

Message #3: “Angels: Proclaimers of Peace!” (Luke 2:1-20)

Additional Resources

Dr. David Jeremiah’s *Answers to Your Questions about Heaven*

Each angel has his own job description and carries out God’s will. To find out about the varied types and tasks of the angels, let’s take a look at a few of the terms the Bible uses to reference angels.

Hosts: Throughout the Bible, angels are called “the hosts of the Lord.” The word “host” comes from the Old Testament Hebrew word *tsaba* and the New Testament Greek word *stratia*. Both terms mean “a well-trained army”—one that is prepared for war. God’s angels are organized and ready to respond to His every desire and command.

Seraphim: This term, which literally means “burning ones,” is only mentioned in the book of Isaiah. These angels dwell so close to the presence of God that they burn with a holy brilliance. According to Isaiah chapter 6, the seraphim have six wings. Two wings cover their faces in reverence, two wings cover the seraphim’s feet in humility, and two wings are for flying. The seraphim also have human features such as feet, hands, and voices.

Cherubim: Cherubim are angels that stand close to God’s throne (and they don’t even vaguely resemble the winged infants we usually think of as cherubs). The description in Ezekiel 10 suggests that cherubim have a more human appearance than the seraphim. Each cherub has four faces: the face of a man, the face of a lion, the face of an ox, and the face of an eagle. They have human hands and four wings instead of six. Unlike other angels, the cherubim never convey messages from God to people. They are also never directly called angels. The first time cherubim appear in the Bible is at the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24). God had the cherubim placed at the Garden with flaming swords to guard the tree of life after Adam and Eve were evicted from Paradise.¹

Dr. Michael Heiser’s *Angels: What the Bible Really Says about God’s Heavenly Host*

Though this is a popular axiom for the nature of angels, it is difficult to know precisely what someone who expresses the thought actually means by it.

Angels are not “timeless” in the sense of being eternal beings. They had a beginning as created beings. They are immortal (Luke 20:36), but that immortality is ultimately contingent, based on God’s authority and pleasure. As God wills, angels are not subject to time in terms of aging or having a necessary terminus point for their existence, but this says nothing, for instance, about whether they can travel back in time or forward into the future. The latter would be more relevant to being “outside of time.”

By “space,” we do not refer to outer space but to the matter of how a bodiless being can be said to occupy space (i.e., place). Philosophical theologians have, of course, thought a great deal about the question. Peter Williams, following Peter Kreeft, suggests that “angels may be in definite places or make things happen in definite places” not because they are materially present or occupy material space but because they are “spiritually present.” By “spiritual presence” Williams and others mean that the presence of angels is evidenced by *activity*, not substance. The idea is certainly

¹ David Jeremiah, *Answers to Your Questions about Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2015), 46–47.

biblical, as angels are described as affecting people that are materially present without being materially present (Gen 21:17; 22:11, 15; 31:11; Matt 1:20; 2:13, 19; Acts 8:26; 10:3).

This approach does not require angels be spatially present in a material way. They can, however, be materially and spatially present. For example, two angels share a meal with Abraham (Gen 18:1–8; cf. 19:1) and physically seize Lot (Gen 19:10); an angel struck Peter to awaken him (Acts 12:7).

Rather than existing “outside space,” we might say that angels exist without regard to space. Space and spatiality are not necessary to angelic existence or presence.²

Though it seems obvious that angels would be engaged in praising God, specific references to that effect are not common in the New Testament. Earlier we noted the instance in Luke 2:13, where “a multitude of the heavenly host” praised God at the announcement of the birth of messianic child. Angelic worship is noted in passing in Revelation 4–5, a scene which many readers presume is focused on angelic worship of the Lamb. In reality, it is the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, and glorified human worshippers who fall down before the Lamb. Only in Revelation 5:11–12 (cf. Rev 7:11) do angels enter the picture—and then in a great multitude:

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

Angels have other responsibilities in heaven besides praising God. The term “archangel” suggests hierarchical rule. That is, certain angels have oversight over other angels. But the two references to archangels we noted earlier (1 Thess 4:16; Jude 9) do not reveal much about that oversight.

More interesting are those passages that cast angels as approving divine decisions, a role akin to the divine council scenes of the Old Testament. Revelation 4–5 is commonly accepted by scholars as a divine council scene. As Aune notes:

The focus of the throne vision is God enthroned in his heavenly court surrounded by a variety of angelic beings or lesser deities (angels, archangels, seraphim, cherubim) who function as courtiers. All such descriptions of God enthroned in the midst of his heavenly court are based on the ancient conception of the divine council or assembly found in Mesopotamia, Ugarit, and Phoenicia as well as in Israel.

