



A Way Out? Bird Metaphors in Psalm 102

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Abstract

This article shows how the bird metaphors in Ps 102 create an alternative space for the troubled praying person. In V. 7–8, the praying person is compared to birds: to owls who are inhabitants of desert places and a small bird or sparrow who is described as lonely. V. 8 may suggest the situation of a sleepless night. On the one hand, these situations are by no means comforting and peaceful; on the other hand, the metaphors describe a place far away from the threatening enemies (V. 9). The bird metaphors are therefore ambiguous in this psalm. They create a spatial distance that separates the praying person from their social environment. This leads to loneliness and, at the same time, to safety from distress. As the praying self leaves their social place, which is no longer safe for them, a free space opens up.

Keywords

Ps 102 – bird metaphors – owl – bird – lament – loneliness

Ps 102 laments the transience of human life, using motifs from wisdom tradition.¹ The title (V. 1) ascribes it to a bowed one who is faint and pours out their sorrows before YHWH. Thus, it is characterised as an individual lament

¹ Cf. Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL 15), Grand Rapids, MI 2001, 212.

which, however, describes only part of the psalm adequately.² Whereas the first part of Ps 102 develops the complaint of the praying person, the second part focuses on Zion and the collective connected to it, the עבדים *ʿĕbādîm* (V. 15). The metaphors of lamentation in V. 4–12 are original and in part even unique³ and describe the experience of the dissolution of the body as well as social distress. In V. 7–8, the latter is expressed by bird metaphors, which will be analysed in the following.

After an overview of the structure and content of the psalm (1), I will ask for the identification of the three birds mentioned in V. 7–8 and their occurrence in the Hebrew Bible (2). The zoological classification of the birds is anything but obvious. However, identifying the exact species often affects the interpretation of the metaphors. Therefore, the information about the birds drawn from other texts of the Hebrew Bible and their function in these particular contexts also contributes to the understanding of the metaphors in Ps 102.

Then I will discuss possible interpretations and connotations of the metaphors and their specific function in Ps 102, arguing for an ambiguous understanding of the bird metaphors, which may suggest a chance for the praying person to escape from the distressed situation (3).

1 Structure and Content of the Psalm

The psalm can be divided into three parts.⁴ Part one (V. 2–12) is a lament of an individual. First, the praying person turns to YHWH and pleads for help. In V. 4–12, they describe the affliction. In the first section V. 4–6, the “I-lament”,⁵ metaphors of dryness express the psalmist’s experience of life’s transience. In V. 4–5, the images are focused on the body: bones, heart, flesh, and eating

2 Cf. e.g. *William H. Bellinger*, Psalm 102. Lament and Theology in an Exilic Setting, in: R. L. Foster / D. M. Howard (Hg.), *My Words are Lovely. Studies in the Rhetoric of the Psalms*, New York 2008, 147–155; *Renate Brandscheidt*, Psalm 102. Literarische Gestalt und theologische Aussage, in: *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 96 (1987) 51–75, here 62; *Frank-Lothar Hossfeld*, Psalm 102, in: F.-L. Hossfeld / E. Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150* (HThKAT), Freiburg i.Br. 2008, 37–52, here 39.

3 Cf. *Franz Delitzsch*, *Psalmen* (BK 4/1), Leipzig, 4th ed. 1883, 672: “Von hier an wird der Ps. eigentümlich.”

4 For a detailed structural analysis cf. *Pierre Auffret*, *Merveilles à nos yeux. Etude structurale de vingt psaumes dont celui de 1Ch 16,8–36* (BZAW 235), Berlin 1995, 87–104.

5 Cf. *F.-L. Hossfeld*, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 2) 39: “Ich-Klage”.

are mentioned. V. 7–9, which can be called enemy-lament,⁶ begins with the bird metaphors by which the speaker of the psalm describes himself. In V. 9 the enemies and their mockery and scorn against the praying person are explicitly mentioned. Here, the focus is on the social aspect of the affliction. V. 10–12 is again dominated by metaphors of drought and transience. Hossfeld defines V. 10–11 as God-lament,⁷ which in the strict sense fits only for V. 11.

