

Jn 6:1-15 and its Synoptic Parallels: An African Approach Toward the Solution of a Johannine Critical Problem

The literary relationship between John and the Synoptics has continued, in recent years, to evoke passionate and critical discussion.¹ The question being addressed, *inter alia*, is how the Gospel of John, written much later as is currently maintained in Johannine scholarship, shares a number of traditions in common with the Synoptics. A close examination of parallel texts has led modern scholars to abandon some of the earliest theories that sought to explain the relationship between John and the Synoptics, such as those of the Supplementary Hypothesis, which proposed that the Fourth evangelist wrote his Gospel to supplement the Synoptics.

While a brief sketch of some of the views as they stand in current literature is considered quite apropos to the present enquiry, this paper argues, through comparative analysis of the Synoptic (oral) material with a brief account of the transmission processes of African oral literature, the independence of John's story of the feeding of the five thousand from the parallel accounts in the Synoptic Gospels. The fascinating examples of the transmission of African royal literature, even though, as J. Vansina cautions, one must, "*a priori*, suspect falsifications in official traditions," are

*Dr. Manus is a Nigerian theologian currently doing research at St. Georgen Theological College, Frankfurt, Germany

¹One of the most recent is J.-M. Severin, "L'écriture du IV^e Evangile comme Phenomene de Reception. L'Exemple de Jn 6" in J.-M. Severin (ed.), *The New Testament in Early Christianity*, BEThL LXXXVI, Leuven University Press, 1989, pp. 69-83.

helpful models towards the appreciation of the problem *ad intra*.² In light of the reader-response criticism, and from the viewpoint of the traditional processes associated with the transmission and circulation of African oral narratives, another horizon from which one can reconsider this problem is being suggested, of course, not without some reflections on the text's socio-theological implications for African, African American, and Third World readership.

Review of Previous Studies

Authors such as E.K. Lee and S. Mendner are known among other Johannine scholars as the earliest advocates of the Johannine dependence on the Synoptics.³ C.K. Barrett somewhat takes a similar position. He, however, supposes that John did not use any of the Synoptic Gospels as Matthew and Luke are believed to have used Mark. For him, it was obvious that John reproduced the tradition known to Mark.⁴ Barrett further asserts that a few of the narrative sections of John could be better explained on the grounds that "John knew and combined both Marcan narratives" on the multiplication of the loaves.⁵ Another school of thought, which includes R.T. Fortna, J. Becker and H. Weder, holds the view that John's Gospel did not depend on the Synoptics, but had its origins notably in the *Semeia-Quelle*.⁶ Although as early as the fifties, C.H. Dodd had disdained every fancy of the Source theory

²Cf. J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, English Translation (ET) by H.M. Wright, London, 1965, p. 84.

³E.K. Lee, "St. Mark and the Fourth Gospel", *NTS* 3(1956/57)50-58; S. Mendner, "Zum Problem 'Johannes und die Synptiker'" *NTS* 4(1957/58)282-307.

⁴C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, (London, SPCK, 1979), 2nd Ed., p. 271.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶R.T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconsideration of the Narrative Sources Underlying the Fourth Gospel*, SNTS MS 11, Cambridge, 1963, pp. 199-211; J. Becker, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, I, Gutersloh, 1979, pp. 189-194; H. Weder, "Die Menschenwerdung Gottes. -berlegungen zur Auslegungsproblematik des Johannes evangeliums" *ZTK* 82(1985)325-360, pp. 332-335.

regarding its claims about the affinity between John and the Synoptics,⁷ there is today an increasing number of Anglo-Saxon scholars, who may be said to be represented by P. Gardner-Smith, who still believe that John is quite independent of the Synoptics.⁸ However, it is noteworthy to remark that opinions which had been expressed on this question before the publication of Gardiner-Smith's book (1938) had been severely criticized and as a consequence forced the advocates to retract their positions. It is no one else but R.E. Brown who cautions that for anyone to come to a right decision about the relationship of John to the Synoptics, such a one must study the parallel scenes as well as the sayings.⁹ In fact, it was such a survey that enabled Brown to arrive at the conclusion that "the evidence does not favor Johannine dependence on the Synoptics or their sources. John drew on an independent source tradition about Jesus similar to the sources that underlie the Synoptics."¹⁰

Much earlier, T.W. Manson had observed that John's Gospel reflects a tradition of the ministry of Jesus which is independent and, in fact, quite possibly superior to those of the Synoptic accounts.¹¹ A.M. Hunter shares this view in his *Cambridge Bible Commentary*. He provides illustrations from some pericopes on the basis of which he contends that both the accounts and geography of John's Gospel are indeed superior and much more historical than

⁷C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge, 1953, p. 121 n. 2; *idem*, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge, 1963.

⁸P. Gardner-Smith, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospel*, Cambridge, 1938, pp. v - xii. For a brief and succinct survey of Anglo-Saxon skepticism of the claims of the Source theory, see the recent essay of J. Beutler, "Methodes et Problemes de la Recherche Johannique Aujourd'hui" in J. O. Kaestil et al. (eds.), *La Communaut Johannique et son Histoire. La trajectoire de l'evangile de Jean aux deux premiers siecles*, Geneve, Labor et Fides, 1990, pp. 15 - 32, esp. pp. 16 - 17.

⁹R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I - II)*. Introduction, Translation and Notes, The Anchor Bible, New York, Doubleday, 1966, p. xliv.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. xlvii.

