

What does the Bible teach about: Angels?

*[English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.
Text in blue not included in the broadcast, but is extra information from the author.]*

Good day and welcome. Thank you for tuning into this week's Truth for Today programme.

The question I've been asked to try to answer is, "What does the Bible teach about angels?" Since I've only 23 minutes for this big subject I've excluded fallen angels, i.e., demons, from the remit.

The short answer to the question, "What does the Bible teach about angels?" is, "Not as much as you might imagine." There are about 167 references to angels in the New Testament. That means that only about 2% of its nearly 8,000 verses mention angels. The incidence of mentions of angels in the Old Testament is even sparser: in only about 0.7% of its 23,000 verses are they mentioned. This count includes all the various words used in the Old Testament to refer to angels. [This calculation leaves out the gold cherubim connected with the ark in tabernacle and the gold-plated cherubim similarly associated with the ark in Solomon's temple. But even with these added in, less than 1% of verses in the Old Testament mention angels.](#)

To put this point in perspective: verses including mention of "God" or "Jehovah" are about twenty times more frequent in the Old Testament than verses including mention of angels. And verses including the words "man" or "men" are about twelve times more frequent than verses including mention of angels, never mind the uncounted references to particular men by their names.

Many non-Bible-readers have the idea that the Bible is riddled with angels. It isn't.

But now to turn to the positive side. Why were angels sent by God at all? We shall consider this firstly as regards the Old Testament, then the New. It is inevitable that a talk like this will involve many Bible references. Often in what follows I will give only chapter-references, or no references at all. Fuller references can be found in the transcript available on the TruthforToday.org.uk website.

What does the word "angel" mean? The Hebrew word translated "angel," is as often used of men as of supernatural beings, and in this context is translated "messenger" or "ambassador." This implies that angels are God's messengers or ambassadors, and therefore that they do nothing independently of their Creator. (This throws into relief the enormity of Satan's fall.) In particular, it tells us that when angels bring God's "messages" to man, they declare what God has told them to, nothing more, nothing less.

The Greek word translated "angel", *angelos*, also means "messenger" or "envoy".

In the Old Testament an important distinction must be observed, between “the Angel of the LORD” (or “the Angel of Jehovah”, often nowadays pronounced “Yahweh”), and other angels. We shall begin with the Angel of the LORD.

The first mention of Him is in Genesis 16:7-14, where the Angel of the LORD appeared to Hagar in the wilderness, told her to return to Abraham and Sarah, and pronounced a blessing on her and her unborn baby. In this very first mention of “angel” in the Bible the Angel of the LORD declared God’s word to her.

The Angel of the LORD also intervened to deliver Isaac from Abraham’s knife on Mount Moriah, and to declare God’s blessing on faithful Abraham (Genesis 22:1-18). [Another reference that can be included here is Jacob’s wrestling with the angel \(Genesis 32:24ff; Hosea 12:4\).](#)

He also caused Jehovah, or Yahweh, to appear to Moses in the phenomenon of the burning bush that was not consumed: see Exodus 3. From the bush God declared what He would do – deliver Israel from Egyptian slavery.

Mentions of the Angel of the LORD are especially frequent in the book of Judges.² This frequency is connected to the character, or dispensation, of God’s government of Israel at that time, namely, by judges He raised up, not by a succession of kings. In chapter 2 of Judges the Angel of the LORD rebuked Israel; in chapters 6 and 13 He appointed Gideon and Samson as judges, both of whom in different ways wrought deliverance for Israel from threatening enemies.

Much later in time, in 2 Kings chapter 19:35, we read about the Angel of the LORD delivering Judah by annihilating the army of the king of Assyria. [This matter of deliverance is individualised in David’s prayer of David against his enemies in Psalm 35:5-6, “Let them be like the chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them away!”](#)

What was done for the nation of Israel was done also for individuals. In Psalm 34 verse 7 we read, “The Angel of the LORD encamps round those who fear him, and delivers them.” On the other hand, the Angel of the LORD also brought divine judgment on Israel because David had insisted on a census of the people. See 2 Samuel chapter 24:1-17. [Isaiah 63:9 states that the angel of God’s presence saved them.](#)

In summary, we may see three different kinds of action performed by the Angel of the LORD, that can be summarised in three words: deliverance, judgment, and (especially from the burning bush), declaration.

It is noteworthy that the Angel of the LORD only ever appeared to those who acknowledged Jehovah as their God. Even Balaam, whom the king of Moab hired to curse Israel, and whom the Angel of the LORD obstructed, was a renegade prophet of Jehovah (see Numbers 22:22-35).

