

Mark – The First Gospel

014 – What’s More Important than Proclamation? – Mark 6:30-44

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First Thoughts

A theological vision of God’s economy of plenty unfolds in this telling by Mark of the feeding of a multitude.¹

The narrative of the feeding of the five-thousand is found in all four gospel accounts. We have heard this story so many times that it may seem like there is nothing more to be learned from it. What has happened though, I suspect, is that what we have in our minds is an amalgamated story with bits from all four gospels that are seen in isolation from their respective literary contexts. When we choose to focus on just one account in its full context, what we see might be somewhat different from what we think we have heard so many times in the past.

The Markan context is that Jesus had just been rejected by his home town, he had sent out his disciples to proclaim the gospel, and the apostle narrative was interrupted by a flashback to Herod and John the Baptist and his execution. This Herod story was a story about a king, a kingdom, and a banquet of death. The story of the feeding of the multitude occurs immediately following the Herod story. It is, among other themes, a story of a different king, a different kingdom, and a different banquet.²

Mark records another feeding of the multitude, the four-thousand, that will come a little later. In the following discussion we will note some of how these two feeding miracles complement one another and provide a fuller picture into the kingdom of God and Mark’s intent for his audience.³

¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6492.

² *UBC: Mark*, 6:30-44. “Immediately following the episode about ‘King’ Herod, this account suggests that Jesus is the rightful king and the true leader of Israel instead of the wicked Herod.”

³ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:35-44. “The account of the feeding of the multitude on the shores of Lake Gennesaret possesses a particular significance in the framework of Mark’s Gospel. Its elaborate introduction (Ch. 6:30–34), the extended dialogue with the disciples (Ch. 6:35–38), as well as subsequent references to this occasion (Chs. 6:52; 8:17–21) and its sequel in the feeding of the four thousand (Ch. 8:1–10), show that the evangelist regarded this event as crucial for understanding the dignity of Jesus. Its position in the Marcan framework after the account of Herod’s feast juxtaposes the sumptuous oriental aura of the Herodian court with the austere circumstances in which Jesus satisfied the multitude with the staples of a peasant’s diet. In spite of the tetrarch’s pretensions to royalty, the people are as leaderless as sheep who possess no shepherd. In contrast to the drunken debauchery of the

Sheep and Shepherd

^{6:30} The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. (ESV)

Discussion

1. Verse 30 can be seen as the closing verse of the previous sandwich/interrupted narrative.
2. Verse 31 shows that crowds were continuing to come to the disciples, even though their short-term mission trip was over. They were so overwhelmed that they had no time to eat. This echoes 3:20 where Jesus is reported as being so busy so as to not have time to eat.
3. Self-care is equally important as acts of service. The gospel cannot be proclaimed and lived if the apostle is tired and cranky.
4. This new unit of the gospel begins with a boat journey and will close with one in chapter 8.
5. A "desolate place" does not mean barren, but away from cities and towns, away from population centers and travel routes. Throughout Mark's gospel, the wilderness is where critical spiritual moments occur (temptation [1:12], focus on mission [1:35]) and where Jesus slowly reveals the nature of his kingdom (teaching by the sea [3:7], parables [4:1]).⁴
6. Mark paints a vivid picture of Jesus and his disciples sailing away and the crowd, noticing this, literally run (only in Mark) to keep up along the shore to get to the destination before Jesus. What might be the significance of this detail?⁵

Herodian feast, Mark exhibits the glory of God unveiled through the abundant provision of bread in the wilderness where Jesus is Israel's faithful shepherd."

⁴ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:31-32. "That God provides rest for his people within the wilderness is a recurring theme in the Scripture. It was the literal rest of the wilderness generation led by Moses and Joshua which became the type of the final rest promised to the people of God in a second exodus in the preaching of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The ancient hope of rest within the wilderness is to be fulfilled as Jesus gathers his disciples to a wilderness-place that they may be by themselves. The disciples and the multitudes who pursue them prove to be the people of the new exodus. The presence of Jesus and the provision of God will give to this time of withdrawal the character of rest within the wilderness."

⁵ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 6549, 6563. "Sheep without a shepherd. Sheep with faithless shepherds distracted by idols that do not save, that do not provide for the life and well-being of the sheep. Sheep with exploitative shepherds who use the sheep for their own gain. Having sustained suffering and deep wounds at the hands of such shepherds, some of these sheep remain in the pews of present-day congregations, but daring never to trust a shepherd again... Jesus was confronted by a shepherdless crowd, a crowd lacking a true shepherd, a crowd whose leaders, Herod and the Pharisees (see 8:15), were not focused on the people's welfare but instead on their own agendas. These people chased after Jesus. Was it because of his many acts of healing and casting out demons?"

