

Matthew 14 : 14 - 21.

The feeding of the five thousand.

A grammatico-historical exegesis

Prof N. S. L. Fryer

INTRODUCTION

The 'grammatico-historical method' as any other exegetical approach to Scripture, has its own peculiar characteristics, strengths, and as many would contend, weaknesses. In our discussion below we shall first offer a brief theoretical discussion on some crucial points. Next, we shall give a brief exegesis of the pericope on the feeding of the 5 000, from which some idea can be formed regarding the methodology involved.

1. THE NAME 'GRAMMATICO-HISTORICAL' EXEGESIS

1.1 The term 'grammatico-historical exegesis' is believed to have been first used by K.A.G. Keil in his *De historico librorum sacrorum interpretatione eiusque necessitate* (1788) (Terry 1964 : 203 and n 1 there).

1.1.1. The word *grammatical* is somewhat misleading. Keil did not use the term in its modern sense of the arrangement of words and the construction of sentences. What he had in mind was the Greek word *gramma* ('letter'), and his use of 'grammatico-' approximates what we would nowadays understand by the word 'literal' (a synonym derived from the Latin, *litteralis*). Of course, here 'literal' does not mean literalistic, ignoring the presence of literary figures and idiomatic usage of language. Literal interpretation includes the use of every kind of figurative language in a literal context (Fountain 1983:35; Mickelsen 1963:33).

Thus, the 'grammatical' element demands that the interpretation should be 'in agreement with the characteristics of language' (Fountain 1983 : 35). Some prefer to use terms like 'syntactical' (e.g. Kaiser 1981:88f), or 'lexical-syntactical' (e.g. Virkler 1981:93-112) analysis of the text in order to underscore the fact that this element includes a study of both lexicology and syntax, that is an analysis of the sentence structures and syntactical relationships, an analysis of any grammatical points of importance and the explanation of all key words and expressions.

1.1.2 The *historical* element is 'that sense which is demanded by a careful consideration of the time and circumstances in which the author wrote. It is the specific meaning which an author's words require when the historical context and background are taken into account' (Kaiser 1981:88). This also includes such things as the ascertaining who the author was, the time and place of writing, and the circumstances of the readers (Fee 1983:93-96). Nowadays some prefer to speak of it as the 'historical-cultural' analysis of the text (cf Fee 1983:93 101; Virkler 1981:77-84).

1.1.3 Exegesis, however, is more than merely a 'grammatical' and/or 'historical' investigation of the Biblical text. Popma rightly refuses to apply the name 'exegesis' to a mere grammatico-historical analysis of the text (1944:63). Kuyper emphasizes that the *ex-* of *exegesis* should

never be weakened (1909:115). A mere grammatico-historical investigation fails to do justice to what Kuyper calls the 'mystical' element of Scripture (1909:101ff). This element is more commonly known as the *theological*. It is this element that separates the Bible conclusively from all other books. Scripture contains much that finds its explanation neither in history nor in the grammatical alone, nor in the human authors, but only in God, its primary Author. Implicit in the term 'Theological Interpretation' is the recognition both that God is the primary Author of Scripture, and that He is in the final analysis, the proper Interpreter of His Word (cf Berkhof 1951:133f).

1.2 *The grammatico-historical method in history*

This method is the most ancient of all. Its use 'may be verified earlier than the second century after Christ' (Fountain 1983:35). Theophilus, bishop of Antioch (AD 115-188), practised it (cf Farrar 1961:171). But it was especially in opposition to the rise of the allegorical method of the School of Alexandria in the second and subsequent centuries that grammatical and historical exegesis was advocated by the School of Antioch. Important representatives of this approach were Diodorus of Tarsus (†393), Chrysostom (†407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (†438), and Theodoret (†458). What these men emphasized was not a wooden literalism. They made full use of typology, and 'insisted that the literal meaning cannot exclude metaphor' (Mickelsen 1963:33). Jerome (†419) in his later life largely abandoned the allegorical method for the literal (cf Farrar 1961:225; Mickelsen 1963:31f). In theory Augustine did recognize the necessity of basing theological reasoning on the literal sense of Scripture, but at the same time he used extensively allegorical interpretation (Polman 1961:70). Due, among other reasons, to Augustine's great authority, the allegorical method became the recognized method of exegesis in the Middle Ages – for a thousand years.

Thomas Aquinas (†1274) stands close to Augustine both in theory and practice (cf Berkhof 1951:25). Nicolas of Lyra (†1340) was a happy exception. He stands as a bridge between the Middle Ages and the Reformation. Ostensibly he accepted the current practice of a fourfold sense of Scripture, but '*in reality he admitted only two senses, the literal and the mystic [allegorical], and even so founded the latter exclusively on the former*' (Berkhof's italics, Berkhof 1951:25).

The Reformers (16th century) broke decisively with the exegetical practices of the Middle Ages. *Luther* repudiating the allegorical method as 'Affenspiel' recognizes the 'sensus grammaticalis' (literal sense) only. *Melanchton* insisted that Scripture had to be understood grammatically before it could be understood theologically. *Calvin* expounded Scripture almost exclusively grammatically and historically. At the same time, all the Reformers gave special attention to the theological element of the text. 'It was, in fact, the Reformation "that started the trend toward the grammatico-historical exegetical method as the basis for developing the spiritual message of the text"' (Fryer 1981:8).

