

"Angels" in Scripture

Introduction

"Angels" are created ontological beings in Scripture. They appear to have four [4] main roles¹: (1) revealers [and interpreters] of God's word, (2) ministers to God's people, (3) executioners of God's judgments, and (4) worshippers of God.²

The most common of the Hebrew terms translated "angel" is *mal'āk* "messenger, envoy," which the LXX translates *ἄγγελος*, leading to the English word "angel." As terms denoting functions, both *ἄγγελος* and *mal'āk* can refer equally to human or angelic beings.³ Some passages, consequently, remain in dispute as to whether the reference is to a heavenly being or a human being. The Hebrew masculine noun *mal'āk* occurs 215 times in the OT. The Greek masculine noun *ἄγγελος* occurs 294 times in the LXX.⁴ For human messengers [of various types] there are numerous occurrences⁵, which clearly demonstrates the word had not taken on a technical sense, meaning "angel," in earlier stages. The remaining OT occurrences do refer to angelic beings however, and there are indications that in the LXX *ἄγγελος* was beginning to take on the quasi-technical meaning for a heavenly being.

In the GNT, *ἄγγελος* occurs 175 times. It occurs 6 times in reference to human messengers, 3 of those citing OT passages about human messengers; nine additional occurrences might refer to human messengers, yet not with out debate.⁶ It seems clear, that by the 1st century, the term had taken on the technical sense of "angel."

Angels were among the created order, *i.e.*, there is no evidence they preexisted creation. The only evidence of preexistence is for the Godhead [Gen 1.1, 26–27; Jn 1.1–18; Col 2.8–9], to whom is attributed the creation of *all* things "both in the heavens and on earth, visible and *invisible...*," which would include angels by implication [Col 1.15–17]. Ps 148.1–5 calls for all those in the heavens—including "his angels" [מַלְאָכָיו]—"to Praise the Lord [יהוה]...For He commanded and they were *created* [בָּרָא]." Some have suggested angels were present *while* the world was being created, thus, their creation preceded that of the world, based on Job 38.4–7. However, there are problems with this view. (1) Stars are also mentioned as present and they were created on the 4th day [Gen 1.16]. There is no need to suppose a strict chronology of any sort here, particularly as the language is poetic. (2) The Hebrew text of Job 38.7 does not refer to "angels" [מַלְאָכָיו] as in the NIV, but rather "sons of God" [בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים] as in the NASB [and most other translations]. Nevertheless, based on Job 1.6; 2.1 [the only other occurrences of the phrase בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים in Job] and Gen 6.2 [בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים], later Jewish tradition saw these as fallen angels [1 En 6:1ff.; Philo, Gigantibus 6; Jub 4:15; 5:1f.; T. Reub 5:6; Josephus, Ant 1:73]. Likewise, the LXX understands them as οἱ ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ in Job 1.6; 2.1 and πάντες ἄγγελοι μου ["all my angels"] in Job 38.7.⁷

The phrase בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים ["sons of God"] and the English phrase "*host* of heaven" ["starry *host*"]—generally the single Hebrew term צְבָא ["army"]—especially in Ps 148.2 where it may be parallel to מַלְאָכָיו, are both understood to at least include "angels," if not exclusively, when one considers no other supernatural heavenly beings are ever described with any detail [as angels].⁸ If

¹Inherent to their essence and roles are authority and power, which almost always appear to be recognized by the humans they encounter, at least eventually.

²This summary is taken strictly from Old and New Testament Scripture. Testimony of profane Jewish and Christian literature [Pseudepigrapha, Apocrypha, *etc.*] is not included.

³The first occurrence of *ἄγγελος* and *mal'āk* is in Gen 16.7.

⁴The inclusion of the apocryphal material essentially accounts for the increased number of occurrences in the LXX.

⁵Gen 32.3, 6; Num 20.14; 21.21; 22.5 *cf.* 22.15; 24.12; Dt 2.26; Josh 6.17, 25; 7.22; Judg 6.35; 7.24; 9.31; 11.12–19; 1Sam 6.21; 11.3–9; 16.19; 19.11–21; 23.27; 25.14, 42; 2Sam 2.5; 3.12, 14, 26; 5.11; 11.4, 19, 22–23, 25; 12.27; 1Kings 19.2; 20.2, 5, 9; 22.13; 2Kings 1.2–5, 16; 5.10; 6.32–33; 7.15; 9.18; 10.8; 14.8; 16.7; 17.4; 19.9, 14, 23; Is 14.32; 18.2; 30.4; 33.7; 37.9, 14; 42.19; 44.26; Jer 27.3 (only occurrence in Jer); Ezek 17.15; 23.16, 40; 30.9 (only occurrences in Ezek); Nah 2.13; Hag 1.13 (only occurrences in Nah & Hag); Mal 2.7; 3.1 (only occurrences in Mal); Job 1.14; Prov 13.17; 16.14; 17.11 (only occurrences in Prov); Eccl 5.6 (only occurrence in Eccl); Neh 6.3 (only occurrence in Neh); 1Chron 14.1; 19.2, 16; 2Chron 18.12; 35.21; 36.15–16

⁶Mt 11.10 and Mk 1.2 [citations from Mal 3.1]; Lk 7.24, 27; 9.52; 2C 12.7(?); Jas 2.25 [allusion to Josh 6.17–25]; Rev 1.20 w/2.1, 8, 12; 2.18; 3.1, 7, 14 [mostly taken as "angels," but not without challenges].

⁷However, in Gen 6.2 the LXX has οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ.

⁸However, see below on [Cherubim and Seraphim](#).

"host of heaven" is understood as angels, Neh 9.6 offers another passage referencing the creation of "angels."

In Mt 22.23–33 Jesus' answer to a question from the Sadducees designed to stump Jesus, obviously had to depend on supernatural knowledge only, but raises others questions. The concluding clause ἀλλ' ὡς ἄγγελοι ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ εἰσιν ["but they are like angels in heaven"], must not be generalized to mean altogether or in every respect, but only in so far as marriage (and sex?) is concerned; human beings will be like the angels, *i.e.*, not marrying. Jesus' use of angels contains a double thrust since the Sadducees denied angelic existence [*cf.* Acts 23.8]. Does this mean angels are "sexless," although the term [ἄγγελος] is masculine? Does this mean the basic procreative drive in humans is absent in glory, and what does this say concerning the most interpersonal human relationships?

As to the character of God's angels, we can only infer they do not sin,⁹ particularly as they are referred to as "holy" by the Lord and others [Mk 8.38; Lk 9.26; Acts 10.22; Rev 14.10 *cf.* Job 5.1[LXX]; Tob 11.14; 12.15]. In addition, the fact that they are often referred to as in the presence of God, and no provisions are ever mentioned for atonement on their behalf, sin on their part would appear to be impossible.

The angel of the LORD

As the first occurrence of ἄγγελος/*mal'āk* in Scripture [Gen 16.7] is a reference to "[the] angel of the LORD," this figure must be considered first. "The angel of the LORD" (מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה) is mentioned *ca.* 58 times in the OT, "the angel of God" *ca.* 10 times. The figure appears frequently in *Genesis* and *Judges*, but rarely in literature dealing with later periods. He has been variously understood to be God himself appearing in human form [*cf.* Gen 12.7; 17.1], the *Logos* [by the early church Fathers] or a *person* of the Godhead, or a heavenly creature [being] who represents God.

In Hebrew, the phrase is always anarthrous [מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה], lit. "[an] angel of Yahweh."¹⁰ In the LXX [and the GNT] the phrase is generally anarthrous when the figure is introduced [ἄγγελος κυρίου],¹¹ but can be grammatically articular when an anarthrous form is antecedent [Gen 16.7–11; Judg 2.1, 4; 6.11–12, 14–21, but 6.22 is anarthrous!; 13.3, 13, 16a, 20–21a, but 16b and 20b are anarthrous!; 1Chron 21.12, 15, 18; Mt 1.20, 24 (only articular occurrence in GNT)];¹² however, even that grammatical tenet is not always followed [Gen 22.11, 15; 2K 1.3, 15]. Even when first introduced, or with no immediately recognizable antecedent, the phrase can be articular [Judg 5.23; 2Sam 24.16; Zech 1.12; 3.5–6, but see 12.8]. In 1K 19.7 the articular phrase has the antecedent τις ["someone"] in the LXX, but the anarthrous מַלְאָךְ in Hebrew. That the articular phrase ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου can refer to one with no particular significance is seen in Hag 1.13 as it is applied to the prophet Haggai, who certainly need not be understood to be "THE messenger of the Lord" [*cf.* Mal 2.7].

The Hebrew phrase "angel of God" [מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה] is likewise always anarthrous.¹³ In the LXX the phrase ἄγγελος τοῦ θεοῦ is anarthrous in Gen 21.17, and as might be expected, in comparisons [2Sam 14.17, 20; 19.27 *cf.* Acts 6.15; Gal 4.14], but it is articular in Gen 31.11; Ex 14.19; Judg 13.9. Occasionally, the Hebrew מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה is translated ὁ ἄγγελος τοῦ θεοῦ [Num 22.22–27, 31, 35; Judg 6.20]. In the GNT the phrase is only anarthrous [Acts 10.3; Gal 4.14].

This brief analysis suggests the nomenclature "THE angel of Yahweh [or God]" as indicating a single peculiar manifestation of God, unique from all other "angelic" manifestations—"one of pre-eminent excellency," is likely unfounded.

⁹Job 4.18, "He [God] puts no trust even in His servants; And against His angels He charges *error*" may be simply a meandering of Eliphaz [4.1], not derived from divine revelation. It is unlikely there was any development of "fallen angels" at this time [as in intertestamental literature], but the tradition of Gen 6.1–4 may have provided the impetus for his assessment of angelic unreliability.

