

# A Study Of Angels

**Introduction.** All of us grew up with stories of fairies, gnomes, and leprechauns. Books and movies have spun many fanciful stories based upon these mythical figures of antiquity. To many, angels also belong in this list of imaginary characters. However, the Bible portrays angels as the instrumentality God uses to carry out His divine plan.

A recent poll in *Time* magazine revealed that 69% of Americans believe in angels, and 46% of that group believe they have a personal guardian angel. Is there danger in all of this interest in angels? “Is Satan doing the same thing again? Or instead of launching a big new anti-Christian religion or cult, perhaps he and his demons are simply using angelic disguise — a little here and a little there — to flirt with people’s fascinations and to create a curiosity and craving for angelic presence. By influencing the right people with the right connections to get the right books and magazine articles published and the right television shows on the air, he can lure millions into a false sense of spiritual experience and security. The syrupy-sweet, spirit-tingling taste of a little angelism can ruin people’s appetite for the good, solid food of God’s word and His gospel of grace and truth” (David Jeremiah, *What The Bible Says About Angels*, p. 16). “For those who choke too easily on God and His rules, angels are the handy compromise, all fluff and meringue, kind, nonjudgmental. They are available to everyone, like aspirin” (*Time*, Nancy Gibbs, “Angels Among Us,” December 27, 1993).

## I. **The Definition Of “Angel”**

- A. Not all angels in the Bible are heavenly creatures.
  1. Thayer defines “angel” as “a messenger, envoy, one who is sent.” He furthermore said, “In the scriptures, both of the Old Testament and of the New, one of that host of heavenly spirits that, according alike to Jewish and Christian opinion, wait upon the monarch of the universe, and are sent by Him to earth, now to execute His purposes.”
  2. Arndt and Gingrich likewise note the different uses of angel.
    - a) Of human messengers.
      - (1) By men (Luke 7:24; 9:52).
      - (2) By God (Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27).
    - b) Of supernatural beings.
      - (1) Messengers of God (Matthew 1:20-25; 2:13, 19; Luke 1:8-19, 26-38; 2:8-12; Acts 8:26; 27:23-24).
      - (2) Intermediary beings with no reference to their relation to God (1 Corinthians 4:9).
      - (3) Evil spirits (Matthew 25:41).
  3. What about the “angel of the Lord”?
    - a) The “angel of the Lord” is a designation used 56 times in the Old Testament and 12 times in the New Testament.
    - b) He is also known as the angel of God (Genesis 31:11; Exodus 14:19), angel of His presence (Isaiah 63:9), and angel or messenger of the covenant (Malachi 3:1).
    - c) Many believe this was a designation for a very special angel, and have even speculated that the angel of the Lord is actually Christ.

- (1) Arguments for the angel of the Lord being Christ.
    - (a) There are places where the angel of the Lord appears to be deity.
      - i) Exodus 3:1-2, 4, 14; 23:20-21.
      - ii) Joshua 5:13-15.
    - (b) There are places where the angel of the Lord can be linked to Christ.
      - i) Exodus 3:14; cp. John 8:58.
      - ii) Malachi 3:1; cp. Mark 1:2.
  - (2) Arguments against the angel of the Lord being Christ.
    - (a) The Bible is very plain in stating that Jesus was not an angel.
      - i) John 1:1-4.
      - ii) Hebrews 1:4-8, 13; 2:5-9.
      - iii) Before Christ came down on the earth, He was equal with God. However, the angel was one who was sent (Exodus 14:19; 1 Samuel 29:9; 2 Samuel 14:17; Galatians 4:14).
    - (b) The words spoken by Jesus are greater than the words revealed by angels (John 12:48; Hebrews 2:1-4). If the angel of the Lord was Christ, why would the importance of His words be limited by the dispensation in which they were spoken?
    - (c) Angels are not omniscient (Matthew 24:36; 1 Peter 1:12). In Zechariah 1:11-12, the angel of the Lord asks God a question.
    - (d) In the New Testament, the angel of the Lord is mentioned while Jesus is on the earth (Matthew 2:13, 19; 28:2; Luke 2:9-11).
  - (3) God reveals Himself and acts on behalf of His people. Sometimes He does this directly, but sometimes He does this in the person of an angel. Often the distinction between God's action and the angel's is blurred to the point that they seem synonymous.
- B. The words for "angel" in the original language are translated in different ways 400 times in the Bible.

## **II. The Origin Of Angels**

- A. They are obviously created beings (Psalm 148:1-5; Nehemiah 9:6; Colossians 1:16).
  1. Angels evidently are capable of sinning, at least in the past (Job 4:18-19; Matthew 25:41; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). This implies that they have freewill because no sin is possible without freewill.
    - a) Satan had evidently sinned when Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden; thus angels must have been created prior to man (Job 38:4-7; cp. 1:6).
      - (1) Some people reason that Satan could not have been created evil, but is evil now; therefore, he must be a fallen angel.
      - (2) The theory that Satan must be a fallen angel is based on the idea that there are no heavenly creatures but angels, but we do not know this for certain.
        - (a) Isaiah 14:12.

