

**Luke 12:24, Noah Midrash**  
**Consider the Birds: the Raven**  
**June 30, 2024**  
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I don't know what comes to mind when you think of ravens. For me, it is Edgar Allen Poe's poem, "The Raven."

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—  
    While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.  
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—  
    Only this and nothing more."

"The Raven" is a poem about a heartbroken man grieving the recent death of his beloved Lenore. On a lonely December night while in his room, a raven taps repeatedly on the door and then the window. He first thinks the noise is a late-night visitor. He is surprised to find the raven when he opens the window. After being let in, the raven flies to and lands on a bust of Pallas (an ancient Greek goddess of wisdom).

The man begins talking to the raven; however, the bird can only reply by croaking "nevermore." The man, having lost his love, muses that the bird will leave him soon, like everyone he has ever cared about. When the raven replies "nevermore," the man assumes the bird agrees with him, although it's unclear if the raven actually understands what the man is saying or is just speaking the one word it knows.

As the man continues to talk to the bird, he slowly loses his grip on reality. He moves his chair closer to the raven and asks increasingly hopeless questions, including whether he and Lenore will be reunited in heaven. He understands the raven's repeated "nevermore" response as a sign that all his dark thoughts are true. He eventually grows angry and shrieks at the raven, calling it a devil and a thing of evil.<sup>1</sup>

Saying:

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—  
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,  
    Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—  
    On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—  
Is there—*is* there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!"  
    Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

In this stanza, the lover, desperate for comfort, asks if there is something or someone who will save or soothe his soul, and again the Raven responds, "nevermore."

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis of "The Raven" paraphrased from <https://blog.prepscholar.com/the-raven-poem-summary>, accessed 6/28/24.

Ravens, in general, have a reputation as bringers of bad news and even harbingers of death. Unlike other birds, they don't have a song to sing, it's more of a gurgling croak. To be fair, it is more musical than the crow's caw, but it is much less pleasant than the songs of other birds. When asked to describe the sound a raven makes, very often people will say something like, "It sounds like death."

Ravens, like vultures, dine on dead bodies. They have large, stout bills, shaggy throat feathers, and wedge-shaped tails, visible best when in flight. Common ravens are large and average 25 inches in length and weigh about 2.6 pounds. They can have wingspans of up to 3 ½ feet. When the author of the Gospel of Matthew tells us Jesus said to "Consider the birds of the air...", considering the raven doesn't immediately spring to mind. Surely, he meant to consider the cardinals or bluebirds. But then along comes the author of Luke with his version of what Jesus said. More specifically than "consider the birds," he says, "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!" (Luke 12:24)

The gospel authors are quoting the same source, but Luke chooses to "raven" rather than the more general "birds." When we encounter these textual differences, we should be curious about why they exist. If both authors were using the same source, why did they make different choices? Was the author of Luke trying to make a different point than the author of Matthew? Who could know? Honestly, we don't know. But we can have some fun wondering about it together.

Let's start by imagining that the author of Luke chose the word raven because of the ways ravens were used in other biblical texts the author would have been familiar with. This morning we will look at two stories: the story of Noah and the story of the prophet Elijah, the raven appears in both.

Let's start with Noah. And let's remember that this story is an ancient myth told and written down by people who believed acts of nature were deliberately performed by gods or, in this case, their God. Almost every culture and tradition has its own flood story.

Noah's story is in Genesis and begins with Noah being told to build a big boat and load it with his family and seven pairs of each clean animal and one pair of the ones deemed unclean. He does so and then it rains for forty days and forty nights.

This is Genesis 8:6-12.

<sup>6</sup>At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made <sup>7</sup>and sent out the raven, and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent out the dove from him to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground, <sup>9</sup>but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. <sup>10</sup>He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark, <sup>11</sup>and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the

waters had subsided from the earth. <sup>12</sup>Then he waited another seven days and sent out the dove, and it did not return to him anymore.

Most of us remember Noah sent the dove and the dove returned with the olive branch, but sometimes we forget he sent a raven first. Why do you think he sent a raven before the dove? While the text tells us he sent the dove to see if the waters had subsided, it does not say why he sent the raven. It says, “[He] sent out the raven, and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth.” This has been a puzzle for rabbis (and curious preachers) for centuries. And, as is the case with many things about the Bible, there is not widespread agreement about this puzzle.

I have a good number of biblical commentaries in my office and access to more online, and very often they offer different opinions. Modern commentaries are written by biblical scholars who have devoted their lives to studying certain aspects of the texts. Similarly, ancient commentaries on the Hebrew scriptures were written by rabbis. Commentaries are written to explain what is unexplained in the text. The opinions about the raven in the story of Noah are based on what is written in the Talmud, which is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism. The Talmud says the raven wasn't let out, but cast out, because it broke protocol and had relations on the Ark. So, while the dove was sent on a reconnaissance mission, the raven was simply expelled. The raven refused to leave, which is why it went “to and fro until the waters were dried up...”

