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# ИСТОРИКО-КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

**Olga Rakitianskaia**, *University of South Africa*,  
*olga1821@gmail.com*

## BIG CATS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE: ANTHROPOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF IMAGE DUALITY

*Abstract:* The present article examines the duality of the symbolic (sacred and social) imagery of big cats (the lion and the leopard) in the Hebrew Bible. The author considers the cultural and historical context of this duality, as well as its parallels in Egyptian and Near Eastern cultures, and suggests its possible anthropological origins: *coincidentia oppositorum* as a general pattern of human mentality, as well as predator-prey and predator-scavenger relations between large felids and *Homo* genus (including archaic *Homo sapiens* and contemporary hunter-gatherers).

*Keywords:* lion, leopard, big cats, feline imagery, feline symbolism, duality, Hebrew Bible, human evolution, hominid evolution, scavenging, feline predation.

**Ольга Сергеевна Ракитянская**, *Университет Южной Африки*

## ДУАЛЬНОСТЬ ОБРАЗА БОЛЬШИХ КОШЕК В ЕВРЕЙСКОЙ БИБЛИИ И ЕЕ АНТРОПОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ ИСТОКИ

*Резюме:* В настоящей статье анализируется дуальность символического (сакрального и социального) образа крупных кошачьих (льва и леопарда) в еврейской Библии. Рассматривается культурно-исторический контекст этой дуальности, а также ее связь с аналогичными образами в культуре Древнего Египта и Ближнего Востока, и высказываются предположения о ее возможных антропологических истоках: *coincidentia oppositorum* как универсальной структуре человеческого мышления и отношениях «хищник-жертва» и «хищник-падальщик» между крупными кошачьими и представителями рода *Homo* (в том числе древними *Homo sapiens* и современными охотниками-собираателями).

*Ключевые слова:* лев, леопард, большие кошки, крупные кошачьи, образ больших кошек, символика больших кошек, дуальность, еврейская Библия, эволюция человека, эволюция гоминид, падальщики.

Big cats have always occupied a special place in human culture. Their images are found in Paleolithic and Neolithic visual art, in ancient mythologies and poetry, in sacred texts, in decorations of temples and palaces, on banners of kings and warlords, in ancient and modern emblems of families and states... Even peoples and nations that never came into contact with big cats in the wild, but had only heard of them from their neighbours (or neighbours of their neighbours), assigned an important place to these animals in their cultures. The cultural image of big cats is always connected to the most important issues, problems, and phenomena of human life: life and death, gods and rulers, good and evil. Few animals have enjoyed similar rapt attention in human culture throughout the world and epochs — especially considering the fact that big cats have never been an object of human economic activities: they have never been systematically hunted for meat and skin (the latter mostly had a sacred and/or social rather than economic value, even in the modern Western society where it symbolizes social status) or bred as domestic animals. Yet something always drew and continues to draw human imagination towards big cats, causing humans to place these animals on the most important, core positions in their cultural imagery.

The Hebrew Bible is no exception to this universal principle. The big cats of the Near Eastern and Northern African regions — the lion and the leopard — are frequently mentioned in biblical texts. Their image in the Bible is usually metaphorical rather than purely zoological and documentary — in other words, it is not just a casual mention of animals encountered by authors and characters of the texts in their everyday life, but an important cultural archetype, laden with manifold meanings.

The present study is an attempt to briefly analyze the framework and possible anthropological background of these meanings, in order to place them in a broader context of universal human culture and thinking patterns.

## 1. LION

Lion is one of the most frequently (more than 150 times<sup>1</sup>) mentioned animals in the Hebrew Bible. Seven different words are used to denote specific kinds of this animal<sup>2</sup>: אַרְיֵה *arjeh* / אַרְיָי *'ārī* — adult (male) lion, קַפִּיר *kəfir* — young lion, לָבִיא *lāvi*' / לַבִּיָּא *ləvijjā*' — probably lioness, גּוּר *gūr* /

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<sup>1</sup> Kaplan 1981, Strawn 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Botterweck 1972, Riede 2010.

גֹּר *gôr* — lion cub, לַיִשׁ *lajiš* and שַׁחַל *šāchal* — probably subspecies, such as Barbary lion.

All these words are mostly used in metaphors, though often pointing at typical external and behavioural features of the lion as animal species. The three main figures symbolized by (and metaphorically described as) lions are warrior, king, and God.

An in-depth analysis of leonine metaphors in the Hebrew Bible has been attempted by B. A. Strawn in his book *What is Stronger than a Lion? Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (2005). It is a detailed study of various aspects of the leonine image and its historical background in the ancient Hebrew culture, linking it to other contemporaneous cultural traditions of the Near East and Egypt; the royal and divine functions of lions in the Bible are largely explained by Strawn through Near Eastern and Egyptian influences, as well as through common Semitic cultural traditions, which, of course, can hardly be disputed. Yet Strawn in his study focuses mostly on philological and historical aspects and origins of the leonine image; its possible anthropological origins are evidently out of the scope of his book and therefore require further research from other scholars. An important aspect of the leonine image in this respect, which Strawn briefly mentions but leaves undiscussed, is its constant and manifest duality.

