

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

MARK: BREAD IN THE WILDERNESS

MARK 6.31-44

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Last time we saw Mark sandwich two stories together, the mission of the 12 and the execution of John; the point there was to teach us what kind of opposition we can expect as we take on the mission of Jesus. Now we will find Jesus seeking a retreat with his disciples that they may rest, but to no avail as the crowds anticipate their retreat across the lake and get to the location before Jesus and the 12. It would seem the mission of the 12 has had the visible effect of drawing a large crowd of people from the villages of Galilee to seek Jesus, though we will see their motive is probably not a good one. The basic point of our story is "the sheer wonder of an impossible act and the testimony which this provides in answer to the growing Christological question of this part of the gospel, 'Who is Jesus?'"

Also significant as we consider the clues given by the textual position of this story is the following:

"It's position in the Markan framework juxtaposes the sumptuous oriental aura of the Herodian court with the austere circumstances in which Jesus satisfied the multitude with the staples of the 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 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."

This is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels, and as we proceed we'll see it has some special meaning which might explain its favored place.

We begin with the end of Mark's last sandwich in v30, where the apostles returned from their mission and report to Jesus. Meanwhile the crowds had them

surrounded and are making rest impossible, so Jesus takes the 12 into the boat, over the lake, but possibly this time they remain on the same side of the lake, just in a more secluded spot. In v31 Jesus uses an unusually emphatic expression so as to point out the disciples' need of rest.

In v33 the people recognize Jesus and anticipate his destination; they get there by land before Jesus and the 12 get there by boat, and so there will be no rest on this occasion! Before going further we need to point out a thread which runs through this story, and which gives us some insight into the intentions of this crowd.

Simply put, there are a number of reasons to believe this crowd gathered to Jesus for the express purpose of making him king by force and beginning a popular uprising. First, because Mark uses the Greek word *andres* instead of the more general *anthropos*, likely indicating the mostly male makeup of the crowd. Second, in Matthew's account, it is possible his comment about the makeup of the crowd intends to communicate that there were only men and no women or children. Third, the image of sheep without a shepherd is possibly taken from the OT, 1Kings 22, where Ahab's army is thus described after his death; i.e. This phrase can have a military sense. Fourth, John's gospel tells us specifically that on this occasion the crowd intended to take Jesus and make him king by force. Fifth, Jesus concludes this meal by somewhat forcefully sending his disciples over the lake and removing himself into the hills.

Additionally, there is the historical situation of Galilee at this time, including the

"volatile political situation of Galilee under Roman rule; the undercurrent of zealot sympathies in the Gospels; the test of Jesus' attitude to zealots in the question about paying taxes; the charge on which Jesus was finally executed; the context of a rebellion in which Barabbas was arrested; these men tracking Jesus down in wilderness, traditionally a location for launching liberation movements; rural Galilee was a stronghold for Zealot movements, which (group) was founded in AD6 by Judas the Galilean...Galilee...was in other words, the spearhead of

freedom movements against Rome, and particularly of the Zealot movement." In this vein, it may also be significant that this militaristic scene comes just after the beheading of John. Perhaps the execution of John, plus the preaching mission of the 12 which has announced the incoming of a new kingdom, as stirred the political unrest of many Galileans who respond by seeking Jesus out in the wilderness in hopes of making him their rebel leader.

Now none of this is to say either Jesus or Mark saw the event as having military significance, or desired such. The point is that the Galileans had such misguided motives in seeking out Jesus. For Mark and Jesus, this wilderness banquet has a very different meaning, as we'll see.

Jesus' desire of rest for his disciples is set aside in the interest of compassion for the crowds who have followed him on foot. For Jesus (and Mark), the significance of the crowd being sheep without a shepherd speaks of the lack of care and leadership which these people suffer under their derelict priests, elders and scribes. In the sense of lacking leadership, the phrase is also used in Numbers 27 when Moses, knowing his time to die draws near, asks the Lord to appoint a new leader over Israel lest they be as sheep without a shepherd. Jesus' compassionate response to this shepherdless flock is to spend time teaching them many things.

