CHAPTER NINE

MOTIFS IN JEWISH SYNAGOGUE ART

Synagogue art motifs appear on architectural elements such as lintels, friezes, and mosaic floors, as well as on funerary art. Explicit tendencies betray themselves in the persistent selection by the Jews of Late Antiquity of heraldic and antithetic symmetrical designs. The popular and common motifs in Jewish synagogue art indicate a constant preference for particular themes in the ornamentation (Hachlili 1988:335–346).

The motifs consist either of a single image or object or of a combination of several antithetic or heraldic elements and include: (1) fauna—animal motifs: the lion, bull, eagle, and others; (2) human figures; (3) mythological motifs; (4) genre motifs; (5) flora—plant ornaments; (6) geometric motifs.

Several sources are posited for the motifs used in Jewish art:

- Tradition and the continuation of popular motifs descended from Jewish art of the Second Temple period, mainly geometric and plant motifs.
- Decorative patterns and motifs taken from contemporary arts (Graeco-Roman, Syrian, and Nabatean) but devoid of their symbolic context and significance.
- The persistent selection by the Jews of Late Antiquity of heraldic and antithetic symmetrical designs.
- Pattern books, reflected in the stylized postures and representations of animals, plants, and other designs. At the same time, some of the motifs were probably directly copied from nature.

1. FAUNA—ANIMAL MOTIFS

Animal motifs appear frequently in Jewish art—on wall paintings, sculpture, reliefs, and mosaics, where they are usually depicted in a prominent position, frequently flanking the Torah shrine, the Ark of the Scrolls, and inscriptions (Hachlili 1988:320–346).

The most common animal motifs are the exalted creatures—the human, lion, bull, and eagle, which appear in early Near Eastern art as well as in Jewish and Christian art. In pagan arts they possess religious symbolism as astral, zodiac, and solar symbols, but in both Jewish and Christian art they are deprived of this aspect and acquire different connotations.

Human and animal figures as hybrid creatures appear in early Near Eastern art in various forms; especially significant are the animals rendered on ivories and sculpture, where they are found also as the side-supports of chairs or thrones. This tradition, slightly altered, continued later in the form of a king or deity’s throne flanked by the regal animals, the lion and the eagle being especially popular. The biblical Cherubim possibly belong to this tradition and are identified with similar hybrid creatures (Hachlili 2008:25*, 34*–40*).

The four exalted creatures—the human, the lion, the calf/ox, and the eagle—are first described as a tetrarmorphic creature in the portrayal of the throne-chariot (Merkabah), a throne in motion (with no mention of the ark) in Ezekiel’s vision (Ez. 1:5–12, 10:20–21), where each has four faces and four wings; the four faces include a human one, a lion on the right, an ox on the left, and an eagle; two of the spread wings touch one another and two cover the bodies. They have legs and “…the feet of each were like a single calf’s hoof” (Ez. 1:7). In the later description (Ez. 10) they are described as
Cherubim, and the face of the ox is omitted and replaced by the face of the Cherub (Ez. 10:14). In Ezekiel's vision of the Temple model (Ez. 41:18–20, 25), images of the Cherubim appear on the walls and doors, each pair flanking a palm tree, and each Cherub has two faces: one of a human and the other one of a lion.

The Chariot—Merkabah vision also appears on a scroll fragment found at Qumran (4Q385 6 [earlier 4]) designated Pseudo (or Second)—Ezekiel (Dimant & Strugnell 1990; Dimant 2000). The text of this fragment is dependent on and close to the version in Ezekiel chapter 1, as preserved by the Massoretic Text.

Scholars interpret the choice of these creatures by their symbolic traditional characteristics. The prominent animal images in Jewish art, although sometimes transferred from pagan art, lost their pagan meaning and acquired new values through the influence of biblical and midrashic literature (Hachlili 1988:346; but see Yuval-Hacham [2007:76–80], who maintains that the eagle which ornamented synagogues "is a symbolic representation of the power and might of the God of Israel").

The following commentary may explain part of the reason for the prominence of these four particular motifs and their continued use in Jewish art:

In the Babylonian Talmud, Hagiga 13b, we find:

"מלך שבחיות ארי, מלך שבבהמות שור, מלך שבעופות נשר, ואדם מתגאה עליהן והקדוש ברוך הוא מתגאה″.

For a Master said: The king of the wild animals is the lion; the king of the cattle is the ox; the king of the birds is the eagle; and man is exalted over them; and the Holy one, blessed be He, is exalted over all of them, and over the whole world. (BT Hagiga 13b, Complete Soncino English Translation of the Babylonian Talmud)

A similar account is given in Midrash Rabbah, Exodus 23:13:

The Four most exalted of all living creatures is man; of birds, the eagle; of cattle, the ox; and of wild beasts, the lion. All of these received royalty and had greatness bestowed upon them, and they set under the chariot of God. This is the meaning of ‘For he is highly exalted’.

The lion, bull, and eagle, which are the most frequent animal motifs encountered in Jewish art, appear in flanking positions, juxtaposition, or confrontation (when in an antithetic motif) and take many shapes. These creatures possess religious symbolism; they are most often rendered separately. There are only a few examples in Jewish art that portray them in flanking, juxtaposition or confronting episodes.

### 1.1 Lions and Lionesses

Lions and lionesses are a common theme in ancient art, including Jewish art, where their most common depiction is connected with the Torah shrine (Hachlili 1988:321–328; 1995:186–7; 2008a:25*, 34*–40*).

Lions in sculptures, reliefs, and mosaics are rendered in several standard types of ornamentation: (1) in the round as part of the Torah shrine ornamentation; (2) in symmetrical antithetic composition flanking the Torah shrine, a menorah, a vase, a tree, a bull's head, or a human figure; (3) in pairs flanking inscriptions; (4) as single decorative motifs; (5) in hunting scenes.

#### 1.1.1 In the Round as Part of the Torah Shrine Ornamentation

Lions in three-dimensional or free-standing sculpture or in relief, possibly as part of the Torah shrine ornamentation, are found in Galilean and Golan synagogues.