

# ON ANGELS

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*In loving memory of grandmother Hinda Raizel Breitman*

Angels: What, who are these beings? Artists such as Leonardo or Raphael depicted them as ethereal, winged beings. But was this correct? Scripture abounds with divine creatures which differ in form and function. Naively massing them as one genre is misleading, a conception that should be revised. Every biblical account must be set within the context in which it appears. This approach will help both the advanced scholar and student.

We begin with the word *malakh* — a general Hebrew term, literally “messenger.” Not every *malakh* is divine; some are human emissaries. The prophets are sometimes called *malakhim*,<sup>1</sup> humans assigned by God to admonish the people. Similarly, Jacob sends *malakhim* to his brother Esau (Gen. 32:4), who are clearly mortals. Conversely, a heavenly *malakh* may manifest through inanimate matter, as when Israel flees the Egyptians. Here, God dispatches the “cloud” to protect them (Ex. 14:19).

The following is a classification of angels found in the Bible: *seraphim*, *erelim*, *ophanim*, *hayoth*, *keruvim*, *malakhim* and *Bnei HaElohim*.

*Seraphim*, composed of fire, proclaim God’s holiness. The *seraph* of Isaiah’s vision performs the ritual of placing hot coals on the prophet’s mouth as purification (Is. 6:2-7).<sup>2</sup>

1 Hag 1:13; Is. 42:19. *Malakhim* is plural of *malakh* [מַלְאָךְ]. Cf. cognate *melakha* [מְלָכָה] meaning “work.”

2 See *Daat Mikrah* 6:2, Commentary by Amos Chacham (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1984). שָׂרַף means “to burn.”

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The word *erelim*, in one view, is synonymous with human and divine *malakhim*. Others strictly define them as "heavenly beings." In liturgical poetry they are angels who lament over the destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple.<sup>3</sup>

*Ophanim* [אפנים] are, precisely translated, "wheels." In the mystical first chapter of Ezekiel, they are linked to another celestial entity — *hayoth* [חיות] or "living creatures." The prophet later identifies *hayoth* as *keruvim* [כרובים]. (The "cherub" is highly represented in Western art as a cupid figure).

The relationship between these three classes of angels — *ophanim*, *hayoth*, and *keruvim* — is perplexing. Ezekiel's first description of *hayoth* depicts them with four faces: man, lion, ox and eagle (1:10). The second picture varies somewhat: cherub, man, lion and eagle (10:14). Note that "ox" is now replaced by "cherub." The meaning of this change is not given in the text. Also puzzling is Ezekiel's statement that one of the faces is a cherub. (Remember that in this second prophecy, the *hayoth* are referred to as *keruvim*). One could call this a "circular definition," explaining a word with the same word. Clearly, there is deeper intent behind this.

Are there clues to their true nature? The likeness of two cherubim cover the holy ark. Cherubim guard the path to the Tree of Life. Rabbinic commentaries ascribe to them a child-like appearance.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, cherubim are of two varieties: those possessing four faces, and those of youthful visage. What then, is the distinguishing mark of cherubim? Does Ezekiel equate them to *hayoth* because one of their four faces is a cupid-like cherub? Or, is there some unmentioned factor, which Ezekiel overlooks in the first vision but finds in the second?

Are there other significant points? Fire is associated with *keruvim* as with *seraphim*. They are sentinels of the Tree of Life,

3 אַרְאִלִּים. See Isaiah 33:7; Radak, *Metzudat David* and *Daat Mikrah*.

4 Exodus 25:18-22; Genesis 3:24. Also see Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkah* 5b; *Baba Bathra* 99a; II Chronicles 3:10; Ezekiel 10:20.

along with a flaming sword. Ezekiel describes them as coals of fire — torches accompanied by lightning. The *ophanim* attending them are no less wondrous and mysterious. Do these “wheels” — circular entities — parallel the flaming sword of the Garden of Eden which revolves? Whether the connections are valid or not, there is much to ponder.

*Malakhim*, as an individual category, are specifically divine messengers. The twelfth-century philosopher and poet Judah Halevi defines two kinds of angels: eternal and ephemeral, created for a particular point in time. According to him, it is impossible to discern which types appear to Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.<sup>5</sup> This observation corresponds to a dual pattern of “primary” and “complex” heavenly beings in the Bible.

A primary *malakh* exhibits behavior most often attributed to angels. He performs his assignment as an independent existence without human qualities. Some examples are: the angel preventing the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22:11); the encounters with Hagar (Gen. 16:21) and the angel assisting Elijah in his flight from Jezebel (I Kg. 19:5, 7).

Complex *malakhim* are controversial and problematic. They seem autonomous and decisive, almost human. This anthropomorphic character is heightened by the Bible’s terminology: “man” and “men.” The following cases illustrate that complex angels are a distinct group of divine entities.

We begin with the well-noted story of Abraham and the three angels. The text identifies them as “men,” and directly as “God.”<sup>6</sup> Their human appearance is misleading, but through conversation their true form is revealed. Before departing, one angel imparts a secret to Abraham — the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The patriarch “barters” to spare the cities for the sake of the righteous. Is this angel empowered with free judgment to negotiate? Or, does he

<sup>5</sup> *Kuzari* IV:3.

<sup>6</sup> *Anashim* (אנשים). Gen. 18:2, 16, 22. The Ineffable Name, Tetragrammaton — Gen. 18:1, 13, 17, 20, 22, 26, 33.

act solely as a channel between God and Araham? If so, his role is more of interpreter than ambassador.

