

CATHERINA RECKER, *Seraphim und Cherubim in der Spätantike und Byzanz. Der Dunkle Stil Gottes* (Dissertationen der LMU München 63). Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag AG, 2023. 346 pp. – ISBN 978-3-487-16342-0 (€ 60.70).

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Since their first mention in the books of the Mosaic Law and of the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament, the angelic beings known as cherubim and seraphim have inhabited the Jewish and Christian celestial spheres and have fascinated scribes, scholars, and students of liturgy, theology, and art down to the present day. In her dissertation appearing here in printed form, CATHERINA RECKER presents the first book-length study of these mystical and mysterious heavenly beings since the end of the nineteenth century and Oskar Wulff's doctoral dissertation on the topic.¹ Beginning with an examination of the scriptural passages that mention cherubim and seraphim and possible Ancient Near Eastern antecedents or influences on the description and understanding of these angelic beings in both the Old and New Testaments (Part B.I.1–4), RECKER then presents a fourfold descriptive scheme for cataloguing artistic depictions of cherubim and seraphim (B.II.1–5) before examining the role these beings play in hymnody and on liturgical implements in the Byzantine liturgy (B.III.1–3). She concludes (Part C) with a brief reiteration of her key thesis (suggested in the subtitle of the work) that seraphim and cherubim primarily serve as a visible representation of the invisible God and that these beings serve to obscure or hide the Divine through this “dark style” of divine imagery so as to protect the human mind/spirit from the overpowering divine presence.² Following the conclusion is a brief historical outline of various scriptural and historical events and persons mentioned in her study, together with bibliography, an extensive selection of reference images and figures for the artistic depictions of cherubim and seraphim studied here (Part D), and a catalogue arranging these depictions according to the typology developed by RECKER and accompanied by a catalogue-specific bibliography (Part E).

1. Cf. RECKER 2023, p. 19, where she mentions OSCAR WULFF, *Cherubim, Throne und Seraphim: Ikonographie der ersten Engelshierarchie in der christlichen Kunst*. PhD dissertation, University of Leipzig, 1894.

2. Cf. RECKER 2023, p. 16.

Despite the ambitious scope of this study on important, even key, artistic and liturgical figures such as the cherubim and seraphim—speaking in terms of chronology, geography, and interdisciplinarity (the author positions herself as an art historian delving here also into theological waters)—RECKER’s dissertation falls short of providing a convincing argument for the central thesis of this angelic *obscuritas* representing God in safe manner to human sight and intellect. To the reviewer, these problems undermining the book exist on three levels: methodological, factual, and editorial.

In terms of methodology, the issues appear even in the title of the work, where the reviewer was confused by the juxtaposition—without any real elucidation thereof in the work—of chronological and geographical terms: *Late Antiquity* and *Byzantium*. Is the reader to understand these as referring to different locations or times? Or something entirely different? Given RECKER’s initial look into the Ancient Near East, its images of flying serpents, and the heavenly visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah which might contain similar elements,³ perhaps using this as a location connected to a specific time (i.e., “in the Ancient Near East and Byzantium”) would have been a better and above all clearer subtitle for the work. Yet the subtitle is the smallest problem here. Throughout the entire study of the scriptural contexts of cherubim and seraphim, RECKER focuses on contemporary, primarily Protestant biblical scholarship in understanding the Old Testament text, and even uses—without any clear explanation or justification for this—the translation prepared by the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich (!) throughout the book for all biblical citations. Neither contemporary Protestant biblical scholars nor this particular translation are representative or reflective of the geographical and chronological context under study, however: Byzantium. How did Byzantines understand these beings? What might the Byzantine Majority text of the Old and New Testaments show here? These questions have been explored elsewhere by renowned Byzantinists and theologians, volumes not addressed or included in the present study;⁴ moreover, there is no methodological reason given for this reliance on contemporary non-Byzantine scriptural approaches. The issue, in fact, is not raised at all by RECKER. In Part B.III, where the author explores how cherubim and seraphim appear and function in Byzantine liturgy, she cites and briefly mentions seminal works by ROBERT

3. RECKER 2023, pp. 36–69.

4. Cf. especially PAUL MAGDALINO – ROBERT NELSON (eds), *The Old Testament in Byzantium*. Washington (DC) 2010; DEREK KRUEGER – ROBERT NELSON (eds), *The New Testament in Byzantium*. Washington (DC) 2016.

