



7-1-2006

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Kirby, Dale Z. "'The Way of an Eagle': Birds in the Scriptures." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 7, no. 2 (2006). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol7/iss2/10>

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Prince of Peace
Painting by Simon Dewey

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“The Way of an Eagle”: Birds in the Scriptures

Dale Z. Kirby

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The book of Proverbs speaks of “things which are too wonderful for me,” the first of which is “the way of an eagle in the air” (Proverbs 30:18–19). In this article, I will explore the ways of eagles and explain the symbolism of the behaviors, flights, and colors of birds in the scriptures and in the teachings of modern prophets and apostles. My goal is to testify of the handiwork of the Creator in forming these beautiful creations.

Moses, who wrote the first books of the Bible, recorded that all things testify of Christ (see Moses 1:63). Truly, birds, with their broad, beautiful colors in nearly endless patterns and combinations, reflect the joy the Lord has in such colors and designs. Likewise, the varieties of notes, melodies, songs, and calls of birds tell of the Creator’s joy in music.

Multiple references to birds are found in the standard works and doctrines of the prophets. Like the flight of birds, these verses come and go throughout the text. A deeper study of them reveals that the Old Testament use of birds by the prophets often testified of Jehovah. Jesus Christ Himself frequently referred to various birds and their behaviors as symbols representing Himself, His Atonement for mankind, and the deeper truths of His gospel.

The Old Testament

The first mention of birds in the Old Testament occurs in the fourth creative period of the earth as recorded in Genesis 1:21. At that time, God created “every winged fowl” and told them to multiply after their own kind. God created a very large number of species of birds. A

partial list in the book of Leviticus includes the eagle, ossifrage, osprey, vulture, kite, raven, owl, little owl, great owl, night hawk, cuckow, hawk, cormorant, swan (probably an ibis), pelican, gier eagle, stork, heron, and lapwing. Under the provisions of the Mosaic law, these were considered to be the unclean birds that were not to be eaten (see Leviticus 11:13–19). In Deuteronomy 14:20, Moses explained that members of the house of Israel were allowed to eat clean birds, but a biblical list of them is not available. Judging from the thousands of existing birds, the list would have been lengthy.

Birds played a part in the drama of real life at the time of the Flood. Noah must have taken hundreds of pairs of birds onto the ark. What a powerful sound they would have made! However, their morning singing may have been subdued because there was no visual sunrise during the first forty days they were on the ark. After forty days and nights of rain, plus nearly one year of additional time on the ark waiting for the waters to subside, Noah first sent out a raven (see Genesis 8:7). Soon thereafter, he released a dove “to see if the waters were abated . . . but the dove found no rest . . . and she returned” (vv. 8–9). After seven days, Noah again freed the dove, and she returned in the evening with an olive leaf, symbolizing that God was again at peace with the earth. Noah then knew that the cleansing of the earth was completed and that “the waters were abated from off the earth” (v. 11). Seven days later, the dove again flew away, never to return. These final seven days may have symbolized that the earth was completely clean.

The Father likewise sent the Son to the earth. His Atonement cleansed the inhabitants of the world from sin. Just as the dove that Noah sent forth found no rest and returned to Noah, Christ also found no mortal rest and returned to the Father.

Approximately 1,140 years after Noah left the ark and about 180 years after the brother of Jared left for the land of promise, Moses led the children of Israel through the wilderness of Sinai. At times they were near starvation; Jehovah twice sent quail to preserve Israel and to give variety to the diet of the group, who had been living on manna for years (see Exodus 16:13; Numbers 11:31–35). The greedy who gathered more than the prescribed number of quail were smitten with a plague. Since then, man’s greed has caused the death of untold numbers of birds and made some species extinct. In contrast to the fate of the gluttonous who made quail their downfall, those who were obedient not only allowed the quail to save them but also looked forward to the spiritual saving powers of Christ. He would come and save the obedient both temporally and spiritually.

Just as the sent quail had saved Moses's people, another species of bird would later become Elijah's temporal savior. Ravens are large birds, and ornithologists consider them one of the most intelligent of all birds. In about 900 BC, the country in which the prophet Elijah lived experienced a drought. God directed him to the brook Cherith, where God commanded ravens to feed him. This they did each morning and evening, saving Elijah from starvation (see 1 Kings 17:5–7). Thus, God chose these large, intelligent birds to supply food to preserve His prophet. The bread and flesh they brought were symbols of the Savior, who taught that He had "meat to eat that [men] know not of" and that He was the true bread of life (John 4:32; 10:48).