In Western European culture, the lion is usually associated with expressly positive notions, such as nobility, bravery, royalty in a positive sense, etc. Even when this fundamentally positive image is satirized (e.g. Leo in *Le Roman de Renart*), the satire is always based on reversion or lack of the positive features that are supposed to belong to the leonine image in European culture by default. In contrast to this, a metaphorical lion in the Hebrew Bible — often denoted by exactly the same words, and within the same text — can equally be a positive or a negative symbol *per se*.

## 1.2. LION AS LEADER (PEOPLE) OF ISRAEL

Lion is frequently mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as a symbol of leaders and/or people of Israel. Genesis (49:8–9) likens Judah and his tribe to lions (לְבִיָּא, אַרְיֵה), thereby emphasizing their might and invincibility in a sense evidently positive for Israel. Considering the key role that the tribe of Judah played in Hebrew history (the very word for Jewish people in Hebrew, יְהוּדִים, originates from Judah's name, king David belonged to this tribe, Jerusalem was the main city of the Kingdom of Judah, etc.), the leonine image in this metaphor takes on an expressly positive character, corresponding in many respects to the above-mentioned noble lion-king of the medieval and modern cultural traditions of Western Europe.

In Deuteronomy (33:22), the tribe of Dan is also likened to a lion (אַרְיֵה), in the same positive sense (lion as noble and mighty leader) as mentioned above.

It is therefore no wonder that king Solomon chose lion images (אַרְיֹת, אַרְיִים) as decorations of his throne, evidently intended to symbolize his royal power (I Kings 10:18–20).

The people of Israel in general — in its ideal embodiment, such as it is supposed to be under the rule of the Messiah, redeemed, purified, and restored in its might — is also positively likened to a mighty lion (אַרְיָה, כְּפִיר). A fragment from Micah (5:7/8) is worth citing here, as its wording of the leonine metaphor is quite significant for the present discussion:

*“And among the nations the remnant of Jacob, surrounded by many peoples, shall be like a lion (אַרְיָה) among the animals of the forest, like a young lion (כְּפִיר) among the flocks of sheep, which, when it goes through, treads down and tears in pieces (טָרַף), with no one to deliver (וְאֵין מַצִּיל)”*<sup>3</sup>.

Yet Israelite leaders (and people) are not always likened to lions in a positive sense. Zephaniah (3:3) describes unrighteous officials (princes) of wicked Jerusalem as roaring lions (אַרְיֹת שֹׁאֲגִים). The same expression (אַרְיֵי נֶהָם) is used in Proverbs (28:15) to describe a wicked (Israelite) ruler in general. Psalms (22:14, 58:7) also describe wicked and sinful enemies of the righteous Israelite (apparently among his own people) as (roaring and tearing) lions (אַרְיָה טָרַף וְשֹׁאֵג, כְּפִירִים).

A similar example is found in Job (4:7–11), where sinners are presented as roaring lions (שֹׁאֲגַת אַרְיָה וְקוֹל שֹׁחַל, כְּפִירִים, לֵישׁ לְבִיא) that God shall leave without prey (טָרַף) and destroy. This fragment is especially interesting because of the number of lion terms used in it (5 out of 7).

## 1.2. LION AS ENEMY OF ISRAEL

Besides inner goods and evils, a lion in the Hebrew Bible can also symbolize something completely outward and foreign, manifestly hostile and alien to Israel in general, an active source of death and destruction.

In I Samuel (17:34–36), David (himself a member of the tribe of Judah, “a lion offspring”) likens his Philistine adversary to a lion (אַרְיָה), but evidently without any intention to praise the former’s might or bravery. David remembers real lions he used to kill when defending his sheep and likens his enemy to these animals to emphasize his own power — as well as inevitability of the Philistine’s defeat. The leonine image is used here to describe an enemy of both the people of Israel and their God.

Jeremiah, with his ubiquitous leonine metaphors (the Book of Jeremiah is the most lion-full text of the Hebrew Bible), also applies different lion terms (גּוֹר, כְּפִיר, אַרְיָה) to enemies of Israel — and not just some abstract “enemy in general”, but concrete people and states personally hated by the author and his audience: kings of Assyria and Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar), kingdoms (people)

<sup>3</sup> Cit. New Revised Standard Version.

of Babylon and Edom (2:14–15, 49:19–20, 50:17, 50:44–45, 51:36–39). These lions roar (יִשְׁאַגוּ, נִתְּנוּ קוֹלָם) to display their hostile and destructive power.

Ezekiel (32:2) uses the image of a young lion (כַּפִּיר) to describe the Egyptian pharaoh that is to be severely punished by God of Israel. Nahum (2:11–13) describes Nineveh as a whole pack of lions (גֹּר, לְבִיא, כַּפִּיר, אֲרִיָּה) that had been tearing (טָרַף) their prey (טָרֶף) in pieces before the divine punishment destroyed them utterly to the benefit of Israel.