¹⁰Gen 16.7, 9–11; 22.11, 15; Ex 3.2; Num 22.22–27, 31–32, 34; Judg 2.1, 4; 5.23; 6.11–12, 21–22; 13.3, 13, 15–18, 20–21; 2Sam 24.16; 1Kings 19.7; 2Kings 1.3, 15; 19.35; Is 37.36; Zech 1.11–12 [in v. 13 using 11–12 as antecedent "angel" alone is articular (מַלְאָךְ)]; 3.1, 5–6; 12.8; Ps 34.7; 35.5–6; 1Chron 21.12, 15–16, 18, 30. *Cf.* Hag 1.13; Mal 2.7 where the phrase is found in reference to human messengers.

¹¹Gen 16.7; 22.11, 15; Ex 3.2; 4.24 [not in Heb.]; Judg 2.1; 6.11; 13.3; 2K 1.3; 19.35; 1Chron 21.12; Ps 34.7; 35.5–6; Mt 1.20; 2.13, 19; 28.2; Lk 1.11; 2.9; Acts 5.19; 8.26; 12.7, 23

¹²The first occurrence is in Gen 21.17. In 1Kings 19.7 the articular phrase has the antecedent τις ["someone"] in the LXX, but the anarthrous מַלְאָךְ in Hebrew.

¹³Gen 21.17; 31.11; Ex 14.19; Judg 6.20; 13.6, 9; 1Sam 29.9; 2Sam 14.17, 20; 19.27. See *e.g.*, Gen 32.1 for the plural מַלְאָכֵי יְהוָה.

Angels in Hebrews 1-2 – the Superiority of the Christ to the Angels

Heb 1.4–2.18 is the most extensive and informative discussion of angels in Scripture.¹⁴ Heb 1.1–4.13 discusses the superiority of the Son of God's word [*at (the) end of these days he spoke to us by a Son* (1.2)] to: the prophets [1.1–2], the angels [1.3–2.18], Moses and Joshua [3.1–4.13]. Jesus' deity determines his superiority to all creation, which includes the angels [1.2–3, 8].¹⁵ It is curious why so much space [1.4–2.18] is dedicated to Jesus' superiority to "the angels," particularly when compared with the prophets [1.1–2] and Moses [3.1–6], the most authoritative figures under the old economy. However, Jews commonly understood that angels played a key role in revelation and redemption [Ex 3.2 Is 63.9 *etc.*], and that they mediated the Law [2.2 *cf.* Acts 7.38, 53 Gal 3.19]. The fact that the angels dwelt in heavenly realms likewise demonstrates the importance of Christ being superior to them. Thus, he serves and rules "on high...in the heavens" [1.3 8.1–2].

"Having become" [1.4, aorist participle] suggests Jesus' superiority is related to his completed *priestly* work and not his enthronement, although the two are nearly inseparable in time [1.3b]; prior to these events the *human* Jesus was "lower than the angels" [*cf.* 2.7–9], but never in his eternal existence [particularly as Creator] was he lower than angels.

The "more excellent name" of Jesus than that of the angels [1.4] is "Son" [see 1.5, 8; 3.6; 4.14; 5.5; 7.28 *cf.* Lk 1.32, 35; 3.22; Mt 3.17; 17.5; Jn 20.31 *et al.*; on "name" see also Phil 2.9; Eph 1.20]. The superiority of Jesus is not found strictly in his sonship [which was also true of all God's kings [the LXX even changes "sons of God" to "angels of God" in Job 1.6; 2.1; 38.7], but in the *nature* of his Sonship [1.2b–3, 8–12; 2.9–18; 4.14–16; 5.7–10; *etc.*].

The time reference in 1.6 is uncertain. It could refer to the *incarnation*, understanding "world" in its usual sense of the known inhabited earth. However, the only other time it occurs in *Hebrews* is 2.5 where it refers to "the world to come." The "bringing in" of Jesus the Hebrew writer is concerned with his *exaltation*—his entering in to heaven ["the world to come"]. It was at this time, it seems, the angels were subject to the *human* Jesus¹⁶ [1P 3.22¹⁷]. "Let all God's angels worship [προσκυνέω] him" is taken verbatim from Dt 32.43[LXX], expanding the Hebrew, which does not include "angels." The OT context speaks of God avenging the blood of his people; he is the one to be worshipped.

The citation in 1.7 is taken from Ps 104.4[LXX]. Πνεύμα [spirit] is frequently translated "wind(s)" in the LXX, but only rarely in the NT [Jn 3.8a, used as an analogy to "spirit"]. The word ἄνεμος is the regular word for "wind" in both the LXX and NT. In Ps 35.5 ἄνεμος and angels are used in parallel as instruments of God's judgment upon the Psalmist's enemies. Similarly in Ps 104.3–4 ἄνεμος is used in the context with angels as πνεύματα [spirits]. Pss 11.6 and 148.8 bring πύρ and πνεύμα [as "wind"] together in judgment. The connection of "ministers" and πνεύματα in 1.14 suggests πνεύματα could be translated "spirits" in 1.7 [KJV, NKJV]. In this passage [1.7] "angels" and "ministers" are parallel, as are "spirits" and "flame," while "wind" is the better parallel for "flame" than "spirit" [but see Acts 2.3–4].

Rabbinic tradition also interpreted Ps 104.4 as "He who makes his angels into winds." Even though the angels were viewed as *changeable*, the emphasis was not on the inferiority of angels. The author of *Hebrews*, however, is using the passage in such a way as to contrast the superiority of the Son. The contrast lies in the fact that the angels are *part of this created world and mutable* [unstable, not sharing in the exaltation, capable of reduction to the elemental forces of wind and fire] as opposed to the exalted Son who is *sovereign, creator of this world, and immutable* [1.8–12]. This contrast is even sharper in light of the fact that angels were considered part of the heavenly realm [Rev 5.11].

In verses 1.8–12 Jesus is clearly declared Creator God in his enthronement, leading to the citation in 1.13, which is verbatim from Ps 110.3[LXX]. The historical context presents some problems. In brief, the Psalm appears to be addressed to a king. The authority with which the writer speaks suggests he is a prophet, or even God himself speaking to the king *by the Holy Spirit* [see next ¶]. The reference to the king as a priest [4] might be explained by the fact that the king was the leader of the kingdom of priests and thus had a priestly character [Ex 19.6]. He

¹⁴The term ἄγγελος occurs 11 times in *Hebrews*.

¹⁵In 1.1–3 the writer takes his readers through the three states of Christ's eternal existence: pre-existence, incarnation, and exaltation [*cf.* Phil 2.5–11].

¹⁶Having *always* been subject to the eternal Word.

¹⁷Peter does not attempt to define or distinguish three orders of supernatural beings; together they add up to "all things," every power, good or evil, in the universe. Thus, oppressed Christians in Asia Minor to whom Peter is writing need not fear anyone. It is possible to understand these as *evil* angels [enemies] in accordance with Psalm 110:1 [*cf.* 1Cor 15.24–26; Ps 8.6].

embodied God's purpose on earth, and could be spoken of in terms far exceeding the personal significant of any particular king, or in terms exceeding the boundaries of the Davidic kingship itself. There could also be an anticipation of the deeper fulfillment of God's Davidic king in the Messiah [Zech 6.9–15]. The most likely king addressed would be David himself, as the words could indicate. Clearly David was the prototype of the Messiah. The Messianic application is clearly eschatological—"until I put your enemies as a footstool of your feet" [10.13 1Cor 15.24–28]. At least in part, it is the writer's purpose to demonstrate Jesus' superiority to the angels through his enthronement.

The writer concludes in 1.14 with an exegetical comment on, or provoked by, 1.7. The words "spirits" and "ministering" are the obvious connections. Having clearly declared the inferiority of angels to the Son, the writer, almost as an afterthought yet nevertheless central to his thesis, underscores the angels' role is none other than serving "the ones about to inherit salvation." Angels have their place in God's scheme of redemption, but not at the Father's right hand, the place reserved for the Son who secured eternal salvation. Their place is "for [purpose] service [διακονία, only here in Heb. cf. 'deacon'], being sent out [ἀποστέλλω, only here in Heb., but cf. noun ('apostle') in 3.1 in reference to Jesus—the angels are not acting on their own initiative; these are God's servants on behalf of the saints] on account of the ones about to inherit salvation [*i.e.*, eschatological salvation]." Test Levi 3.5 has the archangels serving as priests before God on behalf of the sins of the righteous ones, although this goes far beyond the writer of *Hebrews*. There is an anticipation of the writer's use of Ps 8 in 2.5–9 where the writer works out the relationship of the Son to this salvation. The transition is made in 2.1–4 by a practical warning to the readers not to neglect "so great a salvation." The angels, as it turns out, are not only inferior to the Son, but in fact, *all the saints!* The realization of this will not come until the eschaton, but Jesus is the surety of that promise having risen from the dead. Until the eschaton, the angels serve the saints!

In 2.2, the protasis of the conditional sentence contrasts "the word [message] having been spoken through angels" with that of God speaking in the Son [1.1], "the things having been heard" [2.1]. The message [word] of the angels was the Law cf. Dt 33.2 [to which the LXX adds "and on his right hand were his angels"]. The writer's point is simple; under the Law of Moses violation involved judgment [repentance is not being considered]. The apodosis [2.3a] presents the obvious conclusion based on a word of God given in a superior context [*i.e.*, ἐν υἱῷ, "in (his) Son," 1.2 cf. 2.3b].

