

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN - PART XXIV

THE RETURN TO GALILEE, THE FINAL COMMISSIONING OF PETER, AND THE CONCLUDING REMARKS

I. The account in chapter 21 comes after what seems to be a conclusion at the end of chapter 20. Some have argued that this chapter was a later addition.

A. Even if it is a later addition, however, it is designed to tie into the rest of the Gospel.

- It is appropriate that the Resurrection account goes from Jerusalem, the place of conflict, where the Apostles are still afraid, to Galilee, where the more idyllic scenes of restoration occur in the Gospel.
- The Gospels of Matthew and Mark relate that Jesus told the disciples to go to Galilee, see Matt 28:10; Mark 16:7, but do not describe what happened there. This account thus fills in the gap.
- This account also develops the relationship between Peter, John, and the other disciples, whom the first chapter introduces, thus bringing a sense of completion with the beginning of the Gospel.

B. This account also cross references the first three appearances, see verses 2 and 14, thus indicating that it was not developed independently.

C. The alternative use of "we" and "I" in the last two verses may indicate that there was a primary author of the account, but that he had a community surrounding him. The simplest theory is that John gave the account to his disciples, who wrote it down, possibly because John was too old to do so.

D. There are similarities between this account and the miraculous catch associated with the callings of the disciples in the Gospel of Luke. Luke 5:1-11

- This Gospel emphasizes this point, both by referring to James and John and the sons of Zebedee, a reference unique to this Gospel, but used in Luke. See Luke 5:10.

- In addition, the other miraculous catches concluded with a reference to Peter and the other disciples as fishers of men; this one refers to Peter as the shepherd.

- This account, like the earlier one, is associated with a calling to the Apostles, but here the calling is associated with Jesus no longer being visibly present, but the Apostles, especially Peter and John, now acting more with their own initiative.

II. The scene opens with Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James and John fishing on the Sea of Galilee, with Simon Peter clearly in the leadership position.

A. There now seems to be more of a sense of cooperation among the disciples. They follow Peter, but Peter also recognizes something special in John.

- There are only seven, and thus not all eleven of the remaining Apostles were there. The unnamed disciples may in fact not have been Apostles.

- At one level, this fact makes sense, for not all of the Apostles were fishermen. At another level, John may be emphasizing that the Apostles will not have to be united as long as the leadership (represented by Peter) and the prayerfulness of the Church (represented by John) are present.

- Seven is also a common symbol of perfection, especially reflecting the seven days of creation.

B. The Gospel describes them as fishing through the night.

- This reference would make sense because fishing generally was done during the night. But it also has a spiritual significance of the absence of Jesus, and the resulting frustration.

- It may seem odd that they were fishing while awaiting Jesus. However, it makes sense that they would do so, both because they needed to support themselves, and because, in times of uncertainty, people often seem refuge in things they are used to. There is also possibly a notion of the consecration of ordinary life. Even after the Resurrection, daily labor is not left behind, but rather is consecrated.

C. As dawn breaks, Jesus appears to them, but they do not recognize Him.

- At one level, this fact may be understandable, for He was 100 yards away, the light was just beginning to shine, and they were no doubt tired.
- But this failure to recognize is also consistent with the other appearance accounts. In addition, there is a spiritual lesson that Jesus is usually working in our lives well before we recognize Him.

D. Jesus refers to them as children, and tells them to cast their nets to the other side.

- At one level, He is taking on the role of a parent or elder teaching younger ones. However, unknown to the Apostles at the time, there is also a notion of their adoption as sons of God. See John 1:12; 1 John 3:2
- Jesus waits for them to say that they have caught no fish. There is perhaps an indication of God waiting for people to realize that their own efforts alone will accomplish nothing before bringing in success.

E. Upon the catch of fish, John recognizes Jesus first. Peter then immediately acts.

1. At one level, this complementarity reflects their characters. John is more thoughtful and understands Jesus more. Peter tends to be the one who speaks or acts first, either boldly or foolishly depending on the circumstances. See, e.g., Matt. 16:16, 22; John 6:68, 13:37. The other disciples deal with the practical aspect of getting the boat to shore with the fish.
- 2.. At another level, they represent different aspects of the Church, insight of the mystics, the action of the leaders and the assistance of the rest of the Church.

F. They bring the fish to shore, combining their efforts with the bread, fish and fire that Jesus has already prepared.

1. It makes sense that Jesus would have from His journey there. And it makes sense for Him to have prepared a fire so that the fish could be cooked immediately. But the bread and fire can also be considered a symbol for the Eucharist and Confirmation. The fish that Jesus brings may reflect those that died before the time of the Apostles, now joined with the

Church.

2. The Gospel notes the precise number of fish, 153, that they caught, and the fact that the net was not torn.

- John, being a professional fisherman, would note the exact number of fish. This fact indicates that, after three years with Jesus, they had not forgotten their talents as fishermen. There is here again a notable realism in the Gospel.
- According to St. Jerome, the Greeks sorted out all of the fish into 153 species. Thus the number of fish may well reflect a sense of universality. See Luke 10:16.
- St. Augustine also sees in the number 153 the sum of all numbers from 1 to 17, 17 being symbolic of the 10 commandments and 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit or days of creation.
- In addition, noting the exact number of fish reflects the fact that each individual brought to Christ is important. See Luke 15:1-7; John 10:3. God does not think in terms of round numbers of believers.
- The fact that the net was not torn indicates that the Church will not suffer from having all sorts of people. The Greek verb used here, *schizo*, can also mean a division within the Church. See 1 Cor. 1:10, 12:25.

