Yvonne Sophie Thöne, Kassel-háskóla

A Vulture's Wings and a Lion's Roar

Theological Animal Imagery in the Old Testament[1]

Introduction

Animals as well as the relationship of humans to animals have been focused on recently not only in ethical debates in the media (e.g. in discussions about vivisection, human rights for great apes, vegetarian or vegan diets), but also in the humane, cultural and social sciences. The cultural and social relevance of non-human animals in the past and present as well as the ethical and political dimension of the human-animal-relationship are analysed in the context of the interdisciplinary Human-Animal Studies. Within the Human-Animal Studies, the focus shifts from treating animals as mere objects to regarding animals as living beings with agency and influence, as active subjects in social processes. It sharpens the awareness that humans are also animals – mammals, great apes, and their anthropological difference (i.e. the question of the boundaries between humans and other animals) is discussed.[2]

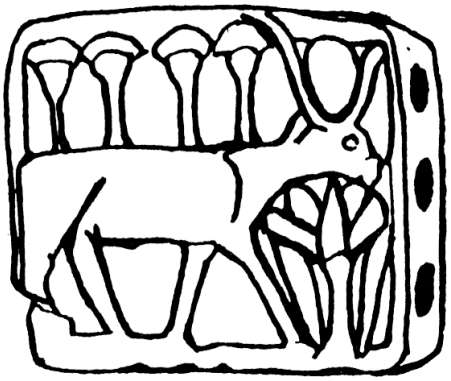

Fig. 1: Egyptian tile, 22nd-26th dynasty (945–525 B.C.); cow with a solar disc between its horns, standing among papyrus plants; it represents the goddess Hathor.

Given the reservations concerning animals in the field of biblical theology up until the 1990s, the increased number of publications seen since then is remarkable (e.g. by Bernd Janowski, Silvia Schroer, Rainer Hagencord). What is noticeable is that these publications mostly have a critical impetus concerning the contemporary treatment of animals in contrast to a biblical ideal.

With regard to the high relevance of non-human animals in the ancient Israelite society, they are mentioned on almost every single page of the Old Testament. Animals are interrelated with other animals, with humans or God (or other deities). Thus, in theology, the focus on human-animal-relationships, as it is usually studied in the social sciences, is extended to the triad of animal-human-God.

[1] Lecture held at the Faculty of Theology of the Háskóli Íslands, 8.9.2014. I sincerely thank Prof. Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson for the invitation and for the opportunity to publish this paper.

[2] Cf. Markus Wild, Tierphilosophie zur Einführung, Hamburg[2] 2010, 25–28.

In the Ancient Near East, animals were considered to be representations or companions of divine powers. Hence theriomorphic (i.e. animal shaped) images of deities are widely spread in the cultural environment of the Bible. The worship of animals dates back to the 4th millennium B.C. in Egypt. The goddess of love, Hathor, for example, appears as a female human with the ears and horns of a cow, or even completely in the shape of a cow; the death deity Anubis is represented as a jackal or a human with a jackal's head. These animalistic elements show specific characteristics of the deity and indicate a type of power that cannot be depicted with conventional methods. In the Near Eastern context, deities are often portrayed in an anthropomorphic manner, but there is also a close connection between god/goddess and animal, e.g. when a deity is standing on or next to a bull (weather god Ischku/Adad, demonstrating the power and fertility of the bull) or a lion (war goddess Ischtar/Inanna).

Accordingly, in the OT, animals are often surrounded by a numinous sphere. For example, in the Song of Songs, the woman conjures the Daughters of Jerusalem by the gazelles (צְבָאוֹת) and the hinds/does (אַיְלוֹת) (Song 2:7; 3:5) – this aural similarity with the designations for God, צְבָאוֹת and אֵל, is not a coincidence as it was usual to swear by a deity; gazelle and hind were known as the attribute animals of Near Eastern love goddesses.

