

Cherubim An Inquiry Into An Enigma

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Introduction

After many years of Biblical research, there is still no consensus about the meaning and nature of cherubim; hence the subtitle - an inquiry into an enigma. This paper discusses two prevailing notions about cherubim and presents alternatives to their enigmatic identity.

The common notions, that lasted for many centuries, perceived 'angels' and 'cherubim' as winged human figures; they were depicted as such in almost all artistic representations of Biblical and Christian themes. Only in the last century, no doubt, thanks to archaeological discoveries in Mesopotamia, have scholars begun to reinterpret cherubim: a new concept, now widely accepted, relates them to the images of winged complex-creatures found in Mesopotamian palaces. Such artistic images - of unnatural or supernatural creatures - have many variations in the cultures of the ancient world. They were usually eclectic compositions of human and animal parts: animals' heads on human bodies in ancient Egypt, the several parts of the griffon and the chimaera in Greece, and in Mesopotamia - winged human bodies with animal heads, and winged animals with human heads, as can be seen on Ashurnasirpal II's palace walls, now in The British Museum.

How relevant are such artistic images to the 'cherubim' of the ancient Hebraic culture, that is - from the formation of the nation in Moses' days until the destruction of the First Temple? Do such Middle Eastern images enable us to deduce the nature and form of the cherubim in Gen 3,24, of those on the ark (Ex 25,18) and of the ornaments of King Solomon's Temple (1Kgs 6)?

U. Cassuto's answer, like that of many other commentators, including museum publications¹, is decisive - cherubim are an eclectic image, common to the Bible and the neighbouring cultures: "Ezekiel's description is well known. The neighbouring peoples also envisaged the cherubim as creatures of composite form, mostly as winged lions (of oxen) with a human head", and they had two functions: "guarding" and performing as "the embodiment of the strong winds, which drive the clouds of the sky, the chariot of the Holy One blessed be He".

Cassuto's perception is debatable on three points. In equating the symbolic artistic images of Israel and Mesopotamia, via the first function of "guarding" (because the Mesopotamian figures are posted, as guards, in the palaces's entrance), he seems to ignore his own emphasis, often repeated, on the uniqueness of the Biblical "product" compared to parallels in other cultures. He claims that in spite of similarities between the stories and literary images of the Bible and the literature of other peoples, the uniqueness of the Biblical

¹U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (trans.: I. Abrahams, Jerusalem, 1972), I, 175; *The British Museum Publication: R. D. Barnett, "Cherubim and the Temple of Solomon", Illustrations of Old Testament History* (London, 1966), 46-47.

ones is their adaptation to the "national spirit of Israel and its religious convictions"². This implied, among other things, avoidance of relating to the unnatural and supernatural: "The Tora ... was careful not to introduce ingredients that were not completely in accord with its doctrines"³. This unique value-perception caused the elimination of theogenic elements in the creation stories of Genesis and the illumination of rational elements⁴. We may conclude, therefore, that plastic-artistic images of unnatural and supernatural creatures, and conceptual relations to them, do not correspond to the kind of Biblical convictions emphasized by Cassuto. Execution of such plastic images on the Temple's walls, and in particular "guarding" the content of the Ark seems inconceivable. For the same reason - avoidance of the unnatural - we have to reject the notion that cherubim were 'winged human forms', as the representation of angels common to many generations of European artists. Similarly in literary interpretations that regard all creatures around God (including cherubim and seraphim) as angels with different functions⁵.

The second point is Cassuto's total and literal reliance on the descriptions of Ezekiel. One has to bear in mind that Ezekiel's visions may be just that: visions. As can be deduced from archaeological findings, the forms in the visions were influenced by later Babylonian and Assyrian plastic representations of the Mesopotamian cultures in which he lived (e.g., the four-winged creatures in palace carvings, now in The British Museum). These do not necessarily reflect the much earlier visual representations of King Solomon's Temple. Thus, his description of the Temple's ornaments (Ez 41,18) has no parallel in 1Kgs (artistic and semantic elaboration, further on). Ezekiel's description of the Temple's frieze, of two winged creatures and a central element, implies a repeating heraldic motif and, as such, is a stylistic ornament of his period (e.g.: the reconstructed friezes of Saragon II's palace in Khorasbad)⁶.

The third point concerns the second function that Cassuto relates to the cherubim, "embodiments of strong winds". For artists, this means to give a plastic form to, or to create an attribute that symbolizes, a strong wind. The subject of winds/weather in the neighbouring cultures was related to Had/Haddad, "The god of Storm, the greatest god in the Canaanite pantheon"⁷. In this capacity, as the god of the winds and the weather, he is presented in many carvings as a natural human being, standing astride the back of a natural ox, like the example in fig. 1.

Artistic representations common in the region, and recurring throughout the eras, are carved Stellas similar to the one of the 8th century B. C. presented in fig. 1: in all of them a figure stands on the back of an animal, and the species of the animal and other attributes point to the identity of the god. The rock

²Ibid., 9.

³Ibid., 11.

⁴R. Gilboa, *Creator-Created Relationships: Mythic Motifs in Genesis. Read as a Literary Text* (an unpublished thesis presented to The University of Manchester), 1993.

⁵L. K. Handy, "Dissenting Deities or Obedient Angels: Divine Hierarchies in Ugarit and the Bible" (*Biblical Research*, XXXV, 1990), 18-35.

⁶E.g.: S. Lloyd, *The Art of the Ancient Near East* (London, 1961), 199.

