

Noah's Ark in *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*

Ni Li

English Department, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Email: bothing@163.com

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Abstract

Noah's Ark serves as the thread patching up the seemingly disorganized stores in this unique one of Julian Barnes' master pieces. A biblical symbol of "the grace in the eyes of the Lord" to the "righteous," the ark is nevertheless interpreted in a different way than in traditional exegetics. By close reading of each of the chapters in the novel, we hope to sort out the series of metamorphosis of the ark in different ages and Barnes' hidden theme from among the wrongly targeted criticisms. While the novelist confuses readers in juxtaposing contradictory comments frequently, we try to lay bare how the fleeting images he creates in the work reflect his agnostic hesitation in view of the moral implications imbedded in the biblical references and clarify the religious ambivalence behind his writing.

Keywords

Noah's Ark, Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, Religious Ambivalence, Agnostic, Ethics Of Belief

1. Introduction

A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters, a novel in the form of a collection of related essays by the British novelist and Booker Award winner Julian Barnes, has been hailed as a brilliant masterpiece since its publication in 1989. Of the ten and a half chapters (half because one chapter carries the title of "parenthesis"), three stories either directly relate to Noah's Ark or indirectly to the event by two independent expeditions on top of the Mt Ararat in eastern Turkey in search of the remnants of the ark. Other chapters revolve around the biblical event by narratives referring to figurative repercussions resulting from either shipwrecks or vessel disasters. The remaining chapters all refer to the related issues. Although Brian Finney believes that the novel "is nothing but a series of digres-

sions from the supposed mainstream of history” (Finney, 2003), it sticks to the ark nonetheless, as it has nothing to do with the professional chronicling of history. Be it discursive, as many reviewers find the topics to be, the novel begins with a stowaway’s version of the biblical event and ends with an updated heaven of our own time, with the intermediate chapters working on diversified aspects of the central theme of salvation.

Many a reader and critic alike can easily get misled by the title as to Barnes’s real interest in the book. The first half reminds people of Sir Walter Raleigh’s *The History of the World*, especially because Raleigh’s history book also begins with *Genesis*. However, Chapter one sets up the note of a serious apology with the disguise of an irony or sarcastic style. Heavily reliant on Roland Barthes’ ideas about discourse of history, Finney still emphasizes the importance of discursive issues revolving around history. “He would appear to agree with Barthes’ objection to what he calls ‘the fallacy of representation’ attaching to traditional historical discourse.” (Finney) In like manner, “A cursory reading of *A History*, even its mere title, suggests that the most prominent theme which threads through the novel is history, with love trying to provide an alternative to it,” (Candel, 2001) as Daniel Candel says in *English Studies*. Gregory Salyer refuses to be solely attracted and fooled by the misleading title of the novel; he insists on threading all the chapters in the biblical image of the ark, improvising greatly whenever possible. It is interesting to find that all three critics quote one remark in the novel, as if to support the legitimacy of their points.

We fabulate. We make up a story to cover the facts we don’t know or can’t accept; we keep a few true facts and spin a new story round them. Our panic and our pain are only eased by soothing fabulation; we call it history (Barnes, 1989).

The reason why most critics become interested in a discussion about Barnes’ views of history from the perspective of postmodernism does not only lie in the fact that the title itself is indeed intriguing, but also in the fact that Barnes does have either concentrated or occasional comments on the issue of history, directly and indirectly in many pages of the novel. It causes Gregory Salyer to believe that “Barnes does not present history as being trivial. On the contrary, he believes it to be vitally important.” (Salyer, 1991) And for this reason, Salyer is able to discern that “Barnes’ presentation of history as power has affinities with the work of Michel Foucault,” (Gregory) and that the chapter (“Parenthesis”) “is about the tension between love and history,” and “that sacred history and truth are at war with love,” etc. However, this same Salyer comments on the last chapter and has the following interpretation:

God can be created if he is desired, because God is just a question of what we want. Heaven is not imposed; instead, its existence and nature are determined by desire. There are some “old heaveners” who insist on the old structures of heaven such as prayer, churches, and worship, but old heaven is pretty much closed down. After all, the desire for old heaven is nothing more than one more desire leading to another.

