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*Number Symbolism and the Feeding of the  
Four Thousand in the Gospel Matthew*

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**Abstract:** This study argues that the feeding of the 4,000 in Matthew 15:32–39 should be read as a Gentile feeding. There are a number of arguments that support this reading (structurally, geographically, thematically, and OT background), but the most debated aspect is the role of the numbers 4,000 and seven. These numbers have been interpreted symbolically throughout the history of interpretation but in the time of the Reformation an allegorical reading of numbers began to be rejected. The number 4,000 should be understood representing people coming from the four corners of the earth, and seven points to the completion and fulfillment of God’s purposes. By seeing these numbers as symbolic, the argument that this is a Gentile feeding becomes more secure.

Number symbolism in the modern age is generally looked at as passé. To even usher this topic to the surface evokes deep skepticism on the part of biblical scholars although there are a few who have

argued for value in numerology.<sup>1</sup> One positive example comes from François Bovon in his SNTS presidential address. He asserted, “It is my hypothesis that the early Christians used the categories of ‘name’ and ‘number’ as theological tools. Often they consciously interpreted names and numbers in a symbolic way.”<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, distinguishing between numbers with symbolic meaning and numbers used simply to state a calculation is difficult. But to conclude that numerological interest arose only after the composition of the early Christian writings would be a grave blunder.

In this article I will argue that the feeding of the 4,000 in Matt 15 is a Gentile feeding based on five arguments.<sup>3</sup> First, the numbers 4,000 and seven should be interpreted symbolically. Second, the literary structure points towards a Gentile mission in Matthew. Third, the geographical overlay in Matthew conveys such idea. Fourth, this position notes the unique language used by Matthew in the passage. Fifth, the Old Testament allusions to banquets point toward a

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<sup>1</sup> Although some commentaries do mention that it was popular in the patristic period they rarely engage the arguments. There are still modern interpreters who see numbers as symbolic, but it would be fair to say they are in the minority. For an example of a more recent modern interpreter who argues for symbolic numbers see Richard Bauckham, “The 153 Fish and the Unity of the Fourth Gospel,” in *Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: The Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 271–83. Mikeal C. Parsons, “Exegesis ‘By the Numbers’: Numerology and the New Testament,” *PRSt* 35, no. 1 (2008): 25–43. For a slightly different view of numbers, see Labuschagne who argues that counting the words and syllables regularly serve as boundaries by which the text was composed that regulates the words, sentences, and verses. See Casper Labuschagne, *Numerical Secrets of the Bible* (Texas: D. & F. Scott, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> François Bovon, “Names and Numbers in Early Christianity,” *NTS* 47 (2001): 267.

<sup>3</sup> A cursory look at the commentaries appearing in the last decade shows that they are equally divided on the question of the ethnic identity of the four thousand. See J. R. C. Cousland, “The Feeding of the Four Thousand Gentiles in Matthew? Matthew 15:29–39 as a Test Case,” *NovT* 41, no. 1 (1999): 1–23.

worldwide mission. Since the first point is the most debated and least researched, I will spend the majority of time on the topic of number symbolism in light of the history of interpretation of the passage. Various modern interpreters have argued for a Gentile understanding, but few put significant weight on the numbers to argue their case.<sup>4</sup>

On the surface of Matt 15 and the feeding of the 4,000, the numbers (4,000 and seven) look like the calculating type, but the fact that a very similar story (the feeding of the 5,000) occurs in the same Gospel raises the probability that the numbers are symbolic. In addition, Matthew drew special attention to the numbers. He uses the number “seven” in vv. 34, 36, and 37 and the number 4,000 once is direct contrast to the 5,000 just previous in the narrative.

In the following paragraphs I explain how pre-moderns interpreted the numbers in Matthew’s feeding of the 4,000.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, this essay will reveal how they understood numbers as fundamental realities, and not only mathematical quantities, and therefore regularly interpreted them allegorically.<sup>6</sup> Without pretending to be exhaustive, I will cover the major interpreters, stopping to make brief comments about their hermeneutics.

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<sup>4</sup> Here is a list (not complete) of those who think this is a Gentile feeding: Argyle, Bacon, Beare, Blomberg, Bruner, Carson, Davies, Fenton, France, Gaechter, Gundry, Hill, J. Weiss, Klostermann, Lohmeyer/Schmauch, McNeile, Morris, Mounce, Reinecker, Schmid, Schniewind, S. E. Johnson, Tasker, Wilkens, Zahn.

<sup>5</sup> As David Parris says if we are going to learn from the giants of the past then we need to learn to read them sympathetically and not assume that their readings are outdated or ignorant. See David Parris, *Reading the Bible with Giants* (London: Paternoster, 2006), 57.

<sup>6</sup> I will use allegorical, symbolic, and figurative all interchangeably.

## History of Interpretation: A History of Number Symbolism

To begin it is important to outline an overview of the history of number symbolism. A symbol is usually understood in several ways. First, symbols work cognitively to help people understand non-symbolic concepts, ideas, and things. Second, symbols are understood as enhancements or adornments to real life. Symbolic language has rhetorical effect and power to elucidate or make more arresting an idea or concept. With number symbolism both realities are probably at play. The symbolic number would then play a number of roles. It (1) enhances the language, (2) helps one didactically remember, (3) and moderately conceals the concept in dissimilar language.<sup>7</sup> But why would numbers be used as symbols? Like all symbols the power resides in the understatement. Rather than making the point obvious or unambiguous, the author puts a clue in the text for the reader to figure out. As Strunk & White say in their book *Elements of Style*, “It is seldom wise to tell all.” The reader is given enough information to figure it out and use their imagination. Like all symbols, numbers seem to perform the same function.