The second part of the psalm (V. 13–23) has a completely different perspective. It focuses on YHWH, on Zion and on YHWH's people. As Robert Culley put it, it is a "joyous anticipation of the rescue of the religious community".⁸ This part can again be divided into two sections: V. 13–18 and V. 19–23. The first section speaks about YHWH's majesty and how he acts on Zion. YHWH's permanence marks a sharp contrast to human transience. YHWH has mercy on Zion, but also his servants, the עבדים *ʿābādîm* mentioned in V. 15, display mercy on Zion. V. 16 envisions the consequences of this mercy on the nations. V. 17–18 anticipate YHWH's redeeming actions on Zion and on the exposed, הָעָרֶץ *hāʿarʿār*. In V. 19, the second section of part two begins with an asyndetic connection with a *yiqtol* form. What YHWH has done shall be written down with the aim that his people, whom he will create, will praise him. V. 20–23 further unfolds the reason as well as the goal of this record: YHWH's redemption of the captives, which leads to the praise of YHWH by his people and by the nations.

The third part of the psalm (V. 24–29) connects the perspectives of parts one and two: the psalmist's suffering and the shortening of his days on the one hand and YHWH and his permanence on the other hand. V. 25 picks up V. 3 and asks YHWH, the everlasting God, not to end the psalmist's days too early. Human transience and divine permanence are thus contrasted and simultaneously connected to each other. V. 26–28 or part of it is often seen as a later addition, as it focuses on the opposition of the transience of the cosmos – heaven and earth – and the permanence of YHWH.⁹ These verses, however, pick up the cosmological perspective of part two: all that is created is transient; only YHWH is everlasting, the latter being the reason and solid fundament of the

6 Cf. *ibid.*

7 Cf. *ibid.*

8 Robert C. Culley, Psalm 102. A Complaint with a Difference, in: *Semeia* 62 (1993) 19–35, here 32.

9 Cf. R. Brandscheidt, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 2) 57; Franz Sedlmeier, Psalm 102,13–23. Aufbau und Funktion, in: *BZ* 40 (1996) 219–235, here 220 fn. 4 and 231; F.-L. Hossfeld, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 2) 39.

psalmist's hope. Thus, these verses develop the statements of YHWH's permanence in V. 25. The last verse, V. 29, opens up a future perspective of permanence for the coming generations. Ultimately, the psalm does not give a direct positive answer to the sufferings and pleas of the person praying, but broadens the view to the cosmos and future generations.¹⁰ Therefore, some commentators have suggested that the original psalm may have ended with the plea in V. 25,¹¹ while others argue for the unity of the whole psalm.¹² A plausible solution to the question of unity is Beat Weber's composition-critical hypothesis, according to which the author has consciously picked up different forms and traditions.¹³ Word and motif links exist between all parts of the psalm, and the third part connects the individual and collective perspectives. Furthermore, Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher has convincingly argued that the destruction and rebuilding of Zion reflect the fate and hope of the praying person.¹⁴ Zion as a place and as a group – the עֲבָדִים *ʿābādīm* connected to Zion – strengthens the psalmist's hope and trust in YHWH.

10 Whether there is a solution for the individual praying person is discussed. For different positions, cf. *Erich Bosshard-Nepustil*, *Ferne und Langzeitigkeit Jhwhs. Zur theologischen Auseinandersetzung in Jes 63,7–66,4 und Ps 102*, in: T. Naumann / R. Hunziker-Rodewald (Hg.), *Diasynchron. Beiträge zur Exegese, Theologie und Rezeption der Hebräischen Bibel*, FS Walter Dietrich, Stuttgart 2009, 39–55, here 51 (the praying person does not participate in the future salvation of the people); *R. Brandscheidt*, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 2) 58 (the individual believes in the eschatological salvation); *Gunild Brunert*, Psalm 102 im Kontext des vierten Psalmenbuches (SBB 30), Stuttgart 1996, 168 (V. 29 is a confession releasing all tensions); *Christian Brüning*, *Mitten im Leben vom Tod umfassen. Ps 102 als Vergänglichkeitsklage und Vertrauenslied* (BBB 84), Frankfurt a. M. 1992, 288 (based on YHWH's salvation of the exposed in V. 18 and the prisoners in V. 21, the praying person is sure to be answered, too); *R. Culley*, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 8) 29 (the perspective of the praying person changes).