But who is the Angel of the LORD? Hagar asked whether she had seen Him who saw her, i.e., whether she had seen God Himself. At the burning bush in Exodus 3 the Angel of the LORD is effectively identified with the LORD Himself. Yet in Zechariah 1:11-12, the Angel of the LORD petitions the LORD to intervene mercifully for Jerusalem and Judah. The relationship between the LORD Himself and the Angel of the LORD is therefore rather elusive. Nevertheless I think one can say that the manifestation of the Angel of the LORD was visible evidence that the God, whom no man can see and live (cp. 2 Timothy 6:16), was present. So much, then, for “the Angel of the LORD.”

As well as 52 references to the Angel of the LORD in the Old Testament, there are about 110 other references to angels, chiefly under the name “angel”, but also under the names “holy one”, “watcher”, “man,” etc. [References to angels are especially sparse in the so-called poetical and](#)

wisdom books, including the Psalms and Proverbs, - only thirteen in all. Time forbids any detailing of these references, except to say that almost all of the mentions of such angels under the name of “angel” itself falls into only six distinct and limited episodes:

1. Two verses referring to the two angels’ mission of deliverance to Lot and his family (Genesis 19:1, 15)
2. Five verses referring to the angelic superintendence of Jacob’s journeyings (Genesis 24:7, 40; 32:11; 48:16)
3. Five verses referring to the LORD sending an angel to guide Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 23:20, 23, 34; 33:2; Numbers 20:16).
4. Five verses concerning the judgment God visited on Israel consequent on David’s numbering of the people (2 Samuel 24:16; 1 Chronicles 21: 15;20,27,30).
5. Three verses speaking of the LORD giving His troubled servants into the care of angels (Ps 91:11; Daniel 3:28; 6:22)
6. Eleven verses in Zechariah where an angel explains to Z, what he sees (Zech. 1:9,14,12; 2:3; 4:1,4,5; 5:5,10; 6:4,5).

Then there are angels by other names in Daniel who decree the fortunes of Nebuchadnezzar (4:13f, 17, and, more frequently, holy ones or unnamed supernaturals who explain things to Daniel (8:13f; 15ff; 10:5ff; 12:6-13). There are “princes” who govern the course of the nations (Daniel 10:13, 20; 21:1).

“Angel” in the Old Testament translates a word meaning “messenger”. However the Old Testament also mentions by other names beings whom we would understand to be angels. Chief among these are the cherubim (mainly in the early chapters of Genesis and in Ezekiel), and seraphim (only in Isaiah). But this does not take us much further in defining what angels are, since the meaning of cherubim is, I think, unknown, and “seraphim” may describe what these being do, namely, consume others with fire; but it does not reveal what they are. “Sons of God” also denotes some sort of angel-like beings in Genesis 6 and in the book of Job and gets us a bit further. Angels are creations of God; they are not independent gods.

But, speaking generally about angels other than the Angel of the LORD, and by whatever name they are signified, their activities can be summarised under the headings of deliverance, declaration, and judgment – the very same services as just identified for the Angel of the LORD.

However, in addition, these other angels discharge a fourth service, namely the glorification of the LORD, by praising Him. See, for example Job 38 verse 7 and Isaiah 6 verse 3. This, I think, is never predicated of the Angel of the LORD, and it marks them out as creatures, in contrast to the Angel of the LORD. And, unlike the Angel of the LORD, these “other” angels could appear to idolaters, as evidenced by the two angels who went to Sodom.

To turn now to the occurrence of angels in the pages of the New Testament. Of the 169 references to angels in the New Testament, there are really no other words used to refer to angels that the word “angel” itself, except in the well-known nativity verse, “a multitude of the heavenly host,” and the “young man” sitting on the right side of the empty tomb in Mark 16:5. There are 167 occurrences of the word “angel” in the New Testament, in the nativity narratives of Matthew and Luke; in the book of Acts, and in Revelation. So these three sections of the New Testament account for nearly two-thirds of all the mentions of angels in the entire New Testament.

Whilst the phrase “angel of the Lord” occurs in the nativity narratives³ and also in the book of Acts, it never occurs with the definite article. And so it should be translated “an angel of the Lord”, and not as denoting the Angel of the LORD. The purposes for which angels appear in the nativity narratives were, obviously, declaration, and glorification, the latter when, in Luke 2 verse 14, the multitude of the heavenly host said, “Glory to God in the highest.”

