



QUESTION: Angels – what is their place in the Divine Purpose?



This month I want to look at some of the questions which have been asked concerning what I will describe as, "*Angels – and their Place in the Divine Purpose*". This is a wide-ranging topic and I do not expect to deal with it in one "Q.B." article, to either your satisfaction or to my own. In other words, this will be 'Part One'.

The Letter to the Hebrews

Any study of Angels should begin with an examination of the first two chapters of the letter to the Hebrews, because they contain more information on the subject than can be found in any other part of the scriptures.

When we look at the opening verses of the very first chapter we find that there are two things which are both surprising and significant and which certainly ought to be noticed. They are:

- 1st. *The abruptness* with which, in v.4, the writer introduces the subject of angels. No sooner has he shown the superiority of Christ over the Old Testament prophets, than we are hurried, - we might say, into this discourse about angels. And,
- 2nd. *The amount of space* he devotes to this discussion of angels, considering the brevity with which he has dealt with the ancient prophets. In real terms he dispenses with the prophets in just two verses - vv. 2 & 3, but then he launches into a passage of 28 verses in a discussion of Christ and Angels.

This has prompted the question, "*Why has the writer of this letter so much to say about angels?*" I suggest that the probable reason is that he is responding to a controversy, or a situation, which has been troubling the Hebrew Christians to whom he is writing.

But, before dealing with that controversy, allow me to make a few general comments on this subject of angels, since it appears to be a topic about which a number of misconceptions are in circulation.

A Neglected Subject

I suspect that there are many Christians who have never heard a single sermon about angels, because some preachers are reluctant to commit themselves on the subject, and, as a consequence, it is discreetly ignored. It seems that, in a world as 'sophisticated' as ours, angels just do not fit in!

It is as though old-fashioned 'country-cousins' have come down from the hills and are an embarrassment to their modern, rich, city-relations, who wish they would go away

– back to where they came from! People today are prepared to accept the possible existence of ‘alien visitors from outer-space’ and U.F.O’s; they will believe in the occult and put their trust in pagan, superstitious, ‘astrological forecasts’; they will talk in a manner that reveals they really believe it matters and makes a difference under which so-called ‘star-sign’ they were born; and they will listen eagerly to anyone who talks about having had an ‘out of the body experience’; and listen to mediums and fortune-tellers with something approaching reverential awe - the list is almost endless.

But, mention angels, and you immediately are viewed as some sort of religious fanatic! Such is our society today!

The ‘Post-Christian Age’

Now, this situation should not surprise us, in what has been described, whether rightly or wrongly, as ‘the post-Christian age’. What is really sad is that, thanks to modern liberal theology, many so-called Christians also dismiss belief in angels as out-dated and old-fashioned.

The fact is that much of the so-called ‘Christian world’ is merely the Sadducean unbelief of Jesus’ time, dressed up in modern clothes. You will remember, that among the sects and parties of N.T. times, the Sadducees were the ones who did not believe in Angels or Spirits, and who denied the possibility of miracles, resurrection or life after death.

That this should be the case in the denominational world should not surprise us. What concerns me is the fact that there are even members of the Lord’s Church who also reveal a reluctance to confess a belief in angels, and they advance a variety of arguments to try to justify their attitude.

“Angels are Mysterious Beings”

Some suggest that angels are ‘*mysterious beings, about whose nature and function little has been revealed*’, and they conclude, therefore, that, “*we should not seek to be wise above that which is written*”.

‘Mysterious beings?’ Nonsense! Angels are mentioned 213 times in the Old Testament scriptures and 188 times in the New; thus, a total of 400 times. The Hebrew word for ‘angel’ is ‘*malak*’, and the Greek word is ‘*angelos*’, and both words simply mean ‘*messenger*’.

Whether a human or a spirit messenger is indicated must be determined by the context. For instance, the meaning of the name of the prophet ‘Malachi’ is ‘*My messenger*’, and, over in the New Testament, Luke 7:24 records that, whilst in prison, John the Baptist sent two ‘*angeloi*’- messengers – to Jesus.

Progressive Revelation of Angels?

Furthermore, neither are Angels the subject of ‘progressive revelation’; that is to say, they are not first hinted at, and then exposed to view, little by little. They are there, in Gen. 3:24, almost as soon as you open your Bible, and they remain there through

to the very last chapter of the Book of Revelation.

Wilful Blindness!

There are several places in both the U.S.A. and Canada, where you may visit what are virtually "Dinosaur graveyards" - places where huge numbers of Dinosaur bones have been discovered - (and I write this from personal experience). But I heard the story of a young man who suggested to his father that they might drive out and see the Dinosaur bones in one of these locations. His father said, however, "*I don't believe in dinosaurs and I don't want to see any!*"

Angels still Exist!

Well the fact is that angels exist. We may close our eyes to what the scriptures say about them, but they will not go away!

"Angels belong to an Earlier Dispensation"

This is another claim that is sometimes made. There are those who take the position that there *was* a time, in what they describe as '*a former dispensation*', when angels were active, but they claim that, since Jesus has become our Mediator, there is no longer any need for the ministry of angels. Once again, they neatly brush aside the need for any further discussion! With a stroke, they take angels 'out of circulation', make them 'redundant'; put them 'in moth-balls', you might say!

And, to some people this explanation sounds very wise and scholarly; but it is not at all scholarly nor wise, because, in the letter to the Hebrews which was written about 35 years *after* Jesus became our Mediator, the writer of this letter stated; that angels are: "**worshipping spirits, sent forth to serve those who are to obtain salvation.**" (Heb 1:14) So there is no reason to suppose that the intercession of Christ, as our High Priest, in any way affects the service which angels are said to perform.