In the law of Moses, birds were sacrificed as an offering to Jehovah to cause Israel to look forward to the Savior for redemption. Because of their peaceful nature, the sacrifice of turtledoves or young pigeons symbolized the future offering made by Christ. Birds were also used under the law of Moses in the ritual of cleansing lepers and their houses. A priest took two birds, "alive and clean," from the person to be cleansed. One bird was "killed in an earthen vessel over running water" (Leviticus 14:4–5). Then, the priest dipped the living bird, which was wrapped in a scarlet cloth soaked in hyssop, into the blood of the bird that was killed. Next, he sprinkled the blood of the dead bird upon the leper and his house seven times. Thus, he symbolically cleansed both the house and the leper. Finally, the priest pronounced the leper clean and released the bird "out of the city into the open fields" (Leviticus 14:53). Thus, an atonement was made for the house, and it was made clean. The blood of the bird represented the cleansing power of the blood of Christ that would come into the home and heart of fallen, natural man, as symbolized by leprosy. Cleansing seven times symbolized a complete or total cleansing of body and spirit. The flight of the living bird into the open field typified the unclean man leaving society as well as the separation of man from sin.

It is interesting to note that although birds were often sacrificed, the angel of the Lord who saved Abraham from being sacrificed by the priest of Pharaoh was depicted as a bird, as shown in facsimile 1 in the book of Abraham.

In addition to their symbolical use as cleansing sacrifices, the behavior of birds symbolizes the escape of one's soul from sin and error. The Psalmist wrote that through the Lord, "our soul is escaped as a bird out of a snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped" (Psalm 124:7). Solomon advised the reader to flee from six of the behaviors the Lord hates when he wrote, "Deliver thyself . . . as a bird from the hand of the fowler" (Proverbs 6:5).

Solomon further warned against placing too much emphasis on riches when he stated that “riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven” (Proverbs 23:5). Eagles were the largest birds of prey in the biblical region of Palestine. Both golden and imperial eagles were common in that area.

Isaiah, the great Old Testament prophet and poet who testified of the coming of Christ, wrote of swallows and owls. In Isaiah 38:14, he taught that swallows portray human chatter, most likely since swallows are social birds who flock together and chatter constantly. In reference to the final destruction of the latter-day spiritual wickedness called Babylon, Isaiah prophesied that the “houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there” (Isaiah 13:21). This image seems appropriate, as owls often perch in the rafters of deserted buildings, looking somber and doleful as they quietly watch within their dim surroundings.

The New Testament

As recorded in the New Testament, the sign of a dove at Christ’s baptism became a symbol that was employed frequently throughout the Savior’s ministry. After coming forth out of the Jordan River, John the Baptist “saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him” (Matthew 3:16). The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “The sign of the dove was instituted before the creation of the world, a witness for the Holy Ghost. . . . The Holy Ghost cannot be transformed into a dove; but the sign of a dove was given to John to signify the truth of the deed, as the dove is an emblem or token of truth and innocence.”¹ The Prophet additionally taught that just as a dove is beautiful, the Holy Ghost beautifies men and women as its influence sanctifies them. As a dove is peaceful, the Holy Ghost is a continuing source of peace, giving charity (see Galatians 5:22–23). Further, a dove’s mournful call reminds us of the Holy Ghost’s influence on our conscience, causing us to mourn for our sins.

The classification “dove” in biblical texts is applied to several types of pigeons as well as doves. Biblical writers must have been close to nature to have carefully observed doves, noting their peaceful, innocent behavior. The Bible Dictionary notes that doves are symbols of truth, innocence, affection, and timidity (see Bible Dictionary, “Dove, Sign of,” 658). Doves illustrated swiftness (see Psalm 55:6), beauty (see Psalm 68:13), harmlessness (see Matthew 10:10), simplicity (see Hosea 7:11), a loving nature (see Song of Solomon 1:15), and mournfulness (see Isaiah 38:14).

