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Holy Hybridity

On the Role of Mixture in the Holy Sphere

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to explore the role of mixture in relation to holiness and separation. By examining the angelic hosts, specifically the cherubim, as hybrids, and how they relate to the holy realm and the divine, it investigates the association between holiness and hybridity. It utilizes a grammatical analysis of pertinent words and expressions to open up new possible meanings. The following theological reflection is further advanced by insights from the fields of anthropology and phenomenology, as well as theology. The cherubim as covering and dwelling place of YHWH infers the close connection between divinity and mixture. The findings suggest an understanding of separation as inherent in mixture, as part of the dynamics of holiness.

Keywords: hybridity, mixture, separation, difference, holiness, angels, cherubim

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ANE	Ancient Near East
ANET	Ancient Near Eastern Texts
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
HB	Hebrew Bible
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>OTE</i>	<i>Old Testament Essays</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TLOT</i>	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ABBREVIATIONS	iv
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1. Purpose and Question	2
1.2. Methods and Theory	2
1.3. Material and Demarcation	4
1.4. Previous Research	5
1.5. Remarks on Language use in the Essay	6
2. ANALYSIS	8
2.1. Forbidden Mixtures	8
2.1.1. Leviticus 19:19	8
2.1.2 Deuteronomy 22:9–11	11
2.1.3 The Two Prohibitions – a Summary	14
2.2. Heavenly Creatures in the ANE	15
2.2.1. Seraphim – שרפים	15
2.2.2. Cherubim – כרובים	19
2.2.3. Mal’akh - מלאך	24
2.2.4. Ambiguous Hybridity – a Summary	26
2.3. God and his Angels	27
2.3.1. Lord of Hosts	28
2.3.2. He who Dwells Among the Cherubim	30
2.3.3. (Dis)Covering Mixture	33
2.3.4. Hybridity and Separation	37
2.3.5. Difference and Relation – a Summary	41
3. REFLECTION	42
4. CONCLUSION	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY	45

1. INTRODUCTION

In Lev 19:19 and Deut 22:9–11 we find a prohibition against mixtures; animals, plants and yarns of different kinds are not to be combined. A common explanation for these, somewhat strange verses, is as a symbolic prohibition against intermarriage. But the most favored interpretation of this embargo on mixtures is as a symbol of disorder. By joining together two things, separated by the order of creation, that order and hence creation itself is reversed.¹ Simply put, mixtures lead to chaos. Jacob Milgrom suggests a different answer: Mixtures belong to the sacred sphere and are thus forbidden for lay Israelites, operating in the profane world. The prohibition functions as a warning; the way for man to acquire holiness is not through an acquisition of mixtures, but by obeying God's commandments. Milgrom points out the abundance of mixtures in ancient mythology, including their presence in Israel's cult, namely the cherubim. These hybrid creatures had a place inside the sanctuary and on the Ark itself.² Milgrom suggests that: "Mixtures, then, characterize the holiness of the sacred sphere and those authorized to enter or to serv in it."³ If it is so, that mixtures belong to the holy, then how does this relate to the traditional understanding of holiness as intensified separation? Milgrom could be perceived as disputing this order, when he presents a hierarchy of holiness where the grade of holiness increases along with the expanse of mixture.⁴ Is God, as the source of holiness, then to be understood in terms of mixture? By investigating the hybridity of angelic beings, God's intermediaries, this essay seeks answers as to how God may be conceptualized.

¹ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1659.

² Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1659-1662.

³ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1661.

⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1664.

1.1. Purpose and Question

The purpose of this essay is to examine the role of mixture, as it relates to separation, in the holy realm and in God, through exploration of angels as hybrid creatures and by considering the relation between God and the angelic hosts.

This wider purpose can in turn be divided into subsidiary questions, in order to clarify the research and better define the subject. I have distinguished three such questions:

- How does mixture relate to separation?
- What sort of hybrids are the angels?
- What impact might such hybridity have on how we think and speak about God and the holy sphere?

1.2. Methods and Theory

Suitably for the topic the present work is itself a form of hybrid, navigating the borders between exegesis and theology. To assess what kind of creatures we are dealing with here, I will do a short historical outlook on divine creatures in the ancient Near Eastern context. Although the Israelite culture is distinct and differentiated from the cultures of Egypt, Babylonia and Assyria, it did not exist in a vacuum. The similarities between the biblical account of the creation of the universe and other creation myths, especially the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, have long been recognized. As well as those between the Song of Songs and Egyptian love-poems. It is not too farfetched to expect there to be similarities also in the conceptualization of creatures pertaining to the divine. As the biblical account on these creatures does not provide us with a clear picture of their appearance, the wider ANE material may at least provide us with potential images. In observing the similarities, we must not forget that there are differences, and similarity is not sameness.

The investigation of heavenly creatures is further informed by a grammatical analysis of three terms used to denote “angels” in the HB: the seraphim, the cherubim and *mal’akh*. These three appear to denote three different kinds of creatures, in both form and function, but all are explicitly connected to YHWH. I will also take a closer look on the prohibitions of Lev 19:19 and Deut 22:9–11, as well as examine a divine title in two parts יהוה צבאות ישב הכרובים “Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim” (1 Sam 4:4 NRSV), pertinent to the

association of cherubim and YHWH, and which may shed some light on the relationship between God and angelic beings. I will consider the etymology of the words and analyze the context in which they are used, to better understand their meaning. In order to gain new insight, scholarly consensus on their interpretations must be illuminated and questioned.

Although relying heavily on exegesis in this respect, the aim and scope of this essay remains a constructive theological one. I am not primarily seeking the (correct) meaning of the text, but if and how these textual angels may aid in a contemporary understanding of holiness. I make no claim to present a single truth, nor that the interpretations suggested are the only valid ones. In a time characterized by mobility and multi-cultural societies, as well as brewing populism and separatist tendencies, and lately isolation as a result of quarantine, with this essay I simply wish to examine the danger and potential liberation inherent in mixture, as it relates to separation and the sacred. What we regard as holy says something of what we esteem and what we consider to be correct relations. Holiness has tended to be understood in terms of separation, sacred is that which has been separated from use in the profane world. This essay asks if there is another way, true to the text and tradition of the HB, to understand holiness as open to plenitude and complexity.

Traditionally the quest for a theological understanding of human relations tend to take trinitarian relations as its point of departure, here the datum is instead divine relations in a wider sense, those between God and the angelic hosts. The overarching approach is a theological analysis of mixture in relation to the holy sphere, and angelic beings as an exemplification of this relation. The interest for the Hebrew text in relation to theology, taking special note of those terms that are hard to translate, but has potential to unlock new meaning in the text, is inspired by the work of constructive theologian Catherine Keller. Due to restraints in time and space the consequence of this focus for the essay, unlike the work of Keller, is a limitation in the dialogue with theological tradition to more recent discourse. I cannot claim to have accommodated her tehomitic hermeneutics in the present essay, but a certain inspiration cannot be denied. The anthology *Ambiguity of the Sacred* collects essays on aspects of sacrality written by scholars from various disciplines, with the intention to address what they refer to as “the fundamentally ambiguous nature of the phenomenon itself.”⁵ To them, the sacred is imbued with an instability

⁵ Jonna Bornemark and Hans Ruin, eds, *Ambiguity of the Sacred : [phenomenology, Politics, Aesthetics]*, (Södertörn Academic Studies, 49; Huddinge: Library, Södertörn University, 2012), 7.

and multiplicity that cannot be reduced to a singular meaning.⁶ Nor perhaps to a separated singularity. In its own way, this paper takes a theological approach in the search for this ambiguous sacrality, probing the meaning of mixture and separation.

1.3. Material and Demarcation

Angels have long captured the human imagination and there exist a vast material spanning a variety of media; texts, paintings, sculptures and so on. All of them, in their own right, have something to say of the conceptualization of angels. This means that the format of an essay is not sufficient to treat the conceptual history of angels in its entirety. As the focus of this essay is the hybridity of angels as an example of the relation between mixture and the sacred, connected to two prohibitions in the Pentateuch, the material has been limited to texts that concerns angels in the MT of the HB as presented in the BHS.⁷ This text, including the double Masora and critical apparatus, is well established as the authoritative critical edition for academic exegesis on the HB. The text is based on the Leningrad Codex, the earliest complete manuscript of the HB to have been dated so far, and the reprint I have used is the fifth edition. I have chosen to look specifically on cherubim and seraphim, creatures that in modern scholarly debate are generally considered as mixed beings or *Mischwesen*, as well as the *mal'akh* from whose Greek translation in the LXX as *angelos* the English “angel” is derived. The decision of this demarcation is made knowing that the interest in angels first blossomed fully during the Second Temple period. Angels figure in apocalyptic literature such as Jubilees and 1 Enoch, and several texts, like *Rule of the Congregation*, *Melchizedek*, *War Scroll* and *Hymns of Thanksgiving*, recovered from the caves at Qumran, show that angels were important to the sect in Qumran.⁸ Angelologies, often concentrating on the hierarchy of angels, are developed during the Second Temple period and new classes and individual angels are named. It was a time when

⁶ Bornemark and Ruin, *Ambiguity of the Sacred*, 7-9.

⁷ K. Ellinger, and W. Rudolph eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (5th ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997).

⁸ Matthew Walsh, “Claiming Israel’s Angels as their Own: The Angelic Realm and the Religious Identity of the Qumran Sect,” n.p. [cited 27 May 2020]. Online: <https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/claiming-israels-angels-their-own-angelic-realm-and-religious-identity-qumran-sect>.

much was happening, and to me it marks the beginning of a new phase in the conceptualization of angels. This means that this material is not easily equated with the prohibitions in Lev 19:19 and Deut 22:9–11. They are thus not included in this work but may serve as material for future studies.

1.4. Previous Research

As previously stated, angels have preoccupied the minds of men for a long time and this have generated much artistic material. There is likewise a long tradition of scribal work on the angels. Much of what is written concerning the angels is concentrated on their hierarchies or the relation of angels to fallen angels, as for example in the anthology *Angels: The Concept of Celestial Beings – Origins, Development and Reception*. This volume collects a wide range of material on the conceptualization of angels with articles contributed by a number of scholars and provides an informative cross section of the research on angels. While earlier theologians may occasionally have pondered on the nature of angels, often as ethereal spirits of light or fire, modern critical scholarship instead tend to focus either on their form or function. Although the form and function of heavenly creatures are of interest also for this essay, they are so mainly as expressions of their nature as mixtures. Whereas there appears currently to be a consensus on the hybridity of these creatures, at least the seraphim and the cherubim, as well as their close connection to God, I have not found any work which thoroughly investigates the relation between this hybridity and the sacred. Why this question has not previously been asked, I do not know, but I intend to begin the process of rectifying this omission with this essay.

Much work remains, fortunately we do not begin from nothing. As is customary for constructive theology, insights are gathered from several fields. There appears to be some interest in angels within the field of exegetics and the new millennia has provided a number of doctoral theses on the subject, such as *The Messenger of the Lord in Early Jewish Interpretations of Genesis* by Camilla von Heijne, *The Invariable Variability of the Cherubim* by Anna Rozonoer and *Cherubim and Seraphim in the Old Testament* by Adam Carlill. While neither Rozonoer nor Carlill is particularly interested in their relation to the holy, they offer a solid investigation into the biblical cherubim and seraphim. In turn von Heijne contributes an understanding of the ambiguity of the messenger of the Lord, and in extension of angels. With regards to the ANE and creatures possibly similar to biblical “angels” I am largely indebted to Friedhelm Hartenstein’s article on “Cherubim and Seraphim in the Bible and in the Light of

Ancient Near Eastern Sources” as well as *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* by Jeremy Black and Anthony Green.

