

# Symbolic animals

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THE VERY MENTION OF SYMBOLIC ANIMALS reminds us that there is a dimension of human discourse which extends beyond the written and the spoken word. Ideas are also communicated through symbols. Mention, sight or sound of a particular object can communicate a range of ideas and emotions without any recourse to words. What message a particular word or object conveys will depend on the mind, the beliefs and the worldview of the recipient. All this will hold for any civilization. In this essay, however, our chief interest will be in the world of the Bible, particularly of the Old Testament, and in certain later Western traditions. So I begin by indicating the sort of general worldview in which mythical and mundane animals can be used in political and prophetic ways, contrasting this worldview with a modern approach which has much less sensitivity to such symbolism. Some readers may ask what is conveyed by animal symbolism which cannot be conveyed in other ways. How should the modern reader try to understand this ancient imagery?

A prior desideratum, of course, is an awareness that such worldviews existed in former times, reaching right back over four thousand years through the Middle Ages of the West to the civilizations of Greece, Egypt, Canaan (including the biblical world), Mesopotamia and other lands. It is no easy matter to ascertain what precise messages each of those civilizations conveyed through animal symbolism, and how we might appropriate these today. One belief common to biblical and middle-eastern thought was that at the creation, or ordering, of our present universe there was a mighty conflict between God, or the gods, and a hostile force (generally represented as a monster, variously called Tiamat, the Sea, the dragon, Rahab, Litan or Leviathan). The dragon represented a threat to the universe unless held in check by a more powerful divine force. Thus understood, the point expressed in the ancient myth has persisted in the belief that there are destructive forces at work endangering our physical and moral life. At times this force was called the Devil, Satan, destroying angel, or the principalities and powers of the New Testament. Evil persons on earth could be understood as participating in the extraterrestrial primordial evil force. The primordial force of evil (for instance the Dragon) could manifest itself

in earthly rulers. In fact when prophets or sacred writers wrote to encourage their people in the face of foreign rulers or potentates, they could compare these with one or other of the primordial monsters. Their readers would get the message intended: just as the tradition on such symbolic or mythical animals informed them, the Lord God of Israel destroyed or tamed these animals at creation. Their God was in complete control and would repeat in history what he was believed once to have done at creation. This point is very clear in the canonical Apocalypse of John: the Beast from the great abyss, working through human monarchs, will ultimately be totally destroyed, his power taken away from him. In the biblical mindset it was commonly believed that the End-time would be similar to the time of the beginning – the *Endzeit* to the *Urzeit*. As God was believed to have overcome or even destroyed his enemies, in particular his archenemy the Dragon, at the beginning, so too will he do in the new creation, when he makes all things new, when all things are made subject to Christ and God's kingdom has really come. In reflecting on the evils of society today, with drug-trafficking, violence, racial hatreds and so many other ills, we also hear people asking whether there is some evil force at work, the devil, evil angels or whatever. We can empathize with some of the symbolism and imagery of former ages.

### *The symbolic world of the Bible*

Before entering the symbolic world of the Bible, of the Old Testament in particular, it may be well to recall that the Hebrews received and developed their understanding of God and the world in a language already highly developed and within a civilization which had behind it centuries of reflection on the divine and the relationship of God or the gods to this world. It would be for Israel's religious leaders to express its ongoing monotheistic beliefs within this tradition. Over the past century or so scholars have been able to reveal the wealth of Middle Eastern (Canaanite, Hittite, Mesopotamian, Egyptian) beliefs and mythology on a variety of topics relating to the origin of our world, to the manifestations of the divine and to a host of other topics besides. A certain amount of this lore can be detected as the background to the early chapters of Genesis. Relatively little of it is found in the writings of the earlier prophets, but it becomes more apparent in the book of Ezekiel, and in later writings, particularly in apocalyptic.

