CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ANIMALS IN THE RELIGIONS OF SYRIA-PALESTINE

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The relationship between man and animal in ancient Syria-Palestine is manifested most visibly in cultic observance. Animal sacrifice provided the means for expression of devotion and piety and for celebration of family and community. The blood of the victims purified the sacred spaces. Animals substituted for humans, freeing them of guilt and sin. Some were used to define the character and status of the gods, their symbolism adding depth to divine imagery. Some animals bore more than their fair share of symbolic meaning. Snakes in particular seem to have evoked a certain fascination, and were very important in magical performances. If our sources leave us short of a full understanding of human attitudes toward the animals they manipulated so freely, at least they provide us with basis for asking all the right questions.

DIVINE REPRESENTATION

The pace of scholarship in recent years has unraveled a complex iconography of symbols in Syria-Palestine in which particular animals may escort, herald, signify, or substitute for a deity. A cult stand from tenth century Taanach illustrates the rich religious symbolism of this region and the difficulty ultimately of separating god from animal (fig. 15.1). ¹ This terracotta stand comprises four tiers, each depicting a simple cultic scene with figures of animals, deities, and architectural features indicating a temple. In the center of the fourth (bottom) tier is a naked female flanked by lions. Two winged sphinxes (cherubim) flank a vacant space in the third tier. The second tier repeats the lion imagery of tier four, this time flanking two ibexes that in turn flank a sacred tree. In the top tier, containing the most

¹ For bibliography on this cult stand see Smith (1990: 19 and n. 89).
Fig. 15.1. Cult stand. Taanach. 10th century b.c. H. ca. 3 ft. Photo courtesy Zev Radovan.