

Angelic Hierarchy

Scripture Foundations

There are, as we saw, references to angel types in the Old Testament such as Cherubim and Seraphim. However there is no indication in those passages for the relationship between the types of angels. It would make sense for God to have ordered the heavenly realm in some manner, but we have few clues until the Book of Daniel.

There are two important points about angelic governance and hierarchy in Daniel 10. First, it is clear that there are angels appointed over nations of people. Michael is called “your prince” (10:21) in the same context that there appears a “prince” of Persia, (10:13) and a “prince” of Greece. (10:20) It would seem reasonable to believe that this idea covers more than just Israel, Persia, and Greece, particularly in light of Deuteronomy 32:8 and the plural “princes” in verse 21. Second, there are possibly at least three ranks listed in this passage. If there are angelic princes then it seems reasonable to assume not all angels have that title, and there are angels and prince angels. Also, Michael is not just called a prince but “one of the chief princes”. Perhaps there is also a distinction between prince angels and chief prince angels.

Aquinas and Bonaventure disagreed on the nature of these princes in the Book of Daniel. If these are both angels, then why are they working against each other? For Aquinas the fall of the angels had happened prior and so removed from positions of authority. Thus for him this passage represents angels in imperfect understanding of God's will, and so at conflict over their service.¹ Bonaventure, however, held that some princes were evil as in the case of Persia, and so had less difficulty than Aquinas with this passage.²

Another indication of angelic rank is the title of “archangel” used in the New Testament. As covered earlier, this title is used twice. Once for an angel given no name, (1 Thess 4:16) and again for Michael. (Jude 1:9) This confirms the account of Daniel that Michael has some hierarchical standing among angels which would also explain his role leading the army of heaven in Revelation 12:7.

Paul uses various names for angelic beings that imply authority, but no indication of how these terms should rank. One such list is in Ephesians 1:21 where Paul states that Christ ascended above every Principality, Power, Virtue and Dominion. This has generally been taken as a reference to spiritual beings based on a slight parallel in Ephesians 6:12 that lists Principalities, Powers, and Rulers. Whither Paul intends these terms in any technical sense or order is unclear. Many of these terms also appear in the Pseudepigrapha and not in the Old Testament, and so Paul may be drawing on those traditions.

¹ Keck, David. *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 62

² Ibid. 63

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Development of the Nine Choirs Tradition

Adapted from Davidson's Dictionary of Angels with some corrections and additions

	Apostolic Constitutions – Clementine Liturgy	St. Ambrose in Apologia Prophet David, 5	St. Jerome	Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite in De Coelesti Hierarchia	St. Gregory the Great in Homilia	Anonymous Irish. De Ordine Creaturarum
	<i>4th AD</i>	<i>4th AD</i>	<i>4th AD</i>	<i>5/6th AD</i>	<i>6th AD</i>	<i>7th AD</i>
1	Seraphim	Seraphim	Seraphim	Seraphim	Seraphim	Seraphim
2	Cherubim	Cherubim	Cherubim	Cherubim	Cherubim	Cherubim
3	Aeons	Dominations	Powers	Thrones	Thrones	Thrones
4	Hosts	Thrones	Dominions (Dominations)	Dominions	Dominions	Dominions
5	Powers	Principalities	Thrones	Virtues	Principalities	Principalities
6	Authorities	Potentates (Powers)	Archangels	Powers	Powers	Potentates (Powers)
7	Principalities	Virtues	Angels	Principalities	Virtues	Virtues
8	Thrones	Archangels		Archangels	Archangels	Archangels
9	Archangels	Angels		Angels	Angels	Angels
10	Angels					
11	Dominions					

	St. Isidore of Seville in Etymologiae	Barberini Euchologion Baptismal Exorcism	John of Damascus in De Fide Orthodoxa II.3	St. Thomas Aquinas in Summa Theologica	Dante Alighieri in The Divine Comedy XXVIII
	<i>7th AD</i>	<i>8th AD</i>	<i>8th AD</i>	<i>1225-1274AD</i>	<i>1308-1321AD</i>
1	Seraphim	Seraphim	Seraphim	Seraphim	Seraphim
2	Cherubim	Cherubim	Cherubim	Cherubim	Cherubim
3	Powers	Powers	Thrones	Thrones	Thrones
4	Principalities	Majesties	Dominions	Dominions	Dominions
5	Virtues	Lordships (Principalities?)	Powers	Virtues	Virtues
6	Dominions	Thrones	Authorities (Virtues)	Powers	Powers
7	Thrones	Archangels	Rulers (Principalities)	Principalities	Principalities
8	Archangels	Angels	Archangels	Archangels	Archangels
9	Angels		Angels	Angels	Angels
10					
11					

As can be seen from the chart above, the exact names and ordering of the angelic hierarchy has changed over time. The names come from both Scripture and Jewish tradition from the Pseudepigrapha. There are some consistencies, but overall there was no definite revelation on the subject and so the lists developed over time.