The three-volume commentary on Leviticus by Jacob Milgrom is one of the most influential on the subject, and perhaps also one of the most comprehensive. Milgrom was professor of Biblical Studies, with a special interest in the laws of the Pentateuch. As made clear by the introduction to this essay, his suggestion that mixture is not opposed to holiness but belongs to it, lies at the very heart of this essay. Another perspective on Leviticus is offered by the anthropologist Mary Douglas. Perhaps most known for her work on purity as system and order in *Purity and Danger*, she shares with Milgrom an interest in the legislation of the Pentateuch. Douglas argues that these laws have often been misunderstood, and their depth and dynamic neglected. Her presentation in *Leviticus as Literature* opens up the symbolic world of the text.

When it comes to holiness, Rudolf Otto’s *Das Heilige* cannot be overlooked. He describes the holy as the numinous, as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a strange wonder at the same time frightening and mesmerizing. Just how this dynamic tension of conflicting emotion and experience relate to the angelic hosts remains unclear. Otto’s explanation of holiness as something dynamic is also mirrored in Catherine Keller’s theistic theology. The attentive reader may well note an influence from Keller’s *Face of the Deep* far greater than the short episode explicitly referencing to this work toward the end of the essay might suggest. In the vein of constructive theology, she writes forth a theology of *becoming* in contrast to the linear perception of *origin*, arguing creation out of the bottomless deep that is not something, and yet not the nothing of *nihil*. She does this by returning to the two first verses of Genesis, taking seriously the enigmatic *tehom*, the watery abyss with tentacles pointing back to the Babylonian primordial goddess Tiamat. Her excursion of the deep can assist in understanding the complexity of mixture, as will be shown.

1.5. Remarks on Language use in the Essay

As part of the constructive theological approach of the essay, it aims to be accessible not only to those with specialist knowledge in exegesis and theology, or familiarity with biblical Hebrew. The choice is therefore made to use the general style of transliteration as found in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, with the primary aim to aid pronunciation. As *seraphim* and *cherubim* are the transliterations recognized and incorporated in the English language for these

designations, they are the ones who will be used to designate these creatures in the running text, and unlike other transliterations will not henceforth be italicized. For the tetragrammaton, the divine name, I will use the established consonantal transcription YHWH. In the sections discussing the meaning of words and terms, the transliteration is complemented by the Hebrew consonantal text to facilitate identification. To this end I have also supplied a list of abbreviations used, in the event these are not known to the reader.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. Forbidden Mixtures

The analysis on mixture and holiness will begin by taking a closer look on the two texts, Lev 19:19 and Deut 22:9–11, that contain divine commandments apparently forbidding different kinds of mixtures. They have several traits in common but there are also divergences, and I shall therefore look at them separately, to discern in what way and to what extent they may be of significance to the subsequent study on how mixture and separation relate to each other and to the holy.

Although there is definitely a strong connection between the prohibition passage in Lev 19:19 and that in Deut 22:9–11 they are not identical, and it would seem they are utilized and motivated somewhat differently. Milgrom maintains that to the scribe behind Lev 19:19 holiness remains as a possibility to the Israelites, but it is conditioned on adhering to YHWH's commandments.⁹ To Deuteronomy on the other hand, with all its decalogue inspiration, holiness for the Israelites is a reality, due to the promise to their fathers.¹⁰ There is also a marked difference on the prominence of YHWH as a holy God, while this idea is central to Leviticus 19,¹¹ it does not appear to be of special importance to Deuteronomy.¹² The following analysis will investigate the motive behind the prohibitions in Lev 19:19 and Deut 22:9–11 respectively and what connection, if any, that can be said to exist between the sacred and hybridity.

2.1.1. Leviticus 19:19

You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials. (Lev 19:19 NRSV)

⁹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1663.

¹⁰ Jack Lundbom, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 63, 77-78; Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1663.

¹¹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1714-1715.

¹² Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 60.

The nineteenth chapter of the book of Leviticus is comprised of a number of statutes, all of which should be understood in light of the opening statement in verse 2, where Moses is enjoined to communicate to the congregation of Israel that they are to be holy because YHWH is holy. Holiness is thus not a genetic trait reserved to the sons of Aaron, but is achievable to all of Israel, on condition that the divinely given religious and ethical decrees are obeyed.¹³ One of these edicts is the prohibition of mixtures in verse 19, and it would seem therefore that mixtures are banned as they are incompatible with holiness. As Milgrom points out however, one of the forbidden mixtures is actually proscribed elsewhere in conjunction with the sacred sphere.¹⁴ This is the *sha'atnez* שַׁא'אֲתֶנֶז, the combination of two kinds of yarn in one piece of textile. In light of the parallel pericope in Deut 22:9–11 and archaeological evidence, *sha'atnez* is taken to signify a blend of wool and linen.¹⁵ This combination is also implied in the ordinances for the tabernacle in Exodus 26, verse 1 and 31, whose curtains are to be made of lengths woven from linen and colored yarn, taken to be wool. These verses also mention the cherubim, which are to be woven into the cloth. As the prohibition explicitly regards clothing, a closer equivalent might be the priestly garments, which includes items of this mixture (see Exod 28:6, 15; 39:29). According to Milgrom the passage in Num 15:37–41, which allows the insertion of one blue thread in the garment tassels of lay Israelites, stems from the same tradition as Lev 19, and asserts the call to holiness for all Israelites.¹⁶ He considers there to be a gradation of holiness marked by the use of *sha'atnez* in garments. The outer garment of the high priest, the belt of the other priests and the tassels of the laity are all comprised of this mixture.¹⁷ The term *sha'atnez* however is not used in biblical texts outside the prohibitions in Lev 19:19 and Deut 22:11.¹⁸ In addition to this the etymology of the word is unclear and the term is therefore practically untranslatable, other than through the explanation offered by Deuteronomy. The use here of the term *kil'ayim* makes it clear, despite the problems with translation, that the term

¹³ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1663.

¹⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1660-1661.

¹⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1658, 1662.

¹⁶ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1660-1661.

¹⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1664.

¹⁸ James Strong, 8162 “שַׁא'אֲתֶנֶז,” *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, [cited 20 May 2020]. Online: <https://biblehub.com/str/hebrew/8162.htm>.

sha'atnez signifies a mixture or combination. That the prohibition further concerns the “putting on” of such garments can be explained by the association of *sha'atnez* with holiness. The grade of *sha'atnez* in one’s garments corresponded to the areas of the temple to which one had access. The layman with his tassels was admitted to the outer court, the ordinary priest to the outer sanctum, and once a year the high priest entered the inner sanctum. To dress in *sha'atnez* could hence be construed as an attempt to acquire greater access and correspondingly greater holiness.

The prohibition regarding garments is the third in the verse while the previous two are against breeding two different types of cattle with each other and sowing two kinds of seed in the same field. The prohibition moves from animal-animal, to plant-plant and lastly animal-plant hybrids. All three prohibitions contain the term כְּלָאִים *kil'ayim* that only appears here and once in Deut 22:9.¹⁹ Cognates in other languages as well as the dual form suggests it has to do with the existence of two diverse things, and it is interpreted in the Targums as “mixtures.”²⁰ Two differentiated entities are the minimum for mixture to occur, and I do not think it unreasonable to assume that the intention of the prohibition is that *not even two things are to be mixed*. One cannot circumvent the embargo by simply adding a third to the party. It would seem the problem with mixing things lies in the resultant hybrid. Breeding two types of livestock with one another would result in a hybrid creature. Now of course this is only true when there exists some compatibility between the two parties, such as the horse and donkey, a combination resulting in the mule. Whether or not this precise hybrid was comprised in the prohibition,²¹ is beside the point. The ANE was a milieu ripe with hybrid creatures, well beyond what we today might call “real.” The prohibition states that it is not for Israel to attempt production of such or comparable creatures. Likewise, the problem lies with the garment as a result of mixing linen and wool with each other. As a result of mixture, it is a hybrid, and whoever wears it dresses himself in hybridity, taking that hybridity upon himself.

The part about the seeds are a bit harder to decipher. Milgrom asserts that it is not about cross-pollination but the trouble that comes with harvesting a combination of crops or their possibly negative influence on one another.²² I do not believe that this solution considers the focus on hybridity in the text adequately. Like the breeding of cattle, the sowing starts a process

¹⁹Strong, 3610 “כְּלָאִים,” *Concordance*, [cited 20 May 2020]. Online: <https://biblehub.com/str/hebrew/3610.htm>.

²⁰ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1659.

²¹ See Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1658-1659.

²² Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1662.

of reproduction. Having two kinds of seed in the same ground without borders between them, might be construed as resulting in a hybrid plant. Without knowledge of what was imagined to be going on underground, it is hard to assess. My point is that it is perhaps not the actual, practical, result that is of importance here, but what was believed to happen. As is discussed more extensively below in 2.1.2., sowing seeds to produce new plants can be considered a sexual means of plant reproduction. This connection is exemplified in the Hebrew word for “seed” and “semen” זרע *zera'*, with the extended meaning of “descendants.” That the prohibitions on mixtures in Lev 19:19 in the context of the chapter as a call to holiness for Israel, containing rules and regulations for how such holiness can be achieved, should suddenly shift to practical advice for an easier harvest appears unlikely. It is far more probable that the entire prohibition of Lev 19:19 regards profane misuse of the hybridity belonging to holiness.

2.1.2 Deuteronomy 22:9–11

You shall not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed, or the whole yield will have to be forfeited, both the crop that you have sown and the yield of the vineyard itself. You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together. You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together.
(Deut 22:9-11 NRSV)

On first glance the prohibitions of Deut 22:9–11 and Lev 19:19 may well appear to be dealing with the same problem. They both concern mixtures and they both take up similar examples. Still, this is where the similarities end, the examples are similar but not the same. Deuteronomy has a different order than Leviticus and begins with the example from the plant world. Instead of a field it speaks of a vineyard and makes the explanatory amendment that sowing an additional crop in the area set aside for vine, will result in the “forfeiture” of the entire harvest. The Hebrew word that the NRSV has here chosen to translate as “will have to be forfeited” is תקדש *tiqdash*, the third person feminine singular of the imperfect form in Qal of the verb קדש *qadash*. This verb carries the meaning “to be holy” and the root *qdash* appears to be connected with the numinous and holy already in proto-Semitic, an association that is sustained for the

root throughout the related languages.²³ A more appropriate translation from my point of view is thus “will be rendered holy” or “will become sanctified.” The yield is consequently forfeited only in the sense that it is no longer available for profane use, it has entered the holy sphere. According to Milgrom this addition is a further sign of the connection between mixture and holiness.²⁴ The combined yield of the vines and the additional crop is rendered holy due to their status as mixed, much like the mixed *sha’atnez* cloth is reserved for the holy sphere.

Jack Lundbom however gives a different explanation to the sanctification of the whole yield.²⁵ He argues that the grapes are considered to be under a ban similar to that of fruit trees. For the first three years fruit from a new tree is to be discarded, in the fourth offered to YHWH and not until the fifth year can the owner enjoy it. The prohibition would thus not apply to an established vineyard, but only to a new one. This explanation would draw the prohibitions of Deut 22:9–11 and Lev 19:19 further apart. The connection between the “fruit-ban” and the new vines is not entirely clear to me, even if Lundbom assures this is what is referenced in Deut 20:6 where a man who has not yet had the chance to eat the fruits of (הללו *khillo* lit. profane) his new vineyard, is to be excused from battle and sent home. Referring to one of Milgrom’s earlier works, Lundbom claims that the infectious nature of holiness means the sanctity of the grapes is extended to the other crop as well.²⁶ The fruit-ban that Lundbom refers to is found in Lev 19:23–25 just a few verses after the prohibition on mixture, yet, as the prohibition in Lev 19:19 speaks of seeds in a field, it is clear this was not the connection intended in that context. The fruit-ban does not mention vines but speaks only of כל-עץ מאכל *kol-’ets ma’akhal* “all trees for food.” That vines are part of this category is not asserted and Lundbom’s assumption of the existence of a similar ban for vines cannot be corroborated.

