

ANGELS: MESSENGERS AND MINISTERS OF GOD

Few biblical topics have provoked more wild speculation and fruitless debate than the topic of angels. Scripture doesn't begin to answer all our questions about the subject. But there's a lot more information about angels in the Bible than you might think. (As a matter of fact, the Old and New Testaments combined speak of angels more than 250 times.) And it's important that we understand the biblical doctrine of angels correctly, especially in an age like ours, when so much popular superstition surrounds and obscures the truth about these glorious creatures.

How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? The question is raised nowadays only to caricature people who like to indulge in useless squabbling over theological fine points. But some theologians in the middle ages were seriously intrigued by that question — and many other interesting enigmas like it. Prior to the Reformation, practically every imaginable question about angels was a subject of debate at one point or another. Nineteenth-century Baptist theologian Augustus Strong pointed out that in medieval theology, “even the excrements of angels were subjects of discussion, for if there was ‘angels’ food’ ([Ps. 78:25](#)), and if angels ate ([Gen. 18:8](#)), it was argued that we must take the logical consequences.”

If medieval doctrine seemed obsessed with mysterious fine points about angelology, the focus of twentieth-century theology swung about as far as possible to the opposite extreme. Someone might point out that for the past twenty-five years or so (owing mainly to a handful of fiction



writers who captured the evangelical market), demons have loomed large in the popular evangelical consciousness. But sensationalized novels about demonic activity don't constitute authentic theological discourse. And considered as a whole, it seems fair to say that the body of serious Reformed and evangelical writing over the past century has shown remarkable apathy about angelology.

Ironically, while interest in demonic activity has been on the rise among Christians, angels have become an extremely popular topic once again among non-Christians. The rising tide of New Age spirituality, spurred by a profound backlash against sterile secular rationalism, has awakened a widespread curiosity about angels and the spirit-world.

So just as modernity led to a diminished interest in angels, postmodernity has resurrected a superstitious belief in them. This presents Christians with a unique



opportunity to shed biblical light on a spiritual topic the world is currently showing interest in learning about. Of course, it is by no means possible in one short article to make up for the egregious deficiency of a century of evangelical apathy on this topic, but perhaps we can make a helpful start by highlighting some of the key biblical truths and answering some of the popular misconceptions about angels.

Angels are spiritual creatures. Scripture speaks of the angels' creation only in passing. They are not explicitly mentioned in Genesis 1, so the precise timing of their creation is uncertain. [Job 38:7](#) seems to speak of the angels' worshiping when God laid the foundations of the earth, so their creation could well have occurred at the very start of day one in the six-day time frame. Nevertheless, Scripture plainly teaches that angels are creatures, and not

eternal beings of some kind. God "alone has immortality" ([1 Tim. 6:16](#)). And [Psalm 148:1–5](#) is a summons for the angels, along with the rest of creation, to worship. It says, "Let them praise the name of the Lord! For he commanded and they were created" (v. 5). [Colossians 1:15–17](#) also indicates that the angels were created by Christ and therefore are subordinate to Him.

They are spirit-beings ([Ps. 104:4](#); [Heb. 1:7, 14](#)) and therefore incorporeal as to their nature, but they are capable at times of assuming at least the appearance (if not the actual, albeit temporary, form) of bodily organisms ([Gen. 19:1–14](#); [John 20:12](#)). They can do this so perfectly that they are easily mistaken for humans ([Ezek. 9:2](#); [Heb. 13:2](#)). But because we know that "a spirit does not have flesh and bones" ([Luke 24:39](#)), we ought to understand that these occasional visible manifestations of angels are an accommodation to the limitations of human perception, and not a lesson about the true and essential character of angels.

Angels are personal and moral beings. Angels are always portrayed with personal attributes, including intelligence, volition, and a moral nature. Their wisdom and power are vastly superior to our human abilities ([2 Sam. 14:20](#); [Ps. 103:20](#)), but their knowledge is by no means exhaustive (there are "things into which angels long to look," [1 Peter 1:12](#); as well as facts they do not know, [Matt. 24:36](#)).

