

New Light on the
Difficult Words of Jesus

Insights from His Jewish Context

David Bivin

Foreword by
Dwight A. Pryor

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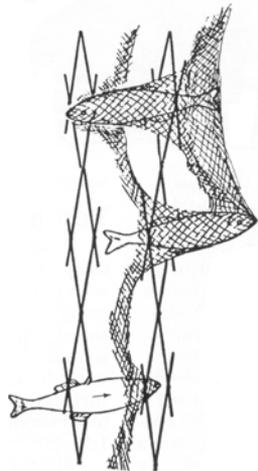
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Miracle on the Sea of Galilee

He [Jesus] got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to push out a little from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Push out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Teacher, we have worked all night and caught nothing! However, if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they enclosed a great school of fish ... when Simon Peter saw it, he fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Go away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man!" (Lk 5:3-6, 8)

Understanding more about ancient fishing on the Sea of Galilee allows us to paint, in vivid detail, this scene of one of the first miracles of Jesus' ministry as it occurred, likely during winter on the lake shore at Heptapegon near Capernaum.¹

Peter and the other fishermen were using a trammel net to catch musht (*Tilapia galilea*; "St. Peter's fish"). They fished at night and stopped their work at dawn because in the light of day the fish could see the netting. Before the fishermen turned in for the day, they carefully washed their nets and hung them to dry. If the linen nets were not dried promptly after use they would rot in a short time. From the gospel account we learn that Jesus arrived at the lakeshore while the fishermen were still



How fish are enmeshed in a layered trammel net

washing their nets, and immediately got into one of the boats and began to teach. If the washing of the trammel nets took place shortly after dawn, then Jesus must have begun teaching very early in the morning.²

Jewish sources support this picture of the diligence and faithfulness of teachers in Israel during this period, and the people's eagerness to learn Torah. From rabbinic literature one learns that the rabbis taught in every conceivable venue and at any time of the day or night. Here we have an example of a rabbi teaching in the early morning, perhaps as early as 7:00, from a boat moored offshore. A crowd large enough to cause Jesus to use a boat as a teaching platform had gathered, despite the early hour.

The Tough Work of the Fisherman

Was it just by chance that Jesus chose fishermen as disciples, or had their difficult work especially prepared them for the task for which they were chosen? The Sea of Galilee fishermen were tough. Their bodies were wet much of the time, even in the winter, for it is during the winter when fishing is at its best on the Sea of Galilee – the musht season is in the winter, as is the sardine season. The winter is also the rainy season in Israel, and it often rained on the fishermen during those long winter nights when they were out on the lake.³ (In those days there were no rubberized rain gear like today's fishermen wear!)

The fisherman's work was also difficult physically, entailing rowing to and from the fishing sites, hauling in heavy nets and

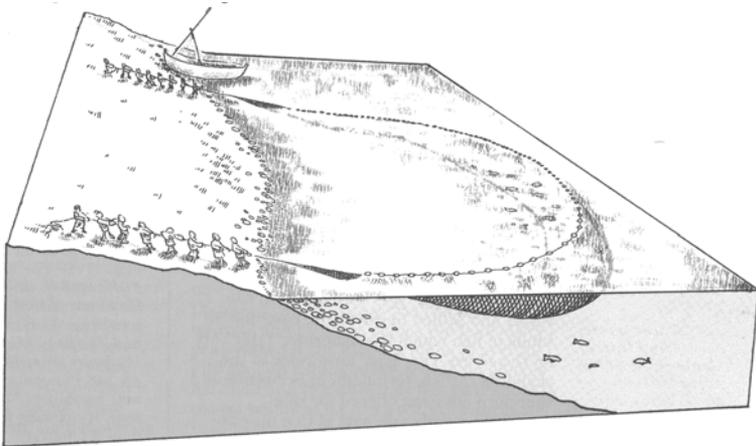
A cast-net fisherman working from shore



lifting catches of fish. Cast-net fishermen had to dive under the water repeatedly to retrieve their nets. Most fishermen worked all night and slept during the day. We can image that a typical fishing village like Capernaum was quiet until 12:30 or 1:00 p.m., with mothers shushing noisy children or any dog that barked.