TAFT⁵ and Gabriele Winkler,⁶ but seems unaware of the expanded edition and translation of Taft's work on the Great Entrance by Stefano Parenti.⁷ More problematic methodologically though—as above in the examination of scriptural sources—is a lack of engagement with the fuller corpus of Byzantine commentary on the Divine Liturgy. Maximos Confessor is briefly cited (though not in connection with the angelic powers)⁸ and Cyril of Jerusalem merits a brief mention;⁹ more attention is paid to the commentary on the liturgy by Patriarch Germanos I of Constantinople (r. 715–730),¹⁰ but only the translation prepared by Paul Meyendorff in the 1980s is cited¹¹ and other influential commentaries, such as those by Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022)¹² and Nicholas Kabasilas (1319/1323–1392)¹³ go unmentioned, whether in the original Greek or in translation. The reviewer finds it difficult to imagine any analysis of the role of cherubim and seraphim in Byzantine art and liturgy without a firm focus on the scriptural texts as Byzantines had and read them, and on the Byzantine commentaries who reflect Byzantine thought on these images and ceremonies. Several factual errors also appear in the work under review. While no publication this side of paradise is likely to be error-free (the reviewer has always found typos or other errata in his own publications), errors that betray greater misunderstandings of sources or otherwise proffer claims that are not proven or underscored can and should be avoided. A few examples will suffice here. (a) In her analysis of the inscription accompanying a fresco depicting tetramorph figures by the throne of Christ from the ninth century from the Church of the Cross (Haçlı Kilise) in Göreme/Kızılçukur Valley

5. ROBERT F. TAFT, *The Great Entrance: A History of the Transfer of Gifts and Other Pre-Anaphoral Rites of the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 200). Rome 1975.

6. GABRIELE WINKLER, *Das Sanctus. Über den Ursprung und die Anfänge des Sanctus und sein Fortwirken* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 267). Rome 2002.

7. Cf. ROBERT F. TAFT – STEFANO PARENTI, *Il Grande Ingresso*. Edizione italiana rivista, ampliata e aggiornata, Grottaferrata 2014.

8. RECKER 2023, p. 189, n. 95.

9. RECKER 2023, p. 192, n. 106.

10. Cf. RECKER 2023, pp. 193–199.

11. Germanos of Constantinople *On the Divine Liturgy*, translated by PAUL MEYENDORFF. Crestwood (NY) 1984.

12. Cf. Symeon the New Theologian (Symeon of Thessalonika), *The Liturgical Commentaries*, edited and translated by Steven Hawkes-Teeples (Studies and Texts 168). Toronto 2011.

13. Nicholas Kabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, translated by JOAN M. HUSSEY and P. A. McNULTY. Crestwood (NY) 1977.

in Cappadocia,¹⁴ RECKER argues that the fresco offers an innovative new reading, contrasting the liturgical mention of the angelic beings as “shouting” (Gr. κερραγότα) with a new mention (next to the tetramorph-quabull) as “roaring” (Gr. κραγότα, which RECKER translates as “brüllt”). However, the argument is all based on a misunderstanding of Medieval Greek sound changes that often lead to misspellings; the inscription reads ΚΑΙΚΡΑΓΟΤΑ, which is not to be parsed καὶ κραγότα (as the author does), but simply reflects medieval spelling uncertainty after the historic diphthong /ai/ merged with the vowel /e/ in this period.¹⁵ (b) Narsai of Nisibis is cited as a Byzantine authority on the Great Entrance in the Divine Liturgy,¹⁶ when he is of the Syriac world and is not representative of Byzantine (Greek/Chalcedonian) thought and commentary. (c) In her discussion of liturgical fans (Lat. *flabella*/Gr. ῥπίδια), RECKER states that “only forms of the cherubim and/or seraphim ever appear on these fans, and never other beings of the heavenly hierarchies or angels”,¹⁷ yet this statement is contradicted by another liturgical fan from Byzantium-adjacent and -influenced Georgia dating to the eleventh century and depicting eight additional figures clearly recognisable as (more anthropomorphic) angels of the lower heavenly choirs¹⁸—this fan is absent from RECKER’s study and accompanying catalogue, which claims to contain all available depictions of cherubim and seraphim up to the fall of Constantinople in 1453.¹⁹ (d) A more major misunderstanding seems to be RECKER’s understanding of how Byzantines understood God to be revealed or approachable. On the first page of the book proper, the author writes: “The depiction of God by means of images became possible in terms of Christianity as a result of the depiction of Christ. God shows himself **metaphorically** in his son and

