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Angelic Categories: A Short Analysis of the Old Testament Definitions of Heavenly Beings

Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze from a historical, scriptural, and theological perspective, in a shortened and easy-to-read for all public, either trained or unfamiliar with theology, the different categories of angels present in the Hebrew



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Bible. In this paper, we have analyzed the biblical definitions of angelic categories found throughout the Old Testament and have provided the historical and theological context that prompted their inclusion in the Holy Scriptures. Apart from textual and etymological analysis, in which we have tried to offer a thorough explanation of the words' occurrence and meaning in their original textual language, we have paid special attention to examining the historical context in which the words have originated. Our primary concern was finding the original meaning of the words that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament has used when defining or referring to angelic or other kinds of heavenly beings. We have also used patristic and rabbinical commentaries when needed but have tried to keep our study as original as possible in order to avoid redundancy.

Keywords

Old Testament, angels, cherubim, seraphim, gods, God, Biblical Hebrew, Biblical Greek, Ancient Mesopotamia

1 Introduction

From a Christian point of view, one may argue that angelology peaked with the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Celestial Hierarchy*. As much as this work has influenced the historical and contemporary thought on angelic creatures, it represents a very mature stage of doctrine on this matter. If we were to draw a history of the concepts used to describe angelic beings, we would have to start with the earliest authoritative writings on this subject, which, again, for Christians, would be the biblical writings. In this work, we will try to provide a concise exposition of the biblical words used on this matter. More precisely, we will be focusing on the Hebrew Old Testament, which represents the theological basis of the New Testament. In our study, which by no means pretends to be exhaustive in any aspect, the focus will be primarily centered on an analysis of the words and their textual meaning, ranging from a historical, cultural, etymological

and theological viewpoint. We are primarily concerned with giving a brief insight on the original meaning of the words in the biblical texts when we first encounter them, which is why we will not appeal excessively to biblical commentaries and hermeneutics done by the Church Fathers or by other important exegetes, since this would be beyond the purpose of this short study.

The first obstacle we met was the fact that, even if the content itself of the books of the Bible, as well as their canonical outline, offer a chronological order of events, the redaction itself of these books does not match the time they were set in. For example, regarding the Pentateuch, scholars generally agree¹ that it was composed using four different sources (J, E, P, D) knitted together by a final redactor or group of redactors. In our case, this would imply that even if we see a certain term used to describe an angelic being in Genesis, it may reflect the views of the late redactor who lived a few centuries before Christ than the actual conception regarding said being in the time the events of the book are presented as having happened. Nonetheless, we are still going to analyze the words in the same order as the Bible presents them. It is worth mentioning that we will not analyze syntagms like “the angel of the Lord” or such since these describe a mission, not proper kinds of angels. Of course, we will study the words in their original textual language, and we will mention translations only when it is relevant to do so.

2 The Nephilim, the Sons of God and the gods

The first matter that surprises the reader eager to study such a subject is the fact that the Bible is notably silent when it comes to providing a genealogy of angels or a story of their origin. We will receive in Genesis 2.4 a detailed presentation of the תולדות

¹ Richard Elliot Freedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989), pp. 22-32.

וְהָאֲרָזִים הַשָּׁמַיִם² (“Generations of the heavens and the earth”), and of all that is in them, but nowhere in this cosmological narrative do we get an explanation regarding what angels are exactly, why were they created or any other vital questions that we can pose in order to understand these creatures. If we regard the Bible³ as a collection of texts that are divinely inspired, we must conclude that God did not wish to reveal anything directly regarding angels, and all we know about them must come primarily from scattered parts of the Bible that mention them. In order to fill the void regarding the creation of angels, parabiblical writings come to our aid and the Book of Jubilees, also called “Little Genesis,” tells us that:

“For on the first day He created the heavens which are above and the earth and the waters and all the spirits which serve before Him - the angels of the presence, and the angels of sanctification, and the angels [of the spirit of fire and the angels] of the spirit of the winds, and the angels of the spirit of the clouds, and of darkness, and of snow and of hail and of hoar frost, and the angels of the voices and of the thunder and of the lightning, and the angels of the spirits of cold and of

² The biblical texts quoted in this paper are our own translations from the original languages in which they were written. For the Hebrew text, we have used the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1967/77), and for the LXX text we have used the *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006).

