

# Animal Affinities: Monsters and Marvels in the Ambrosian Tanakh

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## Abstract

*The Ambrosian Tanakh, one of the earliest Ashkenazic books to include zoocephalic protagonists, closes with an extraordinary pair of scenes: Ezekiel's Vision of the Chariot painted across the gutter from the Feast of the Righteous—an eschatological event discussed in a series of rabbinical texts and later medieval commentaries. In this article, I consider the Ambrosian beastly banquet as a nucleus of images and ideas that coalesce around the visually and ontologically exceptional zoocephalic idiom particular to late medieval Jewish manuscripts. After considering the book's material and figurative emphasis on animality as a whole, I explore visual conversations its images establish with each other and with other contemporaneous Hebrew manuscripts in order to suggest the way that they—along with Talmudic and midrashic exegetical literature—inflect the meaning and perception of the feasting scene. Finally, I consider animal-human hybrids within a larger set of Jewish cultural discourses on the monstrous and the marvelous. At stake is the very system of signification that binds the visual and the discursive in a vivid, intellectually demanding mode of reception characteristic of medieval Ashkenazic books, here distilled and foregrounded through the trope of animality.*

For my beloved zoocephali:

*Dzhena, Damien, and Delilah*

Created in the middle of the thirteenth century in Germany, and compiled into three volumes, the Ambrosian Bible (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MSS B.30–32 INF) is one of the earliest extant Hebrew manuscripts to feature zoocephalic, or animal-headed, figures. The Bible—which should be more accurately called the Tanakh—contains, in fact, an entire menagerie of fantastic beasts romping across its hundreds of pages.<sup>1</sup> The manuscript has attracted scholarly attention mainly for the extraordinary opening at the very end of the book, where the four divine beings from Ezekiel's Chariot Vision (1:4–28), reimagined as an ox, an eagle, a rooster, and a lion arrayed around a colorful heavenly sphere, face two sets of eschatological creatures across the gutter (Figs. 1–2 and 33). There, in the upper register, Leviathan the Sea Monster curls himself around the earth amid blue waters. Behemoth, whose dominion is land, turns toward the hills. The avian ruler Ziz, a colossal bird figured as a griffin, hovers above and between the two.<sup>2</sup> Below this floating visionary realm unfolds a sumptuous banquet, a celestial feast for the righteous men and women that will take place at the end of times—an event passionately discussed in rabbinic literature. Seated at the table filled with delectable foodstuffs are the blessed who, from right to left, are depicted with heads of an ox, a lion, an eagle, a lioness, and a donkey. Two zoocephalic musicians entertain them.

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1. The Jewish Tanakh (or, more properly, TaNaKh) is fundamentally different from the Christian Old Testament. Written in Hebrew and made for Jewish use, in the Tanakh the five books of the Torah are succeeded first by Prophets and then by Writings (Ta = Torah, Na = Nevi'im, Kh = Ketuvim).

2. Joseph Gutmann, “Leviathan, Behemoth and Ziz: Jewish Messianic Symbols in Art,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 39 (1968): 219–30 and “When the Kingdom Comes, Messianic Themes in Medieval Jewish Art,” *Art Journal* 27, no. 2 (1967–68): 168–75.

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Figure 1. *Primordial beasts and the Feast of the Righteous*, fol. 136r, *Ambrosian Tanakh*, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, *Biblioteca Ambrosiana*, MS B.32 INF (photo: © *Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio*).



Figure 2. *The Vision of Ezekiel*, fol. 135v, *Ambrosian Tanakh*, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, *Biblioteca Ambrosiana*, MS B.32 INF (photo: © *Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio*).

Thanks to the detailed colophons inscribed at the end of the first volume, a fair amount is known about the circumstances of the book's commission. Copied in the year 4996 (or 1236 CE), by Jacob ben Samuel, who refers to himself as *ha-Sofer*—the scribe—this volume was vocalized and masorated by Joseph ben Kalonymus exactly two years later.<sup>3</sup> It contains the Torah proper: that is, the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The second and third volumes comprise the texts of Prophets and Writings, respectively. All three volumes are accompanied by the *parva* (small) and *magna* (large) *masorah*, along with Targum, or Aramaic paraphrase of the biblical text.<sup>4</sup> The Tanakh seems to have been illustrated by at least two artists: one who was retained to complete the first volume and another who illuminated the rest, when the second and third volumes were completed, presumably just a few years later.<sup>5</sup> Their identities are unknown, but the colophons preserve the name of the patron, one Joseph ben Moses of Ulmana, who commissioned other manuscripts as well.<sup>6</sup> Among them was the so-called Munich RaShI Commentary (made in 1232, Munich, Bay-

erische Staatsbibliothek, MS hebr. 5/1, 2); it is notable that the RaShI Commentary and this Tanakh are the earliest extant illustrated manuscripts from medieval Ashkenaz, the Jewish communities of northern, central, and eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup> Joseph was a learned reader, associated with the circle of Hasidei Ashkenaz, or the German Pietists, previously considered an esoteric group of moralist ascetics (a consideration based largely on their own self-depictions in *Sefer Hasidim* and other texts) and now generally recognized as a more widespread resource for, and a nexus of, a broad spectrum of Ashkenazic thought—cultural, spiritual, didactic, and halakhic.<sup>8</sup> Relevant in particular for the Ambrosian Tanakh are two aspects of Pietist writings. One is moralistic: a fervent call for the revitalization of biblical study, voiced by one of the Hasidei greats, Rabbi Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (d. before 1234). The other is metaphysical: an embrace of cosmological ecology that posited an entirely natural, epistemologically defensible continuum between the human and the otherworldly, quasi-beastial realms.<sup>9</sup>

In this essay, I want to consider the Ambrosian beastly banquet as a nucleus of sorts: a nucleus of images, a nucleus of ideas, a scene that attracts close scrutiny and then allows us to move outward, through the pages of the book, across other manuscripts, and out into the cultural universe of its patron. To date, this scene—as well as the manuscript that contains it—has attracted only a modest amount of scholarly attention, and has largely been read through the lens of the messianic aspirations of the Ashkenazic community that produced the book: from Zofia Ameisenowa's argument

3. See Joseph Gutmann, "Joseph ben Kalonymus: The Enigma of a Thirteenth-Century Hebrew Scribe," in *A Crown for a King: Studies in Jewish Art, History and Archaeology in Memory of Stephen S. Kayser*, ed. Shalom Sabar, Steven Fine, and William M. Kramer (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2000), 147–51. Hebrew is consonantal, and vocalization is used to denote vowels through the system of diacritics.

4. Targum in the Ambrosian Tanakh is interlinear; *masorah parva* is found in the margins and between the columns of the text; *masorah magna* takes figurative micrographic form. *Masorah* is a scholarly apparatus that, among other things, comments on the spelling and pronunciation of certain words, stabilizing and preserving the biblical text in order to forestall changes and misreading. See Annette Weber, "The Masoret Is a Fence to the Torah: Monumental Letters and Micrography in Medieval Ashkenazi Bibles," *Ars Judaica* 11 (2015): 7–30.

5. Sarit Shalev-Eyni, "Between Carnality and Spirituality: A Cosmological Vision of the End at the Turn of the Fifth Jewish Millennium," *Speculum* 90, no. 2 (2015): 458–82, at 460. Luisa Ottolenghi describes the difference in style between the first volume and the rest by characterizing the original style as "swift," the colors as "cold and used in unusual and effective combinations," and gestures as "lively and most expressive." The two other volumes, she suggests, feature static figures that are not as expressive; the colors, she writes, are brighter, uniform, and used in combination with copious gold. The first five panels are "illustrative"; the rest are "symbolic." See Luisa Mortara Ottolenghi, "Description of Decorated and Illuminated Hebrew Manuscripts in the Ambrosian Library," in Ottolenghi and Aldo Luzzatto, *Hebraica Ambrosiana 1: Catalogue of Undescribed Hebrew Manuscripts in the Ambrosiana Library* (Milan: Il polifilo, 1972), 124, 125. These differences are highly debatable, especially where liveliness and expressivity are concerned.

6. "Ulmana" may refer to Ulm (Swabia) or Olmen, in the Würzburg area (Rhineland); given that another book Joseph ben Moses commissioned came from Würzburg, the location of Olmen appears to be the more likely one.

7. Katrin Kogman-Appel, "Christianity, Idolatry, and the Question of Jewish Figural Painting in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 84, no. 1 (2009): 73–107.

8. See David I. Shyovitz, *A Remembrance of His Wonders: Nature and the Supernatural in Medieval Ashkenaz*, Jewish Culture and Contexts (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), esp. 5–6; Ivan G. Marcus, "The Historical Meaning of Hasidei Ashkenaz: Fact, Fiction or Cultural Self-Image?" in *Jewish Culture and Society in Medieval France and Germany* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 103–14; and especially Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Peering Through the Lattices." *Mystical, Magical, and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000). On *Sefer Hasidim*, I found most useful Ivan G. Marcus, "*Sefer Hasidim*" and the Ashkenazic Book in Medieval Europe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 161–90; and Haym Soloveitchik, "Piety, Pietism and German Pietism: 'Sefer Hasidim I' and the Influence of Hasidei Ashkenaz," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 92, nos. 3–4 (2002): 455–93.

9. See Shyovitz, *A Remembrance of His Wonders*, 131–60. For the visual resonances between manuscript illuminations and practices of Pietist communities, see Katrin Kogman-Appel, *A Mahzor from Worms: Art and Religion in a Medieval Jewish Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012) who calls Eleazar "a communal authority" (188).

that animal heads in the manuscript signal righteousness; to Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical take on what he calls "theriomorphs," who embody a new form of animal-man relations, whereupon "man himself [is] reconciled with his animal nature"; to Sarit Shalev-Eyni, who contrasts the carnality of the Ambrosian scene with the spiritual Christian visions of the end; to Eva Frojmovic, who reads in this image a sustained social polemic and an answer to Christian constructions of aristocracy.<sup>10</sup> These valuable and insightful studies focus on the banquet scene and the one that immediately accompanies it across the gutter as a discrete unit, rather than as an integral part of the book's larger visual program. They also (characteristically for scholarship concerning art made for Jews) position these scenes squarely in relation to Christian imagery: viewed as either having been influenced by or created in response to it. Certainly, Jews and Christians in medieval Europe did not live in hermetically enclosed societies, completely distinct from one another: the interaction between the two communities is well-documented.<sup>11</sup> But the notion of "influence" is thorny at best, dangerous at worst, especially when

it comes to the exchanges between a majority and a minority culture, whereby the significance of Jewish art is diminished and submerged by the implicit assumption that it has to respond in some way to images made for Christians.<sup>12</sup> The zoocephalic idiom, as it is employed in medieval Jewish manuscripts, is arresting precisely because it is exceptional, both visually and ontologically. Moreover, just as Jewish and Christian traditions of biblical study and exegesis were different, so the reading of biblical images differed greatly between the two religious cultures. In this essay, then, I hope to consider these images on their own terms—as specifically Jewish images made for a specific Jewish audience within the context of a specifically Jewish culture—and, in shifting the focus from intention to reception, I hope to use the last two folios as a lens through which to examine the Ambrosian Tanakh as an integral whole.<sup>13</sup>

My intent in particular is to explore the meaningful connotative affinities that the animal presence in this Tanakh

10. Zofia Ameisenowa, "Das messianische Gastmahl der Gerechten in einer hebräischen Bibel aus dem XIII Jahrhundert. Ein Beitrag zur eschatologischen Ikonographie bei den Juden," *Monatsschrift für die Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 79 (N.F. 43), no. 6 (1935): 409–22, the argument reprised in her "Animal-headed Gods, Evangelists, Saints and Righteous Men," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 12 (1949): 21–45; Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 3 (for the analysis of Agamben's own analysis, see Kathleen Biddick, "Read Yourself! The Griffin Condition on the Day before the Last Day," *Qui Parle* 27, no. 1 [June 2018]: 77–98, who argues that Agamben's interpretation "has the effect of dropping from sight an Ashkenazic political theology forged over the thirteenth century in response to the Christian threat of exception and bare life that were the conditions of possibility for medieval Christian sovereignty"); Shalev-Eyni, "Between Carnality and Spirituality"; and Eva Frojmovic, "Feasting at the Lord's Table," *Images* 7, no. 1 (2013): 5–21 and idem, "Neighboring and Mixta in Thirteenth-century Ashkenaz," in *Postcolonising the Medieval Image*, ed. Eva Frojmovic and Catherine E. Karkov (London: Routledge, 2017), 245, 250–53. See also a brief entry (#138), penned by Evelyn M. Cohen, in *Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People Under Heaven*, ed. Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), 281–82, as well as Shalev-Eyni's entry "Ambrosian Bible" in Grove Art Online, 2012 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T2226642>). The description of the entire manuscript is found in Maria Luisa Gengaro, Francesca Leoni, and Gemma Villa, *Codici decorati e miniati dell'Ambrosiana, ebraici e greci* (Milan: Ceschina, 1959), nos. 1–3, pp. 19–34, pls. i–xxiii, as well as in Ottolenghi, "Description of Decorated and Illuminated Hebrew Manuscripts," 115–44 and pls. 1–40.