One reflection Lundbom makes that is of importance for the interpretation of the prohibition, is that it clearly speaks of the sowing of seeds. This is in stark contrast to modern viticulture, where seeds are only used to produce new varieties, as these plants differ greatly from the parent. He also points out that sowing can be considered a sexual means of reproduction, with all the uncertainties this entails, in contrast to the more asexual methods used

²³ H.-P. Müller, “קדש,” *TLOT* 3:1103-1106.

²⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1663.

²⁵ Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 623.

²⁶ Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 623.

in modern viticulture, in effect reproducing the same plant, a clone of sorts.²⁷ This is also the only verse that contains the *kil'ayim*, suggesting the importance of the two kinds of seeds being sown together. The two other verses instead utilize the term יַחְדָּו *yakhdaw*, suggesting unity and equality or “togetherness,”²⁸ a slightly different emphasis from the diversity of *kil'ayim*. That the two different kinds of seed are placed in the ground where some sort of fertilization appears to take place and a new plant emerges may well lead to the new plant, or at least its seed, being considered as hybrids.

The following prohibition regards animals, here explicitly an ass and an ox. But in contrast to Lev 19:19 it concerns plowing rather than mating, and Lundbom understands it as practical, in place to avoid damage to either of the two animals of unequal strength.²⁹ Milgrom notes that plowing is a common euphemism for sexual intercourse but he is still not convinced that Leviticus and Deuteronomy intends the same thing, and sees them instead as in opposition.³⁰ If indeed Deut 22:10 is restricted to plowing a field it is hard to see how this applies to mixture, the animals moving side by side, unless the combination of their work is thought somehow to be a hybrid. Considering the implications of sowing as a sexual means of reproduction for plants, the meaning of plowing as a code for sexual reproduction among cattle ought not to be overlooked. As already stated in 2.1.1. with regards to the prohibition on mating different kinds of cattle in Lev 19:19, such a union would result in a hybrid creature.

The third prohibition is once more against wearing *sha'atnez*, with the explanatory statement of what this is, namely; a combination of animal and plant fibers from wool and flax in one garment. As in Leviticus, the prohibition is explicitly against wearing such combination cloth. To “dress in” can be symbolic of attaining the properties of the garment. Wearing *sha'atnez* is to wear an animal-plant hybrid and the holiness associated with it. This prohibition is immediately followed by the decree in verse 12 to wear tassels on one's outer garment. Which according to Lundbom solidifies these tassels as an exception to the rule.³¹ But Milgrom asserts

²⁷ Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 622.

²⁸ William Holladay, ed., “יַחְדָּו,” *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

²⁹ Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 623.

³⁰ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1658.

³¹ Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 624.

that this must mean that they are included in the ban and thus are not to be *sha'atnez*, in opposition to Num 15:37–41.³²

2.1.3 The Two Prohibitions – a Summary

The prohibition of Lev 19:19 is found in a collection of laws and ordinances for how the Israelites are to achieve holiness in the image of YHWH their God. It appears to me that Leviticus 19:19 with its repetition of *kil'ayim* and stress on the resulting hybridity, puts a greater emphasis on mixture and blending than does Deuteronomy 22:9–11. It also offers a clearer connection between holiness and mixture, due to the strong emphasis on holiness in the chapter. The Leviticus pericope therefore, and indeed the book of Leviticus, is of special interest for our quest to find how mixture and holiness relate to one another. The focus in chapter 19 is on right relations and ethical living as a condition for holiness, and the prohibition on mixture likewise concerns right relations. The *sha'atnez* fabric used in the cult belongs to the holy sphere and is not to be put to profane use. This animal-plant hybrid, apart from the tassels on the outer garment, is thus off limits to all that strive for holiness, as it is already holy. In light of the cultic use of *sha'atnez* it is not possible to explain the prohibition as due to the incompatibility between holiness and mixture, for clearly this mixture has a place in the holy sphere. That plant-plant and animal-animal combinations which would result in hybrids are equally forbidden indicates these too belong to the sacred. This conclusion is strengthened by the use of *tiqdash* “become holy” in the amendment of Deut 22:9. It is therefore unlikely that the prohibitions are simply aimed at practical matters that would make life less complicated. The context of the Deuteronomy passage is similarly that of Lev 19:19 one of right relations and with its affirmation that the combined yield is sanctified it echoes Leviticus’ claim that hybrids are holy. The hybrid resulting from a union of two diverse things is holy, and the conclusion must be that this status is due to its hybridity.

³² Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1658.

2.2. Heavenly Creatures in the ANE

The Ancient Near East was home to a myriad of hybrid creatures associated with the divine realm. Combinations of human and animal attributes connected to certain capabilities resulted in an image of superiority, and they often functioned as representations of power. There is a special connection between these supernatural creatures, and the monstrous army created by the goddess Tiamat in her failed attempt to avenge her spouse Apsu. With their roots in cosmogony these creatures came to be understood as guardian figures, manning the border regions of existence. What they were truly guarding was the center, and the center of the ancient city state was its temple and palace, its god and its king.³³ As guardians and protectors they are benevolent creatures, but at the same time they are dangerous, with a potential for destruction. As part of the holy sphere they are both fascinating and fearsome. They are ambiguous creatures both to form and function.

This part of the analysis will focus on three diverse creatures, the seraphim, the cherubim, and the *mal'akh*, mentioned in the HB where they are associated with YHWH and the holy. It will place these creatures in the context of the ANE and study the terms used to denote the three creatures, in order to assess their hybridity and their place in the holy sphere.

2.2.1. Seraphim – שרפים

Although there is some dispute in the matter, the most likely explanation of the term "seraphim" is as I see it as a plural form of the nom שרף *saraf*, associated with the verb of the same root with the meaning "to burn." A possible translation of seraphim would then be "the burning ones," or maybe rather "the ones who burn" as the term *saraf* lies closer to setting something on fire than being on fire. Including the singular, the term occurs seven times distributed over five texts in the HB.³⁴ In at least four of these, there seems to be a connection between seraphim

³³ Friedhelm Hartenstein, "Cherubim and Seraphim in the Bible and in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Sources," in *Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature, Yearbook 2007, Angels, The Concept of Celestial Beings – Origins, Development and Reception*, (ed. Friedrich V. Reiter et al.; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 157-158; Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary*, (London: British Museum, 1992), 177-178.

³⁴ Strong, 8314 "שרף," *Concordance*, [cited 20 May 2020]. Online: <https://biblehub.com/str/hebrew/8314.htm>

and snakes. Num 21:6–9 tells the story of how YHWH sends “fiery serpents” (הנהזים השרפים) against the people during the exodus. But also, how Moses is instructed to fashion a serpent (שרף) in order to save those who have been bitten from death. Deut 8:15 may allude to this story, as it warns the people not to forget YHWH, who led them through the terrible dessert and the “fiery serpents” (נהז שרף) there. The remaining three texts are all found in the book of Isaiah. In Isa 14:29, part of the oracle against the Philistines, there is a climactic buildup from serpent, to viper, to “flying seraph” (שרף מעופף). A similar stance is found in Isa 30:6 where the flying seraph (שרף מעופף) is coupled with the viper, in par with the lion and lioness in a land of trouble and anguish.

Hartenstein argues that all four texts mentioned so far, not only connects the seraph with snakes and serpents, but with the desert as a zone of lifelessness and terror.³⁵ There is no doubt that both Num 21:6–9 and Deut 8:15 places the seraph in a desert surrounding and associates it with the harsh, life-threatening, conditions there. The Isaiah texts are a little more dubious. Still Isa 30:6 presents a similar milieu and Isa 14:29 could be understood as extending this symbolic further, maintaining a focus on death and destruction. It would then appear that the odd one out is the remaining text in Isaiah 6, where suddenly the seraphim are found surrounding the throne of YHWH. In this context they seem to belong within the temple, in the abode of YHWH, rather than in the desert. Nowhere here is it clear whether they have the shape of a serpent. All we are told is that they have a total of six wings, a face hidden behind two of them and a pair of feet (רגליו, this could possibly also be interpreted in an extended sense as legs – genitalia – body, but the literal meaning is feet) hidden by another pair of wings. We can further deduce that they have at least one hand capable of maneuvering a pair of tongs, as this is used to deliver a glowing coal from the altar, a hint of the creature’s connection to burning. This mentioning of limbs contradicts our modern understanding and notion of the snake. But I do not think we should all too swiftly discard the feet of the serpentine seraphim.

Throughout the world, serpents hold an important place in mythological and religious traditions. From snakes and sea-serpents to wyverns, dragons, hydras and basilisks.³⁶ In ancient Mesopotamia there were several minor serpent deities, these seem to have been the only fully non-anthropomorphic gods in this context. Images of snakes are frequent in Mesopotamian iconography and there are several serpent-creatures, such as the *bashmu* and *ushumgallu*,

³⁵ Hartenstein, “Cherubim and Seraphim,” 165.

³⁶ Lowell K. Handy, “Serpent (Religious symbol),” *ABD* 5:1113.

horned snakes with or without forelegs, or the hydralike seven-headed snake-creature *mushmahhu*. There is also the snake-dragon, a horned snake with the forelegs of a lion and hindlegs of a bird, well-known from the Ishtar Gate. This creature has been associated with a number of different gods through history but was also utilized as a magical protective hybrid in general, it's Akkadian name *mushhushshu* carries the meaning of "furious snake."³⁷

The creature most closely related to the seraphim however is probably the Egyptian *uraeus*. This is a Greek loan-word designating the important symbol of the cobra, common in Egyptian art with a prominent place on the forehead of Pharaohs and gods. One of the Egyptian titles for this creature is the word for "flame" alluding to the fiery sensation of the snake's venom, a parallel to the etymology of seraph. Like the seraph the *uraeus* too is found both with and without wings, and it is not uncommon in the geographical area of Judah and Israel. Of the depictions found there none have six wings, two or four seems the usual amount. But the association with the temple and YHWH's abode might not be entirely accidental. Some motifs have been found from Israel and Judah showing the *uraei* together with griffins and sphinxes, and the sacred tree.³⁸

If the seraphim are indeed to be identified with the *uraei*, this would connect them not only with the desert but also with the garden, with Eden. This would tie in well with the ambiguous character that the serpent commonly has as a religious symbol.³⁹ They can be simultaneously understood as representations of both creation and chaos, as protection and potential danger, and as good and evil. Nowhere is this duality as pertinent as in the double role of killer and healer, the very same role the seraphim/seraph holds in Num 21:6–9. This dark side of the serpent is in the Bible exemplified by the role it plays in the Eden narrative of Genesis 3. Here, as in other ANE narratives, the serpent intercedes and averts the immortality intended for humans.⁴⁰ As a consequence of the part it had in the humans eating of the "wrong" fruit, the serpent is cursed and condemned to henceforth "crawl on its belly," suggesting this was not its original means of transportation. This text opens the possibility of understanding the Eden serpent as having limbs. The hand and feet of the seraphim in Isaiah 6 does not necessarily contradict an understanding of the creatures as serpents. Rather, it would be quite natural for

³⁷ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols*, 166-168.

³⁸ Hartenstein, "Cherubim and Seraphim," 166.

³⁹ Handy, "Serpent (Religious symbol)," *ABD* 5:1113-1116.

⁴⁰ Handy, "Serpent (Religious symbol)," *ABD* 5:1114.

the servants of YHWH to share the likeness of the serpent before “the fall.” Although I have not found any evidence of *ureai* with limbs, legged serpents do exist in the Mesopotamian material. Still, with this Eden narrative in mind, the ambivalence of serpents guarding the sacred tree, sometimes interpreted as the tree of life, becomes clear.

