

# ANGELS AND OTHER HEAVENLY BODIES

*(Genesis 16.1-15, Matthew 1.18-25, 2.13-15 and 19-23)*

According to an article in The Times last week, a character in a new US drama talks about US decline like this: America only leads the world in three things: the number of incarcerated citizens per capita, the number of adults who believe angels are real, and defence. He's being ironic of course, but three cheers for the second one anyway if it's true.

If you take the Bible seriously, you have to take angels seriously, they're there all the way from Genesis to Revelation. So what are angels and other heavenly beings all about?

It's really important to start with creation. In creation there is a clear divide. On the one hand there is God, the God revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And on the other, there is creation, everything created, everything else. We are all familiar with creation in the physical realm; from humanity to the rest of the earth to the rest of the cosmos. But in creation there is also the heavenly realm. In Biblical terms that means angels, seraphim and cherubim are also part of the creative order. They are not divine, not part of the godhead; they are creatures, created just as we are.

I'm going to stick to what the Bible says about all these creatures of the heavenly realm, and pay no attention to a vast amount of speculation in contemporary Jewish and post-biblical literature. And first just a quick word about seraphim and cherubim, because they only play a small part in the Bible.

Seraphim only appear in Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6) as strange creatures with 3 pairs of wings that surround God's throne, calling Holy, Holy, Holy, and which apply the burning coal to Isaiah's mouth. *[They seem very similar to the creatures guarding the throne of God in Revelation 4. We used to sing "Thus spoke the Seraph and forthwith..." in the carol "While shepherds watched their flocks by night", but in Luke's gospel it is an angel not a seraph who speaks, and Mission Praise has replaced the word seraph with angel].*

Cherubim, on the other hand, guard the entrance to the Garden of Eden, guard the throne of God and allow it to fly! They appear mostly as descriptions of decorations in temple buildings. They have nothing to do with the putti of classical art, which are also called cherubs in English.

Angels on the other hand, are much more interesting, and appear much more in scripture, all the way from Genesis to Revelation. They act particularly (but not exclusively) as messengers from God to humanity. The word for angel and for messenger is the same, both in Greek and in Hebrew.

So let's see the two examples of angels as messengers in our Bible readings. First, Genesis chapter 16. Abram is getting old, and his wife Sarai has born him no children. And as usual she assumes it's her fault. So she persuades Abram to sleep with her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar. And sure enough Hagar becomes pregnant. But it doesn't work out very well. Hagar despises Sarai, so Sarai treats Hagar badly and Hagar runs away.

Then the angel of the Lord finds Hagar by a spring in the wilderness. And the angel speaks words of instruction and words of promise to Hagar. Return to your mistress. Your offspring will be a great multitude. You will have a son; you are to call him Ishmael.

So Hagar does go back, she has a son, calls him Ishmael, and his offspring do become a great multitude (by tradition the Arab nations). Later on, in Genesis 21, Hagar and Ishmael leave for good, and the angel of the Lord saves them from dying of thirst in the desert. The angel of is an agent of God's instruction, and agent of God's promise and of God's protection.

When we turn to Mathew's gospel, we find something remarkably similar. Three times, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream. The first time, the angel says: do not be afraid to marry Mary; the child will be from the Holy Spirit. You are to name him Jesus. He will save his people.

The second time is when Herod orders the slaughter of the infants, and angel warns Joseph to flee. And finally when Herod dies, an angel tells Joseph to go back to Israel, though when he hears that Herod's son is now

ruling in Judea, he is warned in another dream and they settle in far away Nazareth.

So Hagar and Joseph's angels bring words from God, words of instruction, words of explanation, words of promise, words for protection.

But in the Bible we also find angels operating on our behalf in the heavenly realm, like the archangel Michael fighting with Satan over the body of Moses (The letter of Jude), or fighting the heavenly price of Persia (Daniel 10). Hence the idea that we might have guardian angels looking after us. And that we can also use angel language in praying for spiritual protection.

Now this is all fine and well, but how relevant is it to us today? For me, the main message is that as God's agents, the activities of angels reveal a lot about God. They reveal that God loves us, and wants the best for us. They reveal that God is involved with us personally. That God is not like an absentee landlord or a blind watchmaker.

God wants us to go His way, because that's good for us. God wants us to understand his purposes for us, and take on board his promises to us. He wants to protect us from harm. All these things are revealed in what angels communicated to Hagar and Joseph.

But of course, God also has lots of other ways of communicating with us, through prayer, through the Bible, through prophetic words, even through dreams or visions. For us, angels might not be a very likely means of communication, but we should be open to the possibility. I know of 2 people I trust who believe they have encountered angels. But it's good to know that in the heavenly realm, God has agents working for our blessing, even if we can't see them. And it's comforting to know that so many people in America believe they're real!