

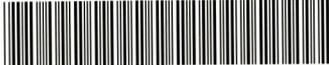
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ANGELS

D. B. KNOX

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Angels are mentioned quite frequently in the Bible (over 160 times) so that although we don't often think about angels these days there is a lot said about them in God's revelation. They are spiritual beings, higher in the order of creation than mankind, and normally they are invisible to our powers of sight. For some people, this means that angels do not exist, because the rationalist equates the unseen with the non-existent, though a moment's reflection will show that the human eye is not constructed to enable it to see everything that exists. e.g. I need only mention two things that cannot be seen: our thoughts, and God Himself. We all experience thought though it is something which cannot be seen and Christians believe in God's existence and have fellowship with Him. So although angels cannot be seen, this does not mean of itself that they don't exist, though it does mean that we would not know of their existence apart from God's revelation, because they are not discernible by the faculties that we have at our disposal.

But quite apart from revelation, the analogy of nature makes highly probable the existence of innumerable spiritual beings higher in the order of creation than mankind. Throughout nature there is a regular gradation from the lower to the higher forms of life; for example from the lowliest vegetable fungi and plants to the giant gums and redwoods, and from the minutest plankton floating on the sea to the huge whales. In every species there is infinite variety and innumerable types. In mankind we meet with the first and to all

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appearances the lowest of rational, self conscious beings. It would be an extraordinary departure from the way God has made the rest of creation if man were the only sort of being in this category. So there is every reason to presume that the scale of being among rational creatures is as extensive as that in the animal world and that there are innumerable beings of spiritual order above mankind as there are innumerable forms of life below him.

Modern philosophy which deifies man leaves no room for any being above him, not even room for God Himself, but if we believe in the Creator then it is highly probable that there are vast numbers of created beings ranking above man, just as there are below him. This is in itself probable, and the Scripture makes clear that it is so, for it speaks of the heavenly host of angels. It uses many terms to describe these gradations: angels, archangels, cherubim, seraphim, thrones, dominions, powers are terms which reveal something of the immense variety of the unseen created world.

Like all God's creation, the angels fulfil His will. The Bible calls them His ministers fulfilling His purposes, and in particular His purpose of salvation for men. In this gracious, loving purpose of God the angels minister (Heb. 1:14). Yet it is important to notice that the Bible never lays on us any duty towards angels. Our duty is confined to our relationship with God, and our relationship with one another, and our relationship with nature of which we are head.

We have no duty towards angels, and in particular we are warned against venerating and worshipping them. It is a natural instinct to worship that which is greater than ourselves. Thus in ancient times

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people worshipped the sun and the moon thinking these were great powers, and St. Paul (Col.2:18) warns the Colossians against worshipping angels. "Let no man rob you of your prize by ... worshipping of the angels". The worshipping of angels is also strictly forbidden in the book of The Revelation. Twice when St. John fell down at the foot of the angel to honour and worship him because of the greatness of the revelation the angel had given him: he received a stern rebuke: "See thou do it not, worship God" (19:10, 22:9). We are not to turn aside from our relationship with God to give religious worship or honour to any of God's creatures, not even the highest. The Roman Catholic church, however, prays to angels and teaches that they should be worshipped. In this respect the Catechism of the Council of Trent is at fault when in explaining the First Commandment, "Thou shalt have none other gods but me", it states: "The veneration and invocation of holy angels .... are not forbidden by this commandment". By these words the Roman catechism simply sets human tradition against the plain teaching of the Scripture and it tries to cover up the discrepancy by a vain distinction: "If we sometimes read that the angels refused to be worshipped by men we are to know that they did so because the worship which they refused to accept was the honour due to God alone." However the Scripture clearly forbids us to give any religious honour to angels, and we need to be careful in our obedience to God's Word. In fact, the Scripture does not suggest we should ask God even for the assistance of angels. It is interesting to notice that when Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac he assured him that God's angel would go with him.

But when the servant came to the point of decision his prayer was directed to God entirely. Thus we conclude that although God uses the angels as His servants, our religious activity is always to be directed to God and never to turn aside to rest on his servants as objects of faith or hope or honour or worship or prayer.

