

I. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

THE BYZANTINE ICONIC REPRESENTATION OF THE CHERUBIM: SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE POINTS

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this study is to tackle a subject of iconography from a Scriptural perspective. In other words, we wish to study the extent to which the iconic morphology of the cherubim abides by the details mentioned in the Holy Book and assumes the theological message it conveys. We are aware that the Holy Scripture is not the only source for iconography. Icon painters can also use other sources when creating their artistic representations. However, if the morphology they represent originates in the Holy Scripture, then it is compulsory that the elements taken from the biblical texts should be correct and not at all distorted. In our research, we shall focus especially on the Tetramorph, a morphology that has greatly challenged the creativity of icon painters, in order to clarify the mystery of its origin. Contrary to the general view, some terminologists and icon painters considered this morphology proper to the group of the seraphim and not to that of the cherubim. In our endeavour, we shall also use the method of contextualisation and linguistic analysis, but the main working method is specific to the Christian East and places primacy on the unity of the text and the integrity of the theological message.

Keywords: cherubim, iconic morphology, hermeneia, Miron Cristea, Dionysius of Forna, Ezekiel, Tetramorph

Introduction

Cherubim are angelic beings about whom the Holy Scripture and in particular the Old Testament offers us the most details with respect to their appearance. This is not by chance, as the cherubim are mentioned in all the categories of canonical texts from the Old Testament. Starting with the Genesis,

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they are entrusted with the mission of mysteriously signalling God's presence. In the mind of the chosen people, the cherubim were associated with the holy space, given their place at the entrance to Eden (Gen 3:24) and especially given their artistic representations portraying their face in various ways in the biblical sanctuary. Whether we refer to the faces woven on the veil (Ex 36:35) or on the curtains of the tabernacle (Ex 26:1) or to the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25:18-22; according to 37:7-9) or to those that guarded the Holy of Holies (2 Chron 3:10-13) or to other representations from the area of the Temple of the earthly (3 Kg 6:32-33; 7:27-29) or heavenly (Ez 41:17-20) Jerusalem, the cherubim had the role of offering the chosen people the possibility to reach the communion with the One enthroned between the cherubim (2 Kg 19:15; Ps 80:1; Is 37:16) or flying on the wings of the cherubim (Ps 18:10).

Even though we have enough Scriptural details to reconstruct the iconic morphology of these celestial beings, the representation of the cherubim has been a great challenge for icon painters. This is due, in particular, to the information prophet Ezekiel provides with respect to their appearance in the inaugural vision, where God's glory is described. The artistic representation of the cherubim in this writing has led to the so-called Tetramorph, portraying four faces united in a single body. Taken separately, these four faces have been associated in iconography with the evangelists, given the patristic exegesis which correlated their image with the four faces of the beings described by Ezekiel. Although the cherubim are linked with three animals (the lion, the bull and the eagle), their appearance is anthropomorphous¹ or at least partially humanoid (Ez 1:5-14)². They have several pairs of wings and a multitude of eyes on their body. And, to deepen even more the mystery of their morphology, they are associated with winged wheels of fire that move in line with the cherubim's body.

We have provided these Scriptural details in order to understand the reason why the artistic representation of the cherubim has been challenging for icon painters. The lack of a unitary Scriptural discourse with respect to their appearance has led to iconic morphologies that are not consistent with the Holy Scripture. For these reasons, we wish to analyse the iconic representation of the cherubim described in two hermeneias³, proper to the Eastern world, and

¹ Ioan Chirilă, *Fragmentarium exegetic filonian* [Veinal exegetic collection of fragments] (Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2002), 104.

² J. Skinner, *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Chapters I-XXXIX. With Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: University Press, 1897), 44.

³ We shall resort to the Greek hermeneia of monk Dionysius of Fournia (*Hermeneia of the Painting Art*, re-edited by Sofia in 2000) and to the only Romania hermeneia, whose author is patriarch Miron Cristea (*Iconografia și întocmirile din interiorul bisericii răsăritene* [Iconography and compilations from within the Eastern Church], edited in Sibiu in 1905, following Western sources, yet adapted to the Byzantine specificity).

to ascertain their faithfulness to these sources. We shall focus solely on Byzantine morphologies in order to restrict even more the area of research. Since the present study aims at an introductory approach, of a general nature, we shall not analyse the specificity of distinctive representations in various churches, like Andela Gavrilovic did⁴. Consequently, we shall not resort to recent Western specialised research except for cases of reconstruction of the Old Testament religious context⁵. The working method used for the analysis of Scriptural texts is specific to the Christian East, but we shall also resort to contextualisation and linguistic analysis where necessary. The present research shall be divided in two sections: one dedicated to hermeneias and the other to the Holy Scripture.

