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The Wind of God

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IN my paper of the above title, published in Vol. XXX, Part I (1911) of the *JOURNAL*, on page 47 I said:

“Of the actual procedure of eagles, griffon vultures, or other similar birds in the earlier stages of teaching or helping their young to fly, described in the first two verses of the above quatrain, I am able to get no information from published works or from personal inquiry of the most distinguished ornithologists, whom I have in the last few months annoyed with many importunities.”

Indeed, at that time, the best ornithological authorities whom I consulted seemed inclined to agree that birds do not teach their young to fly; that, with the exception of pigeons, no bird pushes its young out of its nest; and that eagles and vultures, certainly, are so built that they cannot carry nor support their young; that, consequently, the passage in Deut. 32 11, which seemed to me to be an eye-witness description of the manner in which griffon vultures teach their young to fly, was not the description of an eye-witness at all, and that, therefore, one could not from that deduce the meaning of רָחַף.

At that time I had no personal evidence from reliable witnesses as to the procedure of griffon vultures or other large birds with their young before flight, and only one passage, quoted by Driver in his “Commentary on Deuteronomy” and by Tristram

in his "Natural History of the Bible", giving Davy's account of two parent eagles on Ben Nevis supporting their young on expanded wings when exhausted in making their first flight. I have no doubt that normally, as was suggested to me by the naturalists whom I consulted, young birds in general learn to fly by themselves, but I have now obtained abundant proof of the eye-witness character of the account in Deuteronomy, and that, if not the regular and ordinary method, the procedure there described is at least characteristic in the case of many birds, and especially of eagles. For small birds I have the evidence of numerous observers among my own acquaintance of the old birds pushing their young out of the nest, and then trying to entice or force them to fly, but none of birds supporting their young in flight.

For large birds I have from Dr. Talcott Williams the following observation of the habits of the stork, which he permits me to use:

"I passed my early boyhood, as you well know, up to my ninth year, in Mosul. Every mosque in the city had its storks' nest and they were common at other coigns of vantage. One of the highest was not far from the high, flat roof on which I played as a boy, there being room on it, as I remember distinctly, for two and I think three separate nests. I remember, with the distinctness with which one goes back in memory on a point like this, my father calling me and taking me on the roof in the early morning one day when the storks were teaching their young to fly. The time had come for migration, some having left their nests already, some having taken preliminary wheels before the flocks started and some apparently delayed by their undeveloped young. The awkward young stumbled around their nests and seriously objected to taking a flight. The older birds pushed them out and when they were fluttering swept below and caught them, carrying them along until they learned to use their wings. I remember distinctly one bird, well grown, which was not caught and dropped, a shapeless, fluttering mass, to be killed at the foot of the minaret. This picture is all extremely distinct. My impression was, and here I pass from the distinct field of memory to the vaguer field of

knowledge, that all the chicks did not need to be taught but that all of them needed urging, in order to leave the nest. Some flew easily and some needed a good deal of aid, but the sight of the parent birds and their companioning friends, sweeping down near the nest, showing how easy it is to fly, apparently (for this you will see is inference) clattering their bills and sounding the note of the stork, which is like that of all those birds, is very evident in my vision. This particular nest was near enough to the house so that one could see the hen stork sitting, could mark her interest in the approach of her spouse with food and see the furry little chicks before they had the later feathers which grow upon them. The storks were never molested, and, as you know, in Turkey the stork is never touched."

The Rev. Mr. Hanauer, of Damascus, to whom I wrote to ask if he could obtain from natives information as to the habits of the griffon vulture in Palestine and the Lebanon, writes me as follows:

"I have never seen either eagles or vultures "stirring up" their nests, or "carrying their young on their wings." I have, however, heard the late Bishop Gobat relate that when in Abyssinia, between the years 1829 and 1837, he had seen eagles assist their young in flight, by flying underneath them when the brood were beginning to try their wings, and seemed weary and about to drop. In this case the parent birds carried their young for a while till they had rested, and then let them start again by themselves. I have also the testimony of one of my sons, who takes a keen interest in such things, to the effect that he has seen ravens act towards their young in the same way."¹

¹ The Rev. William J. Long records the following observation of an eagle forcing its young to fly, which shows the stirring up the nest, a rushing upon the young, and also the support of the young in its flight by the old bird. I doubt, however, whether as an observation of facts this has much value.

