

PHONOLOGY, FISH, AND THE FORM ΤΟΥΤΩΝ: A NEW APPROACH TO AN OLD CRUX IN JOHN 21:15

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Abstract: *The apparent ambiguity of the pronoun τούτων in Jesus’s question to Peter, Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων; (John 21:15) has resulted in a standing debate over its referent in Johannine scholarship. The majority believe that the other disciples in the preceding story (vv. 1–14) are the referent, while a minority think that Jesus had in view the fish and fishing equipment in that same story. This article proposes that awareness of ancient conventions of literary composition, according to which authors frequently exploited a text’s sound to effectively communicate or highlight their message, presents a new understanding of τούτων that resolves the debate over its referent. The pronoun’s phonology may reveal what its seemingly ambiguous morphology has hitherto concealed, that the referent of τούτων is the fish and fishing gear, not the other disciples as most have suggested.*

Key words: *John 21:15, “more than these,” orality, aurality, sound patterns, sound mapping, ancient media culture, John’s Gospel*

An unresolved crux in Johannine scholarship concerns the intended referent of the pronoun τούτων (“[than] these”) in John 21:15, where Jesus asks Peter, Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων; (“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than *these*?”). Interpreters believe that this pronoun is ambiguous because it is both the masculine and neuter plural form of the demonstrative pronoun, and there is a plausible masculine (i.e. the other disciples) and neuter (i.e. the fish and fishing gear) referent in the preceding story (John 21:1–14). The pronoun’s supposed lack of clarity has resulted in a standing debate in the literature over its referent. Most take the other disciples as its antecedent, while a minority opt for the fish and fishing equipment instead.¹ Besides these two main views, a few have conclud-

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¹ Among those taking the other disciples as the referent, opinions differ regarding the meaning of Jesus’s question. The vast majority believe that Jesus is asking, “Do you love me more than these [other disciples love me]?” E.g. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2nd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1978), 584; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 3:362; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 405; Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 665; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1991), 675–76; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 597; J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1042–43; Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 635; Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 2:893. Others taking the disciples as the referent think that Jesus asks instead, “Do you love me more than [you love] these [other disciples]?” E.g. Francis J. Maloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 559; Ben Witherington, *John’s Wisdom* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 356; Grant R. Os-

ed that the pronoun is intentionally ambiguous or that it has no referent.² Adding to the frustration over this pronoun is Harold Greenlee's observation that the referent would have been clear if the author had simply used the alternative comparative construction involving the particle η .³

In this article, I approach this old crux from a new angle. I propose that revisiting the author's choice of $\tau\acute{o}\upsilon\tau\omega\nu$ in light of ancient, acoustically-oriented conventions of literary composition suggests an alternative understanding of this pronoun that may resolve the long-standing debate over its referent: the pronoun may not be ambiguous after all; it may actually reveal, rather than conceal, the referent of Jesus's question to Peter, confirming the minority view as the correct one (i.e. the fish and fishing gear).

I. PHONOLOGY AND FISH IN JOHN 21:11

NT scholars have long been aware that the NT writings were composed to be read aloud to an aural audience, not silently studied on a written page. Like other literary works in antiquity, the NT was written primarily for the "ear reader," not the "eye reader."⁴ Since these writings were composed to be read aloud and heard, "to be understood, the NT must be understood as speech."⁵ And this meant that the acoustic dimension played an important role in the communication process

borne, "John 21: Test Case for History and Redaction in the Resurrection Narratives," in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2: *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham; Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1981), 309; For scholars taking the fish and fishing gear as the referent, see J. H. Bernard, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 2:705; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel according to John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:1236; Timothy Wiarda, "John 21.1–23: Narrative Unity And Its Implications," *JNT* 46 (1992): 60–65; R. Alan Culpepper, "Peter as Exemplary Disciple in John 21:15–19," *PRSt* 37 (2010): 172–173; J. Harold Greenlee, "More than These? John 21:15," *Journal of Translation* 1.2 (2005): 19–20 (www.sil.org/system/files/realpdata/17/00/45/170045653181104208428365630695750061511/siljot2005_2_02.pdf). A related view that likewise takes the pronoun as neuter is Ilaria Ramelli's contention that Jesus's question "ought to be interpreted 'Do you love me more than you love these things?,' i.e., all the rest ... this world in general vs. Jesus." See Ilaria Ramelli, "'Simon Son of John, Do You Love Me?' Some Reflections on John 21:15," *NovT* 50.4 (2008): 332–50.

