An Exegesis and Analysis of Mark 6:34-44

By C. A. Gallimore, 2014

Introduction

The present passage contains the first of two major feeding miracles recorded in the second gospel. Along with synoptic and Johanine parallels, the present passage represents one of six narratives containing a feeding miracle. Thus, the early church cherished the memory of Jesus feeding the multitudes. However, I aim to explore, in much more depth, the importance of this passage within the context of the Markan narrative.

Exegesis and Analysis

The opening, καὶ ἐξελθὼν, contains a second aorist participle, meaning the action takes place before the main verb (ἐζητομεν). As Jesus' appears to see the crowd after getting out of the boat it ought to be literally rendered 'having gone out/having left'. πλοiarov, is left supplied by the context.

The large crowd that Jesus saw is the subject of his compassion (ἐσπλαγχνισθη). The particularly intense feeling suggested by σπλαγχνιζομαι is...
used only of Jesus in the New Testament. Though an interaction with the crowd was apparently not part of Jesus' plan, his response was compassion, which manifested itself as teaching and feeding; suggesting pity expressed in active assistance.

The large crowd were 'like sheep without a shepherd.' The idea of sheep without a shepherd is often linked to similar Old Testament passages. In this instance, the reader finds a large crowd in the ἔξεκόοιόπνος (desolate/desert place; read 'wilderness'). Lane suggests that the writer is introducing a wilderness theme in which Jesus is being introduced as the successor to Moses as the leader of Israel; A new Joshua, or Septuagintally; a new 'Jesus'. Guelich further sees this as a reference to Jesus as the one who is to come; the eschatological shepherd who feeds the sheep. For France, the Joshua motif, Ahab's army motif, the failure of leaders, and the

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Presumably both spiritually and physically, as presented in this story; though the crowd clearly hadn't gathered for a physical meal.

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Numbers 27:17; 2 Chronicles 18:16; Ezekiel 34:5; Zechariah 13:7; Psalm 23; 1 Kings 22:17

Numbers 22:17

1 Kings 22:17

Ezekiel 34:5
helplessness of a leaderless flock\textsuperscript{19} is apparent. France picks on the military context of the metaphor whilst suggesting that the wider application suggests Jesus’ compassion for the ordinary folk of Galilee.\textsuperscript{20} Collins presents Jesus’ role here as either royal messiah, or eschatological prophet;\textsuperscript{21} perhaps both. Edwards, however, sees the image as predominantly military, though relating to the messianic fervour of the zealot crowd,\textsuperscript{22} who hoped to make Jesus king by force.\textsuperscript{23} However, the diffusion of this militant-messianic figure is carefully crafted by the writer throughout the pericope.\textsuperscript{24} 

Jesus’ compassion is first worked out in the phrase, \textit{καὶ ἤδειαν δηδάζθεηλ αὐὴνὺο πνιιά}. The length of the teaching session is implicit in the next sentence; Cranfield and Lane’s suggestion that Jesus taught ‘at length’ about the kingdom of God, therefore, requires that \textit{πνιιά} ought to be rendered adverbially.\textsuperscript{25} Because Jesus’ compassion is the reason for his teaching I suggest a rendering of \textit{καὶ} in its explicative sense;\textsuperscript{26} ‘and so, he began to teach them at length.’ \textit{καὶ ἤδε} can be rendered as the English adverb ‘when’, since \textit{καὶ}, in this instance, carries no translatable force, and \textit{ἤδε} is developing the narrative

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Zechariah 13:7
\item \textsuperscript{20} France, \textit{Mark}, p. 265
\item \textsuperscript{21} Collins, \textit{Mark}, p. 319
\item \textsuperscript{22} For information regarding the possibility of the crowd being a zealot uprising; Cf. France, \textit{Mark}, pp. 260-261; Eduard Schweizer, \textit{The good News According to Mark}, (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1970) p. 137; Edwards, \textit{Mark}, p. 194. It is also interesting to note the juxtaposition of this particular pericope with the re-telling of John the Baptist’s death. Perhaps those zealots have lost their supposed eschatological shepherd, John the Baptist, and are looking to Jesus as the replacement.
\item \textsuperscript{23} John 6:15
\item \textsuperscript{24} Edwards, \textit{Mark}, pp. 194-195
\end{itemize}
temporally.27 ‘Late’ ought to be understood as ‘late in the afternoon’28 or, around the time of the evening meal.29 A further redaction has been made for readability, thus; ‘when it had become late’.

