

## **Angels: are they physical beings or metaphors for human conscience?**

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### **What is an Angel?**

Each of the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity – all acknowledge the existence of angels, however, these are not the only faiths to believe in these spiritual beings. Zoroastrianism, for example, believes that each person has their own guardian angel called ‘Fravashis’ (Jones 2011, 10). Despite the obvious differences in religious beliefs, there are in fact many similarities between the Judaic and Zoroastrian theology of angels. This is because Judaism developed its theology during the time of diaspora in Babylon from 597 BCE to 538 BCE and the religion which was dominating ancient Babylon during that period was Zoroastrianism. Therefore, due to the pluralistic nature of the community within that time the same religious doctrine influenced both Judaic and Zoroastrian theological development (Davidson 1967). Angels also occur within the Eastern religions of Hinduism, Shintoism and Taoism. Some scholars, such as Guiley (2004), argue that Buddhism also has a belief in angels, suggesting that their belief in the ‘devas’ (ibid. 101), which are spiritually more powerful and blissful than humans, is similar to the Abrahamic religions’ belief in angels. However, Jones (2011) explains that the Abrahamic religions’ practices and beliefs regarding life and death are much removed from the Buddhist and Hindu beliefs of rebirth and enlightenment. For example, many of the Eastern religions which follow, broadly speaking, the beliefs of rebirth believe that the angels or devas are souls who are waiting to be reborn into a new body (Burke 1996). The Abrahamic belief differs from this somewhat as, again broadly speaking; angels within Judaism, Christianity and Islam are believed to be messengers from God. In modern society there are also many New Age and neopagan religions; religions which have evolved and amalgamated religious practices and beliefs from several sources such as paganism, Christianity et cetera (Pike 2004), which also believe in angels as messengers, spiritual guides or supreme beings. It is therefore evident that throughout history angels have played important roles in the development of religious doctrine or belief.

The recurring theme within the theology of angels, accepted by many of the above named religions, is that they are messengers of some kind (Jones 2011). The word angel itself, according to Craig (1849), is a hybrid fusion of the Old English and French etymology, both of which were borne from the Latin *angelus* which is derived from the ancient Greek “ἄγγελος” or *angelos* which means messenger (Jones 2011, 47). Angels are also considered to be representations of God and to act on behalf of Him. This is seen in Luke (9: 51-52) when Jesus sent the messengers [angels] ahead to a

Samaritan village to get things ready for his arrival. The Hebrew word *malach* is used to denote angels within Judaism and is simply the word for messenger (ibid.).

### **Angels in Scripture**

Throughout the Hebrew Bible God's angels appear to patriarchal and matriarchal figures to help guide them, provide them with the covenant message and, in the case of Jacob (Genesis 32), to wrestle with an angel and gain resolution. The angels that appear in the Jewish Holy Scriptures often convey a message from God, and although they appear resembling human form, they speak with the voice of God (Corrigan, Denny, Eire and Jaffee 1998). Maimonides, a Jewish rabbi and philosopher, wrote the *Mishneh Torah*, which details Judaic observance of the covenant between God and the Hebrew people. The *Mishneh Torah* introduces ideas of a hierarchical structure of angels, with ten different orders according to the roles and divine attributions of the angels (Hurtado, 1988; Corrigan et al. 1998). The book of Daniel (NRSV 1977) is the first book in which an angel is given a name: 'Gabriel' (Daniel 9: 21). Gabriel is acknowledged as the primary messenger of God's covenant (Hurtado 1998). The Archangel Michael is also introduced in the book of Daniel (10: 13). Michael is spoken about as a 'protector of the people' (Daniel 12:1) and the leader of God's army of angels in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. This idea that angels are warriors is further developed in Revelations, where the Archangel Michael is said to defeat Satan after a war in Heaven (NRSV 1977; Jones 2011).

