



A Fascination with Angels

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G. K. CHESTERTON AND ST. AUGUSTINE ARE AMONG THOSE AUTHORS WHO HAVE become well known for one sentence. Observing the decline of traditional faith in the twentieth-century western world and the accompanying increased interest in astrology, tarot cards, palm reading, ouija boards, superstitions, and other esoteric fortune-telling devices, Chesterton observed:

When people cease believing in something, it isn't that they believe in nothing; but that they then believe in anything.

St. Augustine's most famous sentence, from his *Confessions*, has been quoted at some time or another by every preacher in every parish:

Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O God.

Behind both statements is a common assumption: By nature, human beings are hardly ever crass materialists. We yearn for something beyond this secular world, and if we do not find it in traditional religious faiths, we will latch on to something else.

I. THE TROUBLE WITH GOD

People today have trouble believing in God. There are many reasons for this, including the general secularism pervading our worldview, the troubling questions about God following the monumental sufferings of our century, disillusion-

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Speculation about angels, though now rampant, is not new. Biblically speaking, however, the point to make is that encounters with angels—in whatever form—are encounters with God. God uses angels to do his work, but it is God, not angels, to whom we pray.

ment with the church, and the predominant relativism in intellectual circles that avoids any claims of absolute truth.

Still, people do want to believe that there is something more to this world than what we see and hear around us. So, as Chesterton noted, having abandoned their faith in God, people are sitting ducks to believe in anything else—a spaceship waiting for believers on the other side of the Hale-Bopp comet; aliens landing in Roswell, New Mexico; reports of people dying and going through a tunnel of light before being resuscitated; the daily horoscope in the newspaper, etc. A recent newspaper included an advertisement offering an analysis of my personality through numerology for just \$9.95.

II. THE FASCINATION WITH ANGELS

In addition to all those supernatural fascinations, we add today's astonishing interest in angels.

In a large local bookstore I found five shelves of books on angels, 121 different books in all! Billy Graham anticipated the tidal wave of interest in angels, publishing his *Angels* in 1975. Since then he added the subtitle *Ringling Assurance That We Are Not Alone*; the book continues to sell, now over three million copies. By 1994 there were eight books about angels on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

There is a remarkable variety of angel books. For the person who wants as much information as possible there is *Angels A To Z*. Skeptics would be drawn to *Angels—A Modern Myth*. Readers of a scientific bent can look at *The Physics of Angels—Exploring the Realm Where Science and Spirit Meet*. Persons who like literature will appreciate *The Quotable Angel*, which lists Bible verses with angels as well as references to angels by well-known authors.

Billy Graham's book is one of the few that actually examine what the Bible says about angels. Most books deal with angels as an independent topic. The vast majority tell stories of angel activity among people or give instructions on how we can contact angels ourselves. *In Search of Angels* and a book with the playful title *To Dance with Angels* are typical.

In this day and age, when people have trouble believing in a personal God, there is something very appealing about being in contact with angels. *How to Talk with Your Angel* includes a chapter on "The Step-by-Step Technique," which is really a manual on channeling. *Ask Your Angel* carries the promising subtitle *A Practical Guide to Working with the Messengers of Heaven to Empower and Enrich Your Life*.

As one might expect, the assurance of angels guarding over us is very popular. Typical titles are *Finding Your Guardian Angel* and *Embraced by Angels: How to Get in Touch with Your Own Guardian Angel*. New Age adherents will like *Finding Your Guardian Angel through Incense and Candle Burning!*

Minnesota bookstores feature Joan Nyberg's *The Rustling of Wings*, a survey of angels appearing in churches and cemeteries in the Twin Cities area. Individuals or groups take this book in hand for instructive "angel tours" to see angels in stained glass, carvings, paintings, and statues both inside and outside.

III. A LONG TRADITION

Speculation about angels is nothing new, and the twentieth century takes a distant second place to the discussions of the scholastic age. “Angelology” was given a jump start in the fifth century by the avid angel researcher Dionysius, who combed the Bible for references to any and all sorts of heavenly beings. In his “Celestial Hierarchies” he organized the heavenly host into three ranks, each with three kinds of angelic beings. The dazzling seraphs, or seraphim, of Isaiah 6 are the five-star generals of the angelic host. They are followed by the cherubs, the cherubim, whom we have insulted by portraying them as chubby little children. The thrones round out the top rank of three. Then come the dominions, virtues, and powers, whom most of us have never thought of as angels. In seventh place are the principalities, followed by the archangels and ordinary angels, the latter two being the only two which ever come into contact with humans.

The medieval centuries continued to speculate. One can only wonder what calculations St. Albert the Great used to conclude that there were 399,920,004 celestial beings!

IV. ANGELS IN THE BIBLE—A SHORT COURSE

There are angels all over the Bible, from the mighty cherubim guarding the entrance to Eden in Genesis 3 to the messenger sent by Jesus in the last chapter of Revelation. There are 122 verses in the Old Testament mentioning angels; 170 in the New. As one might expect, the book of Revelation has the most verses mentioning angels (79), but other books are close behind, including some where one might not expect to find them—Numbers (11), Judges (22), Zechariah (20). For those who are interested in angel trivia, angels in one form or another (angels, archangels, cherubs, seraphs, Michael, Gabriel) are mentioned 404 times in 375 verses in the Bible.