Salyer's interpretation to Barnes' chapter about dreams may very well have stricken him as an insightful initial understanding to this one of Barnes' novels. His precise explanation of the idea in the last chapter should have shed him greater light in the appreciation of Barnes' real intention in the whole novel. It is true that sacred history is talked about in great detail and variety, but the sacred history and the stories about the ark lead us to lots of questions that need to be answered by any contentious readers. Who is Noah, indeed? What do the vessels mean? Does salvation mean salvation at all the times? What about Barnes' religion? How do we make sense of the disparate chapters in one masterpiece?

2. How the Noah's Ark Threads up the Stories

A reader's discerning power is often made visible by showing how she relates the seemingly scattered parts of a work with the whole narrative. Fortunately, we have a comparatively objective layout of the plot of the work by Salyer.

The book begins with a revisionist account of Noah's Ark then moves successively to: a story about terrorists taking over a luxury cruise liner; a transcription from a 1520 French courtroom which recounts why a specific group of insects were excommunicated from the church; a woman's story about the apocalypse of which she is the only survivor (or is she simply the victim of a schizophrenic delusion?); an account of the wreck of the *Medusa* with a subsequent deconstruction of Gericault's painting; an expedition by a young woman to Mount Ararat to intercede for the soul of her father; a re-examination of the story of Jonah and the whale; a look at the meanderings of the *St. Louis*, which in 1939 earned a group of Jewish refugees all over the Atlantic before finally returning to Europe; letters from an actor who is filming a reenactment of an historical event that re-creates itself in the act of filming; a parenthesis about love; a project to recover Noah's Ark by an astronaut who receives a revelation while playing football on the moon; and finally, a new vision of heaven.

Salyer's excellent summery of the plot indicates that the whole work has indeed very little to do with history proper as a discipline. The ark and substitution of ark, the reincarnations of the ark—the rafts or other vessels, present themselves time and again for an unmistakable purpose of religious instigation: has the wickedness of humankind really been purged thoroughly since Noah's time? Does not the very reason why the ark was made in the first place persist that "the Lord was sorry that he had made mankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart"? (Genesis 6:6) This brings us back to Noah's Ark itself. As a microcosm of a three-layer Hebrew conception, the ark pivots the story of creation, as can be found in many other cultures. (Gooder, 2005) Biblical scholars have agreed that the Noah's story is based on much older Mesopotamian models, (Kvanvig, 2011) and the primary source is the Epic of Gilgamesh. (Nigosian, 2008) Quite contrary to the woodworm's complaint about the tyrant Noah, some version insists that Noah was engaged both day and night in feeding and caring for the animals, and did not sleep for the entire year aboard the ark. (Nebenzahl, 1997)

Today, in the Visitors' Center at Noah's Ark National Park, Turkey, you can find startling geographical facts about the suspected ark. Here are the top points to consider about the excavation according to the organization Ark Discovery International, Inc.:

- 1) The shape of a boat with pointed bow and rounded stern;
- 2) Exact length as noted in biblical description, 515 feet or 300 Egyptian cubits (Egyptian not Hebrew cubit would have been known to Moses who studied in Egypt then wrote Genesis);
- 3) It rests on a mountain in Eastern Turkey, matching the biblical account, and
- 4) It contains petrified wood, as proven by lab analysis... (Arkdiscovery, 2019)

Even so, very few contemporary believers would stick to the verbatim understanding of the Scripture for their faith. There is no scientific evidence for a global flood, and despite many expeditions, no evidence of the ark has been found. (Cline, 2009) Most of the expedition resulted in pseudo archaeology; the others are but natural sedimentary formations. (Collins & Fasold, 1996) What makes us most interested is why Barnes should have the woodworm's view of this part of the sacred history. The Noah's Ark, one of the numerous parables in the Holy Bible, would challenge the most intelligent ones, once taken to mean literal history. One obvious problem is, for instance, the water supply. No one would imagine that the ark should have miraculous fittings to make tap water supply available as absolutely needed. The great difficulties in housing all living animal types, and even plants, would have made building the ark a practical impossibility. (Moore, 1983) The parable carries with it a simple teaching that God once became resentful of human wickedness and man should repent for his deeds. If this is the case, then, Barnes' disparate chapters make a lot of unified senses. Let's look at these chapters from a different perspective.

