

Cherubim and Seraphim: a textual and iconographic study

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Figure 1

Parrot 1961:155 (Figure 188).

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Problem statement

The Hebrew words כְּרוּבִים and שֶׁרָפִיִּים are well-known terms, but it is not clear exactly to what they refer. Some work has been done on the word כְּרוּבִים, and many sources agree on a probable definition and iconography,¹ but much less work has been done on the word שֶׁרָפִיִּים, which is not common in the Hebrew Bible, and appears translated as “seraph” only in two verses in Isaiah,² in a passage very similar to one in Ezekiel which involves cherubim.³

This study will attempt to answer the question: “What are cherubim and seraphim?” To do this, it must be determined exactly what is meant when these two words are used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to heavenly creatures, and also how the people who wrote the texts visualised the creatures.

The problem thus consists of two closely related parts:

- i) What is meant in the Hebrew Bible when the words כְּרוּבִים and שֶׁרָפִיִּים are used?
- ii) How did the people of the Ancient Near East visualise the beings they referred to with these two words?

The problem is complicated by the intervening period of over two thousand years, which has produced many inaccurate and unhistorical depictions of cherubim and seraphim, many of which have become entrenched in the popular imagination. Depictions of cherubim and seraphim in Christian art from the time of the early church up to the mediaeval period generally show them as disembodied human heads, equipped with the requisite number of wings: six for seraphim, four for cherubim. This has some basis in the Biblical texts, but is missing a large number of things (animal heads, bodies...).

¹ Roth 1961:78; Layard 1849 vol.II:464; Bodi 1991:42; Wright 2001:47; Cody 1984:25; Vawter & Hoppe 1991:26; Eichrodt 1970:55 etc.

² Is 6:2; 6:6.

³ Ez 10.



Figure 2

Wilson 1994:37.

Cherub from a Sicilian mosaic⁴

This creature is labelled as a cherub, despite having six wings.

Even further astray are the depictions, dating from the Renaissance onwards, of “cherubs” as naked baby boys with wings (one pair). The correct name for these little creatures is actually *putti*⁵ and they are descended from depictions of the Graeco-Roman god Eros / Cupid.⁶



Figure 3

Wilson 1994:86.

Putto from a Tunisian mosaic⁷

⁴ Wilson 1994:36.

⁵ Wilson 1994:23.

⁶ Wilson 1994:23; Albright 1938:1.

The cherubim of Ezekiel's vision also became conflated in Christian art with the living creatures of Revelation 4:6, which in turn became symbols for the four Gospel authors. In early Christian and mediaeval depictions of this type, the man (or angel), the lion, the ox and the eagle are represented separately rather than as parts of four identical composite beings as they are in Ezekiel.⁸

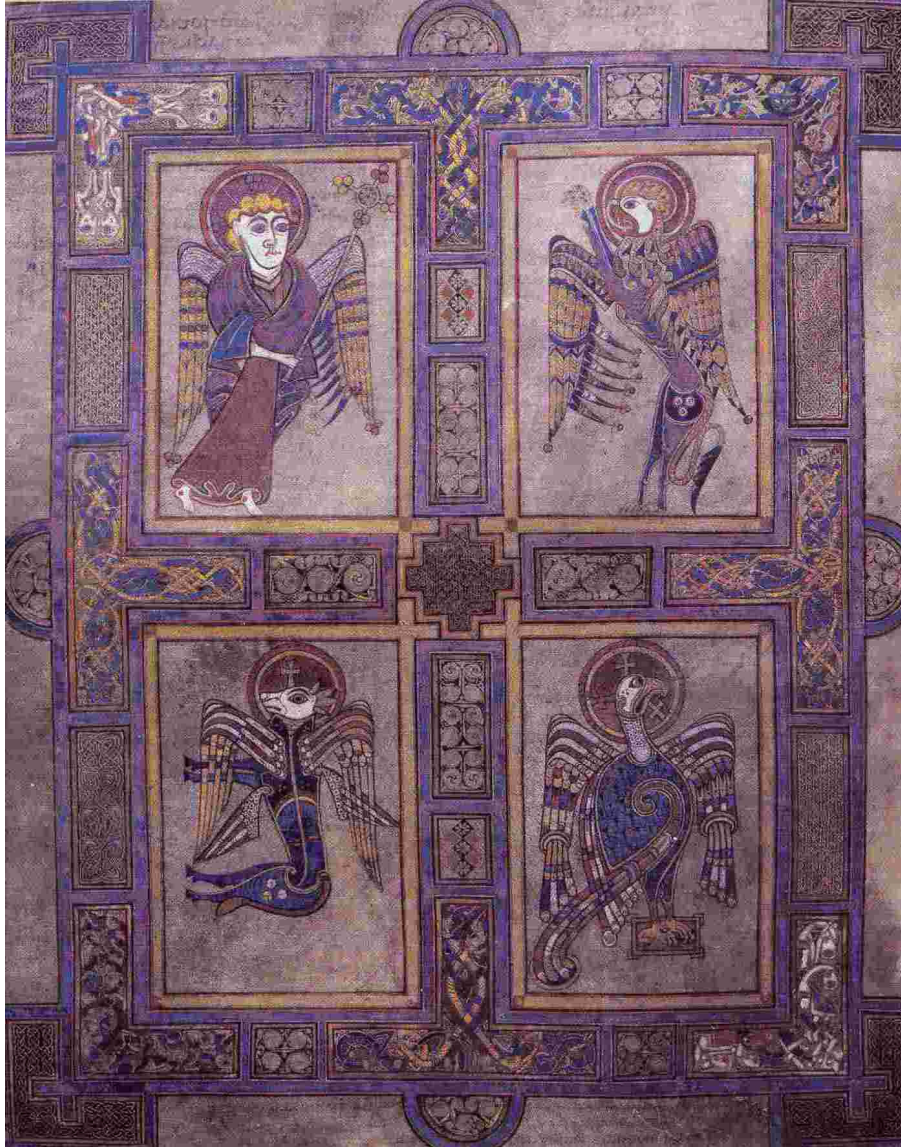


Figure 4

Jensen 1995:45.

Page from the Book of Kells, Ireland, 8th century AD.

⁷ Wilson 1994:86.

⁸ Jensen 1995:43; 65.

What is said about cherubim and seraphim in popular works on angels, whether Christian-theological or more New-Agey, is often as unrelated to the texts as are the depictions. Many popular sources draw their information from Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Celestial Hierarchies*,⁹ which is a speculative work and not based on the Biblical texts. One meaning often given in popular works for the word כְּרֻבִים is “fullness of knowledge”, a translation which is uncorroborated by any of the scholarly sources consulted for this study, and the origin of which may lie in the fact that knowledge was the function assigned to the cherubim in the angelography of Pseudo-Dionysius.¹⁰

1.2. Method and hypothesis

In accordance with the twofold problem, a twofold method of research is needed. Problem i) is essentially a lexical problem, and intratextual as well as intertextual analysis is needed to solve it. Problem ii), on the other hand, is a problem of iconography – of what forms are used to depict certain concepts – and an iconographic approach is needed to solve it. It should be noted, though, that an image may also be regarded as a kind of text, and from this perspective iconography would be a form of intertextuality rather than, as it is usually considered, an extratextual approach.

In other words, this study will approach the basic problem “What are cherubim and seraphim?” from two angles: linguistic and iconographic. By combining these two approaches, it should be possible to put together an accurate picture of what is meant by these two words when they are used in the Hebrew Bible.

As mentioned in the problem statement, some work has been done on the word כְּרֻבִים, and much less on the word שְׂרָפִים. My hypothesis is that the two words refer to two similar but not necessarily identical classes of heavenly beings represented by creatures made up of parts of human beings as well as various animals. This is easily proved to be highly probable in chapter 2 of the study by studying and analysing all the occurrences of the two words in the Hebrew Bible. With this as a starting point, and by using the established research on the word כְּרֻבִים, it should be possible to determine by analogy a probable definition and iconography of the word שְׂרָפִים.

⁹ Bittleston 1980:10.

¹⁰ Wilson 1994:27; Downing 1987:40.

In Chapter 2 all the occurrences of the words כְּרוּבִים and שֶׁרָפִים in the Hebrew Bible will be recorded and categorised according to meaning and context. Any tendencies discovered during this process that appear to have a possible bearing on the interpretation of the words will be analysed and discussed. Then the most relevant texts will be selected for analysis in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 3, textual analyses will be done of the texts selected in Chapter 2, using secondary sources such as commentaries and articles. Chapter 3 will thus provide an overview of the state of current research on these two words. Discussion will be entered into with previous research, and a conclusion will be drawn up.

In Chapter 4, the focus will shift to iconography. Secondary works on the iconography, archaeology and art of the Ancient Near East will be consulted, and a detailed report will be given on what current research says about the iconography of cherubim.

Chapter 5, then, will attempt to determine the iconography of seraphim by analogy with the existing work on cherubim. This will be done in the following way: Using the information gathered in chapters 2-4, probable features of the seraph will be identified. Then examples of artefacts and artworks from the Ancient Near East around the Old Testament period will be examined, in the hope of finding depictions of beings which have some or all of these features and which are depicted in a similar way and in similar situations to those beings commonly identified as cherubim.

Chapter 6 will consist of a summary of what has been discovered through intratextual, intertextual and extratextual approaches, and conclude with a probable definition and iconography of both the cherub and the seraph.

1.3. Scope

In an iconographic study, it is very important to define the limits of time and provenance for those images one is planning to use as primary sources. It would not be academically sound, for example, to try to interpret a text in the light of artworks that were produced many centuries later and in a completely different culture. For the purposes of this study, iconographic sources will be limited to artefacts either produced or excavated in the Near East – that is, Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine and Egypt – and dating from before the beginning of the New Testament period. Naturally, this excludes all works from the mediaeval period, which is the source for many of the popular conceptions and Church tradition concerning the appearance of cherubim and seraphim, as well as modern depictions.

Such sources may still of course be consulted as secondary sources, along the lines of commentaries, but no “proof” may be derived from such images.

A note on some terminology

Various terms are used in describing mythical beasts. The terms we are looking at here, *cherub* and *seraph*, are quite nebulous and hard to define authoritatively (hence this study), but some of the other terms that will be used in the iconographic study have more definite denotations, and these are given below:

Dragon: Reptilian composite creature, rarely simply a giant snake, more often a snake of this sort with legs, often with taloned feet. Sometimes winged. Varies from one culture to another of the many in which it occurs.

Griffin: Has the head and wings of an eagle with the body of a lion. The forefeet are sometimes those of a lion, and sometimes an eagle's talons.

The term “griffin” is occasionally used to describe any winged composite creature with an eagle's head, hence the term “lion-griffin” used in some sources for the above creature. Wings are an integral part of what makes a griffin; it would probably be incorrect to refer to a wingless composite creature as a griffin.

Sphinx: Has a human head, male or female, and sometimes female breasts, with the body of a lion. Not all sphinxes are winged; those that are are often specifically called “winged sphinxes”.

Winged bull: A bull, more often than not human-headed, with wings, presumably those of an eagle. Sometimes specifically, and more correctly, called a “winged human-headed bull”, as the term “winged bull” may also refer to one without a human head.

Winged lion: A winged lion is specifically one without a human head, as one with a human head would be a sphinx.

Whose wings?

A minor difficulty is encountered in listing the animals which make up a composite creature, when it comes to the wings. Angels' wings of the Renaissance and later tend to be white, leading one to think of the swan as a probable model. However, the wings of mediaeval angels come in all colours and patterns, not related to any earthly bird. Today, depictions of dragons all seem to have batlike or reptilian (pterodactyl?) wings. The winged serpents seen in the iconographic part of this study are not like this: they have feathered wings, i.e. birds' wings. It is probably justified to assume from the presence of eagles' heads and talons in many of the composite creatures that the wings are also most likely those of eagles. When wings are found as part of a composite creature, then, in the absence of other evidence I assume they are eagle's wings.

In short, the aim of this study is to look at all the Biblical texts mentioning cherubim and seraphim, in the light of iconographic representations from the ancient Mediterranean world, in order to reach a conclusion as to how the authors of the Bible visualised the beings that they described as cherubim and seraphim. Work already done by scholars on the subject will be brought together, and a consensus will be formed on the probable iconography of both cherubim and seraphim.

Chapter 2

List of occurrences

In this chapter, a complete list of the occurrences of the words כְּרוּב and שָׂרָף in the Hebrew Bible will be given. These lists are derived from Mandelkern.¹¹ Matters immediately arising from the lists will be discussed, as well as the dictionary definitions of the words. The English translation is my own.

2.1. Occurrences of the word כְּרוּב with all prefixes and suffixes¹²

כְּרוּב (Cherub)

<p>וַעֲשֵׂה כְּרוּב אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מְזֹה וּכְרוּב־אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מְזֹה מִן־הַכַּפֹּת תַּעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הַכְּרֻבִים עַל־שְׁנֵי קְצוֹתָיו:</p>	<p>Ex 25:19</p>	<p>Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end Make the cherubim of (one piece with) the kapporet at its two ends.</p>
<p>כְּרוּב־אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מְזֹה וּכְרוּב־אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מְזֹה מִן־הַכַּפֹּת תַּעֲשֵׂה אֶת־הַכְּרֻבִים מִשְׁנֵי קְצוֹתָיו:</p>	<p>Ex 37:8</p>	<p>One cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end He made the cherubim of (one piece with) the kapporet from its two ends.</p>
<p>וַיִּרְכַּב עַל־כְּרוּב וַיַּעֲף וַיֵּרָא עַל־כַּנְפֵי־רוּחַ:</p>	<p>2 Sam 22:11</p>	<p>He rode on a cherub and flew, he was seen on the wings of the wind.</p>
<p>אֶת־כְּרוּב מְמֹשַׁח הַסּוֹכֵךְ וַנִּתְּתֶיךָ בְּהַר קֹדֶשׁ אֶל־הַיָּם הַזֵּה בְּתוֹךְ אַבְנֵי־אֵשׁ הַתְּהַלֵּכֶת:</p>	<p>Ez 28:14</p>	<p>With an anointed covering (guardian) cherub I placed you, you were on the holy mountain of God, you walked among the stones of fire.</p>
<p>כְּרֹב רַב רִבְלִיתְךָ מְלִי תוֹכְךָ חָמָס וַתַּחֲטֵא וְאֶחְלַלְךָ מִהַר אֶל־הַיָּם וְאֶבְדְּךָ כְּרוּב הַסּוֹכֵךְ מִתּוֹךְ אַבְנֵי־אֵשׁ:</p>	<p>Ez 28:16</p>	<p>In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence and you sinned, and I profaned you¹³ from the mountain of God, and the covering cherub drove you from between the stones of fire.</p>

¹¹ Mandelkern 1975 (I): 598

¹² Mandelkern 1975 (I): 598

¹³ Declared you profane / drove you out as profane

וַעֲשׂוּי כְּרוּבִים וְתַמְרִים וְתַמְרָה בֵּין־כְּרוּב לְכְרוּב וּשְׁנַיִם פָּנִים לְכְרוּב:	Ez 41:18	It was made of cherubim and palm trees, a palm tree between cherub and cherub, and each cherub had two faces.
וַיִּרְכַּב עַל־כְּרוּב וַיַּעֲוֶף וַיֵּדָא עַל־כַּנְפֵי־רוּחַ:	Ps 18:11	He rode on a cherub and flew, he flew swiftly on the wings of the wind.

וּכְרוּב (And a cherub)

וַעֲשֵׂה כְרוּב אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מְזֵה וּכְרוּב־אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מְזֵה מִן־הַכַּפֹּף רֶתֶת תַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת־הַכְּרָבִים עַל־שְׁנַי קְצוֹתָיו:	Ex 25:19	Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end Make the cherubim of (one piece with) the kapporet at its two ends.
כְּרוּב־אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מְזֵה וּכְרוּב־אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מְזֵה מִן־הַכַּפֹּף רֶתֶת עֲשֵׂה אֶת־הַכְּרָבִים מִשְׁנַי קְצוֹתָיו:	Ex 37:8	One cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end He made the cherubim of (one piece with) the kapporet from its two ends.

הַכְּרוּב (The cherub)

וְחָמֵשׁ אַמּוֹת כַּנֵּף הַכְּרוּב הָאֶחָת וְחָמֵשׁ אַמּוֹת כַּנֵּף הַכְּרוּב הַשֵּׁנִית עֲשֹׂר אַמּוֹת מִקְצוֹת כַּנְּפוֹ וְעַד־קְצוֹת כַּנְּפוֹ:	1 Kgs 6:24	The first wing of the cherub was five cubits, and the second wing of the cherub was five cubits. (It was) ten cubits from the end of its wing to the end of its (other) wing.
וְעֲשֹׂר בְּאַמָּה הַכְּרוּב הַשֵּׁנִי מִדָּה אֶחָת וְקָצַב אֶחָד לַשֵּׁנִי הַכְּרָבִים:	1 Kgs 6:25	And the second cherub was ten cubits, the measure and shape of the first was the same for the second of the cherubim.
קוֹמַת הַכְּרוּב הָאֶחָד עֲשֹׂר בְּאַמָּה וְכֵן הַכְּרוּב הַשֵּׁנִי:	1 Kgs 6:26	The height of the first cherub was ten cubits, and so (too for) the second cherub.
וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־הַכְּרוּבִים בְּתוֹךְ הַבַּיִת הַפְּנִימִי וַיִּפְרְשׂוּ אֶת־כַּנְּפֵי הַכְּרָבִים וַתִּגַּע כַּנֵּף־הָאֶחָד בְּקִיר וּכַנֵּף הַכְּרוּב הַשֵּׁנִי נִגְעַת בְּקִיר הַשֵּׁנִי וּכְנָפֵיהֶם אֶל־תוֹךְ הַבַּיִת נִגְעַת כַּנֵּף אֶל־כַּנֵּף:	1 Kgs 6:27	He put the cherubim in the inner house, and the wings of the cherubim spread out and the wing of one touched the wall and the wing of the second cherub was touching the second wall and their wings touched wing to wing in the middle of the house.
וּכְבוֹד אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִעְלָה	Ez 9:3	And the glory of the God of Israel was taken up

<p>מֵעַל הַכְּרוּב אֲשֶׁר הָיָה עָלָיו אֶל מַפְתַּן הַבַּיִת וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־הָאִישׁ הַלְבָּשׁ הַבְּדִים אֲשֶׁר קָסַת הַסֵּף פָּר בְּמַתְנָיו: ס</p>		<p>from upon the cherub on which it was to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in white linen who had a writing case at his side.</p>
<p>וַיָּרֶם כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה מֵעַל הַכְּרוּב עַל מַפְתַּן הַבַּיִת וַיִּמְלֵא הַבַּיִת אֶת־הָעָנָן וַהֲחֻצָּר מְלֵאָה אֶת־נִי גֵה כְּבוֹד יְהוָה:</p>	Ez 10:4	<p>And the glory of the LORD rose up from above the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the courtyard was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD.</p>
<p>וַיִּשְׁלַח הַכְּרוּב אֶת־יָדוֹ מִבֵּינֹת לְכְרוּבִים אֶל־הָאֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר בֵּינֹת הַכְּרוּבִים וַיִּשָּׂא וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־חֻפְנֵי לְבַשׁ הַבְּדִים וַיִּקַּח וַיֵּצֵא:</p>	Ez 10:7	<p>And the cherub stretched out his hand from among the cherubim to the fire that was between the cherubim, and took (some) and gave it to the hands of (the one) clothed in white linen, and he took it and went out.</p>
<p>וַאֲרָאָה וְהִנֵּה אַרְבָּעָה אוֹפְנִים אֶצְל הַכְּרוּבִים אוֹפֵן אֶחָד אֶצְל הַכְּרוּב אֶחָד וְאוֹפֵן אֶחָד אֶצְל הַכְּרוּב אֶחָד וַיִּמְרָאָה הָאוֹפְנִים כְּעֵין אֶבֶן תַּרְשִׁישׁ:</p>	Ez 10:9	<p>And I looked, and behold, four wheels beside the cherubim, one wheel beside the one cherub and one wheel beside the one cherub. And the appearance of the wheels (was) like the gleam of Tarshish stone (gold topaz¹⁴).</p>
<p>וְאֶרְבָּעָה פָּנִים לְאֶחָד פְּנֵי הָאֶחָד פְּנֵי הַכְּרוּב וּפְנֵי הַשֵּׁנִי פְּנֵי אָדָם וְהַשְּׁלִישִׁי פְּנֵי אַרְיֵה וְהָרְבִיעִי פְּנֵי־נֶשֶׁר:</p>	Ez 10:14	<p>Each one had four faces: The first face was the face of the cherub and the second face was the face of a man and the third was the face of a lion and the fourth was the face of an eagle.</p>
<p>וּכְנָפֵי הַכְּרוּבִים אַרְבַּע אַמּוֹת עֶשְׂרִים כַּנְף הָאֶחָד לְאַמּוֹת חֲמִשׁ מֵצַעַת לְקִיר הַבַּיִת וְהַכַּנֵּף הָאֶחָד אַמּוֹת חֲמִשׁ מֵצַעַת לְכַנְף הַכְּרוּב הָאֶחָד:</p>	2 Ch 3:11	<p>And the length of the wings of the cherubim was 20 cubits; the wing of the one, at five cubits, touched the wall of the house, and the other wing, five cubits, touched the wing of the other cherub.</p>
<p>וּכְנָף הַכְּרוּב הָאֶחָד אַמּוֹת חֲמִשׁ מֵצַעַת לְקִיר הַבַּיִת וְהַכַּנֵּף הָאֶחָד אַמּוֹת חֲמִשׁ דְּבָקָה לְכַנְף הַכְּרוּב הָאֶחָד:</p>	2 Ch 3:12	<p>And the wing of the other cherub, five cubits, touched the wall of the house and the other wing, five cubits, was joined to the wing of the first cherub.</p>

¹⁴ Zimmerli (1983:83) says that אֶבֶן תַּרְשִׁישׁ is named after Tartessus in Spain, that Spain was renowned for the supply of gold topaz and of jet, and that it is probably the golden yellow Spanish topaz which is referred to here.

לְכָרוֹב (To/for a cherub)

וַעֲשׂוּי כְרוּבִים וְתַמְרִים וְתַמְרָה בֵּין־כְּרוֹב לְכָרוֹב וּשְׁנַיִם פָּנִים לְכָרוֹב:	Ez 41:18	It was made of cherubim and palm trees, a palm tree between cherub and cherub, and each cherub had two faces.
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לְכָרוֹב (To/for the cherub)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָאִישׁ לְבָשׂ הַבְּדִים וַיֹּאמֶר בֹּא אֶל־בֵּינוֹת לַגְּלָגֶל אֶל־תַּחַת לְכָרוֹב וּמְלֵא חַפְנֶיךָ גְּחָלֵי־אֵשׁ מִבֵּינוֹת לְכָרוֹבִים וְזָרַק עַל־הָעִיר וַיֵּבֶ אֶל־עֵינָי:	Ez 10:2	He spoke to the man clothed in white linen and said, go to between the wheelwork beneath the cherub and fill your hands with coals of fire from between the cherubim and scatter abundantly over the city. And he went from my eyes.
וַעֲשׂוּי כְרוּבִים וְתַמְרִים וְתַמְרָה בֵּין־כְּרוֹב לְכָרוֹב וּשְׁנַיִם פָּנִים לְכָרוֹב:	Ez 41:18	It was made of cherubim and palm trees, a palm tree between cherub and cherub, and each cherub had two faces.

כְּרוּבִים, כְּרָבִים (Cherubim)

וַעֲשִׂיתָ שְׁנַיִם כְּרָבִים זָהָב מִקְשָׁה תַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם מִשְׁנֵי קְצוֹת הַכַּפֹּת רָת:	Ex 25:18	And you shall make two golden cherubim Of hammered work (?) you shall make them from two ends of the kapporet.
וְאֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן תַעֲשֶׂה עֲשֹׂר יָרִיעַת שֵׁשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר וּתְכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתֵלַעַת שָׁנִי כְּרָבִים מַעֲשֶׂה חֵשֶׁב תַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם:	Ex 26:1	And you shall make the dwelling (of) ten curtains of fine twisted linen and violet and purple and cochineal scarlet, you shall make them (with) cunning works (of) cherubim.
וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כָל־חֹכְמֵי־לֵב בְּעֵשֶׂי הַמְּלָאכָה אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן עֲשֹׂר יָרִיעַת שֵׁשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר וּתְכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי כְּרָבִים מַעֲשֶׂה חֵשֶׁב עָשָׂה אֹתָם:	Ex 36:8	All the wise of heart among the workers made the work of the dwelling: ten curtains of fine twisted linen and violet and purple and cochineal scarlet (with) cunning works (of) cherubim he made them.
וַעֲשִׂיתָ פָרֹכֶת תְּכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי וְשֵׁשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר מַעֲשֶׂה חֵשֶׁב יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָהּ כְּרָבִים:	Ex 26:31	And you shall make a dividing curtain (of) violet and purple and cochineal scarlet, fine twisted linen, you shall make it (with) cunning works (of) cherubim.
וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת־הַפָּרֹכֶת כֵּת תְּכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי וְשֵׁשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר	Ex 36:35	And he made the dividing curtain (of) violet and purple and cochineal scarlet, fine twisted linen, he made it (with) cunning works (of) cherubim.

מעשה ח' שב עשה א' תה כרבים:		
ויעש שני כרבים זהב מקשה עשה א' תם משני קצות הכפ' רת:	Ex 37:7	He made two cherubim (of) hammered (?) gold, he made them from two ends of the kapporet.
ויעש בדביר שני כרובים עצי־שמן עשר אמות קומתו:	1 Kgs 6:23	He made in the sanctuary two olivewood cherubim, their height was ten cubits.
ואת כל־קירות הבית מסב קלע פתוחי מקלעות כרובים ותמ' ר'ת ופטורי צצים מלפנים ולחיצון:	1 Kgs 6:29	On all the walls of the house round about, he carved engraved carvings of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers in the inner and the outer (rooms).
ושתי דלתות עצי־שמן וקלע עליהם מקלעות כרובים ותמ' רות ופטורי צצים וצפה זהב ויכד על־הכרובים ועל־התמ' רות את־הזהב:	1 Kgs 6:32	And the two doors of olivewood he carved on them carvings of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers and he overlaid gold and beat out the gold on the cherubim and the palm trees.
וקלע כרובים ותמ' רות ופטורי צצים וצפה זהב מישר על־המקשה:	1 Kgs 6:35	He carved cherubim and palm trees and open flowers and he overlaid smoothed gold on the carving.
ויפתח על־הלח'ת יד'תיה ועל מסג'ר'תיה כרובים אריות ותמ' ר'ת כמעראיש ול'יות סביב:	1 Kgs 7:36	He opened (carved) on the surfaces of its hands ¹⁵ and on its rims cherubim, lions and palm trees, according to the space on each, and wreaths all around.
היא החיה אשר ראיתי תחת אל'־הי־ישראל בנהר־כבר ואדע כי כרובים הם:	Ez 10:20	It was the living (creature) which I saw beneath the God of Israel by the river Chebar, and I knew that they were cherubim.
ועשוי כרובים ותמ' רים ותמ' ר'ה בין־כרוב לכרוב ושנים פנים לכרוב:	Ez 41:18	It was made of cherubim and palm trees, a palm tree between cherub and cherub, and each cherub had two faces.
ועשויה אליהן אל־דלתות ההיכל כרובים ותמ' רים כאשר עשויים לקירות	Ez 41:25	And there were worked on them, on the doors of the temple, cherubim and palm trees like those that were worked on the walls and a projecting roof of wood was in front of the

¹⁵ Probably some kind of support: NRSV translates it as “spokes”.

וְעַבַּיִם עֲלֵי־פְנֵי הָאוֹלָם מִחֻוּץ:		porch from the outside.
יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ יִרְגָזוּ עַמִּים יֵשֵׁב כְּרוּבִים תְּנוּט הָאָרֶץ:	Ps 99:1	The LORD is king, the nations tremble He is seated (on) cherubim, the earth shakes.
וַיִּחַף אֶת־הַבַּיִת הַקָּרוֹת הַסָּפִים וְקִירוֹתָיו וַיִּדְלֹתוּתָיו זָהָב וַיִּפְתַּח כְּרוּבִים עַל־הַקִּירוֹת: ס	2 Ch 3:7	He covered the house, the beams, the sills, and its walls and its doors, with gold, and he opened (carved) cherubim on the walls.
וַיַּעַשׂ בְּבֵית־קֹדֶשׁ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים כְּרוּבִים שְׁנַיִם מַעֲשֵׂה צַעֲצָעִים וַיִּצְפוּ אֹתָם זָהָב:	2 Ch 3:10	In the Holy of Holies he made two cherubim, work of images, and they overlaid them with gold.
וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת־הַפָּרֹכֶת תְּכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְכַרְמִיל וּבוּיָץ וַיַּעַל עֲלָיו כְּרוּבִים: ס	2 Ch 3:14	He made the dividing curtain of violet and purple and crimson and fine linen, and he put cherubim on it.

וּכְרוּבִים (And cherubim)

וְעַל־הַמְסָגְרוֹת אֲשֶׁר בֵּין הַשְּׁלֵבִים אֲרִיּוֹת בָּקָר וְכְרוּבִים וְעַל־הַשְּׁלֵבִים כֹּן מִמַּעַל וּמִתַּחַת לְאֲרִיּוֹת וְלַבָּקָר לִיּוֹת מַעֲשֵׂה מוֹרֵד:	1 Kgs 7:29	And on the rims which were between the frames were lions, oxen and cherubim, and on the frames, both above and below the lions and the oxen, were wreaths of descending work ¹⁶ .
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הַכְּרֻבִים (The cherubim)

וַיִּגְרֹשׁ אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּשְׁכֵּן מִקְדָּם לְגֹן־עֵדֶן אֶת־הַכְּרֻבִים וְאֵת לַהֵט הַחֶרֶב הַמְתַּהַפֶּכֶת לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת־דֶּרֶךְ עֵץ הַחַיִּים: ס	Gen 3:24	He drove the man out, and east of the garden of Eden he stationed the cherubim and the flame of the whirling sword in order to guard the way to the tree of life.
וַעֲשֵׂה כְרוּב אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מִזֵּה וְכְרוּב־אֶחָד מִקְצֵה מִזֵּה מִן־הַכַּפֵּי רֶתֶת תַּעֲשֶׂוּ אֶת־הַכְּרֻבִים עַל־שְׁנֵי קְצוֹתָיו:	Ex 25:19	Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end Make the cherubim of (one piece with) the kapporet at its two ends.
וְהָיוּ הַכְּרֻבִים פִּי רְשָׁיִם כְּנָפֵיהֶם לְמַעַל:	Ex	The cherubim will be with wings spread to

¹⁶ Possibly bevelled work.

<p>ס ככים בכנפיהם עלהכפ רת ופניהם איש אל-אחיו אלהכפ רת יהיו פני הכרבים:</p>	<p>25:20</p>	<p>above, covering with their wings the kapporet; and their faces will be one towards the other (lit. man to his brother); towards the kapporet will be the faces of the cherubim.</p>
<p>ונועדתי לך שם ודברתי אתך מעל הכפ רת מבין שני הכרבים אשר על-ארן העדת את כל-אשר אצווה אותך אל-בני ישראל: פ</p>	<p>Ex 25:22</p>	<p>I will meet with you there, and say to you from above the kapporet, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the covenant, everything which I will command to you, to the sons of Israel.</p>
<p>כרוב-אחד מקצה מזה וכרוב-אחד מקצה מזה מן-הכפ רת עשה את-הכרבים משני קצותיו:</p>	<p>Ex 37:8</p>	<p>One cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end He made the cherubim of (one piece with) the kapporet from its two ends.</p>
<p>ויהיו הכרבים פ רשי כנפים למעלה ס ככים בכנפיהם עלהכפ רת ופניהם איש אל-אחיו אלהכפ רת היו פני הכרבים: פ</p>	<p>Ex 37:9</p>	<p>The cherubim were with wings spread to above, covering with their wings the kapporet; and their faces were one towards the other;¹⁷ towards the kapporet were the faces of the cherubim.</p>
<p>ורבא מ'שה אל-א'הל מועד לדבר אתו וישמע את-הקול מדבר אליו מעל הכפ רת אשר על-ארן העדת מבין שני הכרבים וידבר אליו: פ</p>	<p>Num 7:89</p>	<p>And when Moses went to the tent of meeting to speak to him, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the kapporet which was on the ark of the covenant, from between the two cherubim, and he spoke to him.</p>
<p>וישלח העם של ה וישאו משם את ארון ברית-יהנה צבאות י'שב הכרבים ושם שני בני-עלי עם-ארון ברית האל הים חפני ופינחס:</p>	<p>1 Sam 4:4</p>	<p>And the people sent to Shiloh, and they carried from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, he who sits (on) the cherubim, and there were two sons of Eli there with the ark of the covenant of God: Hophni and Phineas.</p>
<p>ויקם וילך דוד וכל-העם אשר אתו</p>	<p>2 Sam 6:2</p>	<p>They got up and they went, David and all the people who were with him, from Baale-Judah,</p>

¹⁷ Lit. Man to his brother.

