

Why Does Scripture Record the Number of Men?

Why do New Testament writers stress the number of men that were present at certain events? What were the roles of women during the various time periods covered in the Bible? What was the effect of Roman rule on life during the time of Christ? Do we have any information on Jesus' childhood--e.g., Egyptian Coptic Christians believe the holy family spent some years in Egypt.

In today's Gospel lesson, we read that there were 5000 men present at the feeding of fish and loaves (A miracle Jesus performed with fives loaves and two fish).

When looking for the answer to the question, "Why are the number of men specifically recorded in the scripture?" we need to look at Jewish history and background. In a male, patriarchal society, men are highlighted as being of most importance. It is the male that is given the privilege of education, learning the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings by going to synagogue.

When a Rabbi came along, men and their sons would go to listen. Very rarely did women go because they were to do the chores and tend to the young. However, many women began to also follow Jesus, because of His teachings.

If we look to the book of Proverbs, we see what the women's role was (Proverbs 31:10-31). Even though the male had duties to perform, his options were more open to leaving his duties to listen to a rabbi or attend a town meeting or be available to go off to war.

With Roman oppression, men especially felt the oppression because of the lack of their freedom. Town meetings were suspect of plotting revolts. Large assemblies were suspect of anarchy. Roman soldiers, observing the coming and going of Jesus and the disciples, were curious as to what He was doing. His gatherings seemed to be calming the people rather than riling them.

Details within scripture are noteworthy. The fact that twelve baskets of leftovers from this feeding of the 5000 indicate the abundance of blessings God bestows. God had provided a similar miracle in the days of Elisha, recorded in 2 Kings 4:42 ff.

God provides for us so abundantly that we need to take note of how gracious and good God is. For example, looking at the items the boy had that Jesus used to feed the thousands who had gathered.

We've probably overlooked the fact that they were barley loaves. What significance could that have? Plenty. First of all, someone in the Old Testament had multiplied loaves, and they too were barley loaves. Elisha was the successor of Elijah, the greatest of all the prophets. Elijah had multiplied flour and oil to save a widow and her son from starvation. Elisha did a bit better than his master, multiplying 20 barley loaves so as to feed 100, with some even left over. But in the Gospel, Jesus multiplies 5 barley loaves and feeds 5,000, leaving 12 baskets left over. We're talking serious one-upmanship here. So here's one clear message: Jesus is a prophet greater than even Elijah and Elisha.

But there is someone else who is referenced here, though you have to look a bit harder to see him. Did anyone else in the Old Testament provide bread for God's people in the wilderness? Of course! Moses and the manna. What is the symbolic number associated with Moses? There are five books of Moses which are called the Torah or Pentateuch. No wonder Jesus starts with five barley loaves. He is transforming the Mosaic Law into something much bigger, greater, and more nourishing. Moses predicted that God would raise up a prophet like himself (Deut 18:18). The people got the point—Jesus had to slip away to avoid them making him king (Jn 6:14-15).

But let's get back to those barley loaves. There is even more symbolism here to probe. Barley is the first grain to be harvested in the Spring, and the feast of unleavened bread celebrates the first fruits of the barley harvest. Jesus performs this miracle as Passover approaches, and will go on later in John 6 to explain that he himself is the bread of life. The miracle of the loaves points backwards to great events in the Old Testament to give us clues as to who Jesus really is. But it also points forward to the future, to what Jesus will do in the upper room on the night before he died and which will made present again in every Eucharist. The people recline where there is much grass, verdant pastures (Psalm 23), and the Good Shepherd, after giving thanks (eucharistia in biblical Greek) feeds them with rich fare that causes their cup to run over with blessings of not only earthly satisfaction, but eternal life.

How many baskets of scraps are left over? Twelve, the mystical number symbolizing God's people. Twelve tribes, twelve patriarchs, and now twelve apostles, the patriarchs of the New Israel gathering up the remnants of a feast that will be the new covenant meal of God's new people, the celebration of their deliverance, the new food for the journey to the true promised land, heaven.

- **2 Fishes:** These represent the **Two Covenants**, the primary division of Scripture in the Old and New Testaments. The Old Covenant sacrifice was the Passover Lamb and the New Covenant is the sacrifice of Jesus' atonement for sin.
- **5 Loaves:** The Number 5 is the Number of Life. The Five Loaves therefore have a double association with Christ as the Bread of Life (note the Five Wounds in the broken Bread) and with the Bible as the Manna God feeds His People. Taking the latter sense, we immediately recognize the extremely strong association of the Number 5 with the structure of Scripture. Four of the seven canonical divisions contain five books each, and the size of the divisions - 5, 12, and 22 - are the second, third, and fourth terms in the Pentagonal Number sequence. Clearly, there is a deep connection between the Number 5, the Geometry of Life, and the Living Word!
- **12 Baskets:** The Numbers 5 and 12 combine to define the sevenfold symmetric perfection of the Holy Bible, the Book God gave to **teach His children**. It is the Bread from Heaven that feeds the children of God.

Understanding the use of numbers in scripture helps us understand God's message more completely. Certainly the message of salvation is clear. However, there is more to God's Word as we read the numbers. Numbers are significant indicators of God's complete message, especially to the Jew. This was a plan of God to reach the Jew through Old Testament history of covenants and from creation along with God's acts of deliverance.

Therefore, when we read this account of the feeding the 5000, we glean that God's abundant provision is tied to His covenants with His people, including us, and relating to all that He is the one who comes to bring life and bring it abundantly through Jesus Christ – the Bread of Life.

Amen.