

The Birds of the Air – Part One

One lovely morning back in mid-January, I was sitting down at our local beach. As I sat there, I saw what I thought were a couple of clouds skittering across the calm water in the distance.

I was amazed how fast they were moving and I thought to myself, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen clouds moving so fast.”

But as I concentrated my gaze on them, I realized that they were *not* clouds at all; but two huge flocks of small sea-birds flying in close formation.

What a sight! Especially as they changed course and the morning sunlight caught their white undersides!

I began to wonder that morning, as I have often done before when seeing other sea-birds or V-shaped flights of geese flying together, how they manage to keep a constant distance from one another; how they maintain exactly the same direction and changes of direction so perfectly, without mass confusion; how they know that they should follow their leader, and how they know who their leader is!

Is the leader of the flock somehow programmed by his Creator to know where the best food is – and where the best place is to rest for the night? Or are *all* of them so programmed? Just how do these seeming ornithological miracles occur? What is the answer?

The answer is “Instinct”! God has created instinct into them. Somehow, through their God-given instinct, they know which bird is the leader, and that leader somehow knows where the food is, and where a good resting place might be.

Why can’t we be like those birds? Wouldn’t it make our Christian lives so much simpler? God would give His spiritual food – His plain truth – to *one* leader, and His little flock would follow that leader without question.

To some limited extent, ancient Israel was like this under Moses' leadership and the church – the spiritual Israel of God – was at least something like this under Herbert Armstrong's leadership. One day it will be like that again. Even better!

Again I ask the question: Why can't we be like those birds? The answer is that birds have brains – small but excellent ones, superbly fashioned for their needs – but they don't have minds like we humans do – minds with which to reason, and sometimes to differ and disagree.

But that's enough of my own symbolism! Let's go on with God's symbolism – God's ornithological symbolism.

A few months ago, I received an e-mail letter from a man in South Africa, referring to the Mustard Seed parable. The man asked the following brief question:

May I ask how you view 'the birds of the air' as in Matthew 6:26?

The man asked how *we* view “the birds of the air.” But more to the point is the question, “How does God view the birds of the air?” What do birds symbolize in God's Word? This is the question I would like to ask and answer in this article.

This is one of those subjects that could take many articles to cover, so this one can only really scratch the surface of a huge topic.

I do hope that *your* view of Biblical birds is not limited to the horrific prophecy of “the supper of the great God” in Revelation 19. There are so very many symbolic mentions of birds in the scriptures. Yes some certainly *are* warning messages, but many others are positive, comforting and encouraging messages from our loving God – including references to specific types of birds and their various qualities: eagles, ostriches, owls, doves, pelicans, storks and ravens; even roosters, hens and chickens.

Symbols of God's Providence

Let us go back to the South African man's question. Here is what I told him in my reply – first of all quoting the verse he mentioned in its context. Jesus is speaking here:

Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (Matthew 6:25-33)

The bottom line here, literally, is that we must seek God's Kingdom and righteousness first; and if we make these two things our priorities, then He promises to provide all of our other secondary needs.

But specifically, what does Jesus say about the birds in this context? He points out that, although birds don't farm for their food as humans do, God certainly does provide food for them. Jesus' point is that, if He is willing to do this for the birds, which are of far lesser value than human beings, He will certainly provide for us.

Nevertheless, we must be careful not to read inaccurate messages into what Jesus said here. He did not, of course, imply that human beings should not farm for food. Nor that we should not put effort into providing food for our families. Nor that we should just sit back, devote all of our time to prayer and study, and let God do every single thing for us.

Although birds do not farm, they still do put effort into finding the food that God provides for them. Is this not what they do with most of their time and energy each and every day?

Now God's people are not all farmers or even avid vegetable gardeners; but we, like the birds, must work hard to provide food and shelter, etc. for our families; but without neglecting the spiritual priorities of our lives: communication with God in daily prayer, Bible study, meditation and occasional fasting.

With minds unencumbered by the modern mechanistic view of nature, the biblical authors repeatedly mention the instinctive "trust" of birds in the daily bread supplied by God as an example of faith.

For example, the Eternal asked Job and his friends:

Who provides food for the raven, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food? (Job 38:41)

He answered His own question, of course, but His answer is repeated in Psalm 147:7-9:

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; sing praises on the harp to our God, who covers the heavens with clouds, who prepares rain for the earth, who makes grass to grow on the mountains. He gives to the beast its food, and to the young ravens that cry.

Our great God, who can make the impossible possible, He who regularly provides birds with food, in an ironic twist, once used birds to provide food for one of His human servants:

And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word.” Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” So he went and did according to the word of the LORD, for he went and stayed by the brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook.