³ Considering the different canons that different denominations use when it comes to define what the Bible is, we always refer to, when using the term “Bible,” to the 66 canonical books accepted by most Christian denominations. Since we, the authors of this study, are members of the Orthodox Church, we also include in this term the several books labeled “Deuterocanonical” by many other Christians, and we regard them as Scripture.

heat, and of winter and of spring and of autumn and of summer, and of all the spirits of His creatures which are in the heavens and of the earth.”⁴

We don't know exactly which creation narrative is this text following, because, according to Genesis 1, the heavens were created on the second day, while the waters gathered in one place to show the land beneath on the third day, and, while Genesis 2 gives us no orderly creation in the same manner as the first chapter does, it shares with the Book of Jubilees the apparent notion that detailing such matters is not important, while focusing on the creation of humans. So does Jubilees, focusing on detailing the kinds of angels that were created on the first day along with the heavens, the earth and the waters. This book is not regarded as canonical by the Christendom in general, which means that its credibility is disputed since nobody gives to it the status of canonicity and doctrinal inerrancy. Nevertheless, it remains a source that can be used when there are no other answers at hand, and it provides, at the very least, a historical witness to the history of theology.

The first instance in which we come across new beings other than God, humans and animals in the Bible is Genesis 3, but we will analyze the cherubim in another section. In Genesis 6, we are first introduced to the בני־האלהים (“Sons of God”), who have seen the daughters of men and were attracted by them. They are mentioned along the נפילים (Nephilim), who were the גבורים (“Mighty men”, “warriors”) of old. It is quite hard to explain this fragment of these texts if our only source is the Bible itself, for the book is silent when it comes to offering a detailed explanation concerning these beings. We must resort to other instances in which the word is used in the Bible and to “parabiblical” literature written in the same time period as these texts in hope of finding some explanations. The LXX translates this term as γίγαντες (“Giants”), and the possibility of them being related to the Nephilim comes

⁴ Robert H. Charles, *The Book of Jubilees or Little Genesis* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1902), pp. 11-13.

also from the text perhaps implying that these were the product of their union with the daughters of men. This is also how many biblical scholars, like Jaime Vázquez-Allegue⁵ or Alonso Schökel,⁶ have translated it. The verb נפל⁷ (Naphal, “to fall”), has prompted many Bible versions to translate this word as “fallen,” perhaps pointing to certain notions of mysticism that make of these creatures fallen angels. The Targum Onkelos⁸ identifies these Nephilim with the fallen angels Semyaza and others of his kind, which gives us a very early insight into the history of interpretation concerning this text. Semyaza plays an important role in many parabiblical writings, such as 1 Enoch, where fallen angels and angels in general are vital in many events. Their relevance in the Hebrew Bible is rather small. This may be attributed to the same situation that has caused the prevalence of the Law over prophetic, apocalyptic and mystic aspects. This book was written, according to Alejandro Díez-Macho,⁹ by proto-Essene and prequmranic circles, by the same groups that have written Deuteronomy 10-12 and various parts of 1 Enoch. This information is important because it gives us an insight into the religious and social context in which they were written. According to Robert H. Charles,¹⁰ in postexilic times, the Law reached in Palestine a status that wouldn’t allow other forms of religiosity to develop. Therefore, we see the presence of angels and other beings only in writings that were originally written in Greek, like the Book of Tobit, the diaspora being a tolerant place for such elements to be considered. However, in other parts of the Hebrew Bible where we see this word being used, such as Numbers

⁵ Jaime Vázquez Allegue, *Diccionario bíblico hebreo-español, español-hebreo* (Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2003), p. 151.

⁶ Luis Alonso Schökel, *Diccionario bíblico hebreo-español* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1999), p. 501.

⁷ Qal, participle, masculine, plural absolute.

⁸ Abraham Berliner, אנקלוס תרגום (Berlin: Gorzelanczyk & Co., 1889), p. 6.

⁹ Alejandro Díez Macho, *Apócrifos del Antiguo Testamento*, I (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1984), pp. 180-181.

¹⁰ R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), p. 1.

