

THE 153 FISH AND THE UNITY OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

Richard Bauckham
University of St Andrews

ABSTRACT

An important clue indicating the overall unity of the Gospel of John, including chapter 21, is often overlooked. This is the numerical value of 153 fish caught by the disciples according to 21:11, which represents the mathematical triangle of 17. The key text for interpreting the passage is Ezek 47:10, prophesying streams of living water flowing from the temple in the last days to make the Dead Sea fresh and full of fish. These symbolize numerically the children of God who receive life through believing in the signs given by Jesus, which are enumerated in the gospel. A complex but consistent numerical pattern or gematria can be demonstrated to underpin the structure and thematic of the whole gospel, particularly linking the Prologue with the Epilogue, which is expressed in the number 153.

1. Introduction

The final chapter of the Gospel of John has presented scholars with many problems, but probably those that have been most discussed are two: (1) the relationship of this chapter to the rest of the Gospel, and (2) the significance of the number 153 in 21:11.¹ In this article I shall argue for a solution to the second of these problems that also solves the first problem by demonstrating that chapter 21 is an integral part of the design of the whole Gospel.

J H Bernard's comment that, "The Fourth Gospel was plainly intended to end with 20:31",² expresses what a very large majority of modern scholars have thought, though a few have dissented and considered chapter 21 an original part of the Gospel.³ Some who regard chapter 21 as an "afterthought" or "appendix" added to an already complete Gospel hold it to come from the same author as the rest of the Gospel,⁴ but Rudolf Bultmann, considering it "incontestable that chapter 21 is the work of a second hand, added later",⁵ made this, along with a few of the alleged *aporias* within chapters 1-20, the justification for extensive source and redaction criticism of the Gospel. In this Bultmann has been followed by many others offering different accounts of the sources and processes of redaction that have produced the Gospel we have. Chapter 21 often functioned in twentieth-century Johannine scholarship as the "incontestable" evidence that the Gospel of John was not designed as a whole by a single author but had a history of composition by members of a Johannine school or leaders of a Johannine community. Thus the relationship of chapter 21 to the rest of the Gospel is an issue of considerable significance for our understanding of the composition of the whole Gospel.

1 For a survey of attempted solutions to the riddle of the number 153, see Beasley-Murray 1987, 401-404.

2 Bernard 1928, 687.

3 E.g. Cassian 1956; Thyen 1977; Minear 1983; Carson 1991, 665-668; Brodie 1993, 572-582. Others are listed in Gaventa 1996, 249-250 n. 8.

4 E.g. Bernard 1928, 687-688.

5 Quoted in Ashton 1991, 46.

Whether chapter 21 can be sufficiently distinguished from the rest of the Gospel on grounds of style to preclude its coming from the same author as the rest of the Gospel has been debated,⁶ and many scholars have commented that the evidence is insufficient to prove or to disprove common authorship.⁷ The latest work of Eugen Ruckstuhl (writing with Peter Dschulnigg),⁸ a new and very much strengthened version of his earlier argument, employs 153 (!; cf. John 21:11) distinctive features of Johannine style and a careful methodology to demonstrate the stylistic homogeneity of the whole Gospel, including chapter 21. The fact that many of the stylistic features are inconspicuous and not imitable proves that this homogeneity reflects not the sociolect of a Johannine group, but the idiolect of a single author. This argument against sources (other than thoroughly assimilated ones) and multiple layers of redaction by a series of Johannine authors has yet to be properly addressed by proponents of source and redaction criticism. Very recently, Tom Felton and Tom Thatcher report stylometric work that they claim supports Robert Fortna's hypothesis of a Signs Source (including parts of ch. 21),⁹ but the results seem too limited to establish the case. They are right to argue that statistical modelling and stylometry (not used by Ruckstuhl) should be applied to the Fourth Gospel, but they are surely not justified in simply dismissing the very thorough and methodologically quite sophisticated work of Ruckstuhl and Dschulnigg.¹⁰

However, the issue of stylistic homogeneity with the rest of the Gospel is not essential to the question with which we are presently concerned, i.e. whether chapter 21 is a later addition to a Gospel which originally ended at 20:31 or an integral part of the design of the Gospel as a whole. It is possible to hold a single author responsible for all twenty-one chapters of the Gospel and at the same time to regard chapter 21 as an appendix which that same author added subsequently to a Gospel s/he had originally designed to end at 20:31. It is also possible to consider that chapter 21 is dependent on a source that accounts for aspects of its style and vocabulary that distinguish it from the rest of the Gospel while also regarding it as composed in the form we have it by the author of the whole Gospel and designed by that author to be an integral part of the whole Gospel.