² "Jesus leaves the referent ambiguous ... he does not make it clear what it is Peter's love is supposed to surpass." Bradford B. Blaine Jr., *Peter in the Gospel of John: The Making of an Authentic Disciple* (SBL Academia Biblica 27; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 163. See Blaine's discussion on p. 164. "There is nothing Peter has said in the Gospel of John to which Jesus can be alluding" (Ernst Haenchen, *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 7–21* [ed. Robert W. Funk with Ulrich Busse, trans. Robert W. Funk; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984], 225).

³ Greenlee, "More Than These," 19. As Greenlee notes, this alternative construction clarifies the referent because it makes available a form of the demonstrative pronoun other than the ambiguous $\tau\acute{o}\upsilon\tau\omega\nu$ (i.e. $\acute{o}\upsilon\tau\omicron\iota$, $\tau\acute{o}\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$, or $\tau\acute{\alpha}\upsilon\tau\alpha$). Both $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\alpha\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ $\mu\epsilon$ $\pi\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\omicron\nu$ η $\acute{o}\upsilon\tau\omicron\iota$; ("Do you love me more than these [other disciples] love me?") and $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\alpha\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ $\mu\epsilon$ $\pi\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\omicron\nu$ η $\tau\acute{o}\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$; ("Do you love me more than [you love] these disciples?") unambiguously identify the disciples as the referent, though the meaning of Jesus's question is obviously different in each case. On the other hand, Greenlee points out, writing $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\alpha\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ $\mu\epsilon$ $\pi\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\omicron\nu$ η $\tau\acute{\alpha}\upsilon\tau\alpha$; ("Do you love me more than these [things]?") clarifies that Jesus had in mind the fish and fishing equipment instead.

⁴ Roger F. H. Pugsley, "The Sound Aspects of the Greek New Testament," *WTJ* 38 (1976): 194.

⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *JBL* 109 (1990): 19.

between the authors of the NT writings and their original—aural—recipients. As Chrys Caragounis has noted, “the sound of the message was part of the message!”⁶

In his book *The Development of Greek and the New Testament*, Caragounis demonstrates the importance of the acoustic dimension of the NT texts, among other ways, by drawing attention to various rhetorical figures (well attested since classical times) upon which authors drew to more effectively communicate their message.⁷ One figure that was especially “intended for the ear” is *parechesis*.⁸ Parechesis is “the repetition of the same sound in words in close association or immediate succession.”⁹ It differs from the related figure *paronomasia* in that, in the case of parechesis, the similarity of sound occurs in words that are “etymologically unconnected ... in fact, they may even have quite different orthography, particularly as regards vowels.”¹⁰

There are many instances of parechesis in the NT writings. Consider the following examples:¹¹ λιμοὶ καὶ λοιμοὶ (“famines and plagues”; Luke 21:11); ἐμαθεν ἀφ’ ὧν ἐπαθεν τὴν ὑπακοήν (“He [Jesus] *learned* obedience from the things *he suffered*” (Heb 5:8); φθόνου φόνου ... ἀσυνέτους ἀσυνθέτους (“*envy, murder... foolish, faithless*”; Rom 1:29–31); καὶ οὐχ ὡς δι’ ἐνὸς ἀμαρτήσαντος τὸ δῶρημα· τὸ μὲν γὰρ κρίμα ἐξ ἐνὸς εἰς κατάκριμα, τὸ δὲ χάρισμα ἐκ πολλῶν παραπτωμάτων εἰς δικαίωμα (“And the *free gift* is not like the one who sinned. For the *judgment* [resulting] from one [transgression] led to *condemnation*, but the *free gift* [resulting] from many *trespasses* led to *acquittal*”; Rom 5:8).¹² In each of these examples, the author has exploited the acoustic dimension to skillfully and effectively reinforce his message.