All these examples present roaring and tearing lion enemies as adversaries of Israel and their God at the same time. Yet not all lion enemies are thus unambiguously evil (even though all of them are equally destructive). Some of these enemies apparently “play” against Israel — but on the side of God, thereby becoming instruments of the divine will (and divine punishment). Isaiah (5:24–29) is worth citing here:

*They [people of Israel] have rejected the instruction of the LORD of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them... He will raise a signal for a nation far away, and whistle for a people at the ends of the earth; here they come, swiftly, speedily!.. Their roaring (שִׁאָגָה) is like a lion (לְבִיא), like young lions (כַּפִּירִים) they roar (יִשְׁאַגוּ); they growl (וַיִּנְהָמוּ) and seize their prey (טָרֶף), they carry it off, and no one can rescue (וְאֵין מַצִּיל).*

Considering the importance of God in the life of Israel and the overall relationship between God and Israel in the Hebrew Bible, this image, despite its destructiveness, can hardly be viewed as negative. The wording of the fragment displays interesting parallels with Micah (5:7/8), cited above, resulting in a somewhat paradoxical situation: the ideal people of Israel, triumphing over their enemies, are described with the same words and expressions as enemies destroying and triumphing over sinful Israel.

### 1.3. LION AS GOD OF ISRAEL

This paradox grows deeper in God-related leonine metaphors. In Hosea (5:14), the roaring and tearing lion is God of Israel himself, punishing his own people for their sins:

For I will be like a lion (שִׁחֹל) to Ephraim, and like a young lion (כַּפִּיר) to the house of Judah. I myself will tear (אֶטְרֶף) and go away; I will carry off, and no one shall rescue (מִצִּיל וְאֵין).

Again, the wording here displays evident parallels with the above-cited fragments from Micah and Isaiah. A roaring and tearing lion, described in exactly the same terms and expressions, can equally be the people of Israel, the enemy of Israel, and God of Israel.

Despite the fact that the leonine image is frequently used to describe sinners and enemies, it is also the most prevalent animal metaphor for God in the Hebrew Bible. It is usually the punishing God, God the destroyer — be it for the enemies of Israel or for Israel itself having sinned against its God.

Lamentations (3:1–11), Isaiah (38:13), and Job (10:16) use lion images (לְשׂוֹחַל, אֲרִי, אַרְיֵה) to describe this punishing God that persecutes sinners and adversaries. Hosea (13:6–8) in a similar passage uses four different animal images to describe God the punisher — two of them are lion images (and 3 out of 4 are feline):

They were satisfied, and their heart was proud; therefore they forgot me. So I will become like a lion (לְשׂוֹחַל) to them, like a leopard (לְפָרְדָּיִם) I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, and will tear open the covering of their heart; there I will devour them like a lion (לְבַיָּא), as a wild animal would mangle them.

Yet this image of the lion God is not only terrible and menacing. The leonine imagery maintains its duality in God-related symbolism. The same Book of Hosea (11:8–11), along with the above-cited description of God as a dangerous and destroying lion, uses a leonine image to describe yet another side of divinity — the merciful and saving one.

My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender... They shall go after the LORD, who roars (אֲרִיִּים) like a lion (אֲרִיִּים); when he roars (אֲרִיִּים), his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come... and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

Yet again, the Bible presents the image of a roaring lion — but this time its roar, though described in exactly the same terms as that of a dangerous and killing lion, is not intended to intimidate or express evil hostility. Quite the contrary: it is a mighty but tender and merciful roar, a saving call to be followed. Paradoxically, the lion God acts here like a typical Near Eastern shepherd: using his voice to guide and care for his flock that follows him. Two natural antagonists — a feline predator and a shepherd — are combined in one image.

#### 1.4. LION AS GOD AND SHEPHERD

This paradoxical combination of lion and shepherd deserves special attention. It cannot be explained through everyday experience of Hebrew shepherds: unlike wolf, which can (theoretically speaking) be tamed and/or associated with dogs (as proved by some cultures and languages, such as Adyghe<sup>4</sup>),

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<sup>4</sup> In ancient Adyghe language, the word хьэ meant both “dog” and “wolf”. In modern Adyghe, this word means “dog” only, but wolf is sometimes called “мэзыхь” (lit. “forest dog”). See Kumakhov and Kumakhova, 1998; Bagirokov, 2010.

a lion in its relation to shepherd is always an enemy, a danger, a human killer and cattle stealer.

Of course Hebrew shepherds of biblical times (such as David, before he became a king) did have everyday experience with real lions. The Hebrew Bible provides not only documentary, but also a metaphorical example of it: in Amos 3:12, God is likened to a brave shepherd that rescues his sheep (the people of Israel) from the mouth of a lion. Yet this is just one — and only — example where God stands on the natural side of relations between lions and shepherds. In all the other divinity-related lion-shepherd metaphors the images of aggressive predator and protective shepherd blend with each other in such a way that it is extremely difficult — in fact, almost impossible — to draw a clear distinction between them. K. Nielsen (2007), analyzing these paradoxical lion-shepherd metaphors in the Hebrew Bible, interprets the combination of lion and shepherd in divine imagery as God of Israel being “like a shepherd for his people but towards others like a lion”. Considering the above-cited fragment of Hosea 11:8–11, where God acts towards his people as a shepherd in the form of a lion (and other passages, such as Amos 3:8, where God is depicted as a roaring lion, *שָׁאֵג אֶרְיָהּ*, in the sense that he grants prophets of Israel the ability to prophesize), I would rather say that God of the Hebrew Bible is (metaphorically speaking) a dualistic lion that saves and kills, provides and bereaves at the same time.