1.3 *The grammatico-historical method and the Divine inspiration of the Bible*

1.3.1 'Grammatico-historical', or as Kaiser proposes, 'syntactical-theological', exegesis as practised in conservative evangelical circles, goes

out from a very definite 'material' or 'subjective' *a priori* viz that all Scripture is inspired of God. The Hodge-Warfield definition of the divine inspiration is still regarded by many as a classic formulation of it:

'We prefer to use it [inspiration] in the single sense of God's continued work of superintendence, by which he presided over the sacred writers in their entire work of writing, with the design and effect of rendering that writing an errorless record of the matters he designed them to communicate, and hence constituting the entire volume in all its parts the word of God to us' (1881:17-8).

This definition is commonly regarded as subscribing to a verbal, plenary, infallible, inerrant, and unlimited inspiration of the Scriptures.

1.3.1.1 The issue of Biblical inerrancy is now dividing evangelicals all over the world into two fairly well defined groups whom Masters calls *conservative* and *liberal* evangelicals. Liberal evangelicals believe that the Bible is infallible whenever it speaks on matters of salvation and faith, but that it may contain errors in such matters as, for instance, geology, geography, genealogies, astronomy, history, and chronology. Conservative evangelicals, on the other hand would agree to the Hodge-Warfield definition without reservation since they believe that all Scripture (ie the autographs) is altogether free from error.

1.3.2 The conservative evangelical conception of the Inspiration of the Bible has *far-reaching effects* on the exegesis.

1.3.2.1 As any other exegete, the conservative evangelical also goes to his exegetical labours with a very definite presupposition regarding the Bible. 'Voorzeker', says Grosheide, 'wij hebben een *a priori* van dogmatisch karakter: De Heilige Schrift is het Woord van God en daarom met gezag bekleed. Ik geef toe, dat dit een dogma is, dat over de exegese heerscht, maar het is dan ook het eenige' (Grosheide 1912:25).

The *effects* on the exegesis of a conservative evangelical view of the inspiration of the Bible can be seen from the following points.

First, as compared with a historical-critical approach *there is a different conception of the task of exegesis*.

Greijdanus gives the traditional Reformed view of the task of exegesis, as 'de uiteenzetting van hetgeen gesproken wordt of geschreven staat opdat het verstaan worde' (1946:7). 'Verstaan worde' (understanding) in this context is taken to mean: 'Men verstaat iemands woorden als men er hetzelfde bij denkt, dat de schrijver of spreker daarbij gedacht heeft en ook bij gedacht wilde hebben' (Doedes 1878:2; Greijdanus 1946:7).

These and similar formulations are, however, not without difficulties. For instance although the avowed aim of all exegesis might be to make the Scriptures understandable, not even exegesis achieves this end. 'Historisches Faktenwissen bedeutet noch nicht verstehen,' writes Hengel (1973:86). 'As interpreters of the Bible', says Blackman, 'we are concerned with much more than its aspect as literature or history' (Blackman 1964:8f). In addition, the demand that the Bible be interpreted *emente auctoris* is pressed by serious problems and needs careful definition (cf Fryer 1981:3f). It amounts to this: the Bible claims explicitly that its human authors were instruments, inspired by and used of the Holy Spirit. They were the so-called secondary authors. It makes all the difference whether and how far the interpreter recognizes the Holy Spirit

as the real, ie the primary, Author of Scripture (Brouwer 1929:75; Grosheide 1935:173). Says Sikkel: 'In de Heilige Schrift hebben wij dan ook met *een meerdere dan de schrijvers* te doen. De schrijvers des Heilige Schrift zijn diensknechten Gods . . . instrumenten des Heiligen Geest' (Sikkel emphasizes, Sikkel 1906:108).

Now, if one agrees with the Reformers (Kooiman 1961; Packer 1973:95ff; Renwick 1947:110ff; Werrell 1963:79ff) that God is the primary Author of Scripture, then it follows, (a) that the meaning of the human writers can be none other than that of the Holy Spirit who inspired them; (b) that the task of the exegesis is above all to understand and make explicit the mind of the Holy Spirit, the primary Author (Grosheide 1912:29). Says Kuyper: 'De kerk toch is het niet te doen om wat Habakuk of Jacobus gedacht of bedoeld hebben, maar wel om in te zien, wat, door het orgaan dier mannen, God zelf ons zegt' (1909:100); (c) that the Bible having but one Author, though many human writers, constitutes a unity which should be taken seriously in the exegesis (Kuyper 1909:114; Werrell 1963:81); and (d) that both elements in Scripture, its Divine as well as its human, should be taken seriously (Ridderbos 1968:74f). It is at one and the same time the Word of God and the words of men. The exegete has to investigate these writings, written by men, as the *only* means of coming to know the 'mind' of the Holy Spirit. There is always the risk here, of emphasizing the one aspect at the cost of the other. Historical criticism consistently ignores or minimizes the Divine element; evangelical exegesis tends to minimize the human.

Second, since the Bible is God's Word, *the meaning of the Holy Spirit can be expected to be found in the most simple, direct and literal sense* of the language employed. The God of the Bible speaks clearly and not in riddles (cf Nm 12 : 8). This does not mean that there are not in the Bible 'some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort' (cf 2 Pt 3 : 16). But it does mean that we confess the Reformation principle of the *perspicuitas Scripturae*. It also means that we reject the implication that underlies the historical critical approach namely, that God's Word can only be made understandable through an application of historical critical methods. Of course, we remember that the grammatico-historical approach leaves ample room for the use of the various literary genres, literary figures, idiomatic and figurative language in a literal context. However, the conservative evangelical exegete is convinced that historical criticism's predominant stress on the study of the *human* element of Scripture is neither demanded by the text nor imperative to a better understanding of the *divine* element; on the contrary, that it is irreconcilable both to the intention of the Bible and the principle of the *perspicuitas Scripturae*.