Put yourself in Peter's place, having worked all night in a small boat, in the cold, in the dark, perhaps in the rain. How would you feel if while washing your nets shortly after dawn, dead tired after a long night of fishing, someone climbed into your boat and asked you to row him out into the lake, and then you had to sit in the boat waiting for several hours while that person spoke to an audience? Before long, your patience would be wearing thin because you would not only be sleepy, you would begin to be very hungry as well. Imagine then being ordered to go back to work, to let down your nets again – after they had already been washed! What *chutzpah* on the part of Jesus!

Where was Jesus when he said to Peter, "Push out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch?" Where was Jesus when Peter fell at his feet in shock and amazement? Our impression of the story in Luke 5:1-11 is sometimes colored by a similar story found in John 21:1-14. We often unconsciously harmonize these accounts even though the story in John takes place after the resurrection. We picture Jesus standing elegantly on the beach, perhaps with an arm outstretched towards Peter's boat some



Fishing with a seine net

distance offshore. We envision Peter jumping out of his boat, swimming ashore, falling on his face on the beach before Jesus, and then climbing back aboard his boat to drag the loaded net ashore. This is due to the influence of John's account which has Peter, when he heard that it was the Lord, jumping out of his boat which was 200 cubits (about 90 meters) from land and swimming ashore.

However, in Luke's story, Jesus is in Peter's boat when he tells Peter to push out into the deep water and begin fishing again. Jesus also is in the boat when Peter falls at his feet immediately after the loaded fish nets are hauled into the boat.

It may seem to us from English translations of this story that Peter alone maneuvered the boat into position for Jesus' teaching session, that Peter alone took his boat out to deeper water, and that Peter single-handedly let down the nets. But Jesus' command – "Push out [plural] into the deep water and let down [plural] your [plural] nets for a catch" – indicates that there was at least one other fisherman from Peter's crew who got into the boat with Peter and Jesus. Also the statement in verse 7, "they motioned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them," shows that Peter was not the only fisherman in the boat.

The size and shape of trammel net boats have remained constant since the time of Jesus.

The crew is a minimum of two.



The trammel net boat was normally manned by four fishermen. It is therefore likely that there were two or three other fishermen who got into the boat along with Peter. (The trammel net boat could with some difficulty be operated by a crew of two – one crew member rowing and the other playing out and hauling in the nets.) If only two persons besides Peter and Jesus got into the boat, then

perhaps Jesus served as the crew's fourth member. If three got in then Jesus was in the way, since in a boat of this size – fifteen to eighteen feet long – there was barely room for four fishermen, their nets and other equipment.

This alters the usual picture we have of Jesus' lakeside teaching session: as the crowd listened to Jesus, they saw him in a boat flanked by two to four fishermen. Furthermore, we have to picture Jesus, as the nets were being hauled into the boat, crowded into a corner of the boat and partially covered with nets and fish – unless he had replaced the fourth crew member and was helping to pull in the nets. Had Jesus himself spent time fishing on the Sea of Galilee?

The Miracle of the Catch

When Peter saw the enormous catch, he fell down in the boat in front of Jesus crying, "Go away from me, Lord. I am a sinful man!" The text adds that Peter and those with him were astonished "at the catch of fish which they had taken." Did these fishermen react this way because statistically it was unlikely that they would catch fish, not to speak of a near-record catch, after having worked all night and caught nothing? Yes, this partially accounts for their shock. The unlikelihood of now catching enough fish to be worth their while financially is also indicated by Peter's initial response. He didn't immediately do as Jesus said, but first argued a little: "Lord, we have worked all night and caught nothing."

