

**KERUBIM IN  
SEMITIC  
RELIGION AND ART**

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Kerubim in Semitic Religion and Art by Frederic N. Lindsay

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**FREDERIC N. LINDSAY**

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# KERUBIM

IN

## SEMITIC RELIGION AND ART

BY  
REV. FREDERIC N. LINDSAY, B. D., M. A.

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MENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF  
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**TO MY WIFE**

Whose love and counsel have been  
among the choice blessings of my life.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE OLD TESTAMENT CONCEPTION

What were the *Kerubim*? This is a problem that until recently has been obscure owing to the want of the proper historical and scientific point of view. Hitherto the discussion of the problem has been largely influenced by theological bias, a side of the question which was reserved to itself by the Church, but the deciphering of the cuneiform texts and our resultant increased knowledge from them has changed the entire situation. Furthermore, the results of the science of Comparative Religion, largely deduced in this instance from the cuneiform texts, have altered our views. It is proposed in this treatise to trace by means of the historical documents the development of the *Kerubim* ideas and to endeavor to discover exactly what concrete form the name *Kerub* awakened in the Hebrew mind.

A study of the O. T. sources plainly indicates that the earliest accounts were written at a date long subsequent to the times represented in the sources. The oldest narrative in which is found a reference to the *Kerubim* is Gen. iii:24. After having driven the first human pair from the earthly Paradise, as a punishment for their sin, it is written that "Yahveh Elohim placed to the East of the Garden of Eden the *Kerubim* and the flaming blade of the sword which turns, to keep the way of the tree of life." Gen. iii:24. Probably we have here, as scholars generally believe, two independent symbols—the fiery sword and *Kerubim*—for the sword is one and the *Kerubim* are many; and the symbol of the sword is represented elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> as an independent power, the ultimate source of which is evidently the fiery sword of Gen. iii:24. Budde<sup>2</sup> finds in the verses iii:22, 24, the story of the 'tree of life,' a secondary ver-

<sup>1</sup> Zeph. ii:12; Jer. xlvi:10; Isa. xxxiv:5.

<sup>2</sup> Budde, *Biblische Urgeschichte*, p. 55.

sion of man's expulsion, which in origin may be earlier than the longer story of the Garden of Eden; its presence, however, in Chapter iii seems to be due to the work of a later prophet. According to this fragment, God sent forth man from the garden, i. e., commanded him to go forth (drove him forth) as he still lingered or still stood without before the gate. That every possibility of his wilfully returning to the Garden and to the 'tree of life' may be cut off, he stations eastward of the Garden of Eden the *Kerubim*, where as in an earthly sanctuary the entrance was. The *Kerubim* were not stationed to dwell in the Garden, instead of man, but to guard the approach.

No account is given of the appearance of the *Kerubim*. In the height of the mythological period no such account was needed. All we know from this primitive Hebrew tradition describing the *Kerubim* is that they were beings of superhuman power and devoid of human sympathies, whose office was to drive away intruders from the abode of the gods. Originally this abode was conceived of as a mountain, on the slopes of which was a garden or park (Paradise) containing the sacred tree. The *Kerubim* have in the Paradise story the functions of being guards of the divine blessings and treasures. Their number is not mentioned; nor is it stated, as is usually supposed, that each of the *Kerubim* bore in his hand a flaming sword. They were earthly beings and not heavenly beings. While there is much that is obscure about the form of the primitive Israelitish *Kerub*, it may be safely said that in the main it was a land-animal, monstrous and ferocious.\* From this point of view the recognition of certain spots as haunts of the gods is the religious expression of the gradual subjugation of nature by man. It points to a time when primitive man regarded the spontaneous life of nature as exhibiting the presence of superhuman powers. We have here evidently the proof of the existence of animism in the early Semitic religion.

\* It appears from several poetical passages of the O. T. that the Northern Semites believed in demons called *Se'irim* ("hairy beings"), and *Lilith* ("nocturnal monsters"), which haunted waste and desolate places, in fellowship with jackals and ostriches (Isa. xiii:21, Isa. xxxiv:14. cf., Luke xi:24).



The fullest description of the *Kerubim* is given by Ezekiel. In Ezek. xxviii:14-19, we have an allusion to the king of Tyre, who 'walked amid the stones of fire in the holy, divine mountain' and was cast out and destroyed by a Kerub. The Hebrew text is corrupt and an intelligent exegesis of the passage is rarely given. Cheyne corrects the text of verses 13f and 16f and arrives at the following sense of the passage: that we have here a tradition of the Paradise Myth distinct from that of Gen. ii and iii. Certain favoured men, it appeared, could be admitted to Eden, but they were still liable to the sin of pride and such a sin would be their ruin. Following the analogy of Isa. xiv:13-15, where the king of Babylon is hurled from heaven because of his pride, Ezekiel applies the same to the king of Tyre. In the Genesis myth the Kerub is the guardian of the 'tree of life,' but in Ezekiel he becomes the guardian of the 'divine treasures' which are in the 'holy mount.' The latter is evidently a faithful report of a popular tradition. We have here a tradition distinct from that in Genesis.<sup>4</sup> Wherever the sacred treasures have to be guarded and hidden, the early Semite conceived these denizens as keeping off all intruders and driving out those who were bold enough to intrude within the 'sacred place.' A Kerub, according to this account, abides in the sacred precincts of the Most High, and is the guardian of Yahveh's treasures. The imagery employed by the same prophet in the vision<sup>5</sup> of the *Kerubim* (Ezk. 10) is very obscure, and introduces a much more complex idea. The prophet recognizes them as identical with 'the living creatures (*hayyoth*) that he saw under the God of Israel by the river Chebar' (10:20), referring to the vision of the chariot in Ch. i. These were four in number (10:10); they had each four faces, 'the face of a *Kerub*, a man, a lion, and eagle' (10:14) and 'four wings' (10:21). As one of their faces was that of 'a *Kerub*,' and the prophet on seeing them 'knew that they were '*Kerubim*,' the