In relation to declaration, there is more to the nativity appearances of angels than may meet the eye. Angels' names are not often mentioned in the Scriptures, in fact, only twice, to my knowledge. One of these named is Michael (Daniel 10:13, 21 & 12:1; Jude v.9; Revelation 12:7); the other is Gabriel, who is mentioned by name twice in Daniel (8:16; 9:21) and twice in Luke (1:19, 26). He was the angel who in Daniel chapter 9 had imparted to Daniel the vision of the seventy weeks of years that foretold the key points of Israel's future history. Now this self-same Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, father of John the Baptist, when he was serving in the temple, and told Zacharias about the son who would be born, and about that unborn son's special mission – to be forerunner of Messiah.

But why did this angel reveal his name to Zacharias? As said, that is not a normal thing for angels to do in the Scripture. The reason is obvious, namely, to connect John the Baptist with the progress of the seventy weeks concerning which, centuries before, the same Gabriel had instructed Daniel (9:21). He came to intimate to Zacharias that the 69th week, the week after which Messiah would be "cut off", was imminent. Gabriel was underlining to Zacharias John's important place in the prophetic history of his people. See Daniel chapter 9 verse 26.

A few months later the same Gabriel appeared to Mary herself, and, according to Luke chapter 1 verse 26, he also told her his name. This must surely have been to alert Mary likewise to the fact that, in the birth Messiah Himself, the fulfilment of Daniel's 69th week was approaching, and with that, the death of Messiah, her own Son (Luke 2:34-35).

And there is a sequel to these episodes. According to Matthew 28:1-3, after the resurrection an angel appeared to the two women at the tomb. This angel is described as having the appearance of lightning. This identifies him with the dread angel described in Daniel 10 verse 6, who revealed to Daniel coming world events that would affect Judah, and, from chapter 11 verse 36 onwards, events of the final years of Israel's history prior to the coming of the kingdom of God in power.

Now, whilst this lightning-like angel appeared at the tomb to announce the resurrection to the women, He also appeared in order to tell them to tell the disciples to return to Galilee, where they would meet the risen Lord.

Why Galilee? God's purpose regarding Israel obviously centres on Jerusalem. But on a mountain in "Galilee of the nations", as Isaiah 9 verse 1 describes it, the Lord imparted to the apostles the "great commission." They were to evangelise all the nations. That was their immediate task, and it would interrupt the history of Israel as imparted to Daniel centuries before by the same dread angel. Only when that great gospel ministry was discharged would what is revealed in Daniel 11 from verse 36 on to the end of Daniel's book, happen to Israel. So mentions of angels' names and descriptions of their appearance are by no means fairy-tale embellishments.

After this digression I now return to the ministry of angels in the four Gospels. An angel delivered Joseph by warning him from God to flee into Egypt. Angels ministered to the Lord after the ordeal of His temptation by the devil, and an angel strengthened Him in the garden of Gethsemane. There were no angels, however, to strengthen Him at Golgotha. There was "none to help", as Psalm 22 verse 11 said prophetically concerning His crucifixion. The Lord had refused to summon the twelve legions of angels to a judgmental intervention.

Then, as already mentioned, angels heralded the resurrection of the King of kings to the women in the garden. [In addition to doing that, the appearance of the angel who descended and rolled away the stone in Matthew 28:2 & 3 carried a further message](#) (Matthew 28:2-3). In the book of Acts, angels delivered apostles from prison (5:19), directed Philip to go to the Gaza road (8:26), smote the blasphemous Herod with a fatal illness (12:23), appeared to Cornelius, instructing him to send for Peter (10:1-7), and reassured Paul regarding the rescue of all aboard the stricken vessel (27:23).

I may therefore conclude that declaration, glorification, and deliverance characterised the ministry of angels in the four Gospels and in Acts. And also judgment, but only in the single case of the fatal disease visited upon the blasphemous king Herod.

Our Lord's teaching concerning angels was mostly not about their present service, but about their part in His public and glorious return to the world in time to come. This will have a judgmental dimension to it. But, regarding the present ministry of angels, the Lord taught how they rejoice at one sinner who repents and intercede on behalf of little children.

Paul mentioned angels only about ten times. In Colossians 2 verse 18 he warned his readers against worship of angels. And in 1 Corinthians 11 verse 10 the angels' guardianship of what glorifies God rather than man is given as the chief reason why women should "take charge of their heads" by covering them when praying and prophesying.