3. The meal together also indicates that ordinary things are not left behind after the resurrection. Rather, they are combined with the sacred.

G. John says it was the third appearance of Christ after His resurrection.

- He clearly means the third appearance to the disciples gathered together, for Jesus had appeared at other times as well. See Luke 24:13-35; 1 Cor. 15:5-11.

III. Jesus then commissions Peter as Shepherd of the flock and implicitly forgives him for his denials.

A. The reference to a charcoal fire in verse 9 already reminds one of Peter's three denials while around the charcoal fire at the high priest's house.

B. Jesus asks Peter three times whether he loves Him, reflecting the three denials of Peter.

1. At this point, he refers to Peter again as Simon, both because that name is more personal (Peter, or rock, is more of a title) and because He is going to commission Simon again to take on his role as the rock of the Church.

2. The first question is whether he loves Jesus "more than these."

- The more that these (pleon touton) could mean: (1) more than the other disciples love Me; (2) more than you love the other disciples; or (3) more than you love the fish, tackle, and old way of life generally.

- If the first meaning is intended, Jesus is asking Peter whether He still claims to love Jesus more than the other disciples do. See Matt. 26:33, Mark 14:29. In that case, Peter's answer affirms he loves Jesus, but is not claiming to compare his love to that of the other disciples.

- The second meaning is unlikely, given that there does not seem to be a competition between Peter's love for Jesus and his love for the other disciples.

- If the third meaning is intended, the question is whether Peter will be able to make a break from his old way of life.

3. In all cases, Peter responds, "You (Jesus) know that I love You." He is no longer relying on his own power or resolutions anymore, but rather on Jesus' knowledge of him.

4. There is a subtle wordplay here. When Jesus asks, "Do you love Me?" for the first and second time, He uses the Greek word agape, which Christians coined to reflect perfect love of God and love of others as created by God. When Peter responds, he uses the word phileo, which reflects the love of friends. Jesus then uses Peter's term for the last question. This wordplay would not have been in the original Aramaic or Hebrew that was spoken, so Peter's subtle misunderstanding would not have been as evident at the time. The difference may have been more one of a manner of speech.

- It may be that Peter did not yet understand the more perfect love reflected in the word agape, instead thinking still in terms of simple friendship. If so, Jesus adjusts the call to Peter's level. It may also be that Peter is not willing to make any extravagant claims, and so only declares the lesser more human love.

C. In response to each affirmation of Jesus' knowledge of his love, Jesus gives Peter a commissioning: "feed My lambs," "tend My sheep", and "feed My sheep."

- All of these commissionings reflect the image of Peter as chief shepherd (pastor in Latin.) This image reflects the idea of the leaders of God's people as shepherds, see 2 Sam. 5:2, 24:27; Ps. 78:70. It also fulfills the prophecies that God would send new shepherds, under one shepherd, for His flock. See Jer. 3:15; 23:4-6; Ez. 34:23-24. The Christians would take up this image of shepherds for their ministers. See Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:2-4.

- Jesus is above all the Good Shepherd fulfilling the line of David. But the kings of the line of David always had a royal minister to guide their kingdom in their absence. See Is. 22:15-25. Peter and his successors would fulfill this role.

- As described in the Gospel according to Matthew Jesus promised that He would make Peter the rock upon which the church was built and give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven. See Matt. 16:16-19. Here He fulfills this promise.

D. Jesus then speaks to Peter about the sufferings he is to endure. The reference to stretching out his hands and being led to a place where he does not want to go refers to Peter's crucifixion in Rome at the hands of Nero between 64 and 67 A.D. But the Gospel presents this crucifixion in terms of glorifying God, showing the power of God not inspiring Peter to a martyrdom he fled before.

IV. Peter then asks about John, recognizing his special role.

A. Jesus tells Peter not to worry about him, for He may want John to abide until He returns again. Evidently, Peter has some sense that John should not suffer death, perhaps because of His closeness to Jesus, or perhaps because of his purity. It is noteworthy that John alone was not martyred.

- At one level, Jesus is telling Peter not to concern himself with the future of John.

- At another level, the vision of John, as set forth in this Gospel and the Book of Revelation, will remain until Christ comes again.

B. The Gospel uses the occasion to clarify a misunderstanding that Jesus had promised He would come again before the death of the last Apostle. It would seem that this passage was written shortly before, or perhaps right after, the death of John. Because Peter had died at least 30 years earlier, John seems also to be emphasizing the importance of the office of Peter as the Church would continue after the apostolic era.

C. The Gospel then specifically attributes authorship to the beloved disciple, whom the Gospel emphasizes it an eyewitness. This eyewitness nature of the account gives it greater credibility. See Peter 1:16; 1 John 1:1-4.

- These lines may have been written by a disciple of John, or John himself may still be speaking of himself in the third person. However, the reference to "we" indicates that there was certainly a community gathered around him.

D. The Gospel ends on an open note, saying that the mysteries of Jesus' life on earth are too vast for human language. Like all great literature, but even more so, the Gospel opens the mind to a sense of mystery beyond itself.