

John 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way.
- Simon Peter, Thomas, called the twin, Nathaniel of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, I am going fishing.
- They said to him, We will go with you. They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore, yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.
- Jesus said to them, Children, do you have any fish? They answered him, No. He said to them, Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.
- So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, It is the Lord. When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.
- [1 : 0 9] The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.
- Jesus said to them, Bring some of the fish that you have just caught. So Simon Peter went aboard, and hauled the net ashore full of large fish, one hundred and fifty of them.
- And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, Come, and have breakfast. Now none of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you?
- They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread, and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.
- When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? He said to him, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.
- [2 : 1 2] He said to him, Feed my lambs. He said to him a second time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? He said to him, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.
- He said to him, Tend my sheep. He said to him the third time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Peter was grieved, because he said to him the third time, Do you love me?
- And he said to him, Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you. Jesus said to him, Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted.
- But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go. This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.
- And after saying this, he said to him, Follow me. Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper, and had said, Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?

[3 : 22] When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, Lord, what about this man? Jesus said to him, If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?

You follow me. So the saying spread abroad among the brothers, that this disciple was not to die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?

This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true. Now, there are also many other things that Jesus did.

Were every one of them to be written? I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. John chapter 21 is an unusual chapter.

We've just read John chapter 20 verses 30 and 31. Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

[4 : 30] That seems like a pretty good ending for the gospel. But yet, the gospel goes on for a whole other chapter. So, what's this other chapter doing here? The question of what this chapter is doing here has exercised many scholars, and many have thought that John chapter 20 verses 30 to 31 is the ending of the book, and that chapter 21 is an awkward later edition.

But yet, that doesn't seem to be the case to me. As you look through the structure of the gospel more generally, this seems to have served the purpose of an epilogue. Now, an epilogue is not part of the main body of a story.

It's fenced off from the main narrative, but yet it is intended to be part of the narrative more generally. It's not just an appendix that's been added at some later point. It's deliberately set apart, but it's part of the design of the work.

And in the case of the Gospel of John, as Richard Borkham and others have argued, this balances the prologue with which the gospel begins in verses 1 to 18 of chapter 1.

And what the prologue does is give us a sense of the prehistory to the gospel story, what occurs before any of the events of the gospel. And then the epilogue gives us a sense of what's happening next, what's going to happen into the future of the church's mission.

[5 : 48] The epilogue previews what the church is going to do, and gives us an understanding of the character of its mission, and how its ministers are prepared for it. As Richard Borkham points out again, the story of the gospel opens with the words, in the beginning, and the last words of Christ in verse 23 are, until I come.

There is a holding of the narrative of the gospel between these two poles, the very beginning of history and the very end of history. Borkham has also observed that while the prologue has 496 syllables, the epilogue has 496 words, which would heighten the sense of a balance between them.

Now the epilogue is a story about the failure of the disciples and their fishing, followed by a miraculous catch of fish. And this is a story very similar to the story associated with the first calling of Peter, James, John and Andrew in Luke chapter 5 verses 1 to 11.

Not a story that's recorded in John's gospel, but which would be familiar to readers of the gospel, who knew other gospel accounts. Peter takes the lead in the plan to go fishing.

Some have seen this fishing expedition as a bad thing, that Peter and the other disciples are returning to their original trade, abandoning the gospel, abandoning the work of Christ. I don't think that's necessarily the case.

[7 : 07] Jesus' question to his disciples about whether they have any food, in verse 5, might recall the similar question that he asks in the feeding of the 5,000, in chapter 6 verse 5.

Once again, Jesus instructs them and they receive numerous fish. So it recalls, first of all, the calling of Peter, but also recalls the bread and the fish of the feeding of the 5,000.

There's a miracle here, once again, that involves believing and obeying Jesus' words. We've seen in the signs of the first half of the gospel that most of them involve taking Jesus' word and obeying it.

There's no pyrotechnics. It's not something that Christ does directly without any other party being involved. Indeed, most of the time, Jesus is giving instructions to people that they must obey. Take up your bed and walk.

Draw some of the water. Return to your home. Give out the bread and the fish. Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam. Lazarus, come forth. Open up the grave.

[8 : 06] All these sorts of things are events in which people must obey for the miracle to take place. And it's the believing of Christ's word that is really important here. The beloved disciple tells Peter, not the other disciples, it is the Lord.

However, although the beloved disciple is the first to recognise Jesus, Peter is the one who plunges into the sea and seeks to beat the boat to the land. The fact that he puts on his outer garment before doing so suggests some greater feat of physical strength, especially as he then goes and drags the net filled with 153 fish to the land seemingly single-handedly.

The beloved disciple is physically outmatched by Peter by some distance in the previous chapter, but Peter is really without equal here. Putting on the garment again might also suggest that he's returning to his office in some sense.

It's an image of restoration. The catching of fish is probably symbolic of the role of the church in the mission to the Gentiles. The church is like a part of the land that's been brought out to sea.