While we clearly have a meeting in heaven involving God and his host, the role of angels operates on the periphery. One angel asks loudly (Rev 5:2): “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” and then the multitude joins in the praise (Rev 5:11).

Other passages reveal more of what we’ve come to expect as council input. Several stand out:

The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. (Rev 3:5)

² Michael S. Heiser, *Angels: What the Bible Really Says about God’s Heavenly Host* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 170–171.

And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. (Rev 12:8–9)

In both passages Jesus presents believers destined for heaven not only to God, but also to the heavenly host. It is not that Jesus or the believer whose name is in the book of life need an administrative stamp of approval from the divine assembly. Rather, the scene is one of introducing a new family member into their heavenly home. The council validates or enthusiastically endorses those who are in Christ who have endured in faith to the end.

The most dramatic passage in this regard is Hebrews 2:10–15 (LEB):

For it was fitting for him for whom are all things and through whom are all things in bringing many sons to glory to perfect the originator of their salvation through sufferings. For both the one who sanctifies and the ones who are sanctified are all from one, for which reason he [Jesus] is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying,

“I will proclaim your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the assembly I will sing in praise of you.”

And again,

“I will trust in him.”

And again,

“Behold, I and the children God has given me.”

Therefore, since the children share in blood and flesh, he also in like manner shared in these same things, in order that through death he could destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and could set free these who through fear of death were subject to slavery throughout all their lives.

Note that Jesus calls believers his siblings “in the midst of the assembly.” Because of his incarnation, work on the cross, resurrection and ascension, Jesus brings human believers into the divine family, and the supernatural sons of God of the heavenly host rejoice.³

Dr. Michael Heiser’s *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*

In the spiritual world, the realm of divine beings, there is no need for procreation. Procreation is part of the embodied world and is necessary to maintain the physical population. In like manner, life in the perfected Edenic world also does not require maintaining the human species by having children—*everyone has an immortal resurrection body*. Consequently, there is no need for sex in the resurrection, just as there is no need for it in the nonhuman spiritual realm.

But Genesis 6 doesn’t have the spiritual realm or the final Edenic world as its context. The analogy breaks down completely. The passage in Matthew is therefore useless as a commentary on Genesis 6:1–4.

Despite the flawed use of this gospel passage, Christians still balk at this interpretive option for Genesis 6:1–4. The ancient reader would have had no problem with it. But for moderns, it seems impossible that a divine being could assume human flesh and do what this passage describes.

³ Ibid., 138–140.

The objection is odd, since this interpretation is *less* dramatic than the incarnation of Yahweh as Jesus Christ. How is the virgin birth of God as a man *more* acceptable? What *isn't* mind-blowing about Jesus having both a divine and human nature fused together? For that matter, what doesn't offend the modern scientific mind about God going through a woman's birth canal and enduring life as a human, having to learn how to talk, walk, eat with a spoon, be potty trained, and go through puberty? All these things are far more shocking than Genesis 6:1–4, and yet this is what Scripture explicitly affirms when it informs us that the second person of the Godhead became a man. *God became a man from conception onward.*

The truth is that Christians affirm the incarnation because they have to—it defines Christianity. Genesis 6:1–4 is set aside as peripheral. But belief in a personal God as the Bible describes means embracing the supernatural. For the Christian, the high point of the supernatural story of Scripture—its most dramatic and unthinkable expression—is the incarnation of God in Christ. The notion that the sons of God came to earth in fleshly form ought to be *more* palatable than the incarnation, since it is *less* supernaturally spectacular. There is no suggestion that any corporeal appearance of a divine being was accomplished through incarnation—becoming an actual human. All such instances are lesser than the incarnation. This particular supernatural approach to Genesis 6:1–4 derives from other passages that plainly have divine beings (angels) in embodied human form.

For example, Genesis 18–19 is quite clear that Yahweh himself and two other divine beings met with Abraham in physical flesh. They ate a meal together (Gen 18:1–8). Genesis 19:10 informs us that the two angels had to physically grab Lot and pull him back into his house to avoid harm in Sodom, something that would be hard to do if the two beings were not truly physical.

