

## The Existence and Activity of Angels

The subject of angels is one that is of increasing interest in contemporary society, primarily because of the rise in occult activity in the public eye and the influence of signs and wonders theology in the Christian church. Issues that were at once thought to be rather esoteric are now recognized as very practical because of their immediate relevance to life and ministry. The baby boom generation is open to new spiritual ideas, and interest in outside forces (including angelic and/or demonic powers) is very much a part of that.

The Dallas Seminary doctrinal statement has an extensive portion on angels. Surprisingly, this is considerably longer than the section on man, which itself is considerably longer than the section on the Godhead!!!! (A copy is included later in the notes.)

It is appropriate to study the topic of angels in order to be prepared for the issues that will confront us in this society, but it is also appropriate for our personal relationship to God. Though we certainly profess to believe in His omni-attributes, many of us tend to think of God with limited abilities that are really more appropriately applied to an angel. By perceiving how capable these beings are, we grow in our understanding of the God who made them. At the same time, our study of angels should also help us to understand another dimension of temptation, spiritual warfare, and the nature of God's activity on our behalf.

### The Existence of Angels

Interestingly, many in our society are more likely to believe in the existence of demons than they are in the existence of holy angels. Perhaps this is because demons manifest their presence in the world of the occult, or perhaps it is because it is easier to believe in evil forces in a fallen world than it is to believe in creatures who always manifest the holiness of God.

How would one go about "proving" the existence of angels? Many may have witnessed angels without knowing it (Heb. 13:2), but the only real argument for their existence is the fact that Scripture assumes it. Skeptics may maintain that belief in angels is unscientific, the remnant of an ancient world view that "we all know" is overly superstitious and primitive. The biblical world view, however, has always been distinguished by its lack of superstition, particularly when compared to other works of ancient religious literature.<sup>1</sup> It remains distinctive today because it is theistic, not naturalistic.

Even though the Sadducees may have denied the existence of angels (Acts 23:8)<sup>2</sup>, the biblical text makes no attempt to defend their reality. Their presence is simply assumed.

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Ronald Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* (Dallas: Probe Ministries, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>The statement that the Sadducees did not believe in the "resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit" is difficult to explain in light of the fact that they did respect the authority of the Pentateuch, which clearly assumes the existence of angels. It may be that this is a reference to different views on life after death (as Marshall suggests [*Acts (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)*, 365]. That

## The Creation and Fall of Angels

There is no question about the fact that angels are created beings. Colossians 1:16 reads, "For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created by Him and for Him." However, they are not specifically mentioned in the creation account of Genesis 1 and 2, so the question naturally arises as to when they were created. It has been argued that God was addressing an existing heavenly company of angels in Genesis 1:26, when He said, "Let us create man in Our image." In fact, there is a near consensus among contemporary biblical scholars that this is the case.<sup>3</sup> However, it was argued earlier (see the class notes on the image of God) that this is not an appropriate understanding of the passage.

The first real mention of an angelic being comes in Genesis 3, where the serpent enters the picture. This passage does not demonstrate that Satan is in view, but that point becomes obvious through a comparison of other passages (Rom. 16:20 [with Gen. 3:15]; 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9; 20:2). So then, by the time of the temptation in the garden, angels had been created and Satan had fallen. Neither the creation nor the fall of Satan could have come later than Genesis 3.

Job 38:7 implies that angels were present and shouting for joy when the earth itself was created. If that is the case, then angels had already been created before Genesis 1:1. The largely discredited "gap theory" maintained that Satan fell in between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, but that seems to be an unnecessary conclusion that is foreign to the text.<sup>4</sup>

Since the text leaves us free to speculate as to the time of the angels' creation and the fall of Satan, we should also make some comment on the argument of Thomas Aquinas that the demons fell in the first instant in which they were created.<sup>5</sup> Because he believes that angels do not have bodies, Aquinas maintains that each angel is a distinct species, different from the others "according to the diversity of their powers."<sup>6</sup> Since they appear to be in a fixed hierarchy, not a flexible one, Aquinas argues that the powers of angels must not be able to increase, since that would present the possibility that a lower angel might eventually surpass a higher one in abilities, and, therefore, in rank. Since their powers must evidently be fixed, they must not be able to grow in knowledge. Aquinas argues that the angels must therefore be fixed in their choices – either in obedience or rebellion. If they existed for a time before making that crucial choice, then there would be potentiality in their knowledge and hence in their abilities. There would be a lack

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would make sense in Acts 12:15 as well, as would the concept of a "guardian angel," though it is not really found in other texts.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Gunnlaugur A. Jonsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Research* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1988), 224-25; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D. G. M. Stalker (New York: Harper, 1962), 145.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Mark Rooker, "Genesis 1:1-3 – Creation or Re-creation?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (1992): 316-23.

