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The Angels: An Introduction

Throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation and in all the important events in it, we read about spiritual beings called angels. Those angels witnessed the creation of man, accompanied him in his glory and humiliation, in his rise and fall and in his sinfulness and righteousness. They escorted the Lord God along the way towards redemption.

Nature of Angels

The angels are heavenly, articulate spiritual beings possessing intellect. They were created by God Almighty at the beginning of creation for glorifying the Lord, praising and ministering to Him as can be inferred from God's words to his servant Job: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth...? When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4-7).

Appearance

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes the angels saying: "Are they not all ministering spirits?" (Heb. 1:14). "Who maketh His angels spirits, and His ministers a flame of fire." (Heb. 1:7, Ps. 104:4).

It is believed that they are pure incorporeal souls. It is also believed that even though they are spirits, they possess gentle, invisible, aerial body with no ordinary human needs. "The countenance" of the angel, who rolled back the stone from the door of the Lord's grave after His Resurrection "was like lightning and his raiment white as snow." (Matt. 28-3). The angels mentioned, however, in the Bible, appearing with sundry bodies and various forms, possess temporary bodies assumed to reassure people and encourage them to talk to them. Apostle Paul says of these bodies: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, the first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit... The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthly, such are they also which are earthly: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, neither doth corruption inherit incorruption." (I Cor. 15:44-50).

Jesus Christ describes the pious believers who are to inherit his eternal heavenly kingdom, saying: "But they, which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage; neither can they die any more, for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection." (Lk. 20:35-36).

Number

Angels are not born. They neither marry nor are given in marriage. They do not procreate or become old, nor do they die. Their abode is heaven. They are sent as messengers to earth for ministering to mankind. God created them in great numbers that only God Almighty knows of. The Psalmist said: "The chariots of God are twenty thousand." (Ps. 68:17).

Elisha, the prophet said to his servant who was scared when he beheld the huge number of his enemies: "Fear not, for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man and he saw. And, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha." (II Kings 6:16-17). Daniel the prophet said: "I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head like the pure wool. His throne was like the fiery flame, and His wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him. Thousand thousands ministered unto Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him." (Dan. 7:9-10).

The Lord Jesus said to His disciple Simon Peter: "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He shall presently give Me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. 26:53). And the author of Revelation said: "And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne... and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands... (Rev. 5:11).

Church Fathers, therefore, deduced that the number of angels was so huge and it outnumbered that of human beings and all other beings over all the ages.

Power, Ability, Function

Angels outdo human beings in knowledge, learning, power and ability. Due to the perfection of their nature, they are capable of predicting future inevitable events. They have extensive wisdom but are not omniscient. God alone is omniscient.

The Psalmist said in his exaltation of the Creator: "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor." (Ps. 8:4,5). The Psalmist addresses the angels saying: "Bless the Lord, ye His angels, which excel in strength, who do His commandments, hearkening unto the voice of His word". (Ps. 103:20).

Angels worship God, prostrate in adoration of Him and keep, as it were, praising Him day and night. They are always ready to fulfill His will and His commandments. It is through the angels that God, the invisible, gets in contact with man. "No man has seen God at anytime" (Jn. 1:18). And God's angels are standing before Him at all times. Their faces are covered with their wings, the way they were beheld by Prophet Isaiah (Is. 6:1-4). God sends angels to our earth for taking care of the believers, meeting their needs, guarding and rescuing them from their spiritual or corporal enemies. The Psalmist addresses the believers, saying: "For He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone". (Ps. 91:11-13) and "the angel of the Lord encompasseth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them." (Ps. 34:7).

The Holy Bible is full of services done by the angels to mankind in fulfillment of God's Commands. When God drove man out of the Garden of Eden "He placed Cherubim to keep the way of the tree of life." (Gen. 3:24).

The power of angels and their authority, which is derived from God, is manifested here. "When the angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it" (II Sam. 24-16), and in (II Kg. 19:35) "the angel of the Lord went out and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred four score and five thousand."

The Lord God invested the angels with authority to control material elements, manage and guard them, yet God never permitted them to change laws or principles set by God, neither did God permit them change any procedures without His consent.

No material or human obstacles, no natural forces or laws can stand in the way of the fulfillment of tasks assigned to angels by God. The Lord sent His angel to his servants Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and delivered them from the fiery furnace in Babylon (Dan. 3:25-28) by making the fire have no power to burn. God also delivered His servant Daniel from the lions' den: "My God has sent His angel and has shut the lions' mouths that they have not hurt me for as much as before him innocence was found in me." (Dan. 6:22).

