

Angels in Holy Scripture



Attendants at God's throne

It is as messengers that they most often figure in the Bible, but “messenger” expresses neither their essential nature nor their essential function, which is that of attendants upon God's throne in that court of heaven of which Daniel has left us a vivid picture:

I beheld as thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days sat: His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head like clean wool: His throne like flames of fire: the wheels of it like a burning fire. A swift stream of fire issued forth from before Him: thousands of thousands ministered to Him, and ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before Him: the judgment sat and the books were opened. (Daniel 7:9-10; cf. also Psalm 96:7; Psalm 102:20; Isaiah 6, etc.)

This function of the angelic host is expressed by the word "assistance" (Job 1:6; 2:1), and our Lord refers to it as their perpetual occupation (Matthew 18:10). More than once we are told of seven angels whose special function it is thus to "stand before God's throne" (Tobit 12:15; Revelation 8:2-5)..

God's messengers to mankind

The angels of the Bible often appear in the role of God's messengers to mankind. They are His instruments by whom He communicates His will to men, and in Jacob's vision they are depicted as ascending and descending the ladder which

stretches from earth to heaven while the Eternal Father gazes upon the wanderer below. It was an angel who found Hagar in the wilderness (Genesis 16); angels drew Lot out of Sodom; an angel announces to Gideon that he is to save his people; an angel foretells the birth of Samson (Judges 13), and the angel Gabriel instructs Daniel (Daniel 8:16; 9:21). The same heavenly spirit announced the birth of St. John the Baptist and the Incarnation of the Redeemer, while tradition ascribes to him both the message to the shepherds (Luke 2:9), and the most glorious mission of all, that of strengthening the King of Angels in His Agony (Luke 22:43). Such appearances of angels generally last only so long as the delivery of their message requires, but frequently their mission is prolonged, and they are

represented as the constituted guardians of the nations at some particular crisis, e.g. during the Exodus (Exodus 14:19; Baruch 6:6).

Personal guardians

Throughout the Bible we find it repeatedly implied that each individual soul has its guardian angel. Thus Abraham, when sending his steward to seek a wife for Isaac, says: "He will send His angel before thee" (Genesis 24:7). The words of the ninetieth Psalm which the devil quoted to our Lord (Matthew 4:6) are well known, and Judith accounts for her heroic deed by saying: "As the Lord liveth, His angel hath been my keeper" (13:20). These passages and many like them (Genesis 16:6-32; Hosea 12:4; 1 Kings 19:5; Acts 12:7; Psalm 33:8), though they will not of themselves demonstrate the doctrine that every individual has his appointed guardian angel, receive their complement in our Savior's words: "See that you despise not one of these little ones; for I say to you that their angels in Heaven always see the face of My Father Who is in Heaven" (Matthew 18:10). Indeed, the book of Tobias seems intended to teach this truth more than any other, The Bible represents the angels not only as our guardians, but also as actually interceding for us. "The angel Raphael (Tobit 12:12) says: "I offered thy prayer to the Lord" (cf. Job 5:1 and 33:23; Revelation 8:4).

As divine agents governing the world

There are biblical texts that teach that it is the angels who put into execution God's law regarding the physical world. Thus the pestilence which devastated Israel for David's sin in numbering the people is attributed to an angel whom David is said to have actually seen (2 Samuel 24:15-17). Even the wind rustling in the tree-tops was regarded as an angel (2 Samuel 5:23-24; 1 Chronicles 14:14, 15). This is more explicitly stated with regard to the pool of Siloam (John 5:1-4), though there is some doubt about the text; in that passage the disturbance of the water is said to be due to the periodic visits of an angel.

The number of angels

The number of the angels is frequently stated in scripture as quite large (Daniel 7:10; Revelation 5:11; Psalm 67:18; Matthew 26:53). From the use of the word host (*sabaoth*) as a synonym for the heavenly army it is hard to resist the impression that the term "Lord of Hosts" refers to God's Supreme command of the angelic multitude (cf. Deuteronomy 33:2; 32:43).

Angels in the New Testament

When we come to the New Testament their name appears on every page and the number of references to them equals those in the Old Dispensation. It is their privilege to announce to Zechariah and Mary the dawn of Redemption, and to the shepherds its actual accomplishment. Our Lord in His discourses talks of them as one who actually saw them, He describes their life in heaven (Matthew 22:30; Luke 20:36); He tell us how they form a bodyguard round Him and at a word from Him would avenge Him on His enemies (Matthew 26:53); it is the privilege of one of them to assist Him in His Agony and sweat of Blood. More than once He speaks of them as auxiliaries and witnesses at the final judgment (Matthew 16:27), which indeed they will prepare (13:39-49); and lastly, they are the joyous witnesses of His triumphant Resurrection (28:2).