The history of number symbolism goes back to earliest literature we have.<sup>8</sup> But number symbolism is still generally frowned upon today. As A. M. Farrer says, the study of number-symbolism is generally unpopular for two good reasons, not to mention many that are bad.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Leithart is right to say in an important sense; all language is symbolic because it employs visual symbols or sounds that mean something other than themselves. Even if we put that point to the side, it is still evident that there is a spectrum from less metaphorical to more metaphorical language rather than a clear boundary line. Peter Leithart, “Embracing Ritual: Sacraments as Rites,” *CTJ* 40 (2005): 12.

<sup>8</sup> Hopper says, “Nothing in the history of number symbolism is so striking as the unanimity of all ages and climates in regard to the meanings of certain few number symbols.” Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression* (New York: Cooper Square, 1969), 3.

First, it lends itself easily to rabbinical folly and gnostic extravagance. Second, it has an intrinsic formality or tenuity which unfits it to be the vehicle of substantial doctrine. Both objections must be admitted. But the first only tells us that the interpreter must handle number-symbolism with special caution, prune his fancies and confine himself to what his author contains...(and to the second) it can very well provide the principles of arrangement...It is rash, then, to refuse to consider such numbers...<sup>9</sup>

In ancient times, numbers were regarded not abstractly but concretely. Mathematics slowly encouraged the idea of abstract numbers.<sup>10</sup> If numbers are abstract their objects do not have to be specific, and therefore numbers do not have to be interpreted. Farbridge even says, “primitive man could form no idea of an abstract number. Want of familiarity with the use of numbers...must result in extreme indefiniteness of mental conception, as well as almost entire absence of exactness.”<sup>11</sup> Although Farbridge’s point may be overstated, his point the interpretation of numbers stands.

The earliest known development of an extensive number system is found in ancient Babylon. One also sees evidences of it in the *Creation Epic* (2225–1926 BCE) and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.<sup>12</sup> But it was not until

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<sup>9</sup> Austin Farrer, “Loaves and Thousands,” *JTS* 4 (1953): 1–14.

<sup>10</sup> Of course the Ancients understood numbers in a Mathematical fashion as well, however, the argument here is that this is not the only way they used them. See M. Pope, “Number, Numbering, Numbers,” in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (vol. K-Q; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 561–67.

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Farbridge, *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism* (New York: KTAV, 1970), 88.

<sup>12</sup> See Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 12–21.

Pythagoras (c. 580–500 BCE) that number symbolism received systematic treatment.<sup>13</sup> For Pythagoras, the number was a kind of objective principle from which the whole objective world proceeds. During the intertestamental period, apocalyptic writings employed the numbers 3, 4, 7, 10 and 12, both rhetorically and symbolically.<sup>14</sup> With the rise of the Gnosticism, considerable attention was given to numbers. Augustine is representative of Patristic interpretation of number when he says:

There is a relation of numbers which cannot possibly be impaired or altered, nor can any nature by any amount of violence prevent the number which comes after one from being the double of one. This can in no way be changed; and yet you represent God as changeable!<sup>15</sup>

The middle ages continued the Augustinian understanding of numbers.<sup>16</sup> But in the Renaissance numbers began to be seen as more mathematical, as people began to understand that nature reflected mathematical principles. Therefore modern people have been more wary of number symbolism. Statements such as these follow, “in the Bible itself there is no reference to numerical gematria, or the symbolic use of numbers.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Although Farbridge thinks Pythagoras is indebted to the Babylonians, where numbers played an important part because of their use of musical instruments and building and constructing. See Farbridge, *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism*, 93–94.

<sup>14</sup> See John Davies, *Biblical Numerology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 109–10.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, “On the Morals of the Manichaeans,” in *NPNF*, IV:76.

<sup>16</sup> See Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, 89–135.

<sup>17</sup> Isidore Singer, ed., “Gematria,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnals, 1905), V:589.

Although the summary above was necessarily brief, it situates one in the history of interpretation. It seems fair to say that those who reject the idea of number symbolism are a modern phenomenon and the anomaly, not the other way around. The history of number symbolism goes back to the earliest literature we have. Therefore when we turn to the history of interpretation for Matt 15:32–39 it is not surprising to find those who saw the numbers 4,000 and seven as symbolic. Although not all in the history of interpretation saw the symbolism as pointing to a Gentile feeding this does not necessarily overturn the argument. Like any symbol, there is fluidity in interpretation. Therefore, having more than one explanation does not mean that it is not symbolic, but rather that the symbol was understood differently by different interpreters. Symbols by their nature are more difficult to determine because their meaning is not directly spelled out for us.

### **Patristic**

Virtually all the patristic and many medieval interpreters saw numbers as significant in the Scriptures. This stemmed from the belief that “all nature bespeaks of God. All nature teaches human beings. All nature imparts reason, and there is nothing barren in the universe.”<sup>18</sup> Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315–67/8) is most famously known at the ‘Athanasius of the West,’ because of his involvement in Arian disputes.<sup>19</sup> However, for our purposes his comments on Matthew’s second feeding in 15:32–39 provide an example of a symbolic understanding of numbers. Hilary, without appealing to literary structure or geographic location, but only to the fact that there are different numbers represented in the

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<sup>18</sup> Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalion* 6.5 [PL 176:805].