It is difficult for us in the twenty-first century to appreciate how real the mythological symbolic world was for the writers and readers of Old

and even New Testament books. Because this symbolic world was real these writers could use it to convey political, religious and other messages. This point is best illustrated by the biblical texts rather than by any abstract description. Let us take the book of the prophet Ezekiel, for example. In his condemnation of the pride of the king of the city of Tyre, he addresses him as follows: 'Because your heart is proud and you have said, "I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas", yet you are but a mortal, and no god, though you compare your mind with the mind of a god' (Ezek 28:1-2). Ezekiel goes on: 'You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; . . . with an anointed cherub as guardian I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God' (Ezek 28:12,14). This is the imagery, the mythical world, on which the creation narrative of Genesis 2 and 3 draws. In the chapter that follows Ezekiel has words of warning for the ruler of Egypt who has been intervening in the affairs of Judah: 'I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon (in Hebrew *tannîn*) sprawling in the midst of its channels, saying, "My Nile is my own; I made it for myself." I will put hooks on your jaws and make the fish of your channels stick to your scales . . .' (Ezek 29:3-4; NRSV). Ezekiel continues his message, passing with the greatest of ease from the mythical dragon of the primordial ocean to the crocodile of the Nile. In chapter 31 Ezekiel addresses the Pharaoh of Egypt, in all his pomp, as the proud tree of Paradise, which is to fall. The magnificent tree he describes in 31:3-9 is not any ordinary tree of unusually large dimensions, but rather the great world-tree, known to Mesopotamian religion as the Khiskanu tree, to Teutonic religion as the world ash-tree, known also to the Vedas and the Upanishads in India. A variant of the tradition is also found in a mediaeval Irish text, where it is introduced as the mystical tree spoken of in a legend. In chapter 32 Ezekiel returns to the theme of Egypt as the dragon in the seas, resonant of the myth of the combat of a god with the primordial sea-monster. We shall return to this theme presently in our consideration of Leviathan.

### *Ezekiel's four symbolic beings and the evangelists' symbols*

One of the best known passages in the Bible in relation to symbolic animals is that on the faces of the four beings supporting the throne of God in Ezekiel 1:10: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of a bull (Hebrew *šôr*; NRSV 'ox') on the left side, and the face of an eagle. To examine this text in isolation

would run the risk both of losing much of its meaning in the context of the book and of overlooking the mention of the other symbolic animals and beings of this chapter.

The overall context of the passage in the book is a highly significant one. It narrates the mystical experience of Ezekiel and prepares for his prophetic call. The year is 592 BCE, the fifth year of the first Babylonian phase of the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem. Back in Jerusalem it would appear that a conspiracy was being hatched against Babylonian rule and a revolt was being planned. The prophet Hananiah was challenging the prophetic status of Jeremiah (see Jer 28). Jeremiah had predicted disaster for temple and city. The end seemed imminent. Ezekiel the priest was exiled in the unclean land of Babylonia, but was near a stream of pure water by the river Chebar, a navigable channel of the Euphrates south-east of Babylon. At that clean place he could pray (see also Ps 127 and Acts 16:13). The vision of the divine presence came to him in storm wind from the north. In Canaanite religion the storm was a recognized vehicle of divine presence. It had its storm god Baal-Hadad. Baal was called 'the rider of the clouds'. The Israelites also could see Yahweh as present in the storm and thunder (see Ps 29). He came in the storm-cloud at Sinai, and Psalm 18:10–12 tells us how he came to help his Davidic king: 'He bowed the heaven and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy thick clouds dark with water.' The Bible also can designate the Lord God of Israel as 'the Rider of the Clouds'. The Bible speaks of Yahweh coming (to Zion) from the south – from Sinai, Seir, Edom, Teman, Mount Paran (see Deut 33:2; Jud 5:4–5; Hab 3:3; see also Ps 68:8). Ezekiel in exile represents him as coming from the north, possibly because in Iraq in July such storms come from the north-west, but probably also from the belief that the north was regarded in Middle Eastern religion, and occasionally in the Bible (Ps 48:2; see Isai 14:13), as the seat of the gods. At the juncture of history in question, Yahweh could hardly come from his abode in Jerusalem. This he will do later, as narrated in Ezekiel 10, when he abandons his sanctuary in the Temple to go to the exiles in Babylon. The four living creatures form part of the chariot of the Lord. Above their outstretched wings the Lord is enthroned (Ezek 1:22–28).

