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# Heaven: Use, Function and Content of a Cosmic Concept

**Abstract:** Among religious concepts from the Ancient Near East, the word “heaven” should be called a “container term,” that comprises many different attributes. In the Ancient Near East in general, as in ancient Judaism in particular, these attributes refer primarily to temple concepts that denote certain cosmological ideas. “Heaven” and “temple” point to an *imago mundi* in Jewish cosmology by referring back to more ancient traditions. Furthermore, temples or sanctuaries and their iconography, especially with a view to the sphinx thrones, reflect associations with heavenly spheres. Their archaeological remains date from the Bronze and Iron Ages to the Persian and Hellenistic eras, and they find their textual counterpart in poetical and liturgical texts of the Tanak and beyond. In general, the concept of “heaven” focuses on the link between temple and cosmos. The overall purpose of its use and function is the symbolization of divine or royal power.

**Keywords:** heaven, temple, cosmos, throne iconography, Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice

## 1 Preliminary remarks

Ancient Near Eastern ideologies frequently connect the heavenly sphere with temples or sanctuaries. One reason for making this strong link between “heaven” and “temple” relates to the central value of the heavenly realm for cosmological concepts. Moreover, in Ancient Near Eastern literature and iconography, the cosmos can be directly linked with the temple as a place of divine emanation. The ancient Egyptian cosmology refers to the word *p.t* (*pet*) in a hieroglyph consisting of a star and an “upside-down” box with slanted sides that recalls a roof. The hieroglyph is used to cover both heaven and temple. For instance, the temple of Heliopolis is called “the heaven of Egypt.”<sup>1</sup> Mesopotamian traditions exhibit similar ideas. Here, the Babylonian temple of Nebuchadnezzar II. (604–562

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1 Cf. Janowski, “Himmel,” 98–100.

BCE), the “Ziqqurat,” is called in Sumerian language *é-temen-an-ki*, the “foundation of heaven and earth.”<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, it has been recognized for years that the creation-account in Gen 1:1–2:4a is also reflected in the Sinai narrative about the construction of the “tent of meeting” (cf. Exod 24:15b–18aα; 25–31 and 35–40).<sup>3</sup> Especially the book of Psalms encompasses diverse references to “heaven” as a cosmic term for temples and sanctuaries. In Ps 78:69, the reciter confesses (NRSV): “He (i.e., God) built his sanctuary like the high heavens (read: במרמים, MT: כְּמִדְּרָמִים), like the earth, which he has founded forever.” The verse, slightly emended, recalls the tradition of divine superiority and transcendence that, in this particular case, explicitly combines the temple with cosmology.<sup>4</sup>

In later, post-exilic texts, the creator-God was conceptualized as the only God, while other gods were polemically excluded. In the book of Deutero-Isaiah one reads (Isa 42:5–6a: NRSV):

5 Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out (בִּנְרָא הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנוֹטִיחֵם  
 (רִקַּע הָאָרֶץ וְצִפְצָצָאֶיהָ), who spread out the earth and what comes from it  
 who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:  
 6a I am the Lord (אֲנִי יְהוָה),  
 I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand.

With regard to the Tanak, it is of some significance that the creation of “heaven” is predominantly combined with the motif of “stretching out” (Heb.: נֹטַח), as in Deutero-Isaiah. What is more, God’s incomparability is connected with the creation of heaven only in late prophetic texts.<sup>5</sup> Conclusively, the creation of heaven hints at a powerful and autocratic role of God within the process of divine creation.

Within ancient Jewish cosmology, the concept of “heaven” focuses on the temple as *imago mundi*.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, a further aspect of the use and function of “heaven” in Jewish cosmology relates to the question of divine power.

<sup>2</sup> For the Mesopotamian traditions, cf. Janowski, “Himmel,” 87–98.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Janowski, “Tempel,” 214–46.

<sup>4</sup> For the tradition-historical contexts of the elevation of God and its cosmological background, cf. recently Lichtenstein, *Mitte*, 372–83.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Hartenstein, “JHWH,” 383–409.

<sup>6</sup> On the temple as *imago mundi* in rabbinic traditions, cf. also Ego, *Himmel*, 20–26, 42–44.

## 2 “Heaven” and the temple as *imago mundi* in Jewish cosmology

The following arguments are designed to demonstrate that “heaven” in Jewish cosmology not only denotes a single place or space. “Heaven” may also be associated with various components and items in temples and temple architecture. It seems obvious that a simple “space”-oriented exemplification of “heaven” is not a sufficient definition given that ancient Jewish texts—such as the Testament of Levi, 3 Baruch or 2 Enoch—knew of different heavens or heavenly spheres.<sup>7</sup> But only one of these spheres housed the heavenly temple or sanctuary. Consequently, the question arises: To what extent does the temple, or references to the sanctuary and sanctuaries, in Second Temple Judaism include heavenly and cosmological connotations?<sup>8</sup>

Already in the Bronze and Iron Ages, archaeological and iconographical motifs or concepts communicated a cosmological world-view within a temple setting. Literary sources also highlight a significant terminology in this regard: Isa 6:1–5, to point to only one of many examples, connotes the heavens by referring to the visional throne of God as “high and lifted up” (v. 1: רָם וְנִשְׂאָה).<sup>9</sup> The combination of the divine throne and the highest position of this throne constitute a blueprint of the imagined entirety of the cosmos. Exactly this combination is also attested in several sources from the Second Temple period. While in 1 En. 14 the visionary looks at the “highest throne” in a heavenly sanctuary, the worshipper in 4QMilḥamah<sup>a</sup> (= 4Q491) 11 I, 12, probably a high-priest of the end-times, speaks about a “lifted throne in the council of the gods.” A “lifted throne” is also mentioned in the 4QInstruction-like Composition A (= 4Q419) 1:9, and the “New Jerusalem” text in 11QNJ ar (11Q18 31 II, 2; 32:1) refers to a throne in the temple of an eschatological Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> The composition known as the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* among the Dead Sea Scrolls is especially interesting. These songs mention a throne on high on three occasions, although the temple is not explicitly placed in the heavens (cf. 4QShirShabb<sup>f</sup> [= 4Q405] 20 II–22 II, 8;

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Wright, *History*, 143–48, 164–81.

