

153 Fish: “A Great Mystery?” Or “A Mystery Story?”

A literary hypothesis for why John’s Gospel states in 21:11 that the exact number of fish caught by the disciples was 153 (21:1-13). Other passages of interest are: 2:1-5; 2:6-11; 2:13-22; 13:36-39; 21:14; and 21:15-23.

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Preface

For many people, reading the Gospel of John is both inspiring and bewildering. It is inspiring because we encounter a remarkable message of hope—that God offers us eternal life through Jesus Christ. It is bewildering because we run across events, statements, and historical details in this book that seem rather odd. Why is Nathanael, a natural born skeptic, suddenly convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, the King of Israel, because Jesus saw him under a fig tree? (1:45-51). What does Jesus mean that we must “eat his flesh” and “drink his blood” to have eternal life? (6:47-58). Even if we account for cultural differences, the statement is rather shocking (if taken literally) and very hard to decipher figuratively, as demonstrated by how many of his disciples stopped following him because of it (6:66). Of course part of the problem may be Jesus himself and the fact that not everything he said is easy to understand. But as one becomes familiar with the Gospel, and learns what scholars have unveiled, it becomes evident that some of the perceived “strangeness” is often due to John’s literary artistry. For example, he utilizes a very limited vocabulary but still makes profound theological statements throughout the book.¹ How is John able to do this?

One obvious answer to this question is that John brings greater meaning to his text, like all good authors, by the use of literary devices (or techniques) known both by him and his intended audience. Such devices allow John to advance his theological interest beyond the mere retelling of

¹ Since Greek would be a second language for many of John’s audience, it makes sense for him to write his Gospel with a simplified vocabulary. This would allow more people to understand his text without requiring the assistance of more proficient Greek speakers.

what Jesus said and did among us. What has been far less obvious is the *identification of the literary device* used by the Evangelist in John 21:11 and why he gives us the precise number of 153. On this lies the crux of the problem for understanding this rather strange exactitude in John’s Gospel. While commentators have defended various hypotheses over the centuries, almost all of them have one thing in common: they defend a view that John is using only *one* literary device in this verse. Alternatively, there are those who believe there is *no* literary device being employed and that John is merely sharing some historical trivia of a miraculous event. While this “historical trivia” position may be the most sensible in light of the other hypotheses, nevertheless, I believe it is mistaken. Indeed, I will argue that John is utilizing *several* literary devices in this passage to further enrich the content of his Gospel beyond the actual statements. Even more so, I will argue that these devices can be seen throughout the Gospel and can be conceptually tied to John 21:11, so that the Gospel itself provides internal evidence in support of my hypothesis. Such a statement may appear rather brash to those familiar with this passage and its exegetical history, but to my knowledge no other hypothesis has provided the kind of collaborating evidence that will be presented in this paper.² Nevertheless, I leave it to the judgment of this paper’s readers whether or not I have succeeded with my boast.

Literary Devices Explained

Special Meaning of Numbers and Literary License

We begin our discussion on literary devices used by John with one that many exegetes presume is present in the 153 fish story. This device is commonly found in the biblical text, so the presumption is quite reasonable to start with. It is the device or practice of *assigning special*

² For a review and my critique of the most prominent interpretations of John 21:11, see page 22— *Appendix – A History of the Interpretation of John’s 153 Fish*.

meaning to certain numbers. These numbers in the biblical tradition are 3, 7, 10, 12, 40, and 70. In these instances, the number does not merely signify a *literal quantity*, but often denotes a quality of ‘being’ and preeminence for that which it modifies. Its exact definition depends on the context and what it modifies, but in many instances it denotes a condition of perfection, fullness, or completeness. But there is a problem with this approach—the number 153 cannot be found in any other biblical text. Nor can it be found as a significant number in any other text having the same antiquity.³ Many have tried to find significance in it by noting its unusual and intriguing mathematical traits as a number, but these views are highly speculative and can only be appreciated by mathematicians.⁴ As far as the hypothesis of this paper, this particular literary device plays no major role in understanding the 153 fish query.⁵ However, I mention it because in some idiosyncratic way it does play a role, a very significant role, but not as described above. What I will argue is that John uses the reader’s awareness of this type of device to draw him in, to have him pay special attention to the passage, but not to give the number itself special meaning. Indeed, this entire paper is an explication of the peculiar ways of John (at least for us) and how he tells part of his story using numerical designations.

But before we continue to the main body of this paper, we must dispel a common exegetical misstep that some readers bring to the Bible. This misstep happens when we bring the preconceived notion that any document that professes to be historical must *present its material in a chronological order and all details, no matter how trivial, must be factual.* Such a notion of how historical documents *should* be written is a *cultural ideal* and needs to be recognized as such. The fact is that

³ See page 22 for an explanation of how one early exegete (i.e. Jerome) believed he found the number in antiquity.

⁴ See page 23, *A Mathematical Riddle*, for a more comprehensive evaluation of this approach.

⁵ It is possible, according to this hypothesis, for this device to play a *secondary role* in John’s Gospel. For instance, when Jesus talks to Peter in ch. 21 and asks him three times, “Do you love me?” and then charges him to shepherd his people, the act of reinstating Peter to his calling is given the sense of ‘completeness’ by occurring three times.

not all cultures have this view. Indeed, for many ancient authors (including those of the Bible), it was more important for their audiences to understand what happened, to know what was said and why, and to remember the salient points after *hearing* the story read.⁶ Consequently these authors were not all that concerned about reporting minor details with absolute historical accuracy. If they could improve the literary quality of their work by altering a few insignificant details, they would. This practice of not being overly fastidious about chronology and/or historical details is a common practice in today's movie making industry. Anyone who is savvy about movie scripts knows why this is the case. In order to tell a better story, a more memorable story, the writer must not let the hodgepodge nature of history and all its unfolding ambiguities dictate what is conveyed. Instead, with a retrospective eye, the best authors express the greater meaning of human existence in the retelling of historical events. In its best form, this is what "literary license" means, and it is from this perspective we must approach the Gospel of John if we are to fully understand the good news that John has proclaimed.

Overarching Device: Mystery Story

As stated above the position of this paper is that John is utilizing *several literary devices* in connection with 21:11 to enrich his Gospel. However, there is one overarching device that governs the use of the rest: *mystery*. Such mystery is not of the theological kind, but of literature, namely the *genre of mystery story*. In other words, one of the literary objectives of John was to have the element of mystery in his Gospel, the kind of mystery that leaves enough clues for the inquisitive person to see and eventually solve the riddle. So how does a mystery story work?

⁶ People of the modern era often fail to appreciate the availability and affordability of written documents. During the period of the early church, ALL documents were handwritten (including copies) and written on expensive materials. Consequently, only the wealthy (or maybe communities) could own large written documents, like the Gospel of John. Therefore, skilled authors would craft their material in such a way that people who *heard* it read would naturally remember its content. This is the way most people would have access to the biblical material and the NT authors knew this.

