

FEEDING 5,000 IN THE SLUMS OF BETHSAIDA
(LUKE 9.10-17)

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This chapter juxtaposes Luke’s version of the miraculous feeding of 5,000 men¹ against the socio-economic changes taking place in Palestine in the lead up to the initial organizing of the early Jesus movement. It considers the likely environmental impacts of Herodian building projects, and the disruptions caused to established life patterns, both human and more-than-human, that would have taken place as a consequence. Specifically, I argue that the socio-economic and environmental upheavals around the Sea of Galilee during the early decades of the first century CE generated a perception—if not a lived experience—of food insecurity among non-elite human populations. This milieu of economic hardship and environmental exploitation forms the immediate material backdrop to Jesus’s miraculous multiplication of loaves and fishes and should facilitate the critical reader to generate new meanings and meaning effects with the biblical text.

Adopting a historical materialist lens,² my analysis is further enhanced by an exploration of ‘habitat’. Elaine Wainwright’s important work on the

1. Luke retains Mark’s emphasis on ‘men’ (ἄνδρες) rather than ‘people’ (ἄνθρωποι). Only Matthew adds ‘besides women and children’, thereby increasing the total number of people fed. Some scholars have suggested that, while women and children are rendered invisible by Luke, we can presume they were ‘present and active’ in the story, as in Matthew’s Gospel. See, e.g., Barbara E. Reid and Shelly Matthews, *Luke 1–9* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), p. 280. However, the androcentric focus, in addition to Jesus’s instructions for the men to ‘sit down in companies of about 50 each’ (Lk. 9.14), may also have militaristic overtones of Jesus feeding an army of (male) soldiers, thereby giving the story a completely different twist. See Hugh Montefiore, ‘Revolt in the Desert? (Mark VI.30ff.)’, *NTS* 8 (1962), pp. 135-41. Reference to a ‘crowd’ (ὄχλος), which appears in Lk. 9.12 and in v. 11 in plural form, carried strong political connotations in Graeco-Roman and Jewish usage. The LXX often explicitly connects the term to military affairs (e.g. Isa. 43.17; Ezek. 16.14; 17.17; 23.24, 46, 47; Dan. 11.13, 25, 43). See further Robert J. Myles, ‘Crowds and Power in the Early Palestinian Tradition’, *JSHJ* 18 (2020), pp. 124-40 (130).

2. Historical materialist approaches typically frame phenomena in terms of

Gospel of Matthew in particular has helpfully introduced the analytic of ‘habitat’ to ecological biblical interpretation. Habitat refers to ‘the dynamic context and contextualizing of interrelationship/s between the material, temporal, spatial and social’ such that materiality is ‘inextricably linked to sociality’.³ It is a much broader concept than *setting* or even *context*, given its focus on interconnectedness, albeit in my understanding it also fruitfully draws on these adjacent categories. Thus, within a narrative framework, setting generally denotes ‘the background against which the narrative action takes place’, ‘contributes to the mood of the narrative’ and ‘highlight[s] the religious, moral, social, emotional, and spiritual values of the characters’.⁴ These factors will be important for interpreting the feeding of the 5,000 in light of rapidly changing habitats, as we shall observe below.

The path of navigation is as follows: I begin by introducing historical and material changes that were taking place in Palestine through the early decades of the first century CE, assessing their socio-economic as well as environmental impact. This leads me to a discussion of Luke’s unique description of the narrative setting of the feeding of the 5,000 as occurring simultaneously within ‘a deserted place’ (v. 12) and ‘a city called Bethsaida’ (v. 10). In unpacking this tension, I suggest the ‘desolate’ habitat of the urbanized Bethsaida—in which hungry crowds are required to draw on the material resources of the surrounding fields and villages in order to satisfy human needs—exposes not only the damaging cycle of economic and environmental exploitation by this newly raised *polis*, but also the inherent contradiction of a *polis*, which cannot adequately provide for its own mass of inhabitants. I suggest this contradiction is resolved ideologically in the text via Jesus’s miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes, in which he provides an abundance of food without depleting natural resources from the surrounding fields or marine environment. From an ecological perspective, however, this ‘utopian’ solution is left wanting, for it problematically infers that it is only through divine intervention, rather than a tectonic shift in mode of production, that economic and environmental problems can be overcome in the longer term.

longer-term material and technological changes leading from one mode of production to another, i.e. feudalism to capitalism or, in my case, agrarianism to feudalism. Marxist and ecological approaches do not always sit comfortably together. For the complexities and possible resolutions, see Jonathan Hughes, *Ecology and Historical Materialism* (Studies in Marxism and Social Theory; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

3. Elaine M. Wainwright, *Habitat, Human, and Holy: An Eco-Rhetorical Reading of the Gospel of Matthew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2017), pp. 21-22.

