

The Dove and the Crow

An Ornithological Christology in Judeo-Christian and Vedic Symbolism

by

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 16, No. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn, 1984).
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There is a striking and beautiful image of two birds, perched on a single tree, illustrating the nature of man, in the Hindu text, Mundaka Upanishad.¹ The birds are said to be “close companions”; one of them eats of the fruits of the tree and the other looks on without eating.

To unlock this symbolism, we need to invoke the symbolic identity of the bird and the serpent. Both represent angels, the bird in their celestial aspect, and the serpent in their luciferian aspect. Both glide, rather than walk, and therefore suggest non-spatial or spiritual movement. Jesus combined both symbols when He urged the disciples to be “as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves.” The tree, on the other hand, is macrocosmically the Universe, and microcosmically man himself.² When the tree is considered as the Axle Tree in the center of the earth, or in the Garden of Eden, we have here a picture of Lucifer hanging from the limbs of the Tree of Eden, eating the forbidden fruit. The first bird, therefore, represents fallen man, or in Pauline terms, the Old Adam, subject to death. Vedantine commentators make the same point; Swami Prabhavananda translates it thus: the first bird “tastes of the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree,”³ referring to the duality of earthly destiny, such as pleasure and pain and, in biblical terms,

1. Mundaka Upanishad, III.i.1.

2. Genesis 2.9. The Tree is in the *midst* of the Garden, the navel of the world, or the center of the earth. Rev. 22.1,2. Cf. the Hindu Axle Tree, the Norse Yggdrasil, the Kabbalistic Sephiroth Tree, the Buddhist Bodhi Tree and the Tree of Golden Apples, guarded by a serpent in the Garden of the Hesperides. Equally, man the microcosm or tiny world is a tree: Pss. 1.3; 128.3; 144.12; Isa. 61.3; Ezek. 31.22,3; Mk. 8.24; Mt. 7.15-20; cf. The Katha Upanishad: “Both *Paratman* and *Jivatman* are situated on the same tree of the body...” (I.ii,20).

3. *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester. Mentor Religious Classic. 1957. Page 47. Similarly, Swami Bhaktivedanta translates the Svetasvatara Upanishad thus: “Although the two birds are in the same tree, the eating bird is fully engrossed with anxiety and moroseness as the enjoyer of the fruits of the tree...” *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*. Collier Books, New York. 1972. Page 103. Cf. the Persian Sufi Poet Jalal al-Din Rumi: “Although your intellect is flying upward, the bird of your conventional notions is feeding below.” Quoted in *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*. Presented by Whitall N. Perry. Perennial Books, Bedford. 1981. Page 482.

the knowledge of good and evil. In Vedantine terms, the first bird is *jivātman*, the individual self which is subject to the illusions of Māyā. The second bird is the transcendent Self, in Vedantine terms *Purusha* or *Ātman*, and in Pauline terms, the New Adam.⁴ He is not subject to passions or appetites; He neither consumes, nor is He consumed:⁵ He observes. He is, in fact, the uncreated and divine Center of Identity in man. He is calm, liberated and at rest.

It must not be imagined that the two selves are absolutely dualistic: the second is the principle of the first, which is absolutely dependent upon the *Ātman*, and is its expression on a lower level. Hence both selves are symbolized by a bird. Moreover the two selves command different ranges of experience, for when the consciousness is attuned to the finite *jivātman*, it loses the apprehension of the *Ātman*: but when it merges into the *Ātman*, its true source and destination, its infinity comprehends and includes the *jivātman*.

In Christian iconography, the two birds are the crow and the dove. The crow is the symbol of the devil⁶ who is the liar,⁷ the ego-God,⁸ the lower nature, he who “lives by bread alone,”⁹

The lower nature is not “totally depraved”, for its dualism includes the polarity of goodness, nobility and earthly virtue, as well as their opposites. Thus, fallen man does not oscillate between the two selves; he oscillates between the opposites of his lower self. He is oblivious to the higher Self.

