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Birds of a Feather: Animal Criticism, Domestication, and The Use of Bird Imagery and Metaphor in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes

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Abstract

Wisdom literature is replete with the use of animals for a variety of rhetorical ends, often explained as a function of the universality of such literature in its analysis of nature and the world. In this article, I examine the role and function of bird imagery in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. I do so with the goal of demonstrating the underlying rhetorical ends to which fowl can be put to service, "thinking with" birds in a Straussian sense. Yet the ability to "think with" fauna like birds from a literary perspective is possible because of processes of domestication. I conclude with preliminary thoughts on how recent research on domestication and animal criticism can elucidate the malleability of bird imagery from a rhetorical perspective. In this sense, the incorporation of birds into wisdom imagery is not simply a reflection on the world as is, but rather on a particular type of domesticated (and, by implication, non-domesticated) world, a world that humans have cultivated to be or that exists as yet untamed.

Keywords: *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, birds, domestication, animal criticism.*

Introduction

An adage claims that "birds of a feather flock together." If members of a similar species tend to congregate, then, according to a classic study by Patrick Miller, so also the metaphors involving these species tend to congeal along certain semantic associations.[2] In Miller's scheme, these

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[2] "One may find in the Hebrew Bible and Ugaritic literature various similes and metaphors using different animals to convey images of swiftness, fierceness, hostility, tenderness, and the like" (Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Animal Names

associations aid in understanding the development and use of metaphors in ancient Israel and in Ugaritic literature.[3] One weakness of Miller's study is the assumption that one can determine the nature of the metaphor solely from the juxtaposition of animal traits (strength, speed, persistence) with human characteristics.[4] For instance, simply because a bull often connotes power does not mean that its metaphorical application to a human will utilize and accentuate this notion of strength positively. Indeed, the narrow picture presented in Miller's article does not allow the metaphor to be nuanced by an author's argumentation and rhetoric, and thus it potentially robs animal imagery of its flexibility. For example, the lad in Prov. 7:22 is likened to a bull not to display strength but rather to display weakness. Here, the animal's potential power is not a positive trait; rather, the focus is on leading the otherwise powerful

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as Designations in Ugaritic and Hebrew," *VT* 2 [1970]: 177). For more on the use of animal imagery (including animal worship) in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, see Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus: An Introduction to Wisdom in the Age of Empires* (Eerdmans, 2008), 130, 292, 339, 415. For a contrasting view of the development of animal proverbs in the Book of Proverbs compared to the later appearance of animal proverbs in Egyptian wisdom tradition (these proverbs being rare before the late Instruction of Ankhsheshonqy), thereby concluding that the use of animals in Proverbs is of Semitic origin, see John Day, "Foreign Semitic influence on the wisdom of Israel and its appropriation in the book of Proverbs," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 62–65.

[3] The use of animals is vital for understanding the logic of the sages. For example, comparisons in wisdom literature often appeal to the juxtaposition of mankind and animals such that surface similarities and distinctions become the platform for deeper reflection. In making such comparisons, the sages reveal an inner-working of reality in which "close observations of nature and the animal kingdom" became an integral part not only of literary *topoi* but also of an understanding of the notion of "a harmonious universe" (which of course could be subverted depending on the individual sage; James Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* [Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 27, 55). Wisdom was at times conceived of as an animal (see Sir. 14:20–27; Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 49). For an example in the psalms of the use of animal imagery in a riddle (חידה) which resembles Qohelet's view in Eccl. 3:19, see Leo G. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus*, 177.

[4] Roland E. Murphy seems to make the same error when he comments on the dynamic relationship between humans and their environment in wisdom literature, but only assesses the role of animals, such as ants, that were both small and wise (T*he Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* [Eerdmans, 1996], 113). He does not consider how animal imagery and metaphor could be employed otherwise, which will be explicated below. For a critique of Koch's "mechanistic system" of the ways of the world in wisdom literature (including the role of animal life) as well as a critique of Murphy's understanding of Yahwism in wisdom literature, see James Crenshaw, *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (Mercer, 1995), 352 n 20. R. E. Clements astutely observes concerning Job 39:13–18 how the ostrich, which was thought to be innately endowed with wisdom, at times acts absurdly, thus producing a negative exemplar from the animal world and showing how normal usage of an image or metaphor can become supple in the context of an author's rhetoric (*Wisdom in Theology* [W. B. Eerdmans, 1992], 56).

beast to slaughter, thus subverting and terminating any strength. In this manner, the image of a bull as powerful is inverted for the sake of the argument in Proverbs 7 concerning the enticements of the wicked woman and how her advances render even powerful animals dumb objects of slaughter. The point, then, is not to argue against any stable connotations and usual imagery as applied to animal metaphors, but rather to shed more light on how authors can play with imagery in a variety of ways, leveraging polyvalency or subverting a host of notions to achieve the rhetorical ends desired.[5]

This study will focus on a single image from the animal world to provide a basis for broader theoretical reflection on animal metaphors and domestication. In particular, I explore bird metaphors and imagery in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.[6] I demonstrate that bird imagery and metaphors involve certain common characteristics, but that these characteristics are flexible and an author can use them in a variety of ways within a particular rhetorical unit. Finally, I offer comments on the nature of recent publications on animal criticism and domestication to demonstrate that such flexibility is perhaps born out of a framework of the cultural background of domestication of the authors of the Hebrew Bible.[7] In this sense, the rhetorical flexibility and malleability of animals, in this case birds, in wisdom rhetoric is not simply a product of examining

[5] See, for example, the polyvalency of the lion in Hugh Pyper, "The Lion King: Yahweh as Sovereign Beast in Israel's Imaginary," in *The Bible and Posthumanism*, ed. Jennifer L. Koosed (SBL Press, 2014), 59–74.

[6] The presence of bird imagery and metaphors in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes is consistent with Solomonic lore and Israelite conceptions of topics in wisdom literature. Solomon was said to have spoken of birds in his wisdom according to 1 Kgs. 5:13.

[7] The utility of birds in this sense appears also in Mesopotamian disputation literature, which often features non-human animals generally (as in animal fables) and even entails a disputation between a bird and a fish. See Yoram Cohen and Nathan Wasserman, "Mesopotamian Wisdom Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom and the Bible*, ed. Will Kynes (Oxford University Press, 2021), 132–33. For a recent publication on the role and function of the non-human world in Wisdom literature, see Mordechai Cogan, Katharine J. Dell, and David Glatt-Gilad, eds., *Human Interaction with the Natural World in Wisdom Literature and Beyond: Essays in Honor of Tova L. Forti*, LHB/OTS 720 (Bloombury, 2023). None of these essays addresses the function of birds in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

the world; rather, it is part and parcel with a particular worldview of a constructed realm of tamed and untamed, a worldview born of domestication that also explains, then, other features of wisdom literature and its production more broadly.[8]

Prov. 1:17

כי־חנם מזרה הרשׁת בעיני כל־בעל כנף׃

"For in vain is a net spread in the eyes of every winged creature."

The opening chapter of Proverbs contains bird imagery that functions within a larger discourse of instruction between a father (the teacher) and a son (the student). After the statements about the fear of Yahweh and admonitions to heed parents' instructions in Prov. 1:7-9, the father begins a hypothetical scenario (1:10), which includes a representation of the kind of rhetoric that חטאים might use to persuade the son to act unwisely with them (1:11–14). The father exhorts the son not to follow in their tracks (1:15) since (כי) these unwise men are only hastening to do harm (1:16).

