

The Mission of The Raven (Gen. 8:7)

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Noah's sending out of the birds from the ark is one of the most familiar episodes of the biblical flood narrative. After the rains cease and the ark is grounded on one of the mountains of Ararat, Noah sends out birds, first a raven and then a dove. Whereas the dove account has been appreciated over the years as a literary gem and one which substantially contributes to the Noah story, the raven account has had a sharply different history. Unlike the case of the dove, no reason is given in the text as to why Noah sent out the raven,¹ and no information is imparted to the reader as to what Noah may have learned from this bird. Indeed many modern scholars believe that the raven episode is a later insertion or has been misplaced because it interrupts the literary structure of a threefold sending out of birds such as is present in the immediately following verses and in other ancient Near Eastern flood narratives. The mission of the raven is also suspect because it was considered an unsuccessful experiment from which Noah did not learn anything.² However, many medieval and modern commentators believe that the raven did perform a vital service for Noah and that this mission can be deduced from traits belonging exclusively to that bird.

The account of the sending out of the raven is found in just one verse in chapter 8. Because this verse occurs immediately before the account of the dove, some scholars believe that it has been misplaced.³ Comparative support against the originality

This paper is dedicated to Professor Richard Corney on the occasion of his retirement from full-time teaching at the General Theological Seminary.

1. It is commonly believed that the mission of the raven was identical to that of the dove, "to see if the waters had decreased" (v. 8). However, as Umberto Cassuto has pointed out, if similar missions for the two birds were intended, then this phrase should have been indicated with the first bird (the raven) rather than with the second (the dove); see his *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Jerusalem, 1964), 2.109. Nevertheless, a comparable phrase (του ἰδεῖν εἰ κεκόπασκεν τὸ ὕδωρ "to see whether the water had abated") does occur in the Septuagint. But Origen placed it under the obelus, indicating that it was not originally in the Masoretic text; see John W. Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Genesis (SBLSCS 35; Atlanta, 1993)*, 104.

2. Some moderns who hold this point of view are Hermann L. Strack, *Die Bücher Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus und Numeri* (München, 1894), 25; H. Holzinger, *Genesis (KHAT; Freiburg, 1898)*, 81; Cassuto, *Book of Genesis*, 2.109; and Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15 (WBC; Waco, Texas, 1987)*, 185.

3. This verse is often attributed to the Priestly source as distinct from the dove episode which is attributed to the J or Yahwistic source. See Holzinger, *Genesis*, 81; J. Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des alten Testaments* (1899; repr., Berlin, 1963), 13; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (1910; repr., Macon, GA, 1997), 64; Julian Morgenstern, *The Book of Genesis: A Jewish Interpretation* (1919; repr., New York, 1965), 83; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis (OTL; Philadelphia, 1972)*, 126. In support of the misplacement theory is the fact that in the Greek tradition Codex M (Coislinianus) places this verse under the obelus indicating it was not original. See Johannes Dahse, "Textkritische Studien I," *ZAW* 28 (1908), 5, and John W. Wevers, *Genesis (Septuaginta Vetus Testamentum Graecum 1; Göttingen, 1974)*, 121.

of the verse has been adduced by the fact the verse appears to interrupt the literary structure of the ancient motif involving mariners sending out birds. This ancient motif calls for a threefold sending out of birds such as in the model described in the following verses when Noah sends out the dove three times. Each time the dove is sent out it reveals some new information to Noah.⁴ The first time the dove is sent out he can find no perch and so returns to the ark. Noah waits seven days and then sends the dove out again. This time the dove stays out till the evening, and when he returns he carries a freshly snapped olive leaf in his mouth. Because olive trees grow in the lower hills, the presence of a fresh olive leaf signifies that these hills were already free of water and had trees growing on them bringing forth new branches and leaves.⁵ So Noah was able to discern from this olive leaf that the waters had now subsided and that plant life was beginning to rejuvenate. When the dove is sent out for the third time and does not return, Noah must have been able to conclude that it would be able to sustain itself outside the ark, and this constituted proof that the waters had completely receded.