13.33 עָנַק בְּנֵי אֲתֵּי־הַנְּפִילִים רְאִינוּ) “We saw the Nephilim, sons of Anak”), where the text clearly refers to human beings, sons of another human being, who were perhaps large enough to be considered giants. This would seem to imply that there were two schools of thought concerning the interpretation of this word and how it was used, or that it was a word with various meanings and theological and textual implications, the other one being “giant” and referring to tall and great warriors.

The syntagm “Sons of God” (or “Sons of the gods”) appears only two more times in the Hebrew Bible. Apart from Genesis 6, we see it in the first and second chapter of the Book of Job, where the syntagm appears to be quite eloquent. Job 1.6 tells us that וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם בָּתוֹכֶם גַּם־הַשָּׁטָן וַיִּבְּרָא עַל־יְהוָה לְהִתְנַצֵּב הָאֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי וַיִּבְּאֹה הַיּוֹם (“And it was one day that entered the Sons of God to stand before Yahweh, and there also entered the Satan with them”). St. Augustine argued in his *City of God*, ch. XV that:

“There is therefore no doubt that, according to the Hebrew and Christian canonical Scriptures, there were many giants before the deluge, and that these were citizens of the earthly society of men, and that the sons of God, who were according to the flesh the sons of Seth, sunk into this community when they forsook righteousness,”¹¹

making the “sons of God” to be actually the sons of Seth, continuing the bloodline of Adam. This interpretation is, perhaps, the fruit of some apocryphal information regarding the life of Seth, since the canonical scriptures give us no detailed information about his life. It could simply imply that the “sons of God” were just human. In any manner, this proves at least that even from Antiquity there were more than just one viewpoint regarding this matter.

We notice the low angelology that this text portrays because of how Satan is mentioned here. We will not go in depth into the

¹¹ Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 304.

history of this being and how it appears in the texts, but it is enough to mention that, according to Juan Eduardo Campo,¹² the portrayal of this figure was severely influenced by the Persian antagonistic deity, Ahriman. This would explain some aspects, like the dualistic tendency that we can observe starting with the Second Temple period that portrays two polarizing worlds of good and God and of evil and Satan. This would be consistent with the historical evolution of how this entity's portrayal is showed in the biblical texts. In the texts that are dated before the exile, its importance is quite irrelevant, while in texts that are dated after the exile, it is shown to be an active part of many events. How this being is portrayed in the Book of Job would seem to fit more with the "Accuser" figure that Satan had originally, and not with how it has been later portrayed. "Accuser" is how many biblical scholars^{13 14} translate the word *šāṭān* ("Satan"). The abovementioned appearance of this syntagm in the Book of Job gives us a hermeneutical clue as to how the author of said book understands what or who the "sons of God(s)" are, which results from here that it is clear that they are angels, which makes Satan an angel too, even if the canonical writings nowhere explicitly describe it like an one, although we do have some texts that give us insight into this matter (Ezekiel 28.12-18; Matthew 25.41, Revelation 12.7). However, we must not forget that, as Yehezkel Kaufmann puts it:

"The serpent of Eden is no rival of God, but a 'beast of the field' who entices rebellion against the divine command. That is why he could become a central figure of later demonology. Satan became the chief of devils, not as the symbol of a cosmic evil principle, but by virtue of his biblical role of seducer and tempter. Later legends connect him with the fallen angels who took human wives; he was 'the first of sinners.' His host

¹² Juan Eduardo Campo, *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Nueva York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), pp. 603-604.

¹³ Moisés Chávez, *Diccionario de Hebreo Bíblico* (El Paso: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1992), p. 622.

¹⁴ Schökel, p. 914.

are his angelic fellows in sin and their illicit progeny. It is they who seduced men to sin, who incited them to idolatry, and taught them divination, magic and all the other wicked ways. Judaism's demons are the offspring of sinful creatures; their power is only to entice men into sin and thereby bring divine judgment upon him."¹⁵

The fact that Satan appeared firstly as one of the *בְּהֵמוֹת* ("Beasts"), being a serpent, raises some questions. Why wouldn't the texts portray him in Eden as an angel, which he is later describe as being? We saw that there were cherubim in Eden, so the theory that poses that he isn't portrayed as one because angelology was not yet developed when the text was written, doesn't hold up. It could be, nonetheless, that the ancient traditions that would later become the texts we read in Genesis 1 and 2 came from an era that had no such notions of advanced demonology. We can, still, observe the interesting evolution of thought regarding this figure and how he started as a serpent and became the chief enemy of the saints of God, lastly to be identified again as that same serpent (Rev. 20.2) and be defeated once and for all.

