The Feeding of the Five Thousand

Mark 6.31-44; Matt 14.13-21; Luke 9.10b-17; John 6.1-15

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus recounted in all four Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels, it comes after Herod Antipas' receipt of reports about Jesus' activity (Matt 14.1-2; Mark 6.14-16; Luke 9.7-9) but with differing intervening material. Mark and Matthew first describe the death of John the Baptist at Herod's orders (Mark 6:17-29; Matt 14.3-21). Mark then records the return of the twelve from their mission (Mark 6.30), which Matthew does not mention. Luke omits the story of John's execution (having told of his imprisonment earlier in his Gospel, Luke 3.19-20) and refers only to the return of the twelve (Luke 9.10). In Mark and Matthew, the feeding miracle is followed by the walking on the water. Luke, who passes over a whole stretch of Mark's narrative (Mark 6.45-8.26), follows up the feeding of the five thousand with Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah (Luke 9.18-22). In John's Gospel, the feeding miracle follows teaching given in Jerusalem (John 5.1-47) and is succeeded by the walking of the water, as in Matthew and Luke.

Mark and Matthew also have a second miraculous feeding: the feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8.1-10; Matt 15:32-39).

The Shared Story

A comparison of the four accounts reveals a common story:

- Jesus goes to a certain place and is met there by a great multitude, numbering (at least) five thousand;
- the need to feed the crowd emerges;
- only five loaves and two fish are available;
- a command is given for the people to sit;
- Jesus takes the bread and offers a blessing/gives thanks;
- the food is distributed;
- all the people eat until their hunger is satisfied;
- twelve baskets of leftovers are collected.

The shared story recalls God's supply of manna in the wilderness through Moses (Exodus 16) and Elisha's feeding of a hundred persons with twenty loaves (2 Kings 4.42-44).

In the Synoptic Gospels, the actions of Jesus – taking, breaking, blessing and giving – are repeated at his final meal with the disciples, at which he institutes the Eucharist (Mark 14.22-25; Matt 26.26-29; Luke 22.15-20). The feeding miracle thus to some extent prefigures the Last Supper. John does not narrate the institution of the Lord's Supper; yet

his description of Jesus taking the bread, giving thanks for it and distributing it has Eucharistic overtones.

The Synoptic accounts of the feeding of the five thousand are very similar with few unique features. John's narrative, though, is distinctive in various ways.

Mark

Mark explains why Jesus takes his disciples to the isolated place where the miracle occurs: it is to get away from the relentless thronging of people around them, which has reached such an intensity that they have *no leisure even to eat* (v. 31). It is thus ironic that in seeking the escape the crowds, they attract a huge multitude! Mark is fond of such ironies (e.g. 1.44-45).

According to Mark, Jesus shows compassion to the crowd *because they were like sheep without a shepherd* (v. 34; Matthew makes a similar comment in an earlier passage in his Gospel, Matt 9.36). The remark calls to mind Moses' concern that the congregation of Israel 'may not be like sheep without a shepherd' (Num 27.17). We are told that *he began to teach them many things* (v. 34), though Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus teaches. The evangelist often refers to Jesus' teaching activity, without specifying the content of Jesus' teaching (e.g. 1.21-22; 2.13). Mark records far fewer of Jesus' actual teachings than the other Gospel writers.

When Jesus instructs the disciples to give the people something to eat, they reply sarcastically, '*Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?*' (v. 37). This somewhat disrespectful response by the disciples is in keeping with Mark's rather unflattering portrait of them in his Gospel (e.g. 4.11-13, 33-34, 40).

Mark refers to *the green grass* (v. 39). John mentions the *grass* (John 6.10) but does not highlight its green colour. Mark typically shows attention for descriptive detail. Grass would be green in early spring, which gives this miracle a setting around the time of Passover, as in John's account.

Matthew

Like Mark, Matthew also refers to Jesus' *compassion*, but whereas in Mark, Jesus' sympathy leads to teaching, in Matthew, it is expressed in healing. Luke also tells us that Jesus heals, but he doesn't relate this to Jesus' compassion (which he doesn't mention). Elsewhere in Matthew, the compassion of Jesus is linked with his healing ministry (9.35-36; 20.34).

Mark and Luke tell us that the crowd number five thousand men; Matthew adds, *besides women and children* (v. 21). The same expansive comment occurs in Matt 15.38 in connection with the feeding of the four thousand. It serves to underline the scale of the miracle.

Luke

Luke's account is the shortest and neatest of the four. When the crowds find Jesus, *he welcomed them* (v. 11). 'Welcoming' is the action of a host, receiving his/her guests. Luke has a special interest in hospitality and includes Jesus' teaching on being a host (14.12-14). In offering an indiscriminate welcome, Jesus exemplifies what he teaches. Jesus preaches to the multitude *about the kingdom of God* (v. 11). This is the main theme of Jesus' public preaching in the Synoptics, though only Luke mentions it in this context.

John

John gives the Sea of Galilee its more up-to-date name, the *Sea of Tiberias*. The crowds follow Jesus *because they saw the signs that he was doing*. *Sign* is John's preferred word for Jesus' miracles (e.g. 2.1, 23; 3.2). John speaks of Jesus and his disciples going up *the mountain*, which is different to but not necessarily in conflict with the Synoptists' *deserted place* (Jesus returns to *the mountain* in v. 15, which matches Mark 6.46 and Matt 14.23). Reference is made to the nearness of *the Passover*, which is the second of three Passovers mentioned by John (2.13, 23; 11.55).

In the Synoptic versions, it is disciples who express concern to feed the crowd, but in John it is Jesus who raises the problem. It is important for John that Jesus takes the initiative. To show that Jesus is not flummoxed, the evangelist clarifies that Jesus knows exactly what he intends to do (v. 6). Whereas the Synoptists speak generally of Jesus' disciples, John refers specifically to *Philip* (vv. 5, 7) and *Andrew* (v. 8). Only John attributes the fives loaves and two fish to *a boy* (v. 9). John specifies that the loaves are *barley* loaves (vv. 9, 13). This seems to echo 2 Kings 4.42: in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint), the loaves multiplied by Elisha are specifically *barley* loaves.

In John's account, Jesus gives a command for the leftovers to be gathered up. A reason is also supplied: *so that nothing may be lost* (v. 12), which may reflect an ethical concern for conservation. The people, seeing *the sign* that has been accomplished, identify Jesus as *the prophet who is to come into the world* (v. 14). This is an allusion to Deut 18.15, and Moses' promise of a prophet like himself. When Jesus realises that the people want to make him king, he withdraws from them. As Jesus later makes clear in the Gospel, although he is indeed a king, his kingdom is not of this world (18.36).

In John's Gospel, the feeding of the five thousand is connected to the discourse on the bread on life (6.22-59), which follows after the walking on the water. The sermon is addressed to *you* who *ate your fill of the loaves* (v. 26) and brings out the significance of the miracle. It points to the food that endures for eternal life (v. 27).

Summary

Small but interesting details distinguish the Synoptic accounts of the shared story from each other. Mark gives Jesus' appraisal of the crowd that they were like shepherd-less

sheep. Matthew emphasises the scope of the miracle. Luke gives prominence to Jesus' role as host. John's version is much more distinctive, but he still conveys the same central story. He singles out particular individuals: Philip, Andrew, the boy. He emphasises Jesus' control over the situation. He narrates the people's reaction to Jesus: they rightly perceive him as the Prophet to come but wrongly want to press him into the mould of a worldly king.

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