Jesus Christ, the master teacher of truth, used birds in His instructions to the people of Palestine. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ instructed

those called to the ministry and stated, “Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?” (Matthew 6:26). Thus, Christ called upon His servants to trust Him for sustenance as they labored in His behalf. Telling them to notice the unencumbered life of birds, He questioned their faith in Him and encouraged them to make their first priority the building up of the kingdom of God.

In two of His parables, the Savior uses birds as symbols. In the parable of the sower, after seeds were sown, unnamed “fowls of the air devoured” them. When His disciples asked the meaning of the parable and its symbolic details, the Master said that the birds are “the devil that taketh away the word” out of men’s hearts if the soil of their souls is shallow and full of stones (see Luke 8:5–12). Anyone who has watched birds quickly eat seeds planted in shallow, rocky soil understands this allegory. However, when gospel seeds are planted deep in the hearts of the Lord’s disciples, Satan cannot devour them.

Later, Matthew recorded Christ’s parable of the kingdom of Heaven, which He likened unto a mustard seed. In this parable, the Lord taught that when the seed grows and becomes great, or when the kingdom matures and becomes great, the “birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof” (Matthew 13:32). Joseph Smith taught that these birds represent the angels, gifts, and powers that God is sending down from heaven to lodge in the branches.² These branches symbolize congregations of the Church. The Prophet later added that these angels would come down and combine together to gather their children and save their kindred.³

Matthew also recorded the Son of God’s sermon on the signs or events preceding the Second Coming of the Lord. In Matthew 24:28, the Savior taught, “For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.” Respecting this parable, Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote, “In the parable, as here given, the carcass is the body of the Church, to which the eagles, who are Israel, shall fly to find nourishment.”⁴ At times, the world regards The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a religion void of spiritual life, when, in fact, spiritual nourishment awaits those who flock to it.

Matthew further noted that Christ’s teachings always placed the souls of men on a high level of importance. When speaking to His Twelve Apostles, He told them not to worry about those who were able to kill them physically. He taught them to be more concerned about those who would destroy their souls. Then, He asked, “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the

ground without your Father knoweth it” (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 10:26). Christ then said, “Fear ye not, therefore; ye are of more value than many sparrows” (10:27). Sparrows, like the human race, are widely spread over the earth. They are common birds; their brown, gray, and white colors are not sources of awe. Christ’s concern is for all of God’s children, not just for those with public lives or for those whose appearance or achievements draw the world’s attention. He gave His life and continues to give His forgiveness and love to even the most common and plain of the human race. Christ clearly values those who labor with Him, not only for the message they carry but for their individual personal worth as children of God.

John the Revelator saw “every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth . . . and such as are in the sea, . . . saying, Blessings, and honour, and glory, and power, be . . . unto the Lamb for ever and ever” (Revelation 5:13). Of this vision, Joseph Smith said, “[John] saw every creature that was in heaven—all the beasts, fowls and fish in heaven—actually there, giving glory to God.”⁵ These creatures, the Prophet continued, were of a thousand forms that had been saved for ten thousand times ten thousand earths, creations of which we have no conception. The Prophet further said that “John learned that God glorified Himself by saving all that His hands had made, whether beasts, fowls, fishes or men.”⁶ Truly, in the creation of the beautiful and colorful birds of the earth, the Lord shows us a part of His great power and glory.

Jesus Christ, who inspired John His beloved Apostle to write the book of Revelation, warned the wicked nations of the earth that in the last days before the Savior’s Second Coming, an angel would cry with a loud voice, “saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God; that ye may eat the flesh of kings, . . . captains, . . . mighty men, . . . both small and great” (Revelation 19:17–18). John, in the unfolding vision of the downfall of Babylon, wrote that fallen Babylon “is become . . . the hold of every foul spirit and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird” (18:2). He also prophesied that “the remnant were slain with the word of him that sat upon the horse . . . and all the fowls were filled with their flesh” (Joseph Smith Translation, Revelation 19:21). This scene was later shown to Joseph Smith, who recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 29:20 that vengeance and death would come upon the unrepentant wicked who would be devoured by the beast of the field and the fowls of the air. These fowls will act as cleansing agents, devouring the slain bodies of the wicked and thus helping cleanse the earth of all wickedness in preparation for the return of its Creator.

