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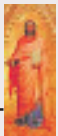
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With this study we begin a four part examination on missions in the Formations series of the Smyth-Helwys Sunday School guides. The theme is "Approaching a Missional Mindset." Three of the four studies are taken from parts of the Gospel of Matthew.

This first study comes from Jesus' miracle of feeding the Four Thousand that is recorded in Matthew 15:32-39 and Mark. 8:1-10. Consideration will be given to both passages, with the Matthean passage being the primary focus.

I. [Context](#)

Since we have studied texts from the Gospel of Matthew on several occasions, relevant background materials from those studies will be used here.



a. [Historical](#)

External History. The external history regarding the composition of the Matthean gospel is the first matter of importance. F.C. Grant in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (iPreach) provides some helpful summary of this matter:

Hence the background of Matthew must be sought in some area where Judaism and early Christianity still overlapped, were in close contact--and in conflict. The area which best suits these requirements is probably N Palestine or Syria, perhaps Antioch; and the date, some time after the fall of Jerusalem in 70--probably a considerable time after this date, when apocalyptic eschatology has had a long enough period to decline and revive again--as in IV Ezra and II Baruch. A. H. McNeile and others have dated the book between 70 and 115, when Ignatius of Antioch apparently quotes the gospel, or at least is familiar with traditions which Matthew also uses. E.g., his Letter to the Ephesians, ch. 19, seems to show acquaintance with Matthew's birth narrative, though with a difference--including midrashic elements very like those in Matthew.

Early church tradition connected this gospel document with Matthew, who was one of the original

Twelve Apostles of Christ. Nothing inside the document identifies the writer by name, so our assessment of who wrote this gospel depends upon emerging Roman Catholic tradition beginning in the late second century. The impression one gains from a careful study of the contents of the document suggests a writer very knowledgeable of Jewish concerns and rather skilled in patterns of scribal argumentation, a certain style of ancient Jewish midrashic thought development. The person named Matthew shows up [only five times](#) in the New Testament, and may possibly be identified under a more Jewish name, Levi, which is the person identified in five of [the nine New Testament references](#) to the name Levi. The difficulty of this internal profile, with connecting it to the person named Matthew and/or Levi, is that this person was a tax collector who essentially worked for the Roman government in Palestine and would have clearly been on the fringes of Jewish religious life, not closely involved in it to have gained the necessary training to be able to make skilled scribal arguments, such as are found in the

first gospel. Additionally, Matthew was an eye-witness of the things Jesus both said and did, but the first gospel is not written from an eye-witness perspective. It borrows heavily upon the gospel of Mark and from another major source, usually labeled Q after the German word *Quelle* meaning source. Thus many have questioned the accuracy of the early church tradition that links the writer of the first gospel with the disciple of Jesus. This uncertainty does not, in my estimation, cast doubt on the trustworthiness or importance of this gospel document. Instead, it merely indicates that the compositional history of Matthew's gospel has large gaps in it that cannot be filled in apart from reasoned deductions from the existing data. And not all of the gaps can be even deduced and must be left blank.

Internal History. The time and space markers inside the passage provide some indication about where this miracle took place. But space markers in the preceding pericopes play a more important role in locating this event. Mt. 15:29 is central here: "*After Jesus had left that place [the region of Tyre and Sidon according to v. 22], he passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up the mountain, where he sat down.*" Tyre and Sidon to the north were coastal towns on the Mediterranean Sea that lay outside the Roman province of Galilee and were in the province of Phoenicia. While there Jesus healed the demon possessed daughter of a Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:21-28). From there, Jesus "passed along the Sea of Galilee" (Mt. 15:29) and went up into a mountain. There large crowds followed him seeking healing for themselves and others (vv. 29-31). This sets the background for our passage. Jesus is still on this mountain; the crowds have been with him three days without anything to eat.

The location for the miracle is the mountain (τὸ ὄρος), which is unnamed in the text. The parallel in [Mark 8:31](#) provides some help by indicating that this was somewhere in the "region of the Decapolis."



This is on the southeast side of Galilee mostly across the Jordan River. Thus the text provides some clues about the location. Ancient church tradition will supplement this with understandings, some perhaps factual but many mythical. For Matthew the location doesn't seem very important. Mark stresses location a little more than Matthew but still doesn't provide precise information. At the end of the text, v. 39, Matthew indicates that Jesus left this area in a boat and traveled to "the region of Magadan." Unfortunately, the loca-

tion of this place is completely unknown to modern students of the Bible. Mark, on the other hand, says that Jesus went to the "region of Dalmanutha" (8:10). But this provides no more help than the reference to Magadan in Matthew. In the process of the copying of both Matthew and Mark in the early centuries, these geographical references bothered those doing the copying as well. An analysis of the various copies of both gospel texts from the third through the tenth centuries reveals a variety of references inserted into both texts. They reflect several concerns. Some texts of both Matthew and Mark are made to contain the same term, usually Magadan. Many copies will shift over to the more familiar Magdala, located on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. Because of the unfamiliarity of the term Magadan, many copies contain variations of spelling of the word, e.g., Magadon, Magedam, Magedel, Magdalan. All of this makes it clear that the precise location of the miracle cannot be nailed down with certainty.

When one steps back at the larger picture of the [life of Christ](#) in the synoptic gospels, another historical aspect surfaces. This event in both Matthew and Mark took place toward the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. This was the period when very little activity occurred inside the province of Galilee itself, since Herod had begun seeking Jesus to arrest him. Most of Jesus' activities (Mt. 14:13-18:35 // Mk. 6:30-9:50) occurred outside the region where Herod had politi-

cal authority, and thus Jesus was relatively safe. This third phase of the Galilean ministry focused on Jesus' preparation of the Twelve for the trip to Jerusalem, as well as ministry to people, some of whom were not Jews. Thus a Gentile emphasis surfaces in these texts, which is not present in the earlier depictions of Jesus' ministry.

