Word & World
Volume 29, Number 2
Spring 2009

Jesus and the Angels

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Across the expanse of Scripture, angels are supporting players and bit characters who seldom steal the limelight. Yet, they are often essential to the unfolding story. Because angels can appear in visible guise and converse with human beings, they assist in the portrayal of an invisible, ineffable deity. Hence, paying attention to what is said about angels enables us to gain a fresh perspective on the larger story and its more central players. Here I will focus on what New Testament talk about angels teaches us about one of the most central players of all: Jesus Christ. Recent research has shown that early Christian understandings of the person and work of Christ were profoundly shaped by Jewish ideas about angels. After considering this historical influence on early Christian doctrine, I will suggest implications for our lives as Christians today.[1]

A Chief Heavenly Mediator

After Jesus' death and resurrection, when his earliest followers were trying to come to grips with all that had happened, they turned to traditions at hand for in-

[1]For a more developed reflection on biblical talk about angels and its implications for theology as well as for our understanding of popular spirituality today, see Susan R. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). Excerpts from the book are used here with permission of the publisher.

Some ancient Jews wrote about God's glory as an angel-like being who participated in the very being of God. Christians drew upon these stories, but insisted that the divine glory had now become present not in an angel but in Jesus Christ. More, as disciples of Christ, we, too, are called to reflect God's glory to one another and to the world.

spiration and insight. Above all, they turned to the Old Testament, which they read in ways influenced by exegetical discussions of the day, some of which pertained to angels. Angels appear throughout the Old Testament, filling various roles, but reflections on angels increased substantially during the intertestamental period. One important development in that period was the growth of interest in a *chief angelic mediator*. Building on biblical traditions about the angel of the Lord (see, for example, Exod 23:20–21; Josh 5:13–15) and the glory of the Lord (see, for example, Exod 33:21–23), in the intertestamental era some Jews began to assume that there was one angel above all others—an angel so close to God as to be virtually indistinguishable from God.

The emerging beliefs about a chief angelic mediator were also influenced substantially by two prophetic texts that interpreted God's glory in angelic terms. The first of these prophetic texts was Ezek 1. Exiled to the banks of the river Chebar in Babylon, Ezekiel had witnessed a revelation of "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD," seated upon a fantastic movable throne (Ezek 1:26–28). Ezekiel's vision captivated Jewish exegetes of the late Second Temple period—for them it was as if the curtains of the inner sanctum had been pulled back to reveal the very being of God. In subsequent centuries, Jewish mystics yearned to see what Ezekiel had seen.[2] The other formative prophetic text was Dan 7, with its vision of the "ancient of days" (Dan 7:9, 13, 22; "Ancient One" in NRSV) and "one like a son of man" (Dan 7:13, or "one like a human being" in NRSV). Though the point is debated, the author of Daniel may well have understood this "son of man" to be an angel.[3]

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By Jesus' day, such descriptions of divine and angelic presences and of divine glory had coalesced for many Jews into images of a mediator who is no ordinary angel, but who represents or participates in God's own being in some mysterious way. Philo, the first-century Egyptian Jewish philosopher and theologian, treats the heavenly mediator (whom he identifies as the *logos* or "word") as scarcely distinct from God at all, but more as an aspect of God that *acts* as an independent person. Other ancient writers ascribed to the mediator a greater degree of separateness

[2]This Jewish mystical tradition (the roots of which go back at least to the first century, and an early form of which may have influenced Paul) came to be known as "merkabah mysticism." The term *merkabah* is the rabbinic (Mishnaic) designation for the throne on which the prophet Ezekiel envisioned the "likeness of the glory of the LORD" (Ezek 1:26–28). The merkabah mystics sought and claimed for themselves the experience of visionary ascent and entry into the heavenly court of God. See Alan F. Segal's discussion, "Merkabah and Its Predecessors," in *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 40–52; see also Gershom Scholem, "Merkabah Mysticism," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., 14:66–67.