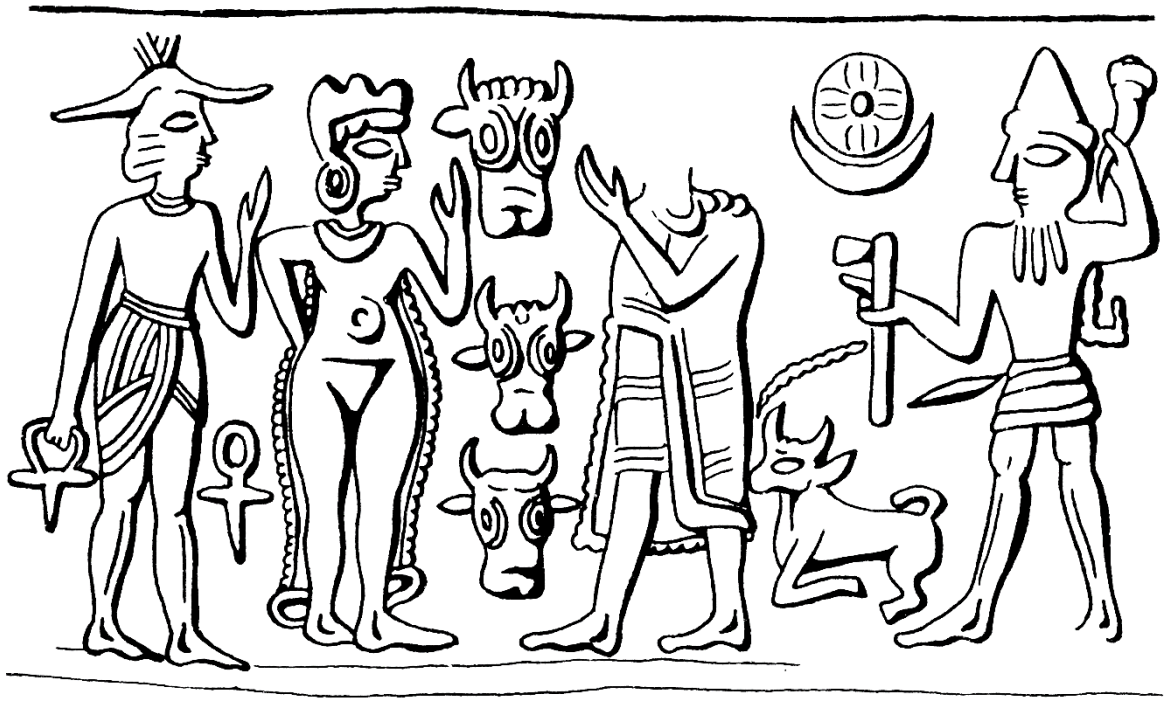

Fig. 2: Cylinder seal, Megiddo, 1795–1730, showing the weather god, clothed with an apron and a pointy hat, holding a club in his hand and an axe as well as a leash with a bull on it in the other hand. The goddess, framed by the bulls' heads, is showing her pudenda and therefore her willingness to love.

Nevertheless, there are only a few specific theriomorphic images of God. God is most often represented as a *lion* (11x). Parallel to the lion, there are also images of a *bear* (2x) and a *leopard* (1x). Also quite common is the image of God as a *bird* (11x). Sometimes God is described as being horned (Num 24:8; Hab 3:4), i.e. he appears in the form of a bull. Finally, God is portrayed as a moth (Ps 39:12; Hos 5:12) and a maggot (Hos 5:12).

In the following, I would like to focus on the most frequent theriomorphic images of lion and bird as well as the interesting image of the female bear.

"How I bore you on vulture's wings and brought you to myself." (Ex 19:4) – God as a Bird

He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will hide.
Ps 91:4

God is shown as a bird 11 times within the OT (Ex 19:4; Deut 32:11–12; Ps 17:8; 36:8; 57:2; 61:5; 63:8; 91:4; Ruth 2:12; Is 10:14; 31:5). There are two general words for the bird in Hebrew: עוֹף and צִפּוֹר. The noun עוֹף is derived from the root עוּף which means "to fly", and therefore describes the typical movement of winged beings.[3] Birds represent the sky where they move and live. Their ability to fly gives them unique agility. They are considered to be smart and wise (Job 35:11). Birds are typical sacrificial animals, especially for poor people (Lev 1:14–17). The relationship of God to birds is quite close; God cares for them (Ps 147:9; Job 38:41) and in return they praise God and point to his might (Ps 148:10; Job 12:7).[4]

Certain species of birds are particularly connoted. The dove, for example, is a messenger of love (Song 1:15; 4:1); ravens and owls, that live in lonely, uninhabited space (Ps 102:7; Is 34:11f.), are regarded as exponents of an anti-human, demonic world and are a symbol of evanescence.

