

The Creation and Fall of the Angels

Roger Beckwith

The creation and fall of mankind are clearly taught throughout the Bible, and with great consistency, but the creation and fall of the angels are hardly more than hinted at. They are probably among those matters on which we are taught only what we need to know, however much our curiosity might wish for more.

Nevertheless, we learn enough to be aware of certain distinctions between the two cases. The creation of the angels does not appear in Genesis 1 and 2, which deal only with the creation of visible beings, and the fall of the angels does not appear in Genesis 3, which deals only with the fall of mankind. The creation of man (properly deserving of that name) began with a single couple, and the rest of mankind came from that couple by way of marriage and procreation, made more necessary by the fact of death; but marriage and death were not intended for angels (Luke 20:34-36), and it seems quite probable that the angels may each have been created individually, whether together or singly.

The fall of the angels has likewise clear differences from the fall of mankind. The fall of mankind took place in the original couple, and the sin which from then on burdened them passed to all their descendants, so that the whole human race is fallen. The fall of the angels, however, related only to some of them. Those who did not follow Satan's example did not participate in his fall, and from then on are distinguished from the rest as the 'angels of God', the 'holy' or 'elect' angels.

The phrase 'elect angels' (1 Tim. 5:21) points to another distinction between mankind and the angels. Whereas by the election of God some of humanity, though fallen, are being redeemed, some of the angels, by the election of God, have been kept from ever falling.

The Creation of the Angels

Although incidental references to angels appear often in the Old Testament, from which we can learn much about them, it is not until the New Testament that we are explicitly told of their creation. We can infer that they have not

always existed from the fact that eternity is a prerogative of God, and the evidence that they regularly serve God strongly suggests that he was their creator. Their very name (Hebrew *malak*, Greek *aggelos*) means ‘messenger’, and investigation shows that it is always God who is sending the message (sometimes in deeds rather than words). But when we come to the New Testament, we are explicitly told that God made all things, and made them through his Son and Word Jesus Christ (John 1:3, 10; 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 1:2), and in Colossians 1:16 that the things he made through Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ, include things in the heavens as well as upon the earth, things invisible as well as visible, ‘whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers’, in other words, angels.

‘Principalities and powers’ is an expression repeatedly used by Paul when referring to angels in positions of authority, whether good angels or evil (Rom. 8:38; Eph. 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:15), to which the corresponding expression used by Peter is ‘angels and authorities and powers’ (1 Pet. 3:22). The New Testament also refers to at least one ‘archangel’, namely Michael (1 Thess. 4:16; Jude 9), elsewhere called the ‘great prince’ and ‘one of the chief princes’, the champion of God’s people (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1); and both Testaments refer to Cherubim (Gen. 3:24; 2 Sam. 22:11; Ezek. 10:1-22; Rev. 4:6-8; 5:6-14; etc.) and the Old Testament at least to Seraphim (Isa. 6:2-8; but note that the Cherubim of Rev. 4 have various features of the Seraphim, such as six wings and the repeating of the Sanctus), living creatures particularly close to the presence of God, and usually thought of as important angels.

While human beings are embodied spirits (Num. 16:22; 27:16), angels are simply spirits (Ps. 104:4; Heb. 1:7, 14), which accounts for the fact that they are normally invisible. The sceptical Sadducees, unlike the Pharisees, denied their existence, just as they denied the survival of the human spirit outside the body (Acts 23:8-9), while the Essenes not only affirmed their existence but even speculated about their names (see Josephus, *Jewish War* 2:142), probably in the manner exemplified in the Book of Enoch and the Qumran writings. The translation of Psalm 104:4 as ‘spirits’ (Hebrew *ruchoth*, Greek *pneumata*), which the New Testament seems to adopt, is favoured by the grammar, even if not by the context, of the verse. Though invisible, angels are extremely numerous—possibly as numerous as the human race (Deut. 33:2; Dan. 7:10; Matt. 26:53; Heb. 12:22; Rev. 5:11). They are also outstandingly strong (Ps.