Third, *there is necessarily a different methodology*. The conservative exegete recognizes that his pre-understanding concerning the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible includes well defined limits with regard to what constitutes a legitimate methodology. He could and can never indulge in an 'unrestrained and often arbitrary manner, often simply for the sake of novelty, in all sorts of exegetical excursions. He could never be engrossed in the grammatical and historical aspects of the Biblical text alone' (Fryer 1981:9f). As a result, he repudiates, and

refrains from using, any method that focuses so predominantly on the human activity in the writing of the sacred books that the divine aspect recedes into the background or is lost sight of. He also rejects the assumption that it is possible to do justice to the divine element of Scripture irrespective of the exegete's subjective presupposition(s) and the methodology he employs.

Fourth, *apparent discrepancies between passages are treated in a different way*. Going out from the *a priori* viewpoint that all Scripture (ie the autographs) is without error since God is its real Author, the conservative evangelical exegete makes every effort to find an exegetically legitimate way to resolve apparent discrepancies. This point will be illustrated in the exegesis below.

Finally, passages in *the Synoptic Gospels are approached in a different way*. Conservative evangelical exegesis commonly goes out from the assumption that some form of Oral Tradition is still offering the most plausible solution to the Synoptic Problem. This does not exclude the existence of written accounts (Lk 1 : 1). However, the conservative exegete rejects the solution to the Synoptic Problem as proposed by historical criticism. He rejects the priority of Mark; the Two- and Four Document Theories; he objects against the use of historical-critical methods such as Source-, Form-, and Redaction Criticism; he maintains that almost all that may be validly used of these methods (ie as not contrary to his preunderstanding about the divine inspiration of the Bible), has ever been done by conservative exegesis.

1.3.3 A recent development viz some form of structural analysis of the Biblical text, has important but limited value for conservative exegesis. The method practised by the New Testament Society of South Africa is known as Discourse Analysis. It may be defined as 'The linguistic task of discovering the . . . features of discourse structure, the way in which words, phrases, clauses and especially sentences and whole compositions are joined to achieve a given purpose' (Huey & Corley 1983 : 64sv). Here the exegete's interest in the historical dimensions of the text is minimal. The method itself purports to be nothing more than a linguistic tool and it can be used to complement both a grammatico-historical and a historical-critical approach to the text.

A discourse analysis of Matthew 14 : 13 - 21 by Van Aarde is given in the *Addendum to Neotestamentica* (16 (1982), 1 - 17, p3). However in order not to complicate our exegesis unnecessarily we shall not take it into consideration in our discussion below.

2. EXEGESIS

2.0 When doing an exegesis a few important 'steps' are involved. We can note a few of the more important ones.

2.0.1 *Establish the general literary form of the passage*

The literary form may have important bearing on our understanding of the passage. Our present pericope belongs to the literary genre 'Gospel'. Regarding its specific literary form, it is a narrative, and more in particular, a so-called miracle story.

Dibelius classes the narratives that aim at representing Jesus as a wonder-worker as *Novellen* ('Tales') (1961 : 70ff). Bultmann prefers the

term *Wundergeschichte* ('miracle stories') (1931:223). With many others Dibelius and Bultmann reject the historicity of these Gospel accounts and take them as non-miraculous. Moderate critics are more inclined to accept the possibility of miracles. Yet, they would not hesitate to reject the credibility of any Gospel miracle if *historical criticism* cannot relieve satisfactorily the literary or rational problems involved.

Conservative evangelical exegesis, on the other hand, assumes as a *sine qua non* both the miraculous element and the historicity of the Gospel accounts. It also accepts, contrary to historical criticism, that the two Gospel accounts about a miraculous feeding, viz that of the 5 000 (Mt 14 : 13 - 21 par) and that of the 4 000 (Mt 15 : 32 - 9 par), are not duplicate accounts of the same story, but independent accounts of two separate historical events.

2.0.2 *Establish the natural limits of the passage*

Each passage should be a self-contained unit. The easiest way for the non-theologian to determine these limits is to check the paragraphing of a few modern translations (such as RSV, NIV, TEV, NAS). Our present pericope included Matthew 14 : 13 to 21 (par 6 : 30 - 44; Lk 9 : 10 - 7; Jn 6 : 1 - 15).

2.0.3 *Do a Discourse Analysis of the whole pericope*

Since this step requires certain special skills we merely mention it here.

2.0.4 *Analyse the passage, verse by verse, in order to determine its meaning*

As we have seen above such analysis should include three broad areas, viz the grammatical, historical and theological dimensions of the text. In addition, when investigating a passage in the Gospels we should always take into account the parallel passages in the other Gospels.

2.1 *Grammatical, historical and theological analysis of Matthew 14 : 13 - 21*

Verse 13. 'Now when Jesus heard it, He withdrew from there in a boat, to a lonely place by Himself; and when the multitudes heard (of this), they followed Him on foot from the cities' (NAS).

Now when Jesus heard it

'heard', ie having heard about the fate of John the Baptist from John's disciples (14 : 12). John's 'after these things' (6 : 1) is quite indefinite. The length of the interval envisaged between ch 5 and ch 6 of John's account depends on the feast alluded to in ch 5. If it was Passover (AD 31), nearly a year had elapsed (cf Dods 1970:746).

