The Symbolism of the Biblical World

Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms

by

Othmar Keel

Translated by Timothy J. Hallett

Winona Lake, Indiana
EISENbrauns
1997
INTRODUCTION 7
The Old Testament and
Two Approaches to the 'The Iconographic Appr:
The Present Work 11

I. CONCEPTIONS OF
1. Technical Conceptions
2. Symbolic-Mythical Co
a. The Bipartite Wor
b. The Multipartite V
3. Dualistic Features 4;
4. That Which Fills Hea

II. DESTRUCTIVE FO
1. Spheres of Death 6;
   a. The Grave 63
   b. Prison, Cistern anc
   c. Torrent and Sea
   d. The Desert 76
   e. The Night 77
2. The Enemies of the I
   a. Demons and Offer
   b. Animal Comparisc
   c. Comparisons Base
   d. The Mortality and
3. Enemies of the Natio

III. THE TEMPLE: PL/I
   PRESENCE AND SI
1. Temple and Mountain
2. The Temple Gates 1
3. The Forecourts and T
4. The Altars 144
5. The House of Yahwe

CONTENTS
reminiscent of the Chaos-cosmos conception prevalent in ancient Near Eastern sanctuaries, no attempt was made to trace the foundation of the Jerusalem sanctuary back to the time of the primal beginnings. In the Yahwistic creation narrative (Gen 2), there appears instead of a temple a garden made for men; in the Priestly version (Gen 1) there is no special area at all. In the course of his history with Israel, Yahweh chose Zion. Yahweh is not, as it were, elementally or eternally linked with Zion. Ps 132 relates, in the context of the story of the ark (1 Sam 4–6; 2 Sam 6), how he moved to Zion. Yahweh loved (Pss 78:68; 87) and desired (Ps 132:13b) Zion, and chose (Ps 132:13a) it over all other mountains (Ps 68:16), over all the sanctuaries of Jacob (Ps 87:2). Yahweh’s dwelling on Zion is thus a free act of grace. In it the exodus from Egypt and the settlement of the land find their full completion. The object of the exodus is the sovereignty of Yahweh, which produces life and salvation. That lordship will extend from Zion to include all nations (Ps 87; Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1–3). In the free election of Zion as an act of divine condescension lie the essence and

the specifics of all Zion-theology, all Davidic theology, and finally, of the whole biblical theology of incarnation.23

2. THE TEMPLE GATES

As a holy precinct, the temple area, like paradise, is safeguarded by extraordinary measures. Moses had to set a boundary around Sinai (Exod 19:12). Zion was surrounded by a wall suitable for military service (Ps 48:12–13). In Jerusalem, as in the Egyptian (157) and Assyrian (158) representations of a Canaanite city, one must distinguish the outworks (158), the city wall itself, with its towers and salients (157 and 158), and the acropolis, with its fortified palaces and the temple (157 and 158). It is not quite clear whether “Zion” in Ps 48:12–13 includes at least some part of the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem and Zion are sometimes virtually synonymous (Pss 51:18; 102:21; 147:12). According to Ps 116:19, the forecourts of the temple lie “in the midst of Jerusalem.” Acropolis and city, as Figs. 157 and 158 suggest, were understood as a unity.

The gates were the most vulnerable points of an ancient Near Eastern city. Attempt was made to secure them by special fortifications (cf. 159–61) and by all kinds of magical or religious measures (158a).

Because the gate, flanked by two mighty towers, formed a most impressive representation of the city, it could stand as pars pro toto for “city” (cf. Fig. 162, where the temple gate represents the temple; cf. “gates of death” in Ps 156. The “Holy Rock” at Megiddo: (a) bird’s-eye view; (b) section. In the sanctuary, Chaos (the cistern) is harnessed and becomes a source of fertility.
9:13; 107:18; Mt 16:18 RSVm; and “gates of righteousness” in Ps 118:19). When in Ps 122:1–3 the pilgrim expresses his desire to stand in the gates of Jerusalem, he does not have in mind merely the moment of arrival, but also his entire sojourn in Jerusalem. Arrival at the holy place was of course a longed-for moment (Ps 84:2, 7), and passage through the several gates was a significant occasion. It was indeed possible to stand “in the gates,” because in most instances there were two or three gates staggered one behind another, forming two or three chambers. 1 Kgs 9:15 reports that Solomon enlarged the walls of Gezer, Megiddo, and Hazor. Tenaille gates dating from the time of Solomon have been unearthed in all three cities (Hazor: 159; Megiddo: 160; Gezer: 161). In 1 Kgs 9:15, Jerusalem is firmly together. . . . Peace be within your walls and security within your towers!” (Ps 122:3, 7).