103:20; Luke 22:43; 2 Thess. 1:7; 2 Pet. 2:11), have great though limited knowledge (1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 2:2; 1 Pet. 1:12; Rev. 1:1) and for a time had superhuman dignity (Ps. 8:5). But men are forbidden to worship angels, for only God, their creator, may be worshipped (Col. 2:18; Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9). Like men, angels are personal and have names, two of which, Gabriel ('man of God') and Michael ('Who is like God?') are made known to us, the former in Daniel 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26, and the latter in Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev. 12:7. But though personal, and in fellowship with one another, angels do not marry (Mark 12:25). Sometimes angels are called 'sons of God' (Gen. 6:2, 4; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7), perhaps meaning that, like men, they are made in the image of God: the same phrase is used of Adam in Luke 3:38. Angels stand in the presence of God (Luke 1:19; Rev. 8:2), not simply to be sent on his errands but also to praise him (Pss. 103:20; 148:2), to pray for their human charges (Matt. 18:10) and to witness his joy over every sinner who repents (Luke 15:10), while they are waiting to be sent on their next commission. They will accompany Christ at his second coming (Matt. 25:31; Mark 8:38).

When it was that the angels were created is not clearly revealed, but it was in time for them to shout for joy at the rest of God's creative work (Job 38:7), and in time for them to fall into sin before man's own fall into sin, in which Satan was active as his deceiver (Rev. 12:9).

The Fall of the Angels

The fall of the angels is likewise shrouded in mystery, but it seems that about a third of them fell, led by Satan (Rev. 12:3-4). They are here called 'stars', but angels tend to be linked with stars, as both belonging in the heavens. The name Satan means 'adversary', so was presumably given to him after his fall; and he is also called the devil (Greek *diabolos*, literally 'slanderer'), the evil one and the tempter, titles equally negative. Some early Jewish interpreters, such as the authors of the Book of Enoch, thought that the time when the angels fell was when they formed liaisons with the daughters of men (Gen. 6: 1-4), but it seems from the activities of the serpent in Eden, and from his identification with Satan in Revelation 12:9, that their fall must have occurred earlier, and that what we read of in Genesis 6 is a later sin and not their original one. The angels who followed Satan are occasionally still called his 'angels' (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 12:7, 9), but much more frequently 'devils' or 'demons' (Hebrew *shed*, Greek *daimon*, *daimonion*). In pagan literature, the Greek terms are used

of deities, and in both Testaments idolatrous worship is understood to involve the worship of devils or demons (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:36-38; 1 Cor. 10:19-22; Rev. 9:20). It is also foretold that demons will spread heretical teachings in the church through false prophecy (1 Tim. 4:1-4). But the context in which demons most frequently appear, in the New Testament at least, is that of demon-possession.

Since angels are spirits, and demons are by origin angels, it seems that it is possible for them to enter into bodies not their own. It is striking how often in the New Testament the demons involved in demon-possession are described as 'spirits', though usually with an epithet such as 'unclean' or 'wicked'. We even hear of several demons or spirits entering into the same body (Matt. 12:45; Mark 5:9; Luke 8:2). We also hear of demons or spirits entering into the bodies of animals (Mark 5:10-13).

If the account of the temptation of Eve is to be understood literally, this would explain how Satan could speak through the mouth of a serpent. The unnatural marriages between the sons of God and the daughters of men (Gen. 6:1-4) could be similarly explained: it would simply be necessary for the demons to enter into the bodies of men in order to marry women. Though a different explanation of this mysterious passage has been attempted, the traditional interpretation is also the oldest, going back to pre-Christian times, and seems to be endorsed in the New Testament by the Epistle of Jude 6-7.

The motive behind the fall of the angels, so 1Timothy 3:6 suggests, was pride. Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, book 5, infers that this led them to be envious of the Son of God. They could also have been envious (had they known its destiny) of the human race, since the Son of God would take human nature, not angelic nature (Heb. 2:16-17), and would rule over angels and be worshipped by angels in his glorified humanity (Eph. 1:20-22; Heb. 1:6; 2:5-9; 1 Pet. 3:22), while angels would be sent from heaven to assist the human beneficiaries of his saving work (Heb. 1:14), who would also finally share in judging angels (1 Cor. 6:3). But envy of humanity is speculation (though an ancient speculation, first found in *Wisdom 2:24*). All we actually know is that Satan tempted Eve to be envious of God (Gen. 3:5), which suggests that he is envious of God himself.