In 2.5 the Hebrew writer picks up on his discussion of Jesus' superiority to the angels, but the emphasis shifts from Jesus' exaltation to his incarnation and death. The central motif in this section is *Jesus' solidarity with humanity* as he temporarily shared with humanity a status "lower than angels"—manifested in sharing flesh and blood, opening him to temptation and death. Psalm 8 promised the status "lower than angels" was temporary ["for a short time"] for *all* humanity. The eschatological fulfillment of that promise is realized now in Jesus, who partook of humanity to guarantee fulfillment for all. Jesus identified with, and died for, God's creatures in the "flesh and blood" realm, not God's creatures in the spiritual realm [angels]. As the eternal Word in his preexistent form, he was *above* the angels, their Creator [1.2c, 10], but "for a short time" made lower in the incarnation. The exaltation reestablished his superiority to the angels, and assured the same for all God's children. Thus, the focus in this section on angels helps the readers understand the true significance of their own salvation in Christ. In the end, "the coming world" is subjected [2.5, 8 (3)] to humanity; God's interest is centered in humanity, not the holy angels.

"The coming world" is explained as the world "about which we are speaking," thus, the context demonstrates that the "coming world" is the world that will ultimately be subjected to humanity, *now* subject to Jesus. It is a world restored to the edenic ideal [Gen 1.28–31], the eschatological kingdom reminiscent of OT proclamations [cf. Pss 93.1 96.10 which may have been in the author's mind cf. Heb 12.28], established by the Son [1.5ff], tasted by the community of believers [6.4–5], yet which is yet to come in its fullest [2.5].

There apparently was a tradition that this world was under the governance of angels. Deut 32.8[LXX] states: "When the most high divided the nations, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God" [the Hebrew has "sons of Israel"].

This vs. provides a transition between the catena of chapter 1 demonstrating the superiority of the Son and the citations in chapter 2 refuting the possible objection to the Son's superiority because he was subjected to the angels and death [2.9]. The thrust of the OT quotes, therefore, is not the future superiority of humans to the angels [although true], but rather the present superiority of Jesus to the angels.

The quotation in 2.6–8a is verbatim from Ps 8.5–6, 7b[LXX].¹⁸ In the context of the Psalm, the writer is marveling at the status of humanity over the rest of God's works. It is *humanity* that God takes thought of and cares for, crowns with glory and honor, and has rule over the rest of creation. God created humanity, not angels, in his image, and he selected humans, not angels, to subdue and rule creation [Gen 1.26–28].

The statement in 2.16 is essentially parenthetical. Humanity in its natural state is lower than angels, yet in a glorified state, as implied through the glorified Jesus [1.4–2.18] will be higher. The angels throughout Hebrews can only be those who retained their proper place in heaven [cf. 2Pet 2.4; Jude 6]. That Jesus is not 'concerned' with them is stated only in relation to the saints who are in need of his help with regard to salvation. This assurance is critical as the saints face 'fear of death' and 'testing' [2.14–18].

Angels as revealers [and interpreters] of God's word

This is the most fundamental role of angels, as they are, by definition, "messengers or envoys" of God. Their immediate access to the presence of God [Dt 33.2; Mt 18.10; Lk 1.19; Rev 5.11; 7.11; 8.2, 6, 10; 14.10; *et al.*]¹⁹ gives them a natural opportunity to receive words from God and be sent as his messengers into the world.²⁰ The communication of God's word obviously was not a challenge to the angels. In some Jewish traditions, angels preferred to speak Hebrew, but most Jewish people would have agreed that angels understood [all] human languages, especially since angels were appointed over various nations. In 1Cor 13.1, Paul may be suggesting he too had the ability to speak many foreign languages in contrast to the probability "ordinary" tongue speakers were capable of speaking only those that would have been necessary for their particular missions [Mk 16.15–20]. Perhaps Paul could have said, "Though I be so fluent in tongues as to speak every conceivable language when needed, even as angels can, but do not have love..."

Angels as present before God is implied in the apostle Paul's declaration that the suffering apostles became a "spectacle," objects of scorn in the theater of the world, including the unseen world of angels [1Cor 4.9].²¹ The theater included God and Christ Jesus in the audience [1Tim 5.21²² cf. 6.13; 2Tim 4.1; 2.14 (although angels are not included)].

Announcements or invitations are other forms of the role of angels as revealers of God's word. For example, in Rev 19.17–18 there is an invitation to the "great supper of God."²³ The angel of 21.9–17 is given an antecedent reference, *viz.* one of the 7 angels who had the 7 bowls

¹⁸The LXX has ἡλάττωσας αὐτὸν βραχύ τι παρ' ἀγγέλους ["You made him a little less than *angels*"]; the Hebrew has עָלֶיךָ מְעַט מִמְּלֹאכֵי עֵלְיָהוּ ["You made him a little less than *God* (or *gods*)"]. The translation ἄγγελος may have been prompted by modesty, for it may have seemed rather extravagant to claim that mankind was only a "little" less than God. The Hebrew might be an allusion to the creation of man in *the image of God* [Gen 1.26–27] and the God-given role of dominion to be exercised by mankind within the created order. See also the LXX translation "angels" from the Hebrew "gods" in Ps 97.7 [96.7 LXX]; 138.1 [LXX 137.1].

¹⁹At least some angels are able to do what no human can do and live [Ex 33.20]. In Jewish tradition such angels see the face of God [Tob 12.15 cf. Is 6.2; 1Enoch 14.21; *contra.* "angels of the Presence" in Jub 2.2, 18; cf. 1Enoch 40].

²⁰The angels ascending and descending on the ladder in Jacob's dream [Gen 28.11–12] may suggest the idea of the angels' access to both worlds, coming into the world from the presence of God as revealers, ministers, and executioners [cf. Jn 1.51].

²¹The apostles were like captured slaves who made up the end of the procession in Roman victory parades before they were slaughtered.

²²Paul is likely referring to the holy gathering in heaven, some of whom at least will accompany the Lord when he comes in judgment [2Thess 1.6–8, *etc.*]. The "elect" angels could simply be those who did not fall as opposed to those who did. This might suggest Paul is referring to those angels whom God chooses to do his special tasks and, in this case, take part in final judgment. Therefore, as we walk in this life, we must do so knowing those who partake in executing judgment are observing our actions. This may be behind the meaning of 1Cor 11.10. Other ideas on 1Cor 11.10 include: (1) Akin to the preceding idea, the common Jewish belief that God's angels, are present especially in the worship of God's people & would be offended by a breach of propriety or affront to the husbands. (2) Angels who [according to ancient Jewish interpretations of Gen 6.1–3] lusted after women & so fell. The head coverings were seen as a "protection" against the lustful angels. (3) The angels who rule the nations, who will ultimately be subordinate to all believers, including these women [6.1–3]. (4) The "angels" are actually human messengers, perhaps visiting leaders from other churches [cf. Rev 2–3], who would be offended by women's inappropriate appearance in worship.

²³The description of the angel "standing in the sun" an image, not literal—there is no reason to ask how an angel could withstand the heat of the sun. As the angel of 14.18 had power [authority] over fire, the angel here no doubt has power over the sun, even as he might participate in power over all creation, though only representatively, through God's power granted to him.

of plagues [Rev 15–16].²⁴ This angel, unlike the "interpreting angel" in 17.1–18, has very little to explain to the author, none of which can be considered interpretive. He is more restricted to the role of inviting the prophet and showing him things, even so, by the use of a "measuring rod" [17.15–19]. This is clearly a direct contrast to the vision of Rev 17—there, John saw the immoral whore of Babylon, here the pure bride of Christ.

As well as presenting themselves in actual physical form,²⁵ in some cases, angels only make their presence known audibly [Gen 21.17; 22.11, 15²⁶], in dreams [Gen 31.1–6, מַלְאָכֵי הַאֱלֹהִים; Mt 1.18–25; 2.13–21] or visions [Zech 1.8ff, see below; Lk 24.22–24; Acts 12.9],²⁷ and in some cases visible only to select individuals [Num 22.22–35]. On occasion, angels may work only through a prophet [1Chron 21.18].

It is in this capacity as revealer of God's word an angel is first encountered in Scripture [Gen 16.7–14]. Certain elements of angelic/human encounters that would become a pattern are already present in Hagar's encounter [see also Judg 13; *et al.*]. (1) Initially Hagar did not realize with whom she was speaking. He appeared as just a man who had come to the well [*cf.* Gen 18–19; Judg 6.7–24; *et al.*]. The accounts of Jesus' resurrection reflect this 'confusion' of angelic identity. Mt 28.1–8 leaves little doubt for the reader [and apparently the guards] of the angel's presence. Mk 16.5 has a young man sitting at the right inside the tomb. Lk 24.4 has two men suddenly standing near in dazzling apparel, presumably inside the tomb also.²⁸ The angels, appeared as mere men to the women, as the accounts of Mk and Lk suggest, having previously appeared to the guards in a more glorious state—thus, the different reactions of the guards and the women.²⁹ Nevertheless, the women are immediately obedient to the angels, so they must have manifested angelic authority in some sense. The women typically responded as so many saints in the OT. In Lk 24.22–24 the women must have communicated their experience as a vision of *angels*, which suggests they eventually understood, if not immediately. (2) Eventually Hagar realizes his identity through the revelations given her. (3) The fact Hagar referred to him as God אֱלֹהִים, not יְהוָה as the author does because the name had not yet been revealed (Ex 3), and Hagar likely did not know to which "god" she was speaking, *cf.* Gen 48.15–16]. There is often confusion between an angel and God himself [Ex 3³⁰; Judg 6.7–27³¹]. (4) That Hagar was surprised she remained alive after being in his presence suggests why she identified him as deity [Judg 6.22–23; 13.22]. Likewise, Balaam's response of worship before God's angel, suggests he believed he was in the presence of deity [Num 22.31].³² Nevertheless, had anyone seen God in his full glory, they would have died [Ex 33.18–23]. (5) The birth oracle was an annunciation that became a hallmark of angelic proclamation in Scripture [Gen 18:9–15; Judg 13:3–7; Is 7:14–17; Mt 1.18–25; Lk 1:8–25, 26–38; 2.8–15, 21³³].³⁴

²⁴"He [the angel] carried me away *in spirit* [ἐν πνεύματι]" [21.10], not necessarily the Holy Spirit as most translations favor [KJV, NRSV have "in the spirit"]. See esp. 17.1–3 and also 1.10; 4.2. Exactly how the angel transported John is unknown, but it is likely nothing more than a "spiritual" transportation took place.

