


## Article

# Nature's Apostle: The Dove as Communicator in the Hebrew Bible, from Ararat to Nineveh

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**Abstract:** The dove, the most frequently mentioned bird in the Hebrew Bible, appears in diverse contexts, spanning its appearance as an element in the narrative (as in the case of Noah's ark), and as an allegory and metaphor (as in the cryptic "sword of the dove"—twice in Jeremiah—and "the city of the dove"—Zephaniah). The dove even appears as the proper name of a prophet (or possibly of two, both named Jonah, son of Amittai). This article applies a communication perspective to better interpret some of these texts. We argue that the dove's communicative attributes, to include unique acoustics, remarkable power of flight, but primarily the trait of returning home—the basis for the use of doves as carrier pigeons—may either explain or deepen the interpretation of many of the references to the pigeon in the Bible. In this vein, a major focus of the article is on using the dove's homing ability as a key for reinterpreting the Book of Jonah. We conclude by suggesting that the dove's trait of returning and, hence, its use as envoy made it a useful symbol of the deity's presence in the world. In the Jewish reading, it became an emblem of one of the main political and eschatological themes of the Bible: the return home from exile, beginning with the exodus and return of Jacob's sons to Canaan and ending with the Eschaton.

**Keywords:** Hebrew Bible; Jonah; carrier pigeons; doves in antiquity; Noah's ark; communication in the Bible; media history



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## 1. Introduction

The dove (*yonah*) is the most frequently mentioned bird in the Hebrew Bible, and it appears there in a variety of contexts. It is found as a player in biblical narratives such as in the story of Noah's ark; as an allegory from the world of nature for human behaviors, traits, and relationships, such as in the story of the lovers in the Song of Songs; and even as the proper name of one, or perhaps two, biblical personalities. In this article, we will survey some of the appearances of the dove in the Bible, from the perspective of communication.<sup>1</sup>

Our general premise is that media of communication have served over the ages to illustrate and assimilate religious and theological ideas.<sup>2</sup> After all, religion relates to the impossible encounter between humans and the Divine—between heaven and earth—an interface that requires particularly creative channels of communication. The dove served in the past as a paradigmatic communication medium, and we suggest that as such, it was relevant to religious thinking, particularly since its flight inhabits the space between heaven and earth, symbolically mediating between the divine and humanity. In what follows, we will demonstrate that this perspective—focused on communication—can help explain some opaque biblical references to the dove, as well as deepen our understanding of other references to the dove that seem clear enough.

The first appearances of the dove in the Hebrew Bible relate to actual birds, feather-and-blood, such as the dove that Noah sends as a harbinger to see whether the waters of the flood have receded (Genesis 8:8–12), or as a sacrifice to be offered on certain occasions (Leviticus 1:14, 5:7, 5:11, 12:6–8, 14:22, 14:30, 15:14, 15:29; Numbers 6:10). Subsequently,

the dove appears as a metaphor or an allegory, primarily for human traits and behaviors such as those of a couple in love, forms of discourse (for example, “moan like the doves”, Isaiah 59:11), or a sign of weakness and escape (for example, “desert the cities and dwell in the crags . . . Be like a dove that nests in the sides of a pit” Jeremiah 48:28).<sup>3</sup> The dove also appears as a proper name for one or two prophets called “Yonah ben Amitai”. The first lived at the time of King Yeravam ben Yoash of Israel (Kings II 14:25) and the second’s story is told in the Book of Jonah.

We propose that some of the biblical references to the dove reflect its unique communicative roles, highlighting two of them. One, previously mentioned, relates to the dove’s acoustic behavior and discursive style.<sup>4</sup> The second relates to its role as a messenger. This latter motif is based on the unique trait of this family of bird (*Columbidae*) to return even from very great spatial and temporal distances to its dovecote.<sup>5</sup>

As was already known in ancient Egypt and Assyria, based on this unique ability to return home, doves could be used for mail delivery. It was accomplished in the following manner: When there was an expectation in a particular place for relevant information from afar, a dove from the place needing the information was dispatched to the distant locale. When the desired information became available, someone in the distant location would write the information on a lightweight surface that would be placed in a receptacle that was then attached to the body of the messenger dove, usually to its leg. The dove would then be set free and would quickly return to its nest, traversing many hundreds, even more than a thousand, kilometers on its way home, at a speed of 50–100 km/h.<sup>6</sup> There, at the conclusion of the journey, the message would be removed from the receptacle. There have been places and periods in which doves were utilized for regular postal service on very long routes, even spanning thousands of kilometers. For instance, in the Middle Ages, a series of dovecotes (*columbaria*) was set up systematically at regular intervals between Baghdad and northern Syria and between Baghdad and Cairo, a distance of 1300 km by air.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding this remarkable communicative record, the awareness of the use of doves for communication has not been consistent throughout history. Thus, for example, while there was a high level of awareness of the use of carrier pigeons in the Roman Empire, it became practically unknown in medieval Christian Europe, following the collapse of imperial transportation and communication systems.<sup>8</sup> And, while the use of carrier pigeons was rather well known into the 20th century due, for instance, to its application by the banking House of Rothschild, by Paul Reuter’s news service, or by residents of Paris during the 1870 siege, few internet and smartphone users in recent decades are aware of it. Thus, the value of doves as messengers was not necessarily known to biblical commentators during whose times they were not widely utilized, such as commentators from feudal Europe or, for that matter, contemporary biblical commentators and scholars. In this article, however, we will not examine differences between biblical commentaries written when carrier pigeons were utilized for long range communication and those written when the practice was less prominent. Our interest is in the biblical texts referring to doves as communicators.