<p>מבעלי יהודה להעלות משם את ארון האל הים אשר נקרא שם שם יהנה צבאות י' שב הכרובים עליו:</p>		<p>in order to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by (his) name, the name of the LORD of hosts, he who sits (on) the cherubim, (this name is given) to it.</p>
<p>ועשר באמה הכרוב השני מדה אחת וקצב אחד לשני הכרובים:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:25</p>	<p>And the second cherub was ten cubits, the measure and shape of the first was the same for the second of the cherubim.</p>
<p>ויטן את הכרובים בתוך הבית הפנימי ויפרשו את כנפי הכרובים ותגע כנף האחד בקיר וכנף הכרוב השני נ געת בקיר השני וכנפיהם אל תוך הבית נ געת כנף אל כנף:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:27</p>	<p>He put the cherubim in the inner house, and the wings of the cherubim spread out and the wing of one touched the wall and the wing of the second cherub was touching the second wall and their wings touched wing to wing in the middle of the house.</p>
<p>ויצף את הכרובים זהב:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:28</p>	<p>And he overlaid the cherubim with gold.</p>
<p>ושתי דלתות עצי שמן וקלע עליהם מקלעות כרובים ותמרות ופטורי צצים וצפה זהב ויךד עלי הכרובים ועל התמרות את הזהב:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:32</p>	<p>And the two doors of olivewood he carved on them carvings of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers and he overlaid gold and beat out the gold on the cherubim and the palm trees.</p>
<p>ויבאו הכהנים את ארון ברית יהנה אל מקומו אל דביר הבית אל קדש הקדשים אל תחת כנפי הכרובים:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 8:6</p>	<p>And the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, to the sanctuary of the house, to the Holy of Holies, to beneath the wings of the cherubim.</p>
<p>כי הכרובים פ' רשים כנפיהם אל מקום הארון ויס' כו הכרובים על הארון ועל בדיו מלמעלה:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 8:7</p>	<p>For the cherubim had wings outstretched to the place of the ark and the cherubim covered above over the ark and over its poles.</p>
<p>ויתפלל חזקיהו לפני יהנה וי' אמר יהנה אל' הי ישראל י' שב הכרובים אתה הוא האל הים לבדך ל' ל ממלכות הארץ אתה עשית את השמים ואת הארץ:</p>	<p>2 Kgs 19:15</p>	<p>And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said: LORD God of Israel, he who sits (on) the cherubim, You are God, you alone in all the kingdoms of the earth, you made the heavens and the earth.</p>
<p>יהנה צבאות אל' הי ישראל י' שב הכרובים</p>	<p>Is 37:16</p>	<p>LORD of hosts, God of Israel, he who sits (on) the cherubim, You are God,</p>

<p>אתה-הוא האל הים לבדך לך ל ממלכות הארץ אתה עשית את השמים ואת הארץ:</p>		<p>you alone in all the kingdoms of the earth, you made the heavens and the earth.</p>
<p>ואראה ונהיה אל-הרקיע אשר על-ר' אש הכרובים כאבן ספיר כמראה דמות כסא נראה עליהם:</p>	<p>Ez 10:1</p>	<p>I looked and behold: above the firmament which was above the heads of the cherubim, like a sapphire stone, like the appearance of the likeness of a throne, appeared above them.</p>
<p>וקול כנפי הכרובים נשמע עד-החצר החיצונית כקול אל-שדי בדברו:</p>	<p>Ez 10:5</p>	<p>And the voice (sound) of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks.</p>
<p>וישלח הכרוב את-ידו מבינות לכרובים אל-האש אשר בינות הכרובים וישא ויתן אל-חפני לבש הבדים ויקח ויצא:</p>	<p>Ez 10:7</p>	<p>And the cherub stretched out his hand from among the cherubim to the fire that was between the cherubim, and took (some) and gave it to the hands of (the one) clothed in white linen, and he took it and went out.</p>
<p>ואראה ונהיה ארבעה אופנים אצל הכרובים אופן אחד אצל הכרוב אחד ואופן אחד אצל הכרוב אחד ומראה האופנים כעין אבן תרשיש:</p>	<p>Ez 10:9</p>	<p>And I looked, and behold, four wheels beside the cherubim, one wheel beside the one cherub and one wheel beside the one cherub. And the appearance of the wheels was like the gleam of Tarshish stone (gold topaz).</p>
<p>ויר' מו הכרובים היא החיה אשר ראיתי בנהר-כבר:</p>	<p>Ez 10:15</p>	<p>The cherubim rose up – it was the living creature that I saw at the river Chebar.</p>
<p>ובלכת הכרובים ולכו האופנים אצלם ובשאת הכרובים את-כנפיהם לרום מעל הארץ ל' איסבו האופנים גם-הם מאצלם:</p>	<p>Ez 10:16</p>	<p>And when the cherubim moved, the wheels moved beside them, and when the cherubim lifted up their wings to rise up from on the earth, the wheels also did not turn from beside them.</p>
<p>ויצא כבוד יהוה מעל מפתח הבית ויצמד על-הכרובים:</p>	<p>Ez 10:18</p>	<p>And the glory of the LORD went out from above the threshold of the house and stopped above the cherubim.</p>
<p>וישאו הכרובים את-כנפיהם וירומו מן-הארץ לעיני בצאתם והאופנים לעמדתם ויצמד פתח שער בית-יהוה הקדמוני וכבוד אל' היישראל עליהם מלמעלה:</p>	<p>Ez 10:19</p>	<p>And the cherubim lifted up their wings and went up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, and the wheels with them, and stopped at the eastern gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.</p>

<p>וַיִּשְׂאוּ הַכְּרוּבִים אֶת־כַּנְפֵיהֶם וְהָאוֹפָנִים לָעִמָּתָם וַיִּכְבוֹד אֵל־הַיִּשְׂרָאֵל עֲלֵיהֶם מִלְמַעְלָה:</p>	<p>Ez 11:22</p>	<p>And the cherubim lifted up their wings, and the wheels (went) with them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.</p>
<p>מִהָאָרֶץ עַד־מַעַל הַפֶּתַח הַכְּרוּבִים וְהַתְּמָרִים עָשׂוּיִם וְקִיר הַהֵיכָל:</p>	<p>Ez 41:20</p>	<p>From the ground to from (the area) above the door the cherubim and palm trees were worked, and the wall of the temple.</p>
<p>רֹעֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל הֲאֲזִינָה נִגְהַג כַּצֹּאֵן יוֹסֵף יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים הוֹפִיעָה:</p>	<p>Ps 80:2</p>	<p>Shepherd of Israel, give ear, (you) who leads Joseph like sheep, (you) who sits (on) the cherubim, Shine forth!</p>
<p>וַיַּעַל דָּוִד וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵלְתָּהּ אֶל־קִרְיַת יִעָרִים אֲשֶׁר לִיהוּדָה לְהַעֲלוֹת מִשָּׁם אֶת אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים יְהוָה יוֹשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים אֲשֶׁר־נִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ:</p>	<p>1 Ch 13:6</p>	<p>David and all Israel went up to Baalat, to Kiriath-Jearim, which belongs to Judah, in order to bring up from there the ark of God, the LORD who sits (on) the cherubim, which is called by (his) name.</p>
<p>וּלְמִזְבֵּחַ הַקֶּטֶר הָיָה זָהָב מְזֻקָּק בְּמִשְׁקָל וּלְתַבְנִית הַמְּרֻכָּבָה הַכְּרוּבִים זָהָב לִפְרָשִׁים וְסִיכָיִם עַל־אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה:</p>	<p>1 Ch 28:18</p>	<p>And for the altar of incense, of refined gold, and its weight, and the pattern for the chariot of the cherubim of gold, which were to spread out and cover the ark of the covenant of the LORD.</p>
<p>וְכַנְפֵי הַכְּרוּבִים אָרְבַּע אַמּוֹת עֲשָׂרִים כַּנְף הָאֶחָד לְאַמּוֹת חֲמִשׁ מִגַּעַת לְקִיר הַבַּיִת וְהַכַּנְף הָאֶחָד אַמּוֹת חֲמִשׁ מִגַּיעַ לְכַנְף הַכְּרוּב הָאֶחָד:</p>	<p>2 Ch 3:11</p>	<p>And the length of the wings of the cherubim was 20 cubits; the wing of the one, at five cubits, touched the wall of the house, and the other wing, five cubits, touched the wing of the other cherub.</p>
<p>כַּנְפֵי הַכְּרוּבִים הָאֵלֶּה פְּרָשִׁים אַמּוֹת עֲשָׂרִים וְהֵם עַל־רַגְלֵיהֶם וּפְנֵיהֶם לְבַיִת: ס</p>	<p>2 Ch 3:13</p>	<p>The wings of these cherubim were spread 20 cubits, and they stood on their feet, and their faces were towards the house.</p>
<p>וַיָּבִיאוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים אֶת־אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה אֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ אֶל־דְּבִיר הַבַּיִת אֶל־קֹדֶשׁ הַקֳּדָשִׁים אֶל־תַּחַת כַּנְפֵי הַכְּרוּבִים:</p>	<p>2 Ch 5:7</p>	<p>And the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, to the sanctuary of the house, to the Holy of Holies, to beneath the wings of the cherubim.</p>
<p>וַיְהִיו הַכְּרוּבִים פְּרָשִׁים כַּנְפֵיהֶם עַל־מְקוֹם הָאֲרוֹן וַיִּכְסּוּ הַכְּרוּבִים עַל־הָאֲרוֹן</p>	<p>2 Ch 5:8</p>	<p>And the cherubim were with wings outstretched to the place of the ark and the cherubim covered above over the ark</p>

וְעַל־בְּדָיו מְלֻמָּעָה:		and over its poles.
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וְהַכְרָבִים (And the cherubim)

וְהַכְרָבִים עַ מְדִים מִיְמִין לְבַיִת כָּב אוֹ הָאִישׁ וְהֵעֲנַן מָלֵא אֶת־הַחֲצַר הַפְּנִימִית:	Ez 10:3	And the cherubim were standing to the right of the house when the man came, and a cloud filled the inner courtyard.
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לְכַרְבִּים (To/for the cherubim)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָאִישׁ לְבֹשׂ הַבְּדִים וַיֹּאמֶר בֹּ אֶל־בֵּינֹת לְגַלְגַּל אֶל־תַּחַת לְכְרוֹב וּמְלֵא חֲפְנֶיךָ גַחְלֵי־אֵשׁ מִבֵּינֹת לְכַרְבִּים וְזָרַק עַל־הָעִיר וַיָּבֹא לְעֵינָי:	Ez 10:2	He spoke to the man clothed in white linen and said, go to between the wheelwork beneath the cherub and fill your hands with coals of fire from between the cherubim and scatter abundantly over the city. And he went from my eyes.
וַיְהִי בְצֻוֹתוֹ אֶת־הָאִישׁ לְבֹשׂ־הַבְּדִים לֵאמֹר קַח אֵשׁ מִבֵּינֹת לְגַלְגַּל מִבֵּינֹת לְכַרְבִּים וַיָּבֹא וַיַּעֲמֵד אֶצְלֵי הָאוֹפֶן:	Ez 10:6	And it was when he commanded the man clothed in linen, saying: Take fire from between the wheelwork, from between the cherubim, he went in and stood beside the wheel.
וַיִּשְׁלַח הַכְּרוֹב אֶת־יָדוֹ מִבֵּינֹת לְכַרְבִּים אֶל־הָאֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר בֵּינֹת הַכְּרָבִים וַיִּשָּׂא וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־חֲפְנֵי לְבֹשׂ הַבְּדִים וַיִּקַּח וַיֵּצֵא:	Ez 10:7	And the cherub stretched out his hand from among the cherubim to the fire that was between the cherubim, and took (some) and gave it to the hands of (the one) clothed in white linen, and he took it and went out.
וַיֵּרָא לְכַרְבִּים תְּבִנִית יְד־אָדָם תַּחַת כְּנָפֵיהֶם:	Ez 10:8	The cherubim appeared to have the form of a man's hand under their wings.

A simplified version of these results can be obtained by grouping all the forms together. The order is that of the Hebrew Bible.

Genesis 3:24

Exodus 25:18; 25:19(x3); 25:20; 25:22; 26:1; 26:31; 36:8; 36:35; 37:7; 37:8(x3); 37:9

Numbers 7:89

1 Samuel 4:4

2 Samuel 6:2; 22:11

1 Kings 6:23; 6:24; 6:25(x2); 6:26; 6:27(x2); 6:28; 6:29; 6:32(x2); 6:35; 7:29; 7:36; 8:6; 8:7

2 Kings 19:15

Isaiah 37:16

Ezekiel 9:3; 10:1; 10:2(x2); 10:3; 10:4; 10:5; 10:6; 10:7(x3); 10:8; 10:9(x2); 10:14; 10:15; 10:16; 10:18; 10:19; 10:20; 11:22; 28:14; 28:16; 41:18(x4); 41:20; 41:25

Psalms 18:11; 80:2; 99:1

1 Chronicles 13:6; 28:18

2 Chronicles 3:7; 3:10; 3:11(x2); 3:12; 3:13; 3:14; 5:7; 5:8

2.2. Matters immediately arising

There are no similar words in Hebrew or words with which the word כְּרוּב may be confused. Mandelkern(1975) states that the word כְּרוּב comes from the root כרב, but does not attempt a definition of this root.¹⁸ He defines the noun itself as *Cherub, animal coeleste*¹⁹ – Cherub; celestial animal. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon²⁰ states that the root is dubious and gives an indication of the controversy surrounding the origins of the word. The entry mentions the possibility that the origin of the word may have something to do with an Assyrian word *kirubu*, but that the identification of *kirubu* with *šêdu* (the usual word for a winged bull) has not been verified.²¹ De Vaux states that the word comes from the Akkadian, and that the Akkadian word *karibu* or *kuribu* refers to a type of genie that served as an advisor to the great gods and an advocate for the faithful.²² The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament says that “the Akkadian cognate verb means ‘to bless, praise, adore’”,²³ and that this may be both their derivation and part of their function. The Akkadisches Handwörterbuch corroborates this: *karābu(m)* is defined as “*Gebet; Segen*” and “*beten, weihen, segnen, grüßen*”,²⁴ and *kurību* is stated to be related to it, and is defined as “*ein Genius*”. Under *kurību* it even says “see Hebrew *k^erūb*”.²⁵ Freedman and O’Connor, in the

¹⁸ Mandelkern 1975 (I):598.

¹⁹ Mandelkern 1975 (I):598.

²⁰ Brown-Driver-Briggs 2000: 500.

²¹ Brown-Driver-Briggs 2000: 500.

²² de Vaux 1978b: 319.

²³ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(1):454.

²⁴ Von Soden 1965:445

²⁵ Von Soden 1965:510

Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, say that the word כְּרוּבִים may be related to the common West Semitic root כָּרַךְ, meaning, of course, to bless or praise.²⁶

Some sources, particularly popular books on angels, give the meaning of “cherubim” as “fullness of knowledge”,²⁷ a translation which has absolutely no corroboration in BDB. The original source for this translation is unknown, although it probably has something to do with the fact that knowledge is the function of the cherubim in Pseudo-Dionysius’ Angelic Hierarchies.

The largest number of references to cherubim occur in Ezekiel, followed by 1 Kings, Exodus, 2 Chronicles, and Psalms which has only three references. 1 Samuel and 1 Chronicles have two references each, while Genesis, Numbers, 2 Samuel, 2 Kings and Isaiah have only one. This means that there are 17 references to cherubim in the Torah, 50 in the Prophets and 14 in the Writings.

References to cherubim in the Hebrew Bible

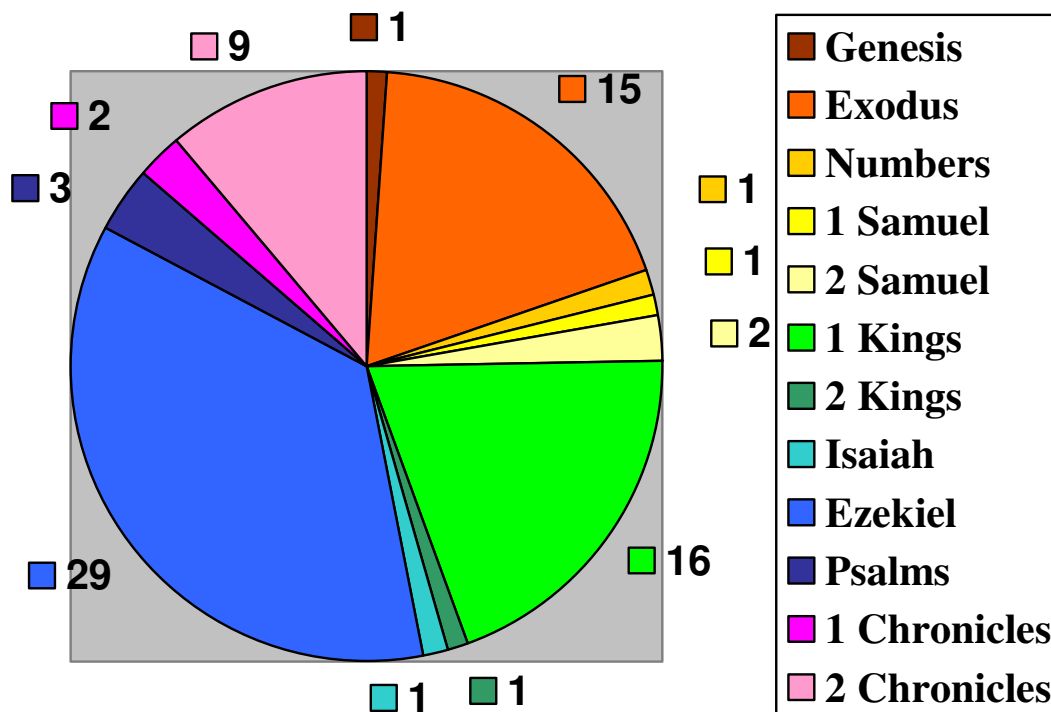


Figure 5

²⁶ Freedman & O’Connor 1995:308.

²⁷ Israel 1995:6; Kreeft 1995:75.

Most of the occurrences of the word in Ezekiel refer to a pair of visions that the prophet had of what is usually described as the *merkabah*, the throne-chariot of God. It occurs in two other contexts as well later in the book. In books such as Ezekiel which have many references to cherubim, forming part of the same context or narrative, the occurrences will be treated together, within their context. All the texts that contain references to cherubim will be studied, but special attention will be paid to Ezekiel's visions, and to the descriptions of cherubim used as decorative motifs on cult objects in Exodus, 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles.

2.3. Occurrences of the word שָׂרָף with all prefixes and suffixes²⁸

שָׂרָף is translated as *seraph* in all cases to aid with identification of the word. This does not constitute a claim that the heavenly being "seraph" is referred to in all these cases.

שָׂרָף (Seraph, serpent)

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ עַל־יָסֹד וְהָיָה כָּל־הַנִּשְׁחָךְ וְרָאָה אֹתוֹ וְחָיָה׃	Num 21:8	The LORD said to Moses: Make yourself a seraph and set it on a standard, and it will be that all who are bitten will look at it and live.
הַמּוֹלִיכְךָ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַגָּדֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא נִחַשׁ שָׂרָף וְעַקְרָב וְצִמְאוֹן אֲשֶׁר אֵין־מַיִם הַמוֹצִיא לָךְ מַיִם מִצּוֹר הַחֲלָמִישׁ׃	Dt 8:15	The one who led you through a great and terrible desert (with) seraph serpent and scorpion, a wasteland in which is no water, he who made come out for you water from flint rock.
אַל־תִּשְׂמְחִי פְּלִשְׁתַּי פְּלִי כִּי נִשְׁבַּר שִׁבְטֵי מִכָּךְ כִּי־מִשׁ רִשׁ נִחַשׁ יֵצֵא צִפְעֵ וּפְרִיו שָׂרָף מְעוֹפֵף׃	Is 14:29	Do not rejoice, Philistia, all of you, because the stick that smote you is broken, because from the serpent's root will come out a viper, and its fruit will be a flying seraph.

וְשָׂרָף (And a seraph)

מִשָּׂא בְהֵמוֹת נֹגֵב בְּאֶרֶץ צָרָה וְצוּקָה לְבִיא וְלִישׁ מְהָם׃	Is 30:6	Burden of the animals of the Negev: In a land of straits and distress, of lioness and lion from them, ²⁹ of adder and flying seraph,
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²⁸ Mandelkern 1975 (II): 1132.

²⁹ Some say *roaring* or *growling* (Landy 1999:23).

אָפְעָה וְשָׂרָף מְעוֹפֵף יִשְׂאוּ עַל־כַּתְּף עֲנִיִּים חֵילָהֶם וְעַל־דֹּבְשָׁת גִּמְלִים אוֹצֵר תָּם עַל־עַם לֹא יוֹעִילוּ:		they carry their wealth on the backs of donkeys, and their treasures on the humps of camels, to a people who do not benefit them.
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שָׂרָפִים (Seraphim)

שָׂרָפִים עַמְּדִים מִמַּעַל לוֹ שֵׁשׁ כַּנְּפִים שֵׁשׁ כַּנְּפִים לְאֶחָד בְּשָׂתַיִם יְכַסֶּה פָּנָיו וּבְשָׂתַיִם יְכַסֶּה רַגְלָיו וּבְשָׂתַיִם יַעֲוֹפֶף:	Is 6:2	Seraphim were stationed above him, six wings six wings for each, with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.
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הַשָּׂרָפִים (The seraphim)

וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה בָּעָם אֶת הַנְּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרָפִים וַיִּנְשְׁכוּ אֶת־הָעָם וַיָּמָת עַם־רַב מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל:	Num 21:6	The LORD sent the seraph serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and many people of Israel died.
וַיַּעַף אֵלַי אֶחָד מִן־הַשָּׂרָפִים וּבְיָדוֹ רֹצֵףָה בְּמִלְקָחַיִם לָקַח מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ:	Is 6:6	One of the seraphim flew to me, and in its hand was a glowing coal taken from on the altar with tongs.

There are so few occurrences of this noun in the Hebrew Bible that it is not really necessary to simplify the results, but it is done here for the sake of consistency.

Numbers 21:6; 21:8

Deuteronomy 8:15

Isaiah 6:2; 6:6; 14:29; 30:6

2.4. Matters immediately arising

שָׂרָף falls under the verbal root שָׂרַף *comburere, cremare*³⁰ – “to burn”. The verb is transitive: “to burn something” rather than “the fire is burning”, and when it is used it often refers to the annihilation by fire of something abominable or ritually impure. The positive aspects of fire are not

³⁰ Mandelkern 1975 (II):1131.

prominent in the connotations of this verb.³¹ The noun itself is defined as *urens, venenosus (serpens); genus quoddam angelorum*³² and is a qatal construction from the verb.³³ ‘Genus quoddam angelorum’ (type of angels) is no surprise, but what might be interesting is the other definition ‘urens, venenosus (serpens)’: a (venomous) serpent or snake. It seems very strange in the light of mediaeval and later iconography, but could this be a clue as to what contemporary depictions of these creatures might look like? שָׂרָפִים is not the only Hebrew word for “serpent”, however. In Isaiah 27:1, the words שָׂרָפִים as well as תַּנִּינִי are used to refer to Leviathan. שָׂרָפִים is the most common Hebrew word for a snake,³⁴ and is translated in BDB as “serpent”³⁵, while תַּנִּינִי is translated as “serpent, dragon, sea-monster”.³⁶ Other words are also used to refer to snakes, for example אֲפָסָה³⁷ and צִפְפָּע.³⁸

BDB distinguish between I. שָׂרָפִים: serpent, flying serpent, or dragon, and II. שָׂרָפִים: seraphim. However, they do state that meaning II is probably akin to meaning I, and that they may have been originally mythically conceived as beings with serpents’ bodies, or serpent-deities. They also mention the possible derivation of the word from the Egyptian term for guardian-griffins (see 5.3.2).³⁹ The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament denies a connection between the two meanings of the noun שָׂרָפִים, stating that they derive, independently of each other, from the verb.⁴⁰ Because of the transitive nature and connotations of the verb,⁴¹ it seems unlikely that a derivation such as “burning ones”, i.e. angels or snakes that are on fire, either literally or metaphorically, can be accurate. The noun should rather be read in the sense of “those who burn *something*”, with venom or with fire. The action of the seraph in Isaiah 6:7, where it purifies Isaiah’s “unclean lips” with the burning coal, is in accordance with this derivation.

Four of the seven occurrences of the word are in Isaiah, and only the first two of these refer to what we transliterate into English as seraphim. The other two, as well as the occurrences of the word in

³¹ Rütterswörden 2004:219.

³² Mandelkern 1975 (II):1132.

³³ Rütterswörden 2004:223.

³⁴ Hendel 1999:744.

³⁵ Brown-Driver-Briggs 2000: 638.

³⁶ Brown-Driver-Briggs 2000: 1072.

³⁷ Is 30:6.

³⁸ Is 14:29.

³⁹ Brown-Driver-Briggs 2000:977.

⁴⁰ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):884.

⁴¹ Rütterswörden 2004:219.

Numbers and Deuteronomy, are translated in most Bibles as “fiery serpents” or “poisonous serpents”. However, not everyone is convinced that the common practice of treating the word as if it has two completely separate denotations is correct. Mettinger, in the *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (DDD), says: “Previous attempts to take the two occurrences in Isa 6:2.8 as more or less distinguished from the rest of the attestations (BDB 977) have now been generally abandoned.”⁴² Instead, all of the occurrences will be studied in order.

References to seraphim in the Hebrew Bible

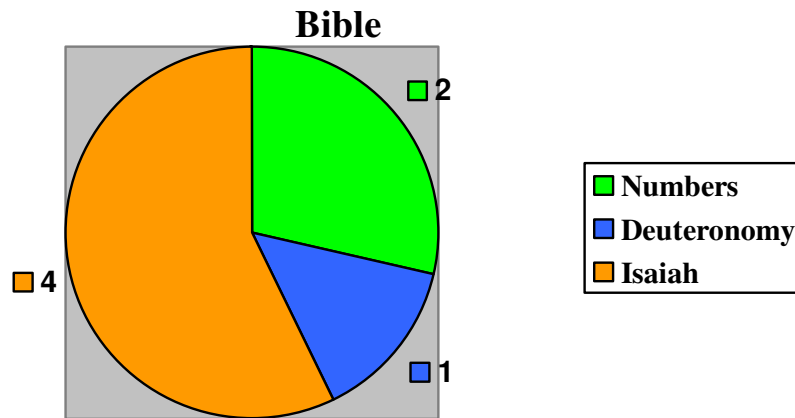


Figure 6

⁴² Mettinger 1999b:743.

Chapter 3

Analysis of all texts containing the words כְּרוּב or שָׁרָף

In this chapter each verse containing the words כְּרוּב or שָׁרָף will be examined in its context. Sometimes in order to provide the proper context, surrounding or intervening verses will also have to be translated and studied. Verse numbers in the tables are in bold if the verse in question contains the words כְּרוּב or שָׁרָף, and in italics if it does not. The broader context of each text is also taken into account, but is not provided or translated here.

3.1. Texts containing כְּרוּב

3.1.1. Cherubim in Genesis

<p style="text-align: center;">וַיִּגְרֹשׁ אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּשְׁכֵּן מִקְדָּם לְגִן־עֵדֶן אֶת־הַכְּרֻבִים וְאֵת לֶהֱטֵ הַחֶרֶב הַמְתַּהַפֶּכֶת לְשָׂמֹר אֶת־דֶּרֶךְ עֵץ הַחַיִּים: ס</p>	<p>Gen 3:24</p>	<p>He drove the man out, and east of the garden of Eden he stationed the cherubim and the flame of the whirling sword in order to guard the way to the tree of life.</p>
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Genesis 3:24 is the first place (textually, not necessarily chronologically) in the Bible where cherubim are mentioned, and they are mentioned, as Candlish notes, as if they are already familiar and well-known to the reader.⁴³ Israel says in reference to this text: “Right from the beginning of creation, angels are not so much described, as their presence noted”.⁴⁴ This familiarity – this assumption that the reader knew exactly what the author intended – is the main cause of our problems regarding the iconography and meaning of cherubim: the authors expected their readership to be familiar with the term and thus did not explain it or describe the things they were talking about. The major exceptions to this rule occur in the prophetic visions of Ezekiel,⁴⁵ and it is quite possible that the cherubim are described here particularly because they are unusual or atypical, different from what the reader would normally have had in mind when hearing the word “cherub”.

⁴³ Candlish 1979:87.

⁴⁴ Israel 1995:11.

⁴⁵ Candlish 1979:88.

In Genesis the cherubim are merely mentioned, then, but the context in which they are mentioned already tells us an important fact about their function: they were guardians. They were placed outside the Garden to keep people out. This allies them with the guardian figures commonly found associated with doors or gateways in Mesopotamian architecture⁴⁶ which many⁴⁷ identify with the Biblical cherubim, giving credence to this widely-accepted theory. Lang (1997) says that the cherubim of Genesis could refer to these Assyrian-type guardian creatures, and adds that if this is the case, since they are four-footed, the sword must stand on its own. The Hebrew word used, מְרִקְדָּיִם, could support this idea, as it indicates a continuous revolving movement.⁴⁸ She refers to the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon's entry for מְרִקְדָּיִם, which mentions the possibility that the origin of the word may have something to do with an Assyrian word *kirubu*, but that the identification of *kirubu* with *šēdu* (the usual word for a winged bull) has not been verified.⁴⁹

The cherubim are guardians, then, and not merely any guardians, but guardians of the way to the tree of life. Freedman and O'Connor, in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, note that cherubim are associated with sacred vegetation.⁵⁰ In this text the cherubim guard the tree of life; the texts where images of cherubim are used interspersed with palm trees are probably also examples of this symbolism.

3.1.2. Cherubim in Exodus

Mentions of cherubim in Exodus have to do with the making of the tabernacle and of the ark of the covenant. They fall into two sets of two parallel passages, the outside set describing the instructions for and the actual construction of the ark, and the inner set describing the instructions for and the making of the curtains.

25:18; 25:19(x3); 25:20; 25:22 Instructions for making the ark

26:1; 26:31 Instructions for making the tabernacle curtains

36:8; 36:35 Making of the tabernacle curtains

37:7; 37:8(x3); 37:9 Making of the ark

⁴⁶ Bodi 1991:42.

⁴⁷ Layard 1849 vol.II:464; Bodi 1991:42; Wright 2001:47; Cody 1984:25; Vawter & Hoppe 1991:26; Eichrodt 1970:55.

⁴⁸ Lang 1997:35.

⁴⁹ Brown-Driver-Briggs 2000: 500.

⁵⁰ Freedman & O'Connor 1995:310.

The cherubim associated with the ark of the covenant

<p>וַעֲשִׂיתָ שְׁנַיִם כְּרֻבִים זָהָב מִקְּשָׁה תַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם מִשְׁנֵי קְצוֹת הַכַּפֹּת רֶתֶת׃</p>	<p>Ex 25:18</p>	<p>And you shall make two golden cherubim Of hammered work (?) you shall make them from two ends of the kapporet.</p>
<p>וַעֲשֶׂה כְּרוֹב אֶחָד מִקְּצֵה מִזֶּה וּכְרוֹב־אֶחָד מִקְּצֵה מִזֶּה מִן־הַכַּפֹּת רֶתֶת תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת־הַכְּרֻבִים עַל־שְׁנֵי קְצוֹתָיו׃</p>	<p>Ex 25:19</p>	<p>Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end Make the cherubim of (one piece with) the kapporet at its two ends.</p>
<p>וְהָיוּ הַכְּרֻבִים פִּי רִשְׁי כְּנָפִים לְמַעַלָּה סִכְכִים בְּכַנְפֵיהֶם עַל־הַכַּפֹּת רֶתֶת וּפְנֵיהֶם אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו אֶל־הַכַּפֹּת רֶתֶת יִהְיוּ פְנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים׃</p>	<p>Ex 25:20</p>	<p>The cherubim will be with wings spread to above, covering with their wings the kapporet; and their faces will be one towards the other;⁵¹ towards the kapporet will be the faces of the cherubim.</p>
<p>וְנָתַתָּ אֶת־הַכַּפֹּת רֶתֶת עַל־הָאָרֶן מִלְמַעְלָה וְאֶל־הָאָרֶן תִּתֵּן אֶת־הָעֵדֻת אֲשֶׁר אֶתֵּן אֵלֶיךָ׃</p>	<p><i>Ex 25:21</i></p>	<p>You shall put the kapporet on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony which I will give you.</p>
<p>וְנוֹעַדְתִּי לְךָ שָׁם וְדַבַּרְתִּי אִתְּךָ מֵעַל הַכַּפֹּת רֶתֶת מִבֵּין שְׁנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים אֲשֶׁר עַל־הָאָרֶן הָעֵדֻת אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה אוֹתְךָ אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃ פ</p>	<p>Ex 25:22</p>	<p>I will meet with you there, and say to you from above the kapporet, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the covenant, everything which I will command to you, to the sons of Israel.</p>

<p>וַיַּעַשׂ שְׁנֵי כְּרֻבִים זָהָב מִקְּשָׁה עָשָׂה אֹתָם מִשְׁנֵי קְצוֹת הַכַּפֹּת רֶתֶת׃</p>	<p>Ex 37:7</p>	<p>He made two cherubim (of) hammered (?) gold, he made them from two ends of the kapporet.</p>
<p>כְּרוֹב־אֶחָד מִקְּצֵה מִזֶּה וּכְרוֹב־אֶחָד מִקְּצֵה מִזֶּה מִן־הַכַּפֹּת רֶתֶת עָשָׂה אֶת־הַכְּרֻבִים מִשְׁנֵי קְצוֹתָיו׃</p>	<p>Ex 37:8</p>	<p>One cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end He made the cherubim of (one piece with) the kapporet from its two ends.</p>
<p>וַיִּהְיוּ הַכְּרֻבִים פִּי רִשְׁי כְּנָפִים לְמַעַלָּה סִכְכִים בְּכַנְפֵיהֶם עַל־הַכַּפֹּת רֶתֶת</p>	<p>Ex 37:9</p>	<p>The cherubim were with wings spread to above,</p>

⁵¹ Lit. Man to his brother

וּפְנֵיהֶם אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו אֶל־הַכַּפֹּת הָיָה פְּנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים: פ		covering with their wings the kapporet; and their faces were one towards the other; ⁵² towards the kapporet were the faces of the cherubim.
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The only explicit information given in this text about the appearance of the cherubim is that they have wings and faces.⁵³ It is not even certain how many wings and faces are being referred to. At first glance, it seems obvious that each cherub has two wings since the word used for wings – כַּנְפִים – is a dual form. However, upon examination of the four-winged cherubim or *chayyot* of Ezekiel 1: 6, we find the construction אַרְבַּע כַּנְפִים – four wings – and the form is again dual. Thus the use of the dual in the word “wings” is no guarantee that the number of wings was in fact two – it simply means that wings fall into the grammatical category of body parts normally occurring in pairs, and are thus grammatically dual. It is quite possible that the cherubim on the *kapporet* could have had more than two wings each. The use of the plural in פְּנֵי, faces, is even less informative, as the word is very often used as a singular. However, other aspects of the text can be studied with the aid of iconography to reach more useful conclusions.

The question of the possible appearance of the cherubim on the ark of the covenant is impossible to separate from that of the appearance, function and significance of the ark itself. The ark, the mercy seat (*kapporet*) and the cherubim will therefore be studied together. This study adopts de Tarragon’s usage of the transliterated term *kapporet* (כַּפֹּת הָרַת) to refer to the object with the cherubim which was placed on top of the ark. This object is commonly known as the “cover”, or the “mercy seat”. Houtman adopts the term “place of atonement”⁵⁴ which is basically the same term as “mercy seat”, but which still involves an element of interpretation. The term כַּפֹּת הָרַת is derived from the root כִּפַּר, which can mean “to cover”, which has led to the term being translated as being simply a lid or cover, but while this is an aspect of its use, the idea of this being its whole significance is not justified in usage.⁵⁵

⁵² Lit. Man to his brother

⁵³ Ex 25:20; 37:9.

⁵⁴ Houtman 2000: 379.

⁵⁵ Brown-Driver-Briggs 2000: 498.

There is no even vaguely contemporary visual record of the ark of the covenant – the earliest depiction of the ark is a painting in the Dura Europos synagogue, which dates from the third century AD.⁵⁶ However, we do have a plethora of modern popular depictions. In the absence of direct pictorial evidence, most popular depictions seem to have taken the textual evidence and have interpreted it, in most cases, from an unthinkingly modern viewpoint and with no reference to its cultural-historical background. They generally draw on the parallel passages in Exodus 25 and 37, which are sufficiently detailed to form the basis of some kind of reconstruction. However, these sources generally ignore the cultural-historical context of the artefact, an approach which results in reconstructions that appear modern and Western. We must not uncritically accept these depictions any more than we should uncritically accept mediaeval paintings of Ezekiel’s cherubim. Rather, we should attempt to create a more realistic picture based on research from various scholarly sources as well as analogy with artefacts originating in other ancient Near Eastern cultures.

The thinking behind this approach is that the ark of the covenant was an artefact made by people. These people were members of a particular culture: ancient Israel. They lived at a particular time: in all likelihood during the Mosaic period of Israel’s history,⁵⁷ during or shortly after the reign of Ramses II (1290-1224 BC),⁵⁸ the third king of Egypt’s 19th dynasty.⁵⁹ And this culture did not develop in isolation. It must be seen in the context of its neighbours, the other peoples of the Ancient Near East and Egypt. Using this approach, we are faced with less ambiguity than confronts us when dealing with other texts where cherubim or seraphim are mentioned, for example, as being seen in visions. The problem in the Exodus text, along with the others where cherubim are used decoratively, is a relatively simple one of the reconstruction of man-made artefacts, and neatly bypasses any tricky questions of angelic form or nature.

The Exodus text speaks of various elements of the ark being fashioned as separate objects: the poles,⁶⁰ the *kapporet*⁶¹ and the cherubim.⁶² However, it seems clear from the text that they are meant

⁵⁶ Hachlili 1988: 279.

⁵⁷ de Vaux 1978: 469.

⁵⁸ de Vaux 1978: 325.

⁵⁹ Gardner 1981: 64.

⁶⁰ Ex 25:13,14.

⁶¹ Ex 25:17.

⁶² Ex 25:18,19.

to be placed together to form a single cult object.⁶³ This is not the opinion of all scholarly sources, however. There is a current of thinking that contends that the *kapporet* was not in fact the lid of the ark. A few sources, most prominently de Tarragon, propose that the ark and the *kapporet* should be seen not as a box and its lid, but as two independent or semi-independent objects. De Tarragon goes even further and states that the *kapporet* was a post-exilic replacement for the ark, which had disappeared during the exile.⁶⁴ De Vaux⁶⁵ also mentions this possibility. Apart from the question this theory poses of how and when the *kapporet* disappeared if it was only manufactured after the return from exile, the policy of this study is to work with the text as it stands, and thus we must proceed from the information given in Exodus 25 and 37 which states that the *kapporet* was to be placed on or above the ark (the preposition לְעַלְיוֹ can mean either)⁶⁶. Most other sources also agree that the *kapporet* with the cherubim was at least associated with the ark; placed on or above it. Jackson states that “the present text [of Exodus 25] is at pains to locate the cherubim at opposite ends of the cover with wings outstretched to overshadow the cover, and to insure that the Testimony will be inside the ark, underneath the cover.”⁶⁷

In chapter 4, where artefacts depicting cherubim are represented, a number of examples may be seen of cherubim thrones (see 4.3.4), thrones either decorated with reliefs of cherubim or where three-dimensional sculptures of cherubim actually form part of the support of the throne. Some scholars have explored the idea that the ark of the covenant was related in some way to these cherubim thrones. Could the ark have been one of these thrones – in other words, was it viewed by those who made it as the metaphorical throne of God?

Several sources support this interpretation at least in part. De Vaux says, “Yahweh is thought of as sitting on a royal throne flanked by winged sphinxes”;⁶⁸ Hall says, “... the interpretation of the ark... as God’s throne... was inevitable”,⁶⁹ and Sarna says, “The final and irrefutable proof that the poetic imagination pictured the divine throne as resting above the Ark is provided by the oft-repeated epithet of God as “Enthroned on the Cherubim.””⁷⁰ However, authorities are not unanimous on the

⁶³ Ex 25:15; 20-22.

⁶⁴ de Tarragon 1981: 11.

⁶⁵ de Vaux 1978b: 300.

⁶⁶ Houtman 2000: 381.

⁶⁷ Jackson 1995:121.

⁶⁸ de Vaux 1978a: 468.

⁶⁹ Hall 1990: 611.

⁷⁰ Sarna 1986: 210.

matter. The strongest argument against the theory that the ark was seen as the throne of God is that nowhere in the Bible is the ark referred to as a “throne”.⁷¹ It is called a “chest”, and those who support the throne idea do not provide any explanation as to why a throne should be consistently referred to as a chest.⁷²

There is another possibility, one that ascribes to the *kapporet* a subtly different metaphorical function from that of the ark itself. The idea is that the ark may have represented God’s footstool. This argument does have textual evidence backing it up, in the form of a parallelism in 1 Chronicles 28:2: “King David rose to his feet and said, “Hear me, my brothers, my people! I wanted to build a resting-place for the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, for the footstool of our God.””⁷³ This theory also has the advantage that it coexists well with the function of the ark as container for the tablets of the Law. Here again archaeological evidence sheds light on ancient practice: we have a letter from Ramses II (thus probably contemporary with the Exodus) regarding his treaty with King Hattusilus [?] which states that a copy of this treaty was placed beneath the feet of the god of the respective parties.⁷⁴ De Vaux calls the ark “the steps leading up to the divine throne”.⁷⁵ it would be as easy in the context to call it a footstool.

However, if the ark was a footstool, what about the *kapporet* with the cherubim? Could the *kapporet*, then, be seen as a throne? There are several strong arguments in favour of such an interpretation. Many Biblical texts such as 2 Samuel 6:2 and Psalm 80:2 refer to God as being “enthroned above (or between) the cherubim”. This could of course refer to a metaphorical or heavenly reality, but there is no reason why this should not be reflected within the tabernacle or temple. The Bible itself sees no contradiction between the two concepts: in one speech by Solomon in 1 Kings 8 we find 1 Kings 8:13: “I have surely built you an exalted house, and a place for You to live in forever”, and only a little later 1 Kings 8: 27: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you. How much less this temple which I have built!”

Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, subscribes to the view that the cherubim on the ark are analogous to the real cherubim associated with God’s real throne in heaven,⁷⁶ and this view has been

⁷¹ Michaeli 1974: 234.

⁷² Houtman 2000: 371-372.

⁷³ Sarna 1986: 210.

⁷⁴ Sarna 1986: 209; de Vaux 1978b:301.

⁷⁵ de Vaux 1978a:468.

⁷⁶ Whiston 1991: 88.

shared by many Jewish and Christian thinkers including John the Apocalyptist and Rabbi Eliezer.⁷⁷ The association proposed by Houtman between the *kapporet* and the ark – two independent objects, placed together⁷⁸ – is analogous to the association between a throne and its footstool. Figures 35, 36 and 37 in 4.3.4 show kings seated on cherubim thrones with footstools.

Houtman himself, however, denies this possibility: “The notion that the כפרת with the cherubim serves as the throne of YHWH and that the shrine is the footstool is without basis... The space, enclosed by the cherubim... and the כפרת, is the place where YHWH appears. The shrine... is... the depository of the tablets”.⁷⁹ This argument does not in fact disprove the theory that the *kapporet* is analogous to a throne and the ark to a footstool, for the following reasons: “The space, enclosed by the cherubim... and the כפרת” is an exact description of where a human king would sit on such a throne, and thus this cannot be an argument against the throne theory. As for the function of the shrine (the ark) as depository of the tablets, this does not rule out its functioning as a metaphorical footstool as well. Documents recording a treaty are known to have been placed under the feet of a statue of a god,⁸⁰ and thus the idea of a footstool that also serves as a repository for covenant documents is not impossible.

