THE FIVE LOAVES OF THE HIGH PRIEST
(Mt xii, 1-8; Mk ii, 23-28; Lk vi, 1-5; 1 Sam xxi, 1-6)

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“At that time Jesus went through a stand of wheat on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry and began to pluck some ears of grain and eat them.” (Mt xii, 1) This verse introduces a pericope featured by the story of how David and his followers ate the holy loaves of proposition. The purpose of this study is to suggest some evidence that the pericopes bears marks of use in Eucharistic catechesis based on a Christian reading of 1 Sam xxi, 1-6.

The commentaries of some of the Fathers would invite us to look in that direction: e.g., Origen 1), commenting on 1 Sam xxi, 6 notes that the passage is prophetic, that David is the type of the union of kingly and sacerdotal dignity that would occur in Jesus, priest and king. Ambrose 2) says that the events are a figure that priestly food would pass over to the use of the people, that David asked for 5 loaves and received one as a type that not 5 books but the body of Christ might be prepared as food for the faithful. Augustine 3) points out that David is a type not only of a king, but also of a priest because he ate the loaves of proposition.

As a first step, we will take the account in 1 Sam xxi 1-6 (LXX) and place in a column elements which could possibly be used in Eucharistic teaching. In a 2nd column we will place parallel passages in the N.T., some of which are used in N.T. Eucharistic teaching 4), and might indicate a similar use of the texts in 1 Sam, or be possibly influenced by them.

1) Adn. in Lib. I Regum (PG XVII, p. 17).
3) Enarr. in Ps. LI, 3 (PL XXXVI, p. 601).
4) The accounts of the multiplication of the loaves reveal marks of liturgical influence when compared with the last supper account. (cp. Mt xiv 19 with Mt. xxvi 26).
Mk xii 6: “I tell you that one greater than the temple (του ἱεροῦ) is here.”

Mk vi 38: “How many loaves (ἐφτασίας) have you”? . . . they answered, five (πέντε)” Mt xiv 18: “Bring them to me”.

Jn vi, 12: “Gather up the fragments lest they be wasted”. This statement may suggest the holy character of the new bread 1). It is significant that the logion of Mt vii 6, “Do not give to dogs τὸ ἄγαν” is applied to the Eucharist in Did. 9, 5.

Mt vi, 44: five thousand men. Lk ix 14 and Jn vi 10 only mention the men. The picture is that of a purified messianic army 2). The food is given them specifically to have strength on the journey (Mk viii 3). The crowds have been with Jesus for three days. (Mk viii 2).

Mk xiv 19: “he gave (ἐδόθην) the loaves to his disciples.” Mk vi 41: . . . . . “so they might place them (παρατίθημα) before them”.

The striking parallels above show how easily the story in 1 Sam could have been used in Eucharistic catechesis. The mention of the priest, the five loaves, the holy bread (need for preparation and purification), bread for the journey after three days preparation, Abimelech taking the loaves from before the Lord to place them before David and his men—all these elements would lend themselves readily to such a use. The question still remains, “Were they actually so used?” The parallel column, I think, with its similarities to passages that do contain Eucharistic teaching at least would give us a start in affirming some kind of probability.


2) Cf. H. W. MONTEFIORE, “Revolt in the Desert!” (NTS 8 (1962) pp. 135-141. The author shows that the mention of only men in Mk, Lk and Jn suggest a messianic uprising. C. H. DODD suggested to him that the chôris gynaiôn kai paidiôn of Mt xiv 21 may mean, “without the admixture of women and children”.