Chapter one sets up the tone for the whole book. As it is an account of the same event in the Genesis, the stowaway's perspective makes it possible to confound everything without having to defend oneself. Let us hear the woodworm of its complaints. First, the ark is not one single boat, but a flotilla of eight ships, making it possible for Noah the patriarch to entertain his family with pleasures. Secondly, Noah and his family bring extinction to many species on the flotilla with gluttony. Thirdly, Noah's youngest son (never mentioned in the Genesis) Varadi died at the age of eighty-five on the voyage that brought a great loss to the human gene pool (one fourth) and to the earth's species (one fifth). And fourthly, this same God-fearing man of Noah "was a monster, a puffed-up patriarch who spent half his day groveling to his God and the other half taking it out on us." (Barnes, 1989) As if these have not been enough, "Ham's wife had been putting its horn to ignoble use," (suggesting bestiality) and this "bad-tempered, smelly, unreliable envious and cowardly" Noah and his family casserole the unicorn to show their gratitude for saving the life of Ham's wife in a gale. Numerous other instances show the same idea that Noah's Ark is a leaky one, hu-

mankind needs a grain of salt to believe the narration.

Chapters six and nine are two stories about the search of Noah's Ark, the former search coming as a result of Miss Fergusson's Deist belief and the latter from God's direct calling on top of the moon. "In the world of divine intent, benevolent order and rigorous justice," Colonel Fergusson saw "only chaos, hazard and malice." (Barnes) The deist daughter decided to intercede for her atheist father on top of Mt. Ararat, for she believed that her father failed to have recognized God's eternal design and its essential goodness,

For instance, trees bearing edible fruits were made easy to climb, being much lower than forest trees. Fruits which were soft when ripe, such as the apricot, the fig or the mulberry, which might be bruised by falling, presented themselves at a small distance from the ground; whereas hard fruits, which ran no risk of sustaining an injury by a fall, like the cocoa, the walnut or the chestnut, presented themselves at a considerable height. Some fruit-like the cherry and the plum—were molded for the mouth; others—the apple and the pear—for the hand; others still, like the melon, were made larger, so to be divided among the family circle. Yet others, like the pumpkin, were made of a size to be shared amongst the whole neighborhood, and many of these larger fruits were marked on their outer rind with vertical divisions, so as to make apportionment the easier. (Barnes)

We quote these lengthy sentences to suggest that as an agnostic, Julian Barnes may very well agree with such Deist observations that God's plan is so manifest in nature and that the moral law and natural law must have the same law maker. Barnes does not proclaim anything concerning his personal belief, though he frequently shows us the dichotomy of belief in the characters. Take this chapter for instance. While the daughter holds it to be self-evident that "the sin of the world was purged by the waters of the flood," his father scolds her for the "myth of the Deluge (the reality of Noah's Ark)." The daughter dies on top of Mt. Ararat.

Not entirely a coincidence, Barnes has his ninth chapter "Project Ararat" to present us an equally absurd and dogged search for the same ark. After hearing the divine command of "Find Noah's Ark" and ruling out any possibility of hallucination, the former famed astronaut Spike Tiggler commenced his project. Here is the list of "payload" he has for the prolonged search (after throwing away his comrade's box of rubbers) as against the simple device carried by Ms Fergusson a hundred and fifty years ago:

Light-weight camping equipment, vitamin pills, a Japanese camera with one of the new zoom lenses, credit cards, American Express travelers' checks, running shoes, a pint of bourbon, thermal socks and underwear, a large plastic bag of branflakes to keep them regular, anti-diarrhea tablets, an infra-red night-sight, water-purifying pills, freeze-dried vacuum-packed food, a lucky horseshoe, flashlights, dental tape, reserve batteries for their electric

razors, a pair of scabbard knives sharp enough to cut gopher-wood or disembowel an assailant, mosquito repellent, sunburn cream and the Bible.

One and a half centuries in time do mean great differences in the kind of mountaineering equipment available, but does the lapse of time also bring hopes to a mission impossible in the first place? Barnes does not answer such a question. We are succinctly informed, however, of the fact that the skeleton they found in one of the caves on top of Ararat belongs to Ms Fergusson instead of Noah. The proclamation that “We found Noah” Spike Tiggler made in the cold darkness has its repercussions time again since then.