Another example we looked at earlier is Genesis 32:22–31, where we read that Jacob wrestled with a “man” (32:24), whom the text also describes as *elohim* twice (32:30–31). Hosea 12:3–4 refers to this incident and describes the being who wrestled with Jacob as *elohim* and *mal'ak* (“angel”). This was a physical struggle, and one that left Jacob injured (32:31–32).

While *visual* appearances in human form are more common, the New Testament also describes episodes where angels are best understood as corporeal. In Matthew 4:11, angels came to Jesus after he was tempted by the devil and “ministered” to him (cf. Mark 1:13). Surely this means more than floating around before Jesus' face. Angels appear and speak (Matt 28:5; Luke 1:11–21, 30–38), instances that presume actual sound waves being created. If a merely auditory experience was meant, one would expect the communication to be described as a dream-vision (Acts 10:3). Angels open doors (Acts 5:19) and hit disciples to wake them up (Acts 12:7). This particular episode is especially interesting, because the text has Peter *mistakenly* thinking the angel was only a vision.⁴

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament's ἄγγελος in the NT

1. The meaning of human messenger plays only a very small role in the NT. The scouts sent out by Joshua to Jericho in Jm. 2:25, the men sent by John to Jesus in Lk. 7:24 and by Jesus to the Samaritan village in Lk. 9:52, are the only cases in which men sent by other men are called ἄγγελοι in the NT.

⁴ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Edition. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 186–187.

Jesus in Mt. 11:10 par. (cf. Mk. 1:2), applying the OT promise,⁵⁸ interprets John the Baptist to be the messenger of the covenant preceding the day of the Lord. Originally the expectation may have been focused on either a human messenger or a heavenly angel, but it is now linked with the concrete person of the Baptist as the messenger of God. The passage shows how the different meanings may merge into one another. The possibility has also to be considered that the application of the promise to the Baptist is conditioned by the various influences on the conception of message discussed in the earlier article on the root ἄγγελ-. This ἄγγελος is a predecessor to prepare the way, bearing the proclamation of Christ (→ 57 f.).

If there are no other instances in which the term is used of human messengers, this is not accidental. It simply derives from the fact that ἄγγελος is now mostly used for angels. In many cases messengers are now denoted by such simple alternatives as πεμφθείς in Lk. 7:10 or ἀπεσταλμένος in Lk. 19:32. Those sent are in many cases identical with men elsewhere described as ἀπόστολοι and μαθηταί (Mt. 10:5, 16; 11:2; Mk. 6:7 etc.).

2. a. The OT Jewish view of angels as representatives of the heavenly world and messengers of God is taken over quite naturally by the men of the NT. The angels represent the other world (Hb. 12:22; 1 Tm. 5:21). To be like them is to reflect this world (Ac. 6:15). To be compared with them is to be compared with what is divine (Gl. 4:14). To be a spectacle to them is to offer such to all who dwell in heaven (1 C. 4:9).

As in Judaism, there is reference to OT scenes involving angels, e.g., the visits of the angels to Abraham (Gn. 18) and Lot (Gn. 19) in Hb. 13:2; or the appearance of the angel to Moses (Ex. 3:2) in Ac. 7:30, 35; or the part of the angels in the giving of the Law in Ac. 7:53, Gl. 3:19 and Hb. 2:2.

The latter tradition is intimated already in LXX Dt. 33:2. Pesr., 21 traces it back to an early tradition. The task of the angels is variously explained, but always in such a way as to stress the importance of the process. The application of the idea in Gl. 3:19 and Hb. 2:2 to prove the inferiority of the Law which is given “only” by angels is not Jewish, but indicates the specific Christianising of the tradition (→ n. 44), strengthened perhaps by recollections of non-Christian and non-Jewish ἄγγελοι (→ 57). In contrast, Ac. 7:38 brings out the uniform estimation of the role of angel probably characteristic of pre-Pauline, Jewish Christianity. Jd. 9 makes use of another Jewish tradition concerning the conflict between Michael (→ ἀρχάγγελος) and the devil over the body of Moses, but this reference is already suppressed in 2 Pt. 2:11, probably because it does not derive from the canonical OT. The true interest in Jude is to emphasise that even the archangel does not anticipate the judgment of God (ἐπιτιμήσαι σοι κύριος). In the parable of Jesus, too, we find the idea of the angels as God’s messengers bringing the dead to Abraham’s bosom (Lk. 16:22).

