Anzu and Ziz: Great Mythical Birds in Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Rabbinic Traditions
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Introduction
Many ancient Near Eastern mythological motifs, particularly those relating to the Chaoskampf—the primordial battle against forces of chaos—found expression in the Hebrew Bible, and were further developed in post-biblical and rabbinic literature.¹ H. Gunkel was the first to note traces of the Babylonian cosmogonic battle Enūma eliš in biblical traditions and in the Apocrypha.² The subsequent discovery of the Ugaritic divine conflict between Baal and “Prince Sea (zbl ym)-Judge River (ṭpt nhr)” reawakened scholarly interest in combat traditions preserved in the Bible and in later Jewish sources.³ Research focused mainly on the representation of insubordinate forces by elements of water. The turbulent, uncontrollable qualities of water pertinently depict chaos, whether as a threatening natural element, or by means of mythopoetic representation, such as the deified figure Sea/River and the monsters associated with it, such as “Leviathan” (ltm); “winding serpent” (bṭn brḥ; bṭn qltm); “dragon” (tnn).⁴

¹. I thank Dr. Kenneth Whitney whose comment led me to writing this article; Prof. Peter Machinist for his many insights on the myth of Anzu; Prof. Menahem Kister and Dr. Maren Niehoff for their helpful comments. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Simo Parpola who checked the existence of the variant Zû in the Neo-Assyrian corpus. This is an updated version of a Hebrew article that was published in Shnaton 14 (2004), 161–91.
³. Following is a partial list of the many studies in this field: A. J. Wensinck, The Ocean in the Literature of the Western Semites (Amsterdam, 1918). For comparisons of biblical and Ugaritic motifs, see F. M. Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 91–144. For analysis of traditions of the battle with sea-monsters in the Bible, see M. K. Wakeman, God’s Battle with the Monster (Leiden, 1973); J. Day, God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea (Cambridge, 1985). For Cassuto’s attempt to trace the hypothetical ancient Israelite epic regarding the rebellion of sea against the creator, see U. Cassuto, “The Israelite Epic,” Biblical and Oriental Studies (Jerusalem, 1973), 2.69–109 (the Hebrew original was published in 1943). For the extension, exegesis, and reuse of motifs from the ancient Near East through biblical to rabbinic and medieval literature, see M. Fishbane, Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking (Oxford, 2003).
⁴. Mythologies of many cultures regarded the state of the world in its primordial stage as watery, see inter alia A. Jeremias, The Old Testament in the Light of the Ancient Near East (London, 1911), 6, n. 1;
Chaotic forces were embodied in many other mytho-poetic figures besides water, such as those signified by the eleven monsters vanquished by the god Ningirsu/Ninurta. Two cases demonstrate the presence of non-watery primeval chaos monsters in biblical traditions. First, “Behemoth,” mentioned alongside Leviathan in God’s response to Job (Job 40:15–24), compared to the Bull of Heaven from the epic of Gilgamesh, and to the Ugaritic ‘gl il. Yet the mythological background of this bovine creature in the biblical description is somewhat obscure, so that some scholars believe that Job’s “Behemoth” relates to a real animal. It is Behemoth’s appearances in post-biblical literature that clarify and reinforce its mythical, sinister nature in the former, biblical representation, exemplified in its enormous dimensions, the amounts of food and drink it consumes daily, its role in the eschatological struggle with Leviathan and eventually, its being served as a special delicacy in the messianic meal for the righteous.

The second case is the metaphoric description of the king of Egypt by the prophet Ezekiel as “a lion among the nations . . . like a dragon (tannîm) in the seas” (Ezek. 32:2–10). T. J. Lewis suggested that the mythic figure underlying the description is a composite creature, with leonine and serpentine features, borrowing from a lion-dragon/serpent figure of enormous dimensions known from the Mesopotamian
epic Labbu. Possibly, this creature is also hinted at in Ben Sira’s metaphorical allusion to sin as a serpent who bites with teeth of a lion (Sirach 21:2–3; for another possible allusion see the reference to Daniel 7 in n. 59 below).

This study will attempt to add another member to the group of creatures belonging to the sphere of combat myths. Anzu, a mythic Mesopotamian bird, left its talon prints in the Bible. As in the cases of Leviathan and Behemoth, traditions regarding Anzu are hinted at in the Bible and more fully developed in post-biblical literature. Furthermore, this discussion has consequences for the reconstruction of the general course of transmission and change that mythical traditions have undergone from ancient Near Eastern traditions to the Bible and to classical rabbinic sources.

**Anzu**

Sumerian myths depict Anzu as a mountain-dwelling bird of prey. Like Labbu, the lion-serpent, it is a composite creature, portrayed in literature and iconography as an eagle with a lion’s face. Anzu’s most prominent feature is its gigantic size. In the Sumerian “Epic of Lugalbanda” Anzu nests within a tree of extensive dimensions, its roots penetrating the seven-headed river of Utu, the sun god. Anzu hunts wild oxen in the eastern mountain range, and carries them to its nest by its talons and around its neck to feed its young. When flapping its broad wings Anzu could cause windwhirls and sandstorms. Other distinctive qualities are its weird countenance and

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11. In this respect too it is similar to Labbu whose description includes actual measurements regarding its length, width, and the perimeter of its ears (CT 13, ll. 8–13; see Lewis, “Lion Dragon Myths,” 31), and when it dies its blood flows constantly for three years, three months, and a day (CT 13, rev. l. 9; Lewis, “Lion Dragon Myths,” 32). Compare to the description in Ezek. 32:6: “I will drench the earth with your oozing blood upon the hills, and the watercourses shall be full with you.”

roaring voice—at dawn Anzu spreads its wings and roars with a frightening voice in the direction of the sun rising in the mountains, causing the land to tremble.\textsuperscript{13}

Similar to other composite creatures in Mesopotamian art and literature, Anzu was not initially related to chaotic forces. It became a threatening force in the Akkadian epic known by its name, the Epic of Anzu.\textsuperscript{14} According to this story the bold bird stole the Tablet of Destinies from Enlil,\textsuperscript{15} the chief god, thus gaining cosmic powers and control over the world and gods, disrupting the existing order.\textsuperscript{16} Petrified, the gods seek a hero to confront Anzu, return the tablet to its legitimate owner and restore order to the world. It is up to Ninurta, Enlil’s son, to face up to the seemingly invincible Anzu, and win eternal glory.

The Epic of Anzu belongs to the genre of combat myths. The original Akkadian title of the story was accordingly “\textit{Bin šar dadme}”—son of the king of inhabited places, referring to Ninurta, the protagonist. Anzu was fit to personify the threat against cosmic order because it dwelled in the mountains—the realm external to habitation, civilization, and order in the worldview of Mesopotamians.\textsuperscript{17} Anzu was born in the mountains (I:25; 53), and retreated there after stealing the heavenly Tablet (I:83). The final confrontation between the hero Ninurta and the rebel Anzu took place in the mountains (II:29).

Like the subsequent and more famous divine combat myth, \textit{Enûma eliš}, the plot of Anzu takes place in primordial times. \textit{Enûma eliš} explains the creation of the world as a by-product of the divine combat, whereas in the Anzu epic the plot takes place a short while later. The world is assembled, but not completed. Gods exist, yet

\textsuperscript{13} Jacobsen, \textit{The Harps that Once}, 324, ll. 45–46. Its dreadful voice was also mentioned in the Akkadian Epic of Anzu, in the description of the creature’s birth, which is regrettably broken and partially missing (Anzu I: 35; For text editions, see below, n. 14), and in the description of its encounter with Ninurta (II: 49). Landsberger, “Einige unerkannt,” 8, proposed that Anzu looked like a bat. See also W. W. Hallo and W. L. Moran, “The First Tablet of the SB Recension of the Anzu-Myth,” JCS 31 (1979), 70, n. 14.


\textsuperscript{15} The origin of this story is in the Sumerian Ninurta mythologies such as the epic “Ninurta and the Turtle,” in which Ninurta struggles with Anzu and returns the Tablet of Destinies that Anzu stole from Enki; B. Alster, “‘Ninurta and the Turtle,’ UET 6/1 2,” JCS 24 (1974), 120–25; S. N. Kramer, “Ninurta’s Pride and Punishment,” \textit{Aula Orientalis} 2 (1984), 231–37; see also Jacobsen, \textit{Treasures of Darkness}, 132–33.

\textsuperscript{16} For the Tablet of Destinies as key to world rule and order, see A. R. George, “Sennacherib and the Tablet of Destinies,” \textit{Iraq} 48 (1986), 133–46.