[8] The definition and utility of "wisdom" as a label for genres of biblical literature has come into question lately in Will Kynes' work *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature": The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford University Press, 2019). He insightfully traces the modern origins for the label and suggests importing it with more sophisticated notions of intertextual relationships. See also Mark Sneed, "Is the 'Wisdom Tradition' a Tradition?," *CBQ* 73 (2011): 50–71; Katharine Dell, "Deciding the Boundaries of 'Wisdom': Applying the Concept of Family Resemblance," in *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Perspectives in Israelite Wisdom Studies*, ed. Mark Sneed, AIL 23 (SBL Press, 2015), 145–60. Indeed, many of the essays in the Oxford Handbook begin their assessments with this very issue: "wisdom literature" is not easy to define. Wisdom here, then, is used advisedly as a broad umbrella of texts, such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, that employ language, skill, and tradents that invite such a modern taxonomy. Jacqueline Vayntrub states the case well: "In short, 'wisdom literature' is a phenomenon of modern scholarly imagination and organization of ancient forms of expression and literary production, a projection of modern self-fashioning. … Through this lens, the literary products identified as Wisdom texts are a manifestation of the verbal and cognitive 'skill' of their authors and tradents" ("Advice: Wisdom, Skill, and Success," in *The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom and the Bible*, ed. Will Kynes [Oxford University Press, 2021], 20).

Bird imagery appears in Prov. 1:17.[9] This verse includes a participle of uncertain meaning (מזרה),[10] but the gist of the verse indicates that if the bird (בעל כנף) can see a net set before it, it can avoid being ensnared. While the precise nature of the net relative to the bird could be understood in a variety of ways (is it spread on the ground waiting for the bird to land, or spread out with the intent to launch it towards the bird when it approaches?),[11] it is clear that the bird sees the net.[12] The bird's act of sight can modify two parts of the sentence: first, from the perspective of the bird, the net is חנם since the bird can see it;[13] second, it can also modify מזרה, the act of setting the net in the sight of the bird, which would be worthless and would not achieve the desired results.[14] In either case, the בעל כנף perceives the net and avoids being ensnared. Its awareness of the trap is the result either of its aerial view or because the bird, which is metaphorically the student in this verse, knows the signs of a trap. In this

[9] See Bernd Schipper for bird imagery also in Egyptian wisdom texts (*Sprüche (Proverbia) 1–15*, BKAT 17.1 [Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018], 137).

[10] The root and semantics of this word are debated. Without entering into a full discussion of the options, which would be beyond the scope of this paper, the root *z-r-h*, meaning "to spread," creates the least difficulties and is thus preferable (Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18A [Doubleday, 2000], 88). No matter the reading of this verb, however, the same basic picture of the bird results, namely that the bird evades capture. For more on this verb and unit in Proverbs, see Samuel L. Boyd, "To Catch a Bird: Proto-Semitic Voiced Dentals and the Phrase מזרה הרשׁת in Prov 1:17," *Revue Biblique* 130 (2023): 182–96.

[11] Bruce K. Waltke correlates this image in Prov. 1:17 with Egyptian art, where fowlers consistently approach the bird stealthily from behind to capture it (*The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, NICOT [Eerdmans, 2004], 195). It is thus in vain to set the trap before the bird by normal convention. The conclusions he derives from this observation are similar to those in this study, namely that "it is pointless to throw a net toward any flying creature, for God has given it the good sense to avoid it" (*The Book of Proverbs*, 195). Thus, the student is to be like the bird, endowed with knowledge for avoiding such traps.

[12] The phrase בעיני indicates cognitive perspective.

[13] James Crenshaw opts for a form of this option. While the above comment indicates that חנם means that the bird sees the trap and will not be caught (thus, it is in vain for the trappers), Crenshaw claims (though admitting the difficulty of the verse) that the vanity lies in the fact that bird heedlessly proceeds to its capture, like "those who scheme violence walk resolutely to their own death" (*Urgent Advice and Probing Questions*, 330). This suggestion, however, is unlikely since the rhetoric of the proverb in its context indicates that the student should strive to be like the bird in its ability to spot a trap, whereas Crenshaw's logic produces the opposite effect. See also D. Winton Thomas, "Textual and Philological Notes on some Passages in the Book of Proverbs," *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, VTSup 3 (Brill, 1960), 281–82.

[14] For an exploration of many of the difficulties of this "enigmatic parable," see Tova Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*, VTSup 118 (Brill, 2008), 27–29.

latter understanding, the bird is conceived of as a wise creature able to discern circumstances and extrapolate the presence of pitfalls, but in either case, the בעל כנף is a positive model for the student. In doing so, the wise student avoids the self-destructive acts of the חטאים (1:18), for these people inevitably act in such a manner that their own lives are at stake (1:19).

Prov. 6:5

הנצל כצבי מיד וכצפור מיד יקוש׃

"Save yourself like a gazelle from the hand [of a trapper/hunter], like a bird from the hand of a fowler."

As Prov. 1:17 indicated, bird metaphors can evoke positive images in which the student of the father's wisdom is instructed to act like the animal used in simile. The appearance of צפור in Prov. 6:5 is another example of such a use of the bird metaphor.[15] It occurs in the setting of a larger discourse involving the dangers of financial transactions with one's neighbors, especially when such financial arrangements involve surety and the fallout of repayment.[16] Such transactions as initially described in

[15] On the manner in which Prov. 6:1–19 anticipates Prov. 10–31 within the introductory chapters 1–9, see Bernd Schipper, *The Hermeneutics of Torah: Proverbs 2, Deuteronomy, and the Composition of Proverbs 1–9*, AIL 43 (SBL Press, 2021), 171.

[16] The exact scenario described in Prov. 6:1–5 is unclear. The father could be warning against giving surety for a stranger (זר) or vouching for a neighbor (רע). In the former case, guaranteeing a loan for a stranger puts one in debt to the neighbor, and threatens to make the neighbor a stranger as well. In the latter case, the same result is possible: if the neighbor defaults, he has abandoned the son into the power of the stranger and the neighbor, neglecting his promise, and he becomes (effectively) a stranger as well to the son. Another option, that the stranger and neighbor are the same, is also possible. A neighbor can, theoretically, be a זר, and the parallelism in Prov. 6:1 could create a heightening effect: granting surety for a רע can, in the context of a binding handshake, make the same רע into a זר. The extreme urgency with which the father warns the son to escape from this arrangement perhaps indicates that the first option is the most likely, though any of the scenarios could be read consistently in this context. Guaranteeing the debt of a זר, and thus someone likely of unknown repute, is much riskier than vouching for a neighbor whose reliability in matters of debt may make such surety a less risky venture. The former thus produces a situation legitimating the extreme urgency of the father to warn the son to get out of such financial obligations.

6:1 could easily result in the entrapment of the son, as indicated in 6:2.[17] Indeed, if the apodosis appears in Prov. 6:3[18] then the trap has been sprung, and the hypothetical scenario presupposes the son's capture in a defaulted loan situation. The imperative in 6:3 begins the directives for escaping from the trap into which the son has fallen (the phrase באת בכף רעך might function as the referent of the trap, namely, falling into the power of the neighbor), and the instructions continue in the lexically difficult 6:3c as well as in 6:4.[19]

At this point, the animal imagery in Prov. 6:5 sums up this section and provides a clue to the broad meaning of the whole (though by no means does the simile resolve all the ambiguities).[20] The maxim to save oneself[21] like a gazelle from "the hand" and like a bird from "the hand of the trapper" hearkens back to the situation described in 6:3b in which the son, in the hypothetical circumstance, has entered "the palm" of the neighbor and is likewise directed to save himself. The son is the animal (the gazelle

[17] Prov. 6:2 uses the root יקשׁ, creating a nice balance with יקשׁ in Prov. 6:5.

[18] In theory, the apodosis could occur in 6:1b, 6:2, or 6:3. The occurrence of the protasis in 6:3, however, has the advantage of conforming to a typology of conditional sentence presented in Thomas O. Lambdin's grammar, in which the אם (which is gapped in 6:1b–6:2, but governs the verbs, which all share the same perfective aspect as 6:1a) plus perfective is followed an imperative (*Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* [Scribner, 1971], 277). According to Lambdin, this imperative lacks the *waw*, conforming to the string of verbs in 6:1–3. If the apodosis occurred in 6:1b or 6:2, one might expect a *waw* of apodosis before the perfectives, though such a *waw* is not necessary in poetry.

