

Bite Size Bible Study

The Dove #212

By Pastor Lee

Many of us are familiar with the story of Jonah and the great fish.

Jonah is a given name derived from the Hebrew word *Yona*, which means a dove or pigeon. One derivative of *yona* is the name *yonah*. One such *Yonah* was the name of the Abrahamic prophet.

Throughout history, the name *Yonah* has gained significance and found its place in many cultures. In ancient Hebrew, the dove carried a symbolic meaning of a peaceful and spiritual creature. The name *Yonah* was given to someone as a symbol of innocence, purity, and peace. The book of *Jonah* (*Yonah*) focuses on the themes of repentance and divine intervention,

Within the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as within archaeological finds, it seems clear that many Israelites believed that this feminine symbol of the dove (*Yona*) represented the spirit of God. The Hebrew word *rauch* means spirit and is feminine in gender as well.

The dove is the most common symbol of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, it was a dove that signaled the end of the flood (Gen 8:8-12 NIV).

Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.

A similar flood story is told in parallel passages in the ancient Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. There, the hero (Utnapishtim) sends out a dove, which returns to the ship unable to find a perch. In fact, from Ancient Near Eastern records, sailors the world over used doves and other birds to help them find and navigate toward land.

Doves were also an instrument of atonement for people who had fallen away from God. Several passages of the Torah (especially Leviticus) specify occasions that require the sacrifice of two doves (or young pigeons) either as a guilt offering or to purify oneself after a period of ritual impurity (including the birth of a child).

As a penalty for the sin they have committed, they must bring to the Lord a female lamb or goat from the flock as a sin offering^{aj}; and the priest shall make atonement for them for their sin. “Anyone who cannot afford a lamb is to bring two doves or two young pigeons to the Lord as a penalty for their sin—one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. Leviticus 5:6-7 NIV

The dove is a particular favorite in art and iconography. It often represents some aspect of the divine. It has been shared, adapted and reinterpreted across many cultures and over many millennia to suit the ever-changing belief systems of mankind. From the ancient world to modern times, the symbolism of this simple bird has developed layer upon layer of meaning and interpretive significance, making it a complex and powerful addition to religious texts and visual representations.

In the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean world, the dove became a symbol of the mother goddess. Small clay shrines from the Iron Age Levant depict doves perched above doorways of these miniature temples. {The Levant is a region in the Near East that encompasses countries like Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Palestine.} The doves represented feminine fertility and procreation and came to be well-recognized symbols of the Canaanite goddess *Asherah* and her counterpart *Astarte*, as well as her Phoenician and later Punic embodiment, *Tanit*.

There is evidence in the Hebrew Bible, as well as the archaeological record, that many ancient Israelites believed the goddess *Asherah* was the consort of their god *Yahweh*. Perhaps the heirs of this Israelite belief then incorporated the “feminine” symbol of the dove to represent the spirit of God.

Dove imagery is also utilized in several of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible. The low, cooing sound of a dove served as mournful imagery to evoke the suffering of the people of Judah (see Isaiah 38:14, 59:11; Ezekiel 7:16 below).

*We all growl like *dubim* (bears), and moan continually like *yonim* (doves); we look for *mishpat* (divine judgment), but there is none; for *Yeshuah* (Salvation), but it is far off from us. Yeshayah (Isaiah) 59:11 Orthodox Jewish Bible*

*Like a swallow or a crane, so did I chirp; I did moan like a *yonah*; mine eyes grew weak from looking heavenward; Adonoi, I am oppressed; go surety for me. Isaiah 38:14 OJB*

*The fugitives who escape
will flee to the mountains.
Like doves of the valleys,
they will all moan,
each for their own sins.* Ezekiel 7:16 NIV

Doves appear in the New Testament at scenes associated with Jesus' birth, baptism and just before his death. The Gospel of Luke records that Mary and Joseph sacrificed two doves at the Temple following the birth of Jesus, as was prescribed in the Torah.

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord", ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." Luke 2:24).

In the New Testament, (recorded in all four gospels Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32) when Jesus was baptized, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove signifying innocence, purity, and peace.

and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Luke 3:22 NIV

The dove was a popular Christian symbol before the "Cross of Jesus" came into prominence during the fourth century. However, the dove continued to be used for various church symbols throughout the Byzantine and medieval period, even up into today.

In the second-century church, Father Clement of Alexandria urged early Christians to use the dove or a fish, as a symbol to identify themselves as followers of Jesus. Archaeologists have recovered oil lamps and Eucharistic vessels in the shape of doves from Christian churches throughout the Holy Land.

Since ancient times the dove was used to represent the divine. It helped many cultures and peoples to envision and understand the many aspects of a God who could not be embodied by an idol or statue. It continues to be a favorite way to show the hand and presence of God in the world.

THE DOVE – innocence, purity, and peace

Reference:
The Enduring Symbolism of Doves - Dorothy Willette - Biblical Archaeology Review July 16, 2024

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