4. The New Adam symbolized Himself as Nehushtan, the serpent hanging on a pole: John 3:14; Nu. 21:9.

5. One of the two birds is “captivated by the fruits of the material tree, while the other is simply witnessing the activity of his friend.” Swami Bhaktivedanta, op.cit., page 102. Similarly, Jesus twice refrained from food in the company of His surprised disciples, as an expression of His awareness of the Kingdom of God: John 4:31-34; Luke 22:14-18. The crucified Serpent ought similarly to be contrasted with the cosmic Serpent, coiled round the globe with its tail in its mouth and symbolizing *samsāra*, the dualistic round of birth and death in which desire is consumed by itself.

6. The crow symbolizes the devil in traditional Christian art. Floris called it *Avis Satyra*—the bird of the Satyrs. It is the bird of death that guarded the body of St. Vincent of Saragossa. Ovid records the curse of Apollo upon the crow for informing him of Coronis' unfaithfulness:

Then he turned upon the Raven:
“Wanton babbler! see thy fate!
Messenger of mine no longer,
Go to Hades with thy prate!
Weary Pluto with thy tattle!
Hither, monster, come not back;
And—to match thy disposition—
Henceforth be thy plumage black!”

7. John 8:44.

8. Satan is the Divine “I AM” under the spell of its own reflection, and imagining itself to be isolated from the Divine Principle; it is thus the seat of all pride, self-centered merit and “self-conscious” action; the truly SELF-conscious man works his deeds in God: John. 3:21.

and eats and drinks of this world. The dove is the symbol of the Holy Spirit,¹⁰ and therefore of the indwelling Lord,¹¹ or higher Self. In the early Christian doctrine of man, the two selves are the psyche, which must be denied,¹² and the Spirit,¹³ which is the God-Self.¹⁴ In several of the lives of the saints, the Spirit is said to have left the body at death in the form of a dove.

In the narrative of Noah's Ark, the two birds are mentioned together in a symbolic context. The Flood represents the end of a cosmological cycle, and the beginning of the next cycle, and the Ark represents the "World Egg," wherein is contained the crystallization of all the possibilities to be unfolded in that cycle. The waters, or the "deep," is the total and infinite sum of all possibilities; just as the Spirit of God brooded (as a bird: Gen. 1:2) over the waters, and activated them into the specific conditions of that Cycle of Creation, so, when the Cycle was concluded and a new Cycle begun, the same Spirit as a dove hovered over the deep, and brought back to the inhabitants of the new Age a message of peace: an olive branch. The waters of chaos were receding from the new world in which Noah and his family were to live. But the psyche, the consumer, the devil in the form of a crow, had already gone "to and fro" through the new earth, as he would do again in the time of Job.

These insights will help us to recognize a Christology.

It seems clear that this iconography is assumed in the narrative of the temptation of Jesus in the Judean wilderness. Both evangelists link the temptation closely with the baptism;¹⁵ it is as if the baptism were the cause, and the temptation the result. The link between the two is the Holy Spirit. While Jesus was being baptized by His cousin, the heavens opened and a voice said, "Thou art my beloved Son." The Holy Spirit appeared, hovering over Him visibly in the form of a dove. According to the symbolism, Jesus became conscious of the God-Self within Him.

9. It was the crow that brought bread and meat to Elijah in the desert: 1 Kings 17:2-6. This provision was the "type" of Jesus' Temptation in the desert. The crow also sustained St. Paul the Hermit with bread, doubling his ration when he was joined by St. Antony; and the crow disposed of poisoned bread which was offered to St. Benedict.

10. Matt. 3:16; Luke 3:22.

11. 1 Cor. 15:45.

12. Matt. 16:25; Luke 14:26.

13. 1 Thess. 5:23. The subsequent confusion of *psyche* and *pneuma*, *animus* and *spiritus*, or soul and spirit, has bequeathed to the Christian world its unfortunate and characteristic heritage: a tendency to oscillate between love and hatred of itself—for "itself" is two distinct entities, one which ought to be metaphysically loved or affirmed, and the other which ought to be metaphysically hated or denied.

14. Rom. 8:9-11; 1 Cor. 15:45; 1 Cor. 6:17.

15. Matt. 4:1-13. Although Saint Luke inserts Christ's genealogy between the two incidents, this is merely to make the same point that the baptism made, i.e., that Jesus is God's Son: Luke 3:38. Then the temptation can go on.

