

Groups of 50 and 100 in Mark's Feeding Narrative (Mark 6:30-44)

Piet van Veldhuizen

By no means am I the first to be fascinated by those lines in the Marcan narrative about the feeding of the five thousand that tell about the way the people had to sit down (vv.39-40):

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| καὶ ἐπέταξεν αὐτοῖς | and he commanded them (i.e. his disciples) |
| ἀνακλιθῆναι πάντας | to make all recline |
| συμπόσια συμπόσια | meal groups meal groups |
| ἐπὶ τῷ χλωρῷ χόρτῳ | on the green grass |
| καὶ ἀνέπεσαν | and they fell down |
| πρασιαὶ πρασιαὶ | garden beds garden beds |
| κατὰ ἑκατὸν | of a hundred each |
| καὶ κατὰ πενήκοντα | and fifty each |

These lines stand out in a narrative that otherwise lacks information about what exactly would have happened. No narrative time is spent on how the multiplication and the consequent distribution would have taken place, and nothing is said about the reception of the food (and the miracle) by those who were fed, apart from the statement that they were satisfied – which in the given context reflects on the abundance of food rather than on the feelings of the crowd.

At a first sight, the riddle of these lines consists of the following elements:

- The remarkable specimens of distributive repetition: συμπόσια συμπόσια and πρασιαὶ πρασιαὶ: whence the form and why these expressions, especially the 'garden beds'?
- The specification, in Jesus' command according to this narrative, of 'the green grass' as the place to make the people not just sit down, but 'recline'.
- The numbers given for the groups or 'garden beds' in which the people sat down: κατὰ ἑκατὸν καὶ κατὰ πενήκοντα – by the way, here the author is making use of the regular Greek alternative to the form of distributive repetition.

In an attempt to clarify these lines and the way the whole story is told, I have considered a number of Old Testament and early Jewish reference texts and themes. Let me say at the start that I think none of the findings that I will present here are new. Only after I had sketched the outline of this paper, two weeks ago, the postman delivered a copy of Roger David Aus's great book 'Feeding The Five Thousand'¹. On its cover our former seminar participant, the late professor Maurice Casey says this book 'should now become the definitive work on this intriguing narrative'. I have tried to finish my paper along my own lines of thought, under the principle *etsi Aus non daretur*, although I could not help peeking into his work for confirmation, and in a few instances below I will discuss some of his findings.

As an experiment, I have made the examination of this Biblical text a study project in my church parish. A group of fifteen participants studied and discussed the text together with me in February. The participants were aged 25 to 85 and from very different educational and professional backgrounds, but all were active parish members and churchgoers. We had three meetings two weeks apart, the last exactly three weeks ago. In the first, we made a longlist of things to find out and people signed up for tasks (word study, meaning of numbers, comparison of gospels, possible OT reference texts, and of course all kinds of Google searches ranging from images to enhance our imagination to searches in the Perseus ancient texts database). I have refrained from doing in-depth research myself before the

¹ Roger David Aus, Feeding the Five Thousand, University Press of America 2010 (Studies in Judaism).

group started working, in order to be sure I would take the work of the group seriously. My role in the second meeting was to help weighing the information found by the participants and help understanding different approaches to the texts. Just before the last meeting I have started research myself, in order to be able to sketch an overall image relating to what the participants had experienced during their four week quest. I am grateful for all the ploughing and digging done by the group members.

In the feeding narrative as a whole (vv.30-44), I can distinguish four or five mutually related conceptual fields that might link the narrative to texts and/or motifs in the Old Testament or in ancient Jewish texts. Two of them are quite obvious: these are **(a)** the metaphorical field of the herding or pastoral motif, and **(b)** the motif of feeding the many in spite of an apparent lack of food. A third conceptual field, closely related to the pastoral motif but on a non-metaphorical level, is that of **(c)** crowd management or even community organization. Related to, but not identical with the feeding motif is **(d)** the field of the meal or bread-breaking. Finally, and much less visibly, there is **(e)** a metaphorical motif of gardening represented by this peculiar expression *πρασιαῖ πρασιαῖ* - which can make sense if it helps to integrate these four fields into a significant whole. I will now consider each of them more closely.