²⁵If the reference in Hos 14.4 is interpretive of Gen 32.22–32; 35.1–10 [angels are not mentioned, but see Gen 32.1], and not merely poetic, it is clear angelic appearances as men were complete in body as well as appearance.

²⁶At first the angel *distinguishes* himself from Yahweh [12], but then speaks as the voice of Yahweh [15–16].

²⁷A vision would not necessarily preclude an actual physical appearance. The basic idea that a vision is a manifestation to the senses of something immaterial [perhaps something seen in a dream], may likewise include a manifestation to the senses of an actual material object—*His vision of the parade was obstructed by the crowd.*

²⁸Mt does not actually locate the angel, but the reader can infer he was inside the tomb ["Come (in to me or come in *with* me), see the place where he lay"].

²⁹When angels appear in the Bible, they are usually recognized by their powers rather than by any significant difference from human form. In Jn 20.10–18 Mary did not respond to the angels in any unusual way, possibly because her eyes were clouded with tears, or because she was preoccupied with the loss of Jesus' body. The sole feature noted in Jn 20 is that the angels were clothed in white, which parallels Luke's description of the men who appeared at the ascension of Jesus [*cf.* Acts 1.10]. Comparing the synoptic accounts: Mk 16.5 a "young man" dressed in white appears to the women; Lk 24.4 two "men" in flashing clothing; Mt 28.2–3 an angel with the appearance of lightning and wearing a garment white as snow. In all cases, the appearance is of angelic beings, for shining white garments are often symbolic of the heavenly world.

³⁰Is it an angel or God himself who appears to Moses? It is "God" who calls to Moses from the bush [4, 6, 11, 13], yet it is Yahweh who is watching the events and also speaks [4, 7]. Clearly, Yahweh is God [15ff], and likely the "angel" is also God. Both אֱלֹהִים and יְהוָה are used in this narrative.

³¹The text transitions from the angel of God speaking to Gideon to יְהוָה speaking to him.

³²However, this type of response in some cases may be nothing more than a recognition of a superior in some sense, or a cultural courtesy [Gen 19.1–2].

³³Added to this scene, seldom seen elsewhere in Scripture, is the manifestation of "the heavenly host" [v. 13, στρατιά, *army*, which are angels *cf.* plural angels in v. 15].

The Lukan birth oracles introduce the angel Gabriel.³⁵ Gabriel was first introduced in Dan 8.16; 9.21, where he is referred to simply as a "man."³⁶ He and Michael [Dan 10.13, 21; 12.1³⁷; Jude 9; Rev 12.7] are the only 2 angels named in Scripture. In later Jewish angelology Gabriel and Michael are among four [IEnoch 9.1; 40.2—Michael, Uriel (or Phanuel), Raphael, and Gabriel] or seven [IEnoch 20.1–8 adds Raguel, Saraqael, & Remeil; Tob 12:15; Rev 8:2, 6] angels who stand in the presence of God. Zechariah appears to challenge the authority of Gabriel, so his authority obviously was not that clear to him. Nevertheless, Gabriel responded as if Zechariah *should* have known. In contrast to Zechariah's response to the angel, Mary is immediately submissive and obedient.

Some suggest Michael may be the angel who announces the second coming of Christ [1Thess 4.16] as he is the only archangel mentioned in Scripture [Jude 9], however, "archangel" in 1Thess 4.16 is anarthrous and could refer to *any* archangel or the general class of archangels.³⁸

In Gen 18–19³⁹ similar elements occur as in the Hagar incident. This event [as well as Judg 13] may be the referent of Heb 13.2. To Lot the visitors first seemed to be men [they even eat and drink with Lot's family], as they did with Abraham when they arrived in Mamre.⁴⁰ The judgment that comes upon Sodom, though announced by the angels [Gen 19.17ff], is not attributed to the angels, only God himself. The announcement of admonishment and coming judgment was an important part of the angels' role as revealers for God [Judg 2.1–4; 5.23; 2Kings 1.1–4, 15–17; Jn 12.27–33⁴¹].

The classic OT passages of God's angels as *interpreters* of his word are found in *Zechariah* [1.9–19; 2.2–5; 3; 4.1–6⁴²; 5.5, 10; 6.4–5].⁴³ There is an interchange between the man in the vision and an angel speaking to Zechariah, unless the angel is simply showing the vision and utilizes the characters in the vision to explain it. However, the characters in the vision also interact with the angel, who likewise seems to be part of the vision. There is a distinction

³⁴Even as the angel's announcement to Hagar might be included, the preservation of a seed line is also the subject of such revelations [Mt 2.13–21].

³⁵If Gabriel was the angel who appeared to Joseph, Matthew simply chose not to name him.

³⁶Although he clearly has the role of an interpreting angel: (1) to explain to Daniel the vision of "the time appointed for the end" [8.15–26], and (2) to reveal the hidden meaning of the words of Jeremiah that Daniel is reading [9.20–27].

³⁷*Daniel* refers to Michael only as a *sar* [שַׂר], *leader, chief, ruler, official, captain, prince*. In general, *sar* does not refer to the Israelite king himself, but to his advisers, *viz.*, city, military, and royal officials. In Jewish tradition, based in part on *Daniel*, he is the patron angel of Israel [1En 20:5; 1QM 17.6–8; *cf.* TMs 10.2]. In this capacity he fights for Israel against the rival angels of the Persians [Dan 10.13–14, 20–21] and will deliver Israel from its enemies in the last days [Dan 12.1; *cf.* Rev 12.7–9; TLevi 5.5–6]. He also had many other functions in Jewish tradition.

³⁸It seems a waste of time and space to entertain any of the bizarre doctrinal contrivances of some sects concerning Michael the archangel, but a few sects wield significant influence. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that the pre-human and post-resurrection Jesus and the Archangel Michael are the same person. Seventh-day Adventists teach that Michael was another name for the Word-of-God [Jn 1] before He became incarnate as Jesus. Archangel [meaning "Chief of the Angels"] was the leadership position held by the Word-of-God as Michael while among the angels. Michael was the Word-of-God, not a created being, by whom all things were created. 1Thess 4.16, it is argued, declares that Jesus' voice is that of an archangel. However, Heb 1–2 undermines these distortions completely, and neither does the context of 1Thess 4.16 support them. It is not necessary to hold Jesus is doing the shouting, with his 'archangel' voice, or that he is blowing the trumpet of God. It is possible each of these things accompany Jesus in some manner—others shouting, archangels among other angels [2Thess 1.7], others blowing trumpets, a common picture in Jewish history [Ex 19.13–19; Mt 24.31; 1C 15.52; Rev 1.10; 8.2]. It is possible none of this is literal to the degree Paul is simply declaring Christ comes with great fanfare and authority as the presence of the Lord often did.

³⁹Neither מַלְאָכִים nor ἄγγελος occur in Gen 18, however מַלְאָכִים in 19.1 most naturally refer back to the visitors in 18.

⁴⁰The reduction in number of visitor's from 3 [chapt. 18] to 2 [chapt. 19] may be explained by one, presumably the LORD [יהוה], not returning [*cf.* 18:22, 33]; these 2 spent most of the day with Abraham before transporting themselves to Sodom.

⁴¹Those in the crowd attributing the voice to an angel may have been mistaken. Nevertheless, it demonstrates some understood this as a role of angels.

⁴²On the difficulty of identifying the speaker in this formulaic expression in 4.9—"Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you," *cf.* 2.10–11. In both places, the first person personal pronoun may refer to the messianic Servant-Messenger [*cf.* Is 9.6] or an angel of the Lord or Zechariah the prophet.

⁴³Although *Ezekiel* uses neither מַלְאָכִים nor ἄγγελος in the sense of "angel" [the prophet uses the terms for *human* messengers only (17.15; 23.16, 40; 30.9)], he clearly makes reference to supernatural beings [see on [Cherubim and Seraphim](#) below, 9.3; 10.1–20; 11.22; 28.14, 16; 41.18, 20, 25], including a "supernatural" man [as his appearance indicates, 1.7, 27; Rev 1.15; 21.15–17] acting in a role similar to *interpreting* angels [40.3–5; 43.6; 47.3].

between the angel and Yahweh as the angel himself inquires of the Lord. Unusual, is the verbal interaction between angels [2.3–5], almost as if one were revealing information from God to the other angel. Zech 3 is reminiscent of Job 1–2.⁴⁴ An [no article in Heb. or Gr.] angel of the Lord seems either to be presiding or have authority, even to pardon sin [cf. Ex 23.20–23].

Revelation has the richest presentation of angels in the NT.⁴⁵ The initial appearance is as a revealer and interpreter of God's word to his people [1.1]. The presence of the definite article with the term ἄγγελος in 1.1 suggests John may have had a specific angel in mind, one whom he assumed was known to his audience, the angel primarily responsible for mediating divine revelation from God through Christ to John. A single angelic guide responsible for mediating divine revelation to John is mentioned only in the prologue [1.1–8] and epilogue [22.6–21⁴⁶], while a variety of supernatural revealers are found throughout the document [the exalted Christ, 1.9–20; 4.1; one of the twenty-four elders, 7.13–17; a variety of angels defined in different terms, yet functioning as a revealers or interpreters: mighty angels [5.1–2⁴⁷]; the bowl angel(s) [15.1–17.18⁴⁸; 21.9–22.5; etc.].

