

The Hierophanic Facets of the Seraphic Hymns

Petru Adrian Danciu

1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia, Speculum Centre for the Research of the
Imaginary, Romania
office.gnostic@gmail.com

Abstract

Starting from the cry of the seraphim in Isaiah's prophecy, this article aims to follow the rhythm of the sacred harmony, transcending the symbols of the angelic world and of the divine names, to get to the face to face meeting between man and God, just as the seraphim, reflecting their existence, stand face to face. The finality of the sacred harmony is that, during the search for God inside the human being, He reveals Himself, which is the reason for the affirmation of "I Am that I Am." Through its hypnotic cyclicity, the profane temporality has its own musicality. Its purpose is to incubate the unsuspected potencies of the beings "caught" in the material world. Due to the fact that it belongs to the aeonic time, the divine music will exceed in harmony the mechanical musicality of profane time, dilating and temporarily cancelling it. Isaiah is witness to such revelation offering access to the heavenly concert. He is witness to divine harmonies produced by two divine singers, whose musical history is presented in our article. The seraphim accompanied the chosen people after their exodus from Egypt. The cultic use of the trumpet is related to the characteristics and behaviour of the seraphim. The seraphic music does not belong to the Creator, but its lyrics speak about the presence of the Creator in two realities, a spiritual and a material one. Only the transcendence of the divine names that are sung/cried affirms a unique reality: God. The chant-cry is a divine invocation with a double aim. On the one hand, the angels and the people affirm God's presence and call His name and, on the other, the Creator affirms His presence through the angels or in man, the one who is His image and His likeness. The divine music does not only create, it is also a means of communion, implementing the relation of man to God and, thus, God's connection with man. It is a relation in which both filiation and paternity disappear inside the harmony of the mutual recognition produced by music, a reality much older than Adam's language.

Keywords: music; seraphim; harmony; chant-cry; time

1. Introduction¹

One of the most important mystic events in Isaiah's writings is the description of the divine chant of the seraphim. These angelic beings do not have knowledge of any other calling than continuous praise near YHWH's throne. Floating in the ether between the temple and God's throne, the seraphim sing a praise chant, later called Trisagion in Christianity (thrice holy): "Above him² stood the seraphim. The one had six wings and the one had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew" (Isaiah 6:2).³ It is interesting that the Septuagint's text is explicit when it affirms that there are only two seraphim: "the one had six wings and the one had six wings," while the Masoretic text is unclear in this respect. This explains the tendency of imagining an entire seraphic choir in Christian liturgical interpretation.

2. Hierophany between Divine Magic and Mysticism

The Masoretic text is "corrected" right after exposing the mantric words of the seraphic chant and affirms the existence of two seraphic presences: "And once called to another and said: 'Holy [Kadosh—], holy, holy is the Lord of hosts'" (Isaiah 6:3). Liturgical Christianity will name as "call" what in fact is a *cry* that was so strong that produced the shaking of the temple, which was filled with "smoke." There is a sacred manifestation that dilated profane time, permitting the "sacred (aeonic) time" to run over the material world. We understand the aeonic time as a structure with spatial and temporal characteristics determined strictly by divine acts. "Time" is measured in this case only through the succession of divine acts. They happen in Heaven, but they may reach the Earth, in a moment of *hierophany* (the "dilation" of profane time), defined (perceived) by human beings as *divine revelation*, capable of announcing and supporting the divine presence. It is a process that defines the sacred manifestation on earth. In Isaiah's description, the sacred presence is a manifestation of the divine presence, in the temple, through a continuous chant of the seraphim for God.

Isaiah pays much attention to details. First, the place of the two seraphim is not at the base of the divine throne. They are closer to the temple when the sacred time or the divine aeon is manifested on Earth. The aim is to announce the presence of YHWH, a precursory moment for the prophet's visions. Isaiah's description of the two seraphim is unique and significant. Continuously moving, they cover themselves with four out of the six wings they have. The covering of the eyes, of the face and of their nakedness is somehow similar to the act of acknowledging existence in relation with sacredness. In the same way, in Eden, after knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:22), Adam and Eve know themselves in relation with the divinity and cover their face (the eyes) and the nakedness (Genesis 3:10). In both cases, hiding is a