(a) Herding: in Mark 6, the herding motif is introduced explicitly in the words about Jesus in v.34: he 'saw much people, and moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd'. In Scripture, this is a recurring image for Israel without a leader, or without the right leadership: Numbers 27,17; 2 Chronicles 18:16; Ezekiel 34:5.8; Zechariah 10:2. Numbers 27 comes to mind particularly, because there Moses at the end of his ministry dreads the thought of his people as sheep with no shepherd, his own pastoral ministry having consisted in both teaching and feeding the crowd.

The 'green grass' of Mark 6,40 is best explained, I think, as part of the pastoral imagery. Several commentaries state that the *χλωρος χόρτος* may refer to the 'grassy dwellings' (*אֲשֶׁר בְּנִיחוֹת*) of Psalm 23. The extensive elaboration of pastoral imagery in Ezekiel 34 should be adduced here as well: it has sheep without a shepherd, gone adrift to far places, and the Lord promises to send, or to be himself, the new shepherd who will lead them to good pastures and have them 'lie down in good dwellings' (*וַתִּרְבְּצֶנָה בְּנוֹה טוֹב*). Feeding or not feeding the flock is part of the extensive shepherding metaphor in Ezekiel 34 as well.

(b) Feeding: the feeding of a large number of people while only a limited amount of bread is available, is a motif that links the story to 2 Kings 4,42-44. There, Elisha feeds a hundred people with 20 barley rolls, which his servant suggests is far too little bread to satisfy all of them. Rudolf Pesch² (*Das Markusevangelium* I,354) provides a list of eight similarities to show the feeding narrative of the gospel to be modelled on the Elisha story both in vocabulary and structure.

- The servant/disciples are told to feed the people
- The servant/disciples suggest that this is impossible
- The servant/disciples put food before the people
- The people eat and there is food left
- The number 100 plays a role
- The people are described as *men* (2Kgs4,42 / Mk6,44)
- The people are qualified as *people* (2Kgs4,43 / grouping in Mk6,39)
- The food consists of two elements (loaves and oars / bread and fish)

Here as in several other signs performed by Jesus, he is shown to do what Elisha did, and to exceed it (Pesch: *Überbietungswunder*). Roger David Aus mentions several sources to show that in early Christianity Jesus as the one coming after John the Baptist has been compared to Elisha as the one coming after Elijah.

² Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (Herders ThKzNT, 1984⁴) I, 354.

For Aus, an important element in 2 Kings 4 is the fact that the barley loaves brought to the prophet constitute the first fruits (*lechem bikkurim*) according to verse 42. The Mosaic law (Lev. 23,9-14) rules that these first fruits of barley had to be brought to the priest as part of the 'omer offering on the second day of Passover³, and that no fruits from the new harvest could be eaten before this offering had taken place. Aus then adduces early Jewish sources which suggest, if I understand him correctly, that first fruits brought for the needs of a prophet in some instances have been counted as being the 'omer offering – which might mean, although Aus does not say so explicitly, that bringing the first fruits to a prophet before a hungry crowd would make the total new harvest available for the people, who before that moment were not allowed to use it for consumption. Now in Mark 6 there is no explicit reference to the first fruits, except perhaps for the baskets mentioned in verse 43, those *kofinoi* sounding very similar to the *kufot*, the baskets used for bringing the first fruits according to the Mishna (Aus p.13).

Considering all this, we should not forget that the feeding in Mark 6 is a secondary or subsequent expression of care for the crowd. When Jesus feels compassion for those people, he teaches them extensively in the first place. It is his teaching until a late hour that makes the feeding necessary. The feeding may, at least in part, be meant as a metaphor for the teaching that was Jesus' primary way of herding the flock. Some commentators suggest that the 5 breads and 2 fishes may refer to the five Torah scrolls and the two 'side dishes' of Prophets and Writings.