One last necessary stop that should be done before finishing this chapter is concerning Exodus 4.24-26: *וַהֲנִיחַ יְהוָה וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ בַמַּלְאָךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וַיִּהְיֶינָה סֵפֹרָה וַיִּבְרָא יְהוָה אֶת־עֲרֻלַּת צַרְפֹּרֶת וַתִּלְקַח הַמִּיֶּתֶוּ וַיִּבְרָא שֵׁטַח מִדָּמִים כִּי וַתֵּאמֶר לְרַגְלָיו וַתִּגַּע בְּנֶה אֶת־עֲרֻלַּת צַרְפֹּרֶת וַתִּלְקַח הַמִּיֶּתֶוּ וַיִּבְרָא שֵׁטַח מִדָּמִים לִי אֵתָּה* ("And it happened at an encampment on the road that Yahveh confronted Moses and sought to give him death. Sephora took a shard and cut off her son's foreskin and touched [Moses'] feet. 'You're a bridegroom of blood to me!' she said.") The Hebrew text is obscure enough by itself, as the reason why such an unexpected occurrence is related is not apparent at all, but the matter takes an even weirder turn in the LXX, where the text says that it isn't Yahveh the author of this attack, but *ἄγγελος κυρίου* ("The angel of the Lord"). We choose to leave aside the classic exegesis regarding the angel of the Lord being the Lord Himself because we don't have here an instance of *וַהֲנִיחַ מַלְאָךְ* in the Hebrew

¹⁵ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1961), pp. 65-66.

text, but we're dealing with an intended change in the text when it was translated. What, then, is exactly this being, after all? Is it God Himself, like the Hebrew text says, or an angel, like the LXX testifies? Since our study deals with angelic beings, we will examine what kind of angel does the Greek text presents it to be, and why it behaves like it does. The main patristic commentaries deal not with the being itself, whom they consider an angel (most likely because of a lack of knowledge of the Hebrew text), but with the significance of the being's actions. According to Origen, that being is not just any angel:

“We must also inquire who that being was of whom it is said in Exodus that he wished to kill Moses because he was setting out for Egypt. And afterwards, who is that is called ‘destroying angel,’ and who also is he who in Leviticus is described as Apopompeus, that is, the Averter, of whom the Scripture speaks thus: ‘One lot for the Lord, and one lot for Apopompeus?’”¹⁶

We know from the fact that he wrote the famous *Hexapla* that Origen knew well the Hebrew text, so we cannot explain why he would still ponder what sort of being tried to kill Moses. He gives us a name, however: *Apopompeus*. This means, in Biblical Greek, “the one that was sent.” He refers to the Hebrew *Azazel*, who appears in Lev. 18:8. He nowhere identifies the being who attacked Moses with any of these, but he is merely asking questions. Even though the Bible gives us not any more details explaining the existence of this angel, we have a colorful description of it and its fate in the apocryphal Book of Enoch. This extremely important piece of intertestamental theological literature never made its way into the Jewish canon of the Bible, mostly because this book was part of the apocalyptic current, which was thoroughly opposed in the period between both testaments by Palestinian Jews and their prejudices. The Law triumphed, after all, and there was

¹⁶ Joseph T. Lienhard, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament, Volume III* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 31.

nothing outside of it that could be of interest to them. The Book is still useful in providing us valuable information about the angel, as we have mentioned. In the text, it seems that Satan and Azazel are the same figure:

“And again the Lord spoke to Rafael: ‘Bind Azazel hand and foot and put him in the darkness; make an opening in the desert, which is in Dudael, and put him there. [...] And on the great day of judgment he will be cast into the fire.’ [...] And the whole earth was defiled through the example of the deeds of Azazel; to him ascribe all the sins” (Enoch 10.4, 6, 8).