Additional time indicators have been helpfully summarized by L. Morris (*Pillar New Testament Commentary*):

Discussions of the passage raise the possibility that we have here nothing more than a variant account of

the feeding of the five thousand, but this is not what Matthew is saying. He clearly regards the two incidents as distinct: the numbers of people are different in the two incidents, as are the quantities of food and the amounts left over; the words for "basket" are different; the people in this incident had been with Jesus for three days (v. 32) whereas in the earlier incident they had just gone around the lake to head him off (14:13-14); and the times appear to be different, the earlier feeding being when the grass was green (Mark 6:39), that is, in spring, while here there is no mention of grass and the ground appears to be hard (v. 35); in other words, it is late summer.⁶⁷

b. Literary

Literary genre.

Mt. 15:32-38 forms a nature miracle. These miracles stress Jesus' use of some aspect of

the natural world in a miraculous fashion. In this instance, Jesus multiplied a small amount of food in order to feed a large number of people, here 4,000 men plus women and children. This is very similar to the previous feeding of 5,000 men plus women and children (Mt. 14:13-21 // Mk. 6:30-44 // Lk. 9:10-17 // Jn. 6:1-14). There the emphasis was upon ministry to Jews, while here the stress is upon Gentiles. Such miracles in Jesus' ministry echo the miraculous feeding of the children of Israel in the Exodus while they were also in a wilderness. Also, Elijah's miracle of the oil for the widow stands in the background as well (1 Kings 17:8-16). The point is that God will take care of the needs of His people -- a theme similar to Mt. 6:25-34.

In our American democratic culture, our tendency is to raise questions about this. If God really takes care of the needs of His people, why then were other people in Jesus' day hungry and some starving. This random use of nature to provide food for only a few of the people seems unfair and unjust. God should have cared for the needs of everyone, not just a few.

In response, several observations are important to understand. Most other cultures, even in the modern world, would not tend to raise such a question. The American sense of "fair play" prompts our question, but most everyone else would not see the issue the same way, especially in a more collective oriented society. Thus we must first recognize our question is a culturally based question growing out of one culture and being super imposed down onto a very different ancient culture. Ideas of "democracy" particularly in the US definition didn't not exist in that

Jesus' miracles concretize God's loving care for His people, as well as point to the Father's presence and blessing in the ministry of Jesus.

world. Even Greek ideals of democracy that had existed temporarily several centuries before the NT world have only the barest connection to US

perspectives. Ancient Jewish culture was very collectivistic so that the group took precedence over the individual, while American culture is individualistic in the extreme.

In that world view, that God demonstrated His care for the needs of some meant that God cared for all -- just the reverse of our viewpoint. Thus, the "feeding" miracles of Jesus affirm God's deep compassion for all His people, not just a select few. Put another way, we Americans focus on the half empty glass, while most everyone else focuses on the half full glass.

Also, one must not lose sight of the divine purpose in each of these miracles, as well as the gospel writer's intention. In both "feeding" miracles, the 5,000 and the 4,000, people had sought help from Jesus with their physical diseases etc. and he had spent much time healing and meeting the needs of large numbers of people. Their hunger was the result of having followed him into a desert place to gain his help. His compassion extended to not only healing and teaching them, but also to taking care of their hunger. Matthew stresses Jesus' intent to use the feeding of the crowds to underscore God's power vested in the ministry of Jesus (cf. Mt. 14:16 and 15:32). For Matthew these two miracles demonstrated in concrete action the teaching of Jesus that God cares found in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6:25-34). With both the Jewish and Gentile emphasis in the two miracles, the universal care of God is stressed. The purpose of such miracles beyond the mere physical needs must always be kept in view. Our American tendency is to either lose sight of

this or else to ignore it in an exclusive preoccupation with only the physical needs. This comes from the materialistic focus of our society, which minimizes the spiritual needs.

Gene Boring (*New Interpreters Bible*, iPreach) summarizes Matthew's use of miracles in a way relevant to our study:

It is to be noted that, with the exception of the cursing of the fig tree (Matt 21:18-19 // Mark 11:12-14), all the miracles in the Gospels are performed for the benefit of human beings. Even the "nature miracles" are performed to help people in distress. Although some sayings speak metaphorically of "nature miracles" and do not address human needs (Mark 11:23 // Matt 21:21; Luke 17:6 // Matt 17:20; cf. 1 Cor 13:2), there are no such stories in the Gospels. Unlike writings of the Hellenistic world generally, including the apocryphal gospels and even the book of Acts, the canonical Gospels contain no stories in which miraculous power is used punitively against human beings (cf. Acts 5:1-11; 13:9-12). In the Gospels, the genre of miracle stories, already present in the Hellenistic world, has been transformed by the character of Jesus, who embodies and makes present the love of God (Matt 1:23).

Literary Setting. Several aspects of the literary

setting of our passage are important. A comparison of the wording makes it clear that Matthew is depending on the Markan text as his primary source for not only this miracle but for most all the material in this [third period of Jesus ministry in Galilee](#). Of Matthew's 25 pericopes 22 of them are drawn in identical sequence from his Markan source.

This period of ministry in Galilee in both Matthew and Mark stresses a shift in Jesus' focus. He moves from many public appearances to mostly interaction with individuals. This is especially true of the Twelve, who receive increasing attention in preparation for the upcoming trip to Jerusalem that will lead to arrest and crucifixion. This the two "feeding" miracles will represent a declining public presence in northern Palestine, which is true at the beginning of this period but accelerates toward the end of the period.

This second feeding miracle in 15:32-39 is preceded by a summary narrative in vv. 29-31. This describes the healing of many people on the mountain and sets up the feeding miracle in vv. 32-38. This follows the pattern in 14:13-14 which introduces the first feeding miracle.

