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Jonah's Ark

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Discussion of the connection between the stories of Jonah and Noah explored in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Phibpwqy0o>. See also my 'Boat Stories' post: <https://theopolisinstitute.com/article/boat-stories>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm going to be commenting on a video by John Higgins over on the Bible is Art YouTube channel. If you're not already following John's work over there, I highly recommend that you do so.

He produces some really polished videos in which he explores literary features of the biblical text and he has some really fantastic, accessible work over there that I think many of you would enjoy. Within this video, I want to comment on his work on the subject of the art of the riddle. And in the video that he discusses this in, he explores the relationship among other things between the story of Jonah and the story of Noah.

He observes that the story of Jonah ends at a surprising point. It ends with a question. There are a couple of details within the conclusion of that that are arresting.

Surprising details you wouldn't expect to find. Why the reference to the much livestock? That just doesn't seem to be apropos of anything. Why would you mention the livestock at the very end of this chapter, at the very end of the chapter in the book? This final note that you're left on concerns livestock.

Why also reference 120,000 persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left? Again, it seems a surprising detail to mention. But it's there for some reason. And so we must consider why this verse is here.

What it might do to open up the rest of the text. John observes that within this verse, we have a connection between man and beast that reminds us of one previous event within scripture. It reminds us of the story where men and beasts are protected through the flood in the story of Noah.

And when we think about the story of Noah, there are 120 years before the judgment of the flood. If we go back to Genesis chapter 6, we read, and the Lord said, As we read through the story of Jonah, we also see a more general parallel that can be drawn. The story of Jonah is a story of God raising up a prophet who travels on a boat to proclaim judgment.

There's a judgment in 40 days that he pronounces. Now, if we read the story of Noah, we see many of those features and a judgment of 40 days with the reigns of 40 days. There are discontinuities that he observes.

Noah listens to the word of the Lord. Jonah does not listen. There are other things to notice that there are three days to walk through Nineveh.

And three is a common feature within the story of Noah. Three as a number that repeats in various points, or is at least a factor of a number of the numbers that are used. For instance, the arc being 300 cubits in length, those sorts of details.

And the arc and its animals create some sort of connection. Then that suggests that what is the arc? The arc isn't the boat in chapter 1. No, Nineveh is the arc. And this gives us a different sense of the story of Jonah.

Jonah is giving us a message about Nineveh, that God is preserving man and beast within this city. Now, I think this is a very insightful way to read the text, but I think it misses a number of things. So I'd like to elaborate on this theory, fill it out in a number of ways.

I think there's one particular clue that we need to start with, and that's Jonah himself. Who is Jonah? Think about the name Jonah. What does Jonah mean? Jonah means dove.

And in the story of the ark, we have two missions of the dove. The dove being sent out the first time and just being over the sea, there's nowhere to lay its feet. And then it returns.

And then it's sent out again. And then it returns with a leaf. If we read the story of Jonah, we'll see a similar thing.

It's a story of two journeys, the two journeys of the dove. The first comes back, he comes back and he comes back empty handed. And then the second time, there's an emphasis upon a plant and this attachment to a plant and what that might mean.

Within the story of Noah, we have the judgment or the relief of the wind that is provided, that God sends a wind over the waters of the earth and the waters subside in chapter eight, verse one. In the story of Jonah, there are two winds. There's the wind that God sends out, a great wind on the sea.

And there was a mighty tempest and the ship was about to be broken up. And then in chapter four, verse eight, and it happened when the sun arose that God prepared a vehement east wind and the sun beat on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. So there are winds and there are winds connected with those two stories.

If we look at the story of Jonah, it's a story of this divides neatly into two. And there are a number of parallels between those two halves. There's a focus upon man and beast, not just at the end of the book, but also in the middle of the book.

And in surprise, even more surprising in the resting ways in chapter three, verse seven to eight, the king of Nineveh, and he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the kings, the king and his nobles saying, let neither man nor beast heard nor flock taste anything. Do not let them eat or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth and cry mightily to God. Yes.

Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. So man and beast join in the fast. Man and beast are dressed in sackcloth.

