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Where the Vultures Gather

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And when the vultures (ὄρνεα/LXX) came down on the carcasses (σώματα/LXX), Abram drove them away. Gen 15:11 (NKJV).

Then they asked him, “Where, Lord?” He said to them, “Where the corpse (σώμα) is, there the vultures (ὄρνεα) will gather”. Luke 17:37 (NRSV)

In the first instance, Jesus’ reply to his disciples seems to be a complete *non sequitur*—we expect a location not an event as the answer to the question, “Where, Lord?” We might expect ‘Jerusalem’ or ‘Sinai’ or ‘caught up to heaven’, but not an answer that refers to vultures and corpses. It is here that

intertextual connections with the land-covenant (Genesis 15) come to our aid—however, the interpretation is complicated by the use of Hebrew and Greek across the Testaments, and with different Greek words in the LXX that denote the birds, birds of prey, eagles or vultures.

Of course, eagles and vultures are birds and both eagles and vultures are birds of prey—however, one would expect carrion to be associated with vultures. The modern English translations prefer ‘vulture’ for Luke 17:37 (NIB/NLT/NRSV) rather than ‘eagle’ (NKJV/KJV/RSV), but Gen 15:11 is always translated with either the more neutral ‘birds of prey’, or with ‘vultures’, but never with ‘eagles’.

This is of course a translational judgement call and the NT translators were no doubt influenced by the fact that the Roman ‘eagle’ had destroyed Jerusalem. There are many countries that use the eagle in an emblematic fashion (including the USA) and one would hardly expect a country to adopt the vulture as a national symbol (more on this *anon*). Nevertheless, a translation should be influenced by inner biblical exegesis rather than perceived historical correspondence. The situation is further complicated by the use of the saying in a different context—when Jesus offers it as the visible sign of his return;

Therefore if they say to you, ‘Look, He is in the desert!’ do not go out; *or* ‘Look, *He is* in the inner rooms!’ do not believe *it*. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For wherever the carcass (πρῶμα) is, there the eagles (ἄετοί) will be gathered together. Matt 24:26-28

Once again NT translators have chosen ‘eagles’ in preference over ‘vultures’ but it is the griffon-vulture that is really envisaged here – the ‘unclean’ vulture is fulfilling the divine will and serves as a signifier of the slaughter.

Doth the vulture mount up at thy command, and make her nest on high? She dwelleth and abideth on the rock, upon the crag of the rock, and the stronghold. From thence she spieth out the prey; her eyes behold it afar off. Her young ones also suck up blood; and where the slain are, there is she. Job 39:27-30 (JPS)

Against all other translations the Jewish Publication Society OT (1917) translates the underlying Hebrew as ‘vulture’ in Job 39:27.¹ The idea in the Matthew passage seems to be the visibility of the slaughter—it can be seen from a great distance because it is marked by the circling vultures.

The saying concerning “vultures circling the corpse” is difficult to understand but in both NT instances it is associated with the Lord’s advent—as a visible sign of his (imminent?) return (Matthew) and as the location (?) where the disciples will be taken (Luke). The setting seems to be the judgement of the Jewish nation and the connection with Genesis 15 requires us to re-examine the land-covenant.

Genesis 15

It is proposed that the ‘cutting’ of the covenant in Genesis 15 forms the basis of the ‘vulture sayings’ found in the gospels. Usually a covenant was ‘cut’ for reasons of ratification and/or imprecation. By that we mean that both parties walked between the cut-pieces of a sacrifice in order to establish the agreement, with the implicit understanding that whoever broke the covenant ought to be cut in pieces like the sacrifice. The covenant in Genesis 15 is unusual on two accounts - firstly, only God ratified the covenant; secondly, any imprecation is not applicable to God who is immortal. The covenant is therefore unconditional and unbreakable because God has sworn it by himself. However, the word ‘unconditional’ must be qualified—for although it was not conditional on the obedience of Abram’s descendants (God would accomplish it despite disobedience), nevertheless, the disobedient would not inherit the land/kingdom. Abram (not yet Abraham the father of a multitude) was told that his descendants would be liberated from slavery in Egypt (Gen 15:14-15) and would inherit the land—indeed this occurred under Joshua, but only after a generation perished in the wilderness because of disobedience. The covenant is therefore unconditional, and will surely come to pass (despite disobedience), but God will not be mocked.