A striking parechesis that, to my knowledge, has gone unnoticed occurs in connection with one of the two main referents that scholars have proposed for Jesus’s question to Peter in John 21:15: the fish and fishing equipment. This oversight is most likely due to two factors. One is the (understandable) bias of modern scholars toward an approach to the NT writings which is visually, rather than aurally, oriented. The figure may have gone unnoticed in John 21:11 simply because

⁶ See Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament: Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission* (WUNT 167; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 401.

⁷ See the discussion in *ibid.*, 402–74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 457–61.

⁹ Herbert Weir Smyth, *A Greek Grammar* (rev. Gordon M. Messing; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 680. The English term “parechesis” comes from the Greek *παρήχησις*, which means “likeness of sound.”

¹⁰ Caragounis, *Development of Greek and the New Testament*, 458. John Cunningham Robertson pointed out that “the ancients made no real distinction between parechesis and paronomasia.” See John Cunningham Robertson, “The Gorgianic Figures in Early Greek Prose” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1891), 20–25.

¹¹ The following examples are from Caragounis, *Development of Greek and the New Testament*, 457–61; BDF 258–59. Greek words sharing the same sound have a double underline in these examples; the corresponding English words are italicized in the translation I have provided. I follow this practice throughout the article.

¹² Blass describes this parechesis as “studied and deliberate.” Friedrich Blass, *Grammar of New Testament Greek* (trans. Henry St. John Thackeray; London: Macmillan, 1898), 299.

interpreters are, by and large, not looking for, or are less concerned with, this and other aurally-oriented rhetorical figures.

The major culprit, however, is probably that detection of this parechesis depends upon recognition that the O and \Omega vowels sounded identical, or very similar, in Koine Greek—not qualitatively distinct as in the system of pronunciation for this period that has been dominant for nearly five hundred years (i.e. the “Erasmian” pronunciation).¹³ As a number of scholars have pointed out, the evidence for the phonetic equivalency of O and \Omega consists of a large number of misspellings in inscriptions and papyri from the Koine period, in which these two vowels are interchanged regularly.¹⁴ Caragounis succinctly summarizes this evidence: “From the third century B.C. on O and \Omega interchange very frequently, which implies that if there had ever been any distinction between them originally, these letters had now become equivalent.”¹⁵

Once we recognize the phonetic equivalency of the vowels O and \Omega in Koine Greek, it becomes impossible for the listening ear to miss the parechesis in John 21:11:

ἀνέβη οὖν Σίμων Πέτρος καὶ εἴλκυσε τὸ δίκτυον εἰς τὴν γῆν μεστὸν ἰχθύων
μεγάλων ἑκατὸν πενήκοντα τριῶν· καὶ τοσοῦτων ὄντων οὐκ ἐσχίσθη τὸ δίκτυον.

Therefore, Peter went aboard and pulled the *net* to the land, *full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three*, and *though there were so many*, the *net* was not torn. (John 21:11)

¹³ For discussions of the origins and errors of the Erasmian system of pronunciation, see Caragounis, *Development of Greek and the New Testament*, 341–51; Constantine R. Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek: New Insights for Reading the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 2015), 193–196. Though it is still the most widely used system of pronouncing Koine Greek, “the consensus supporting the sixteenth-century Erasmian pronunciation has been slowly eroding.” Brickle, *Aural Design and Coherence in the Prologue of First John*, 19. Evidence from ancient inscriptions and papyri (see n. 14 below) has led Campbell to conclude: “it is difficult to mount a serious argument in favor of the Erasmian pronunciation of New Testament Greek at least as far as its accuracy goes.” Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek*, 204. My concern here, however, is only to point out the phonetic equivalency of O and \Omega in the Roman period, not to defend an entire system of pronunciation.