\textsuperscript{17} In Lugale, another Ninurta battle epic (J. van Dijk, \textit{Lugal ud me-lam-bi nir-gâl} [Leiden, 1983]), Ninurta fights against the mountain monster ASAG (Akkadian \textit{Asakku}) which is accompanied by stones, a battle which “expresses the unease felt by the inhabitants of the Mesopotamian plain about the inhabitants of the Zagros mountains” (J. Black and A. Green, \textit{Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia} [London, 1992], 36). This victory is mentioned in the hymn of praise to Ninurta at the beginning of the Anzu epic. The image of the raiding enemy as a foreign bird is found in Egypt too. In the composition entitled “The Prophecy of Neferti” from the twentieth century B.C.E. Asiatics are represented by a metaphorical strange bird nesting in the Delta area, eating Egyptian crops and bringing about distress and fear (H. W. Helck, \textit{Die Prophezeiung des Nfr.tj}, Kleine Ägyptische Texte [Wiesbaden, 1970], 16–28).
there is no sign of humans; the riverbeds of the Euphrates and Tigris are established, yet their waters have not been released. The birth of Anzu released the desired water accompanied by winds and dust storms (I:36–39) and Ninurta’s slaying of Anzu is accompanied by further floods of water (III:17–20). Anzu is thus firmly associated with the watery element, whose source was indeed in the mountains. The chaotic element must first be created, then conquered. Imbalance and then renewed, advanced stability must be achieved before the world can assume its final shape.

Anzu, the rebel bird was a famous mytho-poetic figure in Mesopotamia. Of the various divine combat myths, Anzu is apparently one of the oldest known, first attested in the Old Babylonian period, and recognized also from a Standard Babylonian (SB) version. The later version was canonized around 1200 B.C.E. in content as well as in the division of text into tablets. The place of the Anzu epic in Mesopotamian cultural tradition is corroborated by its connection to Enûma eliš. As shown by Lambert, in that famous composition Marduk is intentionally portrayed as “Ninurta redivivus” proving “direct and conscious borrowing” from the Epic of Anzu. Such overt and deliberate borrowing could only have been effective if Anzu was a familiar figure.

In the Neo-Assyrian period, through a process of historicization, mythical symbols were used to portray the king in a heroic light, his mundane victories described in terms reminiscent of the slaying of cosmic chaotic enemies such as Anzu and Tiamat. By this time Anzu was a longstanding symbol in Mesopotamian culture.

Were the Israelites acquainted with the Epic of Anzu? A seventh century B.C.E. cylinder seal portraying the battle of Ninurta and Anzu was discovered in Israel.

18. Vogelzang, *BIN ŠAR DADMĒ*, 31 (text), 40 (translation). For background analysis to these lines, see also ibid., 134; See also Hallo and Moran, “The First Tablet of the SB Recension,” 92; Annus, *Epic of Anzu*, 19. Lambert, “A New Look,” 296, placed the event of damming underground water as an intermediate phase of creation, parallel to creation acts of the third day in the Bible; Gen. 1:9ff. See Annus, *Epic of Anzu*, xii.

19. Ibid., x. The mountains were known as the region of the sources of the great rivers, hence the connection between the birth and death of Anzu in the mountains and the release of water.

20. Even after canonization of the SB version Mesopotamian scribes continued to copy the OB version and other Ninurta-Anzu combat myths such as Ninurta and the Turtle which are attested as early as the third millennium B.C.E. (Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, 132). See Vogelzang, *BIN ŠAR DADMĒ*, 8–10. Copies of the epic were found at many Mesopotamian sites (Assur, Nineve, Sultatepe, and Tarbiṣṭu; the OB version was found in Susa), spanning a period of 1500 years.

21. Lambert “Ninurta Mythology,” 56. In both epics the story takes place in primordial days, and a force external to civilization represented by the gods is threatening the world order by stealing the Tablet of Destinies (ᵗʰᵘᵖ ˢʰⁱᵐᵃᵗⁱ) which bestows upon its holder cosmic control. In Enûma eliš Tiamat the sea monster, Qingu her helper, and eleven monsters form the chaotic threat, while in the Anzu epic it is the demonic mountain bird which steals the heavenly tablet, threatening Anu, Enil, Ea, and the rest of the gods. In both stories the gods nominate a junior god to fight their battle, rewarding him accordingly.

22. For the political application of the “cosmic combat” motifs in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, in particular the Epic of Anzu and Enûma eliš, see Annus, *Epic of Anzu*, xxii–xxi. E. Weissert demonstrated the use of literary patterns from Enûma eliš in the description of the historical battle against the Babylonian-Elamite coalition in 691 B.C.E. Sennacherib cast himself in the role of Marduk and his political enemies in the role of the cosmic chaotic forces. Historicization of the myth legitimized in this case the destruction of Babylon; Weissert, “Creating a Political Climate: Literary Allusions to Enûma eliš in Sennacherib’s Account of the Battle of Halule,” in H. Waetzoldt and H. Hauptmann, eds., *Assyrien im Wandel der Zeiten, HSAO* 6 (Heidelberg, 1997), 191–202.
While this sporadic, graphic witness cannot count as proof of knowledge of the Epic of Anzu, it does show that symbols of the combat myth had arrived along with the Assyrian army, part and parcel of a general cultural influence. Furthermore, studies have shown that the Bible employs literary motifs and linguistic expressions reflecting royal Neo-Assyrian inscriptions when "quoting" Assyrian speakers, concluding that some biblical authors must have been acquainted not only with the "Assyrian experience," but also with official royal literary traditions. Considering that the Epic of Anzu played a role in the language of royal Neo-Assyrian inscriptions, underlying the criminal characterization of some of the figures in imperialistic propaganda, it is highly probable that biblical authors were familiar with this creature and its traditions—even if they did not know the epic itself, before the Babylonian exile.

Zīz šāday (Ps. 50:11; 80:14)

Anzu is hinted at in the twofold mention of zīz šāday in Psalms. In Psalm 50 God refutes the anthropomorphic notion that he relies on sacrifices to sustain him, in language reminiscent of prophetic rebuke. His pronouncement is phrased in the first person by a double chiastic parallel (vv. 10–11), followed by a declarative sentence (12) and a rhetorical question (13):

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26. For the affinities of this psalm to prophetic admonition see B. Schwartz, “Psalm 50—Its Subject, Form and Place,” *Shnaton* 3 (1978–79), 77–106 (Hebrew with English abstract).
For every beast of the forest is mine, Behemoth on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains and Ziz is mine. Were I hungry, I would not tell you; for the world and all that is in it is mine. Shall I eat the meat of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? (Ps. 50:10–13)

Psalm 80 portrays Israel as a cosmic vine, devastated by its enemies. Following a description of the glorious past (vv. 9–12) the poet complains about the current dismal situation (13–14):

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27. RSV translates by the plural collective form “cattle”; similarly NJPS translates by the generic term “beasts.” Although the parallel is ϋδρον ἅγετι, in the mythological context of the entire passage leads us to prefer the proper name “Behemoth” here, as in God’s answer to Job (Job 40:15). The name is thus derived from plural of extention of ἐνεαυτός, “powerful animal,” HALOT, 112.

28. Dahood proposed to translate here: “the beasts in the towering mountains,” reading מִעָלֶיהָ מִצָּכֵא (M. Dahood, Psalms I: 1–50, AB [Garden City, 1966], 307). He based his interpretation on Ps. 36:7: זָכַרְתָּ נָבִיאוּהַ מְשׁפִּיטִי מַתְחִילָה גִּברְתָּו מְשַׁמֵּשׁ וּמְשַׁמֵּשׁ. In Psalm 80, where ziz is mentioned for the second time, we find the branches of the vine compared to אֲדֹּרֶם—mighty cedars. Another proposal, suggested to me by E. L. Greenstein, is to derive מִצָּכֵא from “bull,” here in the collective, thus reading: “Behemoth in the mountains of bulls.”

29. Translated by RSV according to LXX, Syriac, and Targum: “birds of the air.” BHS offers a Hebrew Vorlage: רַעְבֵּים שֵׁשֶׁם or רַעְבֵּים שֵׁשֶּׁם. However, the hapax enforcement of MT is preferable to הַשֵּׁשֶּׁם שֵׁשֶּׁם which is the common compound, found 38 times in the Bible and once in Aramaic (Dan. 2:38). It preserves precisely one of the mythic characteristics of the legendary Anzu-bird, its mountain habitation (see below).
The construct expression zîz sâday appears in these two passages only. The nomen regens sâday is a poetic form of the word תרש הנס meaning usually “open country, field,” here, probably to be translated “mountain, highland.” Yet the meaning of the nomen rectum, zîz, and consequently, the unique construct, requires consideration. Zîz sâday is explained in both cases by most modern commentators as “everything that moves in the field.” This translation follows an etymological interpretation

30. The suspended letter in this word denotes, according to Jewish tradition, “the middle of Psalms” (b. Qiddushin 30a). There are three other cases of suspended letters in the Bible, two of which also contain the guttural letter ‘ayin (Job 38:13, 15). E. Tov explains these cases as scribal corrections, the guttural wrongly omitted by the original scribes. The other case of a suspended letter is the deliberate, ideological “correction” of the name מַשֵּׁשָּׁה in Jud. 18:30 to מַשֶּׁשָּׁה by the addition of a suspended nun (Tov, Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible [Minneapolis, 1992], 57).