That God speaks to man on man's level is a common rabbinic view.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, the text states that the Almighty responds to Abraham, not "the man," or "the angel." The angel seems to lose identity. Thus, the beings' human visage and behavior are moot. Further accounts need to be studied for comparison.

Lot's encounter with two *malakhim* is both similar to and different from Abraham's. Here, too, angels "debate" with a mortal, and two designations are applied to them: "men" and *malakhim* (Gen. 19). When instructed to flee, Lot appeals for refuge in one of the smaller cities, and the angels concede. They change the tide of events. Do they act independently, or as divine conduit? Unlike Abraham's visitors, Lot's angels display free thinking, as if reacting to a crisis.

Regarding Abraham, the *malakhim* speak in the first person singular: *I will surely visit Sarah . . . ; Shall I conceal from Abraham . . .* In Lot's case, they converse as individuals apart from God: *We are destroying this place, for their cry is great before the face of God, and God has sent us to destroy it.* Note also the use of the plural "we." This is definitely not the Almighty's expression.

Lot's guests seem unfamiliar with his household, and give generalized instructions: *Whoever else you have here — son-in-law, and your sons and your daughters . . .* (Gen. 19:12). Nowhere does the Bible mention Lot's sons! Rabbinic commentaries try to resolve this dilemma;<sup>8</sup> still, it is unlikely such close family members would be omitted from the text. Evidently, these angels are not omniscient (in contrast to Abraham's angels, who know Sarah's innermost thoughts).

The next event sets an extraordinary meeting: a "man" [שׂר] who wrestles with Jacob (Gen. 32:25-31). The patriarch understands the

7 Ber. 31a; Mai., M.T. Yesodei Hatorah 1:9, 12; Guide, 1:46; 2:47.

8 Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra, *ad loc.*

nature of his opponent and demands a blessing. To escape Jacob's hold, the being must concede his wish. This entity is never called a *malakh* — an angel — nor is he referred to as "god." We infer that this is a divine individual, certainly no ordinary man. Then how is he constrained by a mortal?

Jacob contends with a being who is heavenly yet baffling, and who displays human behavior, not only physically but psychologically as well. He is fully aware of where he must be, what he must do. He calls out: *Send me forth, for the dawn breaks . . .*

Of all celestial entities the "sons of God" [*Bnei HaElohim* — בני האלהים] (Gen. 6:1-4), pose the ultimate paradox: angels who sin. They take human wives, siring *mighty men and men of renown*. Immediately thereafter, the Bible speaks of man's corruption and the eventual flood. Rashi calls them "destructive angels" who require atonement. In another source, he defines them as "emissaries of God."<sup>9</sup>

In Job, *Bnei HaElohim* appear before the King of the Universe. Their activities are surmised from the words of Satan (1:7; 2:2) accompanying them: *going to and fro in the earth and . . . walking on it*. The scene recalls Jacob's ladder, by which *malakhim* ascend and descend to and from the earth (Gen. 28:12).

The pseudoepigraphic books of Enoch and Jubilees<sup>10</sup> relate how "Heavenly Watchers" defile mankind by joining with women. Man's downfall is directly linked to these sinful angels. Evidently, some celestial beings possess not only a sense of right and wrong, but also freedom to choose between them.

According to the Midrash, angels are immune to evil's domination.<sup>11</sup> This seems to contradict the previous conclusions.

But again, the Midrash conflicts with some other notions when it suggests, "One angel does not execute two tasks, and two angels do

9 Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 67b (Rashi).

10 Ethiopic Book of Enoch 6-8. Jubilees 5:1-10.

11 Bereshith Rabbah 48:11.

not execute one."<sup>12</sup> Yet *Bnei HaElohim* ("Watchers" in Enoch) are caretakers or sentinels over humanity. Surely, they hold diverse skills and abilities. The "Watchers" teach man various arts, such as magic, astronomy and metallurgy.<sup>13</sup>

Can these inconsistencies be resolved? Jewish mysticism portrays a parallel between heaven and earth. If we assume that God creates a multitude of species in this world, perhaps the celestial realms abound with numerous life forms. Varieties of angels, as appearing in the Bible, would indeed be a multiple genre.

Primary *malakhim* fit the mode of the Midrash, but what of complex *malakhim*? What does the Midrash actually say? "The evil inclination does not *rule* over angels . . ." This does not mean it is *absent*. Divine beings do not have material demands or desires. However, anthropomorphic angels (designated "man," "men" and *Bnei HaElohim*) can react to sensual stimuli.

Concerning *Bnei HaElohim*, we note the text, *The sons of God saw the daughters of Man, that they were fair . . .* (Gen. 6:2). Why does the Bible emphasize "saw" before describing their transgression? There is a cause-and-effect relationship. These are not mortals, guided by internal cravings. Their "evil impulse" lies *in potentia* and can only be triggered externally.

The complex *malakhim* of Abraham and Lot are offered food and do eat.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the primary *malakh* who visits Samson's parents refuses their present. He suggests a sacrifice to God, and ultimately ascends into its flames (Jud. 18:15-20).

A remarkable motif is composed, of beings fantastic yet strangely similar; heavenly denizens that relate to man. The account of angels is vast and diverse

12 Ber. Rab. 50:2.

13 Enoch 7-8.

14 Some say, they *appeared* to eat. (Rashi, Jonathan ben Uziel).