"A mother eagle had tried in vain to tempt her little one to leave the nest on a high cliff. With food in her talons, she came to the edge of the nest, hovered over it a moment, so as to give the hungry eaglet a sight and smell of food, then went slowly down to the valley, taking

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It occurred to me that from our own Rocky Mountains I might obtain some information with regard to the habits of eagles, and, at my request, Bishop Thomas of Wyoming sent a note to the missionaries in the mountain districts of that state, asking them if they could furnish or secure the information I desired. Here are one or two notes which I have received in answer to those inquiries:

“When the young eagles are in the nest the two parent birds are nearly always away hunting, but after the young is forced

the food with her, and telling the little one to come and he should have it. He called after her loudly and spread his wings a dozen times to follow. But the plunge was too awful; he was afraid and settled back into the nest.” What followed, Mr. Long describes thus:

“In a little while she came back again, this time without food, and hovered over the nest, trying every way to induce the little one to leave it. She succeeded at last, when with a desperate effort he sprang upward and flapped to the ledge above. Then, after surveying the world gravely from his new place, he flapped back to the nest, turned a deaf ear to all his mother’s assurances that he could fly just as easily to the treetops below, if he only would.

“Suddenly, as if discouraged, she rose well above him. I held my breath, for I knew what was coming. The little fellow stood on the edge of the nest, looking down at the plunge which he dared not take. There was a sharp cry from behind, which made him alert, tense as a watchspring. The next instant the mother-eagle had swooped, striking the nest at his feet, sending his support of twigs and himself and them out into the air together.

“He was afloat now, afloat on the blue air in spite of himself, and flapped lustily for life. Over him, under him, beside him, hovered the mother on tireless wings, calling softly that she was there. But the awful fear of the depths and the lance tops of the spruces was upon the little one; his flapping grew more wild; he fell faster and faster. Suddenly—more in fright, it seemed to me, than because he had spent his strength—he lost his balance and turned head downward in the air. It was all over now, it seemed; he folded his wings to be dashed to pieces.

“Then like a flash the old mother-eagle shot under him; his despairing feet touched her broad shoulders, between her wings. He righted himself, rested an instant, found his head; then she dropped like a shot from under him, leaving him to come down on his own wings. It was all the work of an instant before I lost them among the trees far below. And when I found them again with my glass, the eaglet was in the top of a great pine, and the mother was feeding him.”

out of the nest one of the old ones always remains with it, nearly all of the time on the wing, generally circling around, but at times doing everything that it is possible for a bird to do on the wing, such as flying swiftly toward the young, as if it were going to fly against it, but stopping and beating the air with its wings just over its head. At other times it would rise several hundred feet, dropping nearly perpendicularly until near its young, then turning upward and rising again."

In answer to more detailed questions, the same writer adds:

"I have seen the young ones learning to fly several times . . . When the young ones are full grown the old ones force them out of the nest. Then the young have to fly up on a nearby cliff before they will feed them, going higher with each trial, until after about a week the young are able to go any place on the ridge. Then one of the old ones will take a bird or small animal and fly across the canyon, continuing to do this until the young follow. Then they will fly around, letting the young ones come nearly close enough to get their food. After that the young are with the old birds for about three weeks, then they are absent for about a week, the old ones returning alone."

A missionary at Wind River, among the Shoshone Indians, sends me the following:

"An old white trapper informs me that the eagle pecks at and jostles its young (when old enough) out of the nest until they take to wing and fly to a nearby crag: then it repeats the same thing until the young one, driven by the old bird, soars away. An experienced half-breed trapper tells me that, when the young eagle attempts to fly, should it get into difficulties, the old bird will seize it with its talons and carry it back to the nest, and that sometimes, when the young one becomes exhausted during its first flight, the parent bird will fly beneath it and bear it up on its back."

Without going further, this testimony, it seems to me, is sufficient to prove that the passage Deut. 32 11 is actually an eye-witness description and that the process there described is as follows: The eagle (or griffon vulture) "stirs up" its nest, that is, it pushes, jostles or in some way drives the young out;

then, if the young does not fly, the eagle proceeds to entice it or to force it to do so, and the particular method described in this passage is the flying at the young with a violent down-rush, flapping of the wings and the like. Then, if the young eagle, thus forced into flight, lose its courage or its strength, the old eagle flies under it and supports it with its pinions.

I am now prepared to claim that the meaning of the word רוח is the same in the three places in which it occurs, Gen. 1 2, Deut. 32 11 and Jer. 23 9, and that it indicates in all cases violent, not gentle motion. The first passage should be translated "The wind of God rushing upon the face of the water;" and the second "rushes upon her young", while in the third it means "shakes".