## 2. The Dove on Ararat

The first appearance of the dove in the Bible is in the story of Noah and his ark after the flood. In that story, the dove does not function as a metaphor or descriptor but as a player with a role in the story. Here are the well-known verses about the dove, along with the equally well-known verse about the raven (Genesis 8:6–12):

At the end of forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; it went to and fro until the waters had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove to see whether the waters had decreased from the surface of the ground. But the dove could not find a resting place for its foot, and returned to him to the ark, for there was water over all the earth. So putting out his hand, he took it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again sent out the dove from the ark. The dove came back to him toward evening,

and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the waters had decreased on the earth. He waited still another seven days and sent the dove forth; and it did not return to him anymore.

The intertwining of the story of the raven with the story of the dove raises the simple question of why Noah did not suffice with the raven, if his goal was to know whether the ground had dried to the extent that it would be possible to exit the ark. After all, the raven had returned to the ark when the waters had not sufficiently receded, and apparently did not return once the ground had dried. What information was provided by sending the dove that the raven would not have provided?

The unique trait of the dove to return to its home, a trait that was known to the ancients, can provide a possible answer to this question. By sending the dove, Noah could know not only when the land dried—information that he could have gleaned from the raven as well—but also when the world was inhabitable again, even at far distances away. As long as it returned to the ark, Noah could understand that the dove saw the ark as its home, as opposed to its cote prior to the flood. The olive branch retrieved by the dove also did not provide additional information to Noah, for the tops of the mountains where the olive trees could have survived were revealed even before the raven was dispatched (“The waters went on diminishing until. . . the tops of the mountains became visible”, Genesis 8:5). However, when the dove did not return, Noah could conclude that its erstwhile abode had returned to its previous state and could be called home. From the time that the dove identified its previous home and returned to it rather than to the ark, the liminal phase of the flood had ended and life on planet earth could resume.

### 3. The Allegorical Significance of the Dove

As noted, numerous meanings were attributed to the dove in the Bible as a parable and symbol of people, traits, situations, and interpersonal relationships.<sup>9</sup> One such prominent aspect that is quite significant to people is bonding. Constancy, stability, and harmony in relationships between partners are prominent characteristics of doves. This quality is expressed, for instance, in the Song of Songs, e.g., “Only one is my dove, My perfect one” (6:9). The “monogamous” trait of doves may possibly be related to the Biblical requirement that when doves are brought as offerings in the temple, they are to be brought as a pair in most cases, while other offerings, even those for which the doves serve as a substitute, are usually single.<sup>10</sup>

The Biblical uses of the dove as a metaphor are based on other traits too. One is its relative weaknesses in the war for survival in nature—its helplessness against predators and hunters, whether airborne or land-based. This weakness apparently leads to the geographical marginality of the dove and its nest, such as its depiction in Jeremiah 48:28: “Desert the cities and dwell in the crags, oh inhabitants of Moab. Be like a dove that nests in the sides of a pit”. Another example is Ezekiel 7:16: “And if any survive, they shall take to the mountains; they shall be like doves of the valley.”<sup>11</sup>

Much closer to the perspective of communication are the biblical references to the dove that emphasize its sound and discourse. Thus, for example, the continuation of the verse from Ezekiel cited above describes the doves of the valley as “moaning together—everyone for their own iniquity”. Other examples are in Isaiah, e.g., 38:14, “I moaned like a dove”, or 59:11, “[we] moan like doves”. However, in the description of David as a captive of the Philistines, we find an opposite image, that of silence: “a distant and speechless dove” (Psalms 56:1). It should be noted that just as silence is uncharacteristic, so is distance; the special quality of the dove that we suggested as being central in its literary representation is the ability to return immediately to its home even from great distances. The anomaly of silence is compounded by the anomaly of distance, thus linking the two central communicative features of the dove.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, it seems that the idea of the return of the dove to its home, which is the basis for its unique place in the history of communication, constitutes a central focus for its

biblical imagery. This image is reflected prominently in the famous verses of consolation in Isaiah 60:4, 8–9:

Raise your eyes and look about: They have all gathered and come to you.  
Your sons shall be brought from afar, Your daughters like babes on shoulders. . . .  
Who are these that float like a cloud, Like doves to their cotes?  
Behold, the coastlands await me, With ships of Tarshish in the lead,  
To bring your children from afar, And their silver and gold as well. . .

The return to Zion is likened here to the return of doves, even from great distances of time and space, to their home. This image appears as well in Hosea 11:11: “They shall flutter from Egypt like sparrows, From the land of Assyria like doves; And I will settle them in their homes —declares God”.