⁷U. Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath* (Jerusalem, 1958), 46-47. (Hebrew sources are in Italics.)

carving from Maltaya (Iraq: 704-681 B. C.) epitomizes this concept by presenting a procession of gods standing on animals⁸. The animal is an attribute that may point to a function of the god; thus, the ox of the storm god/weather god relates to the element of fertility with regard to agriculture (a subject beyond the scope of this discussion). However, the animal is not an attribute of the winds or weather, although the relevant god may stand on it. Cassuto presents an ancient stela (Ras Shamra, 1900-1750 B. C.) in which the same god stands on water - another motif crucial to agriculture - and the ox, as a symbol of agricultural fertility, is symbolically represented by two horns attached to the god's hat⁹.

The storm is sometimes represented by a whip, but the recurring curved lines that the god holds in his hand symbolize lightning - the epitome of the storm (see fig. 1 and others). This artistic representation of lightning is a universal symbol that appeared before, being the attribute of the ancient Babylonian god Marduch (and his successor in Assyria, the god Assur), and much later - of the Greek/Roman god Jupiter. I know of no plastic image in the region, in which the function and attribute of weather elements are symbolized by one of those eclectic creatures discussed earlier and advocated by Cassuto. Therefore, if we agree with him that 'cherubim' are embodiments of "strong winds", then their plastic representation cannot be his suggested "animal", and the word 'cherubim' requires interpreting anew.

The following attempt to research the artistic representation of cherubim as the attribute of the Israelite God, while, as far as possible, excluding all unnatural elements and adhering to the natural world, is carried out in three stages:

- a) The semantic inquiry - looking into all the possibilities that emanate from the Biblical text alone, as no plastic representation has remained that can be attributed with certainty to the word 'cherub';
- b) The fauna inquiry - finding possible species corresponding to the Biblical images;
- c) The artistic inquiry - suggesting artistic possibilities, with a comparison to the contemporary artistic notions of the region, but within the logical-natural limits of what Cassuto calls "religious consciousness".

A. Semantic Inquiry.

The Biblical text does not explain what the cherubim are, and the use of the particle "the" implies that the reader understands the term (Gen 3,24) "and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden the cherubim...". Clarification of the image, therefore, requires the accumulation of data from different verses. The richest source is Ezekiel but, as previously mentioned, careful attention is required: its descriptions are not descriptions *per se*, but accounts of "divine visions" (1,1) in which natural and fantasy elements are intertwined. Ezekiel's images, thus, do not necessarily correspond to other Biblical passages that lack the dream-element.

The suggested starting point is the vision in Jerusalem (Ez 9): God's glory ascends from the cherub (9,4) and the sound of the wings of cherubim is heard (9,5). Cherubim in the vision, thus, are winged creatures,

⁸A comprehensive item: a progress of gods standing on animals, carved on a rock in Maltaya (Iraq). See: J. B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures (Related to the O. T.)* (Princeton, N. J., 1954), fig 537.

⁹U. Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath*, Pl. 4, fig. 2.

and the same perception is stated in the realistic description of the Ark (Ex 25,20).

Ezekiel's visionary cherubim (10,8) have "a form of a man's hand beneath their wings" and each cherub has four faces: a cherub's, a man's, a lion's and an eagle's face (10,14). In spite of Ezekiel's statements (10,15,20) that "this is the living creature that I saw by the river Kebar", and further on he stresses that "the likeness of their faces was the same as the faces which I have seen by the river Kebar" (10,22), the Biblical text does not agree with him. Because in the first vision on the river Kebar (1,10) he saw "the face of a man...of a lion...of an ox...of an eagle...", whereas in the second vision - where our discussion started - the face of "a cherub" comes instead of "an ox" (or a bull). Does Ezekiel equate bull and cherub? Probably not, because the expression 'cherub with a face of an ox' indicates that the two are different elements.

Verse 10,14 tells us that a creature by the name cherub has, among other faces, the face of a cherub. We may deduce, therefore, that a creature by the name cherub which has a cherub's face implies an autonomous living creature; as it was defined "a winged creature" - the conclusion has to be that cherub is a natural winged creature. The additional faces of this creature may point to the eclectic elements of the vision which, in the end, presents an unnatural thing which is regarded in the text as "the living creature" (10,15).

A glance at words similar to the Hebrew form "cherub", in languages of the ancient world, provides little insight and partial help because "the ways in which this form is presented are so different and have changed so much in different periods, that it is not possible to derive the cherubim of Gen 3,24 from any definite one" says C. Westermann¹⁰. He and E. A. Speiser mention the Akkadian cognates Karibu, Karubi and Kurubi that designate a minor interceding deity (Speiser)¹¹ and also a being at the entrance of the sanctuary (Westermann). W. Gesenius provides more natural aspects and tells us that the verb means "to be gracious" and that the Assyrian adjective "KARABU" means "mighty, great"¹². If we combine what we already know about cherubim to be above-stated qualities, we may say that the winged creature we are looking for, is said to be graceful and impressive.

B. The Fauna Inquiry.

According to Ezekiel's visions, the winged creature has four wings (1,6; 10,19), but in the Temple's Holy of Holies only two wings are mentioned (1Kgs 6,24). The earliest description of the Ark (Ex 25,20; 37,9) mentions wings but does not specify their number. The three main zoological categories of winged creatures, commonly known, are birds with feathered wings, insects with wings of chitin, and reptiles and bats with wings of skin. For reasons that concern artistic representation, to be elaborated further on, I ignore at this stage of the discussion the possibilities of cherub = bird and cherub = bat. On the other hand, the four-winged creatures in Ezekiel's visions focus our attention on the insect world, which will be our first inquiry.

