

The Unified *Owph*: Birds and Insects in the Creation

By Chard Berndt

One declaration in the Biblical Classification of Life (BCL) that elicits requests for clarification is its placement of flying birds and insects together as “avian creatures,” created on Day 5. The readers’ puzzlement is undoubtedly sourced in the thinking that birds and insects occupy widely distinct areas of the prevailing biological taxonomy, as vertebrates and arthropods, respectively. In addition to this, it seems that readers of the Creation account may assume the “creeping things” of Day 6 to include insects, which, of course, are pretty creepy at times. Furthermore, “insects” are not mentioned in the Creation account in any major translation, which leaves opportunity to fill in the blanks oneself. Yet the BCL asserts that these two broad groupings of creatures are to be thought of together—their unifying essence defined by flight and the creative movement of sky (not water or land) rather than to be divided according to skeletal structure or metabolism. This can be explained by a look at the biblical words *owph* and *remes* and related vocabulary, and the overarching biblical criteria for classifying creatures. Perhaps this will not only support the BCL’s clustering of birds and insects, but also remind us that indoctrination into evolutionary classification schemes does not lend itself well to a fresh look at the Creator’s own priorities.

First, though, clarification should be made that the BCL does not regard birds and insects as ancestrally *related* to each other, just as all bird Kinds are not themselves related, or all fish Kinds. “Birds” and “insects” are groupings of multiple Kinds—the creatures within each of these Kinds are truly related, whereas creatively-grouped Kinds are not related to each other, but rather *associated*. (This, of course, is a difficult concept to grasp from an evolutionary view, which sees *all* living things as ultimately related, and classifies them according to perceived degrees of how close those believed relationships are.) So, here, a creative connection, not an ancestral connection, is the argument that will be made. For example, spiders, dragonflies, and eagles are not related, but dragonflies and eagles are to be *associated* as Day 5 creatures that have the essential characteristic of flight. The modern taxonomy, of course, would not regard flight as the unifying characteristic, as it would say that spiders and dragonflies are more closely *related*.

But, as stated at the outset, not all creation biologists or Bible students recognize the unifying bird/insect association. So, let us begin with the word *owph*, which is first encountered in the Day 5 portion of the Creation account:

And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl [*owph*] that may fly [*uwph*] above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.

And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged [*kanaph*] fowl [*owph*] after his kind: and God saw that *it was* good. – Genesis 1:20-21

There is no doubt that the emphasis here is on flight, as the *owph* is modified once by the verb *uwph* (to fly) and again by the adjective *kanaph* (winged). So the question is whether this includes only birds, or also includes flying insects (hereafter simply called “insects;” the reasoning will be explained later). The NIV translation and several other major translations read “birds,” while the KJV translation’s “fowl” (above) is clearly dated, as it is certainly not limited to today’s game bird concept of “fowl.” So while the KJV’s rendition may be uncertain, most modern translations have decided to rule out insects.

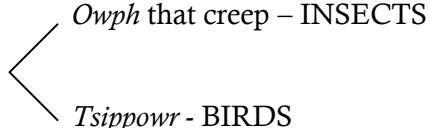
Yet another word, *tsippowr*, is also translated as “birds” in all of the translations, KJV included, and its context undoubtedly speaks of birds. This word does not show up until Genesis 7:14, where it is used *alongside* the word *owph*:

...and every fowl [*owph*] after his kind, every bird [*tsippowr*] of every sort.
– Genesis 7:14b

The use of two unique words raises the possibility that each speaks of distinctly different things, or that one is subset of the other. If, in any other Scripture, insects are specifically described by the use of *owph*, then we can conclude logically that *tsippowr* is more particular, referring to birds, whereas *owph* is more general, having been applied to both birds and insects. Leviticus 11 provides such a passage:

All fowls [*owph*] that creep, going upon *all* four, *shall be* an abomination unto you. Yet these may ye eat of every flying [*owph*] creeping thing that goeth upon *all* four, which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth;
Even these of them ye may eat; the locust after his kind, and the bald locust [katydid] after his kind, and the beetle [cricket] after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind. But all *other* flying [*owph*] creeping things, which have four feet, *shall be* an abomination unto you. – Leviticus 11:20-23