The elements of the description of Ezekiel's four animals can be found in Mesopotamian and Syrian iconography. Reproductions have been assembled and made available by James B. Pritchard in his work *The ancient Near East in pictures relating to the Old Testament*

(abbreviated as *ANEP*).<sup>1</sup> Anthropomorphized gods, with human bodies and animal heads, were common in Egypt. In Mesopotamia it was the lesser divinities (for example guardian genii) and demons who were portrayed in composite form, including winged quadrupeds with animal faces (see *ANEP* 644-665). Thus from Carchemish we have a basalt figure of a composite creature consisting of a lion, wings, and an added human head (ninth century BCE; *ANEP* 664); again from Carchemish (ninth century BCE) we have two identical creatures, composed of human body and bird head and wings, standing with upraised hands facing each other (*ANEP* 645). From the ninth century BCE we have two figures which guarded the doorway of the palace of Ashurbanipal at Nimrud. The body is that of a lion, to which is attached the wings and breast feathers of an eagle, and the head of a man, topped by a horned mitre (*ANEP* 646-647).

The faces of the four beasts (human, lion, bull or ox, eagle) are those of the 'lords' of animate creation: respectively humans, wild animals, domestic animals, birds. These four bear the throne of the Almighty Lord of all.

In chapter 10 of his book, Ezekiel describes a vision similar to this first one, but located at the Temple in Jerusalem. Now, however, the divine throne is supported not by the four beasts but by the cherubim. These fanciful winged beings are mentioned (in the singular or plural) over ninety times in the Hebrew Bible (only once in the New Testament, Heb 9:5).<sup>2</sup> We have already made mention of the anointed cherub that was a guardian to man on the holy mountain of God (Ezek 28:14), in the garden of Eden. Two of them were placed by God at the entrance to the garden of Eden (Gen 3:24), to guard the way to the tree of life. Two-dimensional and three-dimensional images of cherubim were part of the decoration of the tabernacle and temple. Two golden cherubim with wings extended were part of the covering of the ark. They constituted, so to speak, a resting or throne for God's invisible presence or glory. The symbols were a sign of mobility. Psalm 18:10 speaks of the Lord rising on a cherub, coming swiftly (to aid a suppliant) upon the wings of the wind. In combining features of more than one creature, and supplied with wings, the cherubim were apt symbols of the divine presence. In the variations in which they are presented in the Bible, the cherubim correspond to the composite beasts represented in ancient Near Eastern art, although these Middle Eastern figures are not themselves called cherubs.

For John, the seer of the Apocalypse, a door in the heavens stood open, and he was given a vision of the divine throne. In the middle of

the throne and round about the throne – not under it – he saw four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind. The first was like a lion, the second like a calf (or bull calf), the third with a face like a human face, and the fourth like a flying eagle. Each of the living creatures had six wings, and were full of eyes all around and inside (Rev 4:6-7; see Ezek 1:10–11; 10:12, 14). The symbolism clearly derives from Ezekiel. For John the four living creatures and their many eyes symbolize God's concern for the whole world.

