

Mark – The First Gospel

018 – Bread and Boat, Again and Again – Mark 8:1-21

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First Thoughts

Three stories in this section, beginning with another feeding of a large group with just a few bread and fish. What ties all the stories together is the mention of bread or yeast in each. Once more Jesus and his disciples are shown traveling about by boat.

The first story of the feeding is fairly straightforward. The second one regarding the “sign” that the Pharisees demand is a bit more obscure. The third story that begins with Jesus warning about the “yeast of the Pharisees and Herod” is the most puzzling.

The cycle of the third major section of the Markan gospel is approaching its close. The cycle opened with questions from Herod about the identity of Jesus, feeding of 5,000, a boat trip, and miracles. The cycle will close with miracles, a feeding of the 4,000, questions from the Pharisees about the identity of Jesus, and a boat trip. The center of this cycle contained stories and sayings from Jesus destroying the “traditions” which the scribes and Pharisees held, of dismantling boundaries that closely guarded ideas and people from defilement.

Feeding the Four-Thousand

8:1 In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, ²“I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. ³And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away.” ⁴And his disciples answered him, “How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?” ⁵And he asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven.” ⁶And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. ⁷And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. ⁸And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. ⁹And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. ¹⁰And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha. (ESV)

Discussion

1. What are similarities and differences between this account and the earlier feeding the five-thousand (Mark 6:30-45)?^{1 2}
2. Where does this story take place?^{3 4}
3. What is the central focus of this story?⁵
4. What significance, if any, might there be in the number “seven”?⁶
5. Where do they head after the crowds are dismissed?⁷

This story illustrates the riddle of the “dog” which the Syrophenician woman answered brilliantly. There is abundant bread to supply both Jews and Gentiles. There is no lack. Jesus is the Messiah to the whole world.⁸

¹ *Understanding the Bible Commentary: Mark*, 8:1-10. “The second observation concerns the details of the feeding account in comparison with the first feeding story. Here there is no allusion to the OT hope for a shepherd for Israel like Moses or David, as there is in 6:34, 40 (see comments and notes on these verses). Also, though 6:34 emphasizes that Jesus' compassion leads him to teach the crowds, in 8:2 his concern for the crowd has to do with their hunger exclusively. That is, this account is much more concerned with Jesus providing a miraculous supply for the people. We note again, as in 6:32, 35, the description of the area as a remote or uninhabited place (8:4, see note). This is surely an allusion to the OT passages that speak of God's future salvation as a new miracle in the “desert,” like the miraculous preservation of Israel in the desert under Moses (e. g., Isa. 43:19–20), and that describe God's promised time of new blessing as involving a miraculous abundance in desert places (e. g., Isa. 35:1, 6; 51:3).”

² *NICNT: Mark*, 8:6-7. “Assuming that the multitude was representative of the mixed population of the region, the blessing of God's name before the distribution of the bread would have been a new action to many of them. This may explain the unusual pronouncement of thanksgiving over fish in verse 7. The pronouncement of blessing over bread is the normal Jewish practice for beginning a meal, but the blessing of God's Name prior to the distribution of the fish seems to have been intended to teach the people to thank God for their daily food.”

³ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:1-3. “It may be deduced from the reference to the Decapolis in Ch. 7:31 and the general reference to time in Ch. 8:1 that Jesus remained on the eastern shore of the lake where a mixed population of Jews and pagans lived.”

⁴ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7797. “Mark 8 takes place on the predominantly Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee, and we are told that some in the crowd “have come from a great distance.” These clues suggest this crowd includes a significant number of Gentiles as well as Jews, perhaps in contrast to the crowds fed in Mark 6.”

⁵ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:8-10. “In view of the mixed population of the area, however, it is probable that both Jews and Gentiles sat down together in meal fellowship on this occasion, and this prefigured Jesus' intention for the Church. This seems to be a more realistic approach to the historical situation than the desire to find an exclusively Gentile audience in Ch. 8:1–9.”