The seven "angels" [ἄγγελος] of the seven churches in Asia Minor [2.1–3.22] present a peculiar problem.⁴⁹ As their role seems clearly to bring the message of Jesus to each of their respective churches, determining their identity continues as a matter of debate. The term ἄγγελος, like the Hebrew מַלְאָךְ [mal'āk], means "messenger" and may refer to a supernatural being or a human being—anyone carrying a message for another. Elsewhere in *Revelation* ἄγγελος is used clearly of supernatural beings,⁵⁰ including Satan [9.11] and his angels [12.7, 9].

The major views on the identity of the ἄγγελοι of Rev 1:20; Rev 2–3 can be placed in two broad categories: (1) *supernatural* beings, perhaps as *guardian* angels who guide and protect each congregation—akin to the idea of angels as heavenly representatives of *nations* [cf. Dt 32.8 LXX, "according to the number of the sons (בְּנֵי, ἄγγέλων in LXX) of Israel"; see Dan 12.1], or (2) *human* beings. The latter category has been understood a number of ways: (a) Human messengers or emissaries as in the case of John the Baptist's messengers who came to Jesus asking whether he was the Messiah or not (Lk 7); John the Baptist himself was called an angel in Malachi's prophecy of him (Mt 11), as were the spies of Israel in Joshua's time (Jas 2), *et al.* (b) Christian prophets, perhaps members of a prophetic guild represented in each of the seven communities, or prophetic messengers sent by John from Patmos to each of the churches [cf. Hag 1.13; Mal 3.1]. This is akin to (a). (c) Leaders [like bishops] of each of the seven communities. Since the ἄγγελοι of each church receives blame and condemnation as well as praise, proponents of this view argue that it is ludicrous to suppose these could be good angels sent by God.

Rev 10.1–11.14 presents an interlude before the last of the seven judgments introduced by the seven trumpets of the seven angels. The interlude concerns the testimony of the prophets announcing the victory of the Messianic kingdom over its enemies.⁵¹

Comparing the face of the angel to the sun [10.1] is a metaphor used in theophanies [Rev 1.16; Mt 17.2], of angels [cf. Dan 10.5–6], and to describe the transformed appearance of the righteous in the eschaton [Mt 13.43; Dan 12.3] or as a result of their experience of the presence of God. Moses, whose face shone when he descended from Mount Sinai, is a paradigmatic figure for such imagery [Ex 34.30; 2Cor 3.7]. The reference to the mighty angel's legs as "pillars of fire" is often considered an allusion to Ex 13.21, where the guiding presence of God is described as a

⁴⁴See "*Demons*" in *Scripture*.

⁴⁵The word is used 67 times, nearly 3 times any other NT document.

⁴⁶It appears at first the angel of 21.9 is the antecedent to "He said to me..." Some argue it is Christ based on 21.7, 12. However, the parallel with 1.1 suggests that the reference is to that same interpreting angel, even though the 3rd person reference—"sent *his* angel"—to himself is awkward. Jesus refers to this angel as "my angel," as no doubt all angels are his, as well as God's.

⁴⁷The expression, ἄγγελον ἰσχυρόν, "mighty angel," occurs 3 times in *Revelation* (5:2; 10:1; 18:21), where it seems to refer to three different angelic beings, perhaps as angels high in the angelic hierarchy—in each appearance they bring major revelations: 5.2, fulfillment of Messianic role; 10.1, revelation of the coming end; 18.21, symbolic action concerning Rome's fall [cf. 14.8]. For angels with a loud voice [φωνῆ μεγάλη, cf. "megaphone"] see also 7.2; 14.9, 15, 18; 19.7.

⁴⁸One of the seven angels of judgment in chapters 15–16 becomes an "interpreting angel" in Rev 17 [see Zech 1–4; 1P 1.10–12; Rev 1.1–3; *et al.*]. The term δεικνύναι, "to show" [17.1], occurs eight times in *Revelation* [1.1; 4.1; 17.1; 21.9, 10; 22.1, 6, 8]. In each case the subject of δεικνύναι is an "interpreting angel," according to Rev 1.1 and 22.6, 8, the primary mediator of revelation to John.

⁴⁹They are mentioned only once collectively [1.20].

⁵⁰Within 1.20–3.22, this meaning is also clearly intended in 3.5.

⁵¹The angel seems to appear as more than a vision, for John has material contact with him. However, the figurative nature of the scene could allow for such interaction.

“a pillar of fire,” though it is not clear that this is anything but a formal allusion without material significance. The stance of the angel may symbolically correspond to the oath he takes in 10.5–6, in which he appeals to heaven [toward which he extends his right hand], earth [one foot], and sea [the other foot].⁵²

Certain NT passages suggest angels took part in giving the Law [Acts 7.30–38, 51–53; Gal 4.19; Heb 2.2]. Aside from the angel who appeared to Moses in the bush [Ex 3], the OT does not state God mediated the law through angels; Jewish tradition had added them to heighten reverence for the law and the early church either uses this tradition for its own purposes [see below] or simply reveals such an activity through inspiration in the NT. The Hebrew has no explicit reference to angels being present in the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. Ex 19.18 portrays God as descending on Mt. Sinai “in fire” accompanied by smoke and the quaking of the mountain. Dt 33.2, however, says that the Lord came to Sinai “from myriads of holiness” [or “with myriads of holy ones”] and “with a fiery law,” while Ps 68.18 [LXX 67.18] refers poetically to an accompanying retinue of chariots in the giving of the law, but not directly to angels. The first explicit association of angels with the giving of the law came about, it seems, with the LXX’s translation of a textually ambiguous Hebrew phrase “with a fiery law” in Deut 33.2 as “angels [ἄγγελοι] from his right hand were with him.”⁵³ Such an understanding of angels present at the giving of the Mosaic Law seems to have been the dominant tradition in the first century.

Such a mediatorial role for angels in the giving of the law seems to have been part of the widespread attempt in early Judaism to assign a role for angels in all the major revelatory and redemptive events of Scripture. In rabbinic Judaism, however, there was a rather strong reaction to seeing angels intervening at the critical moments in Israel’s history, with many rabbis arguing God alone acted for the nation at these times.⁵⁴

By itself, of course, Paul’s reference in Gal 3.19–20 to angels at the giving of the law does not necessarily carry a depreciatory connotation. However, from the context of what was said earlier in v 19a and what follows in vv 19b–20, it is almost impossible to read “ordained through angels” in any other way than with the intent “to depreciate the law as not given directly by God.” It was probably the case that the Judaizers were citing the angels’ presence at Sinai as evidence of the Law’s glory and God’s approval. Paul, however, turns this tradition in *ad hominem* fashion against them.

As the birth oracles and other critical events that have angels revealing God’s word make clear, they are generally present at watershed events in God’s scheme of redemption.⁵⁵ Such is true of the Cornelius incident when God used an angel to bring a radical revelation for the faith system of Judaism as well as Christianity; the Jewish Messiah was for all, regardless of ethnic background [Acts 10.1–8, 22 *cf.* 11.12–14]. This elimination of boundary markers for the people of God would be a source of serious tension in the church at least until Jerusalem fell in AD70, and is reflected in nearly all of the NT.

Angels as ministers to God's people

Angels may serve as *guides* for God’s people [Ex 23.20–23; Gen 24.7, 40; 48.15–16; Num 20.16; Zech 12.7–9]. As such, they had authority from God himself, and thus were to be obeyed. In Ex 23 the angel even had power to forgive sins since God’s name [Yahweh?] was in him [*cf.* Zech 3.3–4], which may well equate this angel with Yahweh.⁵⁶ Perhaps, in many similar passages, “angel” [“messenger”] is just a symbolic representation [manifestation] of Yahweh’s presence.

Angels are also seen as *rescuers* [Dan 3.28⁵⁷; 6.22; Ps 91.9–16; Mt 26.53⁵⁸] and *sustainers* of God’s people [1Kings 19.3–9; Mt 4.11; Mk 1.13; Lk 4.10⁵⁹]—on an *individual* as well as *national* level.

⁵²The plural form of the verb in the phrase λέγουσίν μοι, “they said to me” [10.11], is problematic. Several solutions are possible: (1) The mighty angel (vv 1, 9) and the heavenly voice (vv 4, 8) are speaking to John in tandem. (2) The angel of v 1 and the fictive interpreting angel, who mediates the entire vision of John, introduced by the author in 1.1, are addressing John in tandem. (3) The indefinite plural is a substitute for the passive [“Then I was told,” as in the NIV], an idiom that occurs in Hebrew and Aramaic; *cf.* 13.16; 16.15 [see NIV]. The 3rd possibility is most likely correct.

⁵³The *Hebrews* writer relied heavily on the LXX.

⁵⁴After the close of the NT period efforts were made within certain circles of rabbinic Judaism to belittle the role of angels at Sinai in order to counter the Christian claim that the Law was an inferior revelation because of its mediation by angels.

⁵⁵This is not to suggest they did not appear to reveal less than watershed events [Acts 27.21–26].

⁵⁶To refer this angel to the 2nd person of the Godhead [*the word* at this stage?] may be reading too much back into the text from the GNT [particularly Jn 1].

⁵⁷In Dan 3.25 the LXX has ἀγγέλου θεοῦ [“an angel of God”], but the Hebrew has בן־אלהים [“a son of the gods”].