This image of the dove returning to its home may help clarify the ambiguous expression “*herev hayonah*” (lit. “the sword of the dove”) that appears in Jeremiah, in the following two verses:

Many were made to stumble,  
They fell over one another.  
They said:  
“Up! let us return to our people,  
To the land of our birth,  
Because of the deadly sword [lit. the sword of the dove].  
(Jeremiah 46:16)

Make an end in Babylon of sowers,  
And of wielders of the sickle at harvest time.  
Because of the deadly sword [lit. the sword of the dove],  
Everyone shall turn back to their own people,  
All shall flee to their own land.<sup>13</sup>  
(Jeremiah 50:16)

In both instances, the text refers to a quick return to one’s home, a quality that characterizes the dove. In the first verse, the Babylonian army is attacking the Egyptian soldiers who were drawn into battle to protect their cities. The Babylonians have the upper hand, and the defeated soldiers call to each other to flee from the field of battle and return to their city, “in the face of the sword of the dove”. It seems, apparently, that it is a call to flee home in the face of the sword, like a dove that returns to its home. The second verse is a similar instance in which defeated soldiers flee the battlefield to return to their home. Here, too, the dove can be understood as a symbol for the return home in the face of the enemy’s sword.<sup>14</sup>

This suggestion to interpret the idiom that connects the words sword and dove as “a sword that causes people to flee to their homes” also enables us to explain a difficult verse that mentions a dove in the book of Zephaniah (3:1), translated in the Douay–Rheims Bible as “Woe to the provoking, and redeemed city [of] the dove”. As in the previous instances, here, too the dove appears as an image referring to the return of exiles to their land. In this interpretation, “the city of the dove” in the verse opening the chapter serves as an exposition of the entire chapter that tells of the sin of the city, its redemption, and the return of its residents through divine mercy in spite of their sins. This first verse foreshadows and summarizes the process described in the entire chapter. After the city was sullied through the sins of its corrupt leaders, God redeems it<sup>15</sup> and returns its residents to it as a dove that returns to its nest. This return is mentioned explicitly in the last verse of the chapter (3:20):

At that time I will gather you,  
 And at [that] time I will bring you [home];  
 For I will make you renowned and famous  
 Among all the peoples on earth,  
 When I restore your fortunes  
 Before their very eyes  
 —declares God.

“The sword of the dove” and the “city of the dove” thus refer to the process of return to one’s home in the face of the sword and in the face of sin, a return that is the distinctive quality of the dove.

#### 4. The Prophet as a Dove

##### 4.1. From Ararat to Nineveh: Yonah as a Symbolic Name for a Prophet

The Book of Jonah, one of the books of the twelve later prophets, is a “closed” biblical text that explains itself. It does not reference nor is it connected to historical events or personalities outside of the book, and it is disconnected from any concrete historical context. One possible exception to this rule is the hero of the story, Yonah ben Amittai. As noted, in the Book of Kings II 14:25, upon describing the expansion of the borders of Israel in the time of Jeroboam II, a prophet by the name of Yonah ben Amittai from Gat haHefer has a vision of the expansion of the borders:

It was he [Jeroboam II] who restored the territory of Israel from Lebo-hamath to the sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the promise that the Eternal, the God of Israel, had made through God’s servant, the prophet Jonah son of Amittai from Gath-hepher. For God saw the very bitter plight of Israel, with neither bond nor free left, and with none to help Israel. (Kings II 14:25–26)

One could simply understand that the prophet sent to Nineveh in the Book of Jonah is the same prophet, as was the view of the traditional biblical commentators, and some contemporary biblical scholars as well. In contrast, a majority of contemporary critical biblical scholars find that the Book of Jonah was written hundreds of years after the reign of Jeroboam II, although the name of the protagonist was appropriated from Yonah ben Amittai from Gat haHefer.<sup>16</sup> Should this be the case, it begs the question of why this particular esoteric prophet was chosen as the literary prophet’s namesake.<sup>17</sup> It seems that the answer rests with the name itself and its symbolic meaning and not with the historical personality who first bore the name.

We propose that the role of the dove as communicator is the key to the naming of the literary protagonist of the Book of Jonah. In other words, we suggest that the choice of the name Yonah as a moniker derives from the communicative behaviors of birds from the dove family, as they relate to the theological, psychological, and literary dimensions of the story of Jonah.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, even to those who consider both biblical mentions of Yonah son of Amittai as referring to the same prophet, it may be that the name was not historical but allegorical.

One connection relates to the dove’s acoustics: its soft moaning song, its clarity, and particularly its repetitiveness, which, as mentioned previously, may even be the onomatopoeic source of its name. Its sound could serve as a parable to the prophet as God’s mouthpiece, who is expected to “Cry aloud... not hold back” (Isaiah 58:1) in communicating the divine message. Moreover, the prophet is wont to repeatedly deliver the message that he has been called on to convey over and over again, like the dove’s repetitive song.

Moving from acoustics to flight, it may be that the popular notion that angels (*mal’achim*, namely envoys), like cherubim, are winged creatures may owe to viewing the *yonah*, an excellent flyer, as a paradigmatic apostle. While in Ezekiel, members of God’s entourage are



indeed winged, and flight is also mentioned in the context of God's envoys in Isaiah, Yonah as God's envoy to a very distant destination highlights the image of God's messengers being winged. And, as noted, flight between heaven and earth symbolizes the prophet's mission as bringing the messages of God in heaven to the inhabitants of Earth down below.

