

Cherubim

Orders of Angels · Biblical Angels

The cherubim (Hebrew כְּרוּבִים, *keruvim*, singular כְּרוּב, *keruv*) constitute the most frequently mentioned order of angelic beings in Scripture, serving as guardians of divine holiness and bearers of God's throne-chariot. Unlike the popular sentimental depiction of cherubs as chubby infants with tiny wings—a Renaissance artistic corruption—biblical cherubim appear as majestic, awesome beings of overwhelming power and glory, evoking terror rather than affection in those who behold them.

Cherubim first appear in Genesis 3:24, immediately following humanity's expulsion from Eden: 'So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.' This placement establishes the cherubim's primary function: guarding access to God's holy presence. The flaming sword symbolizes divine judgment preventing sinful humanity from approaching the tree of life in their fallen state. Access to eternal life now requires mediation through promised redemption; raw human presumption meets only the cherubim's flaming barrier.

Note: The etymology of *keruv* remains uncertain. Some connect it to Akkadian *karibu* ('one who prays' or 'one who blesses'), referring to winged guardian figures in Mesopotamian temples. Others derive it from a root meaning 'to cover' or 'to overshadow,' befitting their role covering the mercy seat. Whatever the linguistic origin, Scripture defines cherubim functionally: they guard divine holiness, bear God's throne, and execute His purposes in the visible realm.

When God commanded Moses to construct the Ark of the Covenant, He specified that the mercy seat—the golden cover where blood was sprinkled on

the Day of Atonement—should be overshadowed by two cherubim of beaten gold. Exodus 25:20 details their posture: 'And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be.' This design wasn't arbitrary decoration but theological revelation: God's throne rests upon cherubim (Psalm 80:1, 99:1), and mercy flows to sinners only through blood sprinkled beneath the cherubim's watchful gaze. The cherubim witnessed both God's holiness (which the Ark represented) and the atoning sacrifice satisfying that holiness.

Solomon's temple magnified this pattern. The Holy of Holies contained two enormous cherubim of olive wood overlaid with gold, each standing ten cubits (fifteen feet) high, their wings spanning the entire breadth of the inner sanctuary. Additionally, cherubim were carved throughout the temple's walls, doors, and veil, and woven into the fabric of curtains—creating a structure permeated by these guardians of holiness. Every element testified that approaching God requires recognition of His absolute holiness and humanity's need for mediatorial intervention.

Ezekiel provides Scripture's most detailed cherubim description in his opening vision and chapter 10. He beheld four living creatures (later identified as cherubim in Ezekiel 10:20), each possessing four faces—of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle—representing respectively the pinnacle of creation's intelligence, sovereignty, service, and swiftness. Each had four wings: two stretched upward, touching the wings of adjacent cherubim, two covering their bodies. They moved in perfect unison without turning, each going straight forward wherever the spirit directed. Their appearance resembled burning coals of fire or torches, with fire moving among them and lightning flashing forth.

Note: Ezekiel 1 and 10 present interpretive challenges regarding the cherubim's appearance. The four faces, multiple wings, wheels within wheels intersecting at right angles, and eyes covering the wheels create an image defying naturalistic representation. Various explanations exist: (1) Literal description of cherubim's actual form in the spiritual realm; (2) Symbolic representation of attributes—omniscience (many eyes), omnipresence (wheels moving all directions), omnipotence (living creatures); (3) Theophanic vision adapted to human perception, translating spiritual realities into visual metaphor. The traditional view combines these: cherubim possess actual forms visible in heavenly visions, but these forms inherently symbolize divine attributes they manifest.

Accompanying the cherubim were wheels—'a wheel in the middle of a wheel'—with rims full of eyes all around. These wheels moved in perfect coordination with the cherubim, 'for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels.' Above the cherubim appeared a firmament like terrible crystal, and above that, a throne with the appearance of a sapphire stone, upon which sat the likeness of the glory of the LORD. This vision reveals the cherubim as throne-bearers, the living chariot of God's presence, executing His movements throughout creation.

Ezekiel 28:14 refers to Lucifer before his fall as 'the anointed cherub that covereth,' suggesting that the being who became Satan originally belonged to this exalted order. This identification explains Satan's extraordinary power and intelligence—he wasn't merely another angel but a covering cherub, one stationed in God's immediate presence. His fall demonstrates that proximity to God's glory doesn't guarantee perseverance; only those who maintain humble submission remain in His favor.

The four living creatures surrounding God's throne in Revelation 4:6-8—'full of eyes before and behind,' having six wings (combining seraphic and cherubic characteristics), crying 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty'—likely represent cherubim in their capacity as worshippers. These beings, who

behold God's glory unceasingly, never tire of declaring His holiness, providing the pattern for all earthly worship.

Cherubim thus function on multiple levels: as guardians preventing unholy approach to God's presence; as throne-bearers manifesting divine glory and mobility; as witnesses to atonement's provision; as worshippers declaring divine holiness; and as executors of God's purposes in the visible realm. They remind believers that worship requires reverence, approach demands mediation, and God's holiness infinitely transcends human comprehension. Only through Christ—our mercy seat, our mediator—can sinners safely pass the cherubim's flaming sword and enter God's presence.

Key Verses

Genesis 3:24

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

Exodus 25:20

And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be.

Ezekiel 1:5-6

Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings.

Ezekiel 10:1

Then I looked, and, behold, in the firmament that was above the head of the cherubims there appeared over them as it were a sapphire stone, as the appearance of the likeness of a throne.

Ezekiel 10:20

This is the living creature that I saw under the God of Israel by the river of Chebar; and I knew that they were the cherubims.

Psalms 80:1

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth.

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