The nations are presented as the sea in the Old Testament, and Peter's plunging into the sea could maybe be related to his leading of the way in the Gentile mission. The fact that the net was not broken maybe suggests the capacity of the church to fulfil its mission in the world.

[9 : 25] Now, the fact that there were 153 fish caught is an unusual detail, in which many have seen symbolism, I think quite rightly. Why are we given the exact number of the fish?

Why not just say a great multitude of fish? Or maybe even around 150 fish? Why give that specific a detail? James Jordan has argued that 153 is the triangular number of 17.

He's not the only person to argue this, but I think there's something there. Crucial background, I think, is found in Ezekiel chapter 47, verses 1 to 12.

Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east, for the temple faced east. The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple, south of the altar.

Then he brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate that faces toward the east. And behold, the water was trickling out on the south side. Going on eastward with a measuring line in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits and then led me through the water and it was ankle deep.

[10 : 35] Again he measured a thousand and led me through the water and it was knee deep. Again he measured a thousand and led me through the water and it was waist deep. Again he measured a thousand and it was a river that I could not pass through for the water had risen.

It was deep enough to swim in, a river that could not be passed through. And he said to me, Son of man, have you seen this? Then he led me back to the bank of the river. As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other.

And he said to me, This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Araba and enters the sea. When the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live.

And there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh. So everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea.

From En Gedi to En Eglim, it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the great sea. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh.

[11 : 40] They are to be left for salt. And on the banks on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail. But they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary.

Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing. We've already seen Jesus and John, as the Gospel writer, take up the imagery of this passage earlier on within the Gospels.

Jesus is the one who provides living water. Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water, like the waters from the temple. Water flows from his pierced side. Christ is the one who awakens the winds of the garden, so that it blows out the fragrance.

But also so that the living water from the spring can flow forth into the world. Christ is the one who opens up this living water. And as it flows out, there is healing for the rivers and the waters.

And fish thrive. And then fishermen can catch many fish as they spread out their nets. These are all themes that we're seeing here. First of all, the flowing out of the living waters as Christ's tomb is opened up, and the living waters of that Holy of Holies flow out into the world.

[12 : 54] The living water of the royal lover's garden. Some scholars have suggested that there's an association with all the kinds of fish in the world, and 153 is the number of them.

That's one possible interpretation. But there is another. And that is the gematria of the words Gedi and Eglaym. In Hebrew, letters serve the purpose also of numbers, and so they have a numerical value attached.

And so when you have a particular word, it also has a numerical value that can be given to that word. Gedi is 17. Eglaym is 153. And 153 is the triangular number of 17, which many have noticed independent of the connection between those two names.

This seems like quite a striking connection to me. Probably too strong to be just a coincidence. The fact that the fishermen are catching fish from En Gedi to En Eglaym maybe suggests this movement from 17 to 153, which is an expansive movement, as that 17 is made into a triangular number, and the ministry of the church is going out into the world more broadly.

This also helps us to see this event as a sign. It's not just a miracle. It's not just a great act of power, but it's a symbol of the growing ministry and mission of the church, a ministry that will involve the catching of fish from many nations, the healing of the waters as the waters flow out, and it will involve Peter pioneering in that way as well.

[14 : 24] And all of these things are symbolized within this particular event. Jesus has prepared a fire of coals with fish and with bread, and the fish and the bread might recall the feeding of the 5,000.

In that particular occasion, Jesus involved his disciples in the ministry there, and he gave them a ministry in which they were participants in the spreading of this food. Here he's doing the same thing.

The fire of coals also recalls the fire of coals of chapter 18, verse 18, the fire of coals by which Peter denied Jesus. The fact that Jesus asked Peter three times whether he loves him would also seem to recall Peter's three denials.

Jesus, as in the story of Emmaus, he reveals himself in a shared meal and a bread action. But there's some sort of doubt lingering in some way, or at least they know it's Jesus, but after Easter something has definitively changed about him.

This is not Jesus as they knew him previously. There's something about him that has changed. He's in a resurrected body. There's a sense that something is not the same, and he's going to move on. Jesus, as he questions Peter, focuses on Peter's love.

[15 : 35] Does he love Jesus more than the other disciples? Now he had bragged earlier that even if all the others would forsake him, he would not forsake him. And Jesus' question is one that challenges him on that front.

He calls him to feed his lambs. Now is this a reference primarily to the weaker of the sheep, the s'more of the sheep, the children, and the people who are more vulnerable, those who have just come to faith?

Perhaps. I wouldn't read too much into it, nor would I read too much into the different words for love used here, as some have done. Jesus says much the same thing each time. And the point is that Peter is to demonstrate his love for Christ in his care for his people.

Remember that when Peter denied Christ, he also denied his association with Christ's people. Here he's been told that to demonstrate his love for Christ, he is to demonstrate it by loving and caring for Christ's people in their vulnerability.