<sup>19</sup> F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), 769–70.

feedings concludes that this feeding was for Gentiles and not for Jews. The significant passage is as follows:

Previously the faith of the Israelites is portrayed, now the faith of the Gentiles. Indeed, many who are young run to meet [him]. The disciples, feeling pity for those going hungry for some days, wanted to let the 5,000 men go back to buy food in the village, but they remained silent the entire three days. And one after another the greater multitude was spread out on the grass: They reclined on the ground. There fifteen loaves are offered, here seven [loaves]: there the number is two fishes, here [it is] unspecified, yet under the sign of scarcity. There 5,000 men, here 4,000 [men]; there twelve baskets, here seven baskets full. Indeed, I think the answer to be by the greater multitude, and all near to the personality of the people appropriately to be the subject. Now, let us also try to bring the relevancy of the matter and also the reasoning of the cause: just as those Jewish believers corresponded to the common people, so these were compared with the people of the Gentiles.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, for Hilary, the numbers seven and 4,000 alone uncover that this passage is meant to be a feeding of the Gentiles. Hilary proceeds saying:

They brought forward seven loaves of bread. The Gentiles received no salvation from the law and the prophets. However, they live because of the grace of the Spirit whose sevenfold light, as noted by Isaiah, is a gift. Therefore through faith in the Spirit

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<sup>20</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentarius in Matthaëum* [PL 60.9:1006]. My translation.

the Gentiles receive salvation.<sup>21</sup>

and:

As that first multitude which he fed answers to the people among the Jews that believed; so this is compared to the people of the Gentiles, the number of 4,000 denoting an innumerable number of people out of the four quarters of the earth.<sup>22</sup>

Although this might seem antiquarian to us, Hilary is not alone in seeing the significance of these numbers. Chrysostom comes to a different conclusion but also asks, “What the purpose is in the seven baskets?”<sup>23</sup> Origen makes a veiled statement about “the different orders” and how “those who ate of the seven loaves are superior to those who ate of the five which are blessed.”<sup>24</sup> By superior, Origen may be incorporating a special significance to the number seven which was regularly understood as symbolic.<sup>25</sup> Jerome also sees the numbers as symbolic:<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Manilo Simonetti and Thomas Oden, eds., *Matthew 14-28* (ACCS; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 34, 36.

<sup>22</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, “St. Matthew,” in *Commentary on the Four Gospels* (vol. 2; Oxford and London: James Parker and Co., 1874), 2571. Hilary is quoted in his *Catena Aura*.

<sup>23</sup> Saint Chrysostom, “The Gospel of St. Matthew,” in *NPNF*, X:328. He concludes that it is to rouse the recollection by the difference. The disciples by the variation might be able to make a distinction between the two feedings and be reminded of both.

<sup>24</sup> Origen, “Origen’s Commentary on Matthew,” in *ANF*, IX:449.

<sup>25</sup> See Davies, *Biblical Numerology*, 115–19. Also consider, Farbridge, *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism*, 119–40.

<sup>26</sup> Notice that I am using both “Antiochene” and “Alexandrian” interpreters, although this division has been questioned in recent scholarship. See Frances Young,

For these are not five, but four thousand; the number four being one always used in a good sense, and four-sided stone is firm and rocks not, for which reason the Gospel also have been sacredly bestowed in this number. Also in the former miracle, because the people were neighbours unto the five senses, it is the disciples, and not the Lord, that call to mind their condition.<sup>27</sup>

Augustine, who writes a harmony of the Gospels, states nothing about the significance of numbers in relation to this passage. But this can be explained by the fact that he was writing this harmony for apologetic purposes.<sup>28</sup> Although it has been popular to chalk these interpretations up to allegorical nonsense, pre-critical exegetes were not bereft of method but followed a different method of exegesis.<sup>29</sup>

## Medieval

The influential medieval interpreter, Thomas Aquinas, makes similar hermeneutical steps. Aquinas, in his *Catena Aurea* (The Golden Chain), combines comments from earlier interpreters on the gospels with his

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“Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation* (vol. 1: The Ancient Period; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 334–54.

<sup>27</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, “St. Matthew,” in *Commentary on the Four Gospels*, 2:571.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, “Harmony of the Gospels,” in *NPNF*, VI:103. He says he writes in order to explain to those with “perverted inclinations...perverse ways...and who exhibit more curiosity than capacity...and held up (these things) as objections in the spirit of contention.” Therefore, he simply says that both feedings actually took place, because of the differences in details. Later we will see that he was with the contemporaries of his day in seeing numbers as symbolic and significant for interpretation.

<sup>29</sup> See Richard Muller and John Thompson, “The Significance of Precritical Exegesis: Retrospect and Prospect,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 335–45. And John O’Keefe and R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2005).

own interpretation. And although Aquinas does not come to the same conclusion as Hilary, the same type of hermeneutical move is evident. He says:

The seven loaves are the Scripture of the New Testament, in which the grace of the Holy Spirit is revealed and given. And these are not as those former loaves, barley, because it is not with these, as in the Law, where the nutritious substance is wrapped in types, as in a very adhesive husk; here are not two fishes, as under the Law two only were anointed, the King, and the Priest, but a few, that is, the saints of the New Testament, who, snatched from the waves of the world, sustain this tossing sea, and by their example refresh us lest we faint by the way.<sup>30</sup>

What is important to understand is that for medieval interpreters, like the Patristics, the Bible was a special type of literature because it was written by God. Therefore, “in divine literature not only do meanings signify things, those things signify other things.”<sup>31</sup> The Bible not only tells stories but those stories and the minute elements of those stories indicate meanings. Therefore, for Aquinas, the seven pieces of bread signify the seven gifts listed in Isaiah 11.<sup>32</sup> In this passage, the author speaks of the root of Jesse as a signal for the peoples and the nations. As Hopper says, “the medieval mind (was) a web-like structure of abstract ideas and concrete realities so closely interwoven and interdependent that no serious gap was felt to exist between them.”<sup>33</sup> As stated earlier, most patristic and medieval

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<sup>30</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, “St. Matthew,” in *Commentary on the Four Gospels*, 2:572.

