

Article

The Dove in the Story of Jesus' Baptism: Early Christian Interpretation of a Jewish Image

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Abstract

The expression “like a dove” in Mark 1.10 is syntactically related either to “Spirit” or “descending.” Although a dove was often interpreted as the symbol of the Spirit in later Christian tradition, such imagery is not found in Jewish and early Christian texts of the first century. In my paper I demonstrate that this expression resonates with Gen 1.2; 4Q521; *Odes of Solomon* 28:1; the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Hagigah* 15a; and *Genesis Rabbah* 2.4 as connected with the description of how the Spirit hovers (like a bird) over the righteous. This symbolism was adopted by the pre-Gospel tradition about Jesus' baptism to specify the manner in which the Spirit descended upon Jesus.

Keywords

Gospel, Qumran, Talmud, baptism, dove, Spirit

Introduction

It is a great privilege for me to participate in this issue of *The Bible Translator* in honour of Dr. David Clark. David is not only my senior colleague, whose experience, research, and practice are very important for me, but also a dear friend, whose friendship and advice I greatly appreciate. David has always been an inspired and creative person, no matter what he is doing, whether consulting in a translation project, editing a text, or even just walking in the park. In celebration of David's creativity, my contribution to this volume deals with the issue of the Spirit and the symbolism of a new creation.

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In Mark's story about Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus "like a dove":

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. (1.10 NRSV)¹

The expression "like a dove" (ὡς περιστεράν) in Mark 1.10 can modify either the noun τὸ πνεῦμα (the Spirit) that precedes it or the participle καταβαίνων (descending) that follows it. Therefore, one can understand the Spirit either looking like a dove or descending like a dove. How do the other Gospels understand this? Matthew does not remove the ambiguity: "Suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him" (Matt 3.16 NRSV). Luke makes it more explicit that the Spirit appears in the form of a dove: "and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3.22 NRSV). John adds that the Spirit remains on Jesus: "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him" (John 1.32 NRSV). In the extracanonical *Gospel of the Ebionites* Jesus sees the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending and going into him. However, the *Gospel of the Hebrews* has no dove at all in this story: "The whole source of the Holy Spirit descended and rested upon him (*descendit fons omnis Spiritus Sancti et requievit super eum*)" (quoted by Jerome, *Comm. Isa.* 11.1-3, my translation). Leander E. Keck, who provides a very careful investigation of the connections between the imageries of a dove and the Spirit from the *Religionsgeschichte* perspective and gives a full survey of possible options, concludes that there is no single tradition about the dove in early Christianity. This image of the Spirit has been problematic from the very beginning (Keck 1970, 41–67).²

So, how is one to interpret the image of the dove in the context of Jesus' baptism story? Although the dove was often presumed to be the symbol of the Spirit in later Christian tradition, such imagery is not found in Jewish or Greco-Roman texts, nor in the early Christian texts of the first century C.E. I examine this question from the point of view of the history of ideas and investigate the intertextual and linguistic interactions (at the verbal

¹ In this article, translations of biblical and other ancient literature are from the sources indicated in parentheses or in footnotes. If such an indication is absent, the translation is that of the author.

² The references to earlier studies of this issue and the critics of those studies can be found in Keck's excellent article. There is no need to repeat them here. See also, e.g., Lentzen-Deis's work (1970, 170–83).

and cognitive level) between the story of Jesus' baptism in the Gospels and Jewish literature, taking into account the imagery of the s/Spirit in these texts.³ I agree with Keck that the most plausible explanation of the dove-like image of the Spirit in Jesus' baptism is the comparison of the Spirit's descent with the dove's movement. However, while Keck's arguments are based mostly on texts from the rabbinical period, I demonstrate that this expression resonates not only with Gen 1.2, the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Ḥagigah* (b. *Ḥag.*) 15a, and *Genesis Rabbah* (*Gen. Rab.*) 2.4, but also with the much earlier evidence of 4Q521 and the *Odes of Solomon* (*Odes Sol.*) 28.1. This imagery is connected with the description of how God's spirit hovers (like a bird) over the righteous. In the pre-Gospel tradition about Jesus' baptism, this symbolism was adopted and came to specify the manner in which the Spirit descended upon Jesus.

1. The spirit and the dove in the Hebrew Bible, Jewish, and non-Jewish Greco-Roman literature

First, I turn to the Hebrew Bible and investigate possible links between the spirit and the dove.⁴ Hosea 11.11 reads,

They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD. (NRSV)

In this verse the intensity of a dove's flight represents the speed of the return of Israel from Assyria. Should one connect this simile with the image of a dove in the story of Jesus' baptism? In theory, early Christians may have seen such imagery as a symbol of the new Israel. In the baptism story, Jesus himself can also be seen as a symbol of the new Israel, but the Holy Spirit cannot.

