

4. The twenty-first chapter brings John's gospel to a close and recounts Jesus' appearance to His disciples at the Sea of Galilee (21:1). But there are many scholars who believe it was a later addition and that 20:30-31 was the original ending. The various arguments supporting this conclusion are extensive and complex and beyond the scope of this study, but a couple of considerations are worth mentioning. First, the closing verses of chapter 20 do have a finality that makes chapter 21 seem like an afterthought or appendage. Also, many have noted the oddity of the disciples returning to their fishing vocation after Jesus appeared to them twice in Jerusalem. That decision would be understandable if they believed He was dead and gone, but they knew He was raised from the dead, having personally seen and handled Him. This has suggested to some that the Galilee appearance in chapter 21 was actually the first of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to His disciples. This order seems to fit with Matthew and Mark's record (28:1-7; 16:1-7), but John's account disallows it (ref. 21:1; cf. also 20:19, 26).

If indeed chapter 21 was a later addition, there is no *manuscript* evidence for this; every known copy of John's gospel contains this chapter. Neither do any of the early church writings indicate that the chapter wasn't part of the original published account. There is also a clear parallel between 20:30-31 and 21:24-25 which suggests that the person who penned chapter 21 was either the same writer or someone who wished his contribution to fit seamlessly with the rest of the account. But whether or not this chapter was part of the original document and penned by the same author, there is no indication that its content is inaccurate or fabricated. Matthew and Mark recounted Jesus' intent to meet His disciples in Galilee after His resurrection and this chapter details a Galilean encounter.

The text identifies this Galilee episode as the third time Jesus appeared to His disciples (21:14). But unlike the previous two appearances whose timing is specified (20:19, 26), all that is said about this third one is that it occurred some time after the others (21:1). This suggests that John found some special significance in the timing of the two Jerusalem appearances. There's no way to be certain, but perhaps the first one occurring on the "first day of the week" reminded John of the apostles' crucial role in the new beginning initiated by Jesus' resurrection. The second appearance, which saw Thomas added to his believing brethren, came exactly a week later (seven is the number of fullness or completion). This third one, then, occurred sometime later during the forty days before Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:3). The account of it is presented in three distinct sections: The first describes the circumstances of the Lord's appearance (vv. 1-14), the second His interaction with Peter (vv. 15-23), and the third John's (or the redactor's) summary commentary (vv. 24-25; cf. again 20:30-31).

- a. The first section anticipates the second in that it provides the context for Jesus' conversation with Peter. It consists of two related scenes – the disciples' fishing activity and their subsequent meal with the Lord. Again, this entire episode occurred at the Sea of Galilee. The text gives no explanation for the disciples being there, but the most obvious one is that they'd traveled to Galilee per the angel's instruction to the women at the empty tomb (ref. again Matthew 28:1-7; Mark 16:1-7). This scenario is plausible, but not without its problems.

First of all, it doesn't seem to fit with the accounts in Matthew and Mark. Both give the impression that Jesus intended to appear to the disciples first in Galilee (note esp. Matthew 28:5-10) and this appearance is identified as the third, with the first two occurring in Jerusalem. This is another reason many scholars question this chapter and its relation to John's gospel. Many conclude that it's a stylized, symbolic account rather than an historically exact one. But it's also possible that the apostles were preparing to leave Jerusalem for Galilee when Jesus unexpectedly appeared to Peter and then the others that first day. Perhaps that appearance led them to delay their departure, especially since Thomas hadn't been present. Whatever the case, John (or the redactor) clearly wanted his readers to view this appearance as the first one in Galilee, thus connecting it with the angel's promise that the Lord would meet His disciples there.

The text indicates that all of the Eleven witnessed Jesus' appearance, but apparently only six of them were with Peter when he announced that he was going fishing. Again, some have interpreted this as the disciples returning to their former vocation, which seems at odds with their experience. If Jesus had already appeared to them twice, why would they even consider going back to their former lives? But there is a better interpretation in which Peter's decision to go fishing had nothing to do with his sense of the future. If the disciples had indeed traveled to Galilee to meet their Lord, it makes perfect sense that Peter would fill the time of waiting and quiet his nervous anticipation by going fishing. The others evidently saw the wisdom in this and agreed to join him (21:2-3).

