THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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THE ANGELS AND US

PART 2 OF 2

(3) *The Image of Angels*

It is only by overlooking obvious discrepancies that philosophical and scientific speculation about extraterrestrial beings endowed with intelligence, embodied or not, can be considered as having a significant bearing on the existence, nature, and mission of angels.

The philosophers and scientists who have engaged in such speculations clearly do not have angels in mind—certainly not the angels that make their appearance in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Koran.

Exactly the opposite statement must be made about the painters and poets who have delineated them or made reference to them. The images they have provided us plainly reflect what they have imbibed from the legends and lore, as well as the doctrines and dogmas, of the three great Western religions.

Influenced by Western painting and poetry from the thirteenth cen-

tury to the present day, our imagination responds by picturing winged figures robbed in dazzling white and having some resemblance to the bodily aspect, especially the facial visage, of human beings. This image, shared by believers and unbelievers, contains features that represent some of the elements of meaning in the abstract conception of angels to be found in the writings of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theologians.

The human appearance suggests that angels, like men, are persons—that they are most essentially characterized by their intelligence. The wings, sometimes only a pair and sometimes more numerous, suggest the function of angels—their service as messengers from God to man. That, by the way, is the literal meaning of the Hebrew and the Greek words that become "angel" in English. Not all angels, as we shall see, serve as messengers, but the most frequent reference to them in Sacred Scriptures describes them as performing this mission.

The aura of light that surrounds them, especially the haloes that encircle their heads, suggest a quite different role. Their wings betoken their coming to mankind as messengers, but their haloes symbolize that they come from Heaven which is their home.

They belong to the unearthly kingdom of God, not to the earthly domain inhabited by man and other corporeal creatures. They may come to earth to perform their missions, but they never remain there for long. As members of the heavenly host, the primary direction of their gaze is toward God, not toward man.

The imagery of dazzling, often blinding, light also symbolizes the spirituality of angels. Pure spirits, totally incorporeal beings, cannot be painted, nor can they be described in words that call images to mind. Only by using the symbolism of light, which makes the invisible visible, can painters and poets try to prevent an egregious misunderstanding of the imagery they are compelled to employ. The bodily forms and features that they depict angels as having must be recognized as pictorial metaphors, not as literal representations of what angels are like.

I cannot postpone mentioning a matter to which I will return in a later chapter when I attempt to expound angelology as a branch of sacred theology. Theologians must take account of the bodily appearance of angels in Sacred Scriptures, sometimes in human form and dress, so that they are initially mistaken to be men; and sometimes garbed in white, with wings, haloes, and flashing swords. Holding firm to the thesis that angels are purely spiritual beings,

theologians explain their corporeal forms and aspects as merely instrumental to the performance of their mission as messengers from God.

The explanation involves a fundamental negation, without which the immateriality of angels would be contradicted. The bodies they appear to have are not really bodies or indispensable to their life, as the bodies you and I have are really bodies and indispensable to us. Not only are we unable to live our earthly lives without bodies, but the bodies we have are truly organic, performing a variety of vital functions, including vegetative ones.

Not so the bodies that angels appear to have. In the language of the theologians, their corporeal forms are merely "assumed bodies," bodies that are not truly organic. They perform no vital functions, certainly not the vegetative ones.

In addition, these assumed bodies are taken on by angels as guises only for the sake of engaging in their earthly ministry. Useful for that purpose, they are totally dispensable and, furthermore, must be dispensed with. When angels return to their heavenly home, the resumption of their normal life as members of the heavenly host not only can, but must, discard every vestige of corporeality.

The great Reformed theologian, Karl Barth, in the extraordinary treatment of angelology set forth in that portion of his *Church Dogmatics* devoted to the Kingdom of Heaven, has good reason to complain of the trifling, merely ornamental, and often childish notions about angels that Christian painting and poetry are responsible for obtruding into our consciousness. "Here as elsewhere," he writes, Christian art "is responsible for so much that is inappropriate."

While conceding that "there are tolerable and in their way moving and instructive representations of the specifically childlike angel," Barth deplores paintings that depict "the infant Jesus with a veritable kindergarten of prancing babies amusing themselves in different ways and yet all contriving in some way to look pious. Even more offensive are Raphael's little darlings." He goes on to say that "it would be a good thing if diminutives like the German *Engelein* and the English 'cherub,' with all the false associations that they evoke, could be banished from current usage. The same holds true of the common conception of angels as charming creatures."

Barth's wishing to banish certain misleading references to angels

in speech and certain demeaning depictions of angels in painting reminds us of Plato's wish to expel poets and painters from the ideal state because their portrayal of the gods so grievously misrepresents them.

It also reminds us of the second commandment that enjoins us not to make graven images. Images, whether carved in stone, painted on a canvas, or formed by words, must necessarily be inappropriate—or worse, distortions—when we undertake to contemplate totally incorporeal, purely spiritual, objects, such as God and his holy angels. Strictly speaking, they are objects of thought, not of imagination.