This threefold sending forth of birds is a motif also known in two other flood narratives coming from the ancient Near East. One of these is to be found in the *Babyloniaca* of Berossus, a 3rd century B.C.E. priest of Marduk at Babylon. Extracts of Berossus' account are preserved in the writings of Alexander Polyhistor who lived in the last century B.C.E. The pertinent lines read as follows:

Xisouthros released some of the birds. . . . But finding neither food nor a place on which to alight, the birds returned to the ship. After a few days Xisouthros again released the birds and these again returned to the ship but with their feet covered with mud. On being released a third time, they did not again return to the ship.⁶

This extract parallels the biblical account of the dove episode by conforming to the motif of the threefold sending out of birds after the flood. The type of the birds is not revealed, and in contrast to the biblical account, Xisouthros sent out birds in bunches, not individually as Noah did. In both accounts it is only on the second attempt that the birds reveal important information. Parallel to the olive branch of the biblical account, the Berossus extract relates that the birds returned with their feet muddy, a fact which revealed that the waters must have receded because the birds were able to land on muddy soil.

The second ancient Near Eastern flood story which contains this threefold sending out of birds is in the flood story contained in tablet XI of the epic of Gilgamesh. Lines 147–55 of this tablet read:

4. Edwin Firmage, "Zoology," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York, 1992), 6.1146.

5. Cassuto, *Book of Genesis*, 2.112.

6. Stanley M. Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus* (*SANE* 1/5; Malibu, 1978), 20. The second extract (from Abydenus 2nd c. C.E.) reads: "The third day, after the rain had subsided, he [Sisithros] sent forth (some) of the birds to determine whether they could see land emerging somewhere from the water; but (the birds), greeted by an unbounded sea (and) at a loss where they should alight, returned to Sisithros, and others after them (did likewise). But when upon the third trial he succeeded—for they returned with their feet full of mud—the gods removed him from the ken of man." See Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1963), 118.

When the seventh day arrived,
 I released a dove to go free,
 The dove went and returned,
 No landing place came to view, it turned back.
 I released a swallow to go free,
 The swallow went and returned,
 No landing place came to view, it turned back.
 I sent a raven to go free,
 The raven went forth, saw the ebbing of the waters,
 It ate, circled, left droppings, did not turn back.⁷

This text also parallels the biblical account of the dove episode by conforming to the motif of the threefold sending out of birds after the flood. However, there are a number of differences between the two accounts. Whereas Noah sends out the same bird three times, Utnapishtim sends out three different birds—a dove, a swallow, and raven. Whereas in the biblical account important information is revealed on the second attempt, no information is revealed to Utnapishtim from the dove or the swallow. Finally, whereas the reason for sending the dove, to see if the waters had receded, is given at the beginning of the biblical account, in the Gilgamesh account it is given only at the end.⁸

Since the motif of a triple sending of birds is found in the two other flood narratives, the comparative evidence would seem to be strong evidence in favor of the view that the dove episode is original and that the raven episode did not originally belong in its present position.

However, the same comparative evidence can also be used to argue for the opposite conclusion, namely for the originality of the raven episode. For it is striking that of the three birds mentioned in the Gilgamesh account two of them, the dove and the raven, are identical, although the order of their sending is reversed.⁹ Thus the raven and the dove would seem to have some sort of structural connection in ancient accounts of sending birds from ships. Indeed some Assyriologists have described the bird episodes in general as “the closest parallel of any Mesopotamian flood story with the Book of Genesis.”¹⁰

There is therefore no compelling reason not to assume that the raven episode belongs in the text where it occurs, and it behooves us to examine this verse to determine what the raven’s mission might have been. As we noted above, the raven episode is found in one verse which reads: *וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת־הָעֹרֹב וַיֵּצֵא וַיָּצוּא וְשׁוֹב עַד־יִבְשֶׁת* “He sent forth a raven, which went out going out and returning, until *הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ*”

7. Benjamin R. Foster, “Gilgamesh (1.132)” in W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture, Vol. 1. Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Leiden, 1997), 460. The rendering of the second and third words (*išahhi* and *itarri*) of the last line are highly problematic (for *šahû*, see *CAD* Š/1, 105; *CDA*, 347; *AHW.*, 1336b renders *itarri* as “to soar” but others render it “to caw” (e.g., Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, 87; E. A. Speiser, “Akkadian Myths and Epics” in *ANET*³, 95).

8. The reason that the raven did not return was because “he saw the ebbing of the waters” (*qarūra ša mē imurma*, taking *qarūru* as “receding” with *CAD* Q, 146a).

9. R. David Freedman argues that the reversal of the order of the raven and the dove in the Gilgamesh account “may be due to the Mesopotamian characterization of the raven” as a bird endowed with “prophetic ability” (“The Dispatch of the Reconnaissance Birds in Gilgamesh XI,” *JANES* 5 [1973], 124, 127).