Another objection to the possibility that the cherubim were seen as a throne is raised by the fact that the cherubim on the *kapporet* are described as facing one another, whereas those forming cherubim thrones stand parallel, facing in the same direction. The argument is that the shape thus formed cannot be interpreted as that of a throne.⁸¹

A possible answer to this problem lies in the fact that the presence or appearance of God was not corporeal, but was seen as fire or a cloud.⁸² He was not a mortal king sitting on a real, ergonomically designed throne. Simply the idea or metaphor of a throne would have been enough,⁸³ and it is the contention of this study that this is what the *kapporet* and the ark represented: the *idea* of a visible throne and footstool for the invisible God, and at the same time a repository for the tablets of the Law – the terms of the covenant – kept in a place where they would be “under the feet” of God.

⁷⁷ Hall 1990: 611.

⁷⁸ Houtman 2000: 381.

⁷⁹ Houtman 2000: 381.

⁸⁰ Sarna 1986: 209; de Vaux 1978b:301.

⁸¹ Seow 1992: 392.

⁸² Ex 40: 38.

⁸³ de Vaux 1978b:300.

Sarna refers to the theory that the ark functions metaphorically as a footstool as “...this well-attested conception of the Ark as a footstool”.⁸⁴ De Vaux says of the religious significance of the ark, “The texts concerning it allow us to glimpse two notions which, according to many critics, are irreconcilable: the Ark is presented as the throne of God and as a receptacle for the Law.”⁸⁵ The theory that the *kapporet* represented the throne of God, while the ark was analogous to a footstool in which covenant documents were kept, answers those critics by reconciling the two functions very neatly. Sakenfeld in her commentary on Numbers agrees: “Israelite tradition understood Yahweh to be invisibly enthroned upon the cherubim, with the ark for a footstool”.⁸⁶ The possibility that the *kapporet* was seen as something analogous to a cherubim throne is strong enough to justify paying special attention, in chapter 4, to examples of these thrones as a source of information about what the cherubim on the ark may have looked like.

The cherubim on the tabernacle curtains

<p>וְאֶת־הַמְּשָׁפָן תַּעֲשֶׂה עֲשָׂר יָרִיעַ תִּשַׁשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר וַתְּכַלֵּת וְאַרְגָּמֶן וְנֹתֵלֶת שָׁנִי כְּרָבִים מַעֲשֶׂה חֵשֶׁב תַּעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם:</p>	<p>Ex 26:1</p>	<p>And you shall make the dwelling (of) ten curtains of fine twisted linen and violet and purple and cochineal scarlet, you shall make them (with) cunning works (of) cherubim.</p>
<p>וְעָשִׂיתָ פָּרֹכֶת תְּכַלֵּת וְאַרְגָּמֶן וְנֹתֵלֶת שָׁנִי וְשֵׁשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר מַעֲשֶׂה חֵשֶׁב יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָהּ כְּרָבִים:</p>	<p>Ex 26:31</p>	<p>And you shall make a dividing curtain (of) violet and purple and cochineal scarlet, fine twisted linen, you shall make it (with) cunning works (of) cherubim.</p>
<p>וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כָל־חֹכְמֵי־לֵב בְּעֵשֶׂי הַמְּלָאכָה אֶת־הַמְּשָׁפָן עֲשָׂר יָרִיעַ תִּשַׁשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר וַתְּכַלֵּת וְאַרְגָּמֶן וְנֹתֵלֶת שָׁנִי כְּרָבִים מַעֲשֶׂה חֵשֶׁב עָשָׂה אֹתָם:</p>	<p>Ex 36:8</p>	<p>All the wise of heart among the workers made the work of the dwelling: ten curtains of fine twisted linen and violet and purple and cochineal scarlet (with) cunning works (of) cherubim he made them.</p>
<p>וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת־הַפָּרֹכֶת כֶּתֹם תְּכַלֵּת וְאַרְגָּמֶן וְנֹתֵלֶת שָׁנִי וְשֵׁשׁ מְשֻׁזָּר מַעֲשֶׂה חֵשֶׁב עָשָׂה אֹתָהּ כְּרָבִים:</p>	<p>Ex 36:35</p>	<p>And he made the dividing curtain (of) violet and purple and cochineal scarlet, fine twisted linen, he made it (with) cunning works (of) cherubim.</p>

⁸⁴ Sarna 1986: 210.

⁸⁵ de Vaux 1978b: 299.

⁸⁶ Sakenfeld 1995:48.

The four verses in Exodus referring to cherubim not in connection with the ark all say the same thing: the tabernacle curtains, both a set of outer curtains and the dividing curtain, were woven with artistic designs (מְעֵשֶׂה חָשָׁב, cunning works) of cherubim. This is not particularly informative concerning the nature of cherubim, but it may provide a clue about contexts in which depictions of them may be found. They form part of a design woven into curtains. This tells us several things: the depiction must have been quite small and relatively simple, and in all likelihood it would have formed a repeating pattern. Ancient textiles are rarely found in good condition compared to other materials such as stone and ceramics, so it is much more likely that such a pattern of cherubim may be found forming part of something like a decorative wall frieze or a cylinder seal. Such patterns do indeed exist, and some examples will be examined in chapter 4.

3.1.3. Cherubim in Numbers

וַיֵּבֶא מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אֱלֹהֵי הַלְמוּעַד לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ וַיִּשְׁמַע אֶת־הַקּוֹל מִדַּבֵּר אֵלָיו מֵעַל הַכַּפֹּת אֲשֶׁר עַל־אָרֶן הָעֵדוּת מִבֵּין שְׁנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים וַיְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו: פ	Num 7:89	And when Moses went to the tent of meeting to speak to him, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the kapporet which was on the ark of the covenant, from between the two cherubim, and he spoke to him.
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This is a short text, but a useful one in that it corroborates the idea that the *kapporet* was seen as the throne of the invisible God. When Moses goes into the tabernacle to speak with God, he hears the voice of God coming from a spot above the *kapporet*, between the two cherubim. This is exactly where a human king would be if he were sitting on a cherubim throne, and so this text supports the conclusions reached in 3.1.2.⁸⁷ This verse corresponds directly to Exodus 25:22, being the fulfilment of the promise given in that verse.⁸⁸

3.1.4. Cherubim in 1 Samuel

וַיִּשְׁלַח הָעָם שְׁלֵחִים וַיִּשְׂאוּ מִשָּׁם אֶת אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה צָבָאוֹת יְיָ שֹׁב הַכְּרֻבִים	1 Sam 4:4	And the people sent to Shiloh, and they carried from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, he who sits (on) the cherubim,
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⁸⁷ Brown 2002:64; Sakenfeld 1995:48.

⁸⁸ Brown 2002:62.

וְשֵׁם שְׁנֵי בְנֵי-עֲלִי עִם-אָרוֹן בְּרִית הָאֱלֹהִים הֹפְנִי וּפִינֵחַס:		and there were two sons of Eli there with the ark of the covenant of God: Hophni and Phineas.
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De Vaux links 1 Samuel 4:4 with the idea of the ark as a cherubim throne. He believes the influence here is Canaanite and he uses “winged sphinxes” as a synonym for cherubim⁸⁹. He also wonders whether there might have been a pre-Israelite Canaanite god called Sabaoth who was represented as being carried by cherubim⁹⁰, and that this image was subsequently applied to the God of Israel.

This is the first text in which we come across the divine epithet יְשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים. It is difficult to translate as it consists only of a participle and a noun with the definite article, and no preposition. Literally, it says “The sitter of the cherubim”, or “He who sits the cherubim”. Some sources translate it as “between the cherubim”, some “above the cherubim”. I translate it tentatively as “on the cherubim” because this is the most simple and obvious preposition, and thus the most likely to have been left out. If the preposition meant to be understood here had been unusual or unexpected, it would probably never have been omitted. This translation also works well with the interpretation of cherubim as God’s throne.

The important question is whether this epithet refers to God’s presence above the ark cherubim or in his heavenly realm with real cherubim. There is no reason why it should not refer to both; see the argument in 3.1.2. As Robinson says, this story shows the Israelites forgetting that the ark is only a symbol, and “mist[aking] the material presence of the ark for the real presence of Yahweh.”⁹¹ They treat it as a magical device that will activate the power of God against their enemies, instead of a symbol of their covenant relationship with God.

This text and the next use the epithet in situations specifically concerned with the ark, but 2 Kings 19:15 / Isaiah 37:15-16 uses the same epithet without mentioning the ark. See chapter 4.3.5 for further discussion, with the use of iconography, of this divine epithet.

⁸⁹ de Vaux 1978:469.

⁹⁰ de Vaux 1978b:304.

⁹¹ Robinson 1993:30.

3.1.5. Cherubim in 2 Samuel

<p>וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ דָּוִד וְכָל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ מִבְּעַלְיִי הַיְהוּדָה לְהַעֲלוֹת מִשָּׁם אֶת אַרְוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר־נִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ שֵׁם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת יִשָּׁב הַכְּרֻבִים עָלָיו:</p>	<p>2 Sam 6:2</p>	<p>They got up and they went, David and all the people who were with him, from Baale-Judah, in order to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by (his) name, the name of the LORD of hosts, he who sits (on) the cherubim, (this name is given) to it.</p>
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This is a similar type of text to the previous one: again **יִשָּׁב הַכְּרֻבִים** is used as an epithet for God, and again the context is that of the ark of the covenant.

<p>וַיִּרְכַּב עַל־כְּרוּב וַיָּעֵף וַיֵּרָא עַל־כַּנְפֵי־רוּחַ:</p>	<p>2 Sam 22:11</p>	<p>He rode on a cherub and flew, he was seen on the wings of the wind.</p>
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2 Samuel 22:11 is called a “storm theophany” by Robinson. He says that one of the functions of the cherubim is that of carrying God whenever he appears in such a storm theophany.⁹² In this verse, it is likely that **וַיֵּרָא** should really be **וַיִּדָּא**, from **דָּאָה** (to fly swiftly or dart through the air),⁹³ as it is in Psalm 18:11.

3.1.6. Cherubim in 1 Kings

The references to cherubim in 1 Kings are very reminiscent of those in Exodus. Even the structure of the passage is similar: the references in 6:23-28 are to the construction of two large gilded olivewood figures of cherubim to be placed in the Holy of Holies. Those from 6:29-35 refer to relief carvings of cherubim used decoratively on the walls and doors of the temple, and those in chapter 7 refer to relief carvings and engravings of cherubim on wheeled carts. Those in chapter 8 refer again to the large temple cherubim, this time in the context of telling how the ark was brought into the temple. The structure looks like this:

6:23; 6:24; 6:25(x2); 6:26; 6:27(x2); 6:28 Making of the large temple cherubim
 6:29; 6:32(x2); 6:35 Decorative carvings of cherubim in the temple

⁹² Robinson 1993:180.

⁹³ Brown-Driver-Briggs 2000: 178.

7:29; 7:36 Decorative carvings of cherubim on wheeled carts

8:6; 8:7 The ark is placed under the large temple cherubim

Might the author of 1 Kings have consciously copied the structure of the parallel passage in Exodus, in order to give to Solomon's temple the same legitimacy as the desert tabernacle? In any case, the structure of the passage is just the same, and what we can learn from it is also similar.

The large temple cherubim

וַיַּעַשׂ בַּדְּבִיר לְשְׁנֵי כְרוּבִים עֲצֵי־שֵׁמֶן עֲשׂוֹר אַמּוֹת קוֹמָתוֹ:	1 Kgs 6:23	He made in the sanctuary two olivewood cherubim, their height was ten cubits. ⁹⁴
וְחֵמֶשׁ אַמּוֹת כְּנָף הַכְּרוּב הָאֶחָד וְחֵמֶשׁ אַמּוֹת כְּנָף הַכְּרוּב הַשֵּׁנִית עֲשׂוֹר אַמּוֹת מְקַצּוֹת כְּנָפָיו וְעַד־קַצּוֹת כְּנָפָיו:	1 Kgs 6:24	The first wing of the cherub was five cubits, and the second wing of the cherub was five cubits. (It was) ten cubits from the end of its wing to the end of its (other) wing.
וְעֲשׂוֹר בְּאַמָּה הַכְּרוּב הַשֵּׁנִי מִדָּה אֶחָת וְקַצָּב אֶחָד לְשְׁנֵי הַכְּרוּבִים:	1 Kgs 6:25	And the second cherub was ten cubits, the measure and shape of the first was the same for the second of the cherubim.
קוֹמַת הַכְּרוּב הָאֶחָד עֲשׂוֹר בְּאַמָּה וְכֵן הַכְּרוּב הַשֵּׁנִי:	1 Kgs 6:26	The height of the first cherub was ten cubits, and so (too for) the second cherub.
וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־הַכְּרוּבִים בְּתוֹךְ הַבַּיִת הַפְּנִימִי וַיִּפְרְשׂוּ אֶת־כְּנָפֵי הַכְּרוּבִים וַתִּגַּע כְּנָף־הָאֶחָד בְּקִיר וְכַנְף הַכְּרוּב הַשֵּׁנִי נִגְעַת בְּקִיר הַשֵּׁנִי וְכַנְפֵיהֶם אֶל־תוֹךְ הַבַּיִת נִגְעַת כְּנָף אֶל־כְּנָף:	1 Kgs 6:27	He put the cherubim in the inner house, and the wings of the cherubim spread out and the wing of one touched the wall and the wing of the second cherub was touching the second wall and their wings touched wing to wing in the middle of the house.
וַיִּצַף אֶת־הַכְּרוּבִים זָהָב:	1 Kgs 6:28	And he overlaid the cherubim with gold.

⁹⁴ Layard considers the Jewish cubit to have been about eighteen inches, about 46 centimetres (Layard 1853:642). It was based on the distance between the elbow and the tip of the index finger (Rice 1990:49).

וַיָּבִיאוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים אֶת־אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה אֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ אֶל־דְּבִיר הַבַּיִת אֶל־קֹדֶשׁ הַקֳּדָשִׁים אֶל־תַּחַת כַּנְּפֵי הַכְּרוּבִים׃	1 Kgs 8:6	And the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, to the sanctuary of the house, to the Holy of Holies, to beneath the wings of the cherubim.
כִּי הַכְּרוּבִים פִּי רָשִׁים כַּנְּפֵים אֶל־מְקוֹם הָאֲרוֹן וַיִּסְּכּוּ הַכְּרוּבִים עַל־הָאֲרוֹן וְעַל־בַּדָּיו מִלְמַעְלָה׃	1 Kgs 8:7	For the cherubim had wings outstretched to the place of the ark and the cherubim covered above over the ark and over its poles.

Some sources view the large cherubim described in this text and the small ones of Exodus as being mutually exclusive. Michaeli considers the possibility that the description of the small cherubim on the *kapporet* was an attempt to fit the large temple cherubim into a nomadic context.⁹⁵ On the other hand, Hall points out that if in fact there were four cherubim in the sanctuary – two large and two small – then they would correspond to the four living creatures of Ezekiel’s vision.⁹⁶ The symbolism, described in the section on Exodus, of a throne and its footstool would still stand whether or not the small cherubim on the *kapporet* are still present in Solomon’s temple. De Vaux says: “In the Temple, the cherubim, together with the Ark, represented the throne of Yahweh”.⁹⁷

What can be discovered about them from the passages in 1 Kings is this: they were carvings in the round – three-dimensional carvings, as opposed to relief – made from olivewood (עֲצֵי־יִשְׁמֹן) and overlaid with gold, as opposed to the cherubim of Exodus which were made from solid hammered gold.⁹⁸ From the description of their positioning in 6:23-27, it seems clear that they were placed parallel to each other, facing in the same direction and not facing each other as the Exodus cherubim were,⁹⁹ and also that they almost certainly had only two wings each. This description places them firmly in the same category as the winged sphinxes, griffins and winged bulls of the surrounding cultures, and suggests that they looked very different from Ezekiel’s cherubim or Isaiah’s seraphim. This adds credence to the idea, developed in 3.1.7 and 3.2.2, that Ezekiel’s and Isaiah’s visions may have been described in such detail because they were very different from the usual idea of cherubim and seraphim; that they were, perhaps, a symbolic subversion of the popular imagery. The fact that

⁹⁵ Michaeli 1974: 233.

⁹⁶ Hall 1990: 612.

⁹⁷ de Vaux 1978b: 319.

⁹⁸ Ex 25:17-19; 37:6-8.

⁹⁹ Ex 25:20; 37:9.

the wings of the cherubim cover the ark seems to allude to a guarding function, and allies them with the guardian cherubim of Genesis as well as Ezekiel's "covering cherub"¹⁰⁰ in Ezekiel chapter 28.

The decorative carvings of cherubim in the temple

<p>וְאֵת כָּל־קִירוֹת הַבַּיִת מִסָּב קָלַע פְּתוּחֵי מְקַלְעוֹת כְּרוּבִים וְתַמְרֵי וּפְטוּרֵי צְצִים מִלְּפָנִים וְלַחֲצוֹן:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:29</p>	<p>On all the walls of the house round about, he carved engraved carvings of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers in the inner and the outer (rooms).</p>
<p>וְאֵת־קִרְקַע הַבַּיִת צָפָה זָהָב לְפָנֶימָה וְלַחֲצוֹן:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:30</p>	<p>And on the floor of the house he overlaid gold, for the inner and the outer (rooms).</p>
<p>וְאֵת פֶּתַח הַדְּבִיר עָשָׂה דְלָתוֹת עֲצֵי־שֹׁמֶן הָאֵיל מְזוּזוֹת חֲמִשִּׁית:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:31</p>	<p>and at the entrance of the sanctuary he made doors of olivewood; the porch and the doorposts were fivefold (five-sided?)</p>
<p>וּשְׁתֵּי דְלָתוֹת עֲצֵי־שֹׁמֶן וְקָלַע עֲלֵיהֶם מְקַלְעוֹת כְּרוּבִים וְתַמְרֵי רֹת וּפְטוּרֵי צְצִים וְצָפָה זָהָב וַיִּכְרַד עַל־הַכְּרוּבִים וְעַל־הַתַּמְרֵי רֹת אֶת־הַזָּהָב:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:32</p>	<p>And the two doors of olivewood he carved on them carvings of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers and he overlaid gold and beat out the gold on the cherubim and the palm trees.</p>
<p>וְכֵן עָשָׂה לְפֶתַח הַהֵיכָל מְזוּזוֹת עֲצֵי־שֹׁמֶן מֵאֵת רְבַעִית:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:33</p>	<p>And so he made for the entrance of the temple doorposts of olivewood, each fourfold (four-sided?)</p>
<p>וּשְׁתֵּי דְלָתוֹת עֲצֵי כְרוּשִׁים שְׁנֵי צְלָעִים הַדְּלָת הָאֶחָת גְּלִילִים וּשְׁנֵי קְלָעִים הַדְּלָת הַשְּׁנִית גְּלִילִים:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:34</p>	<p>And two doors of cypress (or fir) wood; the two panels of the first door were folding, and the two panels of the second door were folding.</p>
<p>וְקָלַע כְּרוּבִים וְתַמְרֵי רֹת וּפְטוּרֵי צְצִים וְצָפָה זָהָב מִיֶּשֶׁר עַל־הַמְּחֻקָּה:</p>	<p>1 Kgs 6:35</p>	<p>He carved cherubim and palm trees and open flowers and he overlaid smoothed gold on the carving.</p>

¹⁰⁰ Ez 28:14,16.

Layard notes the high degree of correspondence between this description of the temple of Solomon and the royal palaces he discovered in Nineveh.¹⁰¹ He mentions similarities in the architecture and layout as well as the ornamentation, including the large cherubim. He says:

“Within it [the inner chamber of Solomon’s temple] were the two cherubim of olivewood ten cubits high, with wings each five cubits long, “and he carved all the house around with carved figures of cherubim and palm trees, and open flowers, within and without.” The cherubim have been described by Biblical commentators as mythic figures, uniting the human head with the body of a lion, or an ox, and the wings of an eagle. If for the palm trees we substitute the sacred tree of the Nineveh sculptures, and for the open flowers the Assyrian tulip-shaped ornament – objects most probably very nearly resembling each other – we find that the oracle of the temple was almost identical, in general form and in its ornaments, with some of the chambers of Nimroud and Khorsabad. In the Assyrian halls, too, the winged human-headed bulls were on the side of the wall, and their wings, like those of the cherubim, “touched one another in the midst of the house.” The dimensions of these figures were in some cases nearly the same, namely, fifteen feet square. The doors were also carved with cherubim and palm trees, and open flowers, and thus, with the other parts of the building, corresponded with those of the Assyrian palaces. On the walls at Nineveh the only addition appears to have been the introduction of the human form and the image of the king, which were an abomination to the Jews.”¹⁰²

This correspondence between the entire structure of the temple and that of the Assyrian palaces argues for a correspondence between the Assyrian winged bulls and lions and the cherubim of Solomon's temple.

The decorative carvings of cherubim on the wheeled carts

וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת־הַמִּכְנֹחַ נֹחַ עֲשָׂרָה נָחַ אֲשֶׁת אַרְבַּע בְּאַמָּה אַרְבַּע הַמְּכֹנֹחַ הָאֶחָת וְאַרְבַּע בְּאַמָּה רֹחְבָהּ וְשָׁלֹשׁ בְּאַמָּה קוֹמָתָהּ:	<i>1 Kgs</i> 7:27	And he made the ten stands of bronze; each one of the stands was four cubits long, and four cubits wide, and three cubits high.
וְזֶה מַעֲשֵׂה הַמְּכֹנֹחַ מִסָּגְרֵי תְּלָהִם וּמִסָּגְרֵי תְּבִין הַשְּׁלָבִים:	<i>1 Kgs</i> 7:28	And this was the construction of the stands: they had rims, and the rims were between the frames.
וְעַל־הַמִּסְגְּרוֹת אֲשֶׁר בֵּין הַשְּׁלָבִים	1 Kgs	And on the rims which were between the frames

¹⁰¹ Layard 1853:642.

¹⁰² Layard 1853:643-644.

<p>אֲרִיּוֹת בָּקָר וְכְרוּבִים וְעַל־הַשְּׁלֵבִים כִּן מִמַּעַל וּמִתַּחַת לְאֲרִיּוֹת וְלַבָּקָר לִיּוֹת מַעֲשֵׂה מוֹרָד:</p>	<p>7:29</p>	<p>were lions, oxen and cherubim, and on the frames, both above and below the lions and the oxen, were wreaths of descending work.¹⁰³</p>
<p>וְאֲרִבְעָה אוֹפְנֵי נָח נֶשֶׁת לְמַכּוֹנֵה הָאֵחָת וְסָרְנֵי נָח נֶשֶׁת וְאֲרִבְעָה פְעָמֹת תִּיּוֹ כְּתַפּוֹת לָהֶם מִתַּחַת לְפִי ר הַכְּתַפּוֹת יִצְקוּת מֵעֵבֶר אִישׁ לַיּוֹת:</p>	<p><i>1 Kgs</i> <i>7:30</i></p>	<p>And each stand had four bronze wheels and bronze axles, and its four feet (corners) were blades¹⁰⁴ for it from under the basin; the blades were cast with wreaths at the side of each.</p>
<p>וּפְיָהּוּ מִבֵּית לַפִּי תֶרֶת וּמַעְלֵה בְּאֵמָה וּפְיָהּ עֵגֹל מַעֲשֵׂה־כֶּן אֵמָה וְחֻצֵי הָאֵמָה וְגַם־עַל־פִּיָּהּ מְקֻלְעוֹת וּמִסָּגְרֵי תִיָּהֶם מְרַבְּעוֹת לֹא עֵגְלוֹת:</p>	<p><i>1 Kgs</i> <i>7:31</i></p>	<p>Its opening was within the capital, and its height was a cubit, and the opening was round, as a pedestal is made, a cubit and half a cubit. And also on the opening were carvings, and its rims were four-sided, not round.</p>
<p>וְאֲרִבְעַת הָאוֹפְנִים לְמִתַּחַת לְמִסְגְּרוֹת וַיְדוֹת הָאוֹפְנִים בְּמַכּוֹנֵה וְקוֹמַת הָאוֹפֵן הָאֶחָד אֵמָה וְחֻצֵי הָאֵמָה:</p>	<p><i>1 Kgs</i> <i>7:32</i></p>	<p>And the four wheels were underneath the rims, and the hands¹⁰⁵ of the wheels were in the stands, and the height of each wheel was a cubit and half a cubit.</p>
<p>וּמַעֲשֵׂה הָאוֹפְנִים כְּמַעֲשֵׂה אוֹפֵן הַמֶּרְכָּבָה יְדוֹתָם וְגַבֵּיהֶם וְחֻשְׁקֵיהֶם וְחֻשְׂרֵיהֶם הֵכֵל מוֹצֵק:</p>	<p><i>1 Kgs</i> <i>7:33</i></p>	<p>The wheels were made as is made the wheel of the chariot;¹⁰⁶ their hands, their rims, their spokes and their hubs were all cast.</p>
<p>וְאֲרִבְעַת כְּתַפּוֹת אֶל אַרְבַּע פְּנוֹת הַמֶּכֶּה נָה הָאֵחָת מִן־הַמֶּכֶּה נָה כְּתַפֵּיהָ:</p>	<p><i>1 Kgs</i> <i>7:34</i></p>	<p>And there were four blades at the four corners of each stand; of (one piece with) the stand was its blade.</p>
<p>וּבְרֹאשׁ הַמַּכּוֹנֵה חֻצֵי הָאֵמָה קוֹמָה עֵגֹל לְסָבִיב וְעַל־רֹאשׁ הַמֶּכֶּה נָה יְדֵי תִיָּהּ וּמִסָּגְרֵי תִיָּהּ מְמֻנָּה:</p>	<p><i>1 Kgs</i> <i>7:35</i></p>	<p>And on top of the stand, half a cubit in height, was a round circuit, and on top of the stand, its hands and its rims were of (one piece with) it.</p>
<p>וַיִּפְתַּח עַל־הַלַּחַת יְדֵי תִיָּהּ וְעַל מִסָּגְרֵי תִיָּהּ</p>	<p>1 Kgs 7:36</p>	<p>He opened (carved) on the surfaces of its hands and on its rims</p>

¹⁰³ Possibly bevelled work.

¹⁰⁴ Lit. shoulderblades, probably a kind of support.

¹⁰⁵ Probably another kind of support; this passage makes extensive use of the names of body parts (hands, feet, and shoulderblades) to refer to features of the construction.

¹⁰⁶ *Merkabah*.

כְּרוּבִים אֲרִיּוֹת וְתַמְרֵי תְּ כַמְעֵר־אִישׁ וְלִיּוֹת סָבִיב:		cherubim, lions and palm trees, according to the space on each, and wreaths all around.
כִּזֹּאת עָשָׂה אֶת עֲשָׂר הַמְּכֹנוֹת מוֹצֵק אֶחָד מִדָּה אַחַת קָצָב אֶחָד לְכָל־הֶנָּה: ס	<i>1 Kgs</i> 7:37	Like this he made the ten stands, one cast with the measurement of one; ¹⁰⁷ the shape was one for all of them.
וַיַּעַשׂ עֲשָׂרָה כִּי רֹת נְחֹשֶׁת אֲרָבָעִים בַּת יָכִיל הַפִּיּוֹר הָאֶחָד אַרְבַּע בְּאַמָּה הַפִּיּוֹר הָאֶחָד פִּיּוֹר אֶחָד עַל־הַמְּכֹנָה הָאֶחָת לְעֲשָׂר הַמְּכֹנוֹת:	<i>1 Kgs</i> 7:38	He made ten bronze basins, each basin contained 40 baths, Each basin was four cubits; one basin was on one stand for the ten stands.

The description of the wheeled stands of Solomon's temple has been repeated at such length here because of the correspondences between this passage and the artefacts discussed in 4.3.3, including the wheeled laver from Lanarka on Cyprus, decorated with cherubim. Solomon's stands could as easily be called lavers as well, as they were made to hold basins of water, as seen in verse 38.

3.1.7. Cherubim in 2 Kings and Isaiah

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל חֶזְקִיָּהוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים אַתָּה־הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים לְבַדְּךָ לֹכֵל מַמְלְכוֹת הָאָרֶץ אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ:	2 Kgs 19:15	And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD and said: LORD God of Israel, he who sits (on) the cherubim, You are God, you alone in all the kingdoms of the earth, you made the heavens and the earth.
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וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל חֶזְקִיָּהוּ אֶל־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר:	<i>Is 37:15</i>	And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD, saying:
יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים אַתָּה־הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים לְבַדְּךָ לֹכֵל מַמְלְכוֹת הָאָרֶץ אַתָּה עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ:	Is 37:16	LORD of hosts, God of Israel, he who sits (on) the cherubim, You are God, you alone in all the kingdoms of the earth, you made the heavens and the earth.

¹⁰⁷ i.e. all the same.

These passages are almost identical. In these two texts the set phrase **יְשִׁב הַכְּרֻבִים** is again used as an epithet for God. It is interesting to note that this time the ark of the covenant is not mentioned, and the action of the passage does not have directly to do with the ark as it does in 1 Sam 4:4 and 2 Sam 6:2, where the same phrase is also found. Kissane¹⁰⁸ nevertheless sees the epithet as referring to the ark of the covenant. The other possibility is that the epithet refers to the heavenly reality rather than the cultic symbol. Of course, it could also refer to both domains at once.

3.1.8. Cherubim in Ezekiel

Almost all of the occurrences of the word **כְּרֻב** in Ezekiel form part of the same context, Ezekiel's vision of the throne-chariot of God. However, there are two other contexts: one is the prophecy against the king of Tyre in chapter 28, and the other is the vision of the rebuilt temple in chapter 41. The latter passage describes images of cherubim being used decoratively, and may be compared to similar texts in Exodus, while the former is very strange and has caused much confusion, but contains some very interesting points.

3.1.8.1 The throne-visions

First it must be noted that the word "*chayyot*" in Ezekiel's throne-visions is used synonymously with "cherubim".¹⁰⁹ Thus commentators may sometimes draw conclusions about cherubim from this book by drawing on verses in which our root does not in fact occur. These commentaries will be used here, as in the context of the book of Ezekiel it is logical to conclude that the words are used interchangeably and refer to exactly the same beings. However, it must be noted that some commentators such as Cody believe that the *chayyot* were not originally meant to be cherubim and that their identification as such happened in a later redaction of the text.¹¹⁰ Since these verses will be used, they will also be given here despite the fact that the word **כְּרֻב** does not appear in them.

¹⁰⁸ Kissane 1941:410

¹⁰⁹ Wright 2001:47; Vawter & Hoppe 1991:26.

¹¹⁰ Cody 1984:55.

Ezekiel 1:4-1:25

<p>וַאֲרָא וְהִנֵּה רוּחַ סְעָרָה בָּאָה מִן־הַצָּפוֹן עָנָן גָּדוֹל וְאֵשׁ מִתְלַקַּחַת וְנֹגֵה לוֹ סָבִיב וּמִתּוֹכָהּ כְּעֵיִן הַחֹשֶׁמֶל מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ:</p>	<p><i>Ez 1:4</i></p>	<p>I looked, and behold, a storm wind came out of the north, a great cloud (with) lightning and brightness around it and from the midst of it, like the gleam of amber¹¹¹ from the midst of the fire.</p>
<p>וּמִתּוֹכָהּ דְמוֹת אַרְבַּע חַיּוֹת וְזֹה מְרֵאֵיהֶן דְמוֹת אָדָם לְהִנָּה:</p>	<p><i>Ez 1:5</i></p>	<p>And in the midst of it was the likeness of four living things, and this was their appearance: they had the likeness of man.</p>
<p>וְאַרְבַּעַת פָּנִים לְאַחַת וְאַרְבַּע כַּנְּפִים לְאַחַת לָהֶם:</p>	<p><i>Ez 1:6</i></p>	<p>Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings.</p>
<p>וּרְגְלֵיהֶם רְגֵל יִשְׂרָה וְכַף רְגְלֵיהֶם כַּכַּף רְגֵל עֵגֶל וְנִצְצִים כְּעֵיִן נְחֹשֶׁת קָלִיל:</p>	<p><i>Ez 1:7</i></p>	<p>Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of the foot of a calf, and they sparkled like the gleam of polished bronze.</p>
<p>וַיְדִי־אֲדָם מִתַּחַת כַּנְּפֵיהֶם עַל אַרְבַּעַת רַבְעֵיהֶם וּפְנֵיהֶם וְכַנְּפֵיהֶם לְאַרְבַּעַתָּם:</p>	<p><i>Ez 1:8</i></p>	<p>They had man's hands under their wings on their four sides, and their faces and their wings were (like this) for the four of them.</p>
<p>חַבְרֹת אִשָּׁה אֶל־אָחוֹתָהּ כַּנְּפֵיהֶם ל' אִי־סָבוּ בְלִכְתָּן אִישׁ אֶל־עֵבֶר פָּנָיו וַיֵּלְכוּ:</p>	<p><i>Ez 1:9</i></p>	<p>Their wings were touching, each one to the next;¹¹³ they did not turn in their moving, each went to the side of its face.</p>
<p>וּדְמוֹת פְּנֵיהֶם פְּנֵי אָדָם וּפְנֵי אַרְיֵה אֶל־הַיְמִין לְאַרְבַּעַתָּם וּפְנֵי־שׁוֹר מִהַשָּׂמַיִם אֹר לְאַרְבַּעַתָּן וּפְנֵי־נֶשֶׁר לְאַרְבַּעַתָּן:</p>	<p><i>Ez 1:10</i></p>	<p>And the likeness of the faces: the face of a man and the face of a lion to the right, for the four of them, and the face of an ox to the left for the four of them, and the face of an eagle for the four of them.</p>
<p>וּפְנֵיהֶם וְכַנְּפֵיהֶם פְּרֻדוֹת מִלְּמַעְלָה</p>	<p><i>Ez 1:11</i></p>	<p>and their faces and their wings were spread out above,</p>

¹¹¹ Or electrum.

¹¹² Read as וַיְדִי.

¹¹³ Lit. "a woman to her sister".

לְאִישׁ שְׁתֵּימֵ חַ בְּרוֹת אִישׁ וּשְׁתֵּימֵ מְכַסּוֹת אֶת גּוֹי תִּיהְנֶה:		each had two touching each, and two covering their bodies.
וְאִישׁ אֶל-עֵבֶר פָּנָיו יֵלְכוּ אֶל אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה-שָׁמָּה הָרוּחַ לֵלְכָת יֵלְכוּ לֹא יִסְבּוּ בְּלֻכְתָּם:	<i>Ez 1:12</i>	And each moved to the side of its face; to where it was for the spirit to go, they went; they did not turn in their moving.
וְדַמּוּת הַחַיּוֹת מִרְאֵיהֶם כְּגַחְלֵי-אֵשׁ בְּעֵרוֹת כְּמִרְאֵה הַלְּפָדִים הִיא מִתְהַלֶּכֶת בֵּין הַחַיּוֹת וְנִגְוָה לְאֵשׁ וּמִן-הָאֵשׁ יוֹצֵא בָרָק:	<i>Ez 1:13</i>	And the likeness of the living things was the appearance of burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches it went back and forth between the living things, and the fire shone, and from the fire came out lightning.
וְהַחַיּוֹת רָצוּא וְשׁוּב כְּמִרְאֵה הַבְּזָק:	<i>Ez 1:14</i>	The living things ran and returned like the appearance of the lightning flash.
וְאֵרָא הַחַיּוֹת וְהִנֵּה אֶפְסוֹן אֶחָד בְּאֶרֶץ אֶצֶל הַחַיּוֹת לְאַרְבַּעַת פָּנָיו:	<i>Ez 1:15</i>	I looked at the living things, and behold, one wheel on the earth next to the living things, for its four faces.
מִרְאֵה הָאוֹפָנִים וּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כְּעֵינֵי תַרְשִׁישׁ וְדַמּוּת אֶחָד לְאַרְבַּעַתָּם וּמִרְאֵיהֶם וּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כְּאֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה הָאוֹפָן בְּתוֹךְ הָאוֹפָן:	<i>Ez 1:16</i>	The appearance of the wheels and their construction: like the gleam of Tarshish (yellow topaz), and the likeness of one was for four of them, and their appearance and their construction was like a wheel inside a wheel.
עַל-אַרְבַּעַת רַבְעֵיהֶן בְּלֻכְתָּם יֵלְכוּ לֹא יִסְבּוּ בְּלֻכְתָּם:	<i>Ez 1:17</i>	Towards their four sides in their going, they went without turning in their going.
וְגִבֵּיהֶן וְגִבְתֵּיהֶן לֵהֶם וְיִרְאָה לֵהֶם וְגִבְתָּם מְלֵאֵת עֵינַיִם סָבִיב לְאַרְבַּעַתָּם:	<i>Ez 1:18</i>	Their rims and their height were for them and fear was for them, and their rims were full of eyes, all around the four of them.
וּבְלֻכְתָּ הַחַיּוֹת יֵלְכוּ הָאוֹפָנִים אֶצְלָם וּבִהְנִשָּׂא הַחַיּוֹת מֵעַל הָאֶרֶץ יִנְשָׂאוּ הָאוֹפָנִים:	<i>Ez 1:19</i>	And when the living things moved, the wheels moved with them, and when the living things were lifted up from on the earth, the wheels were lifted up.
עַל אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה-שָׁם הָרוּחַ לֵלְכָת יֵלְכוּ שָׁמָּה הָרוּחַ לֵלְכָת	<i>Ez 1:20</i>	To where it was for the spirit to go, they went where the spirit went,

וְהָאוֹפָנִים יִנָּשְׂאוּ לְעִמָּתָם כִּי רוּחַ הַחַיָּה בְּאוֹפָנִים:		and the wheels went with them, for the living spirit ¹¹⁴ was in them.
בְּלִכְתָּם יֵלְכוּ וּבְעִמָּדָם יַעֲמֵ דוֹ וּבְהִנָּשְׂאָם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ יִנָּשְׂאוּ הָאוֹפָנִים לְעִמָּתָם כִּי רוּחַ הַחַיָּה בְּאוֹפָנִים:	<i>Ez 1:21</i>	In their (the living things') going they (the wheels) went, and in their stopping they stopped, and when they were lifted up from on the earth, the wheels were lifted up with them, because the living spirit was in the wheels.
וְדַמּוּת עַל־רֹאשֵׁי הַחַיָּה רָקִיעַ כְּעֵינַי הַקָּרַח הַנּוֹרָא נָטוּי עַל־רֹאשֵׁיהֶם מְלֻמָּעָה:	<i>Ez 1:22</i>	And there was the likeness, over the heads of the living thing, of a firmament like the gleam of the awesome crystal, spread out above their heads.
וַתַּחַת הַרָקִיעַ כַּנְּפֵיהֶם יִשְׂרוּת אִשָּׁה אֶל־אֲחֹתָהּ לְאִישׁ שְׁתֵּימִם מְכַסּוֹת לְהִנָּה וּלְאִישׁ שְׁתֵּימִם מְכַסּוֹת לְהִנָּה אֵת גּוּי תִּיהֶם:	<i>Ez 1:23</i>	And underneath the firmament their wings were straight, each to the other, each had two covering it, and each had two covering it, their bodies.
וְאָשְׁמַע אֶת־קוֹל כַּנְּפֵיהֶם כְּקוֹל מַיִם רַבִּים כְּקוֹל־יְשׁוּדֵי בְּלִכְתָּם קוֹל הַמְּלָה כְּקוֹל מַחֲנֵה בְּעִמָּדָם תִּרְפִּינָה כַּנְּפֵיהֶן:	<i>Ez 1:24</i>	I heard the voice (sound) of their wings, like the sound of many waters, like the voice of the Almighty, when they went, the sound of a storm, like the sound of an encampment, and when they stopped they let their wings down.
וַיְהִי־קוֹל מֵעַל לְרָקִיעַ אֲשֶׁר עַל־רֹאשֵׁיהֶם בְּעִמָּדָם תִּרְפִּינָה כַּנְּפֵיהֶן:	<i>Ez 1:25</i>	And there was a voice from on the firmament, which was above their heads, and they stopped and let their wings down.