The word used for snake in Genesis 3, נחש *nakhash*, is the same that is used in connection with seraphim, and indeed interchangeably with seraph, in Num 21:6–9. Taking a closer look at the text, a pattern emerges. It is YHWH who sends the “fiery serpents” (את הנחשים) (השרפים) in amongst the people and it is YHWH who orders the making of a seraph (שרף) as a remedy. The people ask to be saved from the snakes (את-הנחש) and Moses manufactures a snake of copper (נחש נחשת) as a response to YHWH’s demands. The root *srp* (שרף), is thus only used when the statement is directly connected to YHWH. Is this a sign of an already established relationship between YHWH and the seraphim? The copper serpent of Moses makes a further appearance in 2 Kgs 18:4, where it is reported to have been destroyed by king Hezekiah. The text states that up until that time, the serpent figure had been revered as a deity and the people had made sacrifices to it. Handy suggests that the copper serpent, in its role as intermediary between YHWH and the people, follows the ANE pattern of a lesser god in service to a more important deity.⁴¹ If this elevated seraph, that may have held a place in the Jerusalem temple of YHWH, is a precursor to Isaiah’s winged seraphim, their appearance in his inaugural vision is perhaps not so surprising after all. Each of the five texts that mention the seraphim connects these desert-dwelling serpent-creatures with YHWH. In Num 21:6–9 and Deut 8:15 the connection is quite clear, YHWH has power over and controls these creatures. In Isaiah 6 they are YHWH’s servants that sing his praise. In the two further texts from Isaiah, 14:29 and 30:6, they appear in an oracle of YHWH, mediated through the prophet. An additional connection between YHWH, the seraphim, the desert and Moses might be made in Moses’ encounter with the burning bush on the edge of the desert in Exodus 3. It would certainly appear to be a suitable surrounding for them. But the word used here is not connected to the root שרף *srp* but to בער *b’r*. There is thus no direct link between this story and the seraphim. Instead, in that instance the enigmatic character of “the angel of the Lord” is mentioned, which remains to be further investigated.

⁴¹ Lowell K. Handy, “Serpent, bronze,” *ABD* 5:1117.

2.2.2. Cherubim – כְּרוּבִים

If there are questions regarding the etymological background of the seraphim, the situation regarding the etymological background of the cherubim is even less clear, and subject to much wider speculation. The root of the word – כָּרַב, *krv* – is not attested otherwise in Biblical Hebrew, which makes all attempts of a translation difficult. Something that is reflected perhaps in the choice of the Targumim, the Peshitta, the Greek Bible and the Vulgate to transliterate rather than translate כְּרוּב.⁴² The cherubim are mentioned 91 times in the HB, the majority of these refer to representations in the temple (Exod 26:1, 31; 36:8, 35; 1 Kgs 6:23–35; 7:29, 36; 8:6-7; 1 Chr 28:18; 2 Chr 5:7-8; 3:7, 10-14) or on the ark (Exod 25:17–22; 37:7–9; Num 7:89) and cherubim were according to these texts depicted on the lid of the ark, the *kapporeth*, as well as in the tabernacle and later the temple.⁴³ Only twice are they directly associated with vegetation and God's garden (Gen 3:24, Ezek 28:14–16). Both these texts also seem to connect the cherubim with the role of guardian. In a couple of instances, the cherubim are linked with the transportation of the deity, either as mount or as drawing a vehicle (2 Sam 22:11; Ps 18:11; Ezek 10:18-19, 11:22). According to the article on cherubim in the *TDOT* by Freedman and O'Connor, in the iconography of the temple freestanding sculptures of the cherubim are generally related to transportation, while the reliefs are associated with sacred vegetation.⁴⁴ Others however regard the sculptures as guardian figures considering them as part of the wider ANE tradition of colossi placed at entrances to temples and palaces, as the cherubim were placed at the eastern entrance to the Garden of Eden.⁴⁵ The depiction of plants along the cherubim on the temple walls indeed suggests affinity between temple and garden. I will later in the analysis return to the use of cherubim in divine epithets to better understand their place in the temple as well as their role in relation to God.

As the biblical texts do not give a complete and coherent description of the appearance of these creatures, their statements often contradicting one another, and as none of the representations survive, we do not surely know what these creatures were and what they looked

⁴² Raanan Eichler, "Cherub: A History of Interpretation," *Biblica* 96.1 (2015): 27.

⁴³ Strong, 3742 "כְּרוּב," *Concordance*, [cited 20 May 2020]. Online: <https://biblehub.com/str/hebrew/3742.htm>.

⁴⁴ Freedman and O'Connor, "כְּרוּב," *TDOT* 7:313.

⁴⁵ See Hartenstein, "Cherubim and Seraphim," 158.

like.⁴⁶ According to the *TDOT* three different roots of *kry* can be attested in related languages: “bless,” “plow” and “plait.”⁴⁷ It holds the first two as possibly related to the biblical cherub, and indeed these seem to be the ones suggested by scholars discussing the appearance of the cherubim in the material I have surveyed.. I do not however see any reason to discard the third meaning as less likely than the first two.

The first sense of “bless” seems to be the most widely endorsed. Derivatives of the Akkadian *karabu* “bless” have been found in at least three texts associating it with statues and cultic figures, such as the *lahmu* and the *lamassu*.⁴⁸ *Lahmu* has been identified as a beneficent male deity with long hair and beard, figures of which have been discovered in foundation deposits to ward off evil. The word *lamassu* likewise refers to a beneficent protective deity imagined in human form, this time as female and less hairy.⁴⁹ This means that neither of the two creatures associated with the *karibu/karibtu* “one who blesses” is pictured as a hybrid, exposing the hybridity of the third for questioning. The term *karibu/karibtu* has often been taken as denoting the human-headed winged bull or lion colossi guarding the entrances of Assyrian palaces and temples.⁵⁰ This identification seems hard to corroborate and a term related to *lamassu* appears to signify the very same creatures. There are however other creatures to consider, especially if Eichler is correct in maintaining that the cherubim were considered as upright creatures, which according to him would exclude quadrupeds.⁵¹

In Neo-Assyrian art are depicted biped human-animal hybrids and genies holding a bucket down in their left hand and a cone up in their right hand, often in association with the stylized, or sacred, tree.⁵² They have been interpreted as fertilizers of the sacred tree and their pose, with a raised hand, as one of blessing.⁵³ Indeed, fertility and blessing may well be understood as intertwined. However, the term used of the cone carries the meaning of “purifier” and their function thus appears to be more closely associated with purification than blessing.

⁴⁶ Eichler, “Cherub,” 26.

⁴⁷ Freedman and O’Connor, *TDOT* 7:310.

⁴⁸ Freedman and O’Connor, *TDOT* 7:308-309; R. H. Pfeiffer, “Cherubim,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 41 (3-4, 1922): 249–250.

⁴⁹ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols*, 115.

⁵⁰ Hartenstein, “Cherubim and Seraphim,” 158.

⁵¹ Eichler, “Cherub,” 37-38.

⁵² Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols*, 46.

⁵³ Pfeiffer, “Cherubim,” 251.

The identification of these human-animal hybrids and genies as the *karibu* is thus uncertain. The biblical texts make no connection between such attributes and the cherubim, and it is rather their association with the sacred tree and vegetation that makes them interesting. Although the connection between the sacred or stylized tree and the tree of life in the Garden of Eden is far from given, similarities in association cannot be excluded. It is clear from the texts describing the temple cherubim that they, at least as carvings (1 Kgs 6:29-35; 7:36), were associated with vegetation, nor can their function as guardians in the parallel Eden/Temple be overlooked.

The second meaning of “plow” has likewise led to an association of the cherubim with the previously mentioned bull colossi. As plowing is an activity characteristic of oxen the cherubim (“the plowing ones”?) must have traits in common with the bull. Further support for this view, it is argued, is given in the parallel visions of Ezek 1:10 and 10:14 where “the face of an ox” in the first text is replaced by “the face of a cherub” in the second, implying they are one and the same. And as guardians to the tree of life in Gen 3:24 they are linked to the Garden of Eden and the task of tending and tilling it.⁵⁴ One creature often associated with Lahmu for instance is “the bull-man,” a biped with the lower body, legs and horns of a bull and the upper body and head of a human.⁵⁵ This character could offer an alternative to the bull colossi, were it not for his lack of wings, the one trait of the cherubim the biblical sources seem to agree on.

The third connotation of “plait” has the wider semantic field of “unite” and “bring near” as attested in Aramaic, Arabic and South Semitic languages.⁵⁶ It has not as often been used to explain the etymology of כְּרֻב *kruv* as the previous two. Still, the poet and Tosafist Isaac ben Judah Halevi in the thirteenth century promoted the understanding of the Aramaic כְּרַב *krv* as “mix,” leading him to argue that the name echoed the creature’s character as composites, a mixture of two species.⁵⁷ A similar stance of cherub as a class of hybrid creature or simply composite being in general, has been argued by contemporary scholars as well, but on conflicting biblical evidence rather than etymological grounds. This leads Freedman and O’Connor to conclude that the cherubim probably did not denote a single form, but a variety of

⁵⁴ See Eichler, “Cherub,” 33.

⁵⁵ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols*, 48.

⁵⁶ Freedman and O’Connor, *TDOT* 7:310.

⁵⁷ See Eichler, “Cherub,” 36.

winged hybrids belonging to the sacred landscape.⁵⁸ It refers thus not to a being, but a class of beings whether birds, bipeds or quadrupeds.⁵⁹

Raanan Eichler disputes this view, and instead argues that the lack of satisfying accounts on the form of the cherubim, is because their appearance was supposedly familiar to the reader.⁶⁰ He gives three arguments for why the description of cherubim in Ezekiel 10 is not to be considered generally applicable. The naming of these creatures as cherubim may well be due to later editing, and creatures described in the same manner in Ezek 1:1–3:13 are not named as such but as “living beings.” Further, these descriptions directly contradict what is known from other passages regarding the number of faces and wings (one and two, rather than four of each). The fact that Ezekiel alone in the HB offers a detailed description of the cherubim is itself conspicuous. That other passages, despite their meticulous account of material, construction, size and direction, refrain from portraying their form, suggests this was widely known. Meaning, the need to describe them here is due to their atypical form.⁶¹

In her thesis *The Invariable Variability of the Cherubim* Anna Rozonoer might be said to support both these views. Although she acknowledges prophetic additions and augmentations in Ezekiel’s description of the cherubim or “living beings,” these are not subjective fantasies but objective visionary renditions bursting with symbolic meaning. She claims a correspondence in the description of cherubim between prophetic visions and historical books, that show that “the original image of the Cherubim was human.”⁶² Still, these dynamic creatures of supreme perfection cannot be captured or contained in a single form. To identify the nature of the cherubim with a static form of the cherubim would be on the verge of idolatry.⁶³ Her research into the biblical descriptions of the cherubim leads her to conclude that the difference displayed is due to their borderline existence. Fluidity and changeability are traits commonly associated with the role of mediator between divine and earthly realms. The biblical cherubim

⁵⁸ Freedman and O’Connor, *TDOT* 7:314.

⁵⁹ Freedman and O’Connor, *TDOT* 7:318-319.

⁶⁰ Eichler, “Cherub,” 37.

⁶¹ Eichler, “Cherub,” 26-27.

⁶² Anna Rozonoer, *The Invariable Variability of the Cherubim*, (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2014), 62.