II. Message

Literary Structure. The miracle itself can be understood in the three traditional elements: 1) need; 2) miracles; and 3) results. The [Semantic Diagram](#) and [Exegetical Outline](#) in the larger internet version of this study illustrate this approach. Verse 39 represents a transition from this pericope to the next one in 16:1-4. We will follow this approach in our study, incorporating the transition into the third section.

a. Hungry People, vv. 32-34

Greek NT

<15:32> Ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς προσκαλεσάμενος τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ εἶπεν, Σπλαγχνίζομαι ἐπὶ τὸν ὄχλον, ὅτι ἤδη ἡμέραι τρεῖς προσμένουσιν μοι καὶ οὐκ ἔχουσιν τί φάγωσιν· καὶ ἀπολῦσαι αὐτοὺς νήστευς οὐ θέλω, μήποτε ἐκλυθῶσιν ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ. <15:33> καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταί, Πόθεν ἡμῖν ἐν ἐρημίᾳ ἄρτοι τοσοῦτοι ὥστε χορτάσαι ὄχλον τοσοῦτον; <15:34> καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Πόσους ἄρτους ἔχετε; οἱ δὲ εἶπαν, Ἑπτὰ καὶ ὀλίγα ἰχθύδια.

NASB

32 And Jesus called His disciples to Him, and said, "I feel compassion for the people, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way." 33 The disciples said to Him, "Where would we get so many loaves in this desolate place to satisfy such a large crowd?" 34 And Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven, and a few small fish."

NRSV

32 Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way." 33 And the disciples said to him, "Where are we to get bread enough in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" 34 And Jesus said to them, "How many loaves have you?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish."

NLT

32 Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I feel sorry for these people. They have been here with me for three days, and they have nothing left to eat. I don't want to send them away hungry, or they will faint along the road." 33 The disciples replied, "And where would we get enough food out here in the wilderness for all of them to eat?" 34 Jesus asked, "How many loaves of bread do you have?" They replied, "Seven, and a few small fish."

Notes:

First we should note the parallel between [Matthew](#) and [Mark](#) at this point. This will provide helpful background for interpreting the Matthean text.

Mt. 15:32-34

32 Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way." 33 And the disciples said to him, "Where are we to get bread enough in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" 34 And Jesus said to them, "How many loaves have you?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish."

Mk. 8:1-5

1 In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, 2 "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. 3 If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance." 4 His disciples replied, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" 5 He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven."

Matthew has tied his narrative on to the previous summary narrative in 15:29-31 very closely so that it provides the setting for the feeding miracle. Mark, however, sets up his narrative generally -- "in those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat..." -- in large part because the preceding narrative, [7:31-37](#), is an individual miracle of the healing of a deaf and mute individual. In the view that Matthew is using Mark as a major source, most are convinced that Matthew simply collapses this individual miracle into the summary declaration that many miracles were performed by Jesus on the mountain, which both gospels describe as a "desert" (ἐν τῇ ἐρημίᾳ // ἐπ' ἐρημίας). [Matthean text listed first, then followed by the Markan text and separated by the // parallel symbol.]

The remainder of both texts are extremely similar in wording, with Mark providing greater detail -- something he typically does in individual pericopes.

The crowds have come to hear Jesus and especially to find healing for themselves and their friends. Jesus has accommodated them for three days. The experience was intensive and demanding.

The central emphasis is upon Jesus' compas-



THE MIRACLE OF THE LOAVES

sion for the crowds and the danger they faced if he just sent them away while they were hungry after three days without food. He declared his compassion to the disciples (Σπλαγχνίζομαι ἐπὶ τὸν ὄχλον // Σπλαγχνίζομαι ἐπὶ τὸν ὄχλον). Usually (4 of 5 uses) the expression for Jesus' compassion is framed in the third person -- "He felt compassion..." -- but here it is in the first person -- "I feel compassion..." The effect is to highlight Jesus' concern for the people here, as well as to set up the question to the disciples about securing food.

The disciples agree that the people should be fed, but they are puzzled about how to find enough food to meet this huge need. Four thousand men plus women and children represented a huge group of people to feed. The logistics of such an endeavor with adequate supplies would be challenging. But all that was available was seven loaves and a few small fish. Note the Matthean addition of fish, which Mark did not include here. Their puzzlement provides the opportunity for the miracle. In this way of describing the event, both gospel writers are able to highlight the miraculous nature of the event. The gigantic need for food was present; the available supplies of food were woefully inadequate. Only a divine intervention

would bring need and supply together adequately.

In interpretative concern, the next question is about the application of this to our day. The answer lies in connecting similar situations present in our world to this part of the passage. Do we run into situations where the need and the available supply come no where near matching each other? Our text deals with physical hunger and the need for food. Are there similar situations in our world? Especially, for people seeking God's presence and power in their lives, as were the people in this event?

I don't think one would have to look very far to find similar needs around us. We tend to look for this in other parts of the world. And certainly physical hunger exists in extreme ways in many parts of our world today. But what about in our country? In our state? And in our community? Is there hunger this morning in Shelby, NC? I suspect there are kids waking up this morning who haven't had much, if anything, to eat in the past couple of days. Are there available supplies of food to meet those needs? Yes and No. Yes, in the sense that people live all around them, including us, who possess the means to supply the needed food. But no in the sense that they have access within themselves to that food. No money. No connections to the right people. No sense of how to get food, other than perhaps out of desperation to try to steal it at the neighborhood grocery store.

Poverty and hunger are realities in our country, and are growing daily. Note the view expressed in the website [Hunger in the U.S.](#):

One of the most disturbing and extraordinary aspects of life in this very wealthy country is the persistence of hunger. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports, based on a national U.S. Census Bureau survey of households representative of the U.S. population, that in 2004 11.9 percent of all U.S. households were "food insecure" because of lack of resources. Of the 13.5 million households that were food insecure, 4.4 million suffered from food insecurity that was so severe that USDA's very conservative measure classified them as "hungry."