The Dispensation of the Fulness of Times

In the first years of this dispensation, Joseph Smith exhorted the marching members of Zion’s Camp “not to kill . . . the birds . . . unless it became necessary in order to preserve ourselves from hunger.”⁷ The Prophet Joseph Smith and other latter-day prophets have discouraged Church members from killing birds for fun or sport. Birds have rescued the Saints several times. In 1846, following the Battle of Nauvoo, five to six hundred Latter-day Saints known as “the poor camp” were struggling for survival in Iowa along the banks of the Mississippi River. They were poorly clothed and had little protection from the elements, meager accommodations, and little food. As in the times of ancient Israel, the Lord sent large flocks of quail that arrived in the camp on October 9. The birds apparently were wearied from a long flight. When they landed in the camp, the destitute Saints caught and killed them. This “miracle of the quail” saved the lives of many members of the poor camp. To these faithful followers of Christ, this was a sign of His great mercy to them.⁸ Thus, quail became the saviors of modern Israel, the same as their ancient counterparts.

Most of us are acquainted with the coming of the seagulls to save the crops of the Mormon pioneers in the Great Basin in 1848. Following many months of poor diets, the crops of the year looked promising until that May, when thousands of crop-devouring crickets entered the valley. For weeks, they destroyed crops planted for food and likewise destroyed the hopes of the Saints. By mid-June, thousands of seagulls were coming to eat the crickets. Settlers saw their coming as a miracle and looked upon the birds as their temporal saviors.

President Joseph F. Smith taught, “I do not believe any man should kill animals or birds unless he needs them for food, and then he should not kill innocent little birds that are not intended for food for man.”⁹ President Spencer W. Kimball in the general priesthood meeting of April conference in 1978 recalled the older Primary hymn, “Don’t Kill the Little Birds,” as follows:

Don’t kill the little birds,
 That sing on bush and tree,
 All thro’ the summer days,
 Their sweetest melody.
 Don’t shoot the little birds!
 The earth is God’s estate,
 And he provideth food
 For small as well as great.

President Kimball then told of his youthful skill with his slingshot and said it was “quite a temptation to shoot the little birds ‘That sing on bush and tree,’ . . . but . . . because I sang nearly every Sunday, ‘Don’t Kill the Little Birds,’ I was restrained.” He further quoted the next verse of the song:

Don’t kill the little birds,
 Their plumage wings the air,
 Their trill at early morn
 Makes music ev’ry-where.
 What tho’ the cherries fall
 Half eaten from the stem?
 And berries disappear,
 In garden, field, and glen?

Then President Kimball said, “I could see no great fun in having a beautiful little bird fall at my feet.”¹⁰ These prophetic doctrines reflect the Lord’s will. They signify the great change from the use of birds under the law of Moses for sacrifice and the use of birds as we follow the gospel of Jesus Christ as taught in this dispensation. These doctrines also demonstrate the high respect the prophet of the Church had for birds.

Bird behavior also symbolizes good and evil in the lifestyles of individuals. We must look beyond the beautiful and sometimes harsh behaviors of some birds to discover the great realities that these scriptural symbols teach about God and Christ and man’s relationship to them. Birds are very alert creatures. They are constantly on the move and watch for their enemies, such as larger birds, animals, and man. We, too, must be alert and continually on the lookout for those who would destroy us spiritually and morally.

In a revelation given to Joseph Smith, the Lord promised that those who observed the laws of the Sabbath with cheerful hearts and countenances would be blessed with the fulness of the earth, including the fowls of the air. Then, he said that all these good things of the earth were “made . . . for the benefit of man, . . . both to please the eye and gladden the heart . . . and to enliven the soul” (D&C 59:18–19). During worship services, Latter-day Saints sing the hymn “How Great Thou Art,” which reads:

When thru the woods and forest glades I wander
 And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees, . . .
 Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee,
 How great thou art!¹¹

Those who enjoy reverently watching birds or delight in their singing, who express amazement at their many colors and sounds, and who

likewise understand the sacred word of God can testify of the greatness of our Savior. Along with birds, they can raise a joyful song to the Lord of creation. **RE**

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 276.

2. See Smith, *Teachings*, 98.

3. See Smith, *Teachings*, 159.

4. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 1:648, 649.

5. See Smith, *Teachings*, 291.

6. See Smith, *Teachings*, 291.

7. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 2:71–72.

8. See B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1948–57), 3:135–36.

9. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939), 265–66.

10. Spencer W. Kimball, in Conference Report, April 1978, 71.

11. “How Great Thou Art,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 86.