<sup>5</sup>Aquinas argued that angels exercised free choice immediately upon their creation and either earned (and received) the ultimate blessing of God, which sealed them in faithfulness to Him, or refused that blessing in that same instant by sinning. Once that first decision was made, Aquinas says that "an angel has an inflexible free choice after once choosing" (*Summa Theologica* 1: 63: 6).<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 1: 50: 5.

of consistent distinctions between the angels as individuals, and their hierarchy would not be firmly established. It is important to note that all of these ideas are built on the premise that angels do not have bodies. One must question the legitimacy of that premise in light of relative silence on the part of Scripture (see below), and one must also question whether all of these points would necessarily follow even if they did not have bodies.

All we really know from Scripture is that Satan had fallen by the time of Genesis 3. In addition, it is likely that angels were created before the heavens and the earth according to Job 38.

### **The Bodies (?) of Angels**

Hebrews 1:14 states that angels are spirits. Luke 24:39 states that spirits do not have "flesh and bones" as Jesus did in His transformed, resurrected body. Similarly, Paul says that our battle is not against "flesh and blood," but against "the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). These passages certainly demonstrate that angels do not have bodies as we know them, but it is important to remember that neither are angels everywhere present. They are localized spirits. Since throughout the Scripture they come and go, it is apparent that spirits are not by definition omnipresent the way God is. As finite creatures, angels have particular limitations.

Since they are localized spirits, is it possible that angels have some kind of immaterial body? If so, then they must still be able to inhabit (in some sense) the bodies of people, as appears to be the case in several biblical examples of demonization (see the notes to follow on that topic).

The biblical text is not as clear on these matters as one might hope, so the arguments of Aquinas seem to be built on a rather shaky foundation.<sup>7</sup> Augustine argued that angels have "immortal bodies," and he may or may not be correct.<sup>8</sup> So how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Aquinas would say an infinite number of them. Augustine would say only a few, depending on how small they could make themselves. What difference does it make? It makes a lot of difference to Aquinas and those like him who build an entire angelology on the idea that angels do not have bodies. To the rest of us, the question is of little significance.

### **Qualities of Angels**

Whether they may be thought of as having bodies or not, the customary state of angels is one of invisibility. In 2 Kings 6:17, God performed a miracle in allowing Elisha's servant to see an angelic army that was otherwise invisible.

It seems likely that angels do not reproduce, but the arguments used to support this idea are not terribly strong. We see from Matthew 22:30 that angels do not marry, and it is assumed by that they do not mate. It is also assumed on the basis of that passage that angels are sexless, though most (if not all) of their biblical appearances are in the form of males (The lone exception may be Zech. 5:9, which describes a vision of "two women with . . . wings like the wings of a stork.").

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. his discussion on the corporeality of angels, *ibid.*, 1: 50: 2.

<sup>8</sup>Augustine, *The City of God* 9: 9, 17.

The Scriptures recognize that angels have great strength and wisdom, but the abilities of holy angels are always discussed in the context of divine delegation. That is, they impart "inside" knowledge and perform great tasks while they function as His emissaries. On their knowledge, see 2 Samuel 14:20; Matthew 28:5; Mark 13:32; Luke 1:13; Revelation 17:1. On their power, see Genesis 19:10-11; Psalm 103:20; Matthew 24:31; Matthew 28:2,3; 2 Peter 2:11). *It is vital to note that angels are not all-powerful, nor are they all-knowing, nor are they everywhere present.* We see their limitation in knowledge in Ephesians 3:10 and 1 Peter 1:12, which describe the manner in which they are learning about the grace of God by observing our salvation. (This study is apparently a joyful exercise on their part [Luke 15:10].)

Angels evidently were created with a capacity for independent choice (free will). The fact that many chose to rebel along with Satan demonstrates their responsibility in this area (1 Tim. 3:6; Jude 6; 2 Peter 2:4).

However they exercised that choice, angels are immortal. Those who are condemned are sent to the "eternal fire," and all are said to be unable to die anymore (Luke 20:36).

When they are made visible, angels frequently manifest themselves in very impressive ways (Dan. 10:5-6; Matt. 28:3; Ezek. 1:15-16). They are able to perform miracles, and they mediate God's power over the elements of nature (Rev. 7:1; 8:12; 16:8).