¹¹T.W. Manson, "The Fourth Gospel", *BJRL* 30(1947), pp. 312- 329.

those of the Synoptics.¹²

R. Bultmann, using the *Formgeschichte*, reaches the conclusion that John had access to three sources: the *Sign-source*, the *Discourse/Revelation-source* and the *Passion Narrative source*, all independent of the Synoptics.¹³ J. Marsh, while impressed by the subtleties of the opinions, pleads that "the seamless robe" as F. Strauss termed John's Gospel, be not rent. The best solution, according to him, is to continue casting lots.¹⁴ In spite of this caveat, however, L. Morris puts forth far-reaching arguments in an attempt to dislodge the points on which Barrett had based his argumentation on John's dependence on the Synoptics *via* Mark.¹⁵ Morris directs our attention to the possibility that the relationship "is much more likely to be oral" than anything else.¹⁶

In recent times, F. Neiryck has made a summary review of the latest discussion on the relationship between John and the Synoptics, especially of the theory proposed by M.-E. Boismard.¹⁷ In Neiryck's opinion, Boismard's invention of a theory of relationship which is so involuted seems to be the best solution so far advanced in current Johannine-Synoptic studies. According to him, it is at the various stages of the redaction of John's Gospel from Jn IIA (the first level Redactor) to Jn III (the post-Johannine Editor) that the evangelist made use of the documents incorporated into the Synoptic Gospels whose final stages: *Mark-Redacted*; *Luke-*

¹²A.M. Hunter, *The Gospel According to John*. The Cambridge Bible Commentary, Cambridge, 1979, p. 64.

¹³R. Bultmann, *The Gospel According to John*. A Commentary, ET. by G.R. Beasley-Murray, Oxford, Blackwell, 1971, p. 210.

¹⁴J. Marsh, *The Gospel According to John*. The Pelican New Testament commentaries, Middlessex, Penguin Books, 1971, pp. 42 -43.

¹⁵L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John*. *The English Text with Introduction, Expositions and Notes*, N.I.C, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1971, pp. 49 - 42.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 343.

¹⁷F. Neiryck, *Jean et les Synoptiques*. Exam critique du l'exegese de M.-E. Boismard, BETL 49, Louvain, 1979; M.-E. Boismard - A. Lamouille, *L'Evangile de Jean*, Synopse des quatre evangile en Francais, III, Paris, 1977, pp. 178 - 185.

Redacted and *Matthew-Redacted* had also been employed as sources for Jn IIB.¹⁸

In spite of this apparently intricate theory represented in Boismard's work, critiqued and furthered by Leuven's Neiryneck, D.M. Smith optimistically concludes that scholars are "about to move from a state of chaos to a measure of consensus"¹⁹ on the subject of John's dependence on the Synoptics. In 1965, J. Blinzler agreed with authors like Barrett and others in support of John's dependence on the Synoptics.²⁰ And in a little more than a decade, Smith could still re-state his position by affirming that while there may be no sweeping consensus on Johannine independence yet "the positions taken by Brown especially p. xlvi; R. Schnackenburg, J.N. Sanders, B.A. Mastin, L. Morris, and R.T. Fortina, all espousing Johannine independence of the Synoptics, lead me to believe that I was certainly pointing to a very significant direction of scholarship, whether or not that deserves to be called a consensus."²¹

But today, unfortunately, the discussion gets hotter and hotter with no clearer objectivity.²² Scholars appear to be standing at a crossroad unable to make up their minds as to which direction the research goes.

In concluding this review, I would like to draw attention to some salient facts. Proposals or solutions proffered on the relation-

¹⁸Neiryneck, *Jean et les Synoptiques*, pp. 182 - 187.

¹⁹D. M. Smith, "The Sources of the Gospel of John: An Assessment of the present Problem", *NTS* 10 (1963/64)336 - 351; p. 349.

²⁰J. Blinzler, *Johannes und die Synoptiker: Forschungsbericht*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 6, Stuttgart Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1965, pp. 31 - 32.

²¹D.M Smith, "Johannine Christianity: Some Reflections on its Character and Delineation", *NTS* 21(1975)222-248; p. 227 n. 1. Smith has devoted a recent monograph to the subject. See his, *Johannine Christianity: Essays on its Setting, Sources and Theology*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1987.

²²Chr. Riniker, "Jean 6,1-2 et les Evangiles Synoptiques" in J.O Kaestil et al., *op.cit.*, pp. 41 - 67; Ph. Roulet et U. Ruegg, "Etude de Jean 6. La Narrative et L'Histoire de la Redaction" in *ibid.*, pp. 231 - 247.

ship between John and the Synoptics which rely on documentary evidence alone may appear fascinating, but may not yield conclusive results, as both proponents and defenders assume the obvious at face value. This can be so certain unless it stands to be tested beyond reasonable doubt that the evangelists began to write much earlier than is perhaps accepted²³ and that the transmission of the oral traditions of the primitive Palestinian churches did not cross-fertilize with those of the extra-Palestinian communities' reminiscences of the historical Jesus prior to the emergence of the written Gospels. Whether this was not likely to have happened is still to be satisfactorily delineated. Perhaps, time will prove Mgr. de Solages correct who warns against making John a "quatrieme synoptique."²⁴

Oral Tradition and Transmission in Africa

Among African peoples there exist numerous stories, which are orally transmitted, about creation and settlement traditions of various tribal groups. Some of these narratives are historical, some mythological, and others merely etiological. From a purely anthropological standpoint, myths can be understood as a type of epic narratives rooted in religious beliefs and cosmological conceptions often orally transmitted, and which primarily recount events and occurrences about the origins of the world. Generally myths tell us something about primordial beings and their exploits, the *arche* of natural phenomena, of man and of his diverse cultures. Professor Richard Olaniyan puts it rather poignantly when he states:

²³I acknowledge my indebtedness to Rev. A.O. Nkwoka, formerly my graduate student whose Term Paper on the subject provided useful insight amplified here and in the exegetical portions of this paper.