ἔλεγον is an inceptive imperfect. The addition of ‘then’ offers the reader a temporal understanding of the participle προσελθόντες, thus; ‘his disciples came to him and then began to say’. The purpose clause, ἵνα...ἀγοράσωσιν, followed by ἐκεῖνοι τί φάγοσιν, can be rendered ‘so that they may buy themselves something to eat.’ τί φάγοσιν is derived from a deliberative subjunctive question;30 however, here it does not take the form of a question. Because of the purpose clause, the verb is in the third person; this is technically an ungrammaticality, though the construction appears logical.31 Here the reader recognises the absurdity of the situation and, the motif of participation in the outworking of the kingdom of God. Perhaps, as Guelich suggests, there was ample food nearby;32 if so, Jesus’ reply is an active creation of the need for miraculous provision.33

ὁ δὲ ἀποκρίθηκε αὐτοῖς has been rendered ‘Jesus replied’. δὲ carries no translatable force in this instance. ἀποκρίθηκε αὐτοῖς ‘he answered them by saying’ is a common form. The aorist participle is describing attendant circumstances, thus, taking place at the same time as the main verb. The

27 ‘now’ or ‘by this time’ would not allow for an adequate thought-for-thought rendering
28 Bratcher and Nida, Translator’s Handbook, p. 205
29 France, Mark, p. 265; Guelich, Mark, p. 340
31 The same ungrammatically appears in 8:1 and supports the idea that both feeding stories were formed from the same original. Cf., Guelich, Mark, pp. 336-337
32 The disciples’ command certainly doesn’t appear to be outlandish. Cf. Guelich, Mark, p. 341
33 This could perhaps be related to the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness. They had left a place of provision, if only as slaves, and Moses’ leadership almost created a situation in which they needed miraculous provision.
addition of ‘Jesus’ to replace the personal pronoun removes ambiguity about the speaker of the reply. The writer uses the same aorist imperative form, though plural, in Jesus’ reply as he used in the disciples’ earlier question, thus emphasising the immediacy of the action, however, he also uses ὑμεῖς to further emphasise that it ought to be the disciples who give the food to the people. ὑμεῖς serves to intensify the crisis created by Jesus. In fact, the need will be met by the disciples; the disciples have a major part to play in the miracle, moreover, the miracle would not happen without them.

Henderson suggests that the disciples’ participation in the feeding is a clue to the importance of discipleship and participation in the kingdom of God. Rather than a natural response from the Markan Jesus that the disciples are seemingly unable and unprepared to comprehend, the motif of participatory discipleship is clear. That the food had to be provided by the disciples suggests that this is not simply a moralistic story where the generosity of the disciples served as an example for the crowd.

I have not offered a translation for ἀπειθοῦσα as the participle serves only to slow the dialogical pace, in translation. The disciples’ response to Jesus’ seemingly unexpected and unwelcome question is at best ironic and at worst

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34 Bratcher and Nida, *Translator’s handbook*, p. 206
36 Edwards, *Mark*, p. 192
41 Edwards, *Mark*, pp. 193-194; Lane, *Mark*, p. 228
disrespectful sarcasm.\textsuperscript{42} For Cranfield, such a disrespectful response bears the hallmarks of an eye witness account,\textsuperscript{43} yet, perhaps more important than the historicity of the exchange is the writers desire to present the disciples as unprepared and unaware of even the possibility of the miraculous.\textsuperscript{44} In fact, for van Iersel, the irony of the disciple’s question in response to Jesus’ answer would not be lost on the intelligent reader.\textsuperscript{45} If the reader had not been aware of the implicit references to Jesus as the eschatological shepherd, the true Joshua, and the new Moses; the claim in 1:1 of his divine sonship would surely frame the reader’s response.

\[\text{ὁ δὲ λέγει αὐτοῖς is again rendered idiomatically as ‘Jesus said to them’.}\]

\[\text{λέγει is in the present tense, but should be translated as an historic present; ‘he said’.}\textsuperscript{46}\]

\[\text{ὑπάγειε ἴδεηε is often translated; ‘go and see’. I have maintained this translation in order to maintain the decisive tone of the imperative, ἴδεηε.}\textsuperscript{47}\]

\[\text{I have rendered καὶ γνόντες λέγουσιν temporally as γνόντες is being used adverbially, thus forming a temporal adverbial clause.}\textsuperscript{48}\]