A good mystery story is one that has a number of clues for solving the mystery, but not enough to give it away until the author is ready to “unveil” it. For the *delight of mystery* is the *sudden realization* of how all the pieces fit together and the opportunity to say, “Aha, I get it!” However, if the author is too obtrusive in answering the riddle, then all the beauty of the clues becomes tainted. Also, most readers want the satisfaction of discovering the truth on their own rather than brusquely being told the answer. So how does this relate to John 21:11 and the *exact* number of fish caught? Despite what may seem highly improbable, I maintain that John’s number of “153” fish was originally meant as a clue to a larger mystery: a mystery that was meant to be revealed. But because *John was too subtle with his “unveiling,”* it has become “a great mystery” (Augustine) down through the ages. Indeed, after stumbling over what I consider persuasive evidence, I find it very mysterious why it has remained a mystery for so long.

So what is our first step towards unveiling John’s mystery story? First, we must understand a common literary technique used in the ancient world that scholars call “intertextualization.” This is when an author quotes or alludes to well known texts (or even his own text) and, by so doing, calls to mind far more material than is actually stated. Thus John can quote a verse or two from Isaiah, but elicit reflection on the entire book and its themes. As far as referring outside of the Gospel, this literary device is not particularly helpful for solving our 153 fish riddle,⁷ but it is extremely useful for understanding passages *within* John. It allows John to *connect divergent passages* that otherwise would remain unrelated or detached ideas in the reader’s mind, unless of course John crassly tells him there is a connection. But such an act would defeat John’s intent to have “mystery” in his story. So what does he do to connect divergent passages?

⁷ Some believe this text is referring to Ezekiel 47. See Appendix, *A Biological Analogy*, p. 22.

Literary “Flares” Illuminating The Landscape

Assuming this paper’s hypothesis, John’s literary challenge would be two-fold, and his first task would be to pique the curiosity of his readers and get them to suspect that something more is happening in the story than a surface reading would indicate. Second, John must somehow connect divergent passages together without being too obvious as to what he is doing. So how does John accomplish this two-fold objective? He does this by first assigning specific numbers or words to the particular passages he wants his readers to conceptually hold together. He then “highlights” these numbers or words by using them in “odd” ways within each context. The end result is to endow certain numbers or words with underlying significance beyond their normal use and to create a more expansive context of how we are to understand particular passages in John.

An example of the above manner of writing can be seen in today’s movies. In the movie *The Sixth Sense*, ghosts appear throughout the story line. As a subtle way of heightening the suspense for the audience, the director had no red objects in the movie, except when ghosts were about to materialize: thus anticipating the scary scenes. Another example is in the movie *Schindler’s List*. Except for the last scene, the movie is in black-and-white – but not entirely. A few times we catch a glimpse of a small Jewish girl whose coat is a dingy red. Spielberg used that small bit of color to weave another thread within the fabric of the story. Thus, by highlighting certain scenes in the same manner, all those seemingly disconnected moments are tied together and make a statement. There is nothing overly significant about the color, or even where the color is found, but the presence of the color says, “This scene is important!”

The premise of this paper is that John is using certain numbers to indicate something important is transpiring in the immediate context, like Spielberg did with the red coat. The numbers become flares, which light up the ground around them, inviting us to pay special attention to these places within the broader landscape of John’s Gospel. And when we pay closer attention, we realize

that John is calling us to pull together a tapestry of passages and endow them with added meaning—more than what we find when examining their immediate context.

Tri-Terms as Literary “Flares”

So what are these literary markers, these flares that illuminate the ground around them? They are what I will call ‘*tri-terms*’⁸—three, third, and thrice⁹ (τρῆϊς, τρίτος, τρίς).¹⁰ The *tri-terms* in the Gospel of John exhibit several distinct literary patterns, which in turn highlight key passages of the book. However, it should be noted that two of these occurrences are obscured by John’s effort to hide his “clues” and because the translation process requires the numeric expressions to be changed. So in the passage where Jesus turns water into wine (2:6-11), a more literal translation of verse 2:6 is, “Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding between two or **three** *metrētēs*” (μετρητής).¹¹ As for the mysterious number in John 21:11, in Greek it is written like this: ‘hundred fifty **three**’ (ἑκατὸν πενήκοντα τριῶν). Thus, verse 2:6 and 21:11 both contain the number *three*, but partly obscured by the peculiarities of the language.

Literary Devices and Converging Factors

So why should we believe tri-terms are significant in John? One of the main reason many scholars have rejected various literary, analogical, or symbolic explanations for the 153 fish is because none of these theories have included corroborating evidence for their conclusions. As a

⁸ Among linguists, there may be a technical term for the class of “three-ness” that are found in John’s Gospel, but despite doing some research, I was unable to discover such a term. “*Tri-terms*” was suggested to me by Steve Layman (see *Acknowledgements*).

⁹ The word *thrice* has become an archaic word in today’s English. Usually this is expressed by saying *three times*. However, Koine Greek expresses it by a single word-- τρίς.

¹⁰ The different classes of numbers are: cardinal numbers: *one, two three (1, 2, 3...)*; ordinal numbers: *first, second, third (1st, 2nd, 3rd, ...)*; multiplicative adverbs: *once, twice, thrice, ...* (expresses how many times an event happens); multipliers: *single, double, triple*; and distributive numbers: *singly, doubly, triply* (numbers that describe sets, i.e. *pair, dozen*).

¹¹ A *metrētēs* is a unit of about 39 liters.

result, “there seems to be no end to the ‘meanings’ that can be extracted from the number.”¹² Conversely, I will argue the following explanation has six, possibly seven, converging factors *that verify that 153 in 21:11 is a literary marker as described above*, and that such *converging factors* can only be attributed to careful intentionality by John.¹³

Converging Factors

The first factor may not appear as evidence in support of the thesis as given, but once seen in the context of the following factors, it reinforces the notion that the *tri-terms* are doing something more than merely giving numeric information. The factor is this: four of the nine occurrences appear as *extraneous information*. That is, there seems to be no reason why the author should provide the reader such trivia information. These instances are **2:1**, “On the third day a wedding took place...”; **2:6**, “...each holding between two or three *metrētēs*”; **21:11**, “a hundred-fifty-three (fish)”; and **21:14**, “This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.”

In regards to 2:1, nothing seems to be gained by telling us the wedding occurred “on the third day,” although some have offered symbolic interpretations of the phrase (none very convincing). Indeed, it is difficult to know on the third day of what? Does it refer to the third day since the exchange between Jesus and Nathaniel?¹⁴ Possibly. But why should that be important? Or is it merely a phrase that ties the two sections together?¹⁵ Maybe. In either case, it seems to add little to

¹² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*. (Rev. ed. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 765.

¹³ The strength of an argument based on converging factors *is not found in the individual components*, but in the fact that *they do converge towards a single conclusion*, and that such a convergence can only be attributed to careful design. Therefore, one needs to be patient while reading about each component, lest he think the point being made is “a bit of a stretch.”

¹⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 167.