¹⁰C. Westermann, Genesis 1-11 (London, 1984), 274.

¹¹E. A. Speiser, Genesis (The Anchor Bible), 24.

¹²"cherub", W. Gesenius, Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (trans.: E. Robinson, Oxford 1966).

1. The Insect World.

In Middle Eastern life, insects - mosquitoes, flies and locusts - were considered a plague because of the damage they caused to agriculture. A harmless insect, an extremely decorative and impressive one, that jumps to mind is the butterfly, but it has to be rejected on the grounds of context: the chosen insect has to be the attribute of God, as stated in the introduction, and some element in its nature has to correspond to, or point to, some function of God that relates to people's interests (like the agricultural ox and its relation to the agricultural weather god/storm god). Butterflies, graceful as they might be, were of no use and did not point to or symbolize any important aspect of people's lives; they have no connection to strong winds and thus do not correspond to the context of God's vehicle.

A suitable candidate is the dragonfly (*Odonata*). It is a common, graceful and, relatively, large insect that does not harm agriculture and lives upon water all year long. This, perhaps, is the reason why, in Sumerian texts, dragonflies are usually connected with floods (rising of river-levels¹³ - a crucial factor in agriculture!). Their Sumerian name "ku-li" may project a sense of beauty, because it also means "feminine finery"¹⁴. Taking into account changes that occur in spoken language, the letter "L" is quite often substituted by "R" (as part of the group-letters LMNR)¹⁵ and, thus, it is quite possible that in different circumstances and periods, the group-name of dragonflies was pronounced as "ku-ri", and later developed into the Hebrew "cherub".

As the Biblical text mentions two and four wings, whereas dragonflies today have four, one could suggest that the artist who perceived the image for the Temple - if he indeed chose a dragonfly - formed his design in the resting pose, in which certain kinds lift up their back-wings to embrace the front ones¹⁶, thus creating the illusion of a single pair of wings.

Four kinds of dragonflies are mentioned in the ancient Sumerian/Akkadian 14th HAR-RA-HUBULLU table¹⁷; nowadays, eighty kinds of dragonflies have been identified in the region of the Land of Israel and, therefore, it would be hard to pinpoint the exact suitable kind. More alternatives arise, if we consider the possibility that the number of kinds and of wings, as well as the size of the bodies, may have been larger in ancient times (ecological destruction!). One can only assume that the artist would have chosen the biggest, most beautiful and graceful amongst them.

No hands are mentioned in the description of cherubim in the Ark and in Solomon's Temple. But if we accept that Ezekiel's vision (10,21): "and the likeness of the hands of a man was under their wings" projects

¹³M. Civil & all, eds., *The Assyrian Dictionary*, 503.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵On the MLNR group: H. Maggid, *Musagey Yesod* (Tel-Aviv, 1984), 24. The most common exchange is N-M, where the Aramaic ending N is in Hebrew M: *MESUBIN-MESUBIM*. For our purpose, e.g.: *SHALSHELET* (Thalmud: Baba Kama, 7,7) - *SHARSHERET* (Ex 28,14).

¹⁶P. Amitai, *Insects of Israel* (Jerusalem, 1987), 50-51.

¹⁷S. Bodenheimer, *The Fauna in Biblical Lands* (Jerusalem, 1949) 180. This research, in the chapter quoted here, heavily leans on B. Landsberger's work on the subject (cited further on).

reality, then the hands create a problem in identifying the cherub as a dragonfly. In the attempt to adhere to the natural, one could project the division of human arms into three joints to the front legs of the dragonfly (which act like hands, rubbing each other), and say that dragonflies legs too, have three parts that parallel the upper arm, forearm and hand; the five human fingers, as well, project on the dragonfly's five sections of the lower "hand"¹⁸. But if we relate to Ezekiel's description as part of "a vision", then his very description of a winged figure with human hands asserts the previously stated claim about the influence of similar ornamental elements that he could have seen in the palaces and common objects around him; because this is how many of them look (e. g.: 9th century B. C. amulets of four-winged protecting-spirits, sometimes bird-headed or lion-headed, with a human body and human hands)¹⁹.

2. The Reptile World

The 14th HAR-RA-HUBULLU table mentioned above presents ancient zoological lists and S. Bodenheimer interpreted and added to B. Landsberger's pioneering work on it. Both scholars tried to identify ancient fauna by comparing them with species found in early 20th Century Mesopotamia. The possible extinction of species during the intervening millennia does not seem to have been taken into consideration, probably because they lacked our contemporary awareness of the destruction of species. Therefore, the possibility that the cherub was a winged reptile has not been seriously considered, because nowadays such creatures are unknown in The Fertile Crescent. Nor have any fossils been unearthed yet, that might testify to their existence in this region.

