

Matthew 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 14 But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask.
- Prompted by her mother, she said, Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter. And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests, he commanded it to be given.
- He sent and had John beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter, and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body, and buried it, and they went and told Jesus.
- Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.
- Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, This is a desolate place, and the day is now over. Send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.
- [1 : 3 7] But Jesus said, They need not go away. You give them something to eat. They said to him, We have only five loaves here and two fish. And he said, Bring them here to me.
- Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.
- And they all ate and were satisfied, and they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.
- Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.
- When evening came, he was there alone. But the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea.
- [2 : 4 1] But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified and said, It is a ghost! And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid.
- And Peter answered him, Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water. He said, Come. So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.
- But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, Lord, save me! Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, O you of little faith, why did you doubt?

And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, Truly you are the Son of God. And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret.

And when the men of that place recognised him, they sent around to all that region and brought to him all who were sick, and implored him that they might only touch the fringe of his garment.

[3 : 43] And as many as touched it were made well. Matthew 14 begins with the story of the death of John the Baptist, but it's introduced in a surprising way.

Herod hears word of Jesus' miracles and actions, and then wonders whether John the Baptist has been brought back to life. Then we hear the story of the death of John the Baptist, after which Jesus responds to hearing the news of the death of John the Baptist.

It's an interesting way to tell us the story. It highlights the theme of resurrection. Jesus is John the Baptist raised up again. And here we might think of the story of Elijah and Elisha, as the ministry of Elisha continues from the ministry of that of Elijah.

Elisha is anointed with the spirit of Elijah. He has the double portion of the spirit of Elijah, and continues his ministry, completing it. Likewise, with John the Baptist, his ministry is a ministry of the desert, that is completed by the ministry of Christ in the land.

There are other themes of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha that are in play here. Themes of widespread rejection, but also of a remnant. As we have already noted in studying this book, John the Baptist's story is very similar to that of Elijah.

[4 : 59] They're both people of the wilderness. They're both dressed in similar garments. John the Baptist is one who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. He's the Elijah that is to come. And in all of these ways, there is an association between those characters.

But here we have a story that brings out further associations. The story of Elijah and 1 Kings is dominated by a conflict with King Ahab and his manipulative wife Jezebel.

And here we have a similar pair, Herod and his wife Herodias, who are in conflict with John the Baptist. Once again, there's a manipulative wife who's trying to spur her husband on to destroy the prophet.

There's a further aspect of Old Testament background that might come to our mind at this point. It's a story that has two key women who influence their husbands greatly. In that story, Ahasuerus, the king, offers up to half his kingdom to the woman who pleases him, Esther.

Herod does the same thing. Once again, it's at a feast. And Herodias is like an anti-Mordecai to her daughter, who's an anti-Esther. She's someone who represents the polar opposite of Esther.

[6 : 10] The character of Herodias might also remind us of Zeresh, who spurred Haman on in his attempt to kill Mordecai, the man who wouldn't bow to him. In Esther chapter 5, verses 9, we read, And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart.

But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh.

And Haman recounted to them the splendour of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honoured him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king.

Then Haman said, Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.

Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast.

[7 : 18] This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made. It's a very similar dynamic that's playing out here. Haman, we should remember, is an Agagite, a descendant of Agag, and a descendant of Amalek.

Amalek sought to kill the Jews, and Herod is an Idumean, a descendant of Edom, like Amalek. And maybe there's a connection between their two characters. The descendant of Esau is trying to kill the descendant of Jacob.

John then is Elijah. Jesus is Elisha. And Elisha, as one of his first miracles, performs the multiplication of loaves. In 2 Kings 2, verse 42, A man came from Baal Shalisha, bringing the man of God bread of the firstfruits, twenty loaves of barley, and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

And Elisha said, Give to the men, that they may eat. But his servant said, How can I set this before a hundred men? So he repeated, Give them to the men, that they may eat. For thus says the Lord, They shall eat, and have some left.

So he set it before them, and they ate and had some left, according to the word of the Lord. Jesus is a new Elisha, performing that multiplication of loaves, but on a much higher level.

[8 : 30] A multitude follows Jesus into the wilderness, where he gets his disciples to serve them food that's multiplied. He's providing food in the wilderness, like the manna was provided in the wilderness. That's a connection that's particularly explored in the Gospel of Matthew.