14. RECKER 2023, pp. 193–194; image (listed as Fig. 36) available in *ibid.*, p. 261.

15. Cf. DAVID HOLTON et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Grammar of Medieval and Early Modern Greek*. Cambridge 2019, p. 9; I make this point on a similar spelling error on the Limburg Staurotheke reliquary (inscribed APXAIE = ἀρχαία) in the late tenth century; cf. CHRISTOPHER SPRECHER, *Emperor and God: Passion Relics and the Divinisation of Byzantine Rulers, 944–1204*. Heidelberg 2024, p. 99, n. 67.

16. RECKER 2023, p. 201, n. 136.

17. RECKER 2023, p. 216: “Es erscheinen stets nur Formen der Cherubim und/oder Seraphim auf diesen Fächern, nie aber weitere Wesen der himmlischen Hierarchien oder Engel” (translation mine).

18. Cf. KITTY MACHABELI, *Medieval Georgian Metalwork*, Atinati blog (<https://atinati.com/news/63ebb4814b142a0038dbd040>, accessed 17.05.2024), who provides a black-and-white photograph of this liturgical fan amidst other examples of such metalwork.

19. Cf. RECKER 2023, p. 20.

consequently in all of the latter's depictions without being seen himself, however."²⁰ Such a statement contradicts not only the Christian witnesses of the Gospels, which proclaim that God has been seen and been revealed precisely (and fully, not metaphorically) through his Son, Jesus Christ,²¹ but also undergirds RECKER's thesis of the divine "dark style" that has to hide God via the angels to protect humans, when in fact a large emphasis in Byzantine Christianity (as indeed in other forms of the faith) is on participation, communion, and personal encounter with God the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit. That this key feature of Byzantine theology was missed in a dissertation mentored by at least one Orthodox theologian is baffling.

Lastly, the volume under review is plagued by several (major) editorial issues. Numerous pages, far too many really to be comfortable in a published dissertation, contain no citations or footnotes whatsoever, when the body text does not consist solely of new, unique authorial insights. Spelling errors, misplaced commas, and spacing issues abound; the publication data at the front of the book state that the dissertation published in 2023 was submitted in 2020—surely this would have been enough time to revise the dissertation before publication. The present reviewer, however, has the impression that no such revisions were undertaken following submission (and defence?). The numerous images are mostly helpful in underscoring points RECKER makes, but all images are printed in one section at the back of the volume, forcing the reader to constantly flip back and forth, and several of the images are printed either in black-and-white or else very small, which makes following the author's arguments based on such images difficult to do when the features undergirding the point are barely discernible. The catalogue according to type of image is a positive feature of the volume and helps establish a typology for cherubim and seraphim depictions; yet the images here too are separated from the catalogue, and so one is left only with words and ciphers corresponding to images which, again, must be found elsewhere in the volume. A final desideratum would have been an index to the work, but this is utterly lacking. Given the chronological, geographical, literary, and artistic breadth attempted in the scope of this work, such an index for terms would be a massive help to future readers;

20. RECKER 2023, p. 15: "Die bildliche Darstellung Gottes ist im Sinne des Christentums folglich durch die Abbildung von Christus möglich geworden. Gott zeigt sich metaphorisch in seinem Sohn und folglich auch in all dessen Abbildungen" (translation and emphasis mine).

21. Cf. esp. John 1:18, 10:30; 14:8–11.

why this was not undertaken between submission and publication remains puzzling given the timespan. In summary, while the author's ambitious scope is laudable and demonstrates the wide array of times, places, and scholarly disciplines that touch on these mysterious angelic messengers, the "dark style" mentioned in the subtitle applies less to the distant sphere of the divine and more to the present dissertation appearing in print; in the end, what remains obscured to the reader is not the Lord of hosts, but rather how exactly the Byzantines themselves really thought about and engaged with seraphim, cherubim, and the divine God-Man Christ enthroned upon them in art and metalwork.

Keywords

angels; iconography