"The description of the crowd is an obvious metaphor for lack of care and leadership, and is used in the OT for Israel in the wilderness after Moses, Ahab's army after his death, the people of God when their leaders have failed in their trust (Ez 34), and their helplessness when their messianic leader is taken away (Zech 13). Here it denotes the untended state of the people of Galilee."

In v35 the disciples come to Jesus and tell him to send the crowds away for food, given the late hour, which speaks of the end of the afternoon when Jews had their main meal. While they are out in a desert place they are not so far that the crowds could not make their way to surrounding villages and buy food.

Jesus responds with the enigmatic command for the 12 to feed the crowd! They question Jesus, suggesting the impossible idea of spending 200 denarii on bread; this would equal nearly a year's wages for the common laborer, and it's obvious the 12 would not have so vast an amount on hand. William Lane says the form of their question to Jesus is disrespectful, which is one more element building toward the comment in v52 about their hardened hearts and Jesus' strong rebuke to them in chapter 8.

Jesus directs them to inventory what food they have on hand and the 12 return with the meager 5 loaves and 2 fish; "these were probably round, flat loaves, large enough at most for one person for a day," and of course the fishes were not much more substantial. Then Jesus directs the crowd to sit down in groups on the grass.

"The green grass probably fixes the time of the incident as spring, before the grass dries up and goes brown, though Mark's motive in mentioning it after the shepherd metaphor of v34 may be rather to allude to the shepherd's role in leading his flock to green pastures, in Ps 23."

In v39 Mark uses the word *sumposion* for the groups Jesus tells them to gather into:

"A *sumposion* is a group of people eating or drinking together and suggests a relaxed, even convivial atmosphere."

The crowds obey and seat themselves into groups of 50's and 100's. Again, the word for "groups", this time in v40, is notable:

"*Prasia* (group) is literally a garden plot or flower bed and is not used elsewhere to describe people so that *prasia prasia* offers a remarkably visual impression of the scene, with men lined up in groups like plots of vegetables on the green grass. The organization serves for ease of distribution and the basis for the count recorded. All of this careful disposition by the crowd is introduced by the verbs *anaklinai* (recline) and *anepesan* (recline). These terms are especially associated with the Greco-Roman style of reclining at table. In a Jewish setting, where meals were

generally taken seated, these terms would normally indicate a more formal banquet setting, following the Greco-Roman style, rather than an ordinary meal...it is possible that by using such terms Mark intends to hint that, while it was hardly a formal occasion and the fare was basic, there was an air of festivity about it which made it, at least with hindsight, a foreshadowing of the messianic banquet."

Now while we mentioned the possible military sense of groups of 50's and 100's above, I suggest a different and likely better sense of these numbers, connected with another text from the Law:

Exodus 18:24-26 ²⁴ So Moses listened ¹to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. ²⁵ Moses chose ^aable men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, ¹of hundreds, ¹of fifties and ¹of tens. ²⁶ They judged the people at all times; ^athe difficult ¹dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor ¹dispute they themselves would judge.

If the connection is valid we should see these numbers in terms of administrative units; they are groupings of people designed to facilitate leadership and government of the people. While the majority of these people will ultimately fall away from Jesus (John 6), we are still left with one more connection between Jesus with his disciples and the crowds, and Moses with Israel in the wilderness (most of whom also "fell away" and perished in the desert, interestingly). This becomes more interesting when we consider Jesus is about to provide supernatural bread in the wilderness for the crowd just as Moses, or Yahweh, provided for Israel. At the least this would seem to present Jesus within the flow of revelatory, redemptive history, continuous with it and as we end up seeing, the fulfillment and summation of it.

In v41 Jesus performs the miracle in the process of offering a table blessing over the meager meal. The content of Jesus' prayer may have been the common table prayer of Judaism: "Praise be to you, O Lord our God, king of the world, who makes bread to come forth from the earth, and who provides for all that you have created."

