

THE BACKGROUND TO THE *DOVE* IMAGERY IN THE STORY OF JESUS' BAPTISM

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All four gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus by John include the report of the descent of the Spirit "as a dove" upon Jesus. Although some would take the account as simply historical fact without attaching any symbolic sense to the dove,¹ many would seek to understand the significance of the dove imagery from various backgrounds to provide a basis for interpreting the symbolic meaning of the descending dove.

Despite much discussion, there is no consensus in this search for the symbolic significance in the dove imagery.² There is much debate on whether a dove was actually a part of the original story. Leander Keck pioneered the theory that Mark's *ὡς περιστεράν* is ambiguous, and that it represents the Aramaic form, כַּיִוָּנָה, which he argues originally represented the action of the Spirit instead of its appearance.³ However,

¹See, for example, A. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (New York: Longmans, 1899), 1:287.

²For a list of works treating this topic, see Stephen Gero, "The Spirit as a Dove at the Baptism of Jesus," *Novum Testamentum* 18 (1976) 19-20, n. 1.

³L. Keck, "The Spirit and the Dove," *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970) 41-67. Others who also held to the view that the phrase is adverbial include Jeremias (J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*. Trans. J. Bowden [New York: Scribners, 1971], 1:52) and Hooker (Morna D. Hooker,

this view goes against the natural positioning of the words in Mark's account and Keck has to accuse Luke of misunderstanding the story or intentionally changing the story to give rise to a "dove-like Spirit."⁴

This paper will seek to trace the use of the dove imagery in the Old Testament, the ancient world in general, and post-biblical Judaism in order to provide a background for understanding the baptism account. The result will be correlated with an analysis of how the baptism story functions in the Gospel of Mark to validate whether the symbolic meaning fits into the total argument of the book.

Since the study will focus on the imagery of the dove, instead of any specific word, the discussion will include all kinds of birds related to the dove family. Most of the references studied will concern the dove (יִנְיָה). In addition, the turtle-dove (תִּרְיָה) and young birds of any kind that the context suggests to be pigeons will be included in the study.⁵

Doves in the Old Testament

*Literal Uses*⁶

Most of the references to doves in the Old Testament are found in relation to the sacrificial system. Doves or turtle-doves were used in the burnt offering, sin offering, and rites of cleansing.⁷

In Genesis 15:9, the Lord commanded Abraham to prepare several animals for the consummation of His covenant with him. Among them a turtle-dove and another young bird (גִּנְזָה) were included. However, Abraham did not cut the birds in halves as he did to the other animals. This has led some scholars to ask whether the birds were actually

The Gospel according to St. Mark [Black's New Testament Commentaries. London: A & C Black, 1991] 46.

⁴Cf. R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* (Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 34A; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), 32-33.

⁵For a list of words relating to the dove, see G. J. Botterweck, "יִנְיָה," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)*, ed. by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, trans. by D. E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 6:32-34.

⁶The heading "literal uses" is employed here to indicate that in the passages discussed, real pigeons were involved, although they may have symbolic significance beyond their reality.

⁷Cf. Lev 1:14; 5:7, 11; 12:6, 8; 14:22, 30; 15:14, 29; Num 6:10.

killed, or were they there for another function. Christopher Begg,⁸ in an attempt to explain the parallel between *tôr*, "dove," and *berît*, "covenant," in Psalm 74:19-20, argues from the "Vulture Stela,"⁹ a third millennium (BCE) Sumerian text recording the border agreement between two kings in which doves were decorated and sent to the temple of the deity during the covenant making process. He notes that the birds in Genesis 15 were not sent away because Yahweh came to the meeting, so there was no need to send the birds to Yahweh's dwelling place. However, this connection between doves and covenant making is not found in other passages.

The most significant literal use of the word *dove* is found in the account of the flood at Noah's time:

Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put forth his hand, and took her and brought her into the ark with him. He waited another seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent forth the dove; and she did not return to him any more (Genesis 8:8-12).¹⁰

This incident has led to views that interpret the dove as representing a messenger.

