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Mother of the Lord and the 153 large fishes in John 21 : 11

The catch of exactly 153 large fishes (John 21 : 11: “Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net ashore, full of big fish, one hundred and fifty-three of them; and in spite of there being so many the net had not broken”) has been the subject of much speculation. The number was recorded for some reason. Some scholars suggested that 153 stood for the number of fish that the Disciples caught and counted correctly. This detail might have been given in an attempt to confirm that the writer John was an eyewitness.

A lot of scholars suggested the number was symbolic. This number has been troublesome for speculative interpretations of the Bible since the early days of the church. The number 153 has some deeper significance, otherwise it would not have been so noted. There are different interpretations on the meaning of the figure of 153 fish, but no explanation takes any notice of the appearance of the number outside the Bible.

Several popular theories

It is not easy to present all interpretations on the meaning of the 153 fish, but there are some popular and very interesting theories.

INTERPRETATIONS PROPOSED BY THE CHURCH FATHERS

Several popular explanations have been proposed by the Church Fathers. They are very interesting:

– Augustine discovered that 153 is the sum of all the numbers from 1 to 17 ($1 + 2 + 3 + \dots + 17$), and 17 is made up of the 10 (Commandments) and 7 (Gifts of the Spirit)¹;

– Jerome claimed that there were 153 species of fish in the sea according to the Greeks²;

¹ Cf. PL 35, 1963–1964.

² Cf. PL 25, 474C.

– Cyril of Alexandria said it was a symbolic number made up of: 100 representing Gentiles, 50 – Israel, and 3 for the Trinity³.

GEMATRIAC SOLUTIONS

In Hebrew and Greek the letters of the alphabet serve as numerals, and so every word has a numerical value which is the sum of the numerical values of its letters. This is gematria:

– H. Kruse explained 153 as the numerical value of the Hebrew *האזכה קהל* (“the church of love”)⁴;

– R. Eisler thought that the number 153 is the sum of the numerical values of the two words in Greek: ἰχθύς (“fish” – 77) and Σίμων (“Simon” – 76)⁵;

– J. A. Emerton pointed out the numerical value of the two Hebrew names *עין גדי* (“En-gedi”) and *עין עגליה* (“En-eglam”) in Ezek 47:10 is 17 and 153⁶.

The number 153 outside the Bible

John 21:11 is the only place in the whole New Testament where the number 153 appears⁷. There are some events outside the Bible, which are strongly connected with the Mother of God and which the number 153 appears in:

– the number 153 appears in the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple who took care of the Mother of God after the death of Jesus;

– St. Louis-Marie de Montfort, in his fifth method of saying the Rosary, considers that the number 153 was foreshadowing the number of Hail Marys in the Rosary⁸;

³ Cf. PG 74, 745.

⁴ Cf. H. Kruse, *Magni Pisces Centum Quinquaginta Tres (John 21:11)*, “Verbum Domini” 38 (1960), p. 129–149.

⁵ Cf. R. Bultmann, *Das Evangelium Des Johannes*, Göttingen 1962, p. 549.

⁶ Cf. J. A. Emerton, *The Hundred And Fifty-Three Fishes in John 21:11*, “Journal of Theological Studies” 9 (1958), p. 86–89.

⁷ According to the tradition of the interpretation I take the view that the number 153 in John 21:11 is not related to the number 153 in 1 Mach 9:54 (“In the year 153, in the second month, Alcimus ordered the demolition of the wall of the inner court of the sanctuary, destroying the work of the prophets. Alcimus had just begun the demolition”).

⁸ Of course, the Rosary before October 16th, 2002 (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*). There were three Mysteries, each of them had five Decades, each of the Decades had ten *Hail Mary*, and there were three *Hail Mary* for the Pope, there were also exactly 153 *Hail Mary* (3 Mysteries × 5 Decades × 10 *Hail Mary* + 3 *Hail Mary* for the Pope = 153 *Hail Mary*).

– Mary’s first apparition in Fatima was on May 13th, 1917. If we put the number of the month (5) into the number of the day (13), we get the number 153, because they are the same digits (1, 3, 5);

– Mary’s last apparition in Fatima was on October 13th, 1917. This date is similar to the date of the first apparition, because the number of the day is 13 too (the same digits: 1, 3) and the number of the month is 10 (double 5!);

– From the day of the first apparition to the day of the last apparition in Fatima there are exactly 153 days!⁹;

– On October 13th, 1917 (the day of the last apparition in Fatima) the Mother of God presented herself as the Queen of the Rosary and there were 153 Hail Mary in the whole Rosary at that time;

– The attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II was on May 13th, 1981, 64 years later after Mary’s first apparition in Fatima, and the number of the day (13) and the number of the month (5) is similar to the number of fish, because there are the same digits (1, 3, 5).

Towards the solution

All solutions which were proposed by scholars, did not take any notice of the occurrence of the number 153 outside the Bible. There are some events in the history of the salvation that are strongly connected with the number 153 and the Mother of God.

There is no place in the whole New Testament where Mary is called Mother of God, but there is one place where Mary is called Mother of Lord. In this Mary’s title equals Mother of God, because Septuagint translated the holy name of God יהוה (JHWH) into the Greek by “Lord”, and the New Testament used the Greek word “Lord” in the meaning of God. The phrase “Mother of Lord” appears in the Gospel of Luke who described some events in the life of Mary. It is Luke 1:43: “Why should I be honored with a visit from the Mother of my Lord?”. The context of this pericope shows that Mary has become the Mother of Lord after the Annunciation, i.e. she has really become the Mother of Lord, because she has become the Mother of Jesus, the real God.