Regarding the reason for this temporary withdrawal Matthew and Mark are complementing each other; Matthew connects it with the danger of arrest by Herod Antipas (14 : 13); Mark links it with the disciples' need of rest after the return from their mission from various parts of Galilee (6 : 31). Luke and John give no motive.

It is evident from Matthew 14 : 1,2,12,13; Mark 6 : 29 - 32, and Luke 9 : 7 - 10 that at least the following events transpired in the relatively long interval between the execution of the Baptist and the withdrawal of Jesus to a solitary place, viz (a) John's execution on Herod's birthday (Mt 14 : 6 - 11 par); (b) and his burial by his disciples (Mt 14 : 12a; Mk 6 : 29); (c) John's disciples' report to Jesus (Mt 14 : 12b); (d) the return of the Twelve from their mission tour in Galilee, and their report to Jesus

(Mk 6 : 30; Lk 6 : 10a); (e) the report to Herod Antipas concerning the works of Jesus, and his response: 'John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead' (Mk 6 : 16; cf Lk 9 : 9a); and (f) Herod 'kept trying' to see Jesus (Lk 9 : 9b). All of this may include an activity covering 'several weeks' (cf Hendriksen 1973 : 591).

We can attempt to locate more precisely within the wider chronology of Jesus' ministry the time of the feeding of the 5 000. The period between the second (Jn 5 : 1), or unnamed Passover (Apr 25, AD 31) (Hoehner), or less probably in AD 28 (Hendriksen), and the third (Jn 6 : 4), was one of vigorous ministry in all parts of Galilee, including three main tours of Galilee. In this year of ministry Jesus appointed 'apostles' (Mk 3 : 13 - 19 par) and attracted disciples; the initial opposition from Jerusalem Pharisees was steadily growing into fierce hatred, climaxed by an upsurge of popular enthusiasm at the miraculous feeding of 5 000 (Jn 6 : 1 - 15 par), and followed by the rejection of Jesus by many after a sermon in a synagogue in Capernaum on the following day (Jn 6 : 22ff).

The feeding of the 5 000 seemed to have taken place when (the third) Passover, probably April 13/14, AD 32 (or AD 29 on a different reckoning, Hendriksen 1963 : 592) was already 'near' (Jn 6 : 4). Thus the miracle was performed by Jesus toward the end of His Great Galilean Ministry which extended from about Winter (Shepard 1978 : 117; cf Hendriksen 1963 : 592, 'December') AD 30 (or, AD 27) to April, AD 32 (or AD 29). Jesus did not go up to Jerusalem for this (third) Passover. One more year and He would die in Jerusalem at the time of (the fourth) Passover, April 3, AD 33 (or, AD 30).

He withdrew from there in a boat, to a lonely place by Himself.
 'by Himself'. Jesus did not go alone. His disciples went 'with Him' (Lk 9 : 10b; cf Mt 14 : 15 - 19, 22). Luke does not mention the boat. 'a lonely place'. Not a desert. Luke identifies Jesus' destination (Mt 14 : 13; Mk 6 : 32), as 'to a town called Bethsaida' (9 : 10); and John says that Jesus 'went away to the other side of the sea of Galilee' (6 : 1). In Mk 6 : 45 Bethsaida is mentioned as the destination of the disciples immediately after the miraculous feeding. There is no conflict between the Synoptists. The 'lonely place' may well have been in the neighbourhood of Bethsaida (Swete 1909:129), the nearest well-known town (Marshall 1978:359). John's statement that the place lay across the lake (6 : 1) points to Bethsaida Julias. Originally a small fishing village, Bethsaida lay on the NE shore of the sea of Galilee, within the territory of the tetrarch Herod Philip. Philip rebuilt and strengthened it, and named it in honour of Julia, the emperor's daughter (JosAnt 18,2,1; JosBJ 2,9,1; 3,10,7). It lay on the eastern bank of the river Jordan, just before it enters the sea of Galilee (Edersheim 1962:676).

When the multitudes heard (of this), they followed Him on foot from the cities

'heard of this', ie that Jesus had departed by boat and was heading across the Lake in the direction of Bethsaida.

'the multitudes' Matthew says they came 'from the cities' (14 : 13); Mark has 'from all the cities' (6 : 33), perhaps Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida Julias (Whitelaw 1888:141; cf Edersheim 1962:678). The concourse of such a great crowd may be due to the circumstance that the Passover

was near 'so that many must have been starting on their journey to Jerusalem, round the Lake and through Perea...' (Edersheim 1962:678; Alexander 1980:165).

'on foot' (Mt). Mark's description is more vivid: 'many . . . ran there together on foot from all the cities' (6 : 33). Luke omits the details of how the crowds travelled. Mark added that the crowds 'got there ahead of them' (6 : 33). This is quite possible. The distance across the Lake is 'scarcely more than four miles; by land the distance . . . could hardly be above ten. If there was little wind, it would be easy to get to the place before a sailing boat' (Swete 1909:130).

Why did the crowds follow Jesus on foot? John says 'because they were seeing the signs (*ta semeia*) which He was performing on those who were sick' (6 : 2).

'the signs' The miracles of Jesus are variously designated as 'powers' (*dunameis*) (Mt 7 : 22; 11 : 20; etc); 'prodigies', ie exciting wonder (*terata*) (Mt 24 : 24; Jn 4 : 48); 'works' (*erga*) ie performances or deeds; but also 'signs' (*semeia*), ie 'symbolic manifestations of His character and works, in short material reflections of His indwelling glory' (Whitelaw 1888:52). John connects the *sēmeia* here with the miracles of healing which Jesus 'was continuously performing' (*epoiei*) on the sick.