7. Only Mark describes the crowd as “sheep without a shepherd.” What might Mark be communicating by this analogy?^{6 7}
8. Jesus does not send the crowd away, but begins to teach them. (Matthew and Luke add that Jesus healed here also.) Rest for him and his disciples must wait a little while longer.
9. Jesus so far has demonstrated the “what” of the gospel: proclamation and service. Now he demonstrates the “why”: compassion.⁸ The “what” is of no lasting value without the “why”.
10. What motivates God? What is the nature of the kingdom of God?
11. What might this passage teach about balancing ministry and rest?

It Is Getting Late

³⁵ And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. ³⁶ Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” ³⁷ But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” ³⁸ And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” (ESV)

Discussion

12. “Desolate place” is repeated for emphasis.^{9 10}
13. In the Synoptics it is the disciples who initiate the conversation about food. In John’s gospel account, it is Jesus who initiates and John writes that Jesus already knew what he was going to do.
14. In the Synoptics Jesus responds by commanding the disciples to give the crowd something to eat.
15. Mark and John include the detail that the disciples questioned Jesus’ request by observing that it would require at least 200 denarii (2/3- to 1-year of wages) to feed the crowd.

⁶ *Reading Mark*, 6:31-56. “In the first of the two feeding miracles in the Gospel, Jesus is pictured as the faithful shepherd promised to Israel in the prophetic and apocalyptic literature (Ezek 34:23; Jer 23:4; Pss Sol 17:40). Both Moses (Exod 3:1) and David (1 Sam 16:11) had been shepherds, and the shepherd had become a metaphor for the religious and political leaders of Israel.”

⁷ *UBC: Mark*, 6:30-44. “This connection of Jesus’ feeding miracle with Moses is further substantiated by the reference to the people as like sheep without a shepherd (6:34), which seems to be an allusion to Numbers 27:17, where Moses prays for God to supply a leader after him to take his role. This description of the people also brings to mind Ezekiel 34:1–31, where God promises to feed his “sheep” by sending a king like David to be their shepherd (esp. Ezek. 34:23).”

⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6540. “‘Compassion’ is a weak rendering of what was going on within Jesus. The Greek word (splanchnizomai) refers to a churning of the gut. Jesus was churning on his insides because those in the crowd “were like sheep without a shepherd.”

⁹ *Reading Mark*, 6:31-56. “The wilderness setting of the feeding miracle (6:34- 35) reminds the audience of the Isaian theme of the new exodus and of God’s miraculous provision of manna during the original exodus (Exod 16).”

¹⁰ *UBC: Mark*, 6:30-44. “Mark may have meant to draw some parallel between this feeding and the supply of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses (Exod. 16).”

16. Mark (only) then has Jesus asking the disciples what food they have among them. Matthew and Luke has the disciples immediately notifying Jesus of what they already have. John has Andrew discovering a boy who has food.¹¹
17. Some scholars place significance on the “five” noting that it is a reference to the Torah – the five books of the Law for the Jews.¹² This is in contrast to the seven loaves of the feeding of the four-thousand, where “seven” represents completeness (i.e., the entire world).¹³
18. What do you make of the differences between the various accounts of this one story?
19. What might have been going on in the disciples’ minds in this section of text? What did they want?
20. One commentary notes that the disciples were to take “no bread, no bag, no money in their belts” (v8b) on their mission trip, yet in the hours after their return they come up with food among their midst. Perhaps this is why Mark has Jesus asking directly, “How many loaves *do you* have?” [*emphasis supplied*]. What might this say about what Mark wants to communicate?

Prophecies Fulfilled

³⁹ Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. ⁴¹ And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² And they all ate and were satisfied. ⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴ And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. (ESV)

Discussion

21. Notice that the “desolate place” now has “green grass.” The fact is it was probably always grassy. But what does it signify from a literary standpoint? (c.f., Psalm 23¹⁴)
22. What other allusions to Psalm 23 can we find?
23. The division into groups and companies echo that which Moses commanded. How might the people see this and Jesus?¹⁵

¹¹ NICNT: Mark, 6:35-38. “The extended conversation of Jesus with his disciples concerning bread is the distinctive element in the Marcan account of the feeding of the multitude. Jesus, in contrast to the circumstances depicted in all of the other miracles, appears deliberately to create the situation in which the people must be fed. His instructions to the disciples to feed the people and to count their reserves of bread signify unambiguously that the food had to be provided through the disciples, not from the multitude.”

¹² UBC: Mark, 6:30-44.

¹³ Feasting: Mark, location 6618. “Specific numbers provided a memory assist for those who passed along this story in its oral form. These numbers also connected the story to the Scriptures of Mark’s church—for example, the five books of Moses, the twelve tribes of Israel. Now recall the numbers Mark uses in his second feeding story: seven loaves and baskets, a number signifying the whole of creation that God called into being in seven days, and four thousand people, indicating the four cardinal points of a compass. It looks as if Mark has expanded the scope of his narrative from the particular (a Jewish crowd) to the general (Jesus feeds both Jews and Gentiles).”

¹⁴ Reading Mark, 6:31-56. “Of course, Psalm 23 contains an extended metaphor of Yahweh the shepherd; this is probably the source of Mark’s ‘green grass’...”