### Specific Classifications of Angels

Most angels seem to come under the broad category of the angelic host, of which there are an innumerable number (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 5:11). The text does refer to some distinct categories, however, with some suggestion of a hierarchy in the fact that the higher angels seem to have greater abilities (Dan. 10:13; cf. Jude 9). As noted above, Aquinas regarded this hierarchy to be so fully developed that each angel occupied a specific place in the pecking order depending on his abilities. There is no real biblical support for such a complete hierarchy, which is based on Aquinas's view that angels do not have bodies and are only distinguished from one another by their immaterial abilities. Some of the categories which do seem to have biblical support follow below.

#### Cherubim

R. L. Harris writes, "The derivation of the word is dubious. The Akkadian cognate verb means, 'to bless, praise, adore' [CAD]. As one of the characteristics of the cherubim was adoration of God, this derivation would appear suitable."<sup>9</sup>

These creatures are described in Ezekiel 1 and 10. They had a human body and hands, but their feet went straight down like those of a calf. They had four wings, two covering their bodies and two used for flight. They each had four faces – of a man, lion, ox and eagle.

We classify cherubim as angels, but they are never called that in Scripture. That is because they do not serve as messengers (ajggeloi), but serve as guardians of the presence of God in His throne room. (Note that it was a cherub who prevented Adam and Eve's return to the garden when they were banished from that place of fellowship with God [Gen. 3:24]). This is

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<sup>9</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. "bWrk" by R. L. Harris, 1:1042.

evidently the highest classification of angelic beings, since the term seems to have been applied to Satan prior to his fall (Ezek. 28:14).<sup>10</sup>

### Seraphim

Seraphim means "burning ones." Harris writes, "These angelic beings were brilliant as flaming fire, symbolic of the purity and power of the heavenly court. They are . . . described from their brilliant appearance."<sup>11</sup> The "burning" is rightly associated with the glory of God as manifested in the shekinah.

This term is used only in Isaiah 6, where the creatures are described as having six wings: two covering the face, two covering the feet, and two with which to fly (v. 2). They cried out continually, "Holy, holy holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory."

It is quite possible that the "living creatures" described in Revelation 4:6-9 are seraphim, for they have six wings and constantly proclaim the holiness of God.

### Archangel

Michael is called an archangel (Jude 9). He is "one of the chief princes" (Dan. 10:13), who rules over other angels (Rev. 12:7) and evidently has a particular role with regard to the nation Israel (Dan. 12:1, cf. 10:20). It may be Michael who is being referred to in 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

It is likely that Michael was at one time second in command, not the leader of the angelic hosts. Satan, even as a fallen angel, apparently has more power than Michael (apart from the Lord), for Michael "did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment" (Jude 9).

Thought: If Michael was afraid to curse the devil, should we not be reluctant to do so ourselves? That is the point of Jude 8-10 and 2 Peter 2: 10-11. We need to be respectful of the capabilities of these powerful creatures, even when they are in rebellion against God.

## **The Angel of the Lord**

Dickason argues that the angel of Yahweh in the Old Testament is the pre-incarnate Christ. His argument is based on several observations from the text. First, Genesis 16:7 reports that the angel of the Lord came to Hagar after she had been cast out by Abraham and Sarah. Verse 13 then states that it was the Lord (Yahweh) who had spoken to her. Dickason concludes that the angel of Yahweh is in fact Yahweh Himself.<sup>12</sup> He makes a similar argument based on the appearances of the angel to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3: 2, 4), to Gideon (Judges 6: 11-14), and to Manoah (Judges 13: 20-22). One might also argue that Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord based on the patriarch's interpretation of the event, in spite of the fact that the text describes his adversary as "a man" (Gen. 32: 24-30).

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<sup>10</sup>This assumes that Ezek. 28 applies to Satan, a point which is by no means certain.

<sup>11</sup>*TWOT*, s.v. "\_rc," by R. L. Harris, 2:884.

<sup>12</sup>C. Fred Dickason, *Angels: Elect and Evil* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 78.

Dickason is certainly not alone in this understanding of the angel of the Lord.<sup>13</sup> However, several questions have been raised about this interpretation. First, if the incarnation of Jesus Christ did not take place until the virgin conception of Mary, why should we regard the human-like appearances of the angel of the Lord to be appearances of Jesus? That conclusion is usually reached by a process of elimination: It is difficult to conceive of this person being the Father (whom nobody has seen) or the Spirit, but it is conceivable that it would be the Son, who appeared for an extended time in human flesh. Therefore, it is argued, this divine person is probably the Son.

