

JOHN 21

John 21:1–14. Epilogue: On the Sea of Tiberias

For the modern Latter-day Saint reader of John 21, it's difficult to escape the enormous influence of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's remarks in his address "The First Great Commandment." We are blessed to have Elder Holland's apostolic commentary on the chapter. However, since he acknowledges that his remarks are not exegetical but rather contain some "nonscriptural elaboration," it is also important that we are open to reading the chapter with a fresh set of eyes to look for meanings and lessons not mentioned by Elder Holland in the limited scope of his conference talk.¹

We do not know how much time elapsed between the post-Resurrection appearances in chapter 20 and this narrative. While we might assume that this event occurred in the forty-day window between Jesus's Resurrection and Ascension, the disciples' decision to spend their time on a fishing trip could make more sense if the period of Jesus's formal postmortal ministry had ended. We may compare 3 Nephi 27–28, in which Jesus appeared and further instructed the Nephite Twelve after the conclusion of His public ministry in the New World.

The Sea of Tiberias is another name for the Sea of Galilee, so named after the important town of Tiberias on the western shore of the lake.

It's also difficult to determine the nature of the relationship between this miracle and the similar accounts of a miraculous catch of fish in Luke 5:1–11. Many scholars argue that these are two accounts of the same event; however, given the differences in context between the stories, it's possible that John is trying to make a point with his story. If we assume that John was familiar with the Gospel of Luke (as most scholars do), we can recognize details in John's account that contrast with Luke 5:1–11. Whereas Luke's account opens the ministry of Jesus, John's closes it. Whereas in Luke the miracle was met with fear, in John it was met with joy and recognition. Whereas Peter's nets broke in Luke, John is careful to note that

the nets held tight—perhaps suggesting, symbolically, that the Apostles’ capacity to accept the grace of Jesus has been increased. If we read these differences carefully, we should recognize that the Twelve were not the same as when Jesus found them some three years earlier.

John 21:15–19. Jesus Teaches Peter about Discipleship

This episode contains a few difficulties, most notably the jarring variation in vocabulary. While it is not entirely clear from the English translation, this passage contains two different words for “love” (*agapaō* twice and *phileō* five times), two words for “feed” (*boskō* twice and *poimanō* once), and two words for “sheep” (*arnion* and *probation*, captured by the King James Version’s “lambs” and “sheep”). Scholars hardly agree on the significance of this sudden variation and the different shades of meaning between the different words. It seems rather strange from the pen of the Evangelist who has otherwise been so careful and precise with his choice of words.

Difficulties aside, what does seem clear is that this interview is a chance for Peter to make up for his earlier threefold denial (for further evidence that the two episodes are connected, note that both take place next to a fire of coals [John 18:18 and 21:9]). Peter must have recognized the significance since he was grieved to hear the question a third time. On this occasion, however, Peter passes with flying colors. Jesus’s commandment, “Feed my sheep,” stands conspicuously at the end of the story, providing the “So what?” for the Gospel’s reader. It is the call to action that transforms the story of Jesus from a set of sterile facts into something that has relevance to the everyday life of the disciple.

Jesus’s prediction of Peter’s martyrdom suggests that it will be Peter’s determination to feed Jesus’s sheep that will ultimately cost him his life. Early traditions confirm with a united voice that Peter followed his Master to the cross, laying down his own life for the gospel’s sake. This ironclad resolve shows us that the Peter who emerged from the ordeal of losing and regaining his Lord, his hopes, and his dreams in gut-wrenching fashion was not the same Peter who denied Jesus three times at the house of the high priest. As we integrate the gospel more fully into our lives, the testimony of the power offered through the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ can have a similarly transformative effect on us.

John 21:20–25. The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple

Though verse 22 has long excited Latter-day Saints and other interpreters with its hints about the continued ministry of the Apostle John upon the earth, the verse is more about Peter and his relationship with Jesus than anything else. Jesus’s final statement is emphatic. We might paraphrase, “All *you* have to worry about is following me.” Certainly this was important advice for the man who was to lead the Church of Christ in Jesus’s absence, but it is equally applicable to each of us. We should not be surprised that each

individual path of discipleship is different, nor should we fault or judge others if their path looks different from ours. So long as we remain on the covenant path, all *we* have to worry about is following Jesus.

The Gospel's final verses turn to the Beloved Disciple and to the authenticity of his apostolic witness. Many scholars see verse 23 as an indication that the Beloved Disciple had passed away and as a subsequent attempt to recast Jesus's words spoken in verse 22. Latter-day revelation, however, confirms that John the Apostle was the author of (or source behind) the Gospel and that he continues to minister on the earth as a translated being. In this case, a few other ways to interpret the verse emerge. One option is that John departed from the public view (early tradition places him at Ephesus) to continue his ministry and that the later editors of the Gospel did not know if he was still alive. Alternatively, we could read verse 23 as clarifying the emphasis of the previous verse: the thrust of Jesus's statement was not on the immortality of John but rather on Peter's need to continue in the path of discipleship.

In verse 25, the plural, first-person endorsement of the disciple's witness that "we know that his testimony is true" leaves open the possibility that John the Apostle was the source of the fourth Gospel's story, if not the author of every word. If true, this could explain the stylistic differences between the Gospel and Revelation of John. At any rate, this statement shows us that the Gospel was revised by later editors.

While we may be tempted to take the final statement as hyperbole, the collective efforts of humanity have yet to commit to paper even a fraction of Jesus's earthly deeds and sayings. What then of His dealings throughout time and across worlds without end? Surely only the celestial library would suffice to contain the cumulative story of Jesus the Christ.

Note

¹ Jeffrey R. Holland, "The First Great Commandment," October 2012 general conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.com.

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