

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 347

Jonah and the Chaos Dragon

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Episode Summary

The story of Jonah being swallowed by a “great fish” (misunderstood as a whale) is familiar to Bible readers and those in the wider culture who have never read the Bible. Given the flexibility of the Hebrew phrase behind “great fish” (*dag gadol*), scholars have wondered whether Jonah connects back to biblical Leviathan, the well-known chaos serpent of Canaanite literature. In this episode we explore the potential connections.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 347: Jonah and the Chaos Dragon. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! How are you?

MH: Pretty good. Pretty good, all things considered. Anxious to get back to the Old Testament today, at least more fully. [laughs]

TS: Yeah. Well, we’re covering Jonah here, and actually... You have one more week of voting in our poll for the next book study that we’re going to be doing. And it ends next Saturday (Halloween) at midnight. So if you have not done so, go to NakedBiblePodcast.com and cast your vote. Right now though, Mike, I think the Old Testament in Revelation is holding steady at 67-68%.

MH: Well you know, it would’ve been nice if we had put the vote up a little earlier, because then we could start the apocalypse maybe right after the apocalypse of the election. You know? We could’ve done something there. We just weren’t thinking ahead.

TS: Now, only if you’re thinking in those terms, which I don’t. So yeah. [MH laughs] That’s all you; that’s not me. Yeah. I hear you, Mike. I hear you on that one. But you know, by covering Jonah here, we had it planned to do this topic for a while now. So for those who voted for Jonah, hopefully this episode will whet their appetite or hold them over until the next vote.

MH: Yeah. Well that's a nice thought. [laughs] Hopefully it will do that for somebody, because... Yeah, Jonah's not looking too good as far as the voting goes.

TS: No, no. But the next time, since Jonah and Jude are so short, hopefully we'll include another short one on the vote... Hopefully we can cover more books rather than these big, long, year-long treks through these 40-chapter books. [laughter]

MH: Right. Well, it is what it is.

TS: Buy hey, that's alright. Revelation's not *too* long. I mean, what is it, 22 chapters?

MH: Yeah, 22 chapters. But I'm sure it's not going to be a chapter a week. I think we *are* looking at a year, if that's where it all ends up. But you know, in my experience, people have a very *high* tolerance for spending time in the book of Revelation. So I'm not real worried about it.

TS: Oh yeah. I mean, Mike, I'm not going to lie. Even in my younger years, it was all about Revelation. That (the End Times) was just the most interesting topic, right? That's just kind of what grabs you. It's just interesting, because it's so weird.

MH: Yep. Well, I can say I was a teenage prophecy nerd. That was one of the first things I read after becoming a Christian. Some well-meaning person handed me prophecy books. [laughs] And then I was gone. So I get it.

TS: Yeah. What's interesting is the more you get into it, that kind of melts away, as far as my interest in concerned. [MH laughs] So I don't know if it's maturity, or growing up, or what it is.

MH: Are you saying that no one mature is *into* prophecy nerd-dom?

TS: Yes.

MH: You just mature out of it? Is that what you're saying?

TS: Correct. That's *exactly* what I'm saying. What are your thoughts on that? Do you agree? Disagree?

MH: I agree, I agree. That's what happened to me. I just remember, as a teenager I thought Gorbachev had the wounded head and was the anti-Christ. [TS laughs] And it turned out that wasn't the case. [laughs] You know? What can I say?

TS: I hear you. Well, I'm interested where we're going here. Obviously when you talk about chaos, there are so many implications with that. And we've touched on it here and there. So I'm going to be listening to this one intensely.

MH: Yeah, I'm glad to move into this a little bit. I enjoy use of the Old Testament by the New Testament writers, but I've been looking at this for a while. Compared to our forays into the New Testament, this feels like a fresh episode, just Old Testament exclusively. But if we're honest, it's not 100% exclusive Old Testament because the Gospels use the sign of Jonah in relationship to the resurrection of Jesus. So at the end, we'll say something about that. But for the most part, yeah, we're going to stick with the Old Testament book.

5:00

Obviously, the story's familiar. But for listeners to this podcast anyway, equally as obvious ought to be the thought that there's more to it than meets the eye. And so our focus today is going to be specifically (in Hebrew) the *dag gadôl* (the "great fish") and chaos themes, in particular connections to Leviathan imagery. And for the purposes of this episode, the focus is *not* going to be the historicity of the story's circumstances (the whole great fish thing). "Did that really happen? Is this a historical narrative? Is it a parable?" So on and so forth. Frankly, you'd have chaos/Leviathan imagery either way because the text is the text. Okay? For me, whether Jonah is a parable or an allegory or historical narrative, it doesn't matter with respect to the imagery. It also doesn't really matter with respect to the New Testament's use of the material. In other words, Jesus' reference to being "in the earth" over the course of three days on analogy to Jonah and the great fish is on target either way, because that's what's in the book of Jonah. That's what's in the text. Not specifically the three-day element (that's going to come from somewhere else), but it's still this analogy of the emergence from the realm of the dead, is really the point.

So regardless of how you would read Jonah, or how anybody else reads Jonah, Jesus' appeal to this as an analogy still holds. And frankly, if the *dag gadôl* (the great fish) is connected to chaos imagery (which I'm going to suggest that it is), it makes the analogy all the more appropriate when it comes to the reference to the resurrection.

So I know people get a little fixated on this question (history or parable) and I'm just being transparently honest with you. To me, it doesn't matter. It doesn't really matter what it is, if you're asking the question because of the fact that Jesus uses it. It doesn't matter. If you're asking the question because of some broader issue of Old Testament historicity or something like that, a different trajectory might make the question more important, is what I'm trying to say. But for our purposes today, we're not concerned with it.