<sup>8</sup> This was exactly the question investigated by Metzger, “Wohnstatt,” 1–10, who concluded (*ibid.*, 10): “Das Heiligtum ist der Ort, an dem der Unterschied zwischen Himmel und Erde, zwischen ‘Diesseits’ und ‘Jenseits’ aufgehoben ist.”

<sup>9</sup> For this interpretation, cf. Janowski, “Wohnung,” 37–38. Furthermore, Janowski speaks about the Temple in Jerusalem as the “center of gravity” between the heavenly high and the depths, as they are represented by the “posts of the doors” (אַמּוֹת הַדְּפֵי) in Isa 6:4.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Tilford, “אֲבָטֵי,” 417.

23 I, 3; 11QShirShabb [= 11Q17] 7:11).<sup>11</sup> The *Songs'* motif of a sometimes fiery throne, surrounded or accompanied by angelic beings, is also attested in later Jewish traditions, as in the *Similitudes of Enoch* (1 En. 61:8–10; 71:7), Apoc. Mos. 33 or Apoc. Ab. 18:12–13.<sup>12</sup>

If we discuss “throne” and “temple” within a cosmological context in ancient Judaism, another important text from the Tanak comes into focus: Ezek 1–3 (and chaps. 8–11). In these visions, the prophet faces a heavenly scene that provides further important testimony to a heavenward-like, cosmological concept, by referring to the *Cherubim* (cf. Ezek 10:1–9) and the “firmament” (Heb.: רָקִיעַ) in connection with precious stones: crystal (Ezek 1:22) and sapphire or lapis lazuli (Ezek 1:26). The term רָקִיעַ, an embossed metal sheet or firm plate, denotes in Ezek 1 (cf. vv. 22–24, 26) the division between the earthly sky below and the upper heavens. The precious stones function as a symbolic realization of a divided heaven. This is already the case in a Neo-Assyrian religious explanatory text from the first millennium BCE, whose origin may be traced back to the Kassite period (second half of the second millennium BCE). In KAR 307 (VAT 8917), line 30–33, one reads:<sup>13</sup>

30. The Upper Heavens are *luludānitu*-stone. They belong to Anu. He settled the 300 Igigi inside.

31. The Middle Heavens are *saggilmud*-stone. They belong to the Igigi. Bel [= Marduk, SB] sat on the high dais inside,

32. in the lapis lazuli sanctuary. He made a lamp<sup>7</sup> of electrum shine inside.

33. The Lower Heavens are jasper. They belong to the stars. He drew the constellations of the gods on them.

As attested in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder (*Nat.* 37.37), jasper (Greek: ἴασπις) is a translucent stone,<sup>14</sup> and also in Ezek 1:22 the firm plate is like the “splendor of ice” or “crystal” (Heb.: כְּעֵין הַקֶּרַח, Gk./LXX: ὡς ὄρασις κρυστάλλου). What is more, just as Bel or Marduk sat on the “high podium inside,” in the lapis lazuli sanctuary, so Ezek 1:26 and 10:1 refer to the throne of YHWH, made of lapis lazuli (Heb.: סַפִּיר, Gk./LXX: σάπφειρος; see also Exod 24:9–10).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ego, “Denkbilder,” 172.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Hartenstein, “Cherubim,” 155.

<sup>13</sup> For the following translation, cf. Horowitz, *Geography*, 4. For a discussion of the text in the context of other ancient Mesopotamian sources, cf. *ibid.*, 4–15.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Horowitz, *Geography*, 13–14, including the quotation of Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 37.37.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hartenstein, “Cherubim,” 175–77. For a more detailed discussion cf. Hartenstein, “Wolkendunkel,” 136–52. See also Wright, *History*, 34–36.

Furthermore, Jewish literature of the Second Temple period used these connotations of precious stones to conceptualize a heavenly sphere in several ways. Philo of Alexandria revealed that the breastplate of the High Priest consisted of two parts that were kept together on the shoulder by emeralds. Those emeralds represented hemispheres of heaven that were above and below the surface (*Spec.* 1.86).<sup>16</sup> In the Testament of Abraham (T. Ab. Recension A 12:3–4), Abraham is on a heavenly journey and sees two gates, one narrow and one wide, “[a]nd between the two gates there stood a terrifying throne with the appearance of terrifying crystal, flashing like fire.”<sup>17</sup> In 1 En. 14:18 the visionary looks at a lofty throne, it appeared just like a crystal.<sup>18</sup> While on his first cosmic journey, Enoch becomes aware of the “seven mountains of precious stones” (1 En. 18:6), and he sees the “throne of God, of alabaster, and the throne’s summit was of sapphire stone” (1 En. 18:8).<sup>19</sup> T. Ab. Recension A 12 and 1 En. 14, obviously combine motifs from Ezek 1; 10 and Isa 6.<sup>20</sup> All motifs, ornaments, adornments and mythical creatures, as they have been surveyed here, reveal a distinct cosmological context for temple concepts in Israel, Judea and beyond. If one asks how this cosmological association started, the answer is “heaven.” While they are attested literarily or archaeologically, within a this-worldly provenance, temples at the same time unite otherworldly or heavenly symbols. The temple motifs confirm a complex amalgamation of earthly and heavenly realms, or, so to say, the *imago mundi*.