More decisive than the question of style in convincing most scholars that chapter 21 is an appendix added to a Gospel which was originally complete without it has been the impression that 20:30-31 reads so much like a conclusion that it must have been written to conclude the Gospel. Difficult as it is to dispel this impression, it is inaccurate. These verses claim to conclude the Gospel's account of the signs Jesus performed. They say that the signs that have been narrated (out of the many that could have been recorded) have been related in the Gospel so that hearers/readers may believe that Jesus is the Messiah and have life. These verses therefore conclude the Gospel's account of Jesus' signs and thereby complete the Gospel's main purpose, but there is no reason why they should be regarded as a conclusion to the Gospel itself.

6 Against common authorship, see especially Boismard 1947; in favour of common authorship, De Solages and Vacherot 1979; De Solages 1979, 191-235.

7 E.g. Lindars 1972, 622; Barrett 1978, 577; Robinson 1985, 111.

8 Ruckstuhl and Dschulnigg 1991; cf. Ruckstuhl [1951] 1987; Ruckstuhl 1977. Hengel (1993, 239-242) attributes considerable importance to Ruckstuhl's work, and of the 1991 book says: "An dieser grundlegenden Monographie wird die künftige Johannesforschung, wenn sie den Anspruch erhebt, wissenschaftlich ernstgenommen zu werden, nicht mehr vorbeigehen können" (241 n. 120).

9 Felton and Thatcher 2001.

10 Felton and Thatcher 2001, 211.

It is important to realize that the miracle in chapter 21 is not another of the signs.¹¹ The Gospel up to chapter 20 narrates seven signs, which are identifiable as the seven events of which the Gospel itself actually uses the word σημεῖον (2:11; 4:54; 6:2; 6:14, 26; 9:16; 12:18; 2:18-19). These include the resurrection, which (contrary to a common assertion) the Gospel does call a sign (2:18-19). These seven signs manifest Jesus' glory so that people may believe in him. The great catch of fish in chapter 21 is not a sign in this Johannine sense, but a miracle with a quite different purpose. It symbolizes programmatically the mission in which the disciples are now to engage. After chapter 20, no more needs to be said about Jesus himself: the central, christological purpose of the Gospel has been fulfilled. But more does need to be said about the disciples, especially about the roles which the two disciples most prominent in this Gospel, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, are to play in the ongoing mission of the church. This different subject-matter makes chapter 21 an epilogue, but an epilogue which there is no reason to doubt belongs to the original design and form of the Gospel. A comparison is often made between 20:30 and 21:25, as though the similarity is merely repetitive and demonstrates that 20:30 is part of the original conclusion while 21:25 is a part of a supplementary conclusion required by the addition of an appendix. But it seems to be overlooked that these two verses (20:30 and 21:25) differ in that the former speaks specifically of "many other signs" that "Jesus did" (πολλά . . . ἄλλα σημεῖα ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς), while the latter speaks generally of "many other things that Jesus did" (ἄλλα πολλά ἔποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς). The variation surely deliberately distinguishes the conclusion to the Gospel's account of Jesus' signs from the conclusion to the Gospel as such.

The present study is not attempting a full argument for considering chapter 21 an integral part of the Gospel, and enough has been said to prepare the way for the contribution that can be made to such a case by an investigation of the number 153. This requires us to broach the subject of numerical composition in the Fourth Gospel.

2. Numerical composition

NT scholars have rarely taken seriously the use of numerical techniques of literary composition by NT authors, but the evidence is mounting that such techniques were used in biblical and related literature.¹² Three such techniques have been identified: (1) The best known is gematria, involving the calculation of the numerical value of a word written in Hebrew or Greek letters. (In Hebrew and Greek the letters of the alphabet also serve as numerals, and so every word has a numerical value which is the sum of the numerical values of its letters.) (2) Another technique is the measurement of sections of text by counting syllables or words.¹³ (3) The number of occurrences of a particular word within a literary work (or a section of one) may be significant. Such techniques can also be combined.