10. W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Ḥasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford, 1969), 12.

the drying up of waters from the earth.” Because of the ambiguity of part of the Hebrew text, three understandings of the raven’s movements have arisen: one that it went out and did not return,¹¹ two that it never left the ark but flew around it, and three that it went out and did return. The ambiguity lies in the phrase וַיֵּצֵא יִצְוֹא וְשׁוֹב “it went out going out and returning.” The forms וַיֵּצֵא יִצְוֹא וְשׁוֹב are infinitive absolutes, one of three combinations of two infinitive absolutes which occur within the space of five verses in this chapter.¹² Normally when two infinitive absolutes occur after a finite verb, one of the infinitives is cognate with the main verb and the other serves as a modifier.¹³ For example, in Judg. 14:9: וַיֵּלֶךְ הָלוֹךְ וְאָכַל “He (Samson) went along eating.” Here the main verb וַיֵּלֶךְ is followed both by a paronomastic infinitive הָלוֹךְ and another infinitive וְאָכַל which modifies the thought of the sentence “he went along eating,” that is, as he was going along he was eating.¹⁴ The modifier may express accompanying¹⁵ or simultaneous action¹⁶ as in our Samson example, or it may express antithetical action as for example, in Isa. 19:22: וַיִּגַּף יְהוָה אֶת־מִצְרַיִם נֹגֵף וְרָפָא “the Lord will afflict the Egyptians, afflicting and healing.” Here the first infinitive absolute נֹגֵף “afflicting” continues the force of its cognate finite verb וַיִּגַּף “He will afflict”; but the second infinitive absolute וְרָפָא “and healing” is antithetic, because the healing will take place at a different (later) time from the smiting. The Lord will first afflict and then heal the Egyptians. The question in our phrase is, how does the second infinitive absolute וְשׁוֹב¹⁷ modify the paronomastic phrase וַיֵּצֵא יִצְוֹא: does it

11. This interpretation is supported by the Gilgamesh account since there too the raven does not return (cf. Henry Heras, “‘The Crow’ of Noe,” *CBQ* 10 [1948], 137).

12. In vv. 3, 5, 7. This fact not only links v. 7 stylistically vv. 3, 5 but only indicates the literary preference of an author who was particularly fond of the infinitive absolutes.

13. Bruce K. Waltke, and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1990), §35.3.2; S. J. P. K. Riekert, “The Struct Patterns of the Paronomastic and Co-ordinated Infinitives Absolute in Genesis,” *JNSL* 7 (1979), 69.

14. Another example of this type is 1 Sam. 6:12 וַיִּלְכּוּ הַלָּוִי וְגַעוּ “they (the milch cows) lowed as they went along.”

15. *GKC* §113s; Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction*, §35.3.2b. An example is Jer. 12:17: וַיִּתְּשֵׁתִי וַיִּשְׁבֹּר הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה כִּי־תִרְשָׁע הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה כִּי־תִשָׁבֵר וְהָיָה כִּי־תִשָׁבֵר וְהָיָה כִּי־תִשָׁבֵר וְהָיָה כִּי־תִשָׁבֵר “I will tear out that nation, tear it out and destroy it,” that is, (God) will both tear out and destroy it.

16. Which is how Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome, 1991), §123m render our phrase here: “and he went out just to come back again (soon).” Note that when the infinitive absolute הָלוֹךְ is not used paronomastically but is combined with another infinitive it serves to indicate gradual action or continuance. Two examples of this usage occur in our chapter, in v. 3: וַיִּשְׁבֹּר הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה כִּי־תִרְשָׁע הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה כִּי־תִשָׁבֵר וְהָיָה כִּי־תִשָׁבֵר “the waters returned from the earth going and returning,” that is, were continually returning. And in v. 5: וַיִּתְּשֵׁתִי וַיִּשְׁבֹּר הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה כִּי־תִרְשָׁע הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה כִּי־תִשָׁבֵר וְהָיָה כִּי־תִשָׁבֵר “the waters were going and receding” that is, continually receding. See *GKC* §113u; Joüon and Muraoka, *Grammar*, §123s; Waltke and O’Connor, *Introduction*, §35.3.2c; Riekert, “The Struct Patterns,” 77–78.

