

Specific Angels

Angel of the Lord

One mysterious angel is the “Angel of the Lord”. Sometimes Scripture merely says “an angel”, but other times uses the phrase “Angel of the Lord”. In some of these later occasions this angel is so closely tied to God as to make the angel seemingly equal to God. One case is in Exodus 3:2-4 where the “Angel of the Lord appeared to him [Moses] in a flame of fire out of a bush” and then “God called him out of the bush”. Another case is Joshua 5:14 where the Angel of the Lord accepts worship from Joshua unlike other angels. (Rev 19:10) He also acts as God in many cases such as forgiving sin, (Zech 3:4) and claims God’s actions as his own. (Judges 2:1)

Traditionally, from the Church Fathers up to and including the Reformers, the Angel of the Lord has often been considered a Christophany. Because Jesus did not come into being at the Incarnation, but always existed as God, he must have had a pre-incarnate existence during the Old Testament. It has been believed that the reason for the close connection between this angel and God is because he is really an appearance of Jesus.

On the other hand there are some legitimate issues with this view. First, the New Testament never directly makes this connection which would seem a very obvious thing to do, particularly in Hebrews. This would be such a strong argument for Christ that it seems unusual to be left out. Second, the equivalent grammatical construction in Greek is also used in the New Testament for Gabriel. (Luke 2:9) This may mean that at least not all references to an “angel of the Lord” are Christophanies, but are at times merely a grammatical clarification. Also, in the Ancient Near East, often the messenger of a King acted and spoke directly as the King. What we may be seeing in the OT is this cultural idea expressed as God’s angel acts and speaks for God himself.

Michael ("Who is like God?")

Michael (sometimes also called the *Archistrategos* or "chief-general") is possibly the most famous angel, and throughout Christian history has been the most venerated (*dulia*). He has very little mention in Scripture, but is the only one actually called an "archangel". (Jude 1:9) The other three passages are two in Daniel where he is called the prince of Israel, (Daniel 10:21, 12:1) and Revelation where he with "his angels" throws Satan out of Heaven. (Revelation 12:7)

Starting in Daniel, Michael is presented as a guardian of the nation of Israel. In what ways he is their "prince" and guardian is unclear but he seems to play a future role during judgment day on behalf of Israel. Later in Revelation that role is transferred to throwing Satan out of Heaven with no other mention of his guardianship over God's people. By tradition he is protector of the Church as the new people of God. The passage in Jude may indicate he takes responsibility as a guardian of the dead, but it may only be Moses' body. Either way the passage in Jude is an allusion to the Pseudepigraphal Book of Adam and Eve, although Jude does not indicate how much of that story he is endorsing as true.

Various legends about Michael say he was the angel who, unlike Satan, was willing the prostrate himself before Adam. His name "Who is like God?" was seen as a battle cry against the fallen angels, and he is considered to be the captain of the heavenly hosts and chief warrior angel. Often he is shown holding scales in his hand as a sign of justice and judgment. He is also seen as the angel who is in charge of guiding the Christian soul at death. Several major holy sites are dedicated in his honor. Two examples in the West are Mt. Gargano and Castel Sant'Angelo, both in Italy. In the Eastern Church a tradition as an angel of healing started in Colossae.

The shrine legend at Mt. Gargano involves a bull that was said to have wandered into the cave only to be protected from the farmer by the Archangel. Later Michael appeared to the Bishop and foretold his help at an upcoming battle against a pagan Neapolitan army. Before the battle the mountain was so full of lightening and thunder that the pagans fled, and the locals say that found footprints in the rock where Michael "landed". Either way, this place became a holy site in the 5th century. The site of Castle Sant'Angelo comes from the 6th century during the time of Pope Gregory the Great. A plague had decimated Rome and during the end of the plague Gregory was said to have seen an apparition of Michael sheaving his sword over the old Mausoleum of Hadrian, supposedly as a sign that the judgment of God on some growing idolatry in Rome was over. The Mausoleum had already been fortified before his time and so it became rededicated as the "Castle of the Holy Angel" and was used frequently as a Papal refuge.

In the Eastern Church he is seen as an angel of healing stemming from a legend connected to the ancient city of Colossae in Asia Minor. According to legend a group of pagans attempted to destroy a shrine in honor of St. Michael

by diverting a flow of water into it. Michael appeared and saved the shrine by splitting a rock for the water to flow into. These waters become associated with healing as well as St. Michael. The shrine no longer exists as the city has become a ruin.

Gabriel (“Strong man of God”)

Although never directly called an Archangel in scripture, tradition pre-dating the New Testament ranks him with Michael as an archangel. The only title Gabriel gives himself is as one who “stands in the presence of God”. (Luke 1:19) Gabriel appears three times in scripture, twice in Daniel, once to announce the birth of John the Baptist, and finally at the Annunciation. In both Daniel passages (8:15-17, 9:20-22) Gabriel explains and responds to Daniel’s visions. Gabriel’s role in Luke 1:19-28 is very similar in giving important revelation. It is though this later event that he is often called the Angel of the Annunciation.

Throughout the Pseudepigrapha Gabriel is listed with Michael, Raphael, and Uriel. His importance in Christian tradition developed with the rise in the importance of Mary during the Medieval Era. In Christian iconography he is represented with a lily, possibly due to traditional connections with him and childbirth.

