

WHO WERE THE RESURRECTION-ANNOUNCING ANGELS?

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ROMAN CATHOLIC WRITERS often pretend to too much direct knowledge about angels. They do so by treating every mention of the word in the Old and the New Testaments as if it were literally authentic divine revelation about angelic essences, rather than the literarily intuitive and imaginative projection of human authors and societies. Therefore they implicitly impose on us the obligation to believe the biblical descriptions literally, and a corresponding sense of guilt or discomfort if we find ourselves unable to do so. Popular understanding tends to act, and to build its religious piety, on the literal meaning of the scriptural texts. Conventional priestcraft and medieval scholastic theology have reinforced these misconceptions, rather than correcting them and admitting limits to what we can know about angels, if such essences or genus and species exist as a distinct part of God's creation.

St Augustine was a little more down-to-earth when he distinguished between the nature and function of so-called angels, although he still conceived of them as spiritual essences. He writes,

The angels are spirits. When they are simply spirits, they are not angels, but when they are sent, they become angels; for 'angel' is the name of a function, not of a nature. If you inquire about the nature of such beings, you find that they are spirits; if you ask what their office is, the answer is that they are angels.¹

The benefit that Augustine's distinction confers is the assurance that to function as an angel, or messenger, one need not necessarily be spiritual

¹ Augustine, 'Exposition 1 of Psalm 103', n.15, in *Expositions of the Psalms 99–120*, translated by Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004), 125.

in essence or nature, and that embodied historical human beings could also be seen and represented as angels.

The Resurrection Angels as Metaphors for Biblical Prophets

I wish to submit that the figures who are described in the Gospels as angels at the empty tomb of Jesus are not pure spiritual essences, but concrete, flesh-and-blood biblical-historical prophetic personalities, whom the evangelists have metaphorically transformed into angels.

The Gospels as Midrash

My first reason for interpreting angels as prophets is that the Gospels are Christian midrash on the Old Testament.² This word may be translated as the exegesis, interpretation or translation of one text in terms or light of another by means of comparison or contrast. The Rabbinic scholar Jacob Neusner explains midrash in terms of three different forms of interpretation: paraphrase, prophecy and parable.³

Midrash as paraphrase is the imposition of a fresh meaning on an old biblical text through additional words, phrases or sentences that obliterate the old with a new translation or sense. In this process, the commentator composes a new text altogether, by blurring and bypassing the distinction between text and commentary. Though the paraphrase imports new elements, it introduces them as though they were there in the original already.

Prophecy is a pointer to a universal pattern

Midrash as prophecy is the use of a scriptural text to interpret a contemporary happening. This interpretation takes place within a particular social and literary tradition. Its assumption is that history remains the same and repetitive, with no essential or qualitative changes, so that the old prefigures the new as the past does the present. Far from being a mere prediction about a unique individual, prophecy is a pointer to a universal pattern or cycle that repeats itself in history, leading to the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan. This is how the New Testament used the Old Testament as a midrashic means of interpreting the life of Jesus and his Church. Matthew's Gospel, for example, reads and interprets Jesus' life in the light of the Jewish scriptures and says that Jesus is their fulfilment. Reading one thing in terms of something else, the evangelists,

² Jacob Neusner, *What is Midrash?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 39.

³ Neusner, *What is Midrash?*, 7.

... transformed history from a sequence of one-time events into an ever-present mythic world. No longer was there one Moses, one David, one set of happenings of a distinctive and never-to-be-repeated character. Now whatever happened of which the thinkers propose to take account must enter and be absorbed into that established and ubiquitous pattern and structure founded in scripture. It is not that biblical history repeats itself. Rather the Bible no longer constitutes history, as a story of things that happened once, long ago, and pointed to some one moment in the future. Rather biblical history becomes an account of things that happened every day.⁴

Midrash as parable is the giving of a parallel meaning or reading so that the text is seen and interpreted as having two layers of meaning, one literal and the other non-literal (symbolic or allegorical)—a process by which the past is extended into the now as current history.⁵

But neither the exegesis by implicit rereading nor the exegesis by implicit rewriting of a story exhausts the range of scripture's own midrash. They are only instances of what was done, without denying other possibilities.⁶ The different ways of seeing and translating correspond to the different interests of the groups engaged in the exercise.

