

CRITICAL NOTES

“THE FLAME OF THE WHIRLING SWORD”: A NOTE ON GENESIS 3:24

At the close of the Garden of Eden story, after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden, Yahweh Elohim stations “the cherubim and the flame of the whirling sword (*lahat hahereb hammithappeket*) to guard the way to the tree of life.” The cherubim are familiar mythological creatures: they figure as part of the iconography of the ark;¹ Yahweh is said to be enthroned on them;² and, indeed, Yahweh is said to fly upon one.³ Images of the cherubim are familiar from Phoenician, Assyrian, and Israelite ivories⁴ and from the throne iconography of Phoenician kings.⁵

The *lahat hahereb hammithappeket* is a less familiar item. Grammatically the phrase is simple: two nouns in a construct relationship with a participle in attributive position. The most literal translation, as BDB and others have it, is “the flame of the whirling sword.”⁶ We note that it is the sword and not the flame that is whirling, since the participle is feminine and therefore agrees with *hereb*. The problem

¹ Exod 25:18–22; 37:7–9; Num 7:89; etc. See M. Haran, “The Ark and the Cherubim: Their Symbolic Significance in Biblical Ritual” *IEJ* 9 (1959) 30–38, 89–94; idem, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978) 246–59; and R. de Vaux, “Les chérubins et l’arche d’alliance, les sphinx gardiens et les trônes divins dans l’ancien orient,” in *Bible et Orient* (Paris: Cerf, 1967) 231–59.

² 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; etc. See most recently T. N. D. Mettinger, “YHWH SABAOTH—The Heavenly King on the Cherubim Throne,” in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays* (ed. T. Ishida; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982) 112–18, 131–34 and references.

³ 2 Sam 22:11 = Ps 18:11. On the mythological background of this image, see F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973) 147–63; and P. D. Miller, Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1973) 122.

⁴ *ANEP*, 38, 213; R. D. Barnett, *Ancient Ivories in the Middle East and Adjacent Countries* (Qedem 14; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1982) 43–55, pls. 45–53.

⁵ *ANEP*, 158; W. F. Albright, “What Were the Cherubim?” *BA* 1 (1938) 1–3, reprinted in *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, Vol. 1 (ed. G. E. Wright and D. N. Freedman; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961) 95–97; H. Seyrig, “Antiquités syriennes” *Syria* 36 (1959) 51–52.

⁶ BDB, 529; J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930) 89; H. Gunkel, *Genesis übersetzt und erklärt* (HKAT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901) 25: “Die Flamme des sich drehenden Schwertes.” The English word “whirling” only approximately conveys the sense of the participle *mithappeket*. A fuller translation of the participle is “turning this way and that” (BDB, 246) in the iterative sense of the *hithpael*. The general sense appears to be the motion that a sword makes in the hand: a constant thrusting and slashing, the “whirl” of swordplay.

lies not in translation but in interpretation. What is the flame of the whirling sword?

Two basic interpretations are prevalent in the literature. The first, followed by G. von Rad, W. Zimmerli, U. Cassuto and others,⁷ is a naturalistic interpretation: the phrase refers to a lightning bolt guarding the garden. The second interpretation, argued by H. Gunkel, T. H. Gaster and others,⁸ is a more folkloristic interpretation: the phrase refers to the magical weapon of Yahweh, standing by itself beside the cherubim. E. A. Speiser and H. Gese have buttressed the latter interpretation by citing the numerous magical weapons of Mesopotamian and Canaanite gods.⁹ Although neither interpretation is entirely satisfactory, it is evident that both groups take the grammatical construction of the sentence seriously and regard the *lahat haḥereb hammithappeket* as a separate object, independent of the cherubim. And yet the major problem of both interpretations is precisely the dissimilarity of the *lahat haḥereb* and the cherubim. In both interpretations there is a disturbing lack of symmetry between the guardians of the divine garden.

