

SOME THOUGHTS ON ANGELS

By Ashby L. Camp

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I. Introduction

A. If you are looking to learn some new songs tonight, you're in the wrong place. That class is at the other end of the building. This is the start of our Wednesday night series for June and July. I plan to teach during June, and then Chuck will teach during July. I have titled my part of the series "A Look at Spirits and Eternity." Lord willing, the four classes will be: (1) June 5 – A Look at Angels, (2) June 12 – A Look at Demons, (3) June 19 – A Look at the Intermediate State of the Dead, and (4) June 26 – A Look at the Eternal State. So tonight, it's "A Look at Angels."

B. You may have more questions about angels and demons than I have answers, but that is due at least in part to the fact Scripture does not address all of our concerns. As Duane Garrett says in *Angels and the New Spirituality* (p. 10), "The Bible will not tell you everything you ever wanted to know about angels. On many questions we can only infer the answers, and on others we are in the dark altogether. Even so, the Bible does tell us a great deal, and its teachings may correct many of the excesses and errors of the angelphiles [those with extreme interest in or devotion to angels]." So should I leave you unsatisfied, take heart that the Lord will explain it all to you at some point.

II. Existence of Angels

A. Angels are all over the Bible, so much so that C. Fred Dickason, in something of an overstatement, says in his book *Angels: Elect & Evil* (p. 17), "The fact that angels exist is as certain as the fact God exists. The Bible reveals the certainty of each." In the ESV, for example, there are 294 occurrences of the word angel(s) (and one occurrence of angel's) in 281 verses.

B. Though some people argue that biblical references to angels are mere metaphoric descriptions of the work of God, there are many references to angels that can only mean they are actual, spirit persons. For example, 1 Pet. 1:12 says that even angels long to look into the mysteries of the gospel. They are said in Job 38:7 (called "sons of God") to have experienced joy at creation. Paul says in Eph. 3:9-10 that God discloses his complex, multifaceted wisdom *to* the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms through the existence of the church. And angels routinely praise God for his greatness (e.g., Ps. 148:2; Lk. 2:13; Rev. 5:11-13), which certainly does not fit as a metaphorical description of God's action. Indeed, two angels mentioned in Scripture have names (Michael and Gabriel)!

C. The existence of angels comes as no surprise when you see how God has created a vast hierarchy of *physical* things that run from inanimate matter up through plants, barely intelligent animals, more intelligent animals, highly intelligent animals, and mankind. There is a gradation of entities that reflects God's creativity rather than huge gaps from minerals to mankind. He has "filled

the space" with a multitude of varied entities. Given he has done so in the physical realm, there is reason to suspect he also would do so in the spiritual realm. So as there is a gradation of physical entities from minerals to mankind, there is a gradation of spirit beings between mankind and God. See Peter Kreeft, *Angels (and Demons)* (p. 33-36).

III. Origin of Angels

A. The creation of angels is not specifically described in Genesis, but that they were all created by God through Christ is made clear in Neh. 9:6 (NIV adds "starry"); Ps. 148:2-5; Jn. 1:1-3; and Col. 1:15-16.

B. The fact angels are spirits, as I'll discuss shortly, and therefore are bodiless and sexless, along with the fact Mat. 22:30 specifies that they do not marry, indicates that they do not procreate. (There is a longstanding debate over whether Gen. 6:1-4 means that fallen angels somehow married human women and sired offspring through them, but assuming that is true it is not angels producing more angels through procreation. The descendants are twice called "men" in v. 4.) Since angels do not procreate, produce other angels from themselves, they all were created *directly* by God rather than by descent from an initially created group.

1. Since God finished his creative work on the sixth day of creation (Gen. 1:31-2:1) and we are told of no direct creations of beings by God after he rested from that original creation effort (Gen. 2:2-3), we can deduce that the angels were all created by the end of the sixth day of creation.

2. Precisely when angels were created during that week is more speculative. It seems from Job 38:4-7 that some of them (possibly all) already existed when God was making the earth as a habitat for man. Since I believe for various reasons that God's work of special creation was limited to the creation week, that nothing was created before that time, I would put the creation of these angels in the first day of the creation week, perhaps at the same instant God brought into being from nothing the earth in its initial empty and unprepared state (as described in Gen. 1:2).