In this late and mature stage of biblical (we will count the Book of Enoch as part of our biblical theology, for obvious reasons) angelology, the figure of Satan has already been developed or revealed, and such themes are recurrent. We can appreciate the likeness of such descriptions with the canonical Apocalypse of the Christian biblical canons, particularly with Rev. 20.1-3, 10. This does not come as a surprise, given how much Christian apocalypticism has inherited from intertestamental theology. There are also interpretations that see Azazel not as a being at all, but as the “azaz el” (“rugged terrain”), the cliff from which the expiatory goat was cast down,¹⁷ but we do see later on that among Christians, however, as Professor John Granger Cook points out,¹⁸ Origen himself tells us to see Azazel as Satan himself (just like the Book of Enoch), and that Julian, from a pagan perspective, saw the scapegoat as a sacrifice to apotropaic (protective) gods. It appears that the only probable solution to this impasse is to regard the original Hebrew text as the one telling the truth about the being’s identity, with God being the One who attacked Moses. Most likely it was changed in the LXX because of piety, just as God’s name stopped being pronounced in general

¹⁷ “Azazel”, article from the 1906 *Jewish Encyclopedia*, available online at: <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2203-azazel>.

¹⁸ John Granger Cook, *The Interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), p. 299.

According to James Strong, an *’ōḇ* is a “medium, spiritist, one who communicates with and conjures ghosts or spirits.”¹⁹ This definition is hardly helpful, since it doesn’t clarify our textual and etymological issue. In the text, the *’ōḇ* is clearly an object or a thing. The late professor and famous expert in Hittitology, Harry A. Hoffner, recalls about the studies that Professor Maurice Veyra conducted regarding the extrabiblical parallels in Hittite and Assyrian literature regarding the *’ōḇ*. Veyra explained, based on etymological and contextual similarities, that the *’ōḇ* may be a ritual pit ascribed to the summoning of certain chthonic or infernal deities.²⁰ This may be connected to our earlier hypothesis, that the woman considered Samuel a god that she summoned. Professor John H. Walton argues that this biblical event has parallels among the nations and religions that surrounded the Israelites, and that the ritual pits of the Akkadians, for example, also summoned the *ilu* (gods) just as the Hebrew text narrates that the woman summons the *’Elohim* (gods) as well, and he also points out that Professor Brian B. Schmidt argues that the *’Elohim* are, instead, the gods that bring the spirits out of the pit and in front of the necromancer.²¹ But again, why would the hagiographer describe the summoned Samuel in such fashion? It could be because the text that ended in the Bible was an ancient tradition that the Jews dared not change out of respect and reverence. It could be that the text merely reflected the perception that ancient and pre-exilic Israelites, not having developed any theology of the soul and being surrounded by paganism, had towards such entities. In any manner, we can establish that this use of the word *’Elohim* refers to actual gods, instead of to angelic creatures, as will be the case in the next instance we will study.

¹⁹ James Strong, *The Strongest Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 1357.

²⁰ Harry A. Hoffner, *Second Millennium Antecedents to the Hebrew ’Ōḇ* (Journal of Biblical Literature 4, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 86th ed., 1967), p. 385.

²¹ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 325.

Psalm 8 is the other notable example of the “gods” appearing in Scripture. Verse 6 says as follows: וְהָיָה כְבוֹד מַאֲלֵהִים מִעַט וַתְּהַסְתָּהוּ: וְעִתְּהוּ תְּעַטְּרֶהוּ (“And you have made him a little inferior to the gods, and with glory and honor you have crowned him”). Naturally, there wouldn’t be any need to treat such a verse in a study about angels, but if we do so is because of the amount of evidence and traditions that interpret the word *Elohim* as referring to angelic beings instead of gods, as the Hebrew text says. The LXX itself translates the word as *ἀγγέλους* (angels).²²

What would be the reasons for such a blatant textual change? We identify two possible explanations. Firstly, we could think that the original translators of the LXX had some prior knowledge that eludes us, according to which “angels” would be the proper translation or meaning of the word. This wouldn’t be farfetched, considering the translators of the Hebrew text into Greek were Jews themselves, just as the ones who wrote the original text. Perhaps they could have been aware of a tradition that used the word *Elohim* for the lack of a better term at that time, a time in which angelology may not have been as developed as it was when writing the LXX. The other possibility is that the piety of the Hellenistic Jews that have translated the text may have intervened and may have considered the text to be inappropriate in its meaning, thus translating “angels” instead of “gods.” Whatever the case is, we find this verse to be an important witness to the development of the theology of angels in which we can observe, if not the maturation of religious doctrine from an earlier to a later stage, at least the existence of two different currents.