31. The form sâday appears in the Bible 13 times in poetic texts only, all but once in construct forms, and it often denotes animals’ habitation (HALOT, 1309, s.v. ציז); “breast” (Isa. 56:9; Ps. 104:11); “breast” (Ps. 50:11; 80:14). Also חִזְיִים (Deut. 32:13; Lam. 4:9); “the moving things of the field” (Hos. 10:4; 12:12); “beast” (Jer. 4:17); “beast” (Jer. 18:14); and once in the absolute state (Ps. 96:12; in the parallel text 1 Chr. 16:32 the more common form appears שֵׁלָד). The ending -ay may have been an archaic Semitic feminine ending, its traces found perhaps in the word קְוַעֹב “locusts,” or the name שָׁרָי (S. C. Layton, Archaic Features of Canaanite Personal Names in the Hebrew Bible, HSM 47 [Atlanta, 1990], 241–49). For the meaning “mountain(s)” or “highland(s),” see W. H. Propp, “On the Hebrew SÆDE(H), ‘Highland,’” VT 37 (1987), 230–36, and n. 66 below.

32. So the dictionaries: “the moving things of the field” (BDB, 265); “the small creatures that ruin the fields” (HALOT, 268, s.v. ציז I); followed by modern commentators. See also the latest attempt to identify this construct as an animal taxon resulting in: “small herbivorous terrestrial animals”; R. Whitekettle, “Bugs, Bunny, or Boar? Identifying the Ziz Animals of Psalms 50 and 80,” CBQ 67 (2005), 264. The ancient versions differentiated between the two occurrences of the identical expression, indicating a difficulty. LXX translates Ps. 50:11 ὀρφαίων ἄγρω— the beauty of the field (cf. also Vulgata’s pulchritudo agrī), which is used to translate biblical words of glory and splendor, such as דוד (Ps. 43:3), דוד (Ezek. 16:14; Ps. 95:6), תּוּם (Isa. 44:13). It may be that the translator referred to the more common word צִיץ which is attested in some of the manuscripts (contra M. Niehoff, “The Phoenix in Rabbinic Literature,” HTR 89 [1996], 256, who believes LXX is hinting at the phoenix; see below). The rendition of Ps. 80:14 is “wild beast”: φῶν (LXX); singularis feris (V); bestiae (Jerome); hayawāthā (S). For the versions see D. W. Thomas, “The Meaning of zîz in Psalm LXXX.14,” Expository Times 77 (1964–1965), 385; see also A. S. Herbert’s reference to this article in “Zeitschriftenschau,” ZAW 78 (1966), 91. In Isa. 66: 11 the lexeme zîz means “breast” (compare Akkadian zizzu in this sense; CAD Z, 149). Here too, many Hebrew manuscripts present the variant ציז. Zîz also appears in the Bible as a personal name, in the forms ציז (2 Chr. 4:37; 11:20), and ציז (1 Chr. 23:10; LXX and G do not support the variant ציז)
of the substantive *ziz* based on the verb מָנוָּה “to move,” first attested in the words of the medieval commentator Rashi: “and *ziz* šāday is mine: the creeping insects of the field; *ziz*, because they move from one place to another” (his commentary to Ps. 50:11; cf. idem, Ps. 80:14).

Although Rashi does not reveal his sources, he was most likely familiar with the Rabbinic Hebrew word מַנוָּה—grouped with other words meaning “flies.”

Originally, *ziz* seems to be an onomatopoeic word like כְּבַּר, “fly,” alluding to the buzzing sound made by flying insects, referring by semantic extension to other, non-buzzing crawling insects in Rabbinic Hebrew. This *ziz* is perhaps related to Akkadian *ziṣu/siṣu*, meaning “locust.”

Accordingly, biblical *ziz* šāday was explained as a general name for field insects.

This explanation may fit the context, but it does not reflect the full scope of the original meaning of the verses. According to the development of the character of *ziz* in rabbinic sources, and in the light of analogous mythical traditions such as Leviathan and Behemoth, it is preferable to understand *ziz* šāday as alluding to a sinister, Anzu-like mythological bird.

### Ziz in classical rabbinic literature

Although they must have been aware of the meaning “worm,” “insect,” rabbinic sources offer a very different context for the biblical *ziz* šāday. In several sources *ziz* represented a mythological creature:

Rabbi Johanan in the name of Rabbi Jonathan said, “Instead of that which I have forbidden you, I have permitted you . . .” Instead of certain fish, Leviathan. Instead of certain birds, *Ziz.*

This is one of whom it is written, “I know every bird of the mountains and *Ziz* šāday belongs to me.”

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33. In y. Shab. XIV, 14b it appears next to כְּבַר, מַנוָּה and סִיוֹד. See also T. Terumot 7:11; T. Bekh. 1.8; b. Ḥul. 67b; Sifra Shemini 7:1. See A. Cohen, “Studies in Hebrew Lexicography,” AJSL 40 (1924), 170; M. Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature (New York, 1950), 393.

34. CAD S, 321. I find Shveka’s attempt to distinguish between the sense of flying buzzing insects and the rabbinic word *ziz* in the sense of small, crawling insects, unconvincing (A. Shveka, “Anzu, Ziz, and the Locust,” Shnaton 16 [2006], 145, n. 9 [Hebrew with English abstract]). The slight gap in meaning can be easily explained by semantic expansion. His suggestion to see in the figure of the biblical *ziz* šāday a giant locust, mostly for its ability to block out the sun, is interesting. However, the locust was a natural phenomenon (see Shveka, ibid., 148), and all its seemingly mythic characteristics (dimming the sun, making a loud noise, causing fear and then wreaking havoc, and finally piling up and rotting, disseminating a terrible stench) were realistic features. Unlike Leviathan, Behemoth, and *Ziz*, the rebellious action of the locust (if one agrees with Shveka that there was a rebellious side to this “army of God”) was not a one-time act in primordial days related to the cosmogonic battles of God against the powers of chaos, but a recurring natural phenomenon, likened to the onslaught of a terrible enemy. The affinities with descriptions of realistic armies, such as of Assyrian troops, which were also sent by God as punishment, yet often outdid their task and were eventually punished (cf. Isa. 5:26–30; 10:5–19), point to the background of those motifs in the descriptions of the locust.
to me” (Ps. 50:11). Rabbi Judah b. Rabbi Simeon said, “At the moment when he spreads his wings he dims the disk of the sun.” . . . Why is its name Ziz? Because in it there are many tastes, a taste of this and a taste of that (mizzeh ūmizzeh). Instead of certain animals, Behemoth on a thousand hills. (Midrash Leviticus Rabba 22:10; cf. Midrash Ps. 18:23).

According to this aggadic tradition Ziz is a proper name, denoting a specific legendary creature, a giant bird fulfilling a role parallel to that of Leviathan and Behemoth. The name is explained as derived from the variety of its tastes. The same tradition is also reflected in another aggadic source, an episode in a series of fantastic fish tales from the Talmud, which underscores its cosmic dimensions:

Rabbah b. Bar Hanna further related: Once we traveled on board a ship and we saw a bird standing up to its ankles in water while its head reached the sky. We thought the water was not deep and wished to go down and cool ourselves, but a Bat\ h K\ of (divine voice, lower grade of prophecy) called out: “Do not go down there, for a carpenter’s axe was dropped into this water] seven years ago and it has not [yet] reached the bottom.” . . . R. Ashi said:

That [bird] was Ziz ̀d\ ay for it is written: And Ziz ̀d\ ay is with me. (b. Baba Bathra 73b)

Here Ziz appears as a cosmic bird; its legs embedded in the foundations of earth, its head reaching heaven.

In several rabbinic sources the giant bird Ziz is grouped together with two other famous legendary giant creatures—Leviathan, the water monster, and Behemoth, the terrestrial beast. Ziz personifies the third realm—sky, and together the three represent the entire living environment: water, land, and air.35 The affinity is not only in their gigantic size but also in their shared fate. The three creatures will serve as the main course at the messianic banquet for the righteous in the world to come.

