

The Boat in the Storm

An interactive story based on Mark 4:35–41

Materials required: Masking tape; stool; cushion

Preparation:

Mark the outline of the boat on the floor with tape according to the diagram below. Place the stool and the cushion as indicated.

One person should act as narrator. Depending on the size of the class there are two ways of allocating acting roles to the pupils:

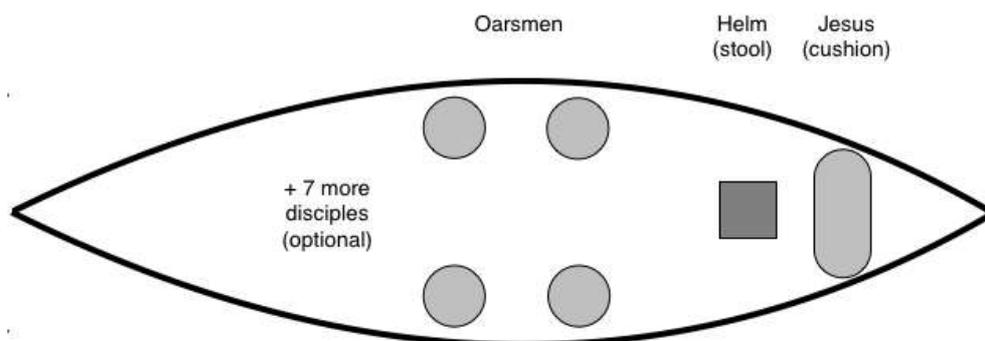
1) Jesus, Peter and four other disciples

The four disciples act as the oarsmen in the narrative and sit in the positions indicated on the diagram; all other pupils form the outline of the boat.

2) as above but with 7 additional disciples in the boat as indicated on the diagram.

The pupils forming the boat should sit or kneel on the outline marked on the floor and either interlock their arms, put their arms around their neighbours' shoulders, or hold hands so that there are no gaps between them. At the beginning of the story, the 5 or 12 disciples and Jesus stand outside the boat on the 'shore'. The pupils forming the boat enact the movements marked in *italics* in the story, and the disciples and Jesus act out the underlined movements appropriate for each character.

Diagram:



Story:

It was evening and the sun was already low on the horizon. The Lake of Galilee was calm with only a few waves making their way lazily to the shore and the surface of the water gleaming with hues of gold and orange. A large boat was tightly moored to the western shore, not far from the small village of Capernaum. *The waves lap on **the boat** and it moves steadily, and quietly (!), back and forth, back and forth.*

Suddenly, a group of men appeared on the shore walking towards the water. On reaching the boat they steadied it and got in one by one. Whenever one of the men stepped onto the boat from the shore, *the sides of **the boat** dipped dangerously deep into the water and it began to sway back and forth, back and forth.* Finally all the men were sitting in the boat. In the middle of the boat there was a small mast with one, large sail and there were four heavy rowing oars. Some of the men were fishermen, and they knew exactly how to prepare the boat. Four of them grabbed the oars and Peter, who owned the boat, took his usual place at the helm. But one man chose to lie down on the cushion below the small deck at the stern of the boat, almost reminiscent of a dog in a kennel. There he promptly fell asleep.

Some of the men untied the knots, and with a few strokes the boat was clear of the shore and out in the small bay. ***The boat** moved smoothly up and down, up and down in time with the strokes of the oars.* As they left the bay, the wind began to pick up. The men pulled in their oars and two of them unfurled the sail. For a moment, ***the boat** lay absolutely still in the water.* Then suddenly the wind from the Mediterranean filled the sail and powerfully pushed the boat along. *The side of **the boat** facing the wind was lifted up, while the other side was pushed down towards the water.* The keel cut a white line into the waves as *the bow of **the boat** moved up and down, up and down with every wave they hit.* And so, in just a few minutes, the boat had made it to the middle of the lake but already the sun had gone down and the shorelines were hidden in darkness.

Out there in the middle of the lake, the wind became stronger and stronger, and the waves began to hit the boat harder and harder. ***The boat** was now swaying hard in the wind, hard in the wind* and the men were yelling orders to each other to get hold

of the flapping sail. Two of the men pulled down the sail. Others pulled hard on the oars to turn the boat into the wind to prevent the waves from tipping it over. In the stern, Peter had to use all his strength to hold on to the rudder, for ***the boat was rocking violently up and down, up and down with every wave that struck it.*** Still, as long as the wind came from one direction, they were able to ride the waves. But the fishermen knew of the dangers of the eddy winds that could suddenly come down from the slopes of the eastern shore of the Lake. They knew boats had capsized, fishermen had lost their lives because of these winds.

