

Feeding Time at the Zoo? Exploring the Motif of Animals Eating People in the Bible¹

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Abstract

The motif of animals eating people is recurrent throughout the biblical texts. Culturally, the image subverts expectations with respect to both diet and burial rites, granting it consistently negative connotations. To be eaten by an animal undermines the dignity of humans made in the divine image and problematises the Bible's theological anthropology. These issues are accentuated by this ignominy most frequently occurring at divine behest; typically, it is God who summons beast and bird to devour human flesh and blood. But for what reason? This article explores instances of humans being consumed to determine the divine purposes at play in corpse desecration. While judgement is a crucial element, it is not a sufficient explanation. Other themes, including purification and sacrifice, also feature prominently. These interrelated concepts are utilised for rhetorical ends as they convey significant outcomes for both people and land. Thus, a canonical consideration of the motif of animals eating people not only clarifies its force in any given instance but also offers interpretative possibilities for more obscure passages.

1. Introduction

The biblical texts bear ample witness to the oftentimes fraught relationship that exists between people and beasts. Tension is introduced early as YHWH God establishes 'enmity' between the woman, the serpent, and their respective offspring (Gen 3:15), and as a postdiluvian Noah is informed, 'The fear of you and the terror of you will come upon every wild animal of the earth, upon every bird of the sky, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on every

1. This article was originally presented as the 2025 Tyndale Fellowship Lecture in Biblical Theology. I am grateful to those who interacted with the paper, suggested clarifications, and provoked further reflection. I am especially thankful to Julie Woods, Steven Coxhead, and Karl Deenick.

fish of the sea' (Gen 9:2).² Fear and terror, however, work both ways. Animal attacks are an ever-present and ominous danger in both biblical and ancient West Asian (AWA) texts.³ Legal sanctions that threaten harm by animals exploit the disquiet (e.g. Lev 26:22; Deut 28:26), and narratives portray the reality as she-bears emerge from the wood to maul youths (2 Kgs 2:23-24) or when a viper latches on to an apostle's hand (Acts 28:3). Poetic and prophetic texts, likewise, frequently capitalise on the metaphorical power of ravening beasts to articulate threat towards individuals (e.g. Pss 17:12; 22:13-14[12-13]; Job 10:16; Lam 3:10-11) and groups (e.g. Isa 15:9; Jer 5:6; 50:17; Hos 5:14; Amos 3:12; Rev 13:1-2).

In this article, however, I examine the more precise, and confronting, biblical image of animals and birds *eating* people.⁴ Variations on the motif occur at least forty times across a wide range of genres and historical backdrops.⁵ Why does the image of faunal consumption occur so often? What cultural assumptions and ideals does it intersect with? For what rhetorical and theological ends is it employed? These are important questions. Nevertheless, with very few exceptions,⁶ the motif receives only ad hoc treatment in commentary on the

2. All translations of biblical texts are my own, unless otherwise stated.

3. See, further, Gordon H. Johnston, 'Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to the Neo-Assyrian Lion Motif', *BSac* 158 (2001): 287-307; Chikako E. Watanabe, *Animal Symbolism in Mesopotamia: A Contextual Approach*, WOO (Institut für Orientalistik der Universität Wien, 2002), 147-156; Brent A. Strawn, *What Is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, OBO 212 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005); Aulikki Nahlola, 'Amos Animalizing: Lion, Bear and Snake in Amos 5:19', in *Aspects of Amos: Exegesis and Interpretation*, ed. Anselm C. Hagedorn and Andrew Mein (T&T Clark, 2011), 83-104; Julie Woods, 'Nonhuman Animals in Biblical Prophecy', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Animals* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). I am grateful to Woods for sharing a draft of her forthcoming essay.

4. Exploring the thematic obverse – the unexpected *non*-consumption of people (e.g. 1 Kgs 13:24-25; Pss 22:22[21]; 124:6; Job 29:17; Dan 6:20-22; Rev 12:4) – must await a subsequent article.

5. Gen 37:33; 40:19; Deut 28:26; 1 Sam 17:44,46; 1 Kgs 14:11; 16:4; 21:19,23,24; 22:38; 2 Kgs 9:10,34-37; Isa 18:6; 50:9,17; 51:8; 56:9; Jer 7:33; 12:9; 15:3; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20; Ezek 29:5; 33:27; 34:5-8,28; 39:4,17-20; Hos 2:12; 5:12; 13:7-8; Jon 2:1[1:17]; Pss 68:23; 74:14; 78:45; 79:2-3; Prov 30:17; Dan 6:24; 1 Pet 5:8; Rev 6:7-8; 19:17-21. If consumption by 'worms' is included, this adds another seven instances to the total (Isa 14:11; 51:8; 66:24; Job 21:26; 24:20; Mark 9:48; Acts 12:23).

6. Most notably, Julie Woods, 'Furry, Feathery, and Fishy Friends – and Insects – in the Book of the Twelve: Their Role and Characterization', in *Reading the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets*, ed. David G. Firth and Brittany N. Melton, *Studies in Scripture and Biblical Theology* (Lexham, 2022), 151-170; Woods, 'Nonhuman Animals in Biblical Prophecy'. Nevertheless, Woods's studies are limited to the Latter Prophets and, while commenting on the eating motif, do not focus on it specifically.

various passages in which it appears.⁷ There is, therefore, warrant to explore the motif *qua* motif, even while attending to its specific contextual nuances.

Accordingly, I proceed along synchronic and thematic, rather than diachronic, lines. Hence, this article does not attempt to substantiate the earliest use of the motif; nor does it resolve matters of relative dating or direction of dependence with respect to the sometimes verbatim phrasing used. Instead, my interests lie in discerning the canonical resonance of a repeated image; that is, to assess, in relation to the eating motif, how 'Christian Scripture functions in light of its collective form'.⁸ For this reason, I include limited consideration of the New Testament. Although the concept of human devourment is less prevalent, it is present, nonetheless. Thus, consideration of New Testament occurrences not only grants insight into how some interpretative communities received and appropriated Old Testament imagery, but also further corroborates the initial findings of this study. The result is a taxonomy of biblical uses which, in turn, provides insight into the compounding effect made possible by layering different nuances of the eating motif.

2. An initial sounding: Deuteronomy 28:26

Although the first canonical instance of human devourment is found in Genesis 37:33, Deuteronomy 28:26 is better suited to provide an initial sounding.⁹ The

7. Benjamin A. Foreman, *Animal Metaphors and the People of Israel in the Book of Jeremiah*, FRLANT 238 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 2, notes, more generally, that research on animal metaphors 'relating to Yahweh's chosen nation has largely been ignored'. While Foreman addresses that lacuna in relation to Jeremiah, he does not consider the metaphor of Israel(ites) as animal food.

8. Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Zondervan, 2012), 126. Nevertheless, there is, as Thiselton notes, no 'single, uniform, canonical approach', but rather a range of analogous canonical criticisms. Anthony C. Thiselton, 'Canon, Community, and Theological Construction: Introduction', in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew et al., Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 7 (Zondervan, 2006), 4.

9. These two instances, along with Gen 40:19, are the only Pentateuchal examples of the motif. Although Lev 26:22 has wild animals bereaving people of children, it does not explicitly state that the children are eaten. In Gen 40:19 Joseph discerns the fate of Pharaoh's baker: 'Birds will eat your flesh from off you.' Such an ignominious execution, with postmortem dishonouring of the corpse, highlights the severity of a punishment designed to impinge upon the afterlife (see below). Similarly, when his sons' ruse causes Jacob to wrongly conclude with respect to Joseph that 'an evil wild animal has eaten him' and that he had 'certainly been torn apart' (Gen 37:33), the patriarch concludes that he would descend to his son in Sheol (Gen 37:35) but does not speak of being gathered to him (cf. 49:29-33; see also 25:8, 17; 35:29).

Deuteronomy reference encapsulates the motif's core dynamics and displays close lexical affinity with other instances. Moreover, in contrast to the passing narrative description in Genesis 37, Deuteronomy 28:26 is situated at a rhetorically highlighted section of Torah. It reads,

וְהָיְתָה נִבְלָתְךָ לְמֶאֱכָל לְכָל-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְבִהֶמַת הָאָרֶץ וְאִין מַחְרִיד:

Your corpse will be for food for every bird of the sky and beast of the earth,
and there will be no one to frighten [them] away.

The literary setting is delivery of divine sanctions, both within Deuteronomy and in relation to Deuteronomy's function as conclusion to the Pentateuch.¹⁰ Verse 26 states one of the many curses YHWH promises to inflict upon a recalcitrant Israel.¹¹ Thus, while already abhorrent by nature, literary placement increases the negative associations of the motif by construing the eating of people by animals and birds as actualised divine judgement. The motif itself comprises several discrete elements, each of which accentuates the already negative tenor of the pronouncement by subverting biblical and cultural expectations.

The first relates to the cause of death. In this case, the birds and beasts do not kill; rather, they are the beneficiaries of prior human demise. The immediate context provides ample mechanisms for loss of life: rampant disease (28:21-22), drought (28:23-24), and defeat at the hand of enemies (28:25). Verse 26, therefore, describes what everyone in the ancient world would have taken for granted. As Jesus himself mused, 'Wherever the corpse is, there gather the vultures' (Matt 24:28; par. Luke 17:37). Deuteronomy, however, does more than merely state the obvious. It provides a theological explanation for events that might *mistakenly* be considered normal. To those who might see corpses strewn on the ground and conclude 'War is hell,' Deuteronomy declares divine purpose. The vultures will circle when YHWH brings death.

A second element accentuates the subversive nature of threatened devourment. The audience are warned that their corpses will be 'for food' (לְמֶאֱכָל – *lemaakhal*). This lexical form appears elsewhere in the Pentateuch only in Genesis 2-3 where it references YHWH God's primordial provision of vegetation 'for food' (2:9; 3:6; cf. Ezek 47:12). Thus, for readers of Torah, the

10. See James W. Watts, *Reading Law: The Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch*, BibSem 59 (Sheffield Academic, 1999), 55-60.

11. A similar curse regarding animal consumption can be found in Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty: 'As for your flesh, may dogs and pigs eat it! May your spirit have no caretaker, no one to pour it libations!' (Jacob Lauinger, 'Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty', in *The Context of Scripture, Volume Four: Supplements*, ed. K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Brill, 2017), 162, §47).

association adds a chilling nuance as the Creator again provides creatures with sustenance, only, this time, humans become supper. For a person to be designated ‘for food’ rewrites creation expectations.

In this way, the eating motif subverts the dominant biblical anthropology in which humans exercise mastery over animals. Whatever affinity, biological or otherwise, people share with the other creatures, a separate act of creation demarcates humans as distinct (Gen 1:26; cf. 1:24-25). That distinction is confirmed and conferred in Genesis 1:27 as YHWH God uniquely fashions humanity ‘in his own image’, and instructs his image-bearers to ‘rule’ (רָדָה – *r-d-h*) the fish, the birds, and every living creature (Gen 1:28). Humanity’s unique status within the created order means God will require a reckoning from ‘every wild animal’ (כָּל-חַיָּה – *kol-khayyah*) that consumes the ‘blood’ (דָּם – *dam*) of a person made in his image (Gen 9:4-6). Based on this foundation, human pre-eminence is simply assumed: people keep animals, breed them, farm them, ride them, beat them, sell them, and sacrifice them.¹² Most fundamentally, people eat animals, birds included. Even if the range of possibilities is curtailed (e.g. Lev 11; Deut 14), the biblical texts typically assume the dynamic affirmed in Genesis 9:3: ‘Every creeping thing that lives will be food for you.’¹³ Deuteronomy 28:26, therefore, subverts deeply ingrained assumptions as people become ‘food’ for animals and birds. This represents a reversal of creation order as the dignity of humans *qua* humans is undone and their power, supremacy, and distinction evaporate. Thus, precisely because the way of things is so normal, the image of humans becoming ‘food’ is utterly repellent.

The eating motif also undermines cultural expectations regarding funerary obligations and care for dead kin. Burial practices in AWA are a crucial feature of the literary and material evidence. Offerings of food and drink, invoking the names of the deceased, and construction of commemorative monuments are commonplace.¹⁴ More particularly, there is widespread evidence of familial

12. Human mastery is exemplified in Solomon’s exhaustive knowledge of animals, birds, reptiles, and fish (1 Kgs 4:33).

13. This remains the case despite the vegetarian idealism of texts like Gen 1:29; 2:16; Lev 26:3-5.

14. See Gary A. Anderson, *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 59-97; Saul M. Olyan, *Biblical Mourning: Ritual and Social Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199264865.001.0001>; Angelika Berlejung and Bernd Janowski, ed., *Tod und Jenseits im alten Israel und in seiner Umwelt: Theologische, religionsgeschichtliche, archäologische und ikonographische Aspekte*, FAT 64 (Mohr Siebeck, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-151105-9>; Matthew

responsibility to protect, and repatriate if necessary, the remains of kin, and to preserve their final resting place.¹⁵ Accordingly, non-burial or corpse mutilation were widespread AWA fears,¹⁶ and could, at times, be exploited for political ends.¹⁷ Analogous funerary concerns are evident in both the biblical texts and in the archaeology of the southern Levant.¹⁸ Kerry Sonia observes that by the seventh century BC bone repositories were prevalent in Judahite bench tombs.¹⁹ Some contain the remains of up to one hundred individuals, granting a physical counterpart to the repeated biblical refrains of a king lying or being buried with ‘his fathers’,²⁰ or of a person being ‘gathered to their people’.²¹ Indeed, in Genesis 35:29, the notion of Isaac being ‘gathered to his people’ is paralleled with the physical act of his sons burying his body. Burial within one’s family tomb is the ritual ideal.²²

J. Suriano, *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190844738.001.0001>.

15. Kerry M. Sonia, *Caring for the Dead in Ancient Israel*, ABS 27 (SBL Press, 2020), 26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv190k9vw>.

16. Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 11 (Doubleday, 1988), 107, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300262056>; Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, ApOTC 9 (Apollos, 2014), 203.

17. Assurbanipal, for instance, exhumed the bones of Elamite kings and removed them to Assyria to impose restlessness on their ghosts. Saul M. Olyan, ‘Unnoticed Resonances of Tomb Opening and Transportation of the Remains of the Dead in Ezekiel 37:12-24’, *JBL* 128 (2009): 495-496, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25610198>. Similar ends motivate corpse desecration in biblical texts (e.g. 2 Kgs 23:12-16; Jer 22:18-19).

18. Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 51-54, lists possible food offerings (Deut 26:14; Ps 106:28; cf. Tob 4:17; Sir 30:18); commemorative monuments (Gen 35:20; 2 Sam 18:18); preservation of names (Deut 25:6; 2 Sam 14:7; Ruth 4:10); repatriation (Gen 49:29-32; Josh 24:32; Judg 16:31; 2 Sam 2:32); and protection (2 Sam 21:10; 2 Kgs 9:34-37; Neh 2:3). See also Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead*, JSOTSup 123 (Sheffield Academic, 1992), 148, who records the presence of dog and bird figurines in Judahite graves, a reality rendered ironic considering the eaten-by-dogs motif so prevalent in 1-2 Kings.

19. Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 56. Likewise, James Osborne, ‘Secondary Mortuary Practice and the Bench Tomb: Structure and Practice in Iron Age Judah’, *JNES* 70 (2011): 35-53, <https://doi.org/10.1086/658476>.

20. E.g. 1 Kgs 1:21; 2:10; 11:21,43; 14:20,31.

21. E.g. Gen. 25:8,17; 35:29; 49:33; Num 20:24; Deut 32:50.

22. Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 168; cf. John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 2: Psalms 42-89*, BCOTWP (Baker, 2007), 521. Thus, in Ps 53:6[5], having one’s bones scattered is regarded as shameful. For this reason, tending to the dead is lauded in both Testaments. For instance, when Saul and his sons are killed on Mount Gilboa, the Philistines remove and publicly display their mutilated corpses (1 Sam 31:8-10). However, some from Jabesh Gilead, whom the narrator deems ‘valiant men’, retrieve the bodies, bury their bones, and fast for seven days (1 Sam 31:11-13). Similarly, in 1 Kgs 13, when an unnamed ‘man

In Deuteronomy 28:26, however, there is no interment. Bodies are left exposed to the elements. Thus, the statement ‘there will be no one to frighten [them] away’ generates a sense of unease and helplessness as hearers are forced to imagine their body parts being scattered by scavengers. In this way, the threat posed by wild animals in life extends to the afterlife.²³ Furthermore, there will be ‘no one’ to remedy the situation. This may simply underline the extent of destruction; that is, everyone is dead. If so, then it becomes another instance of divine judgement resulting in a land emptied of human inhabitants (e.g. Lev 26:22; Jer 4:23-26)²⁴ – a picture often accompanied by a shift in dominance as wild animals multiply to fill the void (e.g. Deut 7:22; Isa 13:20-22; 34:9-15; Jer 9:11).²⁵ Alternatively, ‘no one’ may accentuate the portrait of wicked Israel; that is, nobody will care about performing funerary rites.²⁶ Either way, the result is the same: desecration of the dead and the prospect of not being gathered to one’s ancestors in the afterlife. This is what YHWH will do.

These textual and cultural associations increase the already negative tone of the eating motif and heighten the role of deliberate divine agency. These core ideas remain even as the motif is employed for a range of distinct purposes. Sampling these uses grants a better overall sense of the literary and theological ends achieved by picturing birds and beasts eating people.

3. Functions of the eating motif

Instances of the animal-eating-people motif can be grouped according to six interrelated functions. Gaining a better sense of these possibilities, and their

of God’ is killed by a lion that does not consume the body (13:24-25), a prophet travels from Bethel to repatriate and bury the corpse (13:27-30). In like manner, Joseph and Nicodemus petition Pilate for custody of Jesus’s body so they can place it in a tomb (John 19:38-42; see also Gen 23:4-20; Num 20:1; Josh 24:29-31; Acts 9:36-37).

23. Cf. Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *Land of Our Fathers: The Roles of Ancestor Veneration in Biblical Land Claims*, LHBOTS 473 (T&T Clark, 2010), 84-88.

24. Regarding the potential disparity between text ideology and social reality, see Robert P. Carroll, ‘The Myth of the Empty Land’, *Semeia* 59 (1992): 79-93.

25. On the reversal of this theme in restoration, see Woods, ‘Nonhuman Animals in Biblical Prophecy’.

26. This is the force of the story told by Jesus in Luke 10 in which a priest and Levite pass by ‘on the other side’ when they spy a body on the roadside, presumably to avoid corpse-impurity. Yet, because they are heading away from Jerusalem (10:31-32), any potential acclaim for safeguarding sancta is undermined. Instead, Jesus uses their inaction as a foil to extol love for neighbour – whether by assisting the injured, as the Samaritan does, or by burying the dead, as the priest and Levite ought to have been prepared to do (10:33-34).

interplay, provides interpretative options for passages where the motif occurs as well as granting insight into several more obscure episodes.

3.1 To ridicule

First, and making full use of the motif's negative potential, the idea of animals eating people is used to ridicule.²⁷ Taunt becomes explicit in the altercation between David and Goliath (1 Sam 17). As the combatants converge, Goliath exclaims: 'Am I a dog?' (אֲנִי הַכֶּלֶב – *hakhelev anokhi*, 17:43).²⁸ Then, having invoked the gods to curse David, he announces: 'I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky and to the beasts of the field' (17:44). David immediately responds in kind: 'This day, I will give the corpse[s] (פֶּגֶר – *peger*) of the Philistine camp to the birds of the sky and to the wild animals of the earth' (17:46).