²⁴Mgr. de Solages, *Jean et Les Synoptiques*, (Leiden, Brill, 1979), pp. 8, 22, and especially his table, for whom 29.5% of the verses in Jn 6:1-15 are properly Johannine.

In the African historical tradition, myth and symbolism are often employed to explain origins of peoples, historical causation, migrations and relationships among various communities.²⁵

The migration narratives of the Yoruba, one of the well studied African tribes among the Niger-Congo linguistic group,²⁶ are, for example, well known. All Africanists admit that Yorubaland is rich in oral literature, and this is true as the works of W. Bascom and W. Abimbola make clear.²⁷ The story of Yoruba migrations and settlement at Ife has a renown doublet. One version states that *Olorun*, the Sky-God let down from heaven a chain by which *Oduduwa*, the patriarch of the original Yoruba kings, descended to the primordial watery expanse below and threw onto the waters a portion of sand on which he let a hen with five fingers and a palm nut perch.²⁸ The hen scratched busily at the heap of earth looking for worms and ants to eat, not knowing that as she worked and spread the soil, solid land appeared. The nut germinated and later

²⁵R. A. Olaniyan (ed.), *African History and Culture* (Lagos: Longman, 1982), p. 2.

²⁶J.H. Greenberg, *The Language of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 6-41; and also H. Jungraithmayr, H. Ganslmayr, *Linguistik/Ethnographie - Westafrika, Afrika-Karten-Werk*, Beiheft W. 10, Berlin, Gebruder Bontraeger, 1986, pp. 13- 48.

²⁷W. Bascom, *Ife Divination: Communication Between Gods and Man in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); W. Abimbola, "The Literature of Ife Cult" in S.O. Biobakun (ed.) *Sources of Yoruba History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 24, 39 - 40; *idem.*, *Ife: An Exposition of Ife Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1976) and also E.M. McClelland, *The Cult of Ife Among the Yoruba*, Vol I, *Ethnographica*, London, 1982, pp. 9 - 40.

²⁸For an account of these creation myths and the place of their traditions in Yoruba extant oral history, see R. & J. Lander, *Journal of an Expedition to Explore the Course and Termination of the Niger*, Vol I, (London, 1832), p. 180; T.J. Bowen, *Central Africa. Adventures and Missionary Labours*, (Charleston, 1857); R.H. Stone, *In Africa's Forest and Jungle or Six Years among the Yorubans* (London, 1900), pp. 25 - 27; S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (Lagos: CMS, 1921), Repr. 1960, p. 143.

grew up into a huge tree with sixteen branches.²⁹ Ile-Ife, now a univeristy town, is reported as the place of creation of this habitable world from whence all humans dispersed all over the earth.

Other traditions represent Oduduwa as a settler at Ile-Ife. The most auspicious of the migration narratives is that recorded in Samuel Johnson's book³⁰ which tells how Oduduwa, a son of Lamurudu, a king of Mecca, had migrated westwards as a result of serious clashes between him, an idolater, and the more intolerant Arab Muslim communities.³¹ He led his followers to Ife and settled there. At Ife, he toppled an existing dynasty, the *Obatala* lineage, acquired the throne, and later sent out his children and grandchildren to establish kingdoms all over what is now known as Yorubaland, and beyond.

I know of another set of stories prevalent among the Umnri people, an Igbo kin-group on the left bank of the River Niger whose ancient royal traditions have been uncovered by M.D.W. Jeffreys.³² Umundri, as Jeffreys named them, have a tradition of *divine kingship* whose coronation and installation is nothing less than similar to the elaborate enstoolment ceremonies of the Shilluk kings of southern Sudan. According to custom, the highlight of the king's coronation rite is his ability to perform miracles to authenticate his choice and sacred status. At Aguku, a community near Nri, an area within the king's sphere of influence, he was known to part into two halves the waters of the local river despite its ferocious aquatic inhabitants. Through this partition, a valiant man was known to walk down safely into the riverbed in order to pick up the king's *odudu*— a lump of white clay the king uses for certain

²⁹L. Frobnrius, *The Voice of Africa*, Vol I, Benjamin Blom, New York, London, ET. 1968, pp. 282 - 284; J.K. Parratt, "An Approach to Ife Festivals", *Nigerian Magazine* 100(1969)340-348, p. 343.

³⁰Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, pp. 3 - 4.

³¹R.C.C Law, "The Heritage of Oduduwa: Traditional History and Political Propaganda Among the Yoruba", *Journal of African History* 14 (1973) 207-222, p. 208.

³²M.D.W. Jeffreys, "The Divine Umundri King", *Africa* 8 (1935), pp. 346-354.

special rituals associated with his royal office.

