

HAVE THE ANGELS DISAPPEARED FROM THE EARTH?

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According to the Bible story, angels were frequent visitors to earth from the days of Abraham (2000 B. C.) to the close of the New Testament period (100 A. D.). There are distinct intimations of their presence in the earth in the cycles before Abraham, and there are many plain predictions that they will be present at the end of the present age. Is it possible, however, that they have left our world to itself for the present?

If one may judge from the paucity of references to angels in the current religion literature, it would seem that the doctrine of angels is a negligible factor in modern religious thought and life. Has the spread of scientific research and the scientific attitude made the doctrine of angels untenable? Are we to put the biblical teaching as to angels in the same class with the popular superstitions as to ghosts and witches? Are we to interpret all references to angels as mere figures of speech or as an accommodation to the naïve Hebrew explanation of spiritual experiences? Can religious teachers safely ignore the biblical account of angels and their activities?

At the outset let the student consult his concordance and note how the doctrine of angels pervades all sections of the Scriptures. Of the thirty-nine books in the Old Testament, sixteen expressly refer to angels, and several other books contain the doctrine without using the word "angel". For the study of angelology, the most important books are Genesis, Exodus, Judges, Psalms, Daniel, and Zechariah.

Angels are referred to by name in seventeen out of twenty-seven books in the New Testament, and the doctrine is implied in others. Angelology receives large space

in Matthew, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation. Perhaps the fact that the fullest recognition of angels and their activities is found in the apocalyptic sections of the Bible has led many to regard the doctrine as the creation of ecstatic imagination and therefore negligible in practical life. But it must not be forgotten that the doctrine finds a place in history and biography, in poetry and prophecy, in sermon and epistle. The majority of the biblical writers expressly avow their belief in the presence of angels as a factor in human history. Many of them cite instances of the intervention of angels in human affairs.

If the stories of angels were confined to the primitive and the patriarchal periods, we might feel less confident as to the historicity of the narratives; but angels intervene in the life of David and in the career of Elijah, men standing in the clear light of history. Moreover, the richest teaching as to the ministry of angels occurs in the writings of the most scientific historian of the New Testament and in connection with the birth, ministry, agony, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord. To the devout Christian, it can never be a matter of indifference whether these stories describe real facts or merely attest the exuberant fancy of the beloved physician.

It is not our purpose to discuss all the questions that would arise in a full treatment of the doctrine of angels. It would be interesting to study the origin of angels, and how the devil and his angels fell. The entire article might well be devoted to a study of the Angel of Jehovah, who often speaks as if he were God. As to these questions, let it suffice to say that angels were created by God, and that God did not create the chief of all the hosts of darkness as a devil. Perhaps pride was the cause of the fall of Lucifer and of all who follow in his train. The holy angels were confirmed in goodness by their refusal to follow Satan, while the evil angels have deliberately chosen to obey him rather than God.

While the Angel of Jehovah sometimes speaks and acts like deity, it is not necessary to suppose that he is other than an exalted angel commissioned to deliver Jehovah's message and clothed with power to execute the divine purpose. He overwhelms Jehovah's foes and defends His people. His protecting presence is a bulwark to all who fear God. He intervened to shield the Christ child from the sword of Herod.

Our aim in the present article is to direct attention to the chief function of angels in relation to men on the earth. Perhaps the most important and significant single text for our purpose is Hebrews 1:14: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?" The history of angels throughout the Bible story confirms the conclusion of the author of the letter to the Hebrews as to the function of angels in human history.

Angels visited Abraham and encouraged him to rely upon Jehovah's promise to give him a son by Sarah, and the Angel of Jehovah called to Abraham out of Heaven arresting his hand as he was on the point of giving Isaac as a sacrifice on the altar. Jacob had a vision of angels by night as he fled from an angry brother, and later a company of angels met him when dangers lowered over his camp, threatening destruction to his family and his property. An angel stood guard over Israel as the Egyptians pursued them at the Red Sea. Jehovah promised to send an angel before Israel on the road from Sinai to Canaan. While Joshua was before Jericho the prince of Jehovah's host appeared with a drawn sword in his hand to encourage Joshua to press the struggle. During the dark days of the Judges, when scarcely a prophet appeared to guide Israel, angels intervened time and again to hearten Israel's heroes for their tasks. A good angel ministered to Elijah under the juniper tree. It was the Angel of Jehovah who destroyed the flower of Sennacherib's army in Palestine. God sent His angel to deliver

Daniel from the lions in the den. Gabriel was sent to reveal to Daniel the future of his people and to strengthen him. So runs the story of the ministry of angels in the Old Testament.

When we open the New Testament we discover that the inhabitants of two worlds are streaming toward the earth, Gabriel and a host of angels from Heaven to be met presently by Satan and legions of demons from the pit. The cosmic struggle between the forces of light and the powers of darkness suddenly reaches a fierce intensity with the earth as the field of battle.

