

Three Miracles and the Thomas Code

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Abstract

The book, *The Thomas Code*, shows how the miracles of the feeding of the multitudes in Mark related to the mathematic formula used to structure the gospel of Thomas. This paper extends this finding to two other miracles; the turning of water into wine and the miraculous catch of 153 fish which are the first and last miracles in John. These two John miracles both relate, in particular, to the division of Thomas into eighteens. With this extension, all the gospel stories concerned with the miraculous production of food or drink are shown to be mathematical riddles around the Thomas Code. The paper includes a brief summary of the mystical-mathematics of the Thomas Code, which is based on the properties of the prime numbers 2, 3, 5 and 7.

The Gospel of Thomas is not a random collection of sayings. It has a mathematical structure unlike anything else from early Christianity, or indeed from the ancient world. That is the conclusion of my book *The Thomas Code*.¹ In this paper, I want to reveal two further links between the New Testament gospels and the Thomas Code. These are two miracle stories which are mathematical riddles in disguise. A brief explanation of the Thomas Code is included for those who have not read the book.

Both miracles come from the Gospel of John. One is the very first miracle, the turning of water into wine at the wedding at Cana. The other is the very last miracle, in which the resurrected Jesus appears to the fishermen disciples who make a

¹ S.P. Laurie, *The Thomas Code: Solving the Mystery of the Gospel of Thomas* (London: Hypostasis, 2018).

miraculous catch of 153 fish. This second story has close similarities to another famous miracle which appears in all four of the gospels; the feeding of the multitudes with loaves and fishes. The book shows the connections between the loaves and fish miracle and the Thomas Code—it is another mathematical riddle about multiplication. So there are three separate miracle stories which are all riddles concerning the secret mathematical structure of the Gospel of Thomas. The three miracles all involve a fantastic production of food or drink and are the only three such miracles in the gospels.

Unlike some of the healing miracles, the food and drink miracles always have strained credibility. This would be explained if they started as playful mathematical riddles created by the person who invented the Thomas Code. I believe that the new convert or learner was given the conundrums to ponder until their teacher revealed the hidden mathematical knowledge. But the key to the meaning was lost when the Christian leaders suffered martyrdom in the first century. The stories became viewed naively as miracles performed by Jesus and as such found their way into the gospels.

It should be stressed that the Thomas Code is not some random “Bible code” that has been found by searching a vast number of possibilities by computer. It is very different—a beautiful expression of some simple mathematics of prime numbers. The ancients did not look at mathematics the way we do, but saw it in mystical terms, as revealing religious secrets about the universe. This was as true of pagans as it was Jews and Christians. The Thomas Code is based on the unique properties of the first three prime numbers; two, three and five. The author of Thomas developed a theological interpretation in which two was the number of Jesus, the Son, and three was the number of God, the Father. In *The Thomas Code*, I suggest that this is how the concept of the trinity originated.²

The book offers two main lines of evidence:

1. The Thomas Code is alluded to by certain sayings in the gospel. In the case of one saying, we can go as far as to say that it specifies the Thomas Code. These sayings all involve numbers. Some of them have been very puzzling indeed.

2. Once the Gospel of Thomas is organized by the Thomas Code, numerous links, symmetries and sub-structures become apparent. The author of the gospel continually poses riddles and plays games with us. Features which have defied explanation now make perfect sense. In one case, it has been possible to quantify probabilities to show that there is no realistic chance that the Thomas Code organization is random.

² *The Thomas Code*, pp. 76-77.

The miracle stories complement these internal proofs. The link with the feeding of the multitudes shows that the Thomas Code, and hence the Gospel of Thomas, was in existence before the New Testament gospels. This finding is buttressed by the links with the two Gospel of John miracles.

Miracle 1: Water into Wine

The story of the wedding at Cana, which is found only in the Gospel of John, is Jesus' first miracle. In this famous story, Jesus turns water into wine:

Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now." (John 2:6-10 ESV)

According to this translation, Jesus creates a simply enormous quantity of wine - something like 600 litres, equivalent to 800 modern-sized bottles. The guests have already been drinking all day. How many people would be at the wedding? Let us say 50 to 100. If we exclude children, there would be the equivalent of at least ten bottles per person. Is Jesus trying to kill them?

Clearly, there is something wrong with the miracle story as it stands in John. Why go out of the way to mention the volume of wine when it results in an absurdity? The author of John must be reflecting something in his source, and that something does not make sense when converted into a literal miracle.

