

NOT BREAD, BUT FISH

This brings us to the miraculous Feeding of the Multitude, also known as the Multiplication of the Loaves. This story is told no fewer than six times in the Gospels: twice by Mark and Matthew, and once by Luke and John.³³ Given the duplication in Mark and Matthew,³⁴ as well as the fact that all four Evangelists treat this miracle extensively, we can conclude that—regardless of what happened that day—the event left a lasting impression on the participants.

Beginning with Mark's version, verses 6:34–44 say that Jesus "began to teach them." No doubt he was proclaiming the kingdom of God, though his message would have been strongly influenced by the recent execution of John the Baptist.³⁵ When evening came, the disciples realized they did not have enough to feed everyone, so when Jesus said, "Give them something to eat," the disciples asked, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" Jesus' answer was, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." They did exactly that and reported that they had "five [loaves], and two fish [*ichthus*]."

Jesus divided the crowd into groups of fifty or one hundred, and ordered everyone to sit on the grass. "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men."

Such a miracle is impossible. Jesus did not magically transform—like some kind of Harry Potter—five loaves of bread into hundreds of loaves. Moreover, if he had performed this feat, it would have been at odds with the first temptation in which Satan tried to persuade Jesus to change stones into bread.³⁶

More importantly, however, the whole story has been borrowed from the Old Testament. There is a passage in 2 Kings 4:42–44 about the prophet Elisha, which reads: "A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God [Elisha]: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, 'Give it to the people and let them eat.' But his servant said, 'How can I set this

before a hundred people?' So he repeated, 'Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, "They shall eat and have some left.'" He set it [the food] before them [the hundred people], they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord."

To Christians, Jesus is much more divine than Elisha. So if Elisha could feed a hundred people with twenty loaves of bread, Jesus must be able to feed five thousand people with five loaves. Both of these story elements are pure fantasy. But the fact that the story itself has been recounted all of six times in the New Testament suggests that something special did happen that day in Wadi es-Samak.

J. P. Meier assumes that a communal meal of some sort did take place—one that etched itself indelibly on the memories of the participants.³⁷ But if no miracle occurred, what could have happened to leave such a lasting impression?

B. M. F. van Iersel and J. P. Meier have pointed out that the later the Gospels were written, the more the loaves of bread were stressed, rather than the fish,³⁸ no doubt because bread later became part of the sacrament of the Eucharist.³⁹ In the oldest version (Mark 6:37–44), the words "fish" and "bread" are used four times each. In John, the last version to be written, the word "fish" appears twice and "bread" five times.⁴⁰ By this time, the fish had been edged out of the original text.

A closer look at Mark 8:1–9 (i.e. Mark's second version of the Feeding of the Multitude) reveals that the first three verses do not mention the fish at all. Then Jesus asks his disciples, "How many loaves do you have?" In this version the answer is "seven." Everyone sits down, Jesus utters a prayer of thanks, breaks the bread, and divides it among the crowd, who number four thousand this time. Then there is an abrupt addition: "They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed."

Because this last verse dangles so awkwardly at the end of the passage, van Iersel believes that it was added by a later editor. Yet as he himself has noted, this runs counter to the tendency to minimize the importance of the fish. In my opinion, this last verse (8:7) is likely to be more authentic than the previous verses (8:4–6), in which all mention of fish has been excised. In other words, verse 7 has not been added to verses 4–6, but the other way around. The oldest layer of the story prob-

ably read as follows: “They had a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the pieces left over, seven baskets full. Now there were about four thousand people.”

An additional argument in favor of this reading can be found in the original Greek text. When Jesus distributes the fish in verse 7, he says a blessing, a *eulogēsas*. When he distributes the bread in verse 6, he offers up a prayer of thanks, a *eucharistēsas*. Since the word *eucharistēsas* refers specifically to the ritual of the Eucharist that later arose in Christian circles and the word *eulogēsas* had not yet acquired that connotation, we can conclude that verse 7 is “older” than verse 6. The original source that formed the basis of 8:4–9 was therefore about the distribution of fish rather than bread.

If the fish were indeed de-emphasized in favor of the bread in the period between Jesus’ death and the end of the first century, we can turn this tendency around and approach it from the opposite direction: What was in the sources before the Evangelists began to write? What was preserved in the oral tradition in the years immediately after Jesus’ death? In short, what did the crowd in Wadi es-Samak actually eat?