Literature, on the other hand, mentions winged reptiles. In written Hebrew sources they are explicitly described as a kind of snake - the "flying seraphim" of Is 14,29 and 30,6. In his monumental book, *The fauna in Biblical Lands*, S. Bodenheimer mentions a possible zoological equivalent for the seraphim - a small winged reptile that exists today, a Malaysian lizard (*Draco Volans*)²⁰. But he rejects the validity of this possibility because of the modern-day creature's poor perseverance and the fact that very few of them reached Europe (?) whilst still alive. Bodenheimer regards the issue of "winged seraph = winged lizard" as an enigma, and adds that it has not yet been shown "that creatures of that faraway region were known in the Middle East in 1000 B. C." However, he adds that we "cannot exclude the possibility that such creatures may be discovered in southern Arabia". On these zoological premises Bodenheimer rejects the possibility that the flying seraphim in Isaiah are flying lizards and as well the possible existence of flying reptiles. As contemporary zoology does not correspond to the Biblical data, a closer inquiry into Biblical references to seraphim seems to be in order:

-- The Israelites confront them in the desert (Num 21) and the text (the voice of the author) tells (v. 6) about the "seraphim snakes"; after Moses' prayer for salvation, God tells him (v. 8): "form thyself a seraph and set it upon a pole". The people, however, refer to the creatures as "snakes" (v. 7), and Moses forms "a copper snake" (v. 9). "Snake", apparently, is the general name of the group; "seraph", as implied by verse 6,

¹⁸S. Bodenheimer, *General Entomology* (Jerusalem, 1961), 31, 43.

¹⁹The British Museum (London), No. WA90998, 124578.

²⁰S. Bodenheimer, *The Fauna in Biblical Lands*, 105.

is a kind of snake. In their complaint, the people do not specify the species but rather pronounce the name of the group. Assertion to this distinction can be found when Moses later gives a retrospective account of the tribulations in the desert and counts three creatures (Deut 8,15): "...snake seraph and scorpion,...". "Snake", therefore, has a different meaning from "seraph", but neither of these quotations clarifies the special features that distinguish the seraph among the snakes.

-- The occurrences in Isaiah are more detailed and can be divided into two groups. The first one is within speeches about Palestine (Is 14,29) and Judea leaning on Egypt for help (Is 30,6):

מִשָּׂא בְהִמּוֹת נָנֵב בְּאֶרֶץ צָרָה וְצוּקָה 30,6 כִּי־מִשָּׂרֵשׁ נִחַשׁ יֵצֵא צָפַע 14,29
 לְבִיא וְלִישׁ מִדָּם אֲפַעָה וְשָׂרָף מֵעוֹפֵף : וְפִרְיוֹ שָׂרָף מֵעוֹפֵף :

respectively. In these verses, the identification of seraph as a kind of snake - not a lizard, as suggested by Bodenheimer - is obvious by virtue of verse 29's symmetry and by the couplets formed in verse 6b; both verses specify that it has wings. The second group is within Isaiah's visions (6:2) where the seraphim are seen as having six wings. The correct interpretation, I suggest, is to relate to Isaiah's visions as we did before to Ezekiel's: to distinguish between the kernel of reality and the layer of dream-fantasy. At this stage, therefore, it can be said that seraph (as a creature known to the prophet either directly or from historical sources) is a winged snake with an unknown number of wings.

Bodenheimer's disbelief in the existence of winged snakes is relegated in his book under the title "legends about snakes"²¹, where he quotes only European classical sources of *tales about Eastern snakes*: Herodotus (107,3) tells about flying snakes, similar to watersnakes, that live in Arabia and migrate every year to Egypt, there to be destroyed by the holy Ibis. Also cited is Lucanus (Pharsalia, 9:607ff.), who tells about African snakes (believed to be the product of Medusa's blood) and amongst them he counts the "flying Yakulus"²² (a possible linguistic connection with the Sumerian "ku-li"?). Bodenheimer overlooks possible Mesopotamian literary sources, one of which I would like to cite:

Speiser's popular English translation of "Enuma Elish"²³ mentions the great mother "HUBUR" who gave birth to everything, and also created monstrous poisonous snakes, amongst them "dragon" and later on, among other creatures with figurative names, "dragonfly"²⁴:

"Mother Hubur, she who fashions all things, (132)
 Added matching weapons, bore monster serpents (MUŠMAḪḪU)
 Sharp of tooth, unsparing of fang.

...
 She set up the Viper, the Dragon (MUŠḪUŠIŠU) and the Sphinx (140)
 The great lion-demons, the Mad-Dog, and the Scorpion-Man,
 Mighty lion-demons, the Dragonfly (KULI-LU), the centaur -

²¹Ibid. The whole issue is discussed in pp. 103-104.

²²Ibid., 96.

²³ANET, 62-63; Table I, lines 132-143 of the Mesopotamian text.

²⁴Speiser's English translation of the text seems to be greatly influenced by Landsberger's findings, mentioned above (p. 8), which also contributed to definitions in The Assyrian Dictionary.

Bearing weapons that spare not, fearless in battle"²⁵.

"Dragonfly", in English, is the common name (O. E. D.) for creatures of the genus "*Odonata*" that exist today (discussed earlier), whereas "dragon" is considered to be a "fire-breathing monster like a winged crocodile or snake" (O. E. D.). The first part of the definition of dragon indicates a legendary creature, whereas the second projects a certain confusion between, or mixture of, snakes and lizards - both belonging to the reptils group. The same attitude is evident in D. Van Buren's research, based on artistic representations (mainly of seals), of the dragon in Mesopotamia²⁶: "They crawl like serpents or walk on four short legs like a crocodile or lizard; although they are sometimes winged, they do not fly". Is it possible that, in ancient times, there existed a kind of zoological confusion between the two groups of reptiles? In regard to the creatures mentioned by Van Buren, the mere use of the word "dragon" presents a zoological problem in equating it to a natural living creature. In its legendary aspect, the word fits well into the common approaches to the "Enuma Elish" text which regard it as a legend - a creation myth. Little attention has been given to the dragon's possible relation to natural phenomena: the existing interpretation or identification in The Assyrian Dictionary of some figurative snake-names as constellations²⁷, may suggest the possibility of a less "legendary" interpretation of the poetic verses and figurative names of Enuma Elish. A less legendary interpretation may also suggest the possible existence of ancient zoological creatures.