¹⁵ Ernst Haenchen, *John (2): A Commentary on the Gospel of John*. (Chapters 7-21). Translated by Robert W. Funk. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 175. Also: Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here is Your King*. BST. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 63.

the theological import of the book. Then there is the amount of water each pot holds. Why even say it? Would it not be enough to simply state the jars were used for bathing to know that a lot of water was involved? Then of course we have the 153 fish and the use of an exact number that apparently has no historical significance, except maybe to the disciples who caught the fish. And finally we are told in 21:14 this was the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection. At first glance, this statement seems wrong, since there are three prior reports of Jesus' appearing (20:11-18; 19-23; 26-29). However, the first one is not before *his disciples*, but before Mary Magdalene. Still, why even bring up the fact that it was the *third time* before *his disciples*? What's the point? A number of scholars have argued that chap. 21 was added to the Gospel as a sort of appendix, and therefore one might see this verse as "the redactor's attempt to sew chs. xx and xxi together by making this appearance sequential to the two in xx 19 and 26."¹⁶ I suppose this is possible, but as we will see, it might be an attempt to sew a lot more together than chapters 20 and 21. Indeed, if we assume the author (or final redactor) knew what he was about, and was not about to ruin his labor of love with irrelevant facts, then maybe we can read this Gospel in a more positive light: with the assumption the author knew what he was doing. In which case, we can start looking for the possibility that *mystery* might be a part of the story and ask, "Now why did he say that?" "Why did John use a usually important number, the number "three", in a context where it has no significant meaning?"

The second converging factor is *frequency of use*: both the words *third* and *three* are each used four times in the Gospel, with *thrice* used once. Hence, there are nine occurrences.

The third factor is *pattern of use*: the first word used is *third* (1 τρίτος), and this is followed by three *three's* (3 τρεῖς); then comes *thrice* (1 τρίς), followed by one *three* (1 τρεῖς), ending in three

¹⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (xiii-xxi) (Anchor, v.29a. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 1077.

third's (3 τρίτος).¹⁷ And given this pattern, the total of *nine occurrences* might be significant, since 9 is the sum of '3 x 3' (which could be expressed as *three three's*).¹⁸

The fourth factor is *location of use*: four occurrences are grouped near the beginning (chap. 2), one in the middle (13:38), and four at the end (chap. 21).

The fifth converging factor is *the occasions of use* (or *context*). If we group the *tri-terms* according to *occasions* or *events* in which they appear, thus seeing them as literary markers for important passages, then a definite pattern emerges. Note the following:

Tri-terms in John's Gospel: Nine Occurrences, Seven Occasions

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1) third* (τρίτος) | 2:1 – “On the third day...” |
| 2) three* (τρεῖς) | 2:6 – “Two or three <i>metrētēs</i> ” |
| 3) three (τρεῖς) (<i>Used twice</i>) | 2:19, 20 – “Destroy this temple, and in three days...” |
| 4) thrice (τρίς) | 13:38 – Peter will deny Jesus three times |
| 5) three* (τρεῖς) | 21:11 – One hundred fifty-three fish caught |
| 6) third* (τρίτος) | 21:14 – Third time Jesus appears after resurrection |
| 7) third (τρίτος) (<i>Used twice</i>) | 21:17 – Jesus said to Peter “the third time.” |

So by grouping the *tri-terms* according to *occasions*, we come up with 7 occasions (a significant biblical number!). And when a word is used twice for one occasion, it is at the end of the set: a set of three! Indeed, if we go back to the first converging factor (*extraneous information*), we discover these verses only have one occurrence per occasion (marked by *), which naturally draws greater attention to the 3rd, 4th, and 7th occasions as numbered above.

The sixth converging factor is a *thematic pattern*. While acknowledging that the occasions where the *tri-terms* are used may be interpreted in a number of ways, nevertheless, if one takes into

¹⁷ The pattern graphically displayed: *third – three – three – three – thrice – three – third – third – third*.

¹⁸ Some may question the link between 9 occurrences and the pattern of *three three's* in John's Gospel. While I admit there is only a *possible* connection, at least it is more plausible than Augustine's theory (where he derives the number 17 from 153 and then arrives at 10 and 7).

account the location where they occur within the Gospel (esp. 2:1, 21:17), apply what might be considered the most simple and down-to-earth interpretation, and label them accordingly, we find that a thematic pattern emerges. Indeed, one could call the pattern a “modified chiasm” with theological significance. I therefore suggest the following scheme:

<i>Theme of the occasion</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Passage</i>
A - <i>Jesus’ public ministry begins</i>	Wedding in Cana	2:1-4
B - <i>Divine Provision</i>	Water into wine	2:5-11
C - <i>Resurrection</i>	“Destroy this temple”	2:13-22
D - <i>Peter’s denial</i>	Peter’s denial foretold	13:36-39
B - <i>Divine Provision</i>	Fish caught	21:1-13
C - <i>Resurrection</i>	3 rd time after resurrection	21:14
D - <i>Peter’s restoration &</i> A - <i>Jesus’ public ministry ends</i>	Jesus: “Do you love me?”	21:15-23

It seems clear the intent of the first chapter in John is to establish who Jesus is, what authority he wields, what are his credentials (who has testified on his behalf), and who are his followers. In short, these statements set the stage for what will be a *public ministry* as the light to the world. Thus, the incident of Mary asking Jesus for help (2:1) becomes the occasion for his first public sign of ministry,¹⁹ where his glory is revealed and his disciples believe in him (2:11).

As for the second occasion, where Jesus turns water into wine, there has been a variety of interpretations offered. Many of them approach the passage by examining the *nature* of the miracle: What does the transformation of water into wine symbolize?²⁰ Or they examine the different parts of the story and attempt to identify what symbolic meaning each may have. For example, some have seen “the mother of Jesus” as the New Eve, the woman whose seed will crush the head of the

¹⁹ Notice that Jesus had already given a sign to Nathanael in 1:47-49, but this was a private sign.

²⁰ See Morris, 154-155.

serpent, namely Satan.²¹ So then, to label the passage *Divine Provision*, as I have done, seems overly simplistic. However, *without discounting the more elaborate explanations*,²² I believe they are only secondary concerns of the Evangelist. For he clearly states at the end of the passage why the event was important: because Jesus “revealed his glory to the disciples and they believed in him” (2:11).²³ That is, the primary emphasis is not on the symbolic nature of the story, but on the reality of the event, as witnessed by the disciples. It was the historical act of Jesus, as he miraculously provided for the needs of others, which moved the disciples to believe. Such an understanding does not deny that God works in history through symbolic acts of power to teach us about his kingdom, but instead, it reaffirms a way of seeing the text that has been largely ignored. This way is to ask the question, “Why?” Why did Jesus turn water into wine? What motivated his actions? Such a question may elicit different responses, but the best answer comes from the central message of the Gospel, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” (3:16). It is God’s love for us that remains the central motivation for Jesus. On this single point all his actions converge. Thus, in seeing the need of two newlyweds who failed to provide for all their guests, and

²¹ See Brown, 107-109.

²² Since John’s Gospel is so rich in theological themes, and because he often interweaves numerous motifs within a single passage, it is difficult to single out one theological point for a given story. Consequently, a person could legitimately embrace multiple interpretations regarding one passage.