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² The Masoretic text says: "above Him." We believe that it is not a personal pronoun, because the angelic presence is in relation with the temple and not with God. It is improper to affirm, at least from a theological perspective, that the seraphim were singing the Trisagion above God, especially when such an attitude was punished by YHWH (Isaiah 14:12-15). Such a hierarchy is not possible. The translation of the Septuagint, coordinated by Cristian Bădiliță, uses the form of seraphim "around Him" (*Septuaginta*, vol. 6, part 1 (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2011, 85n. 6, 2), meaning *an equality with Yahweh*. This attitude is not in accordance with Jewish monotheism. We maintain our position that the movement of the seraphim (most probably a rotation) was above the temple, at a distance from the throne of YHWH.

³ We used for this verse the translation *Sfintele Scripturi. Traducerea lumii noi* (Patterson, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 2006).

reflex gesture betraying the knowing of evil, not in a scientific manner, but as insidious and in possible reach. The two seraphim are presented one in front of the other, an unseen reflexion in each other, and an expression of self-knowledge in relation with the twin. The cry is not oriented toward the divinity. They cry/chant *one to another*, like the cantors in the Orthodox churches. Each cry is not only a repetition; it is also an amplified *echo* of the previous cry. We are not interested in presenting the meaning imagined by Christian liturgy, because we are not in the presence of a chant, in the proper sense of the word. A cry affirming the divine presence is practically addressed to another person. The response is a reflex act of a common sacredness. The Logos reverberates as an echo from both actors caught in the magic of the divine presence. The seraphic song dilates the profane time, permitting the *divine aeon* to manifest. It also radiates a sacred power felt in the shaking of the temple, risking demolishing it (Isaiah 6:4). It is a real exposition of the worldly incapacity to “assimilate” God, even when the divine presence is announced by the celestial beings. The moment corresponds to the dilation of profane time and the invasion of the sacredness manifested through the presence of *smoke*, of the divine grace, imagined as a “robe” *hiding* the presence of God (Isaiah 6:1).

In the sacred seon, where the temple becomes liturgical space, a centre for the theophanies of YHWH—“for my eyes have seen the King” (Isaiah 6:5)⁴—takes place a process speculated by the science of magic. It is the time when, through the seraphic “chant,” the power of the words and the divine names are connected with the mundane reality of the human existence. Per se, the cry of the angels proves to be capable of “enchanted” the world and the people before the divine appearance. Not only the profane time is “dilated,” permitting the “birth of the mystic aeon in the mundane world, but man *caught* in the manifestation also “opens” so his soul may see God without leaving the body.

The angelic chant is at the same time a mantric recital of the divine names, powerful words expressing real and direct divine characteristics. The angels are the avatars of the magic power in God’s names as long as they renounce free agency. The magic presented here is at the same time a feeling and a science. It has nothing in common with demonolatry or necromancy. The Book of Enoch presents such a superior magic in relation with the angels, who, using free agency, lost the divine praise and shared with the people this magic or angelic gnosis.

It is not religion, because religion, *religio—religare* (Lat.), unites man with God and, at this level, the constant of the human presence is not significant. At this level of knowledge, the human presence is rare and this is why mystic feelings are important, the human subject being content as a humble addressee of the divine revelations. Thus, it is nonsense to speak about an “angelic orphism.” The progress of the angels into God is achieved through divine gnosis, the equivalent of numeric magic.

The “smoke” preceding the shaking of the seraphic cry is originated in Heaven, a reason for not considering a relation between the acts from the Jewish temple and the psychedelic Dionysian smoke, of telluric origins. The origins of the sacred smoke indicate the existence of

⁴ The prophet does not die, because the theophany is a celestial one, the opening of the skies for Isaiah to see from Earth God in the sky. On the contrary, for a theophany on Earth, with God descending in the mundane world, as happened for Moses, the prophet would have covered his face to preserve his life (Exodus 33:20). John the Apostle is more categorical upon the subject. He thinks that only God’s glory may be seen (John 1:14) and not God Himself (John 1:18). Because the mystic feeling may not be translated into reductive affirmations, we believe that Luke’s moderation (Luke 18:27) is the possibility for Isaiah to see YHWH.

two distinct types of tradition oriented in a different manner from the point of view of the connection with the sacred world.