The other important aspect is that Abram was figuratively ‘dead’ when the covenant was ratified and therefore **Abram could not keep the vultures at**

¹ [ED. AP]: The argument in favour of ‘eagle’ is the seeing from a far distance; eagles have excellent eyesight.

bay (only God could). The covenant was specifically about **inheriting the land** (“to give you this land to inherit it”, v. 7) despite having no heir. Finally, it is often not realised, but the covenant of Genesis 15 was made on the night of the Passover.

Genesis 15 and the Passover

The covenant of Genesis 15 was ratified at night. The time of day is stated as being between the period when “*the sun was going down*” (v. 12) and “*when the sun went down*” (v. 17). This would be equivalent to the time specified in later years for the offering of the Passover lambs, i.e. “*between the two evenings*” (Exod 12:6, RSV mg.), a phrase that apparently means ‘between mid-afternoon and sunset’. The Exodus account uses the expression “*the selfsame day*” (the Jewish day commences at sunset) making it clear that Abram’s descendants left Egypt exactly 430 years after the giving of the covenant (Exod 12:40, 41; Gal 3:17). So, Abram is given the land-covenant on the Passover night and 430 years later the Israelites are liberated from Egyptian slavery on the Passover night. On a Passover more than 2,000 years after Abraham another unconditional covenant (the new covenant) was ratified by God.

In Exodus, the Israelites, having departed from the land of death and slavery, passed through the sea—metaphorically, they were “resurrected” through the Abrahamic covenant. When they entered the land, they were baptized again, before re-establishing **the rite of circumcision covenanted to Abraham**; clearly, the Sinaiatic covenant should be understood as a subset to the Abrahamic covenant and certainly limited in what it could achieve. By obeying the law the Israelites made a choice for life, but that life was only made possible through the Abrahamic covenant. They were saved because of the Abrahamic covenant and **entered the land under the Abrahamic covenant**—ultimately the law could only bring death.



Egypt was known for its elaborate cult of the dead and preparations for the afterlife. Israel's emergence from the land of death and slavery was similar to Abram awakening from the "horror of great darkness". Moreover, the griffon-vulture, portrayed as the goddess Nekhbet, was also the symbol of upper-Egypt; her northern counterpart was the cobra goddess (cf. Exod 7:9-15). The unification of Upper and Lower Egypt was represented by the double crown bearing a prominent vulture and cobra. Over time Nekhbet was transformed from the personal protector of the Pharaoh and from the giver of the white crown to the Pharaoh; she became the symbol of sovereignty in ancient Egypt. Significantly, Nekhbet, who was the "wet nurse" of Pharaoh, became **the guardian of mothers and infants** (contrast the genocide of Hebrew male infants in Exod 1:6) and she took on the role of protector; she moved from being Pharaoh's own goddess to one who looked after **mothers and children** through the whole land. Egypt's oldest oracle was the shrine of Nekhbet at Nekheh, the original necropolis or city of the dead. A mamissi (**birth house**) can be found at the ancient city of Nekheh dedicated to Nekhbet. The temple was built around 2700 BC, and enlarged by later Pharaohs of the 18th through 30th dynasties, (1539-1069 BC) including Tuthmosis III, Amenophis II, and the Ramessids.



The Covenant in Abeyance

The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the heaven and for the beasts of the earth. And no one will frighten them away. Jer 7:33 (NKJV)

The incident that provoked this response was the blatant reversal of the promise that the ruling elite had made to liberate their fellow Hebrew slaves in accordance with the Jubilee laws. Yahweh reminded them that he had, "made a covenant with your fathers (the Sinai covenant) in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Jer

34:13). The Jews had once been a slave people in Egypt and the Jubilee law ensured that fellow Hebrews would not endure perpetual slavery or loss of property rights. The Jubilee enshrined the principle of liberty and restoration of land rights among the people of God.

However, although the Judean rulers imitated the Abrahamic covenant “when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it” (Jer 34:18), and released their Hebrew slaves, afterwards they changed their minds and enslaved them again. This was an abomination to God and therefore the Abrahamic land-covenant was put in abeyance and the people were exiled to Babylon.