M J J Menken's dissertation, published in 1985, is a detailed study of the second of these techniques (with some reference also to the first) in selected sections of the Gospel of John.¹⁴ Despite its publication in a well-known monograph series and despite its potentially

11 Here I differ strongly from Smalley (1964), who sees it as the seventh of the signs.

12 See the summaries of earlier studies of biblical texts in Menken 1985, 10-12, 16-23; also Giblin 1964; Bohak 1990; Cartun 1991; Høyrup 1992, 611; Bauckham 1993a, 29-37, 384-407; Russell 1993; Bauckham 2001, 134; Warning 2001.

13 For this practice in ancient literature, see Menken 1985, 3-10.

14 Menken 1985. Menken's work is confined to John 1:19-2:11; 5; 6; 9:1-10:21; 17.

considerable significance for the source and redaction criticism of the Gospel, this work has been more or less completely ignored.¹⁵ Perhaps scholars who have consulted it have not found the case Menken makes for widespread numerical patterning in John compelling. Perhaps too many of the examples look as though they could be fortuitous. Perhaps the really convincing examples are buried in too great a mass of less compelling detail.

For our present purposes, it will be sufficient to extract from Menken's work three remarkable examples of numerical composition, which all involve both gematria and measurement by numbers of syllables or words. It seems unlikely that the phenomena in these cases are purely accidental, and they are sufficient to establish that this kind of technique occurs in the Gospel. (a) The Prologue (1:1-18) consists of 496 syllables. 496 is a "triangular" number (it is the triangle of 31, i.e. it is the sum of the numbers from 1 to 18) and also a "perfect" number (i.e. it is equal to the sum of its divisors). This makes it a numerologically very significant number. Both types of number – triangular and perfect – are quite rare,¹⁶ and they were of considerable interest for ancient mathematics and numerical speculation.¹⁷ But the reason it seems virtually certain that this length of the Prologue to John's Gospel is deliberately significant is that 496 is also the numerical value of the word *μονογενής* (John 1:14, 18).¹⁸ The length of the Prologue has clearly been designed to relate to its christological content and climax. (b) The section 1:19-2:11 consists of 1550 syllables, which number is the numerical value of the words *ὁ ἄριστός* (John 1:20, 25; cf. 1:41; 20:31).¹⁹ (c) Jesus' prayer to the Father in 17:1b-26 consists of 486 words. This number is the numerical value of the word *πάτερ*, which both begins the prayer and is used five more times within it. To these three examples from Menken's work I can add a further example: (4) The name Jesus written in Hebrew as *יהושע* (the most common spelling of the name in the HB) and the words "the lamb of God" in Hebrew (*שה אלהים*) have the same numerical value: 391.²⁰ So when John the Baptist sees Jesus and says, "Behold the Lamb of God" (1:29, 35-36), he is interpreting the name Jesus by gematria. John's identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God is fulfilled when Jesus dies and the words of Exod 12:46, referring to the Passover lamb, are quoted in 19:36.²¹ The number of words that intervene between the first reference to Jesus in the narrative of the crucifixion (19:16) and the words quoted from Exod (19:36), thus connecting the name Jesus with his identification as the Passover lamb, is 391.²²

These four examples provide sufficient basis for considering whether the number 153 in 21:11 relates to similar elements of numerical composition in the Gospel.

15 I have seen no reference to it in any work of Johannine scholarship.

16 496 is 31st in the series of triangular numbers, and third in the series of perfect numbers (after 6 and 28).

17 Menken 1985, 27-29; Bauckham 1993a, 390-393.

18 Menken 1985, 20-21.

19 Menken 1985, 83-84. It is relevant that the words, "And he said to him, 'We have found the Messiah'" (1:41) occur at the centre of the passage 1:19-2:11.

20 I owe this observation to Asher Finkel.

21 Quotation from Exod 12:46 (cf. 10 LXX) and quotation from Ps 34(33):21 should not be regarded as exclusive alternatives. The author is most likely relating these two scriptural passages, using the Jewish exegetical technique of *gezera shava*. See the good discussion in Schuchard 1992, 133-140.