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16 Cf. Kaiser, “Bedeutung,” 329. For more details in Philo’s description of the garments of the High Priest that associate “cosmological” significance and the description of the Jerusalem Temple as a blueprint of the heavenly sanctuary, see *ibid.*, 329–34. Furthermore, Kaiser emphasizes (*ibid.*, 332): “Das irdische Heiligtum sei mithin nicht in dem Sinn ein Abbild des himmlischen, dass es dieses als ein Bauwerk spiegele, sondern es entspräche in seiner Funktion dem Kosmos als dem wahren Heiligtum Gottes.”

17 Translation: Sanders, “Testament of Abraham,” 889. The Greek text of T. Ab. Recension A 12:4 reads: καὶ ἐν μέσῳ τῶν δύο πυλῶν ἴστατο θρόνος φοβερός ἐν εἴδει κρυστάλλου φοβεροῦ ἐξαστράπτων ὡς πῦρ. For the text, cf. Miller and Scott, “Testament of Abraham.”

18 In this case, the Greek text of *Codex Panopolitanus* is of relevance: ἐθεώρουν δὲ καὶ εἶδον θρόνον ὑψηλόν, καὶ τὸ εἶδος αὐτοῦ ὡσεὶ κρυστάλλινον, καὶ τροχὸς ὡς ἡλίου λάμποντος καὶ ὄρος χερουβίν. For the text, cf. Black, *Apocalypse*, 29.

19 Again, the Greek text of *Codex Panopolitanus* is of relevance: τὸ δὲ μέσον αὐτῶν ἦν εἰς οὐρανόν, ὡσπερ θρόνος θεοῦ ἀπὸ λίθου φουκά, καὶ ἡ κορυφή τοῦ θρόνου ἀπὸ λίθου σαφφεύρου. For the text, cf. Black, *Apocalypse*, 31.

20 For further evidence in Tob 13, cf. Beyerle, “Belief,” 82–86, esp. 85 with n. 64.

### 3 The temple as “heaven”: archaeological and iconographical traces

It is undeniable that temple-sites in the southern Levant reflect cosmological concepts. Even a cursory glance at the literary and archaeological evidence points to the “longue durée” of several cosmological motifs.<sup>21</sup> The combination of patterns that include the exalted throne and mythical creatures such as the *cherubim* or *seraphim* is particularly interesting.<sup>22</sup> In Isa 6:1–5, YHWH appears as the God “who dwells among the *cherubim*” (Heb.: יְשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים)<sup>23</sup> and who is exalted as an enthroned divine being. In Ps 99:1–2 one reads:

1 YHWH has become a king,  
nations shall tremble!  
He dwells among *cherubim*  
(Heb.: יְשֵׁב כְּרוּבִים, LXX: ὁ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τῶν χερουβιν),  
the earth shall quake!  
2 YHWH is great in Zion,  
exalted is he over all the nations.

The Israelite God is conceptualized as a divine being whose power is symbolized in kingship, enthronement and exaltation over the nations. The terminology of the one “who dwells among the *cherubim*” is attested several times in the Tanak<sup>24</sup> and may be connected with the *cherubim* arranged in parallel in the description of the *Debir*, the Holiest of Holies, in 1 Kgs 6:23–26, in which the *cherubim* obviously form a throne.<sup>25</sup> It seems unlikely that the motif of God “who dwells among *cherubim*” belongs to the most ancient traditions of the Jerusalem cult. However, the motif dates back to no later than the seventh century BCE, as indicated by the increase in iconic testimonies in this period.

<sup>21</sup> Beyond every tradition-historical permanence, a true “cosmology,” including the idea of a heavenly realm that was inhabited by divine beings *and* a structured system of different sphere-like realms, requires “Hellenistic thinking:” cf. Schwindt, “Weltbilder,” 3–34.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Mettinger, “Cherubim,” 189–92; *idem*, “Seraphim,” 742–44.

<sup>23</sup> For the grammatical analysis of the phrase and the proposed translation of יְשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים, cf. Eichler, “Meaning,” 365–67.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:15 (= Isa 37:16); Ps 80:2; 99:1 and 1 Chr 13:6.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Keel, *Geschichte*, 294–301, who, among others, refers to a Phoenician scarab from Tharros (Sardinia), dating from the seventh century BCE, that shows the god Baal-Melkart sitting on a throne with *cherubim*, and *seraphim* are also added: cf. *ibid.*, 299–300, and 300, fig. 185.

For a late setting of the motif of the one “who dwells among *cherubim*,” the “Prayer of the Three Young Men,” a deuterocanonical addition to the book of Daniel, should be taken into consideration.<sup>26</sup> The hymn starts with a declaration of the praise of God (Dan 3:29[52]–33[55]):

29[52] You are blessed, Lord, the God of our fathers,  
and praiseworthy  
and highly exalted forever,  
30 and the holy name of your glory is blessed  
and most praiseworthy  
and highly exalted forever.  
31[53] You are blessed in your holy temple,  
to be highly lauded and glorified forever.  
32[54] You are blessed on the throne of your kingdom  
and highly lauded  
and highly exalted forever.  
33[55] You are blessed, you who look upon the depths,  
who dwelled among the cherubim [Collins: “seated upon the cherubim”]  
(OG [Theod., Ms. 88, Pap. 967]: καθήμενος ἐπὶ χερουβιμ/μ, Aram. [MS Bod. Oxf. heb.d.11/  
Chronicle of Jerachmeel]: וייתבתא על כרובין<sup>27</sup>,  
and praiseworthy  
and highly exalted forever.<sup>28</sup>