A highly illustrative example of this duality can be found in another metaphorical passage of Hosea (6:1), also noted and commented on by Nielsen:

Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is he who has torn (*טָרַף*), and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up.

God is not directly called a lion here; yet, as Nielsen argues, the verb *טָרַף*, used to describe his actions, clearly refers the readers to the leonine imagery. Other examples of leonine metaphors, examined in the present article, substantiate this view: “tearing lion”, just as “roaring lion”, is a kind of set formula for the Hebrew Bible authors, and therefore the usage of this highly characteristic verb can hardly be accidental. Yet “healing” and “binding up” is just as characteristic of shepherds as tearing is of lions. Both actions — tearing and healing — have one and the same object here: the people of Israel. It is again the lion shepherd, the dualistic lion that destroys and protects, gives life and takes it away.

Thus, it has been demonstrated that the leonine image in the Hebrew Bible is essentially dualistic. It maintains its duality on all levels: people of Israel versus enemies of Israel, severe God versus merciful God, etc. Usage of specific Hebrew terms for lion has apparently no or very little connection to aspects of this duality: same terms and formulae can describe both the “positive” and

the “negative” sides of these dualistic semantic pairs. Duality does not depend on specific texts either: a lion can symbolize both “negative” and “positive” notions within the same text.

How can this duality of the leonine image be explained? As has just been demonstrated, biological characteristics of the lion as species and everyday experience of Hebrew shepherds are not enough: they may explain a certain prevalence of “negative” lion metaphors over the “positive” ones in the Hebrew Bible, but are unable to substantiate the duality itself. It is clear that there must be other cultural, historical and possibly anthropological reasons. Yet before proceeding to discuss these possible reasons, it is necessary to examine another feline image of the Hebrew Bible: that of the leopard.

## 2. LEOPARD

Unlike lion, leopard (לִפְאָר) is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible only six times — and one of them dubious, as the context in Habakkuk 1:8 suggests cheetahs rather than leopards (“their horses are swifter than leopards/ לִפְאָרִים”). Yet the rest of these examples, despite their fewness, are very characteristic of the leopard as species — and quite significant for the present discussion, as the biblical image of the leopard, like that of the lion, also demonstrates duality.

All the fragments where leopard is mentioned are metaphorical or quasi-metaphorical (poetically descriptive), though displaying evident knowledge of the species’ natural habits, such as lying in ambush for its (human) prey in the nearest vicinity of the prey’s dwelling. A leopard can symbolize evil and sinners (Jeremiah 13:23), God’s punishment of evil and sinners (Jeremiah 5:6), and God himself (Hosea 13:7). Thus, approximately the same duality — though somewhat less elaborate, probably due to the fewness of examples — can be observed here as in the leonine imagery. This duality also does not depend on specific terms (there is only one term for leopard in Hebrew) or texts (two of the above-mentioned contrasting examples — evil versus divine punishment of evil — come from the same Book of Jeremiah). It is therefore possible to speak about a general big cat duality in the Hebrew Bible.

An interesting fact is that in most of these examples (except for the dubious one and Jeremiah 13:23) leopard is paired with lion. This feline pair may be accompanied by other animal images (bear, wolf), but these other animals may as well vary or be absent (as in Song of Songs 4:8), while lion and leopard always stay together. They seem to form an archetypal pair that may be related to the cultural linguistic phenomenon discussed below.

### 3. NOSTRATIC RELATIONS OR UNIVERSAL PATTERN?

The persistent pairing of the lion and the leopard in the Hebrew Bible reminds one of F. Kammerzell's (1994) hypothesis of the words (roots) for "lion" and "leopard" forming a unique pair throughout Indo-European and Afro-Asiatic (including Semitic) languages: he argues that a pair of roots, *\*lw/rw* and *\*pr/prd*, meaning "lion" and "leopard" respectively, can be traced throughout these languages from the Neolithic epoch onwards. W. van Binsbergen (2003), elaborating on this hypothesis, argues that it can be extended to the Nostratic level. Now, the position of Afro-Asiatic languages in the Nostratic macrofamily is largely disputed; some scholars, such as Dolgopolsky (2008) and Starostin (2007), do include the Afro-Asiatic in this family, while other, such as Greenberg (2000–2002), are more reserved in this respect. Yet, however that may be (and whether one accepts the Nostratic theory at all), it is certain that Hebrew for many centuries developed in the immediate vicinity of other peoples speaking Nostratic (or Indo-European and Afro-Asiatic) languages, which, regardless of a natural relation, inevitably resulted in mutual linguistic and cultural influences. Furthermore, it is possible that Kammerzell's hypothesis, despite dealing with specific groups of languages only, has thereby uncovered a part of a universal phenomenon, common to human culture and thinking in general.