The Talmud says the raven, having been made to leave the Ark, accused Noah of acting with cruelty and prejudice, for his expulsion would result in the extinction of the species. One rabbi writes, "The raven said to Noah, 'Thy Master hateth me, and thou hatest me. Thy Master hateth me - [since He commanded] seven [pairs to be taken] of the clean [creatures], but only two of the unclean. Thou hatest me - seeing that thou leavest the species of which there are seven, and sendest one of which there are only two. Should the angel of heat or of cold smite me, would not the world be short of one kind?' (Talmud Sanhedrin 108b)

The Talmud says the raven had a winning argument. The bird accused both Noah and God of hating him: God had shown an obvious preference for other species, commanding Noah to preserve seven of each. And surely it would have been more prudent for Noah to send a bird from one of the species of which more than two of a kind had been on board the Ark. Perhaps Noah saw the world through utilitarian eyes: Either something can be used or it has no value. If a raven can't be eaten and can't be used as an offering, the world simply doesn't need it.

But the raven's argument takes a crazy turn:

Or perhaps thou desirest my mate!' It blurts out.

The raven accuses Noah of being after his spouse; and almost as crazily, Noah actually addresses the accusation with a response. He says that if, while on the Ark, he

maintained abstinence from his own wife, then he certainly would avoid intimacy with the raven's spouse, who is always off-limits. And why would the raven say this? According to the rabbis, this is a case of projection. The raven was one of three who broke boundaries on the ark and engaged in illicit sexual behavior. Legend says the raven, the dog, and Noah's son, Ham, all did what they weren't supposed to do on the Ark. In the story of Noah, the raven is a symbol of the darkness and cruelty that led humans down the path of destruction in the first place, and because of that, it had to be cast out.<sup>2</sup> In other words, raven bad, dove good.

But another rabbi says something different happened, "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Noah: 'Take it back, because the world will need it in the future.' 'When?' Noah asked. 'When the waters dry off from on the earth.' God replied: 'A righteous man will arise and dry up the world, and will cause him to have need of them,' as it is written, And the ravens brought him bread and flesh... (I Kings 17:6) (Midrash Rabbah 33:5) In other words, the raven is good.

Elijah is the righteous man of whom the rabbi speaks. In I Kings, the prophet Elijah was the bearer of bad news to King Ahab and because of that, he needed to get out of town fast. God says, <sup>3</sup>"Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. <sup>4</sup>You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." <sup>5</sup>So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. <sup>6</sup>The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the wadi. (I Kings 17:3-6)

In this story, the raven is good, literally a lifesaver. Which is it, rabbis? Is the raven bad or good? And which kind of raven was the author of Luke talking about? Here's my question...  
Is it possible the raven, like all of us, is a mixture of bad and good? Judaism and Christianity are not the only traditions that include ravens in their stories.

In her book *Consider the Birds*, Debbie Blue writes, "In the sacred narratives of Native Americans, the raven appears sometimes as creator, sometimes as trickster. Shamans say the raven is an ideal guide on the path of the deepest mysteries. Yet anyone who observes the raven for long recognizes its remarkable capacity for deception. They work in teams. One will distract the mark, a feeding hawk or fox, while the other darts in from behind and steals its meal...yet ravens will share their resources, not just with their own, but with other species. Their relationship with wolves is well-attested. Ravens follow hunting packs and share their kills."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Talmud interpretation and commentary: <https://aish.com/48951586/>, accessed 06/28/24.

<sup>3</sup> Blue, Debbie, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*, (Abingdon Press: Minneapolis MN, 2013). 196-97.

Ravens are not just one thing. They are good parents and they woo their mates with spectacular courtship flights where they fly and swoop, dive and roll, and then the two birds lock talons as they tumble through the sky. One study determined ravens actually fall in love. Scientists agree the raven is the smartest bird there is. Captive ravens have even been taught to speak, perhaps even learning to say, "nevermore?" If I had a raven, I would want it to say that. Even in the rabbis' story about the raven and Noah, he was a little unhinged, but the raven was articulate and tried to be reasonable, pointing out that if he died, his species would be extinct. In Leviticus, the raven was pronounced unclean, an abomination, in I Kings, the raven saved Elijah's life. The raven is a mixture. Coincidentally, or not, raven in Hebrew is very similar to the Hebrew word for "mixture."

Is it possible that this is what the author of Luke was getting at when he wrote "Consider the ravens..." Is it possible that we are asked to consider that God sees ravens, and all creatures, including human beings, for who we really are? Is it possible that God's care extends to all of us in our epic failures and our well-executed successes? In the moments when we are not our best selves and the moments we don't even want to be with ourselves. Can we/do we trust that? Do we trust that there is a force in the universe working for us, perhaps working in us for good? If we aren't there yet, if we struggle to trust, maybe considering the raven is exactly what we need to be doing in this season. Because the truth is, the Love that is loose in the world is for you, whether you believe in God or not. Love is alive and it is alive in and around you.

One last thing...

Today is the end of Pride month. And I cannot talk about the story of Noah without talking about the symbol of God's covenant with Noah at the end of the story. The rainbow is a symbol of a promise made by God to God's people. And it is a reminder to us that the world is not black and white, it is multi-colored, and each color melts into the next. It is a reminder of God's love for all of life, the good, the bad, and even the ugly, though I am not sure God understands ugly in the same way we do. God is a lover of our delightfully mixed-up selves. Even when we aren't so delightful. God loves all sexual orientations and gender identities. God loves all colors of skin. God loves all abilities and sizes and shapes. And on the days when you doubt that, on the days when you don't feel "good enough," consider the raven. Amen.