17. As noted by the Masoretes who placed a Masorah Parva notation on the word וְשׁוֹב, this form occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible, and each time it occurs it is with another infinitive absolute. The first occurrence is our passage and the second occurrence is found in v. 3 of this very chapter (see previous note). The third occurrence of וְשׁוֹב is in Ezek. 1:14: וַיִּרְשָׁעוּ הַבְּהֵמָה וְהָיָה כִּי־תִרְשָׁעוּ הַבְּהֵמָה וְהָיָה כִּי־תִרְשָׁעוּ הַבְּהֵמָה וְהָיָה כִּי־תִרְשָׁעוּ הַבְּהֵמָה “the animals running and returning like lightning.” In this verse the two infinitives are not preceded by a finite verb, but their effect is similarly that of continuous motion. This verse is not preserved in the Septuagint, and *BHK*, *BHS*, and a number of commentaries on Ezekiel (e.g., Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel* [OTL; Philadelphia, 1970], 50) recommend that it be omitted. The Vulgate renders *ibant et revertabantur* reading וְשׁוֹב as וְשׁוֹבָא the same reading as in Gen. 8:7.

mean that the raven went out in a returning fashion and just flew around the ark, or does it mean that the raven went out and returned, implying that it first went somewhere and then returned?¹⁸ There is, of course, the third interpretation understood by the Septuagint,¹⁹ the Clementine edition of the Vulgate,²⁰ and the Peshitta.²¹ These versions render “and going out it did not return,” and thus appear to have read the text as **וַיֵּצֵא יְצוּא וְלֹא שָׁב** instead of the MT’s **וַיֵּצֵא יְצוּא וְשׁוּב**.

Based on this interpretation of the text, many ancient exegetes were of the opinion that the raven did not complete its mission.²² The reason advanced for this opinion was that the raven, unlike the dove, which is vegetarian, is carnivorous: it is a scavenger,²³ can survive on carrion, and therefore had no need to return to the ark for food. This explanation can be seen in the works of both early Christian and Jewish writers. For example, in one of his homilies John Chrysostom (347–407) wrote that the raven did not return because “the bird, being unclean, happened upon corpses of men and beasts and, finding nourishment to its liking, stayed there.”²⁴ In the same fashion the Syriac Church Father Bar Hebraeus (13th century) commented that the raven did not return “because it found bodies floating on the water and occupied itself with them.”²⁵ The failure of the raven’s mission is given the same explanation in the eighth century aggadic work *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*. Here it is related that “(the raven) went and found a carcass of a man upon the tops of mountains and settled on it for its food, and it did not return with its message to its sender.”²⁶

18. Cf. Rieker, “The Struct Patterns,” 79. Most modern scholars render these infinitives adverbially as a type of merism such as “to and fro,” “forwards and backwards,” “hither and thither,” or “back and forth.”

19. Wevers, *Genesis*, 121 (καὶ ἐξελθὼν οὐχ ὑπέστρεψεν). Note that the word οὐχ “not” is placed under the obelus in the Syro-Hexapla (note in *ibid.* at v. 7).

20. The rendering *qui egrediebatur et non revertebatur* “which went forth and did not return” is to be found in most printed editions of the Vulgate including Walton’s *Polyglot* (1657), and is the text which is translated by Douay-Rheims (*The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate* [rev. by Richard Challoner; repr. 1971; Rockford, Ill.], 12).

21. The Leiden edition of the Peshitta reads: **וַיֵּצֵא יְצוּא וְלֹא הֵפֵךְ** “it went to and fro but did not return” (The Peshitta Institute, *The Old Testament in Syriac* [Leiden, 1977], 14). R. B. ter Haar Romeny holds that the original Peshitta text was **וַיֵּצֵא יְצוּא וְהֵפֵךְ** but it was later changed on the basis of the Septuagint (“Techniques of Translation and Transmission in the Earliest Text Forms of the Syriac Version of Genesis,” *The Peshitta as a Translation* [ed. P. B. Dirksen and A. van der Kooij; Leiden, 1995], 181). Similarly M. P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament* (Cambridge, 1999), 144. On the other hand, Yeshayahu Maori believes it was changed to the negative on the basis of Rabbinic exegesis (*The Peshitta Version of the Pentateuch and Early Jewish Exegesis* [Jerusalem, 1995], 108–9 [in Hebrew]).

22. *A priori* it could be argued that since the raven did not return, it may have perished. Noah would have no evidence to the contrary since, unlike the dove, the raven was only sent out once and therefore, unlike the dove, had not been able to bring Noah evidence that he was able to survive on the outside. This would indicate a failure of the mission.

23. John K. Terres, *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* (New York, 1987), 144. The raven can uncover the bodies of dead animals however well concealed and “sometimes gather around carrion in vulture fashion” (Uzi Paz, *The Birds of Israel* [London, 1987], 235).

24. Robert C. Hill, *Saint John Chrysostom Homilies on Genesis 18–45* (Washington, D.C., 1990), 153.

25. Martin Sprengling and William Creighton Graham, eds., *Barhebraeus’ Scholia on the Old Testament. Part 1: Genesis–II Samuel* (OIP 13; Chicago, 1931), 39. See also Abraham Levene, *The Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis* (London, 1951), 54, 83, 190.