<sup>31</sup> Richard of St. Victor, *Speculum Ecclesiae* [PL 177:375]

<sup>32</sup> This was a common interpretative move.

interpreters detected significance in the number change from the first feeding to the second feeding in Matthew.

### **Reformers and Post-Reformers**

With the Reformers and post Reformers one begins to see interpreters who fail to find symbolic significance in the shift of numbers. Most Reformers noticed the switch of the numbers in the feedings, but their explanations generally turn it into some kind of moral lesson. The Reformer's readings can be partially explained by the pastoral aim of most of their writings; their statements tended to be employed for rhetorical effects. But they were also quick to shun "allegorical" interpretations and stuck to a more "historical understanding." Three examples should suffice. Calvin in his *Harmony of the Gospels* says:

Let us learn from this (the difference in numbers) that God is not restricted to means or outward assistance, and that it is all one with Him whether there be much or little, as Jonathan said when speaking of his own moderate army and the vast multitude of enemies: *there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few* (1 Sam. 14:6) as the blessing of God can make one loaf suffice as well as twenty for satisfying a great multitude, so, if that be wanting, a hundred loaves will not be a sufficient meal for ten men; for when *the staff of bread is broken* (Lev 26:26) though the flour should come in full weight from the mill, and the bread from the oven, it will serve no purpose to stuff the belly...The disciples manifest excessive stupidity in not remembering, at least, that earlier proof of the power and grace of Christ, which they might have applied

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<sup>33</sup> Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism*, vii.

to the case in hand.<sup>34</sup>

His solution to the two stories with different details is that God is not restricted by outward means. God is bountiful in his provision, no matter what we provide. In addition Calvin points out the stupidity of the disciples. John Gill similarly takes the numbers as teaching a moral lesson commenting that the seven baskets which were taken up showed they had full return of what was given. For Gill, the number 4,000 shows that this is a distinct miracle.<sup>35</sup>

An example of this from the 19th century is C. H. Spurgeon who taught from this passage that history repeats itself and that what Jesus has done once he can, and will do again should the need arise.<sup>36</sup> Spurgeon was not so concerned about the numbers and the differences in the details; he went straight for the tropological aim of the text. Surely the observations made by Calvin, Gill, and Spurgeon are not wrong, but they reveal an attempt to stick closer to a “historical” understanding of what happened in this passage.

### **Modern**

Since the 1980’s there has been an increased interest in Matthew’s Gospel, and the monographs on Matthew show no signs of slowing down.<sup>37</sup> In fact, I must restrict myself to “hot spots” from modern

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<sup>34</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (trans. William Pringle; vol. II; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 274.

<sup>35</sup> John Gill, *An Exposition of The New Testament* (Atlanta: Turner Lassetter, 1954), 146.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon: Commentary on Matthew* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2010), 303.

<sup>37</sup> See Sean Kealy, *Matthew’s Gospel and the History of Biblical Interpretation (2)* (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1997), 474–80.

interpreters or one will be over-whelmed by the bulk of material. We can divide the interpretation of the feeding of the 4,000 into two categories: (1) those seeing it as doublet; (2) those seeing it as an independent story so that two feedings took place. I will spend more time on those who reject it being a doublet, since these are the interpreters who are more likely to make comments about the interpretation of number symbolism.

First and briefly, since the end of the nineteenth century there has been the idea that these two miracles are the same miracle appearing twice (doublet).<sup>38</sup> The basis for this idea is the similar language, scene, and that the disciples are at a loss just as they were with the previous miracle. For example, in one of the most comprehensive commentaries on Matthew, Davies and Allison reject the notion that the second feeding represents the feeding of the Gentiles:

all speculation as to the symbolic significance of the various numbers is quite uncertain, there is nothing in the unqualified phrase, the sea of Galilee, to indicate Gentile territory, the precise meaning of the different baskets are unknown, the God of Israel phrase is usually found on the lips of Jews.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, they conclude that this is probably a doublet. But their (and others's) explanation of the two feedings as a doublet seems implausible. First there are a number of differences in the story itself: (1) only the second story takes place on a mountain; (2) here the

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<sup>38</sup> H.J. Holtzmann, *Die Synoptischen Evangelien* (Leipzig, 1863), 85. To support his theory he gives the names of Schleiermacher, Schultz, Kern, Credner, Hase, De Wette, Neander, Ewald, Hilgenfeld.