The physical description of angels evolves within the Hebrew Bible. At first angels are described as spiritual beings which have the ability to take human form (Hebrews 1:14) and these encounters with angels were often terrifying for the protagonist. During his meeting with Archangel Michael, Daniel stood trembling with fright. These fears were abated by the angel's words 'do not fear' (Daniel 10: 12). This idea of angelic encounters instilling fear into the receiver continues through the New Testament. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus (Latourette 1955), encountered an angel when he considered dismissing Mary as a result of her pregnancy. The angel spoke to him, initially abating his fears with the words 'do not be afraid' (Matthew 1: 20), before conveying God's message. As a result of this angelic revelation Joseph married Mary and named the son she bore Jesus (Matthew 1:21).

Angels were often introduced as 'the word of the Lord' and 'the hand of the Lord' (Ezekiel 1:3), as they convey God's message and covenant and can perform great acts at the request of God. Psalm 91:11 states that 'he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways'. Throughout The Holy Bible, from the book of Genesis through to the New Testament, it is

acknowledged by both Judaism and Christianity that angels were created by God before He created the world. However, unlike man, who according to these religions will be saved after the apocalypse, Angels will not receive salvation (Ryrie 1987; Jones 2011). This is because they have not been created in the image of God but have been made in perfect holiness (Ryrie 1987). There are, however, stark contradictions within the Judaic and Christian sacred scriptures as to what angels actually look like. There are numerous occasions within the Hebrew Bible when angels are depicted as taking on a male form in order to convey their messages from God (Jones 2011). However, there is no defined passage where gender is placed on angels and according to Matthew (22: 30) they cannot procreate. Conversely, whilst the majority of angels are depicted as resembling men, there is a passage in the Hebrew Bible regarding two female angels with wings (Zechariah 5: 9), thus affirming that angels can resemble both male and female form.

The book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible offers arguably the most aesthetic description of angels (Jones 2011). Angels are described as four creatures in human form, with four faces: a human, an ox, a lion and an eagle face, and with four wings. They are depicted as having bronze sparkling skin and human hands (Ezekiel 1:5-12). Given this description it is understandable that the people who received messages from the angels were frightened at what they saw. These angelic creatures are in stark contrast to the portrayal of angels in Genesis (18) where they have no wings. The Christian description of angels differs from both of these portrayals. According to Luke (24: 37-39) Jesus taught that angels did not have body or bones like humans as they were spiritual beings. The gospels of the New Testament also teach that angels can be seen in the form of a dazzling white light (Jones 2011). However, despite these differences, both Judaism and Christianity liken the roles of angels to messengers or guides. It is also important to note that neither the Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament depict angels as having halos (Jones 2010).

Within the Hebrew Bible angels are often utilised by God to allow the human protagonist to come to some moral conclusion (Green 1989). This is arguably the case for Christianity too; however, the way in which the angels assist the decision-makers differs from the Hebrew Bible to the New Testament. For example, within the Hebrew Bible when Jacob escaped to the desert after stealing the covenant he wrestled all night with an angel. The angel had formidable strength and 'struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint' (Genesis 32: 25). This angel, argues Jones (2011), is sent to test Jacob's spirit and Jacob prevails – albeit with a life-long limp. Judaism believes, as a result of these encounters with angels in the Hebrew Bible, that angels are physical beings. This belief is marginally upheld by Christian theology as the gospels state that angels strengthen Jesus during His

temptation (Matthew 4). Post Jesus' crucifixion, an angel rolls the stone from the tomb (Matthew 28). Christianity also believes that angels released the apostles from prison (Acts 5; Acts 12) and strengthened their resolve to go out and spread the word of God when they were afraid to do so (Acts 1; Acts 10; Acts 27).

Despite these references to the physicality of angels it has been argued by theologians and philosophers alike that they are actually metaphors for human conscience within the Hebrew Bible and New Testament (Jones 2011 and Corrigan et al. 1998). This could be because angels seemingly appear to those who are in significant spiritual need. The story of Jacob wrestling with an angel can be interpreted differently if the angel is in fact Jacob's conscience that he is grappling with. However, the fact that he lived his life walking with a limp following this encounter does negate this argument somewhat (Jones 2011). In Genesis we are told that God orders Abraham to kill his only son as an offering to Him, only for an angel to intervene at the last moment; 'do not harm him, for now I know you fear God' (22: 12). Again, it could be argued that Abraham experienced a true angelic encounter as he proved his love, or this was a metaphorical example to all Jewish and Christian people that followers should shed constraints of flesh and blood in order to love one God. During the time of exile, it could be argued that the angels that appear to Moses and Aaron are metaphors demonstrating the need for hope and continuous belief in times of great need. The early followers had lived many years in exile with little food and water. Many had died and the Jewish community desperately needed a reconnection with God in order to believe that their struggles were justified (Numbers 20). Finally, the angels that reveal themselves to Jesus during His Temptation (Matthew 4) could be construed as a manifestation of his desire to overcome his demons rather than physical angelic cheerleaders willing him to success.