Also, what are we to make of the words of the Lord Jesus himself, when he says, speaking of the children: "**Their angels always behold the face of my Father.**" (Matt.18:10)

Now, I am NOT saying that a belief in angels is necessary to salvation; nor do I claim to understand all that the Bible reveals about them; but I am surprised that in these days so little is said about them, because failure to understand what the Scriptures teach on the subject, or to ignore the teaching, means the loss of the encouragement which the doctrine can offer.

"Worshipping and Serving"

Let me mention again that verse in Heb 1:14, because it reveals that angels have a two-fold ministry: "**Are they not all liturgical (worshipping) spirits, sent forth to serve...**" The two note-worthy words used are '*leitourgika*' - which gives us the word "*liturgy*" and has to do with '*worship*', and '*diakonian*' - which has to do with '*service*'. (Do you see the word '*deacon*' in the word?)

The original Greek meaning of the word '*leitourgikos*' was '*worship offered to a god*'.

and, used here by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it tells us how angels relate to the One True God. The word '*diakonian*', on the other hand, tells us how angels relate to '*the heirs of salvation*'; they are to serve them. Thus, angels are worshipping spirits, whom God sends out to serve 'the heirs of salvation' - and that surely means you and me.

“Guardian Angels?”

If you ask me if I believe in 'guardian angels', I answer 'Yes!' And if you now put the question; "*How do you recognize a guardian angel?*" I answer, "*That is not my problem!*" I am not required to recognize him! As an 'heir of salvation', I am one of those who is to be cared for. Nor, for that matter, is the angel required to report to me on his activities. And I would further point out that, whoever else may reject belief in angels:

1. Peter believed in them. Acts 12:11. **"Now I know that God has sent His angel".**
2. Paul also believed in them. Acts 27:23. **"This night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong".**
3. In fact, all of the apostles believed in Guardian Angels! **"An angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out"**, we read in Acts 5;19
4. What is more, the ministry of the Lord Jesus Himself was intimately associated with the Angels:
 - They foretold His birth to both Mary and Joseph.
 - They announced His birth to the Shepherds.
 - They called Mary and Joseph back from Egypt.
 - They ministered to Him after His temptation in the wilderness.
 - They stood ready to respond to His call.
 - They strengthened Him in Gethsemane.
 - They rolled the stone from the Tomb.
 - They met the disciples who came to the tomb.
 - They were present at His ascension.
 - And they will accompany Him when He returns.
5. SATAN also had enough intelligence to believe in them. In the Wilderness, he quoted Psalm 91:11 to the Lord: **"He shall give his angels charge over thee to keep thee..."** In fact, examine the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, and you will see that the range of service they rendered is staggering.
6. And the Hebrew Christians had no problem believing in them, either. We know that, over the centuries, the Jews had developed a very complicated Angelology; that is a system of belief about angels, and they had come to place an exaggerated importance on the ministry of angels. (I have to smile whenever I use that term "angelology", because it sounds a rather ridiculous expression. It is not in my Oxford Dictionary, but is just a word which someone has cobbled together to give us another "ology", although I must admit that I don't know any other word to use!).

It was probably the ancient Persians who first developed a system of doctrine about angels, but, be that as it may, it is certainly true that the Jews themselves had, by

N.T. times, come to hold very firm views about them. Some of things they believed were true, because they were based on Scripture. For instance, they believed that there are millions of angels, and that is certainly true because the writer of this letter writes, in Heb 12:22 of, **"Myriads of angels in festal gathering"**. And Jesus Himself, in Gethsemane, spoke of '*legions of angels*'.

Unfortunately, however, by N.T. times, Jewish teachers had begun to ascribe incredible authority and influence to these angelic beings. They taught that:

1. Angels are intermediaries between God and men.
2. They control the destiny of both nations and individuals. In other words, angels were said to manipulate human destiny.
3. They also control the movement of the stars.
4. They have power over the elements.
5. They execute judgment on God's behalf.

Now, when people credited angels with such authority and power, it is easy to see that it would be a very small step to the *worship* of angels, and we can understand also, that angels could very soon be allowed to take the place of the Lord Jesus, as men began to depend more upon them, than on Him, in very much the same way that Catholicism has come to depend more on Mary, whom they have named "*The Mediatrix*", rather than on Christ as the Intercessor. At the very least, we can see how they could eventually come to regard Jesus as being merely, "*one of the angels*".

Conclusion

This is why the writer concentrates on correcting this heresy and why he spends so much time in dealing with the subject of angels at the beginning of his letter. He is determined, at the outset, to prove the Superiority of the Son over all angelic beings, because the outcome of this false doctrine is that, besides denigrating - demeaning - the Lord Jesus, those who held it were actually denying his deity.

In his argument, which begins at chapter 1:4 and continues to 2:16, the writer points out seven respects in which the superiority and supremacy of Christ over the angels is clearly revealed, and the conclusion to which he arrives is that, whilst the Lord Jesus is, in every possible way, superior to the angels, He became, **"for a little time, lower than the angels, so that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for every man."**

In other words, 'the Word became flesh' – entered into human life – in order to be able to die, because, as a spiritual Being, He could not have died. In effect, the writer of the Hebrew letter tells the Hebrew Christians, **"Whatever else you make of the angels, even considering the service they have rendered through the ages, Jesus, the Son of God is not - and never was - an angel. He did that which no angel could ever do. He stooped to the level of fallen humanity, in order to raise you above the level of angels"**.

More in the next issue, d.v.
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