Since Irenaeus the four living creatures have been taken as symbols of the four evangelists, generally (following the order of Jerome) in the order Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, represented respectively by a man, lion, calf (or ox) and eagle, although Irenaeus connected Mark with the eagle and John with the lion. The evangelists are represented iconographically in this fashion from about 400 CE onwards, in ivory plaques, in mosaics and later in Gospel books, sometimes with individual portraits of the evangelists, at other times also in separate pages, in squares around a central cross. Sometimes all four are provided with wings (two or four). Notable examples of the four symbols are found in the Book of Armagh, the Books of Durrow and Kells, the Lichfield Gospels, the Mac Durnan Gospels and the book-shrine of the Gospels of Molaise (Devenish Island, Co. Fermanagh). The Book of Durrow follows the Irenaean order: man, eagle (Mark), calf, lion (John).<sup>3</sup>

The symbols are aptly chosen. The four evangelists, like the four beasts in Ezekiel and in the Apocalypse, are intimately connected with the revelation of the glory of God, through Christ, the Lamb who was slain (Rev 5).

### ***Leviathan, the Dragon, Behemoth, Rahab***

Towards the end of the biblical 'Apocalypse of Isaiah' (Isai 24–27), composed possibly in the fifth century BCE, there is an account of the divine punishments and rewards to come. The text begins as follows:

On that day the Lord with his cruel and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon (*tannîn*) that is in the sea (Isai 27:1).

It seems clear that the author is using imagery of a *primaeval* fight between Yahweh and a monster (or monsters) of chaos at creation in his description of the end time. Then the enemies of God will finally be destroyed. The well-known Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish* speaks of the struggle between Tiamat, the monster of chaos, and the god Marduk at

creation. We have an exact parallel text to that of Isaiah in a fourteenth-century BCE Canaanite document from Ras Shamra, north of Lebanon (ancient Ugarit). In one of these texts the god Mot speaks of the defeat of Litan (*ltn*, generally vocalized as Lotan) by the god Baal. Baal is addressed as follows: 'Because you smote Litan the twisting serpent, the tyrant with the seven heads, the skies will become hot and will shine.'<sup>4</sup> In another text the victory over this serpent (unnamed) is attributed to Anat (Baal's consort). She says: 'Surely I lifted up the dragon (*tnn*), I . . . smote the crooked serpent, the tyrant with the seven heads.' Another contestant in these Ugaritic texts is Yam, 'the Sea'. While it is not clear that these Ugaritic texts speak of a primordial battle at creation, it seems likely that the Canaanites had such a belief, as we find in the Bible and Mesopotamian texts. In Middle Eastern iconography we have representation of gods in contest with seven-headed dragons (ANEP 691, from c. 2300–2100 BCE; ANEP 670, 671).

The image of 'the dragon that is in the sea' is, as already noted, used by Ezekiel 29:1–5 and 32:2–8 in his censures against Pharaoh, king of Egypt. The dragon in these texts is the king of Egypt, but it is clear that Ezekiel is thinking both of the primordial beast, the dragon of the abyss, and the crocodile of the Nile.

Another designation for the primordial dragon in the Hebrew Bible is Rahab, a name not attested outside the Bible. In the book of Isaiah (Isai 51:9–10) the prophet says to God: 'Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over?' The victory over the monsters of creation is thus seen as having been repeated at the division of the Reed Sea at the Exodus, and to be repeated in future redemptions. In Isaiah 30:7 Rahab is simply called 'Egypt who sits still'; similarly in Psalms 87:4. Elsewhere, however, the words designate the mythical monster (Ps 89:11; Job 9:13; 26:12), with reference to God's primordial victory, possibly with an added reference to that at the Reed Sea.

Psalm 74:14 says that Yahweh divided the sea by his might; he broke the heads of the dragons in the waters; crushed the heads (plural, as in the Ugaritic texts) of Leviathan and gave him as food for the creatures (literally: people) of the desert. Once again, the original triumph over the beasts is applied to that other victory at the Reed Sea. Some mythical being is also intended by Leviathan in Job 3:8 ('curse the day [possibly emend to 'the Sea'], rouse up Leviathan'). The classical text on Leviathan is in Job 41:1–11, with a description of the beast in 41:12–34. Scholars are divided as to whether the primordial beast or some

other animal, such as the crocodile of the Nile, is intended here. The author probably had both the mythical animal and some other identifiable or partly identifiable beast in mind.