Now as in other episodes (when we're getting into the Old Testament use in the New) I typically have as a touchpoint a reference. And this is going to be no different. So the resource of reference today that I find is a really good resource

to tap into... But I'll admit, this one is more technical than most. To get the most out of it, you should probably have some Hebrew. But even if you don't, we're going to distill certain important points. And then when you read the transcript, the Hebrew will be in transliteration anyway, so you can still get a good deal out of it. But if you wanted the source article, it is this one. It's by Scott Noegel, "Jonah and Leviathan: Inner Biblical Allusions and the Problem with Dragons." It's from the scholarly journal called *Henoah* 37:2 (2015). This is available online at academia.edu. So if you googled the title with his name, you're going to find (and that's where the link's going to take you—to that website)... I'm going to read a little bit from the abstract, and then from one of the pages. It'll set up what the issues are that we're going to track through today. So Noegel writes in his abstract:

10:00

Early Christian depictions of Jonah's "fish" as a sea dragon have long posed a problem for scholars. Some have explained it by pointing to the Septuagint's rendering of Jonah's "fish" as a κῆτος (kētos), "sea creature." Yet this translation is itself problematic since it is completely out of step with treatments of the term דָּג (dag) "fish" elsewhere in the Bible. Others have opined the influence of Jewish midrashic traditions in which Leviathan plays a role in the Jonah story [MH: that's the reason you have this connection with ketos and dag]. However, said traditions cannot be dated before the 9th century CE [MH: or AD] – more than half a millennium after the artistic evidence.

So let me just stop there. His point of departure here in his abstract is that if you look at early Christian art that relates to Jonah and the "fish," many of them depict the fish as a dragon or some kind of sea serpent. And he's like, "Where does that come from? Does it come from the Septuagint's rendering of the Hebrew word *dag* (fish)—*dag gadôl* (the great fish)—with *ketos*, which isn't a word you would use just for a normal generic fish? But you *would* use it for some kind of sea creature, some more grotesque creaturely sea monster-ish thing. Is the Christian art inspired by the Septuagint's rendering, or is there something else? Like is there something..." He's ultimately going to ask here toward the end of his abstract... I'm not going to read any more from that because I'm going to skip to a specific page. But he's ultimately going to ask, "Is this notion, where early Christian artistic depictions..." Okay, you've got the Septuagint. Maybe they were inspired by that. Maybe they were led to think about the *dag gadôl* (the great fish) in this way, because of the Septuagint. But maybe, he asks, there are other reasons textually that explain why the Septuagint translator would be thinking of the *dag gadôl* (the great fish) as something monstrous. And more specifically, could that something monstrous be linked to chaos dragon (i.e., Leviathan) literary motifs? That's what he's basically going to ask. So on page 237, another way of getting into this, where he talks about the issue, he writes this:

In Christianity, Jonah was a favorite figure for allegory. Taking their lead

from Jesus' statement that Jonah was a σημεῖον (*sēmeion*) [MH: which is the Greek word for] "sign" (Matt 12:39-40), early theologians depicted him as prefiguring the Christ, descending into the "fish" like Jesus into Hell [MH: more accurately Hades or Underworld], and delivered from it [MH: Jonah, this prefiguration of Christ to early Christians, was delivered from the fish (from what would correspond to Hades and hell) in terms of God saving him for his mission, and with Jesus, of course Jesus is delivered from hell or Hades (the Underworld)] for the salvation of gentiles.

And Noegel, when he writes that sentence, cites references to a lot of important early Christian thinkers: Clement, Irenaeus, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Athanasius, and Jerome. It's a Who's Who list of early Christians that saw Jonah this way (as some sort of prefiguration of Jesus) and equated where Jonah goes into the fish with going into the Underworld. And so this is going to raise a question for Noegel. What appealed to this equation? Of course, it's in the Gospels, but not only do you get this equation written about by these early Church authorities, but when you look at the artwork, the fish is a dragon (a sea monster). Is that somehow connected to the serpent of Genesis 3? Or is it Leviathan—just a broader chaos thing? What's going on here? So this is why he wants to think about this. And he continues:

Early Greek Patristic works identify Jesus as the worm on the fishhook of Job 40:25...

**"Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook
or press down his tongue with a cord? [Job 41:1 in ESV]"**

15:00 An odd reference and an odd way we would think of looking at something. But early Christian writers were pretty abstract in their thinking. Where essentially... He has a reference to Job here, but it's the Leviathan—the hook—imagery here. Let me just explain what he's getting at here with the early Church folks. Jesus' resurrection led to the defeat of Satan, and so they're looking at Satan (the devil) as the dragon. Okay. You get that in Revelation 12:9. You get it in Revelation 20:2. You get the devil and Satan and the dragon of Genesis 3 all tied together. And so Jesus is sort of the bait. He's the hook to the fish, the dragon getting snared and caught, and of course killed, by God. This is how they're looking at it. So he says, when you look at...

... already in the 3rd century CE [MH: AD], one finds paintings, sarcophagi, and other funerary art that link Jonah to Leviathan by depicting the "fish" as a fantastic sea monster with large sharp teeth, tall ears, mammalian forearms, and a long serpentine tail.

And in his article he has pictures of this. So he's, like, "Where did they..." It's one thing to say, "Okay. Jonah gets swallowed by the fish. We know the story. And okay, it's pretty transparent. He gets swallowed. He gets spit up. He goes and he witnesses to the Gentiles (to the Assyrians, the Ninevites). But how do you go from that to being, in your thinking, secure (these early Church writers and artists) of thinking about that fish and Jonah in a certain way that equates him with the serpent of Genesis 3 or Leviathan (evil forces)? Because after all, God's the one who commanded the fish to go swallow Jonah. So where do you get these sinister associations? And of course, you could look at the Gospels and Jesus says that what happened to Jonah was a sign. Of course, he's pointing at the resurrection. But Jesus doesn't elaborate. He doesn't say, "Here's a sign. Yeah, I'm going to get out of the grave in three days. I'm going to be dead, then I'm going to be alive, just like Jonah was dead and then alive." But Jesus never elaborates on anything else. He doesn't say, "I'm also telling you this because of Genesis 3 or Leviathan." Jesus doesn't offer any elaboration that would account for why early Christian writers thought this way and depicted the story in their art the way they do.