[3]See John J. Collins, *Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 304–307.

from God. Ancient rabbis identified a chief angel-like being known as *Metatron* (perhaps deriving from Greek words meaning "one who stands after or behind the throne"). Apocalyptic writers from the Hellenistic and Roman eras named him variously the *son of man*, *Melchizedek*, *Adoil*, *Eremiel*, *Yahoel*, and *Michael*.[4] The *Prayer of Joseph*, a first-century Jewish text, has an angel representing Jacob/Israel make several spectacular declarations about himself: he is "firstborn of every living thing to whom God gives life" (v. 3), "archangel of the power of the Lord" (v. 7), "chief captain among the sons of God" (v. 7), and "first minister before the face of God" (v. 8).[5]

Christ the Glory: Resurrected, Preexistent, Mortal

Early Christians added a new layer to the pattern of interpreting God's glory as an angel-like figure: they identified that glory with Jesus of Nazareth, raised from death to the right hand of God. Alan Segal regards such identification as the central feature of earliest Christianity and as especially pivotal for Paul, who experienced ecstatic visions and apparently claimed personally to have witnessed Christ "the Glory."[6] In 2 Corinthians, Paul reminds his readers that they likewise behold the divine presence, for God "has shone in our hearts to give the light of *the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*" (2 Cor 4:6; emphasis added). The Hebrew Scriptures insisted that mere mortals could not look upon God's face, but now, Paul informs us, we *can* look upon the face of Jesus Christ. And that face reflects God's glory as though in a mirror. In Revelation, the visionary John of Patmos also identifies the risen Jesus with the divine presence, using images culled from Ezekiel and Daniel and then creatively recombined:

> I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. (Rev 1:13–16)

For the seer John, the risen Jesus is none other than "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD," seen by Ezekiel so long before.

[4]Segal, "Merkabah and Its Predecessors," 41–43. On Philo's depiction of the "word" or "spirit" as an angel-like being, see Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1998) 107–112; see also John R. Levison, "The Prophetic Spirit as an Angel according to Philo," *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995) 189–207.

[5]*Prayer of Joseph*, trans. Jonathan Z. Smith, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983, 1985) 2:713. The *Prayer of Joseph*, which survives only in fragments, "maintains that the patriarch Jacob was the earthly incarnation of the angel Israel," and "concerns a conflict between the angels Israel and Uriel over their relative rank in heaven" (Smith, "Introduction to *Prayer of Joseph*," ibid., 2:699). The document may have been written in the first century C.E., but is certainly no later than early third century C.E. (ibid., 2:700).

[6]Segal, "Merkabah and Its Predecessors," 47.

The traditions about a supreme angel-like being who shares in God's glory were used to explain not only Christ's resurrection and exaltation to heaven (as in the quotations above from 2 Corinthians and Revelation), but also Christ's preexistence. The author of Hebrews writes that Jesus "is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb 1:3). Paul writes of Christ as one who, before being "born in human likeness" had been "in the form [Greek *morphē*] of God" (Phil 2:6–7). The letter to the Colossians gives a more complete exposition of Christ's existence and role before the incarnation:

> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:15–17)

The assertions made here call to mind the exalted descriptions of the angelic Jacob in the *Prayer of Joseph*, Philo's language about the *logos*, or word, as the agent of creation, and the Gospel of John's naming of Jesus as "Word become flesh," the one through whom all things came into being (John 1:3, 14).

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According to the author of John, even in the days before Jesus of Nazareth lived on earth, the preexistent Christ had made God's glory known. Explaining why so many who encountered Jesus did not believe in him, the evangelist quotes a saying from Isaiah about the blinding of eyes and hardening of hearts, then adds, "Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him" (John 12:41). Here the author of the Fourth Gospel is suggesting that the prophet Isaiah's great vision of "the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty" (Isa 6:1) was a vision of Jesus.[7] The suggestion is echoed in the fourth-century "Liturgy of St. James," put to music in a well-known hymn. The first stanza of the hymn enjoins all mortals to keep silence, in expression of reverence at the incarnation:

> Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
> And with fear and trembling stand;
> Ponder nothing earthly minded,
> For with blessing in His hand,
> Christ our God to earth descendeth,
> Our full homage to demand.