Ezekiel 9:3

וּכְבוֹד אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִעְלָה מֵעַל הַכְּרוּב אֲשֶׁר הָיָה עָלָיו אֶל מַפְתָּן הַבַּיִת וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־הָאִישׁ הַלְּבָשׁ הַבְּדִים אֲשֶׁר קָסַת הַסֵּפֶר בְּמַתְנֵיוֹ: ס	Ez 9:3	And the glory of the God of Israel was taken up from upon the cherub on which it was to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in white linen who had a writing case at his side.
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¹¹⁴ Translated in this way because this phrase is the same in 10:17, where the word הַחַיָּה would have been replaced by

הַכְּרוּב had it referred to the living beings.

Ezekiel 10:1-10:20

<p>וַאֲרָאָה וְהִנֵּה אֶל־הֶרְקִיעַ אֲשֶׁר עַל־רֹאשׁ הַכְּרֻבִים כְּאֶבֶן סַפִּיר כְּמֵרְאֵה דְמוּת כֶּסֶף נִרְאָה עֲלֵיהֶם:</p>	<p>Ez 10:1</p>	<p>I looked and behold: above, the firmament which was above the heads of the cherubim, like a sapphire stone, like the appearance of the likeness of a throne, appeared above them.</p>
<p>וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָאִישׁ לְבֹשׂ הַבְּדִים וַיֹּאמֶר בֹּא אֶל־בֵּינֹת לְגַלְגַּל אֶל־תַּחַת לְכְרוּב וּמְלֵא חַפְנֶיךָ גַחְלֵי־אֵשׁ מִבֵּינֹת לְכְרֻבִים וְזָרַק עַל־הָעִיר וַיֵּבֵא לְעֵינָי:</p>	<p>Ez 10:2</p>	<p>He spoke to the man clothed in white linen and said, go to between the wheelwork beneath the cherub and fill your hands with coals of fire from between the cherubim and scatter abundantly over the city. And he went from my eyes.</p>
<p>וְהַכְּרֻבִים עַם מְדִים מִיְמִין לַבַּיִת כָּבֹא הָאִישׁ וְהָעָנָן מָלֵא אֶת־הַחֲצָר הַפְּנִימִית:</p>	<p>Ez 10:3</p>	<p>And the cherubim were standing to the right of the house when the man came, and a cloud filled the inner courtyard.</p>
<p>וַיָּרֶם כְּבוֹד־יְהוָה מֵעַל הַכְּרוּב עַל מַפְתַּן הַבַּיִת וַיִּמְלֵא הַבַּיִת אֶת־הָעָנָן וְהַחֲצָר מְלֵאָה אֶת־נֶגַה כְּבוֹד יְהוָה:</p>	<p>Ez 10:4</p>	<p>And the glory of the LORD rose up from above the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the courtyard was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD.</p>
<p>וְקוֹל כַּנְּפֵי הַכְּרוּבִים נִשְׁמַע עַד־הַחֲצָר הַחִיצוֹנָה כְּקוֹל אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמַיִם בְּדַבְּרוֹ:</p>	<p>Ez 10:5</p>	<p>And the voice (sound) of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks.</p>
<p>וַיְהִי בְצִוּוֹתוֹ אֶת־הָאִישׁ לְבֹש־הַבְּדִים לֵאמֹר קַח אֵשׁ מִבֵּינֹת לְגַלְגַּל מִבֵּינֹת לְכְרוּבִים וַיֵּבֵא וַיַּעֲמֵד אֶצְלֵי הָאוֹפֶן:</p>	<p>Ez 10:6</p>	<p>And it was when he commanded the man clothed in linen, saying: Take fire from between the wheelwork, from between the cherubim, he went in and stood beside the wheel.</p>
<p>וַיִּשְׁלַח הַכְּרוּב אֶת־יָדוֹ מִבֵּינֹת לְכְרוּבִים אֶל־הָאֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר בֵּינֹת הַכְּרֻבִים וַיִּשָּׂא וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־חַפְּנֵי לְבֹשׂ הַבְּדִים וַיִּקַּח וַיֵּצֵא:</p>	<p>Ez 10:7</p>	<p>And the cherub stretched out his hand from among the cherubim to the fire that was between the cherubim, and took (some) and gave it to the hands of (the one) clothed in white linen, and he took it and went out.</p>
<p>וַיֵּרָא לְכְרֻבִים תְּבֻנֵית יְדֵי־אָדָם תַּחַת כַּנְּפֵיהֶם:</p>	<p>Ez 10:8</p>	<p>The cherubim appeared to have the form of a man's hand</p>

		under their wings.
<p>וְאֶרְאָה וְהִנֵּה אַרְבַּעָה אֹפָנִים אֶצְל הַכְּרוּבִים אוֹפֵן אֶחָד אֶצְל הַכְּרוּב אֶחָד וְאוֹפֵן אֶחָד אֶצְל הַכְּרוּב אֶחָד וּמְרֹאֵה הָאֹפָנִים כְּעֵין אֶבֶן תַּרְשִׁישׁ:</p>	<p>Ez 10:9</p>	<p>And I looked, and behold, four wheels beside the cherubim, one wheel beside the one cherub and one wheel beside the one cherub. And the appearance of the wheels was like the gleam of Tarshish stone (gold topaz).</p>
<p>וּמְרֹאֵיהֶם דְּמוּת אֶחָד לְאַרְבַּעֵתָם כַּאֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה הָאוֹפֵן בְּתוֹךְ הָאוֹפֵן:</p>	<p><i>Ez</i> <i>10:10</i></p>	<p>And their appearance: the likeness of one was for all of them, it was like a wheel within a wheel.</p>
<p>בְּלִכְתָּם אֶל־אַרְבַּעַת רַבְעֵיהֶם יָלְכוּ לֹא יִסְבוּ בְּלִכְתָּם כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־יִפְנֶה הָרִאשׁוֹן אֲחֵרָיו יָלְכוּ לֹא יִסְבוּ בְּלִכְתָּם:</p>	<p><i>Ez</i> <i>10:11</i></p>	<p>And when they went in the direction of their four sides, they went without turning in their going, for the place the head (front wheel) faced, they went after it without turning in their going.</p>
<p>וְכָל־בְּשָׂרָם וּגְבֵיהֶם וַיְדִיהֶם וְכַנְפֵיהֶם וְהָאוֹפָנִים מְלֵאִים עֵינַיִם סָבִיב לְאַרְבַּעֵתָם אֹפָנֵיהֶם:</p>	<p><i>Ez</i> <i>10:12</i></p>	<p>And all their bodies and their rims and their hands (supports of wheels)¹¹⁵ and their wings and their wheels were full of eyes all around for their wheels, of the four of them.</p>
<p>לְאוֹפָנִים לָהֶם קוֹרָא הַגִּלְגָּל בְּאָזְנֵי:</p>	<p><i>Ez</i> <i>10:13</i></p>	<p>For the wheels, for them, it was called “the wheelwork” in my hearing.</p>
<p>וְאֶרְבַּעָה פָּנִים לְאֶחָד פָּנֵי הָאֶחָד פָּנֵי הַכְּרוּב וּפְנֵי הַשֵּׁנִי פָּנֵי אָדָם וְהַשְּׁלִישִׁי פָּנֵי אַרְיֵה וְהָרְבִיעִי פָּנֵי־נְשָׁר:</p>	<p>Ez 10:14</p>	<p>Each one had four faces: The first face was the face of the cherub and the second face was the face of a man and the third was the face of a lion and the fourth was the face of an eagle.</p>
<p>וַיִּרְמוּ הַכְּרוּבִים הִיא הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתִי בְּנְהַר־כְּבָר:</p>	<p>Ez 10:15</p>	<p>The cherubim rose up – it was the living creature that I saw at the river Chebar.</p>
<p>וּבְלִכְתְּ הַכְּרוּבִים יָלְכוּ הָאוֹפָנִים אֶצְלָם וּבְשָׂאת הַכְּרוּבִים אֶת־פְּנֵיהֶם לָרוּם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ לֹא־יִסְבוּ הָאוֹפָנִים גַּם־הֵם מֵאֶצְלָם:</p>	<p>Ez 10:16</p>	<p>And when the cherubim moved, the wheels moved beside them, and when the cherubim lifted up their wings to rise up from on the earth, the wheels also did not turn from beside them.</p>
<p>בְּעִמּוּדָם יַעֲמֵדוּ וּבְרוּמָם יִרְמוּ אוֹתָם כִּי רוּחַ הַחַיָּה בָּהֶם:</p>	<p><i>Ez</i> <i>10:17</i></p>	<p>In their (the cherubim’s) stopping, they (the wheels) stopped, and in their rising up, they rose up with them,</p>

¹¹⁵ Used in the same construction as the “hands” of Solomon’s stands in 1 Kgs 7: NRSV translates “spokes”.

		because the living spirit was in them.
<p>וַיֵּצֵא כְבוֹד יְהוָה מֵעַל מַפְתַּן הַבַּיִת וַיַּעֲמֵד עַל־הַכְּרוּבִים:</p>	Ez 10:18	And the glory of the LORD went out from above the threshold of the house and stopped above the cherubim.
<p>וַיִּשְׂאוּ הַכְּרוּבִים אֶת־כַּנְפֵיהֶם וַיֵּרָמוּ מִן־הָאָרֶץ לְעֵינַי בְּצֵאתָם וְהָאוֹפָנִים לָעִמָּתָם וַיַּעֲמֵד פְּתַח שַׁעַר בֵּית־יְהוָה הַקִּדְמוֹנִי וּכְבוֹד אֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עָלֵיהֶם מִלְמַעְלָה:</p>	Ez 10:19	And the cherubim lifted up their wings and went up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, and the wheels with them, and stopped at the eastern gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.
<p>הִיא הַחַיָּה אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתִי תַחַת אֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנְהַר־כְּבָר וָאָדַע כִּי כְרוּבִים הֵמָּה:</p>	Ez 10:20	It was the living (creature) which I saw beneath the God of Israel by the river Chebar, and I knew that they were cherubim.

Ez 11:22

<p>וַיִּשְׂאוּ הַכְּרוּבִים אֶת־כַּנְפֵיהֶם וְהָאוֹפָנִים לָעִמָּתָם וּכְבוֹד אֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עָלֵיהֶם מִלְמַעְלָה:</p>	Ez 11:22	And the cherubim lifted up their wings, and the wheels (went) with them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.
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Commentaries on Ezekiel tend, for the most part, not to dwell for very long on his visions of the *chayyot* / cherubim, concentrating instead on the content of his prophecies. Many commentaries yield only a sentence or two, or even just a passing phrase, in reference to the cherubim. Perhaps this is because these visions are seen as peripheral to the main message of the book, or perhaps the commentators were themselves somewhat unsure of what to say about them.

Wright immediately identifies Ezekiel's *chayyot* / cherubim with the Mesopotamian portrayals of guardian beings such as the massive statues that stood outside temples. He lists features that the creatures of Ezekiel's visions have in common with such Mesopotamian portrayals:

Ezekiel's description has features that were common in such paintings and statues: the upright humanoid form (5), but with multiple *heads* or faces and *wings* (6); the *legs* and/or *feet* of a bull (7); the particular animals whose heads were included along with the human one (*lion, ox* and *eagle*,

10). Such composite, winged ‘bullmen’ are found in various postures over a wide spectrum of ancient near-eastern cultures and historical eras.¹¹⁶

“Bullmen”, he says, and bullmen are certainly widespread in the art of Mesopotamia, but “lionmen” would be as appropriate a description, and lionmen or sphinxes are also found throughout the art of the Near East, particularly Egypt. Cody, in reference to Ezekiel’s first vision, states that “Griffins and sphinxes and other mythical creatures in which different parts of different birds and animals and of man were combined were common in the art of the Ancient Near East”;¹¹⁷ in the context the implication is that Ezekiel’s cherubim are a similar sort of being to these mythical creatures.

Very notable in Wright’s commentary is the emphasis he places on the symbolism of the various aspects of these creatures. Firstly, he refers to the contexts in which depictions of them are found to state the following about the symbolism of the cherub as a whole: they are the attendants of a deity; they support his majesty or, literally, his throne; they defend temples, palaces, and (metaphorically) the god’s empire; they indicate the presence of a deity.¹¹⁸ Biggs also says that such creatures were known in other ancient religions, associated with their gods and temples. He calls them “awe-inspiring” and relates them to a sense of wonder and mystery.¹¹⁹

Secondly, the various parts of which the typical cherub is composed each have their own symbolism. Wright quotes from Block’s commentary to say that the lion’s traditional qualities in the Old Testament period were strength, courage, royalty and ferocity; those of the eagle were swiftness and stateliness; the ox or bull, fertility and divinity; and man, the image of God, divine majesty, dignity, nobility, wisdom and reason. Taken together, the aspects of these four different animals express the divine attributes of omniscience and omnipotence.¹²⁰ Borowski attributes wisdom to man, strength to the lion, procreative power to the bull, and soaring movement to the eagle.¹²¹ He says that cherubim are symbols not only of omniscience and omnipotence, but also of completeness.¹²² Parrot, with reference to the Assyrian guardian figures many identify with the Biblical cherubim, attaches a different significance to the four component animals: to him, each is the ruler of its particular

¹¹⁶ Wright 2001:47.

¹¹⁷ Cody 1984:25.

¹¹⁸ Wright 2001:47.

¹¹⁹ Biggs 1996:4.

¹²⁰ Block (I) 1997:96, in Wright 2001:48.

¹²¹ Borowski 1995:37.

¹²² Borowski 1995:36.

domain. Man is the ruler of all creation, the lion is the king of beasts, the bull of domestic animals, and the eagle of the air.¹²³ Cody, on the other hand, finds it hard to say whether the four different faces have any particular significance or not.¹²⁴

Thirdly, Wright goes on to examine some other aspects of the vision that are less often mentioned: The use of the number four, the significance of body parts, and the mobility and dynamism of the whole scene.

Ezekiel states that each creature has four wings (compare the six-winged seraphim in Isaiah), as well as four faces and four hands. Wright says that the repeated use of the number four probably relates to the four quarters of the earth or the four winds. It symbolises God's sovereignty over the whole earth.¹²⁵ The significance of the four faces has already been dealt with, and Wright does not attempt to theorise on the significance of the wings. However, he does speak of the hands: in Biblical imagery, hands usually signify power, ability and competence.¹²⁶ The real significance of the wings probably relates to Wright's next point, the place where Ezekiel's vision diverges dramatically from the usual depictions of cherubim in ancient art: their lightning-fast movement and dynamism. Wright says this is one of the key points of contrast with the ancient near-eastern religious art, that pagan cherubim were still and sentry-like, while Ezekiel's flash around in a state of fiery flux and motion.¹²⁷ It is possible that some of this contrast is due to the style of art used in that time and place – it tended to be rather stolid and static – as well as the media and techniques which were used to create most of the images of cherubim that we have today – mainly metal, stone and clay – which could not have been very conducive to the depiction of dynamic movement, whereas a written account could convey it. Nevertheless, it is very likely that this sense of movement is indeed a subversion of the static imagery of the surrounding religions to convey the “sovereign, roaming freedom of Yahweh”.¹²⁸ Borowski takes the fact that they do not need to turn in order to move in any direction as symbolising God's omnipresence.¹²⁹

¹²³ Parrot 1961:30.

¹²⁴ Cody 1984:25.

¹²⁵ Wright 2001:48,49.

¹²⁶ Wright 2001:48.

¹²⁷ Wright 2001:48.

¹²⁸ Wright 2001:29.

¹²⁹ Borowski 1995:37.

The other major difference between the usual depictions of cherubim (see Chapter 3 for examples) and Ezekiel's vision is the fact that the former, with some exceptions, tend to have a mainly horizontal (animal) posture, while Ezekiel's cherubim have an upright (human) posture. Eichrodt sees this as a deliberate and significant emphasis on the prophet's part:

“Yet we must also recall how the prophet, having insisted in [chapter 1] v. 5b on the human form of the living creatures, needs to bring out this resemblance to man in detail. After the general impression conveyed in v. 6, he describes in v. 7 the upright stance of the feet, thus clearly distinguishing them from the quadrupeds combining the characteristics of two species, the serpent griffons, and lion-men and ox-men of Babylonia and Assyria.”¹³⁰

He also does not accept the Masoretic text's “like soles of a calf's foot” in verse 7, substituting Aquila's “gullā, “round soles”.¹³¹ He takes this to mean that the feet run together into a rounded pillar, further emphasising the cherubim's function as bearers.¹³² Harris, Archer and Waltke take this phrase to mean that the feet went straight down like those of a calf, without human ankles and toes,¹³³ in other words, that they had hooves.

Wright, on the other hand, ignores the significant difference in posture between Ezekiel's cherubim and the common Mesopotamian representations, not noting the fact that the usual type of guardian statues had a horizontal posture when he states on page 47: “Ezekiel's description has features that were common in such paintings and statues: the upright humanoid form, but with multiple heads or faces and wings...”¹³⁴ Although all of these features do exist in contemporary depictions of cherubim, they were by no means the most common way to depict them. In fact, the most common, the winged bullmen and the winged sphinxes or griffins, have, along with the animal posture, only one head, either human or eagle, and one pair of wings. Could the upright posture and the larger than usual head and wing count be another subversion of popular religious imagery, giving the cherubim the animal characteristics commonly found in Assyrian and Babylonian guardian creatures, but emphasising the human characteristics to make a point? And if so, what point is intended?

Vawter and Hoppe have much less to say about the cherubim. They believe that both Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim and Isaiah's of the seraphim were inspired by the figures of the cherubim in

¹³⁰ Eichrodt 1970:55.

¹³¹ Eichrodt 1970:49,50.

¹³² Eichrodt 1970:57.

¹³³ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(1):455.

¹³⁴ Wright 2001:47.

the first Temple.¹³⁵ This is very important in that it connects these cherubim to the ones above the ark as well as those used as a decorative motif in the Temple. However, to get rid of the question of where the image came from by simply saying it was copied from the Temple cherubim is probably too ingenuous a solution to a complex problem: it simply leads to the question of where, in turn, the idea for the images of the Temple cherubim came from. Vawter and Hoppe do in fact mention the influence of Mesopotamian motifs: directly after their very definite statement that the Temple cherubim inspired both visions, they go on to call cherubim “the half-beast, half-human monsters called *karibu* by the Mesopotamians”.¹³⁶ This is interesting to note, as many sources describe ancient depictions of cherubim and seraphim as pictures of “monsters” or even “demons”, making it difficult for the layman to recognise these artworks as depictions of what are known in the Judaeo-Christian tradition as angelic beings. Mays also sees in the cherubim of this vision a reference to the cherubim above the ark as well as those ridden by God in the storm in Psalm 18.¹³⁷ Biggs also connects the storm imagery in these visions to that in earlier texts,¹³⁸ while Eichrodt not only notes the storm, cloud, and fire / lightning imagery in the vision, but also sees the storm cloud as a symbol of the cherub upon which God rides.¹³⁹

Later, in connection with the second vision of the cherubim, Biggs emphasises the cherubim’s association with the altar (the ark cherubim), in view of the fact that they are involved in the destruction of Jerusalem from the Temple. He states that the repetition of details about the cherubim in this vision is intended to link it with the first vision.¹⁴⁰ Cody goes even further along this path of interpretation, hypothesising that the original version of chapter 10 was actually talking about the Temple statues, and that the passage was reworked to refer to live, mobile cherubim in order to harmonise with chapter 1.¹⁴¹

Vawter and Hoppe also mention the roles of cherubim as guardians and as a sign of the divine presence,¹⁴² as well as the symbolism of the number four. They refer to the four winds, the four corners of the earth, the four ages of history – they quote Walther Zimmerli as saying that the

¹³⁵ Vawter & Hoppe 1991:26.

¹³⁶ Vawter & Hoppe 1991:26.

¹³⁷ Mays 1978:26.

¹³⁸ Biggs 1996:4.

¹³⁹ Eichrodt 1970:56.

¹⁴⁰ Biggs 1996:30.

¹⁴¹ Cody 1984:54.

¹⁴² Vawter & Hoppe 1991:26.

Priestly stratum in the Pentateuch has an idea of history being divided into four periods – as well as the fact that it is regarded as a “perfect” number¹⁴³ (it is a perfect square). Eichrodt also sees the cherubim as representing the four corners of the earth, and thus God’s sovereignty.¹⁴⁴ Cook relates the repeated use of the number four to Jung’s archetype of the quaternity, a four-fold arrangement of symbols or objects which symbolises the numinous.¹⁴⁵ He also links the cherubim to another Jungian archetype, Mercurius, who is fourfold and related to the Graeco-Roman god Mercury / Hermes. This symbol is strongly associated with rapid motion and change, as in the English term “mercurial”. Vawter and Hoppe, like Wright,¹⁴⁶ also view as significant the mobility of the cherubim, affirming God’s universality and omnipotence.¹⁴⁷

Clements focuses on another aspect of Ezekiel’s vision: the theophany as throne chariot (*merkabah*). In this interpretation the cherubim play the part of animals drawing or otherwise propelling the chariot.¹⁴⁸ In other Biblical texts God is described as riding on a cherub.¹⁴⁹ Clements places great emphasis on the confusing complexity of the vision, which he relates to the impossibility of defining or describing God.¹⁵⁰ He speaks of Ezekiel’s complex use of visual description, paralleled in the Old Testament only in the book of Daniel,¹⁵¹ as well as his intentionally complex and dynamic language which always holds something back, such as his recurring use of “like” and “something like”.¹⁵² This language usage, along with the repetition of the number four, push the passage close to the realm of apocalyptic, as is noted by Vawter and Hoppe.¹⁵³ Clements makes it clear that the symbols cannot be understood literally: “it seems likely that many features not properly brought into clear focus are symbols that cannot be defined in any normal fashion (for example, the creatures with ‘four faces’ in v. 14...)”.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴³ Vawter & Hoppe 1991:27.

¹⁴⁴ Eichrodt 1970:58.

¹⁴⁵ Cook 2004:180-181.

¹⁴⁶ Wright 2001:48.

¹⁴⁷ Vawter & Hoppe 1991:27.

¹⁴⁸ Clements 1996:12.

¹⁴⁹ Clements 1996:12, referring to Ps 18:11.

¹⁵⁰ Clements 1996:11.

¹⁵¹ Clements 1996:13.

¹⁵² Clements 1996:12.

¹⁵³ Vawter & Hoppe 1991:27.

¹⁵⁴ Clements 1996:45.

McKeating also identifies the vision as the *merkabah*,¹⁵⁵ as does Biggs, though without using the word *merkabah*. Biggs states that the description of the creatures and wheels moving together may refer to God as a king riding in a royal chariot.¹⁵⁶ He does not mention the creatures as *drawing* the chariot, rather, they seem to form part of it. Hals refers to the creatures as supporting the chariot,¹⁵⁷ not drawing it. De Vaux, however, does refer to them as “drawing” the chariot.¹⁵⁸ Halperin, too, in describing the views of Klostermann¹⁵⁹ and Broome¹⁶⁰ as well as his own view¹⁶¹ refers to the vision as the *merkabah*, while defining it as a psychotic hallucination. Cody¹⁶² also mentions the transporting and bearing aspect of the cherubim. Bodi draws on both the *merkabah* and ark traditions when he says: “The structure with wheels in Ezek 1 and 10, may be seen as a mobile throne of Yahweh corresponding to the mobile ark in the wilderness according to the priestly tradition”.¹⁶³

The identification of the *chayyot* in chapter 1 with the cherubim in chapter 10 presents one problem: in verse 10:14 the “face of an ox” mentioned in chapter 1:10 is replaced by “the face of a cherub”. This is problematic as it leads to the question “what exactly is the face of a cherub?” Until now it has seemed that a cherub is a composite creature that necessarily has the face or faces of some other, identifiable creature, not one that is unique to it. So what can be meant by the phrase “the face of a cherub”? Does it mean that the usual face seen on depictions of what were called cherubim was that of an ox or bull? Cody says that this substitution of “cherub” for “ox” is done in order to identify the *chayyot* with the cherubim of the chapter 10 vision, in the reworking of the passage that, he hypothesises, was done in order to harmonise chapter 10 with chapter 1.¹⁶⁴ He does not comment on what “the face of a cherub” might mean, and his redactional explanation for the phrase does not support the idea that it came about because the face of an ox was the usual one for these creatures. Freedman and O’Connor do interpret the substitution as meaning that “cherub” could refer to a hybrid being with the face of an ox as well as one with several faces.¹⁶⁵ Greenberg refers to an

¹⁵⁵ McKeating 1993:23.

¹⁵⁶ Biggs 1996:5.

¹⁵⁷ Hals 1989:14.

¹⁵⁸ de Vaux 1978b:319.

¹⁵⁹ Halperin 1993:9.

¹⁶⁰ Halperin 1993:13.

¹⁶¹ Halperin 1993:40.

¹⁶² Cody 1984:55.

¹⁶³ Bodi 1991:187.

¹⁶⁴ Cody 1984:54,55.

¹⁶⁵ Freedman & O’Connor 1995:313.

Akkadian text where someone is provided with “the head of a *kuribu*”,¹⁶⁶ inferring that although we may not know what the “head of a cherub” may have looked like, it could still be a valid statement and not simply a meaningless change made to harmonise two texts.

Few scholarly sources make mention of an aspect which has captured the imagination of many people judging from various popular and fictional sources – the cherubim's being covered with eyes. This, 10:12, is a rather confusing bit of text, to be sure, and it looks rather as if it is the wheels, rather than the cherubim, that are supposed to be covered with eyes. The inclusion of the word “wings” suggests that it is the cherubim themselves that are being talked about, but the rest of the verse as well as the immediate context point to the wheels alone. If the wheels, too, had wings, the phrase “full of eyes” might refer to the wheels and not to the cherubim at all. Popular mysticism personalises the wheels, making them the Ophanim, another class of angelic beings.¹⁶⁷



Figure 7

Pritchard 1973: plate 50

Fourth-century Jewish coin with a bearded figure seated on a winged wheel¹⁶⁸

3.1.8.2 The cherub in the dirge for the king of Tyre

Ezekiel 28:14-16

אֶת־כְּרוּב מְמַשַׁח הַסּוֹכֵךְ וַיִּתֵּתֶיךָ בְּהָר קֹדֶשׁ אֶל הַיָּם הַיְיִת בְּתוֹךְ אַבְנֵי־אֵשׁ הַתְּהַלֵּכֶת:	Ez 28:14	With an anointed covering (guardian) cherub I placed you, you were on the holy mountain of God, you walked among the stones of fire.
תָּמִים אָתָּה בְּדַרְכֶיךָ	Ez 28:15	You were righteous in your ways,

¹⁶⁶ Greenberg 1983:183.

¹⁶⁷ Wilson 1994:26.

¹⁶⁸ Pritchard 1973: plate 50.

מִיּוֹם הַבְּרָאָה עַד־נִמְצָא עוֹלָתָה בָּךְ:		from the day of your creation until unrighteousness was found in you.
בָּרַב רִבְלִיתְךָ מָלִי תוֹכַךְ חָמָס וַתִּהְיֶינָא וְאַחֲלִילְךָ מִהָר אֶל־הַיָּם וְאַבְדְּךָ כְּרוֹב הַסֵּךְ מִתּוֹךְ אַבְנֵי־אֵשׁ:	Ez 28:16	In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence and you sinned, and I profaned you (declared you profane, drove you out as profane?) from the mountain of God, and the covering cherub drove you from between the stones of fire.

This is a difficult text, and has been subject to wild interpretations in the past. It is described as a “mythical dirge”, although it does not follow the standard dirge metre.¹⁶⁹ Zimmerli (1983) calls it a lament, following the word קִינָה in verse 12.¹⁷⁰ He also notes that it does in fact follow the standard metre in some places.¹⁷¹ The translation given here follows that favoured by Zimmerli; the author is aware that there are other very different interpretations.

One well-known popular interpretation of the text is that it refers to the devil, saying that he was once a cherub and then fell due to pride. However, this interpretation disregards what is clearly there in the text: that the subject of the dirge is no devil but entirely human, the king of Tyre. Hals proposes that here a primeval myth of a fall, well-known and international, is applied to the city-state of Tyre in such a way that its original universal significance is largely set aside.¹⁷² Hals also interprets the guardian cherub not as the figure that falls, the primeval royal figure here identified with the king of Tyre, but as his companion, a being that had been with him in his original state of blamelessness. He draws parallels between this passage and Genesis 3.¹⁷³ It is not impossible that the original myth that is referred to in this passage has something to do with the fall of angels, but this is certainly not the theme of the text as it stands in Ezekiel. Zimmerli also translates the text in such a way that the cherub is the king’s companion rather than the king himself,¹⁷⁴ and the one who drives him out in verse 16.¹⁷⁵ He states that even if the “king of Tyre” is taken in a mythical way to mean the “angel of Tyre”, the guardian spirit of the city – which he disputes on the grounds that מְלִיךְ always refers to earthly rulers elsewhere in Ezekiel – he still cannot be identified, as has been

¹⁶⁹ Hals 1989:199.

¹⁷⁰ Zimmerli 1983:87.

¹⁷¹ Zimmerli 1983:87.

¹⁷² Hals 1989:200.

¹⁷³ Hals 1989:200.

¹⁷⁴ Zimmerli 1983:85.

¹⁷⁵ Zimmerli 1983:88.

attempted on the basis of the Masoretic text, with the covering cherub.¹⁷⁶ Like Hals, Zimmerli draws a parallel between this passage and Genesis 2 and 3. He even claims that the Ezekiel passage preserves an older form of the tradition.¹⁷⁷ In this case, the covering cherub that drives out the king may be equated with the cherubim of the Genesis passage, and the original mythical material must be identified as the story of the fall of man, and not that of angels. However, in his discussion of the stones of fire (אֲבָנֵי יְהִיָּהּ), Zimmerli suggests that the being to whom the king of Tyre is compared, as well as the “stones of fire”, may be some sort of heavenly beings: stars, lightning or angels.¹⁷⁸ The cherub is still not equated with the king of Tyre. In general, though, Zimmerli argues very strongly for the reading of this passage in terms of the same pre-Israelite myth of the fall of primeval man as is recorded in Genesis 2-3.¹⁷⁹ Freedman and O’Connor in TDOT, on the other hand, identify the king of Tyre with the cherub.¹⁸⁰ Their translation of the passage differs accordingly from that given above. Cook also vehemently denies the interpretation of this passage in which the cherub is a companion, stating that the king of Tyre is being compared to the cherub. According to this interpretation, the cherub is the figure that falls, introducing a new ambivalence to the concept of cherubim.¹⁸¹ This ambivalence is attested in iconography: see figures 63 and 64 in 5.3.2, where the cherub-like figure upon which the god rides is almost identical to the monster which he fights.

The word “covering” (כַּוֵּשֶׁת) suggests a guarding function, as seen in the Genesis passage. Zimmerli connects it to the description of the temple / ark cherubim in Ex 25:20 and 1 Chr 28:18, while discounting Widengren’s understanding¹⁸² of the word as “shadower”, applying, it seems, to God rather than to the cherub.¹⁸³ It does not appear that his objection is to the use of כַּוֵּשֶׁת to describe the protective role of the cherub, although later he prefers to explain it as “warding off”, further connecting this text to the Genesis passage.¹⁸⁴ He also does not agree with the translation of מְשֻׁמָּה as “anointed”, preferring to leave it unexplained.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁶ Zimmerli 1983:90.

¹⁷⁷ Zimmerli 1983:90.

¹⁷⁸ Zimmerli 1983:93.

¹⁷⁹ Zimmerli 1983:91; 95.

¹⁸⁰ Freedman & O’Connor 1995:311.

¹⁸¹ Cook 2004:190-192.

¹⁸² Quoted in Zimmerli 1983:85.

¹⁸³ Zimmerli 1983:85.

¹⁸⁴ Zimmerli 1983:91.

¹⁸⁵ Zimmerli 1983:85; 89.

One more interesting point is found in verse 16. In 16b it is the speaker, God, who drives the king of Tyre from the mountain of God. But in 16c which parallels 16b, it is the cherub who performs this act. This suggests something of the usual angelic role, more characteristic of מְלֹאֲכִים than of cherubim, of carrying out God's commands.

3.1.8.3 The cherubim in the vision of the rebuilt temple

עַל־מַעַל הַפֶּתַח וְעַד־הַבַּיִת הַפְּנִימִי וְלַחוּץ וְאֶל־כָּל־הַקִּיר סָבִיב סָבִיב בַּפְּנִימִי וּבַחוּצוֹן מְדוּת: Ez 41:17	To (the space) above the door, and up to the inner house, and on the outside, and on all the walls all around all around, in the inner (room) and in the outer, there were measurements. ¹⁸⁶
וְעָשׂוּי כְּרוּבִים וְתַמְרִים וְתַמְרָה בֵּין־כְּרוּב לְכְרוּב וּשְׁנַיִם פָּנִים לְכְרוּב: Ez 41:18	It was made of cherubim and palm trees, a palm tree between cherub and cherub, and each cherub had two faces.
וּפְנֵי אָדָם אֶל־הַתַּמְרָה מִפּוֹ וּפְנֵי־לִיֹן אֶל־הַתַּמְרָה מִפּוֹ עָשׂוּי אֶל־כָּל־הַבַּיִת סָבִיב סָבִיב: Ez 41:19	The face of a man towards the palm tree from here, and the face of a young lion towards the palm tree from here. They were worked on the whole temple, all around, all around.
מִהָאָרֶץ עַד־מַעַל הַפֶּתַח הַכְּרוּבִים וְהַתַּמְרִים עָשׂוּיִם וְקִיר הַהֵיכָל: Ez 41:20	From the ground to from (the area) above the door the cherubim and palm trees were worked, and the wall of the temple.
וְעָשׂוּיָהּ אֲלֵיהֶן אֶל־דֹּלְתוֹת הַהֵיכָל כְּרוּבִים וְתַמְרִים כְּאֵשֶׁר עָשׂוּיִם לְקִירוֹת וְעַב עֵץ אֶל־פְּנֵי הָאוֹלָם מִהַחוּץ: Ez 41:25	And there were worked on them, on the doors of the temple, cherubim and palm trees like those that were worked on the walls and a projecting roof of wood was in front of the porch from the outside.

The text of Ezekiel 40-42 is among the most poorly preserved in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁸⁷ Fortunately, the part of it that deals with cherubim is very simple, dealing with the use of cherubim as a decorative motif in Ezekiel's vision of the rebuilt temple. This passage has parallels with those

¹⁸⁶ NRSV translates "a pattern". It would seem to indicate an exact repeating pattern, with the same amount of space between each repetition.

¹⁸⁷ Hals 1989:289.

describing the decorative use of the cherubim motif in Exodus, 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles. However, it differs from them in that it describes something in a vision, not something that was actually built. Despite this, it is still useful in understanding the actual use of the cherubim motif in decoration, as Ezekiel would have seen Solomon's temple before its destruction, and this text probably inspired the later reconstructions of the temple, perhaps Zerubbabel's and more certainly Herod's.¹⁸⁸ It differs from the other passages, too, in being more informative: where the others simply mention cherubim being used as a decorative pattern, alone in Exodus and 2 Chronicles and along with other motifs in 1 Kings, Ezekiel's text gives a detailed description of what this pattern was to look like.

Zimmerli relates the motif of cherubim and palm trees to the old motif of the tree of life flanked by two animals facing each other.¹⁸⁹ Several examples of such a pattern can be found in chapter 4. They generally form a band or register, and this is what Zimmerli says of Ezekiel 41's cherubim: he talks of the wall being divided into fields and of fairly broad strips containing a continuous presentation of the sequence of cherubim and palm trees.¹⁹⁰ These cherubim are explicitly described as having two faces; Zimmerli describes them as being different in form from the throne-bearing cherubim of Ezekiel's visions and of Solomon's temple.¹⁹¹ Freedman and O'Connor state that where relief or flat representations of cherubim were used, they usually had something to do with sacred vegetation such as the tree of life; while three-dimensional figures were associated with transport¹⁹² – the throne or throne-chariot of God.

This is a fascinating and very important passage in that it clearly describes the cherubim as having only two faces, whereas earlier in the same book cherubim are described as having four faces. This strongly suggests that the ancient Israelites had no difficulty with imagining cherubim in different forms in different situations. The idea of what constitutes a cherub is not set in stone; it certainly involves a set of factors (wings, parts of various creatures), but which aspects are used depends on the situation. It is important to note, though, that the faces of these cherubim are those of a man and of a lion, two of the four faces mentioned earlier in Ezekiel. It would seem that the creatures of which cherubim are made up are limited to those four: ox / bull, lion, eagle (all cherubim seem to have wings which would almost certainly be thought of as those of an eagle) and man. This limitation will become important when it comes to attempting a similar definition for seraphim.

¹⁸⁸ de Vaux 1978b:323.

¹⁸⁹ Zimmerli 1983:388.

¹⁹⁰ Zimmerli 1983:388.

