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Q&A#153 Peter Walking Upon the Waters

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Today's question: "Following the land/sea symbology of Israel/nations — when Jesus walks on water (as if it were land) do you think this is a type of the mystery revealed in the gospel (ie: the nations/waters are brought into God's family/land)? Does Peter's experience here foreshadow his initial comprehension of the mystery, followed by stumbling with the Judaizers (per Paul's account in Galatians)?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, following the land-sea symbology of Israel and the nations, when Jesus walks on water as if it were land, do you think this is a type of the mystery revealed in the gospel, i.e. that the nations or waters are brought into God's family or land? Does Peter's experience here foreshadow his initial comprehension of the mystery, followed by stumbling with the Judaizers, per Paul's account in Galatians? It's a good question. There's certainly a lot of symbolism playing out in the gospel narratives

of the sea and the lake and the waters.

We have boat stories, and those boat stories often represent the boat, I think, as an image of the group of the disciples and ultimately the church. The boat is a part of the land that's taken out onto the seas. It's a realm that is safe, surrounded by threat and danger, and to actually step out of the boat is to step into a realm of significant threat to one's life.

As you look through the gospels also, particularly in Matthew, Mark, and John, the sea imagery is foregrounded. The lake of Gennesaret is spoken of as the sea of Galilee throughout, or the sea of Tiberias. It's amplified in this sense in its significance as a body of water.

We would not usually think to call a body of water that small a sea, but within the gospels that is exactly what it is. In Luke's gospel it is the lake, but then of course Acts has the sea, which is the Mediterranean Sea later on in the shipwreck and elsewhere. And so I think that is the significance of the shift from that imagery within the gospel itself.

He does not use the sea imagery there because he's reserving it for later on in his book of Acts. The walking upon the water is one aspect, but we can also think about fish imagery. In the Old Testament there's shepherd and sheep imagery wherever we go.

The leader of the people is the shepherd of the people, Moses. We can think of Jacob, we can think of characters like David. All of these are shepherds.

But then in the New Testament there are fish everywhere. There are fish and fishermen. The first disciples are predominantly fishermen.

That's the trade that they're associated with. And they're associated also with the lake of Galilee, the sea of Galilee. They're constantly going backwards and forwards on the sea of Galilee.

So much of Jesus's earlier ministry focuses upon this body of water. It's ordered around the body of water as if that was the central hub of all that's taking place. Now as we go out to the Gentiles, I think we'll find that that symbolism, that symbolism of the lake or the sea, is not there by accident.

It's there to symbolise the later ministry of the church, which will be focused upon sea dwellers, upon fish, upon the Gentiles. Now elsewhere in Scripture we can also see that the imagery of the wild waters are associated with death. It's associated with the death in the realm of the Gentiles.

The Gentiles are this great flood that has to be held back, otherwise they'll totally overwhelm the land. But they're also a realm that's associated with Sheol. The waters

are associated with death and destruction.

In the book of Jonah we can see that the sea and the beast within it is associated with Sheol. I think it's also associated with the Assyrians, that the great sea monster that swallows up Jonah is a picture of Assyria, like the Gord is later on in chapter 4. That story is one of the few fish stories in the Old Testament. We can think of maybe one other major story associated with the seas and that's the story of Noah.

And it's not surprising because there are connections between those two stories. Elsewhere we'll see fish imagery within the prophets, the fishermen that gather up the exiles. We can think about the sea monsters of Egypt and others like that, this great crocodile in the waters of the Nile.

And maybe we can also draw to mind the end of Ezekiel, Ezekiel chapter 47, with the waters flowing out from the temple and then going down and giving life to the sea. In chapter 47 there's also an emphasis upon fishermen at that point. I've argued before that that is taken up in chapter 21 of John, where there is this catch of many fish.

There is the water flowing out from Christ's side, which is a theme within the book of John, Christ's gift of water. And then here at the very end, you have an anticipation of the later ministry of the church, which is as these waters flow out, there's fishing everywhere. There's this mighty catch of fish associated with all the fish of the waters.