In the New Testament we read in Acts of the Apostles how the Jewish high priest and the Sadducees laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison and how the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison door and brought them forth, saying: "Go stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life." (Acts 5:19-20).

When King Herod laid hand on the Apostle Peter, he put him in prison and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him... Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains. "And the keepers before the door kept the prison. And, behold, the angel of the Lord came upon him and a light shined in the prison; and he smote Peter on the side and raised him up, saying: "Arise up quickly." And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, "Gird thyself and bind on thy sandals." And so he did. And he saith unto him, "Cast thy garment about thee and follow me." And he went out and followed him, and wish not that it was true which was done by the angel but thought he saw a vision. When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate which leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed from him. And when Peter was come to himself, he said: "Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath sent His angel and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews..." (Acts 12:1-11).

The Guardian Angel

God's providence and His love of mankind willed that He assign an angel for every believer to guard his soul and body and be with him from his conception in his mother's womb until his soul departs his body, when his spirit returns to God, its creator. Some believe that the child, while still in his mother's womb, is guarded by his mother's guardian angel. The minute the baby is born, a guardian angel is assigned to him.

The guardian angel accompanies the believer in this life and carries his prayer to God. He intercedes with God Almighty for him. The guardian angel guides the believer along paths of righteousness to fulfill God's will and avoid thus paths of perdition. Heaven is the guardian angel's abode. He is capable, however, of hurrying to earth in no time to accomplish his assignment. Had it been possible to attribute human emotions, such as joy and grief, to angels, we would have felt their sympathies with human beings throughout the fluctuating conditions of their life. The Lord said: "Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repenteth." (Lk. 15:10). Angels try to keep the believers away from sin. They fight evil spirits for them and protect them from the temptations of the devil and from disasters and calamities caused by him. Angels do that by praying for the believers. The Lord Jesus says: "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones. For I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father which is in heaven." (Matt. 18:10).

The doctrine of having a guardian angel assigned for each believer was among doctrines of the Old Testament. Thus we read about Jacob, the father of the tribe, blessing the two sons of Joseph, saying: "The angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads" (Gen. 48:16). The author of Ecclesiastes reported: "Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin, neither say thou before the angel that it was an error." (Ec. 5:6). The guardian angel remains with the believer until his soul leaves his body. Angels carry the souls of the righteous, ascending with them to heaven. According to the Lord's words in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus "the beggar died and was carried by angels into Abraham's bosom." (Lk. 16:22).

The angels admit virtuous spirits to paradise to join the spirits of the righteous, where they wait for the Lord's Second Coming to be joined to their bodies and to inherit the kingdom of heaven. Some theologians suggest that the souls of evil people are usually carried, after departing their bodies, by the devils into dark places where they wait for the agony of doomsday when they will be judged and will suffer eternal punishment. Other theologians, however, state that only good angels are entitled to carry the souls of the righteous and the evil either to heaven or to darkness.

The Appearance of Angels and the Heralding of God's Commands and Warnings

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reported:

"Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" (Heb. 1:13-14). Throughout their ministry, angels appeared in diverse forms and conveyed various messages to mankind. Three angels appeared to Abraham that were substantial men to whom Abraham offered butter, milk and the calf, which he had prepared. "And he stood by them under the tree and they did eat... and one of the angels said to him, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life, and lo, Sarah, thy wife shall have a son." (Gen. 18:1-10) And this was fulfilled.

Two angels came to Lot, and he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread. They ordered him to leave Sodom because God would rain upon it brimstone and fire. (Gen. 19:1-3). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers; for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." (Heb. 13:2).

So interesting are the narratives which tell of the appearance of the angels to men. One is that of the vision of Jacob who dreamt and beheld a ladder set upon the earth and reaching to heaven, upon which he saw the angels of God ascending and descending. (Gen. 28:12) Another is the narrative of Jacob's struggle with the angel of the Lord and Jacob's triumph over him. Also, the narrative of the angel who prevented Balaam, son of Beor, from cursing those blessed by God, and how the mouth of Balaam's donkey was opened. (Num. 22:23-24).

One of the significant appearances of angels is that of the archangel Gabriel to Daniel the prophet, when he told him of the future of his people and the coming of the Messiah, fixing the date of the coming of this great redeemer five hundred years in advance (Dan. 8:16; 9:21).