Chapter two and the third story in chapter seven make a good pair. The hijacked cruise liner poses an embarrassing dilemma to challenge our moral judgment on the age-old strife between Christianity and Islam. Likewise, the story about the liner St Louis (in fact a death boat) tortures the conscience of not only Havana, but that of most Christian countries. Barnes makes the Arabic terrorists proficient in English and well educated, sensible whenever possible. They separate the Americans from the Japanese and Canadians, for example, in custody, “separating the clean from the unclean,” as if fitting these animals into their respective Gopher wood partitions. For negotiating, they convince the victims that shooting is a must; while at the same time, the turn of shooting is logically arranged so that those who harm the Arabs the most must take the blame first. Problems in the Middle East are thus summed up in such a way:

European guilt over the Holocaust being paid for by the Arabs. The Jews having learned from their persecution by the Nazis that the only way to survive was to be like Nazis. Their militarism, expansionism, racism. Their pre-emptive attack on the Egyptian air force at the start of the Six Day War being the exact moral equivalent of Pearl Harbor. The refugee camps. The theft of land. The artificial support of the Israeli economy by the dollar. The atrocities committed against the disposed. The Jewish lobby in America. The Arabs only asking from the Western Powers for the same justice in the Middle East as had already been accorded to the Jews. The regrettable necessity of violence, a lesson taught the Arabs by the Jews, just as it had been taught the Jews by the Nazis.

It is inspiring of Barnes, after the above pouring out of troubles on the side of the Arabs, that the number of Arabic hijackers is made eight: the number that reminds us of the Noah flotilla: the Noah couple plus their three sons and wives. Equally ironic is the voyage of the liner St. Louis. The more than 900 Jews on board the swastika boat for the half-dozen Gestapo agents to “dispossess, transport and exterminate” are like attractive bait to poison the conscience of the host nations along the way. But why Julian Barnes is so cautious so that “the Germans with whom they had dealings were courteous, attentive and even obedient,” like the hijacking Arabs in the liner cruise, remains answered. The clue provided is a casual comment: “Perhaps their escape from Germany felt as miraculous as that

of Jonah from the whale.” Havana promised to take in the Jews, but finally everything turned out to be blackmail, “in which money is no less important than principles or laws, and often sounder than either of them.” As if being afraid of readers’ forgetfulness, when a small number of Jews have an opportunity to disembark the boat, Barnes quickly asks: “But how would you choose the 250 who were to be allowed off the Ark? Who would separate the clean from the unclean? Was it to be done by casting lots?” The casual mentioning of casting lots surely refers to the biblical accounts of the same act between Saul and his son Jonathan, and also of the Roman soldiers casting lots for the crucified Jesus’ garments.

The boat that “shamed the world” had to leave off Miami, the Dominican Republic, many South American coastal countries, almost proved that the world’s supposed concern was mere hypocrisy before the boatload was taken jointly by Holland, Brittan and France. “Their wanderings at sea,” Julian Barnes does not forget to add, “has lasted precisely forty days and forty nights.” This reference of the biblical period of time coincides precisely the duration of Moses’ stay on Mount Sinai and of Jesus’ stay in the wilderness.

Three more stories, “the Survivor,” “Shipwreck” and “Upstream” are about boat or raft too—the ark in a somewhat different sense. This avowed escaper from an imminent nuclear disaster experienced a schizophrenic seizure when this newly-wed woman could not tell her personal disaster from an imagined natural catastrophe. What with the pairs of southern-moving reindeers from Chernobyl (carrying with them a radioactivity level of more than 42,000 Becquerel) “like the animals that went into the ark,” and what with a husband who fooled around in nightclubs, the woman herself escaped into a small boat with her pet cat under imagined and real pressures. In “shipwreck,” exactly four vessels (the Noah family take up four vessels too) comprised a French expedition for Senegal, with the frigate striking the reef at high tide and finally getting lost. A raft was made, 150 personnel went into it, but after two weeks of mutiny and cannibalism, only one tenth survived and was saved. Then at great length, Barnes labors on “how [do] you turn catastrophe into art?” “Upstream” portrays an actor enacting a missionary in the rain forest. When the raft capsized in the cold stream, killing his partner and repeating an age-old disaster, this love-letter writer revealed himself as a monster type.

Chapter three, “the Wars of Religion,” seems to be an independent one from the rest of the chapters, one that deals with a medieval case against a woodworm. But this time, the Bishop’s throne is at stake, which crumbled after being eaten away by the woodworm. A bishop’s throne may not be a raft or an ark, but in some sense, it serves the same purpose of saving the dignity and therefore humanity. The trial is to excommunicate the woodworm and bring them under control, but Barnes makes use of it to exemplify other “wars” of religion that try to ridicule anyone (in this case anything) and show the kind of absurdity established religion can incur.