⁶ *UBC: Mark*, 8:1-10. “As suggested earlier, however, when treating 6:30–44, it seems difficult to avoid the symbolic association of twelve with Israel. Is there any significance to the seven loaves and seven baskets of fragments here? Two possibilities are worth consideration. There is, on the one hand, the use of seven to represent completeness and divine perfection. On the other hand, there is the association of seven (and seventy) with Gentiles (see note for references). It is even possible that Mark may have intended his readers to be reminded of both associations for the number.”

⁷ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:8-10. “After dismissing the crowd Jesus left the Decapolis and returned to the western side of the lake and Galilee. Within the limits of our knowledge of Palestinian geography in the first century it is impossible to identify Dalmanutha. The argument that this site was identical with Magdala is worthy of serious consideration, but must await confirmation from new evidence before it is accepted as definitive.”

⁸ *Reading Mark*, 7:24-8:9. “So the Syrophenician woman turns out to be right after all. The gentile “dogs” eat from the provisions of Abraham's descendants, and the disciples are not deprived in the least. They collect enough

Pharisees Demand a Sign

¹¹ *The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him.* ¹² *And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation."* ¹³ *And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.*

This may be another instance of a “sandwich filling” between two parts of a story. A boat journey begins in 8:10, but vv.11-13 interrupt the progression. The boat journey resumes in verse 14 (we observe a crisscrossing between opposing shores). If this is indeed an instance of a “sandwich” construction, there is something important here that Mark wants his audience to see. Not only that, but this material then is not a random insertion of another vignette, but something that is thematically connected with the outer “bread” layers.

Discussion

6. Where does this story take place?
7. What is meant by “sign”?⁹
8. What does it mean “to test him”?^{10 11}
9. Why does Jesus refuse the Pharisees’ demand for a sign?^{12 13}

leftovers to fill seven baskets, each large enough to hold a man (*spuris*, 8:8b; Acts 9:25). At the eschatological banquet that this meal prefigures, everyone has a place at the table, everyone eats at the same time, and everyone has enough (*echortasthesan*, 8:8a).”

⁹ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:11. “The concept of a sign is intelligible from the OT and later Jewish literature. It signifies a token which guarantees the truthfulness of an utterance or the legitimacy of an action... ¶The recognition that a sign is primarily an evidence of trustworthiness, not of power, sheds light on this verse. It indicates that the demand for a sign is not a request for a miracle. Jesus’ miracles are never designated as signs in Mark’s Gospel, nor were they considered to be signs by the Pharisees. They regard Jesus’ miracles as ambiguous actions whose meaning must be confirmed by a sign. They had witnessed his mighty works but had concluded they were of demonic agency (Ch. 3:22–30). That is why the Pharisees demand a sign in spite of Jesus’ deeds. The request for a sign is a demand that he demonstrate the legitimacy of his actions.”

¹⁰ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:11. “In this context “a sign from heaven” signifies a public, definitive proof that God is with him. In this light, the qualifying phrase “testing him” is important; it refers to the biblical provision for testing if a prophet has been sent by God (Deut. 13:2–6; 18:18–22). The demand for a sign is the equivalent to the question of the Jerusalem authorities in Ch. 11:30: what is the source of your authority?”

¹¹ *UBC: Mark*, 8:11-13. “Literally, the Greek says they sought to test or “tempt” him, and the word used here seems to allude to many OT passages that speak of Israel “tempting” God by doubting his previously demonstrated works and demanding new ones (e. g., Pss. 95:9–10; 78:17–20, 40–43, 56; 106:13–14; Num. 14:1–10, 20–25).”

¹² *NICNT: Mark*, 8:12. “Jesus’ refusal of a sign has important historical and theological significance. Historically, the demand for a sign expressed the desire to judge Jesus according to norms defined by scribal interpretation... He had already pronounced the scribal norms decayed and sterile (Ch. 7:1–23) and he now rejects their pretentiousness categorically. Theologically, the demand for unmistakable proof that God is at work in Jesus’ ministry is an expression of unbelief. It represents the attempt to understand the person of Jesus within categories which were wholly inadequate to contain his reality.”