⁶³ Rozonoer, *Invariable Variability*, 74-86.

act as boundary markers of the sacred and the profane, and are thus placed in the space where these two meet. Not only guarding the border but also mediating the exchange across it.⁶⁴

There are here yet some possibilities left to examine, namely creatures that were common in the iconography of the ANE, especially in the Levant, and which at times have been suggested to be identical to the cherub. The English word “griffin” is derived from the Greek γρυψ *gryps* which share phonetic similarities with the Hebrew כרוּב *kruv*.⁶⁵ In Greek mythology the griffin is tasked with guarding unapproachable places, much like the cherub guard the way to the tree of life in Gen 3:24. The griffin is typically considered as having the head and foreparts of a bird, usually an eagle, and the body, hindquarters and tail of a lion, either winged or not.⁶⁶ It appears quite frequently in ANE iconography and has for example been found depicted on an ivory plaque from thirteenth century BCE Megiddo.⁶⁷ A variation on this creature is the “griffin-demon,” a being with a human body and the head and wings of a bird. This is one of the creatures found with the previously mentioned “bucket and cone” accessories in Assyrian iconography.⁶⁸ It is not as widely spread as the more common griffin and lacks any leonine features but offers one possible way of understanding the griffin as a biped, alternately a human-bird hybrid. The griffin is often depicted along with another staple creature of the ANE, the sphinx, a human-headed lion who, like the griffin, can appear with or without wings. Both the griffin and the sphinx are common companions of the stylized tree in Iron Age Phoenician art. This winged form is the one most commonly attributed to the cherub in recent scholarship. Apart from it being frequent in ancient Levantine iconography, its identification with the cherub has been encouraged by the translation of the divine epithet יֹשֵׁב כְּרוּבִים *yoshev hakruvim* as “seated/enthroned upon the cherubim.” In the Phoenician-Canaanite sphere sphinxes are portrayed supporting the thrones of both kings and gods. The cherub and sphinx would thus have a shared function as seat and throne, assuming the translation is correct.⁶⁹

Another possibility is that the cherub is in fact a bird, in resemblance to those in Egyptian monuments sheltering the shrines and gods with their wings, as the cherubim shelter

⁶⁴ Rozonoer, *Invariable Variability*, 200-201.

⁶⁵ Eichler, “Cherub,” 34.

⁶⁶ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols*, 99-101.

⁶⁷ Eichler, “Cherub,” 35.

⁶⁸ Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols*, 100.

⁶⁹ Eichler, “Cherub,” 35; Hartenstein, “Cherubim and Seraphim,” 158-162.

the lid of the ark with theirs. If a conceptual pictorial line can be corroborated between the Arc of the Covenant and the later Torah arks, this might validate this point of view, as examples of inward facing birds surmounting the Torah ark can be attested on items from as early as the fourth century CE.⁷⁰ The earliest preserved identification of the cherubim however, is that they resemble a human child, and stems from the third century.⁷¹ This ascription most likely finds its background in the Erotes and cupids of Greco-Roman art that decorated the main entrance of the Capernaum Synagogue along with a reading of כְּרוּב as Aramaic כְּרַבִּיא rendering it as “like a boy.” Other arguments supporting the cherub’s human form is drawn from Ezekiel 1 verse 5 and 10 respectively which states the beings had the appearance of a man and that the human face is the primary one.⁷² The winged human, or genie, seems to have been the most common biped in the iconography of the ancient Levant, and like the griffin-demon it is found attending the stylized tree with bucket and cone in hand.⁷³ It is thus a probable contender for the figure of the cherub. As noted earlier this is also the view held by Rozonoer in her dissertation on the cherubim, namely that the base conception of the biblical cherubim is anthropomorphic.⁷⁴ This would mean that the form we today commonly associate with angels, might in fact be that of the cherubim.

2.2.3. Mal’akh - מלאך

This is a creature somewhat different from the previous two and there are those who question whether they at all belong to the same category, or if this is a mix-up based in the angelologies of the Second Temple period. Since it is from the designation מלאך *mal’akh* that the English word “angel” is derived (as well as the Swedish *ängel*, German *engel*, and so on), via the Greek *angelos* of the LXX, it plays a major role in our understanding of angelic beings, and I do believe it is important to treat it in this essay. The Hebrew מלאך *mal’akh* means “messenger” and neither the MT of the HB nor the LXX translation makes any distinction in usage between

⁷⁰ Eichler, “Cherub,” 32.

⁷¹ Eichler, “Cherub,” 30.

⁷² Eichler, “Cherub,” 30.

⁷³ Freedman and O’Connor, *TDOT* 7:317; Pfeiffer, “Cherubim,” 249.

⁷⁴ Rozonoer, *Invariable Variability*, 59-60.

divine and human messengers, the Vulgate on the other hand does so, when reserving *angelus* for divine messengers. The noun *mal'akh* is believed to stem from the root *l'k*, attested in South Semitic languages and in Ugaritic, with the meaning “to send with a message” and probably related to *hlk*. The term occurs 213 times in the HB, 92 of these refer to messengers sent by humans and a majority of these are political envoys in the plural form, reflecting the practice of not sending a messenger alone for the security and accuracy of the message. When it comes to the 120 occurrences of messengers sent by God on the other hand, these are predominantly in the singular form. There is no need for the divine sender to “hedge his bets” by multiple messengers, it may also reflect the sender’s superior status in relation to the receiver. Not all messengers sent by God are supernatural creatures, prophets and priests may assume this role as well.⁷⁵

Likewise, even when the messenger is a supernatural entity, they tend to be perceived as men. Perhaps perceived as emanating a certain splendor, inspiring awe in those they encounter, but still recognized as having at least the likeness of a man. So it is with the “men” who visit Abraham in Genesis 18–19, the commander that Joshua meets in Joshua 5:13–15 and the “man” Manoah’s wife encounters in Judges 13. The *mal'akhim* does not appear to sport any features identifying them as a hybrid, that is not to say they are strangers to ambiguity. What is clear from these texts is precisely the unclarity of their identity. They may look like men, but at the same time it is clear they are something else. In other texts it is hard to deduce whether *mal'akh* refers to a divine or human being. It remains uncertain if they are in fact to be understood as individuals, as part of a collective (the heavenly host) or as representations of YHWH, devoid of individual traits or agency. This is especially true of the *mal'akh* YHWH.⁷⁶

The use of envoys was standard practice among dignitaries in the ANE and YHWH is not the only god who makes use of messengers. The *mal'akh* YHWH however seems to differ from the typical norm. Although some hold the identification of the messenger with the sender as customary,⁷⁷ others question this and points to the absence of a similar blurring of identity

⁷⁵ Freedman, Willoughby, Fabry and Ringgren, “מַלְאָכִים,” *TDOT* 8:308-325.

⁷⁶ Funlola Olojede, “Angelo o Angela? Issues of Degenderization in the Depictions of Angelic Beings in the Bible,” *OTE* 29/3 (2016): 539-540.

⁷⁷ Freedman, Willoughby, Fabry and Ringgren, *TDOT* 8:308-325.

anywhere else in the ANET.⁷⁸ Angels and prophets may both speak in God's name, but while the *mal'akh* simply speaks as YHWH, the prophets tend to use an introduction formula in the style of "thus says the Lord" declaring in whose name they speak, simultaneously attaching and detaching themselves from the sender. The practice of the prophets appears to be more in line with that of an emissary in the ANE. There have been several attempts to explain the merging of identities between God and his *mal'akh* in contemporary exegesis, it has been suggested that the *mal'akh* is a manifestation or hypostasis of God, that it is God's ambassador or messenger, or the confusion is due to a later insertion of *mal'akh* to the text in order to avoid anthropomorphism in God.⁷⁹ There are pros and cons to all of these explanations, and as there are different types of "angel of the Lord" texts, perhaps none of them can be utilized to explain all cases of ambiguous identity. The ambivalence remains unresolved and the distinction between God and the *mal'akh* YHWH is diffused, at times differentiated and at others indistinguishable. There certainly appears to be an interchangeability of identity in the *mal'akh* YHWH.

2.2.4. Ambiguous Hybridity – a Summary

Somewhat surprisingly, the analysis found that neither the seraphim, the cherubim nor the *mal'akh* may have started out as composite creatures but as a serpent, a bird and a man, and only later taken on the hybrid form. As no conclusive identification can be made, this is not certain, and I do consider it likely that the seraphim as well as the cherubim were conceptualized as hybrids. It does however pose the question of why they have come to be so strongly associated with hybridity, in modern scholarship as well as in traditional art? For make no mistake, a human – whether man or woman, adult or child – with wings, is as much a hybrid as a griffin or a sphinx. From the examination made here the hybridity of the divine creatures studied does not appear to consist primarily in their outward appearance, but this is rather a consequence of their internal ambiguity.

⁷⁸ Camilla von Heijne, *The Messenger of the Lord in Early Jewish Interpretations of Genesis* (Uppsala: Uppsala university, 2008), 65.

⁷⁹ von Heijne, *The Messenger of the Lord*, 124-129.

In all three creatures the analysis has found traces of ambiguity, as so closely alternating between modes that they may in fact be simultaneous; good and evil, life and death, center and border: dissolving the boundary between sender and mediator. This shows they share traits with their ANE counterparts, manning the border regions of existence. The seraphim mediate both the judgement and the deliverance of YHWH while the *mal'akh* speaks for YHWH, in a way that at times makes it impossible to say where the *mal'akh* ends and YHWH begins. They are agents of YHWH and communicate his will to his people. As intermediaries they are part of both the divine and earthly realms and serve as signs of the presence and immanence of YHWH. Of special interest for this essay are the cherubim, as these are the creatures especially mentioned by Milgrom in connection to the prohibition in Lev 19:19. These beings also held a special place in the cult, which provides us with a platform to investigate the relationship between them and God. The cherubim were woven into the *sha'atnez* curtains of the tabernacle and part of the *kapporeth* of the Ark, and were thus part of the place where the presence of YHWH with his people was realized in a special way.

2.3. God and his Angels

To answer the question of how the ambiguous hybridity revealed in section 2.2. relates to the divine and the holy, we will now turn to the relationship between the angels and God. Often the function of the angelic host is described as singing God's praise and carrying out his commands, but they also act as his heavenly council. Evidence for this is collected from a variety of biblical sources who mention or allude to this relation. Here the focus will however not be on such passages or the function of the angels, but on the investigation of the meaning of a particular epithet for God, one connecting him strongly to the cherubim. The divine title יהוה צבאות ישב הכרובים *adonay tsva'oth yoshev hakruvim* is commonly translated as "the Lord of hosts enthroned above/between the cherubim," nevertheless, there are other possibilities. The title occurs in 1 Sam 4:4, 2 Sam 6:2 and Isa 37:16. The cherubim formula is found also in 2 Kgs 19:15 and 1 Chr 13:16, but without the term *tsva'oth*, as well as in Ps 80:1b and 99:1, where neither *tsva'oth* nor the tetragrammaton is part of the appellation. As the name in biblical tradition is considered to reveal something of the person's character and is connected to their very existence, we may assume this holds true also for God's name, and in addition to this

God's name appears to be tied to his presence.⁸⁰ What God is called thus says something of how God is conceptualized. This investigation of the divine epithet will be immediately followed by an examination of how the biblical temple cherubim, as dwelling place of YHWH, in their hybridity contain elements of both mixture and separation.

2.3.1. Lord of Hosts

The initial part of the longer appellation is in itself a designation for God, with a total 284 occurrences in the HB, largely concentrated to the Prophets.⁸¹ The first word is the divine name, the tetragrammaton, יהוה YHWH. The meaning and etymological background of this name has been widely debated but today the connection to the verb היה *haya* “to be” is generally accepted. This relation is also suggested in the text wherein this name is first presented in the HB, that is in Exodus 3 (esp:14–15), where different forms of this verb are prominent. That the middle consonant was originally a װ *waw* rather than a ם *yod* is supported by the corresponding verb in Aramaic, Amoritic and Akkadian, as well as by the ancient blessing in Gen 27:29. The initial *yod* suggests an imperfect form of the verb in the third person masculine singular but as the original vocalization is lost (the MT adjusted to the Qre perpetuum *adonay*) it can be read as either the basic form Qal or as the causative Hiphil. As there is no attestation for the Hiphil of the verb elsewhere in the HB and as the previously mentioned allusion to the name in Exodus 3:14 are in the Qal imperfect, it is most likely that the Qal is the form also for the tetragrammaton. The meaning is thus “He is” rather than “He who causes (something) to be” and associated with the notion of God's active and saving presence rather than that of God as creator, for which another verb most likely would have been utilized.⁸² The imperfect form of the verb implies that this was not an expression of a past experience but rather considered as a current, ongoing and not terminated reality. As with most names today the inherent meaning of the divine name was probably not activated with each use of it, perhaps even less as the uttering of it became more and more restricted, but instead for the most part laid dormant in the name.

⁸⁰ Trygve Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron* (Örebro: Libris, 1987), 17-20.