<sup>39</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *Matthew*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1988), 2:564.

initiative lies with Jesus and not the disciples (3) only here in chapter 15 the crowd is said to be with Jesus for three days; (4) the numbers are not the same; (5) the word for baskets is different.<sup>40</sup> Second, as Carson remarks:

Even if one of Mark's or Matthew's readers knew there was only one miraculous feeding, and that of Jews, the point about the Gentiles would be lost and the credibility of the two evangelists impugned...The validity of the theological point depends here on the credibility of the historical record.<sup>41</sup>

Carson's point is that early readers would have been confused by the inclusion of two feeding stories if they knew there was only one. According to Carson, the Gentile feeding only stands as a theological point if the historical record is credible. The third and final argument against the idea that the two feedings are doublets is that both Mark 8:17–19 and Matt 16:9–11 report that Jesus referred to the two feedings as separate events. These two statements stand outside the actual feeding narratives and give one more piece of evidence for multiple feedings in the life of Jesus.

In the second category (two feedings), some support the notion that the two feedings record two different events.<sup>42</sup> Those who incline to this interpretation must explain the theological implications of two

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<sup>40</sup> See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:562–63 for list of differences. Admittedly, the differences do not directly support a different feeding but based on other evidence the differences do make it more likely.

<sup>41</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, EBC vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 407.

<sup>42</sup> Some of the interpreters that I will not discuss who think this way on Mark are, E.P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1896), 140–41., C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London, 1972), 205.

feedings. In other words, why does the author put two very similar feedings in his Gospel? Scholars are split about whether they think this is a Gentile feeding or not, what they are unanimous on is a hesitation to the symbolic nature of the numbers.

N. T. Wright says that nobody has come up with a convincing explanation of what all the numbers might mean, and that there is no reason to suppose that this crowd is either Gentile or in Gentile territory.<sup>43</sup> Therefore he rejects it as a Gentile feeding. Unfortunately, Wright leaves us with no solution at all, and never gives a positive answer for the second feeding.

Similarly, Ben Witherington III writes “it is uncertain whether we should make much of the different numbers involved here.”<sup>44</sup> However, he thinks the second feeding in Mark relates to Gentiles because the geographical location of the feeding on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, but rejects a Gentile feeding in Matthew.

Frederick Bruner concludes that the significance is that Jesus really does care about people’s physical needs. He says the following about the numbers:

Is allegorical exegesis of numbers credible any more? Examples: Do the four thousand point to the four compass points from which the Gentile world comes to Jesus, the seven baskets to the seven “deacons” in the service of Gentiles in Acts 6 or the sevenfold grace of the Holy Spirit, the five thousand the five books of the Torah, the twelve baskets of leftovers the twelve tribes? Though numerology was popular in the early church, we do not feel as comfortable with it today. It is best to stick with the text's plain

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<sup>43</sup> N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone Part 1* (Great Britain: SPCK, 2002), 24.

<sup>44</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 303–5.

meaning.<sup>45</sup>

Grant Osborne concludes that it is a Gentile feeding, but does so hesitantly, and will not say anything conclusively about the numbers.<sup>46</sup> Carson, unlike most modern interpreters, finds it hard to believe that the number of the leftover baskets is symbolic in 14:20 and not here. Therefore, he concludes that the number “may” be significant. He also thinks that the Gentile feeding may explain why the disciples are incredulous again. The disciples may have not been prepared for Jesus to have a messianic banquet prepared for the Gentiles.<sup>47</sup> We could go on for pages discussing modern scholars and their conclusions. However, some concluding comments should be made in regards to modern interpreters.

As stated above, modern scholars can be divided into two camps regarding this passage: 1) those seeing it as doublet; 2) those seeing it as an independent story so that two feedings took place. Scholars who detect a Gentile feeding are still hesitant to come to any conclusions regarding the numbers. One hears a lot of “maybe,” “cannot be proved,” “would be a stretch,” and “possible” language. They are

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<sup>45</sup> Frederick Bruner, *Matthew A Commentary* (vol. 2: The Churchbook Matthew 13–28; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 110.

<sup>46</sup> Osborne writes: “It is likely that the “twelve” in the earlier story, this number is symbolic of the perfect provision of God for his people. It is more of stretch to say with some that “twelve” connotes provision for the Jews and seven connotes provision for the Gentiles. Matthew’s term for baskets here refers to slightly larger baskets woven from rushes.” Osborne then concludes, “The important implicit addition is the extension of these blessings to the Gentiles, not explicit in the text but implicit in setting and possibly in some details (like the term for “baskets”). Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 601–9.

<sup>47</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, 408. See Luz who also questions why the disciples’s non-understanding comes up again since Matthew is not as interested as Mark in portraying the disciples as completely lacking understanding. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 345.

happy to see it as a Gentile feeding, but will not say anything conclusively about the numbers being symbolic.

### **Tracing the History of Interpretation**

The study of the history of interpretation began with Hilary of Poitiers and his conclusion that this feeding was for Gentiles based solely upon the numbers. Other patristic writers also saw significance in the numbers, although they came to different conclusions.<sup>48</sup> The symbolic character of numbers continued in medieval tradition, but the Reformers and their successors no longer saw the numbers as symbolic in the text because of their distrust of allegory. Many modern interpreters influenced by form criticism concluded that this feeding was a doublet. However, a subset of modern interpreters were more prone to see this as a separate feeding and therefore drew out theological significance in the passage. Still, they tend to look at the numbers with suspicion, although some of them also concluded that this was a Gentile feeding.

