

What the Bible Says About Angels

Sam A. Smith

The word “angel” appears over two hundred and eighty times in the English Bible (AV). The principal words from which it is translated are: *malak* (Hebrew), and *angelos* (Greek)—both meaning, “messenger.” While it can refer to any messenger, it is most frequently used of spirit beings of various classes who are intelligent and powerful non-human creatures (Heb. 1:13-14), some of which inhabit Heaven, the place of God’s throne, and others of which inhabit the physical universe (Rev. 12:12). They are referred to as: “sons of God” (Job 1:6 cf. 38:7), “watchers” (Dan. 4:13,17,23), “holy ones” (Ps. 89:7), “sons of the mighty” (Ps. 89:6), God’s “host” (Gen. 32:1-2), “ministering spirits” (Heb. 1:14), “princes” (Dan. 10:13), “principalities and powers” (Eph. 6:12), and by individual names (Dan. 9:21; 10:21; 12:1).

The nature and appearance of angels

Angels are created beings (Ps. 148:1-5) that were present before the earth was formed (Job 38:1-7); however, they do not predate the original creation *ex nihilo*, since they are not eternal. Like us, they are personal beings. They are intelligent, they engage in worship, and they rejoice and praise God. They are wholly distinct from men (Heb. 2:6-7; 12:22-23). Angels are not born, and do not marry or procreate (Mt. 22:30), neither are they subject to death (Lk. 20:35-36). When appearing to men, they usually appear in human form (Gen. 18:2; Rev. 21:17 cf. Deut. 2:11). However, in Heaven they may appear differently (Rev. 4:6-9). In the Bible angels always appear in masculine form, and sometimes (if not always) are youthful in appearance (Rev. 16:5). On occasion they appear in such a way as to indicate their supernatural status (Mt. 28:3-4; Acts 6:12). Angels are highly intelligent (2 Sam. 14:17,20) and possess supernatural power, though both their power and intelligence is finite (Mt. 24:36; 2 Pt. 2:11). They are able to transport themselves quickly (Dan. 9:21), though they can be hindered (Dan. 10:1-21, esp. v.13), and they have the ability to appear suddenly (Lk. 2:13-14; Acts 1:10).

The moral character of angels

The Bible refers to both elect (holy) angels (Mk. 8:38; 1 Tim. 5:21), and to fallen angels, or “angels that sinned” (2 Pt. 2:4). It is often stated that the angels were created holy, and that some sinned. However, that view is problematic, since holiness is a positive quality rather than the mere absence of sin. Adam was not created holy, but he was created without sin. Had he obeyed God, he would have become holy, but instead he disobeyed and became sinful. Given that angels as well as men are free moral agents responsible for their choices, it is apparent that angels, like Adam, were created sinless and became either holy or unholy by virtue of their choice of obedience or disobedience to God (2 Pt. 2:4). Angels, having been individually created, do not comprise a race; therefore there is no transmission of sin from one angel to another. The only way that one angel’s sin could affect another is through influence.

The classes, number, and organization of angels

The Bible refers to only two classes of angels: seraphim (Isa. 6:2, mentioned only in this passage) and cherubim (Gen. 3:24; Ezek. 10:1-22; 28:14). However, we are unable to determine from scripture what this distinction means, and there is no particular reason why there could not be any number of classes of angels, all or some with distinct attributes and functions. The angels are virtually innumerable (Rev. 5:11), and both the holy and the unholy angels are organized into hierarchies (Rev. 9:11; 12:7; Eph. 6:11-12). The Bible refers to “archangels” (*i.e.*, chief angels, cf. 1 Thess. 4:16; Jude 9) and to “chief princes” (Dan. 10:13), and indicates that some are closer to the throne of God (Lk. 1:19); there are also differences of rank among fallen angels (Jude 8-9).

The function of holy angels

Angels are engaged in various ministries both to God and man. They praise God (Ps. 148:1-2; Rev. 5:11-14) and serve him (Ps. 103:20), and at least some appear before him at certain times (Job 1:6; 2:1). The angels observe earthly affairs (Dan. 4:13; 1 Cor. 4:9) and serve as ministering spirits to the elect (Heb. 1:13-14). On occasion they bring answers to prayer (Dan. 9:21-23; Acts 12:5-7), aid believers in their ministries (Acts 8:26), offer encouragement in times of danger (Acts 27:22-24), protect and preserve the saints (Acts 5:19; 12:7-10), transport believers after death (Lk. 16:22), and they will gather the saints at the second coming (Mt. 24:31), and presumably they will be involved in gathering the saints at the rapture of the Church (1 Thess. 4:13-18, note v.16). With respect to the unrighteous, angels inflict judgment (Acts 12:23; Rev. 16:1-22), they will gather the unrighteous for punishment at the second coming of Christ (Mt. 13:39-40), and they will bind Satan and confine him in the Abyss at the close of the present age (Rev. 20:1-2).