Scriptural morphology of the cherubim

We have testimonies about the cherubim and in particular about their appearance and their mission from the Book of Genesis (3:24). They are mentioned for the first time in the context of the expulsion of the first man and woman from the Garden of Eden. Then, God placed cherubim with a flaming sword at the entrance to Heaven. Their mission was not necessarily to guard the garden from an eventual abusive attempt of man to get back inside⁶, but to remind Adam and Eve of the state they had before their fall, when they resembled angels and could be close to God. Philo of Alexandria believed that the flaming sword had the role of showing men, even at night, the presence of Heaven, the space of direct communion between them and God⁷. Father Ioan

⁴ Andela Gavrilovic "The Representation of the Cherub in the Narthex of the Decani Monastery Above the Portal Leading to the Nave. Contribution to the Research of the Iconography and Meaning of the Cherub in Serbian Medieval Art," *Zbornik Matice Srpske za Likovne Umetnostimatica Srpska Journal for Fine Arts* 46 (2018): 13-34.

⁵ The main source for this area of research is Alice Wood, *Of Wings and Wheels. A Synthetic Study of the Biblical Cherubim* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 267 p. We also have in mind studies such as: Raanan Eichler, "Cherub: A History of Interpretation", *Biblica* 96.1 (2015): 26-38; Raanan Eichler, "When God Abandoned the Garden of Eden: A Forgotten Reading of Genesis 3:24", *Vetus Testamentum* 65 (2015): 20-32; Lydia Lee, "You Were the (Divine) Cherub': A Potential Challenge to Yhwh's Sole Divinity in Ezekiel 28.14", *Journal for the Study of The Old Testament* 41.1 (2016): 99-116; Mary J. Carruthers, "Ars oblivionalis, ars inveniendi: The Cherub Figure and the Arts of Memory", *Gesta* 48.2 *Making Thoughts, Making Pictures, Making Memories: A special issue in Honor of Mary J. Carruthers* (2009): 99-117; Wolfgang C. Schneider, "The 'Cherub entry' in the 'Temple of Light' – The staging of the spiritual identity of the Christian emperor in the late Antiquity", *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum – Journal Of Ancient Christianity* 10.2 (2006): 336-357; D. Launderville, "Ezekiel's Cherub: A promising symbol or a dangerous idol?", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65.2 (2003): 165-183.

⁶ Eichler, "When God Abandoned the Garden of Eden," 20-32.

⁷ Chirilă, *Fragmentarium* [Collection of fragments], 106.

Chirilă underlines that these angels convey the greatness of divine glory⁸ and invite to communion, their role not being in any case that of interposing themselves between man and God: “The cherub is a revelation, a messenger of the One who is uncontainable, he is not a hindrance, but a discovery, a call. They are the image of ceaseless ministry towards which man has to strive and aspire.”⁹

Unfortunately, this episode does not provide any detail that could help us reconstruct the morphology of the cherubim. The fact that they swirled flaming swords makes us believe they had arms. Likewise, the *swirling flaming*¹⁰ swords offer us the possibility of presupposing that their appearance was fiery, that their nature resembled the fire that sheds light. Even if Josephus Flavius (*Ant.* 8.3.3)¹¹ states that no one knows how the cherubim look like¹², we believe that, from Jewish literature, we can retain the fact that they were placed in front of the doors of Heaven in order to be contemplated by men, just like a painter looks at his model before representing him artistically (Philo, *De Cherubim*)¹³. Like this, men were offered the possibility of trying to be like them, mysteriously taking on their image through dispassion and comprehension, according to Origen¹⁴.

The cherubim are mentioned again in the context of works carried out at the tabernacle. Moses received from God the command of making artistic representations cherubim’s faces on the Ark of the Covenant, on the veil and on the curtains that covered the tabernacle (Ex 26:1-31). On this occasion, we are provided with a few details regarding the appearance of the cherubim (Exodus 25:18-22; acc. 37:7-9). We notice that the cherubim have wings and faces. Moreover, they had to be represented one in front of the other, facing the Covenant, with their wings open so that they looked like covering, shadowing

⁸ Ioan Chirilă, “Porțile cerului. O reabordare a teologiei icoanei din perspectiva dimensiunii simbolice și transcendente a actului liturgic” [The gates of Heaven. A reappraisal of the theology of the icon from the perspective of the symbolic and transcendent dimension of the liturgical act], in *Caietele Echinox. Teoria și practica imaginii. Imaginarul cultural* [The Echinox Notebooks. Theory and practice of the image. Cultural imagination field], vol. 2 (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 2001), 57.