From the Bible we know two angels by name, Michael and Gabriel, and the Apocrypha names three others—Raphael (Tobit), Uriel and Jeremiel (2 Esdras). The name “Lucifer” is found once in the King James Bible (Isa 14:12), but not in the RSV and NRSV which translate the term “Day Star.” Jude 6 speaks about “fallen angels,” but nowhere in the Bible is Satan named specifically as a fallen angel. That notion comes from the cosmic battle in Rev 12:7-9, where Michael and his angelic host defeat the dragon and his angels, and the dragon is named as the Devil or Satan.

Biblical angels are of three types—praising angels, messenger angels, and guardian angels.

1. *Praisers.* These were the angels in the host we read about every Christmas, the chorus who burst into praise before the shepherds outside Bethlehem. The cherubim and seraphim of the Old Testament and the heavenly host in the book of Revelation are prominent among the praising angels.

2. *Messengers.* Messenger angels are the ones we know the best, because they occur in so many Bible stories—the angel appearances to Zecharias, Joseph, the

shepherds outside Bethlehem and, most prominently, Gabriel's annunciation to Mary.

3. *Guardians*. These angels are found in Ps 91:11, "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways," although there are other instances of angels protecting or delivering people (Gen 19:10-11; Ps 34:7; Acts 5:19; 12:7-8). The reverse side of guardian angels are the destroying or avenging angels, such as Michael's host in Revelation.

V. THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

How do we respond to the current fascination with angels, particularly when our parishioners read the popular literature and ask us how they might contact their guardian angel?

1. *Angels as God's Agents*

Angels are mysterious beings, but the one incontrovertible assertion from the Bible is that *there is no such thing in the Bible as an angel acting independently*. Angels do God's work. All the advice in popular books about "getting in touch with your angel" is twaddle. The biblical view is: Forget about getting in touch with an angel—get in touch with God! Don't ask angels to do anything—ask God! Wherever you find an angel in the Bible, there is God acting. The terms "angel" and "angel of the Lord" are used interchangeably.

In his book about angels, Claus Westermann pressed the point by titling a chapter "Are There Really Angels?" He answered:

No! There are no angels...The Bible never speaks of the being or existence of angels *per se*. It does, however, report the comings of the messengers of God.¹

Westermann's point is not to deny the existence of angels, but to establish that they have no independent existence or work apart from God.

2. *Angels as Humans or God*

Angels in popular literature and art always *look* like angels, with their glowing robes, halos, and wings. How different from the angels in the Bible!

Asked what kind of bodies angels have and what they look like, Thomas Aquinas answered, "Angels need an assumed body, not for themselves, but on our account."² Angel appearances range from obviously heavenly beings to their more usual appearance as ordinary human beings. Who was at Jesus' tomb following the resurrection? Matt 28:5 reports that the women saw an angel, but in Luke 24:4 the women saw "two men in dazzling clothes." Most often angels appear as human beings. Only later do the observers realize that they are heavenly beings, and then people are overcome with a sense that they have been in the presence of God.

Consider the visit to Abraham at Mamre: "The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him" (Gen 18:1-2). The Lord/men in-

¹Claus Westermann, *Gods Angels Need No Wings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 18.

²Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.51.2.

form Abraham that he/they are going to Sodom. As the story continues, two angels arrive at Sodom, but Lot sees them as men. Throughout the story they are identified interchangeably as men, angels, or the Lord.

In Judges 13 we read that an “angel of the Lord” came to Manoah’s wife, but she described the visitor as a “man of God.” Not until the angel disappeared did Manoah realize it was an angel, and then he was terrified because “he had seen God.”

All Sunday School children know the story of “Jacob wrestling with the angel” at the Jabbok River (Gen 32:24-31). However, the actual wording of the story is that “a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” Jacob realized he was striving with God and named the place Peniel, “for I have seen God face to face.” So, with whom did Jacob wrestle? A man, an angel, or God? If we had a videotaped record of the encounter, we would probably have seen a man. But Jacob knew he had met God.

The point is that *people recognize angels through their messages or deeds, and usually in retrospect*. A person deals with a human being, but later realizes that the encounter was with God. Then one knows it was an angel. An angel spoke to Hagar, but she knew it was God (Gen 16:7-13).

3. Anonymous Angels

One of the unique, even odd, angel verses in the Bible is buried at the end of Hebrews: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb 13:2). Perhaps this verse is our best guide as to how we should regard angels. We should not yearn for majestic winged creatures to invade our life. Rather we should keep in mind that there are “angels in disguise,” that God may be coming to us in the form of people in need. God does not need anything from us, but we can serve God by helping the “least of these who are members of my family,” as our Lord advised us in the great parable of the last judgment (Matt 25:24).

VI. BACK TO GOD

If Chesterton is correct and people are drawn to angels because they have trouble believing in God, then we need a corrective. We are upheld and rejoice in the presence of angels because we are confident of the presence of God. Our guardian angel is God hovering near us.

I do not disparage the accounts of angelic visions, angelic messages, and angelic assistance reported by the hundreds in the 121 books in the local bookstore. I assume the experiences are real and valid. But I do want people to know that they are accounts of the works of God. All these books and stories about angels—to the degree that they are accurate, they are about God.

St. Augustine is right: Our souls will never be at peace with angels alone. Angels lead us to God. God uses angels to do his work, but it is God, not angels to whom we pray. ⊕