Moreover it is clear that the dove remained over Him,¹⁶ for it was the same Spirit who immediately drove Him out into the wilderness. The narrative here implies that the Spirit caused the temptation and that, without His remarkable Self-awareness, Jesus would not have suffered such temptation. This is so. The man ‘of God is a citizen of two worlds. He is the Son of God, and knows His identity to be the Spirit of God dwelling in Him; but He also has another self, as does every man, an ego-self; and it never leaves Him. That was the barb of Christ’s temptation. Having once seen through the ego and denied it, He was committed to go on denying it to His dying breath; but that it never left Him is clear from His thoughts of self-preservation in the Garden of Gethsemane, instantly corrected by His Divine Consciousness: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.”¹⁷ “The ego had to be beaten down every moment of His existence; indeed, the merit and virtue of the God-man’s life was precisely that the ego *was* beaten down, that the Higher Self of the Dove remained in control of the lower self of the crow.

Therefore, the moment that He sensed His identity, it was tested; and we may represent that testing in an imaginative soliloquy:

“Now I know my Identity, utterly and completely. But will it last? Shall I lose this consciousness? Shall I forget it?” And the very Spirit He is aware of, the Dove at His shoulder, drives Him out to see if He can keep it for forty days of fasting; to see if it is stronger than His bodily needs...

At the end of this period of time, He still has it. It has not wavered; but the enormous hunger pangs now present a more subtle temptation. He refuses to *forget* the God-Self: but will the ego *utilize* it, to satisfy hunger and achieve other less worthy aims? He passes some flat river stones which look like bread loaves, and He remembers that God fed Elijah by a desert stream; that crows brought him bread. And He takes up the theme that has obsessed Him in the desert: You are my beloved Son.

“There,” says the lower self, the crow, the devil: if you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread!¹⁸ But the Dove recognizes that it is the crow speaking and answers:

“Man shall not live by bread alone.”

He resolves the tension within Himself by a refusal to let the crow even mention the Dove,¹⁹ for it debases all that it touches. And that is why there is a Messianic secret; the Synoptic Jesus

16. According to Saint John’s Gospel, the Baptist was able to recognize Jesus as the Son of God at His baptism precisely because the Spirit as a dove remained over Him: John 1:31-34.

17. Matt. 26:29.

18. It is clear that the temptation to throw Himself down from the Temple was inspired from a reading of the Scriptures; it is not so clear that the temptation to turn stones into bread was similarly inspired. Jesus must have thought long about this temptation; He was to refer to it later in His ministry: “What man, if his son asked him for a loaf, would give him a stone?” (Matt. 7:9).

did not speak of His Identity until He was nearing the end of His ministry. Moreover, when He first became explicit at Caesarea Philippi, the same crow mocked Him in the person of Peter, only to be rebuked in the same fashion as at the temptation, “Get thee behind me, Satan.”²⁰

There is one more detail about the crow to be sketched in. According to Vincent of Beauvais, the devil appeared in the form of a bird at the crucifixion, and perched on the arm of the Cross, still tempting Jesus in His dying moments; but at His death, it flew away.²¹ On the other hand, the commentary may misinterpret the iconography: perhaps the bird was the Dove which flew away at death, when “the Spirit returns to God who gave it.”²² Here is a remarkable parallel to the verse in the Mundaka Upanishad with which we began: for the Axle Tree is the Wood of the Cross, the “One and only Noble Tree.”²³

Herein is pictured the Mystery of the Person of the Christ, the God-man.

Post-Script

“The Two Sparrows of the Leprosy Cleansing Ritual”

An extract from a Sermon by Saint Cyril of Alexandria:

It may be that someone would like to see here the great and profound mystery concerning Christ which is related to us in Leviticus. The Law of Moses declared that a leper shall be condemned of uncleanness, and ordered to be driven forth from the camp as unclean. Afterwards, should the sickness leave him, it prescribed that he be received back into the camp. It lays down in what manner he shall be regarded as made clean, saying: *This is the rite of a leper, when he is to be cleansed: he shall be brought to the priest: who, going out of the camp when he*

19. That meaning is partially implied in His teaching that, “When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matt. 6:3). The symbolism is here consistent, for the left hand is “*sinistra*” (-ster), and represents the crow, and the right hand is “*dextra*” (-terous), and represents the Dove. This distinction is one of the pillars of medieval iconography.

