



Therefore with Angels and Archangels and with All the Company of Heaven

By John La Boone

"Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders."

– Revelation 5:11

Angels are popular in America these days. According to a recent AP-GfK poll, 77 percent of adults in the United States say they believe in angels. That number rises to 88 percent of Christians, 97 percent of Evangelical Christians and 94 percent of people who attend weekly religious services. Even a majority of non-Christian Americans say they believe in angels, and 40 percent of people who never attend religious services believe in them. Women are more likely than men to believe in angels, especially

women over the age of 30. By comparison, only 34 percent of respondents said they believe in ghosts or UFOs, so angels are doing pretty good when it comes to believability.

Our English word “angel” is a blend of the Old English *engel* and the Old French *angele* which are both derived from the late Latin *angelus*, originally meaning “messenger” or “envoy.” The Latin comes from the Greek word *angelos*, and that term actually came from an ancient Persian word meaning “mounted courier.” Belief in angels is far older than Christianity and has been part of many faiths from ancient times to the present day. As with other theological concepts there has been plenty of crosspollination among religions.



Angels are mentioned 108 times in the Hebrew Bible and 165 times in the New Testament. There is considerable variety in what people currently believe about angels and there has been a richly varied history of beliefs on this subject. In Christianity, angels are thought of as spiritual beings who are superior to humans in power and knowledge and who serve as intermediaries between God and humans. Angels are similar to humans in that they have personalities complete with intellect, emotion and will, although they are better behaved than people as a rule. Angels are seen as benevolent but also kind of scary. In fact, when they appear in Bible stories the first thing they usually do is to say don't be afraid to humans who in most cases are absolutely terrified of them.

Much of our traditional Christian belief in angels was inherited directly from Judaism. Some scholars think that originally angels were believed in as lesser deities who participated in a Divine Council or assembly of gods; but, in the period following the Babylonian Captivity (597 – 538 before the Common Era) as Judaism evolved into a religion of explicit monotheism, angels sort of got theologically demoted to holy beings that were created by God the Father. They are believed to be immortal but subordinate to God. The Church does not teach that people become angels when they go to heaven, even though that idea continues to have a place in the imaginations of many people. It says in Hebrews 12:22 and 23 that when we get to heaven, among those greeting us will be

multitudes of celebrating angels and also the spirits of righteous humans made perfect, thus making a crucial distinction.

In Judaism and Christianity, angels have been variously referred to as: messengers of God, sons of God, sons of the Mighty, watchers, heavenly beings, heavenly hosts, the Council, flames of fire, chariots of fire, the holy ones, spirits, and the upper ones. In the book of Daniel we see individual angels referred to for the first time, naming Gabriel ("God is my strength") who is God's primary messenger, and Michael ("Who is like God") who is the holy fighter. Only those two angels are named in the canonical books of the Hebrew Bible and the Protestant Bible; however, in extra-Biblical literature there are many others, including:



- **Raphael** ("It is God who heals") – God's healing force. Named in the book of Tobit in the Apocrypha (a fully canonical part of the Catholic Bible). Very compassionate, works to bring people closer to God. Helps people who are struggling physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually. Heals animals. Associated with joy and laughter.
- **Jophiel** ("The beauty of God") – Expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden with a flaming sword and generally punishes transgressors. Described as the Archangel of Paradise. Patron of artists. Teaches the power of Light within oneself.
- **Uriel** ("God is my light") – Leads humans to their destiny. Archangel of salvation and repentance. Guards the gate of Eden with a fiery sword. Often depicted carrying a book or a papyrus scroll representing wisdom. Patron of the arts.
- **Zadkiel** ("The righteousness of God") – The angel of freedom, benevolence and mercy. Patron of all who forgive. Said to be the angel sent to restrain Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. One of two standard bearers (the other is Jophiel) who follow directly behind the Archangel Michael as he enters into battle.
- **Metatron** ("One who marks off a place, or a measurer") – The recording angel or chancellor of heaven. Has immense power and strength. All other angels must obey him. Celestial scribe who records the sins and merits of humans. God's mediator with humanity. Guardian of heavenly secrets.