¹⁴ A few illustrative examples will suffice: $\text{\omicron}\mu\nu\sigma\text{\omicron}$ / $\text{\omicron}\mu\nu\acute{\omega}$ (Papyrus 100.2, 152 BC); $\gamma\epsilon\omicron\mu\epsilon\tau\rho\iota\alpha\varsigma$ for $\gamma\epsilon\omega\mu\epsilon\tau\rho\iota\alpha\varsigma$ (BGU 1462, 3/2 BC); $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\omicron$ $\mu\epsilon\tau\omicron\pi\omicron$ for $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\omega$ $\mu\epsilon\tau\acute{\omega}\pi\omega$ (BGU 911.5, AD 19); $\acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron$ for $\acute{\alpha}\pi\acute{\omicron}$ (WO 1551.2, AD 34; PSI 1320.18, AD 82–96; BGU 68.6, 20, AD 113/ 114), $\eta\gamma\epsilon\mu\acute{\omicron}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ for $\eta\gamma\epsilon\mu\acute{\omicron}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ (Babatha 15.10+11, AD 125). For these and other (even earlier) examples, see Francis Thomas Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, vol. 1: *Phonology* (Milano: Istituto Editoriale Cisalpina-La Goliardica, 1976), 275–77; Caragounis, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament*, 373 n. 101; Randall Buth, *Living Koine Greek: Part One* (2nd ed.; Mevasseret Zion, Israel: The Biblical Languages Center, 2008), 219. Gignac observes that the vowels O and \Omega interchange very regularly “in all phonetic conditions throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods.” Gignac, *Grammar*, 1:275. This state of affairs points to a phonetic “equalizing of the o and \omega ” in the transition from Attic to Koine. Archibald T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (4th ed.; Nashville: Broadman), 72. The evidence for this “equalizing” from the inscriptions and papyri does not entail that these vowels were uniformly pronounced throughout the entire Greco-Roman world. Rather, as Buth notes, the reality was probably that “within any particular dialect, the ω -μέγα, however it was pronounced, will be pronounced like the o -μικρόν in that dialect.” Buth, *Living Koine Greek*, 218 n. 2. For further discussion of this phonetic change, see Geoffrey Horrocks, *Greek: A History of the Language and its Speakers* (2nd ed.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 160–66.

¹⁵ Caragounis, *Development of Greek and the New Testament*, 373.

Nine etymologically unconnected words share the same sound in the author's description of a single object, the net and its miraculous contents: τὸ δίκτυον (2x), μεστόν, ἰχθύων, μεγάλων, ἑκατόν, πενήκοντα, τριῶν, τοσοῦτων, ὄντων. This sound, represented by both -ον and -ων, reverberates an impressive eleven times in these nine words. Two features make this parechesis tied to a single object particularly skillful: (1) the high number of etymologically unrelated words involved; and (2) that the assonance is created by vowels having different orthography but identical phonology (i.e. Ο and Ω).¹⁶ In terms of effect, it is not difficult to discern the reason for the net's aural prominence: it reinforces acoustically the semantic significance of the net of fish in the story of Jesus's third resurrection appearance (vv. 1–14).¹⁷

II. THE FORM ΤΟΥΤΩΝ IN JOHN 21:15: A HELP, NOT A HINDRANCE?

What relevance does this parechesis have for the matter at hand, namely, seeing how the pronoun τούτων in John 21:15 may not be ambiguous after all? To answer this question, we must briefly return to the importance of the acoustic dimension of ancient texts discussed above. The use of rhetorical figures such as parechesis is only one way in which authors exploited sound to reinforce and/or communicate their message. Since most people in antiquity accessed literary texts by hearing them read aloud,¹⁸ the acoustic dimension was the primary tool that ancient authors had at their disposal for signaling structure and developing their ideas. Ancient writings, therefore, were “oral to the core” and “shaped for the ear” in their entirety.¹⁹ The acoustic dimension of communication left its mark on virtually every aspect of ancient writings.²⁰