The phrase “the Mother of my Lord” is very interesting because it is in the Greek ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ κυρίου μου. This is a great surprise, because

⁹ The number of the days from May 13th, 1917 to October 13th, 1917 can be easily counted. There are 18 days in May, 30 days in June, 31 days in July, 31 days in August, 30 days in September, and 13 days in October, so there are exactly 153 days!

the numerical value of the two Greek key words μήτηρ κυρίου (Mother of Lord) is exactly 153¹⁰. This could not be an accident.

$$\mu \eta \tau \eta \rho \kappa \upsilon \rho \iota \omicron \upsilon \\ 12 + 7 + 19 + 7 + 17 + 10 + 20 + 17 + 9 + 15 + 20 = 153$$

The number 153 appears in the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple who took care of the Mother of God, and is strongly connected with the events outside the Bible which are demonstrated by God to emphasize the role and the dignity of Mary. And there is a great analogue between John and Luke (see chart below).

John 21:1–14	Luke 5:4–11
John 21:2	Luke 1:43
Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee (five by name called the Disciples)	ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ κυρίου μου (five words)
no names (two other Disciples)	μήτηρ κυρίου (two words)
153 large fishes	the numerical value of these two Greek words is exactly 153

It corresponds very likely with the opinion of M. J. Lagrange¹¹. He thinks there were only five called the Disciples in the original text, and two more (other) Disciples of Jesus were the marginal gloss, which was incorporated later into the original text.

This explanation on the meaning of the number 153 in John 21:11 is new, very simply, gematriac, and rightly catholic. To understand the number 153 in John 21:11 it must be believed that Mary is the real Mother of God, so Mary's events outside the Bible can show the strong connection of the number 153 with Her and lead towards the solution.

Poznań

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Keywords

John, Luke, Mother of Lord, number, 153 fishes, gematria, Fatima

Streszczenie

Matka Pana i 153 wielkie ryby w J 21, 11

Liczba 153 ryb złowionych przez uczniów w J 21,11 stanowi od dawna przedmiot dociekań. Pojawiło się wiele interpretacji tejże liczby, która musiała być z jakichś powodów

¹⁰ Counted as the simple gematria (linear counting of the numerical values) i. e.: $\alpha = 1$, $\beta = 2$, $\gamma = 3$, $\delta = 4$, $\epsilon = 5$, $\zeta = 6$, $\eta = 7$, $\theta = 8$, $\iota = 9$, $\kappa = 10$, $\lambda = 11$, $\mu = 12$, $\nu = 13$, $\xi = 14$, $\omicron = 15$, $\pi = 16$, $\rho = 17$, $\sigma = 18$, $\tau = 19$, $\upsilon = 20$, $\phi = 21$, $\chi = 22$, $\psi = 23$, $\omega = 24$.

¹¹ Cf. M.-J. Lagrange, *Evangile Selon Saint Jean*, Paris 1948, p. 523.

dobrze zapamiętana i zapisana. Autorami tych interpretacji byli zarówno Ojcowie Kościoła, jak i współcześni teologowie. Wiele z nich jest bardzo ciekawych, jednak żadna z nich nie uwzględniła występowania tejże liczby poza Pismem Świętym.

Jak się okazuje, liczba ta poza Biblią jest ściśle związana z Matką Bożą (ilość *Zdrowas Maryjo* w różańcu, ciągłe przewijanie się liczby 153 w objawieniach w Fatimie). Nie jest to przypadek, bo liczba 153 pojawia się w Ewangelii Jana, któremu Jezus umierając na krzyżu powierzył swoją Matkę. Związek tej liczby 153 z Matką Bożą jest dość oczywisty, ale nie wyjaśnia jeszcze znaczenia tej liczby.

Rozwiązanie znajduje się w Ewangelii Łukasza, który ze wszystkich Ewangelistów poświęcił Matce Bożej najwięcej miejsca. W jego opisie nawiedzenia Najświętszej Maryi znajduje się klucz do odczytania liczby 153. Chodzi mianowicie o słowa, jakie św. Elżbieta wypowiedziała do Maryi: „A skądże mi to, że Matka mojego Pana przychodzi do mnie?” (Łk 1,43). Tytuł Maryi „Matka Pana” jest równoznaczny z „Matka Boga”. W języku oryginalnym (greckim) ten tytuł Maryi zaskakuje. Biorąc pod uwagę wielką analogię pomiędzy Janem i Łukaszem, można odczytać znaczenie liczby 153: a) u Jana jest wymienionych pięciu uczniów z imienia, a u Łukasza pełny tytuł Maryi składa się z pięciu wyrazów (w języku greckim): ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ κυρίου μου; b) u Jana jest wymienionych dwóch uczniów bez imienia, u Łukasza wartość numeryczna dwóch kluczowych słów z tegoż tytułu Maryi (μήτηρ κυρίου) wynosi dokładnie 153, tyle samo, co ilość złowionych ryb. Okazuje się w ten sposób, że wartość numeryczna (gematryczna) dwóch słów kluczowych „Matka Pana” po grecku wynosi dokładnie 153. Taki sposób odczytania potwierdza opinia J. M. Lagrange’a!

Takie wyjaśnienie liczby 153 w J 21,11 jest nowe, gematryczne i właściwe tylko katolikom, bo żeby je znaleźć, trzeba uwierzyć, że Maryja jest prawdziwą Matką Bożą. Mówi nam o tym scena zwiastowania, kiedy Maryja staje się Matką Chrystusa – Boga-człowieka, a potwierdza to scena nawiedzenia, gdy Elżbieta nazywa Maryję „Matką Pana”.

Słowa kluczowe

Ewangelia Jana, Ewangelia Łukasza, Matka Pana, liczba, 153 ryby, gematria, Fatima