So this is how Noegel starts, and he says that there's got to be some way to trace these ideas—to connect these ideas. But when you start looking at the text, you have... On the surface, it looks like there are some contradictory things going on here. So here are the issues. I just make a little grocery list of these that you can elicit from the early pages of his article. The first question is:

1) What is the *dag gadol* (the great fish)? In other words, what is it supposed to be or signify?

2) Why does the Septuagint translate *dag* as *ketos*, a word that isn't used elsewhere to translate *dag*? Let me put that into better English. You have the Hebrew word *dag*, which is a fish. It's just a generic word for fish. It doesn't tell you what kind of fish; it's just a fish. The Septuagint does not render *dag* with *ketos* anywhere else but Jonah. Why? It'll use something else (*ichthys* or whatever). Why?

3) What is it about Jonah that makes them use a word that... They do use *ketos* for Leviathan. So the Septuagint uses *ketos* for Leviathan. And in this one place, it also uses it in Jonah for *dag*. And the kicker is, if you read through the book of Jonah in Hebrew, the word for Leviathan doesn't appear in Jonah. So what is there in the book in this episode that makes them think, "Oh, *ketos* is the way to render *dag* here. Yes, I know that everywhere else in the Septuagint we use a generic word for fish, but here (even though the word Leviathan doesn't show up in the book)—here we're looking at a sea monster (something like Leviathan). We're thinking Leviathan for some reason, so we're going to use *ketos* right here." Why do they do that?

20:00

4) Another thought. The Septuagint (if you're paying close attention) uses two terms for Leviathan. One is *kētos* and the other one it uses is *drakon* (dragon). So we have a clear association. There's a clear path—a clear link—between *kētos* and *drakon* and Leviathan. But there doesn't seem to be any reason why a translator would be looking at the Hebrew text of Jonah and he never sees *liwyatan* in Hebrew. (That's the word for Leviathan.) He never sees that. He just sees *dag*. *Dag gadol*. Big fish. Why does he opt for one of the terms that they would use everywhere else for Leviathan? Why? Why does he do that?

5) The Septuagint further uses *kētos* and *drakon* for another Hebrew term: *tannîn* (the sea monsters or the sea dragons), like in Genesis 1:21 and other verses. That's not the only place where you have *tannin*, which is the plural for dragons. Specifically, we have *ta kētē ta megala* for *tannîn gedolîm*, in other words great dragons or great sea monsters (Genesis 1:21). Septuagint translators will use *ketos* there. I mean, why, when they hit Jonah and they just see this simple, innocent, harmless, little *dag* (little fish)—I'm thinking of a Sunny or something here—why would they look at that word and think *ketos* (sea monster)? It just doesn't seem to make any sense.

So those are the issues. Noegel is wondering. What's going through their heads? What else did they see in the book in the scene with the fish that justified in their minds translating it with a term that they knew their readers would mentally link to Leviathan? Why are they doing that? Why would they mentally link to a chaos symbol.

So unraveling this really is our task for today. That's our point of inquiry, and we're going to follow Noegel's journey here. I'm going to pick a few things out. This is a technical article. It's fairly dense. I'm going to skip a good number of things in it, just to give you the guts of it. Because I think it's really interesting to try to track why the translator is thinking the way that he's thinking when it comes to this word choice. So Noegel writes:

Though Jonah refers to the creature as a דָּג four times [MH: and he gives the references in the Hebrew text] (1:17 [2x], 2:1, 2:10), the ancients were acutely aware of the term's ambiguity.

He adds in a footnote: "The ambiguity also is reflected in that some early Christian artworks depict the creature as a fish, whereas in others, it is a sea monster," so even the artwork's not consistent. Some looked at *ketos* and kind of got the message, and other artists just have a fish. But what he really wants to know is, "What's going on with the sea monster thing?" Noegel then quotes Jack Sasson's observation in regard to the word *dag*:

It is a fact, moreover, that Scripture has preserved no specific names for the many types of salt- and fresh-water fish known to the eastern Mediterranean. This does

not mean, of course, that the ancient Hebrews were not able to distinguish among the area's wide varieties of fish; it simply suggests that no biblical context seems to require a specific vocabulary for fish.

They just didn't bother. There was no need for them to have a full-orbed vocabulary for fish. Noegel nevertheless says:

I contend that the text of Jonah contains a number of linguistic and thematic features that allude to "Tannîn traditions" [MH: dragon traditions or Leviathan chaos traditions] as found in several other biblical texts, and that these allusions encouraged the early identification of the *dag* as a sea monster.

So let's just follow his lines of evidence. I'll just give you some samples here.

1) The first thing he does is talk about the setting. Jonah is on a ship in a raging sea. That's Jonah 1:4. And the Hebrew wording here is kind of interesting. I'm going to read you what ESV has here.

⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.

Pretty simple. Well, if you're reading it in Hebrew, the tempest is *in* the sea, not on it), which is kind of interesting. You can take the Hebrew there as essentially you're looking down at the waters and there's something churning in there. Now Leviathan of course was associated with the churning sea, especially its danger. There are a number of references here we could go to. Psalm 104:26. Let's take a look at that one.

**²⁶ There go the ships,
and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.**

(In the sea.) And the prior verse is:

**²⁵ Here is the sea, great and wide,
which teems with creatures innumerable,
living things both small and great.**

**²⁶ There go the ships,
and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.**

Another reference is Job 26:5.

**⁵ The dead tremble
under the waters and their inhabitants.**

25:00

**⁶ Sheol is naked before God,
and Abaddon has no covering.**

(The pit there.) And there's more cosmological stuff. And you go down to verse 12:

**¹² By [God's] power he stilled the sea;
by his understanding he shattered Rahab. [MH: which is another word for
the chaos monster—you see it in Psalm 89 as well]**

**¹³ By his wind the heavens were made fair;
his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.**

Or you could also translate that something like “the coiled serpent,” depending on what root you think is going on there. But anyway, “fleeing” is just fine for here. And we've got Leviathan, this sea beast Rahab, in the sea. That's obvious. So Noegel is saying that it's kind of interesting how the tempest language in Jonah 1:4 could actually be “*in* the sea,” as though something is churning around in there, something frightening and dangerous, as opposed to just on top of the water. That's his first point.