The next important passage is Song 2.12:

The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove (נְשִׁמֵע קוֹל הַתְּזוּר) is heard in our land. (NRSV)

The Targum on the Song of Songs interprets "the turtledove" as "the holy spirit of salvation":

³ In this research some material from my earlier article (Somov 2015) is used. Similar to the practice of NRSV, "Holy Spirit" and "the Spirit" (when it refers to the Holy Spirit) are capitalized. All other references to "spirit," including "spirit of God," are lower case.

⁴ In this section and the next I mostly deal with the sources examined by Keck (1970).

The voice of the holy spirit of salvation, about which I told your father (וקל רוחא דקודשא דפורקנא דאמרית לאבוכון).

However, this text (written in about the seventh or eighth century C.E.) is much later than the story about the baptism of Jesus. Moreover, no voice from heaven is associated with the dove in this story.

One can also compare the expression “like a dove” with the imagery of the dove from the story of the flood in Gen 8. Here, the dove appears as a messenger:

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. (Gen 8.11 NRSV)

However, the dove is not a messenger in the story about the baptism of Jesus. Besides, while the flood has been related to baptism in early Christian tradition since 1 Pet 3.20-21, Noah's dove and the one at the Jordan began to be associated with each other only in the second century C.E.⁵

In Philo, as Keck demonstrates, a dove represents human wisdom and the soul going back to God,⁶ while in Greco-Roman pagan literature a dove is sometimes associated with kings and royal power (Keck 1970, 53–57). However, all this can hardly be regarded as a sufficient basis for the emergence of a tradition in which the spirit is compared with a dove.

2. The descending movement of the spirit and the dove in biblical and cognate literature

In what follows, I examine the connection between the manner in which the spirit descends and the image of the dove in biblical and cognate literature. The first important example is Gen 1.2: “God's spirit hovered [like a bird; *מְרַחֵף*] over the waters.” Indeed, this verse deals with the manner of the spirit's motion. In some contexts the verb *רָחַף* bears the meaning of hovering like a bird that descends to its nest or circles above it (cf. Deut 32.11). An interesting interpretation of Gen 1.2 appears in the treatise *Hagigah* of the Babylonian Talmud:

[Ben Zoma] replied: I was gazing between the upper and the lower waters, and there is only a bare three fingers' [breadth] between them, for it is said: And the spirit of God

⁵ Tertullian, *Bapt.* 8.3-4; Ambrose, *Myst.* 4.24. See also Keck 1970, 49; Sühling 1930.

⁶ See Keck's analysis of Philo's views as well as his critique of earlier works (1970, 47–48).

hovered over the face of the waters—like a dove which hovers over her young without touching [them] (ורוח אלהים מרחפת על פני המים כינה שמרחפת על בניה ואינה נוגעת) (*b. Hag.* 15a)⁷

This interpretation is repeated in *Midrash Rabbah* (*Gen. Rab.* 2.4):

[R. Simeon Ben Lakish said:] AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD HOVERED: this alludes to the spirit of Messiah, as you read, *And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him* (Isa 11.2) . . . [Ben Zoma said:] “For it is not written here, AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD blew, but HOVERED (מרחפת), like a bird flying and flapping with its wings, its wings barely touching [the nest over which it hovers].”⁸

It is worth mentioning that in his homilies on the six days of creation (*Hexaemeron*) St. Basil the Great refers to a certain Syrian who explained to him the meaning of the Hebrew מרחפת in Gen 1.2, which is analogous to the corresponding Syriac word (ܡܚܦܬܐ). St. Basil points out that the spirit’s motion is similar to that of a bird (*Hex.* 2.6.11-27). However, for St. Basil this is the action of a bird covering her eggs with her body and imparting warmth to them.

Thus, in the Hebrew Bible and cognate literature, the spirit’s motion is compared with a bird’s hovering. There are some other verbs for the movement of the spirit, among which the following occur the most frequently: לבש (put on, clothe; Judg 6.34) and צלח (rush on, lead; Judg 14.6; 15.14). However, none of them was chosen for the description of Jesus’ baptism. The earliest Christian tradition likely had in mind that the Spirit descended on Jesus just as the spirit hovered over the waters of the recently created earth on the first day of creation. Keck states that the image of the dove is connected with the way the Spirit descends. This image was then misinterpreted and taken as a symbolic representation of the Spirit. Joachim Jeremias supports Keck’s view:

Similarly, ὡς περιστέρα did not originally mean that the spirit became a dove or appeared in the form of a dove, but that it descended with a gentle sound “like a dove.” An identification of the spirit and the dove came about only in a secondary stage (it is clearest in Luke 3.22: σωματικῶ εἶδει); it follows a more material idea of the *pneuma* which can also be observed elsewhere in the Hellenistic milieu. (Jeremias 1971, 52)

⁷ The translation is quoted from Abrahams (2012).