There seems to be little evidence that the idea of symbolic numbers was ever refuted. Rather, a turn in understanding occurred. Modern scholars are probably wary of some of the conclusions that the pre-moderns drew regarding the symbolic nature of numbers, and therefore have rejected it wholesale. Looked at from this vantage point, it seems that modern scholars may have overreacted to a loose interpretation of numbers and therefore were hesitant to open to the door too far, so that they cast aspersions with words like “maybe” and phrases like “cannot be proven.” And I, as a modern interpreter, am

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<sup>48</sup> Although some might use this as evidence against the fact that numbers are symbolic, I think this is missing the point. Like any symbol, there is fluidity in interpretation. Therefore, having more than one explanation does not mean that it is not symbolic, but rather that the symbol was understood differently by different interpreters.

with them in many cases. Not every number is to be interpreted symbolically. But Hilary of Poitiers has caused me to rethink my misgivings concerning numbers since he bases a Gentile reading solely on the numbers.

### **Gentile Feeding Arguments from Modern Scholars**

The correlations of a Gentile feeding with the symbolic use of both 4,000 and seven are striking, yet the argument for a Gentile feeding does not rest on this evidence alone. At least four other arguments are used by modern scholars to support a Gentile understanding of the passage: (1) the literary structure of the passage, (2) the geographical location, (3) a thematic argument of the use of the phrase “God of Israel,” (4) and finally the Old Testament background. Although modern scholars are not using the numbers as symbolic, they are still coming to the same conclusion as the 4<sup>th</sup> century church father, Hilary of Poitiers. Because these arguments are more widespread, I will spend less time covering each item but provide references for further research.

#### **Literary Structure**

That the feeding of the 4,000 is a Gentile feeding in Matthew is supported by the literary structure. The structural analysis of the entire book of Matthew falls into two camps. Some lay the emphasis upon the repeated phrase Ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς (4:17 and 16:21), the other camp sees Καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς (7:28–29; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1) as the structural markers. This would allow the emphasis to fall upon the alternation between narrative and discourse. Although in this analysis there is no need to decide on a set structure (and surely many outlines are imposed by readers), it is clear from Matthew’s alternation between narrative and discourse that Matthew was

conscious of structure, and did not haphazardly put material together. Rather he organized the book in a way that served his purpose, as a wood-smith fashions a rocking chair. Therefore, interpreters should be asking themselves why a particular passage was placed in a precise place.

With this in mind, Matt 13:53–17:27 can be looked at from a literary perspective. It generally follows the Markan sequence. First Jesus is rejected in his hometown (13:53–58), then John the Baptist is killed by Herod (14:1–12). Jesus feeds the 5,000. Careful readers notice that Jesus feeds the 5000 in a deserted place (ἔρημον τόπον; 14:13) echoing Exodus imagery. He then performs a water-crossing miracle (14:22–33), which seems to confirm the Exodus typology.<sup>49</sup> Jesus heals in Jewish territory (14:34–36) and then the Pharisees and Scribes come from Jerusalem, testing him with questions.

Matthew then has a transition section where he begins to show Jesus' ministry outside of the nation of Israel. This transition comes in 15:1–21 where Jesus explains why he and his disciples break the tradition of the elders. His basic answer is that it is not outward conformity to traditions but inward obedience from the heart that matters. The debate with the Pharisees and teachers of the law clues readers into a turn toward Gentile inclusion. The antagonism towards Jesus by the Jewish leaders propels him into a Gentile mission. The faith of the Canaanite women in the next section confirms this switch (15:21–28). The shift from a Jewish to a Gentile focus is made explicit in two ways. First, unlike Mark (who calls her a Syrophenician woman) Matthew unambiguously calls her a Canaanite, the common OT term

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<sup>49</sup> Every feeding is followed by the water miracle. For a strong argument that the Gospels should be read as echoing much of the OT, see Richard Hays, "The Canonical Matrix of the Gospels," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 53–75.

for Israel's adversaries. Second, Matthew has Jesus affirm that even the crumbs go to the dogs, and it seems from other passages that Jews identified Gentiles as dogs.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, a close literary and structural reading of Matthew 15 indicates a modification of focus.

What is evident from this survey of the landscape of Matthew's narrative is that he has made a conscious alteration from Jesus preaching and ministering to the Jews to ministering to the Gentiles. Many of the same actions are mirrored (such as healings and feedings) but with slight nuances, signaling a change of audience. Hence, scholars who have paid close attention to the progression conclude it is a Gentile feeding.

### **Geography**

The geography of the feeding of the 4,000, although debated, also supports a Gentile feeding. Matthew gives the following details about Jesus' travel itinerary: Jesus, after his dispute with the Pharisees and scribes, withdraws to the district of Tyre and Sidon, which are Gentile territories. He is then approached by a Canaanite woman, and after he heals her Matthew says Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee and goes up on the mountain and sits down there and feeds the people (Matt 15:29). When they had been fed, Jesus got into the boat and went into the region of Magadan.