2) His second point is the sailors' fearful response to the sea. So this is Jonah 1:13, where we read, “the men rowed hard to get back to dry land.” And on this point, Noegel writes this:

Of particular interest here is the verb חָתַר (*hātar*) “row.” It is an uncommon word appearing only eight times in the [MH: Hebrew] Bible. With one exception, it always refers to digging through walls...

So the only other exception other than the Jonah one is Amos 9:2. Let's just go there. This one's interesting because the digging (the verb here)... In Jonah it's “rowing” because they're on the water. Here חָתַר (*hātar*) is used this way:

**“If they חָתַר (*hātar*) into Sheol,” if they row into Sheol, if they dig into Sheol,
“from there shall my hand take them; if they climb up to heaven, from there I
will bring them down.”**

So the only outlier is Amos 9:2, and it has Sheol as a context. So he says, “Hmm. You know, everything else is, like, digging, you know, digging through walls specifically—walls or floors of a house or something like that. And the only two that aren't are Amos 9, which refers to Sheol and the one in Jonah 1:13.” Then he says:

Thus, its use in Jonah for rowing in water is unique [MH: it's the only time we get it in a water context]. Moreover, since Jonah refers to the sea that covers him as *beṭen she'ôl* "the womb of Sheol" (Jon 2:3)...

Jonah actually refers to the water that he winds up in as "the womb of Sheol" in Jonah 2:3. Since that's the case...

...the sailor's rowing invites us to recall its usage in Amos, in a prophecy also shaped by Tannîn traditions. Thus, Amos' prophecy [MH: there in Amos 9] begins by Yahweh threatening to cut open the enemy and strike him upon the head with a sword while allowing none to flee. Amos describes the enemy's frantic attempt to dig into Sheol as an impossible attempt to escape Yahweh [MH: they cannot escape Yahweh]: "And though they be hid from my sight on the floor of the sea (*hayyām*) then I will command the serpent [MH: in this case it's] (*hannaḥash*) and he will bite them" (Amos 9:3).

So in Amos 9:2 and 9:3 you have a reference to Sheol and the serpent. And Noegel writes:

That Leviathan is intended here is shown not just by the context, but by the LXX's rendering of נָחָשׁ [MH: *nachash*] with δράκοντι [MH: *drakon*].

So to summarize this, what he's saying is, you know, if we look at this verb, we're going to notice that eight times in the Bible, six of those are about digging in a wall or a house. The other two are Amos 9 and Jonah 1. And the Amos 9 one is in a passage that's about Sheol and it has a dragon in it. And then we go to Jonah 1 where now the action of the verb is about rowing through waters that are churning. And Noegel's argument is that it sort of suggests something. It suggests that there's something in the water that is going to be associated to the mind of the reader. And he's going to demonstrate this later on because Jonah brings up Sheol. It's like Jonah's referencing... Jonah's directing people's attention back to Amos 9. "Hey, remember Sheol back there? We were trying to get into Sheol and couldn't, and then God sent the serpent to bite them? They're not going to escape punishment. They're not going to escape judgment. Well guess what? I'm not going to escape judgment either. And I'm about ready to be swallowed up by something." Noegel's argument is that the writer of Jonah wants readers to fill in the blank with Leviathan—with the chaos dragon. Because the serpent—the dragon—are associated together in Amos where this unusual verb is found. And so by using the unusual verb in Jonah 1, he wants readers to connect those two dots as well. So that's his second argument.

30:00

3) Third argument is Jonah's prayer (Jonah 2:3) and the description of his predicament. This is actually going to go beyond verse 3. It's several verses. There are things in several verses here that are important. Reading from the ESV, Jonah prays this in verse 3:

**³ For you cast me into the deep [MH: the Hebrew term there is *metsulah*],
 into the heart of the seas,
 and the flood surrounded me;
 all your waves and your billows
 passed over me.**

Now *metsulah* shows up in English numbering in Job 41:31, where it says, speaking of Leviathan... This section of Job 41 goes all the way back to verse 12 and really the whole chapter. Chapter 41 begins this way:

**“Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook
 or press down his tongue with a cord?”**

And there’s this long description of Leviathan. And in verse 31 it says this:

**³¹ [Leviathan] makes the deep [MH: the *metsulah*] boil like a pot;
 he makes the sea like a pot of ointment.**

(Thick.) So what Noegel is saying is, if you look at Jonah’s prayer, he uses a term here that, lo and behold, occurs in a Leviathan passage in Job—actually kind of a famous one because it’s so long. Basically all of chapter 41 is about Leviathan. Noegel writes:

The term appears only twelve other times in the Bible, mostly in ways that evoke Leviathan traditions (Job 41:31, Ps 107:24) [MH: that may be 106:24, I don’t know if there’s a typo there], or in reference to the crossing through the Reed Sea, itself a literary refraction of the *Chaoskampf* [MH: chaos struggle] motif... In Psa 68:22 [MH: we once again have] both traditions.

We have the sea and then this notion of the place where Leviathan makes the sea to churn. And what Noegel wants you to do is he wants you to connect these things. Let me just read you the Psalm 68 reference, because we get Bashan in there, which in Canaanite (remember Leviathan is a Canaanite symbol), Bashan is Bathan, which means “serpent.” We’ve said this before in connection with stuff in *Unseen Realm*. But here are the verses:

**²² The Lord said,
 “I will bring them back from Bashan,
 I will bring them back from the depths of the sea,**

The *metsulah* of the sea. Well, Bashan doesn’t have a sea. So it’s very clear here in Psalm 68 that he’s talking about cosmic geography. He’s talking about

the place of the serpent. We discussed this in *Unseen Realm*. This should be familiar. For those of you who are taking the *Unseen Realm* class that I teach here in Jacksonville, I'm going to reference Charlesworth's article here. Because Charlesworth deals with this verse and draws the same conclusion—that we have Bathan here. We have serpent imagery in one line of Psalm 68:22 and then in the next line, we have the *metsulah* of the sea (the churning of the sea). And what Noegel wants is he wants you to listen to this vocabulary and its explanation and then go back to the stuff we've already covered about how the story's set on a raging sea. And it's not something on top of the sea; it's something *in* the sea that's causing it to churn. Alright? He wants you to start thinking about, "Okay, there's something in there. And that something is probably going to end up being this dragon/serpent/Leviathan thing, because the writer of Jonah is starting to draw terminology from other passages that take readers into places like Job 41 and Psalm 68 and Psalm 104 that have Leviathan imagery in them.

