JEWISH LAW AND ANIMAL SYMBOLISM

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The smooth running of the laws of nature were of great importance to most ancient people. This is seen, for example, in the writings from Qumran which describe a people who sought "to live according to the divinely ordained structure of the universe" 1). Any departure from or disrupture of the natural laws, such as an eclipse or the birth of a deformed creature, was seen as an unlucky omen which, if overlooked would lead to catastrophe. It is with this understanding that one must view both the harmony and the disrupture of nature described in the Book of Revelation.

Rev iv, v and vii reveal the exquisite unison in heaven. The twenty-four elders, who represent mankind, the four living creatures 2), who symbolize wild animal life, domestic creatures, human beings and bird life respectively together with the angelic host worship God unceasingly day and night. They are all in unison. The sixth seal (Rev vi 12-17) and the trumpets introduce the reader to disrupture of nature which to some degree reflects the order of creation as recorded in Gen. i.

1) Light

Rev vi 12-14 celestial bodies are dimmed and

2) separation of upper and lower waters

the mountains and islands are moved

3) sea and island

First Trumpet Rev viii 7 a third of the earth, trees and grass destroyed

4) vegetation

Fourth Trumpet Rev viii 12 celestial bodies disturbed.

5) sun, moon, stars


2) The living creatures are not composite animals for they are only described with reference to one living creature. Neither does it appear that the cherubim are composite, rather they seem to be a class sui generis.
6) water creatures  Second Trumpet Rev viii 8-9 the death of
1/3 of creatures in the sea, vv. 10-11 the
rivers and springs affected
7) animals  Fifth Trumpet hybrid animals
8) (people)  Sixth Trumpet people first tormented and
then 1/3 killed.

Then Rev ix brings one hybrid animal with supernatural powers
which first torture and then kill humankind. However, in order to
understand the implications it is necessary to look at animal symbolism
more closely. There seems a certain—but not infallible—pattern in
the animal imagery used by apocalyptic writers. One may chart it as
follows:

a) God’s presence is intimated by light, fire, a bright cloud, etc.;

b) angels are symbolized by stars or men e.g. 1 Enoch xxxvi 1, 3
and Daniel viii 15 “a manlike figure stood before me” (Gabriel);

c) good people are symbolized by good animals;

d) evil people are represented by evil beasts and
e) demonic figures are portrayed by hybrid beasts. One can come
to a clearer understanding of this symbolism by considering two
particular types of Jewish laws:

a) the dietary laws;

b) the law of forbidden junctions or mixed species.

The dietary laws are found chiefly in Lev xi and Deut xiv and they
are discussed meticulously in the Mishnah and the Talmud. Over and
above purely hygienic reasons one can discover a philosophy behind
the dietary laws in two writers. Philo (Spec. Leg. 4: 113-115) states
that Moses disqualified creatures which are carnivorous and venomous
and use their strength to attack others. Further clean animals must
chew the cud and have cloven hooves because this symbolizes the
necessity of the memory, pondering over matters and distinguishing
between what is beneficial and what is injurious. One can find further
explanations in the Letter of Aristeas (139-171). The author remarks
that clean birds feed on grain and pulse but others are wild and carni-
vorous. They tyrannize over others, obtain food by cruelty and even
injure human beings. They are a sign that the Jews must practice
righteousness and neither tyrannize nor rob. Of the cud and the hoof
he adopts a view similar to Philo. One may also add the ancient
belief that a person develops the characteristics of the animals which
one eats e.g. in some African tribes males do not eat chickens lest they
become chicken-hearted.