²³ “John tells us what the sign accomplished: through it Jesus revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him. Thus, the first sign had the same purpose that all the subsequent signs will have, namely, *revelation about the person of Jesus*. Scholarly interpretations to the contrary, John does not put *primary* emphasis on the replacing of the water for Jewish purifications, nor on the action of changing water to wine (which is not described in detail), nor even on the resultant wine. John does not put primary emphasis on Mary or her intercession, nor on why she pursued her request, nor on the reaction of the headwaiter or of the groom. The primary focus is, as in all Johannine stories, on Jesus as the one sent by the Father to bring salvation to the world. What shines through is *his glory*, and the only reaction that is emphasized is the *belief* of the disciples.” Brown, 103-104.

in response to his mother's request to meet that need, Jesus responds with love and provides. Hence the reason for labeling this passage *Divine Provision*.²⁴

In regards to the third occasion, where Jesus declares, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up," clearly the central theme is the *Resurrection*. Indeed, it would seem (as argued above) the only reason for the sixth occasion of the *tri-terms* (21:14) is to fill out the chiasmic structure and reiterate the Resurrection theme.

The fourth occasion is the *pivotal point of the chiasm* and is the time Jesus foretells of Peter's denial. For me this is the strangest part of the literary structure and raises an important question, 'Why is the foretelling of Peter's personal defeat a focal point of the Gospel?'²⁵ So important is this question that it will be addressed more fully later on.

The fifth occasion is the catching of 153 fish. As indicated above, it is possible that John had more than one interpretation in mind for this passage, including a symbolic interpretation. However, if we accept the most simple and down-to-earth interpretation, then assign the passage's relative location within the chiasm, then it seems to mirror the miracle story of Jesus turning water into wine (if indeed the "simple" interpretation of *Divine Provision* is acceptable for both passages).

²⁴ "It was not His power, however, but His glory, that Jesus showed forth in the miracle. His power could not be hidden, but it was a poor thing besides His glory. Yes, power in itself is a poor thing. If it could stand alone, which it cannot, it would be a horror. No amount of lonely power could create. It is the love that is at the root of power, the power of power, which alone can create. What then was this His glory? What was it that made Him glorious? It was that, like His Father, He ministered to the wants of men. Had they not needed the wine, He would not have made it, even for the sake of whatever show of His power. The concurrence of man's need and His love made it possible for that glory to shine forth. ... He did not do it even for the show of His goodness, but *to be good*." – George MacDonald. *The Miracles of Our Lord*. Edited by Rolland Hein. (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1980), 21-22.

²⁵ One interesting phenomenon: *thrice* (τρίς) only occurs 12 times in the NT. Except for 3 times in 2Corinthians, where Paul talks about his trials, all other occasions are about Peter's experiences (9 times). In all four Gospels, Peter's denial of Jesus is foretold, and *thrice* is used. In the Synoptic Gospels, Peter's denial is recounted and *thrice* is used. So then, *thrice* is used only 7 times in the Gospels and all of them are about Peter's denial of Jesus. (All references in NT where *thrice* is used: Matt. 26:34,75; Mark 14:30,72; Luke 22:34,61; John 13:38; Acts 10:16; 11:10; 2 Cor. 11:25 (2x); 12:8).

As for the sixth occasion, where it states this was the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, I have already discussed this above.

And finally, the seventh occasion is when Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him, and three times Jesus gives him the command to take care of his sheep. Not only does this last occasion mark the end of Jesus' public ministry, but it reiterates the focal point of the chiasmic structure and completes the Gospel's account about Peter and his fate.²⁶

Consequently, we can see John using at least six literary devices to bind together passages that are designated by the use of one or two *tri-terms*. These devices are: 1) what appears to be *extraneous information* and *the use of a significant number with apparent indifference*; 2) Common words used sparingly, thus *the frequency of use* becomes a point of interest; 3) *Patterns of use*; 4) *Location of use*; 5) *Occasions of Use*; and 6) *A Thematic pattern*.

Summation of the Mystery Unveiled

While Augustine attempted to explain why an exact number of fish is mentioned in John 21:11, even he was not satisfied with his own proposal, and eventually says: "It is a great mystery." If the thesis of this paper is correct, then there is some irony in Augustine's words, since "mystery" is exactly what John wanted to create within the readers' mind. But John's intent was not to have the mystery remain hidden forever, but to unveil it in chap. 21. Unfortunately John was too subtle with his clues and therefore the unveiling of this mystery has been delayed longer than he anticipated.

²⁶ I think an additional argument is worth mentioning, though it may be considered an "argument from silence" (or "omission"). In John 8, Jesus is debating with the Pharisees, and says in vs. 17 "In your Law it is written that the testimony of two people is true" (ESV). Yes, this statement is correct, but the quote omits an important part of the law. The law states on the evidence of two or *three* witnesses...." (See Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Matt. 18:16; 1 Cor. 14:29; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 15:19; Heb. 10:28). Might this be a *deliberate avoidance of using a tri-term* so as to not destroy John's tri-term schema?

So what was John’s method for eliciting curiosity and suspicion in the readers’ mind, so that they would recognize the Gospel contained a mystery? One key approach was to state extraneous information that would cause the reader to ask, “Now why did he say that?” Such information, for example, is his use of an exact number that has no historical or symbolic significance (except possibly to those who caught the 153 fish). And because this clue of 153 fish is the most enigmatic of the nine “markers,” it becomes the most obvious intimation that something more is going on than mere historical trivia. Consequently, I decided to use it as a point-of-entry into the larger discussion of John and the chiastic structure I envision with regards to the *tri-terms*. Hence, a more accurate title for this paper would be, *The Chiastic Structure of the “Tri-terms” in John’s Gospel*.

As for whether or not I have made a strong enough case for such a chiasm and have resolved “the mystery,” I would maintain that John has given us more than enough evidence to establish this scheme. Again, the idea is that the *tri-terms* are functioning as literary markers for the occasions they occur in. And to ensure we see them as such, John has provided us with different patterns that converge upon one another, giving us one conclusion: *the tri-terms are doing something more than providing numerical information*. So besides *extraneous information*, the converging factors are the following:

- 1) *Frequency of use*: ‘third’ and ‘three’ are each used 4 times, plus one time for ‘thrice.’ Thus, $4 + 4 + 1 = 9$, and is also the product of 3×3 .
- 2) *Pattern of use*: both ‘third’ and ‘three’ follow a pattern of three consecutive occurrences.
- 3) *Location of use*: ‘three’ and ‘third’ only occur in two chapters (2 and 21), with *thrice* in the middle of the Gospel.
- 4) *Occasions of use*: they are used in 7 occasions and a pattern emerges for when a word is used twice within the same occasion.
- 5) *Thematic chiasm*: a chiastic pattern emerges when the *occasions* are mapped out.

