



BRUCE HYATT

Note from the editor.

Recently I received a thick envelope in the mail from the UK addressed to the senior editor of the *Ethnodoxology Journal*. In it, Mr. Hyatt, only “92 years young” introduced himself and offered his collection of paintings and thoughts on the birds of the Bible for publication in our journal. Following several letter correspondences, we are pleased to publish this unique work spanning decades. Although Mr. Hyatt did not say much about himself, he speaks about his memories with his brother and fondness for birds below. Thank you, Mr. Hyatt, for sharing this corpus of work with the journal. - AE

Twice, as a teenager, with my elder brother John, I observed the habits of crowds of sea birds and the spring migration of land birds on the Isle of May in the Firth of Forth. We were staying in a disused lighthouse with a bunch of enthusiastic birdwatchers, led by the future TV personality Christopher Mylne. Vivid memories of this have stayed with me for life: ringing birds with the help of a heligoland trap; perching on rocks with my paint box to sketch dramatic cliffs; the hiss of the kerosene pressure lantern in the evening as the logbook was written up; the thrill of being stormbound, and the fun camaraderie of real live ornithologists.

These pictures began life in 1976 as posters, four feet square, which Ian Tait, pastor of Welwyn Evangelical Church in Hertfordshire, used as visual aids while speaking to a youth anniversary. What started as nine pictures eventually became a dozen.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke these words: “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6:26 NRSVUE). The Bible describes a particularly happy moment: “for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land” (Song of Solomon 2:11–12). Martin Luther writes this in his 1521 commentary on the Sermon of the Mount, “You see, He is making the birds our school—masters and teachers. In other words, we have as many teachers and preachers as there are little birds in the air.”¹

¹ Quoted in John Stott, *The Birds, Our Teachers: Essays in Orni-Theology* (Baker Books, 2007), 4.



EAGLE

King of the Birds

If I were to ask you, “Which is your favorite bird?,” you might reply, “The eagle.” Just as the lion is King of the Beasts, so the eagle is King of the Birds. Look at him there in his glistening golden plumage, with his hooked beak, cruel talons, and fierce eye. He makes his nest in an inaccessible place, on a rock ledge high up in the mountains.

The eagle has superb, wide-spreading wings, with feathers at their tips which splay out like a fan. The prophet Ezekiel talked about “A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors” (Ezekiel 17:3). King Solomon was observant as he marveled at “the way of an eagle in the sky” (Proverbs

30:19). And the prophet Isaiah wrote that people who wait upon God “shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles” (Isaiah 40:31). With his wild sharp eyes, the eagle can spot his prey a long way off and then swoop down on it like a thunderbolt. The eagle is also notable for the way he trains his young to fly, ruthlessly pushing fledglings out of the nest and then dropping quickly down to catch them in mid-air on his back. (See Deuteronomy 32:11.)

Some people have the natural leadership ability of an eagle. They are powerful and commanding. They are intelligent and have great ability. Always in the public eye, they are never caught on the wrong foot. They have poise. They are never at a loss for words.

But such people also have a problem: They have so much self-reliance and natural ability, they feel they can do it all themselves. In fact, they are not aware that they need God.

In the Bible, eagles have one great flaw or defect: They are included in a list of unclean birds. With all their gifts and graces, people who share the eagle’s leadership skill also have a need to repent from sin and get right with God.



RAVEN

Helpful Horace

As you can see, the raven is a big, black bird, the largest member of the crow family. His dark color has a special kind of beauty. The raven enjoys flying in a high wind on the tops of hills and mountains, often indulging in aerobatics and flying upside down. The rook makes a cawing sound, but the raven has a deep-throated croak.

He's a helpful bird—a helpful Horace. When the great Flood started to subside, Noah opened the window of the ark and sent out a raven to fly around until the water dried up from the surface of the earth.

When Elijah the prophet proclaimed to King Ahab that there would be a drought for three and a half years, God told Elijah to hide

away on the banks of the brook Cherith, by the Jordan River, and he commanded the ravens to feed him with bread and meat every morning and evening. They are able to do this, Jesus explains, because God in the first place feeds them. He pointed out, “Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them” (Luke 12:24).

What kind of person resembles the traits of the raven? Those who are thoughtful and helpful, always ready to lend a hand. If there is some urgent appeal for a lost cause, they can be counted on to give something. These are people who visit the elderly and have the good of society at heart.

But it's possible to be like this and still not be right with God. Ravens, like eagles, are in the unclean list of birds. So “raven people” are sinners, needing God's forgiveness. They're similar to the Pharisees in the time of Jesus. The apostle Paul says, “Not knowing the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness” (Romans 10:3).



OWL

Worldly wise? Heavenly Wise?

