

QUESTION AND ANSWER

TWO BETHSAIDAS OR ONE ?

Has modern research found any answer to the problems involved in the movements of our Lord and his disciples after the working of the Miracle of the Loaves (Mk. 6:30) until the landing at Gennesaret (Mk. 6:53) ? Is the hypothesis of a second, western Bethsaida still held to be part of such an answer ?

The movements of our Lord and the apostles as accounted for by the synoptic narratives of the feeding of the five thousand, the walking on the water and the landing at Gennesaret have always been a source of some disagreement among those whose work it is to discern 'exactly what happened' during our Lord's public ministry. Yet such real difficulties of harmonisation between the accounts of events given by the evangelists are very often passed over entirely unnoticed by a casual reader of the Gospels. Taking the accounts one at a time, the reader does not notice that the details of one narration of a particular event are presented differently in another ; not infrequently there is a contradiction, at least apparent, between the various accounts. To one who has at heart the objective nature of the foundations of the Christian religion, such discrepancies can often prove a source of uneasiness. He cannot and does not wish to set at naught the considered judgments of responsible scholars ; at the same time he cannot always see his way to reconciling their findings with his own beliefs and presuppositions regarding the factual nature of the gospel accounts, not to mention the question of biblical inerrancy.

The synoptic accounts mentioned above are to be found in Mk. 6:30-53 ; Mt. 14:13-34 and Lk. 9:10-17. They provide a good example of the difficulty outlined here, as well as showing the way to an understanding of the historical problem which has led some to suggest the existence of a second Bethsaida on the north-west shore of the lake of Gennesaret, in addition to the Bethsaida on the north-east shore, at the mouth of the Jordan.

Mark's account of the feeding of the five thousand and the walking on the water is generally held to have been a unit for a considerable time before the full Gospel as we have it was written. It is also held to be nearer to the events which it describes than either Matthew or Luke, mainly because of the vivid nature of the narrative.

If we take Mark's account by itself, the precise statement of what took place might not seem so difficult. Mk. 6:32 places the miracle of

the loaves in 'a lonely place.' Not very helpful for a historian, one might well say, but at the same time its very vagueness is not unhelpful when we come to fitting in the rest of the narrative. Mk. 6:45 tells us that our Lord sent the disciples 'to the other side, to Bethsaida.' On the way there, a storm arose; our Lord walked to them on the water, and the wind ceased. Then in Mk. 6:53 we are told that 'When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret.' Thus we have three stages: they went to a lonely place; they were ordered to cross from this lonely place to the other side, to Bethsaida; when they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret: evidently Bethsaida and Gennesaret are on the same side, and this side is the one opposite to the lonely place. But the presence of both Bethsaida and Gennesaret on the same side of the lake creates a difficulty. The Bethsaida known from other sources was on the north-eastern shore of the lake, at the mouth of the Jordan, a place rebuilt by Herod Philip and named after Julia the daughter of Augustus. On the other hand the only known Gennesaret is that identified by the rabbis with the ancient Kinneret, on the north-western side! So to solve this difficulty we must postulate a second Bethsaida, on the same side as Gennesaret and opposite the lonely place where the miracle of the loaves had taken place.

Now we must consider Luke's account. For him the feeding of the five thousand does not occur at the conveniently anonymous lonely place. It happens at Bethsaida. Yet from Mark we have just concluded that it took place on the eastern side, *opposite* Bethsaida. Luke's Bethsaida therefore must be a different place to the one mentioned by Mark, and it must be on the eastern side, opposite Gennesaret. Our need of two Bethsaidas seems to be confirmed. Granted this, we can reconcile the two evangelists as follows: the miracle of the loaves took place in a lonely place (Mk.), which was Bethsaida (Lk.) Julias, on the north-eastern shore of the lake. Then according to Mark our Lord compelled the disciples to cross over to the other side, to Bethsaida, namely the second one on the western shore; in actual fact, though they reached this shore, they landed not at Bethsaida but Gennesaret.

This seems to be so neat a reconciliation that we may easily lose sight of one awkward fact: it was made possible only by postulating that second Bethsaida, for which there is not a scrap of evidence. It is not surprising therefore that the hypothesis of a western Bethsaida has been abandoned on the grounds that it was an *ad hoc* supposition, very convenient for harmonising gospel texts but unsupported by secular or other biblical sources.