6) *The sum of the digits equals 9*: $153 \Rightarrow 1 + 5 + 3 = 9$, which is the number of occurrences for the *tri-terms* and equals (3x3).²⁷

I am not a mathematician, nor have I studied probability theory, but it would seem highly improbable that such a convergence of patterns, as outlined above, could arise within a document by accident. Indeed, given the length of John's Gospel and the normal frequency of usage for words like "three" and "third" (especially in the biblical literature), it would not even be likely that they would occur only in two chapters.²⁸ Therefore, while a person may argue over the details of the chiasmic structure as I have envisioned it, nevertheless, it would appear the only reasonable explanation for how the *tri-terms* are used in John is by attributing it to careful intentionality by its author.

Theological Significance

What then can we learn from this literary structure? As for the themes of B & C, what I have labeled "Divine Provision" and "Resurrection," they speak a very simple message: Jesus Christ came into the world to provide for *all our needs*. From the most mundane to the most profound, he is the final resource for all our needs. For in this Gospel we find Jesus providing wine for the celebration of a new relationship, and we find him providing fish for those whose livelihood comes from the sea. In both cases, the best efforts of those involved were not enough, meaning they failed to meet their own needs. But from Jesus we can receive our daily bread, for he cares about our earthly existence and everything it entails.

²⁷ This last converging factor has been added as a curious "coincidence." Of course, it requires the Greek expression of "hundred – fifty – three" to be converted into a digital numerical system, like the Hindu-Arabic numeral system (153), before the digits can be added. Given the fact that the Hindu-Arabic system had yet to be developed, it makes the connection more difficult to make. I am not a historian of mathematics, so I cannot say what was conceptually available to the author of John. What I can say, however, is that mathematicians see a certain "beauty" in this number because of its intriguing characteristics as a number.

²⁸ In the NT, *three* is used 69 times (in 62 vss.), *third* is 56 times (47 vss.), and *thrice* 12 times (11 vss.).

But even more so, Jesus came to meet our greatest need: reconciliation with God. Even though we were hostile towards the heavenly Father, by being unable or unwilling to accept his love, he nevertheless sent the Son to die upon a cross for our redemption and our eternal salvation. Thus our heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, provides for all our needs. From the most modest of needs to the greatest, from our daily bread to eternal life, we find what we need in Jesus.

But now we come to the most perplexing part of our literary structure: the foretelling of Peter's denial as a theological focal point of the Gospel. Why should Peter's downfall be so important? While we can look at the last chapter of John and see how Jesus restores Peter in the relationship, by asking him three times, "Do you love me?" this does not answer why Peter's failure and restoration is given such prominence. Or put another way, with all the theological themes at John's disposal, why does this get center stage?

I believe there are three worthwhile observations I can make in regards to Peter's fall. First, Peter represents the reason for Christ coming into the world: to save those who would believe in his name. For despite all his short-comings, Peter continues on with Jesus, even when others fall away because of something Jesus said, or did, that offended them. For Peter knew without a doubt that Jesus had the words of eternal life (even when he fails to understand what those words mean: cf. 6:68, 13:9). So *Peter represents believers who hang on to Jesus,*²⁹ despite the opposition of others, and despite their own misconceptions. He represents those who receive the benefits of God's divine provision.

Second, the focal point of John's literary structure is not Peter's actual downfall, but the *anticipation* of his downfall. Sometimes as believers we forget that God knows our frame: that we

²⁹ While the disciples are often mentioned in John's Gospel, nevertheless, a person might see some significance in the fact that they are specifically mentioned throughout the chiasm. Even in the passages where Peter takes center-stage, the other disciples are always present (i.e., v. 13:35 for 13:36-39; v. 21:20 for 21:15-23). Indeed, throughout the "fish" story (21:1-13) we find Peter is always placed within the context of the other disciples.

are spiritually weak beings. As a result, we acknowledge with our mouths God's grace towards believers, but often we live as though God has only accepted us under probation. We act as though He will overlook certain misdemeanors, but heaven help us if we commit any major sin once in the door. "Either shape up or ship out," is our actual mentality, though our stated theology is filled with more mercy than this.

However, what this passage teaches us is that Jesus came into the world fully aware that his followers would often fail—in significant ways. And yet he still came. He came knowing that Peter would deny him, yet because of his love for Peter, Jesus still came for him. The same is true for every one of us. Jesus knows exactly how we will fail him in the future. Nevertheless, Jesus still wants to demonstrate his love in us, and eventually make us whole.

Third, at the end of John we find that Jesus does not leave Peter as he was—a broken man. A man who could only think of going back to the occupation he was once good at, namely fishing. How could he find joy in that, after spending three years walking in the wake of God's salvation for all humanity? Only unmitigated frustration lies in that direction. So what do we find? We find Jesus once again showing his love for Peter by restoring him to his proper place in the kingdom of God. Thus, Peter discovers that the process which God began in his life would be brought to completion because of grace alone, and not because he had a stellar track record in spiritual matters. God would not leave him forsaken, but would fully restore him.

The Value of This Chiasm

One may ask, "What is the value of this chiasm? After all, the themes of divine provision, resurrection, and restoration are readily found in the Gospel of John." As I see it, there are a number of benefits in recognizing this literary structure. First, it explains the presence of extraneous information that otherwise would go unanswered or be subjected to elaborate interpretations that

ultimately fall short. But with this scheme, one is free not to impose torturous explanations on certain verses, knowing they are functioning more like literary markers than key components of the text.

Second, without this chiasmic structure, there is little reason to consider the foretelling of Peter's downfall as a central component of the Gospel, and consequently it would simply be viewed as one of many periscopes that occupy the middle. Likewise, the importance of having chap. 21 as *the last chapter* would be lost, since its placement is governed by the significance of Peter's downfall and restoration for the chiasm. Indeed, in light of current Johannine scholarship, this last point is important, since there are many scholars who believe that chap. 21 was added to the Gospel, either as an "afterthought" by the author, or by a redactor who believed the material should have been included.³⁰ While this scheme does not solve the question of whether a redactor was involved, it does bring more grist to the discussion, since the outcome of this analysis maintains that whoever wrote the final draft was also involved in the shaping and placement of those passages where the *tri-terms* occur. And if this is the case, then many of the theories regarding the composition of John's Gospel will need to be revisited.

The third reason this chiasm is significant is because it provides a corrective restraint on the symbolic interpretations proposed for these biblical events. That is to say, it supports a more down-to-earth understanding of what is happening in the passages: where the historical outlook of the *participants* (and not just the readers of the Gospel) is taken more seriously. Hence, the reason for labeling *The Wine* and *The Fish* passages, "Divine Provision." Again, this is not to discount the symbolic interpretations of these passages, but to stress a viewpoint that has been largely overlooked. Indeed, if we ask the question, "If John wanted to emphasize one interpretation over

³⁰ For reasons behind this assessment of chap. 21, see Brown 1077-1082.

another of a given event, how could he do it? How could he do it without discounting other legitimate interpretations of the same event?” One way is by linking two stories that have only one common theme, namely divine provision.³¹

And finally, all these stories about divine provision resonate with a number of OT promises: where God will renew Israel and provide its people with endless prosperity. Thus the following,

They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. ... I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD. (Jer. 31:12, 14 – NRSV).