The נֶשֶׁר, the most frequently mentioned bird in the OT, plays very special role. Since the LXX, the term נֶשֶׁר has commonly been translated as "eagle"– the much-admired king of all birds in the occidental culture. But only little attention, in fact, was drawn to the eagle in biblical culture. Recently, several exegetes have translated נֶשֶׁר as "vulture". The reasons for this are, firstly, that it is described as a carrion-eating bird (Job 39:29f.) and, secondly, that it has a bald head (Mic 1:16). The vulture is a renowned bird. It is considered to be quick (2 Sam 1:23; Jer 4:13) and persistant (Is 40:31); it is said to be caring and full of parental love. As a carrion eater, it shortens the process of decay of dead bodies (Prov 30:17). As a consequence, the vulture, who assimilates death, is connected with the symbolism of rebirth and life.[5]

Fig. 3.: Scarab, 1700-1550; the Canaanite goddess, depicted as mistress of animals, kneeling above a lion (stressing her wild and aggressive aspects), next to a vulture, holding a branch in its talon, who symbolises regeneration.

In Ex 19 and Deut 32, one can read about the winged נֶשֶׁר-deity YHWH. Both texts are connected through the keywords נֶשֶׁר (vulture), כָּנָף (wing) and נשׂא (to pick up, to carry).

Ex 19:4 is part of YHWH's speech within the Sinai theophany (Ex 19:1–40:33). Here God reminds his people of the exodus from Egypt and his deeds of rescue. YHWH illustrates his actions by using a theriomorphic image:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on vulture's wings and brought you to myself.

[3] Cf. Stiglmaier, Stiglmair, Arnold, Art. עוֹף, in: ThWAT, Bd. V, Stuttgart u.a. 1986, 1177–1183.
[4] Cf. Riede, Peter, Art. Vogel, in: www.wibilex.de (13.01.2014).
[5] Cf. Silvia Schroer, Die Tiere in der Bibel. Eine kulturgeschichtliche Reise, Freiburg 2010, 99.

It is said that the Israelites themselves have seen (ראה) what God did (עשׂה) to the Egyptians; that means they function as eyewitnesses. The sentence refers to the beginning of chapter 19 where the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt is thematised. Thus YHWH reminds them of his salvational deeds and illustrates his actions by using a theriomorphic image – God has carried (נשׂא) his people on vulture's wings. The verb נשׂא (to pick up, to carry) has a different subject and objects. Humans as well as God and animals are the subject of carrying. For example, God carries Israel "as a father carries his son" (Deut 1:31) or as a shepherd carries his sheep (Is 46:3–4). This all represents his caring and protective actions. In Is 46:1–4, the carrying pack animals are parallelized with the carrying God. Other texts also name animals as subjects of נשׂא: camels (1 Kings 10:2; Is 60:6), as well as donkeys (Gen 45:23; Is 30:6) and a he-goat (Lev 16:22). But with the exception of Ex 19:4 and Deut 32:11 a bird is never the subject of נשׂא.

God says about himself that he has carried his people on vulture's wings (כַּנְפֵי נְשָׁרִים). Wings are a significant part of the bird's body *par excellence* (Prov 23:5; Ezek 17:23). Admittedly, mythological creatures (e.g. the Cherubs, Ex 25:20; 37:9) or the sun (Ps 139:9) can also have wings, but it is clear that the text refers to a bird's wings. By mentioning that God not only carried Israel away from Egypt, but that he also brought his people to himself, he makes clear that the exodus is a movement towards him; going away from Egypt also means coming close to the deity. This closeness matches the connotation of the motherly vulture. In sum, the vulture's actions correspond with the redemptive actions of YHWH.

Deut 32:11–12 is part of the Song of Moses (Deut 32:1–43). In this text, the speaker, Moses, reflects Israel's history with its God YHWH. Here Moses says about God:

> *Like a vulture that wakes up its nest, that flutters over its young,*
> *spreading out its wings, taking them, carrying them on its feathers,*
> *YHWH alone guided him, no foreign god was with him.*

Here again, God appears as a vulture, this time waking up (עור) and fluttering (רחף Pi.) over a nest with its children. Typically, God is the subject of עור in Hiphil: He wakens the human ear (Is 50,4) and his passion (קִנְאָה; Is 42,13), but not his anger (Ps 78,38). The only other passage where the verb רחף is used in Piel is Gen 1:2 – here it is the spirit (רוּחַ) of God that flutters above the water. The agility and omnipresence of a bird is contained within this movement.