<sup>4</sup> "Fiery Stones" evidently must mean the sacred stones, and hence in Ezekiel they represent the sacred treasures of the gods.

<sup>5</sup> No meaning can be attached to the phrases "Anointed *Kerub*" or "*Kerub* with spreading wings," both of which are wanting in the LXX.

\* That this vision is purely apocalyptic is recognized by all.

shape of a '*Kerub*,' as of a fabulous creature, must have been well known through popular representations.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the prophet's description throws no further light upon their shape. He tells us that the 'glory of the Lord' rested above 'the *Kerubim*' (10:19); that their progress was straight forward (10:22); while they moved not with wings only, but with whirling wheels, and burning fire was between them (10:6-7).

This description, though much more complex and involved than any of our previous sources, presents no sort of contradiction. In all probability it represents an elaboration, in accordance with the general style and characteristics of Ezekiel's literary work, of the older and simpler conceptions. Sometimes he speaks of them in the singular (10:24),<sup>8</sup> 'the living creature', to indicate that, being animated by one spirit, the four beings formed one complex phenomenon. From the description we recognize that whereas the original abode of the *Kerub* was conceived of as a mountain on the earth, here when the range of the Supreme God's power became wider, when from the earth-god he became also a heaven-god, the *Kerub* too passed into a new phase; he became the supporter of the divine throne.

We have a different conception of the *Kerubim* in Ezekiel's vision of Ch. i. The prophet has not the old unquestioning belief in tradition and has modified the traditional data so as to produce effective symbols of religious ideas. In this description we have four *Kerubim*, 'each of which has four faces,'<sup>9</sup> one looking each way—man, lion, ox, and eagle. Each has human hands on his four sides. They are not, however, called *Kerubim*, but *hayyoth* ('living creatures'). By this he implies that his own description of them differed so widely from that received by tradition that he would not venture to call them *Kerubim*, and did not until 'he heard them called so by God' (10:30). He speaks of them in the singular *Kerub*, and calls it 'the living

<sup>7</sup> cf. I K. vii:22.

<sup>8</sup> If the text is correct.

<sup>9</sup> cf. Rev. iv:6-8.

<sup>10</sup> In his vision of the temple Ezekiel again modifies his picture of the *Kerubim*, each *Kerub* there having but two faces—man and lion; Ezek. xli:18.

creature.' The fourfold character of the *Kerub* is due to the new function of being bearer of the 'Canopy' (firmament) under the throne (1:22-26). But the whole appearance was for the moment bathed in luminous splendour, so that the prophet needed reflection to realize it. The divine manifestation takes place within a storm-cloud, and a fire, which gives out flashes of lightning, burns brightly between the *Kerubim*; also there are revolving wheels beside the *Kerubim*, animated by the same 'spirit' as the living creatures, and as brilliant as the chrysolith or topaz. When the Chariot of God, in which he rode, descended to earth, moved from place to place, the creature on either side had the appearance of an advancing man. When in motion each creature expanded one pair of wings, and the expanded wings of each touched and thus formed a square.

The vision of the *Kerubim* in Ezek. I. is evidently composite, made up of a number of elements from several sources. There is first the idea that Jahveh moves and descends to earth upon the *Kerubim*. The *Kerubim* are thus regarded as the means and tokens of Yahveh's manifesting himself; wherever they are seen Yahveh was known to be present. The *Kerubim* are the symbols of the storm-clouds on which Yahveh rides and manifests himself.

The age which produced the story of Elijah's ascent to heaven in a fiery chariot<sup>11</sup> may be supposed to have known of fiery *Kerubs* on which Yahveh rode. At a later time, the *Kerubim*, though still spoken of by certain writers, were no longer indispensable.<sup>12</sup> The forces of nature were alike Yahveh's guards and ministers. Mythology became a subject of special learning, and its details acquired new meanings, and the *Kerub*-myth passed into an entirely new phase. Ezekiel probably mingled the old Palestinian view of the *Kerub* with some foreign influence. At any rate, we can affirm positively that the composite form of the *Kerubim* as seen in Ezek. I. is not Palestinian in form or spirit.<sup>13</sup> The Phœnicians, and probably the

<sup>11</sup> II Kings ii:11.

<sup>12</sup> Hab. iii:8 speaks of Yahveh as riding, not upon a *Kerub*, but upon horses.

<sup>13</sup> Whether the sculptured quadruped, with a bearded human head,