⁹ Philo, *On the cherubim (De Cherubim)*, trans. by F. Colson and G. Whitaker (Harvard: University Press, Cambridge, 2014), 14-27.

¹⁰ Saint John Chrysostom, *Omiliile la Facere* [Homilies on Genesis], in *Părinți și scriitori bisericești* 21 [Church Fathers and Writers 21], trans. by Dumitru Fecioru (Bucharest: IBMO, 1987), 213.

¹¹ Josephus Flavius, *Antichități iudaice* [Jewish antiquities], vol. 1, trans. by Ion Acsan (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2002), 440.

¹² It is possible that the first man and woman were so well acquainted with the cherubim that no additional description of their appearance was necessary. N.M. Sarna, “Genesis”, in *The JPS Torah commentary*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 375.

¹³ Ioan Chirilă, “Cunoașterea lui Dumnezeu în Vechiul Testament prin teofanie și anghelofanie” [Knowing God in the Old Testament through theophany and angelophany], *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă* 1 [Annual of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology 1] (1998): 101-102.

¹⁴ K. Stevenson, M. Gluerup, “Ezekiel, Daniel”, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT*, vol. 13, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 4.

and, why not, offering protection. These Scriptural details provide us with two elements specific to all angelic beings, which are always present in the iconographic representations of angels: the wings and the faces. If their wings suggest their spiritual nature, their faces reveal us the personal openness towards communion¹⁵. We can presuppose that the face of the cherubim is anthropomorphous, having in mind the communal side entailed by the presence of these angelic beings.

Grasping at this openness, we underline the fact that, in rabbinic literature, the Hebrew term *cherub*¹⁶ which, by association with an Akkadian correspondent *karabu*, means *to pray, to give blessing, to welcome someone, to praise (a god or a person) or to offer a sacrifice*¹⁷, would mean “child”. Rabbis translate the Aramaic *rabia* like this, claiming that the term cherub can be translated by “like a child” (*Sukkah* 5b). Considering that the face of the cherubim is represented in iconography as that of a child, which emphasises their purity and plenitude, we believe this rabbinic interpretation might have been a source of inspiration for Eastern icon painters.

A new Scriptural detail that helps us reconstruct the face of the cherubim can be found in the second book of Chronicles (3:10-13). From this text, we find out that, when Solomon built the temple, he asked his craftsmen to build in the Holy of Holies two winged cherubim, 10 cubits tall, standing upright on their feet, their face turned towards the Holy and implicitly towards the people, in order to suggest the idea of communion¹⁸. The detail that catches our attention is that the cherubim have a body and legs. Most likely, their appearance resembles that of a man. The wings are the only detail that differentiates them. Still in the context of building the temple, we notice that faces of cherubim (1 Kg 7:27-29) were also engraved on the panels of postaments that supported the bronze sea, in order to urge towards inner purity¹⁹. We are not provided with any detail regarding

¹⁵ Eichler, “Cherub,” 33. Jill Middlemas, *The divine Image* (Tubbingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 69.

¹⁶ More details on the branches of the verbal root *krb* can be found in: David Freedman and M.P. O'Connor, “כְּרֻבִים (*kerub*)”, in Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 7, trans. by David Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 308; M. Kmosko, “Kerub und Kurib”, *BZ* 11 (1913): 225-234; W.F Albright, “What were the Cherubim?”, *BA* 1 (1938): 1-3; J. Trinquet, “Kerub, Kerubim”, *DBS* 5 (1957): 161-86; M. Haran, “The Ark and the Cherubim”, *IEJ* 9 (1959): 30-38, 89-94; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, in *A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 274.

¹⁷ Paul Shalom, “Cherub”, in Fred Skolnik et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia judaica*, vol. 4 (Farmington Hills: Keter Publishing House, 2007), 600.

¹⁸ Louis I. Rabinowitz, “Cherub in the Aggadah”, in Fred Skolnik et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia judaica*, vol. 4 (Farmington Hills: Keter Publishing House, 2007), 601.

¹⁹ Lamar E. Cooper, “Ezekiel”, in *The New American Commentary* 17 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 58.

their shape, but we are told that the cherubim were engraved together with lions and bulls. This association will ease the understanding of Ezekiel's inaugural vision.