We know through the conversation which takes place between the archangel and Daniel, the prophet, that an angel is appointed for every people and every city (Dan. 10:13,20). Five hundred years after his appearance to Daniel, Gabriel himself appeared to Zachariah, the priest in the temple of incense and told him of the birth of his son, John the Baptist. Gabriel likewise appeared to the Virgin Mary in Nazareth and told her of her divine conception of the Holy Spirit and of her giving birth to the Savior, Lord Jesus, who would absolve His people of their sins.

It was Gabriel who appeared to Joseph, who was betrothed to the Virgin Mary, and ordered him to take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt because Herod was seeking to kill the Boy.

The angels ministered to the Lord Jesus in the wilderness after His fasting, baptism and temptation. The angels appeared to the Lord Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane before His Passion, strengthening Him. It was an angel who rolled back the stone from the grave of the Lord and sat upon it after the Resurrection of the Lord from the dead, and he told the women of the Redeemer's Resurrection. (Matt. 28:2).

The angels have been and will remain forever at the service of the saints, encouraging confessors and martyrs to adhere to and be steadfast in their confession.

Ranking of Angels

Angels exist in an orderly arrangement according to standing and function. They are divided into organized groups, ranks and status. Based on the teachings of the Holy Bible and ecclesiastic tradition, the Holy Fathers had nine names given to three ranks of them: high, middle and low.

The first rank includes the cherubim (Gen. 3:23-24), the seraphim (Is. 6:1-4) and thrones (Col. 1:14-16). The second rank includes authorities, principalities and dominions (I Pet. 3:22) and the third rank includes powers, archangels and angels. These three ranks refer to the three Christian ranks of priesthood which are episcopacy, priesthood and diaconate.

In his book entitled *Al-Rutba Al-Samawiya and Al-Rutba Al-Kanasiya* (Heavenly and Ecclesiastic Ranking) Iwannis of Dara (+860) states the following: "Articulate beings are two: angels and humans. Angels are spiritual and so is their priesthood, which is purely spiritual and transcends this world. As angels undergo no change in terms of age and do not experience youth and old age, therefore their priesthood shall have to be static, having no increase, decrease or change. Nor do they move from one rank to another. Human beings, however, are tied to their ever changing body, which grows, matures, becomes old and then dies. As such, they have been granted the type of priesthood which is appropriate to them".

Name of Some Angels

In the Bible only four archangels of the highest rank are mentioned:

1. Gabriel whose name means God's mightiness and power (Dn. 8:1,21). He is the angel who said of himself: "I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God." (Lk. 1:19). He is the messenger of the mystery of Incarnation and Redemption.

2. Michael (Dn. 10:13) whose name means one who resembles God. He is the archangel who will call the dead in Christ to rise (I Thess. 4:15).

3. Raphael whose name means the light of God (Tobit 12:19).

4. Uriel (II Ezra 4.10).

Wicked Angels - Falling into Sin

Angels possess free will. They were led into temptation. Some of them committed the sin of rebellion and offence against God. Angels who were steadfast in their commitment to God Almighty, were called holy angels or the chosen angels because God, the omniscient, knew that they would be firm in obeying Him. The other angels, however, who were disdainfully proud and rebellious, fell with their chief to Hades and were called evil angels. Their job is to fight ferociously against people, do mischief to them and tempt them. They are like the good angels, organized hierarchically.

Isaiah the Prophet referred to the event of the fall of evil angels saying: "How art thou fallen from Heaven, O Lucifer, Son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I'll be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit." (Is. 14:12-15).

In the Epistle of Jude we read about the Lord's punishment of rebellious angels. "And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, He hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day." (Jude 1:6). And the Apostle Peter says: "For if God spared not the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment." (II Peter 2:4).

A great number of angels of all ranks and estates are fallen angels. Their prince is called Satan, which means tempter, complainer, deceiver, and an accuser. He wanted to be equal to God according to Isaiah the Prophet (Is. 14:12). He is called Lucifer, that is adversary, rebellious and insurgent. So many attributes were given to him, some of which are Ekron's god, Baal-Zebub, who is originally the greatest god of the Philistines (II Kings 1:2), the wicked, and Belial, the prince of this world, the prince who dominates the firmament. He is a killer, a liar, the originator of hypocrisy and the father of the serpent and the dragon.