⁸¹ Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron*, 123.

⁸² Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron*, 25-26, 36-40, 47-49.

The second word צבאות *tsva'oth* is a plural form of the frequently occurring word צבא *tsava*. Meaning "army" or "warriors" *tsava* has a rather explicit warlike connotation but as a verb it is also used to denote cultic service.⁸³ The use of *tsva'oth* as a divine epithet occurs predominantly in prophetic texts that are closely associated with the temple, indicating a connection between the epithet and the temple.⁸⁴ This connection is further strengthened by texts tying "YHWH *tsva'oth*" to Zion (Isa 8:18; 24:23; 25:6, Zech 8:3, Ps 48:9). The temple, first at Shiloh and then Zion, was the place where the Ark of the Covenant was held. In the HB these two temples are called היכל *hekal*, a term otherwise used of the palaces of earthly kings. The *tsva'oth* appellation is thus associated with the idea of YHWH as king, a notion emblematic for the theology of the temple in which the temple is construed as the palace of YHWH where he, in a special way, is present as king.⁸⁵ This royal motif is according to Mettinger also associated with creation and the struggle against and ensuing victory over chaos.⁸⁶ The connection of the royal motif to creation opens up for an understanding of the temple not only as palace but simultaneously as an image of the Garden of Eden, while the battle motif may help explain the use of *tsva'oth*. Though textual evidence suggests this heavenly host consists rather of courtiers than of warriors.⁸⁷ Perhaps there is no need to make too strong a distinction between the host as warriors or courtiers, as these functions may well coincide. As the abode of YHWH, the temple is part of both heaven and earth, a realization of heaven on earth. This notion of the hybridity of the temple was not unique to the Israelites but is attested throughout the ANE.⁸⁸ God's presence shifts reality and dissolves borders. The core of *tsva'oth*-theology is according to Mettinger this regal divine presence in which God is active as ruler, YHWH *tsva'oth* is *immanu* "with us" or "amongst us."⁸⁹

⁸³ William Holladay, ed., "צבא," *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 302.

⁸⁴ Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron*, 125.

⁸⁵ Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron*, 102-106, 123-131.

⁸⁶ Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron*, 99-101.

⁸⁷ See Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron*, 132-134.

⁸⁸ Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron*, 131-132.

⁸⁹ Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron*, 134-136.

2.3.2. He who Dwells Among the Cherubim

The *tsva'oth* name is uniquely Israelite as is the appearance of the cherubim in a divine epithet.⁹⁰ The earliest occurrence is in 1 Sam 4:4 in the time of the Judges. In this instance it is associated with the temple at Shiloh but perhaps more importantly and even more strongly, with the Ark. In the parallel texts of 2 Sam 6:2 and 1 Chr 13:6 this Ark association is likewise clear and the scene in the parallel texts of 2 Kgs 19:15 and Isa 37:16 takes place in the temple “before the face of YHWH.” Psalm 99, where the cherubim formula is found in verse 1, detached from YHWH *tsva'oth*, is a hymn of praise to the divine king on mount Zion and thus part of the same tradition as the *tsva'oth* name, according to Mettinger. Psalm 80 is a psalm of lament directed to the shepherd of Israel.

Although the cherubim formula in 1b appears to be separated from YHWH *tsva'oth*, the formula YHWH Elohim *tsva'oth* occurs in verse 4 and 19 with a further Elohim *tsva'oth* in verse 7 and 14, and the psalm as a whole can thus be read as part of this tradition. I therefore believe it is relevant to discuss how the parts of the whole formula relate to one another, even if it does not always appear in its full form. That the two parts, YHWH *tsva'oth* and *yoshev hakruvim*, share a connection to the theology of the temple with its image of YHWH as ruler is attested already with Mettinger. The texts certainly connect both parts with the temple and the Ark, the spatial heart of Israelite religion. Still, I consider there to be another aspect of the connection between *tsva'oth* and *hakruvim* that so far has been largely overlooked.

In trying to understand and translate the appellation *yoshev hakruvim* there are some difficulties. Firstly, to determine the meaning of the verb יָשַׁב *yoshev*, considering its wide semantic field. Secondly, the lack of a preposition connecting the two words, leaving us in uncertainty of how they relate to one another.⁹¹ In addition to this the unclear meaning of cherub further confound the matter. The term may refer to sphinx-like creatures, winged humans - in other words angels - as we tend to imagine them, or it refers to something else entirely. The verb *yoshev* stands here as the active participle in the masculine singular and thus express some ongoing event, which given the semantic field of the word could be “sitting,” “dwelling,” “remaining” or “residing.”⁹² The tendency to translate it as “enthroned” has been prevalent

⁹⁰ Mettinger, *Namnet och Närvaron*, 148.

⁹¹ See Raanan Eichler, “The Meaning of יָשַׁב הַכְּרֻבִים,” *ZAW*, 126/3 (2014): 358.

⁹² William Holladay, ed., “יָשַׁב,” *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids:

since the second part of the 19th century and is defended by Adam Carlill as fitting the context of at least four of the seven occurrences and not incompatible with the remaining three.⁹³ This understanding is closely connected to *yoshev* as “sitting” which was the chosen route of early translations such as the LXX, Peshitta and the Vulgate.⁹⁴ Such a translation seems to be influenced by reading Ezek 10:1, with something like a throne above the cherubim, and 2 Sam 22:11/Ps 18:11, with YHWH riding on the cherub, into the epithet.

This way of interpreting the appellation in light of some other textual appearance of the cherubim, is rejected by Raanan Eichler - who instead favors a grammatical analysis, taking the 238 other cases of the Qal active participle *yoshev* combined with a governed noun without a intervening preposition, into account.⁹⁵ His investigation shows that in no other instance can this formula of “*yoshev* x” be understood as “who is seated upon x” or “who is enthroned among x” nor as other suggested interpretations of the cherubim formula as “who dwells between x,” “who settles x” and “ruler of x.” In general, the phrase should rather be construed as “who dwells in/lives in/inhabits x.” Apart from the cherubim formula there is one other occurrence of “*yoshev* x” where the governed noun regards a plurality of creatures, Gen 4:20, which reads *יֹשֵׁב אֹהֶל וּמִקְנֵה* *yoshev 'ohel umiqneh*. According to Eichler the best rendering of this is “those who dwell in tents and among herds.”⁹⁶ No English bible translation I have found utilizes this interpretation, instead of “dwelling among herds” most render it as “having/raising livestock” putting a stronger emphasis on the shepherd connotations of the verse and restricting “dwelling” to apply only to the tents and not the herds.⁹⁷ If this were to influence our understanding of the cherubim formula, we might imagine YHWH as a herdsman of cherubim. There is not necessarily any opposition between YHWH as shepherd and YHWH as king. Although the social distance between king and shepherd may have been great in ancient Israel, the idea and image of the shepherd was closely connected with the monarchy. It is thus not inconceivable that both these images were contained in the cherubim epithet, something the use of the

Eerdmans, 1971), 146.

⁹³ Carlill, “Cherubim and Seraphim,” 141-144.

⁹⁴ Eichler, “The Meaning of הַכְּרֻבִים,” 359-361.

⁹⁵ Eichler, “The Meaning of הַכְּרֻבִים,” 365-367.

⁹⁶ Eichler, “The Meaning of הַכְּרֻבִים,” 367.

⁹⁷ See Biblehub, a compilation of translations for Gen 4:20, [cited 29 April 2020]. Online: <https://biblehub.com/genesis/4-20.htm>.

appellation in Ps 80:1b and 99:1 may reflect. Nor is such an understanding excluded in Eichler's preferred translation of the epithet as "who dwells among the cherubim,"⁹⁸ which is closer to the Hebrew as "herding" is not part of the semantic field of *yoshev*. YHWH is thus the one who dwells among the cherubim.

What is more important in Eichler's account however is the realization that the cherubim appellation should be construed in line with the formula "*yoshev x*" which means that "the cherubim mark or delimit the space in which YHWH is located."⁹⁹ Though I am not entirely convinced that the cherubim statues of the Solomon temple were conceived as a throne, and in that way marked the presence of YHWH as the invisible king, I do believe there is a connection between the cherubim and the presence of YHWH. The study of the epithet, and taking in consideration the presence of additional cherubim on the temple walls and doors, opens the possibility that the cherubim are an essential part of the abode of YHWH. It is not so much the walls and doors of the temple that makes the temple into the residence of YHWH, but the presence of the cherubim upon and within them. As mixtures they belong especially to that place where heaven and earth meet. In Eichler's view the depictions of cherubim on the Ark and in the temple or tabernacle only in a secondary way corresponds to the cherubim of the *yoshev hakruvim* epithet.¹⁰⁰ These representations of cherubim in the temple served to reproduce YHWH's heavenly milieu, in this way marking the space of YHWH, as the living cherubim placed east of Eden mark the realm of YHWH, out of reach to humans. Ugo Volli points to the refusal of biblical texts to refer to the cherubim in the temple and tabernacle or on the Ark as representations, images or statues, insisting instead that they are simply cherubim, and he affirms that this persistence is not meaningless.¹⁰¹ Although they have a kind of agency it is not their actions, for indeed they are not actively performing, but their presence that matters, they communicate something by simply being there. The cherubim in a way act as a frame, setting up the necessary conditions for a functioning communication.¹⁰² Rather than the content of the message they express the relation, as markers of the discourse between the Israelites and transcendent YHWH. Instead of signifying transcendence itself, they are a "metasign of its

⁹⁸ Eichler, "The Meaning of הַכְּרֻבִים," 367.

⁹⁹ Eichler, "The Meaning of הַכְּרֻבִים," 367.

¹⁰⁰ Eichler, "The Meaning of הַכְּרֻבִים," 368-370.

¹⁰¹ Ugo Volli, "Cherubim: (Re)Presenting Transcendence," *Signs and Society* 2 (2014): 38.

¹⁰² Volli, "Cherubim," 38-42.

possibility.”¹⁰³ The reluctance on the part of biblical authors to speak of the cultic cherubim as representations, may indicate that they were not considered as such. Volli regard them as an exception to the prohibition against making images of living beings.¹⁰⁴ But if they are not seen as representations, as a form of reproduction, then they cannot reasonably be in violation of the prohibition. Understood as an integral element of the heavenly sphere of YHWH, present in the temple, they are something else entirely. If this dwelling of YHWH is indeed to be understood as heavenly rather than earthly, it might serve to explain the use of יָשָׁב *yoshev* rather than שָׁכַן *shakhan* (as in *shekhinah*) the verb more commonly associated with YHWH’s presence on earth.¹⁰⁵ Both parts (*tstva’oth/cherubim*) attest to YHWH being surrounded by his heavenly court of warrior guardians, for whom he is a kingly shepherd.

2.3.3. (Dis)Covering Mixture

In her reading of Leviticus, anthropologist Mary Douglas takes distinct note of the structure of the book. She argues that it is modeled on the temple/tabernacle which in turn is modeled on mount Sinai. It’s two narrative passages divide the legislative text in three parts, and corresponds to the screens of the temple and the sequential ascent to Sinai.¹⁰⁶ The movement goes from the wide outer court or the base of the mountain to the innermost Holy of Holies, the summit of Sinai, going deeper and higher simultaneously. The chapter of interest for this essay, Leviticus 19, is according to this scheme found just inside the first screen, in the outer sanctum. It is flanked on either side by chapters 18 and 20, mirroring each other in their focus on idolatry and sexual offences. To Douglas this framing suggests that chapter 19, with its rules of righteous living, is in fact central to the whole book.¹⁰⁷ As the chapter has 37 verses in total, verse 19, with its prohibition on mixtures, may be construed as the center of this central chapter. Of course, the division into chapters and verses is a later modification and not original to the book, still, the verse does appear to stand apart somewhat from the adjacent verses.

¹⁰³ Volli, “Cherubim,” 47.

¹⁰⁴ Volli, “Cherubim,” 34-35.