Before analysing the details offered by Ezekiel in the vision of divine glory, we shall remind you of the fact that, like for the other two sanctuaries, the prophet mentions faces of cherubim in his description of the new temple of Jerusalem (Ez 41:17-20). In the case of this mention, as well, we point out the presence of a significant detail: the cherubim had two faces, one of a man and one of a lion. It is interesting to notice that the cherubim are represented as bicephalous on the wall of the temple (like in an icon). Having in mind that their iconic representation was two-dimensional, it is possible that this manner of representation was the one recommended by the prophet with respect to the cherubim. Even if he presents the cherubim as beings having four faces, when they appear on the wall of the temple, he chooses a bicephalous iconic representation. A two-dimensional iconic representation would have allowed for all faces to be shown, like we can see in the case of the Tetramorph, but Ezekiel prefers only two of them. We shall close this section where we have summed up the Scriptural texts in which the cherubim appear in the Old Testament, by specifying that in one of the visions, where the prophet describes the cherubim once again, he draws our attention to the fact that, under their wings, the cherubim had "what looked like human hands" (Ez 10:8).

Before describing the way in which the prophet Ezekiel portrays the cherubim in his inaugural vision, we call attention to the fact that these heavenly beings, present during theophanies, have been personified by exegetes, who have associated them with the dark cloud that keeps the mystery of Godhead. In the past, the cherubim were considered beings of the air who, in time, provided the name of one group of the first triad of angels²⁰.

In his vision, Ezekiel described the way in which he saw God's greatness unfold before his eyes²¹. Starting with the 4th verse, he presents the heavenly beings accompanying God (Ez 1:4-15)²². A similar description that contains many of the elements of this prophetic presentation can be read in the text of the Apocalypse, which shows God's Throne, surrounded by 24 chairs on which old men dressed in white clothes, wearing golden crowns, were sitting. Next to the throne, one can notice the presence of the four living creatures in the image of

²⁰ Widyapranawa, *The Book of Isaiah*, 31. For other details regarding the manner in which the cherubim were perceived in the religious context during the time of the Old Testament, see: Lee, "You Were the (Divine) Cherub", 99-116 and Schneider, "The 'Cherub entry'", 336-357.

²¹ D.I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel-Chapters 1-24*, in *NICOT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 96.

²² Launderville, "Ezekiel's Cherub," 170.

an ox, a lion, an eagle and a man (Rev 4:6-11). A sea of glass, clear as crystal, the fire, the lightnings coming out of the throne and the thunders add to this heavenly view that very much resembles what Ezekiel saw²³.

Before moving forward, we point out to the fact that this text made some icon painters believe that the Tetramorph was a species of the seraphim. The arguments on which they could found their opinion are the following: the seraphic chant and the number of wings. The former is meant to link the apocalyptic text to Isaiah's vision, who mentions that the seraphim, standing before God, were continuously singing to one another the following hymn: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." (Is 6:3). In the Apocalypse, the first part of this chant is identical, only the second differs. We believe that, because of this association, some icon painters made this confusion. The fact that Isaiah does not mention the cherubim in his vision does not automatically mean they were not present. Considering that the thrones were there (Is 6:1), where could the other group of angels of the first triad have been? Given that they now chant the same hymn, we believe they were also present then, even if the prophet's attention was directed only towards the seraphim. We also think that, although they are not mentioned in Ezekiel's vision, the seraphim were present when God's glory was revealed. The frequent references to fire, burning coal and lightnings entitle us to believe that the ones with a fiery face (the seraphim) were also present in the theophany of the Apocalypse.

The second argument the aforementioned icon painters could conjure up (opinion shared also by the patriarch Miron²⁴) is that the cherubim from Ezekiel's vision and those mentioned in the sanctuary (here, we have in mind those from the Ark of the Covenant, the two standing in the Holy of Holies, facing the people, those woven on the veil or on the curtains and those carved on the golden acacia walls) had only two pairs of wings. The ones referred to in the Apocalypse and the seraphim mentioned by Isaiah had three pairs of wings. This is why we believe the Tetramorph and the other iconic structures that portray cherubim have this number of pairs of wings. In other words, the

²³ For details on Ezekiel's vision, we recommend the subchapter dedicated to this event in Wood, *Of Wings and Wheels*, 95-138.

²⁴ "They are still portrayed with six wings, with a halo around their head, with the face of an angel and holding the Gospel at their chest with both arms. In the middle of the two wings above their head, there is an eagle; on the pair of wings from the right side, they have a lion and, on that from the left side, they have oxen, a bull. [They] look upwards." Elie Miron Cristea, *Iconografia și întocmirile din interiorul bisericii răsăritene* [Iconography and compilations from within the Eastern Church] (Sibiu: Tiparul tipografiei arhidiecezane, 1905), 82.

cherubim do not borrow one pair of wings from the seraphim..., they have six wings, according to the Apocalypse²⁵.