3. God did not create angels because he needed them, because they were required to fill something lacking in his being. Rather, I think, as in the case of humans, they were created as an expression God's love and grace. God chose to create that his creatures might share in the love and fellowship that have been his for eternity as part of his triune nature. Referring to the creation of humans, John Mark Hicks says in his book *Yet Will I Trust Him: Understanding God in a Suffering World* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999), 57-58:

I think the best analogy for understanding this divine act -- as limited as the analogy is -- is the decision of a couple to have children. Why do couples decide to have children? Certainly, in a fallen world, there are less than pure motives. But in the purest sense, couples decide to have children in order to share their love with another. The decision to have a child is, in the best of circumstances, a selfless decision. They share something that they could have kept to themselves.

The love which exists between a husband and wife is a communion unsurpassed in human relations. When children are born into that loving communion, children share something they did not create. The parents give something they were not compelled to share. Children -- and we wish it were true in every instance -- are born out of the loving communion between parents. The couple shares their love with another.

Following this analogy, when the triune community decided to create, they decided to share with another something they already enjoyed. We humans did not create that fellowship, but it is offered to us in love. God did not create in order to receive (as if he needed anything outside of himself). He created to give of himself. Thus, the act of creation is an act of gracious, selfless love.

4. This is not to deny, of course, that God is glorified in and through creation, that he receives glory from it; it is to say that his glory in and through creation is magnified by the fact creation is an expression of his gracious and self-giving nature rather than the filling of something lacking in his being, the meeting of some need in his existence. In creation God decided to share with others his own loving fellowship in the Trinity. This act of love and grace redounds to God's glory. And his glory is further magnified by the range and diversity of beings that he in his power brought into existence.

5. The idea that humans become angels when they die is not taught in Scripture. As I noted, Job 38:4-7 indicates that at least some angels existed when God was making the earth as a habitat for man and thus existed prior to any humans. Indeed, Satan, a fallen angel (which I will discuss next week), clearly existed before any humans had died, as he animated the serpent who tempted Eve in the Garden. The ultimate future for redeemed humans, according to Scripture, is eternal life in resurrected bodies (which I will discuss in three weeks). They remain human, the person they were, but are raised with immortalized bodies.

IV. Nature of Angels

A. As I noted, angels are spirit beings, meaning they are invisible, nonphysical beings. Whereas humans are a compound of body and spirit, angels are by nature pure spirit, bodiless minds.

1. They are specifically called "spirits" in Heb. 1:14, as are demons (fallen angels) in several passages (Mat. 8:16, 10:1, 12:45; Mk. 1:23; Lk. 7:21, 8:2, 11:26; Acts 5:16, 19:12; Rev. 16:14), and other texts suggest that "spirit" refers to what is nonmaterial. For example:

a. The statement in Jn. 4:24 that God is spirit speaks of his immateriality, as is suggested by the fact it provides the basis for why worship of him cannot ideally be restricted to physical holy sites. Because God is nonphysical, a spirit being, he is not confined to any physical location, so worship that is restricted to a physical holy site is suboptimal, less than ideal. It does not fit or correspond to God's nature as well as worship that is not so restricted. The more fitting

worship of a spirit being is worship not dependent on an external, material circumstance like the existence of a physical holy site.

b. Other texts contrast "flesh" and "spirit" where "flesh" seems to stand for the physical, the implication being that "spirit" stands for the nonphysical. See, e.g., Isa. 31:3; Lk. 24:39; Jn. 3:6; Rom. 8:4-6; Gal. 6:8.

c. In Col. 1:16 the heavenly forces are referred to as invisible, which of course is consistent with their being nonphysical.

2. Yet, angels can be seen by those specially enabled by God (e.g., Num. 22:31; 2 Ki. 6:14-17), and sometimes they become, or at least appear to become, physical and thus are visible to all (e.g., Gen. 18:1-2, 19:1-2; Judg. 13:9-11; Mk. 16:5).