Although the above summary seems to be stocked with details, Matthew has Jesus moving through these locations in a total of 20 verses. Therefore, in Matt 15, his travel itinerary is actually quite vague. We get more clarity when we compare it with Mark's parallel passage, who gives us more details about Jesus' travels regarding this part of his life than Matthew. The argument is that Matthew does

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<sup>50</sup> See Phil 3:2

indeed follow Mark here, and therefore we can consult Mark to confirm geographical details.<sup>51</sup>

In Mark 7:31, instead of giving the generic Sea of Galilee he makes it more specific and says Jesus went specifically to the region of Decapolis, a Gentile territory. Jesus feeds the 4,000 and then goes to the district of Dalmanutha. So, for Mark Jesus goes north to Tyre and Sidon near the Mediterranean Sea, and then south-east to the Decapolis on the Sea of Galilee. What is important is that what Matthew leaves out in no way contradicts Mark. Rather, he seems to be following Mark, but leaving out specific details.<sup>52</sup> Why would he leave out such details? This is question I am not sure Matthew even considered. He probably thought that those reading his gospel would understand where Jesus was without giving specific details, and therefore left out unnecessary details.<sup>53</sup> Contra to Cousland, I think it makes most sense to understand Matthew as following Mark's itinerary here.<sup>54</sup> While there is still some debate about why Matthew omitted some of Mark's itinerary just prior to these episodes,<sup>55</sup> it is most likely, though not conclusive, that this

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<sup>51</sup> I do not presume to think that this is something that Matthew intended interpreters to do, but we can learn from it.

<sup>52</sup> McGown asserts that Matthew makes changes almost always by omission in C. C. McGown, "Gospel Geography: Fiction, Fact, and Truth," *Gospel Geography* no. 60 (1941): 13.

<sup>53</sup> Although if Matthew is read without benefit of Mark, there is nothing to suggest that Jesus proceeds through Gentile territory from Tyre and Sidon. The most straightforward route to the Sea of Galilee is through Galilee.

<sup>54</sup> Cousland, "The Feeding of the Four Thousand Gentiles," 8. Cousland says that argument will only work if Matthew conforms "slavishly" to the itinerary as it is presented in Mark. But this is framing the question in a negative light. Positively, Matthew uses Mark's material and puts difference nuances on some of the pericopes. I think because Matthew and Mark present this material in similar order, it is more likely that Matthew follows Mark here.

<sup>55</sup> Cousland said he changes the itinerary, but it makes more sense to say that he omits Bethsaida in the feeding of 5,000.

feeding was done in Gentile territory, on the southeast side of the Sea of Galilee in the Decapolis.

### **Thematic**

Because the feeding passage is so debated, it is difficult to come up with an argument for it being a Gentile feeding without significant disagreement. And that is the case with the phrase “God of Israel” (τὸν θεὸν Ἰσραήλ) in Matt 15:31. This phrase comes in the middle of the narrative about the feeding of the 4,000. Davies and Allison note that this phrase is cited in the Jewish Scriptures regularly,<sup>56</sup> and in all these texts the phrase is on the lips of Jews.<sup>57</sup> Cousland says that “Israel” appears rarely in Greek and Roman authors.<sup>58</sup> Instead, he asserts that the people of Israel were usually referred to as Jews both by pagans and themselves.<sup>59</sup> Cousland goes on to argue that this is the strongest evidence that Matthew used a deliberate Hebraism to suggest that Jesus’ healings and feeding are seen as an aspect of Yahweh’s covenantal care for his people. In sum, many take this as a phrase that only Jews would utter and therefore conclude this is not a Gentile feeding.

But France rightly turns this argument on its head. He responds saying this is Matthew’s summary as to what the crowd said, not necessarily their chosen vocabulary.<sup>60</sup> It seems that Cousland and

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<sup>56</sup> Exod 5:1; 1 Kgs 1:48; 1 Chr 16:36; Ps 41:13; 59:5; 68:35; 69:6; 72:18; 106:48; Is 29:23; Luke 1:68.

<sup>57</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:569.

<sup>58</sup> Cousland, “The Feeding of the Four Thousand Gentiles,” 15.

<sup>59</sup> Cousland, “The Feeding of the Four Thousand Gentiles,” 17.

<sup>60</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 597n6. In addition when the term occurs in the OT it is used by Israelites in the full

others are the ones reading this phrase a little too woodenly. Matthew, as an editor, has deliberately added this to give a clue of what he is doing with his narrative. The Gentiles are praising the God of Israel, the one they thought was far off for them but now is near. This does not mean that the crowd did not say something similar to this, but maybe not the exact phrase. It is the *ipssima vox* not the *ipssima verba* of the people. Matthew, as the editor and writer of this material, is cueing his readers to conclude that these are Gentiles by using a unique phrase highlighting the contrast between Israel and the rest of the world.

### Old Testament Background

The final argument for this being a Gentile feeding concerns the OT background to the feeding. Although Matthew does not explicitly allude to the OT there are several passages that speak of a feeding for all people. One of the more prominent passages in regard to mountain feeding is Isa 25:6–10.<sup>61</sup> Isaiah has previously painted a picture of judgment on the nations (Isa 24:21–23), but in the midst of judgment, or even after the judgment, he spreads a banquet on the mountain where he makes a feast for “all peoples” (לכל־העמים).<sup>62</sup> This tradition of a feast for all peoples is likely picked up by Matthew, who has used Isaiah consistently through his Gospel. YHWH swallows up the covering, the veil that is cast over all peoples, over all nations (כל־הגוים). And the feast is abundant, with rich food and well-aged wine,

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sense “Yahweh God of Israel.” But in Exod 5:1 it is simply “God of Israel” to identify Israel’s God to a non-Israelite audience.

<sup>61</sup> Other significant mountain feeding passages are Jer 31:10–14 and Ezek 34:14, 26f.

<sup>62</sup> See Terence Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* (England: JSOT Press, 1985), 129.

just as the abundance in Matt 15 overflows into seven extra baskets. Jer 31:10–14 also speaks of the nations coming to a great banquet. YHWH tells the “nations” and those “far away” that they will be “radiant” (נהר) over the grain, the wine, the oil and they will languish no more. There is also the passage in 2 Kings 4:42–44 where Baal-shalishah brings Elisha loaves of barley and ears of grain and although it does not seem like it will be enough, Elisha tells them that the Lord will provide and they will have some left.