In his vision, Ezekiel does not specify what exactly these living creatures are. He does it in chapter 10, when he indicates that the beings he sees are similar to those from the inaugural vision, namely cherubim (10:15-20). Here, new details are offered regarding the way in which these beings act, their role in relation to God and the connection between these beings who had four faces and the wheels of fire on which there were wings and eyes (Ez 10:4-22). The only noticeable differences are the following: here, the prophet replaces the face of a bull with that of a cherub (v. 14) and, now, the face that takes precedence is that of the cherub, not that of the man. Consequently, some exegetes considered that the cherub must have the face of a bull. Let us not forget, however, that man's face is first among the others, a fact received as such in iconography²⁶. The Targum retains this identification and mentions in the first chapter that Ezekiel makes reference to the cherubim. This would also be confirmed by Sirach, who stated that: "Ezekiel saw the vision of glory, which was revealed to him by the chariot of the cherubim" (Sir 49:8). Obviously, the language used here by the prophet is symbolic, offering us at least the frameworks necessary to solve the mystery of Ezekiel's vision.

Hermeneutic reference points for the iconic representation of the cherubim

Patriarch Miron provides icon painters with a few ways in which the cherubim can be represented on the walls of churches, but also in icons: a. bodiless, two-winged angels, wearing a diadem and having a halo around their head; b. angels with four wings, on which there are many eyes. If three cherubim are to be painted, the ones on the sides follow the former model and the one in the middle shall be represented with four wings²⁷. Dionysius of

²⁵ We underline, on this occasion, that the prayer preceding the epiclesis, which reminds us of the threefold angelic chant, has a biblical argument. Not only the seraphim chant *Holy Holy Holy*, but also the cherubim and, together with them, all the heavenly powers: "We thank You also for this Liturgy, which You have deigned to receive from our hands, even though thousands of archangels and tens of thousands of angels stand around You, the Cherubim and Seraphim, six-winged, many-eyed, soaring aloft upon their wings, singing the triumphal hymn, exclaiming, proclaiming, and saying: Holy, Holy, Holy... Together with these blessed powers, Master, Who loves mankind, we also exclaim and say: Holy are You and most holy..." *Liturgier Pastoral* [Pastoral Liturgical Texts] (Iași: Trinitas, 2004), 189-190.

²⁶ Carruthers, "The Cherub Figure and the Arts of Memory," 114.

²⁷ Cristea, *Iconografie* [Iconography], 102.

Fourna mentions in his *Hermeneia* that the cherubim are represented in icons under the form of a child's head with wings²⁸. The same description is also mentioned by patriarch Miron Cristea in his iconographic guide²⁹. In the section dedicated to the groups of angels, Dionysius does not offer other details regarding the manner in which the cherubim are represented, but he does mention the cherubim when describing the way in which the faces of the four evangelists are painted. They are accompanied by a symbol that helps the observer easily identify which of the four men painted at the base of the dome is John, Matthew, Luke and Mark³⁰. Next, Dyonisius offers an explanation with respect to the association between the evangelists and these animals. The source of inspiration for this iconographic model is the Holy Scripture, in particular Ezekiel's inaugural vision. The four faces were seen by the prophet at the river Chebar, in Babylon, when he looked at the brightness of God's glory: "And [the symbols of the evangelists for, emphasis added] the four faces [all together, in one appearance, emphasis added], are painted with a crown around their head, like this having the face of the angel with six wings and holding the Gospel with both hands in front of the chest, with an eagle in the middle of the two wings, above the head; and a lion in the right wing on the side; and an ox in the left hand, looking upwards, having Gospels at their feet. This is how prophet Ezekiel saw it all."³¹

If we read the text of Ezekiel's vision, we will easily observe that the Gospels held by each being are missing from the image described above. Therefore, we notice that Dyonisius does not describe the face of that angelic being that had four faces, but an iconic structure called Tetramorph, also

²⁸ Dyonisius of Fourna, *Erminia picturii bizantine* [Hermeneia of the Painting Art] (Bucharest: Sofia, 2000), 67.

²⁹ Cristea, *Iconografia* [Iconography], 80.