At one level, this is mere battlefield one-upmanship, bordering on pantomime. But there is a sharper theological edge to the exchange. Birds pecking over the flesh of Israel's champion would herald the triumph of the Philistine pantheon. David, with similar theological intent, inveighs, 'YHWH will deliver you into my hand' (17:46). Mention of YHWH causes David to expand the scope when it comes to feeding animals. While Goliath declared he would feed David's flesh 'to the beasts of the field' (וּלְבֵהֶמַת הַשָּׂדֶה – *ulevehemat hassadeh*), David's rejoinder claims he will give the bodies of the entire Philistine encampment 'to the wild animals of the earth' (לְחַיֵּית הָאָרֶץ – *lekhayyat haarets*). While 'beasts of the field' and 'wild animals of the earth' could be read synonymously, Goliath's choice of בְּהֵמָה (*behemah* – 'beast, livestock') and שָׂדֶה (*sadeh* – 'field') invokes the parochial limits of the domesticated world and, by association, the limited jurisdiction of the Philistine gods. In contrast, David's phraseology accentuates global extent and anticipates his subsequent declaration, 'all the earth (כָּל-הָאָרֶץ – *kol-haarets*) will know there is a God in Israel' (17:46). How would all the earth know? Most immediately, when they spied the vultures circling (cf. 17:52). With this appeal to divine judgement, David's jibe becomes more than mere taunt. It is 'a superbly crafted piece of rhetoric'.²⁹ Moreover, by retaining Goliath's head, and taking it to Jerusalem years later (17:54; 2 Sam 5:6-10), David, in the spirit of Deuteronomy 28:26, prevents the giant's repatriation and burial.

27. Similarly, in Acts 12:23, Herod is 'eaten by worms' (σκαληκόβρωτος; cf. T. Job 20:8; 2 Macc 9:9), in direct affront to his pretension and hubris.

28. The exclamation is ironic considering David's earlier claim to have already dispatched lions and bears (17:34-36).

29. David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, ApOTC 8 (Apollos, 2009), 200.

3.2 To pronounce judgement

The eating motif most often occurs in connection with pronouncing judgment. Deuteronomy 28:26 fits squarely within this rubric. However, thematic and lexical parallels to Deuteronomy 28:26 appear elsewhere, especially in the Former Prophets and Jeremiah, to announce imminent doom and to convey actualised judgement.³⁰

In 1 Kings, indictment of a royal house is thrice announced by a stock phrase: ‘Those belonging to [PN] who die in the city the dogs will eat, and those who die in the field the birds of the sky will eat.’³¹ The verdict is pronounced upon Jeroboam (1 Kgs 14:11), Ba’asha (1 Kgs 16:4), and, climactically, Ahab (1 Kgs 21:24). Within ancient settlements, packs of semi-domesticated canines performed a role akin to carrion birds.³² Thus, the dichotomy of urban (‘city’) and rural (‘field’) settings functions as a merism to underscore the assuredness of divine judgement. YHWH’s reckoning is unavoidable, wherever one might flee.

Dogs become a recurring hallmark of Ahab’s demise. The word of YHWH to the king is explicit: ‘In the place where the dogs lapped Naboth’s blood, the dogs will lap your blood’ (1 Kgs 21:19). Fulfilment is noted when Ahab falls to an arrow at Ramoth Gilead and dogs lap the blood washed from his chariot (1 Kgs 22:34,38). Similarly, the king is forewarned, ‘the dogs will eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel’ (1 Kgs 21:23),³³ a promise later reiterated to Jehu with the addition ‘no one will bury [her]’ (2 Kgs 9:10). Corpse violation is foregrounded as YHWH’s verdict is fulfilled: ‘when they went to bury her, they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands’ (2 Kgs 9:35 ESV). As Elijah had predicted, no one could say, ‘This is Jezebel’ (2 Kgs 9:37), wording that echoes Iron Age tomb inscriptions.³⁴ Instead of a grave, the queen would pass through canine intestines to become dung on the ground (2 Kgs 9:37).³⁵

30. As J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy*, ApOTC 5 (Apollos, 2002), 10, quips, ‘Deuteronomy is always somehow there ... as the theological colossus that guards the entrance to Old Testament theology.’

31. The phrases are verbatim except 16:4, which adds לו (‘to him’).

32. Thus, although not explicitly named in Lev 11, dogs, like other meat eaters, were regarded as impure (11:27-28). Moreover, while translation difficulties make specific identification of the examples listed in Lev 11:13-19 tentative, most agree they are birds of prey or carrion eaters.

33. The phrasing is accented by its assonance: אֶת-אִיזָבֵל בָּחַל יִרְעָאֵל.

34. Suriano, *History of Death*, 196–197.

35. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 225 suggests that the Hebrew vocalisation of Jezebel (originally: ‘Where is the prince?’) facilitates a play on the word for ‘dung’. To be

Consumption by ‘dogs’ becomes the narrator’s literary memorial to Ahab and Jezebel, one erected in their dishonour. This was, after all, the royal couple responsible for normalising Ba’al worship within Israel (1 Kgs 16:29-33).³⁶ Their end is fittingly scatological (cf. 2 Kgs 10:15-28).³⁷ It is also commensurate. The pair had shed innocent blood (1 Kgs 18:4; 19:1-2; 21:7-16); now their blood is shed. Yet, devourment by dogs pushes beyond mere talion into the realm of purity. The idolatry and bloodshed that characterised Ahab and Jezebel’s rule pollutes not only perpetrators but also land and temple (cf. Lev 20:3; Num 35:33; Jer 3:2,9; Ps 106:37-39).³⁸ To have impure royals eliminated by impure dogs is darkly apropos.

Jeremiah employs judgement by animal consumption at a national level. The four destroyers YHWH summons against Judah include ‘dogs to tear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour’ (15:3; cf. Ezek 14:21). Similarly, in 12:9, as birds of prey attack, ‘all the wild animals of the field’ (כָּל־חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה – kol-khayyat hassadeh) are invited ‘to devour’ (לֶאֱכֹלָה – leokhlah) YHWH’s inheritance.³⁹ On a further four occasions, Jeremiah corresponds closely to the wording of Deuteronomy 28:26.⁴⁰ Various Judahite groups are told ‘their corpse⁴¹ will be for food, for the bird of the sky and for the beast of the earth’⁴² (16:4; 34:20; cf. 7:33; 19:7).⁴³ As in Deuteronomy, the birds and beasts do not kill; rather, they profit from the disease, famine, sword, and enemies YHWH will muster (15:2; 16:4; 19:7; 34:17, 20; cf. Deut

rendered ‘dung’ by faunal consumption is a repeated judgement motif (Jer 8:2; 9:22; 16:4; 25:33; Zeph 1:17; Ps 83:11[10]).