[19] Prov. 6:4 conveys the urgency of the situation in ascending order, moving from deeper sleep שנה to lighter slumber תנומה; even the latter is not to be allowed as long as the son is in the trap (Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 213–14). The lexical nature of Prov. 6:3c is difficult, if not impossible, to resolve with certainty. The first issue concerns התרפס, which is from the root רפשׂ. A different reading is preserved in the LXX, namely התרפה from the Greek ἐκλύειν. Edwin Hatch and Henry A. Redpath indicate that this Greek verb is only used to translate רפה, never רפס/רפשׂ, indicating that the LXX had a Hebrew *vorlage* with רפה as the root (*A Concordance to the Septuagint and Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament (Including the Apocryphal Books)* [Baker Books, 1998], 438). The MT התרפס indicates treading oneself down, or "humbling" oneself. The LXX reading would mean "do not go weary" from importuning the neighbor. The MT is intelligible, though the LXX is consistent with the sense of urgency, and it is difficult to decide which reading is preferable. Since the MT is intelligible, it is perhaps easier to keep this reading. Another difficulty concerns רהב, which could mean "press," or a more aggressive "pester." If a more aggressive set of instructions is being proffered, then "pester" brings out better the nuance of urgency, but it is difficult to decide the connotation of the verb with certainty.

[20] For the manner in which Prov. 6:5 relates to other texts, including Eccl. 9:12, see Schipper, *Sprüche*, 379.

[21] The N-stem here is understood in its reflexive sense (Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Eisenbrauns, 1990], §23.4b).

in 6:5a, and the bird in 6:5b). The manner in which he is to execute his teacher's/father's instructions in 6:3-4 is comparable to the exertion and persistent struggle of a gazelle and a bird escaping from capture and a trap. The imagery of animals desperately escaping from capture thus follows naturally the instruction not to rest in 6:4.[22] More specifically, the use of the bird evokes images of persistence and speed, and the son is encouraged to be like the animal in his attempts to persistently and quickly disentangle himself from the financial arrangement in which he is caught.[23]

Prov. 7:23

עד יפלח חץ כבדו כמהר צפור אל־פח ולא־ידע כי־בנפשו הוא׃

"Until the arrow pierces his liver, (he is) like the rushing of a bird to a trap, though he does not know that it is in exchange for his life."[24]

An example of the use of bird imagery as a negative exemplar, in which the bird is associated with a negative connotation and the son is exhorted not to be like the bird, is present in Prov. 7:23.[25] This verse is part of an extended discourse beginning in Prov. 7:1.[26] The father exhorts the son to

[22] The command to save oneself like a gazelle and bird ends this first section. In doing so, the imagery in Prov. 6:5 does not resolve the lexical difficulties in 6:3c, which describe more specifically the actions that son/student is to take relative to the neighbor. The animal imagery does, however, convey the persistence and desperation with which the student is to execute the instructions in 6:3, thereby reinforcing the command not to sleep in 6:4. As a further, though by no means certain, possibility, the animal imagery in 6:5 impacts broadly the lexical sense in 6:3c. If an animal not only persistently attempts to escape capture, but also violently thrashes about until it has freed itself, so also perhaps the son/student in 6:3c is to not simply be persistent, but to be aggressively so.

[23] Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 335. See also the positive role of the ant in Prov. 6:6 in Arthur Walker-Jones and Suzanna R. Millar, "Afterward: An Animal Hermeneutics? Research Directions and Teaching Ideas," in *Ask the Animals: Developing a Biblical Animal Hermeneutic*, ed. Arthur W. Walker-Jones and Suzanna R. Millar, SemeiaSt 104 (SBL Press, 2024), 273.

[24] The *bet* in the verse is translated as the "bet of exchange," hence "in exchange" in the translation.

[25] On the similarities between this verse and Prov. 1:17–18, see Schipper, *Sprüche*, 438. There also exists a loose connection between Prov. 6:5 and Prov. 7:22–23 in the succession of animals pondered (Schipper, *Sprüche*, 470).

[26] Crenshaw calls Prov. 7:6–23 a "didactic narrative" (*Urgent Advice and Probing Questions*, 75).

keep his instruction and closely align himself with wisdom (Prov. 7:1–4). The benefit of such activity on the son's part involves the ability to refrain from the אשה זרה (7:5), whose actions are then described in detail in the following verses.[27] The father observes her ways, even in her insidious activities under the cover of darkness, and he observes how an unwise young man easily goes astray in her paths (7:6–9). Not only does the father know her inward disposition and her ploys while on the hunt (7:10–13), but he also knows her persuasive speech in detail (7:14–20), which had already been described in general in 7:5.

The father then portrays the manner of the unwise young man's capture and doom in Prov. 7:21.[28] To make the nature of this tragic end more evocative, the father utilizes a string of three animal metaphors, including a bird metaphor in 7:23.[29] In each of these metaphors, the usual virtue

[27] The כי in Prov. 7:6 connects the thought of this verse and the following scenario with the exhortation in Prov. 7:1–5.

[28] The verbal aspect of 7:21–22a underscores the nature of the deception, which could be understood through a variety of scenarios. In one understanding, the young man completely assents to the logic and teaching of the אשה זרה (hence the perfective aspect of הטתו, describing a completed situation) and continually ponders her "smooth" speech and propositions (hence the imperfective aspect of תדיחנו, describing both commencement and continuation of an action; see Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor on non-perfective aspect and past time [*An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §31.2b]). The participle in 22a then describes the durative thoughtlessness in which the son follows the promiscuous woman. The second understanding involves the same perfective notion of the first verb, but analyzes the second verb as a *yaqtul* perfective. Normally such *yaqtul* perfectives would have a *tsere* and not a *hireq yod* since the closed syllable *-tulø* shortens the historically long vowel in the proto-Hebrew base of the *hifil* verb (**yahaqtīl*>**yaqtil* [intervocalic elision of the *heh* and shortening of the [ī] to i]>*yaqtēl*, as in יִדְבַּר in Ps. 47:4). With the addition of the suffix, however, these forms in the *hifil* retain an open, final syllable, allowing the historic ī to remain long, resulting in a *hireq yod* in the MT and losing any marked distinction with imperfective *yaqtulu* forms (**yahaqtīlanhu*>**yaqtīlannu* [intervocalic elision of the *heh* in the original second syllable and progressive, proximate assimilation of the *heh* in the 3ms object suffix *hu*]>**yaqtīlennu*, as in תַּדִּיחֶנּוּ in Prov. 7:21b [though this verb, being I-*nun*, has the added feature of the assimilation of this consonant to the *daleth*, **tandīḥennu*>*taddīḥennu*]). In this scenario, the two perfective verbs (one *qatal*, the other a preterite *yaqtul*) denote the young man's completed assent to the promiscuous woman, which leads to his thoughtless and continual walking after her (hence the participle הולך). For more on the linguistic developments of the perfective prefixed verbal form and imperfective, see Joshua Blau (though he would opt instead for the label "future" or "indicative present" since he argues for a tense-based verbal system in Biblical Hebrew), *Phonology and Morphology of Biblical Hebrew*, LSAWS 2 (Eisenbrauns, 2010), 150–51, 189, 196–97.