In all three passages there is the common theme of a banquet and those outside the people of God coming to eat from this banquet. In the OT, YHWH shows his people that he is inviting *all peoples* to come to him. In Matthew Jesus comes as the fulfillment of this messianic feast where all nations are gathered before him on the mountain. On the mountain he provides for Jews and Gentiles alike. If Matt 15 parallels these passages, then the disciples’ incredulity at the feeding does not seem so odd. Although they may have known the OT promises they are regularly surprised in the Gospels at Jesus’ actions. They are astounded, and cannot believe that Jesus invites Gentiles to share with them in the covenant promises.

### **Tying it Together**

Taken separately these five arguments may not seem conclusive, but taken together they provide a thesis to be considered. Throughout church history the numbers in this passage have been interpreted symbolically. Matthew has also made the shift structurally, geographically, and even thematically in his gospel. There is also OT precedent for Yahweh having a messianic banquet for all nations. Added to all this is the nagging question of why both Matthew and Mark would provide two feedings with only minor differences, in such

close proximity. Therefore it makes the most sense to see this as a Gentile feeding.

### Conclusion

Interpreting the numbers 4,000 and seven symbolically provide further support that Matthew's narrative of the feeding of the 4,000 points toward a Gentile feeding. The seven loaves and seven baskets point to the completion and fulfillment of God's purposes, which is a common theme in Matthew.<sup>63</sup> Jesus was inviting a Gentile crowd to participate in a messianic banquet with him, which can explain the disciple's lack of understanding a second time. The 4,000 is symbolic for people coming from the four corners of the earth. He is inviting all to come sit and dine with him, not only the people of Abraham. This theme has been hinted at even in the genealogy and is reiterated when Jesus sends them out into the entire world in the Great Commission. This does not mean that these numbers are non-historical; symbolic does not equal *a*-historical. Both the numbers four and seven were used symbolically in Semitic and other literature. Four came to mean completeness because of its symbolism of the four corners of the earth. The OT speaks this way of the earth. Ezek 37:9 says to the wind, "*Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.*" Job 9:9 mentions the same type of idea.<sup>64</sup> These passages make sense

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<sup>63</sup> See J. R. Daniel Kirk, "Conceptualizing Fulfillment in Matthew," *TynBul* 59, no. 1 (2008): 77–98. Robert Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew's Gospel: With Special Reference to the Messianic Hope* Supplements to Novum Testamentum 18 (Leiden: Brill, 1967). Krister Stendahl, *The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968). Graham Stanton, "Matthew's Use of the Old Testament," in *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 346–63.

<sup>64</sup> For other interesting uses of four in the Bible see Is 11:2; Jer 15:3; 49:36; Ezek 1; 10; Zech 2:6; Rev 7:1, 9:13–15 and many others.

when one understands that the Hebrews viewed the earth as a disc surrounded by water, with heaven arching over it. The four corners of the earth correspond to the four corners of heaven (Dan. 7:2). The Babylonians also saw significance to the number four in relation to the earth. They divided the world into four quarters.<sup>65</sup> To the Greeks the world was made up of four elements: water, air, earth, and fire. Needless to say there is strong historical evidence for understanding the number four as symbolic for the entire earth.

The number seven has a similar history and may have an even clearer biblical symbolism.<sup>66</sup> It appears in Sumerian epic tales and myths, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in a Hittite document, in Ugaritic mythology, and repeatedly in the OT. It is used in a historical sense, a ritualistic sense, and apocalyptic sense. It is generally agreed that seven denotes completeness or perfection. L. A. Muirhead said:

In regard to 7, the ritual arrangements found in the Pentateuch would alone warrant the conclusion that this number was regarded as in some sense sacred. If we read that God blessed the 7<sup>th</sup> day and sanctified it, and find that peculiar religious observances or customs with a religious basis attached, not only to the 7<sup>th</sup> day, but to the 7<sup>th</sup> month, the 7<sup>th</sup> year, and the 7 x 7<sup>th</sup> year, we seem warranted in saying that, among the people of the Bible, 7 represents a mystic cycle of work and rest, within which God both accomplishes His purpose in the universe and

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<sup>65</sup> Farbridge says “the Zikkurat or temple tower was quadrilateral, with the four corners towards the four cardinal points to symbolize the four quarters over which the Babylonian kings held dominion.” See Farbridge, *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism*, 116n1. See Parsons for a good overview of all the sevens in the Scripture. Parsons, “Exegesis ‘By the Numbers,’” 27–30.

<sup>66</sup> See Davies, *Biblical Numerology*, 115–22.

cooperates with sanctified men.<sup>67</sup>

Therefore, it was generally understood that seven was symbolic. Although the entire argument for a Gentile feeding may seem somewhat circular and unconvincing when taken separately, taken all together it seems worth considering. As we have seen, it is intrinsically possible that the numbers be assigned symbolic significance, and this interpretation is accounted for in the history of interpretation. Therefore, although moderns have been wary of assigning meaning to the numbers in this passage, it has prevented a more convincing view of this passage. When Jesus feeds the 4,000 and then the disciples collect seven baskets, Matthew is indicating this is a Gentile feeding in fulfillment of the OT promises.

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<sup>67</sup> L. A. Muirhead, "Numbers," in *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), 92.