

Angels in the Christian Tradition

Apostolic Fathers to Early Church (70 – 150AD)

Epistle of Barnabas (c.75 - 135)

Barnabas' comments on angels are in relation to an evil angel who deceived Israel, (9:4) and reflect the Apostolic Fathers' general mild-dualism worldview between light and darkness. (18:1)

1 Clement (c.95)

Angels are mentioned a few times in his argument for Church order. He cites the holy angels for an example of obedience to God's order, (34:5) while pointing out that some angels chose differently and were condemned. (39:4) One interesting note is his quotation of Deuteronomy 32:8 where he, not surprisingly, follows the LXX reading of "number of the angels". (29:2)

Fragments of Papias (c.100 - 125)

Only in one small fragment do we have anything of Papias on angels. The quotation directly relates to the idea of an original angelic rulership of God's creation.

Papias thus speaks, word for word: To some of them [angels] He gave dominion over the arrangement of the world, and He commissioned them to exercise their dominion well. And he says, immediately after this: but it happened that their arrangement came to nothing. (7:1)

Letters of Ignatius (c.110)

Refers to them as both "angels" and "rulers". (*Smyrnaeans* 6:1) He also holds that there are places and hierarchies of them, but does not elaborate. (*Trallians* 5:2) Ignatius states that he knows very little about these due to him still being a learner. Whether this means others may know, or that no one truly knows, is a bit unclear. Though it is difficult to comprehend the Bishop of Antioch not having knowledge about something!

Shepherd of Hermas (Visions, Mandates, Similitudes) (c.90 - 140)

Not surprisingly, most of the angel references in the Apostolic Fathers occur in the Shepherd of Hermas. Most of the work is a series of allegorical visions mediated either by a woman who represents the Church or by an angel. The Shepherd of Hermas is one of the first Christian references to both sins as spirit entities (*Sim.* 6 2:1-2) as well as the idea that each person has a good and evil angel. (*Man.* 6 2:1-10)

Angels function primarily in a role of judgment over sin, (*Sim.* 6 3:2, 7 1:1-16) but also are said to have been given certain control over the world. (*Vis.* 3 4:1-2)

Two angels are given by name. Michael, (*Sim.* 8 3:3) the only citation in the Apostolic Fathers, as well as the angel Thegri. (*Vis.* 4 2:4) Thegri does not seem to appear again in any Christian writings, but in the vision Hermas says he has power

over all beasts. Hermas may also be one of the few writings of Apostolic Fathers to refer to angels as “powers”. (*Vis.* 1 3:4)

Epistle of Diognetus (c.150 - 160)

Diognetus makes the similar argument as the Book of Hebrews, that Christ is superior to all other authority. In his argument he lists angels along with kings as those who have been given power over earthly things as well as the government of the heavens. (7:2)

Martyrdom of Polycarp (c.155)

One of the few possible references to “powers” in a supernatural manner occurs in 14:1 where God is called the “God of angels and powers, and of every creature”. The only other reference is an apparent metaphorical usage comparing the martyrs as being no longer men but becoming angels. (2:3) It may also be possible the writer believes that at least some men do become angels, perhaps following the Enochian tradition. If so, however, he would be the only example and it seems he is more likely using hyperbole to praise the glories of the martyrs.

Early Church (150 – 800AD)

This is a work in progress. I have gathered research on the Pre-Nicene Fathers primarily from what can be found in Schaff's Ante-Nicene Fathers.

Irenaeus (Against Heresies) (b. Late 2nd Century – d. c.200)

In Irenaeus' work *Against Heresies* angels are mentioned frequently but rarely in a Christian context. Most of the time Irenaeus is citing Gnostic beliefs, as the refutation of these ideas was the purpose of the book. Although this gives us little information on what he or the early church believed about angels, it does demonstrate that angels were a major part of the culture of the time and ideas of them were influential outside of the Church.

Justin Martyr (b.100 – d.165)

The only location in his writings where Justin gives a theology of angelic origins is in his *Dialogue*, 128. Emanationism forms the foundation for his Christology as well as his angelology. In seeking to prove that the Son is both from the Father and distinct from the Father he makes the comparison of the sun and the light. Just as light rays emanate from the sun, and so are distinct, they are also inseparable from the sun.