An alternative suggestion has been proposed by P. D. Miller, Jr. Based on his survey of fiery beings in the service of the high gods in Canaanite, Phoenician, and Israelite mythology, Miller suggests that “the cherubim and the flaming sword are probably to be recognized as a reflection of the Canaanite fiery messengers.”¹⁰ Miller cites as collateral biblical evidence the passage in Ps 104:4 where “fire and flame” (*ʿēš <wā>lahat*) are described as Yahweh’s “ministers” (*mēšārētāyw*).¹¹

Miller appears to regard the *lahat haḥereb hammithappeket* as a fiery sword that was originally in the hands of the cherubim.¹² This interpretation is doubtful. The force of the conjunction (“the cherubim *and* the flame of the whirling sword”) would suggest that it is best to take the *lahat haḥereb* as an object separate from the cherubim. Miller has, however, pointed the way to a correct interpretation. The “flame of the whirling sword,” I propose, is an independent fiery being, a divine being in service to Yahweh, in precisely the same mythological category as the cherubim. The problem of asymmetry is solved by this interpretation: both the

⁷ G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968) 97–98; W. Zimmerli, *1. Mose: Die Urgeschichte* (Zurich: Zwingli, 1957) 183; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part I* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961) 176; others include Skinner, *Genesis*; O. Procksch, *Die Genesis übersetzt und erklärt* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1924) 41; and R. de Vaux, *La Genèse* (SBJ; Paris: Cerf, 1951) 49.

⁸ H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 25; T. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 48–49; C. Westermann regards the phrase as referring either to an animate weapon or to lightning (*Genesis I/1* [BKAT; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1974] 374).

⁹ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 24–25; H. Gese, “Der bewachte Lebensbaum und die Heroen: Zwei mythologische Ergänzungen zur Urgeschichte der Quelle J,” in *Wort und Geschichte: Festschrift für Karl Elliger* (ed. H. Gese and H. P. Rüger; AOAT 18; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1973) 80–81.

¹⁰ P. D. Miller, Jr., “Fire in the Mythology of Canaan and Israel” *CBQ* 27 (1965) 259.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 259. The text of Ps 104:4 reads *mēšārētāyw ʿēš lohēt*, a difficult construction since (1) *mēšārētāyw* is plural, and (2) the participle *lohēt* does not agree with the feminine noun *ʿēš*. If we read *ʿēš* and *lahat* as separate nouns the text reads smoothly and yields good sense.

¹² Miller describes the basic mythological image as “warriors bearing a sword, which is sometimes flaming” and cites Gen 3:24 as “the most obvious case” (“Fire,” 259).

“flame” and the cherubim are minor divinities assigned by Yahweh to guard the garden.

A problem remains, however. The grammatical construction of the phrase requires explanation: why is the “flame” connected to the genitival phrase “of the whirling sword”? A satisfactory answer can be found in a parallel expression attached to the West Semitic god Rešep, a god of war, pestilence, and fertility, whose name, incidentally, means “flame.”¹³ In three Phoenician inscriptions from the fourth century B.C.E., an altar and two hearths are dedicated to *ršp hš*, which has been most plausibly translated as “Rešep of the Arrow.”¹⁴ The construction of the title—divine name (*ršp*, “flame”) in construct with a weapon (*hš*, “arrow”)—is precisely parallel to the title of the guardian of the divine garden—divine name (*lahat*, “flame”) in construct with a weapon (*hahereb hammithappeket*, “the whirling sword”).¹⁵ As the arrow is a characteristic weapon of Rešep,¹⁶ so we can presume that the “whirling sword” is the characteristic weapon of the guardian deity “flame.”¹⁷

Minor deities bearing swords are common in biblical and Canaanite lore. In Josh 5:13–15, Joshua encounters a “man” bearing a sword who declares himself to be “commander of the host of Yahweh.”¹⁸ In Num 22:23 and 1 Chr 21:16, divine beings with swords appear to Balaam and to David. Most interesting for our purpose is an old Canaanite attestation of a pair of fiery divine beings equipped, so it seems, with swords:

¹³ On Rešep, see M. J. Dahood, “Ancient Semitic Deities in Syria and Palestine,” in *Le Antiche Divinità Semitiche* (ed. S. Moscati; Rome: Centro di Studi Semitici, 1958) 83–85; M. H. Pope and W. Röllig, “Die Mythologie der Ugariter und Phonizier,” in *Wörterbuch der Mythologie*, Band I (ed. H. W. Haussig; Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1965) 305–6; D. Conrad, “Der Gott Reschef,” *ZAW* 83 (1971) 157–83; and most recently W. J. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Rešep* (AOS 8; New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1976).

¹⁴ *KAI*, 32.3, 4. See the discussion in Fulco, *Rešep*, 49–51 and references.