The owl is an attractive and mysterious bird. With his alarming screech or haunting “twit twoo,” he can seem spooky. Because of his downy plumage, his flight is almost noiseless as he swoops on his prey. His large, forward-looking eyes give him superb night vision. Because of his nocturnal habits, humankind has sometimes associated the owl with the sinister side of life. Yet he has long been regarded as very intelligent.

A wise old owl sat in an oak. The more he heard, the less he spoke. The less he spoke, the more he heard. Why don't we copy that wise old bird?

Wisdom and knowledge are important. Our intelligence makes us different from all the other

creatures on the earth. “So God created humans in his image” (Genesis 1:27), with the ability to think, love, appreciate, and create. All the schools of the world show the tremendous importance we place on being able to think straight and take action to achieve things. “The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight” (Proverbs 4:7).

Yet it is possible to collect an enormous amount of information and insight into affairs and not be truly wise. You can become very intelligent and yet be motivated only by worldly wisdom. In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the hero, Christian, is led astray by Worldly Wiseman, who directs him along the wrong route. Later, Christian is sternly rebuked by Evangelist. “Sometimes there is a way that seems to be right, but in the end it is the way to death” (Proverbs 16:25).

The owl, for all his wise looks, is found in the unclean list of birds. He needs cleansing; he needs salvation. We do, too—and there's only one way: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10).



CUCKOO

Thoroughly Selfish!

Everyone is glad to hear the sound of the cuckoo in spring. His voice is unmistakable: “Cuckoo!” These two notes echo through the woods. Poets mention cuckoos, composers imitate his song, and Swiss craftsmen make cuckoo clocks.

But in character, the cuckoo is a horrible bird—thoroughly selfish and lazy! He is a “me first” creature. He just looks after number one. Nobody else matters.

When the cuckoos arrive in the spring, they lay their eggs in the nests of small host birds, such as meadow pipits, hedge sparrows, or reed warblers. The female cuckoo watches the host or foster birds build their nests and begins laying when the host or foster birds lay. She chooses a moment when the foster parent is absent and

then has the cheek to remove one egg and replace it with one of her own. Can you believe it? The young cuckoo hatches quickly—in about twelve days. This chick has an inbred instinct to burrow under the smaller eggs of the other bird, balance them one by one on its back and then push them up over the side of the nest so they drop down far below onto the ground and smash.

But that’s not an end of it. The host bird proceeds to feed this selfish cuckoo chick and fatten it up, just as though it were its own baby bird. What’s more, the female cuckoo aims to lay about twelve eggs, so she disrupts the domestic routine of twelve nests!

The Bible describes cuckoo people in very straight terms: “Fools think their own way is right” (Proverbs 12:15). “The way of the wicked is like deep darkness” (Proverbs 4:19).

Before we point the finger, however, remember that, in some ways, everyone in the world is like the cuckoo: “every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Romans 3:19).



OSTRICH

Dimwit—But Can't She Run!

The birds of the Bible are amazing. Look at this one: the ostrich. She is the largest bird. And although she has wings, which she likes to flap, she cannot fly. She is much too big and heavy. She weighs up to 336 pounds.

The ostrich stands nearly eight feet high, and she is a great runner. She takes long strides of 15 feet and can run at 40 miles per hour. Her only enemies are lions, cheetahs, and human beings. Just look at those legs—so long and powerful. Each foot has only two toes; the longest is seven inches. The nails and claws are strong, thick, and effective weapons if the bird is cornered. The voice of the male bird is a deep roar with a hissing sound.

The ostrich is a desert bird and can live for long periods without water. She travels in small troops of five or six; usually there is one male in the group. These troops have been known to form mixed herds with zebras and antelopes.

Is it true that the ostrich hides her head in the sand, believing that she can hide from her enemies? Actually, no! She has keen eyesight, and she stretches her lanky neck along the ground, peering intently at some far-off threat. At a distance, one can only see the bird's bulky body, which gives the impression that her head is buried.

Despite her large size and speed, we read in the Bible this strange statement: "It deals cruelly with its young, as if they were not its own . . . because God has made it forget wisdom and given it no share in understanding" (Job 39:16–17).

So the poor ostrich is something of a dimwit. Let's face it, the size of her head compared with her body is small. How unlike the wise old owl! But that's the way God has made her. She's also in the unclean list of birds. May those powerful legs simply run into the ever-open arms of our merciful God!



DOVE

Blameless and Innocent

We now come to the very heart of the message that the Bible's birds can bring us. This is the most important thing in the universe: the gospel. It is good news for the whole world.

In the Bible, the dove, the pigeon, and the turtledove seem to be interchangeable. They all represent the same ideas. None of these three birds is "unclean." The Bible says clearly, "You may eat any clean birds" (Deuteronomy 14:11). Although they are smaller than turkeys, geese, ducks, and chickens, they are excellent food.