Another dimension of communication that is unique to the dove—its singular ability to return home, that made it the best and most trusted envoy in nature for transmitting messages—is particularly relevant to prophesy. This quality parallels the essential role of the prophet as the definitive messenger of God. It is no wonder that in addition to the name Yonah, that can serve as a generic name for a messenger, the name of another late biblical prophet—Malachi—also unequivocally emphasizes the dimension of agency. In the case of Malachi, the Bible provides only this name, which literally means “my messenger”, without any biographical information or historical context. For Yonah, one additional biographical piece of information is provided—the name of his father, Amittai. Yet here too, the name may be symbolic, hinting at the quality of trustworthiness of the messenger, based on the root word *emet*, meaning true. In the final analysis, the difference between a true prophet and a false prophet lies in whether he is a true messenger of God. This issue is particularly relevant to Yonah, for his mission launches a sharp paradox regarding his trustworthiness. After all, the success of his mission is his failure as a prophet: should the people of Nineveh repent, as he implores, his prophecies of doom would not be fulfilled, and he would be exposed as a false prophet. Indeed, many commentators point out this problem as an explanation for Yonah's attempt to evade his mission. In any case, the name “Yonah ben Amittai” alludes to “a faithful messenger”, surely an appropriate name for a literary prophet.<sup>19</sup>

We might add, from a more general perspective, that the Book of Jonah emphasizes the dimensions of agency and mediation. The focus is certainly on Yonah and the very problematic performance of his role as a messenger, but in the shadow of Yonah, we can identify many other messengers and agents of God. God “casts a giant wind upon the sea” at the beginning of the story, the sailors and the captain have roles to play, and later on, God “had appointed” a mammoth fish that swallows Yonah. At the end of the story, God “arranged for” a gourd tree to sprout and shade Yonah but then “ordained” a worm as an agent that causes the tree to wither and then “designated” a scorching east wind. All of these strengthen the connection between the model of agency and the name of the prophet, of the book, and the book's story.

Moreover, the Book of Jonah also emphasizes the universal and the global nature of the demand for repentance. Through the use of effective instruments of communication, such as doves, ships, and fish, the world of diverse people, lands, and ways condenses into a global village unified by shared values and a common view of the correct path. While other prophets prophesied to the nations of the world from the Land of Israel, in the unique case of the destruction of Nineveh, the prophet himself is dispatched to a far-away land.<sup>20</sup> There is nothing more appropriate to symbolize this long-range mission than the “Yonah” who can fly to great distances. This is apparently an element in the adoption of the dove as a symbol by the founders of Christianity, who saw themselves as apostles not only to Israel but also to people around the globe.

We can perhaps point to a further dimension in the connection between the unique communicative qualities of the dove and the task of the prophet, one that relates to the dimension of time—namely, the role that both occupy between the past, present, and future. The dove is sent from its home to a place in which relevant information is expected to arrive in the future, just as the prophet is expected to prophesy about a future that will unfold. On the other hand, the dove fulfills its mission through its return to its original, past location, just as the prophet calls on people to return from their evil ways to the good path of the past and primarily to return to God who had created them. That is, of course, the ultimate mission of Yonah: to cause the people of Nineveh to repent, namely to return (*tshuvah*) to God and to the path of the just.

#### 4.2. Between Noah's Dove and the Yonah Sent to Nineveh

Understanding Jonah—both the book and its hero—as dealing with agency and messaging gains validation from a comparison to the story of Noah's ark. Already, in a first reading, one can identify clear structural and substantive connections between the biblical description of the flood and the story of Nineveh.<sup>21</sup>

- In both instances, a death sentence is decreed by God against the masses because of their evil behavior, which is described in both cases by the Hebrew word "*hamas*". In Nineveh, the leaders urged their people to repent as follows: "Let everyone turn back from their own evil ways and from the injustice (*hamas*) of which they are guilty". (Jonah 3:8) Similarly, in Noah's story, "the earth was filled with lawlessness (*hamas*). . . . I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness (*hamas*) because of them". (Genesis 6:11, 13)
- Both instances include punishments of drowning in water, or more specifically what is referred to in Hebrew as "*mai tehom*" (lit. water of the depths). The destruction of the generation of Noah is described as follows: "All the fountains of the great deep (*tehom*) burst apart" (Genesis 7:11). Similarly, in his prayer from the bowels of the great fish, Yonah cried out: "The waters closed in over me, the: deep (*tehom*) engulfed me". (Jonah 2:6)
- In both instances, a sea vessel is central to the story—Noah's ark and Yonah's ship.
- In both instances, periods of 40 days are prescribed. The punishment in the period of Noah was a flood that lasted 40 days and 40 nights, and Yonah's prophecy warned that "in another 40 days, the city of Nineveh will be overthrown".
- The common structure of both stories includes the appreciation expressed by man to God and God's expression of regret. Both Noah, after being saved from the flood, and the sailors, after being saved from the storm, offer a thanksgiving offering to God. And, in both instances, God regrets his previous actions or thoughts: in the story of Noah for the creation of man ("for I regret that I made them", Genesis 6:6) and in the story of Yonah for the original decree calling for the destruction of the city ("And God regretted the punishment that had been planned for them", Jonah 3:10).<sup>22</sup>
- With the conclusion of the flood and the exit from the ark, the sons of Noah try to settle in the land of Shinar, which implies that it is near Ararat (Genesis 11:2–9), and the city of Nineveh was in the Land of Shinar (Genesis 10:11, Kings II 19:26, Zephaniah 2:13).

We believe that the jumping-off point that dictates the deciphering of this comparison is the centrality and significance of the dove in the two stories. In both, the *yonah*—whether a bird or a person—serves as a messenger, and their agency is both similar and opposite. In the story of Noah, the bird is an agent of Noah sent to determine whether the flood has ended, and in the Book of Jonah, the prophet is the messenger of God sent to inform the people of Nineveh of the impending destruction of the city if they do not repent.<sup>23</sup> The mission imposed on Yonah the prophet was critical, a matter of life and death, just as the dove in the story of Noah fluttered between the living and the dead. In this context, it is important to point out that the connection between the dove and death was common in the ancient Near East. Dove cotes were built above graves, apparently because doves were thought of as a "bird of life". Similarly, it was customary in Hellenistic society to sacrifice doves to the dead.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, fish were also considered "creatures of life" in ancient times, and in the book of Jonah, the fish and the *yonah* combine forces to bring the choice of life through repentance to Nineveh. We might add that in Akkadian, the word for fish is "*nun*", a sound (and letter) that is prominent in both the name of the prophet and the name of the city Nineveh. Indeed, the symbol of the city of Nineveh in cuneiform is a fish trapped in a home. We will shortly present the argument that irony is a dominant literary mode in the Book of Jonah. If so, the symbol of Nineveh as a fish trapped in a house contributes to the irony of Yonah, the messenger bird that returns to its home, being trapped in a fish on a mission to Nineveh.

