

Angels in the Arts. Number Two

Our image of angels has been more influenced by the arts than by the Bible. Until the fifth century artists drew their inspiration from the Bible. Angels were pictured as everyday people as in Scripture they often appeared in the form of human beings. They were not given wings until the fifth century, when Christian artists began to borrow from Greek-Roman art, where wings were universal symbols for supernatural beings. A detailed panel on the "Doors of Paradise", 1425, by the Florentine artist Lorenzo Ghiberti, depicts with wings the three men who appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre (Gen.18:1,2). And during the last three centuries angels have been increasingly sentimentalized. Thus cherubs and seraphs are represented in 18th and 19th century arts as the winged heads of children. And occasionally we speak of "a seraphic smile" - often a baby's. The word "angel" is also associated with a sweet and attractive personality. We often say of such a person, "She is such an angel. "

The Denial of Angels.

The Sadducees denied the existence of angels or spirits and the resurrection. (Acts 23:8) The opposite is also true of course; when we believe in the resurrection, we will also accept the existence of angels. The Sadducees in modern form are still with us. In our age of science many people say, while consulting soothsayers and astrologers, that angels belong to the world of fables and superstition. They proclaim that the idea of angelic beings is completely unacceptable to the modern mind. But at the same time many secular scholars, sustained by the theory of evolution rather than by Scripture, pursue at great cost the possibility of intelligent life on the planets, and wildly speculate in what form and shape this life may appear.

Modern professional theologians, who pretend to be able to interpret the Gospel in the language of our time, surrendered to the Spirit of the Age and decreed that angels do not exist. They are like Balaam, who did not see an angel even when his path was obstructed by one. His donkey was granted the gift of speech to make him aware of the heavenly being in front of him. The donkey was more spiritually in tune than Balaam. (Num. 2:21ff.)

The German scholar Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976), whose name became associated with the attempt to "demythologize" the New Testament, taught that the appearance of the choir of angels in the fields nearby Bethlehem most likely never took place.

He claimed that the belief in good angels is derived from Jewish and gnostic writings, while the belief in Satan has its origin in Iranian (Persian) mythology. The controversial Dutch theologian Harry Ruitert said in an interview about

angels that it is a nice thought to have an angel watch over you but God means that you must take care of yourself.

Awesome Angels.

In order to grasp the importance of angels for our spiritual life, it is necessary to correct our traditional Christmas card image of sweet, idyllic, innocent, hymn singing, harmless beings, who resemble fairy tale characters rather than awesome heavenly beings.

Angels come from heaven, from the presence of the Holy God. They are His mighty and glorious army. (Ps.103:20; Col.1:16), reflecting His majesty and energy. They never draw attention to themselves but always point away to the Lord who sent them. There is nothing sweet or sentimental about angels.

When angels appeared to human beings, there was fear, trembling and awe. When an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah at the right side of the altar of incense, "he was startled and gripped with fear." (Luke 1:12) When the angel Gabriel visited Mary, he assured her that she had nothing to fear from his appearance. (Luke 1:30). When a glorious army of heavenly angels appeared to shepherds, while they were keeping watch over their flocks at night, there was fear and even a sense of terror. The shepherds were overcome by the visible presence of these heavenly beings mirroring the glory of the Creator. And like Zechariah and Mary, the shepherds were told not to fear. (Luke 2:8-10)

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