A sounder solution to the literary problem is found when we realise that the original mention of Bethsaida as the location of the miracle of the loaves comes only from Luke. Luke himself does not have the

episode of the walking on the water, and hence his description, while asserting the location of the miracle of the loaves at Bethsaida, does not contradict itself by speaking of the subsequent crossing of the lake to Bethsaida. Most commentators agree that the 'lonely place' is somewhere in the neighbourhood of Bethsaida Julias, on the north-east shore. If we take it that by Bethsaida Luke meant the general coastal area about the city, then a further journey by sea to Bethsaida is possible. It only remains, then, to explain the phrase used by Mark, 'they went to the other side, to Bethsaida.' For, in this hypothesis, they are already on the side of the lake on which Bethsaida is situated. The most probable explanation of this is that the words 'to the other side' in Mk. 6:45 are an effort to harmonise the text with that of Mt. 14:22. Matthew's text has 'he made the disciples go before him to the other side,' with no mention of Bethsaida. In Mark there has been added to his text the phrase 'to the other side' though he already has 'to Bethsaida,' which phrase does not by itself entail any need to cross the lake. Thus Mark's account, while harmonising his own source with that of Matthew, overlooks the geographical difficulty caused by the addition.

This solution of the problem leaves the account in Matthew clear. The miracle of the loaves is worked in a lonely place near Bethsaida. The disciples then cross the lake and land at Gennesaret. Mark's account would also have the miracle worked in a lonely place near Bethsaida, after which the disciples set out by water for Bethsaida itself. However, there is still no basis in Mark to enable us to understand why after the walking on the water the disciples land at Gennesaret, on the opposite side of the lake from Bethsaida, their destination. If we accept V. Taylor's suggestion that the storm put them off course we have a neatly harmonised version of the facts: the multiplication of loaves takes place in a lonely spot near Bethsaida. Afterwards the disciples leave by water for Bethsaida itself; our Lord comes to them walking on the water; the wind, which had blown them off course, then ceased and they land at Gennesaret.

This explanation may well be true. Without bringing in an unsupported theory of a second, western Bethsaida it does seem to do justice to the literary, geographical and chronological factors involved.

At the same time, one does feel that by bringing forward several literary possibilities, or even probabilities, to harmonise the different accounts, one has only opened the door to further questions and anxiety. Historically speaking, it may well have been so; at the same time, there remain many loop-holes which under the probing finger of historical scholarship could well be greatly enlarged. Faced with this situation, what approach is the Christian to adopt?

There is but one course of action for the man who approaches the

Gospels with faith. He must be frank enough to admit that here as throughout the synoptic Gospels (and throughout the Bible for that matter), the individual strands of the narrative of the historical events as they actually happened have been taken up by the sacred authors and woven into a pattern which is no longer history only, but history together with an affirmation of faith in our Lord and his meaning for us. Such details as precise time and place are related not for themselves alone but as the background ; true historically, generally speaking, but always yielding place to the basic element, the gospel message, the Good News of Christ.

The Christian must be prepared to admit in this particular instance that the movements of our Lord and the disciples may have been exactly as the above solution proposes. He must be equally prepared to admit that they may not. Matthew may have said they went ' to the other side,' not to give an indication of direction, but to emphasise the power of the man who walked across the storm-tossed waters of the lake. Luke may have placed the incident at Bethsaida because it happened there, or just to give a general idea of the area in which it took place. What matters for each evangelist, and what should matter for us, is not precisely what happened or where, but that these wonderful incidents did happen in the earthly life of Jesus Christ ; that these incidents have come down to us more or less as they happened and where they happened ; above all, that here are two more incidents which show forth God's love for His children in Christ : a love which leads Him to give them a bread which the world cannot provide, and a love which all the storms and waves of this world cannot beat down or smother.

As St John Chrysostom puts it : ' If there be anything about times or places which they have related differently, this in no way detracts from the truth of what they have said . . . observe that in matters of capital importance which sustain our life and weld together the preaching (Kerygma), nowhere is any of the evangelists found to be in disagreement, even the slightest. But what are these chief points ? Such as follow : that God became man ; that he worked miracles ; that he was crucified ; that he was buried ; that he rose again ; that he ascended ; that he will judge ; that he has given commandments leading to salvation ; that he has introduced a law not contrary to the Old Testament ; that he is a Son ; that he is only-begotten ; that he is a true son ; that he is consubstantial with the Father ; and whatever matters are like these. Now with regard to these things we shall find abundant harmony.'

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