#### 4.3. Returning Home: Irony and Satire in the Book of Jonah

We have noted that the connection between the Book of Jonah and the qualities of the dove in nature is not limited to the common name but reverberates throughout the plot and its literary style. In the opinion of many commentators, the Book of Jonah is outstanding in its extensive use of irony and even satire. There is no greater irony than calling the book's hero *Yonah* for at least two reasons, if not more. One relates to the dove being a powerful free-flying bird with a vast range (e.g., Psalms, 55:7), while in the story of the prophet Yonah, his freedom and his range of activity are continually contracting. From the expansive world, he goes to the port, and from there, he goes to the confines of the ship, where he withdraws from the open deck to the hold, cuddles up in the corner of the hold, and ultimately finds himself confined in the insides of a fish.

Furthermore, the dove is a high-flying bird; yet, while the bird ascends to the heights, Yonah the prophet continually descends. In a great twist of irony, the book opens with God's commandment to Yonah to "rise up and go", but Yonah's course of action is completely the opposite. In the beginning, "he went down to Jaffe" (1:3)—apparently from the mountain ridge to the port city on the shore of the sea. There, "he found a ship . . . and descended into it" (1:3). With the advent of the storm, while the sailors were throwing heavy objects down into the sea, "Yonah descended into the hold of the ship" (1:5). Subsequently, the sailors cast lots (lit. "throw-down" lots) to find the culprit who is responsible for the storm, "and the lot *fell* on Yonah" (1:7), who was then cast downward from the boat into the sea. The continuation of his descent is well known—he descends "into the depths in the heart of the sea" (2:4), in the belly of a giant fish. This is the height of the irony—that the *yonah*, instead of hovering nimbly in the heavens above, up, up, and away, finds himself below ground in the depths of filth. There is even irony in the spatial expression that Yonah uses in his prayer: "From the belly of the netherworld I cried out . . . I sank to the base of the mountains" (2:3, 7).

Based on this analysis, we can relate to the story not just as ironic, but also as a satire. Here, we follow Northrop Frye, who views satire as irony with "at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque, and at least an implicit moral standard" (Frye 1967, p. 224), quoted in (Holbert 1981, p. 60). Both of these elements appear prominently in the story of Jonah—humor based on fantasy or on the grotesque and absurd, such as a person living in a fish for three days, and a character who deviates from the path of the just, such as a prophet who tries to evade a divine mission and ends up as the butt of the satire.

Nevertheless, the irony and satire are particularly poignant when it comes to the communicative qualities of the dove. In this context, we have discussed the dove's acoustics that set it apart. The first stages of the story, in which the prophet repudiates his mission, can be characterized as a silent stage in which the prophet restrains his prophecy (which is perhaps the reason that he is not called a "prophet" in the book itself). As Galpaz-Geller points out, Yonah says nothing, even when speech is called for—such as when God turns to him and sends him to Nineveh, or when the captain of the ship turns to him, and primarily when the other travelers on the ship lift up their voices in prayer to God (Galpaz-Geller 2009, pp. 21–22, 37–39, 46, 54); cf. (Hauser 1985). It is ironic that the *yonah*, the bird characterized by its voice, and the prophet, whose role is to speak, wraps himself in silence until he arrives at a situation in which there is no longer human speech in his environs. In an ironic manner, the chattering *yonah* begins to express itself only when there is no audience. Only when the prophet called Yonah is found in the depths of the sea does he speak to the walls of the belly of the fish, the creature of the depths that is the most silent in the animal world.

Yet, the pinnacle of the irony and satire relates to the other essential communication aspect that characterizes the dove: its mysterious talent of navigating home. The Book of Jonah begins with the attempt of the prophet to leave his home geographically to go from Joppa to Tarshish. From the standpoint of his "professional" responsibility as a prophet, the flight is from Nineveh, where he was supposed to go to deliver his prophetic message to



the transgressors who reside there. The irony here is quite conspicuous in two ways—the *yonah* leaves its home instead of returning to it, and it betrays its mission by not going to its prescribed destination. Hence, Yonah the prophet betrays his name by doing the opposite of what is expected of a faithful dove—by trying to evade his mission instead of fulfilling it in a natural, instinctive manner and by leaving his place rather than returning to it. The book concludes with yet another contrast to the characteristics of the dove, by ironically leaving its hero in a foreign place near Nineveh, instead of returning him to his home. This occurs in spite of the facts that the people of Nineveh had repented and the prophet's mission had been fulfilled.

The storyteller's choice of the literary motif of the ship as the mode of transportation used by the prophet would also seem a deliberate literary move highlighting the anomaly of a dove fleeing from its home (Classen 2013). It was a common practice in ancient times that sailors took doves with them on their sea journeys as a navigation tool in the event that they lost their way and wanted to know the direction to their port of departure. In such cases, they would set free a dove, and based on the direction of its flight, they would know in which direction to steer the boat. Another reason to bring doves along on a journey was to free them in advance of reaching their home port to inform those waiting for them of their imminent arrival. In any case, the connection between the maritime use of doves and the journey of Yonah in the ship emphasizes the irony embedded in the story that describes a *yonah* on a journey intended to flee from home and not to return to it (Bodenheimer 1956, p. 388).