Verse 14. 'when Jesus landed, He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick.'

When Jesus landed, He saw a great multitude

'He saw.' The crowd came into sight only when Jesus went out of the boat. 'A great multitude.' Edersheim suggests that only some of the eventual crowd had reached the place before Jesus. 'The largest proportion arrived later, and soon swelled to the immense number of "about 5 000 men"' (1962:678).

and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick

There is no resentment of their intrusion on Jesus' part. Luke says He 'welcomed' them. The verb (*apodexamenos*) suggests 'to receive with pleasure' (Marshall 1978:342f). Jesus 'felt compassion (*esplangchisthē*) for them'. The *splangchna* is literally the nobler viscera, ie the heart, lungs, liver, etc. In classical Greek the *splangchna* alone was regarded as the seat of emotions whether love, pity, anger, or jealousy (our usage of 'heart'). The verb *splangchizesthai* ('to feel compassion') appears first in Biblical Greek and 'was perhaps a coinage of the Jewish dispersion' (Lightfoot 1953:86). An excellent rendering would be 'his heart went out to them' (Hendriksen 1973:593).

Mark gives the motive for His compassion as 'because they were like sheep without a shepherd' (6 : 34). The phrase 'like sheep . . .' reflects OT motifs (cf Nm 27 : 17; 1 Ki 22 : 17; 2 Chr 18 : 16; Ezk 18 : 16; 34 : 5). In Jn 10 : 11 - 16 there is an implied contrast between Jesus the true Shepherd and the false shepherds of God's flock. In the pericope the metaphor itself alludes, among other things, to their lack of spiritual guidance. Moved with tender affection by their want of spiritual food and guidance Jesus bade them 'welcome' (Lk) 'as if their presence had been desired' (Swete 1909:130).

and healed their sick. Matthew describes only one aspect of Jesus'

ministry on this occasion, viz 'He healed their sick' (14 : 14). Mark focusses on another aspect, viz that He 'began to teach (*didaskain*) them many things' (6 : 34). Luke has both: Jesus gave them a lengthy discourse (*elalei*, imperfect!) 'about the Kingdom of God', ie the very same theme as that of the Twelve during their recent mission (cf Mt 10 : 7); He also 'healed those who needed healing' (Lk 9 : 11). John adds another touch to the picture. Jesus retired to the top of a height (*to oros*) 'and there sat with His disciples' (6 : 3), perhaps followed thither by those who had outrun the rest (Edersheim 1962:679). The use of the definite article (*to*) denotes either the particular mountain of the district, or 'the mountain range closing round the lake' (Westcott 1962:96), 'as opposed to the level of the shore' (Gdet 1877:203). It was an uninhabited ('lonely') spot (Mt 14 : 13; Mk 6 : 32).

Verse 15. 'And when it was evening, the disciples came to Him, saying, "The place is desolate, and the time is already past; so send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves"'

And when it was evening

The impression created by the whole episode, says Grosheide, is that the crowds 'zo in beslag genomen worden door de prediking van Jezus, dat zij aan geen eten of drinken denken' (1954:233).

The Synoptists agree regarding the time of the feeding: Matthew says 'when it was evening'; Mark, 'it was already a late hour' (6 : 35); and Luke, 'when the day began to decline' (9 : 12). The sun had not yet set, but it was already becoming late. At the Passover season sunset would be at about 6 pm (McNeile 1915:214). It is probable, then, that the feeding occurred 'late afternoon' (Taylor 1952:322), 'an hour or so before sunset' (Swete 1909:131).

the disciples came to Him, saying

'the disciples.' Luke: 'the Twelve' (9 : 12). They seemed to have discussed the matter among themselves and went to Jesus as a group, probably while He was still engaged in His teaching and healing ministry (Alexander 1980:165).

'The place is desolate, and the time is already past'

'desolate,' so that there is here no place to procure food. 'the time (*hora*) is already past.' The meaning is not quite clear. The 'time' (*hora*) does not refer to healing and teaching time (*contra* Fritzsche), nor to daytime (*contra* Meyer), nor to the time for sending them away to get food (*contra* Weiss), but probably to 'the hour (usual for the evening meal)' (McNeile 1915:215; Grosheide 1954:233; Hill 1972:246). Alternatively, the phrase could be idiomatic and corresponding 'very nearly to our English idiomatic expression, *it is now past time*' (emphasis Morrison's, Morrison 1902:251).

'Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves'

'send the multitudes away,' ie dismiss them as an audience. 'villages' (*kōmas*). Mark has 'the country (*tous agrous*) and villages (*kōmas*) round about' (6 : 36). The word *agros*, lit. 'field' ie a plot of land (cf Mk 10 : 29,30; 11 : 8) is also used in Mark in the sense of 'small country towns', 'hamlets' (Bratcher & Nida 1961:164, 205). The disciples suggested to Jesus

that He sent the crowds away so that they might go 'to the nearby villages and towns' and buy 'for themselves' (*heautous*) food (*brōmata*) (Mt 14 : 15), 'something to eat' (Mk 6 : 36), 'provisions' (*episitismos*) (Lk 9 : 12). Luke adds that the crowds should find lodging (*katalusōsin*). This detail may give some support to the suggestion that at least part of the multitudes were not local people but pilgrims on their way to the Pass-over feast in Jerusalem (Edersheim 1962:678; Marshall 1978:360).

Verse 16. 'But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!"'