³⁰ "When they sit on the chair and write, having in front of them the winged symbols, holding Gospels and looking at them. 1. Matthew sitting in the house and writing (the beginning of his Gospel): *This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham*. [It has as a symbol, translator's emphasis] man. 2. Mark, in his house, writing: *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way*. [It has as a symbol, translator's emphasis] the lion. 3. Luke, inside the house, under the baldachin, writing: *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us...* [It has as a symbol, translator's emphasis] the ox. 4. Saint John the Theologian, sitting in the cave and looking back at the sky in awe, having [his] right [hand, translator's emphasis] on the knee and his left hand spread towards Prochorus; and Saint Prochorus, sitting in front of him, writes: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. [It has as a symbol, translator's emphasis] the eagle." Dyonisius of Fourna, *Erminia picturii* [Hermeneia of the Painting Art], 147.

³¹ Dyonisius of Fourna, *Erminia picturii* [Hermeneia of the Painting Art], 147.

inspired by the same vision. The description shows that the Tetramorph is an iconographic representation based on the face of the cherubim that prophet Ezekiel saw.

Following the explanations that clarify the issue of the symbols of the evangelists, Dyonisius also offers the icon painter a Christological interpretation of these images, in order to justify their presence next to the four Apostles: “Interpretation: The one resembling *man* pictures the embodiment [and Christ’s human nature, translator’s emphasis]. The one resembling *a lion* pictures [Christ’s, translators’ emphasis] royal work [and power, translator’s emphasis]. The one resembling *an ox* shows us [Christ’s, translators’ emphasis] sanctifying work and priesthood. And the one resembling *an eagle* shows us the advent of the Holy Ghost [and the greatest meaning, the Godhead of Jesus, translators’ emphasis].”³² The interpretation of the author of the hermeneia springs from the Tradition of the Church which, by means of Saint Gregory the Great, assumed a symbolic interpretation of Ezekiel’s vision³³. We shall probably provide more details on the patristic approach of Ezekiel’s text in a future research in which we shall relate to the manner in which the Church Fathers fathom the mystery of the cherubim’s appearance.

In his hermeneia, patriarch Miron Cristea mentions the fact that the four beings assigned with an obvious symbolic meaning are represented together for the first time in a mosaic from the 12th century in the Church of Saint Pudenziana. They are not placed next to the evangelists, but on each side of a cross that dominates the composition of an iconographic representation: “In this mosaic, we can see animals hovering – to the right and to the left of the cross –, which are the symbols that the first Christians assigned to the evangelists, based on prophet Ezekiel’s vision (1:5-20) and on Saint John (Rev 4:7), where four

³² Dyonisius of Fourna, *Erminia picturii* [Hermeneia of the Painting Art], 147.

³³ He explains in the fourth homily on Ezekiel the way in which the four images are correlated with the evangelists. Saint Gregory the Great, *Omiliile la Profetul Iezechie* [Homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel], trans. by Elena Sima and Ileana Ingrid Bauer (Iași: Doxologia, 2014), 70-3, 95. Saint Nicholas Cabasilas embraces this idea, claiming that “the four living creatures (Ez 1:5) are heralds of the Economy, (the apostles) who travelled the entire world preaching Christ as a man – which is shown through the face of the man –, as originating from a kingly ancestry – which is shown through the face of the lion – and as a heavenly, not earthly emperor – which is suggested through the face of the eagle –, who purifies men with His Blood – whose prefiguration was the face of the ox (acc. to Ez 1:10)”. Saint Nicholas Cabasilas, *Cuvântări teologice: la Iezechie — Hristos — Fecioara Maria. Scrieri I* [Theological Discourses: on Ezekiel — Christ — Virgin Mary], trans. by Ioan Ică jr. (Sibiu: Deisis, 2010), 56. This idea is taken from Saint Irenaeus. Irenaeus, *Adversus haeresis*, in K. Stevenson and M. Gluerup, “Ezekiel, Daniel”, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 4.

mysterious animals stand before God's throne. Each has a different shape, with the whole body covered with eyes and with many wings."³⁴