4. James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 87-88; cf. Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 69-83.

*The Early Jesus Movement and Feeding 5,000
in an Agrarian Context*

From a historical materialist perspective, the prominent ideas, perceptions and activities of the early Jesus movement can be explained in part as a reaction to the socio-economic upheavals and class conflicts in Palestine during the early decades of the first century CE.⁵ These conflicts involved not only the dynamic shifts and rhythms that characterize the agrarian mode of production generally but also the intrusion of considerable disruptions to the normal functioning of daily life.

The basic outline of this social formation should be familiar to most biblical scholars, but I here briefly rehash it for the benefit of those who are not: within pre-feudal and agrarian societies, the smaller propertied class, by virtue of its control of the means of production, appropriated surplus off the larger class group made up of those who mostly worked the land and water. Exploitation usually took its form in unfree labour (including slavery, serfdom and debt bondage), as well as in the form of taxes and tribute, and the letting of land and house property to leasehold tenants in return for rent paid either in money, kind or services.⁶ In the ordinary workings of the world, resources were produced and consumed unevenly, leaving many to go without. In the Roman world in particular, vast inequalities of wealth and power meant that, for many people, procuring adequate nutrition and drinkable water was a daily challenge. Food security was a recurring problem affecting both urban and rural populations.⁷

Anxieties over hunger in Palestine were deemed important enough by the early Jesus movement to warrant frequent and repeated attention. This includes parallel Matthaean and Lukan sayings concerning food insecurity, which, if deemed to derive from *Q*, would go back to a time much earlier in the emerging Palestinian tradition (e.g. Mt. 5.6//Lk. 6.21; Mt. 6.11//Lk. 11.4; Mt. 6.25//Lk. 12.22-23). Jesus's famous miracle of the feeding of 5,000 also appears in all four Gospels (Mt. 14.13-21//Mk 6.32-44//Lk. 9.10-17//Jn 6.1-15), and Matthew and Mark additionally include the feeding of 4,000 (Mt. 15.32-39//Mk 8.1-9). In all six versions, Jesus multiplies a small

5. See James Crossley and Robert J. Myles, *Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2023).

6. See further G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981); Roland Boer and Christina Petterson, *Time of Troubles: A New Economic Framework for Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).

7. See further Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Peter Garnsey, *Cities, Peasants and Food in Classical Antiquity: Essays in Social and Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

number of fish and loaves in abundance to satisfy the hunger of a crowd. As we will see, Luke, who probably finalized their Gospel toward either the end of the first century or early in the second, preserves, distorts and embellishes earlier material in various, sometimes contradictory, ways. However, it appears a kernel of the feeding miracle goes back much earlier in the life of the Jesus movement. Luke's source in Mk 6.30-44 itself appears to be based on an earlier Palestinian tradition written in a Semitic language before being later translated into Greek.⁸

*Historical Materialist and Environmental Impacts
of Herodian Urbanization*

The major economic drivers in Galilee during the reign of Herod Antipas (4 BCE–39 CE)—beyond the usual patterns of agrarian production of the land and water that sustained local populations (or not)—included a small number of sizable building projects. This was part of a broader and longstanding pattern in Herodian Palestine under a policy of Roman imperial development which attempted to bring these habitats into the empire's orbit in order to appropriate its surplus more efficiently through such mechanisms as tribute, taxes, rents and loans. Antipas's father, Herod the Great, was well known for inaugurating several building projects in Judea, most notably the refurbishment of the Jerusalem Temple, the construction of fortresses, and the founding of the *polis* of Caesarea Maritima. Antipas himself, following in his father's footsteps, sponsored at least two major urbanization projects in Galilee as Jesus was growing up there: the rebuilding of Sepphoris and the building of Tiberias.

