

Angels: God's Messengers

Background Information



An **angel** is a pure spirit created by God. The Old Testament theology included the belief in angels: the name applied to certain spiritual beings or intelligences of heavenly residence, employed by God as the ministers of His will.

The English word "angel" comes from the Greek *angelos*, which means 'messenger'. In the Old Testament, with two exceptions, the Hebrew word for "angel" is *malak*, also meaning 'messenger'. The prophet Malachi took his name from this word. He was himself a messenger, and he prophesied about the coming of "the messenger of the covenant", Jesus Christ ([Malachi 3:1](#)).

Although the word "angel" in the Bible, meaning a messenger, nearly always applies to heavenly beings, it can occasionally apply to human messengers. Malachi himself said a priest was a messenger (*malak*) of the LORD of hosts ([Malachi 2:7](#)), and in the Book of Revelation the elders of the seven churches of Asia were called angels ([1:20](#); [2:1](#) etc.). But when we meet messengers doing supernatural things, there is no doubt they are heavenly beings - God's messengers, working for Him and for the ultimate benefit of mankind.

More on Angels

An angel (from the Greek ἄγγελος - *ángelos*^[1]) is a supernatural being or spirit, often depicted in humanoid form with feathered wings on their backs and halos around their heads, found in various religions and mythologies.

The theological study of angels is known as "angelology" . In Zoroastrianism and Abrahamic religions they are often depicted as benevolent celestial beings who act as intermediaries between Heaven and Earth, or as guardian spirits or a guiding influence.
^[2]

The term "angel" has also been expanded to various notions of spirits found in many other religious traditions. Other roles of angels include protecting and guiding human beings, and carrying out God's tasks.^[3]

In art, angels are often depicted with bird-like wings on their back, a halo, robes and various forms of glowing light.^[4]

Christian art perhaps reflects the descriptions in Revelation 4:6–8 of the Four Living Creatures (Greek: τὰ τέσσαρα ζῶα) and the descriptions in the Hebrew Bible of cherubim and seraphim (the *chayot* in Ezekiel's Merkabah vision and the Seraphim of Isaiah). However, while cherubim and seraphim have wings in the Bible, no angel is mentioned as having wings.^[35]

Judaism

Scholar Michael D. Coogan notes that it is only in the late books that the terms "come to mean the benevolent semidivine beings familiar from later mythology and art."^[15] Daniel is the first biblical figure to refer to individual angels by name,^[16] mentioning Gabriel (God's primary messenger) in Daniel 9:21 and Michael (the holy fighter) in Daniel 10:13. These angels are part of Daniel's apocalyptic visions and are an important part of all apocalyptic literature.^[15] Coogan explains the development of this concept of angels: "In the postexilic period, with the development of explicit monotheism, these divine beings—the 'sons of God' who were members of the Divine Council—were in effect demoted to what are now known as 'angels', understood as beings created by God, but immortal and thus superior to humans."^[15] This conception of angels is best understood in contrast to demons and is often thought to be "influenced by the ancient Persian religious tradition of Zoroastrianism, which viewed the world as a battleground between forces of good and forces of evil, between light and darkness."^[15] One of these is *hāšāṭān*, a figure depicted in (among other places) the Book of Job.



Three angels hosted by Abraham, Ludovico Carracci (1555–1619), Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale.

Philo of Alexandria identifies the angel with the Logos as far as the angel is the immaterial voice of God. The angel is something different than God Himself, but is conceived as God's instrument.^[17]

In post-Biblical Judaism, certain angels took on particular significance and developed unique personalities and roles. Though these archangels were believed to rank among the heavenly host, no systematic hierarchy ever developed. Metatron is considered one of the highest of the angels in Merkabah and Kabbalist mysticism and often serves as a scribe; he is briefly mentioned in the Talmud^[18] and figures prominently in Merkabah mystical texts. Michael, who serves as a warrior and advocate for Israel (Daniel 10:13), is looked upon particularly fondly. Gabriel is mentioned in the Book of Daniel (Daniel 8:15–17), the Book of Tobit, and briefly in the Talmud,^[19] as well as in many Merkabah mystical texts.