(c) Crowd management:

In the first chapter of Mark's gospel, Jesus alone goes to a deserted place before sunrise, after a night in which the whole town had gathered at his doorstep (Mk1,35). His disciples find him and summon him back, saying 'All are looking for you' – but Jesus chooses to go elsewhere to preach (v.37). In the end he was condemned to be 'outside in deserted places' (verse 45) because of the crowds that came to him whenever he showed up in a town. This is the ambivalence of the crowd or the many in Mark: they are the people Jesus has come to teach and cure, but at the same time as a multitude they seem to hinder and even to expel him.

In Mark 6,7ff, Jesus has sent his twelve disciples (*δύο δύο*, the only other specimen of distributive repetition in Mark!) to preach and cure like he had taught them. He had told them to take neither food nor money with them. When they returned to report on what they had done and taught, Jesus decided to take them to a deserted place to get some rest, because, as verse 31 says, they even found no occasion to eat with all those many people coming and going (the same has been said earlier, in Mk3, 20: 'And the crowd gathered anew, so that they even could not eat bread' – this being the limit for his family, who decided to go and fetch him because he must be mad).

In Mark 6, the boat trip to a place for rest and food brings Jesus and his disciples to a new crowd, hungry for teaching and later in need of food.

Thus, the crowd in Mark is the flock to be herded, the people to be taught and cured and fed, but precisely in those needs they are a problem to be handled. Jesus has given his disciples power to teach and cure, and at the same time he stays in charge himself. In the feeding narrative, his disciples are commanded to find some food first, and then to distribute it out of Jesus' hands. In between, Jesus has told them how to organize the crowd.

Exodus 18 is named by several commentators⁴ as an important reference text. There, Moses gets no rest, dealing all day with the people of Israel, hearing them and judging their cases (Ex. 18,13ff). His father in law Jethro tells him to organize the people by introducing a hierarchy of leadership and having questions dealt with at the lowest possible level, so that only the most important problems

³ On the day after shabbath, according to Lev. 23,15, but the countings of weeks and days in the following verses suggests that the day after Passover is meant – which has become practice in very early times.

⁴ Rudolf Pesch; Ludger Schenke (Das Markusevangelium, Kohlhammer 2005); C.J. den Heyer (T&T, Marcus I, Kok Kampen 1985).

will come up to Moses himself. Leaders are to be installed over groups of 1000, 100, 50, and 10. These same numbers occur in some of the so-called sectarian documents of Qumran, notably the Damascus Document and the Community Rule, where the community of the faithful is structured by these numbers – there, it is not at all clear what these numbers would come down to practically: they seem just to link the community to the rulings of Moses.

Now the groups in which the crowd of Mk6 is seated, are said to equate the middle two numbers from the structure provided in Exodus 18: 100 and 50. One might try to guess why:

- The order of quantity of both extreme numbers (1000 and 10) is represented in the 5000 men and 12 baskets in verses 43-44.
- The highest order of quantity is dealt with by the Lord himself, his disciples have to deal with the middle numbers.
- These numbers represent credible quantities for meal groups.
- These numbers represent credible quantities for early Christian communities.

Roger David Aus thinks the 100 and 50 in Mk6 refer not to Exodus 18, but to another feeding narrative: in 1 Kings 18, Ahab's God-fearing housekeeper Obadiah is said to have taken 'a hundred prophets, and hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water'(1 Kgs18,4 KJV). A link between this text and the Elisha story of 2Kgs4 would be the Targum text on the first verse of 2Kgs4, where the God-fearing man said to be killed is called Obadiah – and as Aus notes, this verse is part of the Haftara reading that contains the story of the feeding of Elisha's one hundred prophets.