This motif is picked up by the ancient piyyu\ of Qalir, written in Israel in the fifth–sixth centuries C.E.:

He will then show them three consolations
Ziz and Leviathan and Behemoth
Ziz who feeds them with all sort of tastes
Spreads its wings mightily36
And dims the luminaries as far as the deeps37

35. This has been pointed out by the fourteenth c. commentary on the piyyu\ im by Abraham ben Azriel, Arugat Habosem, ed. E. E. Urbach (Jerusalem, 1963), 3.101–2. The three are also joined in the following midrash: “So it is taught in the name of R. Meir: But ask now the Behemoth and it shall teach you (Job 12:7)—’The Behemoth of a thousand hills’ (Ps. 50:10); and the fowl of the air and it shall tell you (ibid.)—that is ziz ̀d\ ay (Ps. 50:11); or speak to the earth and it shall teach you (ibid.)—that is the Garden of Eden; and the fishes of the sea shall declare to you (ibid.)—that is the Leviathan. Who knoweth not among all these that the hand of the Lord has wrought this? (Job 12:9)” (Pesikta Rabbati, 16, 80:2–81:1 = Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, 6, 58:1; see B. Mandelbaum, Pesikta de Rav Kahana [New York, 1962], 112–13; Midrash Numbers Rabba, 21:18).

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37. See ibid., 351. For the development of the artistic motif of Leviathan, Behemoth, and Ziz as food served at the messianic meal, see J. Gutmann, “Leviathan, Behemoth and Ziz: Jewish Messianic Symbols in Art,” HUCA 39 (1968), 219–30.
Some elements of the traditions of the cosmic monsters seem to be a late development, such as their being served in the messianic meal for the pious. However, the grouping together of the three monsters was perhaps motivated by similarities, which existed primarily independently. Thus it seems evident that the size of the monsters was an original mythic element. Another possible originally separate element may be their rebellious nature, leading to their consequent suppression by God. The rebellious character is explicitly mentioned in traditions regarding sea, for example:

Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: At that time when the Holy One Blessed be He, desired to create the world, He said to the ruler of the sea: “Open your mouth and swallow all the waters of the world” (Rashi explains: so that the land will appear). He said to Him: “Lord of the Universe, it is enough that I remain with my own.” Thereupon He struck him with His foot and killed him; for it is written: By His power He stilled the sea; by His skill He struck down Rahab (Job 26:12) (b. Baba Bathra 74b–75a).

In these traditions the dramatic subjugation of water monsters is set in primeval times. Although our sources do not speak explicitly of the rebellious nature of Ziz, the bird monster, it appears that a tradition regarding its rebellion in primordial times existed, hinted at in the following midrash, which elaborates on the argument of the snake when enticing Eve to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge:

R. Judah b. R. Simon said: He (the serpent) argued: “whatever was created after its companion dominates it. Thus: heaven was created on the first day and the firmament on the second: does it not bear its weight? The firmament was created on the second and the herbs on the third: do they not interrupt the waters? Herbs were created on the third day and the luminaries on the fourth; the luminaries on the fourth and the birds on the fifth.” R. Judah b. R. Simon said: The Ziz is a clean bird (may be eaten) and when it flies it dims the orb of the sun. “Now you were created after everything; make haste and eat before He creates other worlds which will rule over you” (Genesis Rabbah 19:4).

According to the opening words of the serpent in this midrash, each phenomenon created in the first six days dominates its predecessor, domination specifically expressed by the ability to bear the weight of the sky, to change the course (absorb?) of the water, maintain and grow plants (in one of the manuscripts, following the assertion that the luminaries were created after the herbs a different hand added in the margins the question: “do they not ripen their fruit?”). Common to all examples is

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38. The basis for the tradition of serving the mythological creatures to the pious in the eschaton is Ps. 74:14, yet the verse probably refers to casting Leviathan as food for people inhabiting the wilderness (cf. KJV, NJPS), playing out the contrast between wilderness and sea. The transfer of this motif to the eschaton and its expansion to include the non-watery creatures is a rabbinic development.


40. Similarly: “When the Holy One, Blessed be He created the sea, it went on expanding until the Holy One, Blessed be He, rebuked it and caused it to dry up” (b. Hagiiga 12a; see also Exodus Rabba 15:29; and the late addition to Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 2:4, ed. Mandelbaum, 455–56).

41. Leviathan and Behemoth too were created at the dawn of time, on the fifth day of creation according to the apocryphic compositions 4 Ezra 6:49–52; 2 Baruch 29:4. See also Genesis Rabba 7:21; b. Baba Bathra 75a; Targum Yerushalmi to Gen. 1:21.
the ability of the latter phenomenon to transform the former. This does not necessarily indicate a negative force from the anthropocentric viewpoint; on the contrary, these are the powers which keep the world as we know it going, such as the control the sun has of the plants, which makes them grow and produce fruit.

The phrasing of the midrash shows that the flight of Ziz is different from other phenomena mentioned. Unlike previous reasoning, phrased in the pattern of a rhetorical question (for example: “do they not interrupt the waters?”) and mentioned to elucidate and exemplify the opening statement of the snake according to Rabbi Judah b. Rabbi Simon, the control of birds over the sun is represented by a particular incident, brought in the name of the same rabbi. Apparently, in the absence of a “natural” explanation for the control birds must have over the sun, the author of this midrash resorted to a known mythic tradition about the control of one ancient bird over the sun, an event connected to primordial times. However, the juxtaposition of Ziz’s ability to fly and dim the sun with the rest of the controlling phenomena implies that this is a powerful act, by which Ziz controls / transforms the sun.

Other phenomena besides Ziz are also described with the ability to “dim the orb of the sun” in rabbincic sources, and these are all wonders from the time of creation: the primordial light (Genesis Rabba 3:5); the heels of the first man (who was of cosmic dimensions in aggadic midrash; Leviticus Rabba 20:2); the ancient giants (Genesis Rabba 26:4). In the first two examples the phrase “dim the orb of the sun” represents a static, relative state. The sun in these cases is not actually darkened, the phrase draws attention to the luminous nature of the primordial light and Adams heels, which outshine the sun. There is no hint in these cases of a rebellious act. On the contrary, they were created with their radiant quality by God, who can make use of their attributes at will, such as to store the unique glow of the first days for the righteous in the messianic future.

In contrast, the very same phrase “dim the orb of the sun” bears a sinister meaning in the story of the giants. In this case dimming the sun is a rebellious act of extortion—“Their necks reached (ºonqim) the orb of the sun and they demanded: ‘send us down rain’ ” (Genesis Rabba 25:4). Spreading its wings and dimming the orb of the sun, Ziz acts more like the rebellious giants than the glowing primeval phenomena. In this case the dimming of the sun is not a result of the nature of Ziz, but of its actions. The sun does not merely seem dim in comparison with the brilliance of its wings. It is dimmed in reality, its light eclipsed by a willful deliberate action aimed at defying God’s authority and sovereignty.42 Control over the sun and the ability to eclipse it indicate, therefore, more than a neutral power, and is different in nature from the control of the firmament over the sky, of the plants over the water, and of the sun over the plants. All the other examples are a natural and desired part of the normal course of the world, existing from creation to present days, whereas Ziz’s flight threatens to overturn world order, devastating the world by cosmic black-out,

42. Contra M. Margulies, Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah (New York and Jerusalem, 1993), 523 (Hebrew), who equates the spreading of Ziz’s wings with the glow of Adam’s heels. In his opinion the Rabbis quoted Job 39:26 here because they interpreted the name °n mentioned there in the sense “to glow” (°xn). About the identification of Ziz and °n see below, n. 47.
an extreme act related to the instability typical of the days of creation, and not to the ongoing existence of the universe.

Accordingly, although our sources do not speak explicitly of the rebellious nature of Ziz, the bird monster, it seems that this trait is indicated in its ability to dim the sun by spreading its wings. A solar eclipse is a sign of calamity and devastation. Darkness is conceived as chaotic, typifying the unformed void (tōhû wabōhû) and the watery deep which preceded creation (Gen. 1:2; cf. Isa. 45:19). Job curses the day he was born wishing it would turn dark (Job 3:4–5), cursing even the night of his conception and wishing that darkness would consume it (Job 3:9). Mentioning Leviathan and perhaps alluding also to Yamm in this connection (Job 3:8) is illustrative of the reversal of creation, return of chaos and darkness.