[29] This assertion that there are three metaphors in Prov. 7:22–23 assumes the textual correction of אויל to איל, a possible error that arose if the doubled consonantal *yod* was written twice as in later Rabbinic Hebrew (אייל, see Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* [Judaica

espoused by appeal to the animal is subverted as the animal meets its doom. The strength associated with the bull is to no avail as this powerful animal is led to slaughter (see the introductory section of this article). The ram, which often connotes metaphorical might and royalty, is subdued in chains, thereby negating its associations of power.[30] Likewise, the speed and agility of the bird is subverted. This very speed was evoked in Prov. 6:5 as a positive trait, part of the exhortation for the son to quickly remove himself from his financial trap. In Prov. 7:23, however, this virtue of speed is turned into a vice. The bird's swiftness hastens it to a trap before it realizes that its life is at stake. Thus, both Prov. 6:5 and Prov. 7:23 employ the metaphor of a swift bird. Whereas Prov. 6:5 used this imagery to encourage the son to imagine himself as a bird and act accordingly, in Prov. 7:23, the son is instructed to avoid being like the swift foul. Indeed, the simpleton (פתאם) of Prov. 7:22 acts in this manner, and the bird imagery is employed to provide a negative simile, what the wise young son is not supposed to do.[31]

Prov. 23:5

התעיף עיניך בו ואיננו כי עשׂה יעשׂה־לו כנפים כנשׁר יעוף השׁמים׃

"Does it fly away when your eyes look at it and it is not? For it will make for itself wings like a vulture,[32] flying to the heavens."

Press, 1989], 48) and the first *yod* was mistaken for a *waw*. This second mistake would be easy given the orthographic/graphemic similarity between *yod* and *waw* at times in the development of the Hebrew script. Schipper sees the teacher as sarcastic (*Sprüche*, 471).

[30] This interpretation assumes the correctness of the reading in the LXX of "chains." See Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18B (Doubleday, 2009), 249–50.

[31] See a more extensive examination of the rhetoric of this chapter and its reuse in William A. Tooman, "Aphorisms and Admonitions: The Reuse of Proverbs 7 in 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman (4Q184)," in *Reading Proverbs Intertextually*, ed. Katharine J. Dell and Will Kynes, LHB/OTS 629 (T & T Clark, 2019), 158.

[32] Peter Altmann points to an abundance of evidence, linguistically and iconographically, for identifying the נשר, often translated "eagle," but perhaps best "lappet-faced vulture." He helpfully indicates that the term could also

Another bird metaphor appears in Prov. 23:5. This verse is part of an association of maxims on wealth and poverty in Prov. 23:1–8, a section of Proverbs that parallels and borrows from the Egyptian work Wisdom of Amenemope. The first of these maxims in Prov. 23:1–3 concerns one's behavior before a ruler. The instructions pertain to one's evaluation of standing at meals, during which portions were often allotted in accordance with royal favor. By focusing on one's own meal, one prevents comparing how much others receive and, therefore, comparing the status of co-participants in the meal. In this manner, the recipient of the food remains satisfied with his portion and does not let hunger or greed motivate his actions and comportment before the ruler, dispositions that could communicate avarice and ingratitude.

The third maxim is similar to the first, involving a meal, but in this example, the sponsor of the meal is not a ruler but a stingy person. This situation hearkens to Prov. 23:3 with the use of the same phrase in Prov. 23:6 ("do not desire his delicacies," אל תתאיו למטעמתיו). The warning is the same, but the reason is different. The stingy person may outwardly show the generosity of the ruler, but inwardly keeps an account and will ask for a return on his generosity. Thus, one does not keep to keep the food of the stingy person, but will rather vomit it back to the miser (23:8).

A stern warning against striving too hard for wealth is inserted between these two maxims, both of which concern the dangers of receiving wealth and provisions from two different sources.[33] In this context, the author of the maxim employs bird imagery through the use of a vulture (נשר). The first maxim warned of the dangers of avarice at the ruler's table, for such greed is poor behavior in the ruler's presence and will not result in lasting

refer to a larger category than subspecies labels can characterize. See Altmann, *Banned Birds: The Birds of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14*, Archaeology and the Bible 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 77 n. 2, 79–91.

[33] The use of the bird here also has broader use elsewhere in Sumerian and Egyptian proverbs, also describing the fleeting nature of wealth. See Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*, 33–35.

satiation (thus, his food is counterfeit). Likewise, wealth in general is fleeting, like a vulture. The imagery in Prov. 23:5 emphasizes the speed with which it leaves: now you see it, now you do not. Its speed and unattainability (since it flies to the heavens where one cannot grasp it) are likened to a vulture. In similar fashion, provisions granted by a stingy person do not last, as Prov. 23:6–8 indicates. In this manner, the bird imagery in Prov. 23:5 is employed similarly to the previous examples with respect to the underlying connotation of speed. Like Prov. 7:23 (and unlike Prov. 6:5), this speed can have negative repercussions when applied to wealth.

Prov. 26:2

כצפּוֹר לנוד כדרוֹר לעוף כן קללת חנם לוֹ תבא׃

"Like a bird flits, like a swallow flies, thus a careless curse comes back to itself (or, backfires)."

The bird simile in Prov. 26:2 is in the context of a cluster of proverbs about the כסיל, or fool.[34] While this verse does not mention the fool specifically, its structure is identical to 26:1, and just as the following verses discuss various things that are suitable or unsuitable for such a person, so also 26:2 examines "an unfitting thing," namely, a wanton curse.[35] The proverb is phrased in a comparison clause, "Like…so also…." It associates the actions of a sparrow and swallow with roaming (also Prov. 27:8; see below) and speedily flying about without direction. In this manner, the gratuitous curse does not nest on its intended victim just as a sparrow or

[34] Waltke, The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15, 345.

[35] Fox, *Proverbs 10-31*, 792. For the magical and practical aspects of this curse, see Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*, 69–71. See also Forti for the difficulties etymologically for this word for "bird" (*Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*, 67–68).

swallow does not nest; these animals flit and fly, and so also the wanton curse does not stick and thus loses its effectiveness.

This use of bird imagery merits several comments. First, the rhetoric of this proverb neither approves nor disapproves of curses generally. Rather, any negative connotations to the curse arise because it is gratuitous, not performed with full conviction and justification, and therefore is ineffective. Second, given the negative portrayal of the wanton curse, the bird simile conveys the ephemerality of the curse. On the one hand, the fact that swallows and sparrows fly and dart (עוף) are not negative characteristics per se; it is simply in their nature to do so. On the other hand, the connotations of נוד suggest that the action in view is one of aimless wandering, perhaps even homeless roving or the type of wandering from home in order to seek refuge elsewhere.[36] In this manner, the proverb uses this action of the bird to convey that a purposeless curse, when it flutters aimlessly and without a sense of direction towards its home like a bird, is an unwise action.[37] Thus, the bird imagery in Prov. 26:2 employs the speed and perception of the swallow and sparrow regarding their aimless wanderings (perhaps how quickly they leave and begin new nests when they flee their old ones) to describe the ineffectiveness and unfitting nature of a gratuitous curse.

Prov. 27:8

כצפור נודדת מן־קנה כן־איש נודד ממקומו׃

"Like a bird wandering from its nest, so is a man who wanders from his home."

[36] For the notions of aimless and homeless wanderings, see Gen. 4:12; Jer. 4:1; 49:30; 50:3–8.

[37] For more on the deadly effects of a deserved curse (Deut. 28:15; etc.) in contrast to the undeserved curse (Num. 22:6; etc.), see Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 16-31*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 2004), 347.

Much like Prov. 26:2, the צפור in Prov. 27:8 is used to evoke images of wandering without a sense of rootedness to a nest.[38] In this short maxim, which appears to be an individual proverb lacking an association with a group of thematic clusters, a comparative clause exists between a bird and a man. This type of clause normally compares two similar objects or entities and has the effect of a simile: the two things compared are not equated, but are rather like one another with respect to a characteristic or action.