26. *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* 23, see Gerald Friedlander, *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York, 1966), 168.

The non-return of the raven was viewed allegorically by Philo and some Church fathers.²⁷ Philo viewed the raven as “a symbol of evil,” producing “arrogance and shameless impudence” so that in expelling the raven, Noah was thus expelling “whatever residue of darkness there was in the mind which might have led to folly.”²⁸ According to Ambrose, the raven symbolized sin,²⁹ to Augustine it personified impure men³⁰ and even procrastinators.³¹ This understanding of the raven’s failure to return has always been difficult to reconcile with the immediately following temporal clause עַד־יִבְשֹׁת הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ “until the drying up of the waters from the earth.” What would be the point of the raven returning to Noah when the waters were dried up from the earth which, according to v. 13, would not occur till some seven weeks later?³²

We now return to the two interpretations arising from the MT, namely whether the phrase וַיֵּצֵא יְצוּא נְשׁוּב is to be interpreted synthetically—that the raven went out in a returning fashion and just flew around the ark—or to be interpreted antithetically meaning that the raven went out and returned. The early rabbis, interpreting the phrase synthetically, were of the opinion that the raven just circled the ark and did not go anywhere. Hence they, like the Church fathers, considered the raven’s mission to be a failure. The rabbinic view was that the raven did not fly off but stayed around the ark because he was concerned about the preservation of his species. If he left the ark and met an untimely death then, since there was only one male raven aboard, his species would be wiped out. They playfully portrayed Noah and the raven as being antagonistic to each other, and as engaging in a dialogue.³³ One section of the dialogue reads:

Resh Lakish said: “The raven retorted to Noah with a winning argument: ‘Your Master hates me and you hate me’. ‘Your master hates me since He commanded you to bring into the ark

27. The contrasts of the raven and the dove in size, color, dietary and nesting practices (one being large, black, carnivorous and nesting on heights; the other being small, white, vegetarian and nesting in low-lying areas) led both the Church fathers and the rabbis to contrast the raven allegorically with the dove, the raven possessing all the negative characteristics and the dove the positive ones. Augustine maintained that ravens seek out their own things and doves seek things that are Christ’s (*Homilies On the Gospel of John*, 6.2, see Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [New York, 1888], 7.40). Jerome explained that “the unclean bird, the devil,” or “the foul bird of wickedness” was expelled by baptism (*Dial. adv. Luciferianos* 22, see Jack P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* [Leiden, 1968], 173). An example of an allegorical reference to the raven is in Gen. Rab. 33:5 where commenting on Ps. 105:28: שָׁלַח הָרָעַךְ וַיִּהְיֶה עָרָב “He sent darkness, it was very dark” the remark is made, “He (Noah) sent darkness, viz. the raven, which is dark-hued, and the raven found it dark—i.e. without light or hope, and so returned”; see H. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis I* (London, 1961), 264, n. 4.

28. Ralph Marcus, *Philo: Questions and Answers on Genesis* (Cambridge, Mass, 1963), 114 (Book II:35).

29. Roy J. Deferrari, *Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works* (Washington, D.C., 1963), 9 (on *The Mysteries*, 11).

30. *Contra Faustum* 12.20. See Lewis, *A Study*, 173.

31. *In Ps* 102.16; see Lewis, *ibid.*, 174 who explains that the idea is drawn from the raven’s cries “cras, cras” which are interpreted as Latin words for “tomorrow, tomorrow.”

32. On this point Maori (*The Peshitta Version*, 109) records an Arabic homily attributed to the fourth century Syriac father Ephraem Syrus stating that the raven, because of its ravenous nature, forgot his mission and only returned to Noah after the waters were already subsided, at which time Noah cursed him for his unfaithfulness and declared the raven unclean.

