

GEMATRIA AND JOHN 21:11—THE CHILDREN OF GOD

Johannine commentators, both ancient and modern, have often sought to explain why the fourth gospel mentioned exactly how many large fish (John 21:11) the disciples are said to have caught after their night of unproductive labour. The number 153 could be a detail recorded to add a touch of realism to the story, but no few commentators have sought to show that it is symbolic. A full survey of interpretations is given by H. Kruse who proposed two suggestions as the most probable; קהל האהבה, "the church of love," and בני האלהים, "the children of God."¹ He discovered both of these by gematria, the ancient practice of adding the numerical values of the letters of a word, name or phrase so as to be able to express it by the computed number. An example of gematria that should be familiar to most people is the number of the beast, 666 (Rev 13:18).²

Of the two phrases which Kruse proposed, he preferred קהל האהבה, "the church of love," and attempted to show that the evangelist was thinking of it when he wrote chap. 21. Against this interpretation, however, R. E. Brown has argued that "it is sheerest speculation to base the gematria on an expression that never occurs in the Johannine writings."³ The proposal to understand the phrase בני האלהים, "the children of God," survives such a criticism, since the expression occurs in John 1:12 and 11:52 and is well-suited to the context of John 21:1-14.

The pericope relates the story of the miraculous catch of fish on the sea of Tiberias, and opens with Simon announcing that he is going fishing (John 21:3). Since the verb ἀλιεῖν, "to fish," occurs only here in the NT, it seems not improbable that some form of the synoptic tradition in which Jesus declares that he will make the disciples ἀλιεῖς ἀνθρώπων, "fishers of men," (Mark 1:17) lies behind it. What Jesus is thus recorded to have predicted actually becomes a narrative in the fourth gospel; the apostolic mission is conceived of as an expedition of fishermen. In accord with this symbolism, the fish which the disciples catch in their net must be converts to Christianity.

This symbolism must be retained when examining John 21:10-11, in which Simon plays the lead role in bringing ashore the fish which have just been caught. It would appear that he hauls them in so they may be cooked for breakfast, but the meal which Jesus and his disciples share (John 21:13) is the same one which was being prepared on the fire before Simon hauled them in (John 21:9), and nothing is said about what was done with them. Why then does he bring them ashore? According to E. C. Hoskyns, the symbolism demands the answer: "*in order that they too may share in the meal*" which the Lord has prepared for them and the disciples.⁴

Such an interest in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples and their converts is not foreign to the evangelist, for the prayer of Jesus makes mention of both the disciples and those who believe through their word (John 17:20). This prayer is for Christian unity, a theme which is

¹H. Kruse, S. J., "Magni Pisces Centum Quinquaginta Tres," *VD* 38 (1960) 129-48, esp. pp. 143-47. Kruse discovered the former independent of D. R. Ahrendts (*ZWT* 41 [1898] 480). Likewise, I discovered the latter independent of Kruse.

²For a survey of the interpretations of this number, see W. Barclay, "Great Themes of the New Testament: V. Revelation xiii," *ExpTim* 70 (1958-59) 260-64, 292-96, esp. pp. 295-96.

³R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John XIII-XXI* (AB 29A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) 1075.

⁴E. C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. N. Davey; 2d ed. rev.; London: Faber and Faber, 1947) 554.

also present, according to F.-M. Braun, in John 21:11, as indicated by the notice that even though there were so many fish, the net was not torn.⁵ We do not need to go far beyond this to see that the number 153 may represent by gematria בני האלהים, "the children of God," since converts to Christianity who receive the Lord and believe in His name fulfill precisely those conditions which are peculiar to the children of God (John 1:12).

Turning to the other occurrence of this phrase in a pericope that "brings us near to the centre of Johannine theology" (John 11:52),⁶ we find scattered children of God (as well as a nation) described as benefitting from the death of Christ; as a result of his death they will be gathered into one. This again reflects Johannine interest in Christian unity.⁷ A similar thought lies behind the statement that the crucified-exalted Christ will draw all men to himself (John 12:32). The use of the verb ἐλκύειν, "to draw," in John 21:11 may refer back to its use in this verse, so that "the risen Jesus accomplishes his prophecy of drawing all men to himself through the apostolic ministry symbolized by the catch of fish and the hauling ashore."⁸

The description of the children of God as τὰ διασκορπισμένα, "those who are scattered," (John 11:52) deserves careful consideration, for it would be a mistake to suppose that all the children of God are scattered. On the contrary, the nation for which Christ dies is the primary locus of the children of God. Yet there are also children of God outside the nation, i.e., scattered, and for these Christ dies that they may be gathered into one. The OT background for this idea is often marked by sheep imagery, as in Jer 31:10-11 and Ezek 34:11-16; and in the sheep imagery of the fourth gospel, two groups of sheep are mentioned. The first group, for which the shepherd lays down his life (John 10:14-15), corresponds to the children of God in the nation for which Christ dies; the second group, which Jesus must lead so that there can be one flock, one shepherd (John 10:16), corresponds to the scattered children of God who are to be gathered into one.

Sheep imagery occurs again in John 21:15-17, where it contrasts sharply with the fish imagery that prevails in the preceding verses of the chapter. Of interest is the observation of F.-M. Braun, that the sheep are parallel to the fish.⁹ Since the sheep represent the children of God, the parallelism suggests that the fish represent the same. Consistent with this is the proposal that the number 153 represents by gematria בני האלהים, "the children of God."

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⁵F.-M. Braun, "Quatre 'signes' johanniques de l'unité chrétienne," *NTS* 9 (1962-63) 147-55, esp. pp. 153-55.

⁶C. H. Dodd, "The Prophecy of Caiaphas: John xi 47-53," *Neotestamentica et Patristica* (NovTSup 6; Leiden: Brill, 1962) 134-43, p. 134.

⁷F.-M. Braun, "Quatre 'signes' johanniques," 148-50.

⁸R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John XIII-XXI*, 1097.

⁹F.-M. Braun, "Quatre 'signes' johanniques," 154: "Les ἀρνία et les προβάτια . . . sont parallèles aux gros poissons."



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