For the Western Church, the two primary influences were the lists by Gregory the Great and *Celestial Hierarchies*. Gregory based the existence of nine choirs on an allegorical reading of Luke 15:8-10 which eventually became standard in the *Glossa*

Ordinaria.³ For Gregory, the ranks of angels each had a separate function appropriate to that rank, which was the interpretation followed later by Bernard of Clairvaux. (*On Consideration V*) Principalities in these scheme were called such because of their governance of human kingdoms.⁴

In *Celestial Hierarchies* emphasis is placed on the meaning of their names and what they teach about the nature of reality. For instance, because Seraphim come from the root “to burn” they are interpreted “embodying” ultimate purification and light, (*Cel. Hier VII*) and latter as those who express the burning love for God.⁵ Another example where the Cherubim, whose supposed etymology of “fullness of knowledge” was interpreted as the knowledge and contemplation of God.⁶ (*Cel. Hier. VII*) This explains why for some theologians the Seraphim were placed above the Cherubim, because love of God was superior to knowledge and contemplation of God.⁷

Divine Council (?)

This is very much a work in progress!

Theodore E. Mullen, Jr. *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, ed. Frank M. Cross (Edwards Bro's, 1980) 24 in Harvard Semitic Monographs

Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Hosts of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Eisenbrauns, 1994)

Michael S. Heiser, “God’s Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible and Israelite Monotheism,” ETS, Orlando (Nov 1998)

Stephen F. Noll, *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness* (InterVarsity, 1998) 35-48.
<http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/>

Deuteronomy 32:8-9 ⁸ *When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; ⁹ the LORD's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.*

Psalms 82:1-8 *God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: ² "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? ³ Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. ⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." ⁵ They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. ⁶ I say, "You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; ⁷ nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince." ⁸ Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you!*

³ Keck, David. *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 55

⁴ Ibid. 62

⁵ Ibid. 59

⁶ Ibid. 60

⁷ Such as Aquinas in ST I.108.6, Ad 3

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Psalm 89:5-8 ⁵ *Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.* ⁶ *For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD,* ⁷ *a God feared in the council of the holy ones, great and awesome above all that are around him?* ⁸ *O LORD God of hosts, who is as mighty as you, O LORD? Your faithfulness surrounds you.*

As evidenced in the Church Fathers, there is a tradition that one of the primary angelic roles was, or still is, governorship over the nations of the world and all of material creation. (*Frag. Papias* 7:1, *Hermas Vis.* 3 4:1-2, *Diognetus* 7:2, *Athanagoras Plea* X, *Tertullian On Fleeing* 12) The Early Church held to some idea of a delegated sovereignty of God. This is not to say that these creatures are equal to God, but that God created a host of spirits as part of his creation of the cosmos whose function was or is to oversee his material creation.

This idea, rooted in several Old Testament passages, has been more recently acknowledged by scholars. The first passage is Deuteronomy 32:8-9 (Qumran/DSS) where God declares to Israel that he set apart Israel for himself at the time that all other nations were divided up for the “Sons of God” (LXX = “angels”). The image here is of a systematic government where God assigns angels to govern and guide all the nations except for Israel that he will govern personally.

The Psalms contain the same theme in 82 and 89. Psalm 82 in particular sets the stage for God as he judges over a court of divine/angelic beings who were perpetuating injustice. There is no indication in Scripture that God rules over a council of human kings, and even hyperbole would seem to much in this passage. The psalmist directly calls these beings “gods” (Elohim) who although being such will die just like mortals. This interpretation is confirmed by the evidence of the Ancient Near East where the high God “El” (the same name used in the Bible) sits over a council of lesser gods. (Heiser, *Divine Council* 1) It is possible that this psalm indicates even a certain amount of freedom God gave over the angels in their governance, and that it was abused. (Noll, *Angels of Light* 37) Psalm 89 continues this same theme where God is praised above the holy ones in the assembly whom these lesser spirits must bow in worship.

Job is another place that indicates a Divine Council of angels. (1:6-12) In this book Satan comes before the court of Heaven that has gathered. The fact that this is on a particular day (1:6) indicates this may have been a regular occurrence and shows the same idea of a Divine Council in Job. (Noll, 37)

In the New Testament there are no clear references to a Divine Council, and in fact this may have been done away with by the time of Zechariah. (cf Chapter 3) What exactly happened to the Divine Council is unclear. The Early and Medieval Church saw holy angels as still in this role as guides and protectors of nations. (Keck, *Angels and Angelology* 43-44, 62,) Another possibility may be that many of these did indeed get the judgment of Psalm 82, at least partially, at the ascension of Christ. This council then became the illegitimate rulers, the evil principalities and powers who tempt the nations to rebellion. (cf Noll, chapter 6)