The prayer, a declarative praise or hymn, repeats God’s exaltation in a kind of refrain and locates the God of the fathers in heaven, who “looks upon the depths” (v. 33[55]). The latter motif clearly has a cosmological overtone.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, God is in the temple. Furthermore, Klaus Koch notes that the Aramaic version in the “Chronicle of Jerachmeel” and the OG text envisaged a heavenly throne, whereas the Syrian version and Theodotion had in mind the earthly sanctuary on Mount Zion.<sup>30</sup> The *terminus ante quem* of this prayer is provided by the Greek translation of Daniel, no later than 100 BCE.<sup>31</sup>

With regard to the iconic representations of an exalted and enthroned God or king, accompanied by mythical creatures, like the *cherubim* or *seraphim*, a very prominent throne typology comes into view. In the second half of the second millennium BCE, the so-called sphinx throne appeared on the scene in Palestine

<sup>26</sup> On the Greek phraseology, and on Peshitta, Targum and Vulgate, cf. Eichler, “Meaning,” 359.

<sup>27</sup> For the versions, see the synopsis in Koch, *Zusätze* 1, 100–101 (line 127).

<sup>28</sup> Modified translation: Collins, *Daniel*, 196.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Schwemer, “Gott,” 61–64.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Koch, *Zusätze* 2, 91.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Collins, *Daniel*, 207.



**Fig. 1.** Ivory Plaque (Megiddo/Tell el-Mutesellim, H.: 6 cm; L.: 26 cm, LBA Schroer, *Ikongraphie*, 375: fig. 947)

and Syria.<sup>32</sup> Its unique shape is characterized by a throne seat, which is flanked by two figures of a sphinx. The sphinxes are represented in a three-dimensional shape. To some extent, Egyptian thrones, as they were adorned with leonine figures, may have influenced those types of thrones.<sup>33</sup> A famous ivory plaque from the late Bronze Age (13th/12th century BCE), found at Megiddo (fig. 1), is a prime example. A victorious king appears twice on the plaque,<sup>34</sup> on a chariot drawn by horses and seated on a sphinx throne to celebrate his victory. The winged sun disk above the chariot and the birds as heralds of the victory indicate Egyptian influences.<sup>35</sup> There is also a small throne model representing the remains of a sphinx throne from the same place and the same time.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, another very prominent depiction of a sphinx throne found a place on a limestone sarcophagus of the Phoenician king, Aḥīrōm, from Tomb V of the royal necropolis at Byblos (fig. 2). The question as to whether this sarcophagus stems from the late Bronze Age, or the early Iron Age, is still a matter of scholarly dispute.<sup>37</sup> Underneath floral decorations, on a relief at the side compartment of the sarcophagus, Aḥīrōm

**32** Recent excavations at Alalakh, located in the south of modern Turkey, at courtyard 9, Level VII from the Middle Bronze Age, revealed limestone or alabaster fluted wing-like fragments at the palace that were used to reconstruct a sphinx throne of king Idrimi dating to the middle of the second millennium BCE: cf. Yener, “Excavations,” 142–53 and 147, 149: fig. 7, 10, 11.

**33** Cf. Metzger, *Königsthron*, 259–63.

**34** Metzger, *Königsthron*, 273, argued that the owner of the throne was most probably a deity, although the plaque offers no hints about the identity of a god or goddess.

**35** Cf. Schroer, *Ikongraphie*, 374–75: fig. 947. Concerning the shape of the feathers of the wings on the Megiddo ivory plaque, Metzger, *Königsthron*, 265–66, 270, points to a Cretan-Mycenaean influence.

**36** Cf. Sader, “Practices,” 65: fig. 1; cf. also Schroer, *Ikongraphie*, 376–77: fig. 948.

**37** From a quick glance at the inscription (*KAI 1*) it appears that the dedicator of the sarcophagus, most of the time identified with Ittoba’al, son of Aḥīrōm, is not explicitly mentioned, since his name can be reconstructed only from a lacuna. Besides other arguments, the genealogy of the kings at Byblos is a crucial aspect for a dating of the sarcophagus. Most recently, Lehmann, “Sohn,” 163–80, challenged the scholarly consensus and argued convincingly for a reconstruction of the name “Pulsiba’al” or “Pilsiba’al,” also questioning the identification of Aḥīrōm with a Phoenician king at Byblos.





**Fig. 2.** Limestone sarcophagus of the Phoenician king Ahīrōm (Byblos, H.: 33 cm, L.: 284 cm, W.: 114 cm, LBA or EIA, Sader, “Practices,” 65: fig. 1)

[...] is shown on a high-backed throne decorated with a standing sphinx whose vertical tail loops downward at its tip, echoing the downward loop of the seat back. The unfurled wing sweeps upward and the feathers are shown as two tiered layers. The hooked erect tails and the stance of these two sphinxes accord well with details of Hittite sculptural styles, as exemplified by sphinx sculptures from the inner doorway of the Sphinx Gate above Yerkapi, at Hattusa (...).<sup>38</sup>

The whole scenery may be interpreted as a funeral meal. The enthroned person holds a lotus flower, symbol of the dead, in his left hand, and a mug or a bowl in his right.<sup>39</sup>