Since 1999, food insecurity has increased by 3 million households, including 1.4 million households with children. In 2004, 38.2 million people lived in households experiencing food insecurity, compared to 33.6 million in 2001 and 31 million in 1999.

Obviously the need is present. In our instance, we possess much more than just seven loaves and a few fish. The challenge of this passage is whether we who name the name of Christ feel compassion sufficient to become the instrument of bringing need and supply together. A miracle is needed in our day. Perhaps it isn't for God to supply the food directly, but for God to touch the hearts of His own people to intervene.

I see this direction of application being more legitimate than the usual tendency to "spiritualize" this passage into meaninglessness. Correct application is in direct relationship to how closely the "then" and the "now" meanings connect to one another. The wider the gap between these two meanings, the less legitimate the "now" meaning is. The closer the meanings the more legitimate the "now" meaning.

b. People being fed, vv. 35-37a

Greek NT

<15:35> καὶ παραγγείλας τῷ ὄχλῳ ἀναπεσεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν <15:36> ἔλαβεν τοὺς ἐπτὰ ἄρτους καὶ τοὺς ἰχθύας καὶ εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ ἐδίδου τοῖς μαθηταῖς, οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ τοῖς ὄχλοις. <15:37> καὶ ἔφαγον πάντες καὶ ἐχορτάσθησαν.

NASB

35 And He directed the people to sit down on the ground; 36 and He took the seven loaves and the fish; and giving thanks, He broke them and started giving them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. 37 And they all ate and were satisfied,

NRSV

35 And commanding the crowd to sit down on the ground, 36 he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 37 And they all ate and were satisfied;

NLT

35 So Jesus told all the people to sit down on the ground. 36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, thanked God for them, broke them into pieces, and gave them to the disciples, who distributed the food to the crowd. 37 They all ate until they were full,

Notes:

The depiction of the actual miracle itself is contained in vv. 35-37a. To be sure, the line of demarcation between the performing of the miracle and its impact, vv. 37b-38, is somewhat blurred. The gos-

pel writers seamlessly transition from one to the other in this narrative. This is not unusual for the miracle narratives found in all four gospels. For study purposes we somewhat arbitrarily draw this

line.

Once again, we need to get both Matthew and Mark on the table in order to see better how Matthew used his Markan source in giving his own interpretative tone to the event.

Mt. 15:35-37a

35 And commanding the crowd to sit down on the ground, 36 he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 37 And they all ate and were satisfied;

Once again we notice the very close wording of both accounts to each other. Also important is the close similarity to the other “feeding” miracle, the 5,000, in [Mt. 14:18-20a](#): “18 And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And all ate and were filled;”

In all three accounts a common sequence oc-



curs: **1)** the crowds sit down in an orderly manner; **2)** Jesus blessed and broke the loaves; **3)** the food was handed to the disciples who in turn distributed it to the crowds; **4)** the people ate and were filled.

This pattern, especially with mention of the loaves of bread and the prayer of blessing, suggests to many interpreters a symbolic anticipation of the Lord's Supper. While this is doubtful, the first two segments certainly echoes Moses' feeding of the children of Israel in the Exodus wilderness with the manna and the water. God took care of His people in that wilderness through His servant Moses. Now, God is taking care of His people in a different wilderness through His Servant Jesus.

The distinctive is *step 2)* where the multiplication of the food comes as a result of Jesus' prayer of blessing. Here is the heart of the miraculous action. When Jesus prayed for God to bless this small amount of food, it turned into an abundance that the

Mk. 8:6-8a

6 Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. 7 They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. 8 They ate and were filled; entire crowd was unable to fully consume. Here we sense divine activity in the pattern of Elijah's miracle for the widow of Zarephath near Sidon ([1 Kings 17:13-16](#)):

13 Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." 15 She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 16 The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

There God miraculously intervened in order to meet the needs for food over an extended period of time.

The role of the disciples, *step 3)*, was as servant to take what Jesus gave and then pass it on to the people. This typifies their ministry both during and after the time that Jesus was with them. It represents the role for all those who follow Jesus. *Step 4)* where the people eat and are satisfied underscores the concreteness of the miracle. They didn't receive “phantasy” food that had some mysterious spiritual content. Rather, they ate good ole bread and fish, something they were accustomed to eating on a regular basis. The miracle was not the substituting of regular food for something spiritual. It was the multiplication of regular food to a quantity where it could take care of their physical needs in abundance.

Here we see an illustration of God's power over the world that He created. He made it; He uses it for His purposes, even if this means unusual uses.

I hesitate to use the term “natural” world, since such an idea didn't exist in the ancient world. When we speak of the natural world, which would seem entirely appropriate here in our perspective, we automatically inject the idea of a closed, self-contained

universe, which God then penetrates in supernatural fashion to accomplish something not possible within the limits of the “rules of nature.” To Jesus and the people of the first century such an idea would have seemed weird and false.

For Jews the world belonged to God and He was always present and active in what He had created. The pattern of things that kept the world functioning weren’t some “laws of nature.” That term reflects early modern western Enlightenment rejection of God as Creator and Sustainer of the world. Rather, God simply answered Jesus’ prayer with His authorizing power for bread and fish to be multiplied abundantly to meet people’s needs. No outside intervention; no “supernatural” action. Just God “doing His thing.”

The connection of all this to us? To fully grasp the meaning of this part of the narrative, we must learn to “step out of our world” and move into a first century Jewish world. Although not easy, doing so will give us a fresh appreciation for what Jesus did for the people that day. His prayer was so in tune with the Father’s will and compassionate heartbeat that God honored the request to take care of the physical needs of the people, even if this meant unusual action. But God’s power flowing through Jesus’ ministry was dramatically demonstrated.