3. When angels are seen, they ordinarily have a human appearance, so that they may well be mistaken for men (e.g., Gen. 18:2, 16, 22; 19:1, 5, 10, 12, 15, 16; Judg. 13:6; Mk. 16:5; Lk. 24:4; Heb. 13:2). Sometimes they are radiant, like lightning (Mat. 28:3), and sometimes they appear in white clothing (Mat. 28:3; Mk. 16:5; Jn. 20:12; Acts 1:10).

4. When angels appear as human in the Bible, they appear as male. Zechariah 5:9 probably is not an exception. The women in that vision are not called angels, and the reference to "the angel" in v. 10 seems to distinguish them from angels.

5. But, of course, the way angels appear to humans is for our sake and to communicate with us; it does not tell us what they are "really" like. Being spirits, they are beings to whom the category of sex does not apply; that is a description of biological entities.

6. Angels never appear in Scripture as babies. Some scholars believe the portrayal of angels as fat little babies got started in the medieval church when people would console parents of children who had died by saying the baby had become an angel. (Slide is from Nicolas Poussin's *Adoration of the Shepherds* painted in 1633-34.)

7. As for the popular portrayal of angels having two, bird-like wings:

a. The cherubim, which may be a class of angel or a distinct kind of spirit being, are variously depicted as having two wings (implied in 1 Ki. 6:24; 2 Chron. 3:11-12) and four wings (connecting Ezek. 1:4-11 with 10:1-20). In Ezekiel, the cherubim each have the faces of an ox/cherub, a man, a lion, and an eagle, and their bodies and wings are covered with eyes.

b. The seraphim are mentioned only in Isaiah 6, and it may be that the term is simply a description of how the angels appeared to Isaiah rather than a designation of a particular type of angel or spirit being. They have six wings and are proclaiming the holiness of God.

c. The four living creatures in Rev. 4:6-8 share features of both the cherubim and seraphim. Like the cherubim in Ezekiel, they have the faces of an ox, a man, a lion, and an eagle, but unlike the cherubim, each has only one of these faces. Also like the cherubim, they are covered with eyes. Like the seraphim, they have six wings and are proclaiming the holiness of God.

d. The women in the vision in Zech. 5:9 have two wings like a stork, but as I said, they are not called angels. Other angels are spoken of as flying (Dan. 9:21; Rev. 14:6), but nothing is said about their having wings.

e. But again, appearances to us are not a reliable guide of what angels are "really" like. They "really" are spirit.

B. Being mere creatures, angels are not in the same category or class with God.

1. It is right for us to respect their character and position, to be impressed by their power, to appreciate their ministries, and to admire their attitude toward God, but we may not worship them.

a. The angels worship God alone (Isa. 6:1-4; Rev. 4:6-11), including God the Son (Rev. 5:8-14), which implies that they consider only members of the Trinity to be worthy of worship.

b. Scripture specifically forbids worship of anyone other than God (Ex. 20:1-6; Mat. 4:10).

c. Angels themselves forbid John from worshipping them in Rev. 19:10 and 22:9, saying they are only fellow servants with John and other Christians.

2. Nor may we treat them as mediators between God and men. In other words, we cannot seek to relate to God through them. Jesus is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

a. This means we cannot pray to them or direct our appeals for help to them, which is how some people use "angel pins" and other depictions of angels. They use them as a charm or contact point in their effort to gain the protection or aid of angels. Nothing in Scripture supports offering prayers to anyone other than God. If we appeal to angels for blessings, we are implicitly declaring that Christ's mediatorship is insufficient.

b. This also means we cannot seek to "win their favor" by doing what we perceive they want us to do. Our responsibility is to God. This is precisely what the Colossian heretics were rebuked for doing -- claiming that angelic beings and powers had to be placated to gain "fullness" with God.

3. Since Jesus is God the Son, it makes sense that angels are everywhere presented as being subordinate to him.

a. In all their dealings with him, angels are joyful heralds or obedient servants, but in contrast to their dealings with biblical prophets, they never gave him instructions.

b. In Revelation 5, the angels in heaven acknowledge that Christ alone is worthy of praise; only he has authority over human destiny and only he merits all honor and thanksgiving.

c. His superiority to angels is assumed as the basis of the argument in Hebrews 1 and 2.