'Jesus said to them'. The Synoptists are in general agreement on the sequence of the events. John apparently differs from the Synoptists on a few important points of detail. The comparison below will highlight some of the points involved:

Synoptists

- a. the Twelve took the initiative to raise the question about food for the multitude (Mt 14 : 15; Mk 6 : 35f; Lk 9 : 12).
- a. Jesus' response 'They do not need to go away [only in Mt]. You give them something to eat' (Mt 14 : 16; Mk 6 : 37; Lk 9 : 13).
- c. Not in Synoptists
- d. The disciples statement on the cost ie 200 denarii. 'They said to Him' (Mk 6 : 37).
- e. The disciples – 'they' – reported back on the resources available: 'five loaves and two fish' (Mt 14 : 17; Mk 6 : 38; Lk 9 : 13b).

John

- a. Jesus took the initiative (shortly after their arrival at the spot) (Jn 6 : 5).
- b. Not in John
- c. Jesus addressed *Philip* regarding matter of food (6 : 5,6).
- d. *Philip* made the statement about the 200 *denarii*.
- e. *Andrew* made the report (6 : 9).

Conservative exegesis recognizes that there is here considerable difficulty to harmonise the Synoptic and Johannine accounts. We fully agree with Alford that, 'if we were in possession of the facts as they happened, there is no doubt that the various forms of the literal narration would fall into their places, and the truthfulness of each historian would be apparent' (1958:755). On this stance one of two basic positions can be adopted. We can admit that it is beyond our power with the details at our disposal to establish the precise sequence of the events; and that since the 'humble and believing Christian will not be tempted to handle the word of God deceitfully' (Alford 1958:755) we believe and receive each Gospel account as it stands (so eg Alford 1958:755). Alternatively, we can endeavour to harmonise the Synoptic and Johannine accounts with each other. The following harmony seems to offer the most plausible explanation: Jesus with the Twelve disembarked (Mt 14 : 13 par); He 'saw a great multitude' (Mk 6 : 34) and 'went up on the mountain, and there sat with His disciples' (Jn 6 : 3). He 'felt compassion' for the crowds (Mt 14 : 14; Mk 6 : 34), and 'welcomed them' (Lk 9 : 11). Jesus had been con-

cerned about the feeding of the multitude 'from the very first moment He had encountered them' (Vos 1979:110). So at the very first arrival of the crowds — 'lifting up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude was coming to Him' (Jn 6 : 5a) — Jesus inquired of Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?' (Jn 6 : 5b). John adds that the motive for the question was 'to test' Philip since Jesus Himself 'knew what He was intending to do' (v 5b,6). Philip's response demonstrated that it was altogether impossible to come up with enough money: 'Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little' (v 7).

There follows a day of teaching and healing (Mt 14 : 14f; Mk 6 : 34f; Lk 9 : 11f) not recorded by John (Westcott 1962:96; Robertson 1932:97). Philip could not come up with any new insights. 'No doubt other disciples also had thought about the problem' (Vos 1979:110). Then, 'as evening approached' (Mt 14 : 15 NIV) the Twelve came as a body to Jesus urging Him to send the crowds away (Mt 14 : 15; Mk 6 : 35; Lk 9 : 12). (So, too, at the feeding of the 4 000 (Mt 15 : 33; Mk 8 : 4) the disciples raised the matter of sending the crowds away.) Jesus' response, 'They do not need to go away [recorded by Matthew alone]; you give them something to eat!' (Mt 14 : 16; Mk 6 : 37a; Lk 9 : 13a) — now put all the disciples to the test. The 'you' is emphatic. Apparently agreeing with Philip's earlier assessment the disciples inquired whether they should go and spend 200 denarii 'on bread and give them something to eat' (Mk 6 : 37). In response Jesus asked: "'How many loaves do you have? Go and see'" (v 38a). The Synoptists recorded the disciples' response in general: 'They' 'found out' and reported back to Jesus, 'Five and two fish' (Mk 6 : 38; Mt 14 : 17; Lk 9 : 13b). John is more specific: it was *Andrew* who reported the discovery of a lad 'who has five barley loaves, and two fish' (6 : 9). In a verse peculiar to Matthew Jesus orders, 'Bring them here to Me' (v 18).

According to this interpretation then 'St John appears to have brought together into one scene . . . the first words spoken to Philip on the approach of the crowds [6 : 5], and the words in which they were afterwards taken up by Andrew [6 : 8], when the disciples themselves at evening restated the difficulty (Matt xiv. 15; Mark vi. 35; Luke ix. 12)' (Westcott 1962:96; cf Hendriksen 1973:220f; Whitelaw 1888:142).

Verse 17. 'And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."'¹⁸ And He said, "Bring them here to Me"

We have here only five loaves and two fish

'We have here'. The supply belonged not to the disciples but to 'a small boy' (*paidarion*) in the crowd (Jn 6 : 9).

'five loaves.' John mentions that the loaves were made of barley-flour (*krithinos*). The fact that barley-bread was considered food 'of the coarsest and cheapest kind, the food of the working man' (Swete 1909:132; Edersheim 1962:681), thus, an 'inferior sort of bread' (Robertson 1932:98) has little or no significance for the present story (cf Hendriksen 1959:222). The 'loaves' resembled nothing comparable to our modern bread. What is meant is 'something that resembles a pancake, flat and round' (Hendriksen 1973:595), 'thin flat cakes' (McNeile 1915:215).