11 See Anm. 9.

12 Cf. *G. Brunert*, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 10) 171–175; *C. Brüning*, *Mitten im Leben* (s. Anm. 10) 293–296; *Hermann Gunkel*, *Die Psalmen* (Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament), Göttingen, 4. Aufl. 1926, 437; *Corinna Körting*, *Zion in den Psalmen* (FAT 48), Tübingen 2006, 44.

13 Cf. *Beat Weber*, *Werkbuch Psalmen 2. Die Psalmen 73 bis 150*, Stuttgart, 2. Aufl. 2016, 170f. *R. Culley*, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 8) 26, considers that a decision on the redaction process might not be necessary and the psalm can be read as a unity of different voices (*ibid.*, 22).

14 Cf. *Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher*, „Ich wachte und war wie ein einsamer Vogel auf dem Dach“ (Ps 102,8). Ps 102 als exemplarischer Identitätsdiskurs, in: A. Wagner / J. van Oorschot (Hg.), *Individualität und Selbstreflexion in den Literaturen des Alten Testaments*, Leipzig 2017, 279–296, here 292.

2 The Bird Species in V. 7–8 and Their Occurrences in the Hebrew Bible

2.1 *Zoological Species*

The psalmist compares himself to birds in V. 7–8. Three birds are mentioned: the קֶאֱת *qāʾat*, usually translated as jackdaw or owl, the כּוֹס *kôś*, an owl, and the צִפּוֹר *šippôr*, a little bird. As it is often the case with zoological names in ancient texts, it is difficult to identify precisely which species of birds are meant here. The Septuagint translates the three birds as πελεκάν (pelican), νυκτικόραξ (“night raven”, owl), and στρουθίον (sparrow). The dictionaries give different translations or identifications for the Hebrew names. Peter Riede provides lists for comparison,¹⁵ showing that the classification of the כּוֹס *kôś* seems to be comparatively clear: it is some sort of owl or a little owl. The case of the קֶאֱת *qāʾat* is more difficult. On the one hand, the dictionaries follow the Septuagint translation as pelican, and on the other, remark the strong connection with the desert. Gesenius translates rather general as “water bird” (with reference to Lev 11,18; Dtn 14,17), but also considers that at the same time it is an inhabitant of desert regions (with reference to Jes 34,11; Zef 2,14);¹⁶ Köhler/Baumgartner also allow both possibilities: the pelican or a sort of owl (the scops owl or jackdaw).¹⁷ As both birds are mentioned in synonymous parallelism in V. 7, Göran Eidevall convincingly argues that the קֶאֱת *qāʾat* is a bird of the wilderness, like the כּוֹס *kôś*.¹⁸ Thus, he thinks of the קֶאֱת *qāʾat* as the little owl as the most likely identification. Therefore, it can be assumed that both birds are some species of owl or little owl.

The third bird, צִפּוֹר *šippôr*, is just a bird. The Hebrew word is often used as a collective noun to denote birds in general, and it can also denote a little bird. The Septuagint, however, specifies this as a “sparrow”. Also Eidevall opts for the sparrow here, because it is a flocking bird that strongly suffers from loneliness.¹⁹

15 Cf. Peter Riede, *Im Spiegel der Tiere. Studien zum Verhältnis von Mensch und Tier im alten Israel* (OBO 187), Freiburg (Switzerland) / Göttingen 2002, 278 (כּוֹס), 282 (קֶאֱת).

16 Cf. Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, Berlin, 17. Aufl. 1915 (reprint 1962), 697.

17 Cf. Ludwig Köhler / Walter Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*, Leiden, 3. Aufl. 1995, 991.

18 Cf. Göran Eidevall, *Sad as a Bird. On Avian Metaphors in Biblical Depictions of Human Suffering*, in: B. Scheuer / D. W. Davage (Hg.), *Sin, Suffering, and the Problem of Evil* (FAT II 126), Tübingen 2021, 85–96, here 93.