b. Jesus is for early Christianity the presence of God and His lordship. This view finds expression in the fact that the early Christian narratives see an angelic accompaniment of the story of Jesus. Angels appear particularly in the birth and resurrection stories. Otherwise their ministry is mentioned only at special points such as the temptation (Mt. 4:11 and par.) and Gethsemane (Lk. 22:43), though it was always regarded as possible (Mt. 26:53). For the Evangelists it confirms and expresses the nature of Jesus. This is shown in Jn. 1:51 by the comparison with Jacob’s ladder; the Son of Man is surrounded by angels signifying His union with God. The restraint of the accounts is equally striking. Only in the later strata (Mt. 28:2f.) do we find any tendency to speak of the independent activity of angels or to describe their figures. There is no permeation of the Gospel narrative as a whole with angelic appearances of different kinds. In so far as they do not serve Jesus directly, the angels are simply heralds the divine action. The infancy stories, in which angelic appearances play the strongest role, are content to introduce only Gabriel (Lk. 1:26 ff.) or the angel of the Lord known to the OT (Mt. 1:20 ff.);

2:13; Lk. 1:11 ff.; 2:9), who in Lk. 2:13 is simply accompanied by the *πλῆθος στρατιᾶς οὐρανόυ*. In these accounts we find no trace of individual angels, nor is there any interest in angelology in abstraction from God.

The active participation of angels seems to be most strongly assumed in relation to events of the last time. Here Jesus Himself ascribes to them the role of accompanying hosts who come with the Judge, who act with Him and for Him, and who are present at the judgment (Lk. 12:8 f.). Paul presupposes the same view (2 Th. 1:7; cf. 1 Th. 4:16). The Revelation of John thus paints on a broad canvas that which is common to all early Christianity when in the description of events of the last days it introduces angels at many points and in many ways, describing in a most varied manner both their appearance and function.

In Rabbinic literature there is an almost complete absence of any thought of the co-operation of angels in the judgment. It seems to be crowded out by the rather different thought of the participation of Israel.⁷⁰ In the Apocalypse, however, it is not merely emphasised that God will be accompanied by angels at the judgment, but that they will also assist in it., Yet in the Apocalypse there is no mention of the angels accompanying the Messiah as emphatically presupposed elsewhere in the NT, where the angels can be called the angels of Christ the Son of Man as well as the angels of God (Mt. 16:27 etc. → n. 68; also 2 Th. 1:7: *ἐν τῇ ἀποκαλύψει τοῦ κύριου Ἰησοῦ ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ μετ' ἀγγέλων τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ*).

Thus to early Christianity the action of the angels is essentially action for Christ and in the service of His history. They are *λειτουργικὰ πνεύματα εἰς διακονίαν ἀποστελλόμενοι διὰ τοὺς μέλλοντας κληρονομεῖν σωτηρίαν* (Hb. 1:14), *σύνδουλοι τῶν ἀδελφῶν τῶν ἐχόντων τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ* (Rev. 19:10). They thus take a dynamic part in the processes of this salvation history, which is described not merely in the nativity anthem (Lk. 2:14) or the eschatological anthems (Rev. 5:11 ff.; 19:1 ff.) corresponding to Is. 6:2 f.), but also as *χαρά* at the development of the individual within this history (Lk. 15:10).

The participation of angels in the activities of the apostolic community assumed by the narrative in certain parts of Acts is based on the same presuppositions as their participation in the nativity and resurrection. Here, too, it is only the *ἄγγελος τοῦ θεοῦ* or *τοῦ κυρίου* who acts on behalf of the apostles (5:19; 12:7 ff.), or declares to them the will of God or of the *Kurios* (8:26; 10:3 ff.; 27:23), or punishes the enemy of the community (12:23). The extent to which the angel has ceased to play any autonomous part is shown, e.g., by a comparison of 18:9 and 27:23; the *ἄγγελος* simply takes the place of the *κύριος* whose message he has to bring.

c. It is thus self-evident that throughout the NT there can be no question of any equality of the angels with Christ. The Messiah is not an angelic being. As the Son He has a radically different origin and position (Mk. 13:32 and par.; Hb. 1:4 ff.). This fact, as shown by the spatial proximity in Hebrews, is not overthrown by the further fact of the *βραχύ τι παρ' ἀγγέλου ἐλαττοῦσθαι* which is accomplished in the death of Jesus (Hb. 2:5 ff.). On the contrary, this declaration only serves to emphasise the absolute otherness and superiority of commission. It is indeed possible that the peculiarly strong emphasis in Hebrews on the essential distinction between Christ and the angels is given added point by the antithesis between the NT Gospel of Christ and the many ideas of messengers and messages current in the surrounding world of religion (→ 57).