Unlike Dyonisius, who only mentions the meaning of these symbols, patriarch Miron offers an argument for the association of the four beings with the Evangelists, each creature being correlated with a certain Evangelist. He claims that man is the symbol of the Evangelist Matthew because his Gospel starts with the genealogy of the Saviour, which emphasises God's human nature (Mat 1:1-2). The lion is the symbol of Mark because the Evangelist starts his writing with the resounding words of John the Baptist, who announced loudly, like a lion in the desert, the advent of the Messiah. Another reason would be that Mark visibly highlights the Saviour's kingly dignity, made obvious through the numerous miracles related. The ox is correlated with the Gospel of Luke because he insists on the sacerdotal dimension of the Saviour, who offers Himself as a redeeming sacrifice. In this sense, the reference to priest Zachary and to rituals from the Temple is not accidental. And, last but not least, the eagle is associated with John because he wanted to emphasise Jesus Christ's Godhead through arguments that raise "our mind in the higher spheres of Christian dogma"³⁵. Nonetheless, it is necessary to specify that the aforementioned correlations have been established in time. There are iconographic representations in which, for example, Mark is linked with a lion and John with an eagle³⁶. In others, the eagle or the lion is correlated with Matthew³⁷. These differences are insignificant for the present approach. What is relevant is that the four beings mentioned by Ezekiel have been accepted by the Tradition of the Church as symbols of the Evangelists. The fact that in some representations the eagle or any of these beings is associated with the Evangelist John or Matthew is less meaningful. The idea itself is the most important one, not a specific correlation that can be justified through a certain argument which can be applied to another evangelist as well.

In the Eastern iconographic tradition, an image has been created that sums up in a single face the four beings presented in the book of Ezekiel and in the Revelation. This iconic representation is called a *Tetramorph*. Its description was written down in Dyonisius' hermeneia, without, however, its name being specified. Patriarch Miron refers to Tetramorphs, but, like we have mentioned

³⁴Cristea, *Iconografia* [Iconography], 99-110.

³⁵Cristea, *Iconografia* [Iconography], 110.

³⁶ See details in the Tetraevangelions of Vatopedi and of the Dochiariou Monastery from the Holy Mountain. Cristea, *Iconografia* [Iconography], 111.

³⁷ Even in patristic writings, there can be associations that differ from the ones already mentioned. For example, Saint Augustine believes the lion is a symbol that suits much better the evangelist Matthew, who highlights God's kingly dignity.

before, he believes they are a species of the seraphim, not of the cherubim. In one of the previous studies³⁸, in which we presented how the group of the seraphim is represented in icons, we explained the reasons why the Tetramorph is included in representations that are specific to the seraphim. The frequent mentioning of the seraphim and the cherubim in prayers and in liturgical songs, the fact that Ezekiel's vision does not clearly state that the four beings mentioned in the first chapter are cherubim and the fact that Tetramorphs have six wings have made certain icon painters make this confusion. We believe this last argument has also determined patriarch Miron state that the Tetramorphs is a species of the seraphim. When describing them, he starts with this argument: "...the so-called *Tetramorphs*... are portrayed with six wings, with a halo around their head, with the face of an angel and holding the Gospel at their chest with both arms. In the middle of the two wings above their head, there is an *eagle*; on the pair of wings from the right side, they have a *lion* and, on that from the left side, they have an *ox*, a bull. They look upwards. This is how prophet Ezekiel saw them: *Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle (1:10)*"³⁹.

In his iconographic guide, (after the description of the Tetramorph) the patriarch makes a connection between the four beings and the symbols of the Evangelists, stating that they represent attributes of the given apostles. It is not by chance that he makes this association, as there is an immediate reference to the idea of evangelical unity. Although there are four different presentations of the Gospel of Christ, this is still one of them: "The *Tetramorph* is thus the combination of the four attributes of the Evangelists in a single image, it is a body with four heads. Matthew's *man*, Mark's *lion*, Luke's *bull* and John's *eagle* have each set their head on a winged man, on an angel. This combination wants to say that the four evangelists are one. This *fourth part* is very much used in Greek iconography, while it is barely known in the western one⁴⁰. In other words, the Tetramorph holds within the idea of unity and, implicitly, of uniqueness of the Gospel. The icon painter who made this model of artistic representation of the four beings from the book of Ezekiel had in mind the emphasis of the unity of the Gospel and not necessarily an exercise of iconic representation of celestial beings who do not have a counterpart in the visible world or who possibly have one only in the mythical or religious imagination field from the Egyptian

³⁸ Stelian Pașca-Tușa, "Iconizarea serafimilor – reperate biblice și patristice care au stat la baza realizării acestei morfologii iconice și a mesajului ei teologic." [The iconic representation of the seraphim – biblical and patristic reference points on which this iconic morphology and its theological message were based] in *In honorem pr. prof. univ. dr. Vasile Stanciu*, ed. Daniel Mocanu (Cluj-Napoca: PUC, 2018), 337-354.

³⁹ Cristea, *Iconografia* [Iconography], 82.