⁸ The translation is quoted from Freedman (1939, 17–18).

In addition, Jeremias argues that Luke wanted to identify the Spirit with the dove in a more material way. I would agree with Jeremias's point that the imagery of the dove was misrepresented in the later tradition, but Luke's expression *σωματικῶ εἶδει* can be seen as an attempt to intensify the factuality and reality of the Spirit's descending (Fitzmyer 1981, 484). Luke uses the same approach in the story about Pentecost when describing the manner in which the Spirit descends upon the apostles: *ὡσεὶ πυρὸς* (like as of fire; Acts 2.3) (Marshall 1978, 152–53).⁹

Thus, I agree with Keck, who provides evidence from Jewish sources to support his argument about the connection between the Spirit and the dove, even though his evidence comes from the rabbinical period and is rather late. Therefore, further development of this idea and references to evidence from earlier sources are needed.

3. Evidence about the dove from earlier sources

An additional and important support for the argument that the imagery of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism and the imagery of the spirit in Gen 1.2 are connected is seen in the *Messianic Apocalypse* 4Q521 ("On Resurrection") found in the Qumran library. Keck does not refer to this text because it was published later than his article (Tabor and Wise 1992, 149–62). According to 4Q521, which uses images from Ps 146 and Isa 40 and 61, at the end of time the Messiah will call the righteous. Then he will lead, shepherd, and glorify them with the throne of his eternal kingdom. The Messiah will free the captives, open the eyes of the blind, straighten those bent double, heal the wounded, resurrect the dead, and proclaim the good news to the poor. 4Q521 does not contain any specifically sectarian ideology and probably does not reflect the specific view of the Qumran community (Lichtenberger 2001, 83–85; Bremmer 2002, 43–45). This text may have been brought to the Qumran library from the outside and may have been popular in a broader circle of Jewish religious groups of that period. Moreover, it has some parallels with Luke 7.18–23 and Matt 11.2–6 and may have been known to the Synoptic writers, who adopted some of its images (Tabor and Wise 1992, 158–62; Pogor 2012, 345–59).

Here, I do not want to draw much attention to the parallels between 4Q521 and Luke/Matthew—these have already been extensively discussed.

⁹ John Nolland links Luke's *σωματικῶ εἶδει* in Luke 3.21 and *εἶδος* in 9.29 as references to the appearances, and suggests that both words can be understood as "language of approximation, not of identification" (1989, 161).

However, this text, as I argue, has a very important parallel with Gen 1.2, Isa 61.1, and the story about Jesus' baptism. Indeed, 4Q521 tells about a renewal, a new age, and a new creation that takes place with the coming of the Messiah. In such a context, 4Q521 1 II, 6 deals with the descending of God's spirit upon the righteous. Although it does not refer to the Messiah, the way it happens is the same. This verse uses the terminology of Gen 1.2 (the verb רָחַף), associating the creation of the world and the new age of the Messiah. It reads, "His [the Lord's] spirit will hover over the poor [= the righteous]" (ועל עניים רוחו תרחף). There is an interesting parallel between this verse and the above-mentioned passage from *Midrash Rabbah* (*Gen. Rab.* 2.4), which identifies the spirit in Gen 1.2 with the spirit of the Messiah, alluding to Isa 11.2. Further, God's anointing of his servant with his spirit in Isa 42.1 and 61.1, which had some impact on the author of the *Messianic Apocalypse*, is the closest parallel to the story about the baptism of Jesus:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him [יָתַתִּי רוּחִי עָלָיו]; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isa 42.1 NRSV)

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me [עָלָי; ἔπ' ἐμέ],¹⁰ because the LORD has anointed me. (Isa 61.1 NRSV)

I suggest that the author of 4Q521 connects Isaiah's description of God placing his spirit upon his servant with that of the spirit descending upon the righteous at the beginning of the messianic age.