To this there corresponds a tendency, particularly evident in Paul, to emphasise the comparative unimportance of angelology. The positive thought of the angel as the messenger of God, as found in the Gospels and also in Acts, is relatively little used in his Epistles. For him the whole stress falls on the complete overshadowing of angels by the fact of Christ. Thus he comes

to attach a lesser significance to what was originally thought to be the significant participation of angels in the giving of the Law (Gl. 3:19; cf. also Hb. 2:2; → 83), the point being that he measures this now by the all-normative action of Christ. Along the same lines, there arises from his union with Christ a consciousness of his own superiority to angels as an apostle. His mission, for example, is superior to any possible mission of an ἄγγελος ἐξ οὐρανοῦ (Gl. 1:8), and his charismatic endowment fulfilled in ἀγάπη is superior to all γλῶσσαι τῶν ἀγγέλων (1 C. 13:1). As the Son is more and other than all categories of angels, so is the believer with and by Him. What is allotted to him, ἐπιθυμοῦσιν ἄγγελοι παρακῶσαι (1 Pt. 1:12); it is to human flesh and blood rather than to angels that the redemptive act of Christ has reference (Hb. 2:16).

3. This depreciation of angels in comparison with the fact of Christ is strengthened in Paul by his opposition to Gnostic teaching concerning them. We can hardly take Col. 2:18 to mean anything other than that a cult of angels had to be contested in the early Pauline communities. In the world of syncretism the belief in angels seems to have been partly divorced from the belief in God with which it has been indissolubly bound and to which it had been subordinate in its first beginnings. The ἄγγελοι can be reckoned with the θρόνοι, κυριότητες, ἀρχαί and ἐξουσία (Col. 1:16). They can thus be regarded as among the forces which threaten man (R. 8:38). What are in view are the elemental or natural angels which were widely accepted in Judaism and which might in isolation become ungodly and demonic powers. Also in view are the earlier pagan gods, which in part came to be identified with the guardian angels under which God placed the nations.⁷⁴ Paul is not concerned to contest their reality. His only concern is to assert the full and definitive overcoming of their influence in Christ. What is to be consummated eschatologically, ὅταν καταργήσῃ πᾶσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ πᾶσαν ἐξουσίαν καὶ δύναμιν (1 C. 15:24), is, like all eschatology, the present possession of the believer as ἀπαρχή in his πέπεισμαι (R. 8:38).

4. Fallen Angels → δαίμων.

5. The idea of the guardian, or better the directing and ministering angel, is taken over from Judaism, which had long since forgotten the animistic roots of the notion.⁷⁶ Ac. 12:15 assumes a likeness in appearance and voice between the ἄγγελος and the man concerned. In Mt. 18:10 recollection of the angels τῶν μικρῶν τούτων who constantly behold the face of God serves to describe the all-embracing love of God to which these μικροί are important, and thus to drive home our human responsibility to regard them as important too. In the verse concerning the → ἐξουσία on the head of the woman demanded διὰ τοὺς ἀγγέλους (1 C. 11:10), we perhaps have a warning against the erotic desires of angels based on Gn. 6:1 ff. More probably, however, it implies that regard should be had to the propriety required by accompanying angels.⁸⁰ Similar regard is had to accompanying angels in Judaism (b. Ber., 60b), which portrays the angels as guardians of good manners (b. Shab., 119b).

A particular exegetical question is posed by the ἄγγελοι τῶν ἐπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν of Rev. 1:20 and Rev. 2f. The only explanations which demand serious consideration are those which see a reference to bishops or to real angels.⁸² Since elsewhere in the Apocalypse ἄγγελοι are always angels, the latter seems more likely. This is supported by the fact that in NT days the ἐπίσκοπος was always regarded as a member of the community and never exalted above it, as would be demanded by the conjunction of images, i. e., community-candlestick, ἄγγελος-star. On this ground, too, the reference would seem to be to angels representing the communities. These correspond to the angels of the nations already found in Judaism, and to Michael as the angel of

Israel,⁸⁴ but also to the description of angels, common to the whole Book of Revelation, as mediators of the divine action.⁵

⁵ Walter Grundmann, Gerhard von Rad, and Gerhard Kittel, “Ἄγγελος, Ἀρχάγγελος, Ἰσάγγελος,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 83–87.