For a pre-Markan Palestinian Jewish Christian miracle collection (as stipulated by Aus), this is a quite convincing link. But then, we have to deal with the way the narrative is molded and incorporated in a larger narrative by Mark. There, the feeding-and-teaching Elisha motif seems to go along with a herding-and-managing Moses motif, strongly suggested by the Moses quote (from Numbers 27) about the people being like sheep without a shepherd.

(d) Bread-breaking: According to Mk6,39, Jesus commands his disciples to seat the people in meal groups (συμπόσια), or rather, to have them recline (ἀνακλιθῆναι) in *symposia*. That is no picnic terminology: it refers to a more formal or festive setting. In Jewish tradition, the *symposia* would be the companies that share a meal, like the family groups that are formed to share a Passover lamb according to Ex12,4.

Roger David Aus states that the Passover meal is the only occasion on which every Israelite, rich or poor or even a slave, *reclines* as a free person instead of standing or being merely seated.⁵

Jesus' act of feeding the people is told in a fourfold formula that according to Billerbeck reflects the practice of the Jewish symposium: He takes bread, speaks a blessing, breaks it, and gives it to be distributed. Rudolf Pesch maintains that there is no hint at eucharist in these words⁶ - but I cannot possibly agree with that.

In the New Testament this fourfold formula of taking, blessing, breaking, giving is used in the synoptic accounts of the feeding of many (here and Mk8,6; Mat14,19; 15,36; Lk9,16), in the synoptic Last Supper texts (Mk14,22; Mat26,27; Lk22,19), and in Luke's account of the meal in Emmaus on the day of Jesus' resurrection (Lk24,30). In Acts27,35, where Paul on the ship celebrates a last supper before shipwreck, the 'giving' element is lacking. In Paul's own account of Jesus' last supper (1Cor11,23f) the element of 'giving' is replaced by words of Jesus that clearly imply the giving.

⁵ Aus, xv and 98f.

⁶ Pesch 348: Abendmahlsterminologie und –typologie ist in V.41 nicht zu entdecken; and 352, about Jesus looking up to heaven: Dieser Zug widerlegt vollends die eucharistischen Interpretationen unseres Texts, den er enthält ein thaumaturgisches Motiv (...).

The fourfold formula, then, seems to be tied to the tradition of Jesus sharing bread in a Passover meal or a meal that evokes a Passover context (in Mk6 by reclining in meal groups). The combination of teaching or preaching with a meal is not only present in Mk6, but it belongs to the essence of the Passover with its *haggada*. The daily bread-breaking practice of the apostles as we find it in the first chapters of Acts, being a ceremonial repetition of a part of Jesus' last Passover meal, was a means to feed the hungry with bread and to teach the gospel of Jesus in an integrated way. In times when food was lacking for many people, bread, however metaphorically shared, could never be a mere metaphor. Thus, the early Christian communities would be formed as meal groups, bread breaking communities, and the meal groups in which the many of Mk6 lay down may be an imaginary representation of the beginnings of Christian community life.

(e) Gardening: The *πρασιαὶ* in verse 40, garden beds, are within this narrative a single instance of a gardening motif. Billerbeck states in II,13: *Die Liege- oder Sitzordnung mit gartentechnischen Ausdrücken zu bezeichnen, war auch sonst üblich* (it was usual anyway to describe the reclining or sitting order in gardening terminology). He then adduces examples from the Palestinian Talmud and the Midrash on Song of Songs 8,11, where the scholars or students are depicted as a vineyard in which they sit *shorot shorot*, in rows. The Aramaic equivalent of *πρασιαὶ πρασιαὶ* (*ginnonijot ginnonijot*) occurs in the 11th century Talmud dictionary Arukh under the *gan* lemma in a quote commenting on Song of Songs 8,13⁷ - "you who are seated in gardens" being explained as: the Lord will listen to the Torah students provided that they are seated *ginnonijot ginnonijot*, in an orderly way as beds or rows in a garden. Roger David Aus gives more examples, many of which come from early Jewish comments on different texts in Song of Songs.