36. The phrases ‘house of Ahab’ and ‘house of Ba’al’ are particularly clustered in the Jehu narrative. As Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 372, notes, ‘the house of Baal falls with the house of Ahab’.

37. 2 Kgs 9:1-10:31 is arranged in two panels, each of which ends with scatological references (9:30-37; 10:15-28) (Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 373).

38. Regarding pollution of land, see, G. Geoffrey Harper, ‘What Hope for the Land? Geospatial Defilement and Cleansing in the Hebrew Bible’, in *Hope for the World from the Old Testament: Essays in Honour of J. Gordon McConville on His 70th Birthday*, ed. David G. Firth, Jamie A. Grant, and Alison Lo, GlossaHouse Festschrift Series 4 (GlossaHouse, 2025), 227-239.

39. The phrase חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה evokes Lev 26:22 and YHWH’s promise to send the ‘wild animals of the field’ against Israel to bereave them of children.

40. In each case, the particle כָּל (‘all’) is dropped. Moreover, 7:33 has a modified object (‘the corpse of this people’), and 19:7 uses וְנָתַתִּי (‘and I will give’) rather than וְהָיְתָה (‘and it will be’).

41. The Hebrew is singular, as in Deut 28.

42. וְהָיְתָה נְבִלָתָם לְמֶאֱכָל לְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְבְּהֵמַת הָאָרֶץ

43. While Judahites or Jerusalemites *en masse* are typically in view, ‘their’ in 34:20 more narrowly refers to the covenant breakers of Zedekiah’s day (cf. 34:19).

28:21-22,25). Perhaps most horrifically, YHWH also announces that Jerusalem's soon-to-be-besieged inhabitants will themselves become scavengers as they eat the flesh of sons and daughters (19:9; cf. Lev 26:29; Deut 28:53-57). The rhetoric is deliberately dehumanising. Moreover, the close lexical affinity with Deuteronomy 28:26, in the context of Babylonian incursions, emphasises enacted curse. Judah's devourment must be viewed through the lens of YHWH's covenantal judgement.

3.3 To depict desecration and defilement

Judgement by animal consumption maims and desecrates the dead. This, as Jeremiah 7 makes clear, is a fitting end for those who wantonly defile temple and land. Verse 33, with only slight modification, parallels Deuteronomy 28:26 in full:

וְהָיְתָה נִבְלַת הָעָם הַזֶּה לְמֶאֱכָל לְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְבֵהֶמַת הָאָרֶץ וְאִין מַחְרִיד:

The corpse of this people will be for food, for the bird of the sky and for the beast of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten [them] away.

The pronouncement follows the prophet's temple speech which justifies God's coming wrath. The Judahites have oppressed the vulnerable, shed innocent blood, engaged in immoral sex, and followed other gods (7:6,9).⁴⁴ They committed 'all these abominations' (כָּל-הַתּוֹעֲבוֹת הָאֵלֶּה – *kol-hattoevot haelleh*) presuming temple proximity would be a safeguard (7:10). Yet, by setting up 'their detestable things' (שִׁקּוּצֵיהֶם – *shiqqutsehem*) in the sanctuary, they defiled it (7:30). Moreover, the Judahites also defiled the ground by sacrificing sons and daughters in the Valley of Ben Hinnom (cf. Ezek 36:17-18; Ps 106:37-39). Accordingly, YHWH decrees that he will deliberately defile those who pollute in these ways. Ben Hinnom would be renamed 'Valley of Slaughter' (7:32).⁴⁵ The dead would be so numerous that graves would overflow (7:32), and birds and animals would feast (7:33). Even those already buried would be exhumed to have their bones spread like dung on the earth (8:1-2). Again, scatological desecration serves theological ends. Human cadavers, left exposed before sun,

44. Similarly, in 15:3, animals and birds are summoned to feast because of what Manasseh did in Jerusalem (15:4), an allusion to the widespread bloodshed (and idolatry) that characterised his reign (2 Kgs 21:2-7,16). In 16:4, corpse desecration by scavengers is recompense for following other gods (see 16:11).

45. Similarly, in 19:12-13, Jerusalem will be made like Topheth because it too was defiled by the people's idolatry.

moon, and stars, become an impurity-laced affront to the celestial bodies the people so stubbornly revered (8:2).⁴⁶

This correlation between defilement, corpse desecration, and animal consumption helps to explain the underlying logic in 2 Samuel 21. Verse 1 causally links three years of famine to Saul's wrongful killing of the Gibeonites. This invokes the spectre of 'bloods' that haunts David's reign throughout 1–2 Samuel, a threat that often provokes the king to embrace or reject certain courses of action.⁴⁷ In this instance, to avoid the implications of 'bloods', David acquiesces to Gibeonite demands to execute seven representative Saulides and to expose their bodies on a hillside before YHWH (21:6,9). However, anticipated corpse desecration by scavengers is prevented by Rizpah, mother to two of the slain. By camping beside the bodies throughout the harvest season, 'she did not let the birds of the sky rest on them by day, nor the wild animals of the field by night' (21:10); that is, Rizpah deliberately prevents the spoliation threatened in Deuteronomy 28:26 from occurring.⁴⁸ Her dedication to the deceased prompts David to have the bones of the executed men gathered (21:13) and to bury Saul and Jonathan's repatriated remains in the family's ancestral grave (21:12–14). Only at this point does the narrator record that God answered prayer on behalf of the land (21:14).

The episode in 2 Samuel 21 leaves many questions unanswered. However, attending to the motif of animals and birds eating people helps explain Rizpah's motivations, which extend beyond simply caring for the dead. According to Deuteronomy 21:23, leaving the bodies of executed criminals exposed defiles the land. Hence, corpses must be taken down and buried before sunset (cf. Josh 8:29; 10:26). However, because of the king's order (21:6), Rizpah is prevented from interring the remains.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, by preventing birds and animals from disposing of the bodies, she prolongs defilement of the land, thereby undermining the king's desire to bring about its restoration (cf. 21:1). This eventually provokes the king to action, including the gathering and interment of her sons' bones (21:13).⁵⁰

46. G. Geoffrey Harper, *'You Shall Be Clean': A Biblical Theology of Defilement and Cleansing*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 65 (Apollos, 2025), 62.

47. See David J. Shepherd, *King David, Innocent Blood, and Bloodguilt* (Oxford University Press, 2023), esp. 193–210, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198842200.002.0002>.

48. Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 147.