The result of the angels' fall is stated in 2 Peter 2:4, where we read that 'God spared not angels when they sinned, but cast them down to hell, and committed them to pits of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment'. Since they were 'reserved unto judgment', this was evidently not their final punishment, though it could be regarded as the first death of those who were previously immortal (Luke 20:36). Their 'second death' is to be 'the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels' (Matt. 25:41), 'the lake of fire and brimstone' (Rev. 20:10, 14-15; 21:8). They are to share this fate with their great human allies, called the Beast and the False Prophet, and with all other sinners whose names are not written in the book of life.

In the meantime, the fallen angels remain remarkably active outside their appointed prison. In Luke 8:31, the demons possessing the man called Legion entreat Jesus that he will not command them to depart into the 'abyss', which is evidently their proper dwelling place, and in Matthew 8:29 they ask Jesus whether he has come to torment them 'before the time'. After his battle with Michael and the holy angels, the dragon and his angels are said to be cast down 'to the earth', and in line with this the dragon is said to have cast his followers 'to the earth' at their rebellion, thus leading to the warning 'Woe for the earth and for the sea, because the devil is gone down unto you, having great wrath, knowing that he hath but a short time' (Rev. 12:4, 9, 12). During this short time, Satan can be called 'the prince of this world' (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), and he even boasts of it to Jesus (Luke 4:6). He goes to and fro in the earth and walks up and down in it, looking on men with no friendly eye, but rather as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (Job 1:7; 2:2; 1 Pet. 5:8).

Apart from his favourite practice of tempting, he also inflicts suffering (Job 1:12-19; 2:6-8; Luke 13:16; 2 Cor. 12:7), and does anything he can to resist the course of redemption (Zech. 3:1-2; 2 Cor. 2:11; 1 Thess. 2:18). His followers do much the same. Perhaps they are not envious of us, but, if not, they undoubtedly hate us; and it seems likely that they also hate the animal creation over which we have dominion as God's stewards, and which experiences so much suffering while awaiting its foretold release (Isa. 11:1-10; Rom. 8:18-25).

Even from their former home of heaven, Satan and his followers are not as yet wholly excluded, though their position there is by no means secure. Satan

appears at times before God, fashioning himself into an angel of light, and taking the opportunity, as the great slanderer, to accuse God's human servants of being hypocrites (Job 1:6-11; 2: 1-5; 2 Cor. 11:14). We read too of another unscrupulous spirit offering his services to God in similar circumstances (1 Kings 22:19-23; 2 Chr. 18:18-22). Still in the New Testament Satan is called 'the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the sons of disobedience' (Eph. 2:2), and his followers, against whom we wrestle, are still called 'the principalities, the powers, the world-rulers of this darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' (Eph. 6:12). So, although Jesus has been willing to experience the worst that they could do in 'your hour and the power of darkness' (Luke 22:53), and has 'stripped off from himself the principalities and the powers, triumphing over them in the cross' (Col. 2:15), thus causing 'the prince of this world to be judged' (John 16:11), yet in the brief remainder of Satan's short time we must still be ready to experience his great wrath, perhaps coming today to its worst fury, before Christ returns and brings his enormities to an end. As we await that day, we must seek, like the Seventy, to overcome Satan by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony, even if it be at the cost of our lives, knowing that, having been cast down once, he can be cast down again and again (Luke 10:17-20; Rev. 12:10-11), and will, before very long, be bruised under our feet (Rom. 16:20).

Revd. Dr. ROGER BECKWITH is the former Warden of Latimer House, Oxford, and former Liturgy Lecturer at Tyndale Hall, Bristol and Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

For further reading:

Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London & Edinburgh: Nelson, 1883-4), part I, ch. xiii, "Angels".

G. H. Pember, *Earth's Earliest Ages* (15th edn.,Walsham-le-Willows: G. H. Lang, 1942).

M. F. Unger, *Biblical Demonology* (Wheaton Il: Van Kampen, 1953).

J. Stafford Wright, "Demon-Possession," in *New Bible Dictionary* (3rd edn.), (Leicester: IVP).