



# Angels: God's Messengers

## SESSION 1

*What does the Bible teach about angels, and how do these views compare to ways that angels are portrayed today?*

### Introduction

What do angels do? The Greek word *angelos*, from which “angel” is derived, means “messenger.” In the Bible, angels are often portrayed as messengers from God, but biblical accounts reveal that they serve in many other capacities as well: they are warriors, rescuers, givers of praise, and agents of punishment. Today, angels are also portrayed in the popular media as offering comfort, psychological healing, and relationship advice, and as escorting souls to the afterlife.

But before we proceed to look more closely at such beliefs and where they have come from, we must acknowledge that some will say, “Why bother? It’s all nonsense.” Skeptical by nature or upbringing, such Christians may sing “Angels We Have Heard on High” at Christmas, but they do not believe that angels are real or regard teachings about them as important. There will probably always be disagreements among Christians about angels. Such disagreements trace back at least to the Reformation, and have grown over time. Even for angel skeptics, however, attention to angels is worth the bother because in the Bible as well as in popular culture today, *angel talk is never merely about angels*. Rather, such talk nearly always addresses other questions as well, including:

- How God is active in the world;
- How we mortals may enter into God’s presence;
- Whether God protects us in times of physical or moral danger;



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- How God guides us in the right course of action;
- What happens when we depart from God’s way by succumbing to temptation; and
- Whether and how God is present with us at death.

Attention to what biblical authors have said about angels helps us to address these and other crucial life questions. Attention to what people today say about angels helps us critically to examine certain widespread assumptions about God and the world, and thus better understand our own cultural context.

This session offers a broad survey of the history of angels, beginning in the biblical era and moving to the present. The survey will help us to see how our society’s crazy quilt of beliefs about angels came to be. In the second session we will consider the relationship between Christian claims about angels and our understanding of the person and work of Christ.

## Early Beliefs

When the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds outside Bethlehem and declared the good news of Jesus' birth, suddenly "there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host," offering their praises to God (Luke 2:8–13 KJV). Luke, like Old Testament authors before him, assumed that readers would understand who these angels were and that their presence revealed God's hand. Biblical writers could make such assumptions because belief in angels was prevalent in the ancient Near Eastern cultures that surrounded the people of Israel and with whom Israel had much in common. The biblical idea of a heavenly "host" (a multitude of angels) parallels belief in these other cultures in an assembly of divine beings who helped the high God bring the cosmos into being and who continued to help direct its course. In other cultures, such beliefs were part of a polytheistic worldview in which gods existed in hierarchies, with some functioning as greater and lesser rulers over various domains, some as warriors, and some as messengers.

Biblical authors affirmed the oneness of the creator God, YHWH (called "the LORD" in many modern translations). Yet, biblical authors did incorporate some elements of the surrounding worldview into their own thinking. Some Old Testament authors assume, for example, that there is a divine court comparable to the court of an earthly king, and heavenly soldiers and messengers (angels) paralleling earthly ones:

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,  
and his kingdom rules over all. Bless the LORD, O  
you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding,  
obedient to his spoken word. Bless the LORD, all his  
hosts, his ministers that do his will.

(Ps. 103:19–21)

Just as the human king has emissaries to do his bidding, so there are "angels, mighty ones" who do God's bidding. Just as an earthly army fights on Israel's behalf, so the heavenly hosts, the "ministers that do God's will," fight from heaven for God's people (see, for example, Deut. 33:2–3). The walls separating the earthly and heavenly realms could be breached: occasionally, individual angels or the assembled host manifested themselves to humans. And prophets could be summoned to stand among the angels, before the very throne of God. So it happened with the prophet Micaiah, who reported seeing "the LORD sitting on his throne, with all the host

of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him" (1 Kgs. 22:19).

Some Old Testament passages depict an angel identified as "the angel of the LORD." This being conveys God's word to humans selected as instruments to carry out the divine will. Thus, when a paid visionary, Balaam, goes out to curse Israel—contrary to God's will that Israel be blessed—"the angel of the LORD" comes to open Balaam's eyes and set him on the right path (Num. 22:22–40). Or, when God foresees the need for a strong warrior to deliver Israel from the Philistines, "the angel of the LORD" tells the wife of Manoah that she will bear a son who will be consecrated from birth for this God-given task (Judg. 13:3–21).