35:00 So Noegel is arguing that the writer is doing this intentionally and intelligently, trying to get his readers to remember other passages that have Leviathan in them, and not only that, but combine Leviathan with the deep and further identify the deep as Sheol. And Jonah himself does this in the passage. Remember we just read the one reference where Jonah refers to the sea that covers him in Jonah 2:3 as the "womb of Sheol." Right there it is. So if we keep reading in Jonah's prayer (that was Jonah 2:3), there's something else in verse 3 where Jonah says, "All your waves and your billows passed over me." That's ESV. Literally it's "All your waves and *nahar* passed over me" or "surrounded me" maybe is better in terms of the verb there. But instead of waves and billows, you actually have the word *nahar*. And that, to anyone who's followed this podcast or read *Unseen Realm*, you should know that that's significant. Noegel writes:

The term [*nahar*] most often refers generally to a "river," "stream," or "canal," or to a specific river, such as the Nile or Euphrates (Gen 15:18). However, when used synonymously with the deep [MH: deep is *tehom*] (Isa 44:27, Ezek 31:4, 31:15, 32:2) and the sea [MH: sea is *yam*, like in] (Isa 50:2, Nah 1:4, Hab 3:8, Ps 24:2, 74:15) [MH: when those combinations happen], it refers to the cosmological waters that Yahweh rebukes and/or cleaves. Even when used figuratively, נָהַר does not mean "flood," but rather "stream" (Job 20:17). Thus, its appearance immediately after the word יַמִּים *yammim* "seas" [MH: *nahar* and *yammim*] emits cosmological reverberations, and recalls the age-old identification of the river with Leviathan, as attested in Ugaritic texts in the creature's other name...

In Ugaritic texts, Leviathan has another name. And his name is *nahar*. [laughs] Okay? In *Unseen Realm*, we talk about this. And we've had other podcasts where we talk about chaos imagery. In the Baal Cycle, Baal becomes king of the gods when he defeats *nahar*. And *nahar* is his deity/cosmic rival. And *nahar* is also referred to as Leviathan. So Baal is the one who overcomes chaos and

becomes king of the gods and is in control of everything and is such a wonderful dude, and blah blah blah blah blah. This is Canaanite religion. This is Canaanite Theology 101.

Well here in Jonah [laughs], “*nahar* surrounded me, *nahar* overcame me.” And he’s just referred to the waters he goes into as the “womb of Sheol,” the realm of the dead. Baal in Canaanite literature (who defeats *nahar* and becomes king of the gods) is lord of the dead. He is lord of Sheol.

So Noegel is saying, “Look, we’re starting to stack these Sheol/*nahar*/serpent/sea serpent kind of things... We’re seeing them light up as we work our way through Jonah, Jonah 2, Jonah’s prayer. They’re just nuggets that are kind of embedded in the text that Noegel would say, the writer’s hoping you start to collect them and start to notice them. You build a collection of these things and they’re all going to essentially point to the same idea.

Continuing from Jonah 2:3, we have the *nahar*. Let’s look at the verb. The *nahar* surrounds Jonah. The verb there is *sabab*. It means to encircle, as in the course of a river that twists its way through a territory. The word is used in Genesis 2 of the Pishon and the Gihon, how the river winds its way through a piece of earth. Of course, Leviathan is a twisting, undulating serpent. And serpents encircle their prey, do they not? Isaiah 27:1 gives us this sort of imagery.

In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent [MH: or the coiling serpent, the undulating serpent], and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.

So Noegel is saying that even the verb here suggests how a snake or a serpent will wind its way around its prey and devour it. The term also occurs in Jonah 2:6 where the “deep” (*tehom*) encircles Jonah to devour him. Let’s go back to verse 5:

**⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head**

“To take my life” is in Hebrew *‘ad nephesh*. It says, “The waters closed in over me up to my *nephesh*.” So *nephesh* on occasion (you can look this up in any lexicon)... *Nephesh* doesn’t just mean soul or life. In some cases it means throat or even breath, really. Noegel writes:

40:00

As is well known, *tehom* is another name for the Tannîn [MH: the dragon, the deep] (Isa 51:9-10 [MH: uses this terminology, it’s comparable to] , cfr. Job 41:24

[MH: there we are in Job 41 again], Ps 148:7), and it is the Hebrew refraction of Tiamat [MH: the chaos dragon from Mesopotamia, and there are some scholars who would dispute that etymological connection, but we'll just go with it for Noegel's case here]. In addition, the expression *'ad nephesh* is polysemous...

That's scholar-speak for "it means lots of different things." Noegel continues, after this idea of *'ad nephesh* being even up to the throat, even up to my breath... He's getting the breath—the air—choked out of him. He says:

See, for example, the description of Leviathan in Job 41:13...

(It's verse 21 in our English Bibles.) ESV has... Again, it's a description of Leviathan. That's what Job 41 is, the whole thing. "His breath kindles coals." Literally, it's "his *nephesh* (נַפְשׁוֹ) kindles coals." That doesn't make any sense. His soul? No, that's because *nephesh* can mean breath or throat. The imagery in Job 41 is like a fire-breathing dragon. So Noegel refers to that, saying, "Look, here we have a case where the waters close in over me up to my throat. The deep surrounds me." He's getting wrapped around in this serpentine language. "Weeds were wrapped around my head." And again, his argument is, it's like he's getting killed and devoured by a serpent. That's essentially what Noegel wants us to see. Verse 6:

**... at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land...**

Wait a minute. He's in the sea. What's he talking about the foot of mountains or underneath mountains? "I went down to the land." There's no land in the sea except for the bottom. Is that what he's talking about? Well yeah, it's ancient Near Eastern cosmology. Where is Sheol? It's under the earth—inside the earth.