19 Cf. *ibid.*; for this interpretation see below 3.1.

2.2 *The Birds of Ps 102,7–8 in the Hebrew Bible*

The קאָט *qāʾat* and the כּוֹס *kôs* do not occur often in the Hebrew Bible. Both appear in Lev 11 and Dtn 14 as unclean birds. A bird called כּוֹס *kôs* is mentioned only in Lev 11,17 and Dtn 14,16 and does not appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The קאָט *qāʾat* is listed in Lev 11,18 and Dtn 14,17 among the unclean birds and is mentioned also in Isaiah and Zephaniah. In Jes 34,11, it occurs together with קִפּוֹד *qippôd* (identified as hedgehog or owl), יָנֹשׁף *yanšôp* (translated as owl or ibis or bee-eater), and עֶרֶב *ʾorēb* (raven).²⁰ The last one, the raven, is the only species in this verse which can be identified with enough certainty. Isaiah 34 announces the day of retribution on the nations, especially Edom. The then destroyed land is characterised as the habitat of the animals mentioned in Jes 34,11. Also Zef 2,14 describes a scenario of judgment of the nations. The קאָט *qāʾat* and קִפּוֹד *qippôd* are spending the nights in the ruins. V. 13 mentions the desert (מִדְבָּר *midbār*) and the wilderness (שְׁמָמָה *šmāmā*), V. 14 the חֹרֵב *hōreb*, a deserted place. Similarly, in Ps 102,7, מִדְבָּר *midbār* and חֲרָבוֹת *hōrābôt* are the habitats of the קאָט *qāʾat* and the כּוֹס *kôs*. Thus, it can be concluded that the קאָט *qāʾat* and the כּוֹס *kôs* are birds that live in destroyed and deserted areas. According to the Torah, they are unclean birds and must not be eaten; and they are connected to the day of YHWH's judgment in Isaiah and Zephaniah.

Other than קאָט *qāʾat* and כּוֹס *kôs*, the צִפּוֹר *šippôr* (V. 8) appears frequently and is a common name for a little bird or birds in general.²¹ That a bird sits on a roof seems to be a common image, too. Interestingly, however, Ps 102 is the only text in the Hebrew Bible which says this explicitly. Most often, the habitat of birds is the sky, as, for instance, in Gen 1,26. Sometimes, it is said that they nest in trees, e.g. in Ps 104,12 and Dan 4. This specific placement on the roof has thus to be taken into account for the interpretation.

3 The Meaning of the Bird Metaphors in Ps 102

3.1 *The Situation Described (Place, Time, and Circumstances)*

Both stichoi of the synonymous parallelism in V. 7 refer to the praying person who expresses that they have become like a bird. In the first stichos, the comparison is expressed by the verb דָּמָה *dmh*, in the second one by the preposition כּ. In both lines, a place is mentioned: the desert (מִדְבָּר *midbār*) resp. the wastelands (חֲרָבוֹת *hōrābôt*). In Jes 34,11 and especially in Zef 2,14, where the קאָט *qāʾat* is connected to deserted places as well, the desolation is a result

20 Cf. P. Riede, Spiegel (s. Anm. 15) 282 (קִפּוֹד), 277 (יָנֹשׁף), 280 (עֶרֶב).

21 Cf. G. Eidevall, Sad as a Bird (s. Anm. 18) 93.

of destruction by YHWH on the day of judgment. Jes 34,2 speaks of YHWH's wrath (קֶשֶׁפַּה *qesep*) and Zef 3,8 of his anger (זַעַם *za'am*). Zef 2,3 uses the word אַפַּ *ap*. In Ps 102,11, the psalmist attributes their distress to YHWH's anger (זַעַם *za'am*) and wrath (קֶשֶׁפַּה *qesep*). Renate Brandscheidt, therefore, explicitly interprets the desert and wasteland mentioned in Ps 102,7 as places of divine judgement.²² Thus, the imagery evokes a wasteland destroyed by YHWH in his wrath, where the praying person sits or flies like a bird.

In Zef 2,14, the קִאֲתָה *qā'tat* and the כּוֹס *kôś* are furthermore associated with the night (לַיִל *lyn*). As owls in general are nocturnal birds, it can be assumed that the imagery in V. 7 implies that it is night although it is not stated explicitly.

The imagery in V. 8 is different; it expands the picture and adds further aspects. The psalmist describes himself as a lonely bird on a roof: "I am vigilant, and I have become like a lonely bird on a roof." The first verb in V. 8, שִׁקְדָתִי *šāqadtî*, is usually translated as "I lie awake", meaning "I cannot sleep" or something similar. According to Eidevall, the psalmist is "awake while most people are sleeping".²³ However, in all other places where the verb שִׁקֵּד occurs it has the meaning of being vigilant, attentive or watching out (cf. Esr 8,29; Ijob 21,32; Ps 127,1; Jes 29,20; Spr 8,34; Jer 1,12; 5,6; 31,28; 44,27; Dan 9,14). Therefore, it is probable that the image is not so much aimed at sleeplessness but at vigilance towards the threat that is explicitly described in V. 9.²⁴ At least this vigilance or alertness is an important aspect of being awake. Thus, V. 8 may evoke the picture of a person sitting sleeplessly and vigilantly on a flat roof at night.

