

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it^[a] stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.^[b] ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Revelation 12:7-12

Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. ⁸ But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. ⁹ The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.

¹¹ They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

¹² Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."

John 1:47-51

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

⁵⁰ Jesus said, "You believe^[a] because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." ⁵¹ He then added, "Very truly I tell you,^[b] you^[c] will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on'^[d] the Son of Man."

Today is Michaelmas, or the feast of St Michael and all Angels. It is a red-letter day in the church calendar, and if you went to a posh school or university then perhaps for you this term was called Michaelmas term. So at some point the church thought it was quite important that we remember Michael and Gabriel and the other angels. I don't think I've ever preached about angels before, so here is a brief summary of thoughts on angels, and perhaps what we might gain from reflecting on this subject.

Angels are quite common in the Bible. In the New Testament, with which we are more familiar you will remember that an angel appeared to Joseph to announce Jesus's birth, and Gabriel appeared to Mary. Angels appeared to the shepherds, and they were joined by a host of angels singing God's praises. When Jesus was tempted, one of the temptations was to throw himself off the temple, to see if the angels would catch him. After the devil flees, angels minister to him. After Jesus's resurrection angels appear at the tomb to tell the disciples that he is risen, and after the ascension, angels ask the disciples what they are doing still looking up! Jude, the letter no one remembers, mentions angels, and Revelation, which we do remember, is filled with heavenly activity, including these lines about Michael leading the armies of heaven in defeating the dragon, who is Satan, and all *his* angels with him.

Angels appear as messengers in the Old Testament too, and as dream interpreters, and occasionally as unseen armies.

They mostly appear as young men, wearing white and shining. We tend to conflate them with other angelic beings, such as cherubs and seraphs, who are not the cute toddlers of renaissance art.

Angels function as messengers and interpreters, but also as watchers and guardians — Michael is apparently the guardian angel of Israel. Within heaven they lead the unending worship, act as God's army, and are generally his servants.

Second-temple Judaism, the faith that was flourishing at the time of Jesus, was *very* interested in angels, and there is a large body of extra-biblical writing that makes reference to angels at various points — naming more of the angels — Raphael, Uriel, Sarial for example — and developing a rich tradition around angels, even if they do not all agree with each other! Within this tradition comes the sense of angels as role-models. They seem to suggest that since angels are sinless, and worship constantly around God's throne, they are the ideal to which we should aspire. This may have led to the idea in Jewish and Christian popular culture that when you go to heaven you 'get your wings' and become an angel.

Angels persist after Biblical times. The story of St Patrick has him protected by angels, and there are many contemporary stories of angel appearances. Indeed, fifteen years ago a woman completed a PhD thesis on contemporary angel sightings, and it has been published.

I slightly struggle to know what to do with all of this. Second temple Judaism and early Christianity was interested in angelology, and, indeed Christianity in other parts of the world can show more interest, but I, personally, have tended to be ambivalent. Angels fill the nativity story, but do I think, talk or behave differently because of this? I don't think so. I don't want angels as role models — they don't live the complex life that we humans do. For role models of a life well lived I can go to any number of heroes of the faith, and of course to Jesus, who was the perfect role model by being fully human as well as divine.

And yet... here they are, in numerous places across the Old and the New Testament, urging people not to be afraid, sharing messages from God, guarding, protecting, praising.

Revelation, despite its many trials and tribulations, is ultimately a triumphant book. By presenting these trials and tribulations it is a book that refuses to gloss over the real human suffering that has befallen Christians all across history, and though this is all presented in vividly visionary language, we should take the reassurances as realistic too. Christ has

defeated sin and death on the cross, the kingdom of God is here and is coming, and the time is coming when Satan and all evil will be completely and absolutely destroyed. Michael and other angels are part of this victory of God's kingdom.

Be encouraged! Be uplifted! However much we humans are fighting a human war against evil (a fight that we win through love and prayer, of course, and never by fighting) we are not alone in this fight. God is still fighting with us, and his angel armies are somehow part of this struggle, even if we do not know how. We can expect God's help in response to our prayer, and we may expect angelic help and encouragement if God sees fit.

Be encouraged, be uplifted! The victory is God's, and his kingdom has come and is coming. If this is so, should we not expect to see more angelic activity as we look towards the completion of this coming, and this victory? We sometimes speak of 'thin' places and times, where heaven and earth seem close. Can we not expect at times, rarely, but really, to see God's army at work? And if we live in this expectation, are we not more likely to see this, in the same way that a birdwatcher will see all sorts of birds that you and I *could* see, but do not notice, because we are not attuned to it?

Be encouraged, be uplifted! While God puts much trust in us to be mature, responsible, 'grown-up' Christians, he nonetheless guards what he loves, too. Might we dare to suppose that our churches have guardian angels watching over us? What confidence might we gain if we felt more of a sense of God's backing — by his sending angels? What might we dare to do, with a bit more assurance of God's kingdom breaking into ours?

Amen

SDG