Figurative names are usually based on the observation of nature, and Landsberger and Bodenheimer, as apparent from their research, seem to overlook the figurative in favour of matching known snakes, or likely candidates, with the aforementioned Sumerian lists; this is also done by relating the etymological expressions to artistic representations found on seals²⁸. Landsberger's brief treatment of only some legendary snakes: "*MUŠĦUŠŠU*" while excluding others from the discussion²⁹, may indicate a possible lacuna in his interpretation of Sumerian zoology. The omission of the rest of the list of snakes, I suggest, precludes a possible discussion of winged snakes or a snake *MUŠGALLU* which resembles a mouse³⁰ [and this brings to mind another alternative mentioned earlier, namely: cherub = bat]; also several different numbers of legs are mentioned for the *HULMITTU* (p. 62; listed under the family of *MUŠĦUŠŠU* on p. 55), fire-snakes (No. 31-33 in his list) and one with a divided tongue (No. 30). Bodenheimer concludes the whole discussion saying that "It is probable that the knowledge of the ancient Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian was wider than we were able to deduce from analyzing the list of these elusive names"³¹. Therefore, taking into account the

²⁵I am grateful for the help given by Prof. M. Anbar of Tel-Aviv University, for the equivalent Sumerian expressions in the text for the snakes and dragonfly.

²⁶D. Van Buren, "The Dragon in Mesopotamia", *Orientalia*, 1946, 1-20.

²⁷"mušĥušu", *The Assyrian Dictionary*, 270-b.

²⁸E. Landsberger, *Die Fauna des alten Mesopotamien* (1963), 48: §3-b.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 55: § 8-b.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 52: 1/10.

³¹S. Bodenheimer, *The Fauna in Biblical Lands*, 180.

destruction of habitat and of fauna and flora, we may also conclude that our current zoological knowledge does not necessarily correspond to the state of nature of four millenia ago. The possibility that flying snakes existed in days of antiquity might solve the nature of God's curse in the Garden of Eden: the text does not say how that particular snake moved; the curse explains what happened to this kind in the aftermath of the affair (Gen 3,15): "upon thy belly shalt thou go..."

If we accept the possibility, written in ancient texts - including the Bible - that once upon a time there existed kinds of winged snakes, and that the seraph was one of them, then we may regard the cherubim too as another kind³².

In the investigation of fauna, two possible interpretations of "cherub" have been presented: among insects - the dragonfly, and among the vertebrates of the region - flying snakes.

C. The Artistic Inquiry.

Let us now consider the two suggested zoological possibilities - cherub = dragonfly and cherub = flying snake - and see how they correspond to the Biblical text as artistic elements at work, and how they relate to parallel elements in the art of the ancient era. The starting point is the Biblical text which elaborates on forms, and the emanating ornamental problems that Bezalel Ben-Uri, being the first commissioned Israelite artist, had to face.

1. Cherub as an attribute of God.

It was a common artistic practice in Canaanite art to place a standing god on the back of an animal, as illustrated in fig 1. Similar artistic expressions are also found in Egyptian art (the goddess Kadesh on the back of a lion)³³, in which animals were almost always attributes of gods or were related to them. As an artist providing a new set of artistic images for a nation in its formative stages, Bezalel had to solve a difficult conceptual problem: to form a visual image that would be understood by people who were used to seeing gods in a familiar artistic context, but also to choose a creature and setting that did not relate to the contemporary pantheon. In other words, his challenge was to fashion a unique religio-national artistic character out of familiar patterns. After excluding manifestations of the unnatural and supernatural, the artistic possibilities for design are two: either to choose ordinary items and animals (like the cow of the Egyptian goddess Hathor or the ox of the Canaanite Haddad) or to give God a restrained mythological attribute by choosing a creature remote from everyday life (like the lion of Kadesh).

The Biblical text tells us that the chosen representation for the Hebrew God was a covered ark as an item, and the attribute creatures chosen to carry the cover - supposedly carrying the unseen God - winged

³²In his conclusion to "Cherub", W. Gesenius (see note 12) suggests the possibility that the seraphim of Jes 6,2-6 are another form of the cherubim. This is an indirect support to the suggestion of this paper. However, Gesenius does not equate cherubim with zoological winged snakes.

³³J. B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures* (Princeton, N.J., 1954), figs. 470-474b.

cherubs. This kind of representation has no parallel in Egyptian or Canaanite art and, thereby, we may deduce that the artist purposely avoided any direct artistic reference to cultures that could confuse, influence or lead astray a community in the process of becoming a nation: Egyptian art, whose sphere they had left and which, no doubt, influenced the Golden Calf made earlier, and Canaanite art whose sphere of influence they were about to enter. The cherub as His chosen animal, thus, was incorporated into God's title, "the rider on cherubs", and remained as such continuously during Biblical times.

(1Sam 4,4; Is 37,16): הָיָה צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים

How do the dragonfly and the winged snake fit into this concept? The dragonfly would have been a totally new artistic concept because there are no archaeological sources, in writing or in carving, that describe a dragonfly as an attribute of a god. Its conceptual context is sophisticated and fascinating: dragonflies tend to circle and fly in groups and thus correspond to God's title as "rider on cherubs". Moreover, as previously mentioned, the dragonfly lives and multiplies en masse near rivers and water, thus evoking the motifs of life and multiplication.