E. M. Dörrfuss argues from this and other passages where the dove appears as a messenger (Psalm 56:1; 68:14; Song of Songs 2:14; 5:2; 6:9), that the function of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' baptism was to express the extraordinary closeness between the Father and the Son.¹¹

The imagery of the dove as messenger is further developed by P. Trudinger.¹² He notes that the Hebrew word for the name of the prophet

⁸Christopher T. Begg, "The Covenantal Dove in Psalm LXXIV 19-20," *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987), 78-81.

⁹A form of the text is published in J. S. Cooper, *Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions: The Lagash-Umma Border Conflict* (Malibu, CA: Undena, 1981), 45-47.

¹⁰Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

¹¹E. M. Dörrfuss, "'Wie eine Taube'. Überlegungen zum Verständnis von Mk 1,10," *BibNotiz* 57 (1991) 7-13.

¹²P. Trudinger, "Jonah: A Post-exilic Verbal Cartoon?" *Downside Review* 107 (1989), 142-143.

Jonah means "dove" (יֹנָקָה); it is a symbol of God's faithfulness and for Israel as the servant of God depicted in the book of Jonah. Therefore, the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at Jesus' baptism suggests that Jesus is the faithful messenger to humankind, especially to the *outsiders*.

These ideas will be evaluated after the discussion of the concept in Judaism.

Figurative Uses

The greatest block of figurative usages of the dove imagery is found in the Song of Songs.¹³ In these passages, the dove was used as a figure for the lover, whose beauty and purity were portrayed as similar to those of the dove. There seems to be no direct connection between this kind of usage and the usage in the baptism of Jesus.

Some passages use the flight of the dove as a figure. Hosea 11:11 describes the return of Israel as "like doves out of the land of Assyria," while Hosea 7:11 complains about Israel's lack of sense; they are like silly doves.¹⁴

Other figurative uses of the dove imagery appear to be derived from the play on the etymology of the word. The Hebrew word for dove, יֹנָקָה, is connected either to the root יָנָה, "to oppress, maltreat," or to the root אָנָה, "to moan."¹⁵ The play on the latter root is clearly reflected in Isaiah 38:14, 59:11, Ezekiel 7:16, and Nahum 2:7. The word for the turtle-dove (תּוֹרֵד), probably being derived from onomatopoeic connection¹⁶ --that is, the name reflects the sound the bird makes--is not used in this fashion in the Old Testament.

The above figurative uses of the dove imagery do not offer a consistent picture for the background of the New Testament usage. Moreover, there is no clear connection between these and the imageries involved in Jesus' baptism. Therefore, the background for the New Testament usage, if it can be determined, must be traced through literature outside

¹³1:5; 2:14; 4:1; 5:2, 12; 6:9.

¹⁴Other passages that refer to the flight of the dove are Psalm 55:6 and Isaiah 60:8.

¹⁵Cf. S. P. Toperoff, "The Dove, Turtle-dove and Pigeon in Bible and Midrash," *Dor le Dor* 15.3 (1987) 181; *BDB* (401) offers יָן as the root but also noted the above etymology.

¹⁶Cf. *BDB*, s.v. "תּוֹרֵד, תּוֹרֵד," 1076.

the Old Testament.

Doves in the Ancient World

There is extensive literary use of the dove imagery in ancient literature. The dove was the bird of the gods in ancient Greece.¹⁷ It is frequently related with female deities. Examples of dove-goddesses can be found in various locations throughout the Mediterranean from as early as the second millennium BCE.¹⁸ The Cypriot Aphrodite was portrayed as a dove, and the dove-goddess appeared at Knossos in Crete, Mycenae, Etruria, Sicily, Carthage, and Phoenicia. It was even conjectured that the Greek word περιστέρα actually was derived as a loan word from the Semitic perach-Istar, "bird of Ishtar," though no inscriptional evidence has been found.¹⁹

A story in Diodor II:4ff tells of Semiramis, who was exposed as an infant by her mother Derketo, was fed by doves, and was later found by shepherds and brought into the court of King Nunus of Assyria to be his bride. After her death she was transformed into a dove.²⁰ However, the development of this story into a so-called "call to kingship sagas" was rightly criticized by Bultmann as audacious.²¹ On the other hand, it cannot be denied that birds frequently appeared with kings in the ancient world.²²

Besides its association with deities and kings, the dove is a representation of the soul.²³ It was also frequently used as a metaphor

¹⁷Cf. H. Greeven, "Περιστέρα, τρυων," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* ed. G. Kittel, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:64.