What the different bird metaphors in V. 7 and 8 have in common is the localisation of the birds in a lonely place and the night as the probable temporal context. Thus, the praying person describes themselves as distant from their social environment in terms of space and time.

3.2 *Loneliness and Helplessness*

Eidevall suggests that the metaphor in V. 7 expresses loneliness and abandonment.²⁵ He draws attention to the fact that the cries of owls resemble utterances of lament and that the fact that owls are nocturnal birds further

22 Cf. R. Brandscheidt, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 2) 64. This interpretation may seem too far-fetched in the context of the individual lament as there is no hint to any kind of sin or guilt. Regarding the Zion part, however, it seems at least a possible connotation.

23 G. Eidevall, *Sad as a Bird* (s. Anm. 18) 93.

24 Cf. C. Brünig, *Mitten im Leben* (s. Anm. 10) 141–147; Peter Riede, *Im Netz des Jägers. Studien zur Feindmetaphorik der Individualpsalmen* (WMANT 85), Neukirchen-Vluyn 2000, 297 (active vigilance and being on the watch).

25 Cf. G. Eidevall, *Sad as a Bird* (s. Anm. 18) 93.

stresses the notion of loneliness and suffering.²⁶ Gunild Brunert argues that the motifs of inner restlessness, of being in danger and persecuted, of loneliness and lamentation are combined into a new metaphor in Ps 102,8. As בִּדְדֵד *bôdêd* in V. 8 is the only adjective in the entire lament, she sees loneliness as the primary meaning of this metaphor.²⁷ Gillmayr-Bucher goes even further: The praying person has, in their own perception, left the area of being human, and turned or returned to nature. This experience is expressed in words similar to the image of a destroyed city.²⁸

Brandscheidt interprets the situation of the psalmist especially in V. 8 as helplessness,²⁹ referring to Jes 22,1–2: “What do you mean that you have gone up, all of you, to the housetops, you that are full of shoutings, tumultuous city, exultant town?” (NRSV) The inhabitants of Jerusalem climb up to the roofs and watch out for help. Although the praying person on the roof in Ps 102 is not part of the crowded and loud city, but lonely, they are certainly helpless as well, as already the pleas for rescue in V. 2–3 make clear. Eidevall points to this same notion as he assumes that the צִפּוֹר *šippôr* in V. 8 is a sparrow who left his flock or was left by his flock and is thus helpless and “an easy target for a hunter or a bird of prey”.³⁰ However, it is night and the hunters – as the praying person’s enemies – are asleep in contrast to the praying person himself. Also, birds of prey like vultures or eagles are asleep. The only birds of prey hunting by night are owls to which the psalmist compares himself in V. 7. Thus, it is probable that the crucial point of this metaphor is something different. As Eidevall also says, the image in V. 8 is situated within the city and reflects “the terrible experience of being outside – near other people”.³¹ In Jes 15,3; 22,1 and Jer 48,38, the roof is a place of mourning.³² All these observations strengthen the image of a lonely bird, waking and crying on the roof. Thus, in V. 7–8, the psalmist experiences himself as living in a destroyed environment, mourning in the night, endangered, and lonely. For, in V. 7–8, we can perceive, as Gillmayr-Bucher puts it, a lack of social relations leading to a loss of identity.³³ In V. 9, however, we do not see missing but harassing and threatening social relations. The psalmist is not alone, but lonely within their social environment. The psalm

26 Cf. *ibid.*

27 Cf. G. Brunert, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 10) 126f.

28 Cf. S. Gillmayr-Bucher, *Ich wachte* (s. Anm. 14) 288.

29 Cf. R. Brandscheidt, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 2) 64.

30 G. Eidevall, *Sad as a Bird* (s. Anm. 18) 94.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Cf. G. Eidevall, *Sad as a Bird* (s. Anm. 18) 94; G. Brunert, Psalm 102 (s. Anm. 10) 122; P. Riede, *Netz* (s. Anm. 24) 302.

