

Angel Powers and Ministry

Angelic Powers

Angels have many powers and abilities beyond human experience. They are limited in this power, however, as only God is omnipotent. They seem to have individual limits compared to each other, such that the angel that visited Daniel needed the help of a more powerful angel to get away from Persia. (Dan 10) Also, the concept of an angelic conflict in Heaven (Rev 12) would indicate the necessity of angels to work together, showing that angels have individual limits.

Compared to humans, however, their power can seem quite unlimited. Although certainly God is the ultimate cause of all power, like in human beings we can say God has delegated that power to spiritual beings. They are credited with high wisdom, (2 Sam 14:10) and of having great power and might. (2 Peter 2:11) They have struck down people with blindness, (Gen 19:11) muteness, (Luke 1:13-20) and pestilence. (2 Sam 24:15-17) Angels have great "physical" strength from our perspective, and can easily move heavy boulders (Matt 28:2) and hold back the winds. (Rev 7:1) In the Book of Acts an angel helps Paul get out of prison by removing the shackles without touching them, opening the gates, and getting him past the guards. (Acts 12:7-10) Angels, being spirits, can also move very swiftly, (Dan 9:21) and as we saw above can likely move instantaneously.

Heralds and Messengers

Mediated Old Covenant Law

According to Jewish ideas at the time of Christ, the Old Testament law was mediated by angels. Luke, (Acts 7:53) Paul, (Gal 3:9) and the writer of the Book of Hebrews (Heb 2:2) follow this tradition as well. For both Paul and the Book of Hebrews the purpose is to compare the New Covenant with the Old. As the Old Covenant was mediated by angels it is inferior to the New which was mediated by God's Son. Oddly, the OT does not mention an angelic mediator, in fact it appears that Yahewh himself gave the law to Moses. (cf Ex 19, Lev 25:1, Num 3:1) One possibility was that in the Ancient Near East a messenger was the same as the monarch that sent them, so perhaps Moses only saw an angel, but one that was giving God's commands through himself as a messenger. Another possibility could be that the NT is referencing how the covenant played out on a daily basis. An example of this could be Exodus 23:20-23 when God sends an angel to perform the direct guiding and punishing of Israel.

Prophecy and Revelation

The most common form of angelic ministry is relying messages from God that either constitute commands or prophecy. Angels explained the meaning of prophecies (Dan 9:22, Zech 1:9) Angels visited Lot in Sodom commanding him to leave with his family. (Gen 19:15) It was an "Angel of the LORD" that stopped Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac

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and promised a blessing of descendents.¹ Angels would at times announce the births of important people such as Ishmael, (Gen 16:11) Isaac, (Gen 18:9) and Samson. (Judges 13:3) Like in the Old Testament, angels in the New Testament give revelation from God in announcing births, (Luke 1:11, 1:26-33) explaining visions, (Rev 17:7) or communicating other messages from God to his people. (Luke 24:23, Acts 1:10)

Judgment

Another major work of angels in to mediate God's judgment on the earth. God has used them to judge entire nations. Angels fought on behalf of Israel in the exodus (Exodus 33:2) and wiped out an entire army of the Assyrians. (2 Kings 19:25) It was an angel that spread the pestilence when God judged his people, (2 Sam 24:16) and another one struck down Herod with worms due to his blasphemy. (Acts 12:23) Angels will also play a primary role in the last judgment by helping separate the righteous and the wicked. (Matt 13:41-49, 2 Thess 1:7-9)

Worship and Prayer

One of the most popular iconographic representations of angels is their involvement in worship. We know that in Heaven angels are involved in the worship of God, (Isa 6:2-6, Heb 1:6, Rev 4:6-11) and according to a somewhat enigmatic passage are also present in the worship of the Church. (1 Cor 11:10) The incense used in liturgy represents the prayers of the people rising to God, (Ps 141:2) which parallels Revelation 8:3-4 where an angel is the one who physically brings these prayers before God's throne. Much of the liturgy and Christian art picks up on these images, and in Christian tradition it is said that the Church never worships alone.

Protectors

Angels are intimately involved in the life of the Church. Angels watch over the Church and see our actions, or lack of them. (1 Cor 4:9, 1 Tim 5:19) God sent an angel to shut the mouths of the lions to protect Daniel, (Dan 6:22) and sent an entire army of Angels to protect his people against the Assyrians. (2 Kings 6:13-17) The idea of angels as protectors both follows these passages as well as being a logical extension of their capacity for judgment. When God's people need supernatural assistance he sometimes sends his angels to help us. (Psalm 91)

Although it has always been agreed that angels protect the Church as a whole, since the Reformation theologians have debated the reality of individual guardian angels assigned to a specific person. The earliest tradition of the Church was always for specific guardian angels. (cf *Herm. Man.* 6 2:1-10, Gregory

¹ Although "The Angel of the Lord" may be a Christophany which will be discussed below.

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Thaumatergus *Orations* 4, 19) In fact some Church Fathers and early Christian writings suggested each person has both a good and evil angel assigned to them to tempt them on either the path of life or of death. It was not until the Reformation theologians, such as Calvin, (*Institutes* I.14.7) that this idea was brought into question.

During the Medieval Era the primary debate centered on when a person received their guardian angel.² Some held they were given at either conception or birth, but this would mean even non-Christians have a guardian angel. In those cases, it was argued, the role of the angel was to help lead the soul to Christ. Others theorized that guardian angels were given at Baptism, part of the benefits of being a member of the Church.

There are two major scriptural arguments for individual guardian angels. First Jesus declares that children have “their” angels who always “see the face of” God in Heaven. (Matt 18:10) Secondly, there is an acknowledged belief among very early Christians noted in Acts 12:15.

It is hard to have any other interpretation of Jesus’ words. At least a person has to argue that those specific children had guardian angels, but to not extrapolate this to all people, or at least all Jews and later Christians, would be very odd. It would make more sense to see Jesus arguing from common knowledge about guardian angels and pointing out that their angels intercede for them just as much as the adults.

The passage in Acts reflects a common Jewish understanding that a persons' guardian angel looked like the human person. In this passage, after Paul is freed, the Christian who answers the door thinks that it is his angel, because Paul is in jail. Although scripture does not comment on the veracity of the belief in this passage, it at least demonstrates how early the belief in guardian angels started, as this passage states their existence with little comment.

Scriptural evidence combined with the continuity of tradition gives strong legitimacy to the idea of individual guardian angels. Calvin’s argument essentially is one of negative utility. Of course God does not need to give each of us a specific angel, and he could just use his entire angel army at anytime he pleases without any angel being assigned to us. However, these types of arguments are very weak. God is a God of order, and it is very fitting for each person to be assigned an angel, furthermore we must ask the question of what God has actually done, and not base that on a minimalist concept of what he could do.

² Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, 161.

Guide the Soul at Death (psychopompoi)

Finally, angels are involved at the moment of death. The old Greek term for spirits who performed this function was “psychopompoi”. This seemed to be a common belief among the early and medieval church. In scripture it finds support possibly twice. First with the parable of Lazarus where Jesus says that he was carried by the angels to the bosom of Abraham, the blessed afterlife. (Luke 16:22) Second, in the story of Jude 9 where Archangel Michael disputes with Satan over the body of Moses. Considering all the other roles angels perform, and the reality of individual guardians, it makes sense to see them as also being with us at the moment of death to lead us into the presence of Christ.