¹⁸TDNT 6:64-5; the following examples are cited from the same source.

¹⁹TDNT 6:64; cf. H. Gressmann, "Die Sage von der Taufe Jesu und die vorderorientalische Taubengöttin," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 20 (1920/21) 1-40, 323-359. Botterweck lists some artifact discoveries of doves in the temple of Asherah at Nahariyah, of Ishtar at Ashur, and dove figurines from the Ninmah temple of Babylon and the royal cemetery at Ur. G. Botterweck, "תְּרִי" TDOT 6:35, 6.

²⁰TDNT 6:64.

²¹R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. by J. Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 249; cf. L. E. Keck, "The Spirit and the Dove," *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970), 54.

²²R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 250; see also TDOT, s.v. "תְּרִי".

²³TDNT 6:65; Greeven cites Quintus Smyrnaeus, 8:202-203, "the soul flew out of his body through the wound."

of human virtues such as affectionateness,²⁴ chastity,²⁵ gentleness²⁶ and guilelessness.²⁷

Although the dove was a common image in the ancient world, both in the east and the west, its connection with the gospel account cannot be clearly established.

Doves in Post-Biblical Judaism

Intertestamental Jewish Writings

In this section, we will consider evidence deriving from the intertestamental literature.²⁸ Currently, there is no known reference to the dove in the Qumran manuscripts.²⁹ The references in the works of Josephus deal mainly with areas of historical rather than literary interests, and will therefore be omitted from the discussion.

The Apocrypha

There is no occurrence of the terms for dove, pigeon or turtle-dove in the Greek Apocrypha.³⁰ However, there are two passages in which the dove appeared as a figure in the Apocalyptic book of 2 Esdras (or 4 Ezra in the RSV), which was supposedly composed near the close of the first century A. D. and was translated and appended in the second and third century.³¹

²⁴For example, *Aristophanes, Pl.*, 1011.

²⁵For example, Pliny, *Natural History*, 10, 104.

²⁶For example, *Diogenes Laertius*, VII, 64.

²⁷For example, Steier, 2495, "a simple person who could easily be outwitted was called ἡμένη πελειάς," cited from W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, s.v. "περιστέρá."

²⁸The designation "intertestamental" will be used to refer to the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran, Philo and Josephus, although some of the writings may come from a date later than the formation of the New Testament.

²⁹*TDOT*, s.v. "דָּבִי," 6:33; cf. K. G. Kuhn, *Konkordanz zu den Qumrantexten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960).

³⁰Cf. E. Hatch and H. A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the other Greek versions of the Old Testament (Including the Apocryphal Books)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 3 vols, 1987).

³¹Cf. Bruce Metzger, ed., *The Oxford Annotated Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University

2 Esdras 2:15

This passage uses the dove to represent the virtue of a mother who brings up her sons with gladness, and the imagery may also be associated with Israel. It says,

Mother, embrace your sons; bring them up with gladness, as does the dove; establish their feet, because I have chosen you, says the Lord.³²

The election by the Lord in the last half of the verse reflects the theme in the context that talks about the judgment and future restoration of Israel. The dove is used here as an image for Israel.