22 This calculation depends on reckoning inclusively from *καί* (19:17) to *πληρωθῆν* (19:36) according to the text in NA²⁷. A different choice among variant readings could include the whole of v. 36 in the figure of 391 words.

3. *The numerical shape of the beginning and end of John*

There is a rather obvious difficulty about measuring the length of sections of the text of the NT by counting syllables and words: the existence of textual variants makes such calculations uncertain to a small but significant extent. Clearly, choices of textual readings should not be made merely because they suit a particular theory of numerical patterning in the text. There must be good text-critical support for the readings selected, but, on the other hand, it is not improper, where the textual evidence is not decisively in favour of one reading, to allow considerations of numerical literary technique to play some part in tipping the balance.

The section of the Gospel with which we shall be concerned is 20:30-21:25. The text on which our discussion is based is that of the 27th edition of Nestle-Aland, but with the following words that appear in that text omitted: *αὐτοῦ* in 20:30; *οὖν* in 21:11; *ὁ Ἰησοῦς* in 21:17; *οὖν* in 21:21; and *τί πρὸς σέ* in 21:23. All these omissions have good manuscript support. The words omitted in 21:17 and 21:23 appear in square brackets in the text of NA²⁷, indicating considerable doubt as to their originality, while the words omitted in 20:30; 21:11; and 21:17 were omitted in previous editions of Nestle-Aland. There is reason to consider the omission of *τί πρὸς σέ* in 21:23 the harder reading, since it leaves an incomplete sentence that scribes will have completed in conformity with verse 22. The author surely left the sentence incomplete in order to make the words “until I come” appropriately the last words of Jesus in the Gospel.

John’s Gospel does not have two endings,²³ but a two-stage ending,²⁴ the two parts of which (20:30-31 and 21:24-25) frame an epilogue (21:1-23). The numerical data help to make this clear. The sections 20:30-31 and 21:24-25 both consist of 43 words.²⁵ We have already noticed that the Prologue to the Gospel (1:1-18) consists of 496 syllables. The Epilogue shows its correspondence to the Prologue in that it consists of 496 words. (This is confirmation from numerical data of the frequently made observation that chapter 21 is an epilogue that balances at the end of the Gospel the Prologue at the beginning.) We may also note that the Epilogue itself falls into two sections (21:1-4, 15-23) and that the first has 276 words. Like 496, 276 is a triangular number (the triangle of 23). But whereas in the Prologue the number 496 is the numerical value of a key word in the Prologue (*μονογενής*), this is not the case in the Epilogue. None of the significant words in the Epilogue has the numerical value of 496. Nor do any of the significant words in the Epilogue appear to have numerical values of any special significance.

However, this does not mean that gematria is absent from the Epilogue. The Epilogue contains a number, 153 (21:11), that contemporary readers familiar with gematria might well suspect of having such significance. One suggested explanation of the number is that it is the

23 I am not persuaded by the interesting proposal of Gaventa (1996) to the effect that chs. 20 and 21 constitute two different endings of the Gospel, each to be read as following directly ch. 19. She notes that “the third time” (21:14) presupposes ch. 20 (p. 245), but fails to account for this feature that directly contradicts her proposal. It is also implausible that “again” in 21:1 refers to events prior to Jesus’ death rather than to resurrection appearances.

24 Brodie (1993, 572-573) thinks there is a three-part conclusion, the first part being 19:35. It is true that there are significant links between 19:35 and (especially) 21:24-25, but I do not think that 19:35 can be considered the first part of the Gospel’s conclusion. It refers only to one event in the Gospel’s story. Moreover, its size (20 words) sets it apart from 20:30-31 and 21:24-25 (43 words each).

25 This is pointed out by Savasta 2001.

numerical value of the Hebrew בני האלהים.²⁶ This would be very appropriate as a kind of equivalent to *μονογενής* in the Prologue. The theme of the Prologue is christological, that of the Epilogue ecclesiological. The Prologue tells of the unique Son of God who comes into the world so that those who believe in him may become “children of God” (1:12: τέκνα θεοῦ). The miraculous catch of 153 fish in the Epilogue is a symbol of the ingathering of these children of God through the church’s mission, of which 11:52 (τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ) also speaks. But there is a problem in this proposal. Given that the gematria in the Prologue relates to the Greek word *μονογενής*, it is not clear why the gematria in the Epilogue should relate to the Hebrew phrase בני האלהים. We should expect the number 860, which is the numerical value of the phrase τέκνα θεοῦ. The use of a Hebrew phrase would be explicable if the reference were to a passage in the HB, but the only occurrences of this phrase in the HB (Gen 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1) are not even conceivably relevant. Perhaps the reason is that, whereas the number 153 makes an extraordinarily large catch in a single net, 860 would be completely inconceivable. Thus it is possible that 153 is intended to be the value by gematria of בני האלהים, but for the time being we should also remain open to other explanations – which need not be incompatible.