11. In particular, many studies have been extremely productive in not only establishing a shared language of the two cultures but

also, and important for the discipline of art history, in pinpointing the elusive interconnections between Jewish and Christian patrons, scribes, and illuminators; they get at the heart of what, in fact, constitutes Jewish art. See, in particular, Marc Michael Epstein, "Parchments and Palimpsests: Scribe, Illuminator, Patron, Audience," in *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink: Jewish Manuscript Illumination*, ed. Michael Epstein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 29–39; Eva Frojmovic, "Jewish Scribes and Christian Illuminators: Interstitial Encounters and Cultural Negotiation," in *Between Judaism and Christianity: Art Historical Essays in Honor of Elisheva (Elisabeth) Revel-Neher*, ed. Katrin Kogman-Appel and Meyer Mati, *The Medieval Mediterranean: Peoples, Economics and Cultures*, 400–1500 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 281–306; Sarit Shalev-Eyni, "Obvious and Ambiguous in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts from France and Germany," *Materia Giudaica* 7, no. 2 (2002): 249–71. See notes below on the sharing of theological/ontological concepts.

12. See, most persuasively, Michael Baxandall, "Excursus against Influence," from his *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 58–62. For the problematics of such shared visual language between Jewish and Christian scriptoria, see, most recently, Pamela Patton, "What Did Medieval Slavery Look Like? Color, Race, and Unfreedom in Later Medieval Iberia," *Speculum* 97, no. 3 (2022), forthcoming.

13. In that, I borrow from Marc Michael Epstein's playbook and argue for intra-visual reading across the pages of the Tanakh—completed over time, slow, laborious, repeating—the kind that comments on itself and makes new meaning again and again. See, e.g., his treatment of the Golden Haggadah in "Iconography: Telling the Story," in *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink*, ed. Epstein, 105–44, at 129–36, a compact version of a much more detailed analysis in *The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative, and Religious Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 129–200. The micrography of this Tanakh, which occasionally takes quasi-animal forms, is a complex subject that falls outside the scope of this essay, but should be addressed in future studies.



Figure 3. *Sacrifice of Isaac, opening of Leviticus, fol. 102r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.30 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).*

produces.<sup>14</sup> After scrutinizing the panoply of the Ambrosian fauna and considering the book’s material and figurative emphasis on animality, I explore visual conversations established across the manuscript’s three volumes and suggest a particular way they may have inflected the meaning and perception of the feasting scene. Subsequently, the purview broadens to include related animal images in other contemporaneous Hebrew books and to investigate a spectrum of symbolic associations they may have conveyed. Next, stepping back further, I consider animal-human hybrids within a larger set of Jewish cultural discourses as they manifest across the religious and geographical strata of the thirteenth-century Ashkenazic community. Having reflected on the many meanings that swirl around such composite bodies, I return to the Ambrosian Tanakh itself and revisit its zoocephalic inhabitants one more time in the context of the manuscript’s reception. In the pro-

14. For the purposes of this essay, “animal(s)” designates specifically nonhuman animal(s).



Figure 4. *Sacrifice of Isaac, opening of Leviticus, detail of fol. 102r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.30 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).*

cess, I explore not only what the animal-headed figures may signify, but, more importantly, *how* they signify it.

### Ambrosian Fauna

Let us begin by following R. Eleazar’s advice on the importance of biblical study and examine the giant manuscript in depth, with a special focus on its beastly and bestial inhabitants.<sup>15</sup> Broadly speaking, these fall into three categories. To the first belong images that feature animals as part of a biblical episode—or an allusion to a set of episodes—but whose connotations stretch well beyond the scriptural narrative itself. Two such animals appear within narrative scenes: a ram caught in a bush in the word panel with the Sacrifice of Isaac that opens Leviticus (Figs. 3–4), and a donkey that conveys David in the image that accompanies the fourth chapter of the book of Ruth (Figs. 5–6). Both animals, as Marc Michael Epstein has demonstrated, have eschatological associations well beyond their immediate participation in that given narrative. The ram, according to the Mishnah, was created “on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight” and sacrificed in Isaac’s stead. *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, a compilation of exegetical, folkloric, and astronomical writings, explains that parts of the ram’s body were destined for all manner of messianic instruments, from the strings of David’s harp to the shofar that

15. For Eleazar’s exhortations to study the Tanakh alongside Targum, see Abraham ben Azriel, *‘Arugat ha-bošem: kolel perushim le-piyutim*, ed. Efraim E. Urbach, 4 vols. (Jerusalem: Mekitze Nirdamim, 1939–63), 4:110–11, trans. in Sarit Shalev-Eyni, *Jews among Christians: Hebrew Book Illumination from Lake Constance* (London: Harvey Miller, 2010), 8.



Figure 5. *The donkey conveying David* (?), book of Ruth 4, fol. 2v, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.32 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

will sound at the end of time.<sup>16</sup> The same text, written sometime in the eighth century and known throughout the Middle Ages, expounds on messianic associations of the donkey that conveyed Abraham to the site of the intended sacrifice—the donkey, as it happens, who was a descendant of the one created on the eve of the first Sabbath along with the ram: “This

16. For the set of ten things created at twilight, see Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 5:6 and the Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 54a. For the discussion of the use of the ram’s body, see *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 31:13: “The ashes of the ram were the base which was upon the top of the inner altar. The sinews of the ram were the strings of the harp whereon David played. The ram’s skin was the girdle (around) the loins of Elijah. . . . The horn of the ram of the left side (was the one) wherein He blew upon Mount Sinai. . . . (The horn) of the right side, which is larger than that of the left, is destined in the future to be sounded in the world that is to come”; analyzed, along with Shamir, the animal-mineral creature, in Marc Michael Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 98. See also Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*, trans. Judah Goldin (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 1993).



Figure 6. *The donkey conveying David* (?), book of Ruth 4, detail of fol. 2v, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.32 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

was ‘the’ ass, the offspring of that ass which was created during the twilight . . . The same ass was also ridden upon by Moses when he came to Egypt. . . . This same ass will be ridden upon in the future by the Son of David [i.e., the Messiah].<sup>17</sup>

More physically impressive in their eschatological monstrosity are the three primordial beasts—Behemoth (or *Shor Habar*), Leviathan, and Ziz (or *Bar Yokhnai*)—which frolic on the last page of the last volume of the Tanakh (Fig. 1). There they complement the Feast of the Righteous unfolding below them—the very feast, according to the Talmud, at which they will be eaten. Brought into being on the fifth day of Creation, these terrible beasts were banished by God himself for fear of destroying the world. The image does not

17. The donkey created at that twilight, described in Mishnah Avot as “the mouth of the ass,” is the one that belongs to Balaam’s ass. RaShI makes a similar connection in his commentary on Exodus 4:20, teasing out a linguistic connection between these donkeys; see the discussion in Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 99–100.

refer to a specific biblical narrative but is rather distilled in rabbinic literature from several allusive verses scattered across the Tanakh. Leviathan, here in the guise of an enormous fish, appears in Psalms 74:14 (“You crushed the heads of Leviathan; You fed them to the creatures of the desert”); his demise is prophesied in Isaiah 27:1: “In that day the LORD will take His sharp, great, and mighty sword, and bring judgment on Leviathan, the fleeing serpent—Leviathan the coiling serpent—and He will slay the dragon of the sea.”<sup>18</sup> Behemoth, figured as a colossal ox in the Ambrosian Tanakh, is also described as such in Job 40:15–19: “Look at Behemoth . . . He feeds on grass like an ox. / See the strength of his loins and the power in the muscles of his belly. / His tail sways like a cedar; the sinews of his thighs are tightly knit. / His bones are tubes of bronze; his limbs are rods of iron. / He is the foremost of God’s works; only his maker can draw the sword against him.” Finally, although Ziz appears only in passing in Psalms 50:11 (“I know all the fowls of the mountains; and the *ziz sadai* is Mine”), this verse garners quite a bit of commentary, including that in Bamidbar Rabbah 21:19: “R. Chiya taught in the name of R. Meir, ‘But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the sky, they will tell you’: ‘But ask the beasts,’ this is the Behemoth; ‘the birds of the sky,’ this is the Ziz of the Omniprovident.”

Finally, the four animals on the penultimate folio—ox, eagle, winged lion, and rooster (Fig. 2)—belong to this first category of biblical beasts. They stand for the four divine beings, attendants of God’s Chariot, described in Ezekiel 1:5–10:

And out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the likeness of a man. / And every one had four faces, and every one of them had four wings. / And their feet were straight feet; . . . And they had the hands of a man under their wings. . . . As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man; and they four had the face of a lion on the right side; and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four had also the face of an eagle.

Certainly, the four beasts on this folio bear little resemblance to Ezekiel’s fevered vision of the divine—they are neither anthropomorphic nor four-faced, the latter clearly in deference to the Talmud’s proscription of showing the four faces of the

18. See also Job 41:1–26, which describes Leviathan, among other things, as a beast whose teeth are sheer terror; whose scales, “shut up together as with a close seal . . . cannot be sundered”; who sneezes light and breathes fire; and whose flesh is so tough that swords, arrows, and all manner of other weaponry cannot hurt him. The “king over all the proud beasts,” Leviathan makes “the deep to boil like a pot” and “the sea like a seething mixture.” Here and throughout, quotes are from the Jewish Publication Society’s Tanakh (Philadelphia, 1985). For more on Leviathan, see Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 70–95.

creatures simultaneously.<sup>19</sup> In the Ambrosian Tanakh’s visual idiom, each creature is granted only one face. The hesitation to show human faces might also account for the replacement of the likeness of Ezekiel’s man-angel with that of a rooster, or *gever*, a homonym for the word “man” in both Hebrew and Aramaic.<sup>20</sup> The colors of the creatures, however, red and gold, cleave closely to Ezekiel’s descriptions that all four were “like coals of fire, burning like the appearance of torches; it flashed up and down among the living creatures; and there was brightness to the fire, and out of the fire went forth lightning” (1:14). The heavenly sphere and celestial bodies, then, gesture to Ezekiel’s description of “a likeness of a firmament” and the divine “likeness as the appearance of a man upon [the throne] above” (1:22, 26), here certainly unrepresentable as such.

To the second category of beasts in the Ambrosian Tanakh belong a myriad of real and imaginary animals, some in hybrid form, that populate the Tanakh’s plentiful word panels but do not always evince direct relation to the text itself. Lions (some winged), griffins, dragons, and eagles—all animals with considerable symbolic valence—dominate these spaces. They are occasionally joined by others: a bear, a stag, hares, and camels, along with a panoply of animal-plant hybrids.<sup>21</sup> Although constrained by the panels themselves and, at times, by the arches inscribed in these panels, as if held in check by the inscribed word, the animals embody definitive semiotic fluidity. The eagle, for instance, which appears across multiple word panels, acquires two heads on occasion and thereby transforms into a heraldic symbol (Figs. 7–8), and a rampant, crowned lion in the standard above Numbers 1:1 is a clear reference to chapter 2, verse 2: “The children of Israel shall pitch by their fathers’ houses; every man with his own standard, according to the ensigns” (Figs. 9–10).<sup>22</sup> In at least two cases, these animals

19. In Rosh Hashanah 24b ([https://www.sefaria.org/Rosh\\_Hashanah.24b?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rosh_Hashanah.24b?lang=bi)), we read that “the Torah prohibited only the fashioning of an image of all four faces of the creatures of the Heavenly Chariot together”—a sentiment echoed in Avodah Zarah 43b. This mode of representing the Chariot’s attendants is not unusual in fourteenth-century Ashkenazic books; we see it, for instance, in the Leipzig Mahzor (Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, MS Voller 1102/I, fol. 31v), illuminated ca. 1310 in Worms, albeit here a vaguely zoocephalic but human creature, consonant with representations of all other humans in the book, stands in place of *gever*. For the difference between Jewish and Christian representations of this vision, see Kogman-Appel, *Mahzor from Worms*, 110–12.

20. Noted in Frojmovic, “Feasting at the Lord’s Table,” 6 and in Salev-Eyni, “Between Carnality and Spirituality,” 471, who also links it to the Kapparot custom and the association with the name of angel Gavriel (Gabriel).

21. Many of these animals had symbolic connotations specific to medieval Jewish culture; some of them will be discussed further.

22. Ottolenghi, “Description of Decorated and Illuminated Hebrew Manuscripts,” 120, points out that a similar representation is found elsewhere in Jewish and Christian Bible manuscripts alike.