¹³ *Reading Mark*, 8:10-26. “If Jesus were to accede to their demand, he would be implicitly acknowledging their right as the religious establishment to define and categorize him according to their standards of legitimation (Waetjen 1989, 140). This, of course, he will not do.”

10. Are the Pharisees “evil”? Explain.^{14 15}

Jesus Warns About Yeast

¹⁴ Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵ And he cautioned them, saying, “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” ¹⁶ And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. ¹⁷ And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸ Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹ When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” They said to him, “Twelve.” ²⁰ “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” And they said to him, “Seven.” ²¹ And he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

Discussion

11. What do you think is going on in this story? How do you propose to explain it?
12. What is Jesus’ warning about when he warns about the leaven/yeast of the Pharisees and Herod?^{16 17 18}
13. What is the disciples’ response to Jesus’ warning? What does Jesus’ response to the disciples indicate about what is happening with them?¹⁹

¹⁴ *UBC: Mark*, 8:11-13. “In short, Mark uses this vocabulary to depict the Pharisees’ request for further proof of Jesus’ authority as an act of disobedience like the disobedience of Israel in the wilderness, in the time of Moses. This disobedience by the Pharisees contrasts powerfully with the faith of the gentile woman of 7:24–30, or the acclamation of the crowd in 7:37, making the Pharisees’ request all the more clearly a refusal to see what they do not want to acknowledge. This characterization of the Pharisees prepares the reader for the next passage (8:14–21), where the Pharisees are mentioned in a negative light as examples that the disciples are not to follow.”

¹⁵ *Reading Mark*, 8:10-26. “Their demand that he provide proof of his insider status is the final straw that confirms them as outsiders. Their status as outsiders is due not to their religion, to their race, or even to their elite status, but to their hardened hearts (3:5), manifested in their blindness to God’s activity in the ministry of Jesus.”

¹⁶ *Reading Mark*, 8:10-26. “When in the next scene the Markan Jesus warns his disciples against the “leaven” of the Pharisees and the “leaven” of Herod, he refers to the corrupting tendency to make Jesus fit into one’s preexisting categories. The Pharisees want a legitimating sign. Jesus’ family diagnoses him as a mental case (3:21). The scribes from Jerusalem have him pigeonholed as a demon- possessed magician (3:22). Herod knows that he has to be John the Baptist come back to haunt his executioner (6:16). Those who are certain that they “know” who Jesus is are inevitably misguided. That the disciples need this warning will become evident in 8:32- 33. In the boat scene (8:14-21), however, the focus is not on what they know, but on what they do not know.”

¹⁷ *UBC: Mark*, 8:14-21. “Thus, both the Pharisees and Herod (see notes on the variant readings) appear in Mark as representatives of a spiritual blindness that goes beyond rejecting the light into hating it. It is no doubt this kind of attitude and action that Mark had in mind in writing these words about the yeast the disciples were to avoid.”

¹⁸ *NICNT: Mark*, 8:14-15. “In Ch. 6:14–16 Herod had betrayed a hostile interest in Jesus, and a tradition not recorded by Mark indicates his own desire to see a sign (Lk. 23:8). The figure of leaven thus describes the disposition to believe only if signs which compel faith are produced. In contrast, Jesus’ warning constitutes a fresh call to faith and understanding apart from signs.”