4. *The 153 fish and Ezekiel 47*

Like 496 and 276, 153 is a triangular number, the triangle of 17. This is unlikely to be accidental. There are not very many triangular numbers (153 is the 17th of the series) and they were well known to ancient people interested in such things. One other triangular number appears explicitly in the NT: the number of the beast 666 (Rev 13:18) has multiple significance both by gematria and by virtue of its “triangular” character.²⁷ An explanation of 153 that recognizes its character as the triangle of 17 would be the most satisfying. Such an explanation was offered by John Emerton,²⁸ who pointed out that the numerical value of the two Hebrew names גדי and עגלaim in Ezek 47:10 is 17 and 153 respectively. The passage tells how the stream of water that will issue from the new temple will flow down to the Dead Sea, turning it into a fresh water lake, where people will stand on the shore fishing all the way from the spring of Gedi (En-gedi) to the spring of Eglaim (En-eglam): “it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds” (Ezek 47:10). In favour of seeing an allusion to this passage in the number 153 is a further remarkable fact about it that Emerton failed to notice: the word Gedi (גדי) in Ezek 47:10 is the 153rd word in this chapter of Ezekiel. Thus both the word Gedi itself and the combination of Gedi and Eglaim link the numbers 17 and 153. Noticing this fact it would have been easy for the writer of John 21 to relate it to the fact that 153 is the triangle of 17.

26 Kruse 1960 (though he preferred to explain 153 as the numerical value of *קהל אהבה*, “the church of love”); Romeo 1978.

27 Bauckham 1993a, 384-407.

28 Emerton 1958. Ackroyd (1959) responded by pointing out that among the many different Greek transliterations of En-gedi and En-eglam in the manuscripts of Ezek 47:10 LXX, two have numerical values that add up to 153 (ηγγαδι = 33 and αγαλλαιμ = 120). In reply, Emerton (1960, 335-336) pointed out that these two Greek forms of the names do not appear together in any one manuscript, while they could explain the figure 153 but not reflect its triangular character as the triangle of 17, to which the Hebrew text of Ezek 47:10 does correspond.

Gematria was often used to associate, as in some way equivalent, two different words that have the same numerical value.²⁹ In exegesis this technique could be used to substitute, in interpretation, a word with the same numerical value as a word in the text. In this way, the fact that the words בני האלהים have the numerical value of 153 becomes more relevant. Since Eglaim and “children of God” have the same numerical value, the author of John 21 could take Eglaim to signify “the children of God.” The fact that he must be working with the Hebrew phrase בני האלהים, rather than a Greek one, is now entirely understandable, since he is engaged in exegesis of the Hebrew text of Ezek 47:10. Thus the 153 fish of John 21:11 constitute a reference to Eglaim in Ezek 47:10 and at the same time are to be understood as signifying “the children of God”, since this phrase has the same numerical value (153) as the word Eglaim. If the author interpreted Eglaim by gematria, we should expect he would also have interpreted Gedi by means of another word with the same numerical value (17). Although we can only guess his interpretation, much the most probable is that he associated Gedi with the word גִּדִּי (“sacrifice”), which has the value of 17. The new life symbolized by the river of Ezek 47, that makes people children of God, has its source in the temple, the place of sacrifice. As we shall see, according to this Gospel’s interpretation of Ezek 47, it has its origin in the sacrificial death of Jesus, who is both the new Passover lamb and the new temple.