Kammerzell argues — and demonstrates through a comparative linguistic analysis, later attested by van Binsbergen — that *\*lw/rw* and *\*pr/prd* are the only two specific animal names (besides domesticated animals, which is a culturally, historically and hence linguistically different case) that display such stable continuity throughout so many languages and epochs. The only other possible root, also denoting a specific animal species (not just a generalized group of animals, such as "wild animal" or "insect") and common to such a wide variety of languages since the Neolithic, is *\*hur-/\*hor-*, meaning "eagle" or "falcon"<sup>5</sup>. Yet the meaning of this root is not as clear as that of the two above-mentioned feline ones; besides, the latter are the only two that frequently and unmistakably occur as a pair<sup>6</sup> (e.g. the leopard and the lion as adjoining or binary symbols of Near Eastern goddesses, as alternating symbols of Hittite kings, etc). This apparently points to some special significance of these two animals, the lion and the leopard, in human culture since very early times.

Hebrew, in particular, seems to substantiate Kammerzell's hypothesis only in part: while *לָבִיא* *lāvi'* / *לַבְיָא* *lavijjā'* may indeed be related to the *\*lw* root or its similar<sup>7</sup>, the Hebrew word for leopard, *נֶמֶר*, can hardly be linked to *\*pr/prd*. Yet Kammerzell's suggested etymology of the *\*pr/prd* is "to rip, to tear" — which immediately refers one to *טָרַף*, "to tear", one of the two verbs

<sup>5</sup> Bomhard 1984; Bomhard & Kerns 1994; van Binsbergen 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Kammerzell 1994; van Binsbergen 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Dolgopolsky 2008.

idiomatically used in the Hebrew Bible to describe a lion. The reason why the leopard as “the tearing beast” is thus replaced with the lion may be the latter’s greater impact on the life of Hebrew herdsmen (leopards, being smaller and solitary animals, are not as dangerous to livestock as lions and prefer rocky habitats with dense vegetation, which also limits their possible encounters with livestock. Note that shepherd-predator descriptions and metaphors in the Hebrew Bible feature lions, bears, and wolves, but never leopards).

It is probable that in prehistoric religion and/or worldview the lion and the leopard formed a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a binary unity of opposites, such as, according to many scholars<sup>8</sup>, is typical for universal human perception, cognition, and description of the surrounding world (subdividing this world into male and female, light and dark, good and evil, own and alien, etc). It is worth noting that the lion and the leopard in many cultures of the world (such as Ancient Egypt and China) are traditionally associated with the sun and the moon respectively, which also indirectly points to their forming a universal or at least very ancient and widespread pair of opposites, united in their very oppositeness. It is even possible that the initial duality line in the Hebrew (or generally Semitic, or Near Eastern) culture had been drawn between these two animals, the lion and the leopard, but in the course of time and history concentrated mostly in the image of lion as the more significant and conspicuous animal of the two in the region.

#### 4. NEAR EASTERN PARALLELS

Many parallels can be drawn between the dual feline images in Hebrew and other Near Eastern and Asia Minor cultures. Yet, in contrast to the predominantly masculine image of the lion and the leopard in the Hebrew Bible, these other cultures often associate these animals with cults of female deities, especially Mother goddesses.

One of the earliest and most characteristic examples of this is found in the Neolithic shrines of Çatalhöyük, with their numerous sculpted and painted felines (mostly identified as leopards, though some of them might as well be lions or lionesses), symbolically associated with images of what seems to be an important female deity, probably a Great Mother. Great Mothers in all cultures of the world are dual figures: they are deities associated with both life and death, reproduction and destruction. This may probably be the case in Çatalhöyük: a figurine found in one of the shrine areas depicts an obese woman with full breasts, extended belly, and accentuated genitals, sitting on a throne in a posi-

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<sup>8</sup> Eliade 1958; Lévi-Strauss 1962a; Lévi-Strauss 1962b; Leroi-Gourhan 1965; Kobo 2002; van Binsbergen 2003.

tion that can equally be interpreted as royal and birth-giving (it may also be both). On the back of the throne, a human skeleton is depicted; the woman's arms rest on two large felines (probably leopards) and her feet stand on human skulls. Thus, a close association between life and death, a strong duality of this image is evident. Some scholars<sup>9</sup> argue that the felids of this figurine (and of the Çatalhöyük imagery in general) are not symbols of a female Mother deity, but rather of male hunters that kill to provide meat for their community, thereby supporting women and ensuring reproduction (that is why the female figurine in childbirth leans on leopards). Yet none of these arguments deny the overall duality of the big cat image (whether male or female) as killing and life-giving (life-supporting) at the same time.

It is also worth noting that leopards (felids) in Çatalhöyük are mostly depicted in pairs. Can this be related to the dualistic nature of the feline image?

The leopard and the lion are also closely associated with the cult of Inanna-Ishtar (Ashtaroth, Astarte)<sup>10</sup>, a goddess worshipped throughout the Mesopotamian and Semitic world and a perfect example of pronounced duality. Ishtar is a Mother deity and a warrior deity at the same time; a goddess of love (fertility), war, and death. In Babylon, she could be depicted either holding a child or holding weapons and clad in armor (and riding a lion); I Samuel 31:10 mentions Philistines putting the trophy armor of a fallen Hebrew king in the temple of Astarte. It is interesting that Ishtar was also associated with the evening and the morning stars — can this perhaps be related to the sun and moon dualistic unity of lions and leopards?