[7]Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology,* 274–275. Gieschen argues that such identification of Jesus with the glory of God also underlies John 5:19–47 (note, especially, v. 44).

The fourth stanza then alludes to Isaiah's vision of the heavenly throne, with its angelic attendants all around:

> At His feet the six-winged seraph;
> Cherubim, with sleepless eye,
> Veil their faces to the presence,
> As with ceaseless voice they cry,
> Alleluia, Alleluia,
> Alleluia, Lord Most High![8]

In the hymn, it is God who is on the throne—but it is also Christ. The Christ who descended to earth (stanza one) is the same glorious figure who long before had been witnessed by Isaiah, encompassed and acclaimed by the angelic host (stanza four).

Angel traditions have influenced not only early views of Jesus' preexistence and of his resurrection and exaltation to heaven, but also understandings of Jesus' incarnate, earthly life. The evangelists indicate that Jesus does not wholly conceal the divine glory even during his earthly ministry. It shines through most brightly at the transfiguration. But the evangelists are careful not to overexpose Jesus' glory in their depictions of his mortal life. Instead they stress Jesus' lowliness, humility, and servanthood. By this emphasis, they show us what divine love and divine presence look like in the human realm: like the deepest sort of sharing, the deepest sort of giving. In Jesus' incarnation, he gave up the glorious form of God, exchanging it for a far more humble and vulnerable human body. And then he gave his body, as well. Jesus' life and death traced a pattern not of striving after glory, but of costly self-donation.[9] By looking at Jesus' manner of living and dying, we discern how God's presence, love, and glory are manifested in and through fleshly life. Jesus took on human flesh, and then put his flesh entirely at risk.

Transformation to the Angelic Life

Some ancient Jews, and early Christians in their turn, assumed that looking upon God's glory *changes* a person. The glory of the Lord isn't simply a sight to see; it is a force that transforms. It affects all that it touches. Jews told tales of humans privileged to enter into heaven, where they beheld the angels or even God, and were transformed by what they saw—much as Moses had been transformed by his encounter with God as reported in Exod 34:29–35. Chief among such righteous persons who entered into heaven was Enoch. In a document called *2 Enoch*, Enoch is lifted to heaven and commanded to put on fresh heavenly garments. When he does so, he reports, "I looked at myself, and I had become like one of his glorious ones, and there was no observable difference" (*2 Enoch*

[8]Words of the hymn "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," quoted from *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990) #5.

[9]Regarding this consistent pattern in New Testament portrayals of Jesus (spanning the Gospels, Epistles, and other writings), see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 141–166.

22:10).[10] In the early Christian view, beholding Christ the Glory has the same transforming effect. Paul declares, "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image..." (2 Cor 3:18). God shines in our individual hearts, and above all in the heart of the community gathered to worship and work for God. The Spirit of Jesus in our midst effects a transfiguration. It heals our spiritual blindness and helps us to see where we are in need of change; it persuades us of God's grace toward us; it strengthens us in times of trial.

Above all, the presence of Christ transfigures human relationships. It is love, the Apostle Paul teaches, and not angelic speech that is the best evidence of divine *charisma*, giftedness. Love is made manifest wherever the strong humbly accommodate to the weak, wherever we share one another's burdens and joys, wherever we forgive those who have wronged us and repent of our own wrongdoing, wherever we reconcile with those from whom we are estranged. Wherever the love of Christ is expressed, there is a new creation, and a ministry of reconciliation. There is a glimpse or a foretaste of heaven, itself a "world of love."[11]

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The glory witnessed in the midst of the gathered people of God is intimately and paradoxically tied to suffering. That is why the glory can be so hard to see. The rulers of this age did not see it; if they had, they would have known that it was the Lord of glory whom they held in their hands and would not have crucified him (1 Cor 2:8). In Paul's ministry, too, the glory is hard to discern. To some of his detractors, Paul looks weak and pitiable; to them, his ministry exudes the stench of death. Paul says that the god of this world has blinded their minds, "to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). They can't see the glory of Christ manifest in Paul's ministry because the devil has them looking for glory and power in the usual worldly packaging and in the usual places. They don't understand that human frailty and even death are not an obstacle to God, but an opportunity to offer healing sustenance and, indeed, life itself.