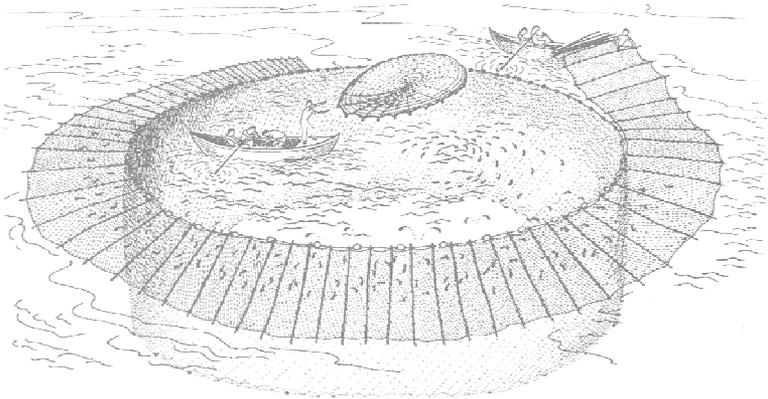
But there is more to these Galilean fishermen's reaction of amazement than the catch itself or its size. Until the introduction of transparent nylon nets in the mid-1950s, trammel net fishing was done only at night. In the daytime, the fish could see the nets and avoid them. The miracle was that the fish swam blindly into the net. In addition, in trammel net fishing the fish had to be scared into the nets after the nets had been put in place. Although possible, it does not seem from Luke's account that the fishermen made a commotion to frighten the fish.

What was it, then, that caused Peter to fall in fear at Jesus' feet? Apparently, it was the timing of the miracle. It was amazement at Jesus' ability to, as we say, "call the shots." Immediately after he

finished preaching, when it was convenient for him, Jesus compensated these fishermen for their inconvenience.

The confidence of Jesus stands out. To teach a crowd of people Jesus apparently did not mind the inconvenience he caused these fishermen because he planned to reward them for their service and knew that he could do so whenever he wished. We see this same confidence demonstrated by Peter after Pentecost when Peter, knowing in advance what he was going to do and what would be the result, healed a lifelong cripple (Acts 3:6).

Jesus was not unaware of the tiredness of the fishermen and their frustration at not having caught anything after working so hard all night. He knew that they were dead tired and wanted to go home and go to sleep. He also knew of their general need for income and their particular lack of it after this unsuccessful night of fishing. He removed their frustration at having wasted a night's work and blessed them with enough fish to compensate them not just for the few hours he took of their time but with as many fish as they would normally have caught in several nights of good fishing. The catch described in Luke 5 was about three-fourths of a ton – as much as a trammel net fishing crew would normally take in two week's work, allowing for nights like the one that Peter and his crew had just experienced when nothing is caught.



Another type of fishing using the veranda net. Fish try to escape the cylindrical trammel by jumping over it, but they land on the *veranda*.

¹ This chapter is based on the research of Mendel Nun, 87, who has spent a lifetime studying the ancient fishing methods used on the Sea of Galilee. Since Jesus spent so much time on or near the sea, and his first disciples were Sea of Galilee fishermen, Nun's work is important in illuminating many gospel stories.

² Nun also has shown that in the story of the miraculous catch, Peter could only have been using a trammel net or a veranda net, a variation of the trammel net. He could not have been fishing with a seine because it was not used near Heptapegon/Capernaum. The floor of the lake in that area of the coast is so rocky that the seine would have continually gotten hung up on the rocks. And it is unlikely that Peter was using a cast-net because he was fishing with a boat and crew.

³ For more on trammel net fishing on the Sea of Galilee, see "Let Down Your Nets" by Mendel Nun, *Jerusalem Perspective* 24 (Jan/Feb 1990), pp. 11–13.

"Miracle on the Sea of Galilee" was adapted and abridged from the article, "The Miraculous Catch (Luke 5:1–11): Reflections on the Research of Mendel Nun," by David Bivin, which is available online at www.JerusalemPerspective.com.