C. Humans on earth are in some sense "lower" than angels (Heb. 2:7, referring to Christ), and angels have superior powers (e.g., 2 Pet. 2:11; Acts 12:7-11), superior knowledge (see, Mat. 24:36 -- gained from their presence before God), and the glory of being in the immediate presence of God.

D. Angels are not subject to death (Lk. 20:36). They are spirits, so they cannot die physically, and God apparently grants them immortality of being. Rebellious angels will, however, endure the punishment of the "second death" (Mat. 25:41; Rev. 20:14, 21:8).

V. Names and Classifications of Angels

A. Scripture does not tell us how many angels God created, but it was apparently a very great number. Heb. 12:22 speaks of "innumerable angels," and in Rev. 5:11 John sees "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands" of angels.

B. Only two angels are named in the Bible: Michael (Dan. 10:13, 21; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7-8) and Gabriel (Dan. 8:16, 9:21; Lk. 1:19, 26-27).

C. The fact Michael is called an "archangel" in Jude 9 (the only angel so identified) and Paul refers to "the archangel" in 1 Thess. 4:16 suggests there is some kind of rank or order among the angels, but we are told nothing about it. Dan 10:13 says Michael is "one of the chief princes," which probably means he is one of a number of archangels. The reference in 1 Tim. 5:21 to "elect angels" seems to confirm the notion of varied status or rank.

D. As mentioned, the cherubim and seraphim may be a type of angel or a distinct kind of spirit being, and the four living creatures in Revelation may be yet another category. If they are in fact angels, we know nothing definite about their rank or position in the angelic order.

E. In the O.T., the term "the angel of the Lord" sometimes refers to an ordinary angel, but sometimes it refers to a specific figure who appears to be God himself.

1. The classic text is Ex. 3:1-6 where "the angel of the Lord" appeared to Moses in the burning bush and said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." It says Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at "God." Some other passages that merge the angel of the Lord with God are Gen. 16:7-13, 18:1-22, 22:11-18, 31:11-13; Judges 6:22, 13:15-23; and Zech. 3:1-2.

2. One way to understand these appearances of "the angel of the Lord" is to see them as temporary, preincarnate manifestations of the Word, the second person of the Godhead. This gains some support from the fact no angels in the N.T. took on the identity of God. After the Son became incarnate as Jesus Christ, any appearance he made would not be described as an appearance of an angel but an appearance of the risen Christ.

VI. Activities of Angels

A. Angels in Scripture frequently manifest themselves to deliver some message, particularly regarding a significant event (e.g., Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah and Elizabeth and his appearance to Mary -- Lk. 1:8-23, 26-38).

B. Angels in Scripture often protect God's people, help them, and deliver them from trouble (e.g., an angel shut the lions' mouths [Dan. 6:22] and whisked Peter out of jail [Acts 12:6-12]). Heb. 1:14 says, "Are not angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" This does not mean, however, that each Christian has a "guardian angel."

1. Bible nowhere states that each Christian has an individual guardian angel assigned to him or her. The two passages used to support the concept are at best inconclusive.

a. When Jesus tells his disciples in Mat. 18:10 that they must not adopt the world's contempt toward even a single Christian, the reason he gives is that "*Their* angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." This does not require one to conclude that each Christian has a specific angel assigned to him or her. An analogy would be telling the Fox network not to mistreat any members of the cast of a certain show "because their fans have direct access to the sponsors." This would not mean that one particular fan was assigned to one particular member of the cast.

b. When Peter knocked at Mary's house in Acts 12 and those gathered there told Rhoda that it is "*his* angel," they may have been referring to an angel they thought was guarding or caring for Peter at that particular time. Or, the comment may simply reflect that some of those present believed, as did many Jews of that day, that individuals *did have* guardian angels and that those angels looked liked their charges.

2. The notion of a private guardian angel has certain dangers. The private guardian angel can take on the function of God in the minds of people, and the idea can easily lead to the practice of praying to that angel.