In my opinion, a meal did take place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and it consisted mainly of *fish*. J. P. Meier comes to the same conclusion, even though—as a cautious Catholic who has no wish to provoke a quarrel with the Vatican—he has buried it in a footnote: “One gets the impression that the fish are mentioned in the present versions of the story simply because they were part of the primitive story (and possibly the original historical event, if one occurred).”⁴¹

It is certainly possible that fish were fed to a large crowd (five thousand is surely an exaggeration; five hundred is more likely) on a grassy plain near the Sea of Galilee. At least four of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen: Peter, Andrew, James, and John. The latter two even owned their own boats. Naturally most of the fishermen on the northern shore knew one another. The Sea of Galilee is small, currently about thirteen miles long and seven miles wide (it was somewhat larger in Jesus’ day). So when the men went out to fish, they were within shouting distance, and would have been able to tell each other where good catches were to be had.

Imagine what happened when hundreds of people suddenly converged on a sparsely populated plain. The fishermen on the Sea of Galilee must have seen them and soon discovered the reason for the commotion: A mass of people, incensed by John’s execution, were listening to one of John’s former followers—a charismatic preacher who was proclaiming the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. Although Jesus surely did not say so openly, his message implied that, with the coming of that kingdom, Antipas’ days were numbered.

I suspect that the fishermen cast their nets and fed the crowd with that day’s catch to show their solidarity with Peter, Andrew, James, and John. We know that a steep tax was normally levied on catches (some Egyptian papyruses mention a figure as high as 30–40%).⁴² Since the levy had to be paid to Antipas’ tax collectors, we could even argue that the distribution of free fish was an act of defiance.

It would make a great movie scene. Back in those days, fish were caught in nets stretched between boats, arranged in a semi-circle at intervals of forty to fifty feet. When another group of boats rowed toward the open side, the fishermen beat their oars on the water to drive the fish toward the nets, where they were trapped. While gathering in the nets, the men chanted or sang songs.

Imagine this against the backdrop of the grassy green plain, where Jesus is preaching and maybe even performing exorcisms. Then evening falls. The catch is hauled on land, and Jesus blesses the fish. Everyone eats and is filled. There is more than enough to go around.

It must have been an impressive sight. Remember that most of the people in the crowd were poor and hungry.⁴³ Free food was always welcome. While it was distributed, Jesus’ earlier promise—“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled”⁴⁴—would have strongly resonated among these men.

A REVOLT

Yet something else must have been going on that day—something that turned it into an unforgettable event to all who witnessed it. Only in verse 6:15 of the Gospel of John do we catch a glimpse of what might have happened: “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and

take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

This verse sheds new light on the Feeding of the Multitude and explains its connection to John’s execution. The emotions aroused by John’s cruel death, Jesus’ charismatic preaching, and the unexpected abundance of food had created a dangerous euphoria. People clamored for Jesus to become their leader, a Davidic king who would put an end to Roman oppression. A shared meal had turned into a political protest, with all the makings of a revolt. In such an inflammatory situation, there was a very real threat of violence.⁴⁵

Only when viewed in this light do we notice a few oddities in Mark’s text. He normally uses the Greek word *anthrōpoi* (“people”). In verse 6:44, however, he pointedly uses the word *andres* (“men”):⁴⁶ “Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand *men*” (my italics). According to Mark, Jesus then split the men into groups of fifty or one hundred—an action reminiscent of a military campaign.⁴⁷ Jesus also had them recline,⁴⁸ as rich people did at a Roman banquet. This suggests that he saw the communal meal as an eschatological feast,⁴⁹ a prelude to God’s kingdom, in which the “men” would take the place of the “rich” (“blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”).⁵⁰ Mark also refers to the crowd as “sheep without a shepherd,” an expression used in the Old Testament to denote an army without a general, a nation without a leader, or a suffering folk oppressed by an evil ruler.⁵¹

This prompted H. Montefiore fifty years ago to postulate that the Feeding of the Multitude was a metaphor for a real event, namely the start of a revolt.⁵² Although this suggestion was pooh-poohed by theologians—after all, it turned Jesus into a political figure or, God forbid, a revolutionary—I think that Montefiore was right. It dovetails nicely with the frenzied euphoria of the multitude as well as with John 6:15: “They were about to come and take him by force [*harpazein*] to make him king.”

R. Brown also sees the crowd’s reaction in political terms, writing that Jesus’ appearance “aroused a popular fervor that created a danger of an uprising.”⁵³ C. S. Mann describes it as “an explosive atmosphere,”⁵⁴ and E. Bammel believes that John’s death had roused the crowd “into a state of agitation,” and that killing Antipas “could be viewed . . . as the

necessary step before the ushering in of the final events [i.e. the kingdom of God].”⁵⁵

But the revolt was averted. Jesus was unwilling—at least at that time—to acquiesce to the crowd’s demands and agree to the use of violence. He believed that God alone could establish his kingdom here on earth, so the notion of an armed revolt against the regime was anathema to him.