157. Egyptian representation of the city of Ashkelon (cf. 132a).

158. Assyrian representation of the city of Ashtarutu, apparently the same city as the Ashtaroth situated east of Lake Gennesaret. "Jerusalem, built as a city which is bound
158a. “Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! For he strengthens the bars of your gates; he blesses your sons within you” (Ps 147:12-13).

The Sed festival (cf. 352) was celebrated to renew the vital powers of the Egyptian king after thirty years’ reign. In the course of that festival, another vital institution was also renewed. The king walked around the capital city, carrying a sacred mace and touching each of the gates with it. This touch was intended to reestablish the defensive strength of the gates, and to prepare them to protect the sphere of blessing which surrounded the king. Ps 147 attributes this function to Yahweh. Ps 48:12-14 alludes to a circuit around Zion; but the purpose of that circuit was different from that of the Egyptian king at the Sed festival (cf. 4).

160. The Solomonic gate at Megiddo.
“Enter his gates with thanksgiving” (Ps 100:4a).

161. The Solomonic gate at Gezer.
“I am the talk of those who sit in the gate” (Ps 69:12).
“Happy is the man who has [many sons]! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (Ps 127:5).
mentioned together with these three cities. We may therefore postulate the existence of such gates at Jerusalem as well. W. Zimmerli finds further evidence to support this assumption in the use of tenaille gates in Ezekiel's temple plan (Ezek 40). The temple enclosure was guarded not only by the city walls and by location on the acropolis, but by its own additional walls as well.

The temple is a sphere of highly intensified life and blessing. In Fig. 162, the life-signs and was-scepters (cf. 19–20) point to the powerful, wholly other energy active within the temple (Ps 133:3). The worshipper who has fulfilled the necessary requirements participates in that energy (Ps 24:5). The flags (cf. 162a, 167a) displayed in front of the gate-towers (pylons) also signal the presence of deity.

That which is holy must be protected from profanation. All manner of guardians safeguarded the outside entrance of the massive gate-towers. Emplaced in pair in the form of a lion (163), "the king [cf. 135] himself assumed the function of guardian of the temple. With his head raised at right angles to his body, he looked straight at anyone who approached, and that gaze was in itself apparently sufficient to repulse any impious intruder."26 The king often guarded the temple entrance in the alternate form of a human-headed lion (cf. 434).27 Amenemhet III sent two sphinxes to Ugarit, where they were installed at the entrance to the temple of Baal.28

In Sumer, it was Imdugud, the lion-headed eagle, who guarded the temple gates (164).29 A Sumerian hymn to Enlil praises the gate complex of Ur-Nammu (ca. 2050 B.C.): "The shepherd Ur-Nammu raised up to the heavens the lofty 'House of the Mountain' [temple of Enlil] in Duranki ['Bond between Heaven and Earth' = the temple district of Nippur], set it down to the astonishment of many. With refined gold he richly adorned the front of the 'High Gate,' the 'Great Gate,' the 'Gate of Salvation of the Step-Mountains,' the 'Gate of the Unharvested Grain.' There the Imdugud-bird killed many [foes]; no wicked one assails the eagles which stand there. The doors [of the temple] are lofty, clothed with dreadful radiance, vast in foundation, inspiring great fear."30

The entrances of Assyrian temples and palaces are often guarded by mighty bulls with human heads and eagle's wings (Plate VIII). They are sometimes called lamassu, sometimes šedu (cf. Ps 106:37, where ṣēnû are evil demons), and sometimes kuribu. The latter term is related to the biblical "cherub." The best-known function of the cherubim was to guard the entrance to paradise (Gen 3:24; Ezek 28:16).