The Land Covenant in Matthew

It has already been suggested that the ‘vulture saying’ echoes the land covenant made with Abram. Other points of contact establish a connection between the narratives:

Matthew 24

Vultures (v. 28)

Carcass (v. 28)

The sun will be darkened (v. 29)

The sign of the Son of Man will appear (v. 30)

Genesis 15

Vultures (v. 11)

Carcasses (v. 11)

The sun went down and it was dark (v. 17)
 Horror *and* great darkness (v. 15)

There appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch (v. 17)

The signs of “the end” in Matthew’s gospel are an allusion to the land-covenant that God made with Abram. The events of AD 70 saw Christ coming in judgement against the Jewish nation and the land-covenant was again put in abeyance – however, this does not diminish the eschatological significance of the prophecy, as it clearly remains unfulfilled until the Second

Advent. Forms of the Greek verb *συνάγω* (gather together) which describe the congregation of the birds of prey in the ‘vulture saying’ in Matt 24:28 are also used to describe the assembly of the enemies of Christ:

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds (*ὄρνέοις*) that fly in the midst of heaven, ‘Come and gather together (*συνάχθητε*) for the supper of the great God’. Rev 19:17 (NKJV).

And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together (*συνηγμέναι*) to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. Rev 19:19 (NKJV).

The supper of the great God consists of the enemies of Christ—the ‘banquet’ that has been laid on for all the birds (vultures) is a recasting of the land-covenant and the ‘supper’ is also probably meant to contrast with the ‘last supper’ covenant meal. Intertextual links with Ezekiel demonstrates shared themes based on the land-covenant (note the mention of the mountains of Israel):

And as for you, son of man, thus says the Lord God, ‘Speak to every sort of bird and to every beast of the field’: “Assemble (*συνάχθητε*) yourselves and come; Gather together (*συνάχθητε*) from all sides to My sacrificial meal Which I am sacrificing for you, A great sacrificial meal on the mountains of Israel, That you may eat flesh and drink blood”. Ezek 39:17

The assembly of the wicked gathered together against Christ in Revelation 19 mirrors first century opposition to the preaching of the apostles:

And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together (*συναχθησαν*) at Jerusalem. Acts 4:5-6 (NKJV)

In Acts 4:26 Peter addressed these rulers with the words of Psalm 2:2 –

The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together (συνήχθησαν) against the Lord and against His Christ. For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together (συνήχθησαν). Acts 4:26-27

Finally, it should be noted that instead of the more usual ‘body’ (σῶμα, *sōma*) used in Luke’s version of the ‘vulture saying’, Matthew employed the less frequently used ‘carcase’ (πτῶμα, *ptōma*) in order to describe the dead body. The usual Greek word for body (σῶμα) can denote a living or a dead body (the word is sometimes used metaphorically to describe the church as the ‘body of Christ’); however, πτῶμα is only ever used of a dead body or carcass. This is significant because besides the ‘vulture saying’ in Matt 24:28, πτῶμα is only used five times in the NT. The word is twice used to describe the corpse of John the Baptist (Matt 14:12; Mark 6:29) and it is used three times for the corpse(s) of the witnesses (Rev 11:8-9). This is significant because John the Baptist pre-figured the eschatological witnessing.

Conclusion

The ‘vulture saying’ is based on the land-covenant made with Abraham. The ‘cutting’ (decapitation) of the body of John the Baptist heralded the establishment of the unconditional New Covenant in Christ. The Jewish and Gentile authorities who gathered together to oppose Christ and his Church were like the vultures swooping down to devour the pieces of the covenant sacrifice. The Judaist attempt to corrupt the Church and lead the nation back to slavery and death was therefore not allowed and the land-covenant was put in abeyance as it had been during the Babylonian Exile. Once again God did not frighten the vultures away and the carcasses of the people in AD 70 were a poignant reminder that God cannot be mocked—nevertheless, the covenant is unconditional and therefore after a 2,000 year *Diaspora* Yahweh has restored his people to their land.

However, the ‘vulture saying’ is intimately associated with the Second Advent and we should therefore expect an eschatological purging of Israel. The period of tribulation will be accompanied by a final witness to the nation and will conclude with the introduction of the Kingdom. This time the vultures are not frightened away, instead they are invited to dine on the enemies of

Christ—as in the first century, this will consist of Gentile opposition and Jews who still reject him and his witnesses.