With the symbolism flowing through the narra-

tive suggesting Gentile focus, the miracle underscores that God’s love and grace is not limited to the Jewish people, as Richard Gardner (*Believers Church Bible Commentary*, iPreach) notes:

While interpreters differ on the significance of these figures, the numbers most likely carry symbolic meaning. Seven is a number that connotes perfection or completeness (cf. Romans 1:4 and the multiples of seven in Matthew’s genealogy). And 4000 is a multiple of four, which is linked with the idea of universality (cf. the four corners of the earth in Isaiah 11:12 and Romans 20:8, and the four winds from the four quarters of heaven in Jeremiah 49:36). If viewed alongside other data in the unit, the numbers suggest that the feeding in 15:32-39 is not merely a repetition of 14:15-21. There the focus was on Jesus as the Messiah who provides for Israel. Here, however, the crowd that is fed represents not only Israel, but the worldwide community that looks to Jesus in the church.

Matthew in writing to a Jewish Christian community in Syria during the 70s stresses to them that the Christian gospel is for everyone, in spite of the insistence of the Jewish synagogue that only the covenant people of Israel rightly participate in God’s Kingdom. Mark’s Gentile target audience in the late 60s receives this same message in even more direct terms in the second gospel.

We need reminding of this from time to time, as well.

c. Lots of Leftovers, vv. 37b-39

Greek NT

<15:37b> καὶ τὸ περισσεῦον τῶν κλασμάτων ἦραν ἐπτά σφυρίδας πλήρεις. <15:38> οἱ δὲ ἐσθίοντες ἦσαν τετρακισχίλιοι ἄνδρες χωρὶς γυναικῶν καὶ παιδίων. <15:39> Καὶ ἀπολύσας τοὺς ὄχλους ἐνέβη εἰς τὸ πλοῖον καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς τὰ ὄρια Μαγαδάν.

NASB

and they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, seven large baskets full. 38 And those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 And sending away the crowds, Jesus got into the boat and came to the region of Magadan.

NRSV

and they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. 38 Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 And sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

NLT

and when the scraps were picked up, there were seven large baskets of food left over! 38 There were four thousand men who were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children. 39 Then Jesus sent the people home, and he got into a boat and crossed over to the region of Magadan.

Notes:

The three English translations link v. 37b to v. 37a with a more dynamic translation. In reality, the Greek text begins a new sentence here and can be literally translated as “the abundance of the broken pieces (κλασμάτων) was seven baskets full.” This is the basis, along with Greek grammar considerations, for link-

ing this statement with what follows, as is reflected in the [Block Diagram](#) and the [Semantic Diagram](#) at the end of this study.

The impact of the miracle was the abundance of “left overs.” When God set out to meet the needs of the crowd of people that day, He didn’t do it in a mea-

gerly manner with a “let’s just get by” attitude. Rather, He generously took care of them.

This is also highlighted in Mark’s account, as well as in the first “feeding” miracle in Matthew (14:20b-27).

Mt. 15:37b-39

and they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. 38 Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 And sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

The common pattern among all three accounts is clear: **1)** left overs picked up and put in baskets; **2)** numbers of men listed with note that women and children weren’t included in the numbers; **3)** crowds dismissed by Jesus before departure.

Mk. 8:8b-10

and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. 9 Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. 10 And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

Mt. 14:20b-22

and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. 22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.



The Jewish tone of the first “feeding” narrative in 14:20b-22 is seen at two points. a) Twelve baskets of broken pieces were picked up, while only seven were gathered up in the second “feeding” in 15:37b-29. The symbolism between twelve (12 tribes of Israel) and seven (all inclusive number of completeness) is important to both narratives. b) Different terms are used for baskets in the two feeding narratives. In Mt. 14, the term κοφίνους (*kophinous*) is used and is a term commonly designating a Jewish basket in the LXX. But in Mt. 15, the term σπυρίδας (*spyridas*) is used. Generally, this term designates a larger basket than a κοφίνος. Newman and Stine (*UBS Helps for Translators*) observe:

Here the word specifically refers to a fisherman’s basket woven from marsh grass. It is the same word used of the basket by which Paul was let down from the city wall (Acts 9.25). Elsewhere in the New Testament the word is used at Matthew 16.10; Mark 8.8, 20. A standard dictionary of classical Greek defines the word as a “large basket,” without specifying any particular dimensions.

The larger size is usually taken as implying the Gentile world, but one should be a bit cautious here. This may be possible, but is not certain.

The numbering of the crowd by only listing the

number of men is quite common in ancient Jewish literature, and doesn’t imply inherently any discrimination against women and children. Matthew simply used the customary Jewish system of his day. Note that Mark doesn’t follow this Jewish pattern. Matthew simply transferred his Markan source into a typical Jewish system. What the total number was can’t be determined, but most likely it was at least double the 4,000 men. But one should take these numbers as approximations, rather than precise numbers. Matthew had signaled this in the first feeding narrative (14:21) with his “about five thousand” (ὡσεὶ πεντακισχίλοι). The symbolism of both numbers is more important than a precise counting of individuals.

Verse 39 transitions from the miracle narrative to the next pericope in 16:1-4. Note that Matthew followed his Markan source both here as well as in the first feeding narrative in 14:22 (cf. [Mk. 6:45](#)). The reference to Magadan in Matthew (15:39) replaces Mark’s Dalmanutha (8:10). The problems of locating this geographical term have already been discussed under [Internal History](#).

The connection? In addition to the emphasis on God’s generosity already mentioned, one can see here a formal concluding of Jesus’ ministry activity on the mountain. Needs had been met; it was time to move on to the next opportunity. Closure is important in ministry. Sometimes pastors forget this when moving to a new congregation. Often they still hang on to the old congregation and end up interfering with the work of the new pastor. But pastors are not the only ones making this mistake. All of us are subject to it. Perhaps one of the great “closure” challenges is retirement. Turning loose and moving on are important for all of us. Knowing that God has new opportunities ahead should make this easier to do.