Just as the idea of reclining and its ceremonial context contrasts with the green grass, so the idea of the multitude as a well-tended garden contrasts with the deserted place in which the event takes place – but that may well be part of what the author intends to tell: that by Jesus teaching and feeding the people and having them orderly arranged by his disciples, the crowd in the desert turns into a well-tended vineyard of Torah students.

Concluding considerations

1. Perhaps I am entirely wrong, but studying this text I have come to see it as a narrative kind of organogram, an organizational chart of the church in its very beginnings. Ordered in meal groups that are at the same time study classes, ordered and fed by the hands of the apostles who have brought their own modest means into the hands of Jesus. The crowd as a crowd is for the Lord to deal with (both at the start and at the end of the story). The groups are tended by the apostles commuting between them all to dispense what they have received from Jesus – and perhaps for the twelve of them an *omer* basket stands waiting.
2. The narrative in Mk6 is labelled a miracle story by, among others, both Rudolph Pesch and Roger David Aus. To be precise, both end up labelling it as a miracle of surpassing (*Überbietungswunder*), and Aus thinks Mark must have borrowed it from a miracle story collection. This may be perfectly true, but then, in the gospel of Mark the narrative is closely connected, partly even interwoven, with the story about the sending of the twelve *δύο δύο* (Mk6,7) and their return to report on what they had taught and done. There, their mission is clearly an extension of the mission of Jesus himself. If the feeding narrative in its Markan version were merely a miracle story to present Jesus as the major Elisha, I would have expected some reaction of the crowd, a statement that people were amazed or praised God. Instead, attention is paid to the interaction between Jesus and the twelve, and those peculiar verses 39 and 40 specify the way in which the crowd is

⁷ KJV: Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to thy voice: cause me to hear it.

arranged, still paying no attention to the crowd's own reactions or feelings or hunger or whatever.

3. The different motifs in the narrative come together as a convincing image of what it means to tend to a community: herding, teaching and feeding, managing, gardening. The act of Jesus represented by the fourfold formula of taking bread, blessing, breaking and sharing is at the center of those efforts, integrating them as community building. Both for Mk6 and for the early Christian bread breaking practice, I am not sure if it makes sense to label it as 'eucharistic' and I am not sure how closely to link it with the Passover meal – but the practice has its origins in Passover and has eventually evolved into Eucharist. The narrative in Mk6 contains some elements of both and might even be a kind of narrative go-between in a time when Christian ritual practices were still very much in process of construction.
4. My opinion is that the Jesus of Mark 6 is depicted as much in the colours of Moses the law-teaching shepherd as in those of Elisha the feeding prophet. He is the namesake of the successor whose name is mentioned to Moses in the next verse after he has expressed his fear 'that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd' (Num27,17-18). Gardening the desert crowd into a well-arranged congregation of food-sharing companies is also rather a Mosaic than an Elishan thing to do. And succession or delegation itself seems to be part of the story.
5. More than when I began this enterprise, I am groping in the dark when it comes to explaining the meaning of the numbers 100 and 50 in Mk6,40. I would like the idea that they reflect the actual size of the earliest Christian bread-breaking communities, between which the apostles would come and go breaking bread and teaching the gospel of Jesus. For Jewish festive meals and for Passover, the size of meal companies was a matter of importance based on Exodus 12,4, and numbers mentioned in the Mishna range from 5 men to a 100 people⁸. Flavius Josephus mentions a minimum of ten people for Passover companies, and says they often amount to about twenty⁹.
In later times, there have always been currents in the Christian church that countered the general preference for large congregations as a sign of a flourishing church. In my own parish, debate arises from time to time about how desirable it would be to expand the building, because it is often full on Sundays and perhaps the flock might still grow – now, lack of money neatly solves the problem. But it proves difficult to discuss the desirability of smaller communities when growth is still possible.
That, of course, is not a question the feeding narrative of Mk6 can solve for me.

⁸ Cf. Aus, 94ff.

⁹ in Bell. 6.422-4