¹⁹ *Reading Mark*, 8:10-26. “The audience comes to the chilling realization that indeed the disciples are deaf and blind, indeed their hearts are hardened. Worse yet, these are the characteristics of “those outside” (4:10-12; Isa 6:9-10). This scene poses a serious threat to an audience that has been led to identify with the disciples as followers of Jesus and recipients of the “mystery of the reign of God” (4:10). ¶The long tradition of the mystery

14. What is Jesus trying to get at with his question, “Do you not yet understand?”²⁰
15. What is Mark’s intent of this story?^{21 22}

Summary

What are some ways in which we might learn from these three stories? Consider the following excerpts from relevant sections in *Feasting on the Gospels--Mark*:

- a. “The inclusive nature of the good news of Mark 8 gives us reason to ponder: Who are we being called to include, whom we might otherwise exclude? What are we being called to share, in our community and society, so that all may be fed?”²³
- b. “Given today’s economic realities, many of our congregants hold a “scarcity” mind-set: “Since we have only a few little fish and seven loaves [read: a dwindling endowment, an aging membership, a changing neighborhood], we really cannot address the enormous needs around us.” What are the resources your hearers have at hand, no matter how meager they perceive them to be? Could adopting a grateful attitude of abundance produce “leftovers,” so to speak?”²⁴
- c. “It is significant that between the two mass feedings of chapters 6 and 8, a nameless Syrophenician woman reminds us, as she contends with Jesus, that even the “dogs” who are not at the table—the marginalized, the poor, those others—eat the crumbs of the meal served to the family.”²⁵
- d. “The yeast of these Pharisees is the insatiable need to defend their influence, a need that they and all religious authorities seem to have. Those who are in control of religious truths will always defend their position. Their threatened stance is revealed in their demand for more

religions and their revival during the Hellenistic period had produced a high level of confidence in the efficacy of initiation. To be one of those to whom the mystery had been given was to be transformed from a mere mortal into a true spiritual insider. This revelation that the disciples are blind, deaf, and hard of heart despite their insider status shatters the complacency of the audience of this Gospel. If the disciples, recipients of the mystery and chosen companions of Jesus, are to be counted among the outsiders, who is left on the inside? And how can one be sure of remaining inside, when the boundaries seem so fluid?”

²⁰ *UBC: Mark, 8:14-21*. “In the same way that the yeast of 8:14–15 is a symbol with an inner meaning, the feedings teach a hidden meaning that Jesus expects his disciples to catch, a meaning hinted at by the numbers twelve and seven respectively... Mark intended to teach far more than that Jesus could work miracles and could supply much food from little. He meant his readers to come to a mature apprehension that Jesus was not just a prophet or wonder-worker but the Son of God, whose ministry not only brought the fulfillment of the prophetic hope of Israel but also was the basis for the preaching of salvation to the whole world.”

²¹ *UBC: Mark, 8:14-21*. “The Pharisees represent those who continually ask for more proof and are unable or unwilling to perceive what is shown them. The disciples, with whom the readers are to identify themselves, show a less hostile, but nevertheless seriously shallow, perception of Jesus. These two groups are intended to warn the readers that there is more than meets the eye in what Jesus did.”

²² *NICNT: Mark, 8:17-18*. “Repeated exposure to Jesus’ teaching and mighty works had not led to reflection on their significance but to a basic insensitivity and dullness... Here the Twelve appear to be no better than the crowds who profit from Jesus’ miracles without reflection and who seek his teaching without applying it to themselves.”

²³ *Feasting: Mark, location 7800*.

²⁴ *Feasting: Mark, location 7878*.

²⁵ *Feasting: Mark, location 7889*.

proof of Jesus' authority... Now Jesus warns his disciples: beware of the endless thirst for maintaining your religious position. If you spend your lives defending what you think you know, you will overlook the signs of God's life-giving presence right in front of you."²⁶

- e. "The yeast of these Herodians—and their modern counterparts—is the insatiable desire for power... Now Jesus warns his followers: beware of the addictive lust for authority. If you spend your lives defending the power you believe you have, you will abdicate real authority to popular opinion."²⁷
- f. "Consider these Pharisees. They want to test Jesus, which means that they want Jesus to fit within their preconceived notions of what the Messiah must look like and act like."²⁸

²⁶ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7943.

²⁷ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7951.

²⁸ *Feasting: Mark*, location 7996.