'two fish'. Probably a common type of small fish from the sea of Galilee. For the customary word *ichthus* ('fish') (Mt, Mk, Lk), John has *opsarion*

(6 : 9) (occurring only here and in Jn 21 : 9,13), a diminutive of *to opson* 'cooked food' eaten with bread. The term *opsonion* can have the same meaning, but is mainly used of 'fish', cooked, and eaten with bread as a relish' (Whitelaw 1888:143; Edersheim 1962:682f).

Verse 19. 'And ordering the multitudes to recline on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed (the food), and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples (gave) to the multitudes'.

And ordering the multitudes to recline on the grass

'ordering the multitudes', ie through the Twelve; (cf Jn 6 : 10, 'Jesus said, "Have the people sit down"').

'to recline'. The verbs used (viz *anaklinesthai*, Mt, Mk; cf *kataklinesthai*, Lk; and *anapiptein*, Jn) are used elsewhere (cf Mt 8 : 11; Lk 11 : 37; 13 : 29; Jn 13 : 12) of taking places on a couch before a meal. Mark's description is more vivid: 'He commanded them all to recline in groups (*sumposia sumposia*) . . . And they reclined in companies (*prasiai prasiai*) of hundreds and fifties' (6 : 39a, 40). The word 'sumposion' is used in the papyri and the LXX also in the meaning, of a *party* or *group* of people eating together (Arndt & Gingrich 1979:780 sv). Used distributively it means 'in companies/groups'. The term *prasiai* (also used distributively) is used here in the sense of 'in orderly groups', 'in ranks'. The 'element of order is stressed in the use of this word: the multitude formed orderly rows which could be easily and quickly served by the disciples' (Bratcher & Nida 1961:207). 'of hundreds and fifties' (Mk), ie in fixed numbers. The carrying out of this order must have taken some considerable time.

'on the grass' (Mt). John remarks that 'there was much grass in the place' (6 : 10); Mark adds a vivid touch, 'all' the people had to 'recline on the green grass' (6 : 39). The total picture is clear. The presence of 'much grass' (Jn) shows that this 'lonely place' (*erēmos topos*) was not a sandy desert; and the term 'green (grass)' (Mk) may indicate that the season was spring, ie the time of Passover (Jn 6 : 4) (cf McNeile 1915:214).

He took the five loaves and two fish, and looking up towards heaven, He blessed (the food)

The five loaves and two fish were brought to Jesus, probably in a basket. He either took the basket, or one of the cakes into His hands (Swete 1909:134), raised His eyes towards heaven, and 'blessed'.

'looking up toward heaven', ie in an act of prayer, to speak to the Father. Though well attested (Mk 6 : 41; 7 : 34; Jn 11 : 41; 17 : 1; cf Ps 123 : 1) to lift one's eyes in prayer 'was not very usual in prayer' (Marshall 1978:680).

'He blessed' (*eulogēsen* Mt, Mk, Lk; — *eucharistēsas*, Jn). The word *eulogēsen* may mean (a) 'give thanks (to God)' (*eucharistein*) (so eg Swete 1909:134; Taylor 1952:324). The recognized form of blessing was, 'Blessed art Thou, Jehovah our God, King of the world, Who causes to come forth bread from the earth' (cited in Edersheim 1962:682). Or (b) 'invoke God's blessing upon' ie 'the food' (so NAS). The Mishnah lays down the principle that if bread and 'savoury' were eaten the thanksgiving should be said over the main article of diet only. In this case undoubtedly the bread (Edersheim 1962:684). The Jew regarded the broken bread as 'hallowed by the glorification of the divine Name in it' (Cole 1961:114).

Jesus here acts in accordance with the Jewish custom where the head of the household would take the bread, 'bless'/'give thanks', 'break' it, and distribute it to those seated at the meal. The sacramental language employed here recalls the institution of the Lord's Supper (Mt 26 : 26f par). *and breaking the loaves*. The compound verb used (kateklasen, Mk, Lk) may point to the breaking of each loaf into pieces or fragments (Bratcher & Nida 1961:209; Swete 1909:134).

He gave (edōken) them to the disciples, and the disciples (gave) to the multitudes. Again Mark is more vivid: '(Jesus) kept giving them to the disciples to set before them; and He divided also the two fish among them all' (6 : 41).

He 'kept giving (*edidou*, Mk, Lk; cf *di-edōken*, Jn) to the disciples,' may refer to the repeated action of giving the broken pieces to each of the Twelve severally (cf Alexander 1980:168; Swete 1909:134).

'to set before them' (Mk) (*paratithōsin*). In the light of the customs of that time, the disciples probably carried from Jesus' hands the bread and fish and placed them before the various groups and not before each individually (Bratcher & Nida 1966:209; Edersheim 1962:684).

John states that the bread and fish were distributed to those who were seated, 'as much as they wanted' (6 : 11c). All had as much as they would, even of the fish (Jn 6 : 11c). Thus, this was 'a satisfying repast, not simply a token meal' (Morris 1971:345; Alexander 1980:169).

Verse 20. 'They all ate, and were satisfied. And they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets.' 'They all ate, and were satisfied' (*echortasthēsan*, Mt, Mk, Lk; *enēplēthēsan*, Jn 6 : 12). The creative energy of our Lord did not cease before everyone was fully satisfied (cf Whitelaw 1888:144). The idea of an abundant supply (Jn 6 : 11c) is continued in the reference to the multitude's being 'satisfied' (Mt 14 : 20 par) and 'filled' (Jn 6 : 12).