This cultural reality highlights sound's importance in the *interpretation* of the NT writings. And it underscores a corresponding need for modern, visually-

¹⁶ In this connection, recall Caragounis's observation that parechesis is often created with words having “quite different orthography, particularly as regards vowels.”

¹⁷ The concentric structure of the net's description, framed by an inclusion formed by the noun “net” (δίκτυον), probably also added to its aural prominence: A¹: εἴλκυσε τὸ δίκτυον εἰς τὴν γῆν (“He dragged the net to the land”); B¹: μεστὸν ἰχθύων μεγάλων (“full of large fish”); X: ἑκατόν πενήκοντα τριῶν (“one hundred fifty-three”); B²: καὶ τοσοῦτων ὄντων (“and though there were so many”); A²: οὐκ ἐσχίσθη τὸ δίκτυον (“the net was not torn”). Though often thought of in visual terms, such parallel literary patterns should probably be thought of as aural patterns aimed at the listening ear. Achtemeier, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*,” 17–19; Harvey, *Listening to the Text*; H. Van Dyke Parunak, “Oral Typesetting: Some Uses of Biblical Structure,” *Bib* 62 (1981): 153–68.

¹⁸ There were a number of reasons for this, such as a bias towards the spoken word in antiquity, the costly price of books, the difficulty of reading a text written in scriptura continua, and low literacy rates. See the discussions in Achtemeier, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*,” 9–19; William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3–24, 175–284; Lee and Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament*, 11–87.

¹⁹ Achtemeier, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*,” 19, 26.

²⁰ This included both the performance and production of these documents, as “texts were spoken into existence through dictation.” Brickle, *Aural Design and Coherence in the Prologue of First John*, 10. Thus, “the entire process, from the production to the reception of documents, began and ended as sound.” *Ibid.*

oriented, interpreters to be sensitive to the text's acoustic features and the ways in which they would have potentially aided the original aural audience in grasping an author's message.²¹ Margaret Lee, a pioneer of "sound-based interpretation," provides the following general guidelines in this area: "Sound patterns give clues for an interpretive method that moves from sound to sense. Such a method should track repeated sounds, especially repeated syllables and phrases, and analyze their aural interplay. Sound-based interpretation should look for a text's primary clues to meaning in its repeated aural patterns."²² Along these same lines, in an important article exploring the highly oral environment of late Western antiquity and its implications for interpreting the NT, Paul Achtemeier observed:

Methods of organization of thought intended to make that thought accessible will, in ancient writings, be based on sound rather than sight. Similarities in sound will be more important than similarities of visual appearance, and sound patterns will provide the clues rather than visual patterns. . . . In short, organization of written materials will depend on sound rather than sight for its effectiveness. . . . What we want to look for, then, are verbal clues that, by being heard (not seen!), would have aided the listener in understanding the organization of the kind of complex writings that are found in the NT.²³

In light of this close relationship between sound and sense in ancient texts, it is not insignificant that the pronoun *τούτων* in John 21:15 resonates acoustically (sound) with one of the two main referents that scholars have proposed for it (sense):²⁴ the fish and fishing equipment. Notice that the terminal sound of *both*