49. Women never repatriate human remains in extant biblical and AWA texts. They do, however, play a prominent caregiving role in cases of non-ideal deaths (Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 133, 144).

50. Shepherd, *King David*, 204–205 argues that the reference to gathering the bones of the impaled in 21:13b refers only to Saul and Jonathan, with Rizpah presumably

3.4 To invoke restoration

The horror of enacted judgement, so graphically depicted in Jeremiah by people becoming food, becomes the basis for protest and appeals for renewal. Psalm 79 opens with historical remembrance.⁵¹ The poet recalls how the nations invaded, defiled the temple, and ruined Jerusalem (79:1). He continues:

They have given the corpse of your servants [עֲבָדֶיךָ – *avadekha*]
as food to the birds of the sky,
the flesh of your faithful ones [חֲסִידֶיךָ – *khasidekha*]
to the wild animals of the earth. (79:2)

The image is, by now, familiar, yet subtly different.⁵² The psalmist does not bemoan divine judgement upon the wicked – those deserving of covenant curse. Rather, he laments the fate of the righteous remnant, YHWH's 'servants' and 'faithful ones', whose bodies also became food for birds and animals; those who, like the wicked, had 'no one to bury [them]' (וְאִין קוֹבֵר – *veen qover*, 79:3). The resulting protest in 79:5 – 'How long, YHWH? Will you be angry forever?' – is followed by a request that God might now avenge the shed blood of 'your servants' (עֲבָדֶיךָ – *avadekha*, 79:10; cf. 79:2; Rev 6:10).⁵³

Ezekiel also makes Jerusalem's demise a reason for future hope. When news of the city's fall reaches the prophet, YHWH pronounces doom on the remaining survivors (33:21). The corollary follows: 'those on the surface of the field I will give to the wild animals to eat' (33:27).⁵⁴ However, as in Psalm 79, judgement leads to restoration. The failure of Israel's 'shepherds' to prevent the sheep from becoming 'for food for every wild animal of the field'⁵⁵ (34:5)

attending to the other remains. Either way, it is only when all human remains are buried that the land is restored (21:14). Cf. Isabelle Hamley, "'Dis(re)membered and Unaccounted for": פִּילגֶשׁ in the Hebrew Bible', *JSOT* 42 (2018): 428–429, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089216690384>.

51. Beat Weber, 'Zur Datierung der Asaph-Psalmen 74 und 79', *Bib* 81 (2000), 521–532, argues the psalm is exilic and reflects the events of 586/7 BC.

52. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia (Fortress, 2005), 305, judge that Ps 79 is 'an intertextual conversation with the book of Jeremiah', including parallels between v. 2 and Jer 7:33; 16:4; 34:20.

53. The plea to vindicate 'your servants' means עֲבָדֶיךָ cannot refer to God's people in general, contra Goldingay, *Psalms 42–89*, 521–522. Allusions to Deut 28:26 and Jer 7:33; 16:4; 34:20 indicate enacted covenant curse upon the Israelite majority whose wickedness is not vindicated.

54. This could imply either that those who flee to the countryside will be killed by animals or that corpses left on the ground will subsequently be eaten.

55. לֹא־כָלָה לְכַלִּיתָּהּ הַשָּׂדֶה

– and, indeed, the shepherds’ own feasting on the flock (34:10) – provokes a divine response.⁵⁶ YHWH says, because ‘my flock has become for food for every wild animal of the field’⁵⁷ (34:8), ‘I will place one shepherd over them, my servant David’ (34:23). When YHWH also removes ‘dangerous wild animals from the land’ (34:25), then the sheep of his pasture will no longer be eaten (34:28,31).⁵⁸

As is typical in the prophetic imagination, restoration of Judah/Israel is premised upon YHWH judging the nations. YHWH has Ezekiel declare against Pharaoh:

You will fall on the surface of the field;
you will not be collected, and you will not be gathered up.
To the wild animals of the earth and to the birds of the sky,
I give you for food. (Ezek 29:5)

In being left unburied as ‘food’ for animals and birds,⁵⁹ the Egyptians’ fate will mirror Judah’s.⁶⁰ A similar verdict is pronounced against the nations *en masse* through the avatar of Gog.⁶¹ YHWH decrees: ‘To every kind of predatory bird and [to] the wild animals of the field, I will give you for food’⁶² (39:4).

3.5 To parody sacrifice

Ezekiel’s denouncement of Gog extends the eating motif beyond judgment *simpliciter* into the realm of sacrifice. In 39:17, YHWH commands the prophet to convey an invitation ‘to birds of every sort and to every wild animal of the field’⁶³ (39:17). The phrasing repeats 39:4 verbatim (uniquely in the Old

56. The image of people being eaten like sheep is recurrent (e.g. Ps 44:12[11]; 1 Pet 5:8). At times, YHWH is pictured as the predatory creature that will devour (Hos 13:7-8).

57. וְתִהְיֶינָה צֹאֲנֵי לְאֶכְלָהָ לְכָל-חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה

58. This is a likely *double entendre* in which ‘dangerous wild animals’ are meant both literally (cf. Lev 26:6,22) and figuratively (cf. Jer 50:17).

59. The image finds a parallel in ‘Leviathan’ becoming ‘food for the wilderness creatures’ (Ps 74:14; cf. Ezek 29:3-5) – if this is taken as a cipher for the exodus Pharaoh (see Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 248–249, for the options). In Isa 18:6, Cushite bodies sustain the birds and wild animals year-round (‘all summer’ and ‘all winter’).

60. This paralleled fate functions as a continual reminder of Israel’s sin in turning to Egypt for help (29:16).

61. For a survey of Gog in Jewish and Christian interpretation, see Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1998), 489–493, <https://doi.org/10.5040/bci-008x>.

62. לְעֵיט צֹפּוֹר כָּל-כְּנָף וְחַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה נִתְּתִיד לְאֶכְלָהָ

63. לְצֹפּוֹר כָּל-כְּנָף וְלִכְלָל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה

Testament) and suggests that 39:17-20 expands on the idea of Gog and hordes becoming 'food' for the animals. YHWH says,

Assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood. You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth – of rams, of lambs, and of he-goats, of bulls, all of them fat beasts of Bashan. And you shall eat fat till you are filled, and drink blood till you are drunk, at the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you. And you shall be filled at my table with horses and charioteers, with mighty men and all kinds of warriors. (Ezek 39:17-20 ESV⁶⁴)

This passage subverts not only dietary norms but the whole dynamic of sacrifice.⁶⁵ Throughout the Old Testament, *people* sacrifice animals – a ritual act that, on occasion, climaxes in a meal shared between YHWH, the officiating priest, and the offerer(s), each of whom is assigned a portion of the animal (Lev 3:3-5; 7:15,28-34). Table fellowship functions as an enactment of *shalom* and celebrates restoration. Ezekiel 39 parodies that potential.⁶⁶ Here, YHWH is the offerer who says this is 'my sacrifice that I am sacrificing, a huge sacrifice' (39:17). The 'huge sacrifice' consists of people, whose slaughtered bodies become a meal for the birds and the animals, to be consumed as if they were lambs or goats (39:18). Strikingly, YHWH invites creatures to gorge themselves on fat and blood – the very things forbidden to people (Gen 9:4; Lev 3:17; 7:23-27; 17:10).⁶⁷ Thus, YHWH says to the beasts and birds, 'you shall be filled at my table' (39:20).