**I went down to the land
whose bars [MH: now we have bars, it's like a prison] closed upon me forever;**

He's in Sheol. He's in the realm of the dead.

**... yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.**

That's Jonah's prayer. It's loaded... And this is nothing new for most commentaries (most commentaries that engage the text, anyway). They're going to point out the Sheol imagery here in Jonah's prayer all day long. And what Noegel wants us to see is, there's also Leviathan/serpent imagery here too, because that's married to the underworld stuff as well. And again, you can see already what Noegel's angling for here. He's saying, "Look, the person who wrote

Jonah and a literate reader would follow these breadcrumb trails. They would pick up these nuggets and realize that they all evoke the same imagery: the underworld and the chaos dragon.” This is what he’s angling for. He also makes a comment about *‘ad nephesh*. That phrase...

... also can mean “like a hunger,” referring to the appetite of the Deep.

The Deep devours things—devours people. He says:

Support for this reading comes from Jonah’s previous description of the deep as *בֶּטֶן שְׁאוֹל* “the womb (lit. stomach) [MH: *beten* in Hebrew you could actually translate either way] of Sheol” [MH: Sheol has an appetite—it devours the living—they become the dead] (Jon 2:3), and from references elsewhere to Sheol’s insatiable *בָּפֶשׁ* “hunger, appetite” (Isa 5:14, Hab 2:5).

Really Sheol was personified like this beast—this creature—that is never satisfied. So in this regard, Noegel is going to move on to draw attention to other dragon/*Tannin*/Leviathan traditions that involve swallowing victims. He has a whole section here. We’re going to skip a lot of what he has here. But he references in this discussion... [laughs] There’s one passage I thought would be fun to bring up here, even though I think it’s pretty peripheral. When he’s talking about how the Leviathan and the serpent imagery and Sheol imagery about being a swallower or a devourer, he references this verse: Jeremiah 51:44. This is going to lead us on a fun sidebar here. The verse says God is pronouncing judgment on Babylon. Let me go back up to verse 42.

The sea has come up on Babylon...

In other words, now the chaos is reversed. Babylon is going to get hers.]

**⁴² The sea has come up on Babylon;
she is covered with its tumultuous waves.**

**⁴³ Her cities have become a horror,
a land of drought and a desert,
a land in which no one dwells,
and through which no son of man passes.**

**⁴⁴ And I will punish Bel in Babylon,
and take out of his mouth what he has swallowed.**

**The nations shall no longer flow to him;
the wall of Babylon has fallen.**

45:00

The Lord promises he’s going to extract the dead from the realm of the dead there. That’s actually what that verse is saying. But what I want to focus on is this

reference to Bel in Babylon. Now Bel is a term that just means lord or master. It comes from Akkadian *bēlu*, which means lord or master. So this is a title for a deity. I'm going to quote from ABD (Anchor Bible Dictionary) here. It says:

The honorific title *Bēlu* is of ancient vintage and was used as an exalted appellation in regard to a number of Akkadian deities. However, it concentrated upon the Sumerian god Enlil until this patron deity of Nippur, who was recognized by the Akkadians as the king of the pantheon, became *de facto* the *bēlu* [MH: the lord], eclipsing even the theoretical ultimacy of father Anu. Enlil assumed the role as the lord of heaven and earth, the determiner of the destinies of the land, so that all other gods paled before him...

The foregoing situation continued [MH: Enlil was the one at the top] until the beginning of the 2d millennium B.C., when Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon, succeeded Enlil as the supreme deity of the pantheon. Two important texts will substantiate this rise to power... The first is the *enuma eliš*, a composition dated to the early 2d millennium (so *ANET*, 60; but see also Lambert 1964), wherein the investment of Marduk as the lord of the pantheon is graphically portrayed. When Tiamat threatened the assembly of the gods with chaos, and bestowed upon her deputy Kingu the control of the tablets of destiny, Marduk alone of all the gods challenged and utterly defeated the frightful opposition [MH: Marduk slays the chaos dragon, Tiamat]. For this he was unanimously acclaimed king of the gods by the appreciative assembly of the deities and duly invested in that regal office.

Then the writer goes on and on about Marduk and so on and so forth. Then he adds this:

...the apocryphal Story of Bel (vv 3–22) and the Story of the Snake [MH: or the dragon] (vv 23–42) [MH: in a book called *Bel and the Dragon* in the apocrypha] in the additions to the Hebrew Book of Daniel [MH: have something to say here]. The Story of Bel relates the disclosure of the deceitful servants of Bel who represented the god Bel as the one who consumed the rich quantity of food set daily before him. The seer Daniel exposed this fraud to the shame of Bel, but to the glory of the God of Daniel. The Story of the “Dragon” is another fictional tale designed to expose the fallacious nature of the cult of the “dragon,” and to exalt the worship of the god of Daniel.

Now for most of you, you're thinking, “What in the world is he talking about?” Well I thought it would be fun... It's short. I'm going to read you *Bel and the Dragon*, chapter 1. There is, in this... This is the apocrypha. So it's a book that you... Essentially, what I'm going to do here is I'm just going to link it to... Let's see... I'll read it from the Lexham English Septuagint. Let's go there. Because this is part of the Old Testament apocrypha. And part of the apocrypha (again, this is going to part of the Septuagint, these extra books) is a book called *Bel and the*

Dragon, which is set in the time of Daniel, and it's cast as a remainder... Stuff that didn't make it into the book of Daniel, but is still about Daniel. Alright? And so the first chapter has this little story about Daniel exposing the deceitful priests of Bel (Marduk). So here we go. You're going to find out shortly why I bring this up. Because there's also a dragon in the story that was being worshiped.