Jones (2011) states that angels within both Judaic and Christian scriptures reflect aspects of human existence that is sometimes inexplicable. Kübler-Ross (1997) suggests that these angelic visits, during highly emotional situations such as births and deaths, are humankind's way of searching for spiritual significance in order to abate the worldly challenges they are facing. In Genesis (28: 12) a ladder between Heaven and Earth is described, upon which angels are always ascending or descending the steps. This has been referenced to many scholarly and literary works for describing spiritual journeys of individuals or groups (Hummon 2008; Jones 2005). Jones (2005) furthers this argument by suggesting that 'Jacob's ladder' (Genesis: 28) is a parable to understand that wherever someone is on their path to God an angel is by their side, even if that angel cannot be seen. Contemporary society recognises other angelic engagement with humankind, such as the Annunciation where,

according to Christianity, the Archangel Gabriel visited the Virgin Mary to inform her that she was to carry the Son of God (Luke 1: 28-36). Today, infant schools worldwide regularly perform nativity plays, depicting the birth of Jesus, with young actors and actresses portraying an angel who announces the birth of Jesus to a group of shepherds who subsequently travel to visit the new born king (Luke 2: 8-20 and Gathercole 2004).

### **Angels in modern society**

As the world has continued to evolve, so has the belief in angels. With the Reformation in the sixteenth century new theology developed to establish close, personal communication with God (Sulavik 2006). From the Reformation the understanding of angels was adapted further. They were no longer seen as just messengers sent from God, but were also understood as being guides for each individual's spiritual journey, sent at birth to provide silent strength in times of need (Sulavik 2006; Jones 2010). This notion developed a more holistic idea of angel, rather than the warrior of God that was previously depicted in the Hebrew Bible (Jones 2010). However, Rosen (2003) describes the modern Judaic theology as being true to its origins. Judaism still believes in the complete physicality of angels whilst many religions, Christianity included, now look upon many of the stories within the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as moral metaphors (Rosen 2003). This stoic Judaic theology is present in the refusal to eat sinew that runs down the thigh of an animal, as this is where Jacob was injured by the angel, and is therefore believed to be sacred (Rosen 2003; Jones 2010). Modern Christianity proposes that angels, through prayer and guidance, can now illustrate the wisdom of Jesus – although physical manifestations are rarely seen (Edwards 2005).

Considering that one of the commandments as given to Moses was 'you shall not make yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above' (Exodus 20:4), Kessler and Nirenberg (2011) state that Judaic belief and practice and angel art are at odds with one another. Because of the belief in the sacredness of the commandments, Judaism practices aniconism which is the barring of images of divine beings. However, it is this practice that Kessler and Nirenberg (2011) argue has led to an abundance of books and exhibits dedicated to displaying supposed Jewish art, such as the wall to ceiling literary portrayals of the stories depicted within the Hebrew Bible. Christianity on the other hand believes that that the law as given to Moses is spiritual. Furthermore, they believe that angelic art is a symbol of the strength of spirituality within the Church and the individual Christian. Jones (2010) suggests that art in Christianity is not worshiped but utilised as a tool for guiding their prayer focus and spirituality. This would suggest that, despite the premise that the commandments are

spiritual laws, Christianity is in fact adhering to the idol law as they are not deifying the images (Kessler and Nirenberg 2011; Jones 2010).