As in Ex 19, Deut 32 also speaks about God's wings (כָּנָף) and pinions/feathers (אֶבְרָה). He spreads them out (פרשׂ) and takes his people (לקח) to carry them (נשׂא). The verb פרשׂ has different subjects. In Is 49:22 it is also the vulture that spreads its wings; in Job 39:26 it is another raptor. God is never the subject of פרשׂ. With regard to the root לקח, it is typical that it is most often used quite unspecifically, and that it is complemented by another, more specific verb (here: נשׂא). By using the root נשׂא, a close connection to Ex 19:4 is established. In both texts, the vulture carries the people on (עַל) the wings. From an aerodynamic aspect, carrying young birds *on* the wings is impossible, but the text is not about what is possible in a physical sense. Instead it is the motif of riding, flying or coming on the wings of the wind or the dawn (2 Sam 22:11; Ps 18:11; Ps 104:3; Ps 139:9), which often appears in the context of theophanies.[6]

[6] Cf. Dohmen, Christoph, Exodus 19–40 (HThK AT), Freiburg i. Br. 2004, 58.

Although the vulture is depicted as a typical bird (with wings, a nest and young birds) in both texts, it is theologically connoted by its actions. With נשׂא (to carry) and עור (to wake up), typical godly actions are transferred to the bird. Also, by using רחף (to flutter), a theological connection to the spirit of God in Gen 1:2 is made. So divine and animalistic aspects melt together, deity and bird are interweaved.

Keeping in mind that the vulture is regarded as a motherly, caring being and is the embodiment of parental love in the Ancient Near East[7], it alludes to the parental love of YHWH (see Num 11:12; Hos 11; Is 49:15; Jer 31:9). Furthermore, the vulture's symbolism of regeneration and rebirth alludes to the new life that Israel will lead after the liberation from Egypt under God's protection.

Ex 19 and Deut 32 express how YHWH protects, leads and rescues his people as a caring, life-giving vulture. God not only comes to Israel, but – as parents carry their children – he carries them to an encounter with himself, which means a new life for Israel.

There are nine more texts where the wings of God are mentioned. Israel or (in the Psalms) the praying individual is located under these wings. This motif makes a strong literary connection to the metaphor of the vulture in Ex 19 and Deut 32, and so evokes the image of the motherly bird, who protects her children. That means Israel or the human individual is identified with the young birds.

Most important is the wing's protective function, illustrated by the most frequently used verb חסה (to hide; Ps 36:8; 57:2; 61:5; 91:4; Ruth 2:12). חסה has human subjects only, and within the Psalms neither places nor other humans give shelter; only God does this.

For example, Ps 91:3–4 says:

> *Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.*
> *He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will hide.*

The praying voice imagines the suffering human as a helpless bird in danger. The one who will rescue him is God (as the context tells us) in the form of a bird. As in Deut 32, the human being is depicted as young bird that finds shelter under the mother bird's wings.

In Ps 17:8, the supplicant says:

> *Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.*

S/He wishes God to keep, to guard (שׁמר) her/him like one who is cherished and to hide (סתר, Hi.) her/him under his protective wings. This variation of חסה, namely סתר, is also associated with shelter and refuge, vividly expressing the message of divine protection.[8]

Beyond the Psalms, some other texts provide God with wings, e.g. Is 10:13–14. The king of Assyria says:

> *'By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, because I have understanding. I removed the boundaries of nations, I plundered their treasures; like a mighty one I subdued their kings.*

[7] Cf. Schroer, Tiere, 100.

[8] Cf. Martin, Evelyne, Theriomorphismus im Alten Testament und Alten Orient. Eine Einführung, in: Martin, Evelyne, Tiergestaltigkeit der Göttinnen und Götter zwischen Metapher und Symbol, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2012, 1–36; 17.

As one reaches into a nest, so my hand reached for the wealth of the nations; as people gather abandoned eggs, so I gathered all the countries; not one flapped a wing, or opened its mouth to chirp.'

The foreign king mocks that his victims, the Israelites, lie unprotected and vulnerable before him. The city and its inhabitants lie there like an abandoned nest filled with eggs. The statement "…*not one flapped a wing, or opened its mouth to chirp"* hints at the image of God in the form of a bird – the one who was not there is YHWH. This image shows God as a patron god of a city. If he takes the city under his wings, it is secure – if not, the city is at the enemy's mercy.[9]

All the avian images of God stress the aspect of protection. God carries or hides his people, the city of Jerusalem or single individuals on or under his wings. He defends them against any enemies. As a bird, God is a shelter for the refugee, a symbol for care, guidance and rescue – which becomes visible with the exodus.