Figure 7. Word panel for Kings with the two-headed eagle and hybrid musicians, fol. 67r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.31 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

enter a direct conversation with other figures in and around word panels: Adam and Eve gesture at the beasts enclosed in the arcade in the Genesis opening, as if confirming human dominion over animals (Figs. 11–12); and on fol. 67r, which opens 1 Kings, five creatures that populate the arcades above the words *Ve-ha melekh* (Now the king [David]) suggest a loosely structured scene (Fig. 8). Above the letter *vav*, in the rightmost arch, a crouching griffin lifts its clawed appendage as if in greeting; in the next arch a hare reclines in a similar pose, its front right paw raised. They seem to be listening intently to two musicians on the left: a bird-headed human hybrid playing a *kinnor* (a lyre or a harp) and an anthropomorphic furry bird hybrid shaking large hand bells. In the middle, a double-headed eagle bridges the two pairs.<sup>23</sup> Placed as he is above the word *melekh* (king), the bird-headed *kinnor* player

23. This word panel offers to the reader a beastly encyclopedia of sorts: a real animal, i.e., the hare; a composite animal, i.e., the griffin; a heraldic animal, i.e., the eagle; a wild hybrid man of sorts, i.e., the hirsute bell-ringer; and a zoocephalic but unequivocally human figure, i.e., the musician.



Figure 8. Word panel for Kings with the two-headed eagle and hybrid musicians, detail of fol. 67r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.31 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

most certainly signifies King David. He also exemplifies the third type of creature found across volumes 2 and 3 of the Ambrosian Tanakh: the zoocephali.

On fol. 2v of the second volume (Fig. 6), two scenes unfold in tandem with the text of Ruth 4, its protagonists clearly zoocephalic albeit abraded beyond all recognition: Boaz and Ruth (?) are pictured in the upper register, and a donkey-riding king (David?) is being anointed by a prophet (Samuel?).<sup>24</sup> A zoocephalic David reappears on fol. 3r in the third volume, in the word panel for the word *Ashrei* (Happy is [the person]), which opens the first psalm (Figs. 13–14). Here, he is lion-headed, and again plays the *kinnor*, while four animals—a lion, a camel, a hare, and a blue beast—stand guard in the arches above. Another bear-headed man, on fol. 78r of the same volume, presides over the word *Va-yehi* (Now it came to pass), in the panel at the start of the book of Esther (Figs. 15–16). This is the Persian king Ahasuerus, crowned and enthroned, holding a flowering branch.

Two images with zoocephalic protagonists stand apart from the rest. On fol. 136r of the second volume, in another *Va-yehi* panel—this one marking Ezekiel 1:1—a curious scene features three animal-headed winged beings and a small lion (Figs. 17–18). An ox-headed man kneels at the right and points to the ground; in front of him is a lion-headed man, his hand raised in blessing. At the left, a creature with a lioness’s head gestures toward a small golden lion at her feet, whose attention seems trained on the lion-headed figure in the middle. Even though these have often been described as the four creatures of Ezekiel’s vision (1:5–10), just two of the scene’s protagonists bear a resemblance to the prophet’s account of the divine attendants—those winged anthropomorphic beings with animal faces and

24. At some later date these abraded images were once again amended, this time to add a semblance of human faces; this later over-drawing is especially evident in the figures of Boaz and the king.



Figure 9. Word panel for Numbers with a rampant lion, fol. 135v, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.30 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

human hands and feet.<sup>25</sup> This unusual and undeniably opaque image appears to show an elision of two chapters in Ezekiel: the vision described in chapter 1, with a dirge in chapter 19, where the prophet laments the unnamed kings of Judah (evidently Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin), referred to as young lions, along with their mother, the Lioness of Judah, or a personification of Israel. Together, the three lion figures on the left appear akin to a nuclear family, presented to the reader-viewer by the winged ox.

Finally, the zoocephalic idiom blossoms in the last image of the third volume, that of the Feast of the Righteous (Fig. 1). This eschatological celebration is obliquely referenced in Isaiah 25:6–9, and the consumption of the primordial beasts by the righteous at that banquet is fleshed out in a variety of aggadic (non-legal) texts. The Talmud, for instance, proclaims that

25. See, e.g., Ameisenowa, “Animal-Headed Gods,” 21 and Ottolenghi, “Description of Decorated and Illuminated Hebrew Manuscripts,” 122 (who thinks that the visual description of the animals is “wrong” and also attributes a head of a dog to one of the lions).



Figure 10. Word panel for Numbers with a rampant lion, detail of fol. 135v, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.30 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

“the Holy Blessed One, will in time to come make a banquet for the righteous from the flesh of Leviathan” (Bava Batra 74b). Various midrashim place this feast in Paradise, some amplifying it in elaborate detail, with God himself, accompanied by heavenly bodies, dancing to entertain the righteous.<sup>26</sup> Medieval Ashkenazic texts pick up on these sources and link the banquet and the beasts explicitly in a variety of liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) as well as in exegetical, halakhic, and customary literature. RaShI, in referring to the Talmudic verse cited above, alludes to the primordial sashimi made out of Leviathan’s wife (preserved in salt, no less) and served to the righteous, while the Pietist Eleazar of Worms, in *Perush ha-Rokeah al ha-Torah*, imagines Leviathan himself being consumed.<sup>27</sup> Other sources from the circle of Hasidei Ashkenaz contain repeated allusions to “being allowed to eat of Leviathan and Behemoth.”<sup>28</sup> In the image, the primordial beasts are arrayed above the righteous as if on a restaurant picture menu—or as if a floating, primeval zoo encroaches upon the zoocephalic feast.

26. See, e.g., Bamidbar Rabbah 13:2 from *Otiot de Rabbi Akiva*.  
 27. *Hamishah ĥumshe Torah: Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Prayers for Sabbath and Rashi’s Commentary* 1, ed. Morris Rosenbaum and Abraham M. Silbermann (London: Shapiro, Vallentine & Co., 1929), 5–6.  
 28. See, for example, Judah ben Samuel, *Sefer Ĥasidim: Ketav yad Parmah H 3280*, an edition of the Parma manuscript (Biblioteca Palatina, MS H 3280), introd. Ivan G. Marcus (Jerusalem: Hotsa’at Merkaz Dinur, 1985), par. 531. Frojmovic provides a list of sources that mention the consumption of the beasts, along with their brief discussion, in “Feasting at the Lord’s Table,” 16–21.



Figure 11. *Adam and Eve*, word panel for Genesis, fol. 1v, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.30 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

### Reading Animalities

The zoocephalic humans in the Ambrosian Tanakh belong to an arresting visual tradition in Ashkenazic manuscripts, prevalent particularly in mahzorim, or festival prayer books.<sup>29</sup>

29. Zsofia Buda compiled the following list of these manuscripts, modifying Bezael Narkiss's previous list: Laud Mahzor, ca. 1260 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Or. 321. 3); Worms Mahzor, 1272 (Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, MS Heb. 4\*781/I. 4); Leipzig Mahzor, ca. 1320 (Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, MS V. 1102/I–II. 6); Tripartite Mahzor, ca. 1322 (vol. 1: Budapest, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Könyvtár, Kaufmann Collection, MS A384; vol. 2: London, British Library, MS Add. 22413; vol. 3: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Michael 619. 7); and Hammelburg Mahzor, 1348 (Darmstadt, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, Cod. Or. 13. 8). Three other mahzorim that Buda lists contain very limited zoocephalic representations: Michael Mahzor, 1258 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Mich. 617 and 627); Tinted Mahzor, ca. 1300 (London, British Library, MS Add. 26896); and the Luzzatto Mahzor, ca. 1270–1300 (private collection). See Buda, “Animals and Gazing at Women. Zoodcephalic Figures in the Tripartite Mahzor,” in *Animal Diversities*, ed. Gerhard Jaritz and Alice Choyke, *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 16 (Krems: Medium Aevum Quotidianum, 2005), 136–64.



Figure 12. *Adam and Eve*, word panel for Genesis, detail of fol. 1v, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.30 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

Among the exceptions to this tradition are the famous Birds' Head Haggadah, a liturgical book for the home celebration of Passover Eve, and the Ambrosian Tanakh itself—the latter, at least in view of the extant corpus, apparently the starting point for the invention of animal-headed humans in Jewish manuscripts.<sup>30</sup> The zoocephalic inhabitants of these books have been subject to a lively art historical debate and extensive iconographic studies, which fall, broadly speaking, into two camps. Scholars such as Meyer Schapiro and Bezael Narkiss sought reasons for *all* such facial distortions—that is, across *all* manuscripts—in the Talmud, and particularly in its oft-cited tractate Avodah Zarah (42b–43b), which equivocates about the representation of human faces.<sup>31</sup> Conversely, taking a refreshingly granular view, Epstein and Zsofia Buda focus on specific manuscripts to propose interpretations peculiar to each—be it the iconographically rich nobility of animal heads that sets the Jews as a nation apart from the blank-faced *goyim* in the haggadah (Fig. 19), or a device used to distinguish men from women and to preclude male readers gazing at the female

30. On the haggadah, see Epstein, *The Medieval Haggadah*, 19–128, with excellent bibliography. The manuscript was recently and convincingly renamed by Epstein the “Griffins' Heads Haggadah.”

31. They also cited various later medieval texts including a cranky assertion of R. Meir of Rothenburg (d. 1293) that figurative images in books are distracting. See Meyer Schapiro, an introduction to *The Birds' Head Haggada of the Bezael National Art Museum in Jerusalem*, ed. Moshe Spitzer (Jerusalem: Tarshish, 1967), 15–19; Bezael Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1978), 108. But the pronouncement of Meir of Rothenburg does not explicitly address human figures in books; in fact, the question he answers specifically concerns itself with animal and bird forms, not human ones—the latter either so self-evidently problematic as not to merit discussion, or not deemed problematic at all. See Meir of Rothenburg, “Responsa Maharam of Rothenburg,” in *Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts*, ed. Vivian B. Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 110–11.

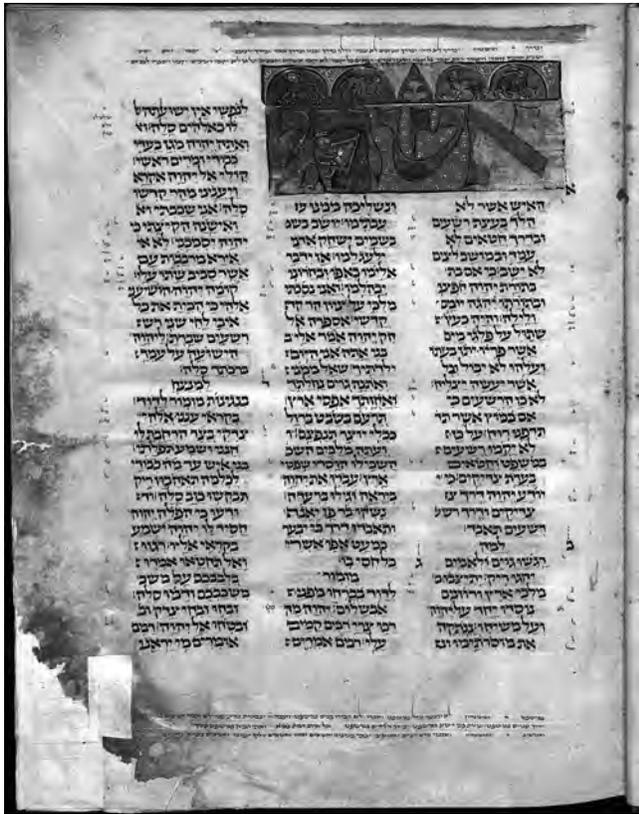


Figure 13. Zoocephalic King David playing the kinnor, opening of Psalms, fol. 3r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.32 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

form in the Tripartite Mahzor (Fig. 20).<sup>32</sup> I gravitate toward this latter approach. In part, it is because connecting varied image types to a single set of particular texts is rarely a fruitful undertaking, especially when it comes to rabbinic literature, which is a genre as self-contradictory as it is expansive: Avodah Zarah, for instance, is equally concerned with representations of the sun, the moon, and dragons, which are featured quite spectacularly throughout the Ambrosian manuscript.<sup>33</sup> In part, it is because the *halakhot* (laws) cannot be considered as a universal predicate for every facial distortion in every Hebrew book: each manuscript should be considered on its own terms,

32. Epstein, *The Medieval Haggadah*, 19–128; Buda, “Animals and Gazing at Women.”

33. See the Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 42b–43b: “Rav Sheshet would consolidate the principles of the *baraitot* pertaining to this matter and teach: Figures of all constellations are permitted, except for the following celestial objects: The sun and the moon. And figures of all faces are permitted, except for the human face. And all figures of other items are permitted except for the figure of a dragon” ([https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah\\_Zarah.42b?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.42b?lang=bi)).



Figure 14. Zoocephalic King David playing the kinnor, opening of Psalms, detail of fol. 3r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.32 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

and in each manuscript zoocephalic creatures signify differently. The Ambrosian Tanakh is no exception.