The winged snake is not a new element in the history of art: it was the attribute of the ancient Babylonian god of storms, Marduch, as represented on seals dating from the third millennium B. C. In the story of "Enuma Elish" mentioned above, the various snakes are defined as monsters that follow Tihamat in her war against Marduch. One of the seals seems to illustrate this battle (fig. 2; the god carries the attribute of lightning). A small detail from this seal is relevant to our discussion: the snake has two hands with fingers. Another seal represents a domesticated snake (fig. 3) wearing a kind of hat on its forehorns and drawing a plough; this may be an illustration of a state of affairs after Marduch's victory, where the dangerous animal turns into a creature useful for agriculture and, as such, it also appears beside the god who stands on water (fig. 4)³⁴.

In another seal, a crucial one for our discussion, the domesticated snake is represented as performing a task similar to that in the Hebrew concept: it has wings and draws the carriage of the god of storms, who is identified by the whip, whilst the goddess (standing on a lion) carries the marks of lightning (fig. 5).

If indeed the alternative of cherub = winged snake corresponds to the attributes of the Hebrew God, then the artist - a millennium later and in a different geographical region - apparently turned to the ancient Mesopotamian artistic sources, to the region from which came Abraham, the first patriarch of the Hebrew nation. The "political" reason for this choice - in that particular period of leaving Egypt - is obvious: evoking the memory of the forefathers is the factor that helped Moses to win the hearts and approval of the people of Israel for the journey back the Canaan, as God pointed out for him (Ex 3,15).

2. Cherubim as Ornaments.

This seems to be a later issue, because the Biblical text does not mention cherubim as a design in the

³⁴The stela in Cassuto's book (mentioned in the discussion, see note 9) also presents the god standing on water.

tent's ornaments; they were fashioned for Solomon's Temple (first millennium B. C.) and mentioned in many chapters of 1Kgs. As a decorative element they are mentioned amidst natural motifs and, thus, it may provide another indication of them being another natural entity among others. But apart from mentioning the wings, there is no elaboration of details that might help us to reconstruct the plastic image of the cherubim. The most detailed verse is 1Kgs 6,29:

וְאֵת קַלְעוֹת הַכְּרוּבִים הַבְּיֹת מִסָּבִיב קָלַע פְּתוּחֵי
מִקְלָעוֹת כְּרוּבִים וְתַמְרוֹת וּפְטוּרֵי צִצִּים מִלְּפָנִים וּלְחֵצוֹן;

This is a description of a continuous arabesque of plaits formed, or woven, from cherubim and palm leaves, where the plaits are decorated, inside and outside the loop, by flowering buds.

The phrasing of this description in 1Kgs differs from that of Ez 41,18-19 which does not include the term "plait":

וְעִשׂוּי כְּרוּבִים וְתַמְרוֹת
וְתַמְרוֹהַ בְּיַד כְּרוּב לְכְרוּב וְשָׁנִים שָׁנִים לְכְרוּב: וּפְנֵי אֲדָם
אֶל-הַתַּמְרוֹהַ מִפּוֹ וּפְנֵי-כַפִּיר אֶל-הַתַּמְרוֹהַ מִפּוֹ עִשׂוּי אֶל-
כַּל-הַבְּיֹת סָבִיב סָבִיב:

Ezekiel's description, as mentioned in page 59 accords with Mesopotamian ornaments in which there is a central element and two similar images on each side, all of which form an ornamental unit; the unit on the frieze is repeated *ad infinitum* (cf. the palace ornaments of Saragon II in Khorasbad). A finding presented in Fig. 6 illustrates Ezekiel's description almost to the letter: two winged figures, one human-headed and one lion-headed, facing central element of a palm tree. But this is not a "plait" even if it is repeated all along a frieze. The conceptual design described in 1Kgs, where it explicitly states that one element, cherub, is plaited with another element, palm leaf, is different: it accords with a basic ornamental design, common to cultures of the region, which is made possible by interweaving lines (fig. 7 - lowest motif; fig. 4 = sleeve and crown decorations). If this is the basic pattern, then "cherubim plaits" can be formed only if the cherub has a linear body which can be plaited, and both suggestions, cherub = dragonfly and cherub = winged snake, correspond to this demand for linearity.

Such is not the case with the squarish body of Cassuto's "animal", with the round bodies of birds or bats which, for this very reason, were excluded from the discussion (p. 62), or with winged human bodies (although linear, they do not lend themselves to being plaited and, in any case, are unnatural). Nonlinear design of elements like these could be forced into a "fake" kind of plait only if some detail was monstrously exaggerated, thus creating an eclectic creature beyond the bounds of the natural: fig. 8 demonstrates such a case, where lions form a quasi-plait by intertwining their over-extended necks with an unidentified insect in the midst of the coil created by their tails. In such a design, the artist had to introduce an unnatural linear element in order to give a roundish form some ability to be plaited.

