

EVERYBODY LOVES ANGELS

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The very first time the Bible mentions the word “Cherub”, or the plural cherubim, is soon after the creation of the world. It is summarized in early teachings that they were originally depictions of storm deities, especially storm winds, a possible explanation for their wings. Later, this is described as acting as the chariot of the LORD in Ezekiel’s visions. As guardians, devoid of human emotion, they held duty to both represent God and guard his sanctuaries. It is here that after Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, the cherubim were stationed at the East end along the path that led to the Tree of Life.

However, these particular cherubs are not those that we know today, small chubby benevolent babies who happen to bear wings, but a more ferocious ancestor. At their inception, as stated in scripture, these guardians of God’s work were alleged to have been a combination of characteristics. From Ezekiel’s description they reveal themselves to be compound figures, unlike any real object found in nature. They are artificial images possessing the features and properties of several different beings. Arriving, as he envisioned them, through a luminous cloud in perpetual motion as if in flames, Ezekiel was able to distinguish four beings. The cherubim had bodies of men with human faces in front, an eagle behind, a lion on the left, and an ox on the right. With hooves for feet they possessed arms that did not bend, for they were wings. These guardians carried the fire of the ever-turning sword. This same sword used to protect the location of the original garden and the original sin.

Once again the cherubim play an important role when they are assigned to figuratively guard the Ark of the Covenant. The two gold figures, facing one another, atop of the vessel that contains the tablets inscribed with God’s Ten Commandments verbally passed on to Moses, are there for its protection. These golden cherubs, sculpted by Bezalel had ... “their wings outstretched upward so as to shield the ark-cover...” [Exodus 37:8-9].

In both instances, the angel acts as a guard, but possibly not one towards mankind, rather against it. Are the cherubim protecting God’s work and words from us, who literally have the potential for destruction? Or, as documented between the 2nd and 5th Centuries, are they symbolizing the love of God to the people of Israel. By protecting the tablets, his words, he is also protecting and loving them? One can only speculate as to the mystical meaning behind the words of Ezekiel to the actions of Solomon, or the instructions given to Bezalel.

Then, as with most historic Jewish texts, there is the contradiction, when the desert tabernacle was to be built at Mt. Sinai the guardian cherubim were to symbolize the existence of God’s voice between the two ends of the ark’s cover. They are now in possession of the face of a babe and body of a soaring angel. Their presence displays a sensitivity that was previously lacking. This is according to the Midrash, the commentary surrounding the Talmud, the book

that discusses and debates the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) and the Bible.

The mere existence of cherubs embarrassed Jewish thinkers throughout history. Whereas Rabbi Ben Moshe Maimon, known as Maimonides wrote, “to the wise man, one sees that what the Bible and Talmud refer to as ‘angels’ are actually allusions to the various laws of nature; they are the principles by which the physical universe operates.” [Guide for the Perplexed 11:4, 11:6]. In spite of the contradiction between the Second Commandment prohibition against the making of graven images, the cherubs’ placement in the holiest of places, the Jerusalem Temple, visual depictions are known throughout centuries old tradition of Jewish art.

Along with the coming into existence of the Kabbalah, as an offshoot of Jewish mythology, the followers of Kabbalah based their beliefs upon the Zohar, the significant collection of books in Jewish mysticism. This is where much of the imagery exists that includes the angels and their relationship to God.

In short, the controversy surrounding the form in which angels presented themselves varied throughout ancient history, especially as written texts were created long after the “facts”. This, done by scholars and Rabbis who had to rely on hearsay and stories handed down through generations and without a doubt had specific ideas and interests of their own that would influence their results. This cannot be more apparent than the existence of the Talmud and it’s counterpart the Midrash. The debate has continued through the centuries, and continues today. The interpretation of Judaism and its texts, in all its manifestations, is always in flux. Nevertheless, according to the Old Testament, the cherubim were conceived to be in a state of perfection, wisdom, without sin, and nearness to God.