3. The bottom line, in my opinion, is that we do not have sufficient reason for believing in a private guardian angel, and we should be aware of the dangers inherent in such an idea.

C. Angels in Scripture serve as God's agents of judgment. Ps. 78:49 says they were involved in bringing the plagues on Egypt, and in Isaiah 37 the angel of the Lord struck down the Assyrian army while it was preparing to assault Jerusalem. Angels serve as agents of punishment throughout Revelation, and Jesus indicated they would be involved in the final judgment (e.g., Mat. 13:41-42).

D. Angels in Scripture are observers of human affairs. In 1 Cor. 4:9 Paul says the apostles had been made a spectacle to the angels, and in 1 Cor. 11:10 he supports his argument about sex-appropriate attire by appealing to the fact angels observe Christian assemblies. In 1 Tim. 5:21 Paul charges Timothy "in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels" to fulfill the work of a minister. 1 Peter 1:12 says the angels eagerly desire to understand the mystery of the gospel of Christ (so they do not fully understand the work of God).

E. Angels in Scripture are involved in visions and in explaining and interpreting visions (e.g., Zech. 6:1-8; Dan. 10:5-12:4; Ezek. 9:2-6, 40-43; Rev. 4:7, 7:1-2, 10:1-2, 21:15-17).

F. Angels in Scripture are sometimes described as being in the courts of the Lord (e.g., Rev. 5:1-2), where they spend much time praising God and worshipping him (e.g., Ps. 103:20; Revelation 4-5).

VII. New Age Beliefs

A. The New Age movement got into angels in a big way. There are many popular books on the subject that portray angels in a completely unbiblical way. These include: *Ask Your Angels* by Alma Daniel, Timothy Wyllie, and Andrew Ramer; *A Book of Angels* by Sophy Burnham; *Guardians of Hope* by Terry Lynn Taylor; *Angels of Mercy* by Rosemary Ellen Guiley; *The Angels Within Us* by John Randall Price; and just this year, *Coffee with the Angels: Angelic Wisdom Shared Over Morning Coffee* by Katie Kiefer.

B. These books draw from all kinds of sources, such as the Bible, the Pseudepigrapha, Gnostic writings, the Kabbalah, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, and seem to give them all the same credibility. They make little or no attempt to reconcile contradictions in how these various sources understood angels. They simply draw what they want to paint whatever picture they want.

C. A big thread running through these books is that angels are everywhere and talk to all kinds of people with all kinds of religious backgrounds. Their point is that it does not matter whether you're Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Mormon, Hindu, or whatever; you can still get into angelphilia and feel good about it.

D. The false ideas they promote about angels include:

1. That angels are channeling messages through certain people.
 2. That angels can choose to be born as humans.
 3. That discovering angel names is a key to spiritual experience.
 4. That the human body contains eight "chakras," defined as "centers in the energy body that help to integrate it with our physical vehicle and with our mind and our emotions," and awareness of these chakras is fundamental to meditation and thus to connecting with angels.
 5. That we can rediscover joy by reconnecting with our "inner angel child," which we do by "let[ting] go of [the] ridiculous notion of being an adult."
 6. That growing awareness of and contact with angels is leading us into a utopic new age of harmony, love, and fulfillment.
 7. That humans can progress through a series of incarnations to angelhood, a crowning spiritual attainment.
 8. That humans can initiate contact with angels through various methods and rituals and can then obtain personal guidance for life.
 9. That angels work with civilizations in other galaxies and with animals on earth.
 10. That angels will invigorate you when you are down with a "heart-to-heart transfusion of golden liquid light."
 11. That certain meditative exercises can help you grow invisible angel wings.
 12. That angels are indifferent to morality and teach that categories of right and wrong are illusory and only entrap us in feelings of guilt, low self-esteem, and a judgmental spirit.
- E. New Age angelphilia is nothing short of an alternative religion based on a new source of revelation -- angel encounters. It is, in fact, a return to paganism, animism, gnosticism, mysticism, magic, and witchcraft. It seems that the total openness to spiritual powers that they advocate has caused them to embrace demons in the guise of angels of light.