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The Lion and the Leopard in the Bible

Although the last lion (*Panthera Leo*) in Palestine was killed during the crusades, he still roams the pages of the Bible where it is mentioned 157 times in 37 of its books. The Jews used many words for 'lion' which are mostly adjectives used substantively. Scripture describes the qualities and habits of the lion – its habitation in wild places, hunting during the night, might, prowess, and savagery. Oddly enough, the same fearful qualities of the lion, "which is strongest among beasts, and turneth not away for any" (Proverbs 30:30), provoked the awe of the biblical authors. Lions became part of Jewish folklore - proverbs (Ecclesiastes 9:4), parables (Ezekiel 19:1-9) and riddles (Judges 14:14, 18). They decorated Solomon's temple - the bases were ornamented by moldings of lions (1 Kings 7:29, 36) while 12 statues of lions were put on the stairs leading to Solomon's throne (1 Kings 10:19, 20). For the people of Bible times the presence of the lion was a real threat to their daily lives. The few examples when men killed lions include Samson (Judges 14:5-6), David (1 Samuel 17:34-35) and Benaiah, the son of Jehoiada (2 Samuel 23:20). The prophet Daniel, who was living in Babylon as a servant of the Persian king Darius, was thrown into a den of lions and survived amongst them owing to the grace of God (6:22-23). In his prophesies Daniel employed the image of a winged lion as a symbol of the Babylonian empire (7:4).

The lion is also a metaphor for the pagan nations which punish Israel when he turns away from the covenant and stops obeying God (Jeremiah 50:17). In other instances the lions are instruments of God's providence among the pagans. When the king of Assyria settled infidel tribes in Samaria, "the Lord sent lions among them, which slew some of them" because "they know not the manner of the God of the land" (2 Kings 17:25-26).

The prophet Ezekiel (1:4-26) had a vision, in which he saw the throne-chariot of God. This four-wheeled vehicle was driven by four "chayot" (Hebrew: "living creatures"), each of which has four wings and the four faces of a man, lion, ox, and eagle. This vision forms the basis of a long tradition of Merkaba mysticism which has also imbued Hasidic philosophy and Kabala.

One also finds in the Bible that the characteristics of the lion are used prophetically and eschatologically to describe Jesus Christ and point to his future role in God's plan of redemption and salvation. In the first book of the Bible are recorded the blessings that Jacob gave to his sons. He compared Judah to a strong lion (Genesis 49:8-10). The royal line of Judah triumphed when David became king. The sceptre later passed on Jesus Christ (Luke 1:32). This pictorial language is also employed by the author of the Revelation of St. John the Divine. He described Jesus as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David" (5:5).

The Messiah is expected to return to earth to take the throne of David and to introduce 'new heaven and new earth'. His second coming will be with lion-like features, to subdue the nations and take vengeance on those who do not know God or obey the Gospel of Jesus (Psalm 2 and 2 Thessalonians 1). After the Last Judgment eternal harmony will prevail and even the lion will not be voracious as it tends to be: "[It] shall eat straw like the bullock" (Isaiah 11:7; 65:25). However, St. Peter in his first epistle (5:8) and St. Paul in his first epistle to Timothy regarded the lion as a metaphor of the eternal enemy – the devil. Ironically, later in Christianity the man, lion, ox, and eagle are used as symbols for the four evangelists. Here the winged lion, hardly different from the Mesopotamian pagan ones, symbolizes Apostle Mark whose narrative begins with John the Baptist's mission in the desert.

The leopard (*Panthera pardus*) is the largest of the cat family that still survives in the Middle East. The Hebrew word for the leopard is 'namer'. It is used eight times in the Bible and references to it are either figurative or proverbial. Places like Lebanon, Amana, Senir and Hermon, called "the mountains of the leopards", are enumerated in the Song of Solomon (4:8).

The prophet Jeremiah referred to the leopard in a way that has become a proverb in common use even today: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?" (13:23). He was condemning the nation of Israel for their waywardness and saying in effect that these chosen people of God were so set in their evil ways that they were beyond redemption. At another point Jeremiah

he was telling the Israelites that their enemies, like the leopard, were eyeing them, watching and waiting for a chance to pounce, tear them apart and devour them (5:6).

Daniel gave an example of the predatory nations that would attack Israel. His description of the third empire is probably influenced by the Babylonian winged lions which he encountered often in his daily life in exile: "...like a leopard, which had on its back four wings of a bird. The beast also had four heads, and dominion was given to it" (7:6). An analysis of Daniel's prophecies will help us to identify this figurative leopard empire as Greece, led by Alexander the Great. Another prophet, Habakkuk, compared the Chaldeans or Babylonians with the leopard and called them "a bitter and hasty nation... terrible and dreadful..." (1:6,8).

Isaiah spoke of a time when "the leopard shall lie down with the young goat... and a little child shall lead them... They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (11:6, 9). This is a view of the Kingdom of God promised in the Bible when God's earth will finally become a place of sublime harmony.