At Aguleri, a town on the other fringe of the Anambra river, still under the king's domain, another version of the story states that the king calms the waters and causes all harmful beasts such as crocodiles and hippopotamuses to flee on the day his *odudu* is to be sought.

There are other popular African stories of origin which have doublets due, perhaps, to the circumstances occasioning their creation and transmissions over the years. Let us take up here the account of the separation of the *Allada* from *Tado*, whose people are today in Eweland in Abomey, later Dahomey, now Repulique du Benin, Nigeria's immediate neighbor on the West African coast. The Tado tradition relates that at Tado, a princess encountered a male *Agasu*—a panther—in the forest. This ferocious wild animal was believed to have made love to her. Eventually she bore a son from the union. The descendants of this son came to be known in Tado as the *Agasuvi*—children of Agasu. Once a vacancy occurred at the Tado throne, a respectable son of the Agasuvi contested the throne but lost on the grounds that he was of a matrilineal kinship as he was related to the throne through his mother. His rejection caused a quarrel in the community. All the Agasuvi and their sympathizers left Tado and migrated eastwards until they pitched their camp at present day Allada.³³

Another version of the story of the peopling of Allada runs like this: Adimola (Ademola), a Yoruba hunter from Ijebu lived and cultivated his profession as a medicine-man in Tado. Adimola was noted for his wonderful magical powers. His exploits had impressed the Tado ruler who later employed him to help him

³³See Le Herisse, *L'Ancien royaume du Dahomey* (Paris, 1911), pp. 92 - 155; G.T. Stride, C. Ifeka, *Peoples and Empires of West Africa: West Africa in History 1000 - 1800* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1971), pp. 274-276.

magically repel his enemies. As a result of his successes in medicinal practices, the king gave him his daughter in marriage. Later, and in an unspecified period of time, one of Adimola's descendants vied for the throne of Tado but was not accepted for lack of patrilineal rights. He organized a revolt and later with all his supporters migrated to Allada.³⁴

While these narratives are politically oriented, in fact they do not detract from helping us perceive the manner in which Africans and their descendants in the diaspora may understand the trajectories and vicissitudes of oral traditions in both secular and Christian antiquity. The stories need interpretation as some of the motifs and forms are not unlike those that underlie biblical accounts. The African cycle of stories purports to describe the creation of the African world and the settlement of their peoples. More often than not, these stories are created to legitimate the foundation of towns, some of which are famous tribal centers and seats of large and powerful kingdoms. The narratives are preserved to enable members of the royal houses to trace their origins and pedigree in order to understand their relationship with one another. However, they vary in details because the purpose is to achieve some measure of effectiveness in putting an end to succession disputes, especially in the ancient West African sub-region.

These mythic stories help legitimize possession and ownership of land, and acquisition of wealth and power.³⁵ In the case of the Yoruba king, the tales purport to highlight Oduduwa as possessing both divine and political functions. The story, among other things, portrays him as the emissary of the Creator and leader of a migration; a Moses to his own people. The Tado tale achieves

³⁴Cf. A. Akindele and C. Aguessy, *Contribution a l'etude de l'histoire de l'Ancien Royaume de Porto Novo* (Dakar: I.F.A.N., 1953), pp. 2-22.

³⁵Cf. R.E. Hood, "Myths in Nigeria: A Theological Commentary", *The Journal of Religious Thought* 45 (1989) 70-84, esp. p. 70.

nothing other than the portrayal of the importance of patrilineal rights. And in the case of the Umunri Igbo community, the plunge into a river whose inhabitants were known to be hostile to man is told to heighten the "miraculous" aspect of the coronation ritual. Whatever way one understands the stories and their plot, the central focus is to emphasize that the king's *odudu* derives from a source by no means easily accessible to ordinary humans. Such narratives were created centuries ago to lend sacrality to African kingship systems. Their doublets are consciously circulated to perpetuate the lineage traditions.

John 6:1-15: Its Context.

At this stage, let us examine John's account as recorded in 6:1-15; especially with regard to the location of the text in the Gospel plot. Firstly, the pericope is thematically divisible into four portions; namely

- vv. 1-3a—the geographical location of the event.
- vv. 3b-9—Jesus' conversation with the disciples
over the plight of the crowd.
- vv. 10-13—the actual sign.
- vv. 14—15—the confession of Jesus as a prophet.

L. Morris, following A. Plummer, describes the narrative as the only miracle apart from the resurrection that all four evangelists have recorded.³⁶ Some other authors are of the opinion that what Jesus did on the occasion was to set an example of sharing before his disciples, and that his action motivated the crowd to hand in all

³⁶Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 338; A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Luke* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1960), p. 242.

food items in their possession to be shared with one another. For me, this is not the most educative lesson of the text.

The exact context of the pericope is disputed. Raymond Brown notes that nowhere else in John's Gospel has the theory of rearrangement had more supporters than in the reversal of chapters 5 and 6.³⁷ Even earlier studies like those of A. Wilkenhauser and R. Schnackenburg rearrange these portions to the extent that they concur with those of J.H. Bernard and R. Bultmann; authors quite well known for their dislocation theories.³⁸ Some scholars see an impossible geographical sequence in the narrative of Jn 6. They wonder how possible it was for Jesus to have been in Galilee after the Jerusalem incident described in Jn 5. After all is said and done, I subscribe to the view expressed by A.M. Hunter that while Jesus' dramatic appearance in Galilee from Jerusalem may be surprising, any attempt at smoothing out the geography of Jesus' movement by placing Jn 6 after Jn 4 and before Jn 5 renders the account inconsistent with Johannine plot and theological setting. As Hunter conclusively opines, "any reshuffling is suspect."³⁹

Analysis of the Text

My analysis of the pericope, though brief, will be tailored to fit the fourfold structure I have proposed above.