There is, nevertheless, no doubt that the animal heads in the Ambrosian manuscript were chosen, first and foremost, to obscure human features, possibly under the influence of Talmudic passages: this is certain because in the first volume a different technique by a different artist was adopted for the same purpose. Joseph ben Moses may have been mindful of the mishap with his previous commission, the RaShI commentary, which yielded a book with human and divine faces that were fully delineated and had to be assiduously erased or overpainted (Fig. 21). For the Ambrosian Tanakh, Joseph would have made it clear *ab ovo* that human faces ought to remain concealed. To that end, the first volume is limited to people who turn away from the viewer and each other, often at unnatural angles, often to uncanny effect. So, Adam and Eve prefacing Genesis (fol. 1r; Figs. 11–12) rotate so that their faces are completely obscured by their hair, and a variant of the same technique is used on fol. 56r that opens Exodus (Figs. 22–23). On fol. 102r, the word panel for Leviticus has Abraham turning his back to the beholder as well as Isaac and the angel, whose faces are nearly blank, only hinted at (Fig. 4). Finally, on fol. 183v that opens Deuteronomy, both Moses and the angel show only a sliver of their faces (Figs. 24–25).

But the obscuration takes a different turn in the other two volumes, which neatly swap human for animal heads. The swap makes its entrance in the Prophets codex, with a bird-headed David playing his *kinnor*, and culminates, in the Writings volume, with the banquet of the zoocephalic righteous (Figs. 8 and 1, respectively).<sup>34</sup> This change is all the more

34. This new visual device, as it happened, proved to be insufficient for some (perhaps later) readers: some figures, especially the clearly identifiable ones in the third volume—David, Ahasuerus, Ruth, the righteous, etc.—have had their faces erased or eyes gouged



Figure 15. Zoosephalic King Ahasuerus, word panel for the opening of the book of Esther, fol. 78r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.32 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

striking because the rest of the stylistic features—the color palette, the composition of the word panels—remain the same throughout all three volumes. Clearly, to quote Epstein, the presence of zoosephalic beings does not “merely satisfy halakha, for they far exceed the default of the simple featureless human face.”<sup>35</sup> Instead, their animality has the distinctive effect of setting the first five books of the Tanakh, the Torah proper, apart from the rest, as if underscoring its special status. People—unequivocal, genuine, indisputable people forged in God’s image—populate the five sacred books, but a manner of visual corruption appears to set in during the age of the Prophets, as if the temporal distance from Creation distorts and alters human countenance. At the same time, animality carries a cleansing

out, as per Avodah Zarah 43b:11: “Shmuel said to Rav Yehuda, who was his student: Sharp-witted one, destroy this one’s eyes, i.e., disfigure it, as it is prohibited even to have a figure of a human being in one’s possession” ([https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah\\_Zarah.43b?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.43b?lang=bi)). Even in their animality, the images remained dangerous.

35. Epstein, *The Medieval Haggadah*, 53.



Figure 16. Zoosephalic King Ahasuerus, word panel for the opening of the book of Esther, detail of fol. 78r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.32 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

connotation: rabbinic literature, after all, takes the clear position that animals cannot sin.<sup>36</sup>

The transformation of the emphasis in the visual lexicon from humanity to animality draws insistent attention to the material composition of the Ambrosian codices.<sup>37</sup> Altogether they comprise more than 550 parchment folios, each measuring roughly 13.5 × 17.5 inches. The massive amount of parchment utilized for these books highlights not only the expense of the project but also the sheer number of animals slaughtered to make books of that size. One might say that the animals were sacrificed to provide a substrate for the creation of

36. Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:4. Discussed in Beth A. Berkowitz, *Animals and Animality in the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 71. Animals can, however, be dangerous; see Mishnah Bava Qamma on the dangerous ox ([https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Bava\\_Kamma](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Bava_Kamma)). For the convergence of fables and Jewish philosophy, where animals behave like humans, see Kalman P. Bland, “Animal Fables and Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” in *Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Its Literary Forms*, ed. Aaron W. Hughes and James T. Robinson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 8–39.

37. On the subject, see Bruce Holsinger, “Parchment Ethics: A Statement of More than Modest Concern,” *New Medieval Literatures* 12 (2010): 131–36, and “Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal,” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 616–23.



Figure 17. *Theriomorphs and a lion, word panel for Va-yehi, the opening of the book of Ezekiel, fol. 136r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.31 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).*

a redemptive narrative across the Tanakh's pages, written through the figuration of animals, from the sacrificial ram to the zoocephalic righteous. Sarah Kay sums up this fraught material as “the site of convergence . . . between bare life and intellectual life, livestock and literacy, the history of the book and the seemingly ahistorical existence of nonhuman animals.”<sup>38</sup> This convergence is uncanny, especially since the skin, “stripped on one side of flesh and on the other of the hair that made the creature it came from recognizable in life,” is rendered unsettlingly like the human skin that touches it in the process of turning the pages or tracing texts and images.<sup>39</sup> In discussing the notion of suture, Kay focuses on bestiaries, arguing that in them “the distinction between content and medium on which reading normally relies is momentarily

38. Sarah Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 2.

39. *Ibid.*, 3.



Figure 18. *Theriomorphs and a lion, word panel for Va-yehi, the opening of the book of Ezekiel, detail of fol. 136r, Ambrosian Tanakh, Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.31 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).*

suspended.”<sup>40</sup> How much truer this is for the Ambrosian Tanakh with its carnival of animals—celestial, terrestrial, primordial, messianic—as the site of both the theoretical suture between the folio, the beast, and the beholder, and the visual suture between animal heads and human bodies.<sup>41</sup> And if within a range of contemporaneous Christian texts the skin of Christ, the sacrificial lamb, was often compared to lambskin as parchment, thereby valorizing and elevating the base biological substance especially as it bore the representation of God, Judaism completely eschewed such metaphor and, in fact, abjured any figuration of the divine whose true likeness in any case was deemed an impossibility to depict.<sup>42</sup> Here, where the divine is, perforce, absent, the animal comes to the fore. The very material of the Ambrosian Tanakh, then, brings out the animality of its quasi-anthropomorphic protagonists who, in their animal form as rendered on animal skin, are shown, in the crescendo to the entire manuscript, at a banquet consuming other animals that look, as we will shortly see, like them.

### Beastly Echoes

These animalities spark intra-visual resonances across the folios of the Tanakh as well as inter-visual conversations with other, contemporaneous Jewish images produced in and around the time that the Ambrosian Tanakh was illuminated.<sup>43</sup>

40. *Ibid.*, 5.

41. We may perhaps extend this conversation to consider bird-feather quills and animal-hair brushes that were used to render zoomorphic designs.

42. For an elegant summary of Christian body/parchment comparisons, see David Areford, *The Viewer and the Printed Image in Late Medieval Europe* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 79–80.

43. I use the term “intra-visibility” to refer to a set of images within a given book and “inter-visibility” to refer to a broader set



Figure 19. Zoocephalic Jews and blank-faced Gentiles, fols. 24v–25r, *Griffins' Head Haggadah*, made in South Germany (Mainz?), ca. 1300, Jerusalem, Israel Museum, MS 180/57 (photo: Moshe Caine; © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem).

It must be noted, however, that it is not always easy to identify the animals that lend their heads to the human bodies of the protagonists in this particular Tanakh, especially because of the damage these heads have sustained. For instance, in the *Ashrei* panel, we would want to read David's head as that of a lion, in reference to Genesis 49:9 (“Judah is a lion’s whelp”), and on fol. 78r, Ahasuerus’s head as that of a bear, since in the Talmud Persians in general and Ahasuerus in particular are likened to bears: “A hungry bear”; this is Ahasuerus . . . [Persians] are compared to a bear, as they eat and drink in large

of visual and textual discourses that swarm around these images, engendering a process, to quote Michael Camille, “in which images are not the stable referents in some ideal iconographic dictionary but are perceived by their audiences to work across and within different, even competing, value-systems” (“Gothic Signs and the Surplus: The Kiss on the Cathedral,” *Yale French Studies*. Special Issue: *Contexts: Style and Values in Medieval Art and Literature* [1991]: 151–70, at 151).

quantities like a bear; and they are coated with flesh like a bear; and they grow their hair long like a bear; and they never rest like a bear, whose manner it is to move about from place to place.”<sup>44</sup> But the muzzles of both creatures are disfigured, cautioning us that extreme care is necessary when attributing any kind of iconographic meaning to the erased beasts. The affinities between particular animals and particular biblical figures, moreover, constantly shift: thus, David appears as lion-headed in one folio and as eagle-headed on another. This iconographic fluidity heralds the shifting set of meanings evoked and induced by the five righteous zoomorphs feasting at the Eschaton on the ultimate folio of the Tanakh (Figs. 1 and 33).

The identities of these five are, by now, familiar to the manuscript’s readers, as their likenesses reverberate across the folios in many permutations. From right to left, three

44. Megillah 11a:3–4 (<https://www.sefaria.org/Megillah.11a?lang=bi>); see also Midrash Esther Rabbah.



Figure 20. Zoocephalic women and human-headed men, word panel for the Adon Imnani piyyut, fol. 3r, Tripartite Mahzor, made in South Germany (Lake Constance?), ca. 1322, London, British Library, MS Add. 22413 (photo: © British Library Board).

anthropomorphic creatures seated along the table assume the head of an ox, a lion, and an eagle, respectively. Their visual echoes are found across the gutter, on fol. 135v, where Ezekiel's divine beasts gather around the seven heavenly spheres (Fig. 2). There, too, the celestial Ox is positioned on the rightmost side, in the lower corner, his red hide resonant with the red skin of the banqueting ox-headed righteous. The Lion on the lower left of the page reflects the lion-head in the feasting scene: the two share not only coloring but also a facial gesture and turn of the head, both looking straight out and a little to the side. Much as Ezekiel's Lion and Ox appear as a pair, so the crowned ox-head and lion-head appear as a pair, turning toward each other, seemingly deep in conversation. Moreover, they hark back to the images of the two divine attendants of God's Chariot, which open Ezekiel's prophecy in the Prophets volume, where the lion-headed theriomorph stands in the gates of the letter *hei*, while behind him the ox-headed theriomorph kneels between *yud* and *vav* (Fig. 18). In fact, the Li-



Figure 21. Abraham with the archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, with everyone's face erased, word panel for Vayera, detail of fol. 13v, RaShI's Commentary on the Bible, made in Germany (Würzburg), 1232–33, Munich, BSB Cod. hebr. 5/1 (photo: © Munich, Bavarian State Library).

ness of Judah, who joins them in that scene, also appears—now crowned and bedecked in finery—at the celestial banquet, gesturing in the direction of an eagle-headed righteous.<sup>45</sup> This last presides at the center of the table, his head upraised to take a drink, his profile mimicking that of Ezekiel's Eagle on the opposite page. This, then, is the visual echo of the third theriomorph underscored by the matching color scheme: where the Eagle has brown plumage with red wings, the eagle-head wears a brown cloak with a red mantle draped over it.

The transformation of the divine theriomorphs into the banqueting righteous makes visual an argument put forward in rabbinic literature that links the Chariot's attendants with the four tribes of Israel that surrounded the Desert Tabernacle

45. Perhaps the young musician with the head of a lion cub playing an instrument to the right is a reference to the young lions of Judah from Ezekiel's book as well.



Figure 22. Obscured faces, word panel for Exodus, fol. 56r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.30 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

on its four flanks, as well as with the three patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and King David, whose zoocephalic likeness, we remember, opens the book of Psalms.<sup>46</sup> The midrash on Genesis, Bereshit Rabbah, alludes to this equivalence in two chapters (47:6: “Resh Lakish said, ‘The Patriarchs themselves constitute the [divine] Chariot,’” 82:6), which in turn were reinterpreted in a broad range of sources, particularly esoteric texts, from the *Sefer Yetsira* (Book of Creation) and its

46. The equivalences were also constructed between the Chariot and the tribes of Israel. See, e.g., Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me’irat Eynayim*, ed. Chayim Aryeh Erlanger (Jerusalem: n.p., 1974, 1993), 240–41, where the Eagle is linked with Ephraim’s tribe, the Ox with Dan’s, the Lion with Reuven’s, and the Human with Judah. Epstein points out that this table is far from definitive, and other correspondences were surely constructed throughout the Middle Ages, some no longer extant (with great thanks for sharing his chapter on beastly bodies in the Duke of Sussex Pentateuch). For the kabbalistic equivalence between patriarchs and the Chariot attendants, see first and foremost Rabbi Shimon b. Lakish in *Zohar Va-ethanan* 262b, *The Zohar*, 12 vols., Pritzker edition, ed. Daniel C. Matt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004–17), 12:682–86.