The water/wine is the Gospel of Thomas

The original story was surely not about a group of wedding guests getting hopelessly drunk. The true wedding is spiritual, and the guests have been invited to

a spiritual banquet. To find the meaning of the water turned into wine, we must turn to the Gospel of Thomas, and a saying about becoming spiritually drunk:

Jesus said: "I am not your master, because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the bubbling spring that I have measured out." (Part of Thomas 13; TC 1.12)

In this saying, a bubbling spring (water) has made the disciples drunk (turned into wine). There is also a second saying about drinking:

Jesus said: "Whoever drinks from my mouth shall become like me; I myself will become he [or she], and the hidden thing shall appear to him [or her]." (Thomas 108; TC 6.15)

You drink from the mouth of Jesus by absorbing the sayings. If you do this, you will become like Jesus, and the hidden things will be revealed. It is the sayings in Thomas that are the bubbling stream. The water (the sayings) will turn into wine in the mind of the disciple and make him or her drunk with the spiritual presence of Jesus.

In the Thomas saying, Jesus measures out the stream that will make his disciples drunk. In the John miracle, the water/wine is measured out by being placed into six jugs. To understand the meaning of these six jugs, we need to look at the Thomas Code structure.

The Thomas Code

The starting point for the Thomas Code was a suggestion from Stevan Davies that the Gospel of Thomas originally had 108 sayings.³ I noticed that the number 108 has a very special prime factorization. Let me explain. A prime number is any number other than 1 that cannot be divided by any other number except itself and 1. Educated people in the first century would have been familiar with prime numbers which were discovered by the Greeks. There are an infinite number of primes, but the series starts simply enough:

2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, ...

³ Stevan Davies, "1994 SBL paper: Does the Gospel of Thomas has a meaning?" in *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* 2nd ed. (California: Bardic Press)

Every number has a unique prime factorization - a way of expressing the number as a multiple of primes. For example, the prime factorization of 20 is:

$$20 = 2 \cdot 2 \cdot 5$$

where "•" is the symbol for multiplication. The order is not important, but there is no other way of expressing 20 as a product of primes except as two 2s and one 5. Now the prime factorization of 108 is special. It is the first two primes raised to their own powers:

$$108 = 2^2 \cdot 3^3$$

This formula uses our modern notation - in the ancient world it would have been thought of as "two twos and three threes". The total number of factors is five which is the sum of the two prime factors and is also a prime number. But was this unusual mathematical property of 108 relevant?

It could be used to organize a gospel of sayings as a hierarchy. To generate such a hierarchy the five factors must be placed in order. What order would someone living in the first century use? Symmetry was all important—we know that many Jewish and Christian writings employ a chiasmic structure which is symmetrical. It also seemed fitting that the factors should alternate, which gave only one possibility:

$$3 \cdot 2 \cdot 3 \cdot 2 \cdot 3$$

This is the formula I have called "the Thomas Code". It is attractive even visually, combining the symmetry of the twos with the triplet of threes in an interlinked whole. I could see how someone in the Roman world would attach a mystical meaning to such a formula. But it is not just visually attractive: it has a number of unique mathematical properties. These come from the very special nature of the three primes, 2, 3 and 5:

- 2 and 3 are the only consecutive numbers which are both prime.
- 2 and 3 are the only two successive primes which sum to give another prime, 5. (If we add together any other two successive numbers from the list of primes we will get an even number which is not prime.)

These properties of 2 and 3 contribute to the very special properties of the Thomas Code formula:

- The sum of the two prime factors gives the next highest prime number which also equals the total number of factors ($2+3=5$).
- The number of occurrences of each prime factor is equal to the factor (two 2s and three 3s).
- If we add any two successive factors, we always get the next highest prime number (either $3+2=5$ or $2+3=5$).

The Thomas Code is unique. There is no other sequence for which all these properties are true.

We can apply the formula to organize a collection of 108 sayings as a hierarchy with multiple levels. The sayings are grouped by applying each factor in turn:

- 3 - group sayings into threes.
- 2 - combine two threes into sixes.
- 3 - combine three sixes into eighteens.
- 2 - combine two eighteens into thirty-sixes.
- 3 - combine three thirty-sixes to give one-hundred-and eight.

Because the Thomas Code is symmetrical, we can carry this process in reverse by dividing up the gospel. We apply the 3 by dividing 108 into three groups of 36 sayings and so on. Either way, we get the same structure.