In the apodosis of this comparative clause, the צפור is said to נודדת, or wander from its nest (קנה). The root of the participle, נדד, is the geminate byform of the hollow root נוד, which appears in Prov. 26:2. Thus, the same connotations of wandering aimlessly without direction towards a home/nest, or the idea of flight away from one's home, as presented in Prov. 26:2 perhaps applies in some manner to Prov. 27:8 as well. Indeed, the action described in the protasis in Prov. 27:8 coheres with this notion of a wandering bird that is isolated from its nest. One might claim that the departure from the nest is temporary; however, the action is presented with the ablative use of the מן and no mention of a return. This departure from the nest has several implications. First, the bird that wanders from its nest is vulnerable.[39] If the bird has chosen the placement of the nest well, it is in a safe, high place where the bird can dwell and raise its young. The bird that has left such a safe domicile has potentially put itself in a vulnerable spot. Second, if permanent abdication of the nest is in view, then such a bird abandons its family, putting the young birds at risk. Although these implications are unstated in the proverb itself, the situation described and verb used invite such a reading in this terse maxim. Nests are for dwelling and raising young. Given these practical

[38] The structure of this proverb then concretizes the wandering of a human through simile with the bird (Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*, 54).

[39] Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 377.

functions, one could imagine that these implications are in view in Prov. 27:8.

The point of the comparison is often presented in the apodosis of comparative clauses. The rhetorical effect of the apodosis, however, consists in its juxtaposition with the protasis, which gives the comparative clause a simile effect.[40] A man who wanders (נודד) from his place (מקומו) is an ambiguous statement. While the verb נדד implies the roaming activity described above, the use of the lexeme מקום is ambiguous on its own. What is a "place"? Is it a home, and if so, why not use בית? The term מקום can denote spaces of a variety of extent, from regions to one's domicile.[41] When juxtaposed with the protasis and the notion of a צפור and its קן, the connotations of the apodosis become clearer:[42] just as the bird abandons its domicile and thus incurs the potential isolation and negative repercussions from leaving its home, so also a man who leaves his home is vulnerable and makes vulnerable those whom he abandoned.

In this verse, the use of the bird imagery combines an activity of an animal with the activity of a man. The action of the man, which resembles the צפור in abandoning his domicile, is judged to be a negative quality. Whether the fact that birds can stray from their nests is a positive or negative quality of the bird is irrelevant; what is pertinent for the maxim is that a man, when he acts like this bird, is acting unwisely. In this

[40] Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §38.5.

[41] For מקום as a region, see Judges 18:10; for מקום as a domicile, see Gen. 18:33; Job 7:10.

[42] In this manner, Fox's claim that מקום can mean a metaphorical station in life loses exegetical validity. See Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 806–807. First, it is not clear whether or not מקום can have this metaphorical sense anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible (none of the lexica list it as an option). Second, the bird's nest is more properly considered a domicile, place of refuge, and place to rear young, but is not so much a station in life. As such, the basis for comparison (the "place") should be read in light of the thing to which it is compared (a bird's nest); this simile dictates that the מקום should more properly be considered a man's domicile and not a metaphorical station in life.

manner, the bird's wandering mannerisms serve as a negative exemplar when applied to certain actions of people.

Prov. 30:17

עין תלעג לאב ותבוז ליקהת־אם יקרוה ערבי־נחל ויאכלוה בני־נשר׃

"An eye that mocks a father, disdains the obedience due a mother, ravens of a brook will gouge it out, young vultures will consume it."

The use of bird imagery in Prov. 30:17 is part of a larger section that focuses on notions of greed. This section extends back to Prov. 30:10, which describes the wicked generation.[43] This generation is characterized by several negative attributes, including disrespect towards parents and a false sense of its own purity. The list of vices extends with the first four lines beginning with דור. This repetition is broken in the fifth line with the point of the description, namely a description of the avarice and insatiability of the generation (לאכל).

While this pattern of repetition could be concluded by the line that breaks the recurring opening phrase (Prov. 30:14b), the next unit continues the description of the vice of greed. The numerical escalation heightens the normal pattern (x, x+1) and perhaps conveys the following description of greed with its extended escalation of numbers (one leech; two daughters; three things that are not satisfied; four things that do not say "enough"). The four things presented in Prov. 30:16 are indicative of this insatiability. Sheol is never satisfied of taking souls. Barrenness, which could be personified as Sheol, is never satisfied with denying potential life in the womb. The land that is never satiated with water could evoke parched land that always absorbs water and never yields any fruit, or could

[43] Crenshaw, *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions*, 485.

describe the fact that no matter how much water one provides for land, it will also need more to keep producing its fruit. Fire that never says "enough" perhaps portrays the fact that fire will attach itself to anything and is not a respecter of objects when it comes to its destructive activity.

The seat of this inordinate desire is the eye, which never tires of lusting after objects. Because of its lusts, the eye of the person who scorns its parents will be plucked out by עורב and נשר.[44] In this punishment, the bird imagery relies on the feeding habits of birds of prey. In this manner, their voracious appetite for carrion will be directed towards those guilty of avarice, providing the culmination of those who are greedy as described in Prov. 30:11–16. Thus, in addition to swiftness and nesting habits, birds can also be used in Proverbs as a means of punishment when birds whose appetites include carrion are directed against the greedy, and therefore the unwise.

Prov. 30:19

דרך הנשר בשמים דרך נחש עלי צור דרך־אניה בלב־ים ודרך גבר בעלמה׃

"A path of a vulture in the skies, a path of a serpent across a rock, a path of a ship on the heart of the sea, a path of a man with a maiden."

Another picture of bird imagery appears in Prov. 30:19. This verse is part of a section that begins in Prov. 30:18. This section focuses on a riddle of an adulteress and begins with a numerical saying of three difficult things and four that the riddler does not comprehend. In Prov. 30:19, four scenarios are presented with minimal detail and juxtaposed to challenge

[44] Both animals have a number of functions in biblical texts. The raven can act as a messenger of sorts, as in Noah's flood, and the eagle/vulture in a sense of salvation (as in "on eagle's wings" in Exod. 19:4). None of these appears in this context; rather, the image is the aspect of the carrion-eating bird.

the reader to discern how each of these circumstances cohere. The first three involve an object (vulture; serpent; ship) and its terrain through which it travels (sky; rock; seas). The relationship between the objects and their terrain could evoke the manner of movement (the circular paths of the vulture in the sky, the serpent on a rock, and the ship in the heart of the sea)[45] or the fact that in each case, the movement leaves no lasting trace on the traversed area.

Each of these options potentially relates to the fourth scenario described, namely, the "way" of a man with a young woman/girl. This "way" could involve the movement of intercourse or the fact that, when a man has had his sexual "way" with a young woman, he leaves no trace of his activity. The conception of this riddle and its meaning is complicated by Prov. 30:20. One might understand the relationship between this verse and Prov. 30:19 as unpacking the riddle of the last element of the four listed objects. In this fashion, the עלמה is really a אִשָּׁה מְנָאֶפֶת. In this understanding, the twisty actions of the vulture, serpent, and ship as they relate to the man are flipped in Prov. 30:20: the serpentine motions refer not to the man having his way with a young woman, but rather the young woman who turns out to be an adulteress. Her passivity in Prov. 30:19d—the *gibbor* acts on her, using the preposition *bet*—thus turns out to be an active ploy, in the same way that other surfaces have more agency than at first glance. A sea can be glassy or stormy, rocks can be smooth or craggy. Each presents itself in one way and can change and be dynamic.[46] One could also understand this same correspondence between Prov. 30:19d and Prov. 30:20 in relation to the lack of a trace left behind after the action. The man who thought he was sleeping with an עלמה becomes the bearer of the blame and allows the מנאפת to "wipe away" (מחתה) any evidence of

[45] Waltke discusses the circular movements of the נשר, which was wondrous given how effortlessly it glides in a circle in the air and given how large the animal is (*The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*, 491).