¹⁰⁵ Compare Eichler, “The Meaning of הַכְרֻבִּים,” 362; Carlill, “Cherubim and Seraphim,” 142.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 218-220.

¹⁰⁷ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 234-240.

According to Douglas, Leviticus utilizes an ancient literary formula of concentric circles, with parallel cases in ascending order, each step including the previous one. It does so especially when it comes to the idea of covering: the skin covering the body, the garment covering the skin, the house covering the garment.¹⁰⁸ Not only is the temple a model of Mount Sinai, there is also a correlation between body and temple.¹⁰⁹ The structure of ascending order is clear in Leviticus ordinances for how the body of the sacrificial animal is to be handled. In the case of the burnt offering first the head, suet fat, kidneys and liver lobe goes on the altar, then the remaining meat and lastly the “entrails and legs,” or in Douglas’ interpretation the “entrails and genitals,” and then it is all burnt, turned into smoke.¹¹⁰ In all sacrifices the suet fat of the sacrificial animal is to be burnt on the altar, and there are strict prohibitions against anyone consuming this part of the animal. The suet is the fat separating the ribcage with heart and lungs from the innards of the gut. This yellowish-white layer covers the organs, the innermost part, situated in the depth of the body, to the point of rendering them invisible. Like the skin is the outer boundary and protective covering for the whole body, so the suet is a covering and boundary, shielding the soft, squishy intestines, the seat of thought and emotion, of life itself. In the parallels of temple and Sinai, the suet fat corresponds to the incense filled outer sanctum and the cloud on the mountain, marking the restricted area of sacred space. Smoke and cloud both hinder visibility, like the suet covering the innards, the incense smoke shrouds the Holy of Holies and the cloud veils the top of the mountain, shielding it from prying eyes and the owner of those eyes from certain death, for no one can see God and live. So, depth and height converge on the point of the presence of YHWH.¹¹¹

We now return to the literary temple analogy, structured around this tripart design, and have entered the temple building, an area barred for non-priests. This is the middle area, situated between the entrance and the entrails, the base and the peak. It corresponds to the place of the cloud-covering of mount Sinai and the suet of the sacrifice, and it is the space wherein Moses was commanded to place the incense altar.¹¹² Leviticus makes no mention of it, but it does have this prohibition on mixtures in a seemingly appropriate place. Milgrom connects the ban of

¹⁰⁸Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 53-54.

¹⁰⁹ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 55-56.

¹¹⁰ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 77-78.

¹¹¹ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 63, 71-80.

¹¹² Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 227.

mixtures as holy with the cherubim present in Israelite cult, as examples of hybrids belonging to the divine realm and argues that the priests by dressing in garments of *sha'atnez* symbolically became cherubim.¹¹³ It is not an uncommon thought in biblical literature that the garment represents the person wearing it.¹¹⁴ The person is thus at one with her clothing. By dressing in mixed fabric reserved for the holy sphere, the priest clads himself in holiness and inhabits the mixture he wears. To be without clothing, to be naked, is to be exposed, to be vulnerable.¹¹⁵ By symbolically becoming cherubim, the priests are sheltered from some of the potential danger of the sacred sphere and are authorized to enter into it.

Douglas also take note of the cherubim, but only as guardians of the Ark in the inner sanctum. She makes a passing remark on their connection to the covering of the Ark but does not develop this further.¹¹⁶ Given her emphasis on the use of coverings in Leviticus this is somewhat surprising. The fact that the cherubim on the Ark are described as being part of and at one with the כַּפֹּרֶת *kapporeth* (Exod 25:17-22), appears to me to be of significance in this context. The word is only used for this “lid” of the ark and is connected to the verb כָּפַר *kofer*, meaning to cover, but as a covering of sin also connected with reconciliation and atonement.¹¹⁷ That the cherubim are part of the covering of this most central and intimate part of Israelite cult, opens the possibility that they are so elsewhere as well. Indeed, the Ark cherubim are not alone in neither temple nor tabernacle. The cherubim are present on the walls and doors of Solomon’s temple and they are woven into the fabric of the tabernacle curtains (Exod 26:1, 31; 1 Kgs 6:29-35). Presumably these curtains are also *sha'atnez*, consisting of a combination of wool and linen, thus cladding the sanctuary itself in mixture.

The connection between cherubim, cloud and covering can be seen by comparing the texts concerning the cherubim with parallel texts but is especially clear in Ezekiel. In Ezek 1:4 the living beings later identified as cherubim are discerned from within an approaching great cloud and in Ezek 28:14–16 the verb סָכַח *sakhakh* “to cover” is directly associated with the

¹¹³ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, 1661.

¹¹⁴ See Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 245.

¹¹⁵ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 246-247.

¹¹⁶ See Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 229-230.

¹¹⁷ William Holladay, ed., “כָּפַר,” “כַּפֹּרֶת,” *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

cherub. The symbolism of the cherubim is thus closely associated with cloud and covering.¹¹⁸ These creatures, as part of the temple furnishings, are thus part of the literary context of Lev 19:19, and according to Douglas, they are at the very place of the smoking suet cloud, covering YHWH from sight. In one of her earlier works Mary Douglas, in a contemplation of anomalies, writes “The viscous is a state half-way between solid and liquid. It is like a cross-section in a process of change.”¹¹⁹ This process of change is, I believe, important for understanding the connection between the hybrid cherubim and the coverings of cloud, smoke and suet.

Although suet is generally described as a hard fat, and thus considered a solid, it is still fat and therefore it has a relatively low melting point. It is not all too difficult to imagine, that taken straight from an animal in a warm climate, it might lose some of its solid character, approaching that half-way state, congealed rather than firm. Not privy to firsthand information, this is mostly conjecture of course. In a similar way, both cloud and smoke can be imagined as a form of viscosity. They might both be described as air made visible, and hence not quite belonging to any one category. Clouds, as miniscule drops of water, may well be considered something between a fluid and a gas, and smoke is a medium rising from earth to heaven, not really belonging to either. Douglas notes that the Hebrew term used for burning the suet on the altar, קטר *qtr*, carries the meaning of “turning into smoke” rather than “burn,” implying a transformation of sorts, a changing of forms.¹²⁰

I would argue that these three coverings, suet, smoke and cloud, all belong to this viscous category. They slip through our fingers, impossible to grasp, and are yet impenetrable. That the cherubim too are part of this category can be inferred from their presence in the outer sancta, the place of cloud and incense, as well as them being part of the *kapporeth*, in many ways the ultimate covering. The cherubim have long been considered as a form of guardians and boundary keepers, similar to those in the wider ANE context, but what if we instead were to think of them as the actual boundary? Their placement in the temple suggests they are part of the covering of YHWH. Protecting the inner sanctum where the living God is present, and therefore exposed, as well as shielding those outside from the immense and precarious power of this presence. Covering is a form of cladding and YHWH, as present on earth, can be said to

¹¹⁸ T. Foote, “The Cherubim and the Ark,” *JAOS* 25 (1904): 281-282.

¹¹⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966; repr., London: Routledge, 2002), 47.

¹²⁰ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 68-69.

be dressed in mixture. In this way hybridity is part of the self-revelation of YHWH. The viscosity of the cherubim is tied to them being divine creatures, belonging to heaven, yet descended to earth, mirroring in a reversed fashion the rising smoke. Though we cannot know for certain what form they took, it is plausible they were a combination of earthbound and airborne creatures. Is it possible that mixture and separation is not as incompatible as we tend to believe? The curtains separating the tabernacle from its surroundings consists of a mixture of linen and wool, so does the garments separating the priests from the laity and the tassels separating the Israelites from other peoples. In this way the hybrid *sha'atnez* functions as separation.

2.3.4. Hybridity and Separation

In her work on creation from the deep, a theology of becoming rather than of origin, Catherine Keller like many before her observes the plural form of אלהים Elohim.¹²¹ This is not a personal name, much as God is not God's actual name, it is an appellative, a term used to designate divinity. Its plural form is oftentimes explained as an intensive plural, signifying supremacy. The plural form of the designation read this way serves to strengthen and solidify the Oneness of God. There is however another way to interpret the plural of the term, without succumbing to polytheistic explications. Not least in the Jewish tradition it has been taken as a reference to the angels. In the case of Genesis 1:26, where the associated verb (עשה) is likewise in the plural form, most scholars acknowledge the trace of a divine court or heavenly counsel. We see here a link between Elohim and YHWH *tsva'oth*, both carry a notion of the angelic hosts. Instead of dominological supremacy, in this consultation we infer God's humility.¹²² The affiliation between the hosts of heaven and the godhead as exemplified in Elohim/YHWH *tsva'oth* "open the possibility of a differential conception of the deity."¹²³ God is then not the separated One, but a plurisignularity, the many within the one, a multiplicity in relation.¹²⁴ This constant flux is part of the mutual fluency of Keller's apophatic panentheism, neither God nor world one-

¹²¹ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 173.

¹²² Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 173-174.

¹²³ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 175.

¹²⁴ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 175, 177.

sidedly containing the other, but each continuously flowing into and through the other, confounding the lines, without losing its difference.¹²⁵ “The smudge, the flux, ‘is’ the *en*, the overlap, of divinity with world, of world with divinity.”¹²⁶ The diverse multitude of angels both reveal and obscure God in their constant fluctuations, they are a cloud with blurred boundaries, a great swarm. They are not static but in motion, a whirlwind of multiplicity, a chaotic collective. The swarm with its flux and blurred edges defies determination, the many moving as one. The individualizations are interdependent, flowing through each other.¹²⁷ In its intangibility the swarm is something viscous, like cloud and smoke.

In the chapter concerning the dietary laws of Leviticus in *Purity and Danger* Douglas cites Lev 19:19 and states that holiness is demonstrated as completeness and conformity, it “requires that different classes of things shall not be confused.”¹²⁸ In this vein, cherubim as a confusion of different classes of beings, of heaven and earth, should thus be considered an atrocity, as a mixture in defiance of the created order. As is made clear by her revisit of the subject,¹²⁹ as well as by the preface to the new edition,¹³⁰ she has since changed opinion. The creatures previously classed as anomalies are to be avoided, not because they are detestable, but for their protection. She takes special notion of the “swarming” creatures of air and water. The Hebrew term שָׂרָץ *sharats* is connected to abundance and fertility, which leads Douglas to suggest it be translated “teeming” rather than “swarming.” These creatures, through their multitude and movement, in a special way fulfill God’s command to multiply and are not to be harmed. They cannot be offered on the altar as a gift to God, as they already belong to him.¹³¹ Teaming life expand, it spreads and erupts seemingly uncontrollably. Leaven and honey are combined to ferment the bread, causing it to grow, this is the reason they too are not to be offered up in smoke.¹³² In her reading of Leviticus 11 Douglas challenge the conventional interpretation of שֶׁקֶץ *sheqets* as “abomination,” contending it is not the creatures that are abominable, but the act of harming them. To hurt these symbols of fertility goes against

¹²⁵ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 216-219.

¹²⁶ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 219.

¹²⁷ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 176-179.

¹²⁸ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 67.

¹²⁹ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 152-175.

¹³⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, xiii-xvi.

¹³¹ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 159-163.

¹³² Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 163-166.

holiness. In addition to this, the water-swarmers lacking coverage from protective scales are vulnerable, exposed, and ought to inspire compassion.¹³³ Two contrasting principles run through the chapter, fertility and covenant. Rules concerning things under the covenant display God's justice, the embargo on teeming creatures demonstrate God's mercy.¹³⁴

The swarming angelic horde as described by Keller has much in common with Douglas' teeming life. In their movement and proliferation, they elude capture. Despite, or perhaps rather because of, their plenitude they are something insubstantial, intangible. Once grasped, they cling to their capturer, distorting the boundary with their sticky viscosity. Catherine Keller's proposed *creatio ex profundis* is no clean start, it is "a fluid matrix of bottomless potentiality, a germinating abyss, a heterogenous womb."¹³⁵ It is messy and wet as it begins and begins again, sticky and viscous in its resistance to fixation. This bifurcating, self-organizing chaos of the tehomic deep and the slippery entrails found in the deep recess of the Holy of Holies at the summit of mount Sinai, they both share in the idea of regeneration. Not as assured origin, but as risky beginning, a potential possibility. Like the entrails entangled in suet, "[t]he tehomic deity remains enmeshed in the vulnerabilities and potentialities of an indeterminate creativity."¹³⁶ This indetermination, the unwillingness to be fixated or measured, characterizes the in-between of the viscous. The covering cloud, suet and smoke all in their own way partake in this ambiguity, and so does the cherubim. Part of the angelic host, they too may be considered as teeming.