Greek NT

<15:32> Ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς προσκαλεσάμενος τοὺς μαθητάς αὐτοῦ εἶπεν, Σπλαγχνίζομαι ἐπὶ τὸν ὄχλον, ὅτι ἤδη ἡμέραι τρεῖς προσμένουσίν μοι καὶ οὐκ ἔχουσιν τί φάγωσιν· καὶ ἀπολύσαι αὐτοὺς νήστευς οὐ θέλω, μήποτε ἐκλυθῶσιν ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ. <15:33> καὶ λέγουσιν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταί, Πόθεν ἡμῖν ἐν ἐρημίᾳ ἄρτοι τοσοῦτοι ὥστε χορτάσαι ὄχλον τοσοῦτον; <15:34> καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Πόσους ἄρτους ἔχετε; οἱ δὲ εἶπαν, Ἐπτὰ καὶ ὀλίγα ἰχθύδια.

<15:35> καὶ παραγγείλας τῷ ὄλῳ ἀναπεσεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν <15:36> ἔλαβεν τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἄρτους καὶ τοὺς ἰχθύας καὶ εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ ἐδίδου τοῖς μαθηταῖς, οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ τοῖς ὄχλοις. <15:37> καὶ ἔφαγον πάντες καὶ ἐχορτάσθησαν.

καὶ τὸ περισσεῦον τῶν κλασμάτων ἦραν ἑπτὰ σφυρίδας πλήρεις. <15:38> οἱ δὲ ἐσθίοντες ἦσαν τετρακισχίλιοι ἄνδρες χωρὶς γυναικῶν καὶ παιδίων. <15:39> Καὶ ἀπολύσας τοὺς ὄχλους ἐνέβη εἰς τὸ πλοῖον καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς τὰ ὄρια Μαγαδάν.

NASB

32 And Jesus called His disciples to Him, and said, "I feel compassion for the people, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way." 33 The disciples said to Him, "Where would we get so many loaves in this desolate place to satisfy such a large crowd?" 34 And Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven, and a few small fish."

35 And He directed the people to sit down on the ground; 36 and He took the seven loaves and the fish; and giving thanks, He broke them and started giving them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. 37 And they all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, seven large baskets full. 38 And those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 And sending away the crowds, Jesus got into the boat and came to the region of Magadan.

NRSV

32 Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way." 33 And the disciples said to him, "Where are we to get bread enough in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" 34 And Jesus said to them, "How many loaves have you?" They said, "Seven, and a few small fish."

35 And commanding the crowd to sit down on the ground, 36 he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 37 And they all ate and were satisfied;

and they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. 38 Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 And sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

NLT

32 Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I feel sorry for these people. They have been here with me for three days, and they have nothing left to eat. I don't want to send them away hungry, or they will faint along the road." 33 The disciples replied, "And where would we get enough food out here in the wilderness for all of them to eat?" 34 Jesus asked, "How many loaves of bread do you have?" They replied, "Seven, and a few small fish."

35 So Jesus told all the people to sit down on the ground. 36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, thanked God for them, broke them into pieces, and gave them to the disciples, who distributed the food to the crowd. 37 They all ate until they were full,

and when the scraps were picked up, there were seven large baskets of food left over! 38 There were four thousand men who were fed that day, in addition to all the women and children. 39 Then Jesus sent the people home, and he got into a boat and crossed over to the region of Magadan.

Mark 8:1-10

Greek NT

<8:1> Ἐν ἐκείναις ταῖς ἡμέραις πάλιν πολλοῦ ὄχλου ὄντος καὶ μὴ ἐχόντων τί φάγωσιν, προσκαλεσάμενος τοὺς μαθητὰς λέγει αὐτοῖς, <8:2> Σπλαγχνίζομαι ἐπὶ τὸν ὄχλον, ὅτι ἥδη ἡμέραι τρεῖς προσμένουσίν μοι καὶ οὐκ ἔχουσιν τί φάγωσιν· <8:3> καὶ ἐὰν ἀπολύσω αὐτοὺς νήσετεῖς εἰς οἶκον αὐτῶν, ἐκλυθήσονται ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ· καὶ τινες αὐτῶν ἀπὸ μακρόθεν ἦκασιν. <8:4> καὶ ἀπεκρίθησαν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ὅτι Πόθεν τούτους δυνησεται τις ὧδε χορτάσαι ἄρτων ἐπ' ἐρημίας; <8:5> καὶ ἡρώτα αὐτούς, Πόσους ἔχετε ἄρτους; οἱ δὲ εἶπαν, Ἑπτὰ. <8:6> καὶ παραγγέλλει τῷ ὄλῳ ἀναπεσεῖν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς· καὶ λαβὼν τοὺς ἐπτὰ ἄρτους εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ ἐδίδου τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ ἵνα παρατιθῶσιν, καὶ παρέθηκαν τῷ ὄλῳ. <8:7> καὶ εἶχον ἰχθύδια ὀλίγα· καὶ εὐλόγησας αὐτὰ εἶπεν καὶ ταῦτα παρατιθέναι. <8:8> καὶ ἔφαγον καὶ ἐχορτάσθησαν, καὶ ἦσαν περισσεύματα κλασμάτων ἐπτὰ σφυρίδας. <8:9> ἦσαν δὲ ὡς τετρακισχίλιοι. καὶ ἀπέλυσεν αὐτούς. <8:10> Καὶ εὐθὺς ἐμβὰς εἰς τὸ πλοῖον μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ ἦλθεν εἰς τὰ μέρη Δαλμανουθά.

NASB

1 In those days, when there was again a large crowd and they had nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples and said to them, 2 "I feel compassion for the people because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat. 3 "If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a great distance." 4 And His disciples answered Him, "Where will anyone be able to find enough bread here in this desolate place to satisfy these people?" 5 And He was asking them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven." 6 And He directed the people to sit down on the ground; and taking the seven loaves, He gave thanks and broke them, and started giving them to His disciples to serve to them, and they served them to the people. 7 They also had a few small fish; and after He had blessed them, He ordered these to be served as well. 8 And they ate and were satisfied; and they picked up seven large baskets full of what was left over of the broken pieces. 9 About four thousand were there; and He sent them away. 10 And immediately He entered the boat with His disciples and came to the district of Dalmanutha.