Figure 23. Obscured faces, word panel for Exodus, detail of fol. 56r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.30 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

several commentaries to the later medieval works of Azriel of Gerona and Jacob ben Sheshet, among many others.<sup>47</sup> The *Zohar*, a foundational kabbalistic text, takes up this association multiple times, glossing, for example, verses from 2 Samuel 23:15 and Genesis 26:19 with an offhand remark, “in this verse [sic] appears the supernal holy chariot, composed of the patriarchs joined by King David” (1:60b).<sup>48</sup> Here we glimpse the visually multivalent language of the Ambrosian Tanakh

47. *Sefer Yetsira* and subsequent commentaries were known to Pietists, who quoted them in their own work (Shyovitz, *A Remembrance of His Wonders*, 35, 83–84). *Sefer Yetsira ha-shalem*, ed. Bentsiyon Vainshtok (Jerusalem: Yaynfeld, 1965), III:2, V:3; Azriel of Gerona, *Peirush ha-Agadol*, ed. Isaiah Tishby (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 57; Jacob ben Sheshet, “Ha-Emunah ve-ha-Brittahon,” in *Kitvei ha-Ramban* 2, ed. Chaim D. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1964), 339–448, at 396. See Georges Vajda, *Le commentaire d’Ezra de Gérone sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969), 339–51, on Azriel of Gerona; and, for an extended discussion of several other midrashic and kabbalistic sources, Micheline Chaze, “De l’identification des patriarches au char divin: recherche du sens d’un enseignement rabbinique dans le Midrash et dans la Kabbale pré-zoharique et ses sources,” *Revue des Études Juives* 149, nos. 1–2 (1990): 5–75. Specifically on the place of David among the patriarchs, see *The Zohar* 8:436n409 and 9:682–86. On medieval Jewish mysticism/esotericism, see Mark Verman, *The Books of Contemplation: Medieval Jewish Mystical Sources*, SUNY series in Judaica (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) and Boaz Huss, *She’elat kiyumah shel mistiḳah Yehudit* [Question about the Existence of Jewish Mysticism: The Genealogy of Jewish Mysticism and the Theologies of Kabbalah Research] (Jerusalem: Van Ler Institute, 2016).

48. In the *Zohar*, the patriarchs are further linked to the three Sefirot: Hesed, Gevurah, and Tiferet, while King David symbolizes Shekhinah. For other allusions to the equivalence between the divine creatures and the patriarchs, see *The Zohar* 1:346n56.



Figure 24. *Slivers of the faces of Moses and the angel, opening of Deuteronomy, fol. 182r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.30 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).*

that disguises, in its zoocephalic righteous, not only some aspects of Israel’s patriarchs, king, and tribes, but also its very personification.

Such carefully constructed visual and exegetical associations pull into their orbits not only the zoomorphs but also animals proper—lions, eagles, and oxen, in their many configurations—that populate this Tanakh’s many pages and find echoes in the cultural language of the medieval Ashkenaz. The lion and the eagle, which visually mark the openings of several books in the Ambrosian Tanakh, carry significant semiotic weight in Jewish literature.<sup>49</sup> Just as the lioness symbolized the entire community of Israel (RaShI, BT Sotah 11b), so the lion signified the tribe of Judah: “a lion’s whelp . . . the king of beasts” (Genesis 49:9). The royal beast is posited as a model

49. Both are found at the start of Genesis and Jeremiah, and the end of Ezekiel; the lion is also figured in the word panels for Numbers, Jeremiah, Psalms, and Ruth, while the eagle accompanies the word panel for 1 Samuel and 1 Kings. On the significance of lions in medieval Jewish iconography, see Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 1, 49, 50, 55–58, and 107–12 (on the lion of Judah vs. the *re’em* of Joseph).



Figure 25. *Slivers of the faces of Moses and the angel, opening of Deuteronomy, detail of fol. 182r, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.30 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).*

of bravery “to do the will of your Father who is in heaven” in the Talmud (Pirkei Avot 5:20; Pesachim 112a:8). That same verse singles out eagles as “swift,” an allusion to Exodus 19:4 and Deuteronomy 32:11, the verses that effectively compare God to an eagle who had borne the Jews—his nestlings—out of Egypt on his own wings.<sup>50</sup> In his dirge over Saul and Jonathan, David bemoaned the two warriors as “swifter than eagles” and “stronger than lions” (2 Samuel 1:23)—the comparison that crops up in the poem by Judah ben Kalonymus (of the same family as the Ambrosian Tanakh’s masorator) dedicated to the Jewish martyrs of the 1096 massacre. Judah, too, characterizes the Jews of Mainz, who committed mass suicide rather than give themselves up to the murderous crusaders, as “swifter than eagles and stronger than lions” who “surrendered their souls on the Unity of the formidable Name.”<sup>51</sup> It should be noted, however, that the lion as a symbol could be semiotically fluid, and could variously signify divine wrath (Lamentations 3:10), Israel’s enemies (Jeremiah 40:17), or the wicked unbelievers (Midrash Tehilim 104:17). Hasidei Ashkenaz further endowed the lion with miraculous characteristics that were the visible vestiges, or “remembrances,” of the Divine. We read in the *Sefer Hasidim* that a “lion can make a circle . . . and move on, and any animal that

50. See also Isaiah 40:31: “But they who trust in the Lord shall renew their strength, as eagles grow new plumes: They shall run and not grow weary, they shall march and not grow faint.”

51. *Seder ha-Kinot le-Tish’ah be-Av*, ed. E. Daniel Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1968), 95–96, translated and discussed in Uri Shachar, “Violent Hermeneutics of Sacred Space in Jewish and Christian Crusade Literature,” in *The Uses of the Bible in Crusader Sources*, ed. Elizabeth Lapina and Nicholas Morton, Commentaria 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 42–62, at 60.



Figure 26. Ox-headed hybrid fighting a centaur, opening of Job, fol. 34v, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.32 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

enters it is unable to leave the circle, till it dies. Behold, the lion can seal and unseal this circle, and allow an animal to leave it, for [the lion] understands every language, and if one goes and beseeches it, [the lion] will understand and indicate what its will is.<sup>52</sup> The lion's abilities to create magic circles and understand all languages constitute divine mnemonic devices imprinted upon the face of this world. The lion-head's presence at the table of the righteous, then, evokes the notion of wrath assuaged by strength, iniquity conquered by courage, and, finally, what Eleazar has defined as "a remembrance of His [God's] wonders."

The catenae of animal affinities carry still more complex rhetoric in the case of the ox-headed zoomorph. Unlike lions

52. Israel M. Ta-Shma, "Kuntres 'Zekher Asah le-Nifla'otav' le-Rabi Yehudah he-hasid," in Ta-Shma, *Knesset Mekhvarim: Iyyunim be-Sifrut ha-Rabbanit bi-Yemei ha-Beinayim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2004), 181–207, at 197; translated in David I. Shyovitz, "Beauty and the Bestiary: Animals, Wonder, and Polemic in Medieval Ashkenaz," in *The Jewish-Christian Encounter in Medieval Preaching*, ed. Jonathan Adams and Jussi Hanska (New York: Routledge, 2015), 215–39, at 223.



Figure 27. Ox-headed hybrid fighting a centaur, opening of Job, detail of fol. 34v, Ambrosian Tanakh, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.32 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

and eagles, no oxen are included before the final opening of the Tanakh, save for the cameo appearance, in the word panel for the book of Job, of a hybrid with a blue torso and wildcat clawed paws, sword-fighting a centaur on fol. 34v of the third volume (Figs. 26–27). The creature is crowned with the head of an ox, and its brilliant red wings highlight the visual peculiarity that may not be immediately obvious to the casual observer of the book's eschatological opening: the Ox in Ezekiel's vision on fol. 135v does not have wings, the only divine creature to lack them. This lack not only sets the Ox apart from the three other angelic beings, but also tethers it to another red ox—a mirror image of itself—across the gutter, where the three primordial beasts are featured. This ox, of course, is Behemoth.

Because the image on fol. 135v abandons the earlier idiom of rendering the Chariot's attendants as human figures with animal heads, the two—Ezekiel's Ox and Primordial Ox—appear uncannily alike, as if two aspects of the same animal.<sup>53</sup> Roughly similar in size, the two stand in nearly identical poses: one hind leg in front of the other, front legs slightly raised. Behemoth faces the viewer's left, his head slightly up-raised toward the hills; the divine Ox turns toward the viewer's right but cranes its neck to the left and upward to look at the luminaries. Both have vivid red coloring and both are wingless: traits they share with the ox-headed righteous seated at the banquet. Unlike the fully bovine oxen, the ox-headed man lacks sharply delineated black horns—a notable detail—but he,

53. They may well have been drawn from the same model book.

too, turns toward the left. The striking configuration of these figures invites a triangulation on the part of the reader-viewer. The divine attendant of God's Chariot and the primordial beast that has the potential to wreak havoc on God's Creation are rendered visually as one and the same, linked compositionally and iconographically with the ox-headed man who reifies the nexus—a balance point—between the two forces, celestial and terrestrial.

That the ox-headed human is a reification of theological balance might also be signaled by the red color of his hide, which distinguishes him from his fellow celebrants, and which remains constant throughout the three volumes of the Tanakh. This uniformity of palette is not shared by other zoomorphs. While eagles and lions across the books' pages are rendered in a variety of chromatic hues, the ox in every one of his guises—whether as a hybrid fighter or the righteous celebrant, a Chariot's attendant or Behemoth—always remains red.<sup>54</sup> The intra-visual insistence on this color allows us to trace the inter-visual conversation with other thirteenth-century Hebrew manuscripts that feature just such a bovine defined by her brilliant coat: the Red Heifer, or the *Parah Adumah*.

Described in Numbers 19:1–10, and elaborated upon in the Talmudic Mishnah Parah, the Red Heifer was “a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid.” It was to be slaughtered and burned, and its ashes to be used in the purification ritual for anyone who came into contact with the dead (although, in a curious reversal, those priests who were involved in the sacrifice were rendered unclean by the very act of its preparation).<sup>55</sup> The images of this red heifer, which most often appear in the contemporaneous mahzorim—where they accompany opening prayers and liturgical poems for a special Saturday, Shabbat Parah, and relevant portions from Numbers—bear striking similarity to the red oxen in the Ambrosian Tanakh. So, for example, the Michael Mahzor, copied, according to the colophon, by the scribe Judah bar Samuel [Zaltman] in 1257–58, features not one but three red heifers grazing across the word panel that introduces the

54. Such red hide is not an iconographic predicate of Behemoth. In the Hebrew Northern French Miscellany (London, British Library, MS Add. 11639), another manuscript clearly related to the Hasidei Ashkenaz community, although illuminated in France (it contains a short version of Rabbi Judah the Pious's *Sefer Gematriot*), the beast is rendered white. See Gutmann, “When the Kingdom Comes,” 169–70; for a detailed study of the manuscript, see Sara Offenberg, *Illuminated Piety: Pietistic Texts and Images in the North French Hebrew Miscellany*, Meqorot u-mehqarim be-sifrut ha-ḳabalah (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2013).

55. On *Parah Adumah*, see Joseph L. Blau, “The Red Heifer: A Biblical Purification Rite in Rabbinic Literature,” *Numen* 14, no. 1 (1967): 70–78.

*yozer*, the liturgical poem inserted into the morning prayers on Shabbat Parah (Fig. 28). Similarly, in the slightly later Laud Mahzor, where the *Parah Adumah* is pictured outside the word panel and across from the priest, the red cow bears more than a passing resemblance to the Ambrosian Ox, both in its stance and in the curious and defiant turn of its head (Fig. 29).

The distinction of the *Parah Adumah* lies in its perfection, a trait that connects it to the Torah itself; Julie Harris points out that the word *temimah* is used in the Tanakh to describe both the Torah and the red heifer.<sup>56</sup> This perfection, as the Mishnah Parah explains, is inherent in its color: in listing disagreements about the purity of the hue among the sages, the treatise confirms that if the cow “had but two black or white hairs growing within one follicle,” it would be disqualified as a sacrificial offering.<sup>57</sup> The cleansing power of a properly red heifer, however, could be truly astounding: for example, Midrash Tanchuma interprets it as an instrument of atonement for the sin of making and worshipping the idol of the Golden Calf near Mount Sinai (Exodus 32): “the Holy Blessed One, said, ‘Let a heifer come and atone for the incident of the [golden] calf.’”<sup>58</sup> The midrash explains such a reversal of genders—whereupon a heifer redresses the wrongs of her male counterpart, a bullock—by drawing a parallel between a mother cleaning up after her son and the heifer “cleaning up” after the calf. The ox-head in the Ambrosian Tanakh is quite emphatically gendered male by his clothing, and yet his blazingly red coloring evokes the female *Parah Adumah*: another balance point, this time between a sin and its expiation.<sup>59</sup> We should note as an aside that the ox-head's horns

56. Julie Harris, “Imaging Perfection(s) in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts,” in *Abstraction in Medieval Art: Beyond the Ornament*, ed. Elina Gertsman (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 309–28.