The half chapter, “parenthesis,” and the final chapter of “the dream” get overly concerned about love and paradise; they concurrently and expressively labor on the theme of the whole novel. While love serves as one way to prove the existence of God from a metaphysical point of view, the paradise explains in a weird way why the sinners can never be saved in other ways other than a belief in His word.

3. The Various Images of the Same Ark

Reworking the Noah’s Ark literarily, Barnes has some alteration and complaint without overt blasphemy (it’s only a woodworm’s view, after all). The ark was more like a prison ship full of stool pigeons instead of a nature reserve; The woodworm was not specifically chosen, therefore its survival should be against God’s will; It rained for about a year and a half and the waters were upon the earth for a hundred and fifty days; Noah’s family comprised a whole flotilla of eight boats that were as oppressive as any royal family today; God should have wrath with his own creation. All in one: the Noah’s Ark is a mission impossible!

But what does Genesis, the Word of God tell us about Noah’s Ark? We know that God “saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth” and “was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth and it grieved him to his heart;” (Genesis 6:5,6) that “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God;” (Genesis 6:9) that Noah is to “make yourself an ark of cypress wood;” (Genesis 6:14) and that “God blessed Noah and his sons.” (Genesis 9:1) Attempts to stretch the exegetics to irrelevant applications have all ignored the essential element of revelation. In “The State-contingent Approach to the Noah’s Ark Problem,” for instance, Neil Perry and Sriram Shankar labor on how the standard Noah’s Ark model assumes only one state of nature, how a state-contingent approach to the Noah’s Ark problem is developed, how the state-contingent species-ranking equation is derived, how different species are boarded on the ark and Noah prepares for climate change and how the state-contingent approach leads to a more explicit and detailed allocation (Perry & Sriram, 2017).

St Peter once compared this salvation through water to one in baptism. (1 Pt 3:20-21) St. Hippolytus of Rome believed that the ark was a symbol of the expected Christ. Hippolytus furthermore stated that the ark floated to and fro in the four directions on the waters, making the sign of the cross, before eventually landing on Mount Ararat. (Lanier, 2018) The dove and olive branch came to symbolize the Holy Spirit, the hope of salvation and eventually, peace. (Cohn, 1996) But, on the whole, science denies the Deluge. Flood geology contradicts the scientific agreement in geology and paleontology as well as that in related disciplines such as chemistry, physics, astronomy, cosmology, biology, geophysics and stratigraphy. (Young, 1995) Barnes need not worry about how the event of Noah’s Ark worries the stowaway of a woodworm because even revealed human beings have problems understanding God’s grace in the Deluge. Our ap-

preciation of the obedience of the righteous and God-fearing Noah is proportional to our belief that to an all-mighty God, there should not be any mission impossible.

In the two searches for Noah's Ark in the novel, one taking place in the beginning years of the 19th century when the Enlightenment was still on its peak years, the other after the moon landing. The hunting for relics has a lot to do with psychology, but very little to do with religious truth, if there be any religious truth or any absolute truth to speak of. Searching for Noah's Ark has never been any sanctified effort organized by any established religion, the latest of which took place in 2010 when a united expedition from Hong Kong and Turkey found the remains of a petrified ark on top of Mt. Ararat. Though Ms Fergusson died before getting any nearer to the truth about the ark, and though her body more than a hundred and fifty years later was almost mistaken to be that of Noah's, her Deistic eloquence should have convinced a lot of atheists of his father's kind. In "Project Ararat," the former astronaut was transformed on top of the moon, believing in the reality of an entirely different world where providence rules over everything. In both these two searches, the point is not the discovery of Noah's Ark itself as described in the Genesis, it is the searching for something steady, reliable and everlasting as religion promises to guarantee that enabled these two spiritual hunters to overcome inconceivable difficulties. In a sense, Barnes seems to suggest, the self-incurred failure in finding the physical ark through Project Ararat, is by no means outwitted by the national scientific expedition of Project Apollo.

The cruise liners in chapter two and the third story in chapter seven suggest a Noah's Ark in irony. The hijacked cruise liner stopped short of finding and enjoying the forsaken Minoan civilization. Showing no signs at all of the so-called Stockholm syndrome, the tour leader spouts an eloquent speech about why they hit on this liner and why they have to kill in order to talk with the western governments for the release of their freedom-fighter brothers. To the hijacking and hijacked parties, the cruise liner serves as a safe vehicle where the short stay on the high sea can lead to a purpose. Although the hijackers failed at a great price at last, the meeting on the sea leaves a lesson to be learned, one that those not on board Noah's Ark must also bear in mind: the human wickedness that once enraged God can surface time and again to incur similar disasters.

