

Introduction to the Study of Angels

A. Angelology in systematic theology

First of all, what is “Systematic Theology?”

“Systematic Theology” can be understood as a fancy term that defines the systematic arrangement of biblical doctrines. It is the gathering and organization of truth.

The major doctrines of systematic theology, and the order in which they are usually taught are:

- Doctrine of the Bible - Bibliology
- Doctrine of God, the Trinity, the Father - Theology Proper
- Doctrine of Christ - Christology
- Doctrine of the Holy Spirit - Pneumatology
- Doctrine of Angels - Angelology
- Doctrine of Demons - Demonology
- Doctrine of Man - Anthropology
- Doctrine of Sin - Hamartiology
- Doctrine of Salvation - Soteriology
- Doctrine of Israel - Israelology*
- Doctrine of the Church - Ecclesiology
- Doctrine of Last Things - Eschatology

* The doctrine of Israel is rarely studied and the neglect has led many to confuse the church with Israel.

B. Popular view of angels

The popular view of angels, like the popular view of just about every Christian doctrine, is very skewed. Unfortunately we, the Church, believers, much to often fail to properly discern what is mere popular belief and what is truth.

Modern pop culture has their own “science fiction” type of views regarding angels and the occult. The popular views can be spotted in popular t.v. shows like: *Angel*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, *Touched by an Angel*, etc.

These shows may mold the way people think about angels more than people realize. Though the purpose of shows like these may just be entertainment, the result is a desensitized audience with a confused view of angels. People may disregard all content in such shows as fantasy or may start thinking that some of the ideas about angels and the supernatural presented in these shows are correct. In fact, a lot of times the plots may actually follow mythical beliefs about angels.

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Even “serious” shows on t.v. (like documentaries on the History Channel or the Discovery Channel) present mythical views of angels along side biblical views of angels. Academic buffs view the biblical perspective on angels as a mere evolution from what previous cultures had considered about them.

Modern Jewish thought rejects the biblical view of angels, as well as the existence of Satan as a fallen angel.

One idealized or general view of angels is that they are winged, blond, effeminate looking, white gown wearing beings that fly around protecting good people. Some people even believe that if they are good they can become angels after they die.

In our modern jargon the term “angel” and its derivatives are used very loosely. People commonly use such terms to refer to an attractive female or a well behaved child. This use implies that culturally we expect angels to be good looking and good doing beings.

C. Definitions

In the Old Testament the word used for “*angel*” was the word “*malek*” meaning messenger.

In the New Testament the word “*angel*” comes from the Greek word “*angelos*” also meaning messenger. The word itself does not automatically imply that the message is from God. The Greek word “*angelos*” comes from the word “*angellō*” meaning to deliver a message. In Scripture, the word “*angelos*” is also used to mean a guardian or representative in Matthew 18:10, Acts 12:15 and Revelation 1:20.

“*Angels*” has become the general term by which supernatural created beings are referred to.

D. Recent neglect of the study of angels and possible reasons for it

1. Rejection of angel worship and the occult

One possible reason why the Christian Church as a whole has not taught the biblical perspective on angels as strongly as it could may be the fear that some people may move to the area of angel worship as a result of exposure to the doctrine of angels. This is a bad reason since the understanding of angels needs to be presented in light of what Scripture says, and in that context the worship of angels is not feasible.

2. Rejection of the supernatural

One more likely reason is our modern rejection of the supernatural. The Western world has adopted the views of God-rejecting philosophers and cannot accept anything that science cannot explain as true. Our modern Western culture pretends to be dependent on truth, and that truth can only be found through science. If science cannot explain something as possible, then it must not be. All sorts of scientific conclusions are arrived at by assuming that God does not exist (regardless of what evidence may exist to disprove this assumption). Since academically we are set up to reject the existence of God, the existence of anything supernatural is therefore not accepted.

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There are cultures in our modern day that do not hold scientific evidence as highly as American or European cultures do. As a result angels, or the supernatural in general, are more commonly used to explain many phenomena. Often to an unreasonable extreme.

It is safe to conclude that Western scholars commonly consider angels to be creatures of myth and legend, and therefore study them in that light. They confuse what Scripture says about them with what mythological writings say about angels as well.

E. Why should we study about angels?

1. Scripture teaches about them

We should seek to learn as much as we can about Scripture and the topics that it addresses. Angels are given a lot of room in Scripture and they take part in some key events in history past and future. Knowing what God intends for us to know about these creatures is therefore useful to our understanding of the Bible.

“Since they [angels] are the subject of revelation they are worthy of study. If we are supernaturalist, then we need to know this area of theology.” (Sarles)

2. Greater understanding of the supernatural

There are good reasons for not trying to explain all difficult phenomena by attributing it to the supernatural, but if we do so we should do it for good reasons. Just because science cannot prove or disprove something is not sufficient. We must trust what Scripture says above all else.

3. Insight into the character of God

Understanding what the Bible tells us about angels will improve our understanding of God and who He is.

a. His Providence (and what that really means)

“The word ‘providence’ comes from the Latin *providentia* (GK. *pronoia*) and means essentially foresight or making provision beforehand.” (Elwell) When applied to God, “providence” is the sovereign, divine superintendence of all things. In other words, through His “providence,” God directs and guides everything to His predetermined outcome, through His predetermined means, in ways consistent with His nature and the nature of that which He created, all for the purpose of His glory. God’s divine, sovereign, and benevolent control of all things for His glory is the underlying premise of everything that is taught in the Bible.

b. His Justice

There is judgement for all, including angels. Church age believers will judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:3). At the Great White Throne judgement Satan and his angels will be sent to the lake of fire (Revelation 19-20).

c. His Mercy

God uses angels in exercising His mercy towards us.