[46] My thanks to Alexiana Fry for suggesting these connections.

wrongdoing since she can now find a scapegoat. Another option is to understand the עלמה and מנאפת as different women. In this manner, the gender roles are reversed. The man has his way with the עלמה in Prov 30:19d and leaves no trace, and likewise the adulterous woman consumes her prey and "blots out" (another definition of מחתה) any claim of wrongdoing (perhaps because the man has chosen to sleep with her). In addition, the motions evoked of intercourse in Prov. 30:19d (which, again, could be likened to the motion of the aforementioned objects) become the transition into the twisted and underhanded rhetorical motions of the adulterous woman in justifying her actions. In the first scenario, the female is the object whereas in the second she is the subject.

However one chooses to understand the relationship of the components of the riddle, the role of the bird imagery is fairly certain. The vulture in the sky is utilized to explicate some manner of relationship between this bird and its terrain.[47] This relationship is either that the bird leaves no trace behind it as it flies or that its flight patterns are circuitous in motion, and the bird image is employed not on the basis of a taxonomic virtue, but rather as a phenomenon of nature utilized in a riddle.

Eccl. 9:12

כי גם לא־ידע האדם את־עתו כדגים שנאחזים במצודה רעה וכצפרים האחזות בפח כהם יוקשים בני האדם לעת רעה כשתפול עליהם פתאם׃

"…because indeed a man does not know his time. As fish are ensnared in a fatal trap, as birds are entrapped in a snare, so are they, namely men, snared at a calamitous time when it falls upon them suddenly."

[47] The use of animals in the sayings of Agur functions to define the limits of human wisdom (Schipper, *The Hermeneutics of Torah*, 283).

Qoheleth's observation in Eccl. 9:12 is related to the previous verse epexegetically by the use of כי. The author inaugurates a new thought in Eccl. 9:11 ("again I observed," שׁבתי וראה). In this verse, Qoheleth undermines the view that those who are prepared and fit for a certain task will inevitably succeed. Despite the expectation that a strong man might win a battle or knowledgeable people might gain favor, randomness prevents any sense of a likely outcome.

If randomness and chance prevails, then the result or meaning of the previously recognized truth is that a person cannot establish or even guess with any sense of certainty how preparation will or will not lead to an outcome. Thus, people have no advantage over animals. No one can truly prepare for and avoid evil times, just as fish and birds cannot have forethought and planning in order to avoid being caught in nets and traps.[48] Just as a fish swims along and a bird goes about its business, neither of them aware when their mortality could be in danger, so also a person cannot know when their time will come.[49]

The use of bird imagery in this section emphasizes the limitations of people.[50] It is not a matter of exhortation or wanting to be like or not be like bird in some respect; people simply are like them in respect to their inability to control their destiny. As such, if humans and birds are alike in

[48] Prov. 1:17 indicates that a bird which sees a trap spread before it can avoid being caught and thus it is not inevitable that the bird will fall prey to the trap. Qoheleth is either contradicting this verse and stating that no bird is able to be prescient enough to avoid traps or he is making a more broader, more general claim that while some birds can see a trap and avoid it, birds generally, as a species, are not able to have the forethought to evade traps.

[49] As Thomas Krüger states, humans treat animals (with a net and snare) in the same way that time and chance (cf. Eccl. 3:18ff) treat humans (*Qoheleth: A Commentary*, Hermeneia [Fortress Press, 2004], 175). On the suddenness of the calamity, see Tremper Longman, III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1998), 233.

[50] This section extends to the following example of a wise man whose wisdom in helping the city avoid destruction was quickly forgotten, much like those who have knowledge and fail to gain favor. For more on this passage, see Jennie Barbour (Grillo), *The Story of Israel in the Book of Qohelet: Ecclesiastes as Cultural Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 106–137. As Ken Stone observes, there is an invitation to identify with the bird, not simply exist in a metaphorical relationship ("'The Fate of Animals and the Fate of Humans Is the Same': Animality and Humanity in Qoheleth and the Hebrew Bible," in *Ask the Animals: Developing a Biblical Animal Hermeneutic*, ed. Arthur Walker-Jones and Suzanna R. Millar, SemeiaSt 104 [SBL Press, 2024], 91–92).

this fundamental respect, then the ultimate difference between them seems to collapse according to the logic of this verse. The use of bird imagery in this verse thus extends to humans the same limitations of birds in evading traps that lead to death; neither can predict and thus avoid mortality when it beckons.

Eccl. 10:20

גם במדעך מלך אל־תקלל ובחדרי משכבך אל־תקלל עשיר כי עוף השמים יוליך את־
הקול ובעל הכנפים יגיד דבר׃

"Even in your intimate thoughts do not revile a king, in your bedchamber do not revile a rich man, for a bird of the heavens may carry the utterance and a winged creature may report the word."

The context of the occurrence of bird imagery in Eccl. 10:20 pertains to notions of royalty. This discourse has two facets: the proper conduct of kings and princes, and the care one should take with respect to comments regarding the ruler. With respect to the former, Qoheleth juxtaposes the follies that a young king risks, especially regarding the abuse of princes whose feasts occur all day (assuming that the princes who feast in the morning continue their activity until evening time) with a noble king and responsible princes (10:16-17). The results of the former are summarized in a proverb in Eccl. 10:18-19, which relates to laziness and preoccupation with money and carousing with the depredation of a house. The overindulgence of royalty and preoccupation with pleasure leads to negligence and the devastation of the kingdom.

The bird imagery is then employed in Eccl. 10:20. In this verse, the bird is presented as a means of transferring private and secret information, even

information spoken casually, to the king.[51] As such, the bird is presented as a conveyor of information, and given the small size, speed, and mobility of the bird, one should be careful about one's speech concerning the king. One may not see the bird in the window, and even in casual conversation, this bird may hear one's comments, fly to the king (and thus be out of reach of the one who would want to prevent it from revealing secrets), and tell the royalty about various private discontents. In this verse, then, the bird is presented as a conveyor of information whose speed, or perhaps inaccessibility in its flight, means that it (within the world of the maxim) is a threat to betray even privately spoken words to the king.[52]

Eccl. 12:4

וסגרו דלתים בשׁוק בשׁפל קוֹל הטחנה ויקום לקוֹל הצפּוֹר וישׁחו כל־בנוֹת השׁיר׃

"The doors in the street are shut, with the noise of the hand mill becoming lower, the sound of the bird indeed rises, all the strains of music die down."

The bird imagery in Eccl. 12:4 relates to the contrast between the youth, who is instructed to enjoy his young age (11:7-10), and the process of human aging (12:1-8).[53] The contrast is made explicit by the assertions of

[51] As Choon-Leong Seow indicates, this scenario brings to mind the adage "a little bird told me so" (*Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 18C [Doubleday, 1997], 334).

[52] It is interesting to note the function of the bird in royal imagery in Sumerian literature, where the head wise men of tablet houses, called *edubbas*, were fascinated by birds, which were thought to be "beautifully ornamented" and "walked about in the palace like a jewel, chirping sweetly" (Samuel Noel Kramer, "The Sage in Sumerian Literature: A Composite Portrait," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, eds. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue [Eisenbrauns, 1990], 35). To the best of my knowledge, the use of "bird," or *iṣṣūru(m)*, does not occur as a metaphor for a spy, nor does it appear in proverbial statements about such animals covertly hearing and then passing along information. The *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* lists no such concept under the word *iṣṣūru(m)*, though admittedly Akkadian may use another word for "bird" that is used in such metaphors and proverbs, but I am unaware of such a word.

[53] For an excellent discussion of the role of allegory and riddle in Eccl. 12:1-6, see Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (Trinity Press International, 1993), 45-46.

the vitality and carefree nature of youth against the steady demise that becomes apparent in old age. It is in this latter context that the bird imagery appears in Eccl. 12:4. A number of elements in this passage are disputed.[54] Indeed, while the first two lines appear clear (the sounds of the outside world, the market, and the mill disappear as the world fades away from the dying old person), the second two lines are less clear.