Thus the rendering ‘when they knew’ is appropriate.

\[\text{kai ἐπέταξεν αὐτοῖς ἀνακλίναι πάντας συμπόσια συμπόσια ἐπὶ τῷ χλωρῷ χόρτῳ is interesting because writer switches from dialogue to a narrative style.}\]

\[\text{ἀνακλίναι is literally ‘to recline’ as one would at a formal meal, however, the concept of reclining for a meal is not one shared with western culture, hence my}\]

\textsuperscript{42} France, Mark, p. 266
\textsuperscript{43} Cranfield, Mark, p. 216
\textsuperscript{44} Collins, Mark, p. 324; Cf. Lane, Mark, p. 228
\textsuperscript{45} van Iersel, Reader-Response, pp. 226-227
\textsuperscript{46} There are 151 historic present instances in the second gospel. These are a characteristic of the writer’s style, suggesting the writers’ redactionary hand. Ben Witherington, The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 19 n62
\textsuperscript{47} Cranfield, Mark, p. 218
\textsuperscript{48} Balfour, Step-By-Step, pp. 304-306
rendering; ‘sit down’. συμπόσια συμπόσια is strong enough to supply the idea of formality to the English rendering without the use of the word ‘recline’. In fact, the formality implied by συμπόσια συμπόσια and ἀνακλίνα places the impending feast in stark contrast with the Herodian feast in 6:21. Herod is the parody of Jesus’ reality.

Whilst Cranfield’s relation of the distributive use of συμπόσια to the Passover meal appears to labour the point, the symbolism of community, suggested by Guelich, does perhaps best explain how this grouping ought to be understood. Certainly, its parallel πρασιαὶ πρασιαὶ goes some way to diffusing the zeal of this ‘army’, even if Jesus’ command that they recline in community does not. πρασιαὶ πρασιαὶ is currently rendered quite literally as ‘like plants in a garden’. This could be seen as Jesus simply arranging an outdoor banquet, or as Cranfield suggests, within the rabbinic traditional interpretation of Song of Songs 8:13; students sitting in rows, listening to their Rabbi.

τῶ χλωρῷ χώρῳ then, is significant to the undergirding themes of the narrative in a wider context than concerns over colour or seasonal interests. Guelich suggests that here, the writer is presenting Jesus as the Lord in Psalm 23, a clear allusion to Jesus as the shepherd for these shepherd-less sheep.

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49 Collins, Mark, p. 324; Cf., Lane, Mark, p. 227
50 Canfield, Mark, p. 218
51 Guelich, Mark, p. 341
52 France, Mark, p. 261
53 I have decided to do this in order to relay to the reader the idea that Jesus is actively diffusing this war-like zeal by effectively ‘disarming’ his ‘troops’. Though in the Greco-Roman world this may have been more easily understood with the concept of reclining, the idea of sitting infers this idea much less. I wanted to re-apply this poetic imagery by translating πρασιαὶ πρασιαὶ as ‘plants in a garden’ as the modern reader would recognise this as anything other than war-like.
54 Collins, Mark, p. 324
55 Cranfield, Mark, p. 218
56 As suggested by Bratcher and Nida, Translator’s Handbook, p. 206; France, Mark, p. 267; Cranfield, Mark, p. 218
57 Κοπιω in the LXX; Cf., Guelich, Mark, p. 341; France, Mark, p. 267; Lane, Mark, p. 229
But, the stronger Old Testament allusion here is that of the wilderness being transformed into a place of nourishment when the messianic age arrives.\textsuperscript{58}

The seating of the crowd in groups of hundreds and fifties is surely not incidental. Whilst it would make the crowd more manageable, it may have served a more eschatological function. Moses arranged the Israelites in groups of 1,000, 500, 100, and 10,\textsuperscript{59} whilst similar practices are apparent in the texts of the Qumran community.\textsuperscript{60} For some, this arrangement recounts the provision of manna for the Israelite community; whilst looking ahead to the eschatological feast of the last day.\textsuperscript{61}

