

The Two Feeding Accounts in Mark

by Joe Spivy

A number of theories have been postulated to explain Mark's use of the two feeding accounts. The accounts display several similarities as well as some differences that may be significant.

Both accounts are offered in the context of the progressive ministry of Jesus. The initial account appears to take place in a more Jewish setting. Immediately preceding the first feeding is an account of the beheading of John the Baptist. Herod, [p]may represent the powerful, who are deciding how to deal with the ministry of John and, thereafter, the ministry of Jesus (Herod's reluctance to behead John may be indicative of the internal struggle many in power are experiencing).

In stark contrast to the viciousness of the banquet where Herod presents the head of John to his daughter, Jesus presides over a banquet whose motive is compassion. In a "lonely place" (Mark 6:32), where Jesus and his disciples had sought refuge, they soon find themselves surrounded by a large crowd. The people, having realized where Jesus is going, have rushed ahead to meet him.

In this context Jesus is moved by compassion because the "great throng" appeared as sheep without a shepherd. After teaching them "many things" until it is late, his disciples ask him to "send them away" (a strong phrase) so they can buy something to eat. Jesus response is to counter with the command, "You (yourselves-"hymeis") give them something to eat." Their reasonable answer is that would take 200 denarii to adequately feed the crowd.

Jesus then asks, "How many loaves have you got?" Upon investigation they find that they have five loaves and two fish.

Jesus then has the crowd sit down in companies (garden plots) of hundreds and fifties. This appears to be an arrangement similar to a formal banquet that would serve as the appropriate setting for teaching. [footnote--it would seem that this information is derived from somewhere.]Where Herod's banquet has led to the death of John the Baptist, Jesus' banquet will provide a lesson for his disciples- though they are slow to discern its significance (see Mark 8:19-21).

When they are seated, (1) taking the loaves and fish, and (2) looking into heaven, Jesus is said to have (3) blessed and (4) broked the loaves. He then (5) gave it to his disciples to set before the people. The fish are then divided for all.

The meal is eaten and all are "satisfied." Twelve baskets are of bread and broken fish are collected, the crowd is said to have included 5000 men, and "immediately" (a typically Markan phrase) [Good insight, but again, I am wondeing if it is occasioned by an external source.]the disciples leave by way of a boat.

The account in Mark 6:34-44 is larger than that in 8:1-10. There are several similarities and a few differences. In both cases the events take place away from larger population areas: ch. 6- "lonely place" and ch. 8- "desert" (remote place- NIV).

The number of people who have gathered around Jesus is quite large: ch. 6- "great throng" and ch. 8- "great crowd."

Mark takes note of Jesus' compassion in both accounts. In the first account it is Jesus' compassion, because the great throng resembled sheep without a shepherd, that led to his teaching them. Later in the day, after he had taught for some time, the need to feed the crowd arose.

The second account records that Jesus had taught the great crowd for three days and, seeing them hungry and realizing how far they might have to go for food, he is moved to have compassion on them.

Accompanying Jesus in both instances are his disciples. The depiction of the actions of the disciples/apostles in Mark 6:30 is quite positive, whereas the majority of the remainder of the book appears to return to the Markan theme of dull or stupid disciples. In both cases their suggestions or reactions, ch. 6- "send them away" and ch. 8- "How can one feed these men...?", are less than helpful. Mark's record that the disciples continue to see no way to feed the crowd in ch. 8 would seem to fit with the dull or stupid disciples theme.

When faced with the need for food Jesus, in both accounts, turns [awkward] to the disciples asks what they can find to eat. In both cases the number of loaves (5 vs. 7) and fish (2 vs. few) leaves little doubt that Mark wants his readers to realize that a miracle is required.

Again in chapter 8, as in 6, Jesus directs the crowd to be seated. As in chapter 6, Jesus takes the bread, prays, broke the bread and then gave it to the disciples. In this account he also specifically blesses the fish. It is the disciples then who pass the bread on to the people (could it be significant that it is the disciples who are taking the bread from the hands of Jesus and then passing it on to the people?).

It may be worth noting that the word used by Jesus in thanksgiving for the bread in chapter 8 is "eucharistesas" (see 1 Corinthians 11). More on why this might fit better in this context rather than the earlier context will be discussed later. {this is important, but why? More detail would be needed here to support your point.}

In the end it is seven baskets, rather than chapter six's 12, that is collected in chapter 8. The total number of people served is recorded by Mark to have been 4,000. In each case the people are satisfied (Jesus had provided more than enough for their needs).

One possible difference between the two accounts, not already mentioned, is that the first may be seen as a more Jewish area where the second feeding follows two miracles performed for Gentiles and the area where Jesus is ministry may be more Gentile in character. For Mark's audience, which has developed a very significant Gentile character, this flow from Jewish to Gentile may reflect their experience. The gospel had first been shared with the Jews (Jesus comments at the miracle for the Syrophenian woman, Mark 7) and then with the Gentiles (see also Acts 1:8).

It is within this Gentile context, which of course would have been heavily influenced by the apostle Paul, that the word "eucharistias" may be seen as more significant since it may evoke images of the eucharist/lord's supper/communion celebration in their assemblies. Assemblies where, almost certainly, individuals would gather listen to the teaching of Jesus (gospel), pray, and partake in the eucharist. Perhaps that's a stretch, but it does seem to be suggested by the text (at least to me). [This is a very interesting theory of the possible socio-historical reasons for the discrepancies in the two accounts.]

The move from chapter 6 to chapter 8, with the similarities and differences, may have spoken in a special way to Mark's audience that validated their experience. It is not a condemnation of Judaism but a reflection of the ever-widening audience for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

(To build on this theme, you might also look at what follows each feeding story. There may be a pattern here, though at times I may be stretching it to get it to fit.)

Chapter 6	Chapter 8
Feeding	Feeding
Trip in a ship	Trip in a ship
Miracles: People Seek	Miracles: Pharisees Seek
Confrontation with the Pharisees	Confrontation with the Pharisees (tied to miracles above)
Jesus teaches disciples	Jesus teaches disciples
Miracle	Miracle
(Miracle) Deaf Mute proclaims Jesus	Peter confesses Jesus
"He has done everything well"	"You are the Christ"

In both cases it seems the feeding narratives are preparing us for a whirlwind of activity that points to Jesus power (he had done everything well) and eventually the recognition that he is the Messiah (You are the Christ). This may be why Jesus reviews the two feedings and then asks, "do you not yet understand?" (8:19-21).