

Prayer and Birds

Birds in the Psalms

Alison Morgan

The Psalmists make many references to birds in their prayers, including 24 references to eight particular species: dove, sparrow, swallow, owl, eagle, stork, raven and quail. Birds serve both as illustrations which help the psalmist express strong emotions and as vehicles of communication between the psalmist and God. A number of distinct themes can be discerned:

1. General references

- 8.8 – man has dominion over the birds of the air
- 11.1 – flee like a bird to the mountains
- 17.8 – hide me in the shadow of your wings
- 36.7 – all people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings
- 50.11 – I know all the birds of the air
- 55.6 – ‘O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest;
- 57.1 – in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge
- 61.4 – let me find refuge under the shelter of your wings
- 63.7 – in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy
- 68.13 – the wings of a dove covered with silver, its pinions with green gold
- 74.19 – do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals
- 78.27 – he rained flesh upon them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas
- 79.2 – They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food
- 84.3 – even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars
- 91.4 – he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler ... he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge
- 102.6 – I am like an owl of the wilderness, a little owl of the waste places; I lie awake like a lonely bird on the housetop
- 103.5 – your youth is renewed like the eagle’s
- 104.12 – by the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches
- 104.17 – in them [cedars of Lebanon] the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees
- 105.40 – quails
- 124.7 – we have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers
- 139.9 – if I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me
- 147.9 – he gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry
- 148.10 – praise the Lord... flying birds!

1. Refuge/Protection

- 17.8 – hide me in the shadow of your wings
- 36.7 – all people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings
- 57.1 – in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge
- 61.4 – let me find refuge under the shelter of your wings
- 63.7 – in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy
- 74.19 – do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals
- 91.4 – he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler ... he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge
- 103.5 – your youth is renewed like the eagle’s
- 139.9 – if I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me

2. Provision

- 50.11 – I know all the birds of the air
- 78.27 - he rained flesh upon them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas
- 84.3 – even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars
- 104.17 – in them [cedars of Lebanon] the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees
- 147.9 – he gives to the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry

3. Escape

- 11 – flee like a bird to the mountains
- 55.6 - 'O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest;
- 124.7 – we have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers

4. Praise

- 104.12 – by the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches
- 148.10 – praise the Lord... flying birds!

5. Human dominion

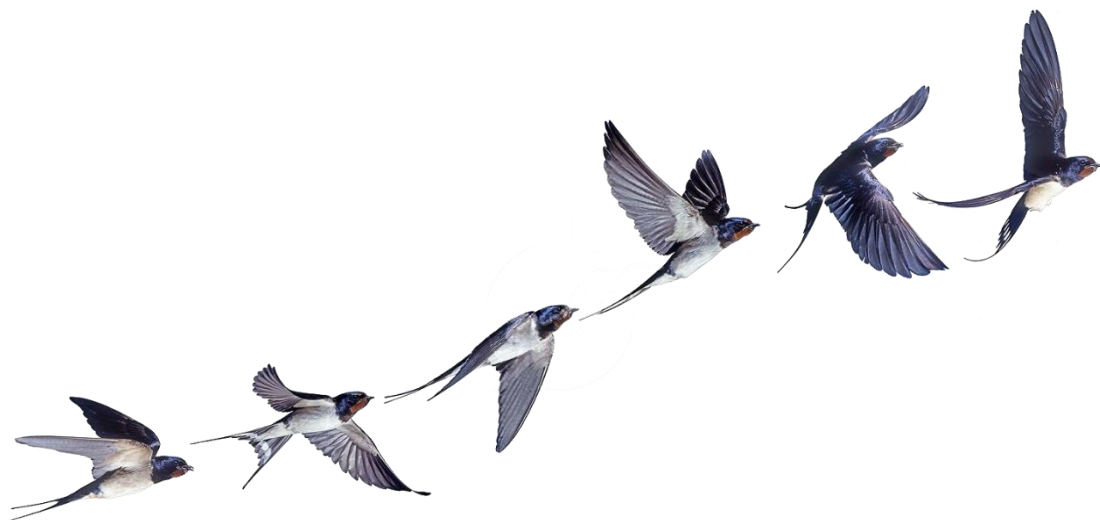
- 8 – man has dominion over the birds of the air

6. Lament

- 102.6 – I am like an owl of the wilderness, a little owl of the waste places; I lie awake like a lonely bird on the housetop

7. Destruction

- 68.13 – the spoil: the wings of a dove covered with silver, its pinions with green gold
- 79.2 - They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food



Notes from *World Turned Upside Down: The Psalms & the Spirituality of Pain*, Alison Morgan, BRF 2023.