

Angels

AS HERALDS OF GOD

BY ROY E. LUCAS, JR.

Compared to modern life where messages instantaneously speed around the world by telephone or by e-mail, communication in the first century A.D. was extremely slow and inefficient. Messengers crossed paths on the dusty trails and paved Roman roads as they purposely searched for the people for whom their superiors had sent them. Following the dictates of their superiors, these messengers carried a word related to matters of diplomacy in times of both war and peace.¹

Below: An overview of modern Nazareth, seen from the southwest.



In classical Greek literature, a messenger (Greek, *aggelos*) served as a substitute for the superior who sent him and who the mythological gods protected. Two or more messengers served to authenticate the message and provide mutual protection. The superior expected the messenger to faithfully communicate his intentions and his words. To deliver the message exactly demonstrated the highest integrity of a messenger's role. Changing the message or deceiving another with the superior's message could constitute a serious crime. Thus, memorizing or even reading the announcement aided in ensuring the truthfulness and authenticity of the message. This background of human messengers in classical Greek culture illuminates the role of angels in both the Old and New Testaments as God's faithful messengers.²

The Revealing Role of Angels

The four Gospels, Acts, and the Book of Revelation present most of the angelic encounters in the New Testament. The Epistles contain only a few, short references to angelic activity, while several New Testament books do not mention angels at all. When a text does mention an angel, the writer usually focuses more on the angel's message than his appearance (see Luke 1-2; 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

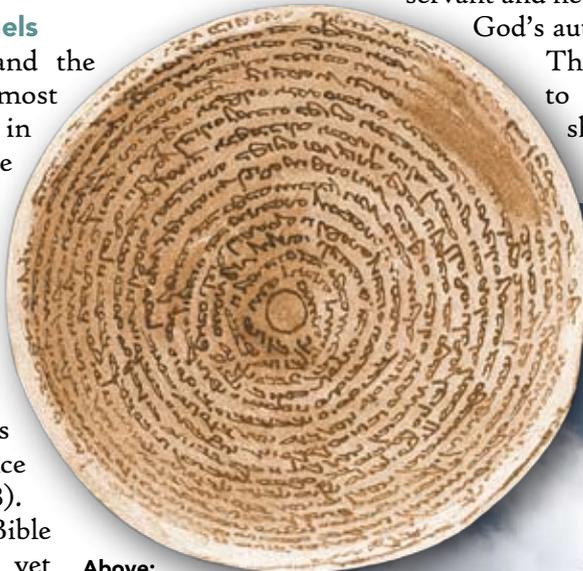
Angels' activities in the Bible revolve around three basic, yet interrelated relationships. First, angels are God's messengers and servants. They worship and praise Him (Isa. 6:1-3; Luke 2:13-14). All of their activities are done in God's service. Second, angels serve to reveal God's truth to humans and to guide and protect those who follow God's will (2 Kings 6:15-17; Dan. 9:20-27; Matt. 1:20-21; 2:13). Finally, angelic activity often is specifically connected to Jesus. Angels are involved at four critical moments in Jesus' life and ministry: His birth (Luke 1:26-38; 2:8-15); temptations (Matt. 4:11); resurrection (Matt. 28:1-7; Mark 16:4-7; Luke 24:4-7); and second coming (1 Thess. 4:16). Their role as messengers of God's revelation is

most prominent in the Gospel narratives that describe Jesus' birth and resurrection.

The Messenger Role of Angels

Luke 1-2—Luke highlights one of angels' major roles in the New Testament: as messengers of God who announce the coming of the Christ. Gabriel is the only angel the Gospels identify by name (Luke 1:19,26). He announced to Zechariah that his wife would bear a son (John the Baptist) and that this son would prepare the way for the Messiah (vv. 11-20). When Zechariah doubted the message, the angel's words, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and tell you this good news" (v. 19, HCSB), revealed both his function and the source of his authority. The angel stands in God's presence as His personal servant and he carries out that service with God's authority.

This same angel was also sent to announce to Mary that she would be the mother of God's Son by the power of



Above: Incantation bowl written in Mandaic or "Syriac Script." The inscription invokes the angel Gabriel and various idols and spirits to protect Chosroes, son of Apra-Hormiz, and his family.



Right: After angels had foretold the births of both Jesus and John the Baptist, Mary went to visit Elizabeth and Zechariah. Shown is the exterior of the Church of the Visitation at Ein Karem, which commemorates Mary's visit to Elizabeth and Zechariah.

LESSON REFERENCE

ETB: Luke 1-2; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

the Holy Spirit (1:26-38). Luke specifically stated that this angelic messenger “was sent by God” (1:26, HCSB), again emphasizing that Gabriel was acting as God’s herald and with God’s authority. An angel also revealed to Mary’s husband Joseph in a vision that her child had been conceived by the Holy Spirit and was the promised Messiah (Matt. 1:20-21).