But is it correct to argue that the angel of the Lord is a divine person? According to Exodus 20, God taught the Law to Moses. However, Hebrews 2: 2 describes the Law as "the word spoken through angels." This is consistent with Acts 7: 53, which states that the Law was "ordained by angels" and Acts 7: 38, which goes so far as to say that it was an angel who spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai (cf. Gal. 3:19). We see that the Lord is the one in the pillar of cloud, leading the nation through the wilderness (Ex. 13:21; 14: 24; Num. 14: 14). However, the text also states that it is an angel that is leading the nation in the cloud (Ex. 14: 19; 23: 20-23; Num. 20: 16). Might it be that the Lord performs His work through the mediation of angels in these passages? If so, the situation might be compared to the inspiration of the Bible, in which the Lord performs His work through the mediation of human authors to such an extent that one can say it is the Holy Spirit who is speaking (Acts 1:16; 28:25). When prophets spoke, their "thus saith the Lord" did not constitute a claim to deity. It simply demonstrated that God was using that prophet to reveal His truth directly.

If the angel of the Lord is an angelic mediator through whom the Lord reveals Himself and acts in the Old Testament, those who came into contact with him could still say that they had been addressed by God (cf. Luke 2:15). This may explain the seemingly interchangeable use of "Yahweh" and "angel of Yahweh" in certain passages. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that kings in the ancient Near East generally sent emissaries to act as their direct representatives in the world. It also harmonizes well with the New Testament assertion that nobody has seen God, nor can see Him (John 1:18; 1 Tim. 6:16). It also helps explain passages like 2 Samuel 24:16 and 2 Kings 19:35, which seem more appropriate as references to angels than to the pre-incarnate Christ. One should also consider Zechariah 1:8-14, where the prophet seems to be talking with an angel who, though clearly distinct from the Lord Himself, is occasionally identified as the angel of the Lord.

It is common for expositors to distinguish between "an angel of the Lord" and "the Angel of the Lord," but this distinction does not appear to have sufficient support in the Scriptures. The former is not possible as a literal translation from the Hebrew phrase *hwby \_alm*, since the first word of the construct pair must always be as definite as the second. Of the biblical languages, the phrase "an angel of the Lord" can only occur in Greek. The LXX, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, does vary between "the angel" and "an angel," but both labels are applied to the same individual depending on the context. For example, in Genesis 16:7 the Greek lacks the article – Hagar encountered "an" angel of the Lord. For the rest of the passage, the article is present – she speaks with "the" angel of the Lord. The article is no doubt used here simply to designate the previous reference (as in Matt. 1:24, where nobody would want to say that Jesus was announcing His own birth). Many similar examples may be cited, and it is evident that the LXX and the NT follow precisely the same pattern. The fact that New Testament designations always lack the article does not mean that they are necessarily distinguishing between mere angels and "the" angel of the Lord. It simply means that the Greek language is capable of distinguishing between

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 106.

the definiteness of two terms in a construct pair ("an angel of the Lord"), something that the LXX does throughout the Old Testament while the Hebrew must keep them both the same ("the angel of the Lord"). The change from "the" angel of the Lord in the Old Testament to "an" angel of the Lord in the New appears not be due to the incarnation<sup>14</sup> as much as it to the change in biblical languages with the change in Testaments.

## The Work of Angels

**Worship God** (Rev. 4: 6-11)

**Perform tasks for God** (Ps. 103: 20)

- 1) Serve believers (Heb. 1: 14)
- 2) Deliver messages for God (Luke 1: 19; 26-33)
- 3) Protect/lead nations (Dan. 10: 20-21)
- 4) Carry out God's judgments (Rev. 16:1-21)
- 5) Act as agents in answering prayer (Dan. 9: 20-24; 10:12)
- 6) Protect believers (2 Kings 6: 13-17; Acts 5: 17-20; 12:7)
- 7) Act as witnesses for God (1 Tim. 5:21; 1 Cor. 4:9)

## The Limitations of Angels: Hebrews 1

Hebrews 1 and 2 describe several important limitations of angels. In his exaltation of Jesus Christ, the writer of the epistle demonstrates in chapter one that Jesus is greater than the angels. He has "become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they" (v. 4). While Jesus is called a Son, the angels are called upon to worship Him (vv. 5-6).

The angels themselves are referred to as ministering spirits (vv. 7, 14). They are servants of God, acting by His command on behalf of believers (v. 14).

Believers are, with the rest of mankind, "for a little while lower than the angels" (2: 7). Christ, too, shared in that condition in order that He might bring us to salvation. He did not act to bring salvation to the angels, only to humanity. In this way, though we are now "a little lower than the angels," we actually surpass them by the grace of the gospel, through which we alone are privileged to be called Christ's "brethren" (2: 11).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>As in Dickason, who gives the following as one reason why the Angel of the Lord should be thought of as the pre-incarnate Christ: "The Angel of Jehovah no longer appeared after Christ's incarnation. A reference such as Matthew 1:20 does not identify the angel and should be understood as an angel of the Lord" (*Angels: Elect and Evil*, 80).