First, the phrase ויקום לקול הצפור could be analyzed in various ways. One option understands an impersonal subject for קום, "one rises to the sound of birds."[55] The subject in this option would be the aging (and therefore dying) person. This suggestion is not persuasive, however, since the aged are often understood to be heavy sleepers, in which case the sound of birds may not be sufficient to wake the aged/dying.[56] Even less likely is the option to redivide the consonants of the text to a rare and uncertain Hebrew root: "ויקמל קול הצפור," meaning "the chirping of the sparrow grows faint."[57] This suggestion fits the context (the chirping would be amongst other noises that fade into the background as the person dies), but it is based on uncertain (at best) lexicography and etymology. Indeed, קמל as a root more likely means "to be infested."[58] A third suggestion involves הצפור as the subject and לקול as an infinitive, "the bird begins to voice." This infinitive, however, never appears in Classical Hebrew, which is not a determinative factor against this suggestion, but indicates that other solutions should be sought.[59] A fourth option entails the emendation from יקום to יקול from the Ugaritic cognate *ql*, meaning "to fall." Two factors can be adduced against this suggestion. First, there is no

[54] Because of the many debated elements within this section, Thomas Krüger opts for maximal interpretation, noting that many levels of understanding might be intended at the same time (*Qoheleth*, 202).

[55] Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 265.

[56] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 357.

[57] Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom & Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 235-36.

[58] Wolf Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Geʿez (Classical Ethiopic)* (Otto Harrassowitz, 1987), 795.

[59] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 358.

manuscript evidence for this emendation. Second, although the emendation would align three lines of the verse to a notion of descending, the idea of the MT as it stands is rising (קום), which contrasts with the noise that falls (שפל). The emendation would drastically alter this contrast, and would, in effect, be an alteration to align verbs synonymously, which are quite sensible in their contrast.

The most likely solution is to understand the ל as either an asseverative or as a *lamed* that, in some cases, marks the subject of a verb.[60] The former is more likely and has possible attestations elsewhere in Qoheleth (9:4).[61] In this understanding, the clause in Eccl. 10:4 would be translated "the sound of birds indeed rises." Birds are described elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern texts as mourners for the dead; or, correspondingly, the sounds of certain birds of prey can convey an ominous portent of death.[62] In either case, the birds contrast with the noise outside: as the world fades away at death, the sound of birds, either as mourners or as opportunistic feeders, becomes clearer.

The second major issue in Eccl. 10:4 involves the בנות השׁירים. The identity of these singers is unclear. They could either refer to professional singers who arrive on the scene and lower themselves (וישׁחו) to the ground to mourn the dead, or they could be the birds that have appeared either to stoop lower to mourn or to stake out their next meal. The latter option provides a cohesive image with the following verse (10:5), which states that the elderly fear what is on high (namely, the carrion vultures that

[60] Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 358–59.

[61] All of the examples cited in Waltke and O'Connor's *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, §10.4.c, of this phenomenon for passive and intransitive verbs could be reanalyzed. For example, 2 Chron. 7:21 states לכל־עבר עליו ישׁם, which Waltke and O'Connor translate as "All who pass by it will be appalled." One could just as easily translate the *lamed* as a *lamed* of respect, "with respect to any who pass over it, s/he will be appalled," in which case the ל no longer marks a subject; instead, the *lamed* specifies the topic or some component of the sentence. All the other examples (2 Sam. 17:16 and 1 Chron. 28:1) could be subject to the same reanalysis. See also John Huehnergard, "Asseverate *la and Hypothetical *lu/law in Semitic," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 569–93.

[62] For the Akkadian evidence, see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 358–59.

circle and await corpses). In this scenario, particularly if the scenario involves the ominous aural and then visual accompaniment of birds of prey, the bird imagery in Eccl. 10:4 uses this animal to portray a gruesome demise and an inevitable marker of looming death.

Conclusion

The variety of uses of bird imagery throughout the examples in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes suggests that, at least as it pertains to the bird, Miller's thesis and study should be complicated. While certain traits are often utilized (the speed of the bird, for example), the use to which these traits are employed varies according to the rhetoric of the proverb or the context of Qoheleth's thought. Sometimes one should seek to be like the bird; at other times, the bird is a negative exemplar. The chart below summarizes the analyses above:

Verse	**Hebrew Term**	**Attribute**	**Positive or Negative?**
Prov. 1:17	בעל כנף	Perception	Positive
Prov. 6:5	צפּוֹר	Persistence and speed	Positive
Prov. 7:23	צפּוֹר	Speed and lack of foresight	Negative
Prov. 23:5	נשׁר	Speed	Negative (wealth can fly away quickly)
Prov. 26:2	צפּוֹר and דרוֹר	Speed and lack of predictable direction	Negative (applied to wanton curse)
Prov. 27:8	צפּוֹר	Wandering	Negative

Prov. 30:17	ערב and נשר	Appetite	Negative (used to evoke punishment)
Prov. 30:19	נשר	Manner of travel over terrain	No taxonomic value (simply employed as a feature of nature in a riddle)
Eccl. 9:12	צפורים	Lack of foresight	Negative
Eccl. 10:20	עוף and בעל הכנפים	Surreptitious and speedy	Negative
Eccl. 12:4	צפור	Associated with death	Negative

Although Miller does not analyze words for "bird" in his study, the flexibility of bird imagery and metaphor presented in this study should be informative for many of his examples.[63] Common traits or established uses of metaphors can often be subverted within an author's rhetoric; in addition, these characteristics of animals (such as the bird's swiftness) assume positive or negative polarities depending on the situation. Sometimes the bird is a symbol of life (it can escape a trap with persistence, Prov. 6:5) and at other times it can augur death (as in Eccl. 10:4). Thus, any analysis of the use of animal imagery in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes should not simply isolate an attribute of an animal as though every metaphorical or proverbial appeal to fauna should simply import one typological characteristic.[64] Rather, as the use of bird imagery in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes has shown, each employment of animal imagery needs to be contextualized within the author's rhetoric in order to

[63] See the introductory paragraph for one instance relating to "bull."

[64] Such typologies as in Miller's article may provide a starting point, and the appeal to animals in metaphors and proverbs may often depend on a certain constellation of characteristics of the animal in question; however, analysis of a passage should also include considerations of context and how this context can shape, adapt, and potentially undermine dominant metaphors. In this manner, one avoids a static, formulaic approach to animal imagery, mistakenly built upon a reified notion of how metaphors operate.

understand better the capacity of the writer to utilize animal imagery for a variety of compositional strategies.

Within this framework of rhetorical utility of animal traits, one can put some of the most profound aspects of wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible, namely metaphors from nature, if not also familial and gendered relationships, into direct conversation with recent advances in animal criticism and domestication. As Carr has argued, domestication in the biblical framework entails a host of conceptual relations.[65] These networks of relations include domestication and dominance of humans with respect to animals, but they also operate (and generate) similar relational framing in the realms of gender and of divine-human encounters.[66] The process of domestication with respect to animals creates a dynamic sphere of interactions: some animals remain wild, some are accustomed to living with humans. As a result, the available palate of interactions (wild versus tame) allows for increasingly diverse perspectives within literary deployment of such species.[67] The bird is not simply a bird in the world but can be mined for a variety of dimensions of its features because of the varied ways in which humans, post-domestication, relate to them. In this sense, animal studies—and examinations on how domestication influences social interactions with animals—is key not only for something of the real experiences behind the text but also for the literary production of the texts themselves and the metaphors that animate them.

[65] David Carr, "The Bible and the Domestication of the World," *BI* 31 (2023): 579–81.

[66] Carr, "The Bible and the Domestication of the World," 593.