Angels were highly esteemed in first-century Judaism, so we are told, and the first chapter of Hebrews emphasises that Christ is greater than angels, being very God, whereas in chapter 2 we are told that He made Himself lower than angels by becoming man in order to make atonement for us. This tells us that as creatures of God, angels rank higher than man.

The book of Revelation contains significantly more references to angels than any other book of the Bible – 66 in all. Glorification is a prominent part of their activities. "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels round the throne..." See Revelation chapter 5 verse 11.

The visions described in the book of Revelation, were not explained to John by our Lord Himself; rather, this task was delegated to angels. Declaration is therefore an important element of the service of angels in this book, and it exemplifies the very meaning of their name, "messenger."

The book of Revelation also tells us that not only will angels accompany our Lord at His momentous appearing in glory, but also, during the time immediately preceding it, they will administer the outpouring of the wrath of God upon this world. Angels will sound the "seven trumpets" and pour out the contents of the "seven bowls."

Significantly, then, glorification, declaration, and judgment characterise the ministry of angels in the book of Revelation, but not deliverance. In that terrible time to come, it appears that all, or almost all, of God's people will be martyred.

To pause on the subject of glorification of God: Isaiah 6 verse 3 tells of seraphim worshipping the LORD of hosts, and John 12 verse 41, tells us that in this instance the LORD of hosts was the pre-incarnate Son of God. They worshipped Him in His pre-incarnate glory. However in Hebrews 2 verses 6 to 9, we read that the Lord, in becoming man in order to be able to suffer death, accepted a rank lower than the angels. And yet angels worshipped Him in the manger: see Hebrews 1 verse 6. Then, in Ephesians chapter 1 verses 20 & 21 we read that the risen Christ has, even as Man, been elevated to a place far above that of any kind of angel. And there, glorified as Man on the throne, angels worship Him, as we have just seen Revelation 5 verse 11 to tell us.

To conclude by returning to the present duties of angels. We have seen how in the Old Testament and in the Acts of the Apostles, angels were the deliverers of saints from their difficulties. The writer to the Hebrews wrote, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister to those who shall be heirs of salvation?"

Do they still deliver the saints? In regard to this, I will end the talk with an excerpt from a book by the late Christopher Willis, who operated Christian bookshops in Shanghai between the wars and during the Second World War. The Japanese had conquered Shanghai in December 1941, and about a year later the following incident happened. In this excerpt Willis refers to the shop

manager as “our brother”, probably because by the time of publication Shanghai was inside the Communist People’s Republic. The book is entitled, “I was among the Captives”, and on pages 44 & 45 we read the following:

“In the early days of the war a Japanese truck half-filled with books, and with five marines on it, drove up to our branch shop at the corner of Avenue and Haroon Road. Our brother was alone in the shop and saw with dismay that they had come to seize our stock. He is by nature very timid, and felt that this was more than he could endure. The marines jumped down from the truck and made for the shop door. But, before they could enter, a stranger, a Chinese gentleman neatly dressed, entered the shop ahead of them. For some unknown reason they (i.e., the Japanese marines) seemed unable to follow him, and loitered about, looking in four large windows; but they did not enter. This was about nine in the morning, and they stayed around until after eleven, but never set foot inside the door.

The stranger asked what the men wanted, and our brother explained that the Japanese were seizing the stocks from many of the bookshops in the city and had now come to seize our stocks. They had prayer together, and the stranger comforted and encouraged him; and so the time passed. Our brother knows practically all the Chinese customers who come to the shop, but this gentleman was a complete stranger. At last the soldiers climbed into their truck and drove away. The stranger left without purchasing anything or even making enquiry as to anything in the shop.

When our brother told me the story, addressing me by my Chinese name, he ended by asking,

Mr Lee, “Do you believe in angels?”
“I do”, was my reply.
“So do I,” said Mr Lee.”

So for the quotation from the book. My wife’s family knew Christopher Willis. The deliverance here was not so much of people as of literature much needed by many of the Christian people in Shanghai during these dark days.

If you have kept tuned in to this broadcast to this point, thank-you indeed, and congratulations for persisting with it! Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Angels talk number T1218. May something in what you heard be blessed to you.

Footnotes

1. Script by Theo Balderston. Narrated by Paul Thomson.
2. Judges 2:1, 4; 5:23; 6:11, 12, 21, 22; 13:3, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21.
3. Matthew 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19) & Luke 1:11,13; 18; 19, 26; 30, 34, 35, 38; 2:9,10, 13,21.

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