57. Mishnah Parah 2:5. The disagreements are as follows: “Rabbi Judah said: within one kos; if they grew within two kosot that were adjacent to one another, it is invalid. Rabbi Akiva says: even if there were four or five but they were dispersed, they may be plucked out. Rabbi Eliezer says: even as many as fifty. Rabbi Joshua ben Bateria says: even if it had but one on its head and one on its tail, it is invalid. If it had two hairs with their roots black and their tips red or with their roots red and their tips black, everything goes according to what is visible, the words of Rabbi Meir. But the sages say: by the root” ([https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Parah.2?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Parah.2?lang=bi)).

58. Chukat, Siman 8. In commenting on Exodus 29:1 (“This is what you shall do to them in consecrating them to serve Me as priests: Take a young bull of the herd and two rams without blemish”), RaShI suggests that the bovine refers to a recompense “for the incident of worshipping the gold calf which is of the bullock species” ([https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi\\_on\\_Exodus.29.1?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Exodus.29.1?lang=bi)).

59. Another association that can be excavated—in a different paper—is between these oxen and the seven fat and sickly bulls of pharaoh's dream (see, e.g., British Library, MS Add. 27210, fol. 7).



Figure 28. Parah Adumah, word panel for the Shabbat Parah, fol. 21r, Michael Mahzor, made in Germany, 1257–58, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Michael 617 (photo: Digital Bodleian, CC-BY-NC 4.0).

are decorously tucked under the crown, or else removed altogether—a nod, perhaps, to another requirement particular to the sacrificial heifer, as spelled out in Mishnah Parah 2:2: “If the horns or the hoofs of the [red] cow are black they are chopped off.”

It is important to note, given the eschatological framework of the Ambrosian banquet, that the red heifer carried distinct messianic connotations: the haftarah (Prophetic) reading for Shabbat Parah was from Ezekiel’s prophecy, and referred to the purification undertaken during the time of final redemption: “I will cleanse you from all your uncleanness and from all your fetishes. . . . Then you shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers, and you shall be My people and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36:25, 28).<sup>60</sup> Given that this miraculous time included the rebuilding of the Temple, and that this rebuilding could be undertaken only by those in a state of absolute purity—that is, those purified by the ritual of the *Parah*

60. The entire portion is Ezekiel 36:16–38.



Figure 29. Parah Adumah, word panel for the Shabbat Parah, fol. 53v, Laud Mahzor, made in Germany, ca. 1270–80, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Or. 321 (photo: Digital Bodleian, CC-BY-NC 4.0).

*Adumah*—the red heifer was the sacrosanct predicate of the messianic era.<sup>61</sup> It was thus a parallel with the donkey, that other enigmatic animal that traces its permuted existence through the length of biblical time, from the twilight of the first Sabbath to the end of days, *aḥarit ha-yamim*, when the Messiah will ride it to Jerusalem’s gates. It is hardly an accident, then, that the ox-head and the donkey-head flank the banquet table in the Ambrosian Tanakh, serving as an eschatological frame for the lions and the eagle—the Chariot manifested as a Jewish body, a beloved trope of Hasidei Ashkenaz—feasting joyously between them.<sup>62</sup>

61. For the discussion of the heifer’s messianic significance, see Blau, “The Red Heifer” and Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 100–103, 147–48nn22–29.

62. On microcosm/macrocosm correspondences, and man as *olam katan*, see Shyovitz, *A Remembrance of His Wonders*, 73–100, especially passages from Samuel (*Sod ha-Yirah* in *Sefer Hasidim*) and his son Judah b. Samuel be-hasid’s *Amarot tehorot hizoniyyot u-fenimiyot*. See in particular *Sefer Yetzirah* and commentaries on it.

### *The Marvelous: Hybrids at the Edges of Reality*

The ox-head, then, forms the nexus of various sutures: between the primordial Behemoth and the divine creature of the Chariot, between the Golden Ox and the Red Heifer. Nonetheless, the main suture it represents remains the one that elides the animal and the human—and it is categorically different from similar kinds of sutures that spawn grotesques in the word panels and the margins of this and other contemporary manuscripts: between birds and plants, between quadrupeds and birds. Only on fol. 38r of the third volume do we see an anthropomorphic face joined to a winged serpentine body and leafy tail stitched to blazingly white human hands. But this golden creature, nestled next to another eagle-plant hybrid within the word panel for Proverbs, is much more akin to the quasi-human centaur on fol. 34v than to the righteous zoocephali at the banqueting table, who are distinguished (like the animal-human concatenations of named biblical figures—David, Saul, Ahasuerus) by their emphatically human behavior. In this manner, these human-bodied animal-headed creatures gesture more obviously to the so-called “monstrous peoples” that were believed to inhabit the edges and the farthest strata of the medieval world.<sup>63</sup>

The existence of these beings is reported primarily by Roman and Christian sources, from Pliny’s *Natural History* and St. Augustine’s subsequent riff on their shared origins with humans: after enumerating various creatures and singling out the cynocephali—the dog-headed humans who could build cities, ride horses, grow spices, and communicate with one another (albeit through barks)—Augustine sweeps away the hearsay about “these monstrosities” and proclaims that “whoever is anywhere born a man, that is, a rational, mortal animal, no matter what unusual appearance he presents in color, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part, or quality of his nature . . . he springs from that one [that is, Adam’s] protoplast.”<sup>64</sup> Closer to the time of the Ambrosian Tanakh’s creation, Vincent de Beauvais described a cynocephalus as a “living creature” with a dog’s head and a human body, smooth-skinned aside from a hairy back, who

63. The term “monstrous races,” historically used to characterize these groups, has been problematized in the recent race studies; see Asa Simon Mittman, “Are the ‘Monstrous Races’ Races?” *post-medieval* 6, no. 1 (2015): 36–51.

64. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: First Series 2*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 315. The sentiment was echoed in the ninth century by Ratramnus, who concluded that the dog-heads should be considered human and therefore able to be converted to Christianity in his *Epistola de Cynocephalis (Patrologiae cursus completus, Series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. [Paris: Migne, 1844–80], 121: cols. 1153–56).

could be perfectly peaceful but could also get angry and savage people.<sup>65</sup> Although cannibalistic, cynocephali, it must be noted, had the potential to be “saved”—that is, converted. In Christian imaginary anthropologies, it must be further noted, they bore more than a passing similarity to Jews: both groups, for instance, were on occasion figured as Golden Calf worshippers.<sup>66</sup>

The 1200s, in fact, saw an uptick in visually constructed kinship between Jewishness and monstrosity. In several thirteenth-century Christian bestiaries, a manticore—described as a ferocious man-eating creature with a man’s face, a lion’s body, a scorpion’s stinger, and possessed of hissing, sibilant speech—is pictured as a beast with caricatured stereotypical “Jewish” features (a beard, a large hooked nose), dressed in the distinctive Jewish hat, or *pilleus cornutus*; in one memorable instance, such a manticore is shown gnawing on a human leg (Fig. 30).<sup>67</sup> Here, the cynocephalus trope is inverted, and a grotesque but

65. Vincent de Beauvais, *Speculum naturale: Version SM Trifaria* (ed. Douai 1624), 31:127: “Eate quoque nostra delatum est animal regi Francie Ludovico, capite fere canino, cetera vero membra corporis habens ut homo. Crura quidem humano more nuda manusque vel brachia, collum album ac nudum, dorsum vero pilosum. Erectus ut homo stabat et ut homo sedebat. . . . Cumque pacatum erat hoc animal instar hominis mitissime ac decentissime se gerebat: at vero furiis agitatum crudelissime movebatur et in homines seviebat” (<https://tinyurl.com/jw4yp39p>). My deep thanks to Barbara Newman for helping me locate the source.

66. Cf., for example, the Jews worshipping the Golden Calf in Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, MS W.106, fol. 13r, and cynocephali worshipping the Golden Calf in London, British Library, MS Harley 3954, fol. 40v. Other monstrous “races” were associated with the lost tribes of Israel: Gog and Magog, for example, who morphed, specifically in German eschatological writing, into the so-called “Red Jews,” ready to burst through the walls erected by Alexander, which separate them from the civilized lands, and to bring on the Apocalypse. See Andrew C. Gow, *The Red Jews: Antisemitism in an Apocalyptic Age, 1200–1600*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 55 (Leiden: Brill, 1995). For more on Jews as members of the monstrous races, see Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 133–36. For Gog and Magog, disguised as the lost tribes of Israel, who acquire monstrous animalistic heads with exaggerated hooked noses, attacking a castle filled to the brim with proper human Christians, see Toulouse, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 815, fol. 49v. For questions of physiognomy and otherness, see Pamela A. Patton, *Art of Estrangement: Redefining Jews in Reconquest Spain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), esp. 70–96; Sara Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible moralisée*, S. Mark Taper Foundation imprint in Jewish Studies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), esp. 14–29; Asa Simon Mittman and Sherry Lindquist, *Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, Wonders* (New York: Morgan Library & Museum, 2018), 90–95.

67. Another example, equally vicious albeit without featuring a disembodied arm, is found in the contemporary London, British Library, MS Royal 12.C.xix, fol. 29v.



Figure 30. *The mantichora as a “Jewish” cannibal, fol. 25r, bestiary, made in England, 1226–50, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodl. 764 (photo: Digital Bodleian, CC-BY-NC 4.0).*

human head crowns the animal body. A contemporaneous enamel medallion features another mythical animal, a wyvern (a bipedal dragon), whose tail ends in expansive vegetational flourishes and whose reptilian neck ends in a *pilleus cornutus*-covered head, complete with a beard and closed eyes—a telltale sign of the Jew “blind” to Christian teachings (Fig. 31).<sup>68</sup> One would run out of space trying to enumerate examples where hooked-nosed demons (quite literally, it would seem, Jews from hell) and Christ’s Jewish tormentors are represented as humans with monstrously animalistic—albeit not animal—heads (e.g., Fig. 32).

Such visual language has led several scholars to read anti-Semitic imagery into zocephalic characters in Hebrew man-

68. *L’Oeuvre de Limoges: émaux limousins du Moyen Age*, ed. Elisabeth Taburet-Delahaye and Barbara Drake Boehm (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1995), 288–91, no. 93; Mittman and Lindquist, *Medieval Monsters*, 95.



Figure 31. *A blind wyvern wearing a pilleus cornutus, medallion, made in France (Limoges), copper and champlevé enamel, before 1227, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, acc. no. 17.190.796 (photo: Open Access, CC0).*

uscripts as well—despite the fact that theriomorphs here display a nobility rather than depravity of features. Heinrich Strauss and Ruth Mellinkoff, for instance, have proposed the perplexing idea that animal-headed humans constitute signs of intolerance wrought by Christian illuminators on the pages of books that were presumably commissioned by and belonged to unsuspecting Jews.<sup>69</sup> The idea, which presumes patrons like Joseph ben Moses to be thick-skulled rubes unable to discern an insult and a desecration of their own books, is palpably absurd. But monstrous associations did bear monstrous results, and at the time of the Ambrosian Tanakh’s creation, Germany was seized by paroxysms of cannibalism accusations, leveled by Christians against Jews, who were indicted on charges of anthropophagy and subsequently imprisoned or murdered.<sup>70</sup> It has been argued, too, that the

69. Heinrich Strauss, *Die Kunst der Juden im Wandel der Zeit und Umwelt* (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1972), 58–61; Ruth Mellinkoff, *Antisemitic Hate Signs in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts from Medieval Germany* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1999). See Epstein’s critique of Mellinkoff in “Re-Presentations of the Jewish Image: Three New Contributions,” *AJS Review* 26, no. 2 (2002): 327–40, at 329, 335–40. These blood libel claims were already documented in France and England by that time.

70. Gow, *The Red Jews*. For example, the execution of the Jews of Fulda took place in 1235, not far from where the Tanakh was created (see 49–50). A different take on the cannibalism trope as a polemic of subversion comes from Kali Steinberg, who suggests that



Figure 32. *Bestial Jews, Jesus before Caiaphas*, detail of fol. 29r, *Salvin Hours*, made in England, ca. 1270, London, British Library, MS Add. 48985 (photo: © British Library Board).

German Pietists were well aware of the content of Christian bestiaries, accessed, perhaps, through public sermons.<sup>71</sup> The banqueting scene in the Ambrosian manuscript might, in fact, hint at its reader-viewers' awareness of the prevalent ethos of the bestial cannibal Jew, and their rejection of that canard. The image departs from rabbinic midrash in one key detail: the righteous in the Ambrosian banquet eat neither Leviathan sashimi nor behemothian steak, as prescribed. Rather, it is bird legs that protrude from their bowls—it would seem they are dining on Ziz instead (Fig. 33).<sup>72</sup> Given the animal affinity between the ox-headed righteous and Behemoth the Ox, the adherence to the rabbinic letter would have suggested that the ox-head was consuming the flesh of

“image appears to reference the language of the oppressor while simultaneously relying on a specifically Jewish viewpoint to be fully understood” (personal communication).