The other liner, St Louis, narrates a story much as a contrary one. More than 900 Jews, half of which were children and women fresh from concentration camps, booked on the transatlantic voyage and became "tourists traveling for pleasure," only to be dumped along the coast of America with no more than ten Reichsmarks in their pockets. The Nazis Germany flew the swastika on the ship, but the real stigma was carried by all those Jews on board to see how the "shabby Untermenschen scuttling away like rats." (Barnes, 1989) Reporters from major news agencies shouted to the shameless world for the outrageous humiliation, but to those desperate Jews, the liner was no less than a contemporary Noah's

Ark, embodying the only hope of survival. When some of the passengers turned themselves into real pleasure-seekers, they are described as feeling “miraculous as that of Jonah from the whale.” This intentional reference to the biblical source serves in turn as a mockery to the doomed Jews. By this symbolic ark, God is seen again purging the world of wickedness in a metaphorical way.

Then the “survivor” who loved reindeer and who “imagined that each pair was man and wife, a happy couple, like the animals that went into the ark.” The south-going reindeer that have been poisoned by overdose radiation signify a heavenly warning that a hiding place must be found. But where to find a better place than a boat out to the sea with herself and the pet cat? This is, too, an ark, notwithstanding only one human and one animal within. Why does she have such great confidence in the one-passenger ark? “If only you could believe that the reindeer can fly, then you’d realize anything is possible. Anything.” Why, again? Because “they butted and raged at one another, charged headlong, tangled horns. They fought so hard they rubbed the skin off their antlers.” Aren’t the wicked human beings doing the same thing? Haven’t they been doing so since Noah’s time? The building of the original ark was incurred by the same wickedness that we see today, so the perennial problem has been instilled into our nature, or so this woman believes.

Human beings go upstream sometimes as salmons often do. In the “Upstream,” the eighth chapter, two Jesuit missionaries argued about how to baptize the local Indians in a Venezuela rain forest. When the raft poled by the Indians capsized, the two missionaries disappeared, never to be found anywhere. About a couple of hundred years later, when a production team came to the same site enacting the unfortunate scene on the raft, one of the two actors died, with assistance and witness of the descendants of the original Indians here to play their ancestors. Even with facilitating safe devices and precaution, the raft proved to be anything but a reliable vehicle. The rain forest hailed earlier by the crew as paradise now turned into hell. The same big trees and the same primitive Indians, but the capsizing of the raft made all the difference. To the narrator of the story (one of the two actors), his personal affair went down, too, as a synchronous occurrence. Then Indians are “so open, so direct. There they are, not a stitch on them, they say what they mean, do what they want, eat when they’re hungry, make love as if it’s the most natural thing in the world, and lie down to die when they reach the end of their lives.” They don’t know the difference between reality and acting, though agile and sympathetic at the same time. The narrator experiences such great spiritual changes as to think of giving up his performing career and moving into real nature with the woman he loves. But pondering over the incident of a capsized raft, he changed again, into one confused more about the differences between civilizations. In the jungle, he once thought of sacrificing for art as the missionaries for their religion. Now,

There’s another possibility—that the Indians were actually following the argument between the Jesuits and understanding it a lot better than we

thought. [...]So maybe the Indians understood this and tipped up the raft because they were trying to kill Father Firmin (me!) so that Father Antonio would survive and baptize them. [...] and the second time round they saw they'd killed Antonio, which was quite the wrong result for them so they ran away because it had all gone wrong.

Then back into civilization, back into Caracas, he is found slipping again into his creepy love triangle and is restored into his former self. Julian Barnes labors to suggest that a raft, either on the high sea or in the thick forest, does not distinguish itself from Noah's Ark, whatever use it may be put into.