Sepphoris had been destroyed by the Romans in 4 BCE during the turmoil surrounding Herod the Great's death. After he became tetrarch, Antipas had the city rebuilt and refortified to the extent that Josephus could later refer to it as 'the ornament of all Galilee' (*Ant.* 18.27). Sepphoris served as Antipas's capital until some years later when he founded the even grander city of Tiberias on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Tiberias was completed around 20 CE and named in honour of the Roman emperor Tiberius (*Ant.* 18.35-6). As Jonathan L. Reed notes, 'No area of Galilee lies outside a 25-km radius of these new urban centers'.⁹ Accordingly, through the construction of these two cities, Antipas was able to extend his strategic and administrative influence over the entirety of Galilee, incorporating previ-

8. See Roger David Aus, *Feeding the Five Thousand: Studies in the Judaic Background of Mark 6:30-44 Par. and John 6:1-15* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010).

9. Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-Examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2000), p. 96.

ously self-sustaining and independent villages and towns into a more tightly integrated imperial economy.

The development of these cities obviously came at a cost. From a class perspective, that cost was disproportionately borne by the non-elite human population. Sepphoris, for instance, had complete dependence on the countryside for agricultural goods, which it was incapable of producing itself. This placed additional demands on local producers: surrounding villages (like Nazareth) would have to contribute additional labour-power to sustain it. Surplus could be expropriated ‘through outright seizure, forced services, taxes, rents, interest on loans, or fees for various services offered by the cities, including market and exchange services’.¹⁰ Similar inequitable dynamics between city and countryside structured the flow of resources and wealth in Tiberias. These urban settlements functioned as concentration points for the upward flow of wealth and resources.

From an ecological perspective, the environmental cost of these building projects should not be underestimated. While the productive technologies of earlier social formations like agrarianism are arguably less damaging to the environment than under capitalism—especially given capitalism’s perpetual drive toward accumulation, self-expansion and exponential growth—moves toward urbanization in the Hellenistic and Roman periods clearly involved an intensification of the productive forces, nonetheless. Indeed, Antipas’s large-scale urbanization efforts in Galilee are only comprehensible in terms of the depletion of natural resources. The need for raw materials for the ornamentation of Sepphoris and construction of Tiberias were, of course, mined or harvested from deposits in the surrounding countryside. With the development of the water system, including from the time of Antipas, Sepphoris also dominated water resources in the area.¹¹ Forests and wildlife had to be cleared and land reallocated to make way for the changes. As the trees were hacked to death, animals, birds and insects lost their habitats. Josephus’s chilling account of the building of Tiberias explicitly refers to the forced and violent displacements that took place as a consequence; he remarks that the new settlers, many of whom were Galilaeans and poor, were ‘by compulsion and with violent force’ relocated to this new city to be its inhabitants (*Ant.* 18.36-38). Although Josephus’s comments were intended to apply only to human inhabitants, we can extend them to include more-than-human inhabitants who were also undoubtedly caught up in these upheavals when they were forcefully moved or killed to clear the path for Herodian progress and development.

10. William E. Arnal, *Jesus and the Village Scribes: Galilean Conflicts and the Setting of Q* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 147.

11. Sean Freyne, *Jesus: A Jewish Galilean* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), pp. 46-47.

In addition to harvesting mineral deposits, depleting forests and displacing wildlife, the urbanization of Galilee also led to longer-term structural changes to natural ecosystems around the region. Given the proximity of Tiberias to the lakeshore of the Sea of Galilee, for example, the impact on the marine environment was likely considerable. Waste produced by the city's large influx of inhabitants would have leached into the soil and the lake, resulting in changes to marine biodiversity. For millennia, fishing on the lake had been a largely local, self-reliant and seasonal affair. The founding of a major urban settlement like Tiberias suddenly enabled better-connected elites to dominate the lake economy and its ecosystems. This would have placed additional demands on local fishermen in small villages like Capernaum through the strategic installation of tax farmers like Levi, and led to an overall rise in extractive activity.¹² This increase in production introduced new environmental imbalances, possibly contributing to the depletion of the lake's fish supply. Although speculative, we might see hints of overfishing in Luke's account of the miraculous catch of fish (Lk. 5.1-11), wherein the fishermen disciples are said to have 'worked all night but have caught nothing' (v. 5).

All in all, the material world was significantly altered by these Herodian building projects. Human-driven changes to local habitats transformed both the 'social' (that is interconnections within the human community) and 'sociality' (as the web of interconnections between humanity and the more-than-human) of the Galilaean landscape, including around the Sea of Galilee where the early Jesus movement initially began to organize their millenarian response to Herodian and Roman power.