"He will roar like a lion…" (Hos 11:10) – God as a Lion

For I will be like a lion to Ephraim,
like a great lion to Judah.
I will tear them to pieces and go away;
I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them.
Hos 5:14

Eleven passages in the OT present God as a lion (Job 10:16; 16:9; 19:22; Is 31:4; 38:13; Lam 3:10; Hos 5:14; 11:10; 13:7–8; Amos 1:2; 3:8). Of all the wild animals in ancient Palestine, the lion was the most frightening and at the same time fascinating beast. The relevance of the lion is concentrated in a quite differentiated vocabulary: There are seven terms for the lion – אֲרִי (lion), אַרְיֵה (lion) and כְּפִיר (young hunting lion), גּוּר (breastfed young lion), שַׁחַל (weaned young lion), לָבִיא (lioness) and לַיִשׁ (lion).

The lion is "mighty among beasts, who retreats before nothing" (Prov 30:30); even today it is regarded as the king of animals. According to the OT, its main characteristics are courage (2 Sam 17:10), strength (2 Sam 1:23) and dangerousness (Ps 10:9; Prov 3:10; Mic 5:7).

Fig. 4: Scarab, 1650–1500 B.C.; showing the dangerous nature of the lion, attacking a human figure.

In the Ancient Near East the lion is a mighty symbol, closely connected with monarchs and deities.[10] Since King Tiglatpileser I. (1117–1077 B.C.) the king is presented as a lion fighter, frequently in combination with reports of war. Fighting against a lion gives the king certain qualities which help him to triumph over his enemies in war.[11] By contrast, the figurative portrayal of the king as a lion is genuinely Egyptian. Pharaos such as Amenophis III., Thutmosis III., Sethos I. or Ramses III. are graphically and literarily

[9] Cf. Koenen, Klaus, „Süßes geht vom Starken aus" (Ri 14,14). Vergleiche zwischen Gott und Tier im Alten Testament, in: Evangelische Theologie 2/1995, 174–197; 184.

[10] Cf. Botterweck, G. Johannes, Art. אֲרִי, in: ThWAT, Bd. I, Stuttgart u.a. 1973, 404–418.

[11] Cf. Janowski, Bernd/Neumann-Gorsolke, Ute, Motive und Materialien 4: Das Tier als *Symbol* königlicher Herrschaft, in: Gleßmer, Uwe/Janowski; Bernd/Neumann-Gorsolke, Ute (Hrsg.), Gefährten und Feinde des Menschen. Das Tier in der Lebenswelt des alten Israel, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1993, 106–111; 107.

depicted as lions. Further, the lion appears as an attribute animal of the goddess Ischtar/Inanna (see above), stressing her wild, invincible character.[12]

Fig. 5: Cylinder seal, Assyriah, 9th-7th century B.C.; the royal lion fighter protects the capride against the attacking lion.

In biblical texts there is no direct comparison of the king with a lion, but the lion sculptures at Solomon's throne (1 Kings 10:19–20) prove that the majestic lion serves as a symbol of royal authority.[13]

There are several passages in the OT in which God's characteristics are symbolised by lion imagery.

In the book of Job there are one explicit (10:16) and two more implicit (16:9; 19:22) comparisons of God with a lion. In chapter 10, Job tells his friend Bildad that God wants to fight and to destroy him without regard to guilt or integrity. Like a young lion (שַׁחַל), God chases (צוד) Job:

If I hold my head high, you chase me like a lion
and again display your awesome power against me.

By describing certain body parts, actions or characteristics, animal imagery can be made visible without explicitly naming the particular animal. Accordingly, in Job 16:9 and 19:22, the verbs used in combination with certain body parts evoke the image of a predator. Job 16:9 says:

God assails me and tears me in his anger and gnashes his teeth at me;
my opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes.

[12] Cf. Schroer, Tiere, 96.

[13] Cf. Schroer, Silvia, In Israel gab es *Bilder*. Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament (OBO 74), Göttingen 1987, 78–81.

Here it is the verb טרף (to tear, to rip) that arouses the image of a bloodthirsty lion, although no lion is explicitly mentioned. But the verb טרף is used for predators only, and mostly lions (Deut 33:20; Ps 22:14; Ezek 19:3). Also in Hos 5:14, where God introduces himself as a lion, טרף is used. Furthermore, it is said that God chases (שׂטם) him, and gnashes (חרק) and sharpens (לטשׁ) his teeth. Normally one sharpens his weapons (1 Sam 13:20; Ps 7:13), and the lion's weapons are his teeth.