The “smoke” preceding Isaiah’s prophetic act may be only exaggerated, associated with the smoke of the incense. Isaiah’s experience reminds us of the shamanic experience, excepting the fact that the Jewish prophet does not provoke it. The prophet sees YHVH before the spread of the smoke into the temple (Isaiah 6:1) and not after his repentance (Isaiah 6:5) and the cleaning of his lips by the seraph with a burning coal (Isaiah 6:6). Isaiah only hears the voice of the Lord (Isaiah 6:8), which is the beginning of the prophetic mission (Isaiah 6:9).

3. The Seraphic Pillars or the First Divine GPS

The smoke and the fire are the forms used by the seraphim to materialise their presence in the earthly world. The association between the seraphim and the *pillars of the temple* is an esoteric one. The symbolic connection with the *pillars* guiding Israel out of the Egyptian desert is an obvious one. It is certain that the divinity does not know any limit (cf. Isaiah 6:4, Exodus 14:24) and YHWH is in a permanent superior position.

In Isaiah’s book, the first seraph is the one that fills the temple with “smoke” and the second seraph is “fire,” because it has the burning coal for cleaning the soul of the prophet, empowering him to receive and disseminate the divine Logos.⁵ We should remember that the holy angels are the avatars of the divine manifestation, presenting various characteristics, allowing their description.

Long before Isaiah,⁶ in Moses’ time, the two seraphim are present⁷ materialised in the form of the two *pillars*, *cloud* and *fire*, protecting the chosen people during their travel to Canaan, the first by day and the second by night:

And YHWH went before them by day in a *pillar of cloud* to lead them along the way, and by night in a *pillar of fire* to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people (Exodus 13:21–22, see Numbers 14:14, Deuteronomy 1:33).

Only once a seraph takes the characteristics of the other, a sign that the characteristics are given and not facts. It is not reported what happens with the second seraph, a sign that, without its function, it loses its earthly role. The plurality of “attributes” happens in a crisis moment, only to protect the Jews in front of the Egyptian following them:

Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel (the “pillar of cloud”—A/N) moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the

⁵ Zechariah is subject to a similar purification (Zechariah 3:1–5), when his clothes are changed into festive ones and a shiny crown is put on his head only after Satan is admonished and thrown aside by the Angel of God. On this aspect, we recommend the study dedicated to Jewish demonology by priest Ion V. Georgescu, “Demonologia Vechiului Testament. Satan în profetia lui Zaharia,” *Biserica Ortodoxă Română* 56, no. 9–10 (September–October 1938), 481–564.

⁶ For sure, the prophet knew about the travel of the chosen people with the seraphim, an episode mentioned in many books of the Old Testament (Nehemiah 9:12; Psalms 78:14).

⁷ It is sometimes only suggested in the context of the descent of God on Sinai Mountain (Exodus 19:18); the meeting between YHWH and Moses in a dark cloud, where the voice of the Creator is heard by the people, too (Exodus 19:9; Deuteronomy 4:12, 5:4).

cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night (Exodus 14:19–20).

A hierophanic moment is also what the Egyptians following the Jews saw. For Isaiah, the divine presence through the seraphim triggers the fear of seeing God. The same presence brings a state of continuous terror for the Egyptians, turning into madness when they “watched YHWH in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic ... And the Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from before Israel, for YHWH fights for them against the Egyptians’” (Exodus 14:24–25). In a position of force before humanity, the divinity flaunts His attributes. The perception of the divine hierophanies is aligned with the gentle or the tough manner in which the attributes manifest, showing the equilibrium in the relation between YHWH and the world and the chosen people. These aspects are more clearly highlighted in one psalm of David: “Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around” (Psalm 97:2–3).⁸ Cloud and darkness are the attributes of the first seraph, while light and fire belong to the second seraph. The first seraph is associated with the divine attribute of *justice*, while the second seraph is associated with the divine attribute of *judgement*. If we identify the divine justice in Truth, whose main function is self-discovery, not being hidden, then judgement is a function of the Logos. It exposes the Truth, dismissing Evil. The same situation is met in Kabbala, where the *rigour*, the equivalent of justice, limits the action of the evil, but only in parallel with the *clemency*.⁹ The theory of the two divine attributes—rigour and clemency—aims to minimise the impact of the Zoroastrian dual fatalism. It shows an equilibrated God¹⁰ ruling over the manifestation of Evil, but not over the generating *principle: free agency*. Without any connection with the theory of free agency that is unknown to the angels, we believe that the angelic theology may not be separated by the theology of the divine attributes. It gives meaning and direction to the angels in their relation with humans.