Another description from the post-Biblical period, tells about the "artistic intention" behind the Temple's "plaits" and how they were interpreted by later viewers; it is discussed the Thalmud in Yoma (5,54) by Rabbi

Ketina:

אמר רב קטינא בשעה שהיו ישראל עולין לרגל מגלילין להם את
הפרוכת ומראין להם את הכרובים שהיו מעוררים זה בזה ואומרים להם
ראו חבתכם לפני המקום כהבת זכר ונקבה

and Rashi explains: *ME^CURIM* - as linked [or stick]. Hence, orthodox interpreters of a much later period gracefully regarded the artistic representation of the cherubim plaits as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. Their less orthodox contemporary viewers, on the other hand, were aware of the sexual connotation - as the text continues:

אמר ריש לקיש בשעה שנכנסו גוים להיכל ראו כרובים
המעורים זה בנה הוציאון לשוק ואמרו ישראל הללו שברכת
ברכה וקלתן קללה יעסקו בדברים הללו

The original ornaments were made more than a millennium before the Yoma texts were written, expressing their contemporary inhibitions. One may assume that the first viewers too, must have been aware of the obvious sexual connotation of the cherub plaits. But the matter-of-fact manner in which the Biblical text reports on these ornaments, allows us to deduce that in an earlier period, there was less inhibition about the issue of copulating, and that the Israelites interpreted the cherub plaits as their symbol of fertility.

The artistic decoration of the walls of Solomon's Temple, therefore, presented an artistic elaboration of God's attribute, the cherub, as the principal ornamental motif that alluded to fertility: God's attribute is not only a vehicle, but also points to God's function embodied in the name and entity by which the forefathers knew Him, and by which Moses gained the people's trust - the god of plentitude and fertility, EL SHA-DAI³⁵.

Conclusion: The Two Zoological Alternative as Artistic Images

The first suggested alternative, cherub = dragonfly, corresponds to the textual description of the plait in 1Kgs and Yoma, because dragonflies have linear bodies which enable various compositions, and because the visual aspect of their sexual intercourse forms a sophisticated form of plait³⁶. If we accept this possibility, then the inovative artist Bezalel - probably for the first time in the region's symbolic art - has chosen an insect as an attribute of a god. The later artists of the Temple incorporated the attribute into an arabesque of plaits - of dragonflies and palm leaves decorated with flowering buds - probably similar to the ones suggested by fig. 9.

The second alternative, cherub = winged snake, also corresponds to the linear requirements of the arabesque suggested by fig. 9 and may replace the dragonfly. But it lacks the spiritual interpretation mentioned in Yoma: a snake is a metaphor for many things³⁷ but it does not stand for any concept of love relationships. On the other hand, it is an ancient symbol of fertility: the snake/dragon as an attribute of gods

³⁵The exact meaning of the name is still under discussion, but its relevancy here is its general indication of fertility. In a late research, W. R. Garr looks into all the promises given under the name El-Shadai and finds that the part accomplished in them is that of fertility; promises given under the name YHWH - all parts are fulfilled (W. R. Garr, "The Grammar and Interpretation of Exodus 6,3", JBL, CXI, 1992, 385-408).

³⁶J. Kugler, Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel; An Illustrated Encyclopedia, III: Insects, 49-50: See also suggestion B in fig. 9 of this paper.

³⁷E. g.: K. R. Joines "The Serpent in Genesis 3" (ZAW, 87, 1975, 1-11) mentions: youthfulness, wisdom, life, chaos; A. J. Williams "The Relationship of Genesis 3,30 to the Serpent" (ZAW, 89, 1977, 357-74) gives Rabbinical sources and regards it as a metaphor for: immortality, wisdom and chaos. Its remedial attributes we encountered in Num 21.

belongs only to those connected in some way with fertility³⁸. In Sumerian decorative art, this element of fertility is represented by two interwoven (plaited) snakes: fig. 10 presents this motif, with floral decorations similar to the Biblical description in 1Kgs 6,29; the same motif appears also in seals³⁹. If winged snakes had been chosen as the artistic representation for God's attribute and the Temple's ornaments, then the artist would have been following the ancient artistic precedents relating to the god Marduch. This choice would not be an evolution of the artistic tradition, but rather an evocation of a remote symbolic motif intended to distinguish Hebrew artistic images from those of their immediate neighbouring cultures, thus emphasizing the ties with Israel's origins.

The two suggested possibilities for the cherub do not solve the enigma but rather offer a choice between two alternatives, neither of them convincing if led by the aim to adhere to the natural:

- Lacking reliable information about the true nature, form and size of the ancient dragonfly, one is left to relate only to its contemporary relation- a small, charming and harmless creature that hovers over water.
- Lacking sufficient zoological data on ancient snakes, one has to rely solely on the Biblical text which tells about the existence of one kind of winged snake (seraphim), and to deduce the possibility that cherubim, in that same text, are another kind.

As this discussion stems out of the Biblical expression, "cherubim", the choice between uncertain zoological alternatives has to be in relation to the Biblical text. The second alternative of cherub = winged snake seems to suit it better, for the following reasons:

- a) public tendency, now and in ancient cultures, to be attracted by less frequent (slightly mythologic) images: the snake, unlike the dragonfly, even when small in size, had, and still has, a mythic grip on human imagination of many cultures⁴⁰. A practical artist, undoubtedly, would have to take *vox populi* into his artistic considerations.
- b) the historical and cultural sources of the winged snake. As God's chosen attribute, the winged snake forms a tie with the nation's origins in Mesopotamia.
- c) the Eden cherubim. It is implausible to conceive the familiar, placid and harmless dragonfly as the guardian of the entrance to the Garden of Eden, unless he had a monstrous character and dimensions that would befit its context in the "Enuma Elish"; in the absence of fossil evidence, this cannot be substantiated. More probable therefore, is the conjecture that those cherubim were natural frightening winged snakes, probably similar to those (*MUS.SA(G).TUR* and *MUS.HUS*) that protected the entrance to temples⁴¹.