33 Cf. S. Gillmayr-Bucher, *Ich wachte* (s. Anm. 14) 289.

does not specify who the enemies are. Obviously, they are part of the immediate social circle of the praying person. So, according to Gillmayr-Bucher, there are three aspects, maybe a progressive aggravation, the psalmist expresses: first, the environment is destroyed, then the social relations, and last, in V. 11, the trust in God's help, which is invoked in V. 2–3, appears to be undermined.³⁴

The praying person is not alone, but nevertheless lonely and helpless in their distressed situation. However, the bird metaphors may imply more than this.

3.3 *The Bird on the Roof (V. 8) as a Representation of the Soul*

Christian Brüning suggested interpreting the metaphor of the bird on the roof (V. 8) with regard to bird statuettes on Egyptian graves representing the “Ba” bird and thus an aspect of the soul.³⁵ For this interpretation, he refers to Job 21,32: “When they are carried to the grave, a watch is kept (יִשְׁקוֹד *yīšqôd*) over their tomb.” (NRSV) He understands this as a hint to such a statue of a soul bird on a grave. According to Brüning, the metaphor is an image of near death – the central motif of his interpretation of Ps 102 – and at the same time freedom of movement because the soul in the form of a bird is free to leave its place, the grave. Time and again it may leave the body of the dead and return to it later. Brunert and Riede have rightly levelled criticism at Brüning's argumentation. Brunert's critique³⁶ aims at Brüning's particular focus on the Egyptian imagery and maintains that the idea of a soul bird is not specifically Egyptian, but a widespread image. Moreover, the “Ba” bird as carrier of special strengths is the opposite of the weak bowed person described in Ps 102. Riede additionally points out that the metaphor in Ps 102 is quite vague and open, and in the psalm, there is no mention of or allusion to a grave. Graves are nowhere connected to roofs, and the צִפּוֹר *šippôr* in the Hebrew Bible is rather an image of someone persecuted than someone watching.³⁷ Although Brüning's comparison of the צִפּוֹר *šippôr* with the “Ba” bird is too specific and not indicated by the biblical text, it draws attention to an important aspect of birds, that is, their freedom of movement.

3.4 *The Association of Birds with Freedom and Deliverance*

What all birds – notwithstanding the precise identification of their species – have in common is that they have wings and can fly away, so Eidevall calls

34 Cf. *ibid.*

35 Cf. C. Brüning, *Mitten im Leben* (s. Anm. 10) 141–147.

36 Cf. G. Brunert, *Psalm 102* (s. Anm. 10) 120–126.

37 Cf. P. Riede, *Netz* (s. Anm. 24) 300f. As I have shown above, watching is indeed an important aspect of the metaphor in V. 8.

them a “powerful metaphor for freedom”.³⁸ Brunert, although she criticises Brüning’s argument based on the Egyptian “Ba” bird, points to Ps 124,7 where the soul is compared to a bird who has just escaped the hunter’s net.³⁹ Though Brunert’s interpretation focuses on the bird’s loneliness,⁴⁰ further arguments may corroborate the connotation of the bird in V. 8 as an image of freedom and deliverance. The bird’s position on the roof connotes loneliness on the one hand, as the adjective בודד explicitly emphasises, and the possibility to escape without obstacles on the other hand.

The metaphor in Ps 124,7 describes the salvation from mortal danger. The bird is already trapped and has no chance to free itself. Once the trap is opened (by YHWH), it can quickly fly away. The image of a bird hunt is often combined with war imagery (cf. Ez 19,1–14; so also in Hittite and Assyrian texts).⁴¹

In Ps 11,1, the psalmist is advised to flee like a bird, צפור *šippôr*, to the mountain, literally: “flee to your mountains, bird!” This opens a chance to escape from the persecutors: a bird may flee from the hunters; human beings flee from their enemies. Dieter Böhler thinks of David here, who is mentioned in the title of the psalm and who, according to 1 Sam 24,1.23; 26,1.13, finds refuge in the mountains.⁴² These mountains, a place far away from the inhabited areas where the enemies are harassing him, may provide shelter. Here, the metaphor of the bird is used to describe the physical ability to flee.