Similar to the literary evidence, the iconography of the sphinx throne may easily be observed over an extended period of time. This especially concerns Phoenician remains from the late Persian and early Hellenistic period.<sup>40</sup> A variety of different types of media contribute to the pictorial agenda of sphinx thrones. The most widely used media are scarabs, seals and seal impressions. For instance, the so-called “classical Phoenician” seals, dating back to between the sixth and fourth century BCE, show male figures, probably to be identified with the Melqart-Ba’al type of a deity, sitting on sphinx thrones. Astral and floral symbols constitute the best indicator of the cosmic dimension of these symbolic depictions.<sup>41</sup> In addition, “aniconic” concepts of empty thrones, or thrones with an enthroned object that is not clearly figural, are present, as, for example, in a sphinx throne miniature with an ovoid object from Sidon dating back to between the second and first century BCE. Most recently, Brian Doak argued that the pop-

<sup>38</sup> So Yener, “Excavations,” 150.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Schroer, *Ikongraphie*, 388–89: fig. 962.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Nunn, *Motivschatz*, 82, 88–89 and plate 44.24, 25; *eadem*, “Phönizier,” 100–102, 113–15 and fig. 4, 9, 10; Morstadt, “Heiligtümer,” 494–97 with fig. 4.1, 5.1+2.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Doak, *Aniconism*, 55–57 and fig. 4.9.



Fig. 3. Silver bracelet (Sidon, 3,4 x 2,7 cm, 5th–4th c. BCE, Nunn, *Motivschatz*, 117: plate 44.25)

ular god, Ba‘al Hammon, as the “sky god,” was probably meant to be imagined on the empty thrones.<sup>42</sup> But, usually the thrones were associated with the goddess Astarte.<sup>43</sup>

With regard to the aspects of empowerment and cosmology, three final iconic examples should be considered. The first artifact is a silver bracelet with an amethyst intaglio stone set in a gold bezel.<sup>44</sup> It was discovered in a tomb at Sidon and dates back to the fifth or fourth century BCE (fig. 3). The bracelet depicts a Phoenician goddess, maybe Astarte, who is seated on a sphinx throne holding a scepter in her right hand. In an offering scene, a female figure in Persian style garments faces the enthroned goddess, while a thymiaterion, or incense altar, is placed between them. Common astral symbols, namely, a winged sun disk, a star and a crescent moon, shield the whole scene. Furthermore, the shaft of the incense altar is decorated with leaves.

The second artifact is a limestone throne with sphinxes wearing nemes-headdresses (fig. 4). It was found in the southern coastal region of the Lebanon, close to Tyre, and dates back to the seventh century BCE. In the center of the throne, an imposing baetyl rests against the back of the throne—maybe a hint of an aniconic divine representation of a god or a goddess. The front panel between the sphinxes shows a floral motif or palmette, representing the sacred tree, or the “Tree of Life.”<sup>45</sup>

The third example comes from Oumm el-‘Amed, an important Phoenician site, twenty kilometers south of Tyre (fig. 5). The archaeological structure encom-

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Doak, *Aniconism*, 109–15. See also Niehr, “Baal Hammon,” 1–3.

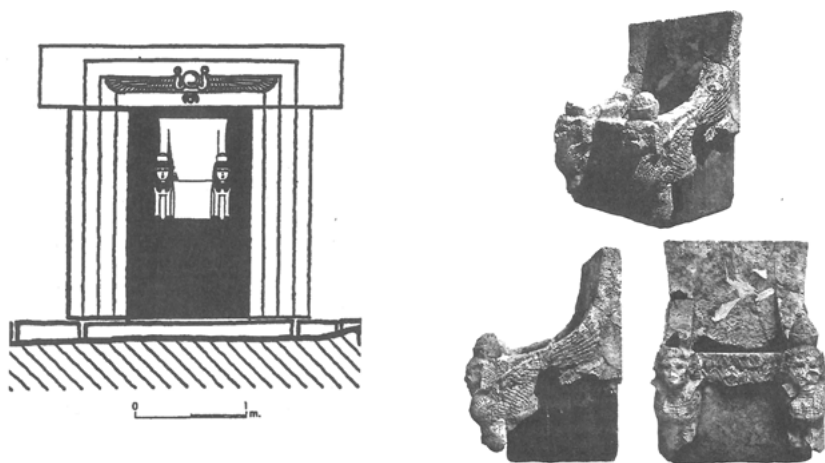
<sup>43</sup> Cf. Cornelius, “Astarte,” 1–7.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Nunn, *Motivschatz*, 88–89, 117, plate 44.25; Kamlah, “Bedeutung,” 136 and 161: plate 8; Nunn, “Phönizier,” 101: fig. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Metzger, “Jahwe,” 76–82 and 87, 89: fig. 1a+b; Keel, *Geschichte*, 300: fig. 184. See also Kamlah, “Bedeutung,” 137 and 152: fig. 11, who counts four Phoenician sphinx thrones with a palmette tree on the front panel between the sphinxes.



**Fig. 4.** Sphinx Throne (near Tyre, Limestone, H.: 73 cm, L.: 39 cm, W.: 39 cm, 7th c. BCE, Metzger, "Jahwe," 89: fig. 1a+b; Kamlah, "Bedeutung," 152: fig. 11)



**Fig. 5.** Reconstruction of a Sphinx Throne in Room 11 of the Eastern Temenos at Umm el-'Amad (south of Tyre, Throne: H.: 95 cm, 3rd–2nd c. BCE, Kamlah, "Bedeutung," 151: fig. 10, 160: plate 7)

passes two temples: the large sanctuary of Milkaštart and a smaller eastern temple, dating back to between the third and second century BCE.<sup>46</sup> The eastern temple provides one of the very rare cases, in which a throne installation has been found in an archaeological context. The condition of the throne is poor. But the reconstructed throne obviously finds a suitable place cut into the middle of the rear wall in the eastern temple of Oumm el-‘Amed. The fragments of the throne were found in the area of the sacrificial site (“*temenos*”), close to a podium, and Jens Kamlah convincingly favors a reconstruction that locates the sphinx throne on the podium.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, every visitor to the eastern temple at Oumm el-‘Amed would have sighted the god or goddess of the temple. The sanctuary could be accessed through the northwestern porch, and the door lintel has been partially preserved.<sup>48</sup> It again depicts the winged sun disk.