Vv. 1-3a

In John's Gospel, *meta tauta* is an opening cliché usually employed to commence a new scenario (and so Jn 3,22; 7,1; 21,1). As J.H. Bernard observes, the idea of an immediate sequence of a foregoing event cannot be read here at all.⁴⁰ J.N. Sanders believes

³⁷Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 235.

³⁸Most of these earliest commentators are referenced in Brown, *ibid.*

³⁹Hunter, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 63.

⁴⁰J.H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, A.H. McNeile (ed.), Vol I (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1942), p. cviii.

that the expression "after this" and the subsequent words imply an indefinite interval of time.⁴¹ Bultmann sees the the expression as a loose indication of an elapsed time-frame.⁴² In my own way of thinking, this imprecise intervening period of time may well explain why the location of the context of the pericope has been a subject of much controversy. It is reported in the unit that Jesus went over to "the sea of Galilee which is called Sea of Tiberias". E.C. Hoskyns accepts this description. He however notes that the sea of Galilee was in Rabbinic literature called the Sea of Tiberias.⁴³ In the works of Josephus, the Jewish historian, Tiberias is described as a town at the Western shore of Galilee said to have been founded by Herod Antipas in honor of Emperor Tiberias in AD 26.⁴⁴ The Sea of Tiberias could hardly have been the name current at the time of Jesus' ministry. Bernard rightly opines that John had added this place-name after the real name of the sea just to make the geographical location of the feeding story clearer to his readership.⁴⁵ In the light of Johannine interest in providing place-names where there are none in the other Gospels, this suggestion is plausibly convincing. The use of the imperfect tenses in v.2 has been noted by Morris as of significant literary importance in John⁴⁶, thus *ekolouthei* (kept following); *etheoroun* (continually saw) and *epoiei* (habitually did) belong to Johannine literary artistry. Here, it appears necessary to suppose that although John did not record many miracle stories of Jesus, sentences structured in this wise give indication of the evangelist's awareness of the miracle traditions, the framework on which he constructed a specific

⁴¹J.N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, B.A. Mastin (ed.), (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), p. 175.

⁴²Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, p. 212.

⁴³E.C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, F.N. Davey (ed.), (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), p. 288.

⁴⁴Josephus, *Antiquities XVIII*, 36ff cited by Barrett, *Commentary*, pp. 272 - 273.

⁴⁵Bernard, *Commentary*.

⁴⁶Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, pp. 388 -389.

Johannine Christology.⁴⁷ Also it belongs to Johannine literary skill to describe the mountain in Galilee with the definite article (*to horos*). In this sort of construction, the Fourth Gospel concurs with a Synoptic tradition represented in Matthew 15: 29.⁴⁸ The Galilean hill is generally associated with important theological events in the Synoptic tradition. Incidents such as the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1ff); the Call of the Disciples (Mk 3:13-19) and the post-resurrection appearances (Matt 28:16) are cases in support of this view. Thus, it becomes noteworthy to state that the motif of Jesus' ascendance to the mountain is a Gospel style usually employed to portray topical events during his ministry in north Palestine. Finally, the reference to the Passover *he eorte ton 'Ioudaion* is quite Johannine. John uses the Jewish feasts to arrange his calendars. Johannine scholars are agreed that it is during the occasion provided by these feasts that John intercalates his polemic against *hoi 'Ioudaioi*.

Vv. 3b - 9

The Johannine miracle story is prepared for by Jesus' invitation to Philip—*legei pros Philippon* (he says to Philip). John tells us that it is Jesus and not any of the apostles who noticed the need to feed the hungry crowd, as is transmitted in the Synoptics. Some commentators, notably Brown, Morris, and Bernard see Philip as a native of Bethsaida (a place-name only attested in Luke 9:10b) as the rightful person to answer Jesus' question as to where food could be got in the neighborhood to feed the crowd. While Bultmann understands the role assigned to Philip and Andrew as a Johannine effort to amplify the significance of the multitude of people fed on the occasion, Barrett prefers to identify the use of the names as a

⁴⁷The idea conveyed by the Johannine term, *semeia* is in consonance with John's view expressed, for example, in Jn 20: 30-31.

⁴⁸Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 232 n, 3; Severin, "L'Ecriture du IVe Evangile", p. 77.

peculiarity of late documents of the early Church.⁴⁹ Barrett's suggestion may be prized for the hint it gives us on the age of the form of the narratives. Name-calling is a stylistic which John holds to dearly. It can be argued that Jesus' question re-echoes the one Moses put to Yahweh in Num 11:13. But here, it is Philip who feels the same inadequacy as Moses. His reply stresses the helplessness of the situation, another device used by the evangelist to heighten the effect of the miraculous deed.

Elsewhere in the Gospels, *peirazon* (testing) from the verb, "to test," is known for its negative connotations. The whole of v.6 can be considered an editorial attempt to forestall any implication of ignorance on the part of Jesus. Perhaps, this is a positive didactic skill employed by John to involve the apostles in Jesus' work of compassion rather than allow them become mere passive spectators.