- 108 groups of 1 saying.
- 36 groups of 3 sayings.
- 18 groups of 6 sayings.
- 6 groups of 18 sayings.
- 3 groups of 36 sayings.
- 1 group of 108 sayings.

Each individual saying belongs to a group of 3, 6, 18 and 36 as well as to the whole gospel of 108.

To say that such a structure is unexpected would be a complete understatement! As far as I know there is nothing like it in any text from the ancient world. Is it really likely that a person in the first century would have come up with this sophisticated

way of organizing a collection of sayings? My own doubts were resolved when I came across a reference to such a hierarchy in a most surprising place; the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand in the Gospel of Mark. It was the first hint of the intimate connection between the Thomas Code and the miracle food and drink stories.

The importance of the eighteens

The levels of the hierarchy are not all equal. The importance of the eighteens jumped out as I placed the gospel into the Thomas Code structure. Essentially, the gospel is organized as six groups of eighteen sayings. The eighteens are put into pairs to give the thirty-sixes. They are subdivided into three sixes and six threes. Because the eighteens were so important, I based the Thomas Code system of numbering around them. In this system, the sayings are numbered first by the eighteen (1 to 6) and then by the position within the eighteen (1 to 18).

This structure is shown in the diagram below, reproduced from the book. The book explores the many features in the gospel that depend upon this fundamental grouping into eighteens. To give one example: it has long been a mystery why the gospel appears to be signalling an end at Thomas 19, which is saying 1.18 in the above structure. Some people have speculated that the first group of eighteen sayings initially circulated as a separate text. However, the Thomas Code shows that an ending at 1.18 is expected because this is the last saying of the important first eighteen.⁴

⁴ Thomas 19 is the eighteenth saying and not the nineteenth, this is because Thomas 1 is now regarded as being part of the incipit and not the first saying.

Incipit

The Thomas Code structure and renumbering

Keystone sayings

		1st thirty-six		2nd thirty-six		3rd thirty-six	
		1st eighteen	2nd eighteen	3rd eighteen	4th eighteen	5th eighteen	6th eighteen
1st six	1st three	1.1	2.1	3.1	4.1	5.1	6.1
		1.2	2.2	3.2	4.2	5.2	6.2
		1.3	2.3	3.3	4.3	5.3	6.3
	2nd three	1.4	2.4	3.4	4.4	5.4	6.4
		1.5	2.5	3.5	4.5	5.5	6.5
		1.6	2.6	3.6	4.6	5.6	6.6
2nd six	3rd three	1.7	2.7	3.7	4.7	5.7	6.7
		1.8	2.8	3.8	4.8	5.8	6.8
		1.9	2.9	3.9	4.9	5.9	6.9
	4th three	1.10	2.10	3.10	4.10	5.10	6.10
		1.11	2.11	3.11	4.11	5.11	6.11
		1.12	2.12	3.12	4.12	5.12	6.12
3rd six	5th three	1.13	2.13	3.13	4.13	5.13	6.13
		1.14	2.14	3.14	4.14	5.14	6.14
		1.15	2.15	3.15	4.15	5.15	6.15
	6th three	1.16	2.16	3.16	4.16	5.16	6.16
		1.17	2.17	3.17	4.17	5.17	6.17
		1.18	2.18	3.18	4.18	5.18	6.18

The miracle of the wine and the Thomas Code

The importance of the eighteens gives us the solution to the miracle of the water into wine.

- The Gospel of Thomas is the water turned into wine.
- The gospel is placed in six “containers” of eighteen sayings each.

The six jars stand for the eighteens. But what about the “twenty or thirty gallons” that each jar holds? What does this stand for? And why is there an “or”? If the author is writing the story, why is he unsure how much the jars hold?

The twenty or thirty gallons are not actually in the original text but have been written in by the translators. A more literal translation of the Greek is as follows:

Now there were six stone water jars [...] holding two or three measures [metrētēs].