In chapter 19, Job compares his friends with God, who in turn is compared implicitly with a predator, a creature that chases (רדף) him and tries to satiate (שׂבע) itself with Job's flesh:

Why do you chase me as God does?
Will you never get enough of my flesh?

In the book of Job, the image of the ripping lion, occasionally used for the enemies within the Psalms, is transferred to God who appears as Job's antagonist. Lion imagery here is closely connected with the aspect of threatening and wickedness. This negative depiction of God stands in the context of the suffering Job who, as the speaker of these passages, unfolds his own judgemental perspective.

In the prophetic literature as well, lion imagery is mostly negatively connoted. Threatening scenarios are outlined by the narrators: Like a lion, God breaks (שׁבר Pi.) the bones of Hiskia into pieces (Is 38:13), lurks (ארב) in his hiding place for his victims in Lam 3:10, carries (נשׂא) his prey away (Hos 5:14) and eats (אכל) it like a lioness (Hos 13:8). This raises the image of a lion on the hunt that treacherously lies in wait for his victim, attacking, carrying off, tearing, and eating it. The leomorphic deity is depicted as mighty and destructive God, and there is no rescue. Where the lion appears, there is death.[14]

But there are exceptions in the field of theological lion imagery: In Is 31:4 and Hos 11:10, we can read about an aggressive predator, who nevertheless does not act *against* Israel, but rather fights *for* them. These passages are an inversion of the traditional lion images, as God is dangerous and combative, but at the same time protective and bringing salvation.

They will follow the Lord; he will roar like a lion.
When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west.
They will come from Egypt, trembling like sparrows, from Assyria, fluttering like doves.
I will settle them in their homes, declares the Lord.

Hos 11:10 uses the motif of the roaring lion. It says that God will roar (שׁאג) like a lion, and hereafter his people will come back to him; i.e. his roaring causes the return of Israel, and thereby a salvific change.

Isah 31:4 is part of a forensic speech of YHWH against Assur, and is followed by the familiar bird image (Is 31:5). It says:

As a lion growls, a great lion over its prey – and though a whole band of shepherds is called together against it, it is not frightened by their shouts or disturbed by their clamour – so the Lord Almighty will come down to do battle on Mount Zion and on its heights.

By using the verb "to come down" (ירד), the scene described is identified as a theophany (Ex 3:8; Ps 18:10; Is 63:19) and is a spatial counter-movement to the rising (עלה) up of

[14] Cf. Koenen, Süßes, 190.

human figures for the purpose of meeting God (Ex 19). "Shepherd" is a common king's title in the Ancient Near East; therefore, the "band of shepherds" stand for the foreign (Assyrian) rulers.[15] God defends Zion against these enemies, and fights for it like a lion. To stress the lion's aggression, it is depicted above its prey. Its growling is to be understood as an ultimate threatening sound. Just as the lion hinders his prey from being taken, God prohibits Jerusalem from being taken.[16]

In Isaiah's animal imagery, the lion's and the vulture's actions are connected. Roaring, not being frightened, coming down and fighting (lion) as well as covering, protecting, rescuing, sparing and releasing (bird) stand in a logical order. While God's combative aspect is manifest in the lion image, it is his guarding aspect in the bird image – both fields of action are directed at the rescue of Israel.

In sum, the leomorphic images of God are ambivalent: The lion is an expressive symbol of strength and wildness, supremacy and pride. Depending on the context, it is an image of terror, threat and danger when it represents an enemy power (e.g. Assyria, the punishing God), or it is an image of self-confidence and power when it is identified with an internal group (e.g. Israel, God as defender of Zion).