<sup>15</sup>The writer to the Hebrews makes use of the LXX of Psalm 8, translating "Elohim" in verse 5 as "angels." This may be correct. The psalmist uses "Yahweh" in verses 1 and 7 when speaking of

We are presently "lower" than them, yet they are servants of God on our behalf. That says something about the value of humanity in God's economy, and about the value of His Image.

It is also incredible to think about Christ, through whom all things were made, placing Himself not only on our level, but below the level of some of his other creatures. He came down past them to get to us. Praise the Lord for His humility and grace! He was exalted above them, with us to follow (1 Cor. 6:3). Praise the Lord upon His throne!

### **Continuing Angelic Revelation**

Hebrews 2 raises the issue of angelic revelation. It is only natural to ask whether that is a continuing part of the ministry of angels, since they clearly were messengers throughout the biblical text.

The question of continuing special revelation is very involved, and there is certainly not room here to consider it at great length. However, a few points should be noted. First, there are no biblical passages which clearly rule out the possibility of special revelation today. If there were, it wouldn't be much of an issue today. Second, the history of the church demonstrates that God's revelatory acts (together with the practice of revelatory gifts) were at the very least significantly curtailed after the time of the apostles. In my study, I have not found any verifiable examples of the sort of revelations and revelatory gifts that we see in the biblical text.<sup>16</sup> Until the rise of the Pentecostal movement in this century, there were very few claims to special revelation, but there were frequent attempts at explaining why such revelatory events were no longer taking place.

Perhaps the most plausible explanation is that with the culmination of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, additional revelation was no longer necessary. This would certainly be consistent with several verses from Hebrews 1 and 2. Hebrews 1: 1-2 reads, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world." This implies that the revelatory process which continued throughout the time of the prophets has come to a close, having been consummated in Christ. Hebrews 2: 3, 4 further supports this idea, declaring that we have a revealed gospel that was spoken to us by the Lord, then confirmed to first century believers by the apostles, whose message was accompanied by miraculous signs.

For this reason, we should not expect special revelation today through angelic messengers. In fact, we should be suspect of any claims to such revelation in light of the fact that

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God, and it may be that "Elohim" in verse 5 is to have a different reference. It has been suggested that "Elohim" refers to angelic rulers in Psalm 82: 1, but there it is possible that the reference is simply to false gods. The term is applied to earthly judges in Psalm 82: 6, who appear to be called "gods" because of their authoritative role in the exercise of the divine will (Cf. John 10:33ff). It may well be that "Elohim" is broad enough to refer to angels in Psalm 8, as the LXX translates it. Some have even suggested that originally the phrase might have been "bene Elohim," sons of God, which is clearly used of angelic powers in Job 1: 6. However, there is no textual support for that suggestion. If the LXX is actually wrong, and the psalmist's reference is not to angels, but to God, it may be that the writer to the Hebrews is using this fortuitous translation to make the theological point that mankind was made for a little while lower than the angels, that Christ shared that position, and that by His redemption we shall be restored to a higher place of authority, being a little lower than God. Either option appears to be acceptable.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. my master's thesis, "The Cessation of Special Revelation as Related to the Pentecostal Movement," Dallas Theological Seminary, 1985.



"Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11: 14) and in the last days "many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many" (Mt. 24: 11).

### **What about "guardian angels"?**

It would be difficult to improve on Calvin's comment:  
But whether individual angels have been assigned to individual believers for their protection, I dare not affirm with confidence. Certainly, when Daniel introduces the angel of the Persians and the angel of the Greeks (Dan. 10:13, 20; 12:1) he signifies that specific angels have been appointed as guardians over kingdoms and provinces. Christ also, when he says that the children's angels always behold the Father's face (Matt. 18:10), hints that there are certain angels to whom their safety has been committed. But from this I do not know whether one ought to infer that each individual has the protection of his own angel. We ought to hold as a fact that that care of each one of us is not the task of one angel only, but all with one consent watch over our salvation. . . . For if the fact that all the heavenly host are keeping watch for his safety will not satisfy a man, I do not see what benefit he could derive from knowing that one angel has been given to him as his especial guardian. Indeed, those who confine to one angel the care that God takes of each one of us are doing a great injustice both to themselves and to all the members of the church; as if it were an idle promise that we should fight more valiantly with these hosts supporting and protecting us round about! (*Institutes* 1.14.7)