¹⁹¹ Zimmerli 1983:388.

¹⁹² Freedman & O'Connor 1995:313.

It can be seen from this study that the major division in texts mentioning cherubim is that between texts where images of cherubim are mentioned, and those involving real ones. Despite the congruence between earthly and heavenly realities discussed in 3.1.4, it is certain that the people of the ancient world could tell the difference. Greenberg, in his commentary on Ezekiel, has this to say:

It must be borne in mind that Ezekiel is the only person who claims to have seen the heavenly cherubs; the only cherubs previously seen by humans were the statues in the inner sanctum, which were only approximations. That the ancients were aware of a gap between their iconography and the real appearance of divinities is suggested by the Sumerian Gudea's ignorance of the glorious divine apparitions that came to him in his dream; a goddess identified them to him as Ningursu – a common Sumerian god who surely was represented in art, and yet not so as to enable the visionary to identify his true apparition".¹⁹³

3.1.8.4 Characteristics of the cherub as found in Ezekiel

Appearance:

Four wings.

Four faces: Human, lion, eagle, ox (cherub).

Two faces: Human, lion.

Four hands under the wings.

Four cherubim in the group.

Upright human form.

Shining like bronze.

Legs straight.

Feet like calves' feet.

Two wings spread upwards; two covering bodies.

Full of eyes (?).

Coals between them.

Dynamic and mobile.

Do not turn when changing direction.

Bearers of the *merkabah*.

Aspect of storm cloud.

Aspect of fire and lightning.

¹⁹³ Greenberg 1983:183-184.

Controlled by spirit.

Capable of action: reaching in and handing the coal to the human figure.

Associated with four wheels.

Make a roaring noise.

Functions:

bearing God's chariot-throne.

covering (guarding).

associated with sacred vegetation.¹⁹⁴

decorative.

carrying out God's commands.

3.1.9. Cherubim in the Psalms

וַיִּרְכַּב עַל־כְּרוּב וַיַּעֲרֹךְ וַיִּדָּא עַל־כַּנְפֵי־רוּחַ:	Ps 18:11	He rode on a cherub and flew, he flew swiftly on the wings of the wind.
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This text is exactly the same as 2 Samuel 22:11, with the exception of the word **וַיִּדָּא**, which makes more sense in the context than the Samuel text's **וַיִּרְכַּב**. Both texts are poetic and make use of a chiasm. This is significant is that the chiasm in both cases places the cherub in parallel with "the wings of the wind". This would of course strongly suggest that the cherub is actually a personification of the wind. This fits in with the storm imagery found in other texts such as Ezekiel's visions, where cherubim are associated with storm clouds and lightning. In particular, it brings to mind the storm wind (רוּחַ סְעָרָה) which brings the living creatures to the prophet in Ezekiel 1:4. Freedman and O'Connor, though, deny the identification of the cherub with the wind, translating the second line as "he hovered upon its [the cherub's] wings through the wind".¹⁹⁵ According to Albright, Psalm 18:11 / 2 Samuel 2:11 is part of a very ancient hymn and reflects the primary function of cherubim in Israelite religious symbolism.¹⁹⁶

רֹעֵה יִשְׂרָאֵל הֶאֱזִינָה בְּהָג כַּצֹּאֵן יוֹסֵף	Ps 80:2	Shepherd of Israel, give ear, (you) who leads Joseph like sheep,
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¹⁹⁴ Freedman & O'Connor 1995:313.

¹⁹⁵ Freedman & O'Connor 1995:312.

¹⁹⁶ Albright 1938:2.

יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים הוֹפִיעָה:		(you) who sits (on) the cherubim, Shine forth!
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יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ יִרְגָזוּ עַמִּים יֹשֵׁב כְּרוּבִים תִּנּוּט הָאָרֶץ:	Ps 99:1	The LORD is king, the nations tremble, He is seated (on) cherubim, the earth shakes.
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Both of the other Psalm texts are examples of the use of the divine epithet (ה') יֹשֵׁב כְּרוּבִים. In neither case is the ark of the covenant mentioned, giving credence to the idea that the epithet can be used to express a heavenly reality as well as referring to the earthly representation of the cherubim throne on the ark or in the temple.

3.1.10. Cherubim in 1 Chronicles

וַיַּעַל דָּוִד וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵלְתָּהּ אֶל־קִרְיַת יְעָרִים אֲשֶׁר לְיְהוּדָה לְהַעֲלוֹת מִשָּׁם אֶת אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים יְהוָה יוֹשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים אֲשֶׁר־נִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ:	1 Ch 13:6	David and all Israel went up to Baalat, to Kiriath-Jearim, which belongs to Judah, in order to bring up from there the ark of God, the LORD who sits (on) the cherubim, which is called by (his) name.
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This passage is similar to 2 Samuel 6:2. The same divine epithet is used, but here as in the Samuel text, the action is closely linked with the ark of the covenant.

וּלְמִזְבֵּחַ הַקֶּטֶר רֶתֶת זָהָב מְזֻקָּק בַּמִּשְׁקָל וּלְתִבְנִית הַמְּרֻכָּבָה הַכְּרוּבִים זָהָב לֶפֶת רְשִׁים וְסִי כְּכִים עַל־אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה:	1 Ch 28:18	And for the altar of incense, of refined gold, and its weight, and the pattern for the chariot of the cherubim of gold, which were to spread out and cover the ark of the covenant of the LORD.
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1 Chronicles 28:18 forms part of a passage where David instructs Solomon in exactly how the temple should be constructed. He gives him exact measurements and plans for various objects, including a plan for the large temple cherubim described in detail in Kings. This verse is significant in that it explicitly calls these cherubim a *merkabah*. Two functions of the cherubim are mentioned in this verse: one is their role as divine transport – they, or the construction of which they are to form part, are called a chariot. The second role is that of protectors – the two key verbs here are פָּרַשׁ (spread

out) and סכך (cover). These two verbs are used, in Exodus, Kings, 2 Chronicles, and particularly in the Ezekiel texts, to express the guardian role of cherubim.

3.1.11. Cherubim in 2 Chronicles

<p>וַיַּחַף אֶת־הַבַּיִת הַקָּרוֹת הַסָּפִים וְקִירוֹתָיו וַיִּדְלַתוֹתָיו זָהָב וַיַּפְתַּח כְּרוּבִים עַל־הַקִּירוֹת: ס</p>	<p>2 Ch 3:7</p>	<p>He covered the house, the beams, the sills, and its walls and its doors, with gold, and he opened (carved) cherubim on the walls.</p>
<p>וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת־בַּיִת־קֹדֶשׁ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים אָרְכוֹ עַל־פְּנֵי רֹחַב־הַבַּיִת אַמּוֹת עֶשְׂרִים וְרֹחְבוֹ אַמּוֹת עֶשְׂרִים וַיַּחַפְהוּ זָהָב טוֹב לְכַפְרִים שֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת:</p>	<p>2 Ch 3:8</p>	<p>And he made the house of the Holy of Holies, its length, according to the breadth of the house, was 20 cubits, and its breadth was 20 cubits, and he covered it with good gold, 600 talents.</p>
<p>וּמִשְׁקַל לְמִסְמְרוֹת לְשֻׁקְלִים חֲמִשִּׁים זָהָב וַהֲעֲלִיּוֹת חִפָּה זָהָב:</p>	<p>2 Ch 3:9</p>	<p>And the weight of the nails was 50 shekels of gold, and he covered the upper (rooms) with gold.</p>
<p>וַיַּעַשׂ בְּבַיִת־קֹדֶשׁ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים כְּרוּבִים שְׁנַיִם מַעֲשֵׂה צַעֲצָעִים וַיִּצְפוּ אֹתָם זָהָב:</p>	<p>2 Ch 3:10</p>	<p>In the Holy of Holies he made two cherubim, work of images, and they overlaid them with gold.</p>
<p>וּכְנָפֵי הַכְּרוּבִים אָרְכָם אַמּוֹת עֶשְׂרִים כְּנַף הָאֶחָד לְאַמּוֹת חֲמִשׁ מִגַּעַת לְקִיר הַבַּיִת וְהַכְּנָף הָאַחֶרֶת אַמּוֹת חֲמִשׁ מִגַּיעַ לְכְנָף הַכְּרוּב הָאַחֵר:</p>	<p>2 Ch 3:11</p>	<p>And the length of the wings of the cherubim was 20 cubits; the wing of the one, at five cubits, touched the wall of the house, and the other wing, five cubits, touched the wing of the other cherub.</p>
<p>וּכְנָף הַכְּרוּב הָאַחֵד אַמּוֹת חֲמִשׁ מִגַּיעַ לְקִיר הַבַּיִת וְהַכְּנָף הָאַחֶרֶת אַמּוֹת חֲמִשׁ דְּבָקָה לְכְנָף הַכְּרוּב הָאַחֵר:</p>	<p>2 Ch 3:12</p>	<p>And the wing of the other cherub, five cubits, touched the wall of the house and the other wing, five cubits, was joined to the wing of the first cherub.</p>
<p>כְּנָפֵי הַכְּרוּבִים הָאֵלֶּה פְּרִשְׁיָם אַמּוֹת עֶשְׂרִים וְהֵם עַמּוּדִים עַל־רַגְלֵיהֶם וּפְנֵיהֶם לְבַיִת: ס</p>	<p>2 Ch 3:13</p>	<p>The wings of these cherubim were spread 20 cubits, and they stood on their feet, and their faces were towards the house.</p>
<p>וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת־הַפָּרֹכֶת תְּכֵלֶת</p>	<p>2 Ch</p>	<p>He made the dividing curtain of violet and purple</p>

וְאֶרְגָּמָן וְכִרְמִיל וּבוּז וַיַּעַל עָלָיו כְּרוּבִים: ס	3:14	and crimson and fine linen, and he put cherubim on it.
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וַיָּבִיאוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים אֶת־אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה אֶל־מְקוֹמוֹ אֶל־דְּבִיר הַבַּיִת אֶל־קֹדֶשׁ הַקֳּדָשִׁים אֶל־תַּחַת כַּנְּפֵי הַכְּרוּבִים:	2 Ch 5:7	And the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, to the sanctuary of the house, to the Holy of Holies, to beneath the wings of the cherubim.
וַיְהִיו הַכְּרוּבִים פְּרָשִׁים כְּנָפֵיהֶם עַל־מְקוֹם הָאֲרוֹן וַיִּכְסּוּ הַכְּרוּבִים עַל־הָאֲרוֹן וְעַל־בְּדָיו מִלְמַעְלָה:	2 Ch 5:8	And the cherubim were with wings outstretched to the place of the ark and the cherubim covered above over the ark and over its poles.

These passages are almost identical with those in 1 Kings, and the same conclusions apply. 3:14 is very similar to Exodus 36:35; the description of the curtain is identical up to the word אֶרְגָּמָן, after which the wording changes but the meaning remains the same.

3.2. Texts containing שָׂרָף

3.2.1. “Fiery serpents” in Numbers

וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה בָּעָם אֶת הַנְּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרָפִים וַיִּנְשְׁכוּ אֶת־הָעָם וַיָּמָת עַם־רַב מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל:	Num 21:6	The LORD sent the seraph serpents among the people, and they bit the people, and many people of Israel died.
וַיָּבֹאוּ הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ חָטָאנוּ כִּי־דַבַּרְנוּ בַּיהוָה וּבָךְ הַתְּפַלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיִּסַּר מֵעָלֵינוּ אֶת־הַנְּחָשׁ וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל מֹשֶׁה בְּעַד הָעָם:	<i>Num 21:7</i>	And the people came to Moses and said, we have sinned because we spoke against the LORD and against you, pray to the LORD and he will turn the serpent away from us. And Moses prayed on behalf of the people.
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שָׂרָף וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ עַל־יָסֵד וְהָיָה כָּל־הַנְּשׁוּךְ וַרְאָה אֹתוֹ וְחָיָה:	Num 21:8	The LORD said to Moses: Make yourself a seraph and set it on a standard, and it will be that all who are bitten will look at it and live.

<p>וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה נָחָשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת וַיִּשְׂמְהוּ עַל־הַמִּצֵּבָה וְהָיָה אִם־נִנְשָׁךְ הַנָּחָשׁ אֶת־אִישׁ הַבָּיִת אֶל־נָחָשׁ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וְחָיָה:</p>	<p><i>Num 21:9</i></p>	<p>And Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a standard, and it was that when a serpent bit a man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.</p>

This text is well-known and much discussed among Christians, ever since Jesus himself used it as an illustration of the salvation brought by his crucifixion.¹⁹⁷

It seems that natural animals are meant when seraph serpents are named here, even though they are sent by the Lord. Many sources including Kissane¹⁹⁸ and Brown¹⁹⁹ speak of the particular region of desert involved as being notorious for the number and deadliness of its snakes. A few sources who favour this interpretation try to explain the adjective “flying” by saying that it refers to the creature’s quick slithering movement over the ground or its speed in striking.²⁰⁰ This seems somewhat laboured, though, and Clements’ explanation is more convincing: “the description has almost certainly been influenced by fantasy and popular mythology. Mesopotamian iconography shows several winged snakes, and we may compare the winged seraphim of 6:2.”²⁰¹ If seraphim had some of the characteristics of snakes, then snakes by association may have taken on in popular belief some of the characteristics of seraphim. Belief in such flying serpents seems to have been widespread: they are also mentioned in Herodotus.²⁰² Another explanation of Clements’ is that the idea may have arisen from the misidentification of some kind of long-tailed bird.²⁰³ Again, this misidentification may have been helped along if the idea of flying serpents, or seraphim, was already a familiar concept to those who saw these hypothetical birds.

Moses’ bronze serpent is an important clue in this investigation, and will be referred to again in 3.2.3 as well as in chapter 5. It is, even in this text, referred to with words other than שָׁרָף. In verse 9 it is called a נָחָשׁ. Later it became known as the Nehushtan, probably a play on the words נָחָשׁ (serpent)

¹⁹⁷ John 3:14-15.

¹⁹⁸ Kissane 1941:335.

¹⁹⁹ Brown 2002:185-186.

²⁰⁰ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):884.

²⁰¹ Clements 1980:149.

²⁰² Herodotus III.109, cited in Brown 2002:185.

²⁰³ Clements 1980:245.

and נְחֹשֶׁת (bronze). It was placed in the sanctuary (according to many sources,²⁰⁴ although as far as the author can find this is never explicitly stated in the Bible), but was destroyed by Hezekiah because the people began to worship it.²⁰⁵ It is quite likely that, given that the people were making offerings to the bronze serpent, it was indeed in the temple. For the purposes of this study it is taken as a possibility (with many backers) that this was indeed the case. At first sight the account of the snakes and the bronze serpent looks very much like an account of sympathetic magic. There is an enormous amount of evidence, especially from Egypt, of snake amulets for curing or turning aside snakebite and even for other healing purposes.²⁰⁶ Brown states that, instead, the bronze serpent should be seen as simply a symbol or a token. As usually happened, later on, the people started to worship the symbol rather than God.²⁰⁷ In the same way as with the ark in 1 Samuel (3.1.4), the symbol became confused with the reality, and this is why it was destroyed by Hezekiah.

3.2.2. “Fiery serpents” in Deuteronomy

המוליכך במדבר הגדל והנורא נחש שרף ועקרב וצמאון אשר אין-מים המוציא לך מים מצור החלמיש:	Dt 8:15	The one who led you through a great and terrible desert (with) seraph serpent and scorpion, a wasteland in which is no water, he who made come out for you water from flint rock.
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In both Numbers 21:6 and Deuteronomy 8:15 the construction נְחָשׁ שֶׁרָף, “seraph serpent”, may be found. In Isaiah 30:6 we find אֲפַעֵה וְשֶׁרָף מְעוֹפֵף, “adder and flying seraph”. These two constructions suggest that שֶׁרָף may not be a generic term for snakes, but rather one particular kind of snake. According to Cooper, the ancient Egyptians distinguished between three types of snake: the cobra, which they called the uraeus; the asp, a type of horned adder; and a large unidentified colubrid.²⁰⁸ (See chapter 5 for illustrations of all three types.) Since the word שֶׁרָף is in Isaiah used together with “adder”, suggesting that they are two different kinds of snakes, and as the large colubrid is more often than not a symbol of evil – the serpent Apep (Apophis), the enemy of the gods, is depicted as this type of snake²⁰⁹ – it appears likely that the particular type of snake identified by the word שֶׁרָף is

²⁰⁴ Clements 1980:74; Zimmerli 1979:98-99; Hayes&Irvine 1987:111; Clements 1980:74 etc.

²⁰⁵ 2 Kgs 18:4.

²⁰⁶ Landy 1999:27.

²⁰⁷ Brown 2002:190.

²⁰⁸ Cooper 2005:5-6.

²⁰⁹ Cooper 2005:6-7.

the cobra or uraeus. Adding to this likelihood is the fact that in Egyptian art the uraeus is the type of snake most often depicted with wings. Keel, in his work *Jahwe-visionen und Siegelkunst*, also identifies the seraph with the uraeus serpent.²¹⁰

Another possible explanation of the construction נִהַשׁ שֶׁרָף is that the word שֶׁרָף is being used simply as an adjective, meaning “fiery” or, by extension, “poisonous” – referring to a possible “burning” effect caused by these serpents’ venom²¹¹. This viewpoint is reflected in some English translations of these texts, for example, the Revised Standard Version. However, the verb שֶׁרָף in the Hebrew Bible is always used to mean literal burning and not for metaphorical matters such as “burning with anger”.²¹²

3.2.3. Seraphim in Isaiah

3.2.3.1 The temple theophany

בְּשָׁנַת־מוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ עֲזִיָּהוּ וַאֲרָאָה אֶת־אֲדֹנָי יְיָ שֹׁבֵב עַל־כִּסֵּא רָם וְנִשְׂא וְשׁוּלְיוֹ מְלֵאִים אֶת־הַהֵיכָל:	Is 6:1	In the year of the death of King Uzziah, I saw my Lord sitting on a throne, high and elevated, and the train of his robe filled the temple.
שֶׁרָפִים עֹמְדִים מִמַּעַל לוֹ שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפַיִם שֵׁשׁ כְּנָפַיִם לְאֶחָד בְּשֵׁתַיִם יִכְסֶּה פָּנָיו וּבְשֵׁתַיִם יִכְסֶּה רַגְלָיו וּבְשֵׁתַיִם יַעֲוִפֶּי:	Is 6:2	Seraphim were stationed above him, six wings six wings for each, with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.
וַקְרָא זֶה אֶל־זֶה וַאֲמַר קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת מְלֵא כָל־הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ:	Is 6:3	And they called one to another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.
וַיִּנְעֻן אֲמוֹת הַסָּפִים מִקּוֹל הַקּוֹרֵא וַהֲבִית יִמְלֵא עָשָׁן:	Is 6:4	The foundations ²¹³ of the sills trembled from the voice of the caller, and the house was filled with smoke.

²¹⁰ Keel 1977:70 ff.

²¹¹ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):884 etc.

²¹² Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980 (2):884.

²¹³ Very dubious translation, everyone has their own. See Brown-Driver-Briggs 2000: 52.

נֶאֱמַר אוֹיְלִי כִי־נִדְמִיתִי כִּי אִישׁ טְמֵא־שִׁפְתַיִם אָנֹכִי וּבְתוֹךְ עַם־טְמֵא־שִׁפְתַיִם אָנֹכִי יוֹשֵׁב כִּי אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוָה צָבָאוֹת רָאוּ עֵינָי:	<i>Is 6:5</i>	And I said: Woe is me! For I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I am a dweller among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the king, the LORD of hosts.
וַיַּעַף אֵלַי אֶחָד מִן־הַשְּׂרָפִים וּבְיָדוֹ רֶצֶףָה בְּמִלְקָחַיִם לָקַח מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ:	Is 6:6	One of the seraphim flew to me, and in its hand was a glowing coal taken from on the altar with tongs.
וַיִּגַע עַל־פִּי נִי אָמַר הִנֵּה נֹגַע זֶה עַל־שִׁפְתֵיךָ וְסֵר עֲוֹנֶךָ וְחִטְּאֵתְךָ תִּכְפֹּר:	<i>Is 6:7</i>	It touched my mouth and said, Behold, this has touched your lips, and your iniquity has turned away and your sin is atoned for.

This vision, like Ezekiel's second vision, is a Temple theophany. While Ezekiel certainly was not physically in the Temple in Jerusalem, it is unclear whether Isaiah was physically in the temple when he had this vision or whether the fact of being in the temple was a part of the vision itself.²¹⁴

Cody draws attention to the similarity in function between the seraph in Isaiah 6:6-7 and the cherubim in Ezekiel 10. Both are associated with burning coals which are capable of destruction, but also of purification.²¹⁵ Lang suggests that the seraphim may be intended as personifications of lightning.²¹⁶ However, whereas Ezekiel's description of the cherubim is immensely detailed, Isaiah's of the seraphim provides surprisingly little information. Holladay says: "We are disappointed when we realize that we really have no idea of how Isaiah visualized them."²¹⁷ The information that is provided is the following:

The seraphim are named. We are told of their position relative to the divine presence – that they are above him. We are told that they have six wings each and how they hold their wings; that they have faces and feet; that they are capable of calling and speaking and using words, that their voices are powerful enough to cause their surroundings to tremble, that they are associated with smoke, and that they have at least one hand, which probably means that they have at least one pair of hands each.

²¹⁴ Herbert 1973:57-58.

²¹⁵ Cody 1984:55.

²¹⁶ Lang 1997:133.

²¹⁷ Holladay 1987:29.

Clements states that “feet” is here a euphemism for sexual parts,²¹⁸ as do Holladay²¹⁹ and Widyapranawa.²²⁰

This is the sum total of the information about seraphim that we are given in this text. Compared with the descriptions of seraphim in various texts, the most obvious lack is that we are not told of parts of what creatures they are composed. One might assume human hands, faces and feet, and eagles’ wings, but what do their bodies look like? Early Christian art depicts both cherubim and seraphim with no bodies at all. This is patently not the case with contemporary depictions: in no ancient Near Eastern art do we find large numbers of disembodied heads flying about. Many scholars identify cherubim with the winged lions and bulls, sphinxes and griffins that are found in much ancient Near Eastern art; could seraphim be identified with another, similarly ubiquitous, composite creature?

The word *šrāp*, as stated in 2.4, has the double meaning of “serpent” and “type of angel”. Or is it really a double meaning? Could it perhaps be a single meaning, the word “serpent” being used to describe a type of angel? It seems rather more logical this way. Many sources state categorically that Isaiah’s seraphim have nothing to do with snakes. Kissane says: “These are represented as like human beings (they have face, voice, hands and feet), but provided with wings. They have nothing in common with serpents except the name”²²¹. Harris, Archer and Waltke disagree strongly with BDB, saying: “They are not ‘originally mythically conceived with serpents’ bodies’ as BDB suggests. There is nothing in the context to suggest serpents’ bodies. Indeed they are said to have feet”²²². A true possibility is that both the snakes and the angels are called *šrāp* for their association with fire: Miscall says that “Seraphim is a play on ‘fiery ones’”,²²³ referring to the angels in Isaiah. Harris, Archer and Waltke say “Rather than the noun being interpreted from the word *šārāp* I ‘serpent’ it should be related to the parent root of both words ‘fire’. These angelic beings were brilliant as flaming fire”.²²⁴ Note, however, that the verb *šrāp* is transitive, and thus a *šrāp* should be a being that burns something else, as opposed to a being that is itself on fire. The action of the seraph in 6:7 may be significant in the light of this derivation. Seraphim may be “those who burn” in the sense of destroying that which is impure. One of their functions may be purification. Also, as stated in 3.2.2,

²¹⁸ Clements 1980:74.

²¹⁹ Holladay 1987:29.

²²⁰ Widyapranawa 1990:31.

²²¹ Kissane 1941:74.

²²² Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):884.

²²³ Miscall 1993:34.

²²⁴ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):884.

some, including Harris, Archer and Waltke,²²⁵ say that the use of the word for serpents refers to their “burning” venom. This explains why in some English translations the word נְּרִיָּן is translated as “poisonous serpent” where it refers to natural beasts.

On the other hand, other sources take the shared name seriously, and claim that seraphim do indeed have something to do with serpents. Clements says:

[T]heir name indicated that they were conceived to be of serpent form (cf. the ‘fiery serpents’ of Num. 21:6; Dt. 8:15), but possessed of three pairs of wings and hands and feet like a man. Such creatures of mixed form were popular in Egyptian royal symbolism, where the winged cobra (*uraeus*) was a widely used symbol for a divine protective spirit guarding the king. It appears prominently both on royal headdresses and as a throne adornment. The seraphim must be regarded, therefore, as guardian deities, or servants, protecting the way to the throne of Yahweh, and comparable to the cherubim, images of which stood in the Jerusalem temple (1 Kg. 6:23-28). These latter certainly had the forms of winged lions. There is no indication that any images of seraphim were set in the *sanctum* of the Jerusalem temple, although a bronze snake had been set there and was removed in Hezekiah’s reign (2 Kg. 18:4). More probably the *uraeus*-serpent form was familiar in Israel in the relief-work adorning thrones²²⁶.

If it were possible to conclude a study based on only one source, this one would end here. Clements’ paragraph on seraphim neatly summarises much of chapter 5 of this study and predicts the conclusion. However, since it is not enough to find only one source that backs up one’s theories, more research is in order. Holladay also mentions the possibility that the seraphim may have been winged serpents.²²⁷ Herbert states that they are depicted as having serpent bodies,²²⁸ however the text does not in fact state this. Rütterswörden in TDOT states that the identification of seraphim with winged serpents has become the consensus, crediting Keel for justifying it with argument and pictorial evidence.²²⁹ De Saignac also argues for a connection between seraphim and the Egyptian *uraeus*.²³⁰ Hayes and Irvine also agree that the seraphim are probably related to the Egyptian iconography of the *uraeus* which adorns the royal headdress and throne, and state that they were the heavenly counterparts of Moses’ bronze serpent which they say was in the temple; they also refer to

²²⁵ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):884.

²²⁶ Clements 1980:74.

²²⁷ Holladay 1987:29.

²²⁸ Herbert 1973:58.

²²⁹ Rütterswörden 2004:224.

²³⁰ de Saignac 1972:320-325.

it a seraph, as it is called in Numbers 21:8.²³¹ Herbert also states that the visionary experience may have been stimulated by the presence of the bronze serpent in the temple.²³²

This leads to an interesting analogy: what would be more logical than if, as has been proposed, the real cherubim (of Ezekiel's vision) were seen as the heavenly counterparts of the golden cherubim above the ark, then the real seraphim were the heavenly counterparts of the bronze seraph, also in the sanctuary? Two types of creature represented in the sanctuary, and two classes of heavenly being surrounding the throne of God, cherubim below and seraphim above. The bronze serpent was still in existence at this time (as Hezekiah who destroyed it was the son of Ahaz who was the grandson of Uzziah whose death introduces this passage), whether or not it was actually in the sanctuary. So it is possible that Isaiah's vision in this text relates to the nehushtan as Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim relates to the ark cherubim.

Widyapranawa has a different idea: he believes that the original seraphim may have been pagan images that Uzziah had been forced or coerced by Assyria into setting up in the temple courts. He calls them "effig[ies] of a foreign god, something like the Sphinx that can be seen today in Egypt", and "ugly monstrosities".²³³ He does not mention any connection with serpents, but says that in later times, seraphim were considered to be fire-spirits and cherubim air-spirits.²³⁴ This certainly agrees with the cherubim's association with storm, clouds and wind.

One more piece of information may be useful: the position of the seraphim relative to the divine presence. Rütterswörden, referring to Keel's argument in favour of identifying the seraphim with the Egyptian uraeus, states that Keel's main argument was that the seraphim's position above God "would be inconceivable if the seraphim had human shapes. Beings with human shape above a god or king are not attested iconographically and doubtless contradicted etiquette."²³⁵ Keel takes this as an argument in favour of the seraphim's having had the form of serpents rather than human bodies. In fact this is not anything like the whole of Keel's argument, as he has many other points and backs everything up with reference to iconography.²³⁶ However, it is an interesting point.

²³¹ Hayes & Irvine 1987:111.

²³² Herbert 1973:58.

²³³ Widyapranawa 1990:31.

²³⁴ Widyapranawa 1990:31.

²³⁵ Rütterswörden 2004:224.

²³⁶ Keel 1977:70-115.

3.2.3.2 “Fiery serpents” in Isaiah

אֶל־תִּשְׂמְחִי פְּלִשְׁתַּ כְּלָךְ כִּי נִשְׁבַּר יִשְׁבֵּט מִכָּךְ כִּי־מִשׁ רֶשׁ נִחַשׁ יֵצֵא צָפַע וּפְרִיָו שָׂרָף מְעוֹפֵף:	Is 14:29	Do not rejoice, Philistia, all of you, because the stick that smote you is broken, because from the serpent's root will come out a viper, and its fruit will be a flying seraph.
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The connotations of the word שָׂרָף in this text are both positive and negative. The negative connotations are obvious: these serpents are dangerous, deadly animals. However, in this case, the deadly animals are in this text attacking Israel’s enemies, which makes them the heroes of the story.

Hayes and Irvine say that the metaphor may play on the fact that some staves may have been carved in the form of snakes.²³⁷ In the same vein, it could also be a play on the staves that turn into snakes and back in Exodus.²³⁸

Various interpretations of who the symbols refer to have been made – the different serpents may refer to the Israelite kings Ahaz and Hezekiah and eventually to the Messiah, or to Assyrian kings, or, as Kissane as well as Landy prefer, all the terms may refer to the kingdom of Judah, where the viper or seraph is the kingdom restored in the Messianic age.²³⁹ Widyapranawa, once again, has a different view: he does consider the viper and the seraph to be symbolic of Assyrian kings, but he views them in a purely negative light. He says “These symbols denote the terrible demonic power that dominates the whole earth, applicable at the moment to Assyria....In the apocalyptic passages the flying serpent is called Leviathan, while the sea dragon reigns over chaos.”²⁴⁰ Leviathan and the chaos dragon are certainly true and legitimate examples of serpent/dragon symbolism, but in his determination to associate every single example of serpent symbolism with evil, Widyapranawa reads the text in a very different way from most commentators. Instead of being a positive prophecy, of punishment of Judah’s enemies and even of the resurgence of the kingdom of Judah in the Messianic age, it becomes a completely negative prophecy, to the point that Widyapranawa sees Judah as being included with Philistia: “*Philistia and Judah* are summoned not to rejoice too early, assuming that the rod which has smitten them has been broken”²⁴¹ (italics my own). This

²³⁷ Hayes & Irvine 1987:237.

²³⁸ Exodus 4:1-5; 7:8-13. Landy 1999:16.

²³⁹ Kissane 1941:178-179; Landy 1999:16.

²⁴⁰ Widyapranawa 1990:92.

²⁴¹ Widyapranawa 1990:92.

fundamental discrepancy in interpretation is caused by the author's view that the symbol of the serpent must always signify evil.

מִשָּׂא בְהֵמוֹת נֶגֶב בְּאֶרֶץ צָרָה וְצוּקָה לְבִיא וְלִישׁ מִהֶם אֲפַעָה וְשָׂרָף מְעוֹפֵף יִשְׂאוּ עַל־כַּתְּפֵיהֶם עֵרִים חִלְהֵם וְעַל־דִּבְבֵּשֶׁת גִּמְלִים אוֹצֵר תָּם עַל־עַם ל' א יוֹעִילוּ:	Is 30:6	Burden of the animals of the Negev: In a land of straits and distress, of lioness and lion from them, ²⁴² of adder and flying seraph, they carry their wealth on the backs of donkeys, and their treasures on the humps of camels, to a people who do not benefit them.
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The term “burden” could either mean “oracle”, as it often does, or else refer to the literal burdens on the backs of the donkeys and camels mentioned in the text. Opinions vary from source to source, and here it is translated as “burden” in order to keep both options of interpretation open: the controversy will not be joined here as it does not affect the matter at hand.

Kissane says that the fact that the flying seraph is mentioned here indicates that the desert intended is that traversed by the Israelites in the Exodus.²⁴³ The intention here seems to be simply an example of a dangerous wild animal, with perhaps the secondary function of identifying the desert as that of the Exodus. Again, natural animals are almost certainly intended (see the discussion of the Numbers text); however, Widyapranawa again differs, saying “The ‘flying serpent’ was a mythological animal denoting evil and demonic power threatening human life”.²⁴⁴ This text is similar to Deuteronomy 8:15, in that in both texts שָׂרָפִים are used to characterise the desert. Landy says that in Isaiah 30:6, “the seraph connotes the desert between Judah and Egypt, the empty interim that infuses all political and linguistic structure.”²⁴⁵ Landy makes the desert into a metaphorical as well as a geographical space.

²⁴² some say *roaring* or *growling* (Landy 1999:23).

²⁴³ Kissane 1941:335.

²⁴⁴ Widyapranawa 1990:185.

²⁴⁵ Landy 1999:16.

3.3. Analysis of the contexts in which cherubim and seraphim are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible

3.3.1. Cherubim

There are two ways of dividing the texts in which cherubim are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, and both are problematic in that whichever criterion is used for the initial division, the other possible division cuts right across the categories thus formed. The two different ways of dividing the texts into two major groups are the following:

- 1) Real cherubim versus representations.
- 2) Function: cherubim as God's throne or transport versus cherubim as guardians of sacred vegetation.²⁴⁶

If one takes option 1), then cherubim as decorative motifs may be further divided into flat or relief representation and carvings/sculptures in the round – fully three-dimensional representations as opposed to relief. Flat or relief representations are purely decorative, possibly with a symbolic protective function. Carvings/sculptures in the round are the temple cherubim and the ark cherubim, which represent God's throne.

Real cherubim are seen as guardians or gatekeepers (Genesis and Ezekiel 28), flying creatures ridden by God as one rides a horse (Psalm 18:11 / 2 Sam 22:11), and in one case executors of God's judgement (Ezekiel 28), a role more usually reserved for מְלֹאכֵיִם. They are also the throne of God, and as such are connected with the temple and ark cherubim, as earthly symbols corresponding to a heavenly reality.

One major subgroup of texts where cherubim are God's throne consists of those where יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִּים is used as a divine epithet. This is a difficult phrase to translate and contains no preposition; the most literal translation would be “sitter of the cherubim”. It is usually translated as “he who is seated above the cherubim”, or occasionally “on the cherubim”. These texts are difficult to place in division option 1), as it is a matter of the interpretation of each individual text whether the cherubim referred to are the real heavenly cherubim or the representations on the ark.

²⁴⁶ Freedman & O'Connor 1995:310.

If one takes option 2), then the divine epithet texts are no longer problematic: they fall into the category of God's throne or transport, along with the three-dimensional ark and temple cherubim, the cherubim of Ezekiel's vision, and those of Psalm 18:11 / 2 Sam 22:11. The cherubim of Genesis fall into the category of guardians of divine vegetation, along with all the flat or relief depictions, and the cherub in the dirge for the king of Tyre²⁴⁷ – even though no tree is mentioned, the “mountain of God” certainly places this text in an Eden-like context. Of course, the functions do overlap at times: for instance, the ark cherubim forming the throne of God in the temple have the secondary function of guarding the covenant documents.

3.3.2. Seraphim

The major division of Biblical texts where seraphim are mentioned is between Isaiah 6 and all the others. Isaiah 6 is the only text where it is certain that heavenly beings are intended when the word is used; all the other texts refer to more or less natural animals, albeit sharing some characteristics (such as flying and fire) with these heavenly beings. Some sources propose a complete separation between the two senses of the word,²⁴⁸ but others disagree strongly.²⁴⁹ There is no textual reason to insist on such a distinction.

Isaiah 6 is a Temple theophany very similar to Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim. Regarding the other four texts, in two of them (Dt 8:15 and Is 30:6) the serpents are mentioned mainly to demonstrate the danger and difficulty of traversing desert terrain. In Isaiah 14:29, the seraph serpent, along with other words for snakes, is used as an example of a dangerous beast in a metaphorical prophecy against Philistia. In Numbers, the seraphim are the central point of a narrative; once again they are dangerous beasts, part of the perils of a journey through the desert, but another aspect is added – that of the bronze serpent, which may quite possibly lead directly to the seraphim of Isaiah's vision.

3.4. The main attributes of cherubim and seraphim, as discovered in the texts

3.4.1. Cherubim

Appearance:

Four wings (Ezekiel).

²⁴⁷ Freedman & O'Connor 1995:313.

²⁴⁸ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):884.

²⁴⁹ Mettinger 1999:743.

Two wings (1 Kings).

Four faces: Human, lion, eagle, ox (Ezekiel).

Two faces: Human, lion (Ezekiel).

Four hands under the wings (Ezekiel).

Upright human form.

Full of eyes (This could more properly refer to the ophanim).

Function:

guardians (Genesis; Ezekiel; possibly 1 Kings).

bearers of God's throne (Exodus; 1 Kings) or chariot-throne (Ezekiel).

bearers of God, presumably ridden like a horse.

carrying out God's commands (Ezekiel 28).

Function of wings: covering (related to role as guardians).

Function of wings: flying (related to role as transport).

In the Ancient Near East, the lion was a symbol of godhood and royalty,²⁵⁰ majesty,²⁵¹ strength and courage,²⁵² but also of danger.²⁵³

Aspect of storm cloud.

Aspect of storm wind.

Associated with storm theophany and chariot theophany.

Associated with sacred vegetation.²⁵⁴

3.4.2. Seraphim

(heavenly beings)

Appearance:

Six wings.

Faces.

Feet (genitals?)

Hand(s).

²⁵⁰ Prinsloo 1999:342.

²⁵¹ Prinsloo 1999:343.

²⁵² Prinsloo 1999:346.

²⁵³ Prinsloo 1999:344.

²⁵⁴ Freedman & O'Connor 1995:310.

Function:

Associated by definition with fire.

Function of wings: flying (one pair).

Function of wings: covering (two pairs, but covering only themselves).

Praise.

Carrying out God's commands.

Purification.

Associated with temple theophany.

(more or less natural animals)

Associated with fire.

Flying.

Dangerous.

Associated with desert terrain.

3.4.3. Shared characteristics

Both cherubim and seraphim are part human and part animal. However, while cherubim have aspects of the ox, lion, eagle and man, the only definite animal characteristic of the seraphim is the wings, presumably those of an eagle. Isaiah does not even explicitly state that the seraphim had *human* characteristics, although a hand, in which the seraph holds the burning coal, is by definition peculiarly human. Otherwise he simply speaks of “faces” and “feet”, leaving one to assume that in the absence of other evidence they were probably human faces and feet.