"Like a bear robbed of her young…" (Hos 13:8) – God as a Bear

Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding,
he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me desolate.
Lam 3:10–11

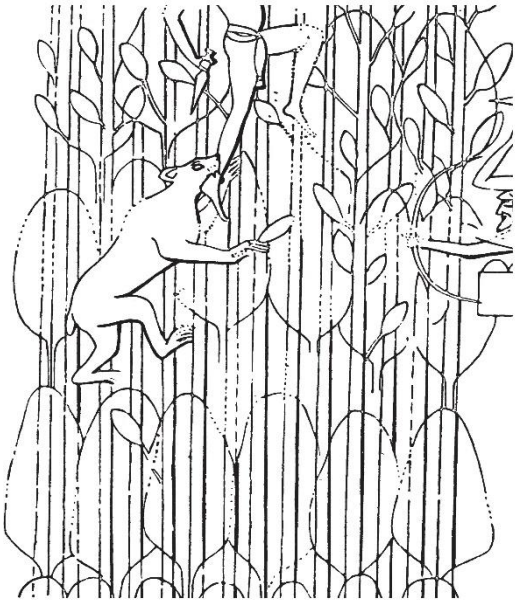

Fig. 6: Relief, Theben, 19th dynasty (1279–1213 B.C.); a bear, representing royal might and danger, attacks a Syrian who is trying to flee from the Pharao in the forest.

There are only two passages within the OT where God appears as a bear (Lam 3:10–11; Hos 13:8).

The term used here, דֹּב, describes the bear without making a distinction between male and female. The bear is considered to be a wild, carnivorous and untameable animal. As a dangerous predator, it is a potential threat for humans although its habitat is apart from civilisation. The bear sometimes attacks herds of domestic animals (1 Sam 17:34–37); 2 Kin 2:24 even tells about two bears that tore apart 42 children. The term דֹּב is generically open, but there are some passages where it is apparent that a female specimen is meant. In Is 11:7, for example, a bear and a cow are parallelized, both having children and grazing next to each other.

[15] Cf. Beuken, Willem A. M., Jesaja 28–39 (HThK AT), Freiburg i. Br. 2010, 213.
[16] Cf. Beuken, Jesaja, 212.

Hos 13:8 compares God's behaviour with such a female bear:

Like a bear robbed of her young (cubs),
I will attack them and rip the lock of their heart open;
like a lioness I will devour them
– a wild animal will tear them apart.

In this passage, God speaks about and to his people. Chapter 13 deals with God's anger over his people – he guided them out of Egypt and looked after them, but they turned away. This causes God's change from a caring shepherd to a harmful predator. God compares himself with a young lion (שָׁחַל), a leopard (נָמֵר), a female bear and a lioness (לָבִיא); i.e. two male and two female animals are parallelized. This fits quite well with the image of Israel as God's flock of sheep (used in Hos 13:6), which now becomes the beast's prey.

This female bear is characterised as שַׁכּוּל. The root שׁכל means in Qal "to be childless" or "to lose children" (cf. Gen 27:45; 42:36; 1 Sam 15:33), in Piel "to make childless" or "to have an abortive birth" (cf. Ex 23:26; 2 Kin 2:19; Lam 1:20). With regard to non-human animals, a sheep or a cow can be childless, lose a child or have a miscarriage (sheep: Gen 31:38, Pi.; Song 4:2; 6:6, Adj.; cow: Job 21:10, Pi.).

The female bear, who lost her young (שַׁכּוּל) appears three times in the OT. Mother animals are usually very aggressive, and a bear, whose children have been taken, is the embodiment of dangerous fury. In 2 Sam 17:8, David's anger is compared with the bitter temper of the childless bear:

You know your father [i.e. David] and his men; they are fighters, and as fierce as a wild bear robbed of her cubs.

In Prov 17:8 one can read:

Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than a fool bent on folly.

Just like the mother bear, who has lost her children, God has also lost his children, i.e. his people, and he is furious because of it. In such a wild anger, the bear meets (פגשׁ) Israel and tears/rips (קרע) the lock of their heart. The term קרע, to tear, to rip, sometimes has God as a grammatical subject (e.g. when God is invited to tear the heavens and to come down, Is 63:19, or when God tears off the veils of the Israelites, Ezek 13:20.21). But it is never an animal except in this verse where the female bear is the subject of קרע. But behind the tearing bear is YHWH, identifying with it.

With regard to the body symbolism of the Bible where the heart does not stand for emotions, but rather for understanding and conscience, it becomes apparent that the purpose of this brutal action is to open the Israelites' mind and conscience. This is reminiscent of the metaphor of the stubborn heart (Ps 81:13; Jer 7:24; Ezek 3:7), which causes Israel's separation from YHWH.

The actions of God imagined as a bear are directed at the return of the people of Israel to YHWH, their helper (13:9), which would resemble a redemption from death (13:14). So in the end, salvation lies in the destructiveness of lion and leopard, bear and lioness.

