



HISTORY OF THE ANGELS



Angels in Religion and Spirituality

In changing and uncertain times, humanity looks toward spirituality for tranquility and peace. Historically angels have been at the forefront of bringing comfort and understanding from God. The Greek word *angelos* means messenger and is the origin of the modern English word angel. In monotheist—the worship of one God—religions, angels are often mentioned in stories as being intermediaries between God and humanity. Angels in the traditional sense first emerged in Zoroastrianism, 1000 BC, the first true monotheism. This Persian religion was an unusually prolific faith leaving numerous doctrines as part of its legacy to its sister/brother religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The belief in angels is but one part of the effect left from the prophet Zoroaster. Winged beings were also prevalent in polytheistic—the worship of many gods—religions such as the Greek/Roman Eros and Nike and in certain Hindu/Buddhist spirits/demigods, such as devas, apsaras, and gandharvas. Some theologians consider angels to be the way some religions moved from a polytheistic worship to a monotheistic manner. By taking the minor/demigods and making them creations of the central God, thus achieving one God but allowing other higher placed entities to exist to serve the bidding of the one.



While most accounts of angel history attribute Zoroastrianism as the first religion to have true angels, Yahweh was served by attendant spiritual beings from the very first biblical narratives, long before Persian religious ideas began to influence Judaism. In the early books of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament) the function of angels was to carry messages, to protect, and to destroy. They were to also offer constant praise to God. Angels are designated by different terms in Hebrew Scriptures, but most commonly called *mal'akh*, meaning messengers. The later books of the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the book of Daniel, reflect the distinct influence of Persian angelology on Judaism. Angels had begun to intercede on the behalf of humans, Zechariah 1: 12-13, as well as carry out roles in the dualistic world view in the battle between good and evil. The concept of the fallen angels shows the influence from Persia on the Jewish religion. Many of the Jewish concepts of angels were never placed into Scriptures, but were contained in the writings of the small sect known as the Essenes – the Dead Sea scrolls. The lesser known alternative narrative, the Book of Enoch expands the apocalyptic role of the angels in the struggle between good and evil. The Jewish religious literature the Talmud and the Zohar expanded the mystical speculation of the role of angels in relationship with God and humanity. While only Michael and Gabriel are mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) the talmudic rabbis elaborated when they wrote of the roles of other angels, such as Uriel, Raphael, and Metatron.



The angels in the Christian faith were inherited from Judaism, and expanded on in the New Testament. Jesus suggested in John 10:34-37 that angels and humans are different only in their degree of perfection, and that the latter could rise above their physical conditions and attain their fullest spiritual nature. Dionysius the Areopagite, the mystical theologian, greatly expanded the concept beyond the Seraphim and the Cherubim mentioned in the Old Testament, and the additions by St. Paul in the New Testament. Dionysius' early sixth-century writings *The Celestial Hierarchy* and



the treatises in Christian angelology *The Divine Names* and *Ten Letters* listed the nine choirs of angels broken into hierarchies depending upon their relationship to God. Angels play central roles in the annunciation to Mary, the announcement to the shepherds of the birth of Jesus, and at the Easter resurrection. Some early churches were concerned that too much attention was being paid to the angels instead of to God, creating angelolatry-the worship of angels. The Council of Nicaea in 325 AD declared belief in angels a part of dogma. The ensuing explosion of angel worship resulted in the Synod of Laodicaea in 343 to condemn the practice of angel worship as idolatry. The Seventh Ecumenical Synod in 787 reinstated a carefully worded definition of angels.

Much of how people today perceive angels developed in the Middle Ages and was refined during the Renaissance. The abundance of church and religious art of the periods created easily recognizable images separating the images of angels from humans. Halos, white robes, and wings were the general details of the angel in art. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) included ideas and theories on the nature and power of angels in fourteen books of the *Summa Theologica*. His testimony was that while angels have form they do not have matter, thereby being eternal and incorruptible. He included in his thoughts that angels would and could assume a physical body but that it was only temporary or until they had fulfilled their mission and that since they had matter only one angel could be in one place at a time. In contrast, Duns Scotus (ca. 1264-1308) held to strong beliefs that angels consisted of form and noncorporeal matter particular to them alone, thus allowing more than one angel to occupy the same space.

The last major monotheistic religion is Islam, founded by the Prophet Muhammad in 622 AD in Arabia . Like its sister/brother religions Judaism and Christianity angels played a role in the belief system. *Mala'ika*, messenger, is the Islamic term for angel and the chief duty of the angels were to carry messages to Allah, the name of the Muslim God. The Koran, the Islamic Holy Book, regularly mentions angels, such as Djibril (Gabriel) and Mikhail (Michael). It was Djibril who contacted Muhammad and dictated the Koran to him, and Djibril was the angel who conducted The Prophet to heaven during the Night Journey (*Leilat al-isra'*). Like the angels in other religions, the Islamic angels protect, deliver messages, and wage war against evil. They also give praise to Allah.

In modern Western thinking the importance of angels began a decline with the expansion of science and its effect on the world. The physical sciences undermined the reality of a physical heaven and hell. It disputed the belief in angels or devils because of a lack of concrete proof. Countering the prevailing scientific theories were the concepts which employed deep psychology by noted persons such as Carl Jung. His school of thought theorized the existence of a collective unconscious which allows for the acknowledgement of angels, demons, and spirits as personifications of the unconscious mind rather than literal beings. The idea of actual beings of heavenly existence came back into vogue with two distinct groups, the modern Evangelical Protestantism and the contemporary metaphysical/New Age movement. The evangelical preacher Billy Graham's popular book *Angels* (1975), and the numerous other works that followed the trend, gave Biblical accounts and actual stories of angels helping humankind. Many of these books centered again on the struggle between good and evil.



The Metaphysical/New Age movement began in the nineteenth-century occult movement, Theosophy. The Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875, affirms a wide and multilevel view of the universe and humanities part within it. In the same manner as the Gnostics the Theosophists see that many spiritual beings inhabit the cosmos. They used

the ancient Sanskrit term *devas* to describe a major group of these entities. Their *devas* compare to traditional angels, though the Christian angels have less functions and tasks to attend to. The earth *devas* were predominant in the Findhorn community in Scotland in the early 1970s. The idea that angels are here to work with humans as messengers from God has taken a central place within the New Age movement, which encompasses many concepts and practices from ancient times and philosophies.

The belief in communication with angels is one of the few things that tie the more traditionally conservative Christian groups with the generally more liberal New Age movement. It is this unity that accounts for much of the popularity of information on angels.

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