2 Esdras 5:25-27

This passage is also about the election of Israel. It is set in the context of Ezra's prayer during a visionary encounter with the Lord. He asks the Lord why He punished the one whom He had elected. In portraying Israel as the elect people of God, he used several figures including the dove.

and from all the birds that have been created thou hast named for thyself one dove, and from all the flocks that have been made thou hast provided for thyself one sheep.³³

Summary

The two passages in 2 Esdras agree with each other in the use of the dove imagery in relation to Israel. However, the paucity of similar usage and the uncertainty concerning the origin of the tradition makes any conclusion tentative.

The Pseudepigrapha

There are not many uses of the dove imagery in the Pseudepigrapha. However, the few uses offer interesting figurative senses which will be discussed below:

Press, 1977).

³²Quotations from the Apocrypha is taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

³³2 Esdras 5:26

Pseudo-Philo 23:7

Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* is an imaginative re-writing of Old Testament history from Adam to David. Its date is not clearly determined but a date around the time of Jesus seems most likely.³⁴ In a description of a covenant ceremony between the Lord and Joshua, Israel is likened to a dove.

These will be a witness between Me and you, that I will give you offspring from one who is closed up. and I will make you like the dove, because you have taken for me a city that your sons will begin to build before me³⁵

This use of the dove to represent Israel agrees with most later rabbinic writings.

Odes of Solomon 24

The dove is used in this hymn as a symbol related to the Messiah and judgment.

The dove fluttered over the head of our Lord Messiah, because he was her Head and she sang over him, and her voice was heard. Then the inhabitants were afraid, and the foreigners were disturbed. The bird began to fly, and every creeping thing died in its hole ...³⁶

Thus the function of the appearance of the dove over the head of the Messiah was to demonstrate His sovereignty, and its voice the announcement of judgment.

Although the Odes have a very strong Jewish tone and perspective, most now recognize that they were early Christian hymns.³⁷ They were judged to be composed around the close of the first century CE³⁸ Thus they postdate the New Testament and may have been strongly influenced by Christian theology. Nevertheless, they represent an early sample of the way a Jewish Christian related to the idea of the Messiah. Therefore,

³⁴Cf. D. J. Harrington, "Pseudo-Philo: *Biblical Antiquities*," in Charlesworth, J. H., ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City: DoubleDay, 1985), 2:299.

³⁵Text cited from the translation by D. J. Harrington, "Pseudo-Philo: *Biblical Antiquities*," 2:333.

³⁶24:1-4; cited from J. H. Charlesworth, "Odes of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:757.

³⁷J. H. Charlesworth, "Odes of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:725.

³⁸J. H. Charlesworth, "Odes of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:727.

the use of the dove imagery here may represent the contemporaneous conceptions on that image.

Apocalypse of Elijah 3:2

Although this is a composite Jewish and Christian text that is of a late fourth century date, it may contain some much older material.³⁹ The association of doves with the Christ is clearly portrayed.

When the Christ comes, He will come in the manner of a covey of doves with the crown of doves surrounding him⁴⁰

Summary for Pseudepigrapha

There are not many usages of the dove imagery in the Pseudepigrapha, and none can be demonstrated to be clearly pre-Christian. However, the examples cited above may have come from earlier Jewish tradition that used the dove to represent Israel, and ideally, her Messiah.

The Writings of Philo

Eleven occurrences of the root περιστερᾶ are found in the writings of Philo Judaeus.⁴¹ Four occurrences of the root appear in a passage discussing the animal required for the sin offering.⁴² He noted that the dove is specially suited as a sacrificial animal for the sins of speech because its flight has certain features which are like those of speech.

... and similarly the birds (the doves and pigeons) as representing speech. For speech is light and winged by nature, moving swifter than an arrow, and flashing its way in every direction.⁴³

Two passages in *On Special Laws* contain three references to the

³⁹Cf. J. H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 42.

⁴⁰Cited from *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 1:744.

⁴¹Based on a search of L. Berkowitz, & K. A. Squitier, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae: Canon of Greek Authors and Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) on CD-ROM searchable by the Ibycus computer system.