The plausibility and appropriateness of this explanation of the number 153 become more apparent when we consider two earlier allusions to Ezek 47 in the Gospel. The first is in 7:38: “as the Scripture says, ‘From his breast shall flow rivers of living water’ (ποταμοὶ ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας αὐτοῦ ῥεῦσουσιν ὕδατος ζῶντος).”³⁰ As is well-known there is no biblical text to which this scriptural citation conforms at all closely. It should probably be understood as a conflation of words from two or three texts which have been connected by means of the exegetical technique of *gezera shava* (which links texts in which the same words occur). The primary reference is to Ezek 47:1, with a secondary reference to Zech 14:8 and perhaps also a reference to Ps 78:16. I give the NRSV’s translation of the Hebrew because I think that the author is working with the Hebrew text of these passages:

Then he brought me back to the entrance to the temple; there, water was flowing (מים יצאים) from below the threshold of the temple toward the east (for the temple faced east); and the water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple (והמים ירדו) (מתחת סכתי הבית הימנית), south of the altar (Ezek 47:1).

On that day living waters shall flow out (יצאו מים חיים) from Jerusalem . . . (Zech 14:8).

He made streams come out of the rock,
and caused waters to flow down like rivers (ויודר כנהרות מים) (Ps 78:16).

The phrase in Ezek 47:1 that the NRSV translates as “from below the south end of the threshold of the temple” could be more literally translated “from below the right-hand shoulder (כתף) of the temple”. The word כתף usually means “shoulder” (of humans or animals), but can also mean the “side” of a mountain or building. John’s use of this text has exploited the possible meaning “shoulder”. Jesus is the new temple from which the living waters flow, and so Ezekiel’s “from below the shoulder/side of the temple” can be translated

²⁹ Examples in Bauckham 1993a, 386-387; Russell 1993, 112.

³⁰ I take the view that the words ὁ ποταμὸς ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας should be connected with v. 37, not with the scriptural quotation in v. 38.

as “from his breast” (ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας αὐτοῦ). In the light of this interpretation of Ezek 47:1 in John 7:38, we can detect another allusion to the same text in 19:34: “one of the soldiers pierced his side (πλευράν) with a spear, and at once blood and water came out”. This combines the image of Jesus as the new Passover lamb from which blood flows with that of Jesus as the new temple from which water flows. The allusion to Ezek 47:1 seems to have been recognized by apocryphal literature (*Acts Pil.* Greek B11) (whence also the Christian artistic tradition) and the Ethiopic version of John 19:34, in which the side is specified as the right side (not, as one might expect, the left side, nearer the heart). We can now see that John 21:1-14, with its allusion to Ezek 47:10 in 21:11, continues the same interpretation of Ezek 47.

5. *The 153 fish and John 20:30-31*

We have still not exhausted the significance of the figure 153. It seems also to be linked to the first part of the Gospel's conclusion (20:30-31) in the following way. That passage states that the signs done by Jesus have been recorded in the Gospel so that readers may believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing have life. That, of course, also describes what the catch of 153 fish in the narrative of chapter 21 parabolically illustrates: people coming to faith in Jesus and to new life as children of God. The keywords of 20:30-31 are: sign, believe, Christ, life. Each of these four words occurs for the last time in the Gospel in those verses. If we count the number of occurrences of these words in the whole Gospel up to and including this passage, the results are: σημεῖον 17, πιστεύειν 98, Χριστός 19, ζωή 36. The sum of the last three of these numbers is 153. So the number 17 and its “triangle” 153 are written into the whole Gospel in the form of these word statistics³¹ and are implicit in 20:30-31.

As we have already noticed, the miraculous catch of fish is not, in the Johannine terminology, a sign. The signs are the miraculous events that are narrated in chapters 2-20 and whose purpose is to bring people to believe in Jesus as Messiah and to receive eternal life from him. The miraculous catch of fish does not have this purpose. Rather its role in the Gospel is to depict symbolically the church's mission of bringing people to faith in Jesus and new life as children of God. It symbolizes what happens as a result of the signs. This relationship between the signs and the miraculous catch of fish corresponds perfectly to the way the numbers 17 and 153 are used in 20:30-31 and 21:11. According to 20:30-31 the signs (symbolic number 17), recorded up to that point in the Gospel, have been written so that people may believe in Christ and have life (symbolic number 153). The signs and the coming to faith are related, just as the number 17 and its “triangle” 153 are related. In 21:11 only the number 153 appears, for the 153 fish symbolize all the children of God, who become children of God, receiving eternal life, through believing in Jesus as the signs reveal him to them. This relationship between 20:30-31 and 21:10 also illustrates very clearly how the Gospel's Epilogue (21:1-23) need not be read as an unexpected appendix added after what was originally the end of the book. 20:30-31 concludes the narrative of the signs; the Epilogue depicts their effect in the mission of the church up to the parousia (21:23).