This embodiment of cherubs was literally lifted over from the Old Testament to the New. Ezekiel’s four angels were to be designated to become the first four Evangelists. Cherubim were now ranked the second highest in the angel hierarchy. The liturgy depicts cherubs and angels throughout as accompaniment to visions and events as protectors and witnesses.

In art, cherubs or angelic figures have been making their mark from the days of the Assyrians to the sphinx in Egypt. Originally, cherubs and putti had distinctly different roles, with the former being sacred and the latter profane. That is, cherubs and seraphs (cherubim, seraphim) are Angels, occupying the highest angelic orders in Heaven and are therefore the closest to God. On the other hand, putti, arise from Greco-Roman classical mythos (the Greek god Eros, son of Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty, i.e., non-Christian), as well as with the Muse, Erato; the muse of lyric and love poetry. The distinction can be made via the setting, putti are likely found in secular scenes, whereas cherubs materialize in religious milieu. Cherubs (and seraphs) were often depicted simply as winged heads demonstrating that they are incorporeal - literally without a body - yet intelligent and thus, Divine. It is universally agreed upon that cherubim represent spiritual beings. They are considered loving assistants,

protectors of sacred places and people, especially the beautiful and virtuous, among them women and children.

Medieval and early Renaissance art had frequently portrayed angels in and around biblical scenes. By representing cherubs as winged heads, painters sought them to be emblematic of a pure spirit glowing with love and intelligence, the head the seat of the soul and the wings attribute of swiftness and spirit alone retained. The body or limbs of the cherub and seraph are never shown in heraldry, adopting the figure of speech termed synecdoche, which adopts a part to represent the whole. With the rediscovery of Greek and Roman art in the High Renaissance, came a popular reintroduction of angelic figures. Here the putti and cherub were so often used that their meaning and history was often confused and at some point their physical dissimilarities began to disappear. A later example of this is *Portrait Studies of Frances Isabella Ker, daughter of Lord William Gordon*, originally titled *Cherub Head in Different Views*, from 1786, by Sir Joshua Reynolds. It represents five infants' heads with wings, in different positions, floating among clouds.

As religious art continued to depict the cherub, in architectural decoration of churches and plazas throughout Europe and eventually the US, they were to fall out of favor in Western art with the rise of Realism. Used in commercial applications for holidays, the cherub fell into disrepute, a victim of kitsch and cliché, even as they re-presented themselves in the Contemporary art of the well-known Warhol, and much later Koons.

But their purpose is not lost. They are often on the tip of the tongue "like a guardian angel". These babies who remain babies, who have super-powers, are still secretly valued and treasured. They make us feel safe; they entice us with their innocence. We visit them in the greatest of museums and historical sights, look upon them as something beyond the hand of their artist creator. We want to capture them, possess them. When mass-produced "designer" clothing was making its debut in 1970, the Italian brand Fiorucci chose the cherub floating on a cloud as their logo. It instilled a sense of rightful history, coming from the land of the church, along with an innocence and sense of well-being. It played with our artistic sensibilities; were we serious creative consumers? Serious enough to understand the insider's perspective of using this once cherished, but now frowned upon image? With the brand's success the cherub became fashion, and fashionable. It was dormant for too long, and was ripe to be splayed on too many surfaces.

Iconography has had a way of making itself materialize all over the world. What was once part of local consequence and tradition has become mobile along with the population that wishes to experience it. Ancient sculptures and carvings of cherubs can be viewed far from their origin, but retain their original essence. This is essentially due to the fact that these young, small innocents, great bearers of burden, never total went away. They were not all displaced.

They remain: on the walls of the Roman catacombs entombing early Jews and in the illuminated Jewish religious texts, in the paintings hovering above the

Madonna and her newborn son, in the inner sanctums of places of worship whether they be church or simply altar. As well as on the facades of buildings holding up pillars and cornices, winged above doorways looking down upon all those who enter and exit, in piazzas and squares acting as receptacle for streams of water, and in front of gardens. They all hang, sit, stare over their protectorate, keeping it safe, keeping it pure. Watching us, but not necessarily, over us.