Jesus then goes on to predict Peter's death. The physical strength that Peter has just displayed will depart, and he'll be girded, as Jesus was, for the utmost act of service.

[16 : 44] And the suggestion is one of martyrdom, specifically on a cross. He will stretch out his hands. And there's a parallel here between the death of Peter and the death of his Lord. In 2 Peter 1, verse 14, Peter suggests that Jesus had informed him about the nature and the timing of the death that awaited him.

Now, all of this calls back as well to chapter 13, verse 36 to 38. Simon Peter said to him, Lord, where are you going? Jesus answered him, Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.

Peter said to him, Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you. Jesus answered, Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

So Jesus restores him, but he also gives him an assurance that he will now be able to follow him. And he will be able to follow him to that point of martyrdom.

Not the martyrdom maybe that Peter expected, this martyrdom where he can chop off the ear of the servant and fight for Christ. But now a martyrdom where he will be seen in that very act of weakness, where he'll be led to a place where he doesn't want to go.

[17 : 58] He'll be put in a situation where he's not in power. And it would be precisely in this moment of weakness rather than the martyrdom of strength that Peter was anticipating, that he will follow his Lord.

At this point, Peter proceeds to ask about the manner of the beloved disciple's death. This isn't for Peter to know. He must rather focus upon following his own calling that he's been given. At this point also, that the identity of the author of the gospel is revealed to be the beloved disciple.

Like certain other figures within the gospel, the beloved disciple is never explicitly named. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is never actually explicitly named. She's spoken of as the mother of Christ or as woman.

I would suggest this is because they are playing not just specific historical parts, but also symbolic purposes. We're supposed to see in these specific characters, characters that we can identify with, that we can recognize our own connection with them and the way that they stand for the broader reality of the church or the paradigmatic disciple.

And this concluding passage presents the characters of Peter and the beloved disciple alongside each other, revealing them to have two unique and crucial callings. The beloved disciple and Peter have already, as I've noted, been played off against each other in different ways, compared and contrasted.

[19 : 17] The beloved disciple has a closeness to Christ that Peter maybe does not. Peter is the one who pioneers in mission in many ways, in the way that the beloved disciple does not. The beloved disciple and Peter are nonetheless always found in association with each other.

They work together. They're not at odds and in a fundamental rivalry with each other. Even though they're racing and other things like that and one's going ahead out of the boat, it's not seen as some fundamental opposition or antagonism between the two.

There's a recognition that they both have different parts to play. And there's something cryptic about the destiny of the beloved disciple. If I will that he remain until I come. And this seems to have been discussed quite extensively by people following Jesus' statement.

What might be meant by it? Well, I think one thing that might be meant by it is a fulfillment of what Jesus says elsewhere, that some of those standing here will not see death until they see the kingdom of God coming in its power.

And that refers in part to the events of the transfiguration, which occurs beforehand in the synoptic gospels. But I think it also refers to the events of AD 70, the events in which Christ would come in judgment upon Jerusalem.

[20 : 28] I think this anticipates that in part. In the book of Revelation, John is the great witness of the prophecy concerning those events. And he seems to be the one who lives to see those events take place.

Unlike most of the other apostles who die before they occur. There's also something about the character of the ministry of the beloved disciple, or John, as I believe he is, that does continue to the end.

Peter seems to be established as the chief shepherd of the church at this point and earlier. But John is the chief witness. He is the one who is in the side of Christ, much as Christ is in the side of the Father.

And in the light of the extreme emphasis upon witness within the book, it's significant that the witness bearer that comes to the forefront at the very end is the beloved disciple.

While the beloved disciple will not survive until the very end of all things, his witness will do. The beloved disciple and his witness are active means of the Spirit's advocacy concerning righteousness, concerning the judgment of the world, and testifying to Christ within the underlying legal drama of human history.

[21 : 38] And as the readers of his testimony were left with the question of where we stand in relationship to it, the Gospel began with a statement about time. The very beginning is the place where Christ is found.

And the very end of history is where Christ is to be found as well. He is going to come. But if the whole scope of time is referenced, there is also the whole scope of space referenced too.

The whole world would not be able to contain the witness to all the things that Christ has done if they were written down. In the very prologue of the Gospel then, and in the very epilogue, we see that Christ completes the full span of human history.

He's the Alpha and the Omega. He's also the one who fills space. The one who cannot be contained by space. The one who's greater than any of the scope that this world, this created universe offers.

He is the one who's greater than all these things. For he is with God, and he is God. A question to consider at the end of this treatment of the Gospel of John.

[22 : 42] The Gospel of John begins with the witness of a John, and ends with the witness of a John. The witness of John the Baptist, and then the witness of John, the beloved disciple. The book of Revelation contains many similar patterns and themes.

Once again, it begins with an emphasis upon witness. And as we work through it, we can see many patterns and similarities emerging. And it ends in a similar place too.

What are some of the ways in which the ending of the book of Revelation mirrors the ending of the Gospel of John?