33. The idea of the dialogue was derived from the word נְשׁוּב and midrashically connected with the *hiphil* הָשִׁיב “to answer,” or “answer back.”

seven pairs of the clean creatures but only one pair of unclean creatures'. 'You hate me because you leave the species of which there are seven and send from the species of which there are only two'. Should the Master of heat or the Master of cold attack me, will not the world be short of one type of creature?'³⁴

Another midrashic explanation as to why the raven stayed around the ark was that the raven did not trust Noah. The raven accused Noah of sending him out of the ark because Noah had designs on his mate.³⁵ To which charge Noah replied: "Evil one! Even my wife who is usually permitted to me, has been forbidden me in the ark; how much the more (your mate) which is always forbidden me!"³⁶ Noah's answer reflects the rabbinic belief that no intercourse was permitted on the ark for humans or animals but that three disobeyed that injunction: Noah's son, Ham, the dog, and the raven.³⁷

A further indication that the rabbis viewed the raven's mission a failure is that they were sensitive to the wording of the following phrase, "until the drying up of the waters from the earth." The raven was unsuccessful in the time of Noah but would eventually be successful in another time when there would be another "drying up of the waters." Here the rabbis made a linguistic and thematic connection between the time of Noah and that of Elijah. In the 9th century B.C.E. in the reign of King Ahab there was a drought, a true "drying up of the waters," and at that time, as related in 1 Kgs. 17:6, the raven was required to feed the prophet Elijah—and he was successful. Thus, according to the rabbinic interpretation, the raven was exempt from this mission with Noah because God was planning another successful mission for the raven much later on in the time of Elijah.³⁸

The second interpretation based on the Masoretic text **וַיֵּצֵא יְצוֹא וַיָּשׁוּב** takes the infinitive absolute **וַיָּשׁוּב** as modifying the phrase **וַיֵּצֵא יְצוֹא** antithetically, that is, that the raven went out and returned.³⁹ This interpretation is found in the Samaritan Pentateuch,⁴⁰ some editions of the Vulgate,⁴¹ all the extant Targumim,⁴² and Josephus.⁴³ With this interpretation one can assume that the raven did contribute something to Noah since Noah did not have to send it out again. Noah thus must have learned something from the raven, but what it was is not disclosed in the text. The information

34. BT Sanhedrin 108b.

35. Ibid.; Rashi at Gen. 8:7.

36. BT Sanhedrin 108b.

37. Ibid.

38. Gen. Rab. 33:5; Rashi at Gen. 8:7.

39. There are some commentators who believe that the raven, like the dove, was taken back into the ark (Bechor Shor; see Yehoshafat Nevo, *Perushe Rabi Yosef Bekhor Shor 'al ha-Torah* [Jerusalem, 1994], 19); David Kimhi (see Moshe Kamelhar, *Perushe Rabi David Kimhi [Radak] 'al ha-Torah* [Jerusalem, 1970], 62); and see J. Göttberger, "וַיֵּצֵא וַיָּשׁוּב" in Gn 8,7," *BZ* 6 (1908), 113.

40. Abraham Tal, *The Samaritan Pentateuch* (Tel Aviv, 1994), 7.

41. The Benedictine edition (D. Henricus Quentin, ed., *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Latinam Vulgatam Versionem* [Rome, 1926], 169) and Weber's edition (Robertus Weber, *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* [Stuttgart, 1994], 13). These editions read: *qui egrediebatur et revertebatur*.

42. Targum Onkelos, Pseudo Jonathan, and the Samaritan Targum. Targum Neofiti emphasizes the raven's return by translating the phrase **וַיֵּצֵא וַיָּשׁוּב** twice: **והיה נפק וחזר נפק וחזר** "and it went out and returned, and went out and returned" (Alejandro Díez Macho, *Neophyti 1* [Madrid/Barcelona, 1968], 1.43, 516). This verse is not translated in the Fragmentary Targumim nor is it extant in the Cairo Geniza.

43. H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus* (London, 1930), 4.44–45 (on Jewish Antiquities, I:91).

that he learned must have been based on some natural characteristic which that bird possesses and which Noah assumed could provide him with information he could not ascertain from other birds.⁴⁴ Four characteristic traits of the raven which might have been useful to Noah have been suggested by various commentators.

Some medieval Jewish commentators (such as the Provençal exegete David Kimhi (1160–1235)⁴⁵ and the mid-13th century French exegete Hezekiah ben Manoah (Hizekuni)⁴⁶ believed that Noah sent out the raven because of the trait we have already mentioned—of its being a scavenger. According to Kimhi, if the waters had diminished, the raven would find corpses strewn on the ground and would bring back some flesh in his mouth. But the raven did not bring back anything to Noah, so that Noah did not learn anything from him.⁴⁷

The second characteristic trait of the raven appealed to has been the fact that ravens nest on higher elevations, on cliffs and on tall trees.⁴⁸ Hence the 15th century Portuguese exegete Abrabanel believed that the mission of the raven was: “to see if any houses, towers, or palaces remained, for it was in those places [that is, in higher elevations] that the raven would nest.”⁴⁹ Since the raven was unable to nest, Noah could have inferred that the upper ground was unsuitable for nesting. While it is certainly true that ravens nest on higher elevations, the knowledge that the raven could find a perch in these areas would not have provided Noah with information he could not have observed himself. For we are told in the text that forty days before Noah sent out the raven, the upper mountains were visible. Thus by the time he sent the raven, the waters would have receded even more from the upper regions. What Noah needed to know was whether the waters had receded in the lower lands, something he was able to find out from the dove that brought him the olive branch from the lower hills.

