CHAPTER THREE

A MIRACULOUS CATCH OF FISH


Both the third and the fourth gospels contain accounts of miraculous catches of fish, with these elements in common: the scene (the Sea of Galilee), Peter and the sons of Zebedee as participants, the catch following a night of unsuccessful fishing, the catch at Jesus’ command. Yet equally striking are the divergences. In Luke Jesus is in the boat which catches the fish, two boats in all are involved, and the incident culminates in Jesus’ call of Peter to discipleship; in John the need for food is stressed, only one boat is mentioned, Jesus remains on shore, the fishing is concluded by a meal, above all, the whole scene constitutes a resurrection appearance. A direct relation between the two accounts, i.e. literary dependence of one on the other, is excluded by the fact that only two significant words are common to both: ἁρπαγμὸς and δίκτυον. That is to say, though the fourth evangelist knew the Lucan passage he has not grafted elements from it into the related passage in his own gospel. A connection between the two can only be a matter of a connection at an earlier stage in the transmission of the tradition, before the two stories were parts of the two gospels. And the question to be asked is whether in either of the two accounts the connection of the miracle with its context is tenuous; if so this would show that its original context was in the other account. For this purpose we shall examine both passages, beginning with the Johannine.

It is characterized by a striking internal difficulty, i.e. the fact that the disciples, having caught at Jesus’ command an enormous catch of fish (ἁρπαγμὸς), on coming ashore find other fish (δύσφρητον) and bread awaiting them; and they eat the latter, not what they’ve caught. On the basis of this, Schwartz 1 sees the fishing element as secondary, having originally nothing to do with the resurrection story which (preserved according to him in vv. 1-3, 4a, 9, 12-13) narrated (a) the appearance of the Lord to the disciples who’ve

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1 In the Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, 1914, pp. 216 f.
fled to Galilee and resumed their occupation, and (b) his renewal of the table fellowship with them. But Bultmann\(^1\) refutes this with the observation that the detailed description in v. 3, and above all the ἐπίλαξαν οὐδέν, are both inseparable from v. 5, to which they lead up. Goguel\(^2\) affirms that the miraculous catch of Jn. 21 originally was followed merely by a meal and had nothing to do with a resurrection appearance until it was later joined to a story, similar to the Emmaus one, in which the resurrected Jesus made himself known to his disciples in breaking bread with them. But this explanation fails to take account of the fact that the recognition of Jesus in Jn. 21 stems exclusively from the fishing incident and has nothing to do with eating. The fact that in Luke's gospel a resurrection account centering about recognition through table fellowship exists (Lk. 24. 13-35) does not justify us, in the absence of compelling evidence in the Jn. 21 text, in seeing a similar story as the core of these verses.

It is clear, then, that at the core of 21. 1-14 lies the miraculous catch and the recognition of the resurrected Jesus rising out of it. There is good reason to believe that this was originally the first appearance of the risen Christ and not the third (or fourth), as it is in its present Johannine form. For this speak the following: (a) the disciples in Jn. 21. 1 ff. have returned to their fishing, which precludes a previous resurrection appearance of Jesus to them; (b) the disciples do not recognize Jesus as they would if he had already appeared to them since his resurrection; (c) 20. 29 implies that the present position of the Jn. 21 resurrection appearance is not the original one: the third appearance in ch. 20 was originally the last one recounted in the gospel—and this is confirmed by 20. 30 f., which clearly formed the conclusion to the gospel in its original (perhaps unpublished) form; (d) 21. 14 lends itself well to the view that the evangelist, when incorporating 21. 1-13 into the gospel,\(^3\) here (and in the addition of πάλιν in 21. 1 and of elements of 21. 7) altered a written account of the event in which it constituted the first resurrection appearance.\(^4\)

\(^1\) Bultmann, op. cit., ad loc.
\(^2\) Goguel, The Birth of Christianity, pp. 51 f.
\(^3\) That ch. 21 stems from the same hand as ch. 1-20 (though, as 20. 30 f. shows, added later as a supplement) has been demonstrated by Bernard, op. cit., ad loc., with his statistics on the extraordinary closeness in style of 21. 1-14 to ch. 20.
\(^4\) Though we can determine this, the passage remains problematic. The