It's also Gematria playing upon En Gedi and En Eglilim, or Gedi and Eglilim, 17 and 153, which is the triangular number of 17. And that connects it back in just another connection with the story of Ezekiel chapter 47. Now, the boat is a part of the land that goes out onto the waters.

It's a part of the land that belongs in this realm of threat and danger. But it's also, we can see it connected with the house of the Passover in the story of Paul's shipwreck. The house of the Passover, you have to stay inside.

So in the same way, you have to stay inside the ship until you'll be rescued. Now, that going out onto the sea and the threat of the dangers of the sea within that realm, I think, is taken up again within the story of Jesus walking upon the sea, calling Peter or inviting Peter to come out towards him. What is happening in that story? I'm not sure that the first thing that comes to mind for me is Peter's Gentile mission.

I think there's an aspect to that. What there is, is an anticipation, I believe, of the resurrection. The disciples have been left alone.

They're in the storm. They're afraid. They're on the boat.

They're in the boat. Jesus, around the fourth watch of the night, just as dawn's about to come, he's walking upon the waters and they think it's a ghost. And then he shows that

it is indeed him.

And he invites Peter to come out to meet him in the book of Matthew. Mark doesn't record that particular detail of the story. And so Peter goes out to meet him and he's afraid at a certain point.

So I think that may be related to the Gentile mission. I think it's primarily about the resurrection of Christ. Christ is the one who walks upon the deep, the deep of Sheol, the deep of death.

He's overcome the terror of the seas. And now he can invite his disciples out. They're afraid in that boat upon the wild waters.

And then you have this invitation and Peter's the one that answers it first. In the stories of Peter following the resurrection, I think Peter is seen as the lead disciple, the one who will lead the apostles in the way that they will carry out the initial mission of Christ. He's the one who preaches first on the day of Pentecost.

He's the one who is the lead spokesperson for the disciples, at least until chapter 12 of the book of Acts. In chapter 21 of John, he's also the one who jumps out of the boat and goes towards Christ when it's about 200 cubits from the land. Those 200 cubits, I don't know what to make of those.

In chapter 47 of Ezekiel, at the very beginning of that chapter, you have the gradual measuring of thousands of cubits as Ezekiel is brought out into the water. So first of all, it's ankle deep, then it's knee deep, then it's waist deep, and then it's impassable because it's so deep. And that development, I think, is probably connected with the measurement of 200 cubits.

4000 cubits, 200 cubits within the story of John's gospel. Peter is the one who performs this. He jumps out of the boat and then he comes towards Christ on the shore.

He's reaffirmed in his mission. He's presented with this new calling three times. There's a miraculous catch of fish, just as there was in his first calling.

There is this threefold declaration of his duty to feed the sheep of Christ. And that threefold reminder is connected to his threefold denial of Christ earlier. Again, it's round a fire of coals.

And so Peter's significance is again prominent here. He's the one that's going to lead the disciples and his lack of faith, his sinking and calling for Christ to rescue him, maybe represents something of the disciples stumbling even after the resurrection, their failure to fully enter into the faith that they've been called to. Maybe that's what's going on.

And reading that story, I think we should see primarily resurrection themes. Jesus

wondering whether it's a ghost coming at around the dawn, the disciples who have been left alone and afraid in the storm. And then Christ comes and brings peace.

He's the one who invites them out to meet him upon the waves. Peter is the one that runs with John to the tomb and he beats. He is the one that enters first into the tomb.

He's the one who jumps out of the boat and then comes towards Christ on the water. He's the one that is the one who leads the mission to the Gentiles. And so at these respects, I think Peter's leading role within the early church is typologically prefigured within chapter 21 of John and maybe also within chapter 14 of Matthew, as he's the one that comes to Christ upon the waves.

One way or another, I think the questioner is right to see some deep symbolism here and to see the character of Peter and the significance of the waves and Jesus walking upon the waves as connected with something broader about Jesus' conquest of death, his Gentile mission of the church, the church as associated with the boat upon the waters. I've written about some of these things elsewhere in a Theopolis article called Boat Stories. I'll link to that in the notes below.

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