A third characteristic of the raven, which is often pointed to by modern scholars, is its ability to scout for land.⁵⁰ If the raven returned, then it must not have found land. It is thus believed that Noah used the raven in accordance with the practice of ancient mariners. Before the invention of the compass, navigators would carry on board shore-sighting birds. When the ship was thought to be lost, a bird would be re-

44. A different approach has been suggested recently by R. W. L. Moberly (“Why Did Noah Send Out a Raven?” *VT* 50 [2000], 345–56). According to Moberly, Noah’s sending out of the raven is a symbolic replication of God’s action through his wind (רוּחַ) by means of which the waters recede (Gen. 8:1). At the time of creation God’s רוּחַ hovered like a bird over the waters, and so the raven flying to and fro over the waters symbolically represents God’s action renewing creation. However, Moberly offers no reason why the raven of all birds should have been chosen for such a mission.

45. Kamelhar, *Perushe Rabbi David Kimhi*, 62.

46. Chayim D. Chavel, *Hizekuni: Perushe ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Hizkiyah b. R. Manoah* (Jerusalem, 1981), 42.

47. Of course, Noah would not have learned much even if the raven had brought back some flesh in his mouth because the raven, being a scavenger, could just as well have procured the food from the waters as well as from the ground.

48. Terres, *Encyclopedia*, 144. In Israel the ravens “used to breed on cliffs in the river valleys of Galilee and Carmel and in the Judean Hills, on coastal cliffs and on tall trees in the Mediterranean region. . . . The nest is on a cliff-ledge, in a crevice or on a tall tree” (Paz, *The Birds of Israel*, 235–36).

49. Isaac Abravanel, *Perush 'al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 1964), 156.

50. See Freedman, “The Dispatch of the Reconnaissance Birds,” 124–25. For the use of birds as an aid to navigation, see Firmage, “Zoology,” 1146.

leased and the ship would follow in the direction that the bird flew. The use of birds as aids in navigation is attested in a number of seafaring societies. The custom appears to be widespread from India to Northern Europe.⁵¹ For example, in book VI of his *Natural History*, Pliny describes how Cingalese merchants going overseas “take no observations of the stars in navigation—indeed the Great Bear is not visible; but they carry birds on board with them and at fairly frequent intervals set them free, and follow the course they take as they make for the land.”⁵² The raven was a popular choice for such a mission since it can fly long distances. It is said that the Vikings, when going to sea, generally took ravens with them and that this is why the raven became the emblem of the Vikings and was placed on their banners.⁵³

It has been noted that both Utnapishtim, in one of the Mesopotamian accounts of the flood,⁵⁴ and Noah sent out ravens and that this may well have been in accordance with established maritime practice. However, the application of this practice to both stories presents problems. In the Mesopotamian case, the problem is that Utnapishtim sends out two other birds, the dove and the swallow, before the raven. If the purpose was to find land, then Utnapishtim should have sent out the raven first.⁵⁵ A further problem is one which applies to both stories since both Utnapishtim and Noah were grounded on mountain tops. In Noah’s case, at the time he sent the raven his ark had been stranded on the mountain top for over four months.⁵⁶ Hence, Noah, even had he wished, could not follow the raven’s flight path; his ark was no longer navigable. Had the raven flown to land, that fact would not have been at all useful to Noah.

The fourth characteristic of the raven mentioned as being useful to Noah is that of the raven’s behavior in flight.⁵⁷ Observance of a raven’s flight was often used in antiquity as a means of divination.⁵⁸ Philo wrote: “The raven is said to be a sort of heralding and fulfilling creature. Wherefore down to our own time many observantly attend to its flight and its voice when it caws (as though) indicating something hidden.”⁵⁹ Likewise, the 19th century Jewish exegete Malbim (1809–1879) stated: “Know that in those ancient times ravens were thought to be able to foretell the future. They were therefore kept in special cages, and the priests would predict the future by observing whether the birds flew to the left or to the right, up or down, silently or not, and by other indicators.”⁶⁰ Noah was able to derive the information that

51. Heras, “‘The Crow’ of Noe,” 131–39; Madeleine V. David, “L’*épisode des oiseaux dans les récits du déluge*,” *VT* 7 (1957), 189–90; James Hornell, “The Role of Birds in Early Navigation,” *Antiquity* 20 (1946), 142–49. R. D. Barnett “Early Shipping in the Near East,” *Antiquity* 32 (1958), 230; Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York, 1969), 130.