Douglas' "teeming" as something boisterous and eruptive share certain similarities with the esthetic category of the grotesque as described by Ola Sigurdson. This category has its roots as a term for describing a specific type of roman art and ornamentation that combined human, animal and plant elements to form a cohesive unit.¹³⁷ The cherub as a hybrid with human and animal traits, strongly connected to sacred vegetation, has a certain affinity to this category. By uniting different categories, presumed to be incompatible under normal circumstances, the grotesque question our organization of the world. It is not something fixated but a process, an

¹³³ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 166-169.

¹³⁴ Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, 174.

¹³⁵ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, i.

¹³⁶ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 226.

¹³⁷ Ola Sigurdson, *Himmelska kroppar: Inkarnation, blick, kroppslighet* (Gothenburg: Glänta produktion, 2006), 489.

in-between of becoming. It is something strange and other and it carries with it both the positive potential of liberation and the negative threat of alienation.¹³⁸ The grotesque can also be seen as something generative, constantly exceeding its own borders, reforming itself.¹³⁹ If the understanding of cherub as mixture with undetermined form is correct, it opens the possibility of regarding them as signifiers of the flux. Placed in the outer and inner sanctum as well as on the *kapporeth*, they cover the divine, they are the very limit and border between human and divine.

In her comment on Bergo in the anthology *Ambiguity of the Sacred* Jonna Bornemark writes about the limit-drawing event, “where separation is created but not yet established.”¹⁴⁰ Rather than making self-sufficient wholes, limit implies separation through relation, a form of tension. The parts sharing the limit are interdependent and interconnected. She considers this limit-drawing a place of birth, as “life,” separating form and matter. As soon as this “life” becomes a fixed concept, it must be deconstructed. For it cannot rightly be sealed up in language, it cannot be objectified and measured and yet remain what it is.¹⁴¹ The high reverence for the tetragrammaton, The Name, and the insistence that the one bearing that name cannot be seen, implies this was a notion shared by the Israelites. The strong opposition against idolatry is connected to the awareness that God cannot, must not, be governed by humans. As an aniconic religion the presence of YHWH in the Holy of Holies was represented as absence. The two cherubim of the *kapporeth* framed the space from whence the voice of God could be heard, pointing at the state of communication they expressed its relation.¹⁴² The cherubim were relational signs, communication devices between the people and their God.¹⁴³ At the same time the hybrid cherubim act as the boundary between the human sphere and the sacred sphere of YHWH. Mixtures are anomalies, viscous and ambiguous. Their prohibition in Lev 19:19 may be explained by a quote from Mary Douglas: “Taboo confronts the ambiguous and shunts it

¹³⁸ Sigurdson, *Himmelska kroppar*, 492-493.

¹³⁹ Sigurdson, *Himmelska kroppar*, 380.

¹⁴⁰ Bornemark, Jonna, “Life as Limit-drawing Event: Comments on Bergo’s Discussion of Formalism vs. Vitalism,” in *Ambiguity of the Sacred: [Phenomenology, Politics, Aesthetics]* (ed. Jonna Bornemark and Hans Ruin; Huddinge: Library, Södertörn University, 2012), 103.

¹⁴¹ Bornemark, “Life as Limit-drawing Event,” 106-107.

¹⁴² Volli, “Cherubim,” 39-42.

¹⁴³ Volli, “Cherubim,” 47.

into the category of the sacred.”¹⁴⁴ Ambiguity is at the heart of mixture and hybridity. Any mixture is comprised of at least two parts, it carries a border within itself. Without separation there would be no difference, without difference all things would congeal into one. And while the hybrid is one, it is also multiple, consisting of differentiated things. In the Oxford English Dictionary under the second entry on “hybrid” we can read it holds the figurative meaning of “Anything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of different or incongruous elements.”¹⁴⁵ As such it is not easily defined or categorized, for it belongs to several categories at once. As relational hybrid boundary keepers, the cherubim, like Bornemark’s limit, Keller’s flux and Douglas’ teeming life, or Leviticus *kil’ayim* for that matter, is an in-between, simultaneously diffusing and maintaining the border, separating and mixing. Perhaps this is the true meaning of hybridity, to be a carrier of difference.

2.3.5. Difference and Relation – a Summary

The examination of the divine epithet revealed strands to a royal iconography, associated with might and power. But more than that it exposed the importance of divine presence inherent in the appellation and hinted at the plenitude hiding in holiness. The *tsva’oth* name already implies plural hosts, a bustling multitude in the company of YHWH. When it is then discovered that the cherubim are not primarily something to sit on, but markers of sacred space, their close connection to God becomes clear. Through Douglas’ reading of Leviticus focus on concentric circles, their role as cover became evident. The borderline identity of this bustling viscous horde means that they in a special way incorporate the difference necessary for communication, for communion. They are the dwelling place and covering of YHWH and as such part of the divine self-revelation. The Ark cherubim of the *kapporeth* further acts as a frame for the divine voice and the plurality of the cherubim in this situation safeguard against idolatry.

¹⁴⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, xi.

¹⁴⁵ "hybrid, n. and adj.," OED Online, March 2020, Oxford University Press [cited May 26, 2020]. Online: <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/view/Entry/89809?redirectedFrom=hybrid>.

3. REFLECTION

Setting out to gain understanding of how the seemingly opposing ideas of separation and mixture can be imagined to relate to one another and to the sacred, this essay has now reached its end. What insights have been reached? Taking a closer look at the texts prohibiting mixtures in Lev 19:19 and Deut 22:9–11 made it clear that the Leviticus text, due to its context and wording, is of primary interest to the current problem. In my reading of the Hebrew text I took special note of two terms – *kil'ayim* and *sha'atnez*. Due to their rare occurrences, appearing only in the mentioned prohibition texts, their meaning remains uncertain. It does however seem probable to me that the term *kil'ayim* implies differentiation, as pertaining to two diverse elements, and that the context of this word indicates the bringing together of these heterogenous entities. This is especially clear in the case of *sha'atnez*, weaving together animal and plant fibers. That this is the combination cloth proscribed for the tabernacle as well as certain priestly garments, is a sign of the connection between mixture and the sacred.

Investigating the angelic creatures of seraphim, cherubim and *mal'akh* revealed the possibility that these might not always have been imagined in the form of hybrids. In the case of the seraphim and cherubim however, they certainly *are* described as hybrids in the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel, and given the abundance of hybrid creatures in the ANE it is reasonable to picture them as such. Apart from their form all three also carry with them a certain ambiguity. The seraphim are connected to both health and illness, life and death. Their connection as serpents with the snake in the Garden of Eden indicate that they are not entirely benevolent, but potentially dangerous. The *mal'akh* as God's envoy appear to diverge from common practice, thereby diluting and disturbing the boundary between sender and messenger. Not least in the case of the *mal'akh* YHWH does this confounding of identity occur, rendering the character of the *mal'akh* unclear. Out of the three it is perhaps the cherubim that are the hardest to define. Apart from Ezekiel's visionary report, the biblical texts only give tantalizing glints of their appearance and the reports doesn't seem to add up. Following the third strand of *krv* one possible translation of their name are as "mixtures." The idea of them might not always have been conveyed as a particular shape or form, but subject to change and transformation. That they are to be woven into the *sha'atnez* curtains of the tabernacle implies they were no strangers to hybridity.

The divine epithet of "YHWH *tsva'oth* who dwells among the cherubim" signify the close connection between YHWH and the cherubim. The *tsva'oth* name, whether taken as referring to a heavenly army or council, indicates the multitude surrounding YHWH. It may

well be true, as Mettinger holds, that this name also carries with it kingly connotations. This image may easily for us become a static one, the king on his throne quite separated from the court around him.

But when we remember that the Israelite notion of kingship was modeled around the shepherd, we might instead envisage the king YHWH as a shepherd moving with his flock, never staying too long in one place. And we might further picture this grazing flock as the cherubim, even if we lack a concrete picture of them. For the appellation makes clear that it is the cherubim that constitute the dwelling place of YHWH. This becomes clear when you recognize the fact that the cherubim on the *kapporeth* are not alone. Practically every surface of the inner and outer sanctum of both tabernacle and temple were covered with cherubim. The heavenly host of YHWH has thus descended to earth, or maybe raised part of earth to haven, to be where YHWH is. The presence of the cherubim in the outer sanctum places them right in the midst of the incense smoke, analogous to the cloud of Sinai and the suet fat of the sacrifice, all acting as coverings. That the cherubim are not only in the smoke, but part of the actual covering, is verified by them being part of the *kapporeth*, the covering of the Ark and the stone tablets within.

Although these coverings are protective and part of a defense, they are not rigid walls and static borders. Neither solid nor fluid, they are the viscous in-between. They move in a constant flux, their ever-changing multitude covering the seat of life within and beyond. The cherubim as part of this “moving border” is reflected in their role as both gatekeepers and as a means of transportation. It is of great importance that this boundary between sacred and profane, divine and earthly, is not only marked by, but consists of, mixtures. These in-between hybrids carry the limit within them, as they are a combination of differences. As an entity comprised by two parts, their flux is internal, integral. Mixture and separation are not simple opposites, but separation, as differentiation, is what makes mixture possible. At the same time mixture functions as separation in the use of *sha’atnez* cloth and in the covering of the hybrid cherubim cloud. Both mixture and separation have a role to play in the holy sphere. We find there, in the depth and height of it all, the one who dwells amidst mixture. Or more daringly, remembering the strands between the tetragrammaton and “to be” as well as the plenitude indicated by *tsva’oth*, “He is the multitude who lives in mixture.”

4. CONCLUSION

The hybridity of the angels, as exemplified by the seraphim, the cherubim and the *mal'akh*, is not comprised mainly by their form or appearance. Instead, their hybridity is closely connected to their ambiguity, their unclear state of being in-between apparent opposites. As creatures between heaven and earth, the cherubim in a way embody the limit between the two. Bringing the parts together while maintaining the difference between them. This is what signifies a hybrid, it is an entity comprised of incongruous elements. The angels, as intermediaries and mediators of the will and voice of YHWH to humans, partake in both the earthly and the divine. They are the viscous divide that allows for communication between the two realms.

Mixture and separation are thus not necessarily incompatible, but instead closely linked, and both are important to holiness. When separation is envisioned as limit-drawing, its relational character can emerge. Division creates difference, a necessary precondition for relation, where the parts are connected by the divide. At the same time mixture functions as separation, distinguishing the degrees of access to the holy between high priest, priest and laity. The examination of the divine appellation combined with a reading of Leviticus observing its concentration on coverings, discovered that the cherubim, with their hybridity, is the appropriate surrounding and dwelling place for YHWH. The divine is thus residing amongst hybridity and relational separation. Mixture, in the form of the hybrid *sha'atnez* and cherubim, are the cover that at the same time separates holy from common and allow for communication between the two.

That YHWH and the holy sphere are shrouded in hybridity suggests it is through this ambiguous multitude that he makes himself known. This viscous border allows the human to approach the sacred without penetrating it. The hybrid enables communication, and even coexistence, between heavenly and earthly spheres. At the same time the viscosity goes some way in the other direction as well, as shown not least in the case of the *mal'akh* YHWH where the distinction between YHWH and his envoy isn't always clear. The human is thus not alone in her movement towards the holy, the holy also approaches her, revealing its presence in the dynamic multitude of hybridity.

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