Composite figures such as those mentioned above were not the only guardian-figures in use. In Assyria and Babylonia, animals in unmixed form often appear as guardians of the gate. The two lions from Tell Harmal in the vicinity of Baghdad (165) guarded the entrance of the temple of Nisaba and Hani. Emplacement of gate guardians was also current in Syria-Palestine. The lion in Fig. 166 was discovered at the entrance of Temple H (cf. 208) in Hazor.

The emplacement of guardian genii was motivated by the belief that they would repel, or even kill the wicked, and thus protect the holy precincts from defilement. There were, however, further means of ensuring the undiminished holiness of the place: lustrations and sprinklings with consecrated water (cf. 167 and Plate VIII).

The model of a temple from Gezer (167) shows two fonts of holy water, one at either side of the entrance. In them, everyone who visited the temple could "wash his hands in innocence" (Ps 26:6; cf. 24:4; 73:13; 168), then go about the altar in the forecourt (Ps 26:6b). The crudely modelled little man on the left in Fig. 167 may be the custodian of the sanctuary. In Assyria, the priests used bronze situlae to ladle holy water from the basins. Those who dared pass by the guardian demons were sprinkled with the water (Plate VIII) as a
162. "Open to me the gates of the realm of salvation; I will enter through them and give thanks to Yahweh" (Ps 118:19 [author's translation]).

A number of life-signs and was-scepters appear above the great pylon of the temple at Karnak, with its eight flags. The signs and scepters characterize the temple as a sphere of life and of divine dominion. A procession has just passed from the temple through the gate. The sacred vessel of Amon is carried in the midst. The cover of the vessel is in the form of a ram’s head. The ram is the animal of Amon of Karnak. Amon himself is occasionally portrayed with ram’s horns (256a). On either side of the vessel stands a statue of the king (cf. 397a). The statue on the left side shows him presenting the wine offering. A huge bouquet of flowers towers in front of the vessel. It is not clear who is carrying the bouquet. At the upper left, Nebsunuennet, the governor of the palace, carries two censers (198–99); a priest follows him with another type of censer. These fill the air with fragrance. Nebsunuennet is the only layman in the procession. The rest of the party consists exclusively of priests, recognizable by their attire and by their shorn heads, a requirement of the code of priestly purity. The picture adorns the tomb of Panhesi, the "director of the singers of the table of Amon." Panhesi is also a priest. He leads the procession in the lower register. Together with a colleague, he is clapping out the cadence for the procession. Its progress brings the blessings of the temple into the realm of men (cf. other depictions of processions in Figs. 307a, 433a–34a, 450).

163. In Egypt, the king himself, in the form of a lion, is sometimes the guardian of the temple gates.

162a. A scene in the Amon Temple at Karnak, from the period of Pharaoh Ay (1349–1345 B.C.). The picture simplifies the complex structure, but preserves all its essential features. The temple fabric surrounds a park with carefully tended trees (cf. Ps 52:8; 92:13; 191:1, 202) set in troughs (10–15) to facilitate watering. At the left, the park terminates in a pool (not shown here). The temple buildings begin at the left with the great gate installation (shown in profile) of Amenophis III. Flags adorn the facade. The gate is opened inwards. A rose-colored, painted obelisk, apparently of Aswan granite, stands in the court. A baldachin, probably used only on special occasions, is propped against the second pylon. Through the second gate, one passes from the courtyard into the roofed sanctuary, which contains an offering table. The holy of holies lies behind yet another pylon. The holy of holies rests on a socle which equalizes its height with that of the sanctuary.

The axial alignment of chambers, typical to Egypt (cf. 176–77, 238a), is clearly evident. The successive chambers are accessible to an increasingly smaller circle. In the sanctuary, a priest is offering incense. The high priest, with an assistant, stands in the sanctuary gate. Neferhotep, a chief overseer of the great livestock herds of Amon, is permitted to enter the courtyard, but his family waits for him outside the first pylon. The high priest rewards Neferhotep’s service with a sacred bouquet from Amon’s table. The scene at the left shows Neferhotep presenting the bouquet to his wife. The gift must have made a strong impression on Neferhotep, for he had it pictured in his tomb. A scene of similar content from the early Middle Kingdom is found at El Bersheh in the tomb of Ananakht (F. L. Griffith and P. E. Newberry, El Bersheh, vol. 2, pls. 17 and 35).