Habitats of Jesus's Miraculous Feeding in Luke

When people respond to shifts in material forces, whether consciously or not, they do so by using cultural (including religious) language and symbols to communicate those responses. As a Jewish social and religious move-

12. Recent excavations in Tarichaea (sometimes identified as 'Magdala') have also uncovered a sizeable harbour complex and several fish processing workshops from the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The Greek word Tarichaea literally means 'pickled fish', gesturing to the large-scale fishing operations and processing work that was situated there. At the time of the early Jesus movement in the late 20s CE, the settlement would have been a thriving hub of activity, second only to Tiberias. See further Robert J. Myles, 'Fishing for Entrepreneurs in the Sea of Galilee? Unmasking Neoliberal Ideology in Biblical Interpretation', in Robert J. Myles (ed.), *Class Struggle in the New Testament* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), pp. 115-38; Richard Bauckham, 'Magdala and the Fishing Industry', in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *Magdala of Galilee: A Jewish City in the Hellenistic and Roman Period* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), pp. 185-268.

ment, the early Jesus movement had access to a substantial repository of cultural knowledge and traditions through which they could interpret their changing world and construct a compelling narrative of a loyal God who intervenes in human history, sometimes through intermediary agents and messianic figures. Indeed, the theme of God coming to the aid of Israel and meeting basic material needs is attested through the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Exod. 16.4; Ps. 68.5-6). This theme was taken up and developed in its own way by the Gospels, such as in the key petition in the Lord's Prayer to 'give us this day our daily bread' (Mt. 6.11//Lk. 11.4//*Did.* 8.2), as well as the feeding miracles, the miraculous catches of fish (Lk. 5.1-11//Jn 21.1-14) and the widespread provision of healthcare. Stories like these provided hope and reassurance to those suffering under the changes instigated by Herodian building programmes, that no matter how much their material world was changing, God would ultimately intervene to take care of his loyal subjects.

The 'Polis' of Bethsaida

Luke's account of the feeding of the 5,000 uniquely takes place in 'a city called Bethsaida' (Lk. 9.10). Quite why Jesus 'slips quietly into' Bethsaida is not explained by the Lukan text. Commentators sometimes set aside the detail as a remnant of the author's underlying Markan source, which has the disciples travel by boat to Bethsaida immediately following the parallel episode (Mk 6.45).¹³ According to Barbara E. Reid and Shelly Matthews, 'the Lukan literary context suggests that Jesus wants to escape Antipas ([Lk.] 9.7-9) by going into the territory ruled by Philip, another of Herod the Great's sons'.¹⁴ Indeed, immediately before this pericope, Antipas had expressed a chilling desire to 'see' Jesus for himself upon hearing about 'all that had taken place' (v. 7). This meeting will ultimately take place during Jesus's trial before Herod Antipas, an encounter unique to Luke (23.6-12).

Bethsaida literally means 'house of the fisherman' and, according to Jn 1.44, was the original homeplace of three of Jesus's male disciples, including the fishermen brothers Simon and Andrew.¹⁵ Located on the north shore

13. Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn, 'Bethsaida in the Gospels: The Feeding Story in Luke 9 and the Q Saying in Luke 10', in Rami Arav and Richard A. Freund (eds.), *Bethsaida: A City by the North Shore of the Sea of Galilee* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 1995), I, pp. 247-48; Michael D. Goulder, *Luke* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), p. 433; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 765.

14. Reid and Matthews, *Luke 1-9*, p. 279. Other commentators obfuscate these political drivers behind the withdrawal. For example, Fitzmyer writes, 'Jesus is depicted retiring to Bethsaida for seclusion, as v. 10b suggests, not to avoid an "encounter" with Herod' (*Luke I-IX*, p. 766).

15. See further Sean Freyne, 'The Fisherman from Bethsaida', in Helen K. Bond

of the Sea of Galilee, the settlement fell outside the territory of Galilee¹⁶ and was instead within the region of Gaulanitis in the tetrarchy of Philip, who ruled the region from shortly after Herod the Great's death in 4 BCE until 34 CE. Like both his father and brother, Philip is remembered for instigating a building programme during his long tenure. Not only did he re-found the city of Pnias in 2 BCE, renaming it Caesarea after the Roman emperor and making it his strategic capital,¹⁷ but, according to Josephus, Philip also raised the small fishing village of Bethsaida into the status of a city (πόλις), increased its population considerably, strengthened its fortifications and renamed it 'Julias' after Augustus's daughter, Julia, in homage to the Roman power that lay behind his own (*Ant.* 18.28).¹⁸

Exactly when this urbanization of Bethsaida took place is not clear. If Josephus's tradition about renaming is accurate, then it presumably took place early, specifically, before Julia was exiled in 2 BCE (*Ant.* 18.27-28). However, the more likely option is that Josephus got the details wrong, and that the city was named after Livia, Augustus's wife, whose name was changed to Julia Augusta in 14 CE and who died in 29 CE. This would mean that Philip renamed Bethsaida after the mother of Emperor Tiberias in around 30 CE. Hence, the city probably would have been under construction during the late 20s CE when the early Jesus movement was initially organizing.