Darkness is often seen as part of, or as a result of heavenly combat, among other terrible changes in heaven and on earth (Isa. 50:2–3; Ezek. 32:7–9; Ps. 44:20). In the Bible God alone possesses the power and ability to control the luminaries, on His own or through agents, and the motif of darkness is closely connected to theophany, especially common in the descriptions of the apocalyptic “Day of the Lord” (Isa. 13:10; Joel 2:10; 3:4 [2:31]; 4:15; Amos 5:18–20; 8:9; Zeph. 1:15). Attributing the dimming of the sun to the act of Ziz spreading of its wings at will portrays an ability to control elements which should otherwise have been under God’s control, threatening a reversal of creation.

Since only Ziz had wings and control of the aerial realm, this is the only element that was undoubtedly originally its own among the three monsters. It is therefore probable that we see here a remnant of a tradition no longer extant in our sources, that of the rebellious nature of Ziz. This trait and its huge dimensions deemed Ziz fit to join Leviathan and Behemoth in the category of threatening mythic monsters of cosmic proportions. The analogy to traditions regarding Leviathan and Behemoth—Ziz’s companions in biblical (cf. “Behemoth” in Ps. 50:10) and midrashic traditions

43. Notice the intentional wordplay between the terms yôm (sea) and yôm (day), first mentioned by Gunkel, Schöpfung und Chaos, 59, n. 1, in the name of Gottfried Schmidt. Greenstein proposed that סה here in the sense of Yamm is a deliberate use of a Phoenician vocalization (א > א) “with the apparent purpose of adding a pagân, Canaanite nuance to the name of the old Canaanite deity Yamm” (E. L. Greenstein, “The Language of Job and Its Poetic Function,” JBL 122 [2003], 655).


46. The piyyuṭ of Qalir also ascribes the same ability to Leviathan: “his fins dim the disk of the sun” (Schirmann, “The Battle,” 353:54), and likewise in a late addition to Pesikta de-Rav Kahana (ed. Mandelbaum, 455). In this case Leviathan is not acting threateningly, and the fins outshine the sun, in combination with the glow of Leviathan’s skin, which like the original light of the seven days is said to be reserved for the future righteous as building material for their sukkah. This motif was initiated in Leviathan’s case by the interpretation of the enigmatic biblical words תומד תומד as fins (dimming) the sun (רַחֲלָה) in the description of Leviathan (Job 41:22; see M. Kister, “Some Observations on Vocabulary and Style in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in T. Muraoka and J. F. Elwolde, eds., Diggers at the Well [Leiden, 2000], 148).
(Leviticus Rabba 22:10; b. Baba Bathra 73:b–74:a)—highlights the place of Ziz in combat traditions and its defiant nature.

Possible Sources for Ziz Traditions

Mythical giant birds exist in many cultures, some of which belong to the same cultural milieu in which rabbinic literature was formed. It is natural to assume that elements from these mythologies found their way to Jewish sources, and their traces can be seen in some Ziz and other rabbinic traditions concerning giant birds.47 Two mythic bird figures have been suggested in previous studies as possible background and sources for rabbinic Ziz: the Persian heavenly rooster (Vendidad 18:15–25) and the Greco-Roman Phoenix. Before acknowledging the ancient Near Eastern roots of Ziz we will discuss these two characters as possible sources for Ziz traditions.

Ziz and the Heavenly Rooster

The Aramaic Targum to Ps. 50:11 identified *zîz šâday* with the cosmic bird from rabbinic legend (b. Baba Bathra 73b), yet branded it further the “Wild Rooster”: “I know of all sorts of birds which fly in the sky, and the wild rooster, whose ankles rest on earth while its head reaches the sky, sings before me.”48 The cosmic rooster singing in the presence of God is familiar from Persian mythology. The rooster is a sacred bird, a helper of the good god, protecting believers during the night. Due to its awakening call at dawn, it was connected to the sun and seen as a positive power, deemed the enemy of sloth and oversleep.49

Based on the Aramaic Targum to Ps. 50:11 Ginzberg concluded that “in most of the Ziz legends the dependence upon Iranic mythology is evident.”50 However, the characteristics of the mythological Persian rooster are intrinsically different from those of the rabbinic Ziz. The Persian rooster is a positive power, typified by an unusual ability to see from afar.51 Its far-sightedness enables it to detect the light of

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47. Rabbinic sources mention a few other legendary birds, such as: *ynkwy rb* (lit. “son of the nest”; b. Yoma 80a; Suk. 5a–b; Bekh. 57b); *br nụn* (b. Gît 31b; Baba Bathra 25b; Rashi and others interpreted it as a winged angel); *nụn* (b. Bekh. 57b; compare b. Men. 9b; Sifra 1:14); and *nụn* (lit. “bird of the sand,” a.k.a. *Urshina*; see below, n. 60). Initially these were different birds, later partially identified and equated: *ynkwy rb* is Ziz in Leviticus Rabba 2:10. The process of “literary contamination” led to *ynkwy rb* being said to be served at the messianic banquet; see L. Ginzberg, “Beiträge zur Lexikographie des Aramäischen,” in V. Aptowitzer, ed., Festschrift Adolf Schwarz (Berlin and Vienna, 1917), 360; idem, The Legends of the Jews, 47–48, n. 139. Lack of distinction between original motifs in separate rabbinic traditions and secondary diffusion undermine the study of these texts in R. van den Broek, The Myth of the Phoenix (Leiden, 1972), 264–68.


50. Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews, 48. At the same time he is aware that the rabbinic figure of Ziz is composite, commenting that: “To quite a different cycle of legends belongs the conception of the gigantic bird Ziz, which will be eaten by the pious in the world to come” (ibid., end of n. 139).

51. The meaning of its Persian name *parôdars* is “the seer.”
dawn before all others, and with its expressive voice the rooster arouses the loyal servants of god. The heavenly rooster does not “dim the orb of the sun.” On the contrary, it invites the sun to rise and shine on the whole world. The heavenly seer and singer cannot account for the traditions regarding Ziz, the primordial rebellious bird, and it seems that the identification of the two in the late Aramaic Targum of Psalms is secondary.

Ziz and the Phoenix

According to another suggestion, Ziz is the Graeco-Roman Phoenix. The major characteristics of this bird are a connection to the sun and longevity of life, combined with an ability to recreate or rejuvenate itself after its death. As in the case of the heavenly rooster, the most noticeable possible connection with Ziz is the association of the bird with the sun. The Phoenix symbolizes the sun and is associated with it in all traditions, even in its external features: its head is adorned with a halo of sun rays, its colors are those of sunrise—hues of gold and blazing crimson. Birds are symbolically connected to the sun in many ancient traditions, and in the Sumerian Anzu traditions as well, yet it is necessary to check whether this motif in traditions regarding Ziz indicates a Greco-Roman cultural influence. In the case of Ziz the connection to the sun finds expression in its spreading its wings, thereby dimming the orb of the sun, a threatening, sinister act. A similar motif is found in a Jewish tradition describing the Phoenix, and because this point has consequences for the reconstruction of the sources of the Ziz traditions, it will be dealt with below in detail.

The Phoenix in 2 Enoch and in 3 Baruch

In two apocryphal compositions the Phoenix appears as a companion to the chariot of the sun. In 2 Enoch (Slavonic Enoch) the seer ascends to heaven, where he sees two birds pulling the chariot of the sun, one like the Phoenix, the other called Chalkydri, composite lion-dragon figures, crimson like the rainbow, and of enormous dimensions (“nine hundred measures”). The creatures carry dew and heat, descend to earth, and ascend from it with the sun’s rays according to God’s orders (6:6–7).

A similar, expanded vision is found in 3 Baruch (the Greek Apocalypse of Baruch). In this apocalypse an angel leads Baruch the scribe to the upper heavens.

52. Niehoff, “The Phoenix in Rabbinic Literature,” 256, 260ff. The obvious differences between the characteristics of each one of the birds is explained by her as a result of mythopoetic development: “Once the phoenix had become familiar, it grew in the rabbinic imagination into a huge mythological monster similar to the leviathan” (ibid., 263).
55. Charles, The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, 527ff. The Phoenix possibly appears in another Jewish source, a tragedy written by the Hellenistic Jew Ezekiel in the second century B.C.E. (H. Jacobsen, The Exagoge of Ezekiel [Cambridge, 1983], 63:254–69). However, the identification of the remarkable animal in the description of Ezekiel with the Phoenix, stated already in the fifth–sixth centuries C.E., is
In the site from where the sun goes forth Baruch sees a bird of huge dimensions circling the sun. The angel identifies it as the Phoenix, explaining that the bird is guarding the earth—by flying alongside the sun and spreading its wings, thus receiving the sun’s fiery rays. Were it not to receive the rays, the angel explains, the human race would not survive, along with all other living creatures. The angel stresses that God appointed this bird (6:3–7). Then, as the angels open the three hundred and sixty-five gates of heaven, Baruch hears the noise of the bird. He is told that the role of the Phoenix’s voice is to awaken the earthly roosters from slumber, which then go on to awaken humanity while the angels prepare the sun (6:13–16). Then, as the sun shines behind the Phoenix, it spreads out its wings, gradually gaining full measure. At dusk, the sun’s rays are defiled from the lawlessness and unrighteousness of men it has seen all day, and the Phoenix likewise contracts its wings, exhausted from having restrained the burning heat and fire of the sun from scorching all living creatures. The angel repeats the assertion that without the shielding wings of the bird, there could be no life (8:7).