In a number of such accounts, God and the angel of the Lord seem to be one and the same because the narrator switches back and forth between them, seemingly at random. For example, the narrator of the Balaam story indicates that it was the Lord, rather than the angel of the Lord, who opened the donkey's mouth and Balaam's eyes (Num. 22:28, 31); moreover, when speaking to Balaam, the angel uses the pronoun "I" as if he were God (v. 35; compare v. 8). In the story of the burning bush, at first it is said to be the angel who appears to Moses, but thereafter it is God (Exod. 3:1–4:17). Such alternation conveys two points, both true although seemingly in tension. First, *God is so holy that humans cannot see the face of God and live* (Exod. 33:20). Second, *God truly is present in these encounters*. As James Kugel remarks, the angel in these switching stories "is not some lesser order of divine being; it is God Himself, but God unrecognized, God intruding into ordinary reality."<sup>1</sup>

## Angels Multiply

In the centuries leading up to the time of Jesus, interest in angels grew. Both noncanonical and canonical works from this era indicate that some Jews had begun to think of angels as individuals with names. The Old Testament had included only two references to named angels, Michael and Gabriel, both appearing in Daniel, the latest book in the Old Testament. The book *1 Enoch* (a composite work, written over several centuries beginning in the fourth century BCE) mentions dozens of named, wicked angels who tried to disrupt the functioning of the cosmos in the primeval era, and good angels who assisted God in punishing them. Other works portray angels as offering routine, sustained intervention in

human life. For example, the book of Tobit<sup>2</sup> depicts the angel “Raphael” coming incognito to the young man Tobias, accompanying him on a journey, arranging a suitable marriage for him, and healing his pious father, Tobit, of blindness. The book *Testament of Abraham* (first century CE) depicts both the angel Michael and the angel-like figure of Death intervening to end Abraham’s life and escort his soul to heaven. New Testament authors portray angels delivering messages, both in person and in dreams, and rescuing people from dire situations. They also anticipate angels’ involvement in Jesus’ return and other end-time events, envision choirs of angels surrounding the throne of God, and assume that after death the righteous will join the angelic assembly.<sup>3</sup> Many beliefs about angels that are held even today can be traced back to these few centuries of expanding angelology.

There were other important developments in angel belief in the centuries both immediately before and after the time of Jesus. In earlier Old Testament writings, as we saw above, the angel of the Lord had been portrayed as nearly interchangeable with God—as representing God’s presence in a form that humans could bear. But as centuries passed, the angel of the Lord was viewed more and more as a being wholly separate from God. Some Jews began to identify the angel of the Lord with Michael, Gabriel, or other named angels, and to see him as head of the angelic host and chief mediator between God and humans.

Meanwhile, other writers described certain *attributes* of God (such as God’s word, glory, wisdom, spirit, power, and name) using language that they borrowed from earlier scriptural descriptions of the angel of the Lord. Indeed, the prophet Ezekiel had already done something like this when he described his vision of “the likeness of the glory of the LORD” in ways that harkened back to previous scriptural portrayals of God’s angel (Ezek. 1:26–28). Early Christians added a new layer to the pattern of interpreting God’s glory, word, and so on as an angel-like figure: they identified these divine attributes with the preexistent and resurrected Christ. In their view, *Jesus* was the word, the glory, and the wisdom of God; indeed, it was none other than Jesus whom the prophet Ezekiel had envisioned upon the throne.

## Angels through the Centuries

In the early centuries of the Common Era, Christian writers continued to take the existence of angels for granted



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and to elaborate on their roles in the drama of salvation. Such writers were particularly interested in the relationship between Jesus and the angels. Some portrayed angels as friends of the bridegroom who led the bride (the church) to Christ. This metaphor served to keep the angels always subordinate to Christ, who is not merely a friend but the bridegroom himself. (Concern to show Christ’s superiority to the angels was evident already in the New Testament era: in Heb. 1:4 we read that Jesus had “become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”)

Ideas about guardian angels (that is, individual angels assigned to each believer) also developed in the early centuries of the life of the church. Some imagined not one guardian angel assigned to us, but two: an evil angel and a righteous one. The former tempt us to disobedience while the latter encourage us to persevere in goodness.

