

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELEK

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VOL. XXXIX (No. 1)

JANUARY, 1925

(No. 824)

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*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## THE ATTENDANTS OF YAHVEH

BY H. M. SELBY

FROM the time of the Captivity onwards, Jewish angelology became much more elaborated than in the earlier periods, until at last a hierarchy of angels was established as an article of belief.

In Christianity the belief in the hierarchy persisted, though with alterations and varieties of conception. Finally, the arrangement of the so-called Dionysius, the Areopagiti, was generally adopted, except that a hot controversy raged in the middle ages as to the relative positions of the Cherubim and Seraphim, which eventually became a dispute as to the comparative value of knowledge and love.

In the arrangement of Dionysius, the angels fall into three groups, with three orders in each group, thus:

Group I	Group II	Group III
1. Seraphim	4. Dominations	7. Principalities
2. Cherubim	5. Virtues	8. Archangels
3. Thrones	6. Powers	9. Angels

These three groups may be described respectively as:

- I. Attendants on the Deity.
- II. Incorporeal Essences.
- III. Guardians (of nations or individuals).

Each group marks a stage in the development of Jewish conceptions. Group I belongs to Hebrew mythology before the Captivity; Group III to Judaism after the Captivity, when the Jews had come under the Babylonian and Persian influence; Group II to Judaism after contact with the Greeks and the introduction of philosophical thought. It is Group I that forms the subject of this article, more especially the Cherubim and Seraphim, which seem to have been

the oldest conception in Yahvistic religion of what we now call collectively "angels," i. e., of beings intermediate between the divine and the human.<sup>1</sup>

In some authors we find other orders named. Most of these as we shall see, are merely conceptions derived from that of the Cher-



#### SAINTS ASCENDING TO HEAVEN

(Reproduced from Photograph of a Painting at Donaneschingen)

ubim and Seraphim, but there is one order that stands by itself, viz: the *Watchers* or *Sons of God* (see Genesis vi and Job i) which probably belong to the Pre-Yahvistic period, though we meet with them chiefly in later Jewish literature. These would certainly fall into Group I if they were mentioned by Dionysius.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It may be noted that, in the Old Testament the term "angel" is not applied to the Cherubim and Seraphim.

<sup>2</sup> It is, of course, generally known that the "angel of Yahveh" mentioned in the Old Testament, is not what we mean by an "angel" but a theophany or manifestation of the Deity.





HEAVENLY MOTHERHOOD

Symbolized by the Moon

(Reproduction from Painting by Bresica, Gallery of Milan)

It is easy to see how the conception arose of the members of Group I. As Yahveh was conceived after the pattern of an oriental monarch, he was naturally supposed to have a great train of attendants. Some of these may perhaps have been inferior deities at an earlier stage of Hebrew Theism. -

Of the Cherubim we hear in the Old Testament much more than of the Seraphim who are only mentioned once *by name*. (Isaiah vi. 17.)

It was Cherubim that guarded Eden (see Genesis iii. 11) though, in spite of the incorrect form "Cherubims," used in the Authorized Version, the Garden is generally described as guarded by one angel only. Nothing could be more different from the modern idea of a Cherub—a small creature, with only head, wings and hands—as represented in such pictures as Raphael's "Madonna di San Sisto," and the Cherubim as originally conceived. We have no description of them in the Bible, very naturally, as their forms would be familiar to the Jews, for they were represented on the covering of the ark and there were images of them in the Temple, but—judging by allusions to them—they must have been large. They probably resembled the figures with animal heads which we see in Assyrian sculpture.

By comparing two passages of Ezekiel, we gather that the Cherubim had the head of a bull or calf. In Ezekiel i. 10, we find a description of four "living creatures" each of which has four faces—one of a man, one of a lion, one of an ox, and one of an eagle. In Chapter x of the same book there is a similar passage, but here instead of "the face of an ox," we find "the face of the cherub"; which seems to indicate that the Cherub was ox-faced.

One office of Cherubim seems to have been personal attendance on Yahveh. In Psalms xviii. 10, we read of Yahveh: "He rode upon a cherub and did fly," and in another Psalm (lxviii. 17) we read that the Cherubim formed the divine chariot.<sup>3</sup> Probably they made a throne for Yahveh with their wings, for we read that the sculptured Cherubim "spread out their wings on high covering the mercy-seat," where we are told "the glory of Yahveh" appeared (see Exodus xxv. 20, 21; Kings viii. 7). Yahveh is also described as sitting between the Cherubim (Psalms xcix. 1).