These two animals accompany Ishtar everywhere: their images are included in her images, their bones are found in her sanctuaries, their guise is used by dancing men during her festivals, and even her sacred bird Imdugud is lion-headed. One of her epithets in Assyria was *labbatu* — Lioness<sup>11</sup>. The famous Ishtar gate in Babylon is decorated with lions.

Despite this apparent femininity, big cats were associated with some male deities as well — and always retained their dual nature in this imagery, though less evidently than in female cults. For example, Baal, a deity worshipped throughout the Semitic world (and associated, among other things, with rain and fertility), is commonly described and depicted as a lion slayer — yet some images depict him sitting or standing on a lion (like Ishtar) as a symbol of his own power<sup>12</sup>.

The same type of feline duality can be found in social symbolism and imagery of Ancient Mesopotamia. Some Sumerian and Akkadian names identify kings as lions and leopards: Lugal-pirig, Sarru-lâba (both meaning “The king

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<sup>9</sup> Hodder 2006; Gifford-Gonzalez 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Paton 1910, McCall 1973; Strika 1983, Harris 1991, Cornelius 2004; Strawn 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Harris 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Cornelius 2004; Strawn 2005.

is a lion”), Lugal-pirig-tur (“The king is a leopard”), etc.<sup>13</sup>. In royal hymns of Ur, kings are often described as mighty lions<sup>14</sup>. In Assyria, kings were also associated with and described as lions — yet one of the main modes of asserting the royal power was a royal lion hunt (probably ritualized), during which the king demonstratively killed lions<sup>15</sup>. Images of this hunt are numerous, and the number of bagged lions is often listed in royal inscriptions. Thus, a king in Assyria is a lion slayer — and a lion himself, just as God (and a Hebrew leader, such as David) in the leonine metaphors of the Hebrew Bible. As M. B. Dick puts it, “by his lion hunt the Assyrian king identifies himself symbiotically with his victim and thus becomes the lion”. I will return to this observation later on.

## 5. EGYPTIAN PARALLELS

Strong parallels to the dualistic felines of the Hebrew Bible can also be found in Egyptian culture. Ancient Egypt is well-known for its deep reverence for cats: more than 60 gods were worshipped there in the forms of different felids, both large and small<sup>16</sup>. The sun god Ra himself appears as Mau the cat while slaying the evil serpent Apep; yet large felids — the lion and the leopard — were mostly associated with female deities, which displayed evident duality.

The most ancient of the known feline goddesses of Egypt, Mafdet, associated with the leopard, was perceived as protector and killer (executioner) at the same time<sup>17</sup>. Pakhet the lioness (also known as “the tearer” — cf. with the “tearing lion” of the Hebrew Bible and Kammerzell’s “tearing animal”) was a deity of destruction and violence, as well as of rain and fertility (cf. the Semitic lion-riding Baal)<sup>18</sup>.

Paired goddesses Sekhmet and Bastet<sup>19</sup> are of a special interest and relevance for the present discussion. Sekhmet, depicted as a lion-headed woman, is a bloodthirsty deity of war, violence, and divine punishment (she was once sent to punish humankind, but got so enraged in the process that other gods had to placate her with beer dyed red to resemble blood, otherwise she would destroy humanity altogether). Yet at the same time she is a healing goddess; one of her names is “Lady of Life”, and there used to be a special “order” of

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<sup>13</sup> Cassin 1981.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*; Strawn 2005; Dick 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Korostovtsev 1976; Wilkinson 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Wilkinson 2003; Diesel 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Diesel 2008.

<sup>19</sup> McCall 1973; Korostovtsev 1976; Wilkinson 2003; Watterson 2013.

priest doctors, clad in leopard skins, that served Sekhmet and cured illnesses in her name<sup>20</sup> (cf. the Hebrew *he has torn and he will heal* — Sekhmet was also known to inflict and stop diseases). Bastet is widely known as a cat, yet there is evidence that she initially was a lioness or semi-lioness<sup>21</sup> (probably a leopard) associated with ferocity and protection. Later on (especially after Egypt was united), Bastet ceded her violent functions to Sekhmet and became a predominantly benevolent deity of protection and procreation (thereby adopting the peaceful “domesticated” cat form). She remained strongly linked to Sekhmet; together, they often represented the dual nature of goddess Hathor and were viewed as the latter’s “kind” and “violent” personifications respectively<sup>22</sup>. It is worth noting that Sekhmet was associated with the sun and Bastet with the moon, which emphasized their paired duality, the unity of opposites such as considered earlier in this article.