Similarly with regard to Psalm 104:25 and the Leviathan which God created to sport (or be made sport of by God?) in the sea. Both the primordial sea monster and some large or fabulous fish are probably intended.

Just before the description of Leviathan in Job (Job 40:15–24) mention is made of another extraordinary beast, Behemoth. The name, not occurring elsewhere, is probably an ad hoc creation. It is the plural of the regular Hebrew word *behemah*, meaning ‘beast’, or ‘cattle’. Behemoth is described as ‘the first of God’s ways’ (NRSV ‘the first of the great acts of God’), words used by personified wisdom to describe herself in Proverbs 8:22. As Wisdom (*hokmah*) represents the divine order implanted in nature from the beginning, the intention of the author of Job may have been that creation, from the beginning onwards, has also in it a lack of meaning, represented by Behemoth. This, however, is not clear. While Behemoth in Job may designate the hippopotamus, it is also likely that the author had some primordial monster of the dry land in mind, just as Leviathan was the monster of the Sea.

The time-old monster tradition was continued in the Old Testament apocrypha. The work 2 (4) Esdras (composed about 100 AD) speaks to God about these two animals as follows:

Then you keep in existence two living creatures; the one you called Behemoth [many Latin manuscripts have ‘Enoch’ instead of ‘Behemoth’] and the name of the other Leviathan. And you separated one from the other, for the seventh part where the water had been gathered together could not hold them both. And you gave Behemoth one of the parts that had been dried up on the third day, to live in it, where there are thousands of mountains; but to Leviathan you gave the seventh part; and you have kept them to be eaten by whom you wish, and when you wish. (6:49–52)

The same theme is taken up in the apocryphal 2 Baruch (29:4), composed slightly later, and dependent on 2 (4) Esdras: at the advent of the Messiah, Behemoth and Leviathan will appear and serve as food for all that survive. These beasts are mentioned also in the more or less contemporary *Similitudes of Enoch* (1 Enoch 60:7–10), the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (10:11; 21:4) and the *Ladder of Jacob* (6:3). Since the New Testament *Apocalypse*, or *Revelation of John* is roughly contemporary with 2 (4) Esdras and 2 Baruch, we are not surprised to find mention in



Revelation 12:3 of the 'great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns'. This dragon is mentioned frequently in chapter 12 of Revelation and also in 13:2,4,11; 16:13; 20:2. The dragon for John is that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan (Rev 20:2).

The Apocalypse of John is using imagery that can be traced back over two millennia.

### *Mediaeval beasts*

Keen interest in symbolic animals is evidenced by the work known as the *Bestiary*. The *Bestiary* is a mediaeval compilation of stories in which the supposed characteristics of real and imaginary animals, plants, and stones serve as Christian allegories for the purpose of moral and religious instruction.<sup>5</sup> The Latin *Bestiary* goes back to a Greek work known as the *Physiologus*. Under the influence of Neoplatonic philosophy this Greek word in early Christian times came to mean one who interpreted the natural world morally and metaphysically, and provided an initiation into a knowledge of the heavenly mysteries. We do not know the exact date or the author of the original Greek work, who drew from classical fables, the Bible, the works of Aristotle, Pliny and other natural historians and from oral tradition as well. A Latin translation appeared between the fourth and sixth centuries. The Latin work continued to grow in bulk and by the twelfth century had expanded into a collection of popular moral nature stories under the name of 'Bestiary'. Beasts, birds, reptiles and fish were put into separate classes, and manuscripts of it were highly decorated. The work was very popular in England. M. R. James, the great specialist on mediaeval manuscripts and literature, says that the *Bestiary* ranked with the *Psalter* and the *Apocalypse* as one of the leading picture books of twelfth- and thirteenth-century England. It was translated into Eastern and many European vernaculars, thereby adding to its influence, which was enormous in the realms of art, architecture, literature and religious writing. The *Bestiary* drew on good and bad natural history and on many legends, and applied what was said of a given animal to Christian belief and morals. An echo of some of its beliefs are with us still. The swan among other things was believed to sing most melodiously before its death; hence our 'swan song'. The phoenix, believed to rise from its own ashes after three days, was given as evidence to all doubters of the credibility of the resurrection. The male elephant, though a loyal husband, is presented as a reluctant lover. He was presented as an example of chastity and restraint for husbands. St