Two hundred denarii of bread—*diakosion denarion artoi*—was quite insufficient to feed the crowd according to John. Once more, here, John heightens this miraculous event. A denarii was the wage for an unskilled laborer for a day.⁵⁰ This may be understood in light of Philip's assertion that the money in hand was unable to procure enough bread even "for each of them to get a little." By so doing John is portraying the enormity of the crowd. The doubt noticed in Philip's response is the more exacerbated when one considers the fear about the paucity of food expressed in Andrew's report of the young boy who had five barley loaves and two fish.

In John's Gospel the personages are depicted in their role-plays and actively act out the scenes. Philip, Andrew, and the

⁴⁹Barrett, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 274.

⁵⁰Marsh, *The Gospel According to John*, pp. 48 -50.

paidarion (lad) execute quite distinct roles in the feeding drama. When compared with the Synoptics, we note that information given and the roles fulfilled by the disciples are, in John, performed by specific individuals. Do these sort of characterizations make the episode detract from the tradition known to John? I believe that here we have a Johannine literary style of using representative figures, role-players, functionaries, and the art of the amplification and elevation of Jesus' deed to polish his narrative.⁵¹

Vv. 10 - 13

In this section, we have a dynamic eucharistic scene. Jesus instructed that the crowd sit down. He took the loaves and when he had given thanks, he blessed the fish and distributed to the people. At the end of the repast, Jesus directed his disciples to "Gather up the fragments that were left over, that nothing may be lost". Twelve baskets of the fragments were collected. Here, John presents similar traits with Mark's *doublet* of this feeding episode (Mk 8:1-10). The eucharistic formula is similar except the phrase *anablepsas eis ton ouranon*⁵² which I consider a Synoptic addition to the basic tradition. The motif of gathering/taking up the left-overs (*klasmata*) and the term, twelve baskets full of fragments, reoccurs in John. John and the Synoptics agree that census was taken only of the men and that they were *pentakischilioi andres*, five thousand men: (Mk 6:44; Matt 14:21; Lk 9:14; Jn 6:10b). Plummer observes that the term *andres* and not *anthropoi* was used to describe the numbered men and that the reckoning confirms Matthew's record that

⁵¹When, however, one compares vv.3-9 with the Markan text, one notices striking correspondences in the central motifs and literary elements. Thus, one can say that apart from Johannine literary embellishments, the verses reflect the narration and redaction of a common source material.

⁵²Here, see Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 388.

women and children were not counted.⁵³ According to Vincent Taylor, the purpose of the evangelists in mentioning the number fed is to confirm the wonder of the miraculous feeding.⁵⁴ Sanders agrees with the view which had long been expressed by J.P. Audet, that the term, *eucharistesas* is related to the one used in the account of the Last Supper. These parallels with the Synoptics do not necessarily reflect a Johannine redaction of Synoptic material as J.-M. Severin argues, but for me reflect a Johannine re-working of an earliest Christian oral narrative on Jesus and the feeding episode.

The number, twelve, used to identify the baskets of unconsumed loaves of bread appears in all four of the Gospels. Brown has thrown more light on the present scholarly exegesis of this number with which we can, for the present, go along with. He agrees with some authors that the number is merely symbolic—just a symbol of the twelve Apostles.⁵⁵ In his opinion and, I think correctly, this is the first time John identifies the disciples with the Twelve.⁵⁶ I have my reservations, however, on symbolic interpretations in a study devoted to literary criticism.

Vv. 14 - 15

In these two last verses, John goes on to give account of the effect of Jesus' *semeion* on the people. The crowd confesses Jesus as a prophet "who is to come into the world," a tradition which harks back to Moses, the prophet of the Old Testament.⁵⁷ The crowd

⁵³Plummer, *Commentary*, p.244.

⁵⁴V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indexes* (London: MacMillan, 1957), p. 236.

⁵⁵Brown, *Commentary*, p. 234 n. 13; and so E.E. Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (London: Nelson, 1966), p. 139.

⁵⁶It is a well known trait in the Johannine corpus that symbols play important functions, so that when the evangelist shares common traditions with the Synoptics, he does not fail to employ symbolism.

⁵⁷On the implications of this, one can see, W.A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Tradition and Johannine Christology* (London, 1967).

understands the prophetic mission of Jesus in a similar light. The motifs of wishing to crown Jesus king and his withdrawal to the mountain area are for me, a *Johannization* of pre-Johannine Christology which were not unknown to the Synoptic tradition.⁵⁸ This sort of Johannine exegesis has given rise to many interpretations. Morris points to the fierce nationalistic expectations of the Jews at that time which could have made the crowd see in Jesus' miracle (sign) the role of a *Theios aner*, a divinely accredited leader of the people.

Hoskyns notes that rebellious movements were frequent in the province of Galilee and that Galileans were often led by those believed to be prophets. Hunter is of the opinion that Messianic agitation with political tendencies was at a high tempo in Palestine during that period. Most of the authors passed in review would suppose that Jesus saw this leaderless mob as an army without a commander. Perhaps it is in this light that Brown's exegesis of the verb, *arpazein*, connoting force, can be understood. And as Hunter would have us believe, the message of vv. 14-15 may explain the quasi-military formation in which the famished crowd was ordered to sit down.

Why are exegetes able to read all these ideas from the text? Provision of food has always been a powerful weapon in hungry nations. Indeed a hungry man is an angry man, the old adage says. Jesus who quenched both the hunger and anger of the people seemed to them ready-made material for the overthrow of the socio-political structure responsible for the impoverishment of the people.