In Ps 55,7–8, the praying person expresses their wish to fly away like a dove (יונה *yônâ*) from their distressed situation and stay in the desert overnight (לֵיַּלַּי *lyn*). The usual conditions are reversed: The town is no longer a place of safety, whereas the desert – usually an uninhabitable and hostile place – becomes the only way to survive. Ulrike Bail claims that the desert is a counter-space of the city here, a place of freedom and safety, as it is for Hagar, Moses, David and Elijah.⁴³ It is again a bird, in this case the dove, which represents the chance to fly away and flee.

Like Ps 11; 55 and 124, Ps 102,9 maintains that the praying person’s distress is caused by human enemies. As in Ps 55,7, the birds in Ps 102,7 are strongly

38 G. Eidevall, *Sad as a Bird* (s. Anm. 18) 87.

39 Cf. G. Brunert, *Psalm 102* (s. Anm. 10) 126.

40 See above 3.1.

41 Cf. Erich Zenger, *Psalm 124*, in: F.-L. Hossfeld / E. Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150* (HThKAT), Freiburg i.Br. 2008, 474–486, here 484.

42 Cf. Dieter Böhler, *Psalmen 1–50* (HThKAT), Freiburg i.Br. 2021, 218f.

43 Cf. Ulrike Bail, *Gegen das Schweigen klagen. Eine intertextuelle Studie zu den Klagepsalmen Ps 6 und Ps 55 und der Erzählung von der Vergewaltigung Tamars, Gütersloh 1998*, 169.

connected to the desert as a place separated from other humans. In both psalms, the bird imagery is used in the description of the praying person's situation of distress; in Ps 11 and 124, it is part of the praise of YHWH for delivering the persecuted. The ability to fly provides the opportunity to escape from one's enemies and flee to a safe place. In Assyrian texts, however, the image of a fleeing bird is always used in a pejorative way and connected to military defeat (cf. Jes 16,2; Ez 7,16).⁴⁴ Thus, taking flight like a bird is the ultimate option to save one's life and sheds light on the hopelessness of the praying person's situation.

3.5 *The Ambiguity of the Bird Metaphor*

Therefore, in addition to the aspect of mourning and loneliness, there is another side to the imagery of the birds in V. 7–8: the opportunity to flee from the distressing social situation. The owl in the wilderness is, on the one hand, situated in a desolate place, an environment that is in no way comforting and peaceful, as the parallels in Isaiah and Zephaniah show. On the other hand, this place is far away from the threatening enemies. In V. 8, the nocturnal loneliness shows the isolation of the psalmist but also provides a time and place distant from the daily harassments as described in V. 9. Being a bird is thus also a metaphor for the possibility to escape the desperate social relations. In V. 3, the psalmist calls their experience צָר *sar*, implying the connotation of narrowness. In contrast, the wilderness and the roof as places in the open air imply the connotation of wideness and openness. The metaphor creates a spatial and temporal distance which divides humans from each other. This leads to loneliness as well as to safety from affliction. As the praying person leaves their social place, which is no longer safe for them, a free space opens up. This does not mean that flying into the desert or escaping into the sky at night would be the ideal solution for the praying person. There are strong negative aspects in the metaphors used in V. 7–8: loneliness, desolation, helplessness.⁴⁵

In Ps 11,1, the psalmist states that whatever others advise them, they take refuge in YHWH and thus will not fly to the mountains. In Ps 102,3, the distressed praying person pleads to YHWH for help, and in V. 11, they attribute

44 Cf. *Cat Quine*, The Bird and the Mountains. A Note on Psalm 11, in: VT 67 (2017) 470–479, here 472f. This aspect again fits in well with the situation of the destroyed Zion in part two of the Psalm.

45 This same ambiguity can be observed in V. 14–17: Zion is destroyed and in ruins. Nonetheless, these stones may be the basis for the future rebuilding of the city and the temple. The dust and stones are a metaphor of destruction and despair and at the same time of hope for restoration. Cf. S. Gillmayr-Bucher, Ich wachte (s. Anm. 14) 291. She emphasises that stones and dust are the very place of affection of YHWH and YHWH's servants.

their misery to YHWH's wrath. In this situation, therefore, it seems that the psalmist sees no help and no hope, not even in YHWH, and fleeing like a bird to a lonely place may seem to be the only way out. In the second and third parts of the psalm, however, the praying person finds trust in YHWH again and envisions a community to which they may belong. The bird metaphors in V. 7–8 create an alternative space for the troubled praying person, though in darkness and isolation.