The Gospels as Apocalypse

My second reason for interpreting angels as prophets is the literary genre of the resurrection narratives. They are apocalyptic in projecting the resurrection of all humanity into that of Jesus, rather than seeing it as an event in the biography of a unique individual in history.

Both vision and symbol are central to the genre of apocalyptic. Along with the other features of apocalyptic literature, they contribute to a style of writing which does not intend to be understood in terms of wooden literalism; but rather, the author is appealing to the disciplined or sanctified imagination in order to cause the reader to think, to wonder, to imagine, and to contemplate that which is unfathomable.⁷

In this same way the prophets may be figured as angels.

⁴ Neusner, *What is Midrash?*, 49.

⁵ Neusner, *What Is Midrash?*, 7–9.

⁶ Neusner, *What is Midrash?*, 19.

⁷ William J. Tsamis, 'The Apocalyptic Literary Genre: Vision and Symbol', at <http://fidei-defensor.blogspot.com/2006/10/apocalyptic-literary-genre-vision-and.html>.

According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, apocalypse is a genre of writing dealing with:

... revelation of mysteries, things which lie beyond the ordinary range of human knowledge. The Most High gives to His saints definite instruction in regard to hidden matters, whether things altogether foreign to human experience, or merely events in human history which have not yet come to pass.⁸

The resurrection can be seen as one of these events. The primary example of apocalyptic literature in the Hebrew Bible is the book of Daniel. 'As Daniel after long fasting stands by the river, a heavenly being appears to him, and the revelation follows.' The angel or angels at Jesus' tomb in the Gospels are introduced in the same way. This is how hidden reality is disclosed, through a vision:

Because of the peculiar nature of the subject-matter, this is evidently the most natural literary form. Moreover, the manner of the revelation, and the experience of the one who receives it, are generally made more or less prominent.

As the *Encyclopedia* continues, 'The introduction of Angels or messengers as the bearers of the revelation is also a standing feature': since God in the biblical tradition does not speak directly to people by reason of their mortal fear. Instead, God gives instruction,

... through the medium of His heavenly messengers, who act as the seer's guides There is hardly an example of a true Apocalypse in which the instrumentality of angels in giving the message is not made prominent.⁹

The Resurrection Narratives

Matthew 28 speaks of two women, both named Mary, going to Jesus' tomb after the Sabbath and seeing an angel, like an earthquake, rolling away the tombstone. Sitting on the stone, the angel announces to them that Jesus has risen from the dead, and instructs them to tell his disciples to go to Galilee, where they will see him.

⁸ 'Apocalypse', in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, edited by Cyrus Adler and others (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1912), volume 1, 669.

⁹ 'Apocalypse', 669.



The Resurrection and the Women at the Tomb, by Fra Angelico

Mark 16 speaks of three women going with spices to anoint the body of Jesus in his tomb. They find the tomb already opened, and, going in, they are alarmed to see a young man in white robes, who announces Jesus' resurrection to them. Again they are to declare it to the disciples, who are to meet Jesus in Galilee. But this time the women are so shaken and frightened that they told no one anything about it!

Luke 24 speaks of an unspecified number of women, intent on anointing Jesus' body, finding the tomb open and empty, except for two men in shining garments who declare to them that Jesus is risen and alive again. Later in his narrative (24:23), Luke redescribes these two men as angels.

John 20:1–2 names Mary Magdalene as going alone to the tomb early on the first day of the week and, on finding it open, running to tell Peter and John, 'They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him'. But when she returns

to the tomb with the two disciples, and lingers there after they have left the place, she sees two angels in the empty tomb who ask her why she is weeping (20:11–13).