Famous angels and their tasks

From the Jewish Encyclopedia, entry "angelology".^[22]

Individual angels

- Michael (translation: *who is like God?*), kindness of God
- Gabriel (archangel) (translation: *the strength of God*), performs acts of justice and power
- Raphael (translation: *God Heals*), God's healing force
- Uriel (translation: *God is my light*), leads us to destiny
- Samael (translation: *the severity of God*), angel of death—see also Malach HaMavet (translation: *the angel of death*)
- Sandalphon (translation: *bringing together*), battles Samael and brings mankind together
- Camael/Chamuel (translation: *one who seeks God*), expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden holding a flaming sword and punishes those who transgress against God
- Sataniel/Satan (translation: *the adversary*),^[23] tempts humans, serves as an adversary, and brings people's sins before them in the heavenly court
- Metatron (translation is disputed, may mean "keeper of the watch", "guardian", or "he who sits behind the throne of Heaven"), God's heavenly scribe recording the deeds of all that is done in Earth and Heaven and all of Creation.

Christianity

Later Christians inherited Jewish understandings of angels, which in turn may have been partly inherited from the Egyptians.^[24] In the early stage, the Christian concept of an angel characterized the angel as a messenger of God. Angels are creatures of good, spirits of love, and messengers of the savior Jesus Christ.^[25] Later came identification of individual angelic messengers: Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, Uriel, and Lucifer. Then, in the space of little more than two centuries (from the 3rd to the 5th) the image of angels took on definite characteristics both in theology and in art.^[26]

By the late 4th century, the Church Fathers agreed that there were different categories of angels, with appropriate missions and activities assigned to them. There was, however, some disagreement regarding the nature of angels. Some argued that Angels had physical bodies,^[27] while some maintained that they were

entirely spiritual. Some theologians had proposed that angels were not divine but on the level of immaterial beings subordinate to the Trinity. The resolution of this Trinitarian dispute included the development of doctrine about angels.^[28]

The angels are represented throughout the Christian Bible as a body of spiritual beings intermediate between God and men: "You have made him (man) a little less than the angels ..." (Psalms 8:4-5). Some Christians believe that angels are created beings, and use the following passage as evidence: "praise ye Him, all His angels: praise ye Him, all His hosts ... for He spoke and they were made. He commanded and they were created ..." (Psalms 148:2-5; Colossians 1:16). The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) declared that the angels were created beings. The Council's decree *Firmiter credimus* (issued against the Albigenses) declared both that angels were created and that men were created after them. The First Vatican Council (1869) repeated this declaration in *Dei Filius*, the "Dogmatic constitution on the Catholic faith". Of note is that the Bible describes the function of angels as "messengers" and does not indicate when the creation of angels occurred.^{[29][30]} Thomas Aquinas (13th century) relates angels to Aristotle's metaphysics in his *Summa contra Gentiles*,^[31] *Summa Theologica*,^[32] and in *De substantiis separatis*,^[33] a treatise on angelology.

Many Christians regard angels as asexual and not belonging to either gender as they interpret Matthew 22:30 in this way. Angels are on the other hand usually depicted in painting and sculpture as looking like male human beings. Their names are also masculine. And although angels have greater knowledge than men, they are not omniscient, as Matthew 24:36 points out.^[34] Christian art perhaps reflects the descriptions in Revelation 4:6–8 of the Four Living Creatures (Greek: τὰ τέσσαρα ζῶα) and the descriptions in the Hebrew Bible of cherubim and seraphim (the chayot in Ezekiel's Merkabah vision and the Seraphim of Isaiah). However, while cherubim and seraphim have wings in the Bible, no angel is mentioned as having wings.^[35]

Interaction with angels

"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."^[Hebrews 13:2]

The New Testament includes many interactions and conversations between angels and humans. For instance, three separate cases of angelic interaction deal with the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. In Luke 1:11, an angel

appears to Zechariah to inform him that he will have a child despite his old age, thus proclaiming the birth of John the Baptist^[36] And in Luke 1:26 the archangel Gabriel visits the Virgin Mary in the Annunciation to foretell the birth of Jesus Christ.^[37] Angels then proclaim the birth of Jesus in the Adoration of the shepherds in Luke 2:10.^[38]

Angels also appear later in the New Testament. In Luke 22:43 an angel comforts Jesus Christ during the Agony in the Garden.^[39] In Matthew 28:5 an angel speaks at the empty tomb, following the

Resurrection of Jesus and the rolling back of the stone by angels.^[40] Hebrews 13:2 reminds the reader that they may "entertain angels unaware".^[41]



An angel comforting Jesus, by Carl Heinrich Bloch, 1865–1890.

References:

<http://www.catholic.org/saints/angels/>