Raphael (“God heals”)

Raphael is ranked with the other archangels due to the Book of Tobit, part of the Deuterocanonicals/ Apocrypha. This book was accepted as scripture by the early middle ages in the West and very early in the East, and thus Raphael is considered a scriptural angel by both churches. The story of Raphael is Tobit is summed up in Tobit 3:17:

And Raphael was sent to heal the two of them: to scale away the white films of Tobit's eyes; to give Sarah the daughter of Raguel in marriage to Tobias the son of Tobit, and to bind Asmodeus the evil demon, because Tobias was entitled to possess her. At that very moment Tobit returned and entered his house and Sarah the daughter of Raguel came down from her upper room.

Beyond his primary appearances in Tobit he is found throughout the Pseudepigrapha listed with Michael, Gabriel, and sometimes Uriel. His connection as the one who bound the demon Asmodeus is also found in the *Testament of Solomon* 5:9-10 (24). Due to these writings and his name etymology he is strongly associated with healing. Often he is represented as a traveler and associated with safety on a journey based on the events of Tobit where he disguised himself to travel with Tobias.

Uriel ("Fire/Light of God")

Uriel has an interesting history. He first appears in the Apocrypha, (2 Esdras¹ 4:1, 5:20-22, 10:27) and Pseudepigrapha. In the Pseudepigrapha he mostly appears in 1 Enoch, but also in other books such as the Life of (Book of) Adam and Eve 48:4-7. In the Western Church he was listed among a list of angels condemned by a local council that met at Rome in 745AD. During the time of St. Boniface in Germany, a man named Adelbert claimed to have received powers from an angel and birth to perform miracles, and the sect he started seemed to involve some heresies involving angels. Pope Zachary called a local council in response and condemned the group as heresy, helping Boniface with his mission work. Part of these condemnations included the requirement that only angels with Biblical support can be venerated, specifying Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. Among the angels condemned was Uriel. Thus in the Western Church he has played a minor role, but in spite of this condemnation has received a reprieve from tradition. Though he is rarely on any official lists and does not have a feast day, he still appears frequently in art and at times even in official artwork of churches. As this was a local Western council it had no effect in the East and Uriel is held as one of the Archangels by the Orthodox.

¹ Sometimes also labeled as "4 Ezra/Esdras". The book possibly dates to the 1st century but was never accepted into either the Protestant or Catholic canons (thus it is part of the apocrypha but not the deuterocanonicals) It has, however, been accepted into the canons of some churches among the Oriental Orthodox.

Other Names

Jeremiel

Appears in the apocryphal book 2 Esdras 4:36 as well as 1 Enoch. Usually part of early lists of Archangels. Sometimes this angel is connected with being the same as Uriel.

Salathiel

Briefly mentioned in 2 (4) Esdras 5:16. NRSV as “Phaltiel”. Reveals prophecy to Ezra.

Metatron

Popular legendary angel connected to the Pseudepigrapha. In 3 Baruch and Jewish lore he is connected with Enoch. In Gen 5:24 Enoch was said to have walked with God and was no more because “God took him”. Later legend elaborated on this to say Enoch ascended into heaven to become one of the greatest angels. The etymology of the name is highly disputed and remains unclear. Although never playing any prominent role even in Pseudepigrapha outside of the Book of Enoch he became a major name in later Jewish tradition and mysticism where he was often associated with "The Angel of the Lord".

Thegri

From *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Visions 4.2.4. Not much else is ever said and there seems to be no prior tradition. His name does not follow the normal convention of ending in “el”. He is called a master of beasts.

Humanity and Angels

How we compare

Similarities

- ✘ Created by God for his purposes
- ✘ Made to glorify God
- ✘ Both have intellect and will

Differences

- ✘ Humans are both physical and spiritual beings
- ✘ Therefore we have, by good design, limits based on physicality

Bad theology to avoid

“Angel Religion”

This does not mean the worship of angels (although that it also problematic) but an attempt to live the Christian life as if we were angels. It is good to emulate angels in morality and prayer, but angels are also fundamentally different from us and so interact with God differently. Since angels are bodiless they worship God in an entirely spiritual manner. Also, because of their nature they had an instantaneous confirmation in grace. Humans, however, worship God as embodied creatures and without an instantaneous perfection in grace. Disembodied spirituality is one that has an aversion to the necessity or even benefit of our physicality. An avoidance of all ritual or religious institutions would be an example. When sacraments are viewed only in the negative, ie we need them because God knows our weaknesses for the material world, as opposed to a positive, that God gave us the great gift of interacting with him through his creation, we have stumbled into angel religion.

“Angel Ethics”

Angel ethics is the attempt to create an ethic that is coterminous with knowledge. Angels are good inherently because they perfectly contemplate the highest good, God. For an angel, to know the good is to be good. Humans, however, can perfectly know what is right and do evil anyway. Angelic ethics is occurs when sin is called “ignorance” instead of evil, as if the real problem is lack of knowledge. Humans, unlike angels, have to use their reason willingly to regulate their desires. Angel ethics in Christianity is one that also demands an unmediated and instantaneous sanctification.

Conclusions

What we can learn

- ✘ God has made a wide variety of creatures in his universe
- ✘ God is the source of ultimate goodness, angels are not good because they are spirits, but good because of God
- ✘ We have many powerful allies in the spiritual world, God uses his angels to watch over us
- ✘ We as humans have a special role to play in God’s creation