As a result of the Christian permission to create scripture inspired art, the imagery of angels has evolved dramatically from the earliest known Christian portrayals in Ancient Rome through to the assimilation of Eastern and Western culture. Early angelic art contained no halos or wings and angels were inconspicuous figures within the wider artistic depictions (Jones 2010; MacQuarrie 1977). Art in the Middle Ages depicted angels as departed Saints who could be called upon to guide worshippers on their spiritual paths (Kessler and Nirenberg 2011). The Renaissance reformed the images intensely as angels were now portrayed as beautiful halo encumbered men, women and children (Jones 2011). Renaissance artists such as Leonardo da Vinci were given more freedom to create Christian inspired art. Angelic images painted during this period, such as the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, are considered artistic masterpieces in modern society and millions of people travel to see them every year, on both spiritual and cultural pilgrimages (Jones 2010; Seymour 1972).

Barkman (2010) argues that the modern world is unrivalled in its ability to adopt cultures and beliefs from others and thereafter 'encoding' (26) them. This encoding enables the adoptee to transform the sacred belief to fit with their own widening understanding of spiritualism and community, although often the encoding leads to commercialisation and thereafter a dilution of the sacredness of the transmuted belief. Nowadays, angels are not only used as sacred spiritual guides and images in Judaism and Christianity, but have been adopted by New Age religions, spiritualist movements and the wider world (Jones 2011). With this wide acceptance of the sacredness of angels a more distorted and less spiritual image has developed. Modern media often portray angels as attractive, desirable females with a sexual appetite (Berger 1970; Sabbagh 1990). Lynx™ (2011) released an advertisement for deodorant with the slogan 'even angels will fall', following which several beautiful women, complete with halo and wings, fall from the sky and walk towards the male protagonist. Nowadays there is a plethora of angelic fancy dress and imagery, all of which are far removed from the early angelic sacredness and appearances. According to Jones (2011), despite this obvious sexualisation of angels in modern media, the sacredness and spirituality within religion has been little afflicted. Both Judaism and Christianity still look upon angels as a source of strength, religiosity and conscience (Green 1989; Edwards 2005).

## **Conclusion**

Angels have both theologically and artistically evolved throughout history in both Judaism and Christianity. However, there are several disparities between Judaism and Christianity in their understanding of angels. Whilst both look upon these heavenly beings as guides and messengers and accept that in the early books within the Hebrew Bible they were utilised by God to spread His word, from the time of Christ the two religions began to develop a difference in ideas.

Judaism remains stoic in the belief that angels are physical, tangible beings. This is evident from their continued refusal to eat the meat from an animal's thigh following Jacob's fight with an angel. Judaic aniconism means it is difficult to visualise what they believe angels look like. Nevertheless, considering their faithfulness to scripture it is reasonable to conclude that they follow the descriptions within the book of Ezekiel. Conversely, Christianity offers a plethora of evolved visual imagery for its understanding of the appearance of angels. Nowadays, Christianity believes that everyone is born with a guardian angel to guide them through life. Moreover, some Christians now believe that angelic stories within the Hebrew Bible and New Testament may represent the protagonist's struggle with their conscience and the angels could be construed as metaphors for human morality.

Whether angels are physical, tangible beings or metaphorical examples of human conscience, there is little doubt that they have affected the beliefs and practice of not only Judaism and Christianity but the wider world. With the development of New Age religions in the Twentieth Century and the developing individual spirituality of the world in general, angels have been adopted as examples of virtuousness. However, with this assimilation of beliefs the doctrine within Judaism and Christianity has been affected, more so in the latter religion. For example, the Christian notion of the angel has evolved dramatically throughout the centuries from warrior-like depictions to the modern halo-adorned images. There is little dispute that angel imagery has been affected by the outside politics and culture of its day. From the dark Middle Ages to the spiritual awakenings of the Renaissance angelic imagery has travelled through an arc of development. In contemporary society angels have been commercialised, with television adverts and programmes based on presumed natures to angelic fancy dress outfits being sold. However, it is concluded that commercialisation has had little effect on the Judaic and Christian belief and respect for angels as they are still considered messengers and protectors who illustrate holiness. Whether this is through physical manifestation or illustrating internal conscience through symbolism is nevertheless down to individual belief.

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