One “measure” (metrētēs) of a liquid was equal to about 9 imperial gallons or 10.5 US gallons. The word comes from metreó, to measure. This same word was used in a technical sense in mathematical treatises, particularly in relation to prime numbers. One number is said to “measure” another if it divides that number without a remainder. For example, Euclid’s defines a prime number as being “measured by unity alone”.⁵ We find the same concept of a number being “measured” by its prime factors in Nicomachus’ textbook “Introduction to Arithmetic” written c.100 AD.⁶

Now both 2 and 3 “measure” 18 in this mathematical sense. They are the two prime factors of 18 and the two primes that make up the Thomas Code. But we can go further than this:

3 “measures” 18 by dividing it into groups of 6 sayings

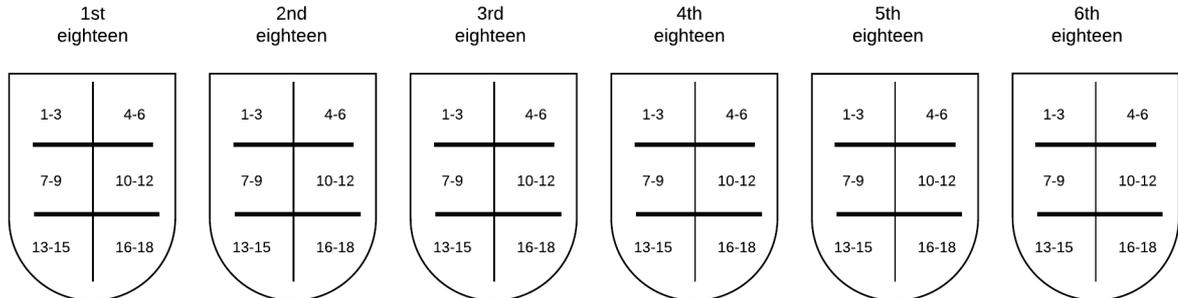
2 “measures” 6 by dividing it into groups of 3 sayings

So if we measure each jar by 3 and then measure again by 2 we would get the complete Thomas Code structure from the eighteens downwards:

⁵ Euclid Elements 7 Def. 11.

⁶ See for example Nicomachus of Gerasa, *Introduction to Arithmetic*, Book 1, Ch. 11-13.

**The Gospel of Thomas:
Six jars measured by three and by two.**



*"...because you have drunk, you have become drunk from the
bubbling spring that I have measured out"*

The wording of John is not quite the same as this, but we can recreate what must have been in the author's source:

"... each jar holding three measures and two measures."

The author of John would have been understandably confused by what is meant by "three measures and two measures". He concludes that some jars must have held three measures and others two. So he writes "two or three measures".

Miracle 2: The Feeding of the Five Thousand

This is the story of the feeding of the five thousand in Mark:

When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found

out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. (Mark 6:34-45 ESV)

There is one clue in this story which, having worked on the Thomas Code structure, immediately resonated with me:

Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties.

What does it mean that they are grouped "by hundreds and by fifties"? Are we to imagine that there are some groups of fifty and some of hundred? This would be an odd way of organising people. The grouping of the people seems a quite unnecessary detail in the story. But the Thomas Code structure made it beautifully clear. The 5,000 are organized into hundreds and fifties as two levels of a hierarchy.

The clue is to recognise that 50 and 100 represent a factorization of 5,000:

$$5,000 = 50 \cdot 100$$

The people are to be grouped into fifties and then two fifties combined to give the hundreds. This is an exact parallel to the organization of the Gospel of Thomas. Following the Thomas Code method, we can write 5,000 like this:

$$5,000 = 50 \cdot 2 \cdot 50$$

We can then apply each factor in turn, just like the organization of the sayings in Thomas:

We first assemble the crowd into groups of 50.

We then combine two groups of 50 to give groups of 100

We then combine the 50 groups of 100 to give the whole crowd of 5,000

We could also reverse the process in the same way as the Thomas Code and divide up 5,000 by the factors in turn.

The formula, however, is not the prime factorization of 5,000 because 50 is not prime. We can write 50 as a multiple of the primes 2 and 5:

$$50 = 5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5$$

See how similar this formula is to $50 \cdot 2 \cdot 50 = 5,000$. Replacing the 50s by the above formula gives us the full prime factorization:

$$5000 = 5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5$$

This is no random sequence – it is closely connected to the Thomas Code. Like the Thomas Code we have two prime factors which alternate. And like the Thomas Code, if we add any pair of successive factors together, we get the next highest prime number which equals the total number of factors—in this case 7.

