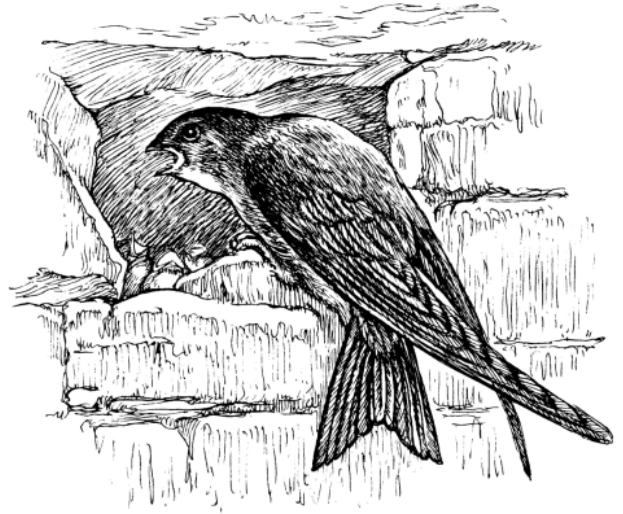


The Birds, the Temple and the Pilgrims

The Bible mentions swallows and sparrows that have an envious place for nesting. They have built their nests at the altars of the Lord — in God's very presence in the Temple.

“The bird also has found a house,
And the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
Even Your altars, O Lord of hosts,
My King and my God.” (Psalm 84:3)



Psalm 84 was written in part for the pilgrims criss-crossing Israel and Judah to arrive with rejoicing at the jubilant festivals in Jerusalem. All of their trials and difficulties of the journey will be compensated for as they arrive in the Holy City. As they trudge along, they envy the birds that continually dwell undisturbed at the altars of God.

The heading for Psalm 84 says, “*A Psalm of the Sons of Korah*”. They were descendants of Aaron the High Priest, through his son Kohath. They were the “guardians of the entrance” of the tabernacle and later the Temple. (1 Chron 9:19). Other passages include them as a guild of temple singers.

So we are not surprised that twelve of the Psalms are attributed to the Sons of Korah as composers and singers for the national worship of God.

In one passage we read that, “All Judah ... fell down before the Lord, worshiping the Lord. The Levites, from the sons of the

Kohathites and of the sons of the Korahites, stood up to praise the Lord God of Israel, with a very loud voice” (2 Chron 20:18-19).

The average Israelite would not know about these birds nesting near the altars of God, but the Korahites, guarding the gates and entrances of the Temple and preparing and providing the music for Temple worship would have these birds swooping over their heads in the sacred sanctums of the House of God.

As singers, they probably noticed the calls and songs of the birds. When the birds do what God created them to do, they praise and bring glory to their creator. They joined in the praise of Almighty God as they flew through the clouds of incense.

“From their privileged position in the nooks and crannies of the temple precincts, the birds fill the air with joyous song. The birds are like the temple singers, whose *hallels* to Yahweh Sabaoth—King and God—are never ending.” Sparrows are commonly a symbol for worthlessness (Matt. 10:29–31) and swallows flit restlessly around. The house of God provides for them both.



Most people would have knocked the nests down since nesting birds make a nasty mess. Though fun to watch, I have removed several nests from our deck and patio area since the bird droppings stain everything and are unsightly. But based on this

Psalm the birds were allowed to nest undisturbed in the Temple compound.

“The reference must be to the nests of birds located in crevices in the walls of the buildings or in trees in the temple courts ... The birds are symbols of the life, freedom, and joy of those who dwell close to God”. Even today at the Western Wall, where the Temple once stood, you can see the birds nesting among the huge stones from the time of the Second Temple period.

Being within the Temple area near the altars was a privileged place near the presence of God. The Psalmist is expressing his longing to always be in the dwelling place of the Lord of Hosts.



Before mentioning the birds, the Korahites wrote, “How lovely are Your dwelling places, O Lord of hosts! My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the Lord; My heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God” (Psalm 84:1-2) and following the observation of the birds they write, “How blessed are those who dwell in Your house! They are ever praising You. ... “For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. (Psalm 84:4, 10).

The birds and the priests spend day and night in the Temple. But it appears this Psalm was written for the pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem, idealistically imagining the rapture and joy, safety and

comfort of being in the dwelling of God, especially for the spectacular feasts and festivals of Israel.

Those on pilgrimage have found strength in God which beacons them on as they trek through rough terrain and danger on their way to the Temple. “They are strengthened by anticipation of appearing before the presence of God in the temple. They will “see” him there and his face will be turned toward them in favor. The prospect of a beatific vision gives them energy to keep going on their arduous trek. The joy of festival time will make up for all their hardships on the journey.”



Janet and I have always been birdwatchers and we also watch for passages of Scripture mentioning the birds. These verses never fail to produce gems to be gleaned.

As even birds desire to build their nests in the presence of God, how much more reason do we have to journey ever closer to God and his presence. We do long for God, his house and the expectation of dwelling in his heavenly courts for all of eternity.

And if the insignificant birds are welcome in the presence of God, how much more are we.

(Quotes taken from Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, vol. 20, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 358–359.)