Lk 16.19–23 may suggest God's heavenly messengers continue to minister to the faithful, even in death, yet beyond that it is difficult to elaborate.⁶⁰

More generally, the author of Hebrews describes angels as “ministering spirits sent forth to serve for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation” [Heb 1.14; for OT background, *cf.* Gen 48.16 and *esp.* Ps 91.11; see also 1QH 5.20–22; 3ApocBar 12.3; StrB 1:781–83; 3:437–40 for rabbinic references]. So important are the disciples of Jesus, the “little ones” of Mt 18.7–14, that they have “their” angels, who presumably look after their welfare primarily through intercession, but perhaps also in other ways. Jewish readers might have the concept of guardian angels; some Jews believed every Jewish person had one.⁶¹ This passage falls short of describing “guardian” angels assigned to each individual Christian, who attempt to keep her or him out of danger. A more general idea is in view, namely, that angels [as a group] represent the “little ones” [as a group] before the throne of God. Nowhere in Scripture is there any suggestion that there is one angel for one person.⁶²

Acts presents angels as intervening in the affairs of the saints, including “jail breaks.” There is a threefold repetition of the motif of the miraculous opening of prison doors in *Acts*: the apostles [5.17–21], Peter [12.6–11⁶³], and Paul in [16.26f, no mention of an angel, nevertheless, divine intervention is assumed]. It is uncertain why God sometimes used angels and at other times not. Clearly, he does not need an angel's help; perhaps their presence was reassuring to those being helped.

In Rev 8.3–5 an angel serves the saints by offering up their prayers on the altar before the throne of God, presumably prayers for retribution upon their enemies. See below, as this angel also participates in the judgment upon God's enemies.

Angels as executioners of God's judgments

As early as the Jews entrance into the promised land, angels are depicted as executioners of God's judgments upon the pagan nations [Ex 33.1–3 *cf.* 32.33–34], and Israel's enemies throughout their history [2Kings 19.35; Is 37.36]. Such judgment is not restricted to Israel's enemies, but included Israel herself [2Sam 24.16–17; 1Chron 21].

In Jewish tradition, angels were commonly viewed as administrators of the will of God accomplishing eschatological judgment [*cf.* IEnoch 46:5; 63:1].⁶⁴ Likewise, in the NT, angels are

⁵⁸Although Jesus does not utilize angels in this role, he could have. Likewise implied in such a rescue of Jesus would be angelic judgment upon his executioners.

⁵⁹Paul writes in 1Tim 3.16 that “He [Jesus] was seen [aor pass ind] by angels.” Since the preceding line refers to Jesus' resurrection [*cf.* 1P 3.18], the ἀγγέλοις could refer to *apostles* [messengers] who witnessed the resurrection, and so proclaimed it among the nations [next line]. Or, they could refer to *evil angels* [demons] who unhappily saw Christ's victorious ascent and victory [*cf.* Eph 3:10(?); 6:12]. Or, they could refer to *angels who ministered* to Jesus during his life, witnessed his resurrection, and now worship him [*cf.* Mt 4:11; 28:2–7; Mark 1:13; Eph 3:10(?); Phil 2:10; Heb 1:6].

⁶⁰Some suggest Lazarus was given no burial by fellow humans, but perhaps there is more involved here. Since there is no close parallel in connection with views of the afterlife to the role of the angels, it may be that we should think in terms not of the normal fate of the righteous, but of a special *translation* to heaven, somewhat akin to Enoch [Gen 5.24] and Elijah [2Kgs 2.11]. However, this says much more than the text allows and Lazarus is only a secondary character in the story; there is no narrative need to account for this extraordinary good fortune. It is probably better to assume Jesus' reference to the angels is simply an artistic touch; we should not conclude at the death of the faithful, or even some “special” believers, angels actually transport their souls to “Abraham's bosom” [*i.e.*, where the faithful go (with the Lord) at death], which may picture reclining at a banquet, as at the “feast in the kingdom of God” where Abraham will be present [13.28–29]. As such it would contrast vv 20–21, where the rich man sits at the table while Lazarus longs for the scraps.

⁶¹The Jew's [at Mary's house] exclamation, “It is his angel” [Acts 12.12–17] is sometimes thought to mean: (1) as in some popular Jewish traditions the righteous would become like angels after death, or (2) his “guardian angel,” or (3) a sarcastic response to Rhoda's claims that it was Peter, even though they had been praying for Peter's deliverance! Which ever is the case, their response indicates a lack of faith in their own prayers.

⁶²Guardian angels for individuals is rooted in the idea that each nation had a representative angle [*cf.* Dt 32.8 LXX, “according to the number of the sons (בְּנֵי, ἀγγέλων in LXX) of Israel”]; see also Dan 12.1 suggesting Michael held such a role].

⁶³Peter is either so astonished he cannot believe it actually is an angel [thinking it only a “vision”], or he was too sleepy to grasp the reality of what was happening, and thought he was dreaming. However, standing alone in the street, possibly brought to his senses by the cool night air, he attributed it directly to God [whether by a human messenger or an angel].

⁶⁴Although angels execute judgment, they are never viewed as passing or determining judgment [*cf.* 2Pet 2.11; Jude 9; see study “*Demons in Scripture*”].

instrumental in dealing out God's retribution upon the enemies of his people [2Thess 1.6–8].⁶⁵ In Mt 13.36–43, 47–50, whatever "age" Jesus is referring to [Jewish or Messianic], angels are depicted as the executioners of God's judgment, both in punishing evil and vindicating righteousness [Mt 16.27–28⁶⁶ cf. 25.31]. In Mt 24.29–36 although angels accompany Christ in his destruction of Jerusalem [AD70], (1) they are as uninformed as to the specific date as the rest of creation⁶⁷ [as even Jesus, although he has specified it would occur in his audience's generation] and (2) they are seen only on the positive side of judgment [gathering the elect].

The angels in Lk 12.8–9 appear to constitute the heavenly royal court [Rev 3.5; see also Lk 15.10] rather than a court specifically set for judgment. Jesus is not suggesting he answers in any way to the angels; they are merely in the court of judgment where the Father sits [cf. Mt 10.32–33]. Nevertheless, they are present and long to hear the confession of the Son concerning his disciples, for whom they care deeply [see Lk 15.8–10⁶⁸].⁶⁹

A good example of angels as executioners of God's judgment on an individual level is recorded in Acts 12.18–24. Herod's execution by God was at the hand of his avenging angel. Herod had committed the ultimate sin in elevating himself [or at least allowing himself to be elevated] to a god. This event, which was inspired by another of God's angels ministering to Peter [Acts 12.1–17], presents a good contrast in the way God uses his angels to minister to his saints and to judge his enemies [particularly the enemies of his people].

The most vivid picture of God's angels involved in God's judgments is in *Revelation*. They are introduced in this capacity in chapter 7.1–3. Four angels are about to execute God's judgment [possibly the first 4 angels of the plagues]. The fifth angel introduced appears to have authority over the four, or at least he has the role of bringing the word directly from God.⁷⁰

"The seven angels who stand before God" in 8.2 is articular; meaning they are either being introduced here for the first time, but are familiar to the readers, or the anaphoric article refers back to the group of angels introduced anarthrously in 1.20 who are referred to individually

⁶⁵Angelic attendance at theophanies is fairly regular [Mt 25.31; Mk 8.38; 13.27]. The angels here in 1Thess 1 may be the "holy ones" [saints] at theophanies like Dt 33.2; Zech 14.5; Jude 14 [citing IEnoch 1.6–7], and if so, may explain 1Thess 3.13.

⁶⁶Cf. Mk 8.38–9.1; Lk 9.26–27 which refer to judgment upon Jerusalem AD70.

⁶⁷Angels are limited in knowledge even in regard to the gospel [1Pet 1.10–12]. Like προφήται in v 10, ἄγγελοι is without the article. These are "angels" in general rather than a particular group; yet, as in the case of the prophets, Peter evidently has specific traditions in mind. The notion that some heavenly mysteries are hidden even from the angels who dwell in heaven is found both in Jewish apocalyptic literature [e.g., IEnoch 16.3; IEnoch 24.3] and in the NT [e.g., Mk 13.32, and by implication Eph 3.10]. This tradition exists in apocalyptic literature alongside that of the "interpreting angel" who explains God's mysteries to a prophet or seer [e.g., Zech 1.9; 4Ezra 4.1; Rev 17.1; 21.9]. The very fact that angels know so much enhances the sense of wonder at the things they do not know.

The best commentary on Peter's brief allusion to the angels [1Pet 1.10–12] is perhaps Heb 1–2, especially the comparison in Heb 2.2–3. The angels, like the prophets [cf. Heb 1.1], belong to the past; the "world to come" is not theirs [2.5], but belongs to Jesus the Son of Man [2.6–9], and to the humans he claims as his brothers and sisters [2.10–18]. While the author of Hebrews referred to prophets only in passing and to angels in considerable detail, Peter has done the opposite. For him the chief representatives of the past are the prophets who lived in the past and inquired about the salvation to come. Now even the angels, to whom the prophets often directed their inquiries, are trying to find out the mystery of God's redemptive plan.

⁶⁸God is no more content than is the woman with those in the fold; there is special importance for him in the one who has been lost but restored to him. The angels, as the "friends" of God, equally share in the repentance of yet another sinner they will reap in God's harvest in the judgment [Mt 13]. They have intense interest in human salvation [1Pet 1.10–12]. They rejoice at the conversion of a sinner [Lk 15.10]; they observed [ministered to] Jesus in his life [1Tim 3:16(?)]; they rejoice in songs of praise at the completion of redemption [Rev 5.11–14]. It is not the desire of angels to bring judgment on God's children.

⁶⁹In a reversal of the idea of God's angels present in the judgment scene, Paul, in 1Cor 6.1–3 writes "angels" are to be judged by the saints? Which angels? Good angels, which seems to make little sense considering their destiny has been sealed from the beginning? Evil angels, which likewise seems academic since their destiny also has been sealed from the beginning [2P 2.4]? In many Jewish traditions, the righteous would judge the nations; this judging could also imply judging the angels who were believed to rule the nations. Which ever the case, angels will likewise stand before judgment, whether good angels [like the saints] who will stand before God's judgment throne on judgment day already acquitted, or evil angels [like unbelievers] who will stand before God's judgment throne on judgment day already convicted. How the saints will be involved is unclear. See also Mt 19.28.