Due to this emanation, permanent angels, including the fallen ones are substantive. In being substantive, they possess a quasi-physicality that allows them to interact with the rest of material reality. Following Jewish precedent of the time, Justin associates angels with the substance of fire. In this, Justin is following a minor strand of

Christian tradition that saw angels as material beings, only with a finer substance than the rest of creation.¹ (cf Ferguson, *Demonology of the Early Christian World*, 110)

The next case of demonstrating a substantive angelology in Justin occurs in reference to the manna eaten in the wilderness. In *Dial.* 57 he takes a very literal reading of Ps 77:25 LXX where the Israelites are said to have eaten the bread of angels in the context of deliverance from Egypt. Justin uses this psalm in defense of the pre-incarnate Christ appearing to Abraham stating that the angels with Abraham, like other angels, are “not nourished by food similar to that which mortals use.” He makes a distinction between food of men and food of angels, but still implies that angels need some form of nourishment, and that they “eat” in the same way fire is said to “eat.” It is as substances that angels require this nourishment, and demonstrate that in Justin’s theology that are not entirely “spiritual” beings.

Athanasios (b.133 – d.190)

Most of Athanasios’ comments on angels deal with the propriety of their place in creation. Angels were created for the purpose of ruling over the world of matter, (*Plea*, X) by providing the particular parts of God’s providence essentially acting as mediators of the Divine Will on the universe. (*Plea*, XXIV) An interesting note is that, at least in the context of the angelic fall from grace, angels do have free will just like men. (*Plea*, XXIV) When taken with his other assertion that:

For this is the office of the angels, – to exercise providence for God over the things created and ordered by Him; so that God may have the universal and general providence of the whole, while the particular parts are provided for by the angels appointed over them. (Plea, XXIV)

Seems to imply that Divine Providence was actually delegated to angels who have, or had, the power to make real decisions about how to run the cosmos. This may find parallel in human rulers who rule under the authority of God even if their decisions are their own.

Clement of Alexandria (b. 1st Century – d. c.215)

Clement is the first Christian reference I have found to mention “angelic choirs”. (*Instructor* 1.6) He is also one of the few to use the term “watcher” for angels but does not elaborate more. (*Instructor* 2.9) This is not overly surprising, however, because it is obvious he pulls heavily from Enochian literature about the fall of the angels. (*Instructor* 3.2, *Stromata* 5.1)

Two other things of note in Clement is his reference to guardian angels (*Stromata* 5.14) and his statement on angelic nature. (*Stromata* 6.7) As could be seen in *Shepherd of Hermas* the idea of a guardian angel began very early, and Clement is merely following this trend. In terms of angelic nature he assumes as part of a larger argument that angels are entirely bodiless and have no sensory organs to speak or hear as humans do.

¹ Ferguson, Everett. *Demonology of the Early Christian World*. (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984) 110.

Tertullian 160-220

Although Tertullian later became a montanist, his writings were a major influence in the Western Church. He held that angels had sinned with human women, which created both fallen angels and demonic offspring. (*Apology* 22, *Idolotry* 9, *Nations* 33, cf *Genesis* 6 and *1 Enoch*) He does not explain further about the free will of angels or if they still possess it.

Following this, he appears to hold that angels have some form of materiality. He says that angels are made of a "material spirit". (*Against Marcion* II.8) He gives a long defense of the idea that angels can assume some form of flesh, but unlike Christ were not born into it and thus it in some way is not truly human flesh in the same way. (*Against Marcion* III.9, *On the Flesh of Christ* 6)

He sees angels constantly watching over humanity and in particular the Church, and sees this as a warning against sin. (*Spectacles* 27) This may be connected to his general idea that angels were originally rulers of the world and became wicked. (*On Fleeing* 12) Perhaps he sees this oversight as still in place with the Holy Angels as well looking over the Church. At the end of life he also believes angels help carry the soul to Heaven. (*On the Soul* 53)

He refers to spirits as having wings, (*Apology* 22-23) and this explains their ability to move swiftly. This explains for him how the pagan oracles could be true, evil spirits create their own prophecies. It is hard to tell if he is literal in his statement on angels wings or merely metaphorical. Considering his somewhat more substantive view of angels, he may mean it literally.

His montanism shows in context of angels by his description of a woman who would regularly converse with angels. (*On the Soul* 9) He also views angels as having some role in assisting God creating a human embryo. (*On the Soul* 37)

Gregory Thaumatergus (213 - 270)

In his *Orations* he writes profusely to Origin, and in it has a few specific references to angels in his life. Gregory praises God for his personal angel whom he sees not only as a protector but also as a guide. (Article 4, 19) There is no indication on how he viewed this taking place, but did seem to think this was a normal aspect of God's working in the world.