Suddenly the wind came dangerously from the east as well as the west. As if moved by a ghost, ***the boat began to turn, almost tipping over.*** The water flooded over the sides as the previously steady waves became a raging chaos. Two of the oars fell overboard, but they were no use anyway. In despair the men held firmly onto the side of the boat with one hand and with the other tried to scoop out the water as fast as they could. Again and again, *heavy breakers hit **the boat**, tossing it around as if it were made of paper.*

And yet, despite all this, the man in the stern remained fast asleep as if unaware of the roaring chaos around him. Peter shook him, and shouted: “Hey, don’t you care that we’re drowning?” And all the while the power of the storm seemed to increase as ***the boat crashed back and forth, up and down as wave after wave slammed into it.*** Just then the man in the stern stood up and, staggering forward, took hold of the mast. Standing there, he stretched out his hand and spoke into the wind, though nobody could hear what he was saying because the storm was so loud. ***The boat was shaking and creaking as if it were just about to break, but then – all of a sudden – it stood still.*** The wind had stopped, the waves collapsed into themselves. The lake had become calm and, once more, the waves gently lap on ***the boat and it moves steadily, and quietly (!), back and forth, back and forth.***

The Boat in the Storm (Mark 4:35–41) Archaeology, History, and Theology

Further information:

In 1986 the remains of an ancient boat were found in the Lake of Galilee. These were subsequently excavated and preserved with painstaking care and are now on permanent exhibition in a special museum in the Qibbuz Kinnosar at the western shore of the lake, close to Tiberias. The ceramics and coins found with it make it possible to date the boat between the first century and second century after Christ. The boat was used for fishing and transport and could be moved either by sail or oars. Its dimensions were as follows: Total length: 8.8m (c. 26 feet); maximum breadth: 2.5m (c. 8 feet); depth: 1.25m (c. 4 feet).

The construction of this boat explains the otherwise strange expression in Mark 4:38 (the parallels in Mt 8:23–24 and Lk 8:23 omit this detail) that Jesus was sleeping “in the stern” and “on a pillow” (ἐν τῇ πρύμνῃ ἐπὶ τὸ προσκεφάλαιον καθεύδων). The excavated boat reveals a large stern deck that was necessary for the use of these boats for fishing. This aft deck was where the net was placed and prepared. To lay *in* the stern instead of *on* it, as many commentators have understood it,¹ makes good sense: the stern or aft deck would be exposed to the weather and either very hot or very wet; in addition, the helmsman who handles the quarter rudder has his place on or close to the stern deck and anybody lying on the deck would be in his way.

Further information about this boat type and its equipment can be drawn from the oldest mosaic from Israel depicting a boat. It was found in Magdala (today Migdal, also called Tarichaeae in Josephus), the hometown of Mary Magdalene. The town is only about 1.5 km away from the discovery site of the Kinneret boat. Because of the simplicity of the mosaic archaeologists assume that it was made by a local artist and based on first-hand observation. This first century mosaic depicts the boat in profile. Clearly visible (on the right) is the back-curved stern and on the left the cutwater stern. Both features are slightly oversized but in general rather realistic and most likely an illustration of a real boat from the lake. Three oars are represented on the visible port side but the sternmost one should actually be understood as a quarter rudder, which was controlled by the helmsman. From this we learn that a crew of five was necessary to sail such a boat, very similar to what can be found in Mk 1:19–20, where a crew of at least five men is associated with a

¹ E.g. C. S. Mann, *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 27; New York: Doubleday, 1986), 275, comments that “the stern of the boat, with a small seat, was the place of honour, the helmsman being placed at the very back”, which is utterly wrong but provided as matter of fact information without any further verification; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 224, speaks only about the “raised section at the end” (referring to the Ginnosar-boat), but without any discussion of the precise features.

boat (τὸ πλοῖον), namely the father Zebedee and his two sons James and John and “hired men,” which implies at least two and makes a crew of at least five men. From the Jewish historian Josephus we know further that up to 15 people (including the crew) could be transported in such a ship.²

Also the “pillow” referred to with the definite article in Mark 4:38 is given a clear meaning in connection with this kind of boat: sandbags of different sizes were used to trim the boat when under sail; when not in service, they were stored beneath the stern deck where they could be used as a kind of pillow. If one looks at the reconstruction drawing in Shelley Wachsmann’s book it becomes understandable why Matthew and Luke avoided the details that Mark provides: The one who is described so majestically as commanding wind and waves is sleeping curled up in a tiny and cramped area “in the stern.” This is the complete opposite to the familiar picture of the Lord Jesus commanding the waves, but at the same time illustrates what Jesus said about himself not having a place to rest his head (Mt 8:20 par. Lk 9:58).

Adapted from Roland Deines, “Non-literary Sources for the Interpretation of the New Testament: Methodological Considerations and Case Studies Related to the Corpus Judaeo-Hellenisticum,” in *Neues Testament und hellenistisch-jüdische Alltagskultur: Wechselseitige Wahrnehmungen* (ed. R. Deines, J. Herzer and K.-W. Niebuhr; WUNT 274; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2011), pp. 25–66 (54–55).

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Literature:

John J. Rousseau and Rami Arav, *Jesus and His World: An Archeological and Cultural Dictionary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 25–30 (“Boats”).
Shelley Wachsmann, *The Excavation of an Ancient Boat in the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret) (‘Atiqot 19)*; Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 1990).
———, *The Sea of Galilee Boat: A 2000 Year Old Discovery from the Sea of Legends* (New York: Plenum Press, 1995).

Web-resources:

http://bibleindex.com/israel/jesus_boat.html [provided by the University of Nottingham]
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_of_Galilee_Boat
<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/jesus-boat>

Roland Deines
Centre for Bible, Ethics and Theology
University of Nottingham

² Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.645.