⁴⁰ Cristea, *Iconografia* [Iconography], 82.

or Mesopotamian area. Even if the Tetramorph, as an iconographic model, appeared and developed in the East, in the Greek world, it was also assumed in the West, especially during the Middle Ages, as it very much aroused the interest of painters. The act of making this iconic structure, involved and required the creative side of artists and, as a consequence, in manuscripts, on frescoes and on mosaics we have various representations of the Tetramorph.

For these reasons, although he said that the iconography of the Tetramorph was barely known in the West, the patriarch presented a morphology of icons specific to Westerners, kept in a manuscript called *Hortus deliciarum*, which was made by the nun Herrad de Landsberg between 1167-1185 and which is now part of the collection of the library of Strasbourg. The image of *animal ecclesiae*, which symbolises and, at the same time, personifies Christian religion, combines the four symbols in one figure: “It has four legs and four heads. The *trunk* of the body is that of a *horse*. The *heads* are the ones assigned to the evangelists; one of a *man*, another of an *eagle*, of a *bull*, of a *lion*. The same for the four *legs*: one – the right one in front – of a *man*, another – the left one in front – of an *eagle*, the third – the right one behind – of a *bull* and the fourth – the left one behind – of a *lion*. The bull is both at the head and at the legs, placed in front of the lion. Why? Maybe by the painter’s mistake. A different representation is justified, with man – as a special being – put in the first, honorary place, the soaring eagle second. Now, the lion should follow and, at the end, the bull, the simplest. We find these symbols in this order many times; even in the aforementioned manuscript (at the Crucifixion), surely made under Byzantine influence”⁴¹. The only notable difference of this iconic structure is the fact that, in the Christian East, the body of the Tetramorph is that of a man instead of an animal. This better highlights the pre-eminence of the human face among these beings. The other differences are related to the peculiarity of Western art, which is not a priority for our study.

Therefore, since the beings that make up the Tetramorph are part of a scriptural vision in which the main role is held by the group of the cherubim, we can say that the iconic morphology of the Tetramorph is part of the imagery of the cherubim. It is to the artistic representations of this group of angels that we have dedicated this study⁴². For this reason, we shall not insist on theological details. We shall only mention that the artistic representation of these celestial beings signals God’ presence. The one who looked at the faces of the cherubim, either on the Ark of the Covenant or on the Holy of Hollies (this privilege was

⁴¹ Cristea, *Iconografia* [Iconography], 83.

⁴² Stelian Pașca-Tușa, “Implicațiile teologice ale reprezentărilor heruvimilor în sanctuarul biblic” [Theological implications of the cherubim’s representations in the biblical sanctuary], in *Icoană. Mărturie creștină. Totalitarism* [Icon. Christian testimony. Totalitarianism], eds. Vasile Stanciu and Cristian Sonea (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2017), 57-72.

allowed only to the high priest) or on the veil or at the ones engraved on the wall of the temple or on the bronze sea, had to be aware that God was above them, invisible, a fact perceived in the other categories of writings from the Old Testament (1 Kg 4:4; 2 Kg 6:3; 2 Kg 22:11; 4 Kg 19:15; Ps 17:12; 79:2; 98:1; Is 37:16; 3 Tin 1:31⁴³). The fact that God revealed Himself in the holy tabernacle / temple above the Ark of the Covenant that was under the shadow of the wings of the cherubim is enough argument for the aforementioned statement.

Conclusions

The approach of iconic morphologies from an exegetic perspective is necessary when these iconographic structures are inspired from the Holy Scripture. In other words, it is appropriate to study first whether the way in which icon painters chose to represent an event, a person or an angelic being is in line with the scriptural text and, implicitly, with the message it conveys. Reaching some theological conclusions that sum up the essential details related to one of the aforementioned categories can clarify certain confusions that might be caused by a fragmentary perspective.

In the case of the cherubim, we have noticed that certain icon painters or authors of hermeneias considered that the tetramorph, as an iconic structure, must be included in the group of the seraphim. This direction is erroneous. The content of Ezekiel's prophecy proves the contrary. The tetramorph must be included in the forms of representation of the cherubim. Through this kind of approach, we only want to clarify a mistake that has slipped, either out of inattention or out of ignorance, in specialised literature. We are aware that, besides the Holy Scripture, iconography also has other sources of inspiration that are important when conveying a theological message.

We believe that, through the present research, we have opened the door towards a more in depth study of the iconic morphology of the cherubim. The other sources assumed by icon painters in the artistic representation of the cherubim are still to be tackled in the future. Here, we refer mainly to patristic texts and to hymnography.

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⁴³ The song of the young; it is an addition to the Book of David. It does not appear in Western versions of the Bible.

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