

The Birds in Genesis 15,9-10

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Very few propositions concerning Genesis 15 are likely to evoke instant and universal assent. One such might, however, be the claim: this is a problem-filled chapter¹. In my presentation I wish to focus on two, related questions posed by Genesis 15. First, why is there mention of two birds alongside the three animals in God's command to Abram in V. 9? Second, what does the statement of V. 10b that, contrary to his handling of the animals, Abram did "not divide" the birds indicate concerning the fate of the latter? Or, in other words, were the birds killed by Abram as well, and if not, to what end are they kept alive?

Space constraints permit only a cursory *forschungs-geschichtlich* review on the above questions. Broadly speaking, one may distinguish two main understandings concerning the birds' significance and fate in the exegetical tradition. A first such understanding might be called the "sacrificial"; it appears already in the second century B.C. relecture of Genesis 15 in Jubilees 14:9-19². This approach takes its starting point from the laws of Leviticus concerning opferfähig creatures. Among such creatures are the "dove" (*tūr*) and the "young pigeon" (*ben yōnāh*), see Lev 1,14-17; 5,7-10. Against the background of these Levitical laws, the *tūr* and the *gōzāl* (the latter being equated with the *ben yōnāh* of Leviticus) of Gen 15,9 are seen, in this approach, as intended sacrificial victims. This approach likewise takes its cue for interpreting the notice of 15,10b that Abram did "not divide (*bātar*)" from Le-

1 For an extensive bibliography on Genesis 15, see C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, BKAT I/2, pp. 247-50.

2 The birds are understood in "sacrificial" terms also by e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 1, 184 and Nachmanides. A currently popular version of this understanding sees the mention of the birds in Gen 15,9-10 as part of a secondary effort to assimilate what was originally a Droh or Schwurritus involving simply the heifer of Gen 15,9 (compare Jer 34,18) to a "sacrifice", see e.g., S. E. LOEWENSTAMM, *Zur Traditionsgeschichte des Bundes zwischen den Stücken* : VT 18 (1968) 500-507.

viticus, specifically from the prohibition of "dividing asunder (*hibdil*)" the bird holocaust in Lev 1,17. In this perspective the author of Gen 15,10b would be depicting Abram as acting in accordance with the sacrificial prescriptions of Leviticus. Conversely, he is giving us to understand that Abram disposed of the birds according to the positive procedure set down in Lev 1,16-17, i.e. he wrung their necks and then tore the wings from the body. In other words, Abram did (sacrificially) slaughter the birds as well as the animals, only using another method to do so.

The second major interpretative approach to the birds of Gen 15,9-10 might be called the allegorical. It surfaces already in Philo and the Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo, and has assumed many variations over time. In it, the birds cited in Gen 15,9 have significance, not as future sacrificial victims, but as standing for some other reality. Generally, the reality (or realities) the birds are thought to symbolize are positive, e.g., the people of Israel as a whole³, representative groups or figures within it⁴, cosmological and epistemological principles⁵, or fertility signs⁶. Occasionally, however, one of the birds- or even both of them- are identified with some historical oppressor of the Jews (just as are the three animals in the "allegorical understanding")⁷. This approach likewise involves a distinctive reading of the notice of Gen 15,10b, i.e. Abram's "non-division" of the birds would imply, not that he sacrificed them in some other way, but rather that he kept them alive, thereby suggesting the survival of the good realities the birds symbolize (in contrast to the animals whose "division" points to the elimination of the negative forces they represent). Fi-

3 So e.g., RASHI; B. JACOB, *Das erste Buch der Tora* (Berlin, 1934) 405.

4 In *Biblical Antiquities* 23:7 the "dove" (young pigeon) is identified with Abraham himself, the "turtledove" with the "prophets" among his descendants. Abarbenel equates the turtledove with Moses, the "young pigeon" with Aaron. For Augustine, *City of God* 16,24 the birds represent Abraham's "spiritual progeny".

5 In Philo's *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 3,3 (cf. *Who is the Heir?* 25,126) the "dove" (young pigeon) stands for the planets, while the "turtledove" represents the fixed stars. Alternatively, they symbolize the corporeal and incorporeal forms of reason, respectively.

6 So H. CAZELLES, *Connexions et structure de Gen.*, XV: RB 69 (1962) 337-38.

7 In *Genesis Rabbah* 44:15 the turtledove is identified with Edom (a code word for Rome) while the term *gōzāl* is understood as a qualification of this from the stem *gāzāl*, meaning "rapacious". In *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer* 28 the turtledove symbolizes the "sons of Ishmael" (= the Muslim Empire), while the young pigeon stands for Israel.

nally, it should be mentioned that e.g., Philo, Genesis Rabbah and Rashi offer both "sacrificial" and "symbolic" approaches in their comments on the birds of Gen 15,9-10.