Both cherubim and seraphim have wings and fly.

Function of the wings: while the main function of wings is to fly, and both cherubim and seraphim do so, there is a strong tendency in the texts on cherubim to note that their wings are used to *cover* (כָּסוּ), a word with connotations of both protection and separation. Isaiah's seraphim, too, use two pairs of their wings to cover.

Both cherubim and seraphim, then, are winged, composite creatures in the service of God.

3.4.4. Differences

Given the basic similarity, mentioned by many authorities, between the texts in which Ezekiel describes his vision of cherubim and Isaiah describes his of seraphim, it is surprising to look closely at the texts and to note how many differences there are between the two types of beings. This is all the more noteworthy given the fact that the Isaiah text really contains very little description of the beings; but almost every detail he gives differs from Ezekiel's cherubim. The differences are the following:

- Number of wings: where mentioned, cherubim have four or two, and seraphim six.
- Position: Cherubim are always beneath God. Isaiah's seraphim are stationed above God.
- Function: Cherubim are usually seen as God's throne or method of transportation, also having a guarding or protective function. The seraphim, on the other hand, seem to form a guard of honour whose main function is to sing praise.
- Voice: While Ezekiel's cherubim have a voice like "many waters", it does not seem to form words but rather to be an undifferentiated rushing or roaring sound. The seraphim, in contrast, are extremely articulate, singing a song of which the words are recorded and speaking directly to Isaiah.
- Covering function of wings: while both cherubim and seraphim use their wings to cover, seraphim cover only themselves, while cherubim also cover things or people in order to guard them. The words used, too, are different, although similar in sound.
- Elemental associations: Seraphim are associated with fire, while cherubim are associated with storm cloud and wind. Ezekiel's cherubim are also associated with fire, which may be either an extension of the usual storm imagery by the inclusion of lightning and thus fire, or else a borrowing from Isaiah's vision of the cherubim. This latter explanation seems probable because of the very similar actions of the cherub and the seraph in taking out burning coals and giving them to someone else: the angel, in the case of Ezekiel's cherub, or Isaiah himself, in the case of the seraph.

The similarity of the descriptions in Isaiah and Ezekiel, with the lack of detail in Isaiah, could lead one to fill in the gaps of the description of seraphim with details gleaned from Ezekiel's cherubim, leading to the conclusion that cherubim and seraphim are basically the same things. Many sources do in fact make little or no distinction between the two types of beings. Harris, Archer and Waltke assert

that the seraphim were cherubim with a brilliant appearance.²⁵⁵ However, there is one very important reason to believe that they are not identical with each other, and that is the simple fact that they have different names. The fact that two different words with different roots and totally different sets of connotations are used, leads to the conclusion that two different types of beings are intended. If not, why not explicitly identify them with each other, as Ezekiel did with his *chayyot* and cherubim? It seems certain that the people of the Ancient Near East had an idea of something that they called “cherub” and another idea of something that they called “seraph”. The two ideas may have been similar, but surely not identical, for if they were identical, why would they need to have two different words? And why would the word for a seraph be the same as the word for a fiery serpent if seraphim had nothing to do with fiery serpents? It is as if, in English, we were to propose a class of angel called “cats” and then assert that they had nothing at all in common with the animals known as “cats”. Why, then, call them by that name?

If the cherubim and the seraphim are both winged composite creatures in the service of God, the differences between them lie in the number of wings (six as opposed to four or two), the type of service (guard of honour, praise, and possible purifying function, as opposed to guardians, throne and transport), and the types of creatures of which they are composed. This last is the sticking point. If cherubim are composed of parts of man, lion, bull and eagle, what comprises a seraph? Might a seraph be a winged composite creature with serpent elements? Freedman and O’Connor surmise that they may be: “if etymology is a reliable clue to meaning, the *š̄rāpîm* resemble dragons or serpents. The two words would then be categorized as follows: *k̄rûḥîm* denotes beings that resemble birds, bipeds and quadrupeds; *š̄rāpîm* denotes beings resembling serpents.”²⁵⁶

3.5. Referring to cherubim and seraphim as angels

One of the more confusing problems involved in talking about cherubim and seraphim today is that at some stage someone will ask you “Do you mean angels?” In Hebrew this would not be a problem: the Hebrew word usually translated as “angels” is of course “מַלְאָכִים” (messengers). This word does not differentiate between human and divine messengers.²⁵⁷ Cherubim and seraphim are definitely not מַלְאָכִים; they are something entirely different. Meier says:

²⁵⁵ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):884.

²⁵⁶ Freedman & O’Connor 1995:318.

²⁵⁷ Meier 1999:47.

“The translation of mal’āk by ‘angel’ in English Bibles obscures the ancient Israelite perception of the divine realm. Where English ‘angel’ is the undifferentiating term for all of God’s supernatural assistants, mal’āk originally could be applied only to those assistants whom God dispatched on missions as messengers. Thus, an early Israelite from the period of the monarchy would probably not have identified the theriomorphic cherubim and seraphim as mal’ākîm ‘messengers’”.²⁵⁸

Eichrodt notes that the cherubim have wings, a feature entirely missing in Old Testament מְלָאכִים.²⁵⁹ Sakenfeld says “OT cherubim are composite animals with wings; they are not the winged human infants of later Christian art, nor are they angels, which in the OT are depicted as adult male figures without wings.”²⁶⁰ However, if we define an angel in the English sense, as any sort of supernatural being serving God, then cherubim and seraphim should really be included. Lang says “The cherubim of Genesis and Exodus have come to be considered as angel figures, part of God’s spirit creation of threshold beings”.²⁶¹ They are neither people nor purely natural animals, and they certainly serve God, so they must fall into the broad category of “angels” in English,²⁶² and have even contributed to the concept that Westerners have of this category (the wings are the most obvious example). Both cherubim²⁶³ and seraphim²⁶⁴ are liminal beings, which is an important attribute of angels.²⁶⁵ Watts, in the Word Biblical Commentary on Isaiah, does not make a very strong distinction between “messengers”, “spirits”, “sons of God”, “cherubs” and “seraphs” – he refers to them all as part of the heavenly host, or angels.²⁶⁶ However, it must not be forgotten that the category of “angels” is one that did not exist in the cultural context in which the texts being studied were written.

²⁵⁸ Meier 1999:47.

²⁵⁹ Eichrodt 1970:57.

²⁶⁰ Sakenfeld 1995:48.

²⁶¹ Lang 1997:36.

²⁶² Few sources argue with this in principle; one that does is Smith’s *The doctrine of the cherubim* (1850), which asserts at length that cherubim are in fact not angels of any kind, but rather purely symbols of the faithful, or the Universal Church.

²⁶³ Cook 2004:197.

²⁶⁴ Landy 1999:17.

²⁶⁵ Meier 1999:46.

²⁶⁶ Watts 1985:74.

Chapter 4

Iconographic study: introduction and a study of cherubim

4.1. Introduction

Iconography is, in the words of Erwin Panofsky, “that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form.”²⁶⁷ It is the study of secondary or conventional subject matter – the ways in which things are depicted. According to Cornelius, it is a research field on its own, which does not depend on written texts for interpretation.²⁶⁸ Cornelius states that iconographic sources “should first be subjected to a full analysis, using *iconographic* criteria”, before attempting to interpret them in the light of written texts.²⁶⁹ However, according to Panofsky, knowledge of literary sources is essential equipment for an iconographical analysis.²⁷⁰ This study will not attempt at all to interpret images in terms of written texts, but rather to study the texts in terms of the images. Naturally, however, one first needs a working definition of a “cherub” or a “seraph” as derived from the texts in order to select images to look at. It is hoped that iconographic purists will not be too offended by the mixing of disciplines that goes on in this study.

4.2. Defining the scope of the iconographic study

From the Biblical texts discussed in the previous two chapters, we can see that the Ancient Israelites definitely had a visual conception of the heavenly beings they called cherubim, to the extent that they used them as decorative motifs on their cult objects.²⁷¹ It is probable that they likewise had a visual conception of what they called seraphim. The challenge to the modern scholar is to reconstruct what these visual conceptions may have been.

We have the best likelihood of finding this information in art and artefacts contemporary with the text. Stander highlights the importance of studying artworks from the ancient world in order to help us in our understanding of ancient texts: “*Ons darf nie die kunswerke van die antieke wêreld*

²⁶⁷ Panofsky 1982:26.

²⁶⁸ Cornelius 1994:18.

²⁶⁹ Cornelius 1994:13.

²⁷⁰ Panofsky 1982:40-41.

²⁷¹ Ex 25:18 et al.

verwaarloos nie, omdat dit ook 'n waardevolle bydrae kan lewer tot ons verstaan van daardie wêreld en van die tekste wat in daardie tydvak ontstaan het."²⁷²

The researcher must apply strict criteria to the selection of such iconographic evidence. It would not be acceptable, for example, to try to interpret a text in the light of artworks produced many centuries later and in a completely different culture. Such artworks will have been produced on the basis of the text, by people who had no more connection with its authors than does the modern scholar. Less, in fact, as since the development of archaeology as a science, we have a much better knowledge of ancient cultures than the cultures of intervening times had, despite the fact that they were chronologically closer.²⁷³

A study comparing texts and artworks from cultures and times such that no cultural exchange or special insight would have been possible may be interesting, but would have no real academic value (in the field of ancient history, that is; such a study may possibly have value in other disciplines, such as psychology, where the repetition of motifs over cultures that can have had no possibility of contact may be useful in determining universal forms and archetypes).²⁷⁴

That much is obvious, but where does one draw the line? The ideal would be to study iconography originating from the same culture as the texts, that is, Ancient Israel. However, this is impossible in this case, due to lack of evidence. Roth says that "The conception of Jewish art may appear to some a contradiction in terms",²⁷⁵ because of the prohibitions in Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 4: 16-18. And we possess very few artefacts ascribable to the ancient Israelites compared to the relatively large amounts of material produced by their neighbours, including the original Canaanite inhabitants of the Holy Land.²⁷⁶ Artefacts that are in fact ascribable to the ancient Israelites, of which seals are of the utmost importance, will be given prominence and studied wherever possible.

However, it is questionable whether these verses in Exodus and Deuteronomy were ever intended as an outright prohibition of the representation of animals or people,²⁷⁷ as can be seen with the most basic examination of their context: when Exodus 20:3 and 5, and Deuteronomy 4:15 and 19, are

²⁷² Stander 1998: 383.

²⁷³ Reader's Digest 1974: Front flap; 10-11; 15-18.

²⁷⁴ Ellenberger 1970:670-671; Jung 1976:4; Wilson 1994:86.

²⁷⁵ Roth 1961: 17.

²⁷⁶ Isserlin in Roth 1961: 75-77.

²⁷⁷ Roth 1961: 17; de Vaux 1978:465.

taken into account, it can be seen that the prohibition was in all likelihood only on representation for the purpose of worshipping the images so produced. De Vaux says that the prohibition did not apply to the representations of cherubim in the temple and sanctuary because they were symbolic figures guarding and supporting the throne of the invisible God.²⁷⁸ In any case, it is certain that the commandment was not always interpreted as a prohibition of all representation,²⁷⁹ as can be seen even in the book of Exodus itself where, within six chapters of the prohibition in Exodus 20, detailed instructions are given for decorating the tabernacle and the ark with (usefully for the purposes of this study) cherubim, respectively woven and carved.²⁸⁰

Exactly what types of representation were deemed allowable varied over time and from community to community.²⁸¹ The end result, though, is that we have relatively few examples of Jewish art to work with. However, an enormous amount of material has been produced by the surrounding cultures, and so for the purposes of this study we will look at art from these cultures as well. For example, archaeologists have not found any objects from ancient Israel comparable with those described in the Exodus texts noted above. We do, however, possess artefacts produced by surrounding cultures that correspond very closely with the descriptions in some of the texts studied in Chapter 2.

How does one ensure that any iconographic sources to be used are in fact pertinent to the investigation? The essential factor is the possibility of cultural exchange. In other words, the artefact, or artefacts like it, must have had some effect or influence on the author of the text, or both the artefact and the text must have their roots in a common culture. For the purposes of this study, iconographic sources will be limited to artefacts either produced or excavated in the Near East – that is, Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine and Egypt. Cyprus is also included.

The use of artefacts from the cultures named above is allowable because although these cultures were certainly not identical with that of the ancient Israelites, a good deal of cultural exchange did take place among all the peoples of the ancient Near East. In the matter of artistic conventions, symbols and style, all these cultures have much more in common with each other than any of them could possibly have in common with Western culture today. Isserlin explains how the very first

²⁷⁸ de Vaux 1978:465.

²⁷⁹ Roth 1961: 17-18.

²⁸⁰ Exodus 25: 19-20; Exodus 26: 31.

²⁸¹ Roth 1961: 18.

Israelites of the nomadic period before the settlement in Canaan may have been influenced in the use of the cherub motif by the art of their settled neighbours in Canaan and Egypt:

Cherubs (by which may be intended sphinxes, or kindred fabulous beasts) go back to types well known in the decorative arts of Syria and Egypt during the second half of the second millennium B.C.E. That the carpet weavings of a nomad population may closely follow the decorative motifs in use among their settled neighbours has recently been demonstrated by the findings of carpets executed among the nomads of ancient Northern Asia which are clearly derived from the art of ancient Persia. There would thus be no *prima facie* objection to the occurrence of the cherub motif, as developed in ancient Egypt, among the nomad Israelites sojourning in the deserts bordering on those two countries.²⁸²

He also states later in the article:

“The cherub, found in Solomon’s Temple and elsewhere, is not by derivation or distribution especially Israelite.”²⁸³

Dalley says that the idea of the *merkabah* or throne-chariot as well as cherubim and seraphim have counterparts in the Babylonian cult and myth.²⁸⁴ The influence of the Babylonians would have occurred later than the Egyptian connection mentioned above – notably during the exile, as seen in Ezekiel.

More evidence of cultural exchange among all the peoples of the Ancient Near East is provided by stone seals found in Israel and Judah, and bearing Hebrew names as well as decorative motifs. The names bear witness to the seals’ Hebrew origin, while the range of motifs and artistic styles testifies to the wide range of cultures that influenced the art of the ancient Hebrews. A well-known seal bearing the name “Shema the Servant of Jeroboam” forms part of a whole class of seals that, especially in the details of the depiction of lions, can be traced back to a style developed in North Syria in the late second millennium B.C.E., and which is itself derived from a Babylonian forerunner.²⁸⁵

²⁸² Isserlin in Roth 1961: 77.

²⁸³ Isserlin in Roth 1961: 114.

²⁸⁴ Dalley 1998:43.

²⁸⁵ Isserlin in Roth 1961: 106.



Figure 8

Albright 1963:136 (Figure 42).

The seal of Shema, servant of Jeroboam II (c. 775 BC)²⁸⁶

Other seals of the same period display Phoenician, Egyptian (possibly via the Phoenician)²⁸⁷ and Mesopotamian influences.²⁸⁸ Cornelius (among others, including, of course, Keel) places great importance on the study of art in miniature, such as seals, because they occur in great numbers, over a long period and in a large region, and they are very varied. Also, many of them come from Palestine / Israel.²⁸⁹

More than a possibility – the certainty of cultural exchange and of the influence on ancient Israelite art of the surrounding cultures has been proved. Thus we know that observations made studying the art of the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Canaanites, Syrians and Mesopotamians, over a very long period from at least the second half of the second millennium BC until the time of the Babylonian Exile or later, will indeed be relevant to our study of the Hebrew words כְּרִיב and שְׂרָף as used in the Hebrew Bible. For simplicity's sake the time period allowable will be taken to be any date before the beginning of the New Testament period.

This study does not pretend to be a detailed and comprehensive survey of the depictions of cherubim and seraphim found in various cultures. Nor is it arranged in chronological order or according to the artefacts' cultures of origin. Instead, it is merely a collection of examples meant to demonstrate that depictions of creatures that may be described as cherubim and seraphim were widespread in the Ancient Near East, and to examine some of the features of such depictions.

²⁸⁶ Albright 1963:136.

²⁸⁷ Isserlin in Roth 1961: 107.

²⁸⁸ Isserlin in Roth 1961: 107.

²⁸⁹ Cornelius 1994:10-11.

4.3. Iconographic study of cherubim

Despite the wealth of Biblical descriptions of the use of cherubim as decorative motifs among the ancient Israelites, we do not possess any of the objects described. Thus we cannot be absolutely sure of exactly what the Israelite depictions looked like. Wischnitzer-Bernstein, to be sure, tells us that there were in fact cherubim in Herod's temple, and that they were set up by the Romans as a trophy on the city gate of Antioch after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D.²⁹⁰ However, Josephus, who lived at this time,²⁹¹ said that "nobody can tell, or even conjecture, what was the shape of these cherubims"²⁹² (referring to those in Solomon's temple; however, one would suppose that had there been cherubim in the temple in Josephus' own time, he would have assumed that the cherubim of the earlier temple would have looked more or less the same). On the face of it, then, it seems somewhat unlikely that there were cherubim in the temple at this late stage.

Faced with the lack of contemporary Israelite depictions of cherubim, we will turn to the depictions produced by the surrounding cultures.

It is currently accepted that the word cherub refers to a hybrid being, composed of parts of various animals, but Houtman believes it likely that it does not refer to a particular form but is a general term for such composite beings.²⁹³ If this were strictly the case, it would seem that seraphim should also fall into the category of "cherub", seeing as they too are composite beings. In fact, almost any imaginary creature from a cockatrice to a mermaid could then be referred to as a "cherub". A word with too broad a definition loses its usefulness, so perhaps it would be better to narrow the definition down a little with the help of the texts and the iconographical representations widely accepted as depicting cherubim, and say that a cherub is a winged composite being made up of aspects of two or more of the following: man, eagle, ox or bull, and lion. Borowski considers a composite creature to be a proper cherub only if it includes elements from all four creatures mentioned in Ezekiel: man, bull, lion and eagle.²⁹⁴ Many other sources are not so exacting, also allowing composite creatures including only two or three, such as winged bulls and sphinxes.

²⁹⁰ Wischnitzer-Bernstein in Roth 1961: 191.

²⁹¹ Whiston 1991: ix.

²⁹² Antiquities 8: 73 in Whiston 1991: 217.

²⁹³ Houtman 2000: 383.

²⁹⁴ Borowski 1995:40.

Several scholars have identified particular Mesopotamian artefacts as depicting cherubim. Layard, the excavator of ancient Nineveh,²⁹⁵ noted the resemblance between the figures he found there and those described by Ezekiel,²⁹⁶ particularly in the use of aspects of man, lion, bull and eagle.²⁹⁷ In fact, as noted in 3.1.5, the cherubim described in 1 Kings are likely to have resembled these Babylonian figures much more closely than Ezekiel's cherubim do. Some others to have noted the resemblance between Biblical descriptions of cherubim and certain Mesopotamian artefacts are F. Vigouroux, R. Dussaud, H. Gressmann, L. Durr,²⁹⁸ A. Jeremias, A. Parrot, and O. Keel.²⁹⁹ Clements states that the Temple cherubim "certainly had the forms of winged lions".³⁰⁰ In all, the identification of cherubim with winged bulls, winged lions, or some composite creature with characteristics of either or both, is widely accepted. Freedman and O'Connor in TDOT, while agreeing for the most part with this line of thinking, make the point that it can only ever be a theory while we have no original Israelite representations of cherubim.³⁰¹

4.3.1 Cherubim sculpted in the round

When three-dimensional sculptures of cherubim are found, they are often in a context (positioned at gateposts, for example) where they are best understood as having a guarding function. This aligns these depictions with the cherubim of Genesis and the "covering cherub" of Ezekiel 28. Some of the earliest artefacts to be identified with the Biblical cherubim fall into this category, in the form of the winged bulls of Nineveh, the similarities between which and Ezekiel's cherubim were noted by Layard.³⁰²

²⁹⁵ Bodi 1991:42.

²⁹⁶ Layard 1849:464.

²⁹⁷ Layard 1849:465.

²⁹⁸ Bodi 1991:43.

²⁹⁹ Bodi 1991:44.

³⁰⁰ Clements 1980:74.

³⁰¹ Freedman & O'Connor 1995:315.

³⁰² Layard 1849:464-465.

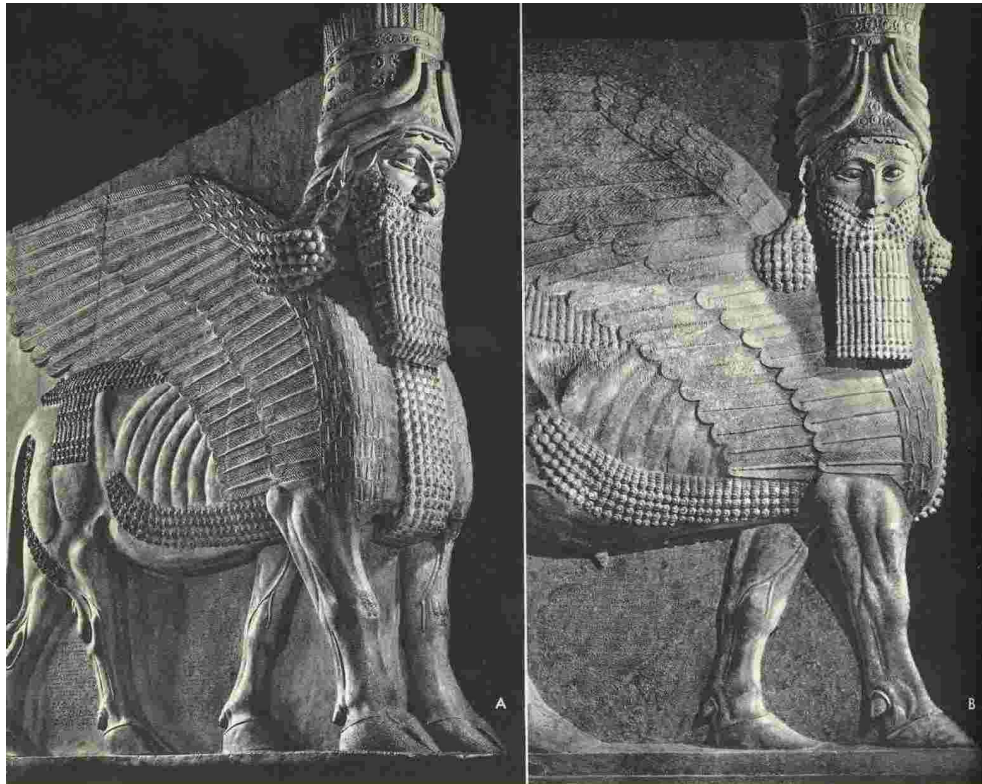


Figure 9

Parrot 1961:30 (Figure 34).

Winged human-headed bulls, 8th century, from Khorsabad, Assyria. The one on the left is in the Louvre, and the one on the right, in the Oriental Institute in Chicago.³⁰³

These monumental figures are gate guardians, and are very similar to those Layard saw at Nineveh. Parrot notes that, but does not attempt to explain why, the sculptors sometimes gave figures of this sort extra legs.³⁰⁴ It is probable that this is not an iconographic phenomenon at all but rather a technical one: the result of applying the rules of relief carving to sculpture in the round. The figures look right from the front, and from the side, but not from a three-quarters view. Basically they are huge blocks of stone with deep relief carving on three sides – not fully three-dimensional figures. This is a fascinating technical point regarding the development of fully three-dimensional sculpture. This problem or stylistic feature only seems to occur on a very large scale: small figurines are fully three-dimensional from an early stage.

³⁰³ Parrot 1961:30.

³⁰⁴ Parrot 1961:30.



Figure 10

Vieyra 1955: plate 75.

Late Hittite column base from a throne room in Sinjirli, north Syria. Istanbul Museum.³⁰⁵

These sphinxes are also guardian figures. Their function was to support one of the wooden columns in the portico of a north Syrian *bit hilani* or throne room.

4.3.2 Cherubim in relief sculpture or flat depictions

4.3.2.1 General



Figure 11

Borowski 1995:36.

Ivory plaque, 5 x 6 inches. Late 9th century. Probably from Arslan Tash in Syria, this piece is now in the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ Vieyra 1955:77.

Borowski conjectures that this creature’s hindquarters are those of a bull because the space allowed for the tail, now broken off, is sufficient for a bull’s tail but not a lion’s – the tail-like object above the creature’s rump being in fact a lotus flower. He goes to this trouble because of his belief, described earlier, that only composite creatures incorporating aspects of all four of eagle, ox, man and lion count as cherubim. The author of this study thinks it is quite possible that the tail is a lion’s, the “lotus flower” being the tuft of the tail, but that the creature could still be a cherub because a less exacting definition is proposed.



Figure 12

Collon 1990:35 (Figure 21).

Lapis lazuli; 12.5 x 3.2 cm. Berlin, Pergamonmuseum.

This seal is Neo-Babylonian and dates from the first millennium BC. It was excavated in Babylon. It portrays the god Hadad.³⁰⁷

Collon says, “The storm-god Adad is shown with a lion-griffin on a leash”.³⁰⁸ A lion-griffin is a composite creature with the head and wings of an eagle with the body of a lion. Both of these

³⁰⁶ Borowski 1995:36.

³⁰⁷ Collon 1990:35.

animals are component creatures of Ezekiel's cherubim. It is sometimes difficult to tell the difference in these depictions between the head of a lion and that of an eagle.

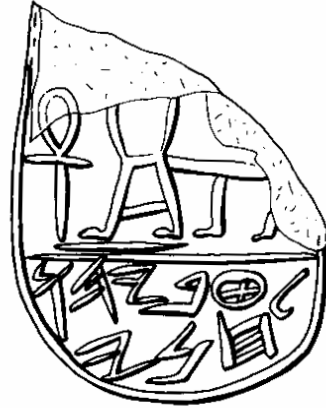


Figure 13

Deutsch 1999:114 (Figure 46).

Composite from two fragmentary bullae impressed with the same seal. Both brown clay, 15.0 x 9.3 mm; 13.0 x 6.1 mm. Weak imprint of papyrus texture and cord grooves visible on the back of both bullae. The Hebrew inscription reads:

לטביהו

חני

“belonging to Ṭobiyahu son of Ḥanni”.

This fragmentary sphinx is included here because it comes from Judah in the time of Hezekiah. See 5.2 for more seals from the same collection, depicting winged serpents. The sphinx is facing an ankh, which is a certain indicator of Egyptian influence, but the style of the carving is not very Egyptian, having more in common with the Mesopotamian style. Note the skirt over the front legs; this is depicted in greater detail in figure 11.

³⁰⁸ Collon 1990:35.



Figure 14

Vieyra 1955: plate 44.

Hittite relief from Carchemish, probably early period. Ankara Museum.³⁰⁹

This winged sphinx, a detail from the Herald's Wall in Carchemish,³¹⁰ is unusual in having two heads, lion and human, like the cherubim in Ezekiel 14. However, in this case both of the heads face the same way.

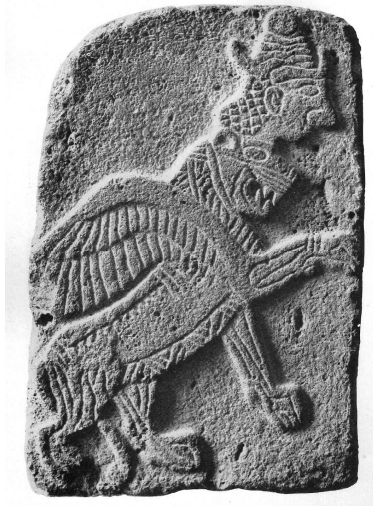


Figure 15

Champdor 1964: plate 133

Relief from Tell Halaf, about 900 BC. Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin.³¹¹

Another, similar Hittite two-headed sphinx, this one from Tell Halaf.

³⁰⁹ Vieyra 1955:69.

³¹⁰ Vieyra 1955:69.

³¹¹ Champdor 1964: plate 133.

4.3.2.2 Cherubim used as a repeating pattern

Patterns of this kind are reasonably common in the ancient world. An obvious source for repeating patterns are the sealings produced by cylinder seals, as seen below. It is common to find a pattern of animals, often goats (caprids) of some sort but sometimes other creatures including cherubim, flanking an object. Sometimes this object is a tree, often identified as the tree of life, and this is the version of the pattern that is described in Ezekiel 41.



Figure 16

Collon 1990:17 (Figure 7).

Black stone; 2.05 (with loop) x 1.4-1.6 cm. London, British Museum, WA 130670.³¹²

This seal comes from the kingdom of Urartu in eastern Turkey, and dates from the 7th century BC. It is a stamp-cylinder – carved both on the cylindrical surface and on the bottom, it can be used either as a stamp seal or a cylinder seal. The sealings are modern.³¹³

The cylinder part of the seal depicts three different creatures, with a vertical fish between them.³¹⁴ None of them may be called cherubim in the strict sense of the word, as neither antelope nor scorpions are ever mentioned in the Biblical texts as constituent animals, but they are interesting nevertheless. They are all winged. The one on the far left, repeated on the right, of the cylinder

³¹² Collon 1990:17.

³¹³ Collon 1990:17.

³¹⁴ Collon 1990:17.

sealing, is the most interesting as it has two heads, of two different types of antelope (the one facing left is probably a mountain goat or ibex). The middle creature also has an antelope's head, as well as a scorpion's tail. The one on the right has the head of a horse or more probably a lion, and its feet also seem to be those of a lion as opposed to the hooves of the other two creatures.

The creature on the stamp part of the seal could more properly be called a griffin as it has an eagle's head; it might also have a scorpion's tail as its hindquarters trail away rather abruptly.

Two things about this pattern are striking: the multiple heads of one of the creatures, not seen very often in depictions, and mentioned in two of the Ezekiel texts, and the fact that the creatures stand on two legs, as Ezekiel is at pains to point out about the cherubim of his vision. However, the fact that these creatures stand on two legs is not an indication of humanity, as it seems to be in Ezekiel, but a necessary result of the fact that their hindquarters are those of scorpions.

These strange creatures illustrate the fact that in the Ancient Near East, composite beings did not have a set form but came in all kinds of variations. No two of the creatures on this seal are identical. In Ezekiel, too, the number of heads of the cherubim varies between the *merkabah* visions and the pattern in the vision of the rebuilt temple. It would be a hopeless task to try and discover one set form for these creatures: they were not envisioned as having one unchangeable set of characteristics.



Figure 17

Pritchard 1954:213 (Figure 650).

Hematite cylinder seal from Syria, 15th century. 1.9 x 1 cm. Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York.³¹⁵

This seal has a pattern of winged sphinxes, seated, flanking the head of the goddess Hathor.

³¹⁵ Pritchard 1954:327.

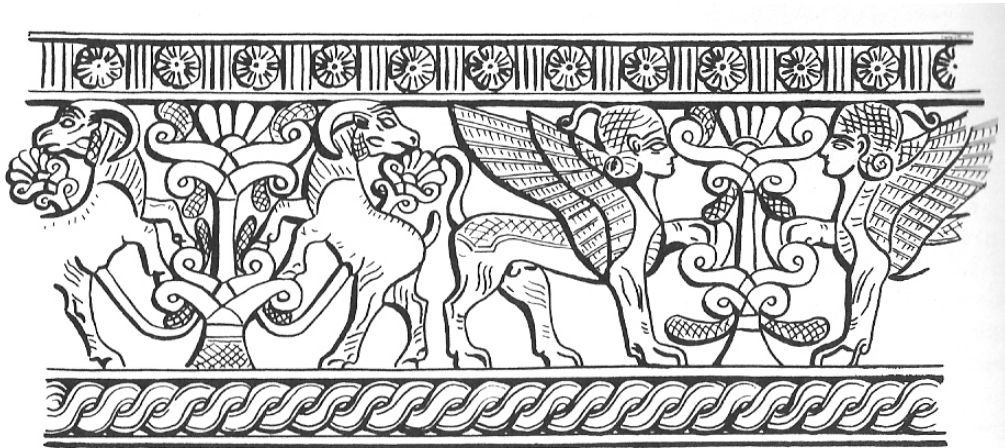


Figure 18

Keel 1997:142 (Figure 189).

Ivory, Nimrud, 9th-8th century BC.³¹⁶

This ivory plaque has both goats, a common motif, and cherubim, flanking stylised vegetation that many sources identify as the tree of life.

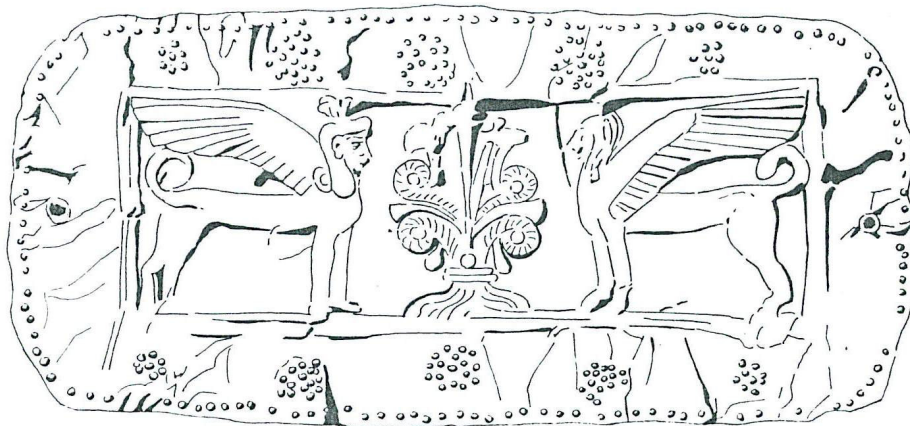


Figure 19

Keel 1997:143 (Figure 190).

Gold lamella, length 20 cm, Enkomi-Alasia (Cyprus), 1430-1350 BC.³¹⁷

This lamella features a design of cherubim flanking the tree of life.³¹⁸

³¹⁶ Keel 1997:396.

³¹⁷ Keel 1997: 396.

³¹⁸ Keel 1997:143.



Figure 20

Guirand 1959:82.

Phoenician relief of palm leaves and griffins, from the Persian period.³¹⁹

The “palm leaves” shown here are the same stylised plants that are often described as the tree of life. The palm trees of Ezekiel 41 may have been similar in appearance.

4.3.2.3 Upright cherubim

Most depictions of winged lions, winged bulls and so on show them in a horizontal, animal stance. It is probable that this is how cherubim were envisaged in many of the texts, including the descriptions of the ark and temple cherubim and the texts where God rides a cherub, but the chariot-visions of Ezekiel are adamant in stating that the cherubim “had the likeness of man”, and that their “legs were straight”, both phrases pointing to an upright stance. So do any depictions of composite creatures from the Ancient Near East show them in such a pose?

³¹⁹ Guirand 1959:82.



Figure 21

Collon 1990:30 (Figure 17).

Haematite; 2.85 x 1.15-1.2 cm. Bodrum Museum, KW 881.³²⁰

This seal is Old Babylonian, dating from the second half of the 18th century BC. However, the cherub is a later addition, dating from the reign of King Assur-Uballit I, who reigned from 1363 to 1328. It replaced a cuneiform inscription, traces of which can still be seen.³²¹

Collon calls this figure a “lion-griffin”. It has the body of a lion, human breasts and arms, and the head and feet of an eagle. It has four pairs of wings and an upright stance. It is hard to tell whether it has human hands on the ends of its arms, or another pair of eagle claws. In any case, of all the depictions treated in this study, it is the closest to Ezekiel’s description of the cherubim in his chariot-vision.



Figure 22

Vieyra 1955: plate 45.

Hittite relief from Carchemish. Ankara Museum.³²²

³²⁰ Collon 1990:30.

³²¹ Collon 1990:30.

³²² Vieyra 1955:69.

This relief, like the two-headed winged sphinx in 4.3.2.1, is a detail from the Herald's Wall. Composite creatures such as these bird-headed figures are usually called genii rather than cherubim. However, the upright, human form, the only thing distinguishing them from what are normally known as cherubim, makes them more like the description of the cherubim in Ezekiel's vision.

4.3.2.4 Depictions of gods riding on cherubim

Cornelius has done extensive studies on the iconography of Canaanite gods and goddesses, and one of his findings is that gods are often depicted in a certain, easily recognisable posture standing on an animal.³²³ At this stage of the study, such a fact evokes associations with all the texts where God rides a cherub, as well as those where *יְיָ שֹׁב הַכְרֻבִּים* is used as a divine epithet. It could even be said that this kind of portrayal is the visual equivalent of the divine epithet. Interestingly, Harris, Archer and Waltke quote, though they do not agree with, W.F. Albright saying that God was iconographically represented standing on the cherubim as Hadad stands on his sacred bull.³²⁴ Harris, Archer and Waltke mention this in the context of Exodus 25:22 where God speaks from between the cherubim; they strongly disagree with Albright both on this point and in supposing that the cherubim were sphinxes.³²⁵ However, this type of depiction does not really link closely to the ark of the covenant, which has more in common with cherubim thrones, discussed in 4.3.4. These depictions, though the visual equivalent of a divine epithet, link rather with the storm theophany texts where God rides on a cherub.



Figure 23

³²³ Cornelius 1994: 195; 263.

³²⁴ Albright 1938:1-3; Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(1):454.

³²⁵ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(1):454-455.

Collon 1990:29 (Figure 16).

Blue chalcedony on bronze mount; 4.2 x 1.65 cm. Berlin, Antikenmuseum, Sa 206.³²⁶

This is a modern sealing made from a Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal from the 8th century BC, excavated in the temple of the Greek goddess Hera on the island of Samos, off the west coast of Turkey.³²⁷ It shows a worshipper standing and facing an armed god, perhaps a storm god, standing on a bull. Behind the worshipper stands an armed goddess on a podium.³²⁸



Figure 24

Collon 1990:32 (Figure 18).

Green (grosular) garnet; 4.3 x 1.8 cm. London, British Museum, WA 89769.³²⁹

Modern sealing from a Neo-Assyrian seal, dating from about 700 BC.³³⁰ Here the warrior goddess Ishtar is seen on her lion.

³²⁶ Collon 1990:29.

³²⁷ Collon 1990:29.

³²⁸ Collon 1990:29.

³²⁹ Collon 1990:32.

³³⁰ Collon 1990:32.