In summary, the iconic program of Phoenician sphinx thrones combines floral and astral elements and symbols. These symbols augment the empowerment of the king and the deities on the sphinx throne, including aspects of a preserved world-order, or a cosmic representation. The throne, as such, symbolized empowerment in the ancient world.<sup>49</sup> Since the fifth century BCE, only divine beings—or their symbols—appear seated on sphinx thrones. Their powers embrace “heaven” and “earth.” Mythical beings, like the *cherubim* or sphinxes, floral elements, like the “Tree of Life,” and astral symbols, like sun, moon and the stars, stand for a heavenly protective power, a prosperous world-order, and a cosmological constituent of all that the media represent.<sup>50</sup> Literary and iconographical sources from the late Persian and Hellenistic period attest to this manner of constructing an “*imago mundi*.”

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Kamlah, “Bedeutung,” 128, 131–34, and the map, 143: fig. 2.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Kamlah, “Bedeutung,” 134–38. For a reconstruction of the throne and its place in room 11, see *ibid.*, 151: fig. 10, and 160: plate 7.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Kamlah, “Bedeutung,” 148: fig. 7.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Metzger, “Thron,” 95–101, who emphasizes (*ibid.*, 101) that a throne could represent 1. the domain of the owner of the throne, 2. the emperor or king himself, or 3. the palace or temple.

<sup>50</sup> Cf., among others, Metzger, “Thron,” 103–36; Kamlah, “Bedeutung,” 137–38, 140, and Eichler, “Meaning,” 369, who states: “The representations of cherubim that adorn the sanctuary—both the sculptures above the ark and the two-dimensional figures on the surfaces of the edifice—constitute one of several aspects of the sanctuary that were aimed at reproducing YHWH’s heavenly environment in his earthly abode, with the phrase *ישב הכרבים* and related ideas in mind. The tabernacle (*המִשְׁכָּן*, lit., ‘the Dwelling’) and the temple (*בית יהוה*, lit. ‘the House of YHWH’) are attempts to create a terrestrial residence for the God of Israel, and the conspicuous presence of cherubim, those creatures which mark the deity’s ‘real’ home, is an effective means to communicate this nature to the deity and to human observers.”

The description of the “Temple of Solomon” provides further hints of heavenly associations and cosmological concepts: The molten sea (cf. 1 Kgs 7:23–26 par. 2 Chr 4:2–5), just by way of example, is described as a basin of considerable dimensions. Its floral shape (“like the calyx of a lily”: 1 Kgs 7:26), and the oxen that carry the basin at its bottom towards all four cardinal points, imply a cosmic dimension and point to the mythical “primeval sea.”<sup>51</sup> More cosmological overtones may be detected in the vision of Isa 6: In v. 4 it is stated that the pivots of the thresholds were shaken by the voices and that “the house was filled with smoke” (Heb.: *והבית ימלא יִשָּׁן*).<sup>52</sup> The Hebrew word for “smoke” (*יִשָּׁן*) also carries negative connotations (cf. Josh 8:20–21; Isa 14:31; 34:10; Hos 13:3; Ps 68:3), as in the description of the Temple consecration in 1 Kgs 8:12–13, wherein YHWH wishes to “dwell in thick darkness” (Heb.: *בְּתַעֲרָפָל*). In sum, “smoke” and “darkness” refer to a cosmological dimension of the divine anger, as is also attested in various Ancient Near Eastern sources.<sup>53</sup> Especially the latter motif of divine anger, as connected with aspects of a weather god and its negative effect on the people, is also included in the *Zeus Hymn* of Cleanthes, a Greek Stoic text from the early third century BCE.<sup>54</sup> The passage in question in the *Zeus Hymn* reads (l. 32–35):

But all-bountiful Zeus, cloud-wrapped ruler of the thunderbolt,  
deliver human beings from their destructive ignorance;  
disperse it from their souls; grant that they obtain  
the insight on which you rely when governing everything with justice[.]<sup>55</sup>

Johan Thom emphasizes that the passage just quoted depends on poets like Homer or Hesiod. The text is part of a prayer for deliverance and depicts Zeus as the mighty ruler of the world-order, and the weather god (cf. also Homer *Il.* 2.412).<sup>56</sup> The combination of motifs that include “cloud” and “darkness” is

51 Cf. Janowski, “Himmel,” 85–86.

52 Cf. for the following examinations, Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit*, 136–66.

53 Cf. the excursus in Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit*, 150–60, who refers in particular to mythical texts from the Hittites and to the *Erra-Epos*.

