The word ἵππος in the second half of the 14th verse Mark viii can be translated in two ways. The first of the translations presents e.g. the Revised Standard Version: “Now they had forgotten to bring bread; and they had only one loaf with them in a boat”. For the second of the possible translations it is necessary to quote another than English version. Hermann Menge [1923] e.g. translates: “Sie hatten aber vergessen, Brote mitzunehmen, und hatten nur ein einziges Brot im Boote bei sich”.

The first of the translations does not give the possibility of the symbolical exposition of this verse [Jesus Himself as the bread]. In this translation the word ἵππος is understood literally: Jesus and his disciples had with them in the boat only one loaf. The disciples were uneasy about this situation. But Jesus recalls to them more difficult situations: When he broke the five loaves among the five thousand and seven loaves among the four thousand. Relatively the present situation of the disciples is better than the previous ones. There is now one loaf for twelve or thirteen men.

The uneasiness of the disciples is incomprehensible for they were present when Jesus broke the bread to the multitudes. The disciples did not understand that in the hands of their Lord little can mean much.

When asking if the word ἵππος in Mark viii 14 is meant literally or symbolically we cannot omit the understanding of this verse in the work of Matthew and Luke, who were the first interpreters and commentators on Mark.

Matthew has a close parallel to the Markan account in chapter xvi 5-12. The verse on which our attention in Matthew is focused reads: “In crossing to the other side the disciples had forgotten to take bread with them” [xvi 5]. There is no mention of one loaf or one loaf of bread in the boat. Matthew—probably in connection with his inclination to ignore all traces of human limitation in
Jesus—omits this account. Or, may be, that he is concerned with
the statement of Mark (viii 16), where the disciples say, that
they have no bread. Whereas Mark taken literally intends to say
that the disciples having one loaf of bread with them should be
satisfied, because Jesus can multiply this one loaf, Matthew's
narrative intends to say that Jesus is able to change nothing into
much. Matthew's reading does not contain the possible allusion
to Jesus as the bread of life. But even in his account Jesus' presence
is important and strongly emphasized.

As far as Luke is concerned, his parallel to Mark's narrative
is very short and limited to Jesus' demand to beware of the leaven
of the Pharisees (xii 1).

Modern commentators cannot agree as to whether to take Mark
viii 14 literally or symbolically. Literal comprehension is obvious
here, where the Greek word ἄρτος is translated into English as
"loaf" [AV, RSV, NEB). Such a translation does not tend to remind
the reader of the possible symbolical meaning. The Interpreter's
Bible (vii 761) takes into consideration the possibility of the symboli-
cal interpretation, but rejects it: "The one loaf has been inter-
preted mystically (the bread of life or Jesus as the true bread); but
this kind of symbolism, natural in the Fourth Gospel, is foreign to
Mark".

We have seen that Matthew and Luke are not inclined to under-
stand Mark's statement of one loaf (or better: of one bread) sym-
bolically. In addition we must consider the relation between
Mark viii 14 and John.

John, in contradiction to Mark, gives only one narrative about
the feeding of the multitudes in the desert. The basis for this
narrative is Mark's first account vi 30-44, where the five loaves
and the two fishes are mentioned. Between Mark's and John's
narrative are many resemblances. Both account possess a number
of common words. Within the framework of John's narrative some
allusions to one bread in symbolical meaning occur: "In very truth
I know that you have come looking for me because your hunger was
satisfied with the loaves you ate, not because you saw signs. You
must work, not for this perishable food, but for the food that lasts,
the food of eternal life (vi 26-27).—"I tell you this: the truth is,
not that Moses gave you the bread from heaven, but that my Father
gives you the real bread from heaven. The bread that God gives
comes down from heaven and brings life to the world" (vi 32-33).