The significance of the verbs; \textit{λαβὼν, εὐλόγησεν, κατέκλασεν} and \textit{ἐδίδνπ} has often been overstated. Hooker uses the verbal links with the Last Supper account\textsuperscript{62} to suggest that the writer is pointing forward to the Last Supper event.\textsuperscript{63} Cranfield suggests that Jesus’ looking up into heaven, rather than down as was customary, is indicative of him receiving power to conduct a miracle.\textsuperscript{64} Guelich disagrees with both the Eucharistic interpretation, and particularly Cranfield’s view, stressing the normality of the meal. This suggestion of normality is a more appropriate and widely supported interpretation.\textsuperscript{65} Whilst Eucharistic allusions can be drawn, this evidence, along with the inclusion of

\textsuperscript{58} Ezekiel 34:26-29; Cf., Hooker, \textit{Mark}, p. 166; Cf. Lane, \textit{Mark}, p. 229
\textsuperscript{59} Exodus 18:25; Numbers 31:14
\textsuperscript{60} 1QS 2:21-22; CD 13:1
\textsuperscript{62} Mark 14:22-25
\textsuperscript{63} Hooker, \textit{Mark}, pp. 164-165
\textsuperscript{64} Cranfield, \textit{Mark}, p. 219
\textsuperscript{65} Guelich, \textit{Mark}, pp. 341-343; Collins, \textit{Mark}, p. 325; France, \textit{Mark}, p. 267; Schweizer, \textit{Mark}, p. 139; Lane, \textit{Mark}, p. 230
fish and no mention of wine or any reference to blood suggest that this is neither a Eucharistic forbearer, nor a re-interpretation of the Passover.\footnote{Guelich, *Mark*, p. 342}

ἀναβλέψας εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εὐλόγησεν has been rendered without the participle, thus, the personal pronoun found within εὐλόγησεν is used at an earlier point in the sentence, with the addition of ‘and then’ to carry the temporal sense inferred by the participle. ἔδίδαμεν has been rendered as an inceptive imperfect despite the protestations by Schweizer and Cranfield.\footnote{Schweizer, *Mark*, p. 139; Cranfield, *Mark*, p. 219; The contrast here is best pointed out by Henderson who emphasises the inaugural nature of ἔδίδαμεν whilst stressing the importance of continuation through the participation of the disciples; Cf. Henderson, ‘Concerning the Loaves’, pp. 14-15} The continuity of the action is best described by the present subjunctive, παρατίθεσιν; ‘so that they might keep distributing the loaves to the crowd.’\footnote{I have included ‘the loaves’ because it is supplied by the context of the phrase. ‘The crowd’ has replaced αὐτότις to avoid ambiguity.} The writer’s use of ἔδίδαμεν bears resemblance to its recent use in 6:7; due to its proximity to this pericope and its expression of the disciples’ participation in Jesus’ mission, Henderson claims that it suggests the possible transmission of power which equips the disciples to play such an integral part of the miracle.\footnote{Henderson, ‘Concerning the Loaves’, pp. 14-15} When the bread increased, though, is not important, for Lane, the important note is that the Kingdom of God was functioning.\footnote{Lane, *Mark*, p. 231}

καὶ ἔφαγον πάντες καὶ ἔχορτάσθησαν should be rendered; ‘everyone ate and was satisfied’. The satisfaction contrasts the suggestion that this was a sacramental meal; rather the satisfaction is emphatic of the miraculous increase.\footnote{Lane, *Mark*, p. 231; Cf., Hooker, *Mark*, p. 167} Edwards further suggests that this event emphasises the kosher hierarchy abandonment of the Kingdom of God; πάντες are satisfied because of
Jesus’ compassion.72 Others note the scale of the miracle73 and its climactic allusion to Jesus as the one who provides manna in Psalm 78.74

καὶ ἦραν κλάσματα is literally ‘and they took away (the) broken pieces’, whilst δώδεκα κοφίνων πληρώματα is literally ‘twelve baskets of fullness’. However, the whole sentence ought to be treated idiomatically as ‘they picked up twelve baskets full of broken pieces’. The ambiguous ‘they’ remains, as it is unclear who is actually collecting the broken pieces. Whilst it could have been the disciples,75 it equally could have been everyone present. The twelve baskets could be indicative of the restoration of Israel,76 however, it is perhaps more likely to refer to the number of disciples;77 and almost certainly not those not present in the wilderness.78