[67] In this fashion, perspectives of domestication do not just entail the domesticated animals but also how other species, including species of birds over time, remain beyond such interactions. The entanglements of those "near" species also reframes those that remain afar. It should also be noted that those species of birds that underwent domestication experienced that transformation in distinct places and distinct times. For many species, such as the chicken and pigeon/dove, the Hellenistic period seems to be a watershed time for domestication (even as these species were present for cultic use and in undomesticated proximity to humans even in the Iron Age). See Altmann for a thorough archaeological, philological, and art-historical study of these species in *Banned Birds*, 27–41.

Perhaps what is most powerful is the identification of these animals with humans. While not strictly a product of domestication, studies on domestication and recent work on animal studies has highlighted how this relationship functions.[68] The identification makes the connection to the human-oriented interactions all the more powerful, and underscores the flexibility inherent in the manner in which wise or foolish people operate in the world, but at the same time brings any notion of human privilege over the animal world into question.[69] Employment of bird imagery in this sense is more than a metaphor but entails a move toward "indistinction" that enfolds the experiences of both into one another.[70] The wise person can have the attributes of the bird, or can be susceptible to the same follies, traps, and snares. Metaphors may have their limitations, but also may be "vehicles" in which concepts can be likened to the point of becoming blurred or indistinct.[71]

Despite differentiation between the human and animal world, Matthew Calarco posits not only the power of indistinction to better understand how these realms relate, but also finds extensive cross-cultural examples of such reflection, including in wisdom texts in the Bible such as

[68] For comments on identification and indistinction between humans and animals and the theoretical backing behind such terms, see preliminary remarks in Arthur Walker-Jones and Suzanna R. Millar, "Introduction: Difference, Identity, Indistinction," in *Ask the Animals: Developing a Biblical Animal Hermeneutic*, SemeiaSt 104 (SBL Press, 2024), 11. For more sustained examination, see Stone, "'The Fate of Animals and the Fate of Humans Is the Same,'" 83–100. Cultures that are pre-domestication, or that have low rates of domestication, can also, naturally, reflect on animals and how they relate to humans (as in the case of hunter-gatherer societies). For example, art in the paleolithic period prior to domestication already displays renderings of animals. The point here is that domestication can also bring new ways of conceiving this relationship even for untamed species, and studies on domestication and animal criticism have focused how distinct species relate to one another in literature, art, and a variety of media and lived experiences.

[69] See particularly Stone, who explores how "indistinction" tears down the walls between animals and humans and decenters human privilege. He acknowledges how the anthropocentric culture of the Bible might seem to rule out indistinction as a productive lens; however, he finds just such a line of thought in Ecclesiastes (Stone, "'The Fate of Animals and the Fate of Humans Is the Same,'" 95–96).

[70] Stone uses the term "our common creaturehood" ("'The Fate of Animals and the Fate of Humans Is the Same,'" 96).

[71] Walker-Jones and Millar, "Introduction," 14.

Ecclesiastes. He points to Eccl. 3:18–21 in particular as exemplary of the shared conditions that invite such overlapping experiences.

> אמרתי אני בלבי על־דברת בני האדם לברם האלהים ולראות שׁהם־בהמה המה להם: כי מקרה בני־האדם ומקרה הבהמה ומקרה אחד להם כמות זה כן מות זה ורוח אחד לכל ומותר האדם מן־הבהמה אין כי הכל הבל: הכל הולך מל־המקום אחד הכל היה מן־העפר והכל שׁב אל־העפר: מי יודע רוח בני האדם העלה היא למעלה ורוח הבהמה הירדת היא למטה לארץ:
>
> *"I considered in my heart as pertains to humans to separate them from divine beings and to see that they themselves are beasts. For with respect to the fate of humans and the fate of beasts, they share one fate. As one dies, so also the other dies. The same lifeforce belongs to each, and humans have not superiority over beasts, since both amount to nothing. Both go to the same place. Both come from dust and both return to dust. Who knows if the lifeforce of humans rise upward and if the lifeforce of beasts descends downward to the earth?"*

As Calarco notes, indistinction pertains to conditions, not to powers and domains, between species. This category allows for reflection regarding the common experiences of embodiment, both human and non-human, and the common experiences of life, death, and everything in between.[72] As such, this framework of indistinct conditions entails the sorts of

[72] Calarco observes also that indistinction, in this sense, answers objections against theorists who posit an approach of "difference" along the human/animal divide. For such theorists such as Derrida, there is not one, ontologically singular divide (which can be reductive regarding the real richness of interactions and thereby instrumentalize non-humans), but rather there are multiple distinctions between humans and animals. Derrida posited such distinction as a way of complicating the relationship between humans and animals in an attempt to prevent human exploitation of other species; yet, Calarco asks, do we need to insist "on refining and complicating this opposition" or rather should we challenge sets of distinction as untenable? Hence, the indistinction approach focuses on shared conditions but "does not preclude the recognition of salient differences and various types of singularity. Indeed, the argument being offered here [the logic of indistinction] is that acceding to and assuming an optic of indistinction is the *precondition* for a thought of radical alterity" (italics original; Calarco, *Beyond the Anthropological Difference*, Cambridge Elements Environmental Humanities [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020], 34. See also Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

perspectives that make possible the use of bird imagery in maxims pertaining to human life and the embodied experience.

Just as people exist in a variety of manners along a number of spectrums of behavior and characteristics (complex and wise, foolish and simple), so also animals. The closer they exist to humans, the more they provide ways in which authors can use them to think with ("good to think") in the terms of Claude Levi-Strauss, not as food but rather as sharing in experiences that humans can identify with.[73] This is particularly true for those species, like birds, that both share spaces of domestication with humans and for some species remain wild and undomesticated. This process, naturally, does not deny or demean the very real instrumental ways in which animals function. Indeed, domestication theory has also brought to light a whole span of interactions that are transformed in this process, including the relationship between genders.[74] Carr, for example, calls attention to Isa. 5:1–7 and the image of a cultivated garden. The domesticated vineyard contrasts with the uncultivated garden, the latter of which yields sour fruit (באשׁים). The totality of the passage plays on gendered metaphors (the undomesticated vineyard like a wayward woman) that map on to God as domesticator and Israel as the wayward woman, whose produce indicts it as fundamentally uncultivated and wanton, thereby deserving destruction.[75] Domestication in gendered descriptions applies both to landscapes and the domesticated fauna therein in Song.[76] It may not be surprising, then, that biblical texts grouped under the modern taxonomic label "Wisdom," which entail much rumination on the world of animals, also contain chapters that so clearly

[73] Levi-Strauss, *Totemism* (Beacon Press, 1963), 89.

[74] Anne Létourneau, "Miss Piggy and the Pretty Woman of Proverbs 11:22: Beauty, Animality, and Gender," in *Ask the Animals: Developing a Biblical Animal Hermeneutic*, SemeiaSt 104 (SBL Press, 2024), 219–34.

[75] Carr, "The Bible and the Domestication of the World," 592–93.

[76] Elaine T. James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs: Poetry and Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 129, 133.

mark gender, as in Prov. 1-9 and 31 (founded though it also may be on aspects of grammar and the manner in which "wisdom" as a lexeme is marked).[77]

Bird imagery in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, then, encapsulates a wider dynamic than anticipated in earlier studies of animal imagery, as Miller's article demonstrates. Indeed, the point is not to demonstrate inadequacies of older scholarship, but rather to use it to highlight more recent studies on animals in wisdom literature (see Forti's work cited throughout), which themselves can be brought into productive conversation with animal criticism and work on domestication. These theoretical lenses, then, reveal something not simply of human and animal/non-human relations in the world as reflected in texts, but also something of the production of the rhetoric and texts themselves.

[77] For a more thorough examination of Prov. 31:10–31, see Jacqueline Vayntrub, "Beauty, Wisdom, and Handiwork in Prov 31:10–31," *HTR* 113 (2020): 45–62.