²¹ Recent efforts of NT scholars have gone a long way to fill this need. In addition to the works already cited in this article, see the following sampling of studies: Charles H. Lohr, "Oral Techniques in the Gospel of Matthew," *CBQ* 23 (1961): 403–35; Joanna Dewey, "The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1–3:6," *JBL* 92 (1973): 394–401; idem, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1–3:6* (SBLDS 48; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1980); idem, "Oral Methods of Structuring Narrative in Mark," *Int* 43 (1989): 32–44; P. J. J. Botha, "Mute Manuscripts: Analyzing a Neglected Aspect of Ancient Documents," *Theologia Evangelica* 23 (1990): 35–47; Christopher Bryan, *A Preface to Mark: Notes on the Gospel and Its Literary and Cultural Settings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 65–162; Margaret Dean, "The Grammar of Sound in Greek Texts: Toward a Method For Mapping The Echoes of Speech in Writing," *ABR* 44 (1996): 53–70; John D. Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (ETS Studies 1; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); idem, "Orality and Its Implications For Biblical Studies: Recapturing an Ancient Paradigm," *JETS* 45 (2002): 99–109; Casey W. Davis, *Oral Biblical Criticism: The Influence of the Principles of Orality on the Literary Structure of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (JSNTSup 172; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1999); Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating The Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language: The Case of the New Testament Epistles* (Leviston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2008); Margaret Ellen Lee and Bernard Brandon Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2009); Dan Nässelqvist, *Public Reading in Early Christianity: Lectors, Manuscripts, and Sound in the Oral Delivery of John 1–4* (NovTSup 163; Leiden: Brill, 2016).

²² Dean, "The Grammar of Sound in Greek Texts," 62. Dean and Scott have developed a full-fledged methodology for sound-based interpretation. See Lee and Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament*. A number of scholars have applied their methodology (or aspects of it) to various portions of the NT. E.g. Brickle, *Aural Design and Coherence in the Prologue of First John*; Nässelqvist, *Public Reading in Early Christianity*, 119–320.

²³ Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat," 18–20.

²⁴ I have borrowed the alliterated expression "sound and sense" from Lee and Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament*.

words in the expression πλέον τούτων (“more than these”) in Jesus’s question to Peter is the same sound repeated eleven times in John 21:11 to give the net of fish its euphonious quality via parechesis:

ἀνέβη οὖν Σίμων Πέτρος καὶ εἴλκυσε τὸ εἰς τὴν γῆν μεστὸν ἰχθύων μεγάλων ἐκατὸν πενήκοντα τριῶν· καὶ τοσοῦτων ὄντων οὐκ ἐσχίσθη τὸ δίκτυον.

Therefore, Peter went aboard and pulled the *net* to the land, *full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three*, and *though there were so many*, the net was not torn. (John 21:11)

Σίμων Ἰωάννου, ἀγαπᾷς με πλέον τούτων;

“Simon, son of John, do you love me *more than these?* (John 21:15)

Awareness of this aural interplay between πλέον τούτων in John 21:15 and the fish and fishing equipment (i.e. the fishing net) in verse 11 is significant for the following reason: it suggests that while τούτων has appeared ambiguous to the modern “eye-reader,” it may not have been so to the ancient “ear-reader.” The main suggestion I am making in this article is that this aural link provides hard textual evidence, hitherto overlooked, confirming the minority view that the fish and fishing equipment—not the other disciples—are the referent of Jesus’s question. Put another way, this acoustic connection reflects—and so reveals to the modern interpreter—a semantic one: that of a pronoun (τούτων) and its intended referent (the fish and fishing equipment). Ironically, then, the very form that has spurred a long-standing debate over Jesus’s question due to its morphology, may actually provide the clue to resolving this debate in its phonology.

In terms of effect, the author’s skillful (and stylish) exploitation of repeated sound aurally underscores the inherent semantic connection between pronoun and referent for the listening ear. It also makes the referent of Jesus’s question more memorable for the original recipients, most of whom would store this important interaction between Jesus and Peter in, and later retrieve it from, memory.²⁵ This aural interplay, therefore, is no mere rhetorical flourish. It reinforces the author’s meaning, and aids in retaining it for later recall.