50:00

From the prophecy of Habakkuk, the son of Joshua, from the tribe of Levi, a certain man was priest whose name was Daniel, the son of Abal, a confidante of the king of Babylon. Now there was an idol named Bel that the Babylonians worshiped. And there was lavished upon it each day the finest wheat flour, twelve artabas of flour, and four sheep, and six measures of olive oil. And the king revered it, and the king went forth each day and prostrated himself to it. But Daniel prayed to the Lord, and the king said to Daniel, "Why do you not worship Bel?" And Daniel replied to the king, "I worship no one except the Lord God, who created the heaven and the earth, and the one who holds power and authority over all flesh." And the king said to him, "This, therefore, is not a god?"

This statue's not a god? What do you mean?

Do you not see how much is consumed for him every day?

Like, "They bring all the food out and then it's gone!"

And Daniel replied to him, "By no means let anyone deceive you, for this thing is on the inside mere clay and on the outside it's bronze. I vow now to you by the Lord, the God of gods, that this thing has never eaten anything." And having become angry, the king summoned the attendants to the holy place and said to them, "Show plainly the one who is eating the things being prepared for Bel. And if not, indeed, you will die. Or Daniel, who affirms these things are not being consumed by him." And they said, "Bel himself is the one who's consuming these things." And Daniel said to the king, "Let it be just so, if I do not show that Bel is not the one who is consuming these things, I will die, and all those who are mine." And there were attached to Bel 70 priests, besides women and children. So they brought the king into the idol's temple, and the food was set before the king and Bel and mixed wine was brought in and set before Bel. And Daniel said, "You yourself see that these things are laid out, O king. You therefore set a seal on the keys of the temple when it's closed up." And the arrangements were pleasing to the king. Now Daniel ordered those with him after forcing everyone from the temple to mark clearly the whole temple with ashes, with no one of those outside of it observing.

In other words, they put an ash powder around the temple. [laughs] Because you know if anybody walks in and gets in there, they're going to... The gig's going to be up here.

Then, sealing the temple, he ordered them to seal it up with the signet ring of the king, with the seal rings of some of the most notable ones of the priests. And so it was so. So it was done, just in this manner. Then it happened the next day that the king was present at the location, but the priests of Bel by means of secret entrances had entered in and eaten everything which was placed beside Bel, and they had quaffed down the wine. And Daniel said, "Look closely at your seals to see whether they are still in place, O men and priests. And you yourself, O king, take care, lest something suspicious is going on." And indeed, they found the seal was unchanged. They removed the sealed lock. And when they had opened the doors, they saw that all the things that had been set out were consumed. The tables had nothing on them. The king was overjoyed and said to Daniel, "Great is Bel, and there is no deception with him." Then Daniel laughed out loud and said to the king, "Come here. See the deception of the priests. O king, these footprints: whose are they?" And the king replied, "Of men and of women and children." And he went to the house in which the priests were living and found the food for Bel, along with the wine.

So they're caught. They get caught in the act. And right after this story, we have this. Daniel does something else. It says:

Now there was a dragon in the same location. And the Babylonians worshiped it. And the king said to Daniel, "You will certainly not say concerning this that it's merely bronze. Indeed, he lives and eats and drinks. Worship him." And Daniel said, "O king, give me the power and I will slay the dragon without sword or staff." And the king granted him authority and replied to him, "I give it to you." And Daniel, taking 30 minas of pitch and hard fat and hair, boiled it together and made a lump from it and threw it into the mouth of the dragon. And after consuming it, the dragon burst open [MH: he had a bad case of indigestion]. And he showed it to the king, saying, "Do not worship such things, O king."

Now I like this story because there's a real dragon in it (whatever that was). It could be made up. But there you have a dragon associated with the worship of Babylon, the worship of Bel.

So some take this and wonder... This is part of the Septuagint. It's Mesopotamian—Babylonish religion. Is this part of what's going on here? I don't really think so, other than that we have this verse in Jeremiah about Bel (Marduk), the swallower of the nations, chaos imagery. And so what Noegel does in his article is he brings this up. And he says, "You know, maybe this is part of a dragon tradition—a *tannin* tradition." And he tries to connect with the swallowing and so on and so forth. I don't really think so. Because *Bel and the Dragon* as a text does not specifically connect the dragon with Bel. It just has... There are two episodes in the same chapter and the Babylonians are worshiping both. So there's no specific connection. But I thought it would be fun. A lot of you have

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never heard of *Bel and the Dragon* as a story and I know you're interested in such things. So if you get the article by Noegel, he's going to bring this up, and you're going to wonder what it is. There it is. That's the story. The Babylonians, in fact... If you ask somebody's who's an ancient Near Eastern scholar about this, they're going to point out that as far as we know from Babylonian material, they didn't really worship living snakes or serpents or large lizards. But yep, you've got this story in *Bel and the Dragon*, Intertestamental text. There you go. Jewish text. Maybe they're just poking fun at Bel and they're poking fun at Tiamat and chaos imagery. Who knows? But there's this big argument over how seriously to take the story.

So what we can say with confidence... I just threw that in at the end. What Noegel is trying to do is he's trying to ferret out certain elements of the Jonah story that describe Leviathan and Sheol... They connect these two things. And he goes out to other passages and he's basically shown (we've gone through a little list of them) how, if you look at the story of Jonah in chapter 2 especially, the way this is told is not just, "Jonah jumps in the water or gets thrown in the water and then he gets swallowed by a fish and then he gets spit out." There's more to it, because Jonah himself... The writer puts in Jonah's mouth—in his prayer—the language of Sheol. And he describes the scene with certain verbs and nouns that are found elsewhere in association with Leviathan—with the cosmic dragon. So Noegel is saying, "Look, you have all the elements here, and they're just sort of floating around (pardon the pun) in the chapter, especially chapter 2 in Jonah." And basically, this is his case.

Essentially what you can say with confidence is this: 1) The Jonah story of the great fish *certainly* includes imagery and vocabulary found in both descriptions of Leviathan and its home—the chaos sea. For sure. 2) Secondly, Jonah and other Old Testament passages sometimes conflate the chaos sea imagery with Sheol, the realm of the dead. So those two thoughts are absolutely demonstrable in the passage. And so the way Noegel draws this together is, "Look, if you have those two thoughts in your head and you're reading the story of Jonah (or you're the Septuagint translator), Leviathan/chaos/sea/chaos imagery/Sheol... The vocabulary that I'm looking at here as a translator comes from passages that evoke those three things: the Leviathan serpent, the chaos sea in which Leviathan lives, and the realm of the dead."