NRSV

1 In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, 2 "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. 3 If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance." 4 His disciples replied, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" 5 He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." 6 Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. 7 They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. 8 They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. 9 Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. 10 And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

NLT

1 About this time another great crowd had gathered, and the people ran out of food again. Jesus called his disciples and told them, 2 "I feel sorry for these people. They have been here with me for three days, and they have nothing left to eat. 3 And if I send them home without feeding them, they will faint along the road. For some of them have come a long distance." 4 "How are we supposed to find enough food for them here in the wilderness?" his disciples asked. 5 "How many loaves of bread do you have?" he asked. "Seven," they replied. 6 So Jesus told all the people to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves, thanked God for them, broke them into pieces, and gave them to his disciples, who distributed the bread to the crowd. 7 A few small fish were found, too, so Jesus also blessed these and told the disciples to pass them out. 8 They ate until they were full, and when the scraps were picked up, there were seven large baskets of food left over! 9 There were about four thousand people in the crowd that day, and he sent them home after they had eaten. 10 Immediately after this, he got into a boat with his disciples and crossed over to the region of Dalmanutha.

Greek NT Diagrammed

32

δὲ

προσκαλεσάμενος τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ

A

Ὁ Ἰησοῦς...εἶπεν,

1

Σπλαγχνίζομαι

ἐπὶ τὸν ὄχλον,

ὅτι ἤδη ἡμέραι τρεῖς προσμένουσιν μοι

καὶ

οὐκ ἔχουσιν τί φάγωσιν·

καὶ

2

ἀπολῦσαι αὐτοὺς νήστεις οὐ θέλω,

μήποτε ἐκλυθῶσιν

ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ.

33

καὶ

B

λέγουσιν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταί,

3

Πόθεν ἡμῖν... (ὥσι) ἄρτοι τοσοῦτοι

ἐν ἐρημίᾳ

/---|

ὥστε χορτάσαι ὄχλον τοσοῦτον;

34

καὶ

Γ

λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς,

4

Πόσους ἄρτους ἔχετε;

δὲ

Δ

οἱ εἶπαν,

5

Ἑπτὰ καὶ ὀλίγα ἰχθύδια.

35

καὶ

παραγγείλας τῷ ὄχλῳ ἀναπεσεῖν

ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν

E

36

ἔλαβεν τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἄρτους

καὶ

τοὺς ἰχθύας

καὶ

εὐχαριστήσας

Z

ἔκλασεν

καὶ

H

ἐδίδου τοῖς μαθηταῖς,

δὲ

Θ

οἱ μαθηταὶ (ἐδίδοσαν) τοῖς ὄχλοις.

37

καὶ

I

ἔφαγον πάντες

καὶ

K

ἐχορτάσθησαν.

καὶ

Λ

τὸ περισσεῦον τῶν κλασμάτων ἦσαν ἑπτὰ σφυρίδας πλήρεις.

38

δὲ

Μ οἱ ἐσθίοντες ἦσαν τετρακισχίλιοι ἄνδρες
χωρὶς γυναικῶν καὶ παιδίων.

Θ Καὶ
ἀπολύσας τοὺς ὄχλους

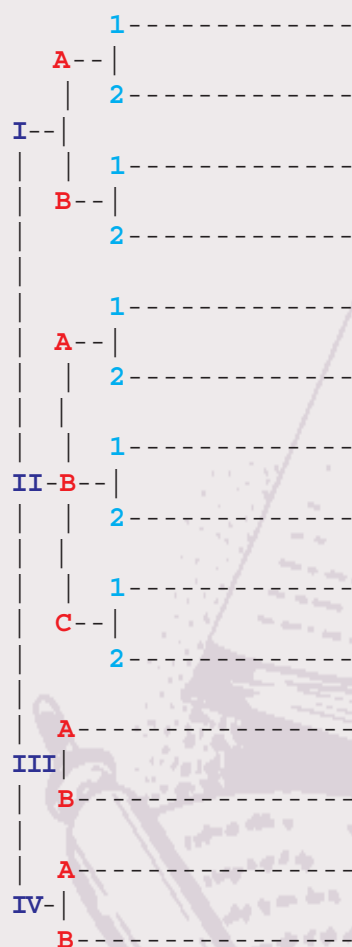
Ν ἐνέβη
εἰς τὸ πλοῖον

Ξ ἦλθεν
καὶ εἰς τὰ ὄρια Μαγαδάν.