⁷⁰"Seal" refers to the impress of a signet ring; an official who wished to delegate his authority for a task to a representative would allow that subordinate to use his signet ring. The connection, if any, between the seal with the angel and that which is sealed on the foreheads of the servants of God [v 3] is not clear. Does the angel seal the saints, or does he simply have God's seal, like the saints, indicating his belonging to God and his protection by God?

thereafter with the definite article [2.1, 8, 12, 18; 3.1, 5, 7, 14]. The first possibility is preferable because of the relative clause—"who stand before God"—that defines their ordinary role in the heavenly court. The readers' familiarity with them may suggest, as some believe, these seven angels are probably the seven archangels who occupy a very particular role in the angelic hierarchy [cf. Lk 1.19]. Some also believe they are identical with the seven spirits of God referred to earlier in *Revelation* [1.4; 4.5].

Whichever the case, these are the seven angels who execute God's judgment [8.2, 6, 13; 15.1, 6–8; 16.1; 17.1; 21.9]. The number 7, particularly in apocalyptic literature, is symbolic of totality, completion, and it might not be correct to take these as seven actual angels in reality. Nevertheless, they are pictured as standing before God, probably in his immediate presence to serve him, in whatever capacity, in this case judgment.⁷¹ The three series of seven cycles, which began in 6.1–17 with the seven *seals*, continued by the sounding of the seven *trumpets* of judgment by the seven angels in 9.1–9.21; 11.15–19, and are completed in 15.1–16.21 ["It is done," 16.17] as the seven angels pour out the seven bowls of judgment.⁷² Again, the primary role of the angels is that of pronouncing [18.1–3, 21]⁷³ and executing the [final] judgment of God—in this case on Jerusalem, and/or Rome.

The seven angels of the presence do not officiate at the heavenly incense offering [8.3–5], but this task is assigned to a yet another angel. This angel is also involved in a symbolic act of judgment about to be poured out by the seven angels. While the incense offering is directed toward God, the hot coals are directed toward the earth [cf. Gen 18–19]. This brief scene involving the casting of fire upon the earth is clearly a metaphor anticipating the judgments that attend the blowing of each of the seven trumpets. This divine punishment is implicitly linked with the prayers of the saints offered with the incense to God in v 4, while the prayers themselves might be read in light of the prayer for revenge uttered by the souls under the altar in 6.9–10.

The angels in 9.1, 13–15 represent a continuation of the judgment being executed by the seven angels introduced in 8.1ff. In 9.1b–2a it seems obvious the "star" is a supernatural being, *i.e.*, probably an angel. See also 8.10; 12.4. In early Jewish literature, stars can represent angelic beings [Judg 5.20; Job 38.7; Dan 8.10]. Falling stars often represent evil angelic beings or demons, even Satan [IEnoch 86.1–3; 88.1–3; Jude 13; Lk 10.18; Rev 12.9]. Here the fallen star should be understood as an angelic messenger [cf. 20.1] and probably not be identified with the angel of the abyss named Abaddon or Apollyon in 9.11 or Satan in 12.9.⁷⁴

For a more extended discussion on Rev 12 see "*Demons*" in *Scripture*. Nevertheless, this passage as another interlude in the judgments executed by angels upon the earth, along with Jude 9; Dan 10.13, 21; 12.1 are the only ones that mention "Michael" [the archangel]. Here he is clearly involved in a "behind-the-scenes" judgment of Satan and his angels. He is singled out as a commander of "HIS [own] angels"—which suggests there may be other angels not under his command, or at least not in *this* "war."⁷⁵ He is also depicted as the godly counter-part of Satan [a roll commonly held by God or Jesus].

In Dan 10.13–21, Gabriel(?) [the only other angel specifically named in the OT, though here it is not certain that he is the angel referred to] claims that he and "the prince of the kingdom

⁷¹In contrast, in chapter 14 a series of six angels both announce and execute judgment. There are not seven angels, which would denote completeness, possibly because more judgment is to come. See chapters 15–16, which denote completeness with seven angels. 14.13–14 suggest the presence of the Spirit [speaks twice or with another unnamed voice], and the Son of Man make these "high level" pronouncements of which these angels participate. In 14.10 the "holy angels" are in the presence of the Lamb observing the judgment of those with the mark of the beast. This angel has authority [ἐξουσία] over fire [judgment]. See 18.1–3 below.

⁷²15.1 is likely a summary of the vision reported in 15:2–16:21 and therefore functions as a title or superscription. It seems John first sees the angels in 15.6.

⁷³This angel is said to have "great authority [power]" [μεγὰς + ἐξουσία]. This angel's authority is not defined but obviously extends over "Babylon the great." Whether or not this angel's "great authority" is relative to only the objects of his destruction or the authority of other angels, or both, is unclear. It may simply be a commentary of the author from his perspective without regard to any other reference. John writes, "The earth was illuminated by his glory." This phrase is a relatively close rendering of the Hebrew text of Ezek 43.2, "the earth shone with his glory" [referring, however, to Yahweh]. This is the only instance in *Revelation* in which an angelic being is described as having δόξα, "glory, splendor," a term usually reserved as a designation for the presence of God [Rev 15.8; 21.11, 23]. The attribution of δόξα or כבוד [kābōd] to angelic beings also occurs in Ezek 9.3; 10.4, 18, 22; Heb 9.5. The angel in 18.21 is likely just another angel; ἄγγελος is anarthrous. He is likely described as a "strong" [ἰσχυρός] angel for the task before him of lifting the "great [μέγας] millstone." Other "strong" [ἰσχυρός] angels are mentioned in 5.2 and 10.1.

⁷⁴For more discussion on 9.11 and the fallen star, see "*Demons*" in *Scripture* on this same passage.

⁷⁵Jesus also is said to have "HIS angels" [Mt 16.27; 24.31], but this could well be a reference to *all* the angels [Heb 1.6; Mt 25.31].

of Persia" [*i.e.*, an angel representing Persia] were in conflict for twenty-one days when Michael relieved him. In Dan 10.20, the "prince of Persia" and the "prince of Greece" are mentioned, and again these are likely national angels of Persia and Greece. Beginning with *Daniel*, Michael is considered "the great prince [Theod. ἄρχων] who has charge of God's people [*i.e.*, Israel]" [Dn 12.1]. Though this appears to be a war fought by angels, nothing is mentioned about angelic armies they might lead. Jude 9 alludes to the story of the archangel Michael disputing with Satan over the body of Moses [from the lost ending of the *Testament of Moses*]. Rev 12 is the earliest evidence that Christians held the view that Michael held the first position in an angelic hierarchy. Since he is depicted as leading an angelic host, he is not simply an archangel but an ἀρχιστράτηγος, "field marshal," in function, if not in title [from non-canonical Jewish texts].

In what appears to be a culmination of all the judgments in *Revelation* [20.1–3], an [anarthrous] ἄγγελος, not directly related to any angel seen thus far, extends his authority [power] over the enemy of God [Satan] to the degree of "having the key of the abyss...",⁷⁶ and so, by implication, this angel is greater than any angel named so far—at least in his role as the gatekeeper of the abyss; this one has power over the force behind all the evil thus far named [*cf.* 19.20–21], not only in the sense of defeating him, but having complete control over him.⁷⁷

Angels as worshippers of God

The Hebrew OT has no reference that specifically mentions angels worshipping God. However, by the writing of the LXX, the idea was present and included in Dt 32.43 [if πάντες υἱοὶ θεοῦ is taken parallel to πάντες ἄγγελοι θεοῦ] and Ps 97.7 [96.7 LXX]—προσκυνήσατε αὐτῷ, πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ ["worship him, all [you] his angels"]. It is not until the GNT that angels worshipping God is directly declared, but even here it is rare [Heb 1.6;⁷⁸ Rev 5.11–14⁷⁹; 7.11–12]. Other passages indirectly refer to the worship of God by the angels [Ps 103.19–22; 148.1–2].

Under the old covenant angels were part of the revelatory process, part of that from which the Jews were separated and of which they were fearful [*cf.* Dt 33.2]. The *Hebrews* writer suggests the new covenant enables angels and the faithful to gather together to worship God in a joyful gathering [Heb 12.22–24].⁸⁰

In Col 2.18 if the genitive ταπεινοφροσύνη καὶ θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων ["self-abasement and worship (religion) of the angels"] is taken as *subjective*, humility and worship [religion] are taken as *practices of the angels*. In short, the heretics were in some sense enamored with angelic self-abasement and worship of God.⁸¹ However, the genitive is generally taken as *objective*, worship *directed toward* angels. Some Colossians were possibly venerating angels, addressing prayers and petitions to angels, a practice that overlapped with magical spirit invocations. Some Jewish literature, especially the Dead Sea Scrolls, spoke of the earthly community entering into the worship of the heavenly community, and some scholars think Paul attacks that idea here.

Any thought of worship directed toward angels was prohibited in the early church. Rev 22.8–9 clearly demonstrates angels are not to receive worship; see also Rev 19.10. The emphasis on worshiping God rather than the angelic messenger has a parallel in the reaction of Joseph when his brothers did obeisance before him in Gen 50:19, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?" Similarly, when Barnabas and Paul rejected the worship of the people from Lystra who thought

⁷⁶See Jude 6; 2P 2.4.

⁷⁷Not unlike the conflict in Rev 12, it is neither God nor Jesus who deals with the devil face to face, but simply an angel. This is delegated divine authority, but nevertheless demonstrates the power of God's forces over those of evil.

