

What Does
the Bible
Say About... ?

Angels and Demons

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Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about ANGELS AND DEMONS.”

Introduction*

Angels and demons and dragons, oh my! Our world is populated by many natural wonders, but faith and imagination have always countenanced the existence of beings of great wonder beyond the reach of our five senses. In the last few decades, while adherence to religion has been in decline, angels have made a comeback. One author has observed that “the angel and demon binary still inhabits huge swathes of cultural space in the technophilic twenty-first century,”¹ and another that “books on angels are as numerous as the celestial choirs themselves.”² They appear in TV series, films, and art. We hear of them in stories and read about them in autobiographies and novels.³

Perhaps you too have had your own experience with these heavenly beings. However, not only angels, but demons too populate contemporary imagination, and, more ominously—according to many—are at work in the world creating havoc, causing destruction, and enticing fallible humans away from noble aspirations.

The biblical world of both the Old and New Testaments mapped a universe smaller than the one we

* In this co-authored work, Clifford Yeary wrote an initial draft of the introduction and the first five chapters and then had to withdraw from the project. John Gillman edited and amplified these chapters significantly and authored chapters six and seven and the afterword.

now know as nearly infinite. To the biblical writers, the world encompassed three heavens: one of the sky overhead, filled with sun and moon and stars; a second “firmament” that held the waters that fell through the sky as rain and snow; and above that a third heaven, where God and his angels held court and ruled over the earth below. Angels appear throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and demons from Leviticus to Revelation; the serpent—though not yet identified as a demon—first shows up in Genesis.

The English word *angel* derives from the Latin *angelus*, which refers to a messenger from the heavenly sphere to the earthly sphere. In the Hebrew Bible and its Greek translation, the Septuagint, the terms for messenger are, respectively, *malak* and *angelos*. These terms are used for both heavenly *and* earthly messengers, a range of meaning broader than the English *angel*. Thus, a human person may also serve as a messenger to another—sharing a blessing, offering encouragement, or bringing comfort. In those instances, such a messenger may truly seem like an angel. In addition, sometimes a heavenly messenger in the Bible may at first appear as a human before being recognized as an angel. While there is a linguistic overlap in the biblical use of the term “messenger,” there remains a clear practical distinction between earthly and celestial messengers.

Today, astrophysicists contemplate many mysterious energies present and at work in our universe, but they rarely, if ever, allow for the possibility of angels and demons, let alone dragons. And yet our culture remains fascinated

with them. Many believe in the reality of angels and fear demons. An Associated Press poll in 2011 found that nearly eight in ten Americans (77 percent) believe angels exist.⁴ The same poll showed that 94 percent of those who attend religious services, 88 percent of Christians, and over 40 percent of people who never attend religious services believe that angels exist.

As a culture, many of us enjoy contemplating the possibility that we are part of a divine plan, but we are not always sure how that plan works or where we fit into it. People whose beliefs are open to the existence of spiritual beings, angelic or otherwise, may look to connect with a dimension of reality that transcends the confines of their material existence.

While angels testify to the presence of the Divine, demons and dragons often, though not always, represent a more sinister side of cosmic forces. Demons refer to evil spirits and dragons to a legendary serpentine or reptilian creature. Dragons have soared back into popularity in recent years, in children's animated movies, like *How to Train Your Dragon* (and its two sequels), in blockbuster 3D films like *Avatar*, and in the adult-themed HBO series *Game of Thrones*. Recall that English literature began with a tale of dragons and their mortal enemies in *Beowulf* (written as early as 700 AD); in many modern tales, by contrast, dragons and people have become more than friends—many stories describe a powerful, lifelong psychic link bonding human riders to these powerful flying beasts. Dragons may symbolize many intuitive responses to what remains

strange and powerful in a world and cosmos beyond our limited comprehension. Little wonder, then, that dragons are presented to us as beasts to be greatly feared or cautiously befriended. In the Bible, dragons may be related to the beast known as Leviathan, the multi-headed sea serpent in Psalm 74:14, or to the seven-headed dragon, the most sinister of creatures, in the Book of Revelation (12:3). Both symbolize ultimate evil and are a direct challenge to the authority of God.

Angels and demons are, if not dominant in, then surely part of the fabric of contemporary culture. They appear from time to time in biblical passages and are defined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.⁵ It is important to recall that Catholic teaching about them is subordinate to the more central and important truths of faith. Belief in angels, although evident in the biblical world and the broader Near Eastern cultural environment of the time, is only alluded to as an article of faith in the Nicene Creed (“I believe in one God, / . . . maker of heaven and earth, / of all things visible and invisible”), for example. These heavenly beings are venerated but not worshipped in the liturgical tradition.

All three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have traditions about angels and demons that have not given rise to major dogmatic differences. These religions display more common ground than distinctive teaching about such spiritual beings that interact with humans, often in surprising ways. The influence of the Hebrew Bible and the deuterocanonical books of the Old

Testament, wherein angels are commonplace, on the latter two faiths is evident. This will be particularly apparent as we explore how the presence of angels and demons in the Old Testament carries over into the New Testament, and from there into our cultural context.

