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Date: Friday, February 15, 2002
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 Subj: The Kerubim

One of the aspects of the Mishkan that is most unusual for the modern reader is the element of the Kerubim. The Torah's minimal description of this element has led to attempts to reconstruct the kerubim from the partial descriptions found in other places. It has also led to many speculations concerning the appearance of the kerubim and their function and meaning. With all the attempts at describing the Kerubim, one might conclude, along with Josephus, that "nobody can tell, or even conjecture, what was the shape of these cherubim" (Ant. 8:3,3). Although he is right that nobody knows what the shape of kerubim was (or even if there was one uniform shape to all the kerubim mentioned in Tenakh), yet that has not stopped attempts at conjecture. The archeological discovery of many kerub-like figures has fueled further conjecture as to the shape of the biblical kerubim. We will discuss both the shape and the function of the kerubim, in the Tenakh and in the Ancient Near East. First, let us explore the possibilities of the meaning of their name.

Kerubim: What's in a Name?

A first attempt at understanding the nature, shape and purpose of the kerubim might be made by examining the name and trying to reveal the origins of the word. R. Abahu understood the word as deriving from the Aramaic word, "rabia" ("growing boy") with the prefix preposition "k," ("similar to"). This led to the explanation that the face of the kerub was similar to that of a child. Abaye raised objection to R. Abahu's determination from Ezekiel 10:14 where two of the four faces of the creature that Yehezkel saw supporting the divine throne were "the face of a kerub" and "the face of a man." Abaye asked, if the face of a kerub is the face of a boy, what is the difference? To which the Talmud answers that the difference is in the age of the person, the "kerub" is a child while the "man" is an adult (Despite the Talmud's answer we are not sure that Abaye was convinced, or was even present when the answer was given.)

Other semantic attempts to find the word's origin include:

- A) Switching the order of the letters to yield "rakhub," which means "ridden." This etymology alludes to the kerub's function of being a creature that God rides upon. "He mounted a kerub and flew, gliding on the wings of the wind" (Psalms 18:11; NJPS). While this verse definitely speaks of that function, the poetic verse might be punning on the sound of the word, without actually giving the etymology.
- B) Changing the first letter from a "kaf" to a "qof," yielding the root "qrb" which means "close." This would imply their proximity to God.
- C) Deriving the word "kerub" from the Aramaic root "krb" which means "to plough." This would mean that the original appearance of the "kerub" was like that of an ox. This has support in Yehezkel's creature, which he describes in both in 1:10 and in 10:14 as having the same four faces. The only difference being that instead of the "face of an ox" of chapter 1, chapter 10 reads "the face of a kerub."
 (For other attempts, see Enc. Miqrail, vol. 4 col. 239-240)

Many scholars today see these attempts as mistaken and instead see the word to be derived from the Akkadian root "karabu" which means "bless." The participle form of this verb "karibu," means beings which stand as intermediaries between the gods and man, bringing man's prayers to the gods and dispensing the gods' blessing to man.

Shape of the Kerubim

The Torah does not describe the kerubim. It mentions them as a known object and there is, of course, no need to describe a known object. The kerub's details that the Torah mentions are just to specify the pose and position of the kerub, but are not intended to describe the being. This is the Torah's discussion of the kerubim in parashat Teruma:

Make two kerubim of gold-make them of hammered work-at the two ends of the cover. Make one kerub at one end and the other
 kerub at the other end; of one piece with the cover shall you make the

kerubim at its two ends. The kerubim shall have their wings spread out above, shielding the cover with their wings. They shall confront each other, the faces of the kerubim being turned toward the cover. (Exodus 25:18-20; NJPS)

The Torah is not describing the kerubim as having wings. Rather, it is just letting us know in what pose to put the wings. We will derive further aspects of the kerub's physical characteristics below. Yet, what is important to realize is that the Torah assumes knowledge of such on the part of its readers.