54 On the date of the hymn, cf. Thom, *Cleanthes' Hymn*, 2–7.

55 For text and translation, cf. Thom, *Cleanthes' Hymn*, 38–39, 41. The Greek text reads:

ἀλλὰ Ζεῦ πάνδωρε, κελαινεφές, ἀρχικέραυνε,  
ἀνθρώπους ῥύου <σύ γ'> ἀπειροσύνης ἀπὸ λυγρῆς·  
ἦν σύ, πάτερ, σκέδασον ψυχῆς ἀπο, δὸς δὲ κυρῆσαι  
γνώμης ἢ πίσυνος σὺ δίκης μέτα πάντα κυβερνᾶς·

56 Cf. Thom, *Cleanthes' Hymn*, 24, 142, 145–47.

also attested within ancient Jewish contexts. A good case in point comes from the *Enoch* tradition, wherein the seer of the heavenly temple in 1 En. 14:8 reflects on what was shown to him: “clouds in the vision were calling and fogs were calling, and courses of the stars and lightnings were troubling me and bothering me.”<sup>57</sup> In Sib. Or. 5:66 “the eternal immortal God will notice you in the clouds.” Again, a “cosmic” aspect attests to a “longue durée.”

## 4 Cosmological concepts in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*

In the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, the combination of motifs like “throne,” “throne chariot,” and *cherubim* convey a heavenly realm within a liturgical setting.<sup>58</sup> The thirteen songs “invoke angelic praise and describe the Sabbath worship of the angelic priesthood in the heavenly temple.”<sup>59</sup> Most scholars agree that the thirteen songs were liturgically recited only in the first quarter of the year. However, this scholarly consensus should be challenged. It was Hanan Eshel who suggested that the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* were articulated at least twice, maybe even four times, throughout the course of the year.<sup>60</sup> As a consequence, the seasonal circle of recitations over the course of a 364-day solar year could add a chronological dimension to the spatial concept of cosmology in the *Songs*.

The textual evidence includes eight manuscripts from Cave Four near Khirbet Qumran (4Q400–407), one from Cave Eleven (11Q17) and one manuscript from Masada (Mas1k). The texts are written in late Hasmonean and early Herodian scripts, dating to between 75 and 1 BCE—the manuscripts from Cave Eleven and from Masada date to somewhere between 20 and 50 CE.<sup>61</sup> Every *Song* is introduced by a heading that includes, where the beginning is readable, למשכיל שיר עולת השבת and a date formula. The composition as a whole presupposes a solar calendar, such as that of the book of Jubilees or 1 Enoch. The composite text can only be reconstructed, but it shows no ideological or terminological co-

57 The Greek text of *Codex Panopolitanus* reads: ἰδοὺ νεφέλαι ἐν τῇ ὀράσει ἐκάλουν καὶ ὀμίχλαι με ἐφώνουν, καὶ διαδρομαὶ τῶν ἀστέρων καὶ διαστραπαὶ με κατεσπούδαζον καὶ ἐθορύβαζόν με. For the text cf. Black, *Apocalypsis*, 28.

58 Cf. Tilford, “כָּסָא,” 417; Wakefield, “כְּרוֹבִי,” 443.

59 So Charlesworth and Newsom, *Liturgy*, 1; cf. also Schwemer, “Gott,” 47–48; Ego, “Denkbilder,” 168–69.

60 Cf. Eshel, “*Songs*,” 170–82, who refers to a thesis of Johann Maier.

61 For the textual evidence, cf. Charlesworth and Newsom, *Liturgy*, 1–3.

incidences with “sectarian texts” among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The composition of the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* might date back to the early second century BCE.

Basically, it possibly stated that the liturgy takes its starting point in heaven, the “highest heights” (4QShirShabb<sup>a</sup> [= 4Q400] 1 I, 20: מרומי רום). The heavens and the temple or sanctuary are not distinguished.<sup>62</sup> The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* describe the temple in *Songs* 9–13, and *Song* 11 contains the portrayal of the inner shrine (Heb. *d<sup>e</sup>bîr*), while *Song* 12 refers to the *merkābāh*.<sup>63</sup> Three observations are of importance: Firstly, when looking specifically at the terminology, the Hebrew noun שמים occurs only twice in the second *Song* (4QShirShabb<sup>a</sup> [= 4Q400] 2:4; 4QShirShabb<sup>b</sup> [= 4Q401] 14 I, 6). Secondly, there is no passage among the preserved fragments that explicitly locates the sanctuary in the heavenly realm. Thirdly, the identification of the temple as a *heavenly* temple is ensured through the extensive use of nominal and verbal expressions from the root רום<sup>64</sup> and the specific use of רקיע (see above: n. 62).

In *Song* 11, the inner sanctuary is furnished with the “royal throne,” and the “chariots of his glory” are mentioned together with the “cherubim of holiness” and the “ophanim of light” (4QShirShabb<sup>f</sup> [= 4Q405] 20 II–22:2–3; 11Q17 16–18:4–5). The latter beings are the ones who guard the heavenly throne (cf. 1 En. 71:7). The twelfth *Song* offers a description of the chariot (4Q405 20 II–22:8–10; 11Q17 16–18:11–12):<sup>65</sup>

4QShirShabb<sup>f</sup> (= 4Q405) 20 II–22:8–10

[...] תבנית כסא מרכבה מברכים ממעל לרקיע הכרובים  
9 [והו]ד רקיע האור ירננו {מתחת} מושב כבודו ובלכת האופנים ישונו מלאכי קודש יצא ומבין  
10 [ג]לגלי כבודו כמראי אש רוחות קודש קדשים סביב מראי שובלי אש בדמות חשמל [...]