Be that as it may, the use of our imagination still remains unavoidable, if only because the delineation of angels in Sacred Scriptures cannot be read without summoning up the images the words evoke. It inevitably leads to pictorial representations of them when religious themes become the preoccupation of great painters and poets, as they most certainly have in Western civilization.

Nor can it be gainsaid that a large part of our fascination with angels derives from immersion in the imagery of angels that we encounter in the galleries of any great museum and from our recollection of angels as heroic figures in such great epic poems as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Goethe's *Faust*, not to mention the memorable lines devoted to angels in countless lyrics.

The great scenes and moments in the Biblical narrative that have been recurrent subjects of Western painting include angels either as central figures in the episode or as an essential part of the background.

They occur in pictures of Abraham's being deterred by an angel from sacrificing his son Isaac, notably by Andrea del Sarto, Rembrandt, and Titian; in portrayals by Raphael, Rembrandt, and Murillo of the visit of three angels to Abraham; in Raphael's painting of Jacob's dream of the ladder stretching from earth to heaven on which angels are ascending and descending; and in pictures by Rembrandt and Rubens of the angel who commanded Hagar in the desert to turn back and return to Abraham.

The New Testament provides Christian artists with an even larger number of themes involving the action or presence of angels: paintings by Raphael, Veronese, Perugino, Tintoretto, and Rubens of the baptism of Christ; Perugino's portrayal of the temptation of

Christ by Satan, in which holy angels hover at Christ's feet; representations of the ascension and resurrection of Christ by Giotto and Correggio; and pictures of the angel rolling the stone away from Christ's tomb.

Nearly every great artist of the Renaissance or at least leading representatives of every major school painted the Annunciation in which the angel of the Lord brings the glad tidings to the Virgin Mary; this is almost equally true of such themes as the nativity of Christ, the adoration of the Magi, and the infant Jesus reclining on the lap of Mary.

In addition, there are paintings by Murillo of a single guardian angel; by Fra Angelico of an angelic host; by Raphael of the Archangel Michael casting Satan out of heaven; by Botticelli of the Archangel Raphael, and also by him a picture of the Madonna surrounded by angels.

In addition to playing central or significant roles in the great epic poems of Dante, Milton, and Goethe, angels are celebrated in a variety of ways by the writers of English lyrics, from Shakespeare, John Donne, and Henry Vaughan to Dante Gabriel Rosetti, Henry W. Longfellow, Leigh Hunt, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Robert Bridges.

Mentioning Leigh Hunt and remembering how Abou Ben Adhem awoke one night to see "an angel writing in a book of gold," only later to discover that his own name led the list inscribed therein, I cannot refrain from quoting a verse by B. J. Boothroyd that comments on Hunt's poem:

Abou Ben Adhem's name led all the rest . . .
Prompting a thesis wildly theoretical
That even recording angels find it best
To keep us alphabetical.

Nor can I refrain from calling attention to a witty verse by Lord Byron:

The angels all were singing out of tune,
And hoarse with having little else to do,
Excepting to wind up the sun and moon,
Or curb a runaway young star or two.

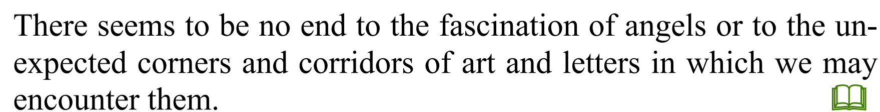
We can never forget that, in the closing lines of Hamlet, Shakespeare has Horatio pay farewell to Hamlet thus: "Good night, sweet prince: and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." Equally

memorable is Milton’s “Look homeward, Angel, now, and melt with ruth.”

The name of Blake cannot be omitted from this recital. In illustrating Dante’s Divine Comedy, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, as well as the Book of Job, Blake was, after Albrecht Dürer, probably the greatest graphic artist depicting angels in the widest variety of shapes, miens, and postures. His famous long poem, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” signalled his rejection of views of Heaven and Hell that he had earlier adopted from Emanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish mystical theologian. With them, he abandoned his admiration for angels. “1 have always found,” he wrote, “that angels have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise; this they do with a confident insolence sprouting from systematic reasoning.”

Nearer our own time, the theosophical visions of Rudolf Steiner and the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke are as replete with angels as are the visionary writings and the poems of William Blake. A recent commentary on the personality and work of the Oxford philosopher and essayist Isaiah Berlin recounts an interview with him in which the writer, himself deeply absorbed in Rilke’s poetry, discussed angels with Berlin. “1 came away,” he wrote, “convinced that he knew more about angels than I ever should.”

There seems to be no end to the fascination of angels or to the unexpected corners and corridors of art and letters in which we may encounter them.



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