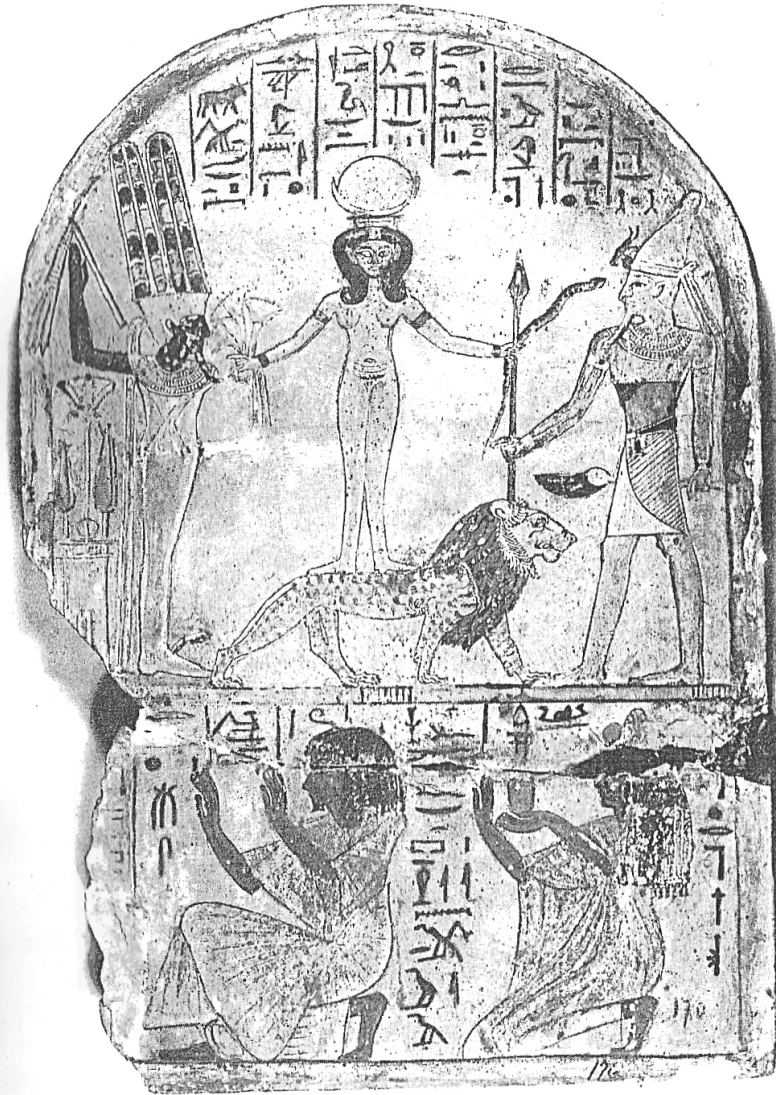


Figure 25

Cornelius 1994: plate 20

Limestone stele from 19th dynasty Egypt. 45 x 30 cm, Museo Egizio di Torino.³³¹

This stele, from Deir el-Medina, depicts the goddess Qudshu on a lion.³³² The iconography is very similar to that of the Assyrian depictions of gods mounted on animals.

When gods are depicted this way they are often riding on their own, special attribute animal. Do any of the gods ride on composite animals?

³³¹ Cornelius 1994:59.

³³² Cornelius 1994:60.



Figure 26

Parrot 1961:208 (Figure 256).

Achaemenian seal impression. Gods standing on cherubim

As seen in this Assyrian relief, sometimes they do.



Figure 27

Vieyra 1955: plate 20.

Hittite relief from Yazilikaya. Staatliche Museen, Berlin.³³³

This relief depicts several Hittite gods and goddesses mounted on various creatures. The god on the left is Teshup, a weather-god and head of the Hurrian pantheon. He is standing on two mountain-gods. Vieyra identifies the mount of the next figure, the goddess Hepat, as a lion as this is her usual attribute,³³⁴ but despite the damage to the face it looks as though it might in fact be a sphinx, as it appears to be wearing the same conical headdress as is worn by the gods. The bodies of this creature

³³³ Vieyra 1955:64.

³³⁴ Vieyra 1955:64.

and the one to its right also look more like those of panthers than of lions. On the far right a two-headed eagle is ridden by two goddesses. The heads face in opposite directions, as those of the cherubim are described as doing in Ezekiel 41.



Figure 28
Klingbeil, 1999:188 (Figure 21).

From a Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal that is presently lost. Probably early 9th to late 8th century.

Klingbeil calls this composite creature a “horned dragon”,³³⁵ although it appears rather griffin-like. The tail is that of a scorpion.



Figure 29
Keel 1997:50 (Figure 44).

In this figure, the storm god Hadad drives a chariot drawn by a lion-griffin, identified by Keel as the chaos monster. The same creature is also ridden by a lightning-wielding goddess. Hadad’s usual animal attribute is the bull:³³⁶

³³⁵ Klingbeil 1999:188.



Figure 30

Klingbeil 1999:245 (Figure 78).

Storm god riding a bull. From Arslan Tash, eighth century.³³⁷

A fascinating minor point about these representations is that they demonstrate the similarity in function and symbolism between the cherubim of the ark of the covenant and the much-maligned golden calves that kept turning up in Israel's history. Just as the cherubim represent an empty throne, the calf or bull is the "empty" mount of the deity – it is as essentially aniconic as the empty throne!³³⁸

³³⁶ Keel 1997:212.

³³⁷ Pritchard 1973: plate 140.

³³⁸ Freedman & O'Connor 1995:315; Mettinger 1999:191.

4.3.3 The wheeled lavers



Figure 31

Borowski 1995:39

Bronze openwork stand, 12th century. Bible Lands Museum collection.³³⁹

This stand is thought to come from Cyprus.³⁴⁰ Borowski considers it to be of Phoenician design showing Cypriot influence.³⁴¹ According to Borowski it was a wheeled laver, that is, it originally rested on wheels and supported a basin of water.³⁴² Given that a Phoenician craftsman, Hiram of Tyre (not the king),³⁴³ was responsible for making the wheeled lavers in Solomon's temple, they may have looked very similar to this one.

³³⁹ Borowski 1995:38-39.

³⁴⁰ Borowski 1995:40.

³⁴¹ Borowski 1995:39.

³⁴² Borowski 1995:38.

³⁴³ Borowski 1995:40.

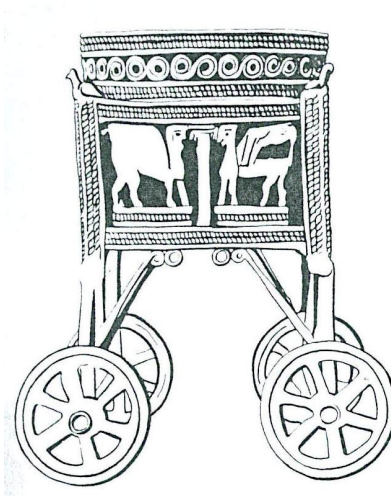


Figure 32

Keel 1997:142 (Figure 188).

Portable bronze kettle from Lanarka, Cyprus. 1400-1200 BC.³⁴⁴

Another very similar artefact. Keel also calls this a laver.³⁴⁵

4.3.4 Cherubim thrones

There are many Ancient Near Eastern depictions of thrones formed by cherubim, some with figures seated in them; others empty. It is highly likely that the *kapporet* of the ark of the covenant was similar in symbolism to one of these thrones. In Ezekiel's vision, too, God's throne is formed by cherubim, this time living, moving ones.

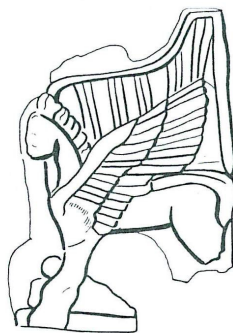


Figure 33

Keel 1997:170 (Figure 234).

Ivory model, 2.6 x 1.7 cm. Megiddo, 135-1150 BC. Oriental Institute, Chicago.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Keel 1997:396.

³⁴⁵ Keel 1997:140.



Figure 34

Keel 1997:170 (Figure 236).

From a stele.³⁴⁷



Figure 35

Keel 1997:170 (Figure 235).

From a stone sarcophagus, section 33 cm long. Byblos, Tomb 5. Late second millennium, inscription c. 1000 BC. Beirut.³⁴⁸

This is part of a relief of Ahiram, king of Byblos.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁶ Keel 1997:397-398.

³⁴⁷ Keel 1997:398.

³⁴⁸ Keel 1997:398.

³⁴⁹ Pritchard 1973: plate 126.

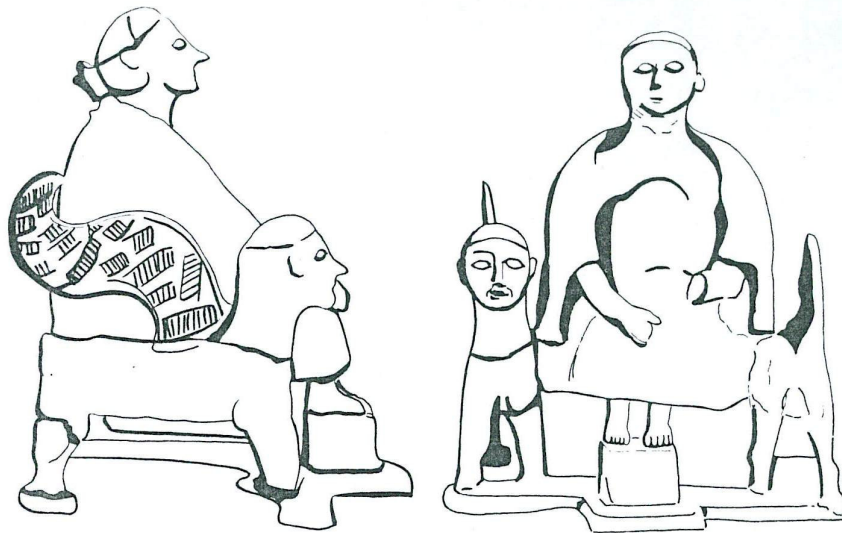


Figure 36

Keel 1997:169 (Figures 231 and 232).

Reddish-brown clay figure with light brown clay coating and black painting. Height of seated figure: 28.6 cm; length of cherub: 20 cm. Ayia Irini (Cyprus), 700-600 BC.³⁵⁰

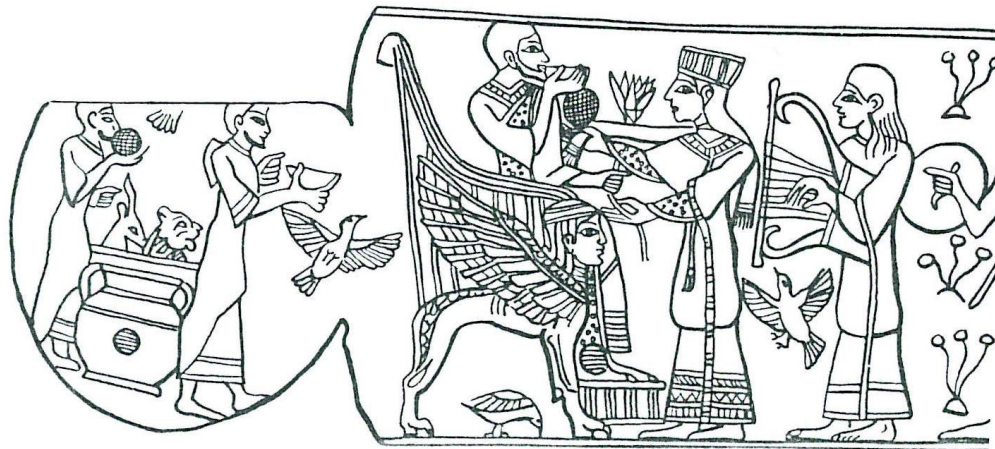


Figure 37

Keel 1997:169 (Figure 233).

Part of a carved ivory plaque, about 13 cm long, Megiddo, 1350-1150 BC. Palestine Museum, Jerusalem.³⁵¹

In the last three depictions, the feet of the king rest on a box-like footstool. This imagery attests to the possibility that the ark may have been conceived as the footstool of God, with the cherubim on the *kapporet* as his throne. When cherubim form the throne of God their function is not practical, as

³⁵⁰ Keel 1997:397.

³⁵¹ Keel 1997:397.

it is in the case of a human king on a throne. Rather, it is to attest to the royal majesty, the holiness, and the presence of God.³⁵²

It is widely accepted that these sphinx/griffin/winged bull/winged lion figures are what are referred to by the term “cherubim”. Work has been done on cherubim thrones and their connection to the ark of the covenant. It is also important to note the consistent association between cherubim and vegetation, often referred to as the “tree of life” after the passage in Genesis 3, as well as their function as the mount of a deity, as seen in much Canaanite iconography. Repeating patterns of cherubim and sometimes also vegetation bring to mind descriptions in various texts, especially Ezekiel 41, while the wheeled lavers from Cyprus are interesting in that they are the closest thing we have to an actual example of an artefact mentioned in one of the Biblical texts involving cherubim.

³⁵² Mettinger 1999:190.

Chapter 5

Iconographic study of seraphim

Given the textual evidence, we know what a picture of a seraph might look like. It needs to be a composite creature. It might look something like a cherub, it might be found in the same sort of context as a picture of a cherub, it might be something like a serpent, it might involve fire, and it might have wings. Is it possible that depictions fitting some or all of these criteria exist in the art of the Ancient Near East? It is indeed, and once one starts looking for them, it is surprising to see in just how many places they can be found – places as well-known and iconic as the Ishtar Gate of Babylon and Tutankhamen’s throne.

Lang suggests that the word seraph could refer to a dragon-like creature.³⁵³ Zimmerli, in his first commentary on Ezekiel, explicitly identifies the seraphim of Isaiah’s vision with Moses’ bronze serpent: “Isaiah smells the incense smoke of the temple in his nose. He sees... the seraphim, of which a bronze image still existed in the temple in Uzziah’s time (2 Kings 18:4, Nu 21:8f).³⁵⁴ Many of the Isaiah commentaries (see 3.2.3) also both identify the seraphim of Isaiah’s vision as serpents and compare them with the bronze Nehushtan.

It seems likely that the main obstacle to wide acceptance of the idea that the Biblical seraphim were envisaged as serpents or dragons lies in the negative connotations surrounding them in Christian symbolism. In Christian iconography, later than the sources studied here, the symbolism of the serpent and of the dragon is entirely negative: Satan is depicted as a serpent³⁵⁵ or a dragonish composite creature,³⁵⁶ or a dragon.³⁵⁷ This depiction is based on several Biblical texts, particularly Revelation 20:10. Droulers states that the dragon symbolises the Devil, Hell, Paganism, Destruction and Envy,³⁵⁸ while the serpent has a more mixed bag of meanings including the Sun, Medicine, the Supreme Being in Egyptian mythology, Reflection, Health, Envy, Remorse, Chagrin, Calumny and

³⁵³ Lang 1997:136.

³⁵⁴ Zimmerli 1979:98-99.

³⁵⁵ Timmers 1974: 112.

³⁵⁶ Timmers 1974: 113 (plate).

³⁵⁷ Sill 1975: 35.

³⁵⁸ Droulers: 60.

Hate.³⁵⁹ Lee and Solopova, in reference to the mediaeval European stories from which the Western idea of dragons is largely derived, state that the dragons were symbols of evil in the Christian tradition.³⁶⁰ These symbolic attributes derive from many different cultures, and do not necessarily reflect the way the people of the Ancient Near East regarded serpents and/or dragons. It is true that they were indeed a symbol of evil in many contexts, but, as this chapter will prove, certainly not in *all* contexts.

The obvious way to prove that not all serpents are Satan is to find examples of serpent symbolism being used in a benevolent sense. So did serpents and/or dragons in fact have any positive connotations among the people of the Ancient Near East? We already have, in Droulers' work, possible positive attributes for the serpent among the Ancient Egyptians. This source, however, should not be regarded as authoritative as it is a guide to traditional interpretations, leaning heavily towards the mediæval. Also, it has no stated date of publication and may date from any year before 1968. Let us then take Droulers' statement about the Egyptians as a clue rather than as fact, and research the matter further.

5.1 Serpents and dragons – good or evil?

The first place to look is the Hebrew Bible itself. Of all the texts containing שָׂרָף, discussed in chapter 3.2, only two occurrences of the word are generally translated as “seraph”. If one looks at the texts where שָׂרָף is translated as “serpent” or the like instead, in all cases but one the connotations are negative, referring to dangerous animals. The exception is Moses' bronze serpent (שָׂרָף or נִחָשׁ) made at God's command to cure the Israelites bitten by the serpents (הַנְּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרָפִים) sent among them by God to punish them. Although it was removed from the sanctuary and destroyed by Hezekiah,³⁶¹ the fact that it was kept at all as an object of veneration suggests that to the ancient Hebrews, the serpent could not have been merely a symbol of Satan, the adversary.

³⁵⁹ Droulers: 203.

³⁶⁰ Lee & Solopova 2005:110.

³⁶¹ 2 Kings 18:4.



Figure 38

Cooper 2005:9 (Figure 12).

“An Egyptian standard, bearing a bronze figure of the goddess Ranno. (Sharpe.)”³⁶²

Cooper refers to Sharpe as having supposed Moses’ bronze serpent to have been an imitation or adaptation of the well-known Egyptian standard consisting of the crowned uraeus on a staff.³⁶³ Furthermore, he traces the caduceus of Hermes, along with other similar symbols, to the same origin.³⁶⁴ Cooper, who wrote in the latter half of the 19th century, was perhaps overly eager to trace religious ideas back to the ancient Egyptians, but the similarities are undeniable.³⁶⁵ Cooper also provides corroboration of Droulers’ statement about the serpent representing the supreme being in Egyptian mythology³⁶⁶ – the early ram-headed creator deity Khnum, sometimes described as the

³⁶² Cooper 2005:9.

³⁶³ Cooper 2005:9.

³⁶⁴ Cooper 2005:10-11.

³⁶⁵ Cooper’s work is quite old and not unbiased, having a whiff of hermetic mysticism, and unfortunately he does not give full references for his pictures, but it is still a rich source of Egyptian serpent imagery. For this reason all pictures taken from Cooper’s work have his captions reproduced in full, in inverted commas, including any references he does give. They do not necessarily represent my own views or interpretations of the images; nor do they always reflect current spellings and transliterations.

³⁶⁶ Droulers: 203.

“soul of the world”, is often accompanied by or represented as a serpent.³⁶⁷ Of course, many other Egyptian deities were represented as snakes of one kind or another, including Wadjet (Buto), and the lesser-known Renenutet / Renenet³⁶⁸ (Ranno) pictured above.

On the other hand, the enemy of the Egyptian gods was also represented as a serpent.

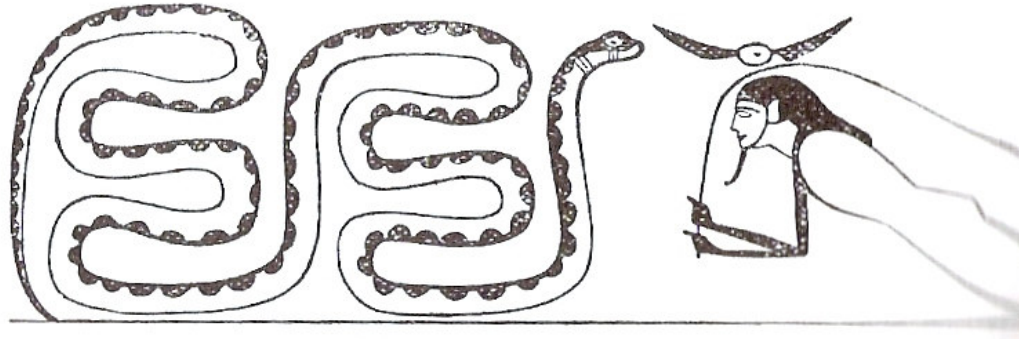


Figure 39

Cooper 2005:52 (Figure 79).

“The Osirian endeavouring to snare the giant Apophis; above his head, as protecting him in his dangerous task, is the winged orb, symbolic of divine interpenetration and assistance. (Sar. Oimen.)”³⁶⁹

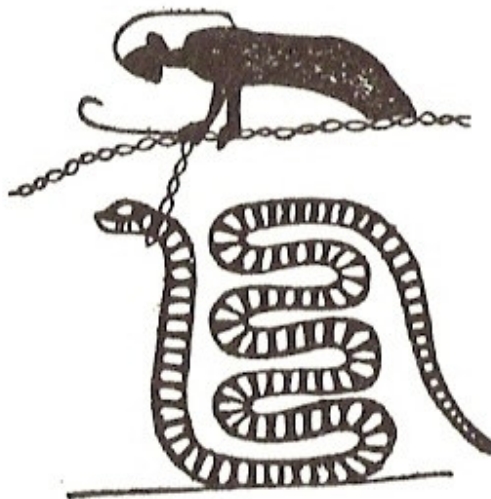


Figure 40

Cooper 2005:59 (Figure 97).

“The deities binding Apophis from above. (Sar. Oimen.)”³⁷⁰

³⁶⁷ Cooper 2005:61-63.

³⁶⁸ Hamlyn 1965:111.

³⁶⁹ Cooper 2005:52.

³⁷⁰ Cooper 2005:59.

The two images above depict the binding of the serpent Apep, the enemy of the Egyptian gods and especially of the sun god Ra. According to Egyptian mythology, Apep (also written Apophis) would every day attempt to hinder the progress of the solar barque across the sky. Here is a good example of the “adversary” symbolism that would later become all-pervasive. The function of Apep in Egyptian mythology is very similar to that of the chaos monster in Mesopotamian mythology, and thus has connections to the idea of Leviathan that appears several times in the Hebrew Bible. This symbolism is undoubtedly negative. But there is other Egyptian material that shows serpents in a very different light.

As stated in 3.2.4, three distinct types of snakes can be found in Egyptian iconography. One is the horned viper that forms the hieroglyph for the letter f:



Figure 41

Cooper 2005:6 (Figure 5).

“The Cerastes. (Bonomi, *Hieroglyphics.*)”³⁷¹

The viper is distinguished by its horns and its short body. It does not seem to appear, as both the other types at times do, as part of a composite creature.

The second is the colubrid: large, sometimes extremely long, and often patterned; Apep is depicted as this kind of snake, but this kind of snake is not always Apep:

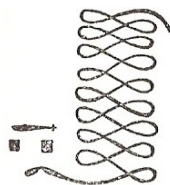


Figure 42

Cooper 2005:7 (Figure 7).

“Apophis, *the destroyer*. The hieroglyphs above his head compose the letters of his name, A-P-P.”³⁷²

See also the images of Apep above.

³⁷¹ Cooper 2005:6.

³⁷² Cooper 2005:7.

Third is the cobra or uraeus:



Figure 43

Cooper 2005:12 (Figure 18).

“The serpent and dish of the goddess Maut, the great mother.”³⁷³

The uraeus is easily distinguished by its hood and rearing posture. The hood is a distinguishing feature even when other types of snake are also depicted in this upright posture, as below:

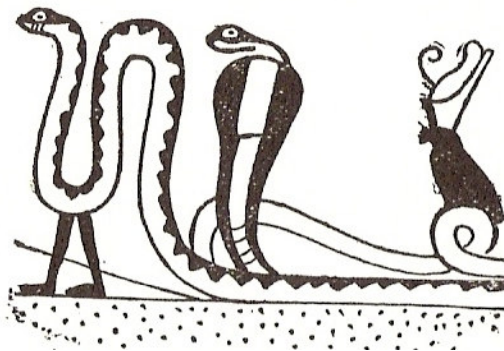


Figure 44

Cooper 2005:53 (Figure 80).

“The serpent warder of the gateway of the path of the sun; behind are Horus-Ra, and possibly the serpent Ranno. (Sar. Oimen.)³⁷⁴

Here we have an upright uraeus alongside an upright colubrid, which is significant in having legs. Although serpents and dragons are for the most part interchangeable symbolically, and although not all traditional dragons have to have legs (some of the English “wyrms”, for example, seem to be simply enormous snakes), it seems sensible to consider the possession of legs to be one of the factors that differentiates a serpent from a dragon. Would it be possible to call this leggy colubrid a dragon rather than simply a serpent? The dividing line is unclear. However, the legs certainly classify it as a composite creature, which is one of the criteria for considering something to be a possible seraph.

³⁷³ Cooper 2005:12.

³⁷⁴ Cooper 2005:53.

They also invalidate Harris, Archer and Waltke’s argument that Isaiah’s seraphim could not have had the form of serpents since they were described as having feet.³⁷⁵ Wings are another feature the modern reader would expect a dragon to have, although again, not all the dragons of European mythology possess them. One might hope to find a depiction of a serpent body with both legs and wings; however, such creatures seem to be elusive.

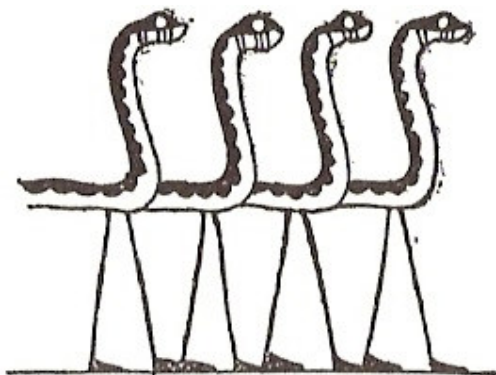


Figure 45

Cooper 2005:62 (Figure 104).

“Four figures similar to preceding. Serpents named Hapu. (Sar. Oimen.)”³⁷⁶

More colubrids with legs. These are more definitely borne upright by their legs, in contrast to the previous one whose body drags along the ground, and they appear somewhat similar, allowing for the differences in style between the two cultures, to the dragons on the Ishtar Gate of Babylon (see figure 75).

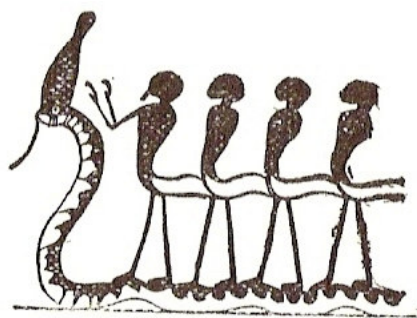


Figure 46

Cooper 2005:61 (Figure 103).

“Four mystic figures treading on a *male* serpent with the crown of Lower Egypt. The serpent’s name is Apte. (Sar. Oimen.)”³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):884.

³⁷⁶ Cooper 2005:62.

These four figures are more composite than most represented here, having human heads on the bodies of uraei (note their hoods corresponding to human shoulders), with the usual spindly legs and, in one case, human arms. This corresponds with the mention of hands in Isaiah 6.

Another feature that we expect from dragons is fiery breath. The monster Leviathan is described as having fiery breath in Job 41, and is described as a “dragon” (𐤋𐤍𐤏𐤍), also translated as serpent or sea-monster), in Isaiah 27:1. Egypt does provide images of fire-breathing serpents, and in a very interesting context:

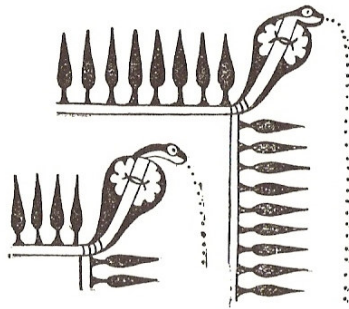


Figure 47
Cooper 2005:19 (Figure 33).

“The corners of Paradise guarded by fire-breathing uraei; further on, but not shown in the plate, are the bodies of the just awaiting in the cypress shades their ultimate revivification. (Sar. Oimen.)”³⁷⁸

Cooper says that the uraeus was often depicted guarding the sacred groves of the Amenti, in the afterlife, breathing out fire to destroy any invaders or unjustified souls. This function is strikingly similar to that of the cherubim in Genesis 3, guarding the entrance to Eden along with a fiery sword. This is important because here we have fire-breathing serpents performing the same function in the same context as is elsewhere performed by cherubim, another of the criteria for possible classification as a seraph. Important too is the fact that the very word “seraph” implies a connection with fire, and that fire is present in Isaiah’s vision of seraphim.

³⁷⁷ Cooper 2005:61.

³⁷⁸ Cooper 2005:19.

Below is another Egyptian fire-breathing serpent:

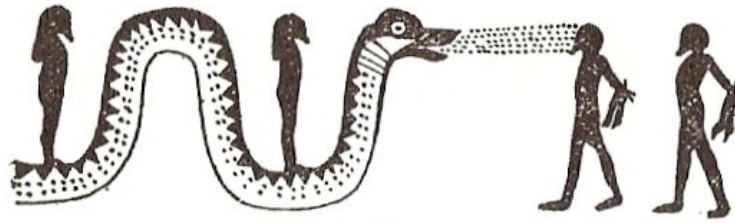


Figure 48

Cooper 2005:60 (Figure 100).

“The serpent “Fire-face” devouring the wicked; the avenging deities are standing upon his folds to restrain his violence within due bounds. (Sar. Oimen.)”³⁷⁹

This colubrid’s destructive function, though in the service of good, reminds one of the fiery serpents God sends upon the Israelite camp in Numbers 21.

Finally, and most importantly, there are many Egyptian depictions of serpents with wings. The word “flying” is used in two of the Biblical texts as a modifier for “seraph” in verses where it is usually considered to refer to a natural animal and translated with the word “serpent”,³⁸⁰ and while some sources may consider this to be merely a reference to their quick motion, one cannot ignore the evidence of Isaiah’s vision where the seraphim are explicitly described as having wings, six each, to be precise. Unfortunately, none of the Egyptian flying serpents shown here have six wings. Four is the largest number that could be found.

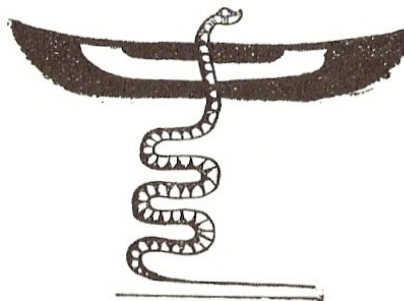


Figure 49

Cooper 2005:61 (Figure 102).

“Winged asp, from the same sarcophagus. (Sar. Oimen.)”³⁸¹

Two-winged colubrid.

³⁷⁹ Cooper 2005:60.

³⁸⁰ Isaiah 14:29 and 30:6.

³⁸¹ Cooper 2005:61.

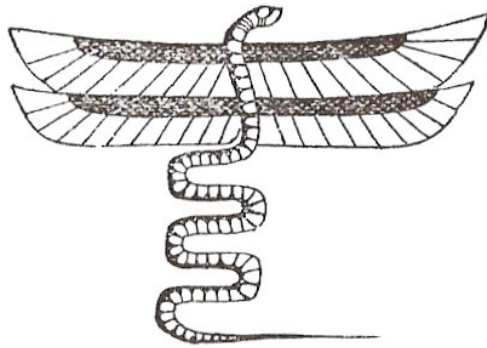


Figure 50

Cooper 2005:12 (Figure 19).

“Four-winged serpent, Chnuphis or Bait.”³⁸²

Four-winged colubrid. Chnuphis is today usually called Khnum.

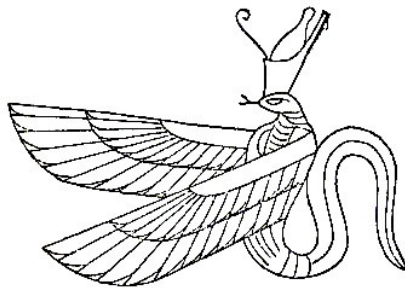


Figure 51

Cooper 2005:13 (Figure 22).

“The symbolic winged serpent of the goddess Mersokar, or Melsokar, wearing the crowns of the upper and lower kingdoms. (Wilkinson.)”³⁸³

Although the previous two pictures show colubrid-type winged snakes, the more common type of winged serpent in Egyptian iconography is the uraeus or cobra. See also 5.3.3. Connecting to the etymology of 𓆎 as “one that burns something” is the statement in the Pyramid Texts that the uraeus is a “flame that consumes the enemies of the pharaoh”.³⁸⁴

³⁸² Cooper 2005:12.

³⁸³ Cooper 2005:13.

³⁸⁴ R.O.Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, Oxford 1969, Utterance 256. Cited in de Savignac 1972:320.

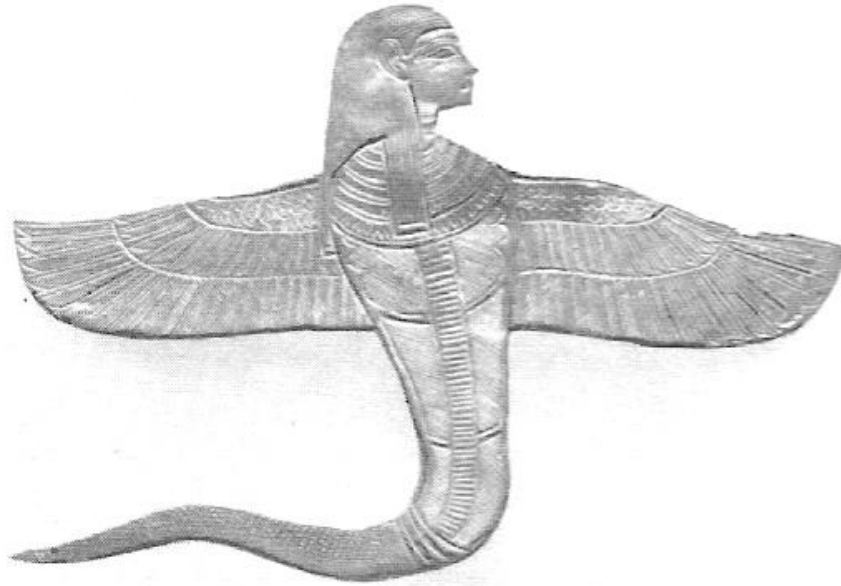


Figure 52

Desroches-Noblecourt 1974:230 (Figure 141).

Amulet from the neck of Tutankhamen. Incised gold sheet.³⁸⁵

According to de Saignac, this winged and human-headed uraeus was probably supposed to revive the mummy. He suggests that the Biblical seraphim may have looked very like this figure.³⁸⁶

There is, then, much evidence for positive connotations of serpents as well as winged serpents in Egyptian mythology. What kind of depictions of serpents or dragons can be found in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures?

³⁸⁵ Desroches-Noblecourt 1974:230.

³⁸⁶ de Saignac 1972:321.



Figure 53

Parrot 1960:256 (Figure 289).

Gudea's libation goblet. Sumerian, from Telloh; 22nd century. Louvre.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁷ Parrot 1960:256.

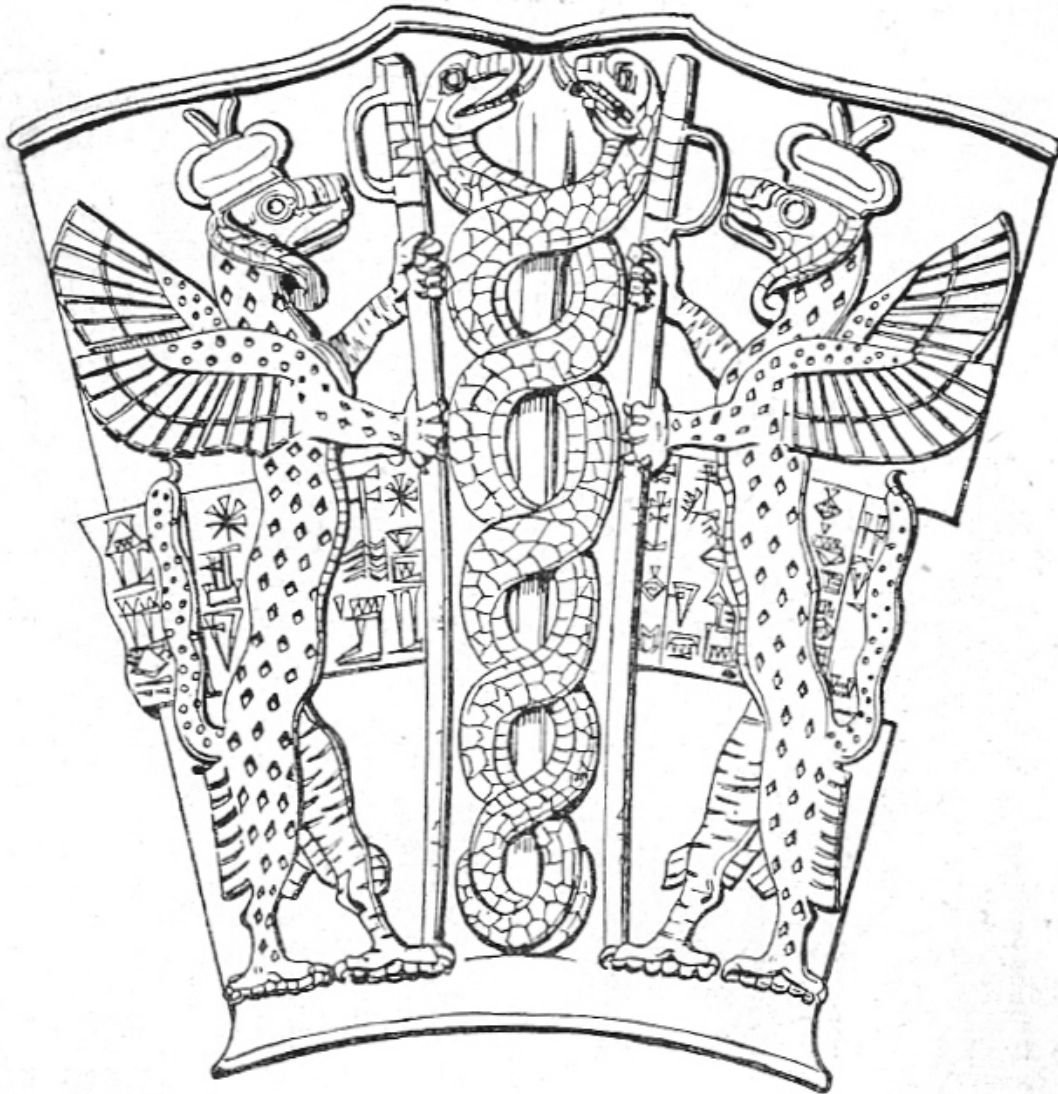


Figure 54

Gressman 1909:92 (Figure 170).

Schematic representation of the same goblet.

Both serpents and dragons appear on this stone goblet, nicely illustrating the similarities and differences in iconography between these two creatures. The dragon is a composite beast, as is a cherub. These dragons have the wings and feet of eagles, the heads of snakes, the bodies of panthers, and scorpions' tails. This dragon is the animal attribute of the Sumerian god Ningizzida,³⁸⁸ an underworld deity.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁸ Parrot 1960:257.

³⁸⁹ Hendel 1999:744.

The Assyro-Babylonian god Marduk also had the dragon as an animal attribute.



Figure 55

Pritchard 1973: plate 141

From a piece of lapis lazuli. Mid-ninth century, Babylon.

This depiction shows Marduk accompanied by his animal attribute the dragon. It is remarkably similar to the depiction, reproduced in 4.3.2.1, of Hadad with a griffin.



Figure 56
Gressmann 1909:60 (Figure 102).