#### 4.4. *The Medium Is the Message (of the Book)*

From a broader perspective, it seems that the metaphoric and allegorical association of the prophet Yonah with a dove serves as a key to understanding the theological significance of the work. There are two dominant exegetical approaches to understanding the theological message of the Book of Jonah. One views the lesson that emerges from the story as a statement about the superiority of mercy and compassion over strict justice. An alternative approach views the book as a statement of the power of repentance to deter the decreed punishment of a city characterized by the evil and corruption of its residents.<sup>25</sup> The name of the prophet and of the book, which is associated with a creature whose unique characteristic is that of return, would seem to strengthen the approach that views the power of repentance and return as the main message of the work.

In Jewish tradition, the reading the Book of Jonah has become part of the prayer service and scriptural readings for *Yom Kippur*—a day of atonement, according to the Bible, and of repentance, namely return (*tshuvah*), according to the Rabbis. It seems that the repentance explanation of the meaning of the book is the basis for the custom. Just as the people of Nineveh repented (“They shall be covered with sackcloth . . . Let everyone turn back from their own evil ways and from the injustice of which they are guilty”, 3:8), just as they prayed for God to return from his anger (“Who knows but that God may turn and relent? [God] may turn back from wrathfulness, so that we do not perish”, 3:9), and just as the dove returns to its home from far away, so, too, a person who has sinned between the last *Yom Kippur* and the current *Yom Kippur* is called upon to return to his God.

But further, the meaning of the book rests on the contrast between the name of the prophet—Yonah—that is associated with returning home, and the actual behavior of the prophet, which involves fleeing from home. Both of these are subjugated to the process of divine providence that reflects return—supporting the request to repent through the agency of the prophet. Yonah the prophet is returned to his home and his mission. While he does not succeed in fleeing to Tarshish, the target population of his mission does succeed in returning from their evil path to God and also, perhaps, to their existential state before the sin, much as the dove knows to return to its home. It seems that the essence of the events that God arranged for Yonah constitute attempts to “domesticate” the runaway prophet so that he fulfills his role as a prophet—a loyal mediator, the same process conducted by a person domesticating a dove as a communication tool.

## 5. Conclusions: Doves, Bible, and Theology

We have seen how the motif of the loyalty of the dove that returns to its home serves in the Bible as a double allegory of return—the return of the exiles to their home and the return of transgressors to their God. The early biblical commentators in the periods after the destruction of the temple used these motifs to express the dual loyalty of the Jewish people to their God and to their land. Thus, for example, the sages of the Midrash interpreted the verse from Song of Songs (1:15)—“Ah, you are fair, my darling, ah, you are fair, with your dove-like eyes!”—as an allegory for this dual loyalty:

Just as the dove, from the moment it becomes familiar with its mate, does not exchange it for another, so too Israel, from the moment that they became familiar with the Holy One blessed be He, they did not exchange Him for another . . . Just as the dove dispatches many on foot and returns to its cote, the same is true of Israel [that they return to their land after the exile]. That is what is written (Hosea 11:11): “They will stir like a bird from Egypt . . . and like a dove from the land of Assyria . . . and I will settle them in their homes, thus says the Lord”. (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, Chapter 2)

In a much more general sense, the core of the story of the people of Israel in the Bible is one of return, and return is, therefore, a central motif in biblical literature and in Jewish consciousness throughout the ages. This explains the prominence of the dove—a bird that uniquely returns to its nest from notable distances of time and space—in the Bible, in Midrash, and even in modern Hebrew literature. In the final analysis, the foundational biblical myth of the Jews is the return of the Children of Israel from Egypt, the house of bondage to which they descended, to the land of their fathers, a land promised to them in a covenant with God.<sup>26</sup> The paradigm of the return from Egypt, which is the cornerstone of Jewish historical memory, was subsequently enhanced. Exile turned into a curse that continued to plague the Jews in their land in periods when exile was a widespread strategy of world powers in the ancient Middle East as well as a punishment that God harshly threatened to bring upon them repeatedly (for example, Deuteronomy 28:36, 63–68). Since exile was an ever-present danger, return naturally provided a measure of hope throughout the generations. The dove was a symbol for this—the image of a bird that always returns home could serve as a meaningful topos in Jewish thought for both a retrospective look at the past or a forward-looking view of the future, as well as for thought on the topics of sin, punishment, exile, and redemption.

Thinking of next steps in studying the theme of the dove in ancient religious scriptures, beyond the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament presents itself as a particularly compelling topos.<sup>27</sup> First thoughts in that direction would suggest that Christianity replaced the Jewish homeland/exile-related allegory of the dove with one of universal and global religious–theological significance. Nevertheless, the communication perspective of the dove as a symbol and an allegory remained relevant in Christian tradition. While in the Hebrew Bible, the dove symbolized the return to the promised land and to God, in the New Testament, the dove became a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, which represents, in practice, the component of God that is sent into the world. The dove, as the allegory for the Holy Spirit of the trinity, appeared in the world at the baptism of Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus himself is said to have called the prophet Jonah a symbol, apparently a symbol of the Holy Spirit—as well as of himself—as the Divine messengers to the world.