Yehezkel's first vision contains an extremely detailed description of God's throne. This description includes "creatures" (Hebrew, "hhayyot") which are supporting the throne.

In the center of the [huge cloud] were also figures of four creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the figures of human beings. However, each had four faces, and each of them had four wings; the legs of each were a single rigid leg, and the feet of each were like a single calf's hoof; and their sparkle was like the luster of burnished bronze. They had human hands below their wings. The four of them had their faces and their wings on their four sides. Each one's wings touched those of the other. They did not turn when they moved; each could move in the direction of any of its faces. Each of them had a human face; each of the four had the face of a lion on the right; each of the four had the face of an ox on the left; and each of the four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. As for their wings, they were separated: above, each had two touching those of the others, while the other two covered its body. And each could move in the direction of any of its faces; they went wherever their spirit impelled them to go, without turning when they moved. Such then was the appearance of the creatures. (Ezekiel 1: 5-13; NJPS)

These four winged creatures that formed the four feet of God's throne, were not the normal kerubim, but something more. They include, for example, the image of a kerub (see Ezekiel 10:14). They were unique creatures that were an improvement on the standard kerub, and therefore it requires a detailed description. In chapter 10 they are called kerubim, but they were quite likely not immediately recognized as kerubim by Yehezkel. At the bottom of each of the four single feet were wheels that could move in any direction. The wheels were an intrinsic part of the creatures—"the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels" (Ezekiel 1:21).

Archeological discoveries have helped us see these kinds of composite creatures as a pervasive element in sacred art. There are many of these winged-composite creatures adorning thrones, temples and friezes. Many of them have the body of a lion or an ox (with four feet on the ground and a tail which sometimes curls upwards), the wings of eagles and the faces of human beings. There are also composite creatures that have lion's legs, eagle's wings and that stand upright. Most famous of the composite creatures of the ancient world are the sphinxes, which are sometimes winged as well. There are those scholars who see a connection between the ancient Near Eastern composite figures which adorned thrones, stands, friezes and temples, and between the Biblical Kerubim which also adorned God's throne, the Mishkan and the Ark of the Covenant.

What was the appearance of the kerubim on the ark-cover? Did they have a four-legged body of an animal or was the kerub upright? From the description of the kerubim in Exodus the upright pose appears more likely. Those kerubim are described as:

The kerubim shall have their wings spread out above, shielding the cover with their wings.

If they had the body of a four-legged animal, most of the ark's cover would be shielded by the kerub's body and not just their wings.

In addition, the kerubim that King Solomon placed in the temple appear to be of human form (or at least they were upright.) They are described as having a height of ten cubits. This makes more sense for an upright kerub. Likewise, in 2 Chronicles 3:13 they are described as "standing on their legs facing inwards." If Solomon modeled those kerubim after the one's on the ark-cover, then possibly the ark-cover's kerubim were also upright.*

Another biblical kerub is described when God chased Man out of the Garden of Eden and,

Caused to dwell, eastward of the Garden of Eden, the kerubim and the flashing, turning, sword to watch over the way to the Tree of Life. (Genesis 3:24)

Presumably, the kerubim are holding the sword, which implies an upright figure.

Function

The function of the kerubim upon the altar is not mentioned. However, what is mentioned about the ark-cover and the kerubim can help us deduce the function.

You are to put the ark-cover on the ark, above it, and in the ark you are to put the Testimony that I give you. I will meet with you there

and I will speak with you from above the ark-cover, from between the kerubim that are on the ark of the Testimony—all that I command you concerning the Children of Israel.

Moshe will be aware of God's presence above the ark from between the kerubim.

God is described as "riding upon the kerubim" in Psalms 18:11 (quoted above). The ark itself is referred to as God's chariot:

The weight of the refined gold for the incense altar and the gold for the figure of the chariot—the kerubim—those with the outspread wings screening the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord.

The kerubim, then, are the chariot/throne of God.