The function of unholy angels

Unholy angels oppose the work of God, God's holy angels (Dan. 10:13), and his people (Eph. 6:12), and they support the work of Satan (Rev. 12:7). Demons appear to be a subgroup of fallen angels that at times possess (take control) of men and animals.

a. Satan

The existence of Satan, God's chief opponent, is taught in the Old Testament (Genesis, 1 Chronicles, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah), and by every New Testament writer. Jesus referred to Satan on numerous occasions. He is called by various names, including: "Satan," meaning "adversary" (52 times), "the Devil," meaning "slanderer" (35 times), "the Evil One" (Eph. 6:12), "the Serpent" (Rev. 12:9), "the Dragon" (Rev. 12:9,12), "the Tempter" (Mt. 4:3), "Beelzebub," and "the Prince of Demons" (Mt. 12:24 cf. v.26). The name "Lucifer" found in the AV at Isaiah 14:12 is unlikely to be a personal name and should be translated "morning star," or "bright one." Nonetheless, students of the Bible find it convenient to refer to Satan by this name, especially when making reference to him prior to his fall.

If Ezekiel 28:14 refers to Satan, as seems to be the case, he is there classified as "the anointed cherub that covers," and possibly of greater rank than any of the other angels. He fell through pride (Isa. 14:12-14; 1 Tim. 3:6), and thus sin entered into the creation. As a result, he became the enemy of God and the adversary of God's people (Mt. 13:24-43; 1 Pt. 5:8). Jesus characterized Satan as "a murderer" and "a liar" (Jn. 8:44), and the Apostle John referred to him as a confirmed sinner (1 Jn. 3:8, cf. Jn. 8:44). Satan's life can be divided into six periods: on the "holy mountain" in the angelic governance of the creation (Ezek. 28:14); in the heavenlies, *i.e.*, in the physical universe (from his fall to his imprisonment at Christ's return, Eph. 6:11-12); confinement to the earth (during the second half of the tribulation period, cf. Rev. 12:9); confinement in the Abyss (during most of the millennial portion of the kingdom of Christ on earth, cf. Rev. 20:1-3); a brief period on earth near the close of the millennium (Rev. 20:1-3); and finally, eternity in the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:10). As a creature Satan is a finite being. Though he is powerful, his power is limited by the cooperation given to him (Jam. 4:7), and by God (Job 1:12; 2 Cor. 12:7; 2 Tim. 2:26). Thus, as seen in the case of Job, there are some things that Satan can only do by divine permission.

b. Demons and demon possession

In the "enlightened" modern age in which we live, demonism is often dismissed as primitive religious belief, and thus there are three theories in addition to the biblical view that need to be considered.

The mythical theory

The mythical theory claims that accounts of demon possession in the Bible are symbolic (not literally true), and that they depict in symbolic terms our Lord's triumph over evil. Obviously such an explanation is not consistent with the verbal inspiration of scripture, or its normal/objective interpretation.

The accommodation theory

The accommodation theory suggests that when Christ and the disciples referred to demons it was not because they believed that such things really existed, but because their contemporaries believed in demons, and thus they accommodated their language to those beliefs. (The swine in the story of Matthew 8:28-34 must have been very accommodating too!)

The psychological theory

According to the psychological theory, emotionally unstable people who believed in demons fancied that they were demon possessed and acted accordingly. Then, believing that Jesus had power over demons, they believed that they were delivered at his command. (Need we mention the swine again?)

The biblical view

Obviously all three of the views above are inconsistent with the verbal inspiration of scripture. The biblical view is that demons are real, personal, malevolent spirit beings. Though it does not seem to be their chief work, demons do have the power to control people, either partially or completely eclipsing the human will under certain circumstances. The reason for the onset of demon possession is not stated in scripture, but it is at least possible that some individuals have opened the door to demon possession by their personal choices, or interest in the occult or false religion (which the Bible views as demonic, cf. 1 Cor. 10:20-21; 1 Tim. 4:1; Rev. 9:20). While it is difficult to know how much of this description might be characteristic of demon possession in general, the demon possessed man of Gadara (Mt. 8:28-34, cf. Mk. 5:1-20 and Lk 8:26-40) displayed these qualities: 1) wildness, violence, and persistent antisocial behavior (Mt. 8:28; Mk. 5:4); 2) a preference for nudity (Lk. 8:27); 3) avoidance of community (Lk. 8:27, 29); 4) possibly a preoccupation with death (Lk. 8:27); and, 5) self-mutilation (Mk. 5:5).

It is important to recognize that Jesus did not "exorcise" demons; he simply commanded them to come out. Exorcism makes use of conjurations, incantations, or religious or magical ceremonies in an effort to expel demons (Merrill Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, Scripture Press, 1963, p.101). In other words, in exorcism the power is assumed to reside in the right formula or ceremony. However, in Jesus' case, and in the case of the apostles, the power was divine authority (Mt. 10:1—note that the word "power" (AV) is the Greek word *exousia*, which should be translated "authority"). There is no evidence that believers today are given the authority to expel demons, though we can, and should pray for people we believe may be under demonic influence or control.

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