Gabriel appears first to Zachariah in the temple announcing the birth of John the Baptist and then to Mary in Nazareth announcing the birth of the Messiah. An angel proclaimed to the shepherds the birth of the Christ, and a multitude of the heavenly host united in ascribing glory to God on account of the coming of the Saviour. After the long struggle with the tempter in the wilderness, Jesus was refreshed and strengthened by the ministration of angels. During the agony in the garden, when human sympathy was lacking, there appeared an angel from Heaven strengthening our Lord as He took upon Himself the sins of the world and faced the cross. A few moments later Jesus, who had been so greatly helped by the angel's visit, could say to Peter, "Thinkest thou that I cannot beseech my Father, and He shall even now send me more than twelve legions of angels? How then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?" At the call of our Lord all Heaven would have emptied itself to defend Him against His enemies. It was an angel of the Lord that descended from Heaven and rolled the stone from the mouth of the sepulchre. "His appearance was as lightning, and his raiment white as snow: and for fear of him the watchers did quake, and become as dead men." The same angel spoke with comforting words to the women who were early at the tomb, and sent to the disciples the good news of the resurrection. The two men in white

apparel who announced to the disciples that Jesus would come again in like manner as He had ascended into Heaven, were angelic visitors, possibly identical with the two in dazzling apparel who spoke to the women at the open tomb on the morning of the resurrection.

The ministry of angels continued throughout the years in which the apostles were propagating Christianity in all parts of the Roman empire. An angel of God appeared to the Roman centurion Cornelius and directed him to send for Peter. A little later when Peter was kept in close confinement it was an angel of the Lord that led him out of prison and delivered him out of the hand of Herod. When Paul was on the sea in a vessel driven by a great storm an angel of God brought him by night a message of good cheer. Thus from Abraham to Paul the blessed ministry of angels gladdened and strengthened the hearts of God's saints.

The question might naturally be raised as to the permanence of the activity of angels in human history. Is there any work that angels can do now on behalf of the heirs of salvation? It would seem that little ones have friends and advocates among the angels of God. Our Lord warned men of the danger of leading astray little children, saying, "See that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, that in Heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in Heaven" (Matt. 18:10). Some infer that this passage teaches the doctrine of guardian angels, every child (or believer) having a good angel whose chief business it is to guard him from all harm. If such a doctrine could be established from other Scriptures, our Saviour's language in the passage under review would easily harmonize with it; but it is too much to say that this passage teaches the doctrine of guardian angels as commonly held. One thing seems to be plainly taught, namely, that little ones have friends among the angels in Heaven, and these angels have access to the Father, who will avenge wrong done to the little

ones. It is dangerous to mislead a little child because of the good angels who champion the cause of the little ones. Our Lord has lifted the curtain for a moment to put men on guard not to harm a little child. We could wish that he had developed the doctrine more fully; but enough has been said to deter men from the folly of leading the little ones astray.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus represents the angels as carrying the beggar to Abraham's bosom. We must not forget that we are here dealing with parabolic and highly figurative language and so must be cautious not to read into the story as doctrine what is mere drapery to the one central truth the parable was designed to teach. Do good angels convoy the soul of the believer to the haven of rest? The idea receives a measure of support from other statements by Jesus in relation to the Final Judgment and the end of this age. Thus Jesus represents the angels as severing the wicked from the righteous and casting the wicked into the furnace of fire (Matt. 13:39-41, 49f). When the Son of man comes on the clouds of Heaven, He shall send forth His angels to gather His elect from one end of Heaven to the other (Matt. 24:31). When the Son of man comes to judge the nations all the angels are with Him (Matt. 25:31). In all the chief apocalyptic passages in the teaching of our Lord the angels play a large part in the drama of redemption. In the Apocalypse of John angels appear constantly in the panoramas of which the book is made up. We even hear of war in Heaven between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels (Rev. 12:7-12). It is evident that Jesus and the apostles assign an important rôle to the angels in the progress and completion of the Kingdom of God.

We have reserved for the last the doctrine of angels in the book of Daniel. In the narrative portion of the book angels appear, as in other parts of the Old Testament, as defenders and helpers of the man that fears God.

The vision with which the book closes contains, in addition to other advanced eschatological teaching, a picture of the participation of angels in national struggles such as cannot fail to attract the attention of intelligent students during the present war of the nations. See Daniel 10:1-12:13, especially 10:1-11:1. The dazzling one who appears to Daniel by the side of the great river says to him: "Fear not, Daniel; for from the first day that thou didst set thy heart to understand, and to humble thyself before thy God, thy words were heard: and I am come for thy words' sake. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days; but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me: and I was not needed there with the kings of Persia." The shining one also adds, "and now will I return to fight with the prince of Persia: and when I go forth, lo, the prince of Greece shall come".

It would seem that already in the book of Daniel the theory of a patron angel for every nation receives definite recognition. It is not the human king of Persia with whom Michael and the shining one had their encounter, but rather the patron angel or prince of the kingdom of Persia. Michael appears as the champion of Israel, the warrior angel who fights Israel's battles in heavenly places. Perhaps Isaiah 24:21 refers to angelic leaders corresponding to the kings of the various nations. Paul refers more than once to principalities and powers in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10; Col. 2:10, 15). He affirms that Christ made a show of them openly through the cross, triumphing over them in it. Neither angels nor principalities nor powers can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38f).

If modern nations have patron angels, the prince of Germany must be a fierce and ruthless angel who delights in frightfulness and carnage. Let us hope that Michael and Gabriel and the myriads of good angels are fully enlisted on behalf of France and her allies. Gigantic as the

struggle on earth has become, our imagination may fail to grasp the extent of the battlefield. The armies of the sky may be locked in battle with the minions of Satan. The struggle on earth may thus be but a sector of the battlefront. Our hope of victory rests upon the justice of our cause; for we believe that Michael and the holy angels will triumph over the dragon and his angels. All hail to our celestial allies! Down with the dragon and his hellish horde!