3.6 To enact purification

The disturbing portrayal of animals and birds functioning as cultic participants is connected to purification. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel repeatedly draws attention

64. Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version™ ©2001 Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. All rights reserved.

65. An analogous image occurs in Isa 34 as doom is pronounced upon Edom. The nation's demise is deemed 'a sacrifice in Bozrah' (34:6) with people imaged as slaughtered animals whose blood and fat soak the ground (34:3,6-7) and whose absence is addressed by a menagerie of impure animals gathered by YHWH's spirit (34:11-16).

66. Cf. Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 473, who terms this sequence a 'literary cartoon' that forms 'an impressionistic literary sketch'.

67. This invitation could function to prevent the conclusion that God (within the sacrificial image) was receiving *human* fat and blood. Alternatively, the portrayal may accentuate judgement upon those deemed less consequential than sacrificial animals.

to moral evils that defile land and temple.⁶⁸ Pollution and presence are incompatible. For this reason, the prophet is summoned to watch the glory of YHWH depart the temple (Ezek 9:3; 10:4,18-19).⁶⁹ However, rather than YHWH fleeing before out-of-control impurity, as is often wrongly assumed,⁷⁰ God remains present in judgement to cleanse land and temple.⁷¹

The correlation between purification and the eating motif becomes clear in Ezekiel 39, where the explicit concern is cleansing land. The invading hordes which fall in the open field (39:4-5) are so numerous the gathered war materiel will provide fuel for seven years (39:9-10; cf. 38:15-16). Moreover, burying the dead will take seven months (39:12).⁷² Such interment is vital. Human remains are the most virulent source of ritual impurity.⁷³ Whether Israelite or Gentile, in whole or in part, corpses defile (Num 19:10-16; cf. Ezek 39:15). Having bodies strewn across the land is inherently problematic. Hence, the thrice-stated purpose of the assigned gravediggers is to 'cleanse' (טָהַר – *t-h-r* (piel) the land (39:12,14,16)). Burial is purificatory. So too is consumption by scavengers. By marshalling 'birds of every sort and the wild animals of the field' to eat the corpses of the fallen (39:4), YHWH also purifies place.

This suggests possible connotations for the sacrifice in 39:17-20. Although technical terms are not used, the description evokes the fellowship offering. These non-atoning sacrifices are the only ones from which the laity eat, and typically express thanksgiving or vow-fulfilment (cf. Lev 3:1-17; 7:11-34). Read through this lens, Ezekiel 39 emphasises fulfilment of divine oaths to execute defilers. Now that their remains have been disposed of, and the land is finally

68. E.g. 5:11; 8:3-16; 22:3-4,10-11; 23:36-39; 33:25-26; 36:17-18.

69. For AWA parallels to gods abandoning cities, see Daniel I. Block, 'Divine Abandonment: Ezekiel's Adaptation of an Ancient Near Eastern Motif', in *The Book of Ezekiel: Theological and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Margaret S. Odell and John T. Strong, SBL Symposium Series 9 (SBL Press, 2000), 15-42.

70. I argue the point in G. Geoffrey Harper, 'Endangered or Dangerous? YHWH's Presence and Impurity in Levitical Perspective', *JSOT* 46 (2022): 480-494, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03090892211061175>; contra, Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3 (Doubleday, 1991), 260, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261110>; Michael B. Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth: Safeguarding the Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle*, FAT 2/50 (Mohr Siebeck, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-151148-6>.

71. Harper, 'Endangered or Dangerous?', 486-487; also, Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 263.

72. There is conceptual correspondence between Num 19 prescribing a 'week of days' to cleanse corpse-impurity and Ezekiel envisioning a 'week of months' (Block, *Ezekiel 25-48*, 470).

73. Accordingly, Gog's vast graveyard blocks the way for travellers (39:11), presumably because of the defilement risk (cf. Josephus *Ant.* 18.2.3).

cleansed, festal rejoicing is apropos.⁷⁴ Alternatively, if an atoning sacrifice is implied, then purification remains the goal.⁷⁵ In the Old Testament, human measures for cleansing land are notably rare.⁷⁶ Numbers 35:33 presents a striking exception:

... blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it.
(ESV)

What Numbers 35 prescribes at an individual level, other passages apply corporately. This is the logic that undergirds the assured demise of Jerusalem in 587/6 BC, and in AD 70, as Jeremiah and Jesus respectively warn of the consequences of shedding ‘innocent’ or ‘righteous’ blood (Jer 26:15; Matt 23:35; cf. LXX Lam 4:13).⁷⁷ Read through this lens, Ezekiel 39 portrays the removal of ritual and moral pollution from the land by means of corpse disposal and sacrificial atonement respectively. Whichever inference the sacrificial image has, it marks the culmination of land purification. This is confirmed by the structural arrangement of Ezekiel in which cleansing land in chapter 39 immediately precedes the vision of a restored temple in chapters 40–48 and the return of the divine glory (43:1–5).⁷⁸ The point is to affirm that Israel’s return to the land will be forever.⁷⁹

4. A zoological reading of Revelation 19

The various nuances attending the motif of animals eating people in the Old Testament generate ‘predictive analogies’ (or patterns of meaning) that

74. YHWH’s victory over enemies is similarly followed by feasting in Isa 34:6–8 and Zeph 1:7.

75. The sequence parallels the flood narrative in which YHWH, provoked by sexual immorality (Gen 6:1–4; cf. 1 En. 6:1–2; 10:9–11; Jub. 5:1) and violent bloodshed (Gen 6:11–13), washes a defiled world clean (cf. Jub. 7:21–25; 1 En. 10:20, 22; 4Q422; 1 Pet 3:20–21; Philo, *Mos.* 2.64). Noah’s postdiluvian reflex to offer sacrifice (Gen 8:20) mirrors the climatic role of the *עֹלָה* in purification rituals (e.g. Lev 12:6–8; 14:19–20, 30–31; 15:15, 30).

