

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#156 Eagle Symbolism

November 8, 2019



### **Alastair Roberts**

Today's question: "I've recently been listening to (who else!) James Jordan's talks on Revelation and have a question about the symbology of the Eagle in the Bible.

Eagles seem to be symbolic of Rome's destruction of Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 28:49, Matthew 24:28)

And eagles also seem to have more positive streams of symbolism: Eagles as symbolic of angels, prophets, the association with Gospel of John.

Is there a way to merge these streams?"

If you have any questions or feedback, please send them to me on Curious Cat:  
<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon ([https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref\\_=wl\\_share](https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share)).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account:  
<https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## **Transcript**

Welcome back. Today I had planned to start my series on Matthew, but if you saw the chaos around me here, you'd understand why it's been put on hold. I bought a large number of books at a book sale a few days ago and have been cataloguing them, trying to sort out my library, and I've just not had time to do much else.

So, I thought I'd answer a question instead and delay the Matthew series until tomorrow. The question is, I've recently been listening to, who else, James Jordan's talks on Revelation and have a question about the symbology of the eagle in the Bible. Eagles seem to be symbolic of Rome's destruction of Jerusalem.

Deuteronomy 28 verse 49, Matthew 24 verse 28. And eagles also seem to have a more positive stream of symbolism. They're symbolic of angels, prophets, and they have an association with the Gospel of John.

Is there a way to merge these streams? It's a good question, and I think we should start off by thinking about the characteristics of the eagle. The eagle is a bird of prey that lives in, generally, often mountains, that flies really high, and has strength in its talons that can be a threat to livestock, can occasionally be a bird that will eat carrion, not just live prey. And so we've got some basic idea of this creature.

When we think about the characteristic of the eagle as a bird of prey, maybe we can think about some of the symbolism arising in connection with that. As a bird of prey, the eagle is one that is associated with warfare themes, with the carcass of Israel and the eagles of Rome coming upon that carcass. That is one symbol.

You can think about the way that the symbol of the eagle has been taken up by various nations, by the US, by Rome itself, with its banners and other use of eagle symbolism. You see it in a number of other countries where the symbolism of the eagle has been taken up as a symbol of military might and speed. It's a symbol of dignified power.

It's a symbol of the ease with which the eagle can swoop and go high up in the air and just circle. And so we can see in Isaiah chapter 40 that, You can think also about the way that the eagle swoops down upon its prey. It's a threat.

And so Babylon and Egypt are described as eagles within the prophets, eagles swooping upon the vine of Israel. Now, these sorts of uses of the symbolism are very close to just natural metaphor that we might think about in the case of the eagle as our experience of it. But there's a deeper sort of symbolism that develops within Scripture surrounding the eagle, because the eagle is associated with the cherubim.

In Ezekiel chapter 1, one of the faces of the cherubim is an eagle. And then in later Christian symbolism, the eagle becomes associated with the fourth gospel. So John is often displayed in symbolism.

If you see him in a church window, he'll often have an eagle with him. And so the eagle symbolism is an important aspect of Christian symbolism. Think also about the way that many lecterns in Christian churches will have eagles upon them or be an eagle lectern.

The eagle is an unclean bird within Leviticus. So that's another way in which we might see it as having more negative connotations. But being unclean doesn't necessarily

mean something is bad.

We can think of a number of examples of unclean animals that have all sorts of positive symbolism associated with them. And other animals that have more ambivalent symbolism that can move in either way. So we can think of the lion, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the way that Christ is described as like the lion of the tribe of Judah.

But then Satan goes around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. So there's symbolism that can go in either way in those sorts of cases. Now is there some sort of unifying principle that helps us to understand these things? Well I think if we think about the way that the cherubim, the way that empires, the way that powerful figures are represented as these sorts of beasts, we may start to move towards something.

And there I think the understanding that we'll arrive at is one in which these creatures are powerful either protectors or predators of the people of God. So the beasts that rise up from the sea in the story of Daniel, they're not necessarily bad figures. They represent empires but they can also represent protectors of Israel.

Figures that will rise up and maintain a realm in which Israel can operate. And so Israel is protected by these beasts. They're cherubic figures just as the beasts of the cherubim are protective.

They guard the boundaries to the garden. They guard God's throne. In the same way the great empires of the nations rise up from the sea and they guard the special people of Israel.

I think that sort of connection maybe moves us closer to understanding how this sort of symbolism operates. So the eagle, the symbolism of the eagle is also associated with God himself. God brings Israel as if on eagles wings to himself.

God hovers over Israel like an eagle over its young. That symbolism is used in the most positive sense of all that is being connected with God himself. God is the great eagle as it were.

The great eagle that swoops down and takes prey in its claws, in its talons. But it's also the great eagle that hovers over its young, protects its young, and is an eagle that is one that brings people away from slavery. So God brings Israel on eagles wings through the wilderness.

In the book of Revelation the woman is given the wings of an eagle. Now she has that ability of flight but they are the wings of an eagle that she's given. And as she flies she is given this particular capacity.

The wings of an eagle are not just regular wings. They're particularly strong and powerful and broad wings. These are special wings.

And so the woman is able to flee from the dragon that's pursuing her. She's given the wings of an eagle and she's pursued by the winged dragon. And in these cases I think we're seeing something more of partly the ambivalence but also the very strong positive uses of this symbolism.

That the eagle is a figure that is part of the wider world. Not within the garden sanctuary itself necessarily but a guardian figure. A guardian figure that can be associated with angels, with great kingdoms and powers, and also associated with God himself.

This isn't a creature that you have within the house. The clean animals that Israel ate were mostly herbivores. Or they were herbivores.

And they were also creatures, the sacrificial creatures, were more domesticated creatures. And so these are tame creatures that really belong to a far gentler realm. But if you're going out into the wider world, you either will be preyed upon by eagles and lions and these sorts of figures.

Or you will have them protecting you. And so Israel is protected by eagle-like figures. By God himself as he brings Israel through the wilderness.

And by the nations that God raises up. And also by the cherubim and these other angelic figures that protect Israel. So I think that's part of how we can start to bring these things together.

Whether John is represented by the eagle, I mean certainly within traditional Christian symbolism he is, I think there are ways to dispute that. I'd suggest along with James Jordan that the eagle symbolism might be associated more with the Gospel of Luke than with the Gospel of John. John is more the Gospel of the man.

And so we have a movement from the Arks, the priestly book of Matthew, and the book associated with the law, to the book of the Lion, the King of Israel in Mark, where Jesus is acting as the King, doing things suddenly and quickly and immediately. And then you have Luke, which is the prophetic book, associated with the eagle, who has farsight, who has that ability to rise up connected with the angels, and all these sorts of things. And then of course John is the book of the man, the book of the God-man.

And so I think that is, for me, a more attractive way of dividing out the Gospels. But eagle symbolism is used on a number of occasions in Scripture. Not as much as lion symbolism.

But in both cases you do have predators presented in very positive ways on occasions. But also that same image of that great predator being expressed as a negative image, as these creatures that will prey upon Israel, whether that's the Romans, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, or whether in the case of the Lion it's Satan himself. Thank you very much for listening.

Lord willing, I'll be back tomorrow with my Matthew series. If you'd like to support this and other podcasts like it, please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal account, or buy me books from my Amazon account. I'll give the links to all of those below.

God bless, and thank you for listening.