

Job 38:4-11 (Opening)

4 *“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
 Tell me, if you have understanding.*

5 *Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
 Or who stretched the line upon it?*

6 *On what were its bases sunk,
 or who laid its cornerstone,*

7 *when the morning stars sang together
 and all the sons of God shouted for joy?*

8 *“Or who shut in the sea with doors
 when it burst out from the womb,*

9 *when I made clouds its garment
 and thick darkness its swaddling band,*

10 *and prescribed limits for it
 and set bars and doors,*

11 *and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
 and here shall your proud waves be stayed’?*

Angels (the good guys)

Angels.

If you say the word to 10 people, you'd probably get 10 different descriptions of what they are.

That shouldn't be a big surprise, considering what our culture has done to our understanding of angels.

"Touched by an Angel", a TV series where a majority cast of female angels go around and help people with their problems.

"Charlie's Angels", a TV series about three beautiful crime-fighting women work for a man no one ever sees.

"Earth Angel", a song recorded by the Four Seasons, where the lead singer professes his love for a "vision of loveliness".

"Michael", a movie starring John Travolta as a smoking, drinking, foul mouthed archangel Michael, living in a small town in Iowa.

I'm sure there's lots of other examples, but I can't come up with any more right now.

We've confused ourselves about angels. We've made them pop culture, and totally forgotten what they really are. And I'll warn you right now, to combat that pop culture image, I've had to pull in a lot of different Scriptures, so be ready to move around a lot in the Bible today!

What are they like?

So what are they? Well, they're heavenly beings, created by God for a purpose. There's several different types of these heavenly beings. How do we categorize them? Well, in general, by how they look.

Human looking

The angels that we think about most are the ones that look a lot like us. In fact, the writer of Hebrews reminds us to show hospitality, because we may not be able to tell angels from people.

Hebrews 13:2

² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Abraham is a good example of that hospitality, in Genesis 18:2. He sees three strangers and invites them for food and relaxation. Two of them later headed off to Sodom and Gomorrah, for a not so pleasant visit (for anyone involved!).

Genesis 18:2

² He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth

Throughout the New Testament, we see heavenly messengers who look just like normal humans, with a few differences. With Zechariah, John's father, we see one in a place where no one else should be, in the inner sanctuary, just outside the holy of holies, in the temple. Zechariah expected to be alone, and rightfully so.

Luke 1:11-13

¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.

Later, that same angel, Gabriel, went to tell Mary that she had been chosen by God, and that she would have a baby, and name him Jesus.

Luke 1:26-30

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is

with you!”²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

Later on in Luke, after Jesus’ crucifixion, we see two angels who rolled the stone from the tomb.

Luke 24:1-9

¹ But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. ² And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. ⁵ And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.” ⁸ And they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest.

Notice in verse 4 it says they were wearing “dazzling apparel”. The Greek word means something like glowing, shining, or brilliant. If it were a laundry detergent commercial, the angels would be wearing the clothes washed in the brand being advertised.

Some other descriptions of these human-looking heavenly beings includes their skin looking like burnished bronze, or glowing bronze. The Greek draws a picture of bronze while it’s still hot in the fire, white hot and ready to pour. But it seems that some of these clues that could give them away as being angels can be concealed, so they can look just like us.

But there’s more “heavenly beings” than just the ones that look like us.

Non-human looking

There are three types of “heavenly beings” that don’t look like we do that I can find in the Bible. It’s easiest to call them by their Hebrew names, since we don’t have any real definitions of their Hebrew names.

Cherubim

The first group of non-human looking heavenly beings I want to talk about are probably the best known of the heavenly beings other than the human looking angels; the Cherubim. This is the same word we get the word Cherub from, those cute little fat babies with wings floating around and shooting arrows at hearts one day a year.

I hate to break it to you but that’s not what they look like, at least that’s not how Ezekiel described them. But we’ll get to that.

First, a short Hebrew lesson. In Hebrew, if you want to make something plural, you add ‘im’ to the end of the word. So, a group of Hassidic Jews are the Hassidim. Simple, right? So, a group of cherubs, or all the cherubs in a single category are cherubim. But what does cherub mean?

Well, there’s a lot of discussion about that among Hebrew scholars. Some people think the word is derived from an ancient Akkadian word karibu, meaning intercessor. Karibu looked sort of like the sphinx, or a griffin if you know your mythological beasts; half lion and half eagle, or a lion with wings and a man’s head.

Chreub is also similar to other Hebrew words, one meaning ‘to come near’, another