This alternative understanding of τούτων in John 21:15 raises the obvious question of the original audience’s ability to detect such aural patterns. In this regard, it must be kept in mind that “in a world of oral literature listeners are likely to have been quicker to notice sound repetitions and patterns than we are in our world of silent reading.”²⁶ The “ancient ‘reader’ will have been more attuned to what one may call ‘acoustic echo’” than the modern, visually-oriented, interpreter of the NT.²⁷ An analysis of the repetitions and sound patterns in Homer’s works, for example, suggest that “the aural audience was capable of perceiving—consciously or unconsciously—connections between spoken words separated by

²⁵ See the discussion in *ibid.*, 63–70.

²⁶ W. B. Stanford, *The Sound of Greek: Studies in the Greek Theory and Practice of Euphony* (Sather Classical Lectures 38; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 91.

²⁷ Achtemeier, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*,” 19.

considerable time and verbiage.”²⁸ Harvey points to a particularly striking instance discovered by Cedric Whitman in which Homer resumes the main story line with a single verb after a seventy-five-line intervening episode!²⁹ Stanford notes a similar instance from the Iliad, where the audience was apparently expected to catch a verbal repetition fifty-five lines apart.³⁰ But these are extreme examples from long stretches of texts. Aural patterns are even more frequent within limited contexts such as the short distance between Jesus’s question to Peter in John 21:15 and its referent in verse 11.³¹ The original recipients of John’s Gospel would have had no problem discerning, and appreciating, such an aural interplay.

III. CONCLUSIONS

A few years ago, Joanna Dewey wrote an essay exploring how knowledge of the highly oral/aural nature of first-century media culture may help understand John’s Gospel. Toward the end she asks, and suggests a number of answers to, the following question: “How does oral reception of the Fourth Gospel affect interpretation?”³² The present article has provided one answer to Dewey’s important question, namely, that the text’s acoustic dimension, or sound, must be taken seriously as an interpretive tool. In the case of Jesus’s searching question to Peter in John 21:15, we have seen that wielding this tool just may resolve the long-standing debate over the question’s referent, confirming the minority view as the correct one (i.e. the fish and fishing gear are the intended referent).

Fleshing out the implications of this study a bit further, the conclusions reached here shed light on the author’s curious linguistic decision to use *τούτων* rather than the “clearer” comparative construction in Jesus’s question (i.e. the one that uses the particle *ἤ*).³³ Seeking an explanation for this choice is important not only because of its seemingly enigmatic nature. It is also important because attempting to understand an author’s choice between multiple linguistic options is an important part of interpretation in general.³⁴ Surprisingly, however, few interpreters

²⁸ Harvey, *Listening to the Text*, 59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁰ Stanford, *Sound of Greek*, 91.

³¹ Harvey, *Listening to the Text*, 57–58, 61–283; Stanford, *The Sound of Greek*, 89–90; Dean, “Grammar of Sound in Greek Texts,” 55–57, 61–62; Lee and Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament*, 167–276; Caragounis, *Development of Greek and the New Testament*, 422–74. Brickle, *Aural Design and Coherence in the Prologue of First John*, 30–125; Nässelqvist, *Public Reading in Early Christianity*, 181–320.

³² Joanna Dewey, “The Gospel of John in Its Oral-Written Media World,” in *The Fourth Gospel in First-Century Media Culture* (ed. Anthony Le Donne and Tom Thatcher; LNTS 426; New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 251.

³³ In this connection, the reader should recall Greenlee’s article cited at the beginning of the present one.