(I Kings 17:1-6)

So here we see that birds can symbolize God’s providence and can serve as examples of the difference between His parental care and the relative callousness of human beings, even His own peoples:

Even the jackals present their breasts to nurse their young; but the daughter of my people is cruel, like ostriches in the wilderness. The tongue of the infant clings to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the young children ask for bread, but no one breaks it for them.

(Lamentations 4:3-4)

In other contexts, His Word uses birds as symbols in many other ways. Here is a brief and only partially complete grouping; acknowledging the help from Ryken’s “Dictionary of Biblical Imagery.”

Symbols of Shelter, Escape and Safety

The enviable flying ability of birds and the constancy of their day-to-day foraging (as already discussed) have long suggested an idyllic, worry-free existence. Have you never envied a bird soaring or hovering on the wind, and then looked forward so much more to the World Tomorrow when we will likely be able to do the same? I have! The ability of birds to fly and to escape shows itself in the many references in Bible symbolism.

Saul and Jonathan were beloved and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. (II Samuel 1:23)

But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31)

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. (Exodus 19:4)

While wings suggest swiftness or soaring strength, as suggested in these verses, they also will compare the protective parenting habits of birds with that of our great God:

For the LORD'S portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance. He found him {Jacob} in a desert land and in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young, spreading out its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings, so the LORD alone led him, and there was no foreign god with him. He made him ride in the heights of the earth, that he might eat the produce of the fields; He made him draw honey from the rock, and oil from the flinty rock. (Deuteronomy 32:9-13)

Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me under the shadow of your wings (Psalms 17:8)

How precious is your lovingkindness, O God! Therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of your wings. (Psalms 36:7)

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me! For my soul trusts in you; and in the shadow of your wings I will make my refuge, until these calamities have passed by. (Psalms 57:1)

I will abide in your tabernacle forever; I will trust in the shelter of your wings. Selah. (Psalms 61:4)

Because you have been my help, therefore in the shadow of your wings I will rejoice. (Psalms 63:7)

Jesus mixes the image of tender care under sheltering wings with the implied rebuke out of those “dumb clucks” who would shun His generous and merciful offers of safety, repeating the prophetic theme of human beings as the least obedient of God's creatures:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (Matthew 23:37)

Yes, the wings of God, offer divine protection:

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust.” Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler *{the trapper of birds}* and from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler. (Psalms 91:1-4)

The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge. (Ruth 2:12)

Not only do they give protection, God’s wings even offer healing to those who fear His holy name:

But to you who fear my name The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves. (Malachi 4:2)

The obvious parallels between birds’ nests and humans’ houses suggest still more analogies to God's provision and protection. Virtually all birds have nests but, as Jesus mentioned, not all humans have homes:

Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, “Lord, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” (Luke 9:57-58)

Sparrows and swallows, with the wisdom of their instinct, built their nests in the Eternal's house and sought the protection of His altar:

How lovely is your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young—even your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they will still be praising you. Selah (Psalms 84:1-4)

Although it is doubtful that the priests and Levites would have allowed birds to nest in the holiness of God's Tent Tabernacle, they may not have been able to trap them in the courtyards, or in the higher ceilings of the later stone temples. The analogy here, of course, is of the benefit of being close to God in His house. His spiritual temple in the New Covenant era is none other than God Himself.

Other birds, such as the stork – which God's Word speaks most favourably of – find safety high in evergreen trees:

He sends the springs into the valleys, they flow among the hills. They give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. By them the birds of the heavens have their home; they sing among the branches. He waters the hills from His upper chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your works. He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the service of man, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine that makes glad the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread which strengthens man's heart. The trees of the LORD are full of sap, the cedars of Lebanon which He planted, where the birds make their nests; the stork has her home in the fir trees. (Psalms 104:10-17)

Their conspicuous, yet relatively inaccessible, nests stand as symbols of heaven-ordained security. Different birds have different nesting places:

O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely. (Song of Solomon 2:14)

You who dwell in Moab, leave the cities and dwell in the rock, and be like the dove which makes her nest in the sides of the cave's mouth. (Jeremiah 48:28)

God is Inescapable

At one low point in his life, David wished that he had the bird's ability to fly away:

So I said, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. Indeed, I would wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. Selah. I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest." (Psalms 55:6-8)

David knew, of course, that it was impossible for him to fly away from his troubles, and therefore that he must put all his trust in God:

In the LORD I put my trust; how can you say to my soul, "Flee as a bird to your mountain"? (Psalms 11:1)