<sup>3</sup> It is true that, in the second passage, in our Revised Version, angels are not mentioned, only "thousands upon thousands," but we may conclude that angels are meant. At any rate there is no doubt that the chariot was conceived as formed of angels, for Ezekiel i and x speaks of wheels which accompanied the living creatures.

The Seraphim, in shape, were serpents or dragons. In the Slavonic Enoch, the term *drakontes*<sup>4</sup> is applied to them. The name "Seraph" is derived from Hebrew *sarapu* "to burn," so the Seraphim were probably conceived as fire-breathing.

I said that the Seraphim were only mentioned once *by name* in the Old Testament, but there is probably a reference to them in the passage of Genesis which I have already mentioned with regard to the Cherubim. This passage is generally interpreted as asserting that the Garden of Eden was guarded by an angel *with* a flaming sword, but the actual words are "Cherubim *and* a flaming sword" and the flaming sword is supposed to denote one of the fiery Seraphim, which, in later literature, are always associated with the Cherubim.

More uncertain, but not altogether untenable, are Canon Cheyne's description of the brazen serpent as "a bronze seraph," and the theory that the serpent that tempted Eve was a seraph—perhaps appointed to guard the tree, as Lador guarded the golden apples in the Garden of Hesperides. In favor of the latter theory is the fact that, in mythology and folklore serpents often figure as guardians of trees. If we accept this view of the tempter, we must regard the seraphim as standing upright, since we are told, in Genesis iii. 14, that the serpent was condemned to creeping as a punishment for bringing about the Fall of Man.

The *Thrones*, which, in the classification of Dionysius, are grouped with the Cherubim and Seraphim, must be the angels who, in Ezekiel are described as forming the throne of Yahveh.

In some Jewish books, we read also of *Wheels* (*Ophanim*), a term which probably denotes the angels, described in the same passage, as forming the wheels of the divine chariot. Thus we find three separate classes of angels in later books (Cherubim, Thrones, Wheels), whereas Ezekiel represents three groups of one class, each performing a different function.

In later Jewish books, we also hear of "living creatures." Where this name occurs, it probably denotes beings with heads of any kinds of animals, whereas the term, "Cherubim" denotes ox-headed beings only. The "four beasts" of the New Testament "Book of Revelation" (A. V.) are *hayyoth*.

It cannot fail to occur to us as we read of these various mythological beings—neither divine nor human—that such conceptions bear a close resemblance to the Gorgons Jinn (Genii) and other

<sup>4</sup> Greek *δρακοντες*, "serpents" or "dragons."

beings which figure in various mythologies; in fact, in the passage of the *Slavonic Enoch*, quoted above, the Cherubim and Seraphim are grouped with various other beings, some of which are derived from Greek mythology.

This being so, the question occurs to us whether as the Greek conception of beings of this sort probably arose out of natural objects or phenomena, the Jewish conceptions may not have had a similar origin and we feel inclined to accept the theory of Dr. A. Smythe Palmer that the Cherubim are a personification of the winds, the Seraphim of the lightning.<sup>5</sup> Certainly no one can read such passages as Psalm xviii.9, without thinking of the winds borne along by the breeze. This idea is also in harmony with the fact that Yahveh has all the characteristics of a sky-god, being associated with clouds, thunder, lightning, etc., and is described as having his abode in heaven, so that we should naturally expect his attendants to be personifications of atmospheric phenomena.

One remark, in conclusion, with regard to the hierarchy of angels. It is worth noting that, though all the angels have been adopted into Christian theology, yet, while, in Judaism the angels who lived for the glory of God are most prominent in Christianity, more attention is paid to those who minister to human needs—a characteristic difference since the keynote of Judaism is worship of God, the keynote of Christianity of God's care of man.

The slight hold that Group II, in the classification of Dionysius, has obtained in general belief arises partly from the nebulous presentment of these conceptions in Alexandrian writers, but it is also an indication of the indifference of both Judaism and Christianity to the realm of ideas apart from personalities. It is needless to contrast this indifference with the Idealism of Greek thought.

<sup>5</sup> See the *Nineteenth Century and After*, February, 1900, and October, 1909.