In any case, similar socio-economic and environmental changes would have occurred in Bethsaida as had taken place in Galilee, albeit the level of urbanization appears to have been on a smaller scale when compared to the significant development at Tiberias.¹⁹ Nevertheless, land would have had to be deforested or razed in the surrounding areas to make room for agriculture and animal grazing, the need for raw materials for the construction of new buildings and fortifications would have had to be mined and transported, and an overall increase in productive and extractive activity would have put further strain on natural resources and especially the marine environment. Frequent reports of lake crossings in the Gospels (e.g. Mk 4.35-36; 5.1, 2; 6.45, 53) also attest to the interconnectedness of these various lakeside settlements. The integration of the lake and its surroundings into the wider Roman imperial network facilitated the ease of fish exports (such as *garum* or fermented fish paste) to service wealthy connoisseurs in the various cities

and Larry W. Hurtado (eds.), *Peter in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 19-29.

16. See Jn 12.21, where the author erroneously locates Bethsaida in Galilee.

17. Jesus travels through the villages surrounding this city in Mk 8.27 (cf. Mt. 16.13) where it is referred to as 'Caesarea Philippi' (lit. 'Philip's Caesarea').

18. It is not clear why Luke retains the name 'Bethsaida'.

19. This is true of either of the major contenders for the archaeological sites of biblical Bethsaida, namely Et-Tell or Al-Araj.

of the empire. The construction of Bethsaida would have thus generated increased economic activity on the lake. Although the Gospel of John is not generally to be relied upon for historical detail, it has been suggested by at least one scholar that the upheaval of the fishermen brothers from their original homeplace in Bethsaida (Jn 1.44) to the quieter and rustic Capernaum (cf. Mk 1.21) could have been related to these increased demands of the Herodian political-economic expansion around the lake.²⁰

Crucially, increased extractive activity combined with rapid population growth as a consequence of raising Bethsaida to a *polis* would have placed additional demands on local resources, especially the production of food. The famished crowds presupposed by Luke's account of the feeding of the 5,000 should be therefore understood as a human-made catastrophe: a consequence of poor urban planning, increased production for export, unsustainable changes to natural ecosystems and the foreseeable gap between a finite level of resources and the ballooning appetite of a rapidly growing human population.

'A Deserted Place', or the 'Slums' of Bethsaida

Luke offers a secondary—possibly ironic—habitat for the feeding of the 5,000 that appears to contradict the first. In setting up Jesus's miracle, the Twelve approach Jesus and (sarcastically?) declare, 'we are in a deserted place [ὄδε ἐν ἐρήμῳ τόπῳ ἐσμέν]' (Lk. 9.12). In his ecological commentary, Michael Trainor highlights this geographical tension and the interpretive questions it raises:

Is this a reflection of Luke's urban auditors? Is their Greco-Roman urban experience like being in a desert wilderness? Or is the need of Luke's urbanites to come into the wilderness, a characteristic withdrawal that Jesus has in his communion with God in this natural environment?²¹

While some commentators attempt to soften this apparent contradiction by suggesting that Jesus's movement 'to' (εἰς) Bethsaida was more of a 'direction ... than the destination',²² I prefer to tease out the hard implications in terms of the meaning effects it potentially generates, albeit I take a different route from Trainor who ultimately explains the urban-wilderness tension as

20. Fred Strickert, 'The Founding of the City of Julias by the Tetrarch Philip in 30 CE', *JJS* 61 (2010), pp. 220-33 (225).

21. Michael Trainor, *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to the Gospel of Luke* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), p. 158.