71. See Shyovitz, “Beauty and the Bestiary,” who explores parallels between bestiary compendia of Christian and Pietist writings, and suggests that for both Christians and Jews “wonders of nature’ (mirabilia) and increasingly sophisticated knowledge about the natural world were increasingly becoming fodder for theological speculation” (216).

72. Half a century later, the consumption of all three animals will finally be codified in the halakhic *Shulchan Shel Arba* (4:2): “Some of the meals prepared in the world to come are bodily and intellectual—for both the body and soul. . . . And they are: Leviathan among the fishes, Bar-Yokhnai among the birds. . . . and likewise the Behemoth of the thousand mountains. . . . And the quality of these foods is very profound; they can penetrate into the intellect and purify the heart, like the manna” (trans. at [https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan\\_Shel\\_Arba.4?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Shel_Arba.4?lang=bi)). Frojmovic (“Feasting at the Lord’s Table,” 11–12, 13) suggests that the depiction of fowl on the table, although it may have been a mistake or an “iconographical eccentricity,” is comparable to contemporaneous Christian images that feature similar feasts, and therefore served as a signifier of this feast’s (and therefore its attendants’) nobility.



Figure 33. *The Feast of the Righteous*, detail of fol. 136r, *Ambrosian Tanakh*, made in Germany, ca. 1236–38, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS B.32 INF (photo: © Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Mondadori Portfolio).

Behemoth in an unsettling act of cannibalism. The disjunction between the textual promise of the bovine feast and its pictorial rendition as a chicken dinner seems to allude specifically to and then reject the imputation of devouring one’s own—a visual polemic underscored by the fact that the eagle-headed righteous does not partake in the meal, lifting a cup to its beak instead, as if defying the association between himself and the bird flesh arrayed in front of him. In fact, it might well be the reason that Ziz himself is rendered not as a bird—as he is described in textual sources and pictured in other Jewish contexts—but as a griffin, emphatically different from the eagle zoomorph.<sup>73</sup>

Whether or not the Ambrosian Tanakh acknowledged and subsequently resisted Christian tropes of xenophobia through its own visual polemic is open to discussion. What is of rather more interest here is that the joining of human and animal parts in service of cultural theology was quite vivid in the medieval Jewish imaginary and required no recourse to Christian sources, although it shared a considerable base of knowledge with them.<sup>74</sup> From the early days of Creation,

73. Ziz, for example, is pictured as a bird in the Northern French Miscellany. As Epstein points out, a direct polemic of this sort would be dangerous but not unheard of; he discusses a response to the eucharistic desecration in *The Medieval Haggadah*, 98–104.

74. For the most comprehensive discussion of such hybrid creatures, see David I. Shyovitz, “Unearthing the ‘Children of Cain’: Between Humans, Animals, and Demons in Medieval Jewish Culture,” in *Monsters and Monstrosity in Jewish History: From the Middle Ages to Modernity*, ed. Iris Idelson-Shein and Christian Weise (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 157–80. There were all sorts of other uncanny

hybrids—alongside giants, pygmies, cyclopes, and blemmyae—roamed the earth, and will continue doing so until the end of times, when the coming of the Messiah will be greeted by the generation whose face will be “like the face of a dog in its impudence and shamelessness” (Sanhedrin 97a:4; cf. Sotah 49b:3). Anthropological echoes of cynocephali are clear here, their rancor reflected in images of the stag-and-hare hunt—pictorial symbols of persecution—such as those in the *Laud Mahzor*, where quasi-canine-headed hunters sic their giant dogs on the fleeing prey (Fig. 34).<sup>75</sup> The Geonic midrash *Bereshit Rabbah* 23:6 mentions centaurs: “They asked in the presence of Abba Kohen Bardela: It (Genesis) lists Adam, Seth, and Enosh, and then it is silent? He replied: Until this point, [man was in] the image and form [of his Creator]; from this point on, the generations became corrupted, and centaurs [*kinturin*] were created.”<sup>76</sup> Sirens appear in the Talmud

creatures, from the winged Lilith to the giant Nephilim (children of humans and angels), with many other wonders in between. That there was a shared discourse on monstrosity between Jews and Christians leaves little doubt: the *Alexander Romance* was not the only point of contact, and we know for certain that Gervaise of Tillbury, who was interested in metamorphic relationships between humans and beasts, had made contacts with Jewish communities during his travels throughout Europe (Shyovitz, *A Remembrance of His Wonders*, 152). In general, knowledge circulated between learned Jewish and Christian circles, especially where ontology was concerned; on the shared discourse of divine nothingness, for example, see Elina Gertsman, *The Absent Image: Lacunae in Medieval Books* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 18–19, 111. For commonalities between Ashkenazic Jewish (specifically Pietist) and Christian stories of the marvelous, see Joseph Dan, “Rabbi Judah the Pious and Caesarius of Heisterbach: Common Motifs in Their Stories,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971): 18–27.

75. On images of persecution, see Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 16–38. The clearly demonic and degraded dog-faced generations that greet the apocalyptic era stand in neat balance with the celestial *keruvim*. In the *Laud Mahzor*, Bodleian MS Laud Or. 321. 3, the image of the hunt accompanies the “*El Mitnasse*” *piyyut*. The *piyyut* is similarly accompanied by this scene in the *Michael Mahzor*, Bodleian MS Mich. 617 and 627 (see Sara Offenberg, “Animal Attraction: Hidden Polemics in Biblical Animal Illuminations of the ‘Michael Mahzor,’” *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures* 5 [2018]: 129–53) and the *Leipzig Mahzor*, Universitätsbibliothek MS Voller 1102/I (see Kogman-Appel, who argues that the illumination therein is reflective of ideas of Hasidei Ashkenaz regarding penitence, but that it also carries messianic connotations [*Mahzor from Worms*, 110–12]).

76. Translated in Nosson Slifkin, *Sacred Monsters: Mysterious and Mythical Creatures of Scripture, Talmud and Midrash*, 2nd ed. (Springfield: Zoo Torah, 2011); he similarly lists midrash *Yalkut Shimoni*, Genesis 4:39 and Chronicles 1:1072. קנטורין (*kenturim*). “*Kinturin*” has many meanings, including “inverted” or “quarrelsome”; Etz. Yosef says the meaning is “upside down and inverted, like an ape” ([https://www.sefaria.org/Etz\\_Yosef\\_on\\_Bereishit\\_Rabbah.4.6?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Etz_Yosef_on_Bereishit_Rabbah.4.6?lang=bi)).



Figure 34. Zoocephalic hunters and their giant dogs, word panel for the “*El Mitnasse*” *piyyut*, fol. 38v, *Laud Mahzor*, made in Germany, ca. 1270–80, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Or. 321 (photo: Digital Bodleian, CC-BY-NC 4.0).

and midrashim as well, as do werewolves, who, as it happens, take pride of place in the imaginary of Hasidei Ashkenaz, along with people who can variously turn into cats or donkeys.<sup>77</sup>

77. See Shyovitz, *A Remembrance of His Wonders*, 131–60; David I. Shyovitz, “Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-century Werewolf Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 75, no. 4 (2014): 521–43; and David Rotman, “Monsters, Metamorphosis, and Intra-Community Conflict in the Tales of Rabbi Judah the Pious,” in *Das kulturelle Profil der SchUM-Gemeinden–Literatur, Musik, Theater*, ed. Karl E. Grözinger (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), 83–98 for the discussion of the werewolf and other transformations in Pietist texts. Rabbi Jehudah HaHassid writes, in *Sefer Hasidim*, that just as the snake used to be akin to a person and walk on two legs, so there exist people “who know how to turn into a wolf, cat, or donkey,” quoted in Slifkin, *Sacred Monsters*, at 219. See *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. Judah Wistinetzki and Jacob Freimann (Frankfurt: Wahrmann, 1924), 1575–77. For an analysis of metamorphosis tales, see David Rotman, “At the Limits of Reality: The Marvelous in Medieval Ashkenazic Hebrew Folktales,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (2013): 101–28, at 108–17. He views these tales, however, as an expression of “the narrating community’s attitudes towards the boundaries of its collective identity and especially towards their violation.”

Jewish versions of the Alexander Romance (unillustrated, unfortunately) circulated in Ashkenazic circles; the *Alilot Alexander Mokdon*, or *Tales of Alexander the Macedonian*, features all manner of human-animal hybrids (including the cynocephali and a lion with human feet and hands).<sup>78</sup> Such creatures, it was believed, could be found most easily in a subterranean netherworld—sometimes styled as a land realm, sometimes as a corner of Creation—which passes under different names and which is inhabited by the descendants of Cain, who was himself a hybrid, born from the unholy union between Eve and the serpent.<sup>79</sup>

In Sephardic sources, this land acquires a demonic significance. For instance, the *Zohar* describes an underworld called Arka as the home of Cain, whose overseers are two composite creatures. Their own hybridity is unstable, as they shift between one form and another: “One resembles an ox, the other an eagle, but when they join, they are transformed into the image of a human being,” while at night they turn “into the image of a two-headed serpent.”<sup>80</sup> The word “image” here is notable: it denotes artifice, deceitful resemblance. Their true *substance* ineluctably animalistic, they assume human and ophidian *likeness*. At the same time, their connec-

tion with the creatures of Ezekiel’s vision—not only because they hybridize three of the four divine creatures he describes, but also because they are winged—endows them with distinctive metaphysical flavor.

Conversely, the Ashkenazic sources treat this underworld populated with hybrids rather differently: it is ethereal but not demonic, uncanny but not sinful. Eleazar of Worms calls this realm “Tevel” and describes it in his *Sodei Razaya* as a place populated with no less than 365 different types of creatures, including those “with the heads of lions and the bodies of men.”<sup>81</sup> His work is clearly informed by cosmological midrashim such as the Geonic Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit (The Greater Order of Creation).<sup>82</sup> There, the description of Tevel includes those “whose heads appear like lions and whose bodies appear human” and “those whose heads appear like oxen and whose bodies appear human.”<sup>83</sup> This realm is liminal in every way: the creatures that inhabit it are neither truly human nor truly beastly, and its geography is both topographically terrestrial (hilly and mountainous, with waterways and valleys) and proleptically celestial—the site of eventual judgment and resurrection of the dead. The shorter version of this work, Midrash Konen (or Adonai be-Ḥokhmah Yasad Arez), written sometime after the eleventh century, styles Tevel as the fifth abyss in the sacred geography of the world where, once again, the 365 creatures (*briyot*) make their appearance. Some of them are distinguished by proliferation of body parts, but others are hybrids, described as “humans, whose heads are similar to that of a bull and bodies similar to that of a bull but they speak like humans.”<sup>84</sup> The midrash discusses quarrelsome characteristics of these creatures but

78. *Tales of Alexander the Macedonian: A Medieval Hebrew Manuscript* (MS Bodleian Heb. d. 11): *Text and Translation with a Literary and Historical Commentary*, trans. and ed. Rosalie Reich (New York: Ktav, 1972), 93–97; this version, which may be Sefardi in origin, was nonetheless added to the Ashkenazic Eleazar ben Asher ha-Levi’s *Sefer ha-Zikhronot* (Bodleian MS Heb. d. 11). The different types of Alexander tales are taxonomized in Saskia Dönitz, “Alexander the Great in Medieval Hebrew Traditions,” in *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 21–39. On the classification of the seven known medieval Hebrew versions, see Wout J. van Bekkum, trans. and ed., *A Hebrew Alexander Romance according to MS London, Jews’ College no. 145* (Leuven: Peeters, 1992), 1–34.

79. See, e.g., the Tannaitic Avot D’Rabbi Natan, composed in Talmudic Israel or Babylon between the seventh and the tenth century, chapter 37:9, trans. by David Kasher (Sefaria.org, at [https://www.sefaria.org/Avot\\_D'Rabbi\\_Natan?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Avot_D'Rabbi_Natan?lang=bi)): “There are seven realms: the upper realm, the lower realm, the air of the world, and the four upper areas. Rabbi Meir says: There are seven skies: *Vilon*, *Rakia*, *Shekhakim*, *Zevul*, *Ma’on*, *Machon*, and *Aravot*. The land, likewise, is called by seven names: *Eretz*, *Adama*, *Arka*, *Haravah*, *Yabasha*, *Tevel*, and *Heled*”; see also Rabbi David Kimchi (RaDAK, 1160–1236) for his commentary on Jeremiah 10:11, written in Provence ([https://www.sefaria.org/Radak\\_on\\_Jeremiah.10.11.2?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Radak_on_Jeremiah.10.11.2?lang=bi)): “And in the words of the Rabbis of blessed memory (Genesis Rabbah 13:12): Four names earth was called corresponding to its four corners—*Eretz* עֶרֶץ, *Tevel* תֵּבֵל, *Adama* אֲדָמָה, *Arqa* אֲרָקָה.” Cain himself is seen as a hybrid (if only inwardly), half human (because his mother, Eve, was human), half ophidian (because he traces his paternity from the Edenic serpent); discussed in Shyovitz, “Unearthing the ‘Children of Cain,’” 166.