As in Mesopotamia, the predominantly feminine nature of big cats in Egyptian sacred symbolism and imagery did not impede strong association of these animals with military and royal power. It has already been mentioned that Sekhmet the lioness was a deity of war and bloodshed, and therefore was often described accompanying pharaohs during battles in order to protect them and destroy their enemies. But social leonine symbolism was not limited to this sacred protection: the pharaoh himself was often referred to and even depicted as a lion. Leonine images decorated royal chariots, ships, thrones, and furniture; early Egyptian kings wore lion tails as a part of their royal garments; Thutmose III called himself “a fierce-eyed lion”, Ramesses II was described as “a strong lion with mighty roar” and depicted as a lion holding a severed head of an enemy between its paws, and various pharaohs’ faces were used as models for sphinx statues<sup>23</sup>. Yet, as in Mesopotamia, lion hunt in Egypt was a mode of assertion of royal power. Pharaohs are depicted and described not only as lions and “sons of Sekhmet”, but also as lion slayers. Exact numbers of killed lions are listed in royal inscriptions, and even Tutankhamun, a pharaoh who died at 18, is depicted slaying an entire pride of lions to emphasize his royalty<sup>24</sup>. The inscription on a flake showing a Ramesside pharaoh spearing a lion reads: “The slaughterer of every foreign country, the pharaoh... ”<sup>25</sup> — that is, the lion here represents not the pharaoh himself, but his enemy. It is the same manifold and essentially dualistic nature of a large felid that is found in the Hebrew Bible: a big cat can equally represent a god, a king, and a king’s (or god’s) despised and hated enemy.

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<sup>20</sup> Diesel 2008; Watterson 2013; Mace 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Herrmann 2003; Diesel 2008; Watterson 2013.

<sup>22</sup> McCall 1973; Pinch 1982; Diesel 2008; Basson 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Badawy 1967; Strawn 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Strawn 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Hayes 1990; Strawn 2005.

Thus, it has been demonstrated that the dualistic symbolism of big cats in the Hebrew Bible has strong and evident parallels in ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian cultures. These common patterns are natural, as the Hebrew culture belonged to the same region, shared archetypal imagery with its neighbours and was influenced by them. The big cats and their symbolic duality seem to constitute one of these common cultural archetypes.

Yet the question remains: why the big cats? Why these specific animals were chosen, and why duality is so essential in their image? An attempt to suggest possible explanations for this is made below.

## 6. BIG CAT AS THE BEAST

If one now turns from philology and history to anthropological and zoological data, one may come to the conclusion that the essential duality of big cats is not only cultural, but also a zoological reality. Leopards, lions, and other large felids (including now extinct species, such as *Dinofelis*) hunted and continue to hunt primates of all sizes (including *Homo sapiens* and other *Homo* species) since they first met on the evolutionary arena<sup>26</sup>. It will not be incorrect to say that primates (including *Homo*) are a target prey of big cats (or rather, big cats are the primary predators of primates)<sup>27</sup>, and this is still reflected in human instincts, just as in the instincts of other primates, shaped by hundreds of millennia and even millions of years of evolution<sup>28</sup>. The impact of these instincts on human behaviour is to a certain extent reduced by culture, yet they continue to exist and operate even in modern “civilized” humans. Some professional hunters and zoologists, specializing in large feline studies, mention an irrational, uncontrolled fear they regularly experienced before big cats, in spite of knowing and being used to them<sup>29</sup>. This kind of fear can hardly be explained by a general sense of danger, since other large predators, such as bears or crocodiles, do not cause similar feelings in experienced professionals.

Some researches<sup>30</sup> argue that defence against feline predators could be an important source of bipedalism, social structure, and even language in early *Homo*. Social consequences are of a special importance for the present discussion. A male that effectively defended his group from feline predators<sup>31</sup> — especially if he succeeded in killing one of them — would thereby raise his social

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<sup>26</sup> Brain 1981; Lee-Thorp e.a. 2001; Kruuk 2002; Krechmar 2008; Hart & Sussman 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Busse 1980; Cowlshaw 1994; Jooste et. al 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Walter 2004; Krechmar 2008; Hart & Sussman 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Kucherenko 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Boesch 1991; Jenny & Zuberbühler 2002; Walter 2004; Fuentes 2008; Krechmar 2008; Bickerton & Szathmáry 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Cowlshaw 1994; Iwamoto et. al. 1996; Krechmar 2008.

status and eventually become a leader. It is therefore hardly accidental that the leading and/or royal status throughout cultures and epochs is designated by a leopard or lion skin or image (as in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern cultures), and the big cat hunt, whether real or symbolic, presented as a duel combat between the leader and the predator, plays an important role in asserting the leader's power.

Acquisition of power by slaying a feline predator naturally leads to identification of the slayer with his dangerous victim. Dick (2006), cited above, noted this identification in the case of Assyrian royal lion hunts — yet this may be just a specific instance of a wider, universal archaic notion, found in all human cultures, from Papua New Guinea to Great Britain and from Southern Africa to China: a person possessing another person's or creature's body part (such as hair, nails, blood, or skin) can exercise a special power over that creature and in many cases (especially if the creature has first been killed by the possessor of its body) take command of its spirit and powers. This is the principle underlying New Guinean head-hunt, African voodooism, and European witchcraft practices alike, most probably dating as far back as the Upper Paleolithic or even earlier. Thus, a big cat-slaying human leader becomes a defender against big cats (symbolizing The Beast<sup>32</sup>, danger in general) — and thereby a big cat himself, feared by his enemies (and his own people, in case they want to turn against him). In a certain sense, it is not the symbolical image of the big cat in human culture that is modeled on the real image of human leaders, but just the reverse: human leaders attempt to imitate the big cat, and their image is modeled on it both symbolically and practically. The big cat is a special animal that humans instinctively fear, because it can kill them — and an example that they, equally instinctively, want to follow for exactly the same reason; it is an absolute power that repels and attracts. This is probably the anthropological source, common to all humanity, from which the Hebrew Bible, along with other Near Eastern cultures, derives its essential duality of the lion (leopard) image as a symbol of both the dangerous enemy and the leader (king) or God who slays the enemy to protect his people, a power destructive and beneficial at the same time.