Proof that angels are moral agents, capable of sin and righteousness, is evident from the fact that some did sin ([2 Peter 2:4](#)). [Jude 6](#) suggests that they did this by exceeding their legitimate authority

and abandoning “their proper dwelling.” Apparently this was an organized rebellion, led by Satan. The apostle John’s vision in [Revelation 12:1–9](#) seems to refer to Satan’s original fall, suggesting perhaps that as many as a third of the angels followed him in his rebellion, and that is why they were cast down.

The angels who did not sin are referred to as “holy angels” ([Mark 8:38](#); [Luke 9:26](#)). The angels are a mighty multitude. Without giving any hint as to their actual number, Scripture makes it clear that the angelic host is a vast and imposing army. The expression “host of heaven,” often used to signify the angels ([Deut. 4:19](#); [2 Chron. 18:18](#); [Luke 2:13](#)), suggests an innumerable throng (see [Jer. 33:22](#)).

The angels were apparently created all at once, yet individually. They are never portrayed as a race descended from a common ancestor ([Luke 20:34–36](#)). Humans are called “sons of men,” but angels are never called “sons of angels.” As a matter of fact, Jesus emphatically said that angels do not marry ([Matt. 22:30](#)). As to gender, they are always referred to with masculine pronouns — but since they have no feminine counterparts and are spiritual beings who do not procreate, it would seem that they cannot meaningfully be categorized as either male or female.

But they are nonetheless organized in ranks and legions similar to a massive army. Again, the expression “host of heaven” evokes the idea of an armed company. Jesus said on the night of His betrayal that he could have instantly summoned “more than twelve legions of

angels” to fight on His behalf ([Matt. 26:53](#)).

The orders of angels are not fully enumerated or explained by the Bible. But the angelic host includes at least one archangel, the seraphim, and the cherubim. The archangel, Michael, is named in [Daniel 10:13, 21](#); [Jude 9](#); and [Revelation 12:7](#). He seems to be the highest of all angelic creatures. Only one other holy angel, Gabriel, is explicitly named ([Dan. 8:16](#); [9:21](#); [Luke 1:19, 26](#)). Some think he is therefore similar in rank to Michael, but Scripture doesn’t actually designate Gabriel as an archangel.

The seraphim are mentioned only in the heavenly vision recounted in [Isaiah 6:2–6](#), where the prophet describes them as glorious and imposing figures who stand before God’s throne and praise Him constantly, guarding the holiness of His throne.



The cherubim, far from the chubby-faced childlike figures often pictured in popular art, seem to represent the power and majesty of the angelic host. They were positioned as guards by the entrance of Eden ([Gen. 3:24](#)). They were also the symbolic guardians of the ark of the

covenant ([Ex. 37:7](#)). And they formed a living chariot of fire on which the Lord would ride ([2 Sam. 22:11](#); [Ps. 18:10](#); see also [Ezek. 10:1–22](#)). They are always described as fearsome and awe-inspiring creatures.

Other angelic beings are called thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers ([Col. 1:16](#)). Similar terms are applied even to the fallen angels ([Eph. 6:12](#); [Col. 2:15](#)). But the precise number and arrangement of the heavenly host is one of the many questions about angels that are left unanswered for us in Scripture.

Angels are God’s unseen ministers. One of the most interesting questions of all about angels has to do with their unseen service on behalf of believers. Scripture portrays angels as caretakers of God’s providence on our behalf — “ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation” ([Heb. 1:14](#)). In [Matthew 18:10](#), Jesus (speaking of His own tender care for little children) said, “I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven” — suggesting that specific angels have guardianship of specific individuals. And [Hebrews 13:2](#) says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Very little further explanation of the angels’ service to humans is given. Many are tempted to inquire into the matter in search of specifics that Scripture doesn’t reveal.

But we are expressly forbidden to do that. [Deuteronomy 29:29](#) says, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us

and to our children forever.” When it comes to the subject of angels, we would do well to keep reminding ourselves of those boundaries on each side of the narrow road. It will keep us from falling into the sort of superstition that dominated medieval angelology, and it will also steer us away from the apathy and rationalism that has marred modern theological thought.

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