It is important to note that when Paul remarks on such paradoxical revelations of God's glory, he is not merely fiddling with semantics. He is not simply *renaming* suffering as glory. Rather, he is insisting that God chooses to manifest di-

[10]The date of composition and provenance of *2 Enoch* are very elusive; see the discussion in the introduction to the work by F. I. Andersen, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 1:94–97. Andersen leans toward a date early in the Common Era and a Jewish (albeit a fringe Jewish) rather than Christian community.

[11]The phrase is Jonathan Edwards's, from his sermon, "Heaven Is a World of Love"; online at www.biblebb.com/files/edwards/charity16.htm (accessed 19 February 2009).

vine glory and power precisely in those contexts where Christians are suffering and weak. This pattern is in keeping with God's character as one who "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17). This pattern of God's self-manifestation also ensures that all will know that the power bestowed comes from God (2 Cor 4:7). In the present age, many cannot perceive the glory, but those whose eyes have been opened by encounter with the risen Lord can see it (2 Cor 3:14–16). One day, moreover, the glory will be beyond all measure and fully manifest (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17).

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So, not only in the life to come, but also already in this life, we are being given heavenly stature and a new capacity to reflect divine glory—a capacity like that of the angels. In Christ, there is a new creation: a world in which we are enabled to transcend our human finitude and moral weakness, and enabled—like the angels, and like Christ—to reflect the glory of God. But this transcendence is not obvious because it is not of a form that counts in the eyes of the world. It is too tied up with suffering and death. It involves renunciation of the idols. It involves paying the price that the powers and principalities exact from those who refuse to give them homage. It involves death to the self—or, in the reformulation of Miroslav Volf, the "de-centering" and "re-centering" of the self in the "self-giving love made possible by and patterned on the suffering Messiah."[12] This re-centering is what enables the self to work for peace, reconciliation, and justice in a world that places so little premium on these. It is what enables the self to escape its imprisoning web of personal anxieties and the fear of death to reach out to others in love.

Paul wrote his words about transformation into glory to a Christian community in desperate need of reconciliation. The Corinthians were estranged from one another and from Paul. The entire first half of 2 Corinthians is a plea for their reconciliation. Yes, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19 KJV), but for God's act to become effective in our lives we must be reconciled to one another (2 Cor 5:17–21). Such reconciliation comes about when we stop thinking about what is best for me and mine, about how I can get more or at least hang on to what I have; such reconciliation comes about when we stop worrying about whether our own opinions are respected and whether we are getting the affirmation that we deserve. Such reconciliation comes about when we re-center ourselves on Jesus and allow ourselves to be remade in the image of the self-giving Messiah. When we allow ourselves to be remade in the image of Christ

[12]Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 71.

who gave himself in love, then we begin to reflect God's glory. We begin to look like angels.

Ancient Jews wrote about God's glory as an angel-like being—a mediator who participated in the very being of God. Christians drew upon such exegesis, but with a crucial change: they insisted that the divine glory has been manifested not in an angel but in Jesus Christ. Before and during the incarnation and now in the era of his exaltation, it is *Jesus* who is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being"; it is *Jesus* who "sustains all things by his powerful word" (Heb 1:3). He is like the angels, who also reflect God's glory, but he is far above them.

As disciples of Christ, we, too, reflect God's glory to one another and to the world. But it is not a glory that the world recognizes, for it is bound up with suffering. We manifest glory whenever we do not regard our security as something we must hang on to, but suffer its loss voluntarily, submitting ourselves to the powers and principalities. We manifest glory whenever we act without seeing the future but trusting nonetheless that a new day will come, that a new creation will be born. We manifest glory whenever we minister to one another and, thereby, reflect to one another the very face of Christ. And, even as our ministering changes others, we are ourselves transformed. We harbor no illusions that God's realm has arrived in power, and yet we do not lose hope, for with the angels we have glimpsed the face of the glory of God. ⊕

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