³⁴ This is one of the insights that the application of functional linguistics to the NT writings has yielded. As Steven Runge points out, “If I choose to do X when Y and Z are also available options, this means that I at the same time have chosen not to do Y and Z . . . choice implies meaning.” Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 5–6. Consequently, using “optional” or “stylistic variation” to explain an author’s choice will not do. As Levinsohn notes, “Too often the terms ‘optional’ and ‘stylistic variation’

even point out that the author had multiple comparative constructions available, let alone attempt to explain why he used what is, at first glance, the less clear one. The only interpreter I have found who does consider this question, Harold Greenlee, expressed puzzlement over the author's choice: "I do not know why John did not use the grammatical construction here that would have made this point clear [i.e. that the fishing net and equipment are the referent of *τούτων*]."³⁵

The interpretation I have provided explains this curious linguistic decision. And it does so simply and in a manner that accords with ancient conventions of literary composition: unlike the alternative comparative construction, which constrained the author to use the accusative plural *ταῦτα* (*ἀγαπᾷς με πλεον ἢ ταῦτα*),³⁶ the genitive of comparison *τούτων* presented the author with an opportunity to create a skillful and effective acoustic resonance between the construction "more than these" in Jesus's question and the referent of that question (i.e. the fish and fishing equipment)—an opportunity difficult to resist for an ancient author writing for an aural audience. Approached from the other direction, the author did not use the alternative construction because the pronoun *ταῦτα* lacked the sound necessary to create this acoustic resonance (i.e. *-ον/-ων*). Contrary to Greenlee's supposition, then, the author chose *τούτων* precisely because it *did* make his point clear.

Two final, broader, implications of this study will be noted. First, this study contributes to the methodology of "sound-based interpretation" by further corroborating Caragounis's contention that "a discourse intended to be heard," such as the NT writings, "cannot be unconnected with how Greek was pronounced."³⁷ Some proponents of this developing hermeneutic have claimed that the issue of pronunciation is non-essential for detecting aural patterns in these texts.³⁸ The present study, however, shows that neglecting the issue of pronunciation may lead to important aural patterns going unnoticed: both the striking parechesis in John 21:11 and its meaningful aural interplay with Jesus's question in verse 15 go undetected on the Erasmian pronunciation (since the *Ο* and *Ω* are qualitatively distinct in this system).³⁹ If interpreters of the NT writings are to reap the full benefits that

are synonyms of 'don't know!'" and "an excuse for not investigating significance. ... So, when an author has the option of expressing himself or herself in more than one way, the ways differ in significance; there are reasons for the variations." Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek* (2nd ed.; Dallas: SIL International, 2000), viii.

³⁵ Greenlee, "More Than These," 20.

³⁶ "Do you love more than [you love] these things (*ταῦτα*)?" To clarify, my meaning is that the author was constrained to use *ταῦτα* on the assumption of the fish and fishing gear as the referent. He was obviously not so constrained if he wanted to use this alternative construction to refer to the other disciples. See n. 3 above.

³⁷ Caragounis, *Development of Greek and the New Testament*, 450.

³⁸ E.g. Lee and Scott, *Sound Mapping the New Testament*, 1, 81; Nässelqvist, *Public Reading in Early Christianity*, 123–24.

³⁹ Among other studies, Brickle's also "brings to the surface instances of aural patterning obscured by the long-dominant Erasmian approach." Brickle, *Aural Design and Coherence in the Prologue of First John*, 21. See the discussion on pp. 54–106. Particularly relevant for present considerations are the instances Brickle cites that involve the phonetic equivalency of the *Ο* and *Ω* vowels.

a sound-based interpretation can offer, then (often difficult) decisions about Koine Greek pronunciation must be made.

These considerations lead to a second, and related, broader implication of this study. Campbell has claimed that, unlike the issue of lexicography or verbal aspect, that of pronunciation “does not have ... the potential ... to change our understanding of what a text means.”⁴⁰ We have seen, however, that recognizing the phonetic equivalency of the O and \Omega vowels in Koine Greek, which are sounded differently on the Erasmian system, potentially sheds needed light on the *meaning* of Jesus’s question to Peter in John 21:15. Thus, even if my particular conclusions are incorrect, the present study clearly demonstrates that the issue of pronunciation *can* potentially “change our understanding of what a text means,” even clarifying the meaning of long-debated passages.

⁴⁰ Campbell, *Advances in the Study of Greek*, 193.