## 7. BIG CAT AS DANGEROUS PROVIDER

Yet the natural link between humans and big cats is not limited to the predator-prey relationship. Despite the conventional wisdom view of archaic humans as super-predators (based on the now largely outdated scientific paradigm

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<sup>32</sup> It is interesting that the main word for lion in Hebrew, אַרְיֵה *arjeh* / אַרְיָא *'ari*, is derived by Nostratic scholars (Bomhard 1984; Bomhard & Kerns 1994; van Binsbergen 2003) from the root *\*?ar/\*?er*, meaning “(wild) animal” in general. The lion is The Beast?

of the 50's), recent studies, such as cited in the previous section of the present article, demonstrate that hominids were prey rather than predators; hunting could hardly be their primary source of food (especially considering their limited natural and artificial means for such a pastime)<sup>33</sup>. Hunting probably started to play the important role we know of today in the Middle and Upper Paleolithic. Yet, as some studies suggest<sup>34</sup>, animal protein indubitably constituted a part of the hominid diet much earlier than that, while constant increase of this protein's share probably contributed to brain development in early *Homo*. This can hardly be attributed to gathering small vertebrates only. As many researchers argue<sup>35</sup>, a considerable source of animal protein for archaic humans was scavenging — and the most important object of this scavenging was big cats (including the extinct ones, such as *Meganthereon*), as these animals hunt large ungulates and often do not consume their prey entirely on the spot, leaving enough meat and marrowbone for possible scavengers. Parasitism of various species of scavengers, both regular and occasional, on big cats is generally common; for example, the African leopard often has to hunt thrice as much as it can eat, because a considerable part of its prey is eventually consumed by scavengers<sup>36</sup>. Even today, scavenging big cat prey is common among hunter-gatherers and even pastoralists, such as Hadza<sup>37</sup> and Nama<sup>38</sup>. One of the Nama words for leopard is *ǀhūiseb*, “distributor of food”<sup>39</sup>, because this animal leaves enough food for other creatures, including humans, to scavenge. Yet it remains true that animal species hunted by big cats included not only possible food for hominids, but also hominids themselves — and it is still true for the regions where large felids such as leopards occur in the wild.

Thus, one and the same big cat can kill a human for food or provide food (occasionally even save a human family from starving). The scavenging process itself (both aggressive and passive) is dangerous, as large felids tend to rest near their prey and may defend it — a human scavenger can therefore get killed (and become food) while trying to obtain food. A big cat for a human scavenger (especially an archaic one, possessing comparatively meager means of self-defense against large predators) is a dangerous killer and food provider at the same time; it gives life and deprives of life. The evident parallel with the dualistic image of metaphorical lions and leopards in the Hebrew Bible may not be accidental.

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<sup>33</sup> O'Connell et. al. 2002; Hart & Sussman 2008; Bickerton & Szathmáry 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Foley 2001; Ferraro et. al. 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Blumenschine 1987; Cavallo & Blumenschine 1989; O'Connell et. al. 2002; Lopatin 2002; Bickerton & Szathmáry 2011; Ferraro et. al. 2013; Moleón et. al. 2014; Pobiner 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Krechmar 2008.

<sup>37</sup> O'Connell e. a. 1988; Stanford & Bunn 2001.

<sup>38</sup> van Binsbergen 2003; Walter 2004.

<sup>39</sup> van Binsbergen 2003; Rust 1969.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The present article demonstrates duality of the symbolic image of big cats in the Hebrew Bible: this image can be both “positive” and “negative”, hostile and friendly, dangerous and protective. I consider the cultural context of this duality and its parallels in Egyptian and Near Eastern cultures and suggest its possible anthropological origins: *coincidentia oppositorum* as a general pattern of human mentality, as well as predator-prey and predator-scavenger relations between large felids and *Homo* species (including archaic *Homo sapiens* and contemporary hunter-gatherers).

These possible explanations should not, however, be taken as mutually exclusive. Unlike in European post-industrial mentality, archaic and traditional human societies do not divide their world into separate, loosely related or even non-related sections: traditional mentality is holistic, syncretic, comprehensive, it considers the world as a whole. It is hardly accidental that the very term (and concept) of holism in modern philosophy was coined in South Africa, a place where this comprehensive approach and outlook still thrive. Therefore the suggestions of possible origins of sacral and social duality of the feline image in the Hebrew Bible could all be equally true; further interdisciplinary research is needed to verify them and determine the exact role each of them played in the formation of this image in Hebrew culture and human culture and mentality in general.

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