22. François Bovon, *Luke* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 354.

another hangover from Luke's Markan source re-contextualized for Luke's urban auditors.²³

In the context of food production and consumption, the 'deserted' habitat elicits multiple associations. On the one hand, for instance, the Greek noun ἔρημος (wilderness, desert) obviously evokes for the biblically literate reader associations with Israel's desert sojourn and, in the context of feeding miracles, manna falling from heaven (Exod. 16.22).²⁴ It is, accordingly, an appropriate habitat for God to come to people's aid in their time of need.

On the other hand, the desert imagery possibly evokes a deforested landscape. Whereas trees and natural vegetation protect water and soil quality and replenish water supplies, from an agrarian economic perspective, the desert features as a kind of 'third-space', outside the formal cycles of production and consumption. Within a spatial analysis of the ancient economy, for instance, a parasitic urban-rural relation largely took place between the *polis* and *chôra*: the *chôra* here refers to the productive countryside with its rural villages and fields supplying food and resources to the *polis*, or urban environment, in order to sustain it.²⁵ From the anthropocentric perspective of the *polis*, then, the desert or wilderness falls beyond the hinterland deemed to be economically productive and valuable.

If taken in an ironic sense, then, the Twelve appear to appropriate this latter connotation of the desert and turn it on its head: the 'city called Bethsaida' is, in fact, 'a deserted place'! It is incapable of providing sufficient nourishment to its newly assembled mass of inhabitants. Instead, the proposed solution of the Twelve is to have the crowd dispersed, 'so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions ...' (v. 12). In other words, to resort to the parasitic urban-rural relation where the resources of the *polis* are appropriated from the *chôra*. But this response only further entrenches agrarian imbalances and lacks hospitality so apparently it will not do. Accordingly, Jesus replies in v. 13 that, instead, the Twelve should themselves give the crowd something to eat. However, they retort: 'We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people'. Their monetary response assumes a level of commodification of food and an alienation

23. Trainor writes the 'urban-rural-wilderness tension is the result of Luke maintaining the wilderness location from the original Markan intertext while placing it explicitly within an urban setting more relevant to the gospel auditors' (*About Earth's Child*, p. 158). What I find insufficient about this explanation is that Mark also had predominantly urban auditors, especially if we take Mark's traditional association with Rome into account.

24. Morna Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (London: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 165.

25. Boer and Petterson, *Time of Troubles*, pp. 81-85.

from nature associated with urban habitats in which fish can now only be purchased and not caught and bread only bought and not baked.²⁶

My own way of understanding this contradiction of a *polis* that is simultaneously ‘a deserted place’ is to imagine the gritty underside of Herodian urbanization: the newly created ‘slums’ of Bethsaida. The metaphor of slums readily calls to mind the environmental consequences of urbanization, such as increased sewage, waste, crime and poverty. Economically too, the appearance of slums at the outskirts or even within the centre of a city is closely linked to the process of urbanization.²⁷ Rapid urbanization drives economic growth, causing further migrants to seek out opportunities for work in populated areas. However, poor infrastructure, insufficient housing and the reallocation of agricultural land for urban development can result in displaced people with no option but to dwell in slums. With a rapid shift from rural to urban life, poverty also tends to migrate to urban areas: these people arrive with hope but lack shelter and other resources to make it work. Slums are the places of alternative economies, for the problem is often not a lack of material goods or supply of food, but rather inflated prices associated with urban environments.

By referring to the ‘city called Bethsaida’ as ‘a deserted place’, the Twelve attempt to diagnose its sickness as a broken habitat—a concentration of wealth, power and resources which, within the context of a hungry mass of people, cannot adequately distribute food or provide shelter for its inhabitants. This underscores the pivotal contradiction between the imperial ideal of the *polis* (how things should be) and the material reality of its slums (how things really are). The conflicting settings of Luke’s account of Jesus’s feeding miracle thus gestures to the economic and environmental ambivalence of urbanization in which the many riches and benefits of the Herodian political-economic expansion were simply off-limits to those not occupying the apex of the social and economic pyramid. But how to resolve this contradiction of a *polis* unable to feed its hungry inhabitants?

Give Us our Daily Bread!

Toward a Fully Automated Luxury Divine Agrarianism

The solution envisaged by Luke’s account of the feeding miracle is, to be sure, fantastical and utopian. Rather than follow the practical strategy offered by the Twelve, which appears to lack hospitality, Jesus instead takes

26. In her reading of the Matthaean parallel account in Mt. 14.13-36, Wainwright asks whether the ‘response of the disciples (v. 15) to the *erēmos* and its being peopled by a great crowd is informed by an arrogant rather than an ecological eye, an eye for commodity exchange in an imperial economy as a way of feeding hungry communities’ (*Habitat, Human, and Holy*, p. 151).