The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. (Amos 9:13-14 – NRSV).

From these passages, one can see the acts of Jesus as a foreshadowing of God’s restoration of Israel and the renewal of the earth. Indeed, if we look at the chiasm again, where Jesus is portrayed as “the real Temple” that replaces all human institutions (2:13-22),³² then maybe the symbolic interpretation of 153 fish that focuses on Ezekiel 47 could be reconciled with the view of this

³¹ Besides being the only other place in the Gospel where John mentions fish, there are good reasons to believe that John has linked the feeding of the five thousand (6:1-23) to the great catch of fish in chap. 21. One indication of this is the term “Sea of Tiberias:” another name for the Sea of Galilee that was relatively new for the time and rarely used (see Brown, 232). Indeed, John is the only one who uses it in the NT and thought it necessary to define it (6:1). Even more so, the term is used as an “inclusio” to mark the beginning and end of the segment (6:1, 23). Hence, when it appears for the third and last time in 21:1, there is good reason to suspect it is functioning as a literary marker that links the two passages *about divine provision* together.

Another example of this is the word “Cana.” In John it is used four times, with the first two occurrences as an *inclusio* for the Marriage in Cana (2:1, 11). Then it is used for the story of Jesus healing the official’s son who was “about to die” (4:46-54); and just in case we might miss the connection, John says it this way, “Cana in Galilee, *where he made the water wine.*” And finally “Cana” is used in 21:2. Thus we have two stories of divine provision bracketing one that resonates with the resurrection (see John 11:25).

³² See Brown, 104-105: “*How did Cana reveal the glory of Jesus?—Messianic replacement and abundance.*”

paper.³³ For in Ezekiel 47, the abundance of God *flows from the Temple*, with one of the results being many kinds of fish which fishermen can cast their nets upon (v.10).

Conclusion

As I have indicated above, I believe there can be only one conclusion with regards to the *tri-terms* and how they are used in the Gospel of John: that the author carefully placed them within key passages in order to highlight the significance of those occasions. While a person may effectively argue against some of the details of this analysis, I do not believe any argument can overturn the proposition that John was very deliberate in how he used these words. The reason is simple: given all the converging patterns, as described above, any argument that ruled out intentionality would be highly improbable.³⁴ As for the chiastic structure of these terms and the general labeling of each occasion, these issues are certainly open to debate. However, I find the theological points that naturally flow from the chiastic structure (as I have envisioned it) quite comforting and resonates with my understanding of the Gospel. Indeed, I would say this is another converging factor towards confirming the thesis: that the theological outcome of this chiastic structure is fundamentally in keeping with the central thrust of the Gospel—that through Jesus Christ, God provides for all our needs. From the most modest of needs to the greatest, from our daily bread to forgiveness and eternal life, we find what we need in Jesus.

³³ For an overview and critique of the symbolic interpretations that focuses on Ezekiel 47, see *Appendix*.

³⁴ This would be a *statistical improbability*, not one based on subjective weighing of ideas.

Appendix – A History of the Interpretation of John’s 153 Fish

We start this discussion about the history of interpretation of John 21:11, and why John states the exact number “153” as the amount of fish caught, by summarizing and critiquing the *symbolic or analogical interpretations*. As stated above, this category encompasses numerous theories and variations of each theory—to the point where it’s impossible to elucidate all of them. I will therefore discuss only the most prominent among the many, but with the understanding that the criticism leveled against these can most likely be applied to all theories in this category. Following this section, we will proceed to the *historical interpretation* of this verse and evaluate its plausibility.

A Biological Analogy

One of the earliest explanations for “153 fish” is found in Jerome’s commentary on Ezekiel 47. Ezekiel 47 presents a prophetic vision of a stream flowing from the Temple, where “fishermen will stand along the shore; from *En Gedi* to *En Eglaim*, there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Great Sea” (v.10 - NIV). Jerome postulates that John 21 alludes to this passage in Ezekiel, with 153 fish corresponding to the number of *species* in the sea (according to *Oppianus Cilix*).³⁵ And because Jesus told the disciples they would become “fishers of men,” Jerome interprets John 21:4-11 as a kind of living parable about the mission of the church and its work among all the nations. In short, according to Jerome, the 153 fish in John 21:11 corresponds to the 153 species of fish in the sea, which represents the universal mission of the church and the work of the apostles.

³⁵ *Oppianus Cilix (Oppian)* was a 2nd century Greek poet who wrote poems on a number of subjects, including marine biology.

There are a number of problems with Jerome's interpretation. First, from what we have of Oppian's work, it is difficult to come up with 153 as the number of species. Not only does "Oppian himself declare them uncountable and does not list them in any systematic way,"³⁶ but even if one attempts to count his list, it does not total 153. Consequently, many scholars suspect "Jerome has interpreted Greek zoology by way of the Gospel and so done some creative accounting."³⁷ Second, Jerome simply *assumes* the author of John has Ezekiel 47 in mind when he tells the fishing story in chap. 21. For even though there are some common themes in the two passages (abundance coming from a supernatural source and the catching of fish), the details do not correspond (Ezekiel speaks about a *variety* of fish, while John only notes their size). If John wanted to highlight the idea of missions to *all the nations*, would he not preserve the notion of *variety*? And finally, Jerome *assumes* that John *presumes* his audience knows certain facts and will mentally connect them with this story, like the number of fish in the sea and that Jesus called his disciples to be "fishers of men" (for only the Synoptic Gospels mentions this – *cf.* Mark 1:17, Matt. 4:19, Luke 5:10). So it is highly unlikely that Jerome's interpretation of 153 fish has hit the mark.

A Mathematical Riddle

Another early explanation was proposed by Augustine, who noticed that 153 is the sum of the numbers of 1 through 17 ($1+2+3 \dots +17 = 153$). He then follows this observation by taking the last number (17) and breaking it down into two parts, 10 and 7, which of course are highly significant numbers in biblical literature. So once the numbers 10 and 7 have been extracted from 153, Augustine can proceed with something familiar in order to do his exegesis of John 21. Yet knowing

³⁶ R. M. Grant, "One Hundred Fifty-Three Large Fish" (John 21:11), *HTR* 42 (1949), 273. [As quoted by George J. Brooke, "4Q252 and the 153 Fish of John 21:11." *Antikes Judentum und Frühes Christentum*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 258].

³⁷ George J. Brooke, "4Q252 and the 153 Fish of John 21:11." *Antikes Judentum und Frühes Christentum*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 258.

Augustine's conclusions are not particularly helpful for this discussion, since those who have followed his methodology have ended up with vastly different conclusions. There are two reasons for this.

First, the question arises, "What is to be gained exegetically by knowing that 153 is really "10 + 7?" Since these numbers are widely used in the biblical text, it becomes somewhat arbitrary deciding what passages of Scripture should be connected to John 21. And if all we get from 10 and 7 is the concept of "perfection," then it is how one interprets the rest of the passage that determines what is considered "perfect." But since verse 11 already indicates the catch had exceeded the net's capacity, "...although there were so many, the net was not torn," then 153 simply becomes redundant information (albeit through a very circuitous route of reasoning).