David asserts that God is inescapable; and that this fact is for our good:

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend into heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. (Psalms 139:7-10)

Nations trust in their mountain strongholds, just as nesting eagles do, but their aerie is not inaccessible to the Eternal God:

The vision of Obadiah. Thus says the Lord GOD concerning Edom. We have heard a report from the LORD, and a messenger has been sent among the nations, saying, "Arise, and let us rise up against her for battle: behold, I will make you small among the nations; you shall be greatly despised. The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who dwell in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; you who say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?' Though you ascend as high as the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down," says the LORD. (Obadiah 1:1-4)

Symbols of Faithfulness and Trust

In Bible times, birds served as an obvious indicator of the seasonal cycles – rhythms to which the ancients tuned their lives. The geography of the Middle East funnels all migratory birds from Europe and Asia, raptors and song birds alike, through Palestine on their way to winter in Africa. This twice-yearly event, impressive even now, was undoubtedly more so in antiquity. Any witness to such a spectacle saw the hand of God orchestrating the relocation of a vast portion of creation to “dwell beyond the uttermost parts of the sea.”

In response to this wonder of bird migration, the eighteenth century American poet, William Cullen Bryant, penned the words, "There is a Power, whose care teaches thy way along that pathless coast."

Referring to His miracles of birds' migration and nesting habits, the Eternal asks Job:

**Does the hawk fly by your wisdom, and spread its wings toward the south?
Does the eagle mount up at your command, and make its nest on high? On
the rocks it dwells and resides, on the crag of the rock and the stronghold.
From there it spies out the prey; its eyes observe from afar. Its young ones
suck up blood; and where the slain are, there it is."**

(Job 39:26-30)

May I strongly recommend a brief side-study on the truly astounding topic of bird migration? A good starting point would be:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bird_migration

In addition to seasonal activity, the *daily* habits of birds governed those of people. Jesus' allusions to the rooster's crow refer to specific times of the early morning:

Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming—in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning. (Mark 13:35)

Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” (Matthew 26:34)

Solomon observes that more mature human beings tend to wake early, accompanied by the predawn twittering of birds:

**When the doors are shut in the streets, and the sound of grinding is low;
when one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of music are
brought low. (Ecclesiastes 12:4)**

Moral Examples

The universal tendency toward anthropomorphic interpretations of bird behaviour generates many images. (Anthropomorphism is the applying of human tendencies to animals or other non-human things).

The dove earns its amorous reputation from its soft voice and its habit of continually renewing its pair bond. No wonder it is mentioned, six times in Song of Solomon! The supposed exemplary family life of the stork earned it the designation "pious" or even "devout":

Even the stork in the heavens knows her appointed times; and the turtledove, the swift, and the swallow observe the time of their coming. But my people do not know the judgment of the LORD. (Jeremiah 8:7)

The Hebrew word for "stork" – "hacydah" – means *good, kind, devoted...* i.e. like a devout, God-fearing, religiously-observant, righteous, pious and kind woman.

The care of storks for their young, in their highly-visible nests, has made the stork a widespread emblem of parental care. It was widely noted in ancient natural history that a pair of storks would be consumed with the nest in a fire, rather than fly away and abandon it.

In the Aesop's fable, "The Stork, and the Farmer," the stork argues that he should be set free, because he needs to care for his parents in their old age.

Symbols of Beauty

The huge variety of bird life in our area of Vancouver Island never ceases to amaze me: bald eagles, chickadees, robins, and many different species of herons, finches, gulls, ducks, geese, and so many others that I do not know by name. What a magnificent and stunningly colourful segment of God's fabulous creation! The beauty of birds has been a universal source of their attraction. Solomon undoubtedly collected exotic birds for their striking beauty:

For the king's ships went to Tarshish with the servants of Hiram: every three years once came the ships of Tarshish bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks. (II Chronicles 9:21 KJV)

The NKJV translates the Hebrew word "tukkiyim" translated in the KJV as "peacocks" as "monkeys." However, various commentators opine that the word more accurately means "parrots" or "guinea fowl."