At what point exactly did the bread and fish multiply? We do not know. Some suggest that 'the Lord blessed, and gave the loaves and fishes to the disciples, *as they were*; and then, *during their distribution of them*, the miraculous increase took place, so that they broke and distributed enough for all' (emphasis Alford's) (so Alford 1958:158f, with Meyer). Others think the miracle took place in the hands of Jesus (e.g. Hendriksen 1973:596). Probably the miracle occurred 'under His hands'. But we do not know. All we know for certain is that both the crowds and the disciples seem to have been convinced that the miracle was connected with Jesus' act of thanksgiving (cf Jn 6 : 23).

'And they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces.' 'They', ie the Twelve. John adds that Jesus' instruction included 'that nothing may be left' (6 : 12). Many people had obviously taken more pieces than they could eat when the bread and fish were distributed. 'the leftover fragments' (*klasmata*, Jn), ie the pieces into which Jesus had broken the food that remained uneaten, not crumbs that were dropped in the process of eating (Alexander 1980:170; Bratcher & Nida 1961:210; Morris 1971:223), nor scraps left on the ground by the people (McNeile 1915:215).

'that nothing may be left' (Jn). The leftover pieces had to be collected not only 'as a memorial of the miracle, like the manna in the wilder-

ness . . . ,’ but also ‘because a “gift so obtained was not to be squandered” (Godet), because frugality is a result and sign of gratitude (Hengstenberg), and because God would thereby afford them a picture of that beautiful economy He Himself observes in nature (Stier, Olshausen) and desires in His creatures’ (Whitelaw 1888:144). The idea of gathering up the leftover fragments was not a foreign one. The rabbis had carefully regulated the manner in which what remained of a meal had to be gathered and used (Hendriksen 1973:596).

‘twelve baskets full’. The *kophinos* which was a stiff ‘basket’ made of wicker or willows was in common use; it was probably a large heavy basket for carrying things, ‘but of various sizes and considered typical of the Jews’ (Arndt & Gingrich 1979:447 sv), mostly used for agricultural purposes (McNeile 1915:215).

‘Twelve’. some have suggested that each of the disciples had carried such a basket (for provisions) which would account for the twelve (eg Bruce 1970:209; Rawlinson 1925:86; Vos 1979:110). But this is far from certain (Dods 1970:749). The twelve baskets may merely signify the great amount of leftover pieces, and ‘incidentally point to the activity of the twelve disciples who did the work’ (Marshall 1978:363). The ‘twelve’ may also allude to the twelve tribes of Israel that typified the Church which was to be fed by the bread of life in the Messianic Age. The blessings of Jesus’ redemptive work extend to all the people of God (Hill 1972:247).

Verse 21. *And there were about five thousand men who ate, aside from women and children*

‘about five thousand men’. ‘About’ (*hosei*) taken as a round number. The arrangement of the crowds by hundreds and fifties (Mk 6 : 40) would doubtless facilitate the numbering.

‘men’, ie adult males.

‘aside from women and children’. *Aside* (*chōris*) – ‘without’, ‘exclusive of’. It was the custom that men ‘recline at their repasts, while the women and children ate apart from them in ordinary sitting posture’ (Alexander 1980:170). It is possible, then, that the groups of hundreds and fifties on this occasion would be composed of men alone and that they alone could be counted with facility. It is also possible that the men constituted so overwhelming a majority that they alone were counted (cf Hendriksen 1973:596 on this latter option). Be it as it may, the total number of those fed must remain unknown. The suggestion that ‘the total could have reached 10 000 or more’ (Vos 1979:110) is nothing more than a conjecture.

2.2 *The meaning of the miracle*

2.2.0 John alone describes the profound impression produced by the miracle: ‘When therefore the people saw the sign (*sêmeion*) which He performed, they said, “This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world”’ (6 : 14).

‘the Prophet’, ie the Prophet of Deuteronomy 18 : 15 which in popular Jewish expectation was often equated with ‘the Coming One’, the Messiah (cf Jn 1 : 21; 11 : 27).

2.2.1 The Synoptic account of the miracle gives no intimation as to its meaning. There was apparently no outward necessity for the miracle. Implicit in the Twelve’s suggestion to Jesus (Mt 14 : 15 par) is the idea

that the people could easily have procured food in the neighbourhood. But Jesus disregarded their suggestion. 'He was bent on working the miracle' (Smith 1976:235).

Two events seem to have filled the Lord's mind: the recent death of John the Baptist (Mt 14 : 12) which gave Him a strong premonition of His own impending death (Mt 17 : 12); and the nearness of Passover, which not only pointed backward to the redemption from Egypt, but also forward to that still greater redemption through His own death.

That the miracle points beyond itself and conveys a symbolic meaning is evident, (a) from the Synoptics themselves (cf Mt 16 : 8 - 11; Mk 6 : 52; 8 : 17 - 21); (b) from John's use of the term *sêmeion* ('sign') to describe it; (c) from the sacramental language used by the evangelists in reference to the miracle (Mt 14 : 19f par) as compared with that used to describe the institution of the Lord's Supper in the Upper Room, a year later (cf Mt 26 : 26 par; 1 Cor 11 : 23f); and (d) from Jesus' own explanation the following day in a synagogue in Capernaum on the Bread of Life (Jn 6 : 22 - 65). It is evident from that discussion that the miracle of the feeding of the 5 000 points proleptically to the Lord's Supper. As the Bread of Life Jesus is in His own person the fulfilment of OT types and prophecy (eg Ex 16 : 4, 13 - 15 cf Jn 6 : 31f) (manna); 1 Ki 17 : 16; 2 Ki 4 : 4f; (cf Jn 6 : 14).

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