But their expectation of a relaxing distraction wasn't realized; long hours of working their net had left them without a single fish. Exhausted and probably frustrated, they noticed a figure standing on the shore just as the day was dawning. He must have touched a nerve when He called out to them, taking note of their empty boat. But they yielded when He instructed them to let down their net one more time. And when they did it became so full that they were unable to haul it back into the boat (21:4-6). John mentioned that he knew at that moment that it was Jesus who was speaking to them. It wasn't just the astonishing catch of fish that tipped him off, but the fact that they'd experienced the same phenomenon before (21:7; cf. Luke 5:1-10). John must have shouted in his excitement and Peter immediately put on his outer garment and dove into the water to swim to shore. The others followed in the boat, struggling to row and control it while the bustling catch was pulling against the submerged net.

When they landed the boat they found Jesus standing by a charcoal fire with broiled fish and bread already prepared. He directed them to bring additional fish and so Peter went to drag the net onto the shore. John recounted that the net contained 153 large fish – evidently far beyond the net's normal capacity given his amazement that it hadn't torn (vv. 8-11). The fact that John mentioned the exact number of fish has provided a field day for those enamored with symbolism and numerology, but it's likely that he only wanted to show how remarkable it was that the net had remained intact.

John undoubtedly connected that catch with the previous time the Lord filled their net on the Sea of Galilee. So he also likely remembered the words Jesus attached to that great haul, “*from now on you will be catching men,*” and the fact that He’d directed those words to Peter. The first catch had pointed to Peter’s role as Jesus’ servant and so it was with the present one: Peter was to be a “fisher of men,” but as one appointed to feed those the Lord gathered to Himself (vv. 15ff).

Peter brought some fish as Jesus instructed and it seems He broiled them while the astonished disciples looked on. When all was ready the Lord called them to sit down and eat breakfast with Him. John’s comment in verse 12 seems to suggest an awkwardness about this situation; the disciples knew they were dining with their Lord and yet were unsettled in that knowledge. They wanted further confirmation but none dared to question Him. This dynamic shows that the disciples hadn’t yet come to grips with the phenomenon of Jesus’ resurrection, let alone its meaning for Him and for them. All of this was so strange and confusing, and all the more so because here they were having breakfast with their Lord as they’d done hundreds of times before, but now under a very different circumstance: They were eating with a man who had been dead not long before.

John added nothing more about this uncomfortable meal, but the disciples must have been struggling to process the whole situation. In some respects it was very familiar to them; even the astonishing catch of fish was something they’d experienced before. And yet there was a radical newness in this familiar scene. Jesus hadn’t appeared as an apparition or vision, but as Himself in the flesh, and yet He was *different*. It wasn’t just that He was alive again after being put to death, but that He was alive in a different way.

- They’d witnessed this first-hand when He twice appeared and then vanished from a locked room in Jerusalem. A spirit could do such a thing, but not a flesh-and-bones human being (cf. Luke 24:33-39).
- And now this man who was able to appear and disappear in a supernatural way was sitting in front of them enjoying a meal of fish and bread just like any normal person; just like He’d done countless times before.

The disciples knew that this person was their Lord, the same Jesus of Nazareth they’d lived with for three years, but yet He wasn’t the same. They knew Him and yet didn’t know Him. While recognizing Him, their hearts were longing to ask Him, “*Who are You?*” The man they’d known and embraced as the Messiah was somehow transformed and they were struggling to sort this out. This was perhaps only the second time they’d seen Jesus eat since His death (ref. Luke 24:41-43) and that, too, may have startled and confused them. It was clear that His resurrection had transformed His physicality in some mysterious way; what did that mean for Him in terms of natural bodily processes? This meal showed the disciples that Jesus could still eat food, but did He *need* to? And what, then, when He ascended to the Father? A myriad of questions must have filled their minds.