The Thomas Code family of sequences

The Thomas Code belongs to a family of related sequences. These sequences share some of the most important properties of the Thomas Code; (i) they involve two prime factors and (ii) if we add any two successive factors we get another prime which equals the total number of factors. It is easy to show that one of the two prime factors must always be 2 and that there is a sequence in the family for every pair of primes whose difference is 2. There are many such pairs of primes, for example:

$$(3,5), (5,7), (11,13), (17,19), (29,31) \dots$$

These twin pairs are common at the start of the prime numbers but become rarer as we go to larger and larger primes. Are there an infinite number of such pairs? This is the famous “Twin Primes Conjecture” which is easy to state but fiendishly difficult to prove. Modern mathematicians are getting close to a proof, but they are still not quite there.⁷

⁷ A breakthrough was made by Yitang Zhang who proved that there is an infinite number of pairs of primes whose difference is not more than 70 million. Mathematicians have subsequently been able to reduce this number to 4,680, but they need to get it down to 2 to prove the Twin Primes Conjecture.

For each pair of primes, there is a sequence in the Thomas Code family. The following shows the first few sequences:⁸

5 factors (2+3=5):

$$3 \cdot 2 \cdot 3 \cdot 2 \cdot 3 = 108$$

7 factors (2+ 5=7):

$$5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5 = 5,000$$

13 factors (2+11=13):

$$11 \cdot 2 \cdot 11 = 12,471,178,944$$

We could go further, but as you can see how the sequences quickly get very large. The next one, involving 19 factors, will multiply out to 1,032,188,877,029,890. Such high numbers are not going to be of interest to the mystical-mathematician who invented the Thomas Code. Only the first two sequences are factorizations of a number small enough to be attractive. The first of these, involving 5 factors, is the Thomas Code. The second sequence, with 7 factors, is encoded in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.

5 loaves and 2 fishes

The seven-factor sequence then is the next closest sequence to the Thomas Code. This sequence multiplies out the prime factors of 2 and 5 to give 5,000. In the miracle story, 5 loaves and 2 fishes are multiplied to feed 5,000 people. The miracle is actually about the sequence, with the loaves and fishes standing for the two prime factors. Given these clues in the story, the links to the Thomas Code formula cannot be chance.

The above is the first part of a mathematical exercise which continues with the near-identical miracle of the feeding for the four thousand. The two parts come together in the summary that Jesus gives to his disciples in a boat. The analysis in the book covers both parts. The second half is a little more involved than the first, but every single feature of the two miracles falls out naturally; the seven and twelve baskets of scraps, the seven loaves of the second miracle, the yeast of Herod and the

⁸ There are actually two sequences for each pair of primes that meet the conditions. We could reverse the factors to get another sequence that starts and ends with 2. But this would be inconsistent with the Thomas Code which starts and ends with the higher prime, 3.

Pharisees and the second miracle's crowd of 4,000. It all leads to an alternative form of the Thomas Code.⁹

Miracle 3: The Catch of 153 Fishes

The last miracle in John occurs when the resurrected Jesus appears to seven of his disciples as they fish in the Sea of Tiberias (the Sea of Galilee). The fishermen are Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus, Nathanael from Cana, the sons of Zebedee (James and John) and two other, unnamed disciples. They have been fishing all night but have had no luck. It is early morning when they spot a man they do not recognise (Jesus) on the shore:

Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have a fish?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find." So they cast it, therefore, and were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was naked, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, about two hundred cubits. When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with a fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have caught now." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of 153 large fish. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. (John 21:4-11)

Jesus invites them to breakfast and serves them bread and a fish. It is a nice story, which many people prefer to the other resurrection narratives: Jesus cooking a simple meal of bread and fish for his disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee. It raises many questions: not least why was Peter fishing naked? And why does he put his cloak on to dive into the water? But we are concerned here with the fish. What is the significance of the 153 fish? The number is precise and must have some meaning.

There is another puzzle that might not be so obvious. The miracle appears to be straightforward. The disciples cannot find any fish until Jesus tells them to put the net to the right-hand side. They make a huge catch, haul it in, and Jesus cooks some of the fish, giving them to the disciples with bread. But there is a problem; Jesus is already cooking a fish before the disciples' catch. Most translations imply that he is cooking a

⁹ *The Thomas Code*, pp. 95-109.

number of fish, but the word *opsarion* (fish) is in the singular here. So why is Jesus cooking a single fish? And where did he get that fish from?

To search for the answers to these questions, we will look at three texts outside John which are linked to the fishing miracle.

Luke's story of the miraculous catch

In Luke 5:1-11 there is another version of the miraculous catch. But the author of Luke sets the story at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is recruiting his first disciples when he sees two boats on the side of the lake with fishermen washing their nets. He boards the boat belonging to Simon, which then takes him a little way out to preach to the people on the shore. Afterwards, Jesus tells Simon to put down the nets. Simon protests that they have not caught anything all night, but lets the nets down anyway. They catch such a large number of fish that the nets begin to tear, and the other boat comes out to help them take the miraculous catch to the shore.