If the Gospel had originally ended at 20:30, it would no doubt have been possible for a redactor to have added an appendix corresponding numerically to the Gospel's Prologue (496

31 With the possible exception of the word μαθητής, which occurs 77 times, these are the only cases in which the number of occurrences of specific words in the Gospel of John seem to me to have significance.

words and 496 syllables respectively) and also to have added a second conclusion of the same length as the first (43 words in each case). If he had been close to the author or circle from which the Gospel originated, he could have known the exegesis of Ezek 47 that lay behind 7:38 and 19:34 and have been able to incorporate a very appropriate development of this into his newly written appendix. He could have created all the other close links between chapter 21 and other parts of the Gospel. All these things are possible, though they do not seem to me probable. But such a redactor could not have designed the number of occurrences, throughout the Gospel, of the key words of 20:30-31, such that they produce the numbers 17 and 153. This phenomenon is surely only attributable to an author who meticulously designed the whole Gospel, including chapter 21, and intended the explicit appearance of the number 153 in chapter 21 as an integral feature of his Gospel.

6. *The Beloved Disciple's numerical signature*

Now that we have observed the remarkable extent to which the concluding sections of the Gospel play with word-counting and gematria (the latter in Hebrew), we shall be prepared to credit another very striking instance of such numerical design in chapter 21. The name of the Beloved Disciple according to the earliest extant traditions was John,³² and, despite many other modern proposals (Lazarus, Nathanael, Thomas, Judas, Philip, Apollos, Matthias, even Paul),³³ this name is likely to be correct, since the Beloved Disciple was a well-known figure in the context of the Gospel's origin (21:23) and the Gospel is unlikely ever to have circulated without a name attached to it.³⁴ In the first century the name John was often written in Hebrew as יהוהוּן,³⁵ which has the numerical value 129. The 129th word from the beginning of the Gospel's Epilogue is the first word (ὁ) of the phrase "that disciple whom Jesus loved" (ὁ μαθητῆς ἐκεῖνος ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς), which is the first reference to the Beloved Disciple in the Epilogue (21:7). By means of the techniques of word-counting and gematria the name of the Beloved Disciple has been cryptically encoded in the narrative that leads to the concluding attribution of the Gospel to his testimony (21:24).

In fact, if we continue to count sections 129 words in length, we find that the fourth such section in chapter 21 ends with the last word of verse 24, which concludes the Gospel's last statement about the Beloved Disciple.³⁶ That this is intentional may be supported by a similar phenomenon with reference to Simon Peter. His Hebrew name שמעון has the numerical value 466. The 466th word of chapter 21 is the last word of verse 22, the conclusion of Jesus' words to Peter and the end of the Gospel's account of Peter.

The purpose of chapter 21, as we have noticed, is to preview the church's mission to the world, but also more specifically to indicate the respective roles, in that mission, of the two disciples most prominent in this Gospel: Peter and the Beloved Disciple. While the former's role is to be the chief under-shepherd of Jesus' flock, the latter's role is that of the perceptive

³² Bauckham 1993b.

³³ See the detailed survey of virtually all suggestions in Charlesworth 1995, ch. 3. The rest of the book argues for Charlesworth's own proposal: Thomas. To those who have proposed Nathaniel, there can now be added Catchpole 1998.

³⁴ Cf. Hengel 2000, 48-56.

³⁵ E.g. Yehoḥanan, son of the high priest Theophilus, appearing in the inscription on the ossuary of his daughter Yehoḥanah: Barag and Flusser 1986.