Another depiction of Marduk's attribute animal. In German it is called a "Schlangengreif", a snake-griffin, which describes its similarities to cherubim-type composite creatures as well as to serpents. Some sources call it a *muš h uššu* dragon.³⁹⁰

However, is there any archaeological evidence for positive connotations of serpents among the Hebrews?

Not nearly as much as, for instance, among the Egyptians, but it does indeed exist. First, there is a rather tenuous piece of evidence that consists not of an artefact but merely the report of an artefact. According to Cohen,³⁹¹ the base upon which was placed the new seven-branched candelabrum ordered for the Temple by Judas Maccabeus resembled the bases of the columns in the temple of Apollo at Didyma. He says that the only difference was that "while the dragons on the reliefs of the Didymian bases have human faces, those on the base of the candelabrum intended for the Jerusalem Temple bear the faces of animals."³⁹² This, if an accurate report, shows that while the Jews of the Maccabean period may have had scruples about the representation of human beings, they had no objection to using dragons as a decorative motif on a cult object to be placed in the Temple. As with the account of the Nehushtan, this suggests that whatever the symbolism of the dragon meant to them, it could not have been solely a symbol of evil.

³⁹⁰ Klingbeil 1999:191.

³⁹¹ In Roth 1961:126.

³⁹² Cohen in Roth 1961:126.

5.2. Serpents on Hebrew seals

Secondly, there are a number of Hebrew seals and sealings (the sealing produced by a stamp seal is called a bulla) dating from the 6th and 7th century BC that bear images of winged serpents, specifically, Egyptian-style winged uraei. Again, this would seem highly unlikely if serpents had been merely a symbol of Satan or of evil. The following images are from Deutsch's book *Messages from the past: Hebrew bullae from the time of Isaiah through the destruction of the first temple*.



Figure 57

Deutsch 1999:102 (Figure 35).

Intact bulla, light brown clay, incompletely impressed, 13.5 x 10.3 mm.

The inscription, in Hebrew using the Phoenician script, as with all the bullae in this collection, reads: לאמריהו

[ב]ן אסף

“Belonging to 'Amaryahu son of 'Asap”.³⁹³

Deutsch describes the motif on this seal as a “four-winged cobra snake *uraeus*”.³⁹⁴ The style of the motif appears very similar to the Egyptian winged serpents shown above, pointing to a strong Egyptian influence. An 'Amaryahu is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, an assistant to the official appointed by Hezekiah to be in charge of the freewill offerings.³⁹⁵ Bullae made by the seals of Hezekiah and his father Ahaz also form part of this collection. Hezekiah's seal has a similarly Egyptian motif, a winged scarab.³⁹⁶ This suggests that Hezekiah's action in destroying the

³⁹³ Deutsch 1999:102.

³⁹⁴ Deutsch 1999:102.

³⁹⁵ 2 Chronicles 31:14-15.

³⁹⁶ Deutsch 1999:204-205.

Nehushtan³⁹⁷ was not motivated by antipathy towards the symbol itself, but rather towards the excessive reverence that was apparently being accorded it.

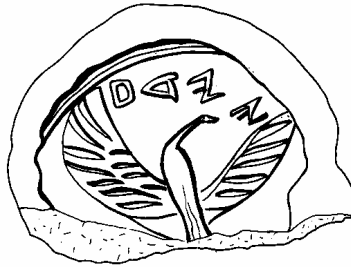


Figure 58

Deutsch 1999:115 (Figure 48).

The upper part of a bulla, light brown clay, 14.3 x 11.4 mm. The imprint of the papyrus to which the bulla was attached is visible on the back.

The partially preserved inscription reads:

ידע

[יהו]

“(belonging to) Yeda’yahu”.³⁹⁸

This time a two-winged *uraeus* is depicted. The style is less Egyptian than that of figure 57 in that the feathers of the wings are less formally depicted. However, the Egyptian influence is still very obvious.

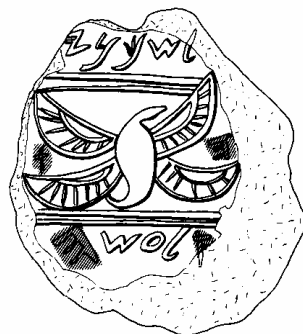


Figure 59

Deutsch 1999:155 (Figure 86).

A worn bulla, grey clay, 10.2 x 12.8 mm. Cord grooves are visible on the back.

³⁹⁷ 2 Kings 18:4.

³⁹⁸ Deutsch 1999:115.

The inscription is of a high calligraphic quality and has been reconstructed based on a previously-published identical bulla. It reads:

לשכני

[ה/ו]

[א]לעש[ה]

“Belonging to Shekanyahu (son of) ’El’asá”.³⁹⁹

Seven individuals in the Hebrew Bible bear this name,⁴⁰⁰ including one of Amaryahu’s colleagues in the distribution of freewill offerings.⁴⁰¹

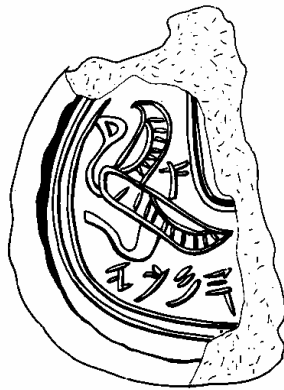


Figure 60

Deutsch 1999:165 (Figure 96).

A fragmentary bulla, light brown clay, 11.2 x 14.2 mm. Both papyrus texture and cord grooves are visible on the back. The inscription reads:

א

שמכני

“...’... (son of) Semakhy”.⁴⁰²

Only the aleph has survived from the owner’s name; however, the patronym is complete. Semakhy is short for Semakhyahu, a name which appears only once in the Hebrew Bible⁴⁰³ but which is very common in various forms in Hebrew epigraphic material from this time.⁴⁰⁴ The two-winged snake here is no longer recognisable as being a *uraeus* as no hood is shown, although Deutsch still names it

³⁹⁹ Deutsch 1999:155.

⁴⁰⁰ Deutsch 1999:155.

⁴⁰¹ 2 Chronicles 31:14-15.

⁴⁰² Deutsch 1999:165.

⁴⁰³ 1 Chronicles 26:7.

⁴⁰⁴ Deutsch 1999:165.

as such.⁴⁰⁵ It has features, in particular the pattern on the wings, in common with the designs shown above, but unlike them it could not be easily mistaken for an Egyptian depiction. The style has more in common with that of certain early Mesopotamian engravings. The cartouche, however, (a section of it is visible on the upper right hand side of the field)⁴⁰⁶ is an Egyptian feature.

The fact that these winged serpents are found on the personal seals of people who could very easily be officials mentioned in the Bible, who were definitely Hebrew-speaking and important enough to have seals of this kind, proves that the Hebrews of that time had no objection to images of this sort. This probably means that the motif of the snake did not symbolise Satan. Again, the very fact that the seraphim in Isaiah are given that name and not something different suggests that there was not a universal identification of serpents with Satan or evil at that time. The serpent was certainly a symbol of evil, but not all serpents were Satan. After all, the lion is also used in a negative context associated with danger and destruction,⁴⁰⁷ but lions are not without positive symbolism as well, both as a component animal of cherubim and as an attribute of the tribe of Judah.⁴⁰⁸

The connotations of serpent or dragon symbolism with Satan are not only detrimental to the seraph/serpent hypothesis; they could also be said to support it, as there is a strong tradition claiming that Satan or Lucifer was one of the seraphim before falling. This, of course, has no basis in any of the Biblical texts, but it is worth mentioning as a tradition since much of the opposition to the seraph/serpent theory probably has its roots in traditional views. Kreeft writes from the perspective of the Roman Catholic tradition when he asserts that the seraphim are the highest choir of angels and that Lucifer was once one of them.⁴⁰⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, paraphrased in Israel, also calls seraphim the highest order of angels.⁴¹⁰ From this perspective, it seems possible that the serpent or dragon could be symbolic of seraphim in general, rather than being symbols of evil.

⁴⁰⁵ Deutsch 1999:165.

⁴⁰⁶ Deutsch 1999:165.

⁴⁰⁷ For example, Psalm 7:3.

⁴⁰⁸ For example, Gen 49:9.

⁴⁰⁹ Kreeft 1995:75.

⁴¹⁰ Israel 1995:4.

5.3 Seraphim in similar contexts to cherubim

Cherubim and seraphim go together like bread and butter, Medes and Persians, Cain and Abel. This is of course only the popular, instinctive view. However instinct or intuition, says Panofsky, can be essential equipment for interpretation,⁴¹¹ and many commentators, too, see the two terms as related. Freedman and O'Connor say "These beings [cherubim] are associated with the obscure term *š'ērāpîm* (Isa. 6), which clearly denotes another class of hybrid creature".⁴¹² Given this probability that "cherubim" and "seraphim" refer to at least similar or even the same things, it would be useful if examples could be found of depictions where serpent- or dragon-like creatures are seen in the same context, perhaps performing the same function, as creatures already identified as cherubim are seen doing in other depictions. Examples of this sort are indeed numerous, and some of the best are given below.

5.3.1 General



Figure 61

Parrot 1961:155 (Figure 188).

Syro-phoenician harness ornament from Kalakh (Nimrud), 8th century

The inscription, in hieroglyphs, reads "Janen" or "Jejanen".⁴¹³

This unusual object, which is probably a harness ornament, and probably Syro-Phoenician in manufacture despite the very Egyptian nature of its style, content and even language,⁴¹⁴ is one of the

⁴¹¹ Panofsky 1982:38;41.

⁴¹² Freedman & O'Connor 1995:318.

⁴¹³ Parrot 1961:155.

few artefacts encountered in this study which portrays a cherub and a seraph together in visual parallel. Uraei like the one on the sphinx's head are certainly found associated with sphinxes in other depictions, but the winged uraeus in front of the sphinx on this ivory is a different thing entirely, being larger, and not simply a crown ornament but another creature in its own right. Compare the tail of the sphinx to figure 11.



Figure 62

Champdor 1964: plate 211

Babylonian stele, Louvre, Paris.⁴¹⁵

This stele shows a whole collection of animals, some composite, some not, including winged lions and dragons both with and without legs. They are probably the symbols of various gods.

⁴¹⁴ Parrot 1961:155.

⁴¹⁵ Champdor 1964: plate 211.

5.3.2 The chaos monster

Cosmic combat between a god and the forces of chaos personalised as a monster or dragon is an important part of Ancient Near Eastern cosmology.⁴¹⁶ Aspects of this myth even appear in the Hebrew Bible, in texts such as Job 7:12 and Psalm 89:10. The word *ṣərūr* is never used in these texts to describe the chaos dragon, however. In iconography, the chaos monster may be depicted either as a winged griffin-type creature, in other words a cherub, or else as a serpent / dragon type of monster.⁴¹⁷ This is a perfect example of the two types of creature being found in the same context: the very same monster is depicted in some representations as a cherub-type creature and in others as a serpent or dragon. The fact that the symbolism here is almost completely negative should not present too much of a problem: we can see from the iconographic study up to this point that the same creatures may be good or evil, protectors or destroyers. The devil, after all, is also, according to tradition, a fallen angel.

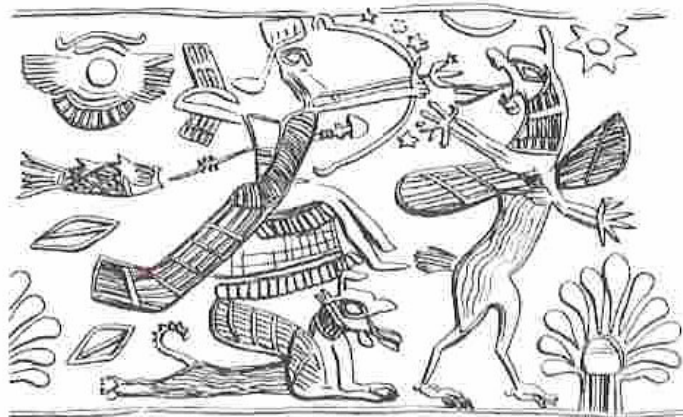


Figure 63

Keel 1997:51 (Figure 45).

Steatite cylinder-seal, 3.7 cm high. Assyrian, first half of the first millennium. Pierpont Morgan Collection, New York.⁴¹⁸

Here the god fights the chaos monster in the form of a griffin. Does the second griffin under his feet represent the monster's eventual subjugation, or is the god riding upon it as in 4.3.2.4? Even when the chaos monster is depicted in this form, Keel still calls it a dragon.⁴¹⁹ Note also the tree in the

⁴¹⁶ Keel 1997:47-56.

⁴¹⁷ Keel 1997:51.

⁴¹⁸ Keel 1997:390.

⁴¹⁹ Keel 1997:50.

bottom right corner. Keel notes that the chaos monster and the tree of life are found together in several depictions,⁴²⁰ recalling the repeating design in Ezekiel 41 and the narrative of Genesis 3.

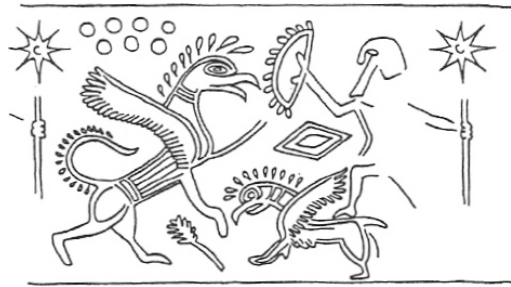


Figure 64
Klingbeil 1999:181 (Figure 14).

A very similar scene from Klingbeil, who notes that it is not possible to identify the figure with the bow as a god with absolute certainty, but that the scene does appear to have a mythological and cosmic dimension.⁴²¹ In the light of other similar depictions, it seems likely that it is indeed a scene of the god fighting the chaos monster.

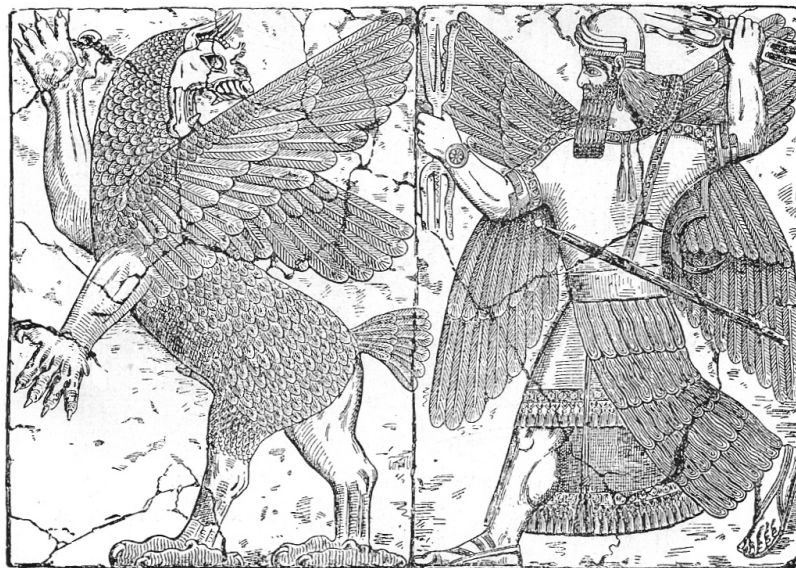


Figure 65
Gressman 1909:91 (Figure 168).

Assyrian relief depicting a winged god fighting the chaos monster in the same griffin form.

⁴²⁰ Keel 1997:51.

⁴²¹ Klingbeil 1999:181.

In the following three depictions, the chaos monster is shown in the form of a serpent or dragon.



Figure 66

Klingbeil 1999:182 (Figure 15).

Neo-Assyrian faience cylinder-seal from Gezer, 750-700 BC. 29mm high.⁴²²



Figure 67

Keel 1997:52 (Figure 48).

Serpentine cylinder-seal from Nineveh, 8th-7th century BC. 1.7 cm high. Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.⁴²³

⁴²² Klingbeil 1999:182.

⁴²³ Keel 1997:390.

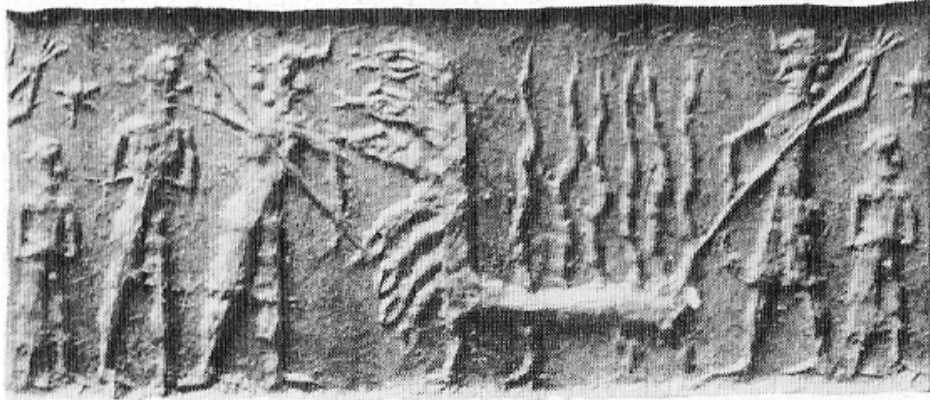


Figure 68

Pritchard 1973: plate 170

Seven-headed fiery dragon attacked by two gods, from Tell Asmar.⁴²⁴

Grey stone cylinder-seal, 2350-2150 BC. 3.2 cm high; 2.2cm diameter. Baghdad.⁴²⁵

This relief is also reproduced in Keel, 1997 as figure 52 on p 54. It is possible that the wavy lines emanating from the creature's back are meant to represent flames. This relief dates from a much earlier period than the previous two.

Where the chaos monster is shown as a dragon, the depictions differ in the number of heads, and the presence or absence of horns and legs. As with cherubim, one should not look for a definite, immutable form.

There is a possible linguistic connection between griffins and seraphim: Rütterswörden in TDOT cites several sources as claiming that the word שֶׁרָפִיִּים derives by metathesis from the Egyptian *sfr*, a griffin. In Egypt the *sfr* had nothing to do with the uraeus, but the idea is that in Palestine the two became confused. This theory is not widespread, however, and has been challenged by other authorities.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁴ Pritchard 1973: plate 170.

⁴²⁵ Keel 1997:390.

⁴²⁶ Rütterswörden 2004:224.

5.3.3 The seraphim throne of Tutankhamun

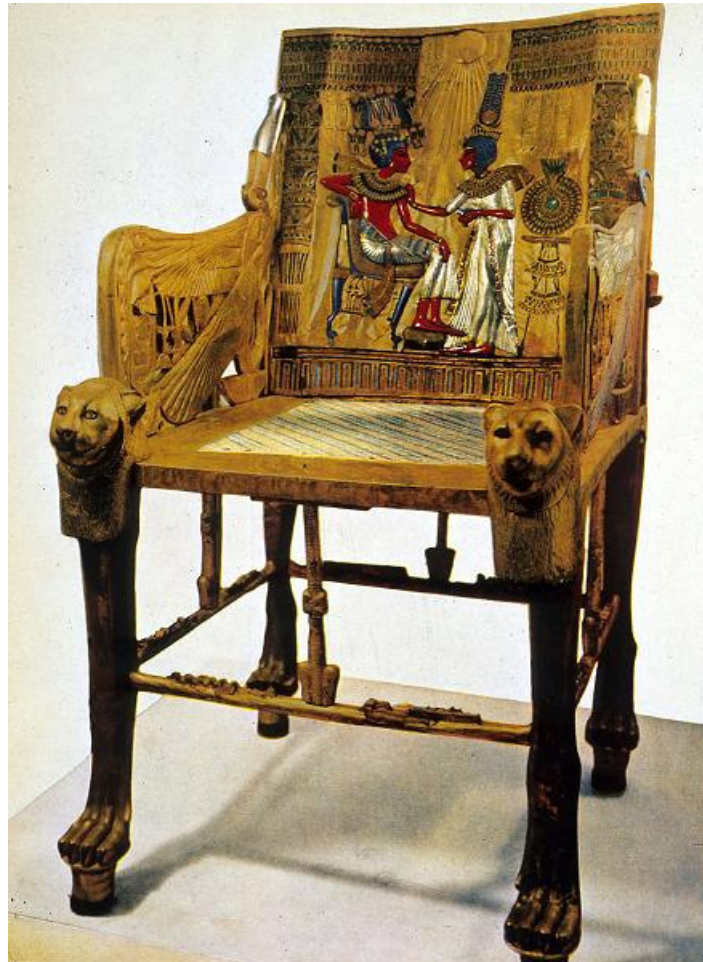


Figure 69

Tutankhamun's gilt throne.

Wood, silver, glass paste, semi-precious stones. 102 x 54 x 600 cm. Photograph from an unknown source. A very similar photograph of this throne can be found in Desroches-Noblecourt 1964, plate X, p 42.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁷ Desroches-Noblecourt 1964:42.

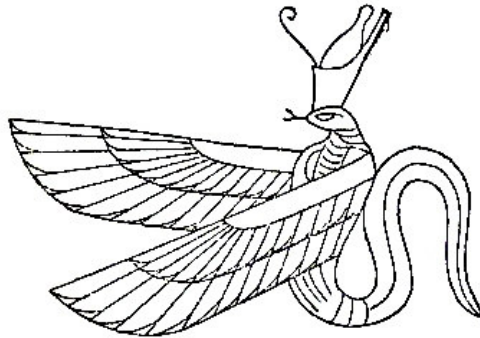


Figure 70

Cooper 2005:13 (Figure 22).

“The symbolic winged serpent of the goddess Mersokar, or Melsokar, wearing the crowns of the upper and lower kingdoms. (Wilkinson.)”⁴²⁸

This diagram shows a uraeus very similar to those forming the armrests of the throne of Tutankhamun pictured above. The significant thing about this throne is the fact that the uraei actually form part of the construction, just as the cherubim form part of the construction of the thrones discussed in 4.3.2. The throne is made of wood covered in gold leaf, recalling the construction of the ark of the covenant. On the back of the throne is a frieze of uraeus serpents, a decorative feature recalling the use of friezes of cherubim in various parts of the temple.



Figure 71

Detail of figure 69, showing decorative frieze of uraei.

The usual posture and function of the winged uraeus in Egyptian iconography is with wings outstretched, protecting the king. This symbolism is inverted in Isaiah’s vision, where the seraphim use their wings to protect *themselves* from the holiness of God – he does not need their protection.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁸ Cooper 2005:13.

⁴²⁹ Mettinger 1999:743.

5.3.4. The walls of Babylon

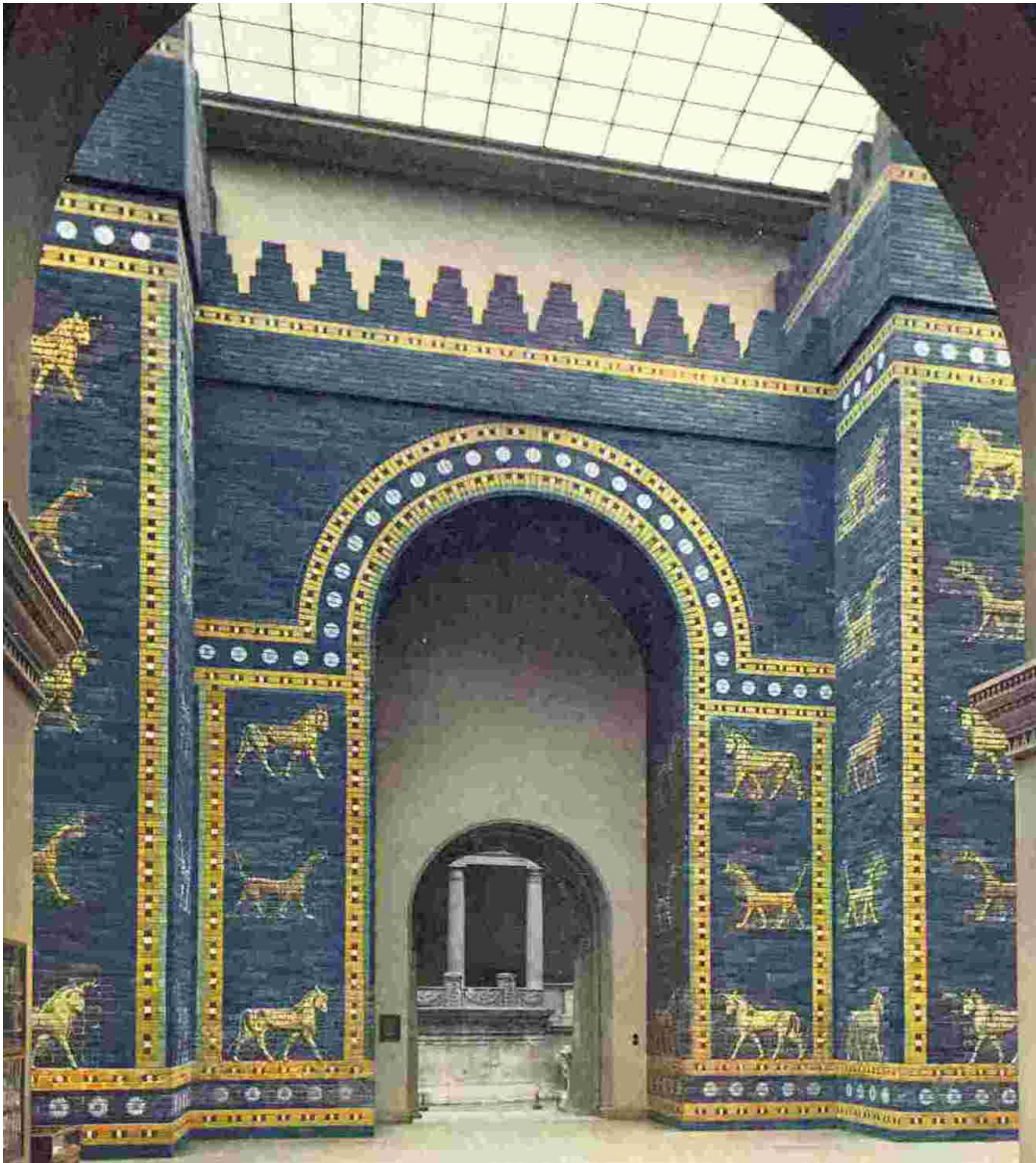


Figure 72

Parrot 1961:175 (Figure 222).

The Ishtar Gate, Babylon.⁴³⁰

The Ishtar Gate itself is decorated with 575 dragons and bulls, the animal attributes of Marduk and Adad respectively. The avenue leading up to the gate is decorated with 120 lions.⁴³¹ The fact that

⁴³⁰ Parrot 1961:174.

⁴³¹ Parrot 1961:174.

both lions and bulls are component animals of cherubim suggests that these dragons are related in significance. None of the animals on these walls have wings. If they did, the bulls and lions would be cherubim and so the dragons might then be seraphim.



Figure 73

Parrot 1961:174 (Figure 221 (c)).

One of the bulls from the Ishtar Gate.



Figure 74

Parrot 1961:174 (Figure 221 (a)).

One of the lions from the Sacred Way leading up to the Ishtar Gate.



Figure 75

Parrot 1961:174 (Figure 221 (b)).

One of the dragons on the Ishtar Gate. Another name sometimes given to these dragons is *sirrush*.

It can be seen from this iconographic study that not only were depictions of serpents and dragons plentiful in the ancient world, but these serpents and dragons are often benevolent and seen in contexts similar to those in which cherubim are found. They also serve as guardian figures. There are evil serpents and dragons too, but often these represent the chaos monster which is also depicted as a griffin- or cherub-like creature. In all, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest a kind of iconographic parallelism between griffin/sphinx/cherub figures, and the serpent/dragon figures which we may regard as being depictions of seraphim.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The texts in the Hebrew Bible in which cherubim are mentioned may be divided into two main groups: those where the cherub's main function is that of a guardian, and those where it serves as the mount or throne of God. Seraphim as heavenly beings are only mentioned once, in Isaiah 6, and here they seem also to be guardian figures of a sort but serve as a guard of honour rather than having any real protective function. Isaiah's vision of seraphim and Ezekiel's of cherubim are very similar to each other, and rather different from the other references to cherubim in the Hebrew Bible. The major differences are their upright, humanoid stance, their sense of movement and dynamism, and their association with fire.

Most Ancient Near Eastern depictions of composite creatures portray cherubim in a horizontal position. Many of the Biblical references to cherubim also suggest this stance. The Genesis passage does not have the cherubim holding the sword, for which they would have to be upright and have hands. The passages referring to the ark of the covenant suggest a cherubim throne, which would have to involve cherubim in a horizontal position. Psalm 18 has God riding a cherub, as one would ride a beast⁴³² – only possible if the cherub is envisaged to have a beastlike, horizontal posture. It seems possible from these Biblical passages, and highly likely in view of the iconographic evidence, that the usual conception of both cherubim and seraphim was of something that had a horizontal posture like that of an animal,⁴³³ and that Isaiah's and Ezekiel's descriptions were something unusual and out of the ordinary. This is borne out by Ezekiel's absolute insistence that their appearance was that of a man,⁴³⁴ that their legs were straight⁴³⁵ (i.e. they had an upright posture)⁴³⁶ and that they had a man's hands (something highly lacking amongst nearly all of the depictions seen in this study) under their wings.⁴³⁷ He would not have needed to be so firm about it if this were not something unusual. It is possible that this insistence is intended to highlight the cherubim's possession of the qualities usually attributed to man: the image of God, divine majesty, dignity, nobility, wisdom and reason.⁴³⁸ Another possibility is that he simply wanted to avoid any appearance of idolatry by

⁴³² Ps 18:11.

⁴³³ Mettinger 1999:191.

⁴³⁴ Ez 1:5.

⁴³⁵ Ez 1:7.

⁴³⁶ Eichrodt 1970:55.

⁴³⁷ Ez 10:8; 10:21.

⁴³⁸ Block (I) 1997:96, in Wright 2001:48.

emphasising their differences from, rather than their similarity to, the figures that would have been seen by the exiles in the temples and palaces of their captors.

The fact that Ezekiel's description of cherubim, in particular, is much more dynamic and full of movement than are the contemporary depictions of such creatures is probably of less significance. As seen in the section on Ezekiel, Wright notes this contrast⁴³⁹ and states that the prophet uses it to convey the "sovereign, roaming freedom of Yahweh".⁴⁴⁰ To some degree, however, the contrast is inherent in the media of transmission used. A picture or a carving can only be static; no stonemason can depict motion as a writer can. Wright's point is still valid and important, though, and there seems to be a definite difference between the guardian cherubim of Genesis, for instance, and those of Ezekiel, where the contrast of stasis versus flux cannot be accounted for by a difference in media. Ezekiel again takes the usual image and subverts it to make a theological point, one very apt and much developed in the Exile: God cannot be confined to one place.

Another difference between the depiction of cherubim and seraphim in the ancient world and the descriptions of them in the Hebrew Bible is their association with fire. Seraphim do not pose a problem. They are by definition associated with fire, and many ancient depictions of dragon-like creatures involve fire. However, while Ezekiel's cherubim are described as having fire and lightning among them, the depictions of cherubim that have been studied are not generally associated with fire or flames. Of the two possibilities – that the fire, via lightning, is an extension of the usual storm cloud and wind associations of cherubim, or that it is a borrowing from Isaiah's vision – it seems highly likely that Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim may have been influenced by Isaiah's vision of the seraphim.

The identification of the cherub as a composite creature as seen in the art of many Ancient Near Eastern cultures is on the whole agreed upon by most authorities; for the most part any differences are caused by scholars focusing on one particular hybrid creature. Some scholars, such as Albright⁴⁴¹ and de Vaux,⁴⁴² champion the winged sphinx, while others, such as Layard,⁴⁴³ prefer winged human-headed bulls. Borowski requires a depiction to have elements of all four of the component

⁴³⁹ Wright 2001:48.

⁴⁴⁰ Wright 2001:29.

⁴⁴¹ Albright 1938:2.

⁴⁴² de Vaux 1978:469.

⁴⁴³ Layard 1853:643-644.

creatures mentioned by Ezekiel in order to classify as a cherub,⁴⁴⁴ an approach which limits one's options and sometimes requires imaginative reconstruction of artefacts to make them fit the requirements. It is more likely that, with Freedman and O'Connor,⁴⁴⁵ we should view "cherub" as a slightly broader term encompassing various kinds of hybrid beings including winged bulls, sphinxes and griffins.

The identification of the seraph, on the other hand, is less sure; however, a good number of scholars including Keel and de Savignac agree that it is a snake-like composite being. Mettinger, in DDD, says that "the Seraphim are now generally conceived as winged serpents with certain human attributes."⁴⁴⁶ Keel identifies the seraph as the Egyptian uraeus;⁴⁴⁷ however, iconography shows that other cultures also have depictions of serpent-like composite creatures. These must not be neglected, and it seems that the term "seraph", then, like the term "cherub", should refer not to only one set form but to a range of composite creatures, this time ones with serpent or dragon attributes.

Certain authorities, for example the Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, are totally opposed to any connection between seraphim and serpents or dragons. Some, such as Harris, Archer and Waltke, attempt to refute the claims that others have made of a connection and provide alternative interpretations of verses that may be seen as supporting this theory,⁴⁴⁸ but others, such as Kissane,⁴⁴⁹ simply deny it without explanation. A possible reason for this tendency may be simple prejudice: serpents and dragons have so long in our culture been associated with evil that it seems almost blasphemous to suggest that a heavenly being considered to be a type of angel may have originally been envisaged as a serpent-like creature or dragon. However these evil connotations may even be helpful to the theory: even Harris, Archer and Waltke call Satan both "a serpent" and "a mighty angel",⁴⁵⁰ but although they consider the theory that Satan might once have been a cherub (see 3.1.8, the section on the dirge for the king of Tyre), they never consider the possibility that he may once have been a seraph, which would explain the connection between serpents and evil while not ignoring the many cases where serpents and dragons are "on the side of the angels", as it were. It is the conclusion reached by this study that seraphim are related, not only to the Egyptian symbol of the

⁴⁴⁴ Borowski 1995:40.

⁴⁴⁵ Freedman & O'Connor 1995:318.

⁴⁴⁶ Mettinger 1999:742.

⁴⁴⁷ Keel 1977:83.

⁴⁴⁸ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):884.

⁴⁴⁹ Kissane 1941:74.

⁴⁵⁰ Harris, Archer, Waltke 1980(2):875.

uræus serpent as argued by Keel and others,⁴⁵¹ but also to the Mesopotamian dragon-creatures such as the sirrush and Marduk's *muš huššu* -dragon. The chaos-monster is the evil counterpart of these symbols, and may be depicted as either a cherub-like or a seraph-like being.

⁴⁵¹ Rütterswörden 2004:224; Keel 1977:70-115.

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Summary:

Title: Cherubim and Seraphim: a textual and iconographic study

Student: Lesley Deysel

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Degree: MA (Ancient Languages and Cultural Studies)

The Hebrew words כְּרוּב (cherub) and שֶׁרָפִי (seraph) are well-known terms, but it is unclear exactly to what they refer. Many sources agree that the word *cherub* refers to a composite creature such as a griffin, sphinx or winged bull. Less research has been done on the meaning of the word *seraph*.

This study employs a textual and iconographic analysis to attempt to reconstruct a picture of what the authors of the Hebrew Bible had in mind when they wrote about *cherubim* and *seraphim*. Every text in the Hebrew Bible mentioning one of these words is listed, translated and analysed with the aid of various sources. Special attention is paid to texts that discuss *cherubim* or *seraphim* at length, such as the description of the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus, the visions of *cherubim* in Ezekiel and the reference to *seraphim* in Isaiah.

Artefacts from certain cultures and dating within a specific timeframe, depicting composite creatures, are studied and analysed. Possible depictions of *seraphim* are identified, using information from the texts of the Hebrew Bible and through analogy with widely-accepted depictions of *cherubim*. The study contends that where *cherubim* were seen as winged composite creatures with parts of two or more of the eagle, lion, ox/bull and human, *seraphim* was a term used to describe winged composite creatures including parts of the serpent. It is also argued that *seraphim* are generally not associated with dragonlike composite creatures because of the negative connotations that modern symbolism has of snakes and dragons, and that the ancient Hebrews did not necessarily share this view.

List of key terms:

Cherubim
Seraphim
Iconography
Ezekiel
Isaiah
Serpent
Dragon
Griffin
Sphinx
Merkabah
Temple
Ark (of the covenant)

Opsomming:

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Die Hebreeuse woorde כְּרֻבִים (*gerub*) en שֵׂרָפִים (*seraf*) is bekende terme, maar dit is onduidelik waarna hulle verwys. Baie bronne is dit eens dat die woord *gerub* verwys na 'n gedierte met buitengewone en verskillende saamgestelde liggaamsdele soos 'n griffioen, 'n sfinks of 'n gevleulde bul. Minder navorsing is al gedoen oor die betekenis van die woord *seraf*.

In hierdie studie word 'n tekstuele en ikonografiese analise benut om te poog om 'n beeld te reconstrueer van wat die skrywers van die Hebreeuse Bybel in gedagte gehad het toe hulle geskryf het oor *gerubs* en *serafs*. Elke teks in die Hebreeuse Bybel wat een van hierdie woorde gebruik, word gelys, vertaal en geanaliseer deur ander bronne ook te benut. Spesiale aandag word gegee aan tekste wat breedvoerig oor óf *gerubs* óf *serafs* handel, soos die beskrywing van die Verbondsark in Eksodus, en die visioene van *gerubs* in Esegïel en van *serafs* in Jesaja.

Artefakte van bepaalde kulture en wat binne 'n sekere tydraam gedateer kan word, wat diere uit saamgestelde dele uitbeeld, word bestudeer en geanaliseer. Moontlike uitbeeldings van *serafs* word geïdentifiseer deur gebruik te maak van inligting in tekste van die Hebreeuse Bybel en deur middel van analogie met algemeen aanvaarde uitbeeldings van *gerubs*. Die studie beoog om aan te dui dat waar die *gerubs* beskou was as gevleulde gediertes bestaande uit saamgestelde gedeeltes met twee of meer dele van 'n arend, 'n leeu, bul en mens, verwys die term *seraf* gewoonlik na 'n gevleulde gedierte wat dele van 'n slang bevat. Dit word ook geargumenteer dat *serafs* nie algemeen met 'n draakagtige gevleulde gedierte geassosieer is nie weens die negatiewe konnotasies wat geheg word aan slange en drake in moderne simbolisme en dat die antieke Hebreërs nie noodwendig hierdie beskouing gedeel het nie.

Sleutelterme:

Gerubs

Serafs

Ikonografie

Esegiël

Jesaja

Slang

Draak

Griffioen

Sfinks

Merkabah

Tempel

Verbondsark