52. Book VI:xxiv, 83; see H. Rackham, *Pliny Natural History* (10 vols.; Cambridge, MA, 1967), 401.

53. Heras, “‘The Crow’ of Noe,” 136.

54. See p. 73 above.

55. See also Freedman, “The Dispatch of the Reconnaissance Birds,” 124.

56. The ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat on the 17th day of the seventh month (8:4); the peaks appear on the 10th day of the tenth month (8:5); and after 40 more days Noah sends out the raven (8:6).

57. Cf. Cassuto: “More probably Noah sent forth the raven without any specific intention; he let it go to see how it would act so he might learn something from its behaviour”; *Book of Genesis*, 2.109.

58. For use of the raven in Mesopotamian omen texts, see Freedman, “The Dispatch of the Reconnaissance Birds,” 127–29.

59. Marcus, *Philo*, 114 (Book II:35).

60. Zvi Faier, *Malbim. Rabbenu Meir Leibush Ben Yechiel Michel. Commentary on the Torah* (Jerusalem, 1978), 1.383.

he sought “from its flight pattern,” and from the raven’s going “to and fro” he was able to estimate the condition of the air and the water.⁶¹ The Malbim’s reference to Noah being able to assess from the raven the condition of the air brings to the fore another of the characteristics of the raven, namely that of being able to endure inclement weather conditions.⁶² This characteristic was noticed by the Italian exegete Sforzo (Obadiah ben Yaakov Sforzo [1470–1550]) who commented that Noah “sent forth the raven to see if the air was dry enough for him to endure it.”⁶³ In this interpretation the mission of the raven was to see what the atmospheric conditions were like, if it were possible for the bird to endure the prevailing weather conditions. Whether we understand the phrase *וַיֵּצֵא יָצוֹא וָשׁוּב* as the raven went out in a returning fashion and just flew around the ark or that the raven went out and returned, Noah was able to observe its movements⁶⁴ for an extended period of time⁶⁵ and was able to determine when the time was ripe to send out the much smaller and more delicate dove to test the level of the waters.

To sum up our discussion: we have noted that there are some scholars who believe that the raven episode is misplaced because it interrupts the literary structure of a threefold sending out of birds such as is present in the immediately following verses and in other ancient Near Eastern flood narratives. The mission of the raven is also suspect because it was considered an unsuccessful experiment from which Noah did not learn anything. The rabbis of the Talmud and the Church fathers were in agreement that the raven did not complete its mission, and this tradition may also be seen in the Septuagint, Peshitta, and some Vulgate translations that interpret the text as though the raven did not return to Noah. If the raven’s mission can be deduced from the special characteristics belonging exclusively to that bird, then the ones widely cited in modern commentaries, namely the raven’s ability to scout for land or that the raven is by nature a scavenger, would not have been the ones likely to have been useful to Noah. The trait most likely to have helped Noah is the raven’s ability to endure inclement weather conditions so that the mission of the raven was to discern what the atmospheric conditions were like. Thus, contrary to widespread assumptions, the raven’s mission can be viewed as a useful experiment and can be seen as another justification for including Noah on par with other legendary ancient Near Eastern flood heroes to whom extraordinary wisdom was attributed.⁶⁶

61. Ibid. Cf. Yehudah Kiel, *Sefer Bereshit* (Jerusalem, 1997), 199.

62. According to Terres, *Encyclopedia*, 144, the raven is such a magnificent flier that it can hold its position motionless in gales.

63. Ze’ev Gotlib and Avraham Darom, *Be’ur ‘al ha-Torah le-Rabbi ‘Ovadyah Sforzo* (Jerusalem, 1980), 1.30.

64. See also Nahum M. Sarna, *The New JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia, 1989), 57.

65. The raven continued to perform this service for Noah “until the drying up of the waters from the earth,” that is, for about seven weeks. Since, according to v. 13 the waters dried up from the earth on the first day of the first month and the raven was first sent out sometime in the eleventh month (forty days after the eleventh month and ten days mentioned in v. 5).

66. Note that Noah’s Babylonian counterpart is also termed Atrahasis—“Exceedingly Wise.” Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 64–65. Claus Westermann also places Noah in the company of that long line of investigators in human history to experiment with animals (*Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* [Minneapolis, 1984], 446).