Now that just seems weird. Why include the beasts within the dressing and sackcloth? I mean, perhaps include them in the fast. That's a bit of a stretch, but dressing them in sackcloth too.

That just seems superfluous, including the man, man and beast together. That's something that recalls the story of the story of the ark, where we have the judgment upon man and beast at the same time. So the Lord said, I will destroy man, which I have, whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.

And it's also a story of divine repentance. God says he saw that the wickedness of man

was great on the earth and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth and he was grieved in his heart.

So we have a reference to God changing his mind and God changes his mind in the case of the story of Nineveh. God repents of his decision to destroy Nineveh. Then God saw their works that they turned from that evil way and God relented from the disaster that he said he had said that he would bring upon them.

And he did not do it. The reference also to the cause of the judgment, the violence that they are involved in. In the story of Noah, it is the whole earth being filled with violence that causes its judgment to come up.

And God's concern in this situation is to deal with that violence and to judge. The wickedness of the city comes up before the Lord on account of its violence. Something that we see in Genesis chapter 6 verse 5, the wickedness coming up before the Lord.

And in Jonah chapter 1 verse 2, the wickedness has come up before me. Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it. So there seems to be a broader connection.

We have the two missions of the dove. But yet there are all these differences as well. There are differences in that he is sent from a boat and he is sent out into the deep.

Now it seems it's very similar to the story of Noah sending out the dove. But then it seems that he ends up under the sea. It's an odd place to be.

He also ends up in Nineveh. What is the meaning of Nineveh? How is Nineveh an ark? It might be worth reflecting upon that a bit more. The story, as I've said, is a book of two sections.

And within these two sections, I believe that there are two images of Assyria. The first is the big fish and the second is the gourd. Now those things are connected with the broader imagery of the book.

Let's step back a bit and think about how that might fit together. First of all, there is this tempest within the sea. He's on the boat and he's cast off the boat.

He's cast out of the secure place and he's swallowed by a big fish that the Lord has prepared. Now this is something that we see as a common theme within the story. And it may tie back to the story of Noah in a number of ways.

The way that God prepares things, the way that God remembers, the way that God acts providentially to preserve his people in a situation of cataclysm. So they're in the middle of the tempest. They cast Jonah off the ship and then Jonah is swallowed by this great

fish that God has prepared.

Later on, God prepares a gourd that rises up and then a worm to consume part of that gourd and to lead to its failing as the shade for Jonah. When we read this, I think we can see some sort of connection between these two images. Jonah, I believe, is an image of Israel.

Israel is cast out of the boat. It's cast into the deep. And as it's cast into the deep of exile, it is swallowed up by the big fish of Assyria.

Later on, we'll see that there is a gourd that protects Jonah, the representative Israelite, from the heat of the day. What's going on there? I believe that in the context of Jeroboam II's reign, that we're seeing in which this context in which Jonah is writing, that the kingdom of Assyria was a means by which Israel was protected. So Adad-Nerari III defeated the Aramean kingdoms, which had really been causing trouble for Israel, and it allowed for the recovery and even the expansion of Israel.

If you read in 2 Kings and the reference to Jonah in chapter 14, verse 25, you'll see that he prophesies about the expansion of Israel, even of a wicked kingdom. So it seems that this is a nation that's being blessed in part as a result of the presence of Assyria in the north, that Assyria deals with the Aramean kingdoms that are troubling them. Then they can expand, then they can find a security that they did not have.

So first of all, we have this image of the gourd, the gourd that protects and that provides shelter and shade. But we also have the image of the big fish that can swallow and swallow them up. But as we look through the story more generally, and we connect it with these arc themes, the big fish is not just a big fish that destroys and is a sort of judgment.

It's a big fish that is protecting. It's an arc that will protect Jonah within the deep, not just upon the deep, but within the very deep itself. Nineveh is described as having a journey around it of three days.

And Jonah spends three days within the belly of the fish. That is a connection between the two, I think. I don't think it's primarily about the arc in this instance.

I don't think that connection is quite so strong. I think the connection is more with the big fish, that the big fish and Nineveh are connected together. What is the arc for? The arc is God's preservation of the Assyrians, but it's also connected with other things.