It is quite possible that Jesus’ cryptic saying—“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven [i.e. the kingdom of God] has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force”⁵⁶—is a reference to this. The Greek verb *harpazein* (meaning “to take by force”) is the same word used in John 6:15 when the throng tried “to take him [Jesus] by force” to make him king. Jesus might very well have been reproaching the men in Wadi es-Samak who were hoping to turn God’s kingdom into a violent insurrection, since at that time he was convinced that God alone, and not man, could bring about that kingdom. Jesus was able to vanquish demons, but he believed that Israel’s ultimate renewal would be God’s doing.

Jesus’ reactions to the crowd’s attempt to crown him king of Israel make this clear. First he forced (*anagkazō*) his disciples to get immediately (*euthus*) into the boat and sail away,⁵⁷ even though we are told by John (6:18) that a storm had arisen: “The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.” Apparently the disciples were so carried away by the crowd’s enthusiasm that they were ready to join the revolt.⁵⁸

Don’t forget that the Twelve included the former Zealot Simon,⁵⁹ as well as the brothers James and John—the “Sons of Thunder,” as Jesus called them.⁶⁰ None of these three men would have eschewed violence. This is borne out by a passage in Luke, in which James and John were so angered by the refusal of a Samaritan village to receive Jesus that they asked him, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”⁶¹

When the disciples sailed off across the sea, however, Jesus did not accompany them, but instead stayed behind to try and calm the crowd. Apparently he was not very successful, for we are told that “he fled [*pheugei*] to the mountain by himself.” At any rate, this is the version of John 6:15 given in the important Codex Sinaiticus. Once again this is a

“difficult” reading, since in the other ancient manuscripts we find the word “withdrew” (*anechōrēsīn*).⁶² But as R. Brown points out, the change from “fled” to “withdrew” might be “a scribal attempt to soften an embarrassing flight by Jesus.”⁶³ During the early stages in the development of the Gospel of John, some editor was probably so embarrassed by the idea of Jesus taking to his heels that he changed it to “he withdrew again to the mountain.”⁶⁴

Up there on his mountain, Jesus prayed. This is the second time he prays in the Gospel of Mark, and like the first time, it occurs at a moment of great existential uncertainty. Actually, this scene was pre-figured in the “temptation” in the desert, when the devil offered Jesus all the kingdoms in the world, if only he would agree to worship Satan instead of God. The crowd in Wadi es-Samak had offered Jesus the “kingship of Israel,” so now all he had to do was to decide whether or not to accept it. He must have been aware of the risks. An armed uprising could end in a bloody defeat, as it had some thirty years earlier in Sepphoris, when the rebel Judas the Galilean sparked a revolt after the death of Herod the Great. Jesus himself could have been conceived in the aftermath of that insurrection.

Or would God be on the side of the Jews this time? Was the battle to begin now? Would the yoke of Rome be cast off at last? As he prayed, Jesus became convinced that he had to reject the use of violence and the offer of a Davidic kingship. The Evangelists glossed over the political implications of these events as much as possible and tried to cover them up with the miraculous story of the Feeding of the Multitude.

ANOTHER IMPOSSIBLE MIRACLE

Immediately after this, Mark says the disciples sailed toward Bethsaida, straining their oars against a strong wind.⁶⁵ (It must have been blowing *North by Northwest*.)⁶⁶ Suddenly they saw Jesus coming toward them, “walking on the sea [*epi tēs thalassēs*].” Thinking that they had seen a ghost (*phantasma*) they cried out in fear, but Jesus told them not to be afraid, and stepped into the boat. The storm died down instantly.

Matthew added a few embellishments. In his version, when Peter saw Jesus walking over the water, he called, “If it is you, command me to

come to you on the water,” and Jesus replied, “Come.” Peter got out of the boat and took a few steps but began to sink. He would have drowned if Jesus had not “reached out his hand and caught him.” The boat, now with Jesus on board, finally landed in or near Bethsaida.⁶⁷

It is ridiculous to think that Jesus or Peter ever walked on water. Such a thing defies the laws of nature. As R. Bultmann has pointed out, various walking-on-water stories were known in those days, so Mark probably copied one of them.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, I can imagine a realistic version of this incident. If the disciples had encountered a strong head wind, their boat’s one square sail would have been useless, and they would have had to row—with twelve men on board and only four oars—against huge waves. The Sea of Galilee is notorious for producing waves that can reach a height of ten feet during a storm.⁶⁹ The wind and waves would have kept blowing the boat toward the eastern shore. Rowing to Bethsaida, five miles away, would have been devilishly hard.