What is the relation of the motif of the Phoenix, spreading its wings in front of the sun, to the ability of Ziz to dim the sun by spreading its wings? Despite the basic resemblance of the act itself, it must be noted that the motif plays a completely different role in each case. The traditions of Ziz regard the sun as an essential necessary element of the world order, and dimming it is considered emblematic of mutinous, sinister powers threatening to reverse the world to pre-creation chaos. In contrast, the same act by the Phoenix in the upper heavens in 3 Baruch plays a reverse role. The sun itself is deemed dangerous. By spreading its wings in front of the sun the Phoenix is a permanent sunscreen, acting to preserve the world order from the destructive heat of the sun.

The difference in the nature of the act points to a difference between the two actors and their purposes. As shown before, spreading the wings and dimming the sun is a negative, power-driven act in rabbinic sources, whereas in 3 Baruch it is a positive, benevolent act. The Phoenix is exhausted and spent by the end of the day, resting all night just to return ceaselessly to its task the following morning. Another difference lies in the frequency of the act. The midrash does not state when Ziz spreads its wings, but the context suggests that it probably refers to a one-time mutinous event during creation, whereas the Phoenix in 3 Baruch fulfills the role of sunscreen daily. A third difference is reflected in God’s attitude toward the two birds. Ziz’s ability to dim the sun is apparently subversive, directed against God. 3 Baruch does not indicate an independent act or a sovereign creature. Special emphasis is given to the fact that the Phoenix is ordered by God to spread its wings (6:7), thereby becoming an essential cosmic element, an unparalleled emphasis when compared to all the other recorded acts of the bird.

These fundamental differences between the two characters in their similar acts are not independent of each other. The motif of spreading the wings in front of the sun in 3 Baruch and in rabbinic sources regarding Ziz seems to be a link between contested; see B. Z. Wacholder and S. Bowman, “Ezechielus the Dramatist and Ezekiel the Prophet,” *HTR* 78 (1985), 253–77.
them, perhaps even a polemic. This possible link can be described in one of the following ways:

1. Direct literary borrowing. Since 3 Baruch is the earlier source, this kind of link can only mean that the midrashic figure of Ziz is borrowing from the description of the Phoenix in 3 Baruch. If this is the case, the midrash must have developed the motif of spreading the wings from a positive, constant act, prearranged by God in order to preserve earthly life, which brings the obedient Phoenix to complete exhaustion daily, to a power oriented, insubordinate element, threatening world order, displaying the control of Ziz, created on the fifth day, over the sun, created on the fourth (Genesis Rabba 19:4).

2. Both traditions rely on a third (hypothetical) source. In this case, the author of the pseudoepigraphic 3 Baruch integrated into the description of the Phoenix, the companion of the sun, motifs that originated in the ancient Near East—the spreading of the wings in front of the sun, and perhaps also the bird’s cosmic size. The same two motifs have found their way into traditions regarding Ziz in rabbincic sources.

The second option is more likely. The Phoenix in Jewish apocalyptic literature has unique features. Only in 3 Baruch does the Phoenix take the role of guardian of the world, a permanent sunscreen. As van der Broek has shown, the exceptional characteristics of the Phoenix in this description testify to the borrowing of elements from other solar bird traditions, and their adaptation into a unique apocalyptic story with its distinct quality. The concept of the three hundred and sixty-five gates of heaven (6:17) is Persian. The source of the role of the Phoenix to awaken the roosters before sunrise is found in the Persian Heavenly Rooster traditions and the concept of the all-seeing sun-god, in charge of justice and observant of sins, is also well known from ancient Near Eastern traditions. The compilation of pre-existing motifs and elements, recasting them in order to fashion a new construction is typical of other apocalyptic compositions as well, perhaps of the entire genre. It is, therefore, reasonable,
that the element of spreading the wings in front of the sun is not original to 3 Baruch, but borrowed, and this fits well with the eclectic nature of the entire passage, which has little in common with the known representations of the Phoenix in the ancient world.

Furthermore, it is hard to accept the possibility that the rabbis were familiar enough with the figure of the Phoenix from apocalyptic literature to use it in their rendition of Ziz, since there are other references to the usual figure of the Phoenix in rabbinic literature. “The bird of the sand,” as the Phoenix is called in rabbinic sources, is totally distinct from Ziz, and there is no overlapping or confusion between the two. It is known for its usual traits—regeneration and longevity. These qualities are interpreted as the bird’s reward from God for an act of righteousness towards God or men.60

Although in the present state of things we cannot rule out this possibility entirely, it is unlikely that the rabbis created the threatening Ziz as a mytho-poetic development of the apocalyptic Phoenix tradition, while preserving the figure of the Phoenix with its usual characteristics. There is a large discrepancy between the concept of the pious bird awarded immortality and Ziz, the cosmic monster threatening a reversal of order which will be subdued and served in the messianic meal.

The Phoenix in 2 Enoch and 3 Baruch is a unique composite figure, composed from various elements of other then-known sun-birds. It is not impossible, that in the making of this figure the authors borrowed elements from a cosmic bird, which expresses its defiance against God by spreading its wings and dimming the sun. Although we have no direct proof of the existence of an ancient (Israelite or other) tradition regarding such a motif prior to rabbinic times, its conjectured existence affords the best explanation, in my opinion, for both the remarkable resemblance expressed in the motif of spreading the wings and dimming the sun, and the many differences between the two figures. The fact that the angel stresses twice, that of all the roles of the Phoenix, the spreading of the wings alone is an act ordained by God,

60. The bird of the sand is mentioned in a midrash on the words “She also gave some to her husband” (Gen. 3:6): “Also is an extension; she gave the cattle, beasts and birds to eat of it. All obeyed her and ate thereof, except a certain bird named לְאִיר (sand), as it is written: ‘Then I said, I shall die with my nest and I shall multiply my days as the sand’ (Job 29:18). The School of R. Jannai and R. Judan b. R. Simeon differ: The School of R. Jannai maintained: It lives a thousand years, at the end of which a fire issues from its nest and burns it up, yet as much as an egg is left, and it grows new limbs and lives again. R. Judan b. R. Simeon said: It lives a thousand years, at the end of which its body is consumed and its wings drop off, yet as much as an egg is left, whereupon it grows new limbs and lives again” (Genesis Rabbah 19:5; translation follows H. Freedman, Midrash Rabbah, Genesis [London-New York, 1983]). Note similar traditions in S. Buber, ed., Tanḥuma (Vilna, 1885; Jerusalem, 1964), 155; Midrash Shmuel 12:2. The Babylonian Talmud refers to the Phoenix under the caption “Urshina”: “Urshina, father found him lying in the side of the ark. He said to him: don’t you want food? He answered: I saw that you were busy, so I said I will not upset you. He said to him: May you not die, as it is written: ‘I shall die with my nest and I shall multiply my days as the sand’ (Job 29:18)” (b. Sanhedrin 108b). It is noteworthy that the midrash concerning the “bird of the sand” in Genesis Rabbah follows directly the section dealing with “Ziz the clean bird which flies and dims the orb of the sun,” but the two are separate entities, to each its own name and features, and with distinct characters. The “bird of the sand” was, according to the midrash, the first righteous creature, its refusal to take its share of the fruit of knowledge wins it the reward reserved for those who had tasted the tree of life—eternal life. The Babylonian Talmud also regards the Phoenix’s longevity as a prize for its considerate attitude toward Noah. The threatening nature of Ziz is fundamentally different.
might even indicate a polemical undertone, directed at the tradition of the rebellion of the bird against the creator, from which the author was apparently borrowing.

**Ziz and Anzu**

Motifs related to Ziz’s two counterparts, Leviathan and Behemoth, the legendary biblical monsters, are entrenched in ancient Near Eastern traditions. I suggest that there we can also find the roots of traditions regarding Ziz, the rabbinic cosmic bird. Ziz reflects traditions regarding Anzu, the lion-faced roaring eagle. The first point of contact between Anzu and Ziz is their cosmic dimension. However, as shown before, cosmic dimensions characterize other eastern mythic birds; hence, this feature alone is too common to indicate a connection. Two other points of contact, unique to Anzu and Ziz alone, may indicate such a link.