⁴²*On the Change of Names* 233, 234, 245, 248. Text for Philo's writings will be cited from the translation given by F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker. Colson, F. H. and Whitaker, G. H., *Philo: With An English Translation*, ed. by Page, T. E., Capps, E., and Rouse, W. H. D., The Loeb Classical Library, 10 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1932-).

⁴³*On the Change of Names* 247; Colson & Whitaker, 5:269.

birds which draw attention to their being tame and gentle.⁴⁴

One passage uses the brilliant colors that reflect from a dove's neck to illustrate the need for variations in ways of judgment and thinking.⁴⁵

Two passages in *Who is the Heir of Divine Things* used the word three times metaphorically for the mind or reason. In sections 126-127, the pigeon (περιστερά) is likened to the human mind while the turtle-dove (τρυγών) is compared to the Divine Wisdom.⁴⁶ However, the human mind and Divine Wisdom are presented as indivisible. Sections 233-4 read,

... "He did not divide the birds." Our mind is likened to a pigeon, since the pigeon is a tame and domesticated creature, while the turtle-dove stands as a figure of the mind which is the pattern of ours. For the Word (λόγος), or Reason of God, is a lover of the wild and solitary, never mixing with the medley of things that have come into being only to perish, but its wonted resort is ever above and its study is to wait on One and One only. So then the two natures, ..., are indivisible, yet indivisible as they are they divide other things without number.⁴⁷

Summary of Dove References in Philo

The usages examined above reflect Philo's tendency to allegorically interpret Scripture. His association of the pigeon with divine reason and wisdom is a concept that could provide the background to the appearance of the bird in Jesus' baptism. However, this connection is not supported by other material and does not fit well into the context of the story of Jesus' baptism.

The Mishnah

The occurrences of the words for dove or pigeon in the Mishnah appear mostly in passages where sacrifice is discussed.⁴⁸ They deal

⁴⁴On *The Special Laws* 1:162 (Colson & Whitaker, 7:191); 4:116 (twice; Colson & Whitaker, 8:79).

⁴⁵On *Drunkenness* 173; Colson & Whitaker, 3:409.

⁴⁶Colson & Whitaker, 4:345-347.

⁴⁷Colson & Whitaker, 4:399-401.

⁴⁸*Shekalim* 6:5; *Zebahim* 3:5; 7:5; 14:2; *Menahoth* 13:6; *Hullin* 1:5; *Kerithoth* 6:8,9; *Meilah* 3:4,5; *Kinnim* 1:1ff; as listed from the index in Herbert Danby, ed. & trans., *The Mishnah: Translated From The Hebrew With Introduction And Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

with various topics such as the kinds of sacrifice in which doves may be used, the timing of legal sacrifices of birds, the kinds of bird that are valid for sacrifice, etc. The tractate *Kinnim* is wholly devoted to the discussion of bird offerings. This emphasis on sacrifice is consistent with the usage in the Old Testament providing a basis for the use of the birds for sacrifice. The discussion of this topic indicates that dove offerings were common. The dove would then be a good metaphorical illustration to use in teaching. However, its use in the Mishnah does not offer an explanation of the imagery used metaphorically.

The Talmud

This study will focus on the occurrences of the words for dove in the Babylonian Talmud, which is the teachings of the rabbis of Babylon from the third century to the sixth century CE.

Since, as noted above, the discussions in the Mishnah concerning the dove focus on its use in sacrifices, many occurrences of the bird in the Talmud are explanations of these regulations,⁴⁹ or discussions concerning raising or owing doves,⁵⁰ or other related regulations.⁵¹ However, there are many other instances where the symbolic significance of the birds is discussed.

The dove was a symbol representing Israel in many instances. In *Shabbath* 222, the congregation of Israel is likened to a dove, "just as a dove is protected by its wings, so is Israel protected by the precepts."⁵² In an interpretation of the figures in the Song of Songs, the community of Israel is likened to a dove.⁵³ *Sanhedrin* 641 likened Israel to a dove by quoting from Psalm 68:13, "ye are as the wings of a dove covered with silver."⁵⁴ Another passage also used this verse from the Psalm in

⁴⁹Cf. *Hullin* 98; 110ff; 331ff; 343; 348; 798; *Menahoth* 382f. Citation from the Babylonian Talmud refers to the text and translation in the *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. by I. Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1963-1990).