Francis De Sales cites the example of the chaste elephant in his *Introduction to the devout life* (3,39,7). And thus on for a host of others: the pelican, the stag, the basilisk, the beaver that castrates himself to save his life from hunters seeking his genitals as prized medicine, and so on.

The *Bestiary* is clear evidence of the interest in animals, whether real, symbolic or mythical, in Late Antiquity down through the Middle Ages. The same evidence is presented by the cathedrals with their many weird animals, griffins, gargoyles and others.

And, of course, we are not to think that the source of interest in symbolic and mythical animals was solely the *Bestiary*. The age-long oral tradition, in part incorporated into this work, was still alive and developed independently of the written work. In what follows I want to concentrate on some aspects of symbolic and mythical animals in folklore, including Irish tradition.

### *Beasts and birds in folklore*

*Leviathan and the primordial monster in Irish tradition* The name of Leviathan has passed into Irish Latin and vernacular tradition (under the form *lebedán*, borrowed from Hiberno-Latin, and variant spellings of it), where it has a variety of meanings: evil power, or the devil; king of the fish; an enormous sea-fish or sea monster; the cosmic monster. In this last sense it is found in at least one Latin and two Irish texts. One of these is the secular epic 'The destruction of Da Derga's hostel'. In this story the invading enemy forces sweep in from the sea, and attack with great noise. Asked what this means, the central figure Conaire replies: 'I do not know, unless the earth has turned over; or the Leviathan that encircles the world.' Here the older Jewish-Christian tradition has probably got combined with a native one concerning a primordial monster. I may note that students of this Irish text ask us to have regard for the comparable Scandinavian traditions of the Midgard serpent.

*Omens of death and beliefs about it*<sup>6</sup> In mediaeval and modern folk belief certain birds are believed to be harbingers of death or ill fortune, and from folk tradition the beliefs have passed into literary classics. Thus for the owl already in Vergil's *Aeneid*. In *Macbeth* (II,ii.4-5) the owl is 'the fatal bellman which gives the stern'st good-night'. Spenser, in the *Faerie queene*, speaks of 'The ill-faste Owle, Deaths dreadfull messengere'. The raven is another such bird. Irish folklore is rich with regard to this belief.

*Departure of the soul as a bird or other winged character* A dove seems to be the bird most intimately associated with the soul, but many small winged creatures (for instance butterflies) may represent the soul. In Christian antiquity it was not uncommon to see souls in the form of birds. Gregory of Tours narrates how monks in a monastery near Nursia saw a dove come out from the mouth of their abbot and ascend to heaven. St Benedict is reputed to have seen the soul of his sister Scholastica depart in like manner. The belief may have been widespread. In Irish texts the souls in heaven awaiting the resurrection are often represented in the form of birds.

*The wren, 'king of all birds'* All over Europe, from Ireland to Russia, the little wren is regarded as king of all birds, a belief written into its name in many languages (French, Italian, German, Dutch, Russian, Polish). There are many stories on how the wren became king, and on other matters regarding the bird. This is the wren myth. Ireland had both a myth and ritual regarding the wren (in Ireland often pronounced *wran*). In the ritual the bird is hunted and killed (often on Christmas Day) and a procession with the wren, mainly by bachelors, takes place on Stephen's Day. A question asked is what is the original meaning and setting of this myth and ritual of the wren. A view recently put forward by Sylvie Muller<sup>7</sup> is that here the wren represents Man, the other birds (and the wren-boys) Nature and that the whole thing goes back to man the hunter in pre-agricultural Neolithic times, when the dead would have been left exposed as a 'debt to nature', to 'feed Nature' (beasts, earth), which has fed Man and will again do so.

