

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

by PETER E. COUSINS

MR. COUSINS, who since he last contributed a paper to the *QUARTERLY* has become Lecturer in Divinity in Gipsy Hill College of Education, subjects to scrutiny the view that our Lord's miraculous feeding of the multitude, as recorded in all four Gospels, is an action of the very kind which He rejected as the first of His temptations in the wilderness.

THE historicity of the Feeding of the Five Thousand has been doubted on two principal grounds. First, the possibility has been denied; this sort of thing "doesn't happen". Jesus "could not" have done such a deed. The *a priori* nature of this argument is clear; to deny the possibility of the incident is to beg the whole question.

The second argument has more substance. It asserts that even if Jesus *could*, yet he *would* not have pandered in this way to man's fleshly preoccupation with the material and the marvellous. In the time of testing after his Baptism he considered and dismissed a "welfare state" concept of the messianic age; and also rejected the possibility of dazzling men's eyes with wonders. In view of this, it is argued, we cannot believe that Jesus performed in the presence of a vast multitude a miracle of a nature that will have encouraged precisely those crude, materialistic hopes which distorted men's understanding of the age to come and ultimately led to his rejection. This is not a subjective assertion about how Jesus "must have" reasoned. On the contrary, it bases itself firmly on evidence which only an extreme scepticism can reject, and demands that we take seriously the presence in the synoptic tradition of what seem to be irreconcilable attitudes. Certainly, if we must choose between the miraculous feeding of the multitude and the trustworthiness of the Temptation narrative (to say nothing of other examples of the Lord's teaching) as providing insight into the mind of Jesus, then the Feeding of the Five Thousand must go, on grounds both of historical probability and religious value.

It appears, however, that there are at least two parallel incidents elsewhere in the synoptic tradition. These are the Transfiguration

and the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. In both cases, Jesus acts a part more appropriate to the Messiah of popular expectation. The Transfiguration shows him a glorious figure "in the clouds of heaven", attended by Moses and Elijah (the traditional forerunner of the Messiah) and attested by a heavenly voice. True, the miraculous event occurs in private, but it is none the less spectacular for that. It has affinities with the Temple pinnacle temptation and presents Jesus, the "one who serves" (Luke 22: 27), and who preserved his incognito to the end, wearing the shining garments of an apocalyptic and supernatural figure. Similarly, the events of Palm Sunday appear to conflict with the decision of Matthew 4: 7-10 that the Messiah will not seek military success. It is true that Jesus rode an ass, not a war-horse, and thus apparently repudiated violence. But the synoptic writers agree that his action was interpreted as a claim to be the Messiah and such a claim made at passover time was bound to encourage thoughts of "the kingdom of our father David" (Mark 11: 10). Can we believe that this risk was taken by one whose reluctance to make messianic claims was so marked as to lead some scholars to doubt whether he even thought of himself as the Messiah?

We have discovered three recorded instances where there is an apparent clash between the messianic ideals of Jesus, as epitomized in the Temptation story, and actions attributed to him in the Marcan tradition. There is even a certain parallelism between these incidents and the three temptations. The psychological problem presented by the Feeding of the Five Thousand is evidently not unique. In point of fact, the tradition contains its own solution of the problems of the Transfiguration and the Triumphal Entry. If the disciples saw Jesus as the supernatural Son of Man with heavenly glory, this was only because they had already witnessed his acceptance of the way of suffering and humiliation (Mark 8: 27-9: 8). The glory of the traditional picture of the Messiah is not denied; on the contrary, the presence of Moses and Elijah implies a reinterpretation (however radical) rather than a repudiation of the Old Testament. Just as we may not interpret the Transfiguration apart from Caesarea Philippi, so we must view Palm Sunday from the slopes of Golgotha. However great the enthusiasm of the crowds at the beginning of the week, they were soon faced with the *skandalon* of the Cross. The man who had refused "all the kingdoms of the world" after His baptism now faced another baptism in order that they might become his (Rev. 11: 15). Here again we find glory and suffering side by side.

If our approach so far has been sound, we may reasonably hesitate before rejecting the Feeding of the Five Thousand as psychologically impossible. If Jesus twice aligned himself with popular expectation, may he not also have done so on this occasion? We have noted in the other two instances the presence also of a corrective to contemporary beliefs, a reference to the "sufferings of the Messiah" as well as "the subsequent glory" (1 Peter 1: 11). Disconcertingly, nothing of the sort can be found in the synoptic tradition (the eucharistic overtones detected by some scholars prove only that the story was told by Christians). The missing link is, however, supplied by the Fourth Gospel. It is a commonplace that the Synoptic and Johannine narratives here supplement each other quite remarkably (for one example cf. Mark 5: 45f. with John 6: 15). Certainly in John 6: 25-29 we find the emphasis on the Cross which the analogy of our other two examples has led us to expect. Jesus has indeed come to fulfil men's hopes that the Messiah would feed and satisfy God's people. But it is on him that they must feed, and this is impossible apart from his death. There is no compelling reason to deny that Jesus gave such teaching or that it was linked with the feeding of the multitude and given about passover time in the synagogue at Capernaum. Apart from the increasing trust placed by scholars in the basic historicity of the Johannine tradition, we can see repeated here the same pattern as in the other two cases. Thus the miraculous feeding of the multitude no longer appears as an incongruity inconsistent with the known teaching of Jesus. It takes its place with the Transfiguration and the Triumphal Entry as an occasion when he both asserts the fulfilment of traditional expectations and the need for their transmutation in the crucible of suffering.

Richmond, Surrey.