It was “early in the morning” when they saw Jesus.⁷⁰ John claims that in all that time they had not covered more than three or four miles.⁷¹ If Jesus had walked north along the shore after his prayer, he could easily have “overtaken” the boat. In that case, the disciples would have been very surprised to suddenly see him by the shore.⁷² This could be the historical basis of the story, though of course it is pure speculation. Still, it does make one wonder why such an accidental meeting was transformed into a miracle. What made Mark, or his source, want to cover up this incident? What on earth were they trying to hide?

According to John, Jesus fled to the mountain. Several hours later, he and his disciples reached Bethsaida and, as we shall see, traveled north to Tyre and Sidon. Many of Jesus’ enthusiastic followers must have been bitterly disappointed when he fled into the mountains and refused to lead the revolt. They might even have thought him a coward. John writes, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”⁷³

I think that the Evangelists had Jesus walk on water to neutralize the negative aspects of his actions. Just as they had presented the miracle of the wine in Cana to defuse the conflict between John the Baptist and

Jesus when the latter began to baptize on his own initiative, here they present the walking-on-water miracle to soften the impact of Jesus' fleeing by endowing him with supernatural powers.

It could even be argued that the Evangelists *always* tried to mask politically dangerous or otherwise disagreeable truths by "overpainting" them with an impossible miracle. To mask the stigma of Jesus' illegitimacy, they presented the miracle of the virgin birth. To disguise the fact that Jesus died a humiliating death, they came up with the miracle of the resurrection. Later we will see the same trick applied to the transfiguration of Jesus and the raising of Lazarus.

IS A HERO ALLOWED TO FLEE?

Although Jesus had fled from "five thousand men" and the threat of revolt, Antipas was no doubt notified of the gathering and the attempt to make Jesus a king. After all, Wadi es-Samak is located almost directly across from Tiberias. If a communal meal had been held and fish roasted, the fires would have been visible from Tiberias, a mere six miles away. Antipas had spies everywhere, surely also among the crowd of five thousand (or five hundred). By the next morning at the latest, Antipas—or whoever was looking after his affairs—must have known what had taken place on the opposite shore.

Perhaps the convoluted passage in John 6:22–24 can best be explained in terms of Antipas' reaction. The Evangelist begins with an unintelligible verse: "The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there.⁷⁴ They also saw that Jesus had not gotten into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone."

How could the crowd see the *next* day that the disciples had left the *night before* and that Jesus had not gone with them? What is the significance of that one remaining boat? Who were the people who had "stayed on the other side"? The text seems to have been made thoroughly incomprehensible by a clumsy editor.

Next the Evangelist writes, "Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread [the fish] . . . So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they them-

selves got into the boats [again] and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus."⁷⁵ At first this verse seems innocent enough, as though a number of people had become interested in Jesus' teaching and were trying to find him again. But what was the point of that obscure and badly formulated verse 6:22? What was the original wording before the Evangelist or his editor smoothed away the wrinkles?

I suspect that the original version reported that Antipas was informed the next morning of what had taken place "on the other side" of the sea. His spies no doubt told him that an enthusiastic crowd (of "men") wanted to proclaim a charismatic miracle-worker as the king of Israel. To Antipas, such a popular movement could only be seen as an insurrection, so he sent several boatloads of soldiers to Wadi es-Samak to arrest Jesus. Maybe he feared that Jesus was going to sail off in that one remaining boat. When the soldiers discovered that both Jesus and his disciples had already decamped, they moved on to Capernaum—Jesus' place of residence—to arrest him there.

The source on which verses 6:22–24 were based could have read something like this: "The next day Antipas was told what had happened on the other side of the sea. He heard that the disciples had left, but that Jesus had not gone with them. He sent boats from Tiberias to the other shore [to arrest him]. When it appeared that Jesus and his disciples were not there, he sent the boats to Capernaum." But Antipas' men came away from there empty-handed as well. After the narrowly averted revolt, Jesus knew that Antipas would respond with military might, which is why he decided to flee north with his disciples.

Matthew tells us that Jesus "went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon."⁷⁶ Mark adds, "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there."⁷⁷ Therefore, Jesus not only fled Antipas' territory, he also tried to keep his hiding place a secret.

It is strange to think of Jesus as a person who was constantly on the run and hiding from his enemies. It does not seem heroic: Heroes do not flee; they make a stand. But eighteen hundred years ago, the notion of Jesus as a fugitive was widely accepted in Christian circles. According to the church fathers Cyprian and Origen,⁷⁸ Jesus taught his followers that fleeing from danger was a *good* thing. (After all, during Jesus' second temptation, he declined to throw himself needlessly from the