In the book of Lamentations, chapter 3, a man describes the misery of 586 B.C. (the conquest of Jerusalem, destruction of the temple and beginning of the Babylonian Exile) from his own perspective. God appears as the speaker's angry antagonist (3:1–9), as an enemy warrior (3:12–13) and dangerous predator (3:10–11) – until 3:22, where everything turns to a perspective of hope.

The deeply felt hopelessness is physically manifested and finds a literary expression in metaphors of spatial narrowness and isolation: God has surrounded him, walled him in, weighed him down with chains and barred his way with blocks of stones (3:5–3:9). In this way, God waits in the form of the bear and lion, the two most dangerous animals of the OT:

Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding,
he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me desolate.

The bear is introduced with the root ארב (Part.): to lurk, to lie in wait. Male characters or collectives are mostly the subjects of lurking (Deut 19:11; Josh 8:4; Judg 21:20; Ezra 8:31; Ps 59:4), often in a martial context. With regard to non-human animals, vultures lurk in the desert (Lam 4:19) or a lion in its hideout (Ps 10:9). Apart from Lam 3, God never lurks.

The lion, parallel to the bear, is located in the hideout (מִסְתָּר). So the wild animals are covert, just like God's reactions are covert and not understandable for the speaker. His misery feels like being dragged and mangled (פשׁח, Pi.), being desolate (שׁמם) – just as desolate as the city of Jerusalem is now. The root שׁמם means to be deserted, destroyed, devastated, cut off from living. Often spaces like countries (Lev 26:32; Jer 12:11) or cities (Is 61:4; Jer 33:10) are desolate. Seldom – and only in traumatic, extreme situations – are humans described as being שׁמם (2 Sam 13:20; Lam 4:5; Ezek 4:17).[17] So in Lam 3, God in the form of the bear and the lion utterly destroys the desperate speaker.

All these actions of the bear-like deity seem to be quite destructive – but in the end they are directed at the return to God, the sole source of all salvation. To drag, to mangle and to destroy are all for the benefit of Israel. In accordance with so-called 'black pedagogy' one could claim: The end justifies the means.

Conclusion

Non-human animals play a significant role within the OT. They are virtually omnipresent on every single page. Nevertheless, the theriomorphic depiction of God appears quite seldomly. But those passages where God appears as a bird, a lion or a bear are impressive and multi-layered.

God as bird, who is a vulture and not an eagle, stands for rescue and guidance (*on* his wings) as well as for protection and motherly care (*under* his wings). The portrayal as a parent illustrates the intimate relationship of YHWH to his people. In addition, the image of the vulture is a symbol for regeneration and new life.

The lion's shape (like the bird's wings, feathers or eggs) is not important, but its actions are: The lion tears, roars, breaks… Generally speaking, it appears as a dangerous and aggressive animal, which means that God imagined as a lion is also dangerous and

[17] Cf. Stolz, F., Art. שׁמם, in: THAT, Bd. 2, Darmstadt [6]2004, 970–974.

aggressive. Depending on the context, leomorphic YHWH acts for or against the protagonist(s). While Job and some prophets describe how God, as a lion, destroys life, Hos 11 and Is 31 show how God fights for Israel. From a salvific perspective, the lion-like deity can make good on its promise to defend and rescue God's beloved people.

The bear shares its reputation of aggressiveness with the lion. When God is depicted as a (female) bear, his actions are directed at the return of Israel, their salvation and closeness to God. The violence depicted is, paradoxically, actually for the victim's benefit.

The named animals – vulture, lion and bear – are usually enforcers of death. But in reference to God they can express his love, care and combat readiness. The theriomorphic God often *saves* – from the Egyptians (as a vulture in Ex 19:4; Deut 32:11–12) or from other political enemies (as a lion and bird in Is 31:4–5), from any animosities (as a bird in the Psalms) or from falling off and from doom (as a lion in Hos 11:10; as a lion, leopard, bear and lioness in Hos 13:7–8). Only in passages blurred by a suffering narrating voice (Job 10:16; 16:9; 19:22; Lam 3:10; Is 38:13; Hos 5:14) does the animal deity appear in a solely negative manner as a destructive predator.

By transferring typical godly actions to animals (e.g. to wake up, to come down) and vice versa, animalistic actions to God (e.g. to flutter, to tear, to roar), the boundaries between God and animals dissolve and coalesce. The result is a theriomorphic God as well as a theologized animal.

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