27. See further Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2005).

the five loaves and two fish, looks up to heaven, blesses, breaks and gives the pieces back to the disciples to distribute them to the crowd. Remarkably, ‘all ate and were filled’ (vv. 16-17), and there were even twelve baskets of broken pieces gathered up afterwards. These theatrical actions by Jesus were religiously coded in ways immediately recognizable to those familiar with the language of early Judaism. As Anne Elvey observes, following Jesus’s blessing of the food stuffs, the resultant blessing in the form of an abundance of food ‘echoes a scriptural tradition of divine blessing of people and land, accompanying a promise of fertility, prosperity and well-being (Deut. 7.12-14; 16.15; 28.3-6)’.²⁸ The action also re-enacts the Lord’s instruction to Moses in the desert regarding the provision of manna falling from heaven: ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day’ (Exod. 16.4).

Materially speaking, this dramatic action by Jesus, with its appeal to divine intercession and abundant blessing of those ‘who are hungry now’ (cf. Lk. 6.21), depicts a superior system of food production and distribution—a kind of fully automated luxury divine agrarianism—in which human needs are met directly through divine deliverance and a ‘short-circuiting’ of the agrarian mode of production, with Jesus as prime benefactor. It does not rely on the urban-based exploitation of villages or fields, nor does it plunder natural resources or destroy ecosystems or local habitats. These overall socio-economic relations envisaged by Luke are, as Halvor Moxnes describes them, a

reversal that implied a central, forced *redistribution* of goods and possessions, prophetically forewarned in the Magnificat (1:51-53). This reversal was an act of God, and the divine redistribution manifested through the acts and speeches of Jesus, the benefactor of humanity.²⁹

Within this utopian way of life, every human eats, every human is filled and no further environmental damage is perpetrated. Even the leftover waste is responsibly gathered up into baskets!³⁰

As a solution to food insecurity and environmental decay, however, Luke’s manifesto sounds somewhat naïve and idealist, at least to our modern ears. The feeding miracle only provides an immediate solution to the hunger of the crowd. It does not offer longer-term policy settings or practical solutions that we might implement to solve the technological and eco-

28. Anne F. Elvey, *The Matter of the Text: Material Engagements Between Luke and the Five Senses* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), p. 177.

29. Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1988), pp. 154-55.

30. As Trainor writes, ‘more is indicated than simply cleaning up a mess left over by the crowd. It suggests that environmental respect is essential. Nothing is to be wasted’ (*About Earth’s Child*, p. 161).

conomic imbalances associated with (agrarian) food production or, indeed, the extractive intensification of resource depletion brought about by (Herodian) urbanization. Despite a well-meaning interpretive tradition that emphasizes an ethic of sharing, no such communal arrangements are explored or advocated by this particular text, and the strict communal arrangements practiced later by the community (Acts 2.44; 4.32) required no transformation of the productive forces of society in the here-and-now. From a historical materialist perspective, then, not least among the ideological deficiencies was an inability of the early Jesus movement to think practicably beyond an advancing agrarian way of life with all of its anthropocentric trappings. These trappings would only intensify in the transition from agrarianism to feudalism and even more so with the onset of capitalism.

Given their perception of the enormity of the material shifts they were responding to, however, the early Jesus movement likely realized that their great leap forward in resource management could be achieved only via supernatural intervention. Ultimately, it would require the dramatic in-breaking of a radical new administration—the kingdom of God—ruled by or on behalf of Israel’s God, and with a decisive bias toward meeting the material interests of the peasantry. While the early Jesus movement’s hope for some momentary respite from the pressures of Herodian urbanization was fantastical, it was simultaneously realistic and understandable in its ancient cultural context, because there was no other way the world could be changed so radically to end hunger without the hand of God dramatically intervening and playing some integral part.

With this we should also keep in mind that miracle stories in the Gospels do much more than elevate Jesus theologically. Grounded in the contradictions of real life, and as ideological resolutions to historical and material changes in first-century Palestinian society, they simultaneously attest to ‘the sigh of oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions’.³¹ They assume that those first attracted to the early Jesus movement perceived conditions as so hostile to possibilities for human flourishing (not to mention the flourishing of the more-than-human) that only through dramatic divine intervention could things be put right.

31. Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction’ (1843), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.