Other interpretations of the link between the dove and the spirit start from the end of the first century C.E. An important piece of evidence is the *Odes of Solomon*, a collection of Jewish-Christian hymns from the late first to early second century C.E., probably originally composed in Syriac.¹¹ *Odes Sol.* 28.1 reads:

As the wings of doves [אֲנָפִי, אֲנָפִי] over their nestlings,
and the mouths of their nestlings toward their mouths,
so also are the wings of the Spirit over my heart.¹²

¹⁰ Cf. ἔπ' αὐτόν in Luke 3.22.

¹¹ Among other possible options, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek are argued to be the original languages of the *Odes of Solomon*. See a discussion on this book in Charlesworth (1985, 725–71).

¹² The translation is quoted from Charlesworth (1985, 759).

On the one hand, the image of the dove in this verse alludes to Ps 55.6,¹³ since *Odes Sol.* 28.3 continues with,

I trusted, consequently I was at rest;
because trustful is he in whom I trusted.¹⁴

On the other hand, *דב*, “of doves” works as a simile for the Spirit, the protecting and saving One who is like a dove protecting her nestlings.¹⁵ This simile points out the connection between the Holy Spirit and the dove in early Jewish-Christian tradition and demonstrates a certain degree of comparison between the motion of the bird and that of the Spirit.

In spite of this resemblance with earlier views on the manner of the Spirit’s descending on Jesus, another hymn from this collection seems to contradict this imagery. *Odes Sol.* 24.1-2 depicts a dove over Christ’s head as follows:

The dove fluttered over the head of our Lord [*דב* *על* *ראש* *יהושע* *בנו*] Messiah,
because he was her Head.
And she sang over him,
and her voice was heard.¹⁶

These verses may allude to Jesus’ baptism (Harris and Mingana 1920, 344; Charlesworth 1985, 757, n. b) but speak about the Holy Spirit as having the appearance of a dove rather than about the manner the Spirit descends upon Jesus.¹⁷ Therefore, one can see the presence of both interpretations of the imagery of the dove in relation to the Spirit in this Jewish-Christian collection of texts.

In further Christian tradition the imagery of the Spirit “like a dove” became more and more eclectic. A good example of such a synthesis of several allusions and associations (a sort of cognitive blend) can be found in one of the sermons of St. Peter Chrysologus (fifth century C.E.):

Today the Holy Spirit hovers over the water under the appearance of a dove [*supernatat aquis in specie colombae*¹⁸], so that, just as that dove announced to

¹³ “O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest” (NRSV).

¹⁴ The translation is quoted from Charlesworth (1985, 760).

¹⁵ E.g., Rendel Harris and Alphonse Mingana admitted such a connection (Harris and Mingana 1920, 360).

¹⁶ The translation is quoted from Charlesworth (1985, 757).

¹⁷ Moreover, in this account the Spirit is subordinated to the Son in an “unorthodox” way (Harris and Mingana 1920, 344).

Noah that the flood that inundated the world had subsided, so too by this sign it would be known that the unremitting shipwreck of the world had come to an end. But it did not carry a branch from the old olive tree, as that one did, but pours out rich, new chrism all over his head as Parent, in order to fulfill what the prophet said: “God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness before your fellows.” (*Sermons* 160.4)¹⁸

In this sermon about Jesus’ baptism, several ideas that had not been combined before are linked together: the Holy Spirit appears in a form of the dove; this dove is similar to Noah’s dove; a branch of the olive tree in the Noah story is associated with the Messiah’s anointment with oil (Ps 44.8; cf. Isa 61.1);¹⁹ the Holy Spirit is moving over the waters.

4. Why a dove?

Why was a dove chosen as the bird that is associated with the descending of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ baptism story? Why does the tradition exploit the Greek feminine noun ἡ περιστερά (a dove), which is used as a common name for this species? After all, ὁ ὄρνις (a bird), which occurs in both masculine and feminine, or τό πετεινόν (a bird), which is neuter, could also be used for such a bird. The choice of περιστερά could be due to the fact that Hebrew רוּחַ (spirit) is feminine (דּוֹבָהּ [a dove] is also feminine). Indeed, Origen quoted an important passage from the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, in which the Spirit is feminine: “Then, my Mother, the Holy Spirit, took me by one of my hairs and brought me to the great mountain Tabor” (*Comm. Jo.* II.12; *Hom. Jer.* XV.4).