There are enough points of close similarity to be sure that the Luke story is related to the John story. But there are also some remarkable differences:

- The author of Luke combines the story of the miraculous catch with the story of the recruitment of two sets of fishermen brothers (Simon and Andrew, James and John) from Mark 1:16-20.
- The nets are not put down on the right-hand side in the Luke story.
- The number of fish is not specified.
- Jesus is not cooking a meal.

John was written later than Luke, so there are two possibilities. Either the author of John has based his account on the Luke story, or both are using an earlier source. The two authors place the story in a completely different context and time. This is evidence that John is not copying Luke, but has independent access to the original story. The John version is probably the more reliable of the two. The imaginative author of Luke likes to change sources quite blatantly. And in Luke, the miraculous catch is used to add colour and drama to the main story from Mark about the recruitment of the first fishermen disciples. Details such as the 153 fish may have been dropped from Luke because they distracted from this main story.

The miracle of the loaves and fishes

The second link is with the miracle of the loaves and fishes in Mark. The two have some obvious similarities:

- They both involve a miraculous production of food.
- In both, Jesus feeds his followers with bread and fish.

We have seen that the miracle of the loaves and fishes is a play on the Thomas Code—a strong clue that the 153 fish also relates to the Thomas Code.

There is one other detail that is common to both miracles, and that is the number 200. In the loaves and fish miracle, the disciples complain to Jesus that they would require 200 denarii to buy enough bread to feed the five thousand (Mark 6:37). In the John story, Simon Peter swims 200 cubits. The number 200 must have some significance - but what? We will deal with this little mystery later.

The fisherman saying in Thomas

The last source for the John story is less obvious but the most important. This is the fisherman saying in the Gospel of Thomas:

And he said: "Man [or woman] is like a wise fisherman, who cast his net into the sea. He drew it up from the sea full of little fish. Among them the wise fisherman found a good large fish. He cast out all of the little fish, down into the sea; he chose the large fish without trouble. He that has ears to hear, let him hear." (Thomas 8; TC 1.7)

The fisherman's net is full of fish, as in the John and Luke stories. But this time only one fish is large and worth keeping. The fisherman returns the small fish to the sea.

What is the meaning? Originally, the large fish would have represented the kingdom of heaven, and the little fish the many distractions of the world. A person should be like a wise fisherman, taking the one large fish and throwing the many smaller fish back into the sea. The unwise will attempt to feast on the little fish, but they do not nourish. The disciple should choose the kingdom and cast worldly distractions away.

The person who put Thomas into its final form uses the saying playfully, building a mathematical conundrum for his own purpose. He changes the meaning so that Jesus is now the wise fisherman. Jesus has taken the one big fish and left the other fish in the sea. This explains why, in the John story, Jesus already has a single fish which he is cooking. The disciples are less wise, putting their net into the sea to catch the fish which Jesus has left behind.

The size of the fish has changed between the Thomas saying and the John story. The many fish are “small” in Thomas, but the 153 fish are “large” in John; the same Greek word for “large” is used in both John and Thomas. This change is necessary for the literal story—a catch of 153 small fish would be an annoyance, not a miracle.

The Thomas saying gives us a vital clue: the miracle is not just about the 153 fish. We are supposed to compare two things:

- The important large fish which Jesus has taken
- The 153 lesser fish that he left for the disciples

The 153 fishes and the Thomas Code

So what do the 153 fish represent? The miracle is the last in John and forms a pair with the first miracle, the water into wine. Most likely, they both belonged together in the source, which would explain their chiasmic placement within John. The story of the wine is about the division of the Gospel of Thomas into the eighteens. This is true also of the story of the 153 fish.

There are two different methods for calculating 153, one of which has been known for 1,600 years. But first, we will look at the other method which uses the Thomas Code groups.

Method 1:

In this interpretation:

- Jesus’ large fish stands for the groups of eighteen.
- The disciples’ 153 fish stand for all the other groups.