4. The Hidden Theme of Religious Nostalgia

"Despite the book's chronological and narrational irregularities," Brian Finney says of the book's structure, "the reader's natural urge to make connections between these disparate segments of text, to convert this sequence of varying narratives into a larger overarching narrative, is given encouragement by various connective devices in the book." (Finney, 2003) We might as well entitle this narrative as "a history of the world from the perspective of the ark." In analyzing the keynote that reverberates in many seemingly discursive chapters, Finney continues to say, "An ark/ship that is supposed to protect its occupants from the storms of the world turns into a prison ship for animals and humans alike, both of whom are victimized by being categorized as the other by those in control." To such overarching metanarrative attempts, Hayden White the 'demythologiser' of history comments that the narrative qualities of history enforce narrative patterns like beginning, middle, end, or closure, which may not always reflect accurately the 'real' historical processes. (White, 1989) About the themes of the book, it is interesting to take note of a warning by Daniel Candel: "However, it is open to question whether with *A History* Julian Barnes is ultimately able to present issues which are at present satisfying from an intellectual point of view. It may be that the predominance [...] threatens the balance of the novel." (Candel, 2001) But obviously, Candel bases his observation on a wrong premise that Barnes centers on history and science in the book. To this, Gregory Salyer has the candid statement: "Barnes is becoming quite adept at this tactic [...] pulls back the curtain at times to peer into philosophical and religious theory via the expression of his characters." (Salyer, 1991) He further distills that "The problem of history is foregrounded, but the problem of the holy is nearly always in the background pressing to be heard. It is with an eye toward this problematizing of the sacred along with history that the novel will be examined."

In an inspiring book of a triptych story, Julian Barnes wrote the following comment on what the ascending of man in terms of their understanding to the concept of God means to Europeans then and now.

When we killed—or exiled—God we also killed ourselves. Did we notice sufficiently at the time? No God, no afterlife, no us. We were right to kill Him, of course, this long-standing imaginary friend of ours. And we weren't going to get

an afterlife anyway. But we sawed off the branch we were sitting on. And the view from there, from that height—even if it was only the illusion of a view—wasn't so bad (Barnes, 2008).

To a reader unfamiliar with Barnes' religious views and changing concerns about life and death, the above-mentioned paragraph may puzzle her greatly in that the messages in it seem to contradict one another. Simply put, what Barnes intends to convey to the readers is but the psychological need in the ethics of belief. When he refers to God as the "long-standing imaginary friend of ours" and believes that "we weren't going to get an afterlife anyway," he nevertheless does not rule out other possibilities and therefore refuses to "saw off the branch we were sitting on."

Barnes' obsessions with the fear of death and his related worries about the truthfulness of the existence of God reveal themselves in the opening statement he makes in the first chapter of *Nothing to be Frightened of*. "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him. [...] I asked my brother, who has taught philosophy at Oxford, Geneva, and the Sorbonne, what he thought of such a statement, without revealing that it was my own. He replied with a single word: 'Soppy.'" (Barnes, 2008) The same "soppy" psychological undertone, however, pinpoints in fact Barnes' logical elimination of the legitimacy of choosing among the prudential, moral and epistemic norms.

In practices of belief formation, we follow the three different types of norms and attach corresponding values to each of them. Most scholars, the English philosopher John Locke and Cambridge mathematician and philosopher William Clifford, for instance, insist on the epistemic and therefore moral norms that govern our belief practices; but William James the American psychologist stresses the prudential norm. (Andrew, 2018) If a certain proposition helps us to a beneficial purpose and promotes us toward that goal, then believing that proposition is something prudent to do at first sight. In such cases, sufficient evidence could and should not hinder us from taking it as true or acceptable. In other words, James' pragmatism looks to the results or consequences of an action to justify belief ethics. For instance, numerous medical facts are created by the application of different belief norms, especially in cases when patients are diagnosed as terminally ill. Faith does create facts.

Of course, when Julian Barnes improvises the belief dilemma into the metaphor of sawing down the tree branch, he is actually referring to an ancient series of questions concerning our belief system.

Is it ever or always morally *wrong* (or epistemically *irrational*, or practically *imprudent*) to hold a belief on insufficient evidence? Is it ever or always morally *right* (or epistemically *rational*, or practically *prudent*) to believe on the basis of sufficient evidence, or to withhold belief in the perceived absence of it? Is it ever or always obligatory to seek out all available epistemic evidence for a belief? Are there some ways of obtaining evidence that are themselves immoral, irrational, and imprudent?

It is one thing that one has faith in one or the other of our everyday introspection; it is quite another cup of tea when we contemplate on something so fundamentally critical like our faith in the existence of God. Such choice is what James termed as a “momentous” decision. We have every reason to believe that Barnes has full understanding to the very nature of our intellectual or moral capacities enabling or disabling our attempts at securing a sense of substantial justification. Logically, James believes that our habits of belief formation, maintenance and relinquishment are not always dependent on evidences that are in many cases either unavailable intellectually or contrary to each other but equally compelling. People “have both an intellectual and a moral right to believe in God, even though by their own admission they lack sufficient evidence to justify this choice.”