In the sixth century CE, a writer who billed himself as “Dionysius the Areopagite” (see Acts 17:34) described an elaborate hierarchy or ordering of the ranks of heavenly angels. In his portrayal, there are nine tiers of angels, arranged in groups of three: the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones; the dominions, powers, and authorities; the principalities, archangels, and angels. For centuries, *The Celestial Hierarchy* by Pseudo-Dionysius was regarded as a first-century writing, and it shaped medieval ideas about angels, including the work of the thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas (known as “Dr. Angelicus”). One still sees references to Pseudo-Dionysius’s angelic hierarchy in some recent Catholic (and also some New Age) writings about angels.

Reformation leaders affirmed the existence of angels, yet changed the conversation in fundamental ways. Martin Luther believed in angels and the devil, but disputed the authenticity of *The Celestial Hierarchy* (a stance that contributed to his being condemned by the Sorbonne in 1521). Also a believer, John Calvin described angels as “celestial spirits whose ministry and service God uses

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At the end of Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address he remarked about heeding "the better angels of our nature."

to carry out all things he has decreed" and as ones in whom "the brightness of the divine glory" shines forth richly. Yet, Calvin was highly skeptical about teachings in his day concerning guardian angels and the angelic hierarchy. Calvin warned Christians not to speculate on questions about angels not answerable from Scripture. He worried that humans too easily drift toward belief "that angels are the ministers and dispensers of all good things to us," and so ascribe to the angels roles that are more properly ascribed to God and Christ.

The long-term effect of the Reformers' skepticism on certain aspects of angel piety was to tamp down popular Protestant belief in angels. Angels were still viewed as having been present at creation and the birth of Christ, and it was assumed that they would be active again at the return of Christ and final judgment. But no longer were they seen as routinely altering the course of events in believers' daily lives—for example, by protecting them from danger or offering moral guidance. In the centuries since the Reformation, the trend has continued, with Catholics manifesting livelier belief than Protestants in the regular intervention of angels, especially guardian angels. In the decades after Vatican II, even Catholic belief in angels seemed to recede—at least until the flowering of interest in angels that took place in the last decade of the twentieth century.

The fascination with angels in the 1990s crossed denominational lines and included people who identify themselves as "spiritual" rather than "religious" (or Christian). For many—especially those raised with a caricature of God as distant and judgmental—angels seem to offer easy, unintimidating access to divine presence and power. As depicted in popular media, angels affirm rather than judge, comfort rather than challenge, and give without making demands. They encourage humans to seize the day and appreciate the beauty around them. They rescue people from the dangers that are part of mortal existence. Angels have long been said to do many of these same things and possess many of these same qualities. Yet,

the overall emphasis and net effect are different today than in past eras of the church, because Western society is no longer one in which the sovereignty of God and the centrality of Christ are taken for granted. Thus, in many portrayals angels seem to possess great autonomy and authority. They lead people to self-actualization but they do not necessarily lead them to Christ. Representations of angels today should always be read or viewed with discernment. Such portrayals may claim to offer answers, but they should also provoke us to ask questions—questions that will in turn help us to think more closely about our own discipleship.

## Summary

Millennia-long tradition asserts that, unlike God, angels can be both seen and heard. Therefore, as God's ministers or representatives, angels offer a way to envision God's earthly presence and interaction with us mortal beings. Biblical writers and countless people since have claimed to know God more fully because of the celestial spirits who serve God as couriers, soldiers, rescuers, and manifestations of the best aspects of God's being. Attention to beliefs about angels helps us to discern what is otherwise unseen: namely, assumptions that shape human relationships to God and to the world. In the next session, we will see how attention to angels may also affect how we live as disciples of Christ and as "angels"—messengers of God and vehicles of God's presence—to one another.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 34.
2. Written in the third or second century BCE; it is part of the Catholic Bible but not the Protestant one.
3. Angels as messengers: Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 1:5–20, 26–38; as rescuers: Acts 5:17–20; 12:5–11; involved in Jesus' return and the end times: Matt. 13:41–42; 16:27; Rev. 7:1–3 (and numerous other passages in Revelation); surrounding God's throne: Matt. 18:10; Rev. 5:11; compare Dan. 7:10). The dead participating in the angelic assembly: Matt. 13:43; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 7:9–17.