³⁸V. van Buren, "The Dragon in Mesopotamia", 14.

³⁹Several of these symbols appear, as independent designs, in H. Frankfort, *Stratified Cylinder Seals from the Diyala Region* (Chicago, 1955). In connection with a deity, see: J. B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, Fig. 675.

⁴⁰E. g.: M. Nadel, *The Bible and Cultures of The Ancient World*, (Tel Aviv, 1962), 260-262, 271-272.

⁴¹B. Landsberger, *Die Fauna des alten Mesopotamien*, 56.



Fig. 1: Storm-god astride a bull
Stela from Arslan Tash, 8th
century B.C. Louvre, Paris.
see: J.B. Pritchard, *The
Ancient Near East: An Antho-
logy of Texts and Pictures*,
(Princeton, 1971), fig. 140.

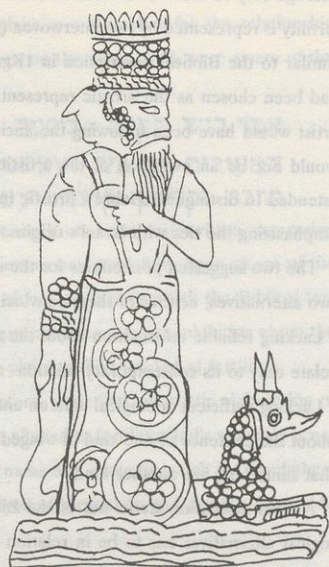


Fig. 4: The God Marduk
Engraving on a piece of lapis
lazuli, 9th century B.C.
The British Museum.
see: J.B. Pritchard, *The Ancient
Near East: An Anthology of Texts
and Pictures*, (Princeton, 1971),
fig. 141.



Fig. 2: Storm-god fighting a snake
Mesopotamian stone seal, 3rd millennium B.C. The British Museum.
see: R.A. Jairazbhoy, *Oriental Influences in Western Art* (London, 1965), p. 185, fig. 22.



Fig. 3: Snake pulling a plough
 Mesopotamian stone seal from Tell Asmar, 3rd millennium B.C. Chicago Museum, As. 31-600.
 see: H. Frankfort, *Stratified Cylinder Seals from the Diyala Region* (Chicago, 1955), fig. 654.



Fig. 5: Storm God and Rain Goddess
 Mesopotamian stone seal, ca. 2250 B.C. Morgan Collection No. 220, New York.
 see: E. Paroda, "Why Cylinder Seals? Engraved Cylindrical Seal Stones of the Ancient Near East. Fourth to First Millennium B.C.". *Art Bulletin* LXXV (December 1993), 570, fig. 19.



Fig. 6: Stylized tree flanked by winged creatures
Relief on stone (h. 70cm). From Tell Halaf, 9th century B.C. Berlin Museum, VA-8850.
see: J.B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, (Princeton, 1954), fig. 654.

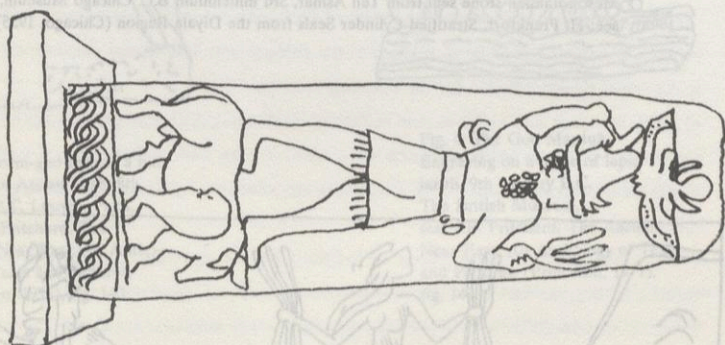
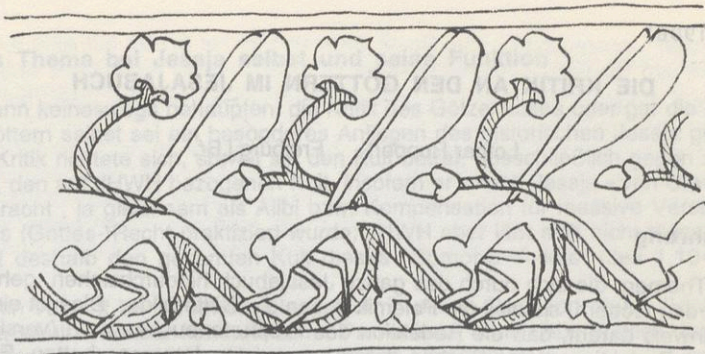


Fig. 7: A Weather god
Scela from Tell Akhmar, 11th
century B.C. Aleppo Museum.
see: H. Klengel, *The Art of
Ancient Syria*, (N. J., 1972), 40.



Fig. 8: Entwined lions.
Mesopotamian seal, 3rd millennium B.C.
see: H. Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*, (London, 1951), Pl/X, fig. 16.



A. A frieze created by plaited leaves and a line of dragonflies, each one linked to the one in front.

Fig. 9: Suggested designs - R. Gilboa.

Inspired by Middle Eastern common floral arabesques, and illustration of copulating dragonflies.

see: J. Kugler, *Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, III. Insects, 49-50.

B. A frieze created by plaited leaves and couples of copulating dragonflies.



Fig. 10: Decorated Entwined snakes

Knife handle (Gold leaf), from Gebel et Tarif.

see: H. Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*, (London, 1951), fig. 40. 75