I think it's connected with Israel. As we look through the story, I think that there are hints that it's for Israel. Jonah, the prophet of Israel, is protected in the big fish by the big fish.

Likewise, the image of the gourd that's associated with the city in God's response, that he took concern for the gourd and that God takes concern for the city, it connects those

two things together. So the gourd is that which will protect Israel at that particular point. And if Israel entrusts itself to God, they can be protected by Assyria.

They can be protected as they're swallowed by that big fish, if they will repent. And the question of repentance is a key thing. There is coming judgment.

What will you do in that time of judgment? Now, the judgment in 40 days is a judgment upon Israel and a judgment upon Nineveh. It's a judgment that's declared upon Nineveh, but it's also something that Israel should hear. There's a coming judgment for them too.

And if they're not prepared, then there's trouble. And what God will do is he will provide a place where they will be safe in this judgment. He's not going to remove the judgment, but he's providing a safe place.

And that will be the ark. And the ark is Nineveh, that as they submit to his will, they could find refuge within the ark of Nineveh. If they will heed his voice, that is where they can be kept safe.

And so I think what we're seeing within this book is a very brilliant riddle. And it's a very brilliant set of symbols that present Israel with a message. It connects it with the story of the ark, and it connects it with other stories.

If we read the story of Jonah, it might also connect it with the story of Paul. That Paul is another prophet of Israel who goes towards, who travels on a boat in the Mediterranean towards the west, and there's a great storm. And in the case of Jonah, he's the threat to everyone on the boat, and he has to be cast off.

In the story of Paul, everyone is safe as they stay with him. And so there's the pagan nations surrounding Israel. Israel will, as a result of its sin, as a result of its waywardness, it will suffer the same fate as Jonah.

It will be cast into the deep, and it will be swallowed by the big fish. Now if it follows the example of Jonah and repents within the deep, within the belly of the great fish, it can be restored. But that really depends.

Will it repent? And the example of Nineveh itself is a salient one here. As we look at the example of Nineveh, it responds, it repents. The people of Nineveh will rise up and judge the people of this generation as Christ declares.

And for the Jews of that day, they were supposed to hear the example of a pagan people. The pagan people surrounding them, the pagan people of the boat, also the pagan people of Nineveh. Both of those groups repent and give some sort of glory to God.

And yet the prophet does not seem to repent. And so the prophet is really against God's sort of grace. But when we think about God's grace exercised in this situation towards

Nineveh, it's a means by which Israel itself would be protected.

Nineveh is being marked out as the ark for Israel. And if Nineveh repents, then Israel is safer. If we think about the sort of parable of the gourd, what is the parable of the gourd? The parable of the gourd is that God can protect his people through this pagan city, through this wicked nation.

Even in all its violence, God can use that people to protect his people because God is the Lord of the deep. God is not just the Lord of the land. God is the of the deep.

He's the Lord of the flood. He's the one who can cast his people into the deep and protect them even there. We often tend to think about God in terms of the land, that God is the one who will protect us within the land.

And that God has all these ordered things, all these ordered things of the establishment of a nation that we have in politics that enable us to worship God in peace, all these sorts of things. But what happens when we are thrown into the deep, when we are overwhelmed by forces that are opposed to God? What happens when we are thrown out as a result of our sin and find ourselves in exile? What happens when everything that we depend upon, all the dry land that we rest upon, even that which is on the deep itself, even the dry land of the boat, is torn out from beneath our feet? What happens then? Can God preserve us in that situation? And the message of Jonah is yes, he can. He can bring a great big fish to swallow you up.

He's the one who can protect you from the nations using another wicked nation. He can use the Assyrians to protect you as Israel. And if we take the lesson, I think there's a lot that we can learn from this.

But looking back at the story, I think there are ways in which the example of Jonah as we see it played out within the story and seeing that against the background of the story of Noah, it opens up a lot of different things. It opens up the way in which God can, first of all, God's more general concern for humankind. There are only two real stories of boats within the Old Testament.

There's the story of Jonah and there's the story of Noah. And in both of these stories, we have a more comprehensive act of salvation or deliverance, one that includes all sorts of people. And it includes animals as well.