καὶ ὧπο τῶν ἵχθων (‘and some fish too’) is a particularly poor Greek construct, thus, some have suggested that this phrase points to a translation of an earlier written Aramaic source, or even earlier tradition.79 If a narrative theme was appropriated by the writer it seems likely to be 2 Kings 4:42-44.80

φαγόντες is a second aorist participle. Its use, along with the definite article, is adjectival;81 thus, ‘the having eaten ones’. However, it should be rendered as a noun clause, along with ἦραν. Thus we have ‘those who had eaten’. τῶν ἄρτων is textually ambiguous; however, its inclusion is not

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72 Edwards, *Mark*, p. 193
73 Thus countering the idea that the numbers were exaggerated. France, *Mark*, p. 268
74 Collins, *Mark*, p. 326
75 Lane, *Mark*, p. 231
76 Collins, *Mark*, p. 326; Guelich, *Mark*, p. 343
77 France, *Mark*, p. 266
78 Hooker, *Mark*, p. 167; Contrast Guelich who states that the collection of leftovers has no place in the Lord’s Supper; Guelich, *Mark*, p. 342
80 Perhaps Jesus is being presented as the one greater than John in the same way that Elisha was the one greater than Elijah, whilst at the same time superseding Elisha.
81 Balfour, *Step-By-Step*, 304
completely unwarranted.\textsuperscript{82} Simply offering no translation does not negatively impact the reader's understanding.

\textit{πεντακισχίλιοι ἄνδρες} is best understood as gender exclusive rather than the gender inclusivity suggested by Schweizer, Hooker, and Collins.\textsuperscript{83} France suggests that all those present were men, in keeping with the idea that religious patriots with an insurrectionary motive were the gathered crowd; thus women and children would likely be not present.\textsuperscript{84} Guelich agrees, adding that purposeful understatement of the miraculous event seems unlikely.\textsuperscript{85}

There is no indication that the crowd had perceived a miracle, thus the miraculous event ought to be revelatory to the disciples only, due to their involvement.\textsuperscript{86} Jesus doesn't demand secrecy, but perhaps that is because the miraculous feeding is apparent only to the reader and the disciples, though they seem somehow oblivious to the miracle too,\textsuperscript{87} which is perhaps resolved in light of 6:52.\textsuperscript{88}

Thus, this particularly nuanced pericope comes to an end and the Markan narrative progresses.

\textsuperscript{82} In support of 'food' see; Bratcher and Nida, \textit{Translator's Handbook}, p. 211; In support of the diminishing role of the fish see; Guelich, \textit{Mark}, p. 343
\textsuperscript{83} Schweizer, \textit{Mark}, p. 139; Hooker, \textit{Mark}, p. 168; Collins, \textit{Mark}, p. 326
\textsuperscript{84} France, \textit{Mark}, p. 268
\textsuperscript{85} Guelich, \textit{Mark}, p. 344
\textsuperscript{86} Lane, \textit{Mark}, p. 232
\textsuperscript{87} Hooker, \textit{Mark}, p. 168; Cf., van Iersel, \textit{Reader-Response}, p. 226;
\textsuperscript{88} Guelich, \textit{Mark}, p. 343
Appendices

Appendix 1

Offered Translation

Mark 6:34-44

Having left the boat, Jesus saw a large crowd and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and so, he began to teach them at length. When it had become late, his disciples came to him and then began to say:

‘This place is a desert and it is already late; send them away so that they may buy themselves something to eat.’

Jesus replied;

‘You give them something to eat.’

The disciples said to him;

‘Should we buy two hundred Denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?’

Jesus said to them;

‘How many loaves do you have? Go and see!’

When they knew, they said;

‘Five! And two fish.’

Jesus commanded them all to sit down in orderly rows on the green grass. And so, they sat down, like plants in a garden, by hundreds and by fifties. And having taken the five loaves and two fish, he looked up to heaven and then blessed and broke the loaves and began to give them to his disciples, so that
they might keep distributing the loaves to the crowd. He also divided the two fish among everyone. Everyone ate and was satisfied. They picked up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and some fish too. Those who had eaten were five thousand men.
Bibliography

All Greek Biblical references taken from Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th edition.

All English Biblical references take from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.