The second reason this approach of reconstituting the original number produces divergent results is because there are no natural boundaries limiting the imagination of the exegete as to what John had in mind. With each step, there exist multiple possibilities, with nothing more than one's own rumination to determine the direction taken. Hence, one author takes the number 17 and associates it with John 6, where Jesus takes 2 fish and 5 barley loaves, and after feeding the multitude, has 12 baskets left over. Thus 5 loaves + 12 baskets = 17. Augustine's magic number! Still others break the number down even further (i.e. 10+4+3), and attach theological significance to each number.³⁸ Indeed, there is no need to produce the number 17, for the total number can be broken down in a more natural way (100+50+3), followed by an allegorical interpretation. Thus Cyril of Alexandria postulated that "the 100 represents the fullness of the Gentiles; the 50 represents the remnant of Israel; the three represents the Holy Trinity."³⁹ But the reason the allegorical method has been largely abandoned by the Church is because it is far too arbitrary.

³⁸ For a brief overview of these and other proposals, see Carson, 672-673.

³⁹ Brown, 1075.

A Coded Language

A third symbolic approach for interpreting 153 is called “gematria:” a term derived from geometry that refers to a kind of secret coded-language. Due to the fact that the Arabic numeral system (0, 1, 2, 3, etc.)⁴⁰ we now use had not yet been developed, the practice of early Greek and Hebrew authors was to utilize alphabetic letters to also represent numbers. Hence, as symbols, they performed double-duty. So for English, it would follow that ‘a’=1, ‘b’=2, ‘c’=3, and so on. With this in mind, it became possible to represent words or phrases with numbers and vice versa. For example, the word “bed” would have a numeric value of 11, because $b=2$, $e=5$, and $d=4$: thus $2+5+4=11$. With regards to the Bible, “the most famous example of gematria is the number of Antichrist, given in Rev. 13:18 as 666; all kinds of names have been found to total 666, but the most likely candidate is *Nero Caesar* written in Hebrew letters...”⁴¹ But as illustrated by 666, the higher the number, the greater the possible renderings become, thus making the author’s original intent more difficult to know and verify. So with gematria in mind, many have tried to interpret 153 as a coded phrase: a phrase that is somehow related to the passage as a whole.⁴² Candidly speaking, most of these attempts seem rather far fetched, because they come up with phrases that *require* long and intricate explanations as to why they are germane to John 21. However, taking up Jerome’s suggestion that John 21 alludes to Ezekiel 47 (as well as Augustine’s derivative number of 17), J. A. Emerton argues that both 153 and 17 can be found in the proper names *En Gedi* and *En Eglaim* (v. 10).⁴³ So once again the verse in Ezekiel 47 has been linked with John 21:11, but this time with gematria, rather than with a biological connection. Even so, there still remains the task of

⁴⁰ Also called *Hindu–Arabic numerals* or *Hindu numerals*.

⁴¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2nd ed.) WBC v. 36. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1999), 402.

⁴² It should be noted that the Greek text in John does not use this manner of expressing ‘153’, but names each digit “hundred fifty three” (ἑκατὸν πενήχοντα τριῶν).

⁴³ John A. Emerton. “The Hundred and Fifty-three Fish in John 21:11.” *Journal of Theological Studies* 9 (April 1958), 86-89.

connecting the two passages together *theologically* in order to understand why John is alluding to Ezek. 47:10 (if indeed he is) and how that effects the interpretation of John's Gospel.

Despite what appears as a significant connection between John 21:11 and Ezek. 47:10 by Emerton, the gematria interpretation has a number of difficulties with regards to John 21. First of all, while it is true this scheme was known to the New Testament writers (cf. Rev. 13:18; Mark 13:14; Matt. 24:15), the instances where it is clearly being used contain odd phrases that alert the readers to its presence. Hence, the Gospels use the phrase, "let the reader understand." Revelation 13:18 bluntly states that the number represents a personal name: "...let anyone with understanding *calculate* the number of the beast, for it is the *number of a person...*" (NRSV, italics mine). The point is that in all three cases, "... gematria performs an important function *in context* by emphasizing cryptically the information already there."⁴⁴

Second, many of the gematria solutions offered (including Emerton) are based on the Hebrew alphabet, not Greek, which would mean that John assumed his readers knew Hebrew and would be able to decipher his coded message of 153. While it is true the gematria found in Revelation, Mark, and Matthew are based on Hebrew, I agree with D. A. Carson, that it is "extremely unlikely in a book where elementary Hebrew words have to be transliterated (*e.g.* 1:37, 41)."⁴⁵

Finally, there is the question of identifying what phrase and/or passage the gematria 153 refers to. For as the theory goes, once the reader recognizes that 153 is indeed gematria and applies his knowledge of Hebrew to determine what are the most probable renderings (remember, there can be many possibilities), then the person must finally determine what passages in Scripture (for there could be more than one) that John had in mind. And all this is to determine why John said that 153 fish were caught. Frankly, the only reasonable assumption here is that John anticipated his readers

⁴⁴ O.T. Owen, "One Hundred and Fifty Three Fishes," *The Expository Times*. 100:2 (Nov. 1988), 53.

⁴⁵ Carson, 673.

would come up with the correct answer. But it is exactly at this point where gematria is discredited with regards to John 21:11. For the whole process involves what I would call “compound conjectures;” that is, it requires a person to build an argument on conjectures, one after another, with *diminishing probability* that the outcome will be correct. Hence, I believe Raymond Brown is correct when he states, “... it is the sheerest speculation to base gematria on an expression that never occurs in the Johannine writings.”⁴⁶

The Landing of Noah’s Ark

More recently, George Brooke has attempted to buttress Emerton’s position of applying gematria to Ezek. 47:10, where he comes up with 153 and 17 from the names *En Gedi* and *En Eglaim*. Brooke’s argument revolves around a *Qumran* commentary of Genesis (4Q252) and its remarks on the story of Noah. He states that, “Although the number 153 does not occur in the text of 4Q252, it is clear that the ark comes to rest on Mount Ararat on the one hundred and fifty-third day after the start of the flood, on the seventeenth of the seventh month.”⁴⁷ So by calculating the time the ark was afloat, and noting the biblical account of the day and month the ark comes to rest (Gen. 8:4), we come up with three significant numbers in regards to John 21 — 153, 17 (via the hypothesis of Augustine), and 7 (the number that went fishing, 21:2). From this, Brooke finds significance in the corresponding numbers by the fact that Noah and his family are linked typologically with baptism in the Petrine tradition (e.g. 1 Pet. 3:20-21) and “the general agreed view that the catch of fish [in John 21] has to do with the mission of the church.”⁴⁸ In short, the fish represent the bringing in of all baptized believers, “who are the fulfilment of the expectations of

⁴⁶ Brown, 1075.

⁴⁷ Brooke, 256.

⁴⁸ Brooke, 265.

