposed contrast between the plurality
of works thought of by the crowd and the single work of faith
spoken of by Jesus. As R. Brown puts it: “... (the crowd’s)
response is in terms of works they can do. Jesus, in turn, puts
the emphasis on faith. Paul and James are the NT names we
associate with the problem of faith and works, but here we have
the Johannine solution. Obtaining eternal life is not a question
of faith without works. Rather having faith is a work; indeed
it is the all important work of God” 1).

R. Bultmann says: “…God’s commands are not fulfilled
by what man works but in obedience to what God works. Inasmuch
as man’s work is not just a series of isolated achievements, but
properly speaking the persistent attitude of his true being” 2).

More recently, S. Pancaro says regarding vi 28-29; “The Jews
question Jesus in terms of ‘works’ to be ‘done’ (the works of the

1) R. E. Brown, The Gospel According to John (AB 29; Garden City, N. Y.:
2) R. Bultmann, The Gospel of John, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray,
Law) in order to allow him [Jesus] to give the answer he does—which does away with the Jewish terms of reference (the Law) and substitutes a totally new criterion for the attainment of eternal life (of the heavenly bread which gives eternal life)" 3).

The words of the scholars quoted above represent by and large the basic approach taken to these verses—an approach taken almost unanimously by scholars today 4). Although not all features are pointed out by every scholar, the following represent the range of arguments used to support this interpretation. First, some propose that the phrase τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ refers to doing (in a legalistic sense) the works of the Law 5). These scholars claim that Jesus rejects such a legalistic understanding of salvation. Second, some scholars propose that for the evangelist the plural use of ἔργον has a negative connotation to it and that this is not what Jesus desires of man 6). Others point to the term ἔργαζεσθαι as having the negative connotation of "trying to do by human


4) One exception to the common approach is that of R. BERGMEIER, "Glaube als Werk? Die 'Werke Gottes' in Damaskusschrift II, 14-15 und Johannes 6, 28-29" RevQ 6 (1967) 253-60. BERGMEIER's approach is similar in several respects to the one taken in this study. However there are several differences. Although an interpretation of vi 28-29 can be read out of BERGMEIER's work, his much more limited purpose was to determine solely whether the phrase in vi 29 is a genitive of the author (i.e. the work "God performs") or an "objective" genitive (i.e. the work "which God demands"). The present study directs itself to the meaning of the entire two verse unit and deals with the full range of arguments for the commonly held interpretation. We would also suggest that BERGMEIER's overemphasis on the predestinarian tones of the Johannine usage and the Qumran parallels detracts from his overall presentation. This predestinarian emphasis may account at least in part for the fact that BERGMEIER's work has attracted little attention in the commentaries.


6) These generally are those referred to in note five above and those who see a contrast between the singular and the plural (mentioned in note eight below). The negative connotation comes from being associated with "works" of the Law.