*The robin in Irish folklore and recent poetry* The bold and friendly little robin looms rather large in Irish folklore archives. Its coming into a house is seen both as an evil omen (of death) and a good token. Occasionally in Irish tradition its presence is mentioned at death, the bird refusing to go away from the wake or funeral until the coffin is in the grave. Seán Ó Ríordáin, one of the leading Irish language contemporary poets, has a beautiful poem on the burial scene of his mother, noting the time of year, the coffin by the graveside, the bystanders. Into this scene of silence came the little robin. It came without fear or trembling, and stood above the grave as if it knew that the reason for its coming was hidden from all, except the person waiting in the coffin. The poet expresses himself envious of this unusual converse. A heavenly atmosphere descended on that grave, with an altogether holy merriment on the bird (robin), a mystic converse from which the poet felt himself cut off.

*Symbolism and Christian meditation*

This is possibly an appropriate note on which to end this essay on symbolic animals and messenger-birds. Birds, in particular, fly to and from this solid earth; they can be considered as belonging to the heavens, and in their visits to solid earth they have been seen, and can continue to be seen, as messengers from another world, a reminder that there is a reality and a meaning beyond the visible.

Awareness of the symbolism attached to animals and even mythical creatures in former times can also present occasion for reflection or Christian meditation. Some of it arose from Christian conviction concerning the importance of moral behaviour, which was brought to mind by stories told about individual animals – arousing thoughts on the resurrection of Christ, or the call to chastity, for example. For Christians there is all around us a world invisible, intangible, unknowable, inapprehensible which can be viewed, touched, known and clutched. There is a Jacob's ladder not away up in the skies but pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross, or between heaven and the nearest cross roads. The vision of God and the divine within us can be recalled (and for many still is) by blood on the rose, by the outspread wings of birds, by a butterfly fluttering inside a church, by the bold little robin at a graveside. Perhaps attention to the message conveyed over the centuries by symbolic animals and semi-mythical beings might help us remain aware of this other world, even though the imagery employed would not be regarded as suitable for our own day.

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## NOTES

1 Princeton-New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1954. There is a convenient listing of them, together with reflections, in M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20* (The Anchor Bible Commentary) (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983), pp 54–59.

- 2 See C. Meyers, 'Cherubim', in D. N. Freedman (ed), *The Anchor Bible dictionary* Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp 899–900.
- 3 See Brubaker, 'Evangelist symbols', in J. R. Strayer (ed), *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* Vol 4 (New York: Scribner, 1984), p 526; G. Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells: the insular gospel-books 650–800* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), esp. pp 41–154.
- 4 Translation as in J. Day, 'Leviathan', in D. N. Freedman (ed), *The anchor bible dictionary* Vol 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp 295–296, at 295. Translation also in D. Winton Thomas (ed), *Documents from Old Testament times* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp 129–133; J. N. Pritchard, *Ancient near eastern texts relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton. NJ: Princeton University Press, second edn, 1955), p 137, col. 1; W. Beyerlin (ed), *Near Eastern religious texts relating to the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1978), pp 197–198, 156 (with illustration of fight with the dragon).
- 5 See B. Rowland, 'Bestiary', in J. S. Strayer (ed), *Dictionary of the middle ages* Vol 2 (New York: Scribner, 1983), pp 203–207. For a richly illustrated book on the subject, see A. Payne, *Medieval beasts* (The British Library, 1990), with illustrations from nine different bestiaries in the British Library's collections.
- 6 On this section see E. S. McCartney, 'Folklore heirlooms. IV. Omens of death and beliefs about it', in *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Sciences* 36 (1931 [1932]), pp 159–210.
- 7 See S. Muller, 'The Irish wren tales and ritual: to pay or not to pay the debt of nature', *Béalóideas: The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society* (Dublin) 64–65 (1996–1997), pp 131–169.