The second point of contact is the element of struggle and combat, the main theme of the Epic of Anzu. As claimed above, this element is subtly hinted at in rabbinic traditions regarding Ziz as well, expressed by its ability to spread its wings and dim the sun. The juxtaposition of Ziz to Leviathan and Behemoth in rabbinic myth reinforces by way of analogy the rebellious nature of Ziz. The third point of contact is the relation to primordial times. Like Leviathan and Behemoth, Ziz is a primeval creature, set in the cosmogetic era with its special wonders, like the story of Anzu.

The last two unique elements, together with the element of the cosmic size of the birds, testify to a link between Anzu and Ziz. Like Anzu, Ziz was a cosmic bird, which defied the divine hierarchy and tried to reverse the world order in primordial days.

Studies dealing with mythic traditions in rabbinic literature have asked whether they are the recurrent remains of older traditions or inner-Jewish developments, namely, memory or interpretation. When trying to reconstruct the original Israelite epic, Cassuto claimed that midrashic mythical motifs fed on an ancient Near Eastern heritage, growing from traditions current among the people and renewed in rabbinic literature. Other scholars claimed that midrashic mythological elements result from the interpretation and elaboration of biblical themes and verses, a development of inner-Jewish ideas. Daniel Boyarin, for example, called Cassuto’s claim that mythic materials were preserved in folk tradition till later periods “naive and unnecessary.”

In his opinion, midrashic mythology is but a psychoanalytic act of interpretation based

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61. See the words of Kohler connecting the rabbinic Ziz with the Mesopotamian Anzu (Zu): “... mythical giant-bird Ziz—זיז, I think it is the same mentioned in Assyrian Mythology as the divine bird Zu”; K. Kohler, “Contributions to Hebrew and Assyrian Philology,” *Hebraica* 1 (1884), 31; I thank Dr. Ronnie Goldstein for this reference.

62. Cassuto himself does not reject the possibility of late, interpretive development: “Needless to say, not all the material to be found in post-biblical Jewish literature, on this and on similar subjects, is applicable for the purpose of our reconstruction. For in part, it is but the product of later development, or of the midrashic interpretation applied by the Rabbis to Biblical passages; but in part it undoubtedly preserves ancient elements retained by the memory of the people even after the original poems had sunk into complete oblivion” (Cassuto, “The Israelite Epic,” 82).

on a close reading of the Bible itself. It is an explicit expression of repressed biblical elements, a development of a preexisting subconscious layer in the Bible, hidden there in metaphorical images. This is a plausible claim in the cases of Leviathan and Behemoth, since the major nucleus of midrashic elements is found already in biblical texts. It does not, however, explain the case of Ziz. As shown before, the language of the Psalms does not indicate that Ziz is necessarily a legendary bird. Rabbinic Hebrew knew a word zîz meaning “insect,” which fits nicely with the biblical text. It is therefore unlikely that rabbinic legends of Ziz are an independent act of interpretation of the biblical verses. They are better explained as the result of Mesopotamian cultural influence.

One must further try to trace the route through which Anzu motifs filtered into midrashic literature. There are two hypothetical reconstructions:

a. Mesopotamian influence was horizontal, a result of direct contacts between rabbinic literature and Mesopotamian culture.

b. The influence was vertical, rabbinic Ziz traditions originating in biblical conceptions, rooted in the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East.

It would seem that the first possibility is probable in the light the contacts which existed in Babylon between the Jews and the Parthians in the first centuries C.E., in a society which still preserved a significant part of a Mesopotamian cuneiform-related cultural heritage.\(^{64}\) Reconstructing the course of influence in this case would start with the Akkadian Anzu epic and other Mesopotamian myths, through Aramaic translations to Babylonian Jewish circles, and from them to the rabbis in the land of Israel.

However, this reconstruction is met with two major difficulties. First, the few studies dealing with the question of the influence of ancient Near Eastern culture on the Babylonian Talmud indicate that the contact occurs mostly within the sphere of “scientific-professional” texts: dream interpretations, omens, medicine, mathematics, and astronomy, and not in the area of literary-mythological motifs.\(^{65}\) Moreover, reconstruction of a direct course of influence, from Mesopotamian traditions to rabbinic literature, assumes that there is a late midrashic interpretation, disconnected from the original meaning of the biblical text, and that the rabbis implemented the character of the cosmic bird on the term zîz šāday secondarily. However, it is precisely the mythological element that fits in well in the verses, both from a linguistic perspective and from the context, as will be shown here.

There is another point of resemblance between Anzu and Ziz, found in the biblical text but unparalleled in the midrash. Anzu, as seen above, dwelled in the moun-

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64. For the claim that cuneiform culture continued till the end of the third century C.E., see M. J. Geller, “The Last Wedge,” ZA 87 (1997), 47–49.
65. On this matter Geller pronounced: “if one expects to find Gilgamesh or Adapa in the Babylonian Talmud he will be disappointed. While mythology is culture specific, ‘science’ (in the European sense) is universal, and therefore one actually finds technical terms and specific concepts known from Akkadian within Talmudic passages dealing with medicine and omens, or mathematics and astronomy”; M. J. Geller, “The Survival of Babylonian Wissenschaft in Later Traditions,” in S. Aro and R. M. Whiting, eds., The Heirs of Assyria, Melammu Symposia I (Helsinki, 2000), 3.
tains, Akkadian šadû. The construct expression zîz šâday occurs in both psalms, and the nomen rectum, šâday is etymologically identical to Akkadian šadû. In Ps. 50:11 zîz šâday parallels the construct “bird of the mountain,” a biblical hapax, which was indeed “corrected” to the common “bird of the sky” by some versions (Greek, Syriac, and Aramaic). The motif of dwelling in the mountain, central to the character of Anzu, is not mentioned at all in rabbinic sources. The parallelism “bird of the mountain” || zîz šâday suggests that the biblical verses already refer to elements from Mesopotamian myth. The first compound “bird of the mountain” is therefore an anticipatory explanatory hyperonym of the proper name zîz šâday, just as “every beast of the forest” relates to “Behemoth on a thousand hills” in the former verse.

One might also point out the possibility that the consonant z, common to both names, indicates an etymological link between Akkadian Anzu and Hebrew zîz šâday. Although this is an attractive possibility, it is extremely difficult to prove. The three phonological changes—dropping of the initial vowel a, assimilation of n to z, and the shift of the vowel u to i—do not allow us to regard the possibility of an etymological link as more than a tentative speculation for the time being.

**Zîz šâday in the Psalms**

The mythological meaning of zîz sheds new light on the two psalms. In Psalm 50 God’s control over Ziz is symbolic of His control over all wild animals: “For every beast of the forest is mine . . . for the world and all that is in it is mine” (Ps. 50:10–12). Mention of Behemoth and Ziz, mutinous monsters in this context, is comparable to the mention of Behemoth and Leviathan in the words of God to Job. God demonstrates His total control over creation by describing His control over the earth and water monsters, Behemoth and Leviathan (Job 40–41). The battle against primordial
monsters illustrates the ultimate power and ability of God: “Have I not the power to save? With a mere rebuke I dry up the sea, and turn rivers into deserts . . .” (Isa. 50:2). Controlling unruly powers—taming the insubordinate and restraining it, transforming it into a harmless pet—is a familiar motif from combat traditions (Jer. 5:22; Ps. 44:19–20; 104:26; Job 7:12; 38:8, 10–11; 40:25–29). In similar fashion, in Psalm 50 the poet singles out Behemoth and Ziz in order to highlight and intensify God’s omnipotence, and the phrase “I know all the birds of the mountains and ziz šāday is mine” (Prov. Ps. 50:11) expresses His control over the animal.69 The absence of the notorious Leviathan, the prominent biblical monster from Psalm 50 is not surprising, as this psalm deals with sacrifices which were brought from beasts and fowl only, and not from the fish. God demonstrates His control over creation, therefore, by His control over two mythical creatures, Behemoth and Ziz, representing the beasts and birds of the animal kingdom.