As we explore in the pages ahead how angels, demons, and dragons are traditionally represented in biblical literature, we will also discuss how they are depicted in much of our entertainment media. In doing that, we will also consider how the Bible might yet have something of real significance to say about angels and demons. Oh my!

Chapter One

When Angels Come Visiting

Shakespeare was well aware of ethereal beings that transcend our senses. Hamlet, on seeing the ghost of his father, petitions that “Angels and ministers of grace defend us!” (Act 1, Scene 4). This theme of defending and ministering angels is reminiscent of their role during and after the temptation of Jesus by the devil (Matthew 4:1–11). One scene later in the Bard’s play, Hamlet assures a skeptical Horatio that, “There are more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (Act 1, Scene 5). Toward the end of the play, Laertes professes that after Ophelia’s death, “a ministering angel shall my sister be” (Act 5, Scene 1). Whatever philosophies might prevail in our times, it is certain that millions still ponder the many things and beings that may lie beyond our senses. Although Hamlet’s encounter with the ghost of his father in theatrical drama may go far beyond ordinary experience, throughout the ages, and certainly still today, angels and demons are popularly regarded as more than fiction.

A Jewish Old Testament Perspective

In this chapter, we will begin to investigate the ancient biblical accounts of angels and see how modern narratives compare. It is important to state at the outset that belief in angels is reflected throughout the Old Testament and hence is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition. It is possible that Israel developed its belief in angels in the transition from poly- to monotheism by transforming Canaanite deities into angels and divine messengers.⁶ The Jewish belief in angels continues up to the present, as is evident in the role that angels have on the eve of Shabbat (Sabbath).⁷ On this holiest day of the week, the presence of two ministering angels reminds participants that this special day recalls God's wonderful work at creation and thus is infused with holiness. In the Talmud (*Shabbat* 119b), Rabbi Jose the son of Judah explains the tradition in these words:

Two ministering angels accompany man on the eve of the Sabbath from the synagogue to his home, one a good [angel] and one an evil [one]. And when he arrives home and finds the lamp burning, the table laid and the couch [bed] covered with a spread, the good angel exclaims, "May it be even thus on another Sabbath [too]," and the evil angel unwillingly responds "amen." But if not, the evil angel exclaims, "May it be even thus on another Sabbath [too]," and the good angel unwillingly responds, "amen."⁸

The traditional song *Shalom Aleichem* (“Peace be upon you”) celebrates the arrival of the Shabbat on Friday evening and the role of the angels in accompanying the person home from the synagogue service. The ministering angels named in this song are “messengers of peace, messengers of the Most High.”

Peace be with you, ministering angels,
messengers of the Most High,
Messengers of the King of Kings, the Holy One,
Blessed be He.

Come in peace, messengers of peace,
messengers of the Most High,
Messengers of the King of Kings, the Holy One,
Blessed be He.

Bless me with peace, messengers of peace,
messengers of the Most High,
Messengers of the King of Kings, the Holy One,
Blessed be He.

Go in peace, messengers of peace,
messengers of the Most High,
Messengers of the King of Kings, the Holy One,
Blessed be He.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, angels come from a heavenly realm, and this easily accounts for their being depicted as lofty spiritual beings with wings. What mortals among us have never wished to have the ability to fly under our own power? Before the advent of aircraft, flying was always associated with feathered wings. (Bats were well known, of course, but they have no feathers and were crea-

tures of the night and of darkness—not how angels were typically perceived.)

In many movies and television episodes, angels come to earth to assist human beings with an essential task. Their mission is seldom, if ever, one of solving a physical or material problem. The greatest of human aspirations is to attain our purpose in life, and at the end, to die with the dignity of knowing that we have succeeded in achieving significant lifetime goals. To a certain extent there is agreement here between dramatized quest stories in popular culture and biblical accounts of angelic interaction with humans.

In the Bible we can readily see that there is a significant purpose to human-angelic interactions and that, as a result, the humans are affected at turning points of great importance, which provide a true purpose for their lives. A significant difference between biblical accounts and those found in modern settings of movies and television, though, is that in the former angels always serve as agents of the one true God.

Most frequently, the angel visiting someone in the Bible is referred to as “the angel of the LORD.” An angel first appears in Genesis chapter 16, yet this angel comes neither with a name nor a visual description. Sarai (later Sarah), wife of Abram (later Abraham), has given to her husband her handmaid, Hagar, as a concubine (a culturally accepted secondary wife), for the purpose of bearing a child, since Sarai, then in her old age, had never conceived a child. But when Hagar displays her pregnancy with such pride that Sarai feels belittled, Sarai treats Hagar harshly until Hagar runs away. Despairing of her life, Hagar encounters “the angel of the