²² We may find a parallel of sorts in Psalm 82, the other notable example of a psalm mentioning “gods” in Scripture, and perhaps the plainest one. The first verse starts as follows: יֹשֵׁבֵת אֱלֹהִים בְּקֶרֶב בְּעֲדַת־אֵל נֹצֵב אֱלֹהִים (“God sits in the divine council; in the middle of the gods, He judges”). There is large evidence pointing to the *’ādat-’ēl* as being a divine council like those existing in ancient Mesopotamian pantheons, but could it be, instead, that the divine council here mentioned are the heavenly angelic hosts? We could be facing another mentioning of the gods being angels. In this case, however, the LXX does not change the word when translating it, but properly uses *θεοὺς*.

What is scholarly called “Hellenistic Judaism” would be a very important precursor to Christianity and to later Christian angelology.

3 The Cherubim, the Seraphim, and the angels that stand near God

When we study the texts regarding cherubim, we discover that such a notion is not encountered in the biblical texts alone, but it rather preexisted in the cultural milieu of Palestine and of its neighbors as well. For example, we encounter the word “kārību” in Akkadian, which, according to Jeremy Black’s definition,²³ comes from the verb “karābu,” and which can be translated as “female genie.” This provides us with a starting insight into the matter, learning that such creatures were known to more parts of the Middle East, and gives us more sources of knowledge in order to understand more about these creatures. The first instance in which we come across the cherubim (כְּרֻבִים) is in Genesis 3.24, where God orders them to guard the gates of Eden for Adam and Eve to be kept out. We encounter them again in the ordinances that relate to the Ark of the Covenant and its crafting (Exod. 25.19-22; 37.8-9; Num. 7.89). Yahweh of the Armies²⁴ is mentioned to have His throne among them (1 Sam. 4.4; 2 Sam 6.2; 2 Kings 19.15; Isa. 37.16) and His house is filled with them, where they serve different purposes (Eze. 10). The book of Ezekiel is the only one that gives us a description of these creatures, mentioning that they are “the living creatures” (הַחַיִּים; τὰ ζῳόν), having כְּנָפֵיהֶם תַּחַת אַדָּם יָדָי וּדְמוּת לְאַחַד כְּנָפֵים וְאַרְבַּע לְאַחַד כְּנִים אַרְבַּעָה אַרְבַּעָה (“Four faces for each one, and four wings for each one, and something like the hands of man underneath the wings”, Ezek. 10.21). According to Ibn Ezra: “Our sages said that the cherubim looked like two youths. They said that the *kaf* in *keruvim* is a preposition

²³ Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate, *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), p. 149.

²⁴ Our literal translation of the syntagm יְהוָה יְהוָה; יְהוָה יְהוָה.

and the word *keruvim* means the same as the Aramaic word *ke-ravia* (like youths). Now if they had a tradition that the cherubim were youth-like images, then what they said was true. They interpreted the word in a manner that would recall the tradition.”²⁵ However, he also states that, when doing his own research, he has found that this word points out to different meanings, especially those tied to Ezekiel’s vision. Regarding the mission they serve and their role, we see them, at least in the Old Testament, as being closely tied to God and the cult that is rendered to Him. Firstly, we see the Lord speaking to Moses and commanding him to make the Ark of the Covenant, which is commanded to be done like this: *מִקְצֵה וְכְרוּב־אֶתֶד מִזֶּה מִקְצֵה אֶתֶד כְּרוּב וְעָשָׂה* (“And make one cherub at one end, and one cherub at the other end”, Exod. 25.19a).