The basic literary and thematic correspondences between John and the Synoptics can now be gathered together and reflected upon. The monetary value of the bread required to feed the crowd

⁵⁸Cf. for example, Matt 21:5; Lk 18:38; Jn 12:13.

remained at 200 denarii as well as the number of loaves and fish that were made available on the occasion. Both Luke and John agree that Jesus said, *eipen*, to the disciples to organize the seating arrangement for the crowd. Mark, Matthew, and John mention the green grass, thus suggesting a spring-time event. All transmit the prayer of Jesus over the loaves—a foreshadowing of the eucharist or better, an indication that Eucharistic Service was well practiced in the communities of the early church whose *Sitz im Leben* is reflected in the Gospels and some of the non-canonical books. The Synoptics speak of “blessing God,” a rather primitive prayer formula. John speaks of “giving thanks” which reflects a liturgical expression. Therefore, what was for the Synoptics a community prayer meeting has become, in the Johannine church, a Eucharistic Service. The description of the manner of the distribution of the loaves and the satisfaction experienced by the crowd (in Jn they were said to have had enough) are similar.

All four Gospels report the gathering of left-over food in twelve baskets. The total impression is that there exists likes and unlikes, similarities and dissimilarities in John and the Synoptics. How does one account for these discrepancies? I will presently address myself to this question in the summary.

Summary

The narrative of the feeding of the five thousand men, recorded by the four evangelists, provides an interesting enquiry into the problem of the literary relationship that exists among the Gospels; especially between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel. Findings as outlined above compel me to draw the following conclusions: the current view that parts or all of John is a midrash on the Synoptics, or that which maintains that the Fourth Gospel used Mark in the way that Matthew and Luke are believed to have

used it must be reconsidered. The hypothesis that John and Luke had access to a common tradition also lacks merit, otherwise how does one explain the omission of Luke's *Bethsaida* in a Gospel narrative known for its predilection for place-names?

In light of the literary and thematic affinities Jn 6:1-15 shares with the two accounts of the feeding (doublets) in the Synoptic tradition, I strongly subscribe to Brown's comment on the Gospel of John. According to Brown:

... the comparison of John and individual Synoptic confirms the conclusion ... that the Johannine account was not copied from any one Synoptic Gospel nor pieced together from several Gospels. It is not impossible that the final redactor added to the basically independent Johannine account details from Mark, for example, 200 denarii. However, it is just as possible that such details were part of the Johannine tradition from its earliest traceable stage.⁵⁹

Given the presence of the parallel elements; the manner in which they had been received in John's Gospel; Johannine literary features such as the explanatory notes, direct name-calling of persons and place-names, and the rare employment of the regular *kai* typical of the Synoptics⁶⁰ what emerges is that the four Gospels are related at a remote level of their oral stage just as the African doubletted stories shared common traits at the oral and transmissional stage. The findings of my comparative analysis tend to support Brown's thesis that John drew his material from an independent

⁵⁹Brown, *Commentary*, p. 244. Similarly, Severin argues for a "dependence par rapport aux recits synoptiques:" see *art.cit.*, p. 77.

⁶⁰On the pericope of the Feeding of the Five Thousand alone, the presence of *kai* is as follows: Mk 28, Lk 13, Matt 13, and John has only 7, that 53:7.

source of tradition about Jesus, not quite distant from those known to the Synoptics.⁶¹ Thus, the case of the Feeding of the Five Thousand supposes that John used a reliable version of a story traceable at the primitive level of the traditions. Rather than appeal to Source Criticism, Form Criticism and Synoptic dependence, my findings favor a Johannine employment of oral narratives about Jesus' miracle variantly known to the Synoptic authors.

I defend this position because in Africa, oral literature or folktales circulated first and foremost in tell-tale forms and frequently the themes and motifs cross-fertilize and later penetrate the lore as variants of the same basic narrative known to other and adjacent tribes. What, for instance, the Igbo tell about *Mbe na Nwaevulako* (the tortoise and his wise son) in Owerri Igbo is not exactly the same version known about them in Uwana Afikpo in northern Igboland.⁶²

Take again the traditions associated with *Moremi*, the valiant queen of the Yoruba in Ile-Ife (Western Nigeria), the cradle of Yoruba civilization, and the versions known of her in Egbaland of the Yoruba Abeokuta. There is always some discrepancies in the narratives, even when they end up as doublets.

On a wider circulation the stories and exploits of *Ananse*, the Spider, and the themes of wisdom, punishment, and death ascribed to him are, as a result of the passage of time and change of places, known variantly among the Akan, the Guan, and the Yoruba-speaking peoples of West Africa.⁶³ In most cases, the

⁶¹Brown, *Commentary*, p. xlvii.

⁶²On the fame and wisdom associated with the tortoise in African folklore, see G.T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (London: Seeley, 1921), pp. 274-276.