But although we have no duty towards angels, yet knowledge of their existence is of great value to us. No word of God is purposeless, and the knowledge of the existence of angels, clearly revealed in many passages of Scripture, helps our Christian life in many ways. For example, a knowledge of their existence provides us with a stimulus in carrying out our known duty towards one another. Thus in Hebrews 13:2 we are encouraged to be hospitable and helpful to one another by the reminder that in the past some of God's servants in fulfilling this duty of hospitality entertained angels unawares: and Jesus, underlining our duty to be considerate towards His little ones, and not to put a stumbling block in their way, emphasized the importance that these little ones have in God's sight by the fact that their angels always behold the face of our Heavenly Father (Mt. 18:10). This probably means that Christians in spirit are always in God's presence. Similarly, a knowledge of the existence of evil spirits is a reminder to us to be on our guard against slackness, for the devil goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8).

Moreover a knowledge of the angels existence deepens our understanding of God's kindness towards us. It

deepens our assurance of the all embracing protection which He promises to those who put their trust in Him. As Scripture says, "He gives his angels charge concerning you and on their hands they shall bear you up lest you dash your foot against a stone" (Ps. 91:11, 12). If in even such a trivial matter as stubbing your toe God's protection surrounds us, how much more may we trust Him in every other circumstance of life; as Psalm 34:7 says "The angel of the Lord encamps round about them that fear Him and delivers them". When Elisha's young servant was terrified by the hostile Syrian army which was besieging their town, Elisha replied "Fear not, for they that be with us are more than they that be with them" (2 Kings 6:16), and as a result of the prophet's prayer the young man saw the angelic hosts of God surrounding the town bringing them protection. God is able to protect us even against overwhelming odds; His power is unlimited and sovereign and a knowledge of the existence of innumerable angelic hosts that gladly carry out His will helps us to realise that our faith in God need never be shaken.

Secondly, a knowledge of the magnitude of the angelic creation deepens our understanding of God who has reached down so far to save us, self willed and God-ignoring humans. He has Himself taken our nature to save us. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it "Truly, not of angels doth He take hold, but He takes hold of the seed of Abraham" (2:16), or as Psalm 8 asks: "What is man that thou art mindful of him or the son of man that thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little

lower than the angels, thou crownest him with glory and honour". God is the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, and yet He is the one who in humility dwells in the heart of the humble and contrite (Is. 57:15).

A knowledge of the vastness of the angelic creation helps us to understand more of God's love and humility, so that we might reflect the same character ourselves.

Thirdly, a knowledge of the angelic hosts as revealed in Scripture makes us understand more fully the grandeur and the graciousness of God's purposes for us in Christ. As Hebrews 2:5 puts it. "Not unto the angels did God subject the world to come"; but He has subjected it to man, that is to say, to Christ and to us who are in Christ. God has a wonderful purpose for us in the future. Jesus told His disciples "I appoint unto you a kingdom as my Father has appointed unto me, that you might eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (Lk. 22:29, 30). We are to share in the dominion of Christ who has been exalted higher than the angels (Eph. 1:21), and we are exalted in Him (1 Cor. 6:3, Eph 2:6). This is the purpose that God has for us. The things which normally fill our mind become trivial in the light of God's purposes; and these gracious purposes are enhanced in our comprehension when we see them against the background of the whole of God's creation, including the invisible hierarchy of angels and archangels. It is not therefore useless knowledge when Scripture makes known to us the existence of angels. Not that we are to turn aside and worship angels or pray to them or even ask God for their assistance. To yield to

that temptation is a misuse of this knowledge, through a forgetfulness of God's uniqueness and His Fatherly relationship to us, but a knowledge of their creation and of their complete and glad obedience to the will of God enlarges our understanding of God's graciousness in saving us; strengthens our faith in His all embracing protection, even in what is apparently a most hopeless situation; stirs us to follow His example of love and humility as we sense the greatness of His goodness and enthruses us to persevere in seeking His kingdom so that we might enter into the fulness of those purposes that He has prepared for those who put their faith in Christ.

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