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From the Selected Works of Keith L. Yoder

2017

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Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/klyoder/7/>

Gematria and John 21

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GPG (28 Dec 2013)

Abstract. Richard Bauckham notes the use of gematria in John 21,¹ and given other passages where that feature exists, concludes that the whole Gospel, including John 21, is integral. I find, on the contrary, that gematria links Jn 21 with passages which for other reasons are late in the formation history of John, and is thus consistent with the Von Wahlde three-stage formation model.

Bauckham's Argument for the integrity of Jn 21 may be summarized as follows::

1. Jn 21 is not a "second ending: to the book, but rather an "epilogue." There are already seven "signs" in Jn 2-20, including the Resurrection, which is called a "sign" in 2:18-19, so the catch of 153 fish is not one of the "signs" of gJn.
2. The Prologue (Jn 1:1-18) consists of 496 syllables. 496 is both a "triangular" number (496 = the triangle of 31 = the sum of digits 1 through 31) and a "perfect" number (the sum of its divisors). 496 is also the number of the word "only-begotten" (μονογενής) in Greek gematria.² He proceeds to show that chapter 21 consists of 496 words, after excluding 8 words that NA27 marked as doubtful, making a numerical match for the 496 syllables of the Prologue.
3. He notes that each of the two "endings," 20:30-31 and 21:24-25, contains 43 words. He concludes from that match that these are not separate endings, but rather two "stages" of a single unified ending, the first stage (20:31) references many other "signs" Jesus did, while the second stage (21:24-25) cites many other "things" Jesus did, there being no additional "signs" in Jn 21.
4. He notes that the "epilogue" part of Jn 21 falls into two sections, 21:1-14 and 21:25-23, and each section contains exactly 276 words. Like 496, 276 is also a "triangular" number, the triangle of 23.
5. While there is no gematria in Jn 21 equivalent to μονογενής in the Prologue, the number of 153 fish stands out in 21:11. 153 is the triangle of 17.
6. The key words of the "first stage ending" 20:30-31 are "sign," "believe," "Christ," and "life." Jn 20:30-31 represents the last occurrence in gJn of each of these four key words. Their usage counts in gJn are as follows:

"sign" σημεῖον	= 17
"believe" πιστεύω	= 98
"Christ" Χριστός	= 19
"life" ζωή	= 36

¹Bauckham 153.

²To this point, Bauckham relies on Menken **Numerical**.

5. The sum of the last three numbers ($98 + 19 + 36$) = 153, which is the “triangle” of the first number, 17. Thus, the catch of 153 big fish in Jn 21 is encoded in the counts of the key words of the first ending 20:30-31; counts that encompass the entire gJn. The number relationship $17 \Rightarrow 98 + 19 + 36$ also matches the thematic relationship presented in 20:30-31. That is, as a result of the (17) signs, many people (the 153 “fish”) will be brought to “believe” in “Christ” and have “life,” Bauckham’s conclusion (p282) is, “This phenomenon is surely attributable only 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.”

I have checked all of Bauckham’s word and syllable counts and his gematria calculations, and can confirm their accuracy. And I agree with Bauckham (and with Menken) that at least the final author/editor of gJn had a demonstrable interest in word/syllable counts and gematria. But his conclusion, that this requires Jn 21 to be part of the original design of gJn, is flawed. Fortna and Von Wahlde envision a final editor of gJn who not only (re)designed the Prologue and the Jn 21 epilogue, but also rewrote the rest of the Gospel in between. Bauckham’s argument would carry weight only if the final editor of gJn simply tacked a new Prologue to the beginning and a new Epilogue to the ending of a pre-existing codex. But that is not what either Fortna or Von Wahlde envision. They both propose a final author/editor who rewrote the entire pre-existing gJn document, and could move text around and/or tinker with various key word counts at will. Making the counts of the key words in 20:30-31 come out to the 17:153 match between the “signs” and the “fish” would have been a trivial matter.

Bauckham mentions the “disciple” word count of 77 as the only other key word in gJn that seems to have “significance” (p281 n32). With all his attention to numerical detail, he has missed the fact that Ἰουδαῖος “Jew” occurs 71 times (Dunn *Jews* p182), which I find “significant,” as 71 is the traditional number of members of the “Great Sanhedrin” of the “Jews,” the Johannine Jesus’ first and last enemy.³

In sum, I think Bauckham, and Menken before him, are to be commended for pointing out these numerological features of gJn. But his numerological argument for the integrity of Jn 21 is after all compatible with the theory that the final writer/editor of gJn was responsible for these features. The proposal of text development from earlier edition(s) or pre-Johannine source(s) would seem to be left standing.

The Problem of 153 Fish

Bauckham cites J A Emerton’s proposal that the source of the 153 is the catch of “many large fish” in Ezekiel 47:10. The gematria of the place names in that vision (Gedi גדי and Eglayim עגליים) are 17 and 153 respectively. He further notes that the gematria of בני אלהים, the Hebrew equivalent of “children of God” (τέκνα Θεοῦ) from Jn 1:12 is also 153. He cites in support the allusions to Ezekiel 47 in Jn 7:38 and 19:34. He emphasizes that the 153 fish symbolize the many “children of God” who will come to believe in Jesus as the result of Apostolic preaching.

³So m Sanhedrin; see Neusner *Mishnah* p584.

More recently, Brooke has found a connection between these two numbers in the contemporary scripture exegesis of the Commentary on Genesis in 4Q252. This document has Noah's ark coming to rest on Mt Ararat on the 153rd day after the start of the Flood, also stated to be the 17th day of the 7th month, the Sabbath eve in the octave of Sukkoth.⁴ So, if the Hebrew place name gematria of Ezekiel 47:10 connects 153 with "many big fish," the exegesis of 4Q252 also connects 153 (and 17) with the Noahic tradition elsewhere associated with Simon Peter, the man pulling the fish ashore all by himself in Jn 21:11.

Comment

E Bruce Brooks

The 153 fish have long been a problem for scholarship. Brown 2/1074f gives a detailed summary of major suggestions. The most plausible, it seems to me, is that the miraculous catch of fish in Jn 21 has the same meaning as the miraculous catch of fish in Lk 5:9-10: the future success of the missionary effort. It was Jerome who first suggested that the number 153 was the number of fish known to the Greek zoologists, and thus is a metaphor for "all kinds of men," emphasizing the variety of people called to Christ (compare Mt 13:47, "fish of every kind"). Jerome cites Oppian of Cilicia (c180) as "the most learned poet among the Greek zoologists." It has been objected that Oppian actually mentions, not 153, but rather 157, kinds of fish. In the light of the above, which establishes the fact that triangular numbers were of formative interest to the final author of gJn, may it not suffice to say that to this meaningless number 157, the final author preferred the nearby triangular number 153?

As to the deep meaning of 17, there may be none. We may as well ask, of the seemingly intentional and identical syllable counts of the Prologue and the Epilogue (496, the triangle of 31), why 31? The triangularity of 496 may be magic enough. Not that any reader would have made that count, but it is useful to know that the final author of gJn liked to amuse himself in this way, and that his amusement sometimes affected the construction of the Gospel as we have it.

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⁴Brooke 4Q252 289.