⁵⁰Cf. *Bezah* 47; 49f; 127; 152; *Baba Kamma* 453; 472; *Beba Mezi'a* 583; *Baba Bathra* 317; 319; 323; *Hullin* 820.

⁵¹Cf. *Shabbath* 795; *Nazir* 39; *Sanhedrin* 47; 677; *Hullin* 810; *Niddah* 159; *Parah* 337.

⁵²See also *Shabbath* 652.

⁵³*Gittin* 198.

⁵⁴The interpretation of Psalm 68:13 is very difficult. It is not sure who is the subject of the comparison. Some translations (e.g. NIV) suggest that the dove here is among the spoils divided

the context of describing the miraculous conception of Israelite women in Egypt, so that the Egyptians were forced to try to control their birthrate.⁵⁵

Another instance in *Berakoth* 3a compares the voice of God to that of the cooing of the dove in the context of a vision concerning the destruction of Jerusalem. This is perhaps significant since it relates the dove with the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶

A few instances note that the figure of a dove was used as a cult object. In *Hullin* 22, R. Nahman b. Isaac said, "Because they found a figure of a dove on top of Mt. Gerizim and they worshipped it."⁵⁷ It is not clear why they worshipped this dove figure.⁵⁸

The Talmud also makes reference to the dove that Noah sent out from the ark after the flood. In an explanation of the olive branch that the dove brought back to Noah, *'Erubin* 127 put these words in the dove's mouth as it addressed God, "May my food be as bitter as the olive but entrusted to Your hand rather than sweet as honey and dependent on a mortal." It seems that the explanation of the figure in the flood story focused mainly on moral teaching, where the dove was seen as an embodiment of the virtues of cleanness and righteousness.⁵⁹ This teaching may be unrelated to the flood account and set in a wisdom context. In a discussion of learning virtues from various animals, the virtue of chastity was related to the dove.⁶⁰

Finally, there is an allusion to the creation account, where the Spirit's hovering over the waters was compared to a dove's hovering

by the women. Edward Lipinski, "La Colombe du Ps LXVIII 14," *Vetus Testamentum* 23 (1973), 365-368, suggests that they may have been Canaanite cult objects, but Zahavi Beilin, "The Wings of the Dove are Covered With Silver and Her Pinions of Gold [Ps 68:14]," *Beth Mikra* 53 (1973) 227, argues that the dove is symbolic of Yahweh's revelation at Mount Sinai; the two articles above were cited in Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, ed. by F. E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 448.

⁵⁵ *Sotah* 56.

⁵⁶ Cf. L. Keck, "The Spirit and the Dove," 52.

⁵⁷ See also *Bekoroth* 278, which referred to doves being worshipped as idols or assigned to an idolatrous purpose.

⁵⁸ The goddess Ishtar, and some other goddesses, were related to the dove (7), but their connection to the cult at Mount Gerizim was not documented.

⁵⁹ Cf. *Sanhedrin* 746.

⁶⁰ *Erubin* 698.

over her young.⁶¹

Summary of Talmudic Usages

The main figurative usage of the dove imagery is in the representation of Israel. However, it does not form a consistent pattern that we can establish as the background to the use of the imagery in the story of Jesus' baptism. Nevertheless, the range of usages show that the dove was a popular figure for use in rabbinic teaching.

The Midrashim

The focus of this section is the major rabbinic Midrash. The date for the teachings found ranges from the third to the sixth century. However, as with other rabbinic literature, they possibly reflect earlier traditions.

The dove was consistently used as a figure for the people of Israel in the Midrashim. Moreover, it provided detailed description of the comparison so that we may know on what basis this comparison was made.