- i) Note that Isaiah did not say that Lucifer was a fallen angel; he said he was “fallen from heaven.”
    - ii) Furthermore, the context shows that Isaiah was speaking of the king of Babylon, not Satan.
  - (b) Luke 10:18.
    - i) Jesus says that Satan fell from heaven as lightning. However, it has no reference to a time prior to creation.
    - ii) Jesus used a highly descriptive way to prove His point that Satan’s power had been overcome by His power.
- (3) One cannot conclusively deduce that Satan is a fallen angel. No scripture calls Satan such or proves him to be a fallen angel.
- b) Do angels still have the ability to sin? Do they still have freewill? The Bible does not specifically address these questions; however, there are implications that this situation still existed in first century times.
  - (1) Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14).
  - (2) It is possible for angels to deceive (Galatians 1:6-8; 1 Timothy 4:1).
- 2. The Sadducees did not believe in angels or spirits (Acts 23:8).
- 3. They do not marry and procreate nor die (Matthew 22:30; Luke 20:36).
- 4. Angels are innumerable (Matthew 26:53; Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 5:11).
- 5. Angels are greater than man in power and might (2 Peter 2:11).
- 6. They have greater knowledge than man (Daniel 8:15-19; 9:21-23; Revelation 17:7).
- B. There seem to be ranks among the angels (1 Thessalonians 4:16).
  - 1. Michael is called the archangel (Jude 9). The word “archangel” means “chief of the angels” (Revelation 12:7).
  - 2. Gabriel is the angel who stands in the presence of God (Luke 1:19, 26). Gabriel appeared to Daniel in a vision and gave him “skill and understanding” (Daniel 8:16).
  - 3. Dionysius the Areopagite grouped angels into nine orders (Celestial Hierarchy, A.D. 500). He grouped them further into three ranks (from highest to lowest).
    - a) Seraphim, cherubim, and ophanim (thrones).
    - b) Dominions, powers, and authorities.
    - c) Principalities, archangels, and angels.
  - 4. Thomas Aquinas assigned functions to each rank. In the third rank, principalities watch over nations, archangels interact with humans in exceptional circumstances and angels act as guardians to individual humans under normal circumstances (Nancy Grubb, *Angels In Art*, p. 7).
  - 5. Although many of these categories exist in the Bible, it never reveals any system of ranking. All that we know for certain is that Michael is the archangel.

### **III. The Appearance Of Angels**

- A. Angels could appear in human form.
  - 1. Angels visited Abraham and Lot in human form (Genesis 18:1-2, 16-22; 19:1, 5).
  - 2. An angel came to Mary as a visitor (Luke 1:28).

3. The women who visited Jesus' tomb saw a "young man" (Mark 16:5).
- B. Angels sometimes took on anthropomorphic form which must have been different enough from human form so as to make them readily identifiable (Genesis 32:1-2; 1 Chronicles 21:15-16, 27; Luke 1:11-12; 2:9-15; Acts 12:15; Revelation 10:1; 15:6).
  1. Their method of appearance could be very dramatic (Exodus 3:2; Judges 13:20).
  2. They could hold a sword, staff, or chain in their hand (Numbers 22:23; Joshua 5:13; Judges 6:21; 1 Chronicles 21:16; Revelation 20:1).
  3. Their garments were remarkable.
    - a) White garments (John 20:12; Matthew 28:3; Acts 1:10).
    - b) Shining garments (Luke 24:4).
    - c) Pure bright linen with chests girded with golden bands (Revelation 15:6).
    - d) A rainbow on the head, clothed with a cloud, with a face like the sun and feet like pillars of fire (Revelation 10:1-3).
  4. The countenance of the angel of God was very awesome, like lightning (Judges 13:6; Matthew 28:3).
  5. God has not always chosen to allow people to be "aware" of them in their midst (Hebrews 13:2; John 12:29; 2 Kings 6:16-18).
    - a) The writer in Hebrews 13:2 is not advocating hospitality on the off chance that one might happen to receive an angel as guest but rather because God is pleased when believers are hospitable (cp. Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9; 3 John 5-8).
    - b) It is simply another way of saying that those who show hospitality to all often gain unexpected benefits from their guests. Barnes wrote, "The motive here urged for doing it is, that by entertaining the stranger we may perhaps be honored with the presence of those whose society will be to us an honor and a blessing." "You never know," the author says, "what hospitality might bring."
- C. Angels could enter the mind through dreams and visions (Matthew 1:20; 2:13; Acts 10:3).

#### **IV. The Work Of Angels**

- A. They assist God.
  1. They serve God (Psalm 103:20-21; 104:4).
  2. They offer praise to God (Revelation 5:2, 11-12; 7:11-12; 8:2; 16:1; 19:1-2).
  3. They reveal God's will or announce events (Acts 10:5; Revelation 1:1).
  4. They aided in giving the law at Sinai (Deuteronomy 33:2; Acts 7:38, 53).
- B. They control nature.
  1. The Egyptian plagues were brought about by "evil angels" (Psalm 78:48-52).
  2. In Daniel 6:22, the mouths of the lions were were shut by an angel.
- C. They guard God's people.
  1. They are involved in our care.
    - a) Angels serve man.
      - (1) The angel provided water for Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:17-19).
      - (2) They offer encouragement (Acts 27:13-26).

