

BIRDS



IN ISRAEL

BY DARRYL WOOD

A POPULAR PASTIME called “birding” infects many people around the world. Bird-watchers travel cross-country to experience the many species of birds found in their natural habitat. In ancient Israel as well, birds commanded great interest.

An enormous variety of birds thrives around the Mediterranean. Most of these probably existed in

prohibited eating certain unclean birds (Lev. 11:13-19). This passage listed 20 different species considered unacceptable for humans, including birds of prey and birds that eat fish.

The New Testament speaks often of birds. Jesus used birds to illustrate points in His teaching. One particular passage includes references to two kinds of birds,

about a normal routine, they regularly came into contact with these flying fowl. In fact, the term *sparrow* often referred to any small bird.²

The abundance of these birds combined with their size made them insignificant. Since they carried little value, the poor could buy five sparrows bundled together as a cheap meal. Jesus’ message was that although these birds seemed unimportant to the average person, God cared even for these small creatures just as He cares for the humble, unassuming people of this world.



Upper right: From the church at Tabgha in Galilee, mosaic showing birds among water flowers.

Left: Floor mosaic showing birds perched on a dish, from Malta.

Right: Terra-cotta statuette of a lady with a bird. From Pella’s chamber tombs, dated from the Hellenistic period.

Bible times. Bible references to winged creatures abound. Birds typically served two practical purposes for persons in ancient times. One, people raised or hunted them for food. Two, birds functioned as sacrifices in religious worship.

The varied geographical landscape of the Near East provided habitat for numerous types of birds. Lakes, grasslands, seashore, forests, desert, and mountains offered a variety of natural settings suitable for wild fowl.

The Old Testament established which birds could be eaten. The law

sparrows and ravens (see Luke 12:1-34). Jesus spoke of sparrows to illustrate God’s care. He said, “Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God” (v. 6).¹ The sparrow, a small, brown bird, nested in areas like grass, eaves of houses, or trees. It ate common things like figs, worms, or bugs. As persons went





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Jesus illustrated another point in Luke 12 with the raven. “For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!” (vv. 23-24). Three kinds of ravens lived in different parts of Palestine. All exhibited similar characteristics. Jews considered ravens unclean.³ Ravens normally lived in desolate places. In the evenings they flocked in great numbers to rocky ravines in the mountains.⁴

These large birds ate sizeable amounts of food, regardless of where that food originated. These animals demonstrated no sense of worry about the source of their next meal. God provided for their needs. Jesus encouraged His disciples not to be concerned about what they needed to live. If God made provision for the uncomely raven, He would provide for the crown of His creation—humans.

Jesus used birds to illustrate other teachings. Undoubtedly Jesus,

a student of God’s creation, observed the free, beautiful creatures of the air. Often Jesus spoke of unspectacular birds commonly seen in daily life. They occupied an important niche in God’s creation. Although simple and commonplace to humans, birds belonged in God’s world just as every person does.

Teaching His disciples, Jesus contrasted His not having a home in this world with birds who have nests (Matt. 8:20). His place in God’s kingdom did not depend on earthly comforts. Jesus also used birds to symbolize humility or innocence (10:16). He called His disciples to practice similar unpretentious qualities. Representing God in this world required no scheming or treachery.⁵

Additionally, Jesus spoke about birds of prey such as vultures. They took advantage of innocent or dead animals (Luke 17:37). Further, He spoke of a mother hen protecting her young from birds of prey (see Matt. 23:37). Jesus lamented the spiritually misguided people of

Jerusalem and how He longed to protect them as a hen protected her chicks.⁶

The plentiful supply of birds of different species in ancient Israel proved useful as a natural teaching illustration. Everyone could see birds around them. Since Jesus sought explanations that the common person could understand, birds held a prominent place in His teaching stories. **B**

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, 1995 Update.

2. Gene Stratton-Porter, *Birds of the Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Publishers, 1916), 110-111.

3. Walter W. Ferguson, *Living Animals of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974), 62.

4. Vilhelm Moller-Christensen and K. E. Jordt Jorgensen, *Encyclopedia of Bible Creatures*, M. Theodore Heineken, ed., Arne Unhjem, trans (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 175-77.

5. Alice Parmelee, *All the Birds of the Bible: Their Stories, Identifications and Meaning* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959), 252-53.

6. *Ibid.*, 253,

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LESSON REFERENCE

ETBS: Luke 12:1-59