The notoriously amorous Solomon pictures the Shulamite woman admiring the hair and eyes of her beloved and comparing them to the beautiful features of ravens and doves:

His head is like the finest gold; his locks are wavy, and black as a raven. His eyes are like doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set. (Song of Solomon 5:11-12)

Solomon's father, David, evokes the delicate, shimmering beauty of a bird's wing in:

Though you lie down among the sheepfolds, you will be like the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold. (Psalms 68:13)

Symbols of Cleansing

The impurity of a leprous house is cleansed by the death of one bird, and carried away symbolically by the release of a second:

And he shall take, to cleanse the house, two birds, cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop. Then he shall kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over running water; and he shall take the cedar wood, the hyssop, the scarlet, and the living bird, and dip them in the blood of the slain bird and in the running water, and sprinkle the house seven times. And he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird and the running water and the living bird, with the cedar wood, the hyssop, and the scarlet. Then he shall let the living bird loose outside the city in the open field, and make atonement for the house, and it shall be clean. (Leviticus 14:49-53)

Symbols of Spirit

The metaphor of spirit as a bird was common in ancient literature and art and, of course, in the scriptures. This symbolism finds its culmination in the Holy Spirit descending as a dove, as recorded by all four gospel writers. Here is Luke's version:

And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased. (Luke 3:22)

Symbols of Wisdom

In the comparison between the built-in wisdom of birds and Israel's mankind's general lack thereof, we see a stern warning for God's people today:

Why has this people slidden back, Jerusalem, in a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, they refuse to return. I listened and heard, but they do not speak aright. No man repented of his wickedness, saying, 'What have I done?' Everyone turned to his own course, as the horse rushes into the battle. Even the stork in the heavens knows her appointed times; and the turtledove, the swift, and the swallow observe the time of their coming. But My people do not know the judgment of the LORD. How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us'? Look, the false pen of the scribe certainly works falsehood. The wise men are ashamed, they are dismayed and taken. Behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD; so what wisdom do they have? (Jeremiah 8:5-9)

Some Negative Symbols

In conclusion, all is not rosy for our feathered friends. They too have their trials. And in their trials, they too are used in God's Word as symbols of trials endured by mankind.

My first example in this group is the lowly sparrow, which is known for its sociable habits, and is said to be unnatural and out of place when alone – a symbol of isolation and loneliness:

**I lie awake, and am like a sparrow alone on the housetop.
(Psalms 102:7)**

In the previous verse, other solitary birds are used to evoke barren, desolate, and forsaken pictures:

**I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert.
(Verse 6)**

The cries of several birds strike the human ear as mournful:

**Therefore I will wail and howl, I will go stripped and naked; I will make a wailing like the jackals and a mourning like the ostriches {KJV: owls}.
(Micah 1:8)**

**Like a crane or a swallow, so I chattered; I mourned like a dove; my eyes fail from looking upward. O LORD, I am oppressed; Undertake for me!
(Isaiah 38:14)**

The Hebrew word for “dove,” is “yownah” – the same as the name of the prophet Jonah, may mean “mourner” – as in the integral part of his story.

Some bird behaviours lend themselves directly to moral lessons or even warnings. The ceaseless, unresting flight of sparrows or swallows is likened to a curse that cannot alight on its undeserving target:

Like a flitting sparrow, like a flying swallow, so a curse without cause shall not alight. (Proverbs 26:2)

The tribe of Ephraim – both ancient and modern – is likened to a silly dove – senseless, easily deceived and entrapped:

Ephraim also is like a silly dove, without sense—they call to Egypt, they go to Assyria. Wherever they go, I will spread my net on them; I will bring them down like birds of the air; I will chastise them according to what their congregation has heard. (Hosea 7:11-12)

Earlier we mentioned God's favouritism for the noble stork. At the other end of the spectrum of family care, and in comparison with the stork, we have the ostrich. The seeming indifference of the ostrich to its young, although ordained by God and compensated with speed is not an acceptable model for human parenting:

The wings of the ostrich wave proudly, but are her wings and pinions like the kindly stork's? For she leaves her eggs on the ground, and warms them in the dust; she forgets that a foot may crush them, or that a wild beast may break them. She treats her young harshly, as though they were not hers; her labor is in vain, without concern, because God deprived her of wisdom, and did not endow her with understanding. When she lifts herself on high, she scorns the horse and its rider.

(Job 39:13-18)

One who unlawfully collects possessions and wealth is likened in God's Word to the partridge, which is said to raise chicks that she did not hatch. In the end, they will be gone:

As a partridge that broods but does not hatch, so is he who gets riches, but not by right; it will leave him in the midst of his days, and at his end he will be a fool. (Jeremiah 17:11)

The idea that partridges raised the chicks of others probably stems from the occasional practice of some pairs, which lay a second clutch before the first has hatched and combine them after hatching. The older chicks, which became independent sooner, were not believed to be the pair's own.

There are so many lessons we can learn from birds: inspiring and encouraging lessons as well as dire warnings.

Let us rejoice in the creation and symbolisms of our wonderful and great God and of His inspiring and colourful Word!

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