So the argument is that the translator knew that. The translator understood it. And for that reason, when translating this passage in the Septuagint, he gets to the words *dag gadol* (the great fish) and he says, "I'm going to use *ketos*, because that's *really* what's going on here. What Jonah is really about is he's being conquered by the forces of chaos—the forces of evil, anti-Eden. He's being punished here. He's fallen victim to it." And you say, "Well, it feels like a bit of a disconnect because God sends the fish and so on and so forth." What I'm not telling you (and you can get Noegel's article) is that there are places where the way Jonah himself is described... The same terminology is used of Jonah as

those that are used for fish and in chaos terminology. It's actually applied to Jonah. And so Noegel speculates on what the author is trying to do—that basically Jonah, by his disobedience to God, has become an agent of chaos. That's what Noegel thinks in the end. So he's being punished and swallowed up, really as a result of his own disobedience. God is using (or allowing or)... They're under his command anyway. I mean, Job 41, who commands Leviathan? It's God. To punish Jonah for his disobedience. For essentially volunteering to be an agent of chaos against God's wishes to go to the Ninevites and preach to them.

1:00:00

So we've got a couple of reversal things going on here. And Jonah comes out in the end looking pretty bad, like he's on the wrong side. And you know what? He is. He *is* on the wrong side. But who rescues him? Is God vengeful? Is God angry? Does God say, "You got what you deserved." No, God is the one who pulls him out of the trouble. The same fish is commanded to vomit him out. To paraphrase Jeremiah 41, God extracts the thing that the dragon had swallowed. He extracts Jonah, pardons him, has mercy on him, and then sends him back to the Ninevites. And we know the rest of the story.

But for our purposes, I think it's kind of neat that, by way of implication, if this is really what Jonah is about... And the text does seem to suggest this, that it really is Leviathan imagery. It's really underworld imagery. That much is pretty obvious. Where you get underworld imagery, it's not a coincidence that you get these four or five things that pop out of Leviathan passages that wind up in Jonah 2. It does seem like the writer is trying to connect these things in the mind of the reader. And so this gets picked up on by the Septuagint translator and explains why he uses a word that they don't use anywhere else to translate just *dag* (fish) except for here.

So if all that's the case, then Jesus using the analogy is actually kind of cool. Who overcomes chaos and the realm of the dead? It's Jesus. Using the same story of Jonah moves the analogy for the resurrection well beyond just chronology or timekeeping. It's an ideal analogy for reversing and defeating chaos and death itself, especially if later readers in Jesus' day understood the connection between *ketos* and *drakon* (in other passages "the dragon")... They are both used to render *liwyatan* (Leviathan). It's easy to see how early Christians... Greek readers. They're the ones reading the Septuagint. Early Christians—they read Greek. It's easy to see how early Christians (Greek readers) would associate this story with victory over the devil (over the serpent) *through* the Septuagint translation.

And while you're wondering, in Genesis 3, no, serpent there (*nachash*) is not rendered by *ketos*. It is *ophis*, which is the normal word for snake. But since the serpent in a wider sense is part of the chaos tradition (all that is not what it's supposed to be, all the forces that are opposed and hostile to God's wishes)... Since the serpent is certainly part of the chaos tradition in the Bible, the conception still retains coherence theologically.

So again, I thought this would be an interesting little sidebar episode. And for me, our point with the episode is not what's the nature of the Jonah story. Is it an historical blow-by-blow kind of thing, that we've got to read a certain way to *make* it history or to ensure it's history? That's a separate question, as opposed to, is it symbolic or allegorical or parable? Again, it doesn't really matter. What I'm after here is for you to see that in the story... Whether it's an historical record or whether it's a parable, the story itself is about the reversal of chaos and the defeat of the forces of chaos. *Jonah* is about that. And Jonah is about what happens when people that God calls to do something align themselves opposite him. They become agents of chaos. And again, God's mercy extracts us from that situation. But ultimately, it's really about the reversal—the defeat—of these forces. And so for Jesus and the New Testament Gospel writers to pick up on this and include it in their presentation of Jesus, I think, is significant. It is the perfect analogy, if you have this sort of stuff floating around in your head.

TS: Alright, Mike. Hopefully this episode will be a consolation prize for the voters who voted for Jonah. Haha. [MH laughs] You only have one more week to vote. I don't think we're going to move the needle, but hey, stranger things have happened. [MH laughs] So go to NakedBiblePodcast.com to vote. One week left. Halloween at midnight is when it ends. And right now, Old Testament in Revelation is holding steady at 68%. 15-16% voted for Jonah. So hopefully for those folks, they got to at least whet their appetite on Jonah.

MH: Yeah, there's a lot of strange stuff in Jonah. And this is sort of a big one in there. But there's other stuff too.

1:05:00

TS: Next week, Mike, we're going to be interviewing John Hilber.

MH: Yep, John Hilber. We're going to talk. He has a book on Old Testament cosmology and the whole idea of accommodation. Basically, what his book is about is how do we think about the disconnect between the way an ancient person would have read the Bible... And he uses cosmology to illustrate these things. But how the whole set of ideas—the matrix of ideas—that's floating around in the head of an ancient Israelite... They're reading the text and thinking one set of things. How do we handle the fact that, "Well that's kind of obvious, but we're not them, and so when we look at the text, we think of a whole different set of things? How do we sort of think about that in terms of hermeneutical method—interpretive method? How do we know when to sort of look at something literally, if they were looking at it literally or not (vice versa)?" So we're going to talk a little bit about the whole problem of using ancient Near Eastern comparative material and the fact that we aren't them. How can we sort of do the right thing, or do a better job of interpreting Scripture when we have this gap between ourselves and the original writers?

TS: We'll be looking forward to that. And with that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.