In concluding this survey I would point out that scholars have only rarely attempted to adduce extra-Biblical parallels to the mention of the birds in Gen 15,9-10⁸. One such parallel has, however, been noted by M. WEINFELD⁹, and following him G.F. HASEL¹⁰, i.e. a third millenium Sumerian record of a treaty concluded between Eanatum king of Lagash and an unnamed ruler of Umma, known as the "Vulture Stela". As my personal contribution in this presentation I shall try to develop these authors' passing references to this text in terms of its possible significance for the elucidation of the "bird reference" in Gen 15,9-10. I begin by noting that WEINFELD's and HASEL's specific reference is to a particularly obscure portion of the Vulture Stela which has recently been translated- with a concluding question mark- by J.S. COOPER as follows: (Eanatum) "made up the eyes of two doves with kohl, and adorned their heads with cedar (foliage). For Utu, king of ..., in the Ebabbar of Larsa, he had them offered as sacrificial bulls?"¹¹. The uncertainty of the reading/translation of this text obviously makes any attempt to use it for the elucidation of our Genesis passage problematical. It should, however, be pointed out that, contrary to the impression suggested by WEINFELD's and HASEL's allusions, mention of "doves" in the Vulture Stela is by no means confined to this one passage. In fact "doves" recur repeatedly in a series of similiar sequences con-

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- 8 N. LOHFINK, *Die Landverheissung als Eid*, SBS 28 (Stuttgart, 1967), p. 63 cited a Mari text (ARM II, 37) in which there would be reference to the (attempted) slaughter of a "puppy" and a "bird" (*hazzum*) in the context of a treaty-making as a parallel to Gen 15:9. Subsequently, however, philologists have come to favor the rendering "goat" rather than "bird" for the term in question, see e.g., M. HELD, *Philological Notes on the Mari Covenant Rituals*, BASOR 200 (1970) 39-40.
- 9 *The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East*, JOAS 90 (1970) 197-98.
- 10 לַיָּוֹן, TWAT IV, c. 365. In this context HASEL avers that a sacrifice of birds is likewise mentioned in a treaty between Naram-Sin and the Elamites published by W. HINZ (ZA 58 [1967], 66-98). In my reading of this treaty I find no mention of a sacrifice of birds, however.
- 11 *Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions: The Lagash-Umma Border Conflict*, SANE 2/1 (Malibu, 1983), p. 47. Rather different renderings of the passage are given in the recent translations of W.H.P. RÖMER, *TUAT I:4*, p. 306 and T.J.H. KRISPIJN, in K.R. VEENHOF, ed., *Schrijvend Verleden* (Leiden-Zutphen, 1983), p. 6. All of them moreover differ from the older version of S.N. KRAMER which WEINFELD and HASEL cite.

cerning the oaths sworn by the subjugated ruler of Umma and where the sense seems better assured than in the above quoted passage. By way of example, I cite the relevant portion of one of these sequences in COOPER's translation:

(Eanatum) made up the eyes of two doves with kohl, and adorned their heads with cedar (foliage). He r[released them] to Ninhursag in Kesh: "After what he has declared and has reiterated to [my] mother Ninhursag, if any leader [in] Umma re [neg] es, when [he opposes or contests the agree] - ment, [wh] enever [he violates this agreement], may the great [battle net] of Ninhursag by which he has sworn, descend upon Umma!"¹².

According to this and related presentations of the Vulture Stela, a standard feature of Sumerian treaty-making was the release of decorated doves towards the sanctuary of a given deity as messengers summoning that deity to punish infractions of the agreement. In light of this evidence, I suggest that the mention of the "turtledove and young pigeon" at the start of the covenant-making account in Genesis 15 reflects the author's awareness of the ancient Near Eastern tradition associating birds of this sort with ratification of treaties. I further propose that his specifying that, in contrast to the animals, the birds were not "divided" (15,10) bespeaks his consciousness that, in this tradition, birds were kept alive, rather than killed. At the same time, it should be noted that, unlike the Vulture Stela, Genesis 15 makes no mention of a "messenger role" for its birds. This state of affairs appears to hang together with the fact that in Genesis Yahweh, the sole deity recognized by Israel, is himself a party to the treaty; he is physically present for its ratification and is the one to obligate himself, see 15,18-21. There is, accordingly, no need of messenger activity by the birds with regard to him (or any other divinity), comparable to what we have in the Vulture Stela. In other words, given the peculiarity of the presentation in Genesis and its "monotheistic" presuppositions, the birds- and their being kept alive when the animals are slaughtered- are, in fact, functionless. This consideration, in turn, suggests that the author's mention of the two birds- as well as his notice about their not being cut up- is reflective of a Traditionszwang, i.e. he mentions these particular birds because he knew them to be customary components of the happening he describes, even though he is unable to give them any actual role in the proceedings.

12 Reconstructing History, p. 46.

In closing I wish to refer to several further items of evidence which might add credence to the supposition that the author of Genesis 15, writing more than a millenium after the composition of the Vulture Stela could, nonetheless, very well have known the "treaty-traditions" embedded in that text. First of all, the Vulture Stela devotes considerable attention to the "battle net" of various divinities who are summoned to cast those nets on the leader of Umma should he violate his sworn commitments. As M. WEINFELD points out, however, this motif finds a Biblical reflex in Ezek 17,20 where Yahweh announces concerning the treaty-breaker Zedekiah "I will spread my net over him..."¹³. Secondly, there are several Psalmtexts which speak of a "dove" in ways reminiscent of the Vulture Stela. In particular, I would point to MT Ps 74,19-20a which juxtaposes appeals that Yahweh act on behalf of "thy dove (*tōrekā*)" and "thy covenant (*labberit*)"¹⁴ - compare the presence of the same two terms in Gen 15,9.18, as well as to Ps 68:12-14 where a "dove (*yonah*)" whose wings are "covered with silver, its pinions with green gold" appears to function as the messenger of Israel's triumph¹⁵. Given these indications, the attempt made in this paper to interpret the "bird reference" in Gen 15,9-10 in terms of a far older Sumerian passage appears less far-fetched than it might seem at first sight.

13 Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School (Oxford, 1972), p. 73 and n. 6.

14 On this text, see my The Covenantal Dove in Ps. LXXIV, 19-20, forthcoming in VT.

15 On this text, see my The Messenger Dove in Ps 68,12-14, forthcoming in ETL.