

Advent Reflections 2021: Angels (Week 2)

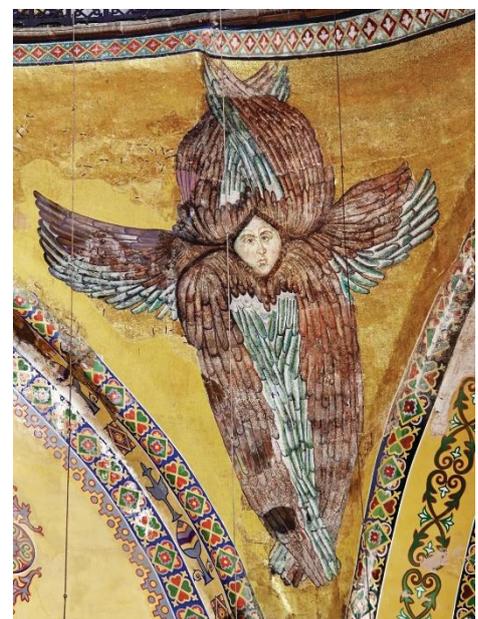
Heavenly Hosts in the Bible: Seraphim, Cherubim and other Living Creatures

Last week, we've reflected on angels appearing as God's messengers on earth, sometimes in human guise. But there are other angelic beings described in the Bible whose ministry is described as continuous worship and to be in attendance at God's throne at all times. While descriptions of such heavenly beings are rare in the OT, the ones we find tend to be strangely detailed. Since God's presence can't really be described so easily in visual terms (and since images of God are explicitly forbidden in the Torah), a detailed description of angels as backdrop to heavenly visions would be one way around the problem of prohibited imagery.

Let's meet some of those heavenly beings described in the Bible:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.' ⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' ⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!' (Isaiah 6.1-8)

While these seraphim became quite important in later Christian thought (in various attempts to categorise the heavenly hosts into celestial hierarchies), it is interesting to note that in the Bible they appear only here in this passage from Isaiah and later in Revelation. Subsequently, we know very little about them. There are two possible sources for the word 'seraphim': either 'to burn' or 'to exalt' (and given their description here in Isaiah, both would be a good fit). As we find winged serpent-gods in the mythologies of Canaan and Egypt (here as benign symbols of power and protection) and winged serpents ('saraḥ' in Hebrew) both in Isaiah 30.6 and Numbers 21.9 (Moses' bronze serpent), some kind of connection to either of those sources could be plausible.



Seraphim Hagia Sophia 9th century

In our vision from Isaiah, these seraphim are engaged in heavenly worship, but also link with the prophet to prepare him for his ministry: it is only after his lips have been cleansed, that he is able to voice his calling.

Q: How do we best sing God's praises? How does worship help us to focus on God's presence? Can we identify 'seraphim' who have helped us to say Yes to our calling and prepare us for our own ministry?

Another set of heavenly beings featuring in the Bible and later Christian thought are the cherubim. In the Book of Ezekiel, we find them described in chapter 10 as winged creatures associated with the glory of God:

The glory of the LORD rose up from the cherub to the threshold of the house; the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of the LORD. ⁵The sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks. (Ezekiel 10.4-5)

These cherubim seem to have some relationship to the Four Living Creatures described in quite some detail in chapter 1 of Ezekiel:

As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. ⁵In the middle of it was something like four living creatures. This was their appearance: they were of human form. ⁶Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. ⁷Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. ⁸Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: ⁹their wings touched one another; each of them moved straight ahead, without turning as they moved. ¹⁰As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; ¹¹such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. (Ezekiel 14-11)



Cherubim of the Ezekiel vision, 12th century, Louvre Paris

Although Ezekiel attempts to describe these celestial beings in detail, their exact appearance and function remain somewhat shrouded in mystery. Yet, they live on in Christian imagination and iconography as other authors try and find ways of expressing visions of heavenly worship and God's presence:

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.' ²At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! ³And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. ⁴Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵Coming

from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; ⁶and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.' (Revelation 4.1-8)

In this passage we see how the writer of Revelation uses the imagery found in Isaiah and Ezekiel to great effect. He certainly knew his Bible! Later Christian imagination saw in these four living creatures symbols for the four evangelists: the lion for Mark, the ox for Luke, the human for Matthew and the eagle for John.

Q: How do we imagine God and God's surroundings to look like? Does our inherited imagery sometimes stifle our imagination and thus relationship with God?

But cherubim also feature elsewhere in the Old Testament in close proximity to God and as part of a sacred artistic expression of the divine: for not only are they described as being part of the artistic embellishment of Solomon's Temple, they even appear on the Ark of the Covenant itself (both in places of heightened sacredness):

In the inner sanctuary [Solomon] made two cherubim of olive wood, each ten cubits high. ²⁴ Five cubits was the length of one wing of the cherub, and five cubits the length of the other wing of the cherub; it was ten cubits from the tip of one wing to the tip of the other. ²⁵ The other cherub also measured ten cubits; both cherubim had the same measure and the same form. ²⁶ The height of one cherub was ten cubits, and so was that of the other cherub. ²⁷ He put the cherubim in the innermost part of the house; the wings of the cherubim were spread out so that a wing of one was touching one wall, and a wing of the other cherub was touching the other wall; their other wings towards the centre of the house were touching wing to wing. ²⁸ He also overlaid the cherubim with gold. (1 Kings 6.23-28)

They shall make an ark of acacia wood; it shall be two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. [...] ¹⁷ Then you shall make a mercy-seat of pure gold; two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its width. ¹⁸ You shall make two cherubim of gold; you shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the mercy-seat. ¹⁹ Make one cherub at one end, and one cherub at the other; of one piece with the mercy-seat you shall make the cherubim at its two ends. ²⁰ The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy-seat with their wings. They shall face each other; the faces of the cherubim shall be turned towards the mercy-seat. (Exodus 23.10,17-20)

These cherubim are not only an embellishment of artwork though, they are markers of sacred space and time. After all, God is understood to be residing in the inner sanctuary of the Temple just as God is described speaking to Moses from the Ark of the Covenant (which, according to the Torah, contained the stone tablets with the 10 Commandments, Aaron's staff and some Manna – the bread from heaven). These cherubim are guardians of the threshold, protecting sacred ground as we learn to be in the presence of God and find sacred ground within us. We see them also deployed in the Book of Genesis as guards of Eden:

Then the LORD God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever' — ²³ therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3.22-24)

Q: How do we guard our own sacred centre? Do we perceive 'guardians' of sacredness to be at work in our journeying with God?

These seraphim, cherubim and other adoring angels are part of an altarpiece by Jacopo di Cione (made in 1370-1 for the high altar of the choir of the church of San Pier Maggiore in Florence – now in the National Gallery London). I have deliberately only chosen to include two of the angelic panels with empty space in between – just as we would find two cherubim on the Temple walls and the Ark of the Covenant were they still in existence: for what is important is the empty space in between, as the angles mark sacred space occupied by God’s living presence, which is beyond our imagination and ability to depict or describe in words.

Q: What do you see – or not see - in this ‘trptych’?