- b) Many look at several passages and believe that a guardian angel is assigned to us at birth and have the task of watching over us (Psalm 34:7; 35:5-6; 91:11-12; Matthew 18:10; Acts 12:15; Hebrews 1:14).
- (1) Communication with guardian angels.
    - (a) Robert Graham, in his article “Angel Talk: Are You Listening?”, says, “If you want a clear and concise message from your angel, you must ask a direct question. Your angel will always answer your questions. You must ask your question out loud. Clear, concise questions will get you clear, concise answers. Answers will always be tangible and explicit, something you can put your hands on. The answers I’ve gotten I could pick up and examine. Asking a frivolous question will get you a silly answer. The universe will match your level of sincerity.”
    - (b) This is a wording of a traditional Catholic prayer to one’s guardian angel: “Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God’s love commits me here. Ever this day/night be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen.”
  - (2) Guardian angels in history.
    - (a) The belief that God sends a spirit to watch every individual was common in ancient Greek philosophy.
    - (b) Guardian angels had strong support in Jewish tradition.
      - i) Tradition says that each of the four divisions of the twelve tribes of Israel had its guardian angel (Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael).
      - ii) It also claims that every man has a special guardian angel, according to Targum Yerushalmi (cp. Genesis 33:10: “I have seen thy face as though I had seen the face of thy angel”). They resemble the Persian fravashis, known in ancient Zoroastrianism, and were probably modeled after them.
    - (c) The first “theologian” to outline a specific scheme for guardian angels was Honorius of Autun (ca. A.D. 1140).
  - (3) “Guardian angel” is not found in the Bible, and furthermore the Bible never supports the idea that each person has a personal angel.
    - (a) There are instances where angels helped to protect or rescue God’s people. However, the angel was always God’s angel, not David’s (Psalm 34:7), Daniel’s (Daniel 6:22), or Peter’s (Acts 12:7) angel.
    - (b) In Hebrews 1:14, the writer does not say that angels serve Christians, but they serve for their sake.
      - i) Adam Clarke, in commenting on Hebrews 1:14, said, “This is part of the economy of God in the government of the world and of the Church; and a part, no doubt, essential to the harmony and perfection of the whole.”
      - ii) A. T. Robertson adds, “We do not have here the doctrine of special guardian angels for each of us, but simply the fact that angels are used for our good.”

- (c) These verses do point to one condition: angels are only involved with those who are trying to serve and please God.
    - i) It is clear that the angelic corps is constantly watching over all of Christ's little ones; that is, His redeemed of any age.
      - (1) No passage in the study of angels pronounces an end to the ministering of angels.
      - (2) Hence, it would seem that God uses angels as long as there are heirs of salvation who need this ministrations.
    - ii) Whatever its extent, the promise is meant to comfort and encourage. The promise also helps with feelings of loneliness and despair, for angels are watching over us.
  - (d) The rejection of the idea of a guardian angel should, in no way, lessen God's concern for us or diminish His ability to protect us. It was not His design to utilize an angel as the guardian and personal defender of every faithful Christian on earth.
2. They are involved in our salvation.
    - a) They rejoice at our confession of Jesus (Luke 12:8-9).
    - b) They rejoice at our repentance (Luke 15:10).
- D. They execute judgment on the nations.
1. An angel executed judgment on the Assyrians (2 Kings 19:35; Isaiah 37:36).
  2. An angel struck down King Herod for his arrogance (Acts 12:21-23).
- E. They liberate us from the earth.
1. They will reap the saints at the end of the world (Matthew 13:39, 41, 49).
  2. They will come with Jesus in judgment (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:7).
- F. Although these facts are intriguing, we are not to speculate about when we think we have seen their work and activity in our lives. What is revealed belongs to us, while what has not been revealed belongs to God (Deuteronomy 29:29).
1. Angels are not more important than the message given by the apostles, nor are they the foundation of God's temple (Acts 2:42; Ephesians 2:19-22).
    - a) God calls us today through the gospel, not through angels (2 Thessalonians 2:14).
    - b) Angels will not bring us new information about God today (Acts 20:27; Jude 3).
  2. Jesus is "so much better" than the angels (Hebrews 1:4; 1 Peter 3:22). Jesus is to be "all in all" (Ephesians 1:23).

**Conclusion.** Angels are not mythical or imaginary; they are real. Regrettably, all of the interest surrounding angels heavily contributes to error. First, it encourages subjective feelings of religion. Stories often border on the absurd and contribute heavily to misconceptions about the Bible. Second, it glorifies the created more than the Creator. For example, some pray to angels for help to get across the intersection or for help in finding a parking space.

Since angels are "ministering spirits," they may influence us while we wrestle against this world (Ephesians 6:12). But you do not have to be on "angel alert." Angels are no substitute for truth or obedience (Acts 8:26; 10:3; cp. 11:13-14).