We do not know the precise reason why cherubim, among all angelic creatures, were chosen by God to be sculpted on the Ark’s cover, but we can line out a few theories as to why exactly is this. Firstly, we see that cherubim were presented to us since the beginning as guardians. Early in the Bible we see God putting them as guardians at the entrance of Eden (Gen. 3.24), in order to prevent anyone from entering in. We see this again when we are presented with the design of Solomon’s temple: *כְּרוּבִים שְׁנֵי בַדְבָּיִר וַיַּעַשׂ* (“And he made on the inside two cherubim”, 1 Kgs. 6.23a), and, again: *כָּנְף וַתִּגַּע הַכְּרֻבִים אֶת־כָּנְפֵי וַיִּפְרְשׁוּ הַכְּנִימִי הַבַּיִת בְּתוֹךְ אֶת־הַכְּרוּבִים וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־כָּנְף הַבַּיִת אֶל־כָּנְף הַשֵּׁנִי בְּקִיר נִגְעַת הַשֵּׁנִי הַכְּרוּב וְכָנְף בְּקִיר הָאֶחָד כָּנְף* (“And he put the cherubim inside the inner chamber, and they stretched out the wings of the cherubim and they touched; the wing of the first cherub one wall and the wing of the second cherub touched the second wall, and their wings, which were in the middle of the chamber, touched each other”, 1 Kgs. 6.27). It is very important to study this scenery. What we are seeing here is perhaps a replica of the Garden of Eden. Just like with Adam and Eve, that which is most holy (for them was the garden, for

²⁵ H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch. Exodus* (New York: Menora Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), p. 547.

the Israelites is the tabernacle) is guarded by two cherubim. We can, thus, deduce from these instances that one of the cherubim's roles was to guard and to protect (that which is holy or sacred, in particular), which is why we can assume that this was the reason they were sculpted on the tabernacle's cover - in order to guard it. Such scenery was not uncommon in the Ancient Middle East. We see the Assyrian *lamassu* being similar in shape and guarding the entrance to certain temples or palaces. We encounter them even outside of the Middle East, in its close vicinity, with the Graeco-Egyptian sphinxes. The Ancient Greek sphinxes had the face of a woman and the body parts of certain animals, like the body of a lion and the wings of a bird. Its Egyptian version was typically wingless and had the face of a man. Their image is somewhat like what we see in Ezekiel's version. Why would the Lord command the Israelites to use pagan figures like these in a context surrounded by so much sacrality?

There are multiple answers to this question. We must firstly acknowledge that neither ancient Israelites nor the peoples that surrounded them used the precise categorization we use today. In a place and time where borders, labels, and other concepts we are so accustomed with in our modern day and era did not exist as they do today, people viewed divisions between themselves in not such strict manners. Of course, ancient Israelites knew better than anyone how to differentiate themselves of the people that surrounded them, since this was and still is for many one of the main precepts of their religion ("our God is different and so should we be"). This implies that ancient Israelites didn't necessarily view religious symbols, words, ideas or practices that the people we today call "pagan" used as inherently bad or "pagan." The usage of incense is a good example of this; many ancient peoples from around Israel used it long before the Lord instructed Moses in using it for the rituals of Israel. Even more considering that we do not know exactly the origin of most of these, so we cannot point out exactly if their origin was in ancient Israel or in the peoples that surrounded it. The history of the genesis of ideas is always a complicated matter, even more considering that few notions in history are truly original, most being at least inspired

by others. From a canonical and religious viewpoint, we can assume that if the Lord has commanded Moses to use imagery that is also found among other peoples to some degree is because said imagery is correct by ancient Israel's religious standards. The fact that pagans also used it was either by coincidence or, in the best of cases, a revelational vestige from eras past. From an "atheistic" and evolutionary historical perspective, it could be assumed that the Israelites did nothing more than to copy the things they watched others do. This school of thought, called "panbabylonism" was very common in the nineteenth century, but it is now obsolete. The belief that relies on the fact that many religions share common elements and that affirms that all the religious practices and beliefs practiced not only by ancient Israel but also by its neighbours come from one single source which evolved into multiple and different entities is unfounded.

Conclusions

Being the heir and the eternal deposit of God's revelation to mankind, the Church has developed a coherent angelology throughout the ages, product of the Holy Spirit's guidance of Its people towards truth and salvation. We have seen, however, how long the journey was until the compact theology of the patristic era. From obscure angelic passages, descriptions, figures, and roles, to the development of the archetypal enemy of God's chosen people – first Israel, then the New Israel; from Ancient Mesopotamian remnant revelational concepts and doctrines to direct revelations from God and His heavenly hosts, all of them allow us to form a clear picture of the Old Testament's angelology, taking in consideration, of course, also the extremely important intertestamental period, its study being imperative for understanding God's revelation to the Church.

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