20. Matt. 16:23; cf. 4:10.

21. Vincent of Beauvais, Spec. hist. VII., cap XLIII: Ludolph, Passio LXIII. Referred to in Emile Male, *The Gothic Image*, Collins Fontana, 1961, page 222. First published in 1913.

22. Eccles. 12:7.

23. *Pange lingua gloriosi lauream certaminis*. Alan Watts produces diagrams of two early Christian engraved gems portraying the mystery of the Christ in the form of two birds perched on or near the Holy Cross. *Myth and Ritual in Christianity*, Thames and Hudson, 1959, pages 79, 83. By symbolic coincidence, the sacrifice which redeemed the first-born Jesus at His Presentation in the Temple was two pigeons or turtledoves (Luke 2:22-24; Lev. 12:2-8; Exod. 13:2,12).

shall find that the leprosy is cleansed, shall command him that is to be purified, to offer for himself two living sparrows, which is lawful to eat, and he shall command one of the sparrows to be immolated in an earthen vessel over living waters: but the other that is alive he shall dip in the blood of the sparrow that is immolated, wherewith he shall sprinkle him that is to be cleansed seven times, that he be rightly purified. And he shall let go the living sparrow in the field (Lev. 14). There were accordingly two sound, that is, clean birds, free according to the Law of every defect, of which one is slain over living waters; the other, exempt from slaughter, being sprinkled with the blood of the one that was slain, is then set free.

This figure truly designates the great and ever to be adored mystery of our Savior; for He, the Word, was from above, that is, from the Father and from heaven: and so is appropriately compared with the bird. By his Incarnation He came down in the likeness of our nature, and took upon Himself the form of a slave. But even in this He was from above. For which reason, speaking with the Jews, He said openly to them: *You are from beneath: I am from above* (John 8:23). And again: *And no man hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended from heaven, the Son of Man* (John 3:13).

For as I have just now said, being made of flesh, that is, truly man, He yet was not of the earth, nor of clay like us, but heavenly and supramundane, as God is understood to be. Nevertheless it is truly lawful to see Christ in the figure of the birds, having *suffered in the flesh*, as the Scripture says (1 Pet. 4), yet remaining beyond the reach of suffering; humanly dead, divinely living: for the Word is life. Wherefore it is that the most wise Disciple says of Him, that *being put to death indeed in the flesh, but enlivened in the Spirit* (1 Pet. 3:18). But though the Word could not suffer in His own diving nature, nevertheless He truly made His own the passion of His Body. For the living bird was sprinkled with the blood of the one that was slain: and so dyed with its blood and, becoming almost a sharer of its suffering, was sent forth into the desert. For the Only-Begotten Word of the Father has returned to heaven. For the family in heaven were astonished at seeing the King of the earth, the Lord of all powers, appearing as one of us. And they exclaimed: *Who is this that cometh from Edom? (that is, from "the earth") with dyed garments from Bosra?* (Isa. 63:1), which is interpreted as meaning "flesh" or "straitness," or "affliction." Then shall they say to Him: *What are these wounds in the midst of thy hands? And he shall say: with these I was wounded in the house of them that loved me* (Zech. 13:6). But someone may say: "Why do you speak of one and the same Christ, since there were two birds offered? Does not the Law here obscurely imply by this that there were two Sons and two Christs?" They would indeed fall into grievous irreverence who would believe and profess

that one is the Christ above, the Word of God the Father, and another he that was born of the house of David....

The Law therefore was a picture, a type, of the things that brought forth truth; so that even though there were two birds, yet by them but one Christ was prefigured, both as suffering and as not suffering; dying, yet above any dying; finally also ascending to heaven, as a second beginning to humanity, reborn to immortality...

(The excerpts above are from *Patrologiae Graecae* 72, 555-563.
Translated in *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*.
M.F. Toal. Longmans. 1960. Vol. 1. Pages 310-312).