The wise fisherman takes eighteen as the base for the Gospel of Thomas. The other groups are left in the sea, but are fished up by the disciples—so they are used also. We can list out the groups in order (we exclude groups of 1 because no one in the ancient world would have regarded a single saying as a group):

3 6 18 36 108

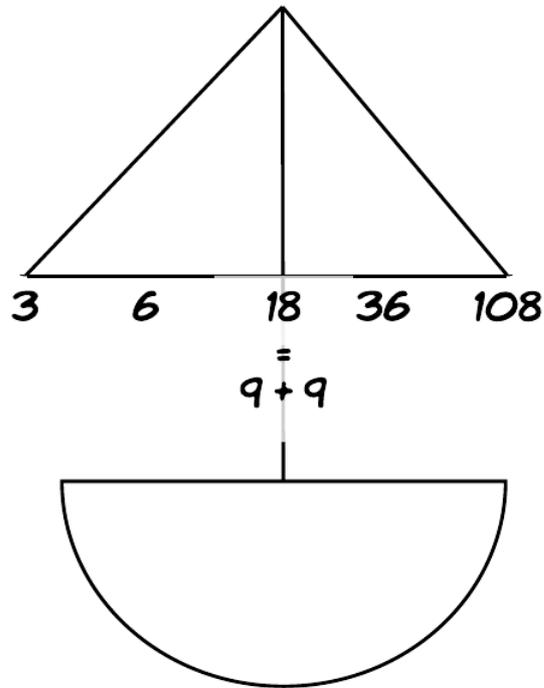
The large fish = 18

The other fish = $3 + 6 + 36 + 108 = 153$

This explains the 153 fish but not why the net is let down on the right-hand side. The disciples who have not caught “a fish” have been fishing on the left-hand side. This side would already have been fished clean by Jesus. He tells them to fish on the right instead.

We can take the same sequence in order and place it over the boat. We want to calculate the left and right side. Because 18 is in the exact middle, we must divide it in two; half (9) to the left and half (9) to the right. The situation is then as follows:

Catching the fish on the left and right side of the boat



LEFT SIDE:

**THE ONE BIG FISH
TAKEN BY JESUS**

$$\begin{array}{r}
 3 + 6 + 9 \\
 = \\
 18
 \end{array}$$

RIGHT SIDE:

**THE MANY FISH LEFT
IN THE SEA**

$$\begin{array}{r}
 9 + 36 + 108 \\
 = \\
 153
 \end{array}$$

So we have the big fish of 18 on the left, and 153 fishes on the right, indicating the other levels; 3, 6, 36 and 108.

Method 2:

There is a different way of doing the calculation. Once again the big fish is 18, but this time the other smaller fish represent all the numbers lower than 18. So:

The big fish =18

The smaller fish = 1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12+13+14+15+16+17=153

The fact that 153 equals the sum of all the numbers up to 17 has been known since St Augustine (354-430 AD). However, this left the question: why 17? Augustine offered an explanation – 17 stood for the ten commandments plus the seven gifts of the spirit. This is so obviously contrived that it has never found much support.

We should note that 17 is a prime number and equals the sum of the first four primes:

$$2 + 3 + 5 + 7 = 17$$

These four primes all play vital roles in the Thomas Code and the miracle stories:

The factors in the Thomas Code are 2 and 3.

There are 5 named fishermen in the boat and 7 in total.

There are also 5 and 7 loaves in the feeding of the multitudes.

The two important sequences have 5 and 7 factors.

But the most important number here is not 17 but 18, signifying the one fish not included in the 153 - the large fish which Jesus has already taken.

The author of Thomas discovered the two separate ways of calculating the number 153. He embedded this knowledge in the story of the large catch, which was then turned into a literal miracle by the author of John.

Peter's cloak and swim

Before Simon Peter dives into the lake to swim 200 cubits to reach Jesus, he puts on his cloak. This is very odd behaviour. A swimmer would naturally take off his clothes before diving into the water. Clothes quickly become waterlogged to weigh down a swimmer, giving a risk of drowning. Less dramatically, the valuable outer garment could be damaged or even lost if the swimmer were obliged to free himself from it. There must be something in the author of John's source to account for this apparent absurdity.

We would expect the (probably unnamed) disciple to take off his cloak to swim. But the author of John would have had problems with this:

- He could not have a naked disciple greeting Jesus —the Jews were very modest where nudity was concerned.
- In any case, why would anyone wear a cloak for the hot business of fishing?

The author of John changes two details in the story. First, he makes the disciple into Simon Peter. This would not be the only time he turns an impetuous unnamed disciple into Peter; the disciple who cuts off the ear is unnamed in the first three gospels but becomes Simon Peter in John. Second, he makes Peter put on the cloak rather than take it off. So what would have been the significance of a disciple taking off his cloak and swimming 200 cubits naked?