In view of the disputes on the ethics of belief and in regard of the many contradictory religious comments in his works, we might as well draw a conclusion that Julian Barnes is actually on a typical process of belief relinquishment. He has full sympathy with those in psychological need of the existence of an almighty God, but considers it morally and intellectually wrong to believe in the omnipotence of God without sufficient evidence—the Omnipotence Paradox, as is traditionally postulated.

In the bulk of works by Julian Barnes, religion has been playing a key role; the loss of religious dimensions is a theme that preoccupies Barnes ever since his first novel *Metroland* (1980). However, only in *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* can we find that the issue of religion has moved to the very fore and has incurred numerous discussion about the author’s reflections upon art, mortality and the sense of living a good life. Meandering between the lines are his illustrations and lamentations for the consolations of religion which are probably the most conspicuously present. By juxtapositions, parallels and contrasts, by connections that depend on irony or accident, instead of the traditional chronological ordering favored by historians, Barnes illustrated numerous examples of disbelief in such revealed truths as the existence of God and sacred history, but nobody’s fear gets really allayed by such disbeliefs. The problem lies, as Barnes reiterates in many chapters, not in the promises of religion, such as a paradise, but in human nature, in the excessive desires within that can never be satisfied.

The stories narrated in various forms in *the History* raise questions that need to be answered. For this reason, Julian Barnes jumps in and talks in the first person about love. He spares no efforts first of all in negating love as a concept for conjugal union, “a promised land, an ark on which two might escape the Flood. It may be an ark, but one on which anthropophagy is rife; an ark skippered by some crazy greybeard who beats you round head with his gopher-wood stave,” (Barnes, 1989) but then he slips into the following affirmations:

The history of the world becomes brutally self-important without love. Our random mutation is essential because it is unnecessary. Love won’t change the

history of the world, but it will do something much more important: teach us to stand up to history, to ignore its chin-out strut. [...] Love makes us see the truth, makes it our duty to tell the truth.

We've been talking about the history of the world, but, except for a blind power of instinct, Barnes appears to believe, there can be found no better word than love to explain the driving impetus behind the movements of human societies. Love may not be a "transforming wand," but "a random development, culturally reinforced, which just happens to be love rather than something else? I sometimes think so." He cites Tertullian to support his belief that love is essential because it's unnecessary, the same way Christian belief holds true because of its impossibility. Finney insightfully concludes that "his book appears to indicate that there are as many versions of history as there are forms of discourse, and yet that certain characteristics of human nature persists in surfacing no matter what discursive formation is employed." (Finney, 2003) In other words, arks, rafts, ships and the like may provide temporary safety to human beings; certain characteristics of human nature have never changed since Noah's time. The biblical message sent to us through the fable of Noah's Ark, and also through numerous reincarnations of the ark, is but the love in the revealed teaching. These events suggest in various forms continuity beneath the bewildering variety of human activity over the ages.

Once confessing "a happy atheist," (Barnes, 2008) Julian Barnes demonstrates his ambivalence toward religion throughout his texts. On the one hand, he longs for the sense of order, harmony and safety, in all, the harmless illusions that religions guarantee to provide; on the other hand, the metaphysical dimension in his pondering of life prevents him from lingering on the impossible. The tension between the two finds its expressions in most of his works, yielding to the metaphor that one should not saw down the tree branch on which one sits.

5. Conclusion

The seemingly disparate chapters in *The History of the World in 10 and 1/2 chapters* are in fact well-balanced semantically and metaphorically, through implied connections and hidden images, all revolving around the religious image of the ark and its numerous reincarnations—all-embracing but not delusively abstract at all. As in most of his major works, the religious ambivalence finds its expressions in various forms and genres. The central image of the ark represents one of the most striking forces behind Julian Barnes' creative writing and his preoccupation with the lingering problem of the loss of religiousness. The Noah's Ark, the hijacked and outlawed ships, the rafts of escape and various attempts to locate the lost ark reveal the lurking longing for a metaphysically justified religious sense of order, security and significance of life. This religious ambivalence originates from Barnes' rationality as an atheist in his younger years, but also from his nostalgia and spiritual experiences with history and art in his more mature writing.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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