The Church After Nicea (325+) [from Danielou, *Angels and their Mission*]

For the Church Fathers angels played a major role in both God's creation and in the life of the Church. The primary responsibility to the angels was originally to govern the physical world, (p.3, 45-7) as well as guide the nations to serve God. (p.15-8) Later this would begin to include God's people starting with Israel who received her law from the angels, (p.5) and was prepared by them for the coming of Jesus. (p.9)

Starting with the Church, angels took on a more important role. Angels were seen as guardians and guides of the Church as well, in a similar manner to Israel, both as a whole and individual congregations. (p.55-8) In addition they were part of the sacraments. They prepared the soul in Baptism for the Holy Spirit, (p.59) and more

importantly were part of the worship of the Eucharist which was seen as a participation in the worship of Heaven. (p.62) Finally the angels would return with Christ in judgment and take an active role in that judgment. (110-1)

For the individual, angels were assigned at birth as guardians and guides. (68-9) At Baptism this angel would take on a new role in guiding the soul as a Christian by providing positive aid, (p.75) acting in the souls repentance, (p.76-7) bringing that persons' prayers to God, (78) and serving as an intermediary of God's blessings. (84) At the end of life the angels, particularly the individual guardian, would assist the soul and guide it to Heaven. (p.95)

Celestial Hierarchy (c. 5/6th Century)

Celestial Hierarchy was mistakenly attributed to Dionysius of Acts 17:34 and so was held to contain a tradition going back to the Apostles. In reality it appears to date to the 5th or 6th century. Authorship is unknown.

In *Celestial Hierarchy* the author presents the main purpose of angels as being one of perfecting, illuminating, and purifying in each order. There is a great chain of being, with those angels closest to God being the more perfect, illumined, and pure who in turn bring the light of God to the order below it. The end result is that the hierarchy exists to bring those below into greater unity with God and to become more like him.

Angels in *Celestial Hierarchies* are divided into three choirs of three orders each. The first choir being Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones, the second are Dominions, Virtues, and Powers, and the third are Principalities, Archangels, and Angels proper. Ps.-Dionysius places them in this order both based on what he states has been passed down to him as well as interpreting the meaning of the names of each rank.

For Ps.-Dionysius angels were entirely immaterial forms. His theology is very platonist in that he sees perfection as an aspect of how far detached from the material world a being is. As the angels ascend the hierarchy so the more detached and perfected they become. All material references in scripture, are to him, symbols that provide those with proper knowledge and contemplation insights into further perfection.

Due to the attribution to Dionysius the Areopagite in Acts 17:34 *Celestial Hierarchies* became very popular during the middle ages and was influential in both the Western and Eastern Church. Thomas Aquinas quoted him in his *Summa*, and many commentaries on *Celestial Hierarchies* were written. In terms of our modern ideas of angels and particularly the nature of the choirs and hierarchy itself, much of it goes back to this work. In fact the modern word "hierarchy" as we think of it originated with him.

Early and Ecumenical Councils

The Councils mention angels very rarely unless it is part of scripture quoted for another purpose. The regional council of Laodicea in 363/4 condemned the “invocation” of angels and “gather assemblies”. (Canon 35) This was probably a condemnation of the veneration of St. Michael at Chonai (Colossae).² There was a shrine to St. Michael at Chonai which was seen by the Laodiceans to be a continuation of the practices condemned by Paul in Colossians 2:18. The Church had recently found itself free of the Emperor Julian whom made an effort to revive Roman traditional religion. In an effort to distance themselves from the paganism of that era, Laodicea also distanced themselves from the popular shrine at Chonai accusing it of being pagan idolatry. The shrine at Chonai would eventually become validated through the influence of the miracle story attached to the shrine, and later as well by the Seventh Ecumenical Council that would articulate a distinction between worship and veneration while allowing angels to be under the later.

The Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) condemned various beliefs attributed to Origin or some of his followers. Among these condemnations was the belief that creation was originally immaterial and indistinct and the different angels only came distinct and took on subtle bodies via giving themselves over to “worse things”, (Anathama 2) and that people were originally angels or can become angels. (Anathama 5, Anathama of Emperor Justinian 1)

The second council at Nicea in 787 (Ecumenical VII,) includes the Holy Angels with Mary and the Saints as proper objects of honor and iconography. This council also specifically calls the angels “incorporeal”. (Session 4) It was this council that made the final decision in the iconoclastic controversies and would allow for the veneration, though of course not worship, of angels.