³⁶ Is it also significant that $129 = 3 \times 43$, and that 43 is the number of words in each of the two parts of the conclusion (20:30-31 and 21:24-25)?

witness to Jesus, who finally embodies his witness in the form of the written Gospel. (I have argued elsewhere that the Gospel as a whole portrays the Beloved Disciple as the “ideal witness” to Jesus, who is therefore qualified to be the “ideal author” of a Gospel.³⁷) In 21:7 the Beloved Disciple for the first and only time in the Gospel performs his role of witness within the Gospel’s own narrative. Elsewhere he is portrayed as the one who observed what happened in the Gospel’s narrative so that he can later witness to hearers/readers of his Gospel, but he does not elsewhere communicate what he sees and perceives to people within the Gospel’s story. In 21:7, he recognizes Jesus (“It is the Lord!”) and communicates this insight to Peter, who acts on it. It is appropriate that, as we have seen, the Beloved Disciple’s own name is encoded numerically in the narrative precisely at this point, but the fact that his witness is to *Jesus* is also represented in numerical composition. The section 21:1-14 consists, as we have noted, of 276 words. The two central words (the 138th and 139th) of this section are the Beloved Disciple’s own words of witness to Jesus: ὁ κύριος (21:7). Moreover, 276 is the “triangle” of 23. If we multiply this “triangular root” (23) of the length of the section by the “triangular root” (17) of the triangular number that occurs within the section (153), the sum is 391. This is the numerical value of the name Jesus in Hebrew (יהושע), a significant instance of gematria that already, as we have observed, underlies the text of the Gospel in 1:29, 35-36; 19:15-36.

A common reaction to the kind of study we have pursued in this article is expressed in George Beasley-Murray’s comment to one of the proposals for understanding the number 153 in terms of gematria: “It is altogether too complicated for the ordinary reader of the Gospel to perceive, and too much even for most modern scholars to guess without being initiated into this particular mystique”.³⁸ In response to this, we should observe, in the first place, that the “ordinary reader” who perceives none of the instances of numerical composition that we have discerned will not find anything in the Gospel unintelligible. Even in the case of the number 153, if the “ordinary reader” takes it merely as a remarkably large number of fish in a single net, this understanding is sufficient to make adequate sense of the story. The numerical literary techniques add dimensions of meaning to the text for those who discern them, but they are not required for understanding the message of the Gospel and they do not impede “ordinary” readers who are not likely to discern them.

It may be that some aspects of numerical composition were not expected to be directly discerned by readers, but were thought to give appropriate form to the text, as ways of conforming the lengths and proportions of the text to its meanings. But we should remember that counting the number of syllables or words in a text was not as unfamiliar an activity then as it is now: it was regularly done in order to determine the price of manuscripts and for scribes to check the accuracy of their transcriptions.³⁹ Gematria was a well-known practice, which took such popular forms as the graffito found in Pompeii: “I love the girl whose number is 545.”⁴⁰ Triangular and perfect numbers were known to everyone with a little education and were widely regarded as significant numbers. Furthermore, such NT writers as the authors of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel certainly considered their literary productions as something very like the Jewish Scriptures, and they were familiar with the learned exegetical techniques employed in the exegesis of those Scriptures, involving such

37 Bauckham 1993c.

38 Beasley-Murray 1987, 403.

39 Menken 1985, 12-13.

40 Deissmann 1910, 276.

numerical techniques as gematria and counting the words of sections of text. It is entirely plausible that they would have expected to have some learned readers who would study their work with the same kinds and degree of meticulous exegesis as the Hebrew Scriptures were studied by careful exegetes such as themselves. The analogy of the Hebrew Scriptures, as studied in first-century Judaism, would easily suggest that they should not confine their compositional work as authors to the obvious surface of the text, readily discernible by the "ordinary reader", but should also embody deeper and hidden meaning in, among other things, the numerical structures of their work. Finally, it is essential to remember that few "ordinary readers" of an early Christian work such as the Fourth Gospel would read it alone, with only the resources of their own knowledge to assist their comprehension, as modern readers do. Reading (which for most "ordinary readers" was hearing) took place in community. Aspects of the text which were not obvious could be explained by teachers who had some training in scriptural exegesis and who may have given time and trouble to studying the text. In envisaging the original reception of a work such as the Fourth Gospel we need not only to allow for the oral context which meant that such a text should make some degree of immediate sense to most listeners, but also to recognize that such a text could also be intended to be studied by especially competent readers who could share their understanding with others.

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Professor Richard Bauckham, St Mary's College, University of St Andrews
 e-mail: rjb@st-andrews.ac.uk



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