These three birds have strong wings. For centuries, they have been message carriers. The record with the US Army Signal Corps is 2,300 miles! They also have a strong homing instinct. Three time, Noah sent a dove from the ark to

see how the water was drying out from the earth's surface.

Doves also speak of escape, of getting away from it all. "Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, 'O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest'" (Psalm 55:5-6).

When God wanted to portray the Holy Spirit, he chose the dove. When Jesus was baptized by his second cousin, John the Baptist, "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3:21-22).

The dove, pigeon, and turtledove also relate to Jesus himself. In character, they are blameless, innocent, and pure. So was he. The writer to the Hebrews says that the Lord Jesus was "holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). What a wonderful qualification for being the sacrificial victim on the rough cross of Golgotha, of Calvary, for the sin, evil, and wickedness of the whole human race!



PIGEON

Crucifixion

We now speak directly of sacrifice. At Mount Sinai, Moses gave detailed instructions. Farm animals were to be slaughtered on a stone altar: bulls, heifers, rams, lambs, sheep, kids, and goats, and their blood was to be poured out and sprinkled around. This was the job of the priest on behalf of people who needed to get right with God. They had sinned, and the penalty for sin was death: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). And this death means separation from God, from everything which is good, right, wholesome, beautiful, and satisfying. Without God, all is darkness, worthless, and under a curse. As each needy person made his sacrifice, he put his hand on the animal’s head, identifying himself with it, and then the sacrificial animal was put to death

instead of him, to obliterate his sin and wash it completely away; “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22)—no pardon or forgiveness.

It was a divine exchange, a heavenly merciful solution to the problem. The animals bore the human punishment.

What of the birds: the dove, pigeon, and turtledove? The farm animals were relatively expensive. People who couldn’t afford them could sacrifice these birds instead. They were much cheaper. When Mary and Joseph presented the baby Jesus for circumcision in the temple, the sacrifice they made was of “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24).

The priest would take the first bird, kill it, and sprinkle its blood on the side and at the bottom of the altar. That was for the sin offering. The second bird was sacrificed as a burnt offering. These taken together made an atonement (literally at-one-ment), to make a person at one with God, to put him back in harmony with God.

We come to the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross. He had to die only once, but what a terrible once. He, very God of very God, yet also Son of man and the Suffering Servant, in one self-giving traumatic act, hung helpless on the cross for six agonizing hours, mocked and scorned, pierced through by cruel spikes, spattered by blood, with a crown of thorns biting deep into his innocent brow.



TURTLEDOVE Resurrection

We continue with the train of thought led by the three birds: dove, pigeon, and turtle dove. When considering the execution of Jesus on a rough piece of wood, the worst thing was that he was momentarily cut off from his otherwise unbroken fellowship with the Father. In desperation, he cried out with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). But at the end, as he reached the finish line of his wonderful, victorious, overcoming life, he again shouted out—triumphantly this time—“It is finished” (John 19:30) and died.

What was the meaning of this terrible and extraordinary event? The apostle Peter says, “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (1 Peter 3:18). And the apostle Paul writes, “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. . . . God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:19, 21).

What came next? Do the birds have anything to tell us? Yes! In Leviticus 14, we read about the cleansing or healing of lepers. The priest was to take two live, clean birds. One he killed in an earthenware jar over running water, and the living bird dipped in its blood, was used to sprinkle the leper seven times. Then the live bird was set free.

These two birds combine to show what Jesus did. He died, but then he flew away! Miraculously free!

On the third day after his death, in the first twilight of dawn, Jesus rose from the dead, leaving behind his grave clothes, dancing out from the rocky prison of the tomb, joyously springing out into the freedom of eternal life. He vindicated all that he had died for. The human race was taken by surprise!



SPARROW

Truly a Christian

You can find the cheerful chirping sparrow in every country with a temperate climate. His coloring may seem humdrum: buff, brown, fawn, gray, black, and white. His song is not very distinctive—just a “cheep, cheep.” Sparrows love to live together, and they have a cheeky, pugnacious personality; they are always scrapping. They also thrive in towns and villages. They like to live in the neighborhood of people.

This is the familiar house sparrow, and, according to the Bible, he is a clean bird. This is a great blessing. The sparrow may be commonplace, not rare or remarkable. But he is in the right place. He is where God wants him to be. In fact, the sparrow is right with God.