However, this question can be resolved in another way, namely with the help of the cognitive study of metaphor. In expressions such as ὡς περιστεράν/הַדּוֹבָהּ/כְּבִנְיָאֵל the words ὡς/כְּ/בִנְיָאֵל serve as an auxiliary means for constructing a comparison, i.e., a simile that builds the comparison or resemblance between two concepts marked by “like” or “as.” Simile is usually distinguished from metaphor, but in some cases their function is similar. Janet Martin Soskice makes a contrast between illustrative and modelling types of simile as distinctive in terms of epistemic distance (Soskice 1985, 59–60). An illustrative simile, which “compares, point by point, two known entities,” has a restricted implication and is different from metaphor. In a modelling simile, a well-known concept is used for the explanation of what is “beyond our full grasp.” An example of such a simile is *God is (like) our*

¹⁸ Quoted from Palardy (2005, 279–80).

¹⁹ Here, the link with Noah’s dove serves as a basis for Jesus’ anointment at his baptism.

father. This sort of simile can be virtually equated with metaphor because it shares its cognitive function, in spite of the grammatical difference.

Such similes and metaphors often appear in apocalyptic language (cf. “one like a son of man [פְּבֶר אֲנָשׁ]” in Dan 7.13). By apocalyptic language I mean the special language devices and symbolic imagery (e.g., number symbolism, similes, and metaphors) that are used in apocalyptic texts for the visionary’s description of the divine or supernatural reality or revelation (e.g., Ezek 1–2; Dan 7; 4 Ezra; Rev) (Beale 1999, 50–69). Sometimes, however, these descriptions are so awkward for interpretation that they are difficult or even impossible to visualize.²⁰

The imagery of the opened heavens in Mark 1.10 (“the heavens torn apart”) can be seen as a piece of apocalyptic language in the story of Jesus’ baptism, because it refers to revelation from above. The expression “like (as) a dove,” therefore, is such an “apocalyptic” simile/metaphor. In this metaphorical extension, the way the Holy Spirit descends onto Jesus is mapped onto the way a dove hovers (over its nest).

Furthermore, according to cognitive linguistic prototype theory, humans rely upon the most representative (the most frequently perceived) part of a category (the principle of perceived world structure). These prototypes build the structure and organize the category. A schematic representation of the most salient or central characteristics associated with members of a given category is called a prototype. A dove can be seen as a prototypical representation in ancient Mediterranean culture of a bird that hovers in a particular way. A dove appears in this function in the passage discussed above about the descending of the spirit in *b. Hag.* 15a.

It is notable that in Deut 32.11, which speaks about God caring for Israel, God’s action toward Israel is described by a form of רָחַף: “as an eagle (כְּנָשׁוֹר) stirs up its nest, and hovers over (יִרְחֵף) its young; as it spreads its wings” (NRSV). The dove most likely does not quite fit in a comparison with God’s action of protection and care for Israel (in spite of such a comparison in *Odes Sol.* 28.1). Indeed, the eagle is a much more impressive bird than the dove. After all, the motion of the spirit is not mentioned in this verse.

Conclusion

As we have seen, in the story of Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1.10; Matt 3.16; Luke 3.22; John 1.32) the expression “like a dove” can serve as a modelling simile that functions as a metaphor. This simile/metaphor resonates with Gen 1.2; 4Q521; *Odes Sol.* 28.1; *b. Hag* 15a; and *Gen. Rab.* 2.4, and depicts

²⁰ E.g., the description of Ezekiel’s vision of the eschatological temple in Ezek 40–48.

the manner in which the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus (like the hovering of a bird over its nest), but not the bodily form that the Spirit takes in this vision. In the pre-Gospel tradition about Jesus' baptism this symbolism was adopted to specify the manner in which the Spirit descended upon Jesus. This is similar to how God's spirit was hovering over the waters on the first day of creation (Gen 1.2) and, then, how his spirit descends upon the righteous at the beginning of the messianic age (4Q521). A dove (περιστερά) in this expression is a prototypical representation in ancient Mediterranean culture of a bird that is capable of flying in such a way. The dove simile in Mark 1.10 therefore probably symbolizes the beginning of a new creation or the new age of the Messiah.

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Abbreviations

- b. Ḥag.* Babylonian Talmud tractate *Ḥagigah* (Abrahams 2012)
- Bapt.* Tertullian's *De baptismo* (*Baptism*)
- Comm. Isa.* Jerome's *Commentariorum in Isaiaem libri XVIII*
- Comm. Jo.* Origen's *Commentarii in evangelium Joannis*
- Gen. Rab.* *Genesis Rabbah* (Freedman 1939)
- Hex.* St. Basil the Great's *Hexaemeron*
- Hom. Jer.* Origen's *Homiliae in Jeremiam*
- Myst.* Ambrose's *De mysteriis* (*The Mysteries*)
- NRSV New Revised Standard Version (1989)
- Odes Sol.* *Odes of Solomon*
- PL Patrologia latina (Migne, J.-P. 1844–1864)