Semantic Diagram

Need



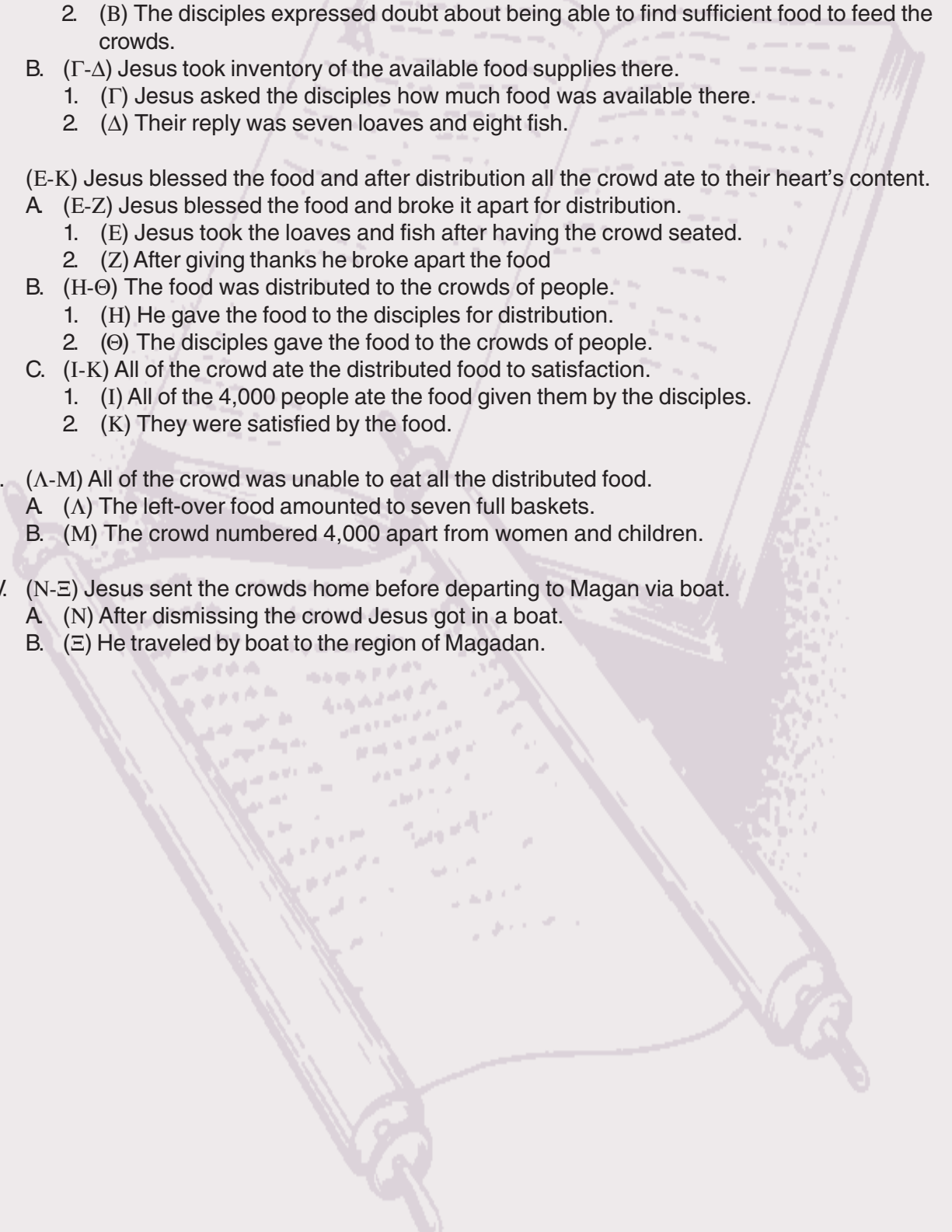
δε						
A	2 Aor	Act	Ind	3	S	ὁ Ἰησοῦς (εἶπεν)
καὶ						
B	Pres	Act	Ind	3	P	οἱ μαθηταί (λέγουσιν)
καὶ						
Γ	Pres	Act	Ind	3	S	ὁ Ἰησοῦς (λέγει)
δε						
Δ	2 Aor	Act	Ind	3	P	οἱ (μαθηταί) (εἶπαν)
καὶ						
Miracle						
E	2 Aor	Act	Ind	3	S	(ὁ Ἰησοῦς) (ἔλαβεν)
καὶ						
Z	1 Aor	Act	Ind	3	S	(ὁ Ἰησοῦς) (ἔκλασεν)
καὶ						
H	Imperf	Act	Ind	3	S	(ὁ Ἰησοῦς) (ἐδίδου)
δε						
Θ	(Imperf	Act	Ind	3	P	οἱ μαθηταί (ἐδίδουσιν)
καὶ						
I	2 Aor	Act	Ind	3	P	πάντες (ἔφαγον)
καὶ						
K	1 Aor	Pass	Ind	3	P	(αὐτοὶ) (ἐχορτάσθησαν)
καὶ						
Impact						
Λ	Imperf	---	Ind	3	P	τὸ περισσεῦον (ἦσαν)
δε						
M	Imperf	---	Ind	3	P	οἱ ἐσθίοντες (ἦσαν)
καὶ						
Transition						
N	2 Aor	Act	Ind	3	S	(ὁ Ἰησοῦς) (ἐνέβη)
καὶ						
Ξ	2 Aor	Act	Ind	3	S	(ὁ Ἰησοῦς) (ἦλθεν)

Miracle

Impact

Transition

Exegetical Outline

- 
- I. (A-Δ) Jesus' compassion for the hungry crowds led him to take stock of available supplies.
 - A. (A-B) Out of compassion Jesus instructed doubting disciples to secure food for the crowds.
 - 1. (A) Jesus expressed compassion for those who had been listening to his teaching.
 - 2. (B) The disciples expressed doubt about being able to find sufficient food to feed the crowds.
 - B. (Γ-Δ) Jesus took inventory of the available food supplies there.
 - 1. (Γ) Jesus asked the disciples how much food was available there.
 - 2. (Δ) Their reply was seven loaves and eight fish.
 - II. (E-K) Jesus blessed the food and after distribution all the crowd ate to their heart's content.
 - A. (E-Z) Jesus blessed the food and broke it apart for distribution.
 - 1. (E) Jesus took the loaves and fish after having the crowd seated.
 - 2. (Z) After giving thanks he broke apart the food
 - B. (H-Θ) The food was distributed to the crowds of people.
 - 1. (H) He gave the food to the disciples for distribution.
 - 2. (Θ) The disciples gave the food to the crowds of people.
 - C. (I-K) All of the crowd ate the distributed food to satisfaction.
 - 1. (I) All of the 4,000 people ate the food given them by the disciples.
 - 2. (K) They were satisfied by the food.
 - III. (Λ-M) All of the crowd was unable to eat all the distributed food.
 - A. (Λ) The left-over food amounted to seven full baskets.
 - B. (M) The crowd numbered 4,000 apart from women and children.
 - IV. (N-Ξ) Jesus sent the crowds home before departing to Magan via boat.
 - A. (N) After dismissing the crowd Jesus got in a boat.
 - B. (Ξ) He traveled by boat to the region of Magadan.