

The Confusion of Angelology

or

What Humperdinck Knew

A Trustee Paper delivered at the Holiday Celebration of the Literary Club

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December 19, 2016

"Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing....."; "Hark, the Herald Angels sing"; "Now let us sing the Angels' song".....

In this season there are images of angels all around us as the birth of Jesus is celebrated. Hanukkah, the eight day Festival of Lights, also shines at this time, coincidentally this year beginning on Christmas Eve. I wondered what role the angels of the TaNaKh, the Hebrew acronym for the Old Testament, might have played in these celebrations. It is time for a multi-religion holiday angel hunt, an angelic archaeological dig. But this kind of archaeology can prove surprising and confusing. Please join me!

First, who believes in angels? A recent Associated Press poll found that 77% of adults believe in angels, which includes 88% of Christians, 95% of Evangelical Christians, and 94% of all those attending religious services regularly. A Baylor University poll found that 55% felt guardian angels protected them from harm, while only 37% of these with incomes over \$150,000 agreed. Oh those devils at the IRS!

In Hebrew the word "angel" is "mal'akh", meaning "messenger," human or divine. The Septuagint, the rendering of the TaNaKh, the Old Testament, from Hebrew into Greek by seventy Jewish scholars in Alexandria, third century B.C.E., translated the word "messenger" into the Greek "angelos."

Why do so many care so deeply about angels? Most civilizations portray or write of some sort of angel-equivalent, some sense of spirits lesser than an Almighty God, invisible but somehow omnipresent, helpful, friendly intermediaries between our fragile human lives and God-- or the gods. This deep yearning is reflected in Psalm 91, "For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."

Where did angels first appear? The answer to that tricky question depends on which culture and civilization you select. Sumerians of the third millennium B.C.E. worshipped at home altars honoring their guardian spirit (angel?) whose job was to mediate between the gods and their earthly suppliants. The Egyptian Book of the Dead lists 500 gods or demi-gods of which one group, the Hunmanit, were servants of the gods and portrayed as rays of the sun, winged guardians of Egyptian well-being. Rabbinic scholars in the Middle Ages actually disputed whether angels appeared on the second day of Creation, the fifth, or were they coeternal with God.¹ (As usual, two Jews, three opinions.) We meet these heavenly beings first in Genesis 2.1, "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them." We also promptly meet the cherubim, in Genesis 3:22, where they hold a flaming sword to keep man out of the Garden of Eden. These are not the cherubs of Valentine cards but winged creatures like the sphinx, half human and half lion, carrying echoes of Egyptian civilization. Some parts of the TaNaKh, believed to be among the oldest fragments, picture the Lord God seated and being praised by other lesser beings, (e.g., angels or others gods) as in Psalm 89:5-8, "And the heavens shall praise thy wonders, O Lord, thy faithfulness also in the assembly of the holy ones! For *who in the skies* can be compared to the Lord? Who among the sons of the gods is like the Lord?" Passages like this appear to describe a God from an age when it was likely that heavenly groups called "the assembly of the holy beings," "the company of the divine beings" (Psalm 29:7), the "sons of God" (lesser gods; angels) were seen as a pantheon of Beings less important than the Lord. We also hear the representation of these lesser, but still divine, Beings standing in submission or reverence before a seated God (1 Kings 29:19;

Isaiah 6:2, Job 1:6 and 2:1). The godly name El was applied to a number of leading deities of major ancient Near East religions, and evolved into the chief god of the Canaanite religion about 1400 B.C. Two hundred or so years later El became an early name (one of seven) for the unitary God of the Hebrew tribes. So the evolution of the monotheistic concept of God, and the vanishing concept of lesser heavenly Beings, gods or messenger angels, seems to have some Semitic semantic background as well.

With these suggestions of the possible angelic pedigree, let's recall some of the places where we come upon them in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Angelic appearances are crucial to the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But sometimes determining exactly what we are told of angel accomplishment can be puzzling as we face some of the important ambiguities within the TaNaKh. For example, in Genesis 18 the Lord appears to Abraham near Hebron. When Abraham looks up he sees three traveling *men*, but not one with wings or haloes, all of whom he hospitably welcomes into the family tent. But in Genesis 18:3 the three men are addressed as one, "My Lord." Then the visitor(s) are addressed as three men again; but only one of them tells Abraham that Sarah, heretofore childless, will have a son. Sarah overhears this and laughs, and suddenly the couple is conversing with the Lord, while the *men* "departed." One of these had to be the Lord conversing face to face with the aged couple, yet all three guests still looked like *men*. Confusing! Later in Genesis Jacob wrestles with a *man throughout the night* (Genesis 32:24-31), but the supernatural power of the "man" suggests to most commentators that he is an angel. When Jacob is still in the ring at daybreak, the angel pulls off an illegal move, dislocating Jacob's thigh with a touch. Nevertheless, Jacob will not surrender and is rewarded with a new name, Israel ("Triumphant with God") by that Being. Then Jacob tells us, "I have seen God face to face." So with whom did he really wrestle, man, angel, God? Joshua 5:13 also encounters a Being described simply as a man, but this man proceeds to identify himself as the Captain of the Lord of Hosts. In the next chapter, Joshua 6, however, it is the Lord God who speaks to the Hebrew warrior. Confused? Me too.

The figure of "the angel of the Lord" is theologically troublesome due to the obscure identity of that Being, as we try to understand who angels are and what they do independently of God.² In analyzing this ambiguity we find:

1. The narration introduces the angel of the Lord, often with the appearance of a man.
2. The angel behaves as if he were a deity, e.g. promising fertility to Sarah, annihilating an opposing army, (e.g. 2 Kings 19:32-36), or delivering a speech wherein he suddenly presents himself as the Lord.
3. The Biblical personage involved in the conversation then addresses and reveres the speaker in a way exclusively reserved for a deity.