- **Samael** ("The venom of God") – The angel of death. In folklore, Samael is considered rather stupid so for centuries when Jewish parents had a child who was gravely ill, they would change the child's name, thinking that the confusion that caused would prevent Samael from finding and taking the child to its death.

There are numerous other angels that have been written about, with their own complex legends, in the literature of Judaism, Christianity and other religions, who have specific names, histories, personalities and special jobs.



So, what do angels do? Religious thinkers have given that a lot of thought. One belief is that they attend God's throne in the heavenly court. In Isaiah 6:3 there is described a specific kind of six-winged angels called Seraphim who attend God calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory," which is quoted in our Eucharistic liturgy. In Tobit 12:15 found in the Apocrypha, we read: "I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who stand in the glorious presence of the LORD, ready to serve him."

In the Bible, the most commonly described angelic occupation is that of messengers between God and humanity: making announcements, giving detailed instructions, presenting visions, or explaining a new mission. Biblical stories tell of angels calling to Hagar in the dessert, instructing Lot to leave Sodom, presenting Gideon with his mission to save his people, foretelling the birth of Sampson, delivering a vision to Daniel, foretelling the birth and the mission of John the Baptist, announcing the Incarnation, and comforting and encouraging Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, to name a few major appearances of angels in the Bible.

St. Ambrose said, "We should pray to the angels who are given to us as guardians." The belief in angels as protectors who are active in human affairs has been embraced since ancient times. There are implications in the Bible that each human has a personal



guardian angel. In Genesis 24:7 when Abraham sends his steward to find a wife for Isaac, he says: "...he [God] will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there." Psalm 91:11 and 12 says: "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." The protective actions of angels may include interceding as we find in Tobit 12:12 when the Angel Raphael says: "Tobit, when you and Sarah prayed to the LORD, I was the one who brought your prayers into his glorious presence."



Protestants and Catholics tend to agree on the basics of the existence and roles of angels including guardian angels; however, Catholics do a lot more with education about angels that involves an extensively detailed belief system regarding them. The Catholic Church teaches that each person is assigned an angel at conception that will be his or her personal

guardian throughout life and even after life during the deceased person's time in purgatory if they go there. After that, the guardian angel becomes employed otherwise but is not reassigned to a new human. Protestants and Catholics agree that angels should not be worshipped but Catholics are taught that it's OK to pray to angels for intercession with God. Most Protestants are probably not comfortable praying to angels as that seems to be getting pretty close to giving attributes to angels that belong to God. Veneration of angels is important in the Catholic Church which celebrates the Feast of Archangels on September 29 and the Feast of Guardian Angels on October 2. Most Protestant Churches believe that angels are real and that they act as servants of God including performing missions that directly affect humans. In the Anglican Communion we have the Feast of Archangel Michael and All Angels on September 29. Our angelology gives special honor to Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and often Uriel.

There are systems of angel hierarchies in different religions, created by various religious thinkers. Here is the 9-level Christian hierarchy (which is also known as the orders of angels or the choirs of angels):

- **Seraphim** – Means “the burning ones,” Noted for their heat, keenness and the exuberance of their intense, perpetual, tireless activity, wholly purifying them by an all-consuming flame. They have an unquenchable, changeless, radiant and enlightening power, dispelling and destroying darkness. Caretakers of God’s throne who continually shout praises. Described in Isaiah 6:1 –8 as having six wings.
- **Cherubim** – They have four faces (man, ox, lion and eagle) and four conjoined wings covered with eyes, plus a lion’s body and the feet of oxen. They guard God’s throne and the Tree of Life. Just imagine encountering one of these holding a flaming sword!
- **Thrones** (or Elders) – Living symbols of God’s justice and authority. Said to appear as great wheels covered with eyes. They serve as chariots (driven by Cherubim) for the transporting God’s throne.
- **Dominions** (or Lords) – They relegate the duties of lower angels and do not normally appear to humans. They look like extremely beautiful humans with feathered wings.
- **Virtues** (or Strongholds) – Signs and miracles in the world are accomplished through these angels. They are described as being powerful and possessing God-like energies.
- **Powers** (or Authorities) – Their main purpose is to supervise the operation of the universe and insure that the cosmos stays in proper working order. They are bearers of conscience and keepers of history, usually depicted wearing full armor and having weapons.
- **Principalities** (or Rulers) – The angels that guide and protect nations or groups of people or institutions (such as the Church). Educators and guardians of the realm of Earth. They inspire people in artistic and scientific efforts.
- **Archangels** – They guard nations and are concerned with the politics, military matters and commerce of countries.
- **Angels** – The lowest order of angels and the most recognized. Concerned with the affairs of individual human beings.