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4. Motivation for our own godly living

a. Thinking of things that are true and pure

Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.”

b. Awareness of the real spiritual battle

Ephesians 6:12, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.”

F. Historical Views on Angels

The emphasis that Christians have placed on the study of angels through history has varied, but in general, the doctrine of angels has not been studied in commensurate proportion to how often the topic is addressed in Scripture.

1. In Old Testament Times

Angels appear in the Old Testament. They were present at the creation of the material world and rejoiced about it.

Job 38:7, “When the morning stars sang together,
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?”

The role of angels in the Old Testament was primarily to declare and promote the will of God. On some rare occasions they were also the agents of destruction or judgement.

Genesis 19:13, “... for we [angels] are about to destroy this place, because their outcry has become so great before the LORD that the LORD has sent us to destroy it.”

2 Samuel 24:16, “When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the calamity, and said to the angel who destroyed the people, “It is enough! Now relax your hand!” And the angel of the LORD was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.”

Angels in the Old Testament did not only appear to people in person, they also appeared to people in dreams.

Genesis 28:12, “And he [Jacob] had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

In the book of Daniel a couple angels are identified by name, Gabriel and Michael.“

2. During Intertestamental Period

During the late postexilic period angelology was corrupted and became a prominent topic in Judaism. “The angel Michael was deemed to be Judaism’s patron, and the apocryphal writings named three other archangels as leaders of angelic hierarchy.” (Elwell). In addition to Gabriel and Michael, the angels named in the Apocryphal books were Raphael and Uriel.

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In the Apocryphal book of Tobit (12:11-15), the angel Raphael identifies himself by name and credits himself as being the one who presented the prayers of faithful Jews to God. This is in contradiction to what Scripture teaches, that Jesus is the only intermediary between man and God.

Hebrews 7:25, “Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”

Romans 8:34, “who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.”

Uriel explained to Enoch many of his visions. Sounds a lot like the angel Moroni revealing the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith!

3. Early Christian Period

The Jewish view of angels had deteriorated and “the Roman world into which Christianity came was a decaying society. Pagan polytheism and emperor worship were everywhere. These and other influences soon led to the worship of angels among nominal Christians. The Archangel Michael was especially popular.” (Lightner)

During these early periods of Christianity, Christian leaders were occupied with defending fundamental doctrines like the deity of Christ, the Trinity and salvation. They did not devote too much time to preparing a biblical doctrine of angels.

The Gnostics were a particularly strong cult from 100 to 700 A.D. They believed that there was some secret knowledge that they were privy to, knowledge that lead to salvation. Gnostics believed in an unknown and remote Supreme Being who existed simultaneously with an evil and subordinate supernatural being called the Demiurge. They believed that the Demiurge had created the world, and that the world was ruled by evil spirits. According to Gnosticism, “from the supreme God there emanated a long chain of aeons, angelic beings, which constituted the divine essence and through which the highest god could relate to created beings. Christ was viewed as the first and highest of these aeons.” (Lightner)

Though Christianity did not adopt Gnostic or Jewish views of angels in whole, these did influence how the view of angels would come to be formulated later on.

4. The Medieval Period

Angels continued to not be studied at a scholarly level during the Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas was the primary contributor to the view of angels during this period, and he did not have a biblical perspective of them. For one thing, he saw angels as unable to learn new things.

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5. The Reformation Period

The Reformation did not bring any great development to the doctrine of angels, but it did bring people back to the Bible. The Reformers did not ignore angels, however, they did have a more accurate understanding of angels as we see in writings from this period. The 12th Article of the Belgic Confession, for example, presents the generally accepted (and accurate yet not complete) view of angels during the period:

“He also created the angels good, to be his messengers and to serve his elect; some of whom are fallen from that excellency, in which God created them, into everlasting perdition, and the others have, by the grace of God, remained steadfast and continued in their primitive state. The devils and evil spirits are so depraved that they are enemies of God and every good thing to the utmost of their power, as murderers watching to ruin the Church and every member thereof, and by their wicked stratagems to destroy all; and are therefore, by their own wickedness, adjudged to eternal damnation, daily expecting their horrible torments.”

6. The Modern Period

Since the 18th century rationalism has negatively influenced all biblical doctrines, angelology has not escaped. Rationalism brought about the rejection of the Bible as the Word of God, which has led people to doubt the truthfulness of anything the Bible teaches.

Liberal theology, the result of rationalism, “seeks to retain a semblance of belief in angels while viewing them simply as symbolic representation of God’s care and concern.” (Lightner)

7. Today

Interestingly, the failure of Liberal theology to deliver in any of its fronts has led to it too being rejected to a large extent. Nothing good has filled the void however. The occult is making headway in Western culture. It is no longer unusual (especially in Hollywood) to see people involved in astrology, spiritism, witchcraft and even Satan worship.

People are recognizing the emptiness any person without Christ experiences, but they are trying to fill it with mythical views that won’t interfere with their own immoral lives.

A lot of the popular books that people are turning to with regards to angels now a days are not very scholarly books. Instead they usually deal with personal accounts of what angels have done in the lives of people. This type of preference in reading material is consistent with our American culture which seeks quick self-gratification, and with the sad move in many Christian circles to place a high emphasis to personal experiences.

In order to know the truth about angels, we need to go to the source of truth —Scripture. What we find there must be accepted with far greater authority than what people today may affirm they have experienced, even people we know. The work of angels in the past, the future, and today needs to be seen through the lens of the Bible.