In this orientation, Jonah the Prophet appears in the New Testament as an unequivocal Christian symbol. It even attributes to Christ the drawing of the parallel between Yonah’s mission and his own: “the sign of Jonah”. There are two alternative approaches in the Synoptic Gospels regarding Jonah’s symbolic meaning. According to Matthew (12:38–40), Jonah is the messenger who disappeared from the world for three days in the belly of a fish and then returned to the world, just as Jesus returned to the world as the messenger of God after being buried for three days in the depths of the earth after the crucifixion. According to Luke (11:29–30), the symbolic meaning is simpler: “For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, both

are messengers of God to the nations of the world, and the image of the dove, the ultimate global messenger, is congruent with the perception of Jesus as the messenger to humankind.

Thus, underlying the great resonance of Jonah in both Judaism and Christianity is the image of the homeward-looking dove, prominent throughout the Hebrew Bible as nature's great communicator and ultimate apostle.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article is partly based on a paper presented at a conference of the International Communication Association: "Tweeting Emergency: The Use (and Non-Use) of Carrier Pigeons for Crisis Communications, From Noah's Ark to the World Wars", ICA 61st Conference, Boston 30 May 2011.
- <sup>2</sup> For preliminary discussions of this issue see, for example, [Blondheim and Rosenberg \(2017\)](#); [Peters \(2012\)](#).
- <sup>3</sup> On the difference between an allegory and a metaphor in the context of Biblical references to doves, see ([Refael Vivante 2019](#)).
- <sup>4</sup> Amichai Nahshon sees the sounds emitted by the dove as the linguistic source for the name of this family of bird in Semitic languages—essentially an onomatopoeia: ([Nahshon 2018](#), Hebrew). Nahshon also sees the acoustic repertoire of the dove as a central element in its characterization in the Bible. However, this aural perspective is not interpreted definitively and appears in both the "negative" and "positive" orientations that Nahshon proposes. Similarly, the linguistic analysis that connects the name of this type of bird to the verb *jnh* (meaning exploitation, corruption) runs counter to the vast majority of biblical references to the dove that are unequivocally positive.
- <sup>5</sup> In this study we do not differentiate between dove and pigeon or between species of the *Columbidae* family of birds, following the uniform use of *yonah* and *tor* in the Hebrew Bible. Carrier pigeons, referred to often in our text, are usually identified with the *Columba livia* species. [Toperoff \(1987\)](#) tries to differentiate between species in biblical references to this family.
- <sup>6</sup> Information on the use of doves for postal service is summarized in ([Blondheim 1994](#)). For a good short historical summary of doves and their communicative use see ([Wheye and Kennedy 2008](#)).
- <sup>7</sup> We suffice here with the veteran but authoritative documentation of Fritz (Shimon) [Bodenheimer \(1956, p. 386, Hebrew\)](#).
- <sup>8</sup> On the collapse of the communication networks in feudal Europe, see ([Bloch n.d.](#), pp. 61–65). Proof for the lack of pigeon posts in feudal Europe, at least until the 13th century, appears in ([Kedar and Aslanov 2009](#)). See also ([Edington 1996](#)). Nevertheless, Rabbi David Kimchi (*Radack*) who lived in 12th and 13th century Provence was aware of the use of doves for postal delivery by kings: see his commentary to Genesis 8:7.
- <sup>9</sup> One of the meanings that has gained prominence in recent generations is the dove as a symbol of peace. Yet this meaning is not found in the biblical representations of the dove. It may, however, have been spawned from the generally harmonious relationships between dove-couples, already highlighted in the Bible.
- <sup>10</sup> A well known case in point is Joseph and Mary offering two turtle doves at the Jerusalem Temple after the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:24). In one of the cases in which the Bible prescribes bringing the dove as a sacrifice, it is possible to draw out a communication context. An instance in which the dove is substituted for a required sacrifice when the person bringing the offering can not afford to buy the default, is the offering for the purification of the leper. Jewish biblical exegesis, beginning with the Midrash, connects leprosy with slander, which is a communication-related transgression (the interpretation is based on the fact that Miriam contracted leprosy apparently as a punishment for slandering Moses, Numbers 12:1, 10). In the spirit of this interpretation, it is appropriate that the offering for a speech-related sin be the dove that stands out for its cooing.
- <sup>11</sup> This weakness may have influenced the use of the dove as a metaphor for Israel that is found frequently in midrashic literature in the generations after the destruction of the temple as well as in periods when the Jews were persecuted. In Matthew 10:16 the theme of weakness is modified to emphasize harmlessness, according to the the KJV, or innocence, according to other translations.
- <sup>12</sup> This uncharacteristic loneliness is highlighted in another such verse: "I am like a lone bird upon the roof" (Psalms 102:8). In the Psalm that uses the imagery of fowl, the vocal practices of sufferers are linked to exile and distance from Jerusalem, once again binding aural communication and distance from home in the case of birds.

