

153 Fish An Introduction to Jewish Exegesis

Near the end of his Gospel, the Apostle John tells a story about an event that happened along the shores of the Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee) shortly after Yeshua's resurrection. John reports in Chapter 21 that seven of the disciples had gone back to the Galilee and resumed their livelihood – fishing. Unfortunately, on one particular night they had had no luck and by morning they had caught nothing. While they were rowing back toward land they saw Yeshua standing on the shore. When Yeshua learned that their nets were empty He told them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. After the disciples had done so their net was suddenly so full to overflowing that they were unable to haul the net on board the boat. When they finally made it to shore, John records this rather cryptic observation: “*Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, **one hundred and fifty three**; and although there were so many fish, **the net was not broken.***” (John 21:11)

Have you ever wondered why John was so careful to record the exact number of the fish and the condition of the net?

EXEGESIS (pronounced: ek'si-JĒ'sis)

Exegesis is defined as *the critical explanation or interpretation of a text – especially a text of the Scriptures*. Jewish reverence for the **Tanakh** (the Old Testament) is based on the belief that the Hebrew Scriptures are the actual Words of God. Every word -- indeed, every letter – of the Scriptures has been put there for a purpose. In Jewish Exegesis, there is nothing in the Scriptures that is there by chance or accident. Moreover, the rabbis teach that there are eternal truths and lessons to be found behind every story, every paragraph, every sentence, every word, every letter. In Hebraic thought the truths contained in the Bible are practically infinite, and they are available to us if we will take the time to diligently search God's Word with the help of the *Rauch HaKodesh* – the Holy Spirit.

PARDES (pronounced: par-DĒZ)

With that in mind, the rabbis have formulated an approach to Biblical exegesis which they call פֶּרְדֵּס (**Pardes**). “Pardes” is the Hebrew word for “an orchard or a garden”. This is the word from which we get our English word “Paradise”. Pardes is sometimes written in English as **PaRDeS**, because it is actually an acronym – a word created from the first letter of four other Hebrew words. These four words form the central basic formula of Jewish Exegesis. The four words are פֶּשֶׁט (P'shat), רֵמֵז (Remez), דְּרָשׁ (D'rash), and סוּד (Sōd). Let's look at each of these four words in turn, and see how they apply to our study and understanding of the Scriptures.

פֶּשֶׁט (P'shat): The word means “simple”. P'shat refers to the *simple* or *literal* interpretation of the text. In the example of John 21:11 the interpretation is easy. John is referring to a literal count of 153 fish – the disciples caught a lot of large fish!

רֵמֵז (Remez): In modern Hebrew the word means “clue”. The idea is that something is “hidden” or “hinted” at. In other words, there is a deeper spiritual meaning than just the literal concept being expressed. Many of Yeshua's allegorical parables are examples of “remez”. Using our text of John 21:11 we might interpret the text in a number of ways: (a) God provides abundance even in the face of impossible situations; (b) the “net” of God's kingdom is unbreakable; (c) the “net” of the Kingdom will eventually return to “the land” (ie, to Israel); (d) cast your “net” upon the water, because with Yeshua it will never come up empty; (e) in obeying the LORD there are tangible rewards. No doubt one could think of innumerable additional examples.

דרש (D'rash): D'rash means to “inquire” or “to seek”. It has to do with the comparative meaning as given through similar words, phrases, or concepts throughout Scripture. Some examples would be comparing John 21:11 (a) with Matt. 4:18-19 where Yeshua sees Simon and Andrew casting their nets and says to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”; (b) with Jeremiah 16:15-16 where God says He will bring His people back to the land by “sending many fishermen” to “fish for them”; (c) with Psalm 8:6-9 where the Psalmist praises God for giving mankind dominion over the living things of earth, including “the fish of the sea”; (d) with Matt. 7:7-11 where Yeshua uses an example of the Father giving His child a fish rather than a stone; or (e) with Psalm 91:3 where the Psalmist praises God for being his refuge and for delivering him “from the net of the fowler, and from perilous pestilence.” Once again, discovering other examples would be almost endless.

סוד (Sōd): “Sōd” means “secret” or “mystery” in Hebrew. In Jewish exegesis this refers to the esoteric or mystical meaning, often as given through a special inspired revelation.

Jewish numerology (called Gematria) is also included in this form of Scriptural interpretation called “Sōd”. Each Hebrew letter has a numerical value. Therefore, each Hebrew word also has a numerical value – the sum of the value of each of the Hebrew letters in the word. Moreover, many spiritual concepts also have a numerical value in Hebraic thinking. For example, the number 6 refers to “mankind”, since man was created on the sixth day.

Let's look at the number 153 – the number of fish that John so precisely recorded in his story above – and give a couple of examples of what “secrets” can be found in that number. (a) The number 153 is “17 factorial” – that is, it is the sum of adding the first 17 numbers together ($1+2+3+\dots+17 = 153$). In Hebraic numerology, the number 17 refers to the concept of “overcoming” or “total victory”. When Peter hauled 153 fish ashore, he experienced “total victory” by following Yeshua's command. (b) the word **בצלאל** (betzlel) has the numeric value of 153. Betzlel means “in God's shadow” or “under God's protection”. One could extrapolate from that fact that when the disciples caught those 153 fish at Yeshua's command, it was a sign to them that they were *in God's shadow* and *under His protection*.

Obviously a person could take Hebraic numerology to an extreme and therefore the use of Gematria in Biblical exegesis is used minimally today by most Jewish scholars. On the other hand, Jewish mystics who are involved in Kabbalah continue to place a significant emphasis on Gematria. Notwithstanding that cautionary note, Gematria can still reveal some astounding Biblical insights!

When one is using the formula of “**PaRDeS**” to study the Scriptures, as a general rule the extended meaning of a passage of Scripture should never contradict the basic meaning -- the **P'shat**. **Remez** is typically the allegorical meaning; **D'rash** is typically the metaphorical meaning; and **Sōd** is typically the hidden meaning. However, keep in mind that there can be considerable overlap among these four categories. By using “**Pardes**” in one's study of the Scriptures, one can approach the Word of God as a beautiful “garden” full of HaShem's infinite truths; a garden filled with the “fragrance of Messiah”, and illuminated by the light of His “*chesed*” – His lovingkindness and His favor toward us!

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