⁷⁸Heb 1.6 is a quote from the LXX of Dt 32.43, and/or a possible allusion to Ps 97.7 [96.7 LXX]. The Hebrew in each of these passages does not mention angels; Ps 97.7 rather commands "Worship Him, all you *gods*." The citation in Heb 1.6 is, of course, applied to worship of the Son.

⁷⁹A scene likely taken from Dan 7.10. Significant in this seen is that the worship is directed at the Lamb as well as the one on the throne.

⁸⁰There is a punctuation problem here, whether πανήγυρις ["joyful gathering"] relates to the angels or the church. Some translations take πανήγυρις as related to the angels ["angels in festal gathering" (RSV, NRSV, NAB); "angels in joyful assembly" (NIV)], others take it as related to προσεληλύθατε ["come to," (KJV, ASV, NASB) "to the general assembly"]. Both NA27 and UBS4 follow ἀγγέλων with a comma thereby disassociating πανηγύρει from ἀγγέλων and favoring the KJV, ASV, NASB renderings. However it is rendered, the effect is the same; there is a joyful gathering of both angels and the assembly before God.

⁸¹Of course, this implies the heretical teachers were claiming some kind of privileged [mystical(?)] access to the world of the angels, perhaps reflected in the phrase "taking his stand on visions he has seen." Such activities were for a spiritual elite pressing on in wisdom and knowledge to attain true "fullness." "Self-abasement" was a term used by opponents to denote ascetic practices effective for receiving visions of heavenly mysteries and participating in mystical experiences. The "mature" were thus able to gain entrance into heaven and join in the "angelic worship of God" as part of their present experience.

that they were gods, they said, "Gentlemen, why are you doing this? We are people just like you" (Acts 14:15).

Cherubim and Seraphim

CHERUBIM

The terms כְּרוּב [cherub] and מַלְאָךְ [angel] never occur together in the Hebrew Scriptures as supernatural beings.⁸² The terms שֶׁרָף [seraph] and מַלְאָךְ [angel] likewise do not occur together. Although some refer to cherubim and seraphim as angelic beings, it is only because they appear in the presence of the Lord and perform some angelic-like functions; however, it cannot be argued with any certainty that they constitute an order of angelic beings.⁸³

The term כְּרוּב occurs 96 times in the Hebrew, which the LXX generally translated χερουβίμ. In the GNT χερουβίμ occurs one time [Heb 9.5]. The Hebrew and Greek terms mean simply "cherub," as the creatures so defined in the contexts.

The first occurrence of cherubim in Scripture occurs in Gen 3.24 as *guardians* of the "tree of life" preventing human access and sinners from taking hold of immortality. They obviously are animated supernatural creatures about which little else is revealed in *Genesis*. Only in this *Genesis* passage can cherubim be defined as actual ontological beings. In all the remaining passages they are either handcrafted objects or subjects of visional experiences by Ezekiel the prophet. The usual function of cherubim in Scripture is that of *guardians* of God's presence, his people, or his property [as with the forbidden "tree of life"].

Cherubim do not appear again until following the exodus, and only in the books of *Exodus* and *Numbers* in the remainder of the *Pentateuch* [18 occurrences].⁸⁴ In each case, the cherubim are hand crafted three-dimensional ornamental winged figures on each side of the atonement cover of the Ark of the Covenant in the wilderness tabernacle as guardians of God's presence and possibly preventing human access; they are also embroidered on the curtains and veil of the tabernacle. In the *historical* documents [38 occurrences]⁸⁵ cherubim are likewise handcrafted figures in Solomon's temple over the Ark of the Covenant, as well as two-dimensional carvings on the walls of the temple.⁸⁶ It is in connection with the Ark of the Covenant that the only NT reference to cherubim is made [Heb 9.5].

Aside from the one reference to cherubim in the historical section of *Isaiah* [37.16, parallel to 2Kings 19.15], cherubim do not appear in prophetic literature other than *Ezekiel* [31 occurrences].⁸⁷ The first occurrence in *Ezekiel* is in 9.3 where it is simply a reference to the cherubim over the Ark of the Covenant.

The references beginning in chapter 10 of *Ezekiel* are quite vivid and depict cherubim as animated celestial living beings [creatures] [10.15, 17, 20 with 1.5, 13–15, 19–22; 3.13].⁸⁸ They form a throne chariot for God's glory to evacuate Jerusalem, which will soon [586BC] be judged [cf. 11.22–25]. In 10.1, the articular הַכְּרֻבִּים [*the* cherubim] likely find their antecedent in chapter 1;⁸⁹ although the word is not used there, the depictions are similar and the prophet identifies these creatures as "the living beings that I saw by the river Chebar" [10.15, 20–22 with 1.1; see also 3.23; 8.4; 43.2–3].

In 28.14–16 it appears that either God had appointed a cherub as guardian [the primary role of cherubim] of the king of Tyre who later drives the king from power for violence and abuse of trade, or, Tyre's king had identified himself with the patron deity of Tyre, directly or symbolically as the god's guardian sphinx [or cherub].

⁸²In 2Kings 19.14–15 [Is 37.14–16] they occur in close proximity, but in no direct relation to one another; מַלְאָךְ refers to *human* messengers in both these passages.

⁸³Cherubim do not even perform the most basic function of angels ["messengers"] as revealers and/or interpreters of God's word.

⁸⁴Ex 25.18–22; 26.1, 31; 36.8, 35; 37.8–9; Num 7.89.

⁸⁵In Ezra 2.59; Neh 7.61 כְּרוּב occurs as a town name.

⁸⁶1Sam 4.4; 2Sam 6.2; 1Kings 6.23–35; 7.29, 36; 8.6–7; 2Kings 19.15 with parallel Is 37.16; 1Chron 13.6; 28.18; 2Chron 3.7–14; 5.7–8. In 2Sam 22.11 David's song of praise to the Lord [paralleled in Ps 18.10] refers to cherubim as a metaphorical means of transportation in parallel with "the wings of the wind." The only other references in the Pss [80.1; 99.1] are historical in nature.

⁸⁷All uses of מַלְאָכִים [always plural] in *Ezekiel* [17.15; 23.16, 40; 30.9] refer to human messengers; thus, there are no direct references to angels. However, "the man clothed in linen" in 9.1–10.7 is often regarded as an angel [cf. Dan 10.5–6; 12.5–9; Mk 16.5; Rev 15.6; 19.14].

⁸⁸This might be understood as the background for the [τέσσαρα ζῶα, "four living beings (creatures)"] around the throne of God in Rev 4.6; 6.6. However, see below on *SERAPHIM*.

⁸⁹The only actual antecedent in 9.3 is singular and represents the hand-crafted figures in the Temple [cf. 10.4]. In 10.1ff the cherubim are *four* "living creatures"; also, there were only *two* figures in the Temple.

The final occurrences of cherubim in *Ezekiel* are in the final vision concerning the restoration of Jerusalem following its destruction in 586BC [40–48], and in particular the rebuilt Temple [40–42]. Cherubim are carved in the walls and doors of the Temple [41.18–20, 25].

The depictions of the cherubim—particularly in the four faces and wheels of each—draw forth many characteristics, such as intelligence, perception, power, speed, courage, industry, *etc.* Their main function seems to have been transporting the throne of God, and God himself. However, all this must be understood in terms of the symbolism before Ezekiel's eyes. No such creatures are known to have ever existed in the natural realm, and God clearly has no need of transporters or assistants.⁹⁰

SERAPHIM

The term שֶׁרָפִים occurs 126 times in the Hebrew, but only twice in reference to "seraphs" or "seraphim" [Is 6.2, 6]. The verb form means "to burn" [Gen 11.3; 38.24; Ex 12.10; Lev 4.12; Num 31.10; Dt 7.25; Josh 11.6; Is 1.7; 44.16, 19; 47.14; *etc.*], and the rarely occurring noun form is translated "snake, serpent" [Num 21.8; Is 14.29; 30.6]. In Is 6.2, 6 the LXX effectively transliterates שֶׁרָפִים to σερραφιν. The term does not occur in the GNT.

Like the cherubim in *Ezekiel*, the seraphim in Is 6⁹¹ are symbolic figures in a vision.⁹² They are distinguished from cherubim, not only nominally, but also structurally ["having six wings" in contrast to cherubim each having "four wings," Ezek 1.6].⁹³ Although they would be in close proximity to the cherubim—*IF* the visions were expressing a supernatural reality, their rolls are more closely aligned with those of angels.⁹⁴ The seraphim, by covering themselves with their wings, appear to be shielding themselves from God's glory as they worship. One seraph has the roll of revealing to the prophet forgiveness from God.

If cherubim and seraphim are created ontological beings in the supernatural realm, like angels and separate from them or even an order among them, nothing is revealed concerning their relationship to one another. It cannot be determined with any certainty that one group ranked above the others or that they interacted in any way.

⁹⁰God is neither *temporal* nor *spacial*—he is ubiquitous [omnipresent]. He does not go from place to place, quickly or otherwise; he is always everywhere. The difficulty defining cherubim rests on the fact they are essentially symbolic figures and, with the exception of the *Genesis* passage, have no existence in the natural realm, unlike the angels. This does not mean, however, they were not part of the created order.

⁹¹The number of seraphim is not revealed.

⁹²God does not have a literal face or feet, nor does he "fly." See *fn.* 91.

⁹³The description of the seraphim and their activities in Is 6 suggest that this passage is the background for Rev 4.6–8; 6.6 and not the visions of Ezekiel.

⁹⁴The "fiery serpents" the Israelites feared in the desert [Num 21.6–8; Dt 8.15] are further embellished in Isaiah as "flying serpents" [14.29; 30.6]—designated by the same Hebrew word as seraphim. This pairing suggests that the image of a seraph may have had more in common with the idea of a dragon than of an angel.