- 13 These verses in the Douay-Rheims Bible appear as follows: “He hath multiplied them that fall, and one hath fallen upon another, and they shall say: Arise, and let us return to our own people, and to the land our nativity, from the sword of the dove” (Jeremiah 46:16); “Destroy the sower out of Babylon, and him that holdeth the sickle in the time of harvest: for fear of the sword of the dove every man shall return to his people, and every one shall flee to his own land” (Jeremiah 50:16). A preponderance of other translations have it as “the sword of the oppressor” or “the sword of the enemy” (see conveniently <https://biblehub.com/jeremiah/50-16.htm>, accessed on 14 April 2024); and the universality of this translation must have prevented readers from reaching the interpretation presented here.
- 14 This reading may enable us to interpret another difficult verse in Jeremiah 25:38, in which the dove also appears in the context of retreat caused by the sword: “Like a lion [God] has gone forth from the lair; The land has become a desolation, Because of the oppressive wrath [*‘mipne haron hayonah’*—lit. ‘from the wrath of the dove’], Because of such fierce anger”. As in the verses above, the suggestion is to read this verse too “like the dove”. Accordingly, the dove serves here as a metaphor for returning home, in this case due to the wrath of the enemy. This is in contrast to Yehudah Eisenberg (n.d.)’s important suggestion that the use of the dove in the verses cited from Jeremiah, as well as the ensuing verse from Zephaniah, serve “as an adjective describing something”. See: Yehudah Eisenberg, “*Herev Hayonah*—The History of a Concept,” *Discussions on the Book of Jeremiah* (Hebrew), <https://daat.ac.il/he-il/tanach/iyunim/neviim/ahronim/yirmiyahu/prakim/aiz-cherev-hayona.htm?printview=true>, accessed on 14 April 2024.
- 15 Ibn Ezra (Abraham Ibn Ezra, ca. 1090–1165, Spanish-Jewish commentator and philosopher), brings such an interpretation. Also, Abravanel (Isaac Abravanel, 1437–1509, Portugese-Jewish philosopher, economist and politician)—and following him Malbim (acronym of Meir Leibusch son of Yehiel Michal, 1809–1879, East European Jewish rabbi and biblical commentator)—interpret the term “*nigalah*” (in 3:1) in this manner. They, however, also interpret the term “*morah*” in a positive light—as awe—i.e., that the enemies of Jerusalem will be in awe of it in the time of its redemption.
- 16 The definitive study on the linguistic dating of the Book of Jonah is Yehudit Golan Ben Uri (2010). Her findings are confirmed by Uriel Simon (1992, p. 33); Shinan and Zakovitch (2015, p. 15), and others. For opposing opinion, see, e.g., (Holbert 1981, n. 24); cf. (Bolin 1997, pp. 36–40, 64).
- 17 A possible, though unlikely, explanation is that since there are many parallels between the story of the flood and the story of the fate of Nineveh (see below), and since a dove (*yonah*) plays an important role in the story of the flood, it became the name of the hero of the parallel story. We might add, here too in a stretch, that there is a certain similarity between the message conveyed by the prophet Jonah in the Book of Kings and the prophet in the book of Jonah. In both instances the prophets are sent to nations that have sinned, but nevertheless they bear a positive promise—i.e., the expansion of the borders in the time of Jeroboam, and the removal of the punishment in the case of Nineveh. Nevertheless, it seems that the essence of the connection between the episodes is the allusion to the dove and its nature. In other words, the selection of the name of an esoteric and marginal prophet from the time of Jeroboam by the author(s)/editor(s) of the Book of Jonah is driven by associations connected directly to the name.
- 18 Thomas Bolin also holds that the name is allegorical, but sees the allegory in the dove’s stupidity and cowardice (as per Hosea 7: 11), reflected in Yonah’s attempt to escape from his mission and from God. Bolin (1997, pp. 71–72).
- 19 In Section 4.3 below we will discuss ironic and satirical elements in the Book of Jonah. In that context, the use of the name “Amittai” (derivative of “true”) as a fraudulent name given to a prophet is certainly ironic. While as noted, the name Yonah can allegorically fit all prophets, it was apparently used here because the story is not anchored in any historical context and is purely literary, while other prophets may well have been historical figures, with proper names. In addition, as the only prophet traveling to prophesize abroad, the tag *Yonah* is particularly fitting. With regard to the question of historicism v. allegorism of Jonah, see a summary of the debate in Simon (1992, pp. 9–17).
- 20 The observation about Jonah being the only prophet sent abroad is based on *Midrash Breshit Rabbati*, quoted in (Shinan and Zakovitch 2015, p. 27).
- 21 This analogy is developed by Shinan and Zakovitch (2015, pp. 9–10).
- 22 Alistair Hunter tends to denigrate the connection between the two stories (Hunter 2001, p. 145).
- 23 One can add to the comparison that for Noah, the dove is the agent who brings tidings of the conclusion of the flood and the possibility to regenerate life, and the olive branch that it carries symbolizes the appearance and blossoming of life and nature. In parallel, Yonah is the name of the agent whose message regarding the future of Nineveh brings successful results that open a new window for life and a positive future for the city.
- 24 (Bodenheimer 1956, p. 389) summarizes the findings on this issue available in his day.
- 25 E.g., (Simon 1992, pp. 3–9; Bolin 1997, pp. 57–63; Shinan and Zakovitch 2015, pp. 14–15). For the opposing view see for instances (Kugel 2007, pp. 628–29).
- 26 There is much literature on this topic. Two prominent examples are: (Yerushalmi 2011; Walzer 1985); See more recently: (Baden 2019).
- 27 The dove has an honored place in Islam as well, based on Surah 10 of the Quran, in which “*yonas*” (*yonah*) is a significant messenger of God, and messaging, as mentioned, is a central human use of the dove. See the Quran’s version of the Yonah story in Surah 37: 139. The present article, however, focuses on the Old Testament, which is not part of Islamic scriptures.



<sup>28</sup> And see Yvonne Sherwood's elaboration on these approaches in (Sherwood 2000, pp. 11–21).

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