It talks about the extent of God's salvation purpose within the New Covenant, the shift from focus upon land, the land, upon shepherds, upon sheep, to fish and fishermen and the sea. That's a natural movement, I think, that reflects God's word going out to the Gentiles, that God takes concern for more than just the people of the land. And that is symbolically, I think, played out in the emphasis upon the Sea of Galilee, other things like that, within the story of the Old Testament, of the New Testament.

I wrote a piece on this for Theopolis recently called Boat Stories. I'll leave the link for that in the show notes below. Looking through this, we can see also the church is seen as an arc in various ways in the New Covenant.

And the Ark story is also connected, as I've mentioned before, with the Exodus story. Now, there are details within the story in the numbers that I think maybe connect more with the Exodus. If we think about the Exodus, it follows through a period of one year and the key events take place over a one year period, which I think corresponds with the story of the Ark, which takes place over a one year period.

And God is bringing his people through, bringing them to the mountain, forming a new covenant with them, the blessing and the sign of grace in the cloud, all these sorts of things. Before the Ark, there are 600 years. Noah is 600 years of age.

And there's 120 years before the Ark as well. There's 120 years from the time that the judgment is pronounced to the time that they are brought on the Ark. So I think there's a connection between Noah's age and the time of the flood and the time from the announcement to the bringing of the flood.

That's three times 40. I think there's significance there in all likelihood. It's also a number that maybe is associated with Israel, 120,000 in the story of Nineveh.

I'm not sure. Think about some of these connections. I think they may help.

If we think about the story of the Exodus, Israel flees with 600,000 people. And they flee from Egypt and they are pursued by 600 chariots. I think, again, that connects back to the story of Noah and the Ark and the 120 years, the 600 years of Noah before the Ark.

Then also they go out in military array in fives or in fifties, depending on how you read that. It's 120 groups of five. That's another way to think about it.

120 times five is 600. So I think there's something more going on there. That this is connected with Exodus themes maybe as well, that God is going to provide some sort of deliverance, Exodus-like deliverance.

The story of Noah, the story of the Red Sea and the deliverance of Israel through the Exodus. All these things I think are connected in the story of Noah as well. In the story of Acts, where Paul and his shipwreck, there are various references back to the Passover within that.

If you read about the shipwreck, it's the 14th night has come and they're sailing. And during that time, Paul says, everyone must remain within the boat. And today is the 14th day you've waited and continued without food and eaten nothing.

It's connected with a fast. And then he says, he takes bread, gives thanks to God in the

presence of them all. And when he has broken it, he gives it to them and they're all encouraged and they all have to remain upon the boat.

There's 276 persons on the ship. Again, they throw the wheat out into the sea, other things like that. This is connected with Passover themes.

It's connected with the time of the Passover. It's connected with everyone remaining in the house, with taking bread, the midnight meal, all these sorts of things. So I think putting all these stories together, I think we'll get a bigger picture of what's taking place.

But the connection between Noah and Jonah, however much those peripheral details can be explored, I think the core connection is a very strong one and an important one to consider. And I would suggest that the meaning of it is that Nineveh is going to be the ark for Israel. If it is faithful, it can find relief there.

And the story of Jonah and Noah connected together, Jonah is the one who is the dove being sent to find dry land. But in many ways, what he's being sent to find is an ark. He's being sent to find somewhere that will be a source of relief.

So in one way, it is the big fish itself as a sort of ark that swallows him out back onto the land at a later point. So it's an ark in that sense. It's also the ark of Nineveh, the big fish connected with Nineveh, connected with the Gourd that protects, and God's providence throughout it all.

We often think about God's providence in a way that focuses so much just upon the stable, secure features of the land. And yet when we're thrown into the chaos of the deep, God is sovereign there too. God is the one who can bring forth rescue for his people, even when there are no sources of security that they can rest upon.

There's no dry land. There's not even floating wreckage. They have to depend upon God alone.

And God can raise up big fish in that situation too. And in a situation where we often find ourselves despairing at the future state of our country and our society as we see it moving away from God, as we see it moving into a position of hostility, and we wonder will we be persecuted, etc., it's worth thinking about that God is the one who brings forth monsters from the deep to swallow up and protect his people. Thank you very much for listening.

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God bless and thank you very much for listening.