76. Harper, ‘What Hope for the Land?’, 237.

77. For discussion of Matthew’s use of Lam 4:13, see David M. Moffitt, *Rethinking the Atonement: New Perspectives on Jesus’s Death, Resurrection, and Ascension* (Baker, 2022), 211–212.

78. The book’s final vision is not chronologically arranged (compare 40:1 with 29:17), which suggests the deliberate juxtaposition of chs 38–39 and 40–48.

79. Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel* (Brill, 2002), 117.

extend into the New.⁸⁰ This is most clearly the case in Revelation, which draws on various aspects of the eating motif explored above. There are echoes of Deuteronomy 28:26 and Psalm 79:2 as the fourth seal is opened, and as Death and Hades are granted power to kill by sword, famine, and plague, ‘and by the wild beasts of the earth’ (καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν θηρίων τῆς γῆς, 6:8).⁸¹ Here, the beasts are an instrument of death, as in Jeremiah 15:3. The following verses legitimise divine judgement. Recalling the protest of Psalm 79 (LXX Ps 78), the seer overhears the voices of the righteous slain cry out, ‘How long, O Master, holy and true, before you judge and avenge our blood upon the earth’s inhabitants?’ (Rev 6:10).⁸² The close affinity with LXX Ps 78:2, in which the bodies of YHWH’s saints become food for the animals and birds, invites judgement in kind.

The protest and petition of 6:9-10 are fully met in Revelation 19. A great multitude stands vindicated (19:2) and, with choral delight, heralds the wedding supper of the Lamb (19:1-7; cf. Isa 61:10). Feasting and rejoicing are prompted by the fall of Babylon, the city repeatedly characterised throughout Revelation as full of idolatry, bloodshed, and sexual immorality.⁸³ Babylon’s defilement of self and of the earth calls forth death and postmortem desecration. With explicit evocation of Ezekiel 39 (cf. Rev 20:8), an angel proclaims God’s invitation to the birds of the sky:

Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great. (Rev 19:17-18 (ESV))

Accordingly, as the gathered hordes are slain by the rider atop the white horse, ‘all the birds were gorged with their flesh’ (Rev 19:21).⁸⁴ Again, repulsive as the

80. I borrow the expression ‘predictive analogies’ from Seth D. Postell, *The Art of Narrative Analogy: Identifying and Interpreting Parallel Passages in the Bible* (Baker, 2025).

81. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 1999), 372–373, locates the primary OT backdrop in Lev 26:18–28; Deut 32:23–25; Ezek 14:21; Zech 6:1–8. These texts form the ‘compositional paradigm for Rev 6:1–8’ (373). Beale also notes possible allusion to Hos 13:8, which pictures YHWH as a lion who will devour the people (382).

82. The appeal is for God to judge persecutors to show he is the true God (Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 393).

83. Rev 14:8; 17:1–6, 15, 16; 18:3, 9, 24; 19:2. Babylon is also home to a host of impure creatures (18:2) – ‘a veritable menagerie of impurity’ (Harper, ‘You Shall Be Clean’, 204).

84. In 20:8, the gathered armies – termed ‘Gog and Magog’ – are, likewise, devoured (κατέφαγεν), although this time by fire from heaven (20:9). Although the wording is drawn from 1 Kgs 1:10 (Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 1027), conceptual and lexical parallels with Lev 9:24–10:2 and Ezek 39:6 inject sacrificial connotations.

image is, it is darkly fitting. Those who reject their human calling to worship God, who instead follow and serve the beast, are eaten by beasts. Moreover, devourment functions as a means of impurity disposal. Thus, as in Ezekiel, purification of place segues to a temple vision. Cleansed of its defiled and defiling inhabitants, the earth is once again fit to host the divine glory. A voice from the throne announces the finale: 'Behold! God's tabernacle is with people, and he will tabernacle with them' (21:3).

5. Conclusion

Ronald Clements writes, 'The greatest truths are often more easily presented in the form of a visionary image, or picture, in which the essential nature of things is expressed pictorially rather than in precisely defined ideas.'⁸⁵ That aptly summarises the motif of animals eating people in the Bible. The motif is employed in all the main biblical genres – narrative, prophetic oracle, poetry, and apocalyptic. In its various manifestations, the mental image of animals and birds feasting on human remains is grotesque. It is even more repellent in contexts in which graves functioned as repositories of social memory; to obliterate a person's remains was to obliterate all remembrance of the deceased.⁸⁶

It is precisely this ability to provoke horror that makes the eating motif such a rhetorically powerful tool. Unlike deliberative modes of ethical reasoning which appeal to cognitive assent, disgust works at a non-rational, visceral level to compel hearers to respond.⁸⁷ By forcing psychological and even physiological reactions in readers, the biblical authors capitalise on the affective force of animal devourment to communicate uncomfortable ideas. Chief among these, is that, rhetorically at least, there exists the potential for YHWH to act towards people as if they are not in the divine image.⁸⁸ Humanity's status within creation is not inalienable but can be downgraded by being designated 'food' for animals and birds; people can even be sacrificed for the

85. Ronald E. Clements, 'Isaiah 45:20-25', *Int* 40 (1986): 392, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096438604000406>; cf. Watanabe, *Animal Symbolism*, 161. (I am grateful to Catherine Fisher for pointing me to the Clements reference.)

86. Sonia, *Caring for the Dead*, 1–2, 198.

87. Cf. Joseph Lam, *Patterns of Sin in the Hebrew Bible: Metaphor, Culture, and the Making of a Religious Concept* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 205–206, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199394647.001.0001>.

88. Determining the degree to which this may also have *ontological* entailments is beyond the scope of this current study.

benefit of creatures. In this complete dismantling of biblical anthropology, people become non-human in the created order.⁸⁹

This subversion of biblical and cultural norms graphically portrays the consequence of rejecting an appointed glory as God's image-bearers. Such rejection is crystalised in the universal human impulse towards idolatry. As Paul summarises, people deliberately exchange the glory of the immortal God for images of birds, animals, and reptiles (Rom 1:23). By upending creation order, idolatry is inherently dehumanising. Thus, by presenting idolatry's shameful terminus, the disturbing motif of animals eating people in the Bible becomes a horror-tinged appeal for repentance. This serves Scripture's wider invitation to embrace God's salvation and, by doing so, to regain a lost humanity. Only then can men and women share in the wedding supper of the Lamb. Thus, with Revelation 19's alternative feasts in mind, and with a nod to William Shakespeare, to eat or to be eaten, that is the question.

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89. Habakkuk utilises the same conclusion to express his incredulity regarding YHWH's ways (Hab 1:14–17).

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