The sparrow had not always been like this. When he heard about the Ten Commandments, he knew right away that he had broken them—if not in deed, then in his thoughts and in his heart. He instinctively agreed with the apostle Paul that “there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:22–23). Full of dismay, he felt thoroughly condemned, cornered by God. The Holy Spirit, Jesus said, convicts the world “of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment” (John 16:8). So, in desperation, the sparrow repented, did a U-turn, turned from his old selfish way to God’s way. And now he knows the reality of sins forgiven and a real joy in his heart in the certainty of eternal life. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Bible gives us two snapshots of the sparrow. The psalmist writes, “Even the sparrow finds a home . . . where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God” (Psalm 84:3). He was welcomed there, not shooed away. What a privilege! His bustling about and squabbling would not disturb the joyful singing of God’s praises.

Jesus pointed out that two sparrows are sold for a farthing, or even five for two farthings, yet “not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matthew 10:29). “Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Luke 12:6–7).



STORK

Arriving on Time

The white stork is striking to look at and a friendly bird by nature. There are about half a million storks in the world. Most are found in Eastern Europe, but some reside in western Asia, Spain and Portugal, France and Germany. The Netherlands has 700 nesting pairs. With their seven-foot wingspan, storks love to soar on upward currents of air and then glide, just like eagles. That's how they migrate.

Storks are known for being friendly to people, building their bulky stick nests on roof tops and chimneys or fir trees nearby (Psalm 104:17). They noisily clatter their bills and flap about. They have a caring nature; the Hebrew word for the white stork means "merciful, kind." In European folklore, the portrayal of storks as

baby carriers is ancient. In the nineteenth century, it was popularized by Hans Christian Andersen.

In the Bible, storks have an important message for us. Jeremiah says, "Even the stork in the heavens knows its times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming, but my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord" (Jeremiah 8:7). Here we have the pattern of regular migration, in spring and autumn, the Jordan valley being a particularly important bird highway. Storks from Eastern Europe would fly down past Jeremiah's house southward on their way to Africa. They knew where they were going, and they would make their deliberate, leisurely way with regularity.

We can imagine the prophet standing in front of disobedient and rebellious Jews and pointing out, with burning indignation, "Just look at those great white and black birds. They fly past us twice a year, traveling a long way, to build their nests. They do it for survival, and they are obeying God's advice and law for them. But how about you? Do you take any notice of what God wants *you* to do?"



SWALLOW Missionary

The swallow is a popular bird. His skimming flight is attractive, as is his whole streamlined shape, with pointed wings and forked tail. Mr. Swallow was a with-it modern bird, and when he heard about Jesus, he was reluctant to follow him. He felt his lifestyle would be cramped. It would, he thought, be so dull, and he would not be able to fly around as he wanted to.

But then, one day, he met with God. Jesus once said, “Whoever is not with me is against me” (Matthew 12:30). That really scared the swallow; he could not continue to sit on the fence. So he turned around and changed direction completely, wholeheartedly accepting “the cup of salvation” which the Lord Jesus graciously held out to him. Like the sparrow, he was now going to go God’s way, and with a glad heart, too.

A new enthusiasm which he had never known before came bubbling up inside him. In contrast to his old agnostic modern self, he now loved to tell other birds what had happened to him. “Hey, Mr. Swift, why are you going nowhere so fast? You’re dashing about. You never seem to be at rest. As though you are hunting for something you don’t know what. You need to repent and look away to Jesus!”

Already Mr. Swallow was proving himself as a missionary, proclaiming the truth of salvation to any bird that would listen to him. And how he loved to cheep and tweet the praises of God with all other like-minded birds. So it did not surprise me to find that he was early commissioned to swoop off, with his strong darting wing beats, to migrate to other continents and spread the glad news of the eternal life that the Lord Jesus gives. For the Savior said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18–19). “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15).

What a harvest there will finally be of “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9).



HEN

What of the Future?

The Bible gives us a veritable farmyard flavor with its mention of the domestic fowl, the hen. The word in Greek is *ornis*, which quite simply means “bird.” So the cock and the hen are basic birds.

Jesus uses the illustration of this ordinary, useful bird with great force. On one occasion, when he spoke about Jerusalem, he was obviously upset and distressed. He said:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one

who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (Matthew 23:37–39)

A little later, on the Mount of Olives, Peter, James, John, and Andrew crowded round him, eagerly questioning him about the future. He began by warning them not to follow false messiahs. And he said that, until the end of time, there would be “wars and rumors of wars,” along with famines and earthquakes. The disciples were to expect this and not be unduly alarmed. He warned that they would be persecuted and would have the opportunity to speak boldly to political rulers. They would be hated and would be put to death. Then, in the same breath, he foretold that Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Romans (which occurred forty years later). But then, leaping over a great stretch of time, he said that, at the very end of human history, there will be a period of great violence and tribulation.

Finally, when the powers of heaven are shaken, the Son of man (the Lord Jesus himself) will return on the clouds of heaven, and “with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matthew 24:30–31).