The most cited passage comes from the Midrash Rabbah on Song of Songs.⁶² It compares the qualities of the dove to the qualities of Israel with this comment:

As the dove is innocent, (so Israel are innocent; as the dove is graceful in its step), so Israel are graceful in their step, when they go up to celebrate the festivals. ... As the dove is chaste, so Israel are chaste. As the dove puts forth her neck for slaughter, so do Israel, as it says, For Thy sake are we killed all the day (Ps. XLIV, 23). As the dove atones for iniquities, so Israel atone for the other nations.⁶³

This association of the dove with Israel atoning for the nations was taken to argue for similar imagery at work in the baptism of Jesus.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Hagigah* 92.

⁶² Cf. H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck'sche, 1926-1928), 1:123-125.

⁶³ Midrash Rabbah on Song of Songs 1:15. Translation taken from Maurice Simon, trans., *Song of Songs*, in *Midrash Rabbah*, ed. by H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (New York: Soncino Press, 1983), 86.

⁶⁴ Cf. William R. Stegner, "The Baptism of Jesus and the Binding of Isaac: An Analysis of

Other passages use the imagery for Israel's escape from Egypt. Rabbi Ishmael, a second generation Tanna from the second century CE,⁶⁵ taught concerning Song of Songs 2:14,

When Israel went forth from Egypt, what did they resemble? A dove which was fleeing from the hawk and flew into the cleft of a rock, and found a serpent lurking there. When it tried to get right in it could not, because the serpent was lurking there, and when it tried to turn back it could not because the hawk was hovering outside. What then did the dove do? It began to cry and beat its wings so that the owner of the cote should hear and come to its rescue. This was the position of Israel by the Red Sea.⁶⁶

The cleft of the rock to which the dove flew was interpreted by Rabbi Akiba⁶⁷ as referring to Mount Sinai when the Lord made His covenant with Israel.⁶⁸

Another interesting mention of the dove occurs in the Midrash Rabbah on Numbers 12:14, which describes the throne of King Solomon with a golden scepter behind it and on top of it is a dove carrying a golden crown in its mouth. When Solomon sits on the throne, the crown would be just above his head.⁶⁹

Summary of Midrashic Usages

The dove was employed as imagery for Israel in the Midrashim.⁷⁰ To this basic concept are attached related ideas of Israel's redemption from Egypt, her atonement for the nations, and threat of judgment. However, since this material is later than the New Testament, we cannot

Mark 1:9-11," in *The Answers Lie Below: Essays in Honor of Lawrence Edmund Toombs*, ed. by Henry O. Thompson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 340-341. A popular form of this thesis is presented in idem., "The Baptism of Jesus: A Story Modeled on the Binding of Isaac," *Bible Review* 1 (March, 1985), 36-46. However, the argument depends on Targumic material concerning Isaac which is of later date.

⁶⁵Cf. H. L. Strack and G. Stemmerger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 79.

⁶⁶Midrash Rabbah on the Song of Songs 2:14; Maurice Simon, *Song of Songs*, 129.

⁶⁷A second generation Tanna of the 2nd century CE; H. L. Strack and G. Stemmerger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 79.

⁶⁸Cf. M. Simon, *Song of songs*, 130-131.

⁶⁹Midrash Rabbah on Numbers 12:14. J. J. Slotki, trans., *Numbers*, in *Midrash Rabbah*, (New York: Soncino Press, 1983), 490.

⁷⁰Other references to the dove may be found in the following places in *Midrash Rabbah: Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices*, 3rd edition, by Freedman, H. and Simon, Maurice (New York: Soncino Press, 1983), *Genesis* 265f; 317; *Exodus* 247f; 264-266; *Numbers* 392; 406; *Song of Songs* 176ff; 233; and *Lamentations* 57.

argue too dogmatically from these parallels.

The Targumim

It is beyond the scope of this paper to survey every occurrence of the term in the Aramaic Targum. A particular passage will be noted which has special significance for our study. In the Targum on Song of Songs 2:12, the "voice of the turtle-dove" is interpreted as the "voice of the Holy Spirit." This makes a connection that is similar to that of the story of Jesus' baptism. However, this targum is generally dated to the eighth century, CE,⁷¹ although the tradition that lies behind it may come from an earlier time.

