

Angels: A Long Development

In order to fully understand angels in the Bible it helps to embrace a bit of temporary amnesia and forget most of what we know about angels. That is because angelology has undergone a long development from its ancient Near Eastern pre-history before the days of the Bible to its final formulation at the hands of Saint John of Damascus (d. ca. 749 A.D.) and we must avoid the temptation to anachronistically read back later developments in earlier texts and understandings.

In the world now long-gone in the ancient Near East it was believed that the world was populated by invisible powers. All the varied forces of nature were personalized in the form of gods. It was believed that deities stood behind natural forces, though the line between gods and demons was not well drawn. Certain illnesses or problems were thought to be the work of malevolent spirits—either working independently or sent by the gods. Men found themselves at the mercy of these powerful natural forces, and sought security by placating them or (as in the case of harmful spirits), by trying to control them.

In monotheistic Israel obviously these forces of nature could not be considered as gods. Rather, they were all under the power of Yahweh, who used them as He pleased to accomplish His purposes. We find vestiges of this notion in parts of the Old Testament: in *Psalms 104:4* Yahweh uses the tempestuous winds as His messengers (Hebrew *mal'ak*), the fiery flames of lightning as His servants (Hebrew *sharath*). In *Psalms 78:49* we read that the plagues of “wrath, indignation, and distress” that God unleashed upon Egypt were called “a company of destroying *mal'akim*”. Just as God uses wind and lightning as His messengers to deliver a sentence of judgment during a storm, so He used plague and pestilence as His messengers when He smote Egypt to liberate Israel from their grip.

We see this same thought in the mention of “destroyer” who brought death to all the firstborn of Egypt (*Exodus 12:23*), and perhaps in *2 Samuel 24:16* which spoke of the “messenger working destruction” in Jerusalem in the form of a plague, and in *2 Kings 19:35* which speaks of “Yahweh’s messenger going forth” to slay the Assyrian army with a plague. God was sovereign over the forces of nature, and used those forces to fulfill His own will. It is possible that in these passages the word *mal'ak* meant such natural forces which Yahweh used to fulfill His will.

Though certainty is impossible when trying to reconstruct a pre-history like this, it seems as if this understanding of God’s power over nature early coalesced with an image of God as a king commanding His servants. God’s power was the power of a king, and a king always had a court, courtiers, a throne, a throne room, an army—and messengers to reveal His decisions to His vassals and servants to carry out His commands. The word *mal'ak* was now also used to describe these messenger members of His heavenly court.

This image of God having a court and courtiers came to Israel easily enough. Outside of Israel it was believed that all the various gods met in council as members of a pantheon, presided over by the head god. The idea of a solitary god, one bereft of membership in a pantheon, was inconceivable. A god must be part of a council if he or she were a real god.

Such a picture, of course, could find no place in Israel: Yahweh was not a member of a pantheon of gods, for He alone was truly God. His council therefore consisted not of fellow-deities, but of His servants, His messengers—His *mal'akim*.

Members of this council had various names in the Old Testament. They were called *bene Elohim* and *bene elim* (sons of God/ gods) in passages such as *Job 38:7* and *Psalms 29:1*. His servants were called *qadoshim* (holy ones) in *Zechariah 15:4*. They were often referred to as *mal'akim* (messengers/ angels), such as in *Psalms 103:20* and *1 Samuel 29:9*. When they appeared in human form to men they were referred simply in

terms of their appearance—i.e. as “men” or “mortals” (Hebrew *enoshim* in *Genesis 18:2*), or as “a man” (Hebrew *ish* in *Judges 13:10*). Whatever their names, they were totally subordinate to Yahweh, and carried out His will among men. That is, their actions were accepted as actions of God Himself, since they never acted independently of Him.

Later on, especially after the Exile when Israel mixed in with nations such as Persia (with its dualistic Zoroastrianism) angelology experienced further refinement and development. God’s *mal’akim* were increasingly regarded as a particular species within creation. Just as the created order included such species as plants and flora, animals and fauna, and human beings, so it also included a species of angels. Angels were no longer merely undifferentiated members of God’s heavenly court. Increasingly they were regarded as having individual names (e.g. “Michael” or “Gabriel”, names which meant “Who is like God?” and “God’s Warrior” respectively). They were regarded as having differentiated functions and corresponding ranks. There were therefore now not just “angels”, but “archangels”. The cherubim and seraphim found their places within this ranked system.

Since the specific ranking of angels cannot be found in Scripture itself, but must be read into it, not surprisingly different systems of ranking emerged. The Jewish Maimonides (d. 1204) counted ten ranks of angels: living creatures (compare *Ezekiel 1:5*), *ophanim* (“wheels”, cp. *Ezekiel 1:10*); *erelim* (“valiant ones”, cp. *Isaiah 33:7*), *hashmallim* (“bronze-coloured ones”, cp. *Ezekiel 1:4*), seraphim, *mal’akim*, *elohim*, *bene elohim*, *cherubim*, *ishim* (“men”). Saint John of Damascus much earlier and working within a different Scriptural world produced a different ranking of nine orders of angels, incorporating the earlier vocabulary of Saint Paul: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, angels.

The details are less important than the conviction that the invisible world contains the same kind of variety and hierarchical ranking found in the visible world. At the end of a long process of (we may think providentially-guided) reflection, angels were eventually regarded as being a species of created being along with human beings, and having distinct and specific individual traits and lives.

Sound exegesis of a given Biblical passage involves first locating the passage along this extensive trajectory. For example, when the author of *Psalms 78* spoke of “a company of destroying *mal’akim*”, sound exegesis will not attempt to inquire from which of the Damascene nine ranks of angels these *mal’akim* came. *Psalms 78* is not using the term *mal’akim* in quite that way. There the term has more in common with an earlier understanding of *mal’akim* as the forces of nature God uses to accomplish His purposes.

We see that the Church is the beneficiary of a long process of inspired and guided reflection concerning how God carries out His will on the earth, and how we find our place in all this. We must be grateful that we stand at the end of such a lengthy trajectory. We have things available to us that were not available to generations long past.