Medieval Church (800 – 1517AD)

The Middle Ages could rightly be called the flowering and pinnacle of Angelology. Angels were said to visit both Saint and sinner for the purposes of guidance, rebuke, and portent in battle. Pilgrimages and even relics of angels enhanced the growing hagiography of angelic visitations. On the clerical level Medieval theologians spent hours debating the finer nuances of angels: what they are, how they move, how they speak, and how they are ordered. All of creation was seen as a great chain of being from God to angels to man to animal to plant to rock. For them angels and spirits were as real as the trees and stones of daily life, perhaps even more so. The mystics of the period as well increased in their appreciation of angels, looking to the angelic hierarchy as a model of their own ascent to the beatific vision of God. To the medieval person miracles, angels, and supernatural power were an expected part of daily life and could be counted on in the Mass, sacramentals, and pilgrimage sites of the Church.

² Cadwallader, Alan “Inter-city Conflict in the Story of St Michael of Chonai” in W. Mayer and B. Neil (eds), *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam*. (Tübingen: de Gruyter, 2013), 115-120

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On a popular level angels played a major role in devotion and pilgrimage. Many shrines and churches were named in honor of St. Michael, primarily Mont Gargano and Mt. Saint Michael in northern France. Mt. Gargano was the scene of several alleged visitations of St. Michael, one of which in battle against the pagans became the feast day. Due to the widespread belief in guardian angels stemming from the Church Fathers there was a popular sense in the angels assisting people in their daily life. In worship angels were believed to take an active part in the sacraments and particularly in the Mass. Over time angels became integrated into the liturgy starting with the *Sanctus*. Theologians of the period held that the Church in mass participated in the worship of Heaven with the angels. Deacons, especially, were seen to play the role of angels in assisting the priest in the way that the angels assisted Christ.

Medieval Theology of angels began, like much of theological thought of the day, with Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. This was a compilation of quotes from many authorities on various topics and became the foundation for scholastic theology. The rise of the dialectic method and the influence of Aristotelianism in the universities lead to growing speculation about the precise nature of angels founded on what the scholastics saw in scripture and especially *Celestial Hierarchies*. Although not everyone followed *Celestial Hierarchies* in every way, it was the important foundation for much of medieval angelology. The specifics of this thinking will be discussed later in the section on Angelic metaphysics.

Medieval spirituality was very mystically oriented, and one of the major influences in this was *Celestial Hierarchy* by (pseudo-) Dionysius the Areopagite. In his work, and among many of the mystics, saw the angelic hierarchy as a example of the path to connection with God. Angels provided the example and language needed by the mystics in their endeavors. Angels also took an exemplary role among the religious orders. The angelic life of celibacy, constant worship, and perfect obedience acted as the goal of monasticism and in addition saw this angelic life as a condemnation on a corrupt Church. Visions of angels were common in hagiography. St. Francis was supposed to have received stigmata from a seraphic vision of Christ, Joan of Arc received visions of St. Michael, and various other saints had an almost common interaction with angelic spirits.

Reformation (1517 – 1662)

The Reformation saw a great change in the view of angels from an apophatic [negation] perspective. Calvin was the prime example of this growing view of angels. In his *Institutes* he writes concerning them:

“in obscure matters not to speak or think, or even long to know, more than the Word of God has delivered. A second rule is, that in reading the Scriptures we should constantly direct our inquiries and meditations to those things which tend to edification, not indulge in curiosity, or in studying things of no use... Wherefore, if we would be duly wise, we must renounce those vain babblings of idle men, concerning the nature, ranks, and number of angels, without any authority from the Word of God. I know that many fasten on these topics more eagerly, and take greater pleasure in them than in those relating to daily practice.” (I.14.iv)

In a similar vein Luther said:

“for most certainly they are about thee, and carry thee upon their hands. How or in what manner it is done, take thou no heed. God says it, therefore it is most sure and certain.” (Table Talks, 568)

This change in attitude stemmed from two Reformation concepts, *Sola Scriptura* and to a lesser extent *Solus Christus*. To the Reformers *Sola Scriptura* meant that the Bible is the sole rule of authority for the faith, although unlike the radical reformation still left room for creeds and some aspects of tradition. Both Calvin and Luther decried the “speculations” of the Medieval scholastics. Primarily this was due to seeing scholastic speculation as the prop of rationalization for the entire purgatory/merit/indulgence system they believed to be contrary to the Gospel. Because much of angelology was considered to be within this realm of speculation, there was little Protestant thinking about angels at the time. Combined with this, *Sola Scriptura* tended to place primary and even sole emphasis on what was deemed useful or edifying, and ideas which could not prove to be such were looked down upon.