Each one of the Gospels records this particular miracle. It seems to be especially important for them. There are five loaves and two fish. The five loaves, perhaps, connect with the five loaves of 1 Samuel chapter 21.

In that chapter, fleeing from Saul, David comes to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest, and asks for some food for his men. He says, Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.

And the priest answered David, I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread. Having just heard about the death of John the Baptist, at the hands of Herod, maybe we're supposed to connect Herod with Saul.

Jesus, upon hearing about the death of John the Baptist, withdraws to a deserted place, and the people follow him. They're like the men around David, as he flees from Saul, and he provides for them, as David provided for his men, with five loaves.

[9 : 39] There's no mention of the distribution of the fish in this particular account in Matthew, which perhaps is because Matthew wants us to connect it with what happens later on in the Gospel, which is the institution of the Lord's Supper.

He looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds, and they all ate and were satisfied. And later on, in chapter 26, verse 26, Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat, this is my body.

Jesus breaks the bread, and gives it to his disciples, who give it to the crowd. We can maybe see there, a pattern for liturgy in general, that Christ breaks the bread, that he gives to his church, through his ministers.

That this is a pattern that's being foreshadowed in the events of the feeding of the 5,000. The gathering up of the bread afterwards, the remainder of the bread, is an event given some significance.

Every single one of the Gospels records the number of the baskets that are gathered up, and later on we're asked whether we saw the significance of this. The 12 maybe suggests the connection with the 12 disciples themselves.

[10:54] Maybe it's a connection with Israel. Maybe we're supposed to see that they are sufficient for their ministry, and that there will be enough left over for each one of them. Now one strange detail about this account that you may have noticed, is that there are 5,000 men, besides women and children.

That's an interesting detail. It's not what you'd expect if you're going to feed a large number of people. You'd expect all the people who are fed to be listed. But this suggests that there's a numbering according to some different principle.

You number men only when you're numbering people for military rank, when you're numbering people for fighting. In the Exodus, there is this same language that's used in verse 37 of chapter 12.

And the people of Israel journeyed from Ramses to Succoth, about 600,000 men on foot, besides women and children. And then later on we're told, And on that very day the Lord brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts.

And then in 13 verse 18, And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. Or in fifties. Now in the other gospel accounts there are references to being divided into fifties, which maybe underlines this point.

[12:08] There is, as it were, the preparation of a military band within the wilderness. The story of the walking on the water follows this. And here we might once again see many Exodus themes.

The disciples are struggling in the water while Jesus is up on the mountain. And when evening comes, he's there alone, but they are struggling with the waves and the sea, which is all against them.

And in the fourth watch of the night, just before the dawn, he comes to them walking on the sea. They are terrified, thinking it's a ghost, but he tells them not to be afraid. It is him.

And then Peter asked to go out on the water. Now there are a number of details that we've probably already picked up on that trigger associations in our mind. Perhaps we've thought back to the story of the Red Sea crossing, where they walk through the water and it's in the last watch of the night that they are finally delivered.

As the dawn comes, the Egyptians are drowned. Then as that event is recounted later on in scripture, in places like Psalm 77 verse 19, we read things like, your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters, yet your footprints were unseen.

[13:18] You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. So what's taking place here might recall the event of the Red Sea crossing and the Exodus, just as those early references to the feeding in the wilderness might remind us of the manor and other elements of that particular event.

But I think the greatest thing we're supposed to associate this with is the event of Jesus' death and resurrection itself. We've just seen the institutions, as it were, of the Lord's Supper prefigured.

And now we have what comes next, going out into the darkness, struggling in the darkness, and this battering of the winds and the waves, this testing time. And Christ seeming to be gone.

Christ then comes walking on the water. They think it's a ghost as he comes just as the morning watch is about to dawn. And then he greets them, saying not to be afraid that it is him.

[14 : 24] And that will be their response as well when the resurrection occurs. Peter's stepping out onto the waves and coming towards Christ partly anticipates what he will do later on in his ministry to the Gentiles.

How does the death of John the Baptist prefigure the death of Christ as it is told within the Gospel of Matthew?

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