The disciples' surprise at the angelic announcement and at Jesus' own apparitions reveals that the resurrection faith or hypothesis is an afterthought. It is in the nature of a midrashic hermeneutic of those Jewish scriptures that, according to the early Church, maintained that the Christ must suffer, die and be raised again for the forgiveness of the sins and offences of his people. In chapter 24 of his Gospel, we read Luke reminding the women disciples, through the two mysterious messengers at Jesus' empty tomb, of what Jesus had foretold in Galilee about his forthcoming death and resurrection in Judaea.¹⁰ Later in the same chapter, Luke reports Jesus appearing and addressing his assembled disciples:

‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. (24:44–45)

The Prophets of the Resurrection

Finally we come to the question of whether we can identify the resurrection-witnessing angels with any Old Testament prophets or personalities in particular. Since the common features of the resurrection narratives are the angels and the empty tomb, the angels of the resurrection must be those prophets who had spoken of, and effectively brought about, that empty tomb.

In Acts 2:25–32, Luke shows Peter citing Psalm 16:8–11 in referring to Jesus:

For David says concerning him, ‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’ Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this

¹⁰ “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.’ (Luke 24:6–9)

day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption'.

Here we have a clue that David may be identified with the first of Luke's two resurrection-announcing angels. Who, then, is the second?

We must keep in mind the narratives' affirmation of the resurrection as the inevitable implication of the empty tomb. Any reference or allusion to an empty tomb in relation to any other biblical figure or prophet can potentially be linked to the second resurrection angel. And we do, in fact, come across mention of open graves in Ezekiel 37:11–14, which follows the vision of the valley of dry bones:

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely".¹¹ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.'

It was Israel's national restoration, through the return from its exile brought about by the Persian conquest of Babylon, which Ezekiel metaphorically described as the opening and emptying of Judah's graves. Thus Cyrus, the conqueror of Babylon, was the metaphorical angel who opened the metaphorical grave of the Judaeans' Babylonian captivity. Cyrus was a particularly important figure for them since belief in one God, as well as in angels, demons, resurrection and judgment, were a part of the Zoroastrian religion, which Cyrus had adopted as the state religion of his empire. Many scholars argue for Zoroaster's enormous influence on Judaeo-Christianity—and on all of Western civilisation.¹²

¹¹ These words would seem to echo and reflect the emotive state of despair and disappointment of the disciples at the death of Jesus on the cross. It would have been as hard for them to believe that God would raise the dead Jesus alive from his tomb, as it had been for the Israelites in Babylon to foresee that the Persian king, Cyrus, would conquer Babylon and let the Jewish exiles return to their homeland.

¹² See, for example, Peter Clark, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction to an Ancient Faith* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1998), appendix 1, which discusses this issue.

The three days that Jesus spent in the grave can also be linked to the Zoroastrian belief that the soul remains in the body for three days before departing.¹³ Three days would establish that he was dead, yet leave his soul in a position to reanimate his body.

The Shift from Metaphorical to Bodily Resurrection

A profound shift is taking place here between the national metaphorical resurrection of Ezekiel and the literal bodily resurrection of the Gospels. And we may note a parallel shift from the metaphorical understanding of angels as particular human beings to a literal understanding of them as an entirely distinct species or order of metaphysical beings.¹⁴ Such a transition from metaphorical to literalised understanding is an index to changes taking place within the society that produces these discourses. It suggests that the influence of Zoroaster, with his overwhelmingly ethical concern for Aryan ethno-political law and order, may have contributed to the birth and growth of a deuteronomistic or legalistic society with its dualistic dialectic between essentialised angels and demons and, spatially, between heaven and hell. The Semitic religions and societies found this Zoroastrian dualism convenient and silently absorbed it as if it were part of their essence, and not borrowed from an older ethno-religious tradition. And whenever they accepted an older tradition in this way, they justified it by metaphorically redescribing it as inspired prophecy or divine revelation—a psychic process wholly reconcilable with biblical midrash.

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¹³ See Donald K. Sharpes, *Lords of the Scrolls: Literary Traditions in the Bible and Gospels* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 68.

¹⁴ This was the ideological contribution of medieval Scholastic theologians in general and of St Thomas Aquinas in particular within Christianity. See also my book, *A Rumour of Biblical Angels: The Metaphorical Key to the Scriptures* (Delhi: Media House, 2008).