**Mark 8:1-21**

**Feeding of the Four Thousand**

**Parallel to earlier feeding:** Denis Nineham (1963) says “Note, e.g. the desert in both cases 6:35, 8:4; the same question: how many loaves have you? 6:38, 8:5;; the same command to recline 6:39, 8:6; the same words used of the loaves: ‘took’, ‘gave thanks’, ‘broke’, ‘gave’, ‘set before’; the statement and they all ate and were satisfied 6:42, 8:8; the same gathering of the remains in baskets, and in each case the dismissal of the crowd, followed by a journey in a boat” (Nineham, 205)

He also points out these “doublets”:

Feeding of the 5000 1. Feeding of the 4000

Crossing of the Lake 2. Crossing of the Lake

Controversy with the Pharisees 3. Controversy with the Pharisees

The Children’s Bread 4. The Leaven of the Pharisees

Healing of the deaf man 5. Healing of the blind man (cf Nineham 206)

This is significant because, as I believe, the doublets interpret each other.

… “it was suggested at least as early as the fourth century that St Mark may have intended the feeding of the five thousand to symbolize the giving of the Bread of Life to the Jews, and the feeding of the four thousand the giving of the Bread of Life to the Gentiles…” (207). This is apparently a reference to Augustine and Hilary. Nineham notes that the first basket is a Jewish style of basket (*kophinos*), the second is an ordinary fish basket (*spyris*).

**Three days in the desert**: the scene is especially hot, even inducing fainting (or death?). In this way it contrasts with the earlier feeding, which was by the still waters and on green grass. Therefore I think the second feeding is an allusion especially to the feeding of Israel in the wilderness in Exodus ch 16.

The three days appears to allude to Jesus’ lying dead for three days—before the resurrection.

Exodus 16:

“…In the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. 15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, “It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat. 16 This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+16&version=NIV#fen-NIV-1964a)] for each person you have in your tent.’”

17 The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. 18 And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed.”

This *gathering just as much as they needed* is precisely the theme in the NT feedings, namely eating as much as each needed: *all ate and were filled.* It is a vision of social flourishing—from each according to their ability, to each according to their needas Marx would have it.

**Twelve loaves to feed the nations**: In the first feeding, five loaves yield twelve baskets; in the second, seven loaves yield seven baskets. The implication is, I think, that all the nations will eat of Israel’s bounty.

Why seven? The Gentile world was traditionally divided into seventy nations; but, I think, more aptly, Israel drove out seven Cannanite tribes when they came into the land.

The feeding to the Jews and the Gentiles gives **twelve loaves in total**. Exodus 25:30 and Leviticus 24:5 provide that *twelve loaves of the Presence* be perpetually displayed on the table in the Sanctuary of the Temple.

Philo speaks often of the significance of the twelve loaves in the Temple:

E.g. the sacred table “is referred to the gratitude which is displayed for the mortal things which are made out of the elements, for loaves and libations are placed upon it, which the creatures who stand in need of nourishment must of necessity use (Philo, *Who is the Heir?* 226) -- note the Eucharistic sense here.

“This unleavened cake is so sacred that it is enjoined in the holy scriptures, ìts place in the innermost part of the temple, on the golden table, twelve loaves of unleavened bread, corresponding in number to the twelve tribes; and those loaves shall be called the shew-Bread …” (*On Mating*)’

“And the table, on which bread and salt are laid, was placed on the northern side, since it is the north which is the most productive of winds, and because too all nourishment proceeds from heaven and earth, the one giving rain, and the other bringing to perfection all seeds by means of the irrigation of water; (105) for the symbols of heaven and earth are placed side by side, as the holy scripture shows, the candlestick being the symbol of heaven, and that which is truly called the altar of incense, on which all the fumigatory offerings are made, being the emblem of the things of earth.” (*The Life of Moses* II)

**The Demand for a Sign**

A highly ironic demand, given Jesus’ great sign (*semeion*), namely the unity of the Jewish and Gentile worlds, which we have just considered. And an ironic response: “no sign will be given to this generation!” The Pharisees are the blind who do not see.

Their attitude mirrors the notorious ‘generation’ of Exodus, who grumbled against God in the desert—demanding yet further proof of God’s power. Consider, e.g. Psalm 78

But they continued to sin against him,  
    rebelling in the wilderness against the Most High.  
18 They willfully put God to the test  
    by demanding the food they craved.  
19 They spoke against God;  
    they said, “Can God really  
    spread a table in the wilderness?  
20 True, he struck the rock,  
    and water gushed out,  
    streams flowed abundantly,  
but can he also give us bread?  
    Can he supply meat for his people?”  
21 When the Lord heard them, he was furious;  
    his fire broke out against Jacob,  
    and his wrath rose against Israel,  
22 for they did not believe in God  
    or trust in his deliverance.  
23 Yet he gave a command to the skies above  
    and opened the doors of the heavens;  
24 he rained down manna for the people to eat,  
    he gave them the grain of heaven.  
25 Human beings ate the bread of angels;  
    he sent them all the food they could eat.

**The Yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod**

**“Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand?** Commentators have come to no consensus about the meaning of this passage (its theme sometimes called “bread obtuseness”.)

Some take Jesus to mean that neither the Pharisees nor the disciples have a true understanding of his ministry and continue to doubt his power (Morna D. Hooker, Gospel 1192; Robert H. Grundy, Mark 407-10; Dennis E. Nineham, Saint Mark 213-14). Others see here a hidden debate over the Eucharist in the Markan community and suggest that some fail to see that Jesus himself is the one bread that will bring Jews and Gentiles together, or that the community faced a crisis situation like that in 1 Cor 5:1-3 in celebrating the Eucharist without having confronted the present of ‘old leaven’ (i.e., a corrupting influence) in its midst. (Quentin Quesnell *Mind of Mark,* 254)

The disciples’ blindness will shortly be compared to the blind man’s sight: note also that this healing involves a restoration to right speaking, namely right understanding (as with its doublet, the healing of the deaf-mute). Jesus, as we have seen, expels the Accuser who works through language to cause illness; our healing must involve a renewal of language. In this way, I think the doublets interpret each other.

**The yeast of the Pharisees and Herod** Bede distinguished the Pharisees and Herodians: “the leaven of the Pharisees is making the decrees of the divine law inferior to the traditions of men, preaching the law in word, attacking it in deed, tempting the Lord, and disbelieving His doctrine and His works; but the leaven of Herod is adultery, murder, rash swearing, a pretence of religion, hatred to Christ and His forerunner.”

The point, I believe, is that the one loaf in the boat is the *one superfluous loaf.* The number of the loaves having been made twelve, there is no need of a *thirteenth.* This superfluous loaf is “yeasted” *i.e. an agent of corruption,* in contrast to the unyeasted bread of the feedings. The agents of corruption are the Pharisees and Herodians, the legalist and royalist parties respectively.

**Dalmanutha** It is not known where this region was; and Matthew changes it to Magadan/Magdala. (209)