There have been other schemes of angel classification in the history of the Church but the one above is what is normally taught today. By the way, the first verse of one of the classic hymns of the Episcopal hymnal (number 618)



names the 9 choirs of angels:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6SHaa2hE7c>

Angels are conspicuously involved in the New Testament stories about Jesus, including:

- Predicted his birth (Luke 1:30 – 33)
- Announced his birth (Luke 2:10 – 14)
- Warned his parents of Herod's plot (Matthew 2:19, 20)
- Ministry after the temptation (Matthew 4:11)
- Ministry before the betrayal (Luke 22:43)
- On call at the arrest of Jesus (Matthew 26:53)
- Rolled back the stone from the tomb (Matthew 28:2)
- First announcement of the resurrection (Matthew 28:6)
- Ascension of Christ (Acts 1:11)
- Return of Christ (Matthew 25:31)
- Executors of the judgment of Christ (Matthew 13:39, 40)

There are also stories of fallen angels, sometimes called rebellious or evil angels. In the Christian Bible there is a reference to them in 2 Peter 2:4 and they show up in extra-canonical literature such as the Book of Enoch. I will return to this subject at some point in the future.

Angels have been a favorite subject of artists since antiquity. They are usually depicted as very beautiful but some, like the Living Creatures or the Cherubim, may appear in awe-inspiring or frightening forms. Angels are supposed to not eat, drink or excrete, and they are presumed to be sexless. However, some angels in art may resemble one sex or the other in form or by clothing or activities. In early Christian art, some angels were bearded. The range of imaginative artistic expressions has been considerable. Until the 19th-century, angels that had a female appearance lacked breasts. I remember back in the 1960s there was a little controversy over a Christmas stamp the Postal Service issued that showed an angel with small, but noticeable, breasts. In trying to convey the concepts of protectiveness, beauty, goodness and radiance, artists have sometimes made angels appear obviously feminine but have stayed clear of overtly sexualized portrayals.





Wings on angels were not always used in Christian art. The earliest example we have of a depiction of an angel is a mid-3rd-century Italian catacomb painting of the Annunciation that shows a wingless Gabriel. The earliest images of winged angels date

from the late 4th-century. Artists were not limited to the human form: images like a dove or the hand of God have been used to indicate angels in paintings. The Archangel Michael is normally shown in the military dress of late antiquity, but most angels tend to be dressed in long white robes sometimes bound by a golden girdle. In the Middle Ages there was a tendency to show angels wearing the dalmatic (the distinctive vestment of a deacon) sometimes with a cope over it. Then in the Renaissance senior angels were given colorful wings while lower ranking angels continued to have white wings. About this time in European art there was a tendency to show angels with feminine ideals of grace and beauty.

For several years I attended worship services, Hebrew lessons and various other classes at Temple *Ahavath Chesed* (Hebrew for "The Love of Merciful Deeds"), one of the large Jewish synagogues in Jacksonville. It was a fantastically enriching part of my life. On one occasion Senior Rabbi Michael Matuson told us a personal story of how he had been in a very bad auto accident that crushed one of his feet and injured his lower legs. He vividly remembers that immediately after the crash, a kindly policeman helped him out of his wrecked car and got him safely out of the street away from the dangers of traffic or the possibility of his car catching fire or exploding. In the later reconstruction of what happened, none of the witnesses saw any such policeman. The rabbi became thoroughly convinced that an actual angel in the guise of a policeman had performed that service for him. Innumerable other people have had similar experiences. The personal testimonies of encounters with angels are endless. And who is to say that we do not interact with angels, known and unknown, not only in extraordinary situations but in our everyday lives as well.

Everlasting God, you have ordained and constituted in a wonderful order the ministries of angels and mortals: Mercifully grant that, as your holy angels always serve and worship you in heaven, so by your appointment they may help and defend us here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.