The naked sub-sequence

In the book, I draw attention to the importance of sub-sequences of both the Thomas Code and the seven-factor sequence. The inner sub-sequence of the Thomas Code is:

$$3 \cdot (2 \cdot 3 \cdot 2) \cdot 3$$

$$2 \cdot 3 \cdot 2 = 12$$

As discussed in the book, this sub-sequence represents the twelve disciples.¹⁰ Sub-sequences of the seven-factor sequence play a vital role in the full explanation of the miracles of the loaves and fishes.¹¹

Now there are seven disciples in the boat. These correspond to the seven loaves in the second miracle of the loaves and fishes. And the seven loaves represent the seven-factor sequence, the result of the first miracle:

$$5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5 = 5,000$$

¹⁰ The Thomas Code, pp. 43-47.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 105-09.

The clue of the seven disciples suggests that we should start with this sequence of seven. The seven disciples are divided into five named and two others. This inclusion of a specific number of unnamed disciples is odd and must reflect something in the source. Most likely, the disciples were all unnamed in the original, not least because the person who probably wrote the mathematical riddles is one of the disciples in the boat—John, the son of Zebedee.¹² I think it unlikely that he would have written himself into his own riddle. But the later author of the Gospel of John believes the story is an eyewitness account of a literal miracle. So he includes John, the author of his source, in the boat.

Assuming that the disciples were all initially unnamed, the riddle must have had something like “in the boat were five disciples and two other disciples”. The split indicates what we are to do with the seven factors—we must split it into five and two. The word translated as “cloak” is *ependutés* which means the outer garment. By removing the outer garment, we reveal the “naked” subsequence:

**SEVEN FACTOR SEQUENCE HAS
OUTER GARMENT**

$$\boxed{5} \cdot 2 \cdot 5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5 \cdot 2 \cdot \boxed{5}$$

**DISCARD GARMENT FOR NAKED
SUB-SEQUENCE**

$$\boxed{5} \cdot 2 \cdot 5 \cdot 2 \cdot 5 \cdot 2 \cdot \boxed{5} = 200$$

So the naked swimmer swims 200 cubits. The number 200 is also linked with the seven-factor sequence in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand; the disciples complain to Jesus that they would require 200 denarii to buy enough bread.

¹² *The Thomas Code*, pp. 231-36. See also S. P. Laurie, *The Rock and the Tower*, (London: Hypostasis, 2016), Ch. 39.

A sieve and a net

The fishermen's net is prominent in the story of the miraculous catch in Luke and John. I think there is a reason why a net is used to represent the groupings of the Thomas Code. The gospel is divided into threes, sixes, eighteens and thirty-sixes rather like a net dividing up the sayings.

The most efficient method for calculating prime numbers in the first century was a little like this. You would write down the numbers in order from two to as many as would fit on your sheet of papyrus. You would then cross out all the multiples of each prime in turn; first every second number after 2; then every third number after 3; then every fifth number after 5, and so on. When you have finished, the numbers not crossed out are the primes. The only limit of this method is the size of your papyrus sheet and your patience.

The method is called "the sieve of Eratosthenes" after the Greek polymath who discovered it. Eratosthenes lived in the third century BC and was the chief librarian at Alexandria. He is most famous for calculating the circumference of the earth to within a few percent of its true value. We only know about the sieve of Eratosthenes through the writings of another mathematician called Nicomachus who lived in the late first and early second centuries.¹³ His book "Introduction to Arithmetic" gives us a valuable insight into the approach to mathematics at this time. Nicomachus was a mystical-mathematician just like the author of Thomas, but of the Greek Pythagorean school rather than a Christian.

Now, a sieve is very like a net; especially if made with leather cords as some large Roman sieves were. So Eratosthenes' sieve may have sparked the idea of using a fisherman's net in the riddle story.

Recall that Luke's version of the miracle relates to Mark's story of the recruitment of the first disciples. Nets are very prominent in Mark 1:16-19 - the first time Jesus sees Simon he is casting a net into the sea. So this story in Mark may be derived ultimately from the same playful mathematical riddle set by the author of Thomas. If so, then the riddle is the likely source of the erroneous notion that the first disciples were fishermen.

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¹³ Nicomachus, *Introduction to Arithmetic*, Book 1 Ch.13.