80. *The Zohar* 1, 9b, pp. 63–64.

81. Curiously, in his *Sefer Tagin*, he describes nations not only with bird beaks but also with dog heads—clearly cynocephali but without an obvious implication of their sinfulness. Eleazar ben Judah, *Sefer Tagin*, ed. Yaakov Basser (Toronto, 2010), 458; see also Moritz Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens und der Cultur der abendländischen Juden, während des Mittelalters und der neueren Zeit* 1 (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1966), 213.

82. Discussed in Shyovitz, “Unearthing the ‘Children of Cain,’” 157–86; parsed in Peter Schäfer, “In Heaven as It Is in Hell: The Cosmology of *Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit*,” in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, ed. Ra’anana S. Boustan and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 233–74. For editions, see *Batei Midrashot*, 2 vols., ed. Avraham J. Wertheimer, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1950–53), 1:19–48 and 1:365–69.

83. Trans. in Shyovitz, “Unearthing the ‘Children of Cain,’” 161.

84. My thanks to Jacob Chatinover (Hebrew College) for his helpful translation of this section. A version of the current text, found on Sefaria.org, was published from a manuscript by Adolph Jellinek in *Bet haMidrash* (Leipzig: Friedrich Nies, 1853 or Jerusalem: Bamberger et Vahrman, 1938), part 5:63–69. Two other versions exist: *Zeh Ma’aseh Bereshit*, which appeared in *Sefer Razi’el ha-Malakh*, and another one published from a manuscript by

stresses their righteousness, and, as does Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit, specifies that the resurrection of the dead will occur in Tevel and that God will sit on the Throne of Glory (or Presence, *kisei ha-kavod*) and “disburse to them good reward, a good portion, and a good heritage” (Midrash Kohen 2:10). Eleazar similarly refers to Tevel’s hybrids specifically as “human beings”—not the demons of the Sephardi sources—who will be apportioned “great reward” at the end of times.<sup>85</sup>

To establish a direct iconographic link between the specific texts of Hasidei Ashkenaz and images in the Ambrosian Tanakh would be a fatuous exercise; to ignore the way these texts may have informed the reception of these images, however, would be irresponsible. Joseph ben Moses, the commissioner of the Tanakh, was, after all, a Pietist: a learned man, likely well educated and familiar with a wide variety of cultural trends, discursive traditions, and visual literacies. In addition to their knowledge of the Talmud, numerous midrashim, and a broad swath of learned commentaries on both, Hasidei Ashkenaz produced a veritable wealth of writings on what David Rotman calls “the marvelous”: liminal hybrid creatures, at once possible and alien, who inhabited God’s worlds, and who, ultimately, would be welcomed at the Feast of the Righteous, reserved, to return one more time to Eleazar of Worms, for “[p]eople of the truth who are involved with the Torah of the Truth.”<sup>86</sup> The outward countenance and apocalyptic circumstance of the Ambrosian celebrants establishes affinities with these texts that casually marry hybridity and eschatology, styling the heavenly banquet and, indeed, the entire manuscript, as a Tevel-like, liminal space: at once exalted and mundane, ethereal and terrestrial, utterly familiar and strikingly alien.

### *Reception and Visual Difficulty*

The study of the Ambrosian Tanakh must be as multi-vectored and multiplex as its images that refuse to be comprehended at once. At stake here is the very system of signification that binds the visual and the discursive in a vivid, intellectually

demanding mode of reception characteristic of all medieval Ashkenazic manuscripts, distilled and foregrounded through the trope of animality. The meaning of the Ambrosian images builds slowly, as the reader-viewer journeys through the text: from Adam and Eve, who stand outside the word panel, their backs to the beholder, facing the beasts over whom they have dominion; across the inhabitants of the other books of the Torah, their faces incomplete and muddled, so human and yet so othered; across the theriomorphs of the Prophets and Writings, so alien and yet so familiar; across a panoply of beasts, imaginary and real; to the crescendo of the final pages. Here, in the vicinity of the divine Chariot and below the three primeval monsters, the righteous assemble in a phantasmagorical kaleidoscope of associations, loosely held together by the Pietist conception of the created universe as a space that runs the gamut, effortlessly and naturally, from the bestial to the divine. Complex and inconceivable, animals painted on animal skin, together they manifest all strata of divine reality, temporal and geographical: people of the truth and anthropomorphized twilight creatures, celestial theriomorphs and primordial beasts, kings of Judea and Judea itself personified, patriarchs of the old and hybrids of the present. Unlike the rest of the inhabitants of the Tanakh, they are not hemmed in by the word panels; here, instead, the painted background creates a quasi-frame for the unpainted parchment, pictorial freedom that harks back to the images of Adam and Eve stepping outside the panels’ discursive confines onto the bare vellum of the page. And so the cycle of reading can commence anew, linking, and linking once again, the visionary future to the legendary past.

This cyclical, repeated, associative manner of looking at images is consonant with the cyclical, repeated, associative manner in which the Torah was meant to be studied alongside Prophets and Writings and scholarly commentaries. The nature of biblical study, which was elevated by Eleazar of Worms, is defined in the Gemara as a combination of public reading and individual repetition: “Rav Huna bar Yehuda said that R. Ami said: A person should always complete his Torah portions with the congregation. The congregation reads a particular Torah portion every Shabbat, and during the week prior to each Shabbat, one is required to read the Bible text of the weekly portion twice and the translation once” (Berakhot 8a). The obligation to read the weekly Torah portion, which will be heard in the synagogue on the coming Shabbat, twice, in Hebrew, followed by a translation or a commentary of that portion—*Shnayim mikra ve-echad targum*—persists to this day. We might note that by the sixteenth century, an additional, no doubt centuries-old, rule was codified in the Shulkan Arukh: “RaShI’s commentary shares the status of Targum, and those who fear Heaven will read the parashah with both RaShI’s commentary and the Targum” (Orah Haim 285:1)—particularly significant if we remember that Joseph ben Moses

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Louis Ginzberg, *Ginzei Schechter 1* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1928), 182–87. The text also cites creatures with body-part proliferation: some “have two heads, and four ears, and four eyes, and two noses, and two mouths, and four arms, but one body.”

85. Eleazar of Worms, *Sodei razzya* (Tel Aviv: Barzani, 2004), 34. Discussed in Shyovitz, “Unearthing the ‘Children of Cain,’” 172.

86. Eleazar of Worms, *Perush ha-Rokeah ‘al ha-Torah*, ed. Hayyim Konyevsky (New York: Klugman, 1978–86), trans. in Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, 78. See Rotman, “Monsters, Metamorphosis, and Intra-Community Conflict,” 83, for the definition of the “marvelous,” reiterated in his “Textual Animals Turned into Narrative Fantasies: The Imaginative Middle Ages,” *Interfaces 5* (2018): 65–77.

commissioned a RaShI commentary just a few years prior to ordering the Tanakh.<sup>87</sup>

The physical composition of the Ambrosian Tanakh suggests that it was meant to be studied at home in its codex form, rather than at the synagogue, where the weekly portion of the Torah, recited before the haftarah, had to be read from a Torah scroll. Torah scrolls were not to be illuminated, vocalized, or otherwise transformed, and they were meant to be heard as they were read publicly; codices like the Ambrosian Tanakh, vocalized and illuminated, and accompanied by the Targum, were meant to be individually read and seen. In any event, the considerable size and weight of the manuscript would have made it prohibitive to carry to the synagogue and back every Sabbath.<sup>88</sup> Joseph ben Moses, then, would have used the manuscripts for private study informed by repetition and reconsideration, the meaning of the words augmented by the complex inter-visual conversation between and among the images, the reading both purposefully difficult and intentionally multivalent. He would have been guided, perhaps, by the Mishnaic exhortation to “turn [the Torah] over, and [again] turn it over, for all is therein. . . . According to the labor is the reward.”<sup>89</sup> With each rereading, a new meaning of the passage might reveal itself; with each relooking, a new visual association might similarly manifest. Such visual and intellectual difficulty—predicated on the relationship between images and texts and, above all, images and images as they unfold across the book and as they call to other images in other books, extending, enriching, and subverting one an-

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87. Shalev-Eyni argues precisely for such a use of the Ambrosian Tanakh and suggests that the manuscripts and the RaShI commentary were likely studied in tandem (*Jews among Christians*, 8). Inter-visual conversations between these two books, which would make a fascinating comparison, are outside the scope of this study. For observances and practices in medieval Ashkenazic communities, see Elisheva Baumgarten, *Practicing Piety in Medieval Ashkenaz: Men, Women, and Everyday Religious Observance*, Jewish Culture and Contexts (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). Definitive ways in which these manuscripts were used are not clear; see chapter 2 of David Stern, *The Jewish Bible: A Material History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 63–135.

88. This was not the case, for instance, for mahzorim, which, while commissioned separately and kept in their owners' houses, were carried to synagogues for relevant holidays and there publicly used by the prayer leader. See Katrin Kogman-Appel, “Pictorial Messages in Mediaeval Illuminated Hebrew Books: Some Methodological Considerations,” in *Jewish Manuscript Cultures*, ed. Irina Wandrey (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 443–68, at 453.

89. Pirkei Avot 5:22–23, trans. at [https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei\\_Avot.5?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.5?lang=bi): “Turn it over, and [again] turn it over, for all is therein. And look into it; And become gray and old therein; And do not move away from it, for you have no better portion than it. . . . According to the labor is the reward.”

other—has been long established for Christian manuscripts; it would be naïve to turn a blind eye to such intentional complexity in Jewish manuscripts.<sup>90</sup>

The place of the viewer in this difficult reading is complicated by the Ambrosian Tanakh's resolute animality. Zoocephalic beings in the Ambrosian Tanakh, surrounded as they are by images of other beasts—drawn from nature and legend—incite category confusion between “the marvelous” and “the monstrous”: their bodies, to quote J. J. Cohen, are cultural bodies, possessed of a “genetic uncertainty principle” that puts them directly at the crossroads of fantasy and anxiety.<sup>91</sup> At the same time, they are insistently figured *as* humans—unlike their predecessors in the first volume of the Tanakh. There, the distance between the beholder and the book's protagonists is palpable and willful, reified by averted, blank, or partially rendered faces. Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses—all disallow the very possibility of a reciprocal gaze, their ostensible humanity rendered unfamiliar. Paradoxically, it is instead the zoocephali of the two other volumes who encourage close engagement with the viewer, their gestures vivid, their snouts, muzzles, and beaks complete and expressive.<sup>92</sup> Because zoocephalism carries through to the image of the messianic future, to the Banquet of the Righteous, it seems to bridge the past of the prophets and the future of the Jews, implicitly comprehending the reader's present in its temporal arc. Readers, too, become putative zoocephali; the animal-heads are their brethren. When the animal skin of the parchment and the human skin of the reader-viewer touch, the convergence between the two deepens, along with another category confusion—this time between the viewer and what is being viewed. The active participation of the beholder in the re-enactment of sacred narratives is more familiar from the haggadah, which directs its readers to reimagine their flight from Egyptian bondage in what Epstein calls an explicit “commandment of engaged memory.”<sup>93</sup> Here, in the Tanakh, such a commandment is implicit: guided by images rather than by text, the

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90. On an excellent treatment of this topic in Christian manuscripts, see, e.g., Alexa Sand, “Vision, Devotion, and Difficulty in the Psalter Hours ‘of Yolande of Soissons,’” *Art Bulletin* 87, no. 1 (2005): 6–23.

91. “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeremy J. Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–25, at 4.

92. See Epstein, *The Medieval Haggadah*, on a similar observation about the expressiveness of griffin- and bird-headed figures (53–54).

93. Epstein, *The Medieval Haggadah*, 1. The impetus for such sensory engagement with the *haggadot* has been explored, in particular, by Adam S. Cohen in “The Multisensory Haggadah,” in *Les cinq sens au Moyen Âge*, ed. Eric Palazzo (Paris: Cerf, 2016): 305–31.

viewer is called to engage in the prospective, or imaginative, memory of sitting at the banquet table, among the righteous, and at the very end of time.

Among the known extant illuminated Jewish manuscripts, the Ambrosian Tanakh is the earliest example to employ zoocephalic images. We may perhaps look at it as an experiment, adopted and refined in subsequent Ashkenazic manuscripts. In the Tanakh, the interplay between facial obscuration and facial transformation is used to a rich and deliberately unsettling (not to say disorienting) effect, offering up to the viewer a veritable

smorgasbord—or, more aptly, a heavenly feast—of associative meanings. Eventually, zoocephalism became a visual idiom that crystalized, variously, into a tool of polemic, an ontological device to mitigate transgressive representation, a social and moral commentary, and a mechanism to set one group apart from another. Over the next two hundred years, this idiom was sharpened and perfected; it was cultivated and elaborated; it was made more consistent and visually sustained; and, by the middle of the fourteenth century, it had run its course, disappearing from medieval Jewish manuscripts for good.

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