¹⁵ UBC: Mark, 6:30-44. “Even the little note that the people were organized into groups of hundreds and fifties (6:40) may allude to Moses’ organizing of the Israelites similarly during the wilderness march (Exod. 18:21, and see note). The effect of these characteristics, not found in the parallels or in the feeding of the four thousand (8:1–10),

24. "Said a blessing," i.e., gave thanks. Jews give thanks; they do not ask for a blessing. (Asking a blessing is a pagan custom.) The words used to describe Jesus' actions echo that which will be seen at the Last Supper/Eucharist.¹⁶
25. The more liberal theologians don't believe a miracle occurred, but rather the people shared the food that they had with them after seeing the initial sharing by Jesus and the disciples.
26. There is no indication that the people were aware of the miracle in Mark's account. On the other hand, John's account makes it quite clear that the people were very aware of the miracle.¹⁷
27. There was plenty to be had. No one went away less than satisfied.¹⁸
28. The remaining food was collected into twelve baskets. Again, some scholars see a significance in the "twelve" here and the "seven baskets" with the four-thousand. "Twelve" represents the completeness of Israel, whereas "seven" represents completeness of the whole world.

Conclusions

- a. The story begins with nearly nothing but ends with an overflow. What might be some implications for us and our world?¹⁹
- b. The story contains many allusions and echoes back to Jewish and Israelite history.
- c. Jesus alludes to *sheep* and *shepherds*, and acts in a way that echoes elements from Psalm 23.

is to show that the event here is not to be seen simply as a great miracle but also as full of particular prophetic significance."

¹⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6532. "The place where Mark's lesson about God's economy of plenty has been rooted most firmly in the Christian tradition is the Eucharist. It is no accident that the words and movement of this story vividly mirror the actions of the Eucharist: provisions are offered, thanks is given, and bread is shared. Just as in the Eucharist, what seems like so little turns out to supply abundantly the need."

¹⁷ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:42-44. "The miracle took place before the multitude, but there is no indication in the Marcan text that they had any realization of what was taking place. The simplicity of the meal Jesus provided is congruous with his general reluctance to perform miracles and give signs; there was nothing extraordinary in the peasants' fare which would call attention to itself. The messianic meal remained hidden from the thousands. The event is intended to be revelatory to the disciples alone."

¹⁸ *NICNT: Mark*, 6:42-44. "The text is emphatic that the loaves and fish were miraculously increased. In sharp contrast to the deficiency of funds and the scarcity of food at hand Mark poses 'all' who 'eat and are filled' with much left over, in spite of the vast size of the gathering. In contrast to a sacramental meal in which the people receive only a morsel, Mark emphasizes that their hunger was fully satisfied."

¹⁹ *Feasting: Mark*, locations 6519, 6520, 6527. "In God's economy of plenty, there is more than just enough to go around. There is an overflowing abundance... Conventional economic wisdom in the world's prevailing economy is that relentless economic growth (predicated on relentless growth in consumption) is the only mechanism available for achieving the just material aspirations of developing nations without restricting the accustomed material comforts of the developed world... Instead of large-scale economies driven solely by a goal of growth, the story of the feeding of multitudes in Mark invites us to consider small-scale economies driven by a concrete awareness of what the needs are. In such economies, there can be a thoughtful accounting of what is already at hand without additional impacts on the environment, grateful acknowledgment of the bounty God has thus already entrusted to us, and generous acts of sharing these resources in resilient, face-to-face communities. Mark's insistence that there was not much stuff available (only five loaves and two fish) suggests an orientation away from growth fueled by the consumption of ever more stuff, to a recognition that God causes life to flourish in many ways that have little to do with more stuff."

- d. This story and sign takes place among the Jewish lands – the next feeding story takes place in Gentile lands.
- e. There are differences of detail, some significant, among the four accounts.
- f. The “what” of the gospel is important, but without a proper “why” or the motivation, the “what” is of little lasting value – or put another the “why” needs to drive the “what” and “how.”^{20 21}
- g. The question that Herod pondered, “Who is Jesus?” is the same question the crowd is forced to consider.²²

*The disciples see that, when the resources God has entrusted to his people are received in thanksgiving and shared with generosity, there is enough.*²³

²⁰ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6659. “He has already taught them what to say and do and has commissioned them to preach in the villages of Galilee. Having had good success with these things, now he has another assignment for them: ‘You give them something to eat.’”

²¹ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6679. “Sermons can form people into active disciples of Jesus who, by feeding the hungry and performing other acts of kindness, become the means by which his divine compassion is extended to the world and his commandments are kept.”

²² *UBC: Mark*, 6:30-44. “What we have noted about the feeding account here amounts to a clear indication that Mark intends his readers to see the event as disclosing not only Jesus’ miraculous power but also the secret of his person and significance. That is, the feeding miracle is really more about Jesus than bread and, like everything else in Mark, it presses the reader to consider who Jesus, the Son of Man, really is.”

²³ *Feasting: Mark*, location 6514.