Many writers note a connection between the words used here as Jesus blesses and gives the bread, and the Last Supper which Mark records in chapter 14:

"There is wide agreement that part of the significance is revealed by the verbs in v41, *labon*, *eulogasen*, *kateklasen*, *edidou*, which are those traditionally used to describe the Eucharistic actions of the Last Supper, and which appear again in the same sequence in 14.22. Since 14.25 indicates the meal is a foretaste of the banquet in the kingdom of God, then the fish and loaves are a pointer to messianic fulfillment; John makes this point more obvious by following the story with the teaching about eating and drinking his flesh and blood."

We are given no help in visualizing this miracle; we do not know what it looked like for the tiny meal to expand into proportions fit for thousands. The Gospel stories have no interest in telling us! What we know is the miracle produced a meal so abundant that in verses 42-44 we are told 5,000 men ate the meal, and all were satisfied (it was not a mere snack), and 12 large baskets were filled with the remnants from the meal.

That's the text. Now what is the theological point Mark is trying to make? We have seen it's scattered elements above but now we'll draw them together:

Mark's point is to show that, in contrast to the misguided military hopes of the crowd, Jesus is the Son of God who stands in the stream of divine revelation and redemption, showing himself the fulfillment of Yahweh's provision of bread in the wilderness, and in this miracle points forward to the coming Messianic Banquet which disciples will enjoy when the kingdom has fully come. From this we can draw a number of theological points:

1. Jesus didn't come to fix the political order of this world; he did not come to change the world or make the world better. He had plenty of opportunity to do so and he rejected it every time. Jesus' work runs along different lines entirely; he came not to make heaven on earth but to fit men for heaven. Now does this mean

we are wrong to try and leave the world a better place than we found it? Not at all; it is both the command of God and plain righteousness to seek to improve the tiny part of the world we live in. The point is that improving the present world order isn't the mission or aim of Christ; saving souls is the mission and aim of Christ. It would be better to say our goal is to make men better rather than making the world better; it would be best of all to say our goal is to make men redeemed.

2. Jesus is continuous with and fulfills the OT revelation of God's past redemption. He is a true prophet of Yahweh, and even more, he now stands in the place of Yahweh as the redemptive story has progressed. He is no mere Moses or Isaiah or High Priest; he fulfills all of these roles and surpasses them in his place as Lord and God. This should remind us of the high place filled by the OT; it is the true revelation of God, on par with everything found in the NT. However, Jesus' role as fulfillment of the OT gives pride of place to Jesus and the NT. To study the Bible apart from understanding Jesus' central and enlightening role leads to a misunderstanding of the Biblical story and usually wrong emphases in theology and practice. The heart of our theology must be Jesus, the Suffering King who arrives at his kingship through self-surrender to the Cross. Consequently, all our practice ought to begin with this great fact of the Suffering Lord, with the readiness for self-surrender, love, mercy and Gospel truth which that entails.

3. Jesus provides entrance into the future state of blessedness which was predicted by the prophets and which the Jews have hoped in for millennia. That promise, long cherished by the people of God as it was kept alive through the prophets, comes to a head in Jesus; this makes Jesus the one who opens the door of the kingdom to men and shuts it. Entrance into future blessedness is based on whether one receives "bread" from Jesus' hands. Those who will not have his salvation must starve outside the kingdom because bread will not be found elsewhere, and the kingdom only has one door. This has implications for our salvation (obviously) as well as our daily spirituality. All of our spiritual efforts must begin and end with Jesus and his redemptive work. It is very easy to attempt a Christian life which is

strangely empty of Christ. Our faith must be faith inspired by and grounded upon the actions of Jesus to save his people. Our hope must point forward not to worldly happiness but to Thy Kingdom Come. Our obedience must be the love-centered obedience apart from which all attempted obedience is a hoax and sham. Jesus as the center of and entrance to God's future blessedness means our whole life must come to revolve around him, and certainly our piety not the least.