Ezekiel 47, especially verse 10 concerning En-gedi and En-eglaim.”⁴⁹ Thus, Brooke attempts “to tie several interpretative threads together to show what kind of rich net is used in John 21:11 for landing those 153 fish.”⁵⁰

While it is intriguing how once again the numbers of 153, 17, and 7 can be found in other sources, there still remains the problem of corroborating evidence from the Gospel itself. For even though some scholars have embraced a symbolic interpretation of John 21:1-13, there is very little in John to indicate an allusion to Noah and/or Ezekiel 47. But even if we *assume* John knew the tradition of the ark resting on the 153rd day, and *assume* he knew the Petrine typology of Noah with water baptism and thereby tied it in with the great catch in chap. 21, there is no reason for Brooke to bring Emerton’s hypothesis into the picture. Indeed, his position is better off without it. While Emerton’s proposal is noteworthy, it still retains all the difficulties of gematria. In addition, there is the problem of elucidating how a passage about a plentiful land (Ezekiel 47) is related to water baptism? Either John 21 speaks about abundant supply from God (thus resonating with Ezekiel 47), or it speaks about water baptism (thus alluding to the Flood story). But it only muddies the waters to say John 21 refers to *both* Ezekiel 47 and the Flood story.

Historical Trivia

As indicated above there are a number of problems with the symbolic or analogical explanations. While some of them are certainly possible, nevertheless, as Brown states, “we have no evidence that any such complicated understanding of 153 would have been intelligible to John’s readers. We know of no speculation or established symbolism related to the number 153 in early thought.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Brooke, 265.

⁵⁰ Brooke, 265.

⁵¹ Brown, 1075.

Consequently, because of the lack of evidence for a symbolic explanation, a number of scholars simply see the number as another example of John's "love for exactness and a readiness to supply numerical detail..."⁵² Hence, they attribute the number to the preoccupation of fishermen to have an exact count of every catch, either for the mundane purpose of dividing it up among themselves, or because they were curious about how large it actually was.⁵³ As for John providing the number, this may serve to give credence to the eyewitness character of the account. So goes the explanation. But where the symbolic explanations appear too esoteric to be credible, the simple historical explanation seems too pedestrian for the Gospel of John and its literary style. For as a literary piece, the Gospel of John is a rich tapestry of interlocking themes and hidden meanings, so carefully crafted in every detail that it is difficult to accept that the author merely indulged in historical trivia. So then, while the historical explanation may provide a more reasonable interpretation than the traditional symbolic ones, as to why John records 153 fish, it leaves one feeling dissatisfied in light of what we know about the literary style of John's Gospel.

⁵² Morris, 764. (Morris states this can be "documented elsewhere in this Gospel," but fails to actually document it).

⁵³ Even if historicity was important to John, the notion that *commercial fishermen* (for that is what they were) are always *preoccupied* with exact counts seems a bit far fetched. For such individuals, fishing is not a sport, but a back breaking job they work day in and day out. It would not be the count that mattered, but whether they made enough profit to feed their families. For them, it would be enough to say, 'The net was so full it almost ripped apart.'

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⁵⁴ Due to the fact that this article is the culmination of many years of off-and-on research, I have lost track of all the journal articles and commentaries I have read on this subject. Since I am unable to give an accurate bibliography of what I have read, I have decided to only provide the references I have quoted or where I direct the reader to look for further information. My apologies to those who would have liked to have more.

History of this Paper

Many times hearing the stories of others and the difficulties they encountered, as they pressed on to make a goal come true, helps our own soul persevere in hard times as we press on to achieve our aspirations. One objective of mine was to publish this paper and to share what I thought was an advance in biblical studies. I thought my basic premise and argument was convincing and would be readily accepted. I was wrong with that initial assessment. The few biblical journals I tried to submit the first version of this paper to never got back to me, let alone publish my work. So for a brief period of time I “published” that early paper on my own website (©2007).⁵⁵ It never got any attention from the academic community, and except for a few friends who read it (some well educated in biblical studies, some not), I don’t think many others bothered to try.

After a few more years went by, I asked a former professor of mine if he would read my paper and tell me what he thought. He agreed to review it and provided me invaluable feedback. I realized then that my old nemesis “dyslexia” had made the paper excessively flawed for a busy editor to accept and continue reading until he got to the “good stuff.” This is because not only was the paper riddled with grammatical mistakes, but I gave far too long of an introduction and overview of previous interpretations before getting to my thesis. My most persistent “thorn in the flesh” and my naïveté about the publishing world had sunk my ship before it left the harbor. But after a great deal of procrastination, I have finally laid my hands upon the plow again and have rewritten this paper. It probably still has flaws, but that’s OK. I no longer have any aspirations to work in the academic world, so it doesn’t matter whether I have published anything of repute. Besides, by “publishing” it on my website, I can garner feedback from others, and revise it to my heart’s content. There is no longer any need to produce a near-perfect presentation or defend my position until I die (which may

⁵⁵ It had the same title as this paper and the website address was the same: www.kesi-discipleship.com.

be the time it takes for the academic community to take my position seriously). Again, for the encouragement of others to persevere in their goals, here is a brief timeline for the realization of this paper.

In the summer of 2001, while researching John 21 to write a paper for a theology class, I came up with the idea of *tri-terms* as a literary device for understanding the enigma of 153 fish in 21:11. In the fall of 2001, I tried to share my thoughts in a sermon for the preaching class I was taking. People were polite and complimentary, but I don't think any of them really grasped what I was *trying* to convey. (Maybe my preaching was like my writing skills). Anyway, in 2003, while *attempting* to finish my thesis for a Th.M. degree, I found myself "irrationally" drawn to the idea of doing further research on John's fish story and produce a paper. Even more, I wanted the paper to be published in a journal. So after spending far too much time on the fish paper (and neglecting my thesis), I sent my paper to a friend, Steve Hayner, who graciously agreed to provide feedback. Steve sent back my manuscripts with his handwritten comments on them and I attempted to upgrade the quality of the paper according to his comments. After a few times of back and forth with Steve, I decided to submit the paper to journals. As I said, nothing came of it. (Frankly, I think Steve was a bit too gentle on me with his criticism—knowing my struggles with academics). So as I stated above, I put it on my website. Then in the summer of 2011, I asked Steve Layman to read the paper and critique it like an editor would. Being a professor and author for many years, he gave the feedback I desperately needed (though it was hard to receive). But I discovered that I no longer had any zeal left to pursue it, though there was still an ember of desire within me. Finally, in the spring of 2017 I revised this paper (15+ years after the first idea), added material that was not in the first version, and hopefully upgraded its literary quality so more people will benefit from it than the previous one.

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Please note: If you do not put an appropriate title of your email in the Subject Box (i.e. Question about 153 fish), then I will assume it is spam and delete it without opening it. Also, if my website is working properly, you should receive an automatic response indicating your email has been received. If not, please try again. If I don't get back to you right away, please don't get discouraged. As indicated by some of my articles, writing anything takes a lot out of me, and I'm just unable to guarantee a quick response. As Charles Spurgeon said, "Writing is the work of a slave." At least that is true for some of us.