So was it an angel or God who had appeared? Is mal'akh just a metaphor? I remain confused!

Well, what else can angels do? Surprisingly, Genesis 6:2-4 tells us that the sons of God (angels, probably) "came in" to the daughters of men, producing children who became "mighty men", "men of renown." So angels are libidinous, and have reproductive capabilities to sire impressive offspring! Yet, strangely, in the very next verse: "God saw that the wickedness of man was great." Are these children of angels evil? Why does God promptly send the Flood to cleanse humanity? I am again confused.

Other abilities of angels include healing from impurity (Isaiah. 6:6-7); petitioning God on behalf of the Hebrew people; becoming warriors to protect all that is good (Daniel 10:13); as teachers and interpreters in Jewish apocalyptic literature in such books as Daniel, Zachariah and Ezra; and, of course acting as mal'akhim, messengers between God and man.

Who *are* these angels? They are nameless until post-exilic times (Babylonian Exile 598-538 B.C.E), when the only two angels named in the Tanakh appear: Michael and Gabriel, both in the Book of Daniel. Michael is seen as the protector and advocate of Israel and becomes a healer and leader of Heaven's forces in defeating the fallen angels (Revelation 12:7-9) in the New Testament. Gabriel

(Daniel. 8:16, 9:20) calls to Daniel to explain an apocalyptic vision, and in the New Testament, announces the birth of Jesus. Angelic names begin to proliferate, in the New Testament (where Raphael and Uziel appear), the apocryphal Books of Enoch and of Tobit, and in many other sources, including various forms of Jewish mysticism, such as the Kabbalah.³

How many angels are there? *The Dictionary of Angels* lists 4,477 names, while fourteenth century Jewish mystics, whose calculations involved turning names into numbers, numbers into names, came up with 301,655,722. If that seems high, remember Engelbert Humperdinck's opera Hansel and Gretel, wherein we learn that "fourteen angels" (actually fourteen 14th century Helper Saints from the Rhineland during the time of the bubonic plague) guard our sleep, presumably not just when we're lost in the woods. Multiply that by seven billion inhabitants of the earth and you have a lot of angels! The Talmud, a vast third to sixth century C.E. collection of commentaries on the Tanakh and an elaboration of the civil and religious laws therein, notes the creation of Angels occurs "with every utterance that goes forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be he." A few angels, especially Michael and Gabriel, became saints in the early Church and were sometimes worshipped, but not with the approval of the bishops. Centuries passed before the Second Council of Nicaea, 787 C.E., when the bishops voiced their approval of reverent adoration, but not worship, of images of angels and saints. The Vatican has banned veneration of any angel not found in the Old or New Testaments. That must thoroughly annoy a singular American angel, the Angel Moroni, who brought New Yorker Joseph Smith to the golden plates of the Book of Mormon, which Smith published in 1830.

What do angels look like? Because Exodus 20: 4 and Deuteronomy 5:8 remind us, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above...." neither the TaNaKh nor tangible Hebrew civilization give any clues. Even though winged angels had been described in Exodus 12:39, Isaiah 6:2 and Ezekiel 1:6, the first representations of angels in Christian

art, found in the Roman Catacombs of Priscilla, third century C.E., reveal them to be wingless. Angels earned their wings for the first time in Christian art in the fourth century C.E. on a tomb painting referred to as "The Prince's Sarcophagus" near Istanbul. The idea of wings appears to have been borrowed from Roman and Greek depictions of Nike, Greek goddess of victory and other Greek gods, such as Hermes. Those cute winged baby angels, close cousins of Renaissance putti, all come from images of the Roman Cupid and Greek Eros. Halos had been employed since 300 B.C.E. in Hellenistic art to signify holiness, innocence, and/or power, but Jesus is first painted with a halo in the mid-fourth century. About a hundred year later angels occasionally sported a halo too, and by the sixth century C.E. angels and saints all wear them. What about harps? There are none in the Tanakh and only a brief mention in Revelations 14:2, but that was enough for artists to begin gifting angels with harps. Merry Christmas. Good angels, of course, virtually always appear beautiful in an asexual way.

While there are neither evil nor rebelling angels in the TaNaKh, nor the concept of a hell where punishment is meted out to the evil, all hell breaks loose in the New Testament, where there are 162 references to that lower region. Bad angels have, however, appeared in Jewish folklore for many centuries. For example, Jews who happily welcome Shabbat in Temple or Synagogue with a well-known song, *Shalom Aleichem*, written in the late sixteenth century, often are unaware that they actually are singing about a contest between that man's good and bad angels (everyone has a couple) who always accompany the observant worshiper home from the Shabbat service. If the home has been properly prepared, the good angel prays that the next Shabbat will also be a good one, and the accompanying evil angel must assent, Amen. If the home is not prepared for Shabbat, the bad angel expresses the opposing prayer that the home be the same the following week, and the good angel is forced, by the folkloric rules of their game, most unhappily to say Amen.

So are guardian angels everywhere? They clearly are in joyous abundance at the birth of Jesus but are invisible, if present at all, in the celebration of Hanukkah, a story of miracles not even included in the TaNaKh.

Finally, especially in these times, do we humans make the angels rejoice or mourn? In contemplation of this, Jean Cocteau, actor, artist, author, director, playwright and poet, once wrote, "I feel that there is an angel inside me *whom I am constantly shocking.*"

Thanks for your attention, and to each and all, a meaningful Kwanzaa, a joyous Hanukkah, "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!

References

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