⁶³J. Yeboa-Dankwa, "Story - Telling of the Akan and Guan of Ghana" in R.K. Priebe (ed.), *Ghanaian Literatures* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), pp 22-41. The author was a DAAD research Fellow at the Johan Wolfgang University, Frankfurt/Main when I interviewed him on 17 August, 1990. Luckily, I met this scholar at the University of Frankfurt during my research period as an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow. On the role of *Ananse*, the Akan-Asante trickster, or that of *Ijapa*, a similar character in Yoruba folktales, as *dramatis personae* in African oral literature, see, K. Tekpetey, "The Trickster in Akan-Asante Oral Literature" *Asemka: A Bilingual Literary Journal of the University of Cape Coast* 5 (1979) 78-82.

narrative forms have become so modified as to produce effects which make them, though not repetitious of the original *vorlage* (copy), but obvious derivations from it. For me, this literary history may well assist the African, the African American and other Third World peoples whose worldviews are not so sophisticated and technologically diluted, to come to a meaningful appreciation of the compositional history of the Feeding of the Five Thousand hungry people in John and the Synoptics.

Although this paper has concerned itself with diachronic matters, namely, with issues about sources, traditions and their transmission, cases of doublets and redaction in the compositional history of Jn 6:1-15, one cardinal question arises: what values have these exegetical subtleties for the African, African American biblical scholarship and ultimately for the churches and denominations in which the scholars' ideas are received. While most European and North American New Testament scholars I know claim that their work bears no relation to churchly interests, in Africa, African American Christianity, Asia, and Latin America, biblical studies is done as an academic discipline that has much to do with life.

With the diachronic method, my ultimate purpose is to arrive at a synchronic perception and understanding of the nexus between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics; that is, to arrive at a deeper understanding of the transmission processes of Jn 6:1-15. I seek understanding of the narrative as it presently stands in its specific context in that Gospel, and the role of the same passage as a final narrative text which had a certain impact on some Christian communities at some point in the history of Christianity. My emphasis must then shift to the question: how do Christians in the African American churches, in developing lands of Africa and Asia react to this particular text when they read it, or hear it preached today?

Even though my interpretation of the relationship between the same episode in the Gospels is influenced by the literary critical method, I deny that this is the only way of reading and interpreting the text. In the context of the reader-response critical approach, I regard the African, African American, Asian, and Latin American readers, and people of other lands where hunger and famine ravage whole populations, as having a very unique angle of approach to the reading process. Given Africa's sagging socio-political and economic experience, in which the affinity between John and the Synoptics is not often considered a "liberating" reading, there is no doubt that a learned understanding of the narrative of the feeding of the five thousand hungry persons must and should be *perspectival*. The construction of the meaning of Jesus' benevolent action should reflect a negotiation between the ancient text and the contemporary readers.

In this kind of mental negotiation, African, African American, Asian, and Latin American readership hold as much of a prime place as the text itself. While literary features of Jn 6:1-15 and parallels such as those already uncovered are meant to guide oppressed and Third World readers, the possible isolation and stress put on the narrative features by Synoptic scholars should be interpreted in the light of related complex social factors—such as joblessness, poverty, disease, squalor, inadequate supply of medical care, hunger, the high incidence of infant mortality, senseless apartheid, and all kinds of racial discrimination. These social ills, and above all, political instability, all vitiate our chances of adequately feeding ourselves, our families, and extended relatives.

Hence, one can say that no reading of the text is objective and scientific that is not also people-oriented. Thus hermeneutical issues are as relevant as methodological questions. Interpretations must evolve out of and lead to praxis. From this perspective, the social situation and the contextual reality of the readership must

constitute primary agenda items in the process of the hermeneutical enterprise. Most of the people of Africa, of African America, of Asia, of Oceania, and of Latin America, encounter the stark reality of ever-increasing socio-economic disparity between themselves and a tiny, privileged minority in a world that was created good by God. This situation makes many of us engaged outsiders in a world which God created for all and without disparities. We are born and raised in lands which the developed economies, our erstwhile colonial masters, have "baptised" the *Third World*.

Notwithstanding political independence and self-government, our nations are still subject to geo-political and economic control and manipulation by the super-powers through their titularies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and cartels in London, Rome, Paris, New York, and Washington, D.C. Because of economic hardships, our men and women of talent and ingenuity are compelled to emigrate to the affluent nations of the First World, while large numbers of the most energetic portion of our work force, our youths, wander the metropolises of these donor nations seeking "refuge" and "asylum." Thus, through acute brain drain, a disappearing work force, and the imposed devaluation of our currency, we become unable to earn money and feed ourselves at minimal levels of sufficiency. The more our socio-economic conditions degenerate, the more the dominant powers consider us politically immature, technologically underdeveloped, unable to reschedule our debts, and economically impotent. It is in the same context of alien domination by Rome that was known in the Palestine of Jesus' time. That is why the account of the feeding of the five thousand was so important for all the evangelists to document in whatever version each received the story, and that is why it must remain relevant in this age of neo-

colonial domination diguised by subtle forms of international relations and diplomacy.

When thus understood in its literary pre-history, what model of Christian response does Jesus' action suggest to us? Some African Christologists are likely to say Jesus is the wealthy ancestor, others the *Pastor Bonus*, and so on. For me, looming large in the text is the image of Jesus Christ, the *Liberator*. Jesus liberates the five thousand from the clutches of hunger. He feeds them. He returns to them lost joy and gladness. Once a famished people, they now have energy and life. For us who live in regions of deprivation and impoverishment, Jesus' action in this text calls for a sustained and critical unmasking of the oppressive and destabilizing conditions acquiesced in and promoted by international aid donors. It calls for nothing less than an equitable redistribution of the earth's bounty and a radical appreciation of the fact that all peoples and cultures on this globe belong to and share in the Reign of God ushered into our midst by God's Son, Jesus Christ, the Lord of all humanity.