<sup>62</sup> Cf. convincingly Löhr, “Thronversammlung,” 190, who refers to the poly-semantic use of רקיע for “heaven” (cf. 4QShirShabb<sup>d</sup> [= 4Q403] 1 I, 43; 4QShirShabb<sup>f</sup> [= 4Q405] 6:4), for an item in the temple (cf. 4Q403 1 I, 42), and for the luminous firmament above the *cherubim* (cf. 4Q405 20 II, 21–22:8–9). Cf. also Ego, “Denkbilder,” 172–73.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Schwemer, “Gott,” 106–12; Charlesworth and Newsom, *Liturgy*, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. “the highest heights,” Heb. מרומי רום (cf. 4QShirShabb<sup>a</sup> [= 4Q400] 1 I, 20; 2:4); “they exalt his glory:” Heb. ורוממו כבודו (cf. 4Q400 1 II, 13); “its loftiness (is) lofty above:” Heb. רומה רם על (cf. 4QShirShabb<sup>b</sup> [= 4Q401] 14 I, 4); “wondrous exaltations:” Heb. רומי פלא (cf. 4QShirShabb<sup>d</sup> [= 4Q403] 1 I, 1); “exalt his exaltedness to the exalted:” Heb. רוממו רוממו למרום (cf. 4Q403 1 I, 33). Dahmen, “רום,” 634, counts eighty entries of רום and related terms in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*. For the semantical range and function of the term; cf. *ibid.*, 638–40.

<sup>65</sup> For the text and translation, cf. Charlesworth and Newsom, *Liturgy*, 94–95, 126–27, and the composite text: *ibid.*, 182–83. Cf. also Newsom, “Shirot,” 345, with the photo: plate XXV, and the notes: *ibid.*, 346.



8 [...] The form of the chariot throne do they bless, (which is) above the firmament of the cherubim.

9 [And (in) the maje]sty of the luminous firmament do they exult, (which is) beneath his glorious seat. And when the ophanim move, the holy angels return. They go out from between

10 its glorious [h]ubs. Like the appearance of fire (are) the spirits of holiest holiness round about, the appearance of streams of fire like electrum.

The praise of the chariots, also taking into consideration the context, interprets Ezek 3:12–13 with references to Ezek 1 (v. 24–27) and 10 (v. 5; cf. also 1 En. 14:19; Dan 7:9–10; 1 Kgs 19:11–12 and Ps 68).<sup>66</sup> The *Song* refers to the sound of the *cherubim* and *ophanim*. The quoted text is part of a tripartite structure of parallelisms: in the first scene, the *cherubim* arise (l. 7). The second parallelism depicts the blessings of the *cherubim* (l. 7–8), while the third similarity describes the object of praise: the chariot throne and the firmament (l. 8–9).<sup>67</sup> Although the passage speaks about the “form (Hebrew: תבנית) of the chariot throne” (l. 8), the *cherubim* appear to have only a connection *with* the throne. They are not *part* of the throne. The noun רִקִּיעַ serves to indicate the luminous firmament of the cherubim, which is beneath the seat of the chariot throne (l. 8–9). Apparently, the text answers the question: Where is the place of the divine glory? The answer in line 8–9 refers to Ezek 1:26 (NRSV): “And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form.”<sup>68</sup> In the Ezekiel vision, aspects like the illumination, created by sapphire and electrum, the elevated throne and the *cherubim* conceptualize a cosmology or *imago mundi* that is closely connected with what is also documented in Near Eastern texts and archaeology (see above).

## 5 Summary

The concept of “heaven” focuses on the link between temple and cosmos and conceptualizes a certain *imago mundi*. Beyond that, the question of divine power is also investigated.<sup>69</sup> The key question is: to what extent does the temple

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Schwemer, “Gott,” 108–9, who also refers to Carol Newsom (cf. *eadem*, “Shirot,” 350–51).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Newsom, “Shirot,” 350.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. for this aspect and the comparison with Ezek 1:26, Newsom, “Shirot,” 351.

<sup>69</sup> On the concept of the God or gods of heaven(s) within the Jewish literature in Persian and Hellenistic times, cf. Beyerle, “God,” 17–36.



in Second Temple Judaism refer to heavenly and cosmological concepts? To answer this question, sources from the ancient Near East, the Tanak, Second Temple Pseudepigrapha and Phoenician provenance are discussed: cosmological motifs, like the lofty throne accompanied by mythical beings, the use of synonyms for “heaven,” like רִקִיעַ, and the use of sparkling gemstones. All motifs reveal a distinct cosmological context for temple concepts in Israel, Judea and beyond.

Furthermore, the iconic program of Phoenician sphinx thrones combines floral and astral elements and symbols that augment the empowerment of the king or deity. Regarding the sphinx throne, divine power embraces “heaven” and “earth,” the *cherubim* or sphinxes, and floral elements, like the “Tree of Life.” Astral symbols, like sun, moon and stars, stand for a heavenly power of protection, a prosperous world-order, and the cosmological aspect of the world as a whole.

In the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, the Hebrew noun שָׁמַיִם occurs only twice in the second *Song* (4QShirShabb<sup>a</sup> [= 4Q400] 2:4; 4QShirShabb<sup>b</sup> [= 4Q401] 14 I, 6), and there is no passage among the preserved fragments that explicitly locates the sanctuary in the heavenly realm. However, the identification of the temple as a *heavenly* temple is ensured through use of specific terminology (like מְרוֹם or רִקִיעַ). In general, a focus on the eleventh and twelfth *Song* leads to the following insights: reference to the Ezekiel vision, aspects like the illumination, created by sapphire and electrum, the elevated throne and the *cherubim*, conceptualize a cosmology or *imago mundi* that is closely connected with that of Near Eastern texts and archaeology. As Joseph Angel puts it: “According to most scholars, the notions of angelic priesthood and celestial temple at Qumran belong to a larger cosmology, with deep roots in broader Jewish apocalyptic thought, as well as in biblical and broader ancient Near Eastern religion.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> So Angel, *Priesthood*, 83.

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