4. From the Magic Moment To Cultic Time

The invocation¹¹ of God’s name through the cry of the seraphim (Psalm 99:6–7) followed by the “hearing” of an unarticulated divine voice, is practically the same voice, belonging to God, who announces His presence through His “vocal organs,” the angels, and calls to Him man, His image and likeness. In other words, God cries after his alter-ego, man, the only concrete reality of His existence. The “chant” of the seraphim is the incantation of man, the image and the likeness of God. The two seraphim standing one in front of the other are God and man, man and God, the only one capable of seeing and finding Him inside Himself and vice-versa.

Starting with the appearance of the seraphim (Numbers 9:15), followed by the shaking of the “world” (the temple) and the filling of the tabernacle with divine smoke or grace, a private

⁸ The kabbalist interpretation remains inside these limits, the only elements of novelty presenting the relation between seraphim and the sephirothic tree, according to Leo Schaya, *Omul și absolutul după doctrina Kabbalei*, trans. Costin Pop (Bucharest: Editra Herald, 2006), 102–104.

⁹ Schaya, 58.

¹⁰ Christianity maintained continuously that God may not be the author of a state or of a fact that is against His nature (Ioan G. Coman, “Dumnezeu nu e autorul răului,” *Studii Teologice* 5, no. 1–2 (January–February 1953), 50).

¹¹ The kabbalists were also aware of this magical-religious reality. “In the general economy of the kabbalist literature, the power-words were more influential than the modern researchers thought, while interpreting this teaching in a mentalist manner” (Moshe Idel, *Perfecțiuni care absorb. Cabala și interpretare*, trans. Horia Popescu (Iași: Editura Polirom, 2004), 169).

time is established for Isaiah, an aeon where the prophet passes from spectator to actor through purification. From the human perspective, he is aware of his relation with the divinity and evaluates this relation. He is aware that he is an imperfect *imitation*, but a *perfectible* one, through the divine intervention of the Creator. In this context, the cry of the seraphim becomes, in the private magic of Isaiah, a chant, a call to a mystic communion where there is no ecstasy, just pure reason.

The trumpet is associated in a cultic manifestation with the exciting presence of the seraphim. The instrument, in its formal image, reminds one of the movement of the smoke and of the fire, announcing the divine presence. The transformation of a magical reality into a religious one, serving as a later development of the cult, comes from the mutation in the air around the tabernacle, at the time of the angelic appearance,¹² as “cloud” and “fire” (Exodus 40:34, 38) or from the miraculous guidance of the chosen people in the desert of Canaan (Numbers 9:18–22). Everything is achieved in a simple manner by imagining connections between the attributes of the angelic divine beings and the trumpet, the only capable instrument of concentrating the divine presence in its powerful sound.

The two silver trumpets “call” the people or the chiefs to gather (Numbers 10:2, 4, 9–10). Gradually, the two trumpets will substitute the presence of the seraphim, remaining as a prefiguration of their presence. The Levites, the main generators of the cult in all its aspects, used to blow the trumpets, calling YHWH with a loud voice (2 Chronicles 20:19). Such evocations are to be met also in magical acts, the cry being an important aspect in the science of calling divinities. It is what happens when the *likeness* wants to subdue the *image*,¹³ which is one of the main laws in black magic.

Together with the cry, the chant connects, as the incantation breaks the connections; we did not come across such aspects magically evolved in the Pentateuch, except for the general form of “taking the name of the Lord in vain” (Exodus 20:7).

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¹² Christian-Orthodox theology agrees with “a certain corporality” (Anca Manolache, Un capitol de angeologie, creația, natura și căderea îngerilor,” *Studii Teologice* 7, no. 1–2 (January–February 1955), 127) of the angels, especially with one imitating fire (Manolache, 127).

¹³ It is the only image that, after the fall of the man, was not perverted. This theory offering the possibility of reconnection between humans and God is sustained by Orthodoxy, too (according to Ioan Bude, “Antropologia Vechiului Testament,” *Studii Teologice* 41, no. 3 (May–June 1989), 35).

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