The custom of affording visitors a share in the blessings of a sanctuary was widespread in Byzantine times. The custodians of a shrine sent departing pilgrims on their way with eulogiai, “gifts of blessing,” in the form of flowers and fruits. Perhaps the “blessing” in Ps 24:5; 67:7; 133:3 and elsewhere should be construed more concretely than is usually done (cf. Isa 65:8; on flowers in the Egyptian cultus and in the OT, cf. A. de Buck, “La fleur au front,” and S. Mowinckel, Psalmenstudien, vol. 4, pp. 29ff.).
165. A stone guardian lion from Til-Barsib (Tell 'Ahmar) bears the following inscription: "[This is] he who rushes against rebellion and means of purification from any possible impurity.

According to the information provided by the psalms, the pilgrim addressed the priest (or priests) sitting at the temple gates (cf. 1 Sam 1:9), asking who might set foot on the mountain of Yahweh (cf. Ps 15:1; 24:3). The gates of the Jerusalem temple, as "Gates of Righteousness," were open only to the "righteous" (Ps 118:19–20). sdq, however, connotes not only righteousness, but the salvation which is associated with it. Thus, the "Gates of Righteousness" are at the same time the "Gates of the Realm of Salvation." According to Ps 15 and 24, this salvation can be attained only under certain specific conditions. These conditions may be summarized under the wider category of "conformity with communal conduct." He who professes fulfillment of the conditions (cf. Deut 26:13–14; Job 31) is pronounced righteous (sdq) and may pass through the temple gates confident of receiving blessing from Yahweh (Ps 24:5; cf. 15:5). Surprisingly, the subject of these two psalms is not simply cultic impurity. In analogous texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia, cultic impurity always plays an important role. In Ps 24 and 15 (cf. also Ps 50), however, the chief wall which separates God and man is (ethical) misconduct toward one's coreligionists. This wall cannot be overcome by magical-elemental means (guardian spirits, holy water). One can only attempt to reduce the wall by heeding the prophetic advice that under such conditions a temple visit is futile (cf. Ps 50:16–21; 24:5; Amos 5:21–24; Isa 1:10–17; etc.). The supplicant of Ps 73 is aware that only by preserving his purity of heart (Ps 73:1, 13) can he maintain his relation to God, and only thus can he stand on firm ground (cf. Ps 73:15; 15:5c). Those who participate in the cultus without fulfilling the condition of purity proceed on slippery, shaky ground (Ps 73:17–20).
166. Guardian lion from Temple H at Hazor (cf. 208).

167a. In Egypt, the king was the priest (cf. chap. 5.3). As such, he sat (or stood) in the form of colossal statues at the entrance to the temple, as shown by the relief from the great outer court of Ramses II at Luxor and by numerous finds of similar statues in situ. The king's function may have been not only to guard the sanctuary, but also to mediate between the deity and those who were not permitted to enter into the sanctuary proper (cf. P. Barguet, Le Temple d'Amon-Rê, pp. 107, 231, 300; W. S. Smith, Art and Architecture, p. 151; 1 Sam 1:9).

167. At Jerusalem, the following question was asked of the gatekeepers: "Who can ascend the mountain of the LORD? or who may stand in his holy place?" (Ps 24:3 NAB; cf. 15:1).

154. The Holy Rock at Jerusalem. Drawing by H. Schmidt in *Der heilige Fels*, pp. 102f., fig. 1; cf. fig. 2. T. A. Busink, *Tempel*, vol. 1, p. 11, fig. 3.


158a. Relief, sandstone: Soleb (ca. 600 km. south of Aswan): Temple, west side of the northern tower of the second pylon: Amenophis III (1413–1377 B.C.). J. H. Breasted, "Second Preliminary Report," pp. 89–92, fig. 51; cf. fig. 50 (the drawing is greatly simplified; e.g., the king is seen at every gate, and not merely at two of them). A section appears in *LD*, vol. 5, pl. 83c. A. Moret, *Royaute pharaonique*, fig. 32.


163. Granite statue, length of base, 2.11 m.: Soleb (Sudan), whence it was brought to Gebel Barkal: Amenophis III (1413–1377 B.C.). BM. W. Westendorf, *Ägypten*, p. 108.


179. Plan of the temple at Baalbek, 1st-