Clearly, the word *owph* is applied here to insects, defining them as *flying things that creep*, using the same word as used in Day 5 of Creation. (It further modifies these as having legs above their feet for leaping – describing a particular, “clean” subset of insects. This does not indicate that “flying things that creep” is limited to grasshoppers and the like.) We can summarize the vocabulary as follows:

Owph – ALL FLYING CREATURES, includes 

So, the Day 5 word *owph* is later used of insects, suggesting strongly that insects are Day 5 creatures. But, to be certain, we should determine if the “creepers” of Day 6 are perhaps regarded as insects somewhere else in Scripture. If so, this would leave ambiguity, or the possibility that insects share two days of Creation. To this end, let us examine the Day 6 word in question:

And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing [*remes*], and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so.
And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth [*remes*] upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that *it was* good. – Genesis 1:24-25

We saw in Leviticus 11 the use of “creeping” to modify *owph*. But this is not translated from *remes* as used on Day 6 of Creation, but rather, from the word *sherets*. *Sherets* is quite general, referring to the movement of creatures in water (Genesis 1:20; Leviticus 11:10), land (Genesis 7:21; Leviticus 5:2, 11:29,31,41,42,43,44; Deuteronomy 14:19), and sky (Leviticus 11:20,21,23). The word *remes*, however, is primarily reserved for land creatures (Genesis 1:24,25,26; Ezekiel 8;10), usually *in contrast to* creatures of water and/or sky (Genesis 1:26, 6:7,20, 7:14,23, 8:17,19; Psalm 148:10, Ezekiel 38:20, Hosea 2:18). Only three times is it unclear regarding water, sky, or land (Habakkuk 1:14; Genesis 9:3; 1 Kings 4:33), and in one case it does refer to water creatures (Psalm 104:25). If the Creation account wanted to indicate the possibility of insects on Day 6, then the general word *sherets* would have been preferable; the specific word for land creatures, however, is what is given.

So, Genesis 1 indicates that both birds and insects (*owph*) are created in the same movement of Creation, on Day 5. Major translations are in error when restricting the translation to “birds” in the Creation account. Day 6 of Creation, devoted to land creatures and mankind, uses a unique and more specific word (*remes*) to refer to its creepers. This might include some creature Kinds that never had wings but are today classified as insects due to their body segmentation and number of appendages. Yet flight is the creative theme here, not body segmentation. So these land-bound “insect” Kinds (perhaps fleas and lice are examples), if showing no evidence of winged ancestry, are not true insects. This is why “insects” and “flying insects” have been used synonymously here. Regarding original Creation, these two terms are redundant. Insects that used to fly, however, but have lost the information content for wings, either entirely and preferentially (New Zealand’s weta, with no natural predators), or in part within their Kinds (ants, cockroaches), are still to be regarded as insects. To minimize confusion, perhaps “true insect” is a preferable term for those modernly-classified insects that do fly or have an ancestry of flight within their Kinds.

It is unfortunate that evolutionary distinctions would lead a creation biologist, Bible student, or Bible translation itself to force a poor interpretation of Scripture. And this is especially puzzling when one considers more obvious discrepancies between modern taxonomy and the biblical account. Note that the modern taxonomic phylum *Chordata* includes creatures of water, land, and sky, as does the phylum *Arthropoda*. If a person wants to maintain major insect/bird differences based on skeletal form or metabolism, then consistency demands that *all* Creation account discontinuities and sequencing be disregarded. In fact, if insects are regarded as Day 6 creepers based on their physiological separation from birds, then they are being associated among earthworms, and even among Day 6's warm-blooded land animals. That does not work in either a biblical scheme or an evolutionary one. One cannot have his biosystematics satisfy both camps. Sadly, the root of criticism about the bird/insect issue in the BCL is not really about the birds and insects alone, but about the very idea of tampering with highly esteemed evolutionary categories. Biblical classification, however, does not require that one cater to physiological similarities, since it concerns things created, not evolved.

When we are honest, we admit that the essence of the flying creatures is not their skeletal structure or metabolism, but their flight. This is what we admire, whether in the darting aerobatics of a dragonfly or the soaring regality of an eagle. This is what unifies them, and it reflects upon why God made together these creatures that “fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky” (Genesis 1:20b, NIV).

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