One other issue for the reformers was the intercession of the Saints and Angels in human affairs. This was the primary aspect behind *Solus Christus*, which meant that only the merits of Christ (and not works of supererogation by the Saints) could be applied to human salvation. The entire construct of saints and pilgrimages were part of this system, and so many reformers saw the devotion and interest in angels by the people as part of the corruption they intended to reform. (cf Calvin’s *Institutes*, I.14.x-xii)

One other possible reason for this development was the growing use of angels in reformation debates. Although both sides used the argument to a degree, the Catholics would many times cite angelic and other mystical visions to support their cause. Eventually many in the Reformed camp would come to hold to a doctrine called “cessationism”, the idea that all miraculous gifts, visions,

and visits by angels ceased sometime after the completion of the Biblical Canon. This idea was an implication of the Reformers' concept of *Sola Scriptura*, as well as provided additional ammunition in apologetics against the Catholics' claims of miracles and visions.

Renaissance to Modern (1300's – Present)

This part will need more future research and thus is more my observations at this time

Three developing philosophies affected angelology starting with the Renaissance and concluding with the Enlightenment. Nominalism denied the existence of universals and forms, thus undermining Thomistic metaphysics. Humanism placed more emphasis on the human person, thus de-emphasizing empyrean reality. Finally, materialism and the rise of logical positivism made any discussion of unseen realities irrelevant to many people.

With the rise of nominalism, the Thomistic foundation of angels as pure forms would have to be re-evaluated. Angels were still seen as purely incorporeal spirits, but there seemed to be no new consensus on what exactly this meant. The influence of the Reformation resulted in Protestant nations having little interest in what angels were, and so the focus became more on what angels did for humans.

This flowed into humanism where the focus was on the human being as the measure of all things. For humanism angels were only important in so far as they were connected to human people and concerns. At this time angels also began to take on a more human construct in people's minds and started to look more earthly.

Materialism (the belief that all of reality is only made of matter) would of course leave no room for spirits in the world. Logical positivism (which developed into modern philosophies of science) in essence assert only things that empirical science can demonstrate are in any sense "real". As no one can place angels under a microscope for study, or observe them in the wild, they began to be regarded as imaginary stories.



Although the idea of angels as artistic and imaginary beings still survived, any concept of them being real began to fade away. In this process the modern world eliminated the middle of reality (cf Part 1) and God became more distant. Anything supernatural is either considered comedy or horror, but cannot be truly real. With the shift in worldview angels appear to be relegated either to "superstition" or something saccharine. Consequently the Church either abandons them or only talks about them when needing to defend an orthodox

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conception. They rarely form something people study in their own right as a serious topic.

In fact, angels became less serious over all. Most greeting cards with angels have representations that do little justice to the majestic and powerful beings portrayed in scripture and tradition. Shows and movies that do include angels make them more corporeal than spirit. Modern stories have continued the process of humanism by humanizing the angels and giving them many of the same human follies and emotions we experience. One exception to all this would be C.S. Lewis' Eldils in the *Space Trilogy*. They are the closest we can get in narrative form for classic angels as viewed by the Fathers and Medieval Scholastics.

Although during the 1970's there was a resurgence in interest in angels, much of what came out of it was not Christian. Christians seemed more concerned with saying what angels weren't than what they are. Ironically, or maybe fittingly, this only preached to the choir and the people wanting more out of life than utilitarian materialism did not find it in the Church. In the end most of the thinking about the supernatural was left to others who developed angelologies that are highly problematic from a Christian worldview. People are looking for something supernatural, and the desire is a good thing. Unfortunately the combination of the Church's adoption of a functional materialism, cessationism, gnostic anti-sacramentalism, and obsession with "only what is practical" have left people looking for angels in other places without guides to assist in discerning the good from the bad.