¹⁵ It is also possible to read *ršp* as a generic divine term, since the plural phrase *t’rbn ršpm* (“the Rešeps enter”) is found in Ugaritic (RS 19.15.11=UT 2004.11=KTU 1.91.11). On the problem of divine names in construct relationship, especially with reference to the divine title *yahweh sēbā’ôt* (“Yahweh of hosts”), see most recently J. A. Emerton, “New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud” *ZAW* 94 (1982) 3–9. Emerton concludes, from his survey of recent epigraphic finds, that there can be no syntactic objection to reading various divine names as occurring in the construct state. There still appear, however, to be restrictions on when such construct forms can occur.

¹⁶ In a Ugaritic text, Rešep is called *b’l hš ršp* (“Rešep Lord of the Arrow,” RS 15.134.3=UT 1001.1.3=KTU 1.82.3); in several Egyptian representations Rešep is depicted as wearing a quiver of arrows (Fulco, *Rešep*, 50).

¹⁷ I am not suggesting that Rešep is the fiery guardian of the divine garden, though a connection might exist. Rešep is a minor deity accompanying Yahweh in the theophany in Hab 3:5; in an astrological text from Ugarit, Rešep is described as the *ṭgr* (“gatekeeper”) of the sun-goddess, *šps* (RS 12.61.3–4=UT 143.3–4=KTU 1.78.3–4). I might stress that, in Israelite tradition, Rešep belongs to the same class of beings as the *lahat* in Gen 3:24: they are both “fiery” members of Yahweh’s divine entourage.

¹⁸ For discussion, see Miller, *Divine Warrior*, 128–31.

iš̄t iš̄tm ȳitmr

hrb l̄iš̄t [b̄ym/l̄š̄]nhm¹⁹

A flame, two flames they appear,

{ In their right hands } are sharpened swords.
 { Their tongues } are sharpened swords.

An Akkadian text presents a similar image of a related god, “Fire” (*Išum*):

^dIšum tābīhu na’du

ša ana našē kakkīšu ezzūti

qātāšu asmā

u ana šubruq ulmēšu šērūti²⁰

Fire, the famous slayer,

Whose hands are suited

To wield his terrible weapons

And to make his fierce swords(?)²¹ flash.

The interpretation that I am proposing does not affect our translation of *lahat haḥereb hammithappeket* (“the flame of the whirling sword”), but it does alter our understanding of it. The “flame” is an animate divine being,²² a member of Yahweh’s divine host, similar in status to the cherubim;²³ the “whirling sword” is its appropriate weapon, ever-moving, like the flame itself.

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¹⁹ CTA 2.1.32–33=UT 137.32–33=KTU 1.2.32–33. The gap at the beginning of line 33 permits two or perhaps three signs to be restored prior to *nhm* (CTA Pl. II). T. H. Gaster proposed [b̄ym]nhm (“in their right hands”) (*Thespis* [New York: Schuman, 1950] 139). F. M. Cross has suggested [l̄š̄]nhm (“their tongue[s]”) (*Canaanite Myth*, 190 n. 187; cf. Pss 57:5; 64:4). Either reading is possible.

²⁰ *Erra* I.4–5, in L. Cagni, *L’epopea di Erra* (Rome: Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, 1969) 58; see also Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* (SANE 1/3; Malibu, CA: Undena, 1977) 84. On the god *Išum*, see Cagni, *Poem of Erra*, 16–18, and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Earliest Semitic Pantheon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1972) 40–41.

²¹ Cagni (*Poem of Erra*, 84; *L’epopea*, 141) reads “spears,” but cf. von Soden (*AHW*, 106 s.v. *barāqu*): “des Schwertes?”

²² As in Ps 104:4 (see above).

²³ In addition to the similarity of status between the “flame” and the cherubim, there is an interesting similarity of image. Both the “flame” and the cherubim would have to be considered anomalous, and therefore taboo, according to the Israelite categorization of living creatures (see especially M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966] 41–57). The cherubim are part human, part animal, and part bird; thus they are anomalous by virtue of their mixing of features from conceptually separate categories. The “flame,” in contrast, is anomalous by virtue of its lack of features that would qualify its type as a living creature. Fire is a quality that belongs to none of the categories in the Israelite classification of living creatures. The cherubim and the “flame” are complementary, seen from the point of view of the Israelite categories of experience. They are both anomalous creatures—one from an excess of distinctive features, the other from an absence of such features—and so they are both appropriate types of creatures to stand guard at the threshold of the divine garden. Both types of creatures are sacred, and, correspondingly, they are also taboo, precisely in parallel with the status of the garden that they are assigned to guard.