Demons have much of what is true of angels for they are incorporeal beings endowed with power, intelligence and ability. Such characteristics will turn into evil once the angel falls, and as such will be committed to do evil. Evil angels hate man because he gained favor with God, Who created him to be a rational being. He granted him dominance over all creatures, hence Satan's temptation of man with the help of the serpent in the Garden of Eden and man's fall into sin.

Ever since the fall of man into sin, God put enmity between the woman's seed and the serpent's soul, that is Satan. This enmity is a grace of God bestowed on man because through this enmity the evil intentions of Satan towards humanity were revealed and God declared Satan as an exposed enemy, eager to disguise in order to destroy mankind. The war between man and Satan has never ceased. The Apostle Paul says, therefore: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." (Eph. 6:12).

Number

The number of devils is huge. They attack man in great numbers as reported in the incident of the healing of the Gadarene demoniac of whom the evil spirit was taken out by the Lord. When the Lord asked him

what his name was, he answered. "My name is Legion: for we are many." (Mark 5:9). The term legion means an army unit consisting of as many as six thousand soldiers. This refers to this one man having been the victim of six thousand demon possessions. And forthwith, the Lord gave them leave and the unclean spirits went out and entered into the herd of swine and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea and were drowned.

Power

Devils have great and fearful material and immaterial power. The difference in their power is manifested in the influence they exercise on the minds of people and in the ways of mischief and elusiveness they adopt for leading man into sin and for causing destruction in the world. They differ in ranks and positions. The Lord says: "When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out. And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in, and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first" (Lk. 11:24-26). The Lord also said about one class of demons or about demons in general: "Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting?" (Matt. 17:21).

Devils possess power which enables them to do great wonders, such as making fire come down from heaven. (Rev. 13:13, 16:14). Satan helps his followers: sorcerers, soothsayers and others, to do miracles and predict the future, or what we call witchcraft and divination. These activities include necromancy, which is in fact consulting Satan himself, as Satan has no authority over the soul of the dead. It is Satan who talks on behalf of the soul, imitating the person, depending on his previous familiarity with him. God condemns magic with all its demonic activities because it is a sin and a practice of Satan.

The power of Satan is doubled through his misleading schemes. He tries to hide and disguise, beguiling men into thinking that he does not exist. Demons in fact are spiritual beings, each of whom has an existing "self". When Jesus Christ healed those who were possessed with devils, He used to command each as an individual being, and an essential self, to come out of a person and never return (Matt. 4:24, Mk. 1:32).

The Lord triumphed over Satan when he tried to tempt him in the wilderness. God gave us power to be triumphant in our Lord Jesus Christ and commended us to pray to the Father, saying "And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." (Matt. 6:13). The Lord annihilated the power of Satan exercised on us by his Holy Cross. The moment we draw the sign of the Cross on our foreheads, demons run away scared and frightened. The Lord says: "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" (Lk. 10:18) and he said before His Passion: "Now is the judgment of this world; now shall the prince of this world be cast out." (Jn. 12:31).

These devils are to undergo everlasting agonies on doomsday. The author of Revelation saw them defeated and wrote of them saying: "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; the dragon fought and his angels prevailed not; neither was their place found anymore in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent called the Devil, and Satan who deceiveth the whole world; he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God, day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto death." (Rev. 12:7-11).

Conclusion

We are surrounded by spiritual beings. They are chosen angels, who are holy spirits; and evil angels, who are evil spirits or devils and demons. The latter are our archenemies and the enemies of the entire human race.

The Apostle Paul warns us saying: "Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Who resist steadfast." (I Pet. 5:8-9) Devils are incapable of subduing us and making us fall into sin no matter how powerful they are. They can only beguile us so that we commit sin of our own free will.

Thanks are due to God Who, out of His abundant mercy and providential care, has assigned a guardian angel for each one of us. This angel accompanies us throughout life, inspires us to be virtuous, guides us towards goodness, offers our prayers before the throne of God and intercedes with God Almighty, for us. We shall have to abide by the guidance of our guardian angel and honor him. However, we should not worship him because the worship of angels is deemed a blasphemy according to the Apostle Paul, who says "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels." (Col. 2:18).

In Revelation, John fell at the feet of the angel to worship him and the angel said to him: "See thou do it not: I am thy fellow servant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: Worship God." (Rev. 19:10)

The Church keeps commemoration days of some of the angels, honoring them as saints. Let us, therefore, also honor them, hoping that we shall join them and be just like them, the inheritors of Christ's kingdom of heaven forever.