Summary and Background Study

The dominant figurative usage of the dove in post-biblical Judaism is as a representation of Israel. However, attempts to further define this imagery or relate it directly with the appearance of the Holy Spirit fail to be persuasive. Guelich writes,

the absence of clear precedent for identifying the dove symbolically with the Spirit, despite the extensive literary use of the dove in ancient literature, (see Str-B, 1:123-25; H. Greeven, TDNT 6 [1968] 64-67; Lentzen-Deis, *Taufe*, 170-83), makes any symbolic explanation of the dove's role in this pericope (Cf. Feuillet, RSR 46 [1958] 524-44; Lentzen-Deis, *Taufe*, 269-73) tenuous at best (so Schweizer, 37).⁷²

On the other hand, Keck's dismissal of any justification for seeing the appearance of a dove in the story does not do justice to the evidence.⁷³ The failure to find clear parallels using the dove as a symbol for the Holy Spirit is an inadequate reason to deny its appearance there.

If we do not limit the parallel to a strict parallel between the dove and the Spirit, there are many possibilities of seeing the dove as a potential symbol in addition to the other aspects of the baptismal story. Most probably, based upon rabbinic evidence, the dove's role in the story is to identify Jesus with Israel, and all that Israel represents. It is

⁷¹L. Keck, "The Spirit and the Dove," 53.

⁷²R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:26* (Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 34A; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 33.

⁷³L. Keck, "The Spirit and the Dove," 53.

easy to associate this identification with the idea that Jesus was at His baptism anointed by the Spirit as the Ideal Israel, the Messiah.

The Implication of the dove imagery for Mark's Gospel

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the theology and message of Mark's Gospel as a whole. It seems clear that one of the purposes of Mark is to present Jesus as the Messiah.⁷⁴ Furthermore it can be seen that Mark intends to present Jesus as the royal Messiah who suffered for the sake of the people. The theme of kingship is seen most clearly in chapter 15.⁷⁵ However, Jesus' messianic identity and function was not held from readers until the end of the Gospel, but was introduced early in the first chapter. It is the contention of this writer that Mark presents Jesus inaugurating His kingdom at his baptism.

Within this context the imagery of the dove at Jesus' baptism functions symbolically to introduce the career of Jesus. At His baptism Jesus was anointed by God as the Messiah. Both the heavenly voice and the Holy Spirit carry the same message. The heavenly voice reveals the election of the Messiah.⁷⁶ The image of the Holy Spirit descending as a dove confirms this message. This identification of the Holy Spirit's message with that of the heavenly voice gives the episode a unified focus, so that the single theme of the prologue of Mark is the presentation of Jesus as the Messiah.

This bracketing of messianic theme at the beginning and the end of the Gospel must then be correlated with the theme of secrecy in the middle portion of the book. This, however, would be left to a future study.

⁷⁴This is clear from the title of the book in 1:1.

⁷⁵Cf. Frank J. Matera, *The Kingship of Jesus: Composition and Theology in Mark 15* (Th.D. Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1981, SBL Dissertation Series 66 [Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981]).

⁷⁶Although the exact background of this statement is debated, one cannot deny its connection with Psalm 2:7 and the inauguration of the Davidic king.

ABSTRACT

This paper will seek to trace the use of the dove imagery in the Old Testament, the ancient world in general, and post-biblical Judaism in order to provide a background for understanding the baptism account. The result will be correlated with an analysis of how the baptism story functions in the Gospel of Mark to validate whether the symbolic meaning fits into the total argument of the book.

撮要

為要提供背景資料，幫助我們明白福音書中，記載耶穌受洗的意義，本文嘗試追溯舊約時代、古代及後猶太教時代對「鴿子」意象的用法，並將所得的結論，與馬可福音記載耶穌受洗的目的貫通，從而確定「鴿子」的象徵意義是否與全書主旨吻合。