When the Messiah was born, angels again served as God’s heralds in announcing the birth. An angel appeared to shepherds in the field and “the glory of the Lord shone around them” (Luke 2:9, HCSB). The angel told of the Messiah’s birth and emphasized that His coming was the work of God. Suddenly, a heavenly host appeared, offering praise to God and telling of the Messiah who had come to bring peace (vv. 13-14). The angels shared this message not with the social elite but with a group of common shepherds. The message was clear: the good news of salvation is offered to all people. For such important news, angels proved to be the appropriate messengers.

First Thessalonians 4:13-18—Angels will fulfill many roles as they accompany Christ at His second coming. The significant phrase “with the voice of the archangel” (v. 16, NASB) reveals that a part of God’s angelic host will announce Christ’s return. The three sounds mentioned (a shout, the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God)

may be one sound which belongs to the archangel. Other New Testament passages connect a voice with a trumpet (Rev. 1:10,12; 4:1), and a “mighty angel” serves as God’s herald (5:2; 7:2). Overall, the biblical texts reveal two future functions of archangels: to proclaim the great news of the return of the Christ and to lead God’s angelic army into battle against those spiritual forces who oppose His will and purposes (12:7-9).

Titles for Angels

When Luke referred specifically to Gabriel or to another individual angel bearing a message from God, he used the Greek term *aggelos*, meaning “messenger” (1:11-19; 2:9). But Luke used another term for the group of angels that appeared to the shepherds: *stratia* or “host” (2:13). This angelic “host” appeared to declare God’s majesty at Christ’s birth. A comparable Hebrew term is *tsaba*, which can also be translated as “host” (Ps. 103:20-21). This Psalm also uses the terms *malakim* and *mishrathim* to refer to angels. These make up the *tsaba*. Both the Hebrew and Greek terms for “host” generally refer to God’s heavenly army of angels, who move at His command to fulfill His purposes. In this role, the heavenly host serve God as an extension of His care for and supremacy over all creation.³

While extra-canonical literature commonly mentions archangels,⁴ the New Testament uses

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (35/47/32)



Right: The Mount of Temptation, which rises over 1100 feet above sea level, is adjacent to Jericho. According to tradition, this was where Satan tempted Jesus. After the end of the 40 days, angels came and ministered to Jesus.

Lower left: The theater at Caesarea Maritima overlooks the Mediterranean. Josephus offered details leading up to Herod's death. Herod (who ruled A.D. 37-44) came to the theater dressed in fine regalia. Upon seeing him, the people began to praise Herod as a god. As this happened Herod saw an owl perched overhead. He took that to be an omen of his impending death. Gripped suddenly with stomach troubles, Herod died in five days. Luke records similar details: "So on an appointed day, dressed in royal



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robes and seated on the throne, Herod delivered a public address to them. The populace began to shout, 'It's the voice of a god and not of a man!' At once an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give the glory to God, and he became infected with worms and died" (Acts 12:21-23, HCSB).

Right: Interior of the Garden Tomb outside of Jerusalem.



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the term "archangel" only in 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18 and Jude 9. Paul refers to an unnamed archangel who will sound the trumpet (1 Thess. 4:16). Jude 9 mentions Michael as "the archangel." This may mean Michael is better known than others rather than his being the top or only archangel. Michael serves God by doing battle with Satan (Rev. 12:7). If Gabriel is an archangel like Michael, then, in contrast to Michael, he serves as God's special messenger to reveal God's plan and kingdom to humanity. The Book of Daniel, while not labeling Michael with the title archangel, does refer to him as a chief prince among the angels (Dan. 10:13, HCSB; see 10:21; 12:1). The existence of archangels implies that other angels exist who are of lesser rank.

The New Testament proves consistent with the Old Testament picture of angels and their roles. The most essential role is that of revealing God's will and work to men. In the New Testament the functions of the angels deal almost exclusively with Jesus' life

and ministry. They directly revealed God's message at Jesus' birth and resurrection. After these announcements though, Jesus Himself stands alone in the New Testament as the greatest revelation of the Father and His will (Heb. 1:1-13). **B**

1. Stephen F. Noll, *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 155.
2. Maxwell J. Davidson, "Angels" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 8; Noll, 155.
3. C. Fred Dickason, *Angels: Elect and Evil* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 59; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, "ἀγγέλως" in *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains (GELNT)*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1:144-45; "στρατιὰ οὐράνιος" in GELNT, 1:145.
4. First Enoch 40:9-10 names four angels: Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and Phanuel. First Enoch 20 mentions three other names for archangels: Saraqa'el, Raguel, and Suru'el. Enoch states Gabriel supervised the garden of Eden and the cherubim. See E. Isaac, trans., "(Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch" in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 23-24, 32.

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