Psalm 80 likens the people of Israel to a cosmic vine damaged by two enemies: “The boar from the forest ravages it, and ziz šāday feeds on it.” The hapax root krsm in the verb יְרֵכָּמָה is probably connected to the root ksm meaning “trimming of hair” (Ezek. 44:20), which here appears in the sense “to break,” “to destroy.”70 The meaning of the parallel verb יִרְצֹּנָה is “to destroy,” “to wreck” according to context (see Mic. 5:5; Job 20:26; Ps. 49:15), and should perhaps be connected to the root ר쇠 (cf. Jer. 11:16: רָשׁוּ כְּלָלְו) similar to רָשִׁי, compelling a change of the vocalization of the word to רָשִׁי, meaning “to crush.”71 The Psalter is thus drawing a picture of gradual destruction. First the removal of fences, leading to unauthorized plucking of fruit by any passerby, followed by total ruin of the vine caused by the trampling by the legs of the boar and ravaging by the bird (cf. Isa. 18:5–6). The devastation is the base of the poet’s plaintive question: “Why did you breach its wall . . .” (v. 13). The process of mythologization, casting historical enemies in the role of chaotic monsters, well known from ancient Near Eastern literature (see above, n. 22) is also prominent in the Bible: Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is depicted as a tanîn ravishing Israel (Jer. 51:34); Babylon, as well as Egypt are named rahab (Ps. 87:4; Isa. 30:7); and Pharaoh king of Egypt is metaphorically referred to as a huge tannîm sprawling in its channels (Ezek. 29:2–5), and to “a lion among the nations . . . like a dragon (tannîm) in the seas” (Ezek. 32:2–9). Generalizing, the prophet Isaiah depicts all of Israel’s historical enemies at all times as surging waters: “Ah, the roar of many peoples,
that roar as roars the sea . . .” (Isa. 17:12). Therefore, it is likely that by mention of the mythological animals devastating the vine—Israel, the author of Psalm 80 was hinting at real enemies, perhaps even historical events of his time, recast in allegorical language.

Is it possible to decipher this cryptic language, reveal the historical background of the psalm and unravel the enemy (or enemies) symbolized by the boar and Ziz? Despite its wild nature, the boar is not a frequent symbol of the devastating enemy.72 Thus, its background and source are hard to determine. Egyptian myth portrays the pig as a vile wild animal, associating it with Seth, god of chaos and evil.73 The connection to Egypt is highlighted also by the interpretation of Rashi to this verse, suggesting that the suspended letter ‘ayin in the word רַי can be interpreted as an aleph: “When Israel is fortunate, they make their enemy like the animal of the Nile (לָיְלָה), which has no power to go up the land, but when they are destined for trouble, their enemy becomes stronger like the animal of the forest (לָיְלָה), destroying and slaughtering.” The “boar of the forest” is, therefore, an appropriate symbol of Pharaoh, and some scholars have identified him as Pharaoh Necho, king of Egypt in the days of Josiah.74 A different pointer to the time of composition is the title attached to Psalm 80 in the majority of the LXX versions, associating it with Assyria: υξαλμός ύπέρ τοῦ Ασσυρίου, as well as its apparent northern background, hinted at by its mention of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh (v. 3), suggesting it was composed prior to the destruction of the northern kingdom and the exile of its inhabitants, events which are not mentioned in the psalm.75

72. The only other place in the Bible in which the boar depicts a wild and dangerous force is in the LXX version of the advice of Hushai to Absalom (2 Sam. 17:8), where after the words “... your father and his men are courageous fighters, and they are as desperate as a bear in the wild robbed of her whelps” it adds: καὶ ὁς δες τραγεία ἐν τῷ πάτῳ—and like a bear in the plain.”

73. In spell 112 of the Book of the Dead (R. K. Ritner, in Hallo, ed., Context of Scripture, 1.31), Seth transforms into a black boar, inflicting Horus’ eye, a story explaining why the pig became an abomination in Egypt. The myth of the god Seth incarnated as a pig, who attacked the moon, Osiris, ripping it apart and scattering the pieces, similarly explains the concept of the pig as a contemptible animal in Egypt (Herodotus, II:47; Plutarch, “About Isis and Osiris,” Moralia 353–54). For the pig as an abominable and contaminating animal with negative powers, see P. Galpaz-Feller, “The Stela of King Piye: a Brief Consideration of ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ in Ancient Egypt and the Bible,” RB 102 (1995), 511–14; S. Ikram, Choice Cuts: Meat Production in Ancient Egypt (Leuven, 1995), 29–33 (the last two sources were brought to my attention by Dr. Danel Kahn).

74. See Z. P. Hayut, Sefer Tehillim, Mikra Meforash (1902; repr. Jerusalem, 1970), 176 (Hebrew); H.-J. Kraus, trans. H. C. Oswald, Psalms 60–150 (Minneapolis, 1993), 143 (from the 5th German ed.). For the suspended ‘ayin and the possibility that it is a scribal correction, see n. 30 above. Rashi compared the boar from the forest to the trampling fourth animal from Daniel 7, which, as Walton suggested (above, n. 25), is comprised of various elements, some of which are taken from the myth of Anzu.

The symbolic, literary configuration of the psalm renders a decisive identification of its historical background unlikely, though it seems safe to conclude that it does reflect the Neo-Assyrian pressure of the northern kingdom during the second half of the eighth century B.C.E. If indeed this is the case, then the mythological aspect of zīz šāday testifies to another dimension in the meaning of the psalm, a political-polemical one. The poet likens the Assyrian enemy to zīz šāday, i.e., Anzu, the mythic mountainous bird from Mesopotamian lore threatening the world order. The metaphoric description of Israel as a cosmic vine whose “branches reached the sea, its shoots the river” (v. 12) is likewise a simile borrowed from the context of Assyrian imperial language, referring to maximal territorial extension, from one end of the world to another. This phenomenon indicates one of the Israelite’s reactions to the pressure of Assyrian propaganda—a reversal of roles, casting Israel in the role of the expanding empire, Assyria in the role of the cosmic-mythic enemy, using the stock phraseology common in royal inscriptions of the Assyrian conqueror.

According to our analysis, neither psalm deals with insects or beasts, nor do they draw a simple metaphoric parable from the world of nature alone. God’s control over zīz šāday and the devastation of the cosmic vine are correctly interpreted only in the light of ancient Near Eastern mythic tradition, like other biblical texts using mythological motifs, while adapting and integrating them in biblical fashion. Furthermore, the addition of Anzu / zīz šāday to the biblical mythic stock not only furthers our understanding of these specific two psalms, but might also shed light on the role of mountains in biblical poetic imagery, such as in Psalms 29 and 114.

76. N. Wazana, All the Boundaries of the Land (Jerusalem, 2007), 95–122 (Hebrew).


78. Paul Mosca suggested that the sequence sea-mountain-desert in Psalms 29 and 114 reflects the Ugaritic Baal myth (Mosca, “Ugarit and Daniel 7,” 503–4, n. 38). However, in the Baal cycle the mountain is the god’s abode and site of his temple, and Mosca does not explain why this element was joined to the enemies of the god, water (sea and river), and desert (to be identified with mut). Mountains were created side by side with the watery deep and the sea (Isa. 40:12 and elsewhere), and in language reminiscent of Chaoskampf phraseology, God’s theophany proves the rebellious nature of the mountains mentioned next to that of the Sea: “He rebukes the sea and dries it up, and He makes all rivers fail; Bashan and Carmel languish, and the blossoms of Lebanon wither; the mountains quake because of Him, and the hills melt” (Nah. 1:4–5a). Compare the actions of the god Erra who is depicted as ruler of the universe and said to “convulse the sea, obliterate mountains”; The Epic of Erra, IIIId.5; translation in Foster, Before the Muses, 778: 5. Nahum here is clearly drawing from “a general stock of so-called mythological storm imagery, which is well known elsewhere in the Bible and the Canaanite world beyond”: Peter Machinist, “The Fall of Assyria in Comparative Ancient Perspective,” in Parpola and Whiting, eds., Assyria 1995, 182.
Conclusion

Our study reveals that Anzu left its mark in biblical and post-biblical literature, zīz šāday preserving the memory of mythic elements originating in the Mesopotamian Anzu epic. The reconstruction of the journey of this motif from the ancient Near East to the Bible and rabbinic literature reinforces Cassuto’s claim, that elements repressed in the Bible reemerged in rabbinic literature, indicating continuity of folk traditions based on an ancient Near Eastern heritage. Cassuto’s case study for this phenomenon was descriptions of divine combat against water—“Ruler Sea,” “Leviathan.” It is now possible to add another divine conflict, the battle against the rebellious mountain bird. Traces of this myth found expression in biblical poetic texts, comparable to traces of the cosmogonic battle of God against the chaotic water monster and the sinister land monster. Tracing the footsteps of Anzu-Ziz also helps determine the general question of the nature of some of the mythical Rabbinic traditions: memory, not interpretation.
According to tradition, these rings were given to Judas Iscariot as payment for betraying Jesus. Going further back into Persian antiquity, there is a bird, amrzs, or snamurv. In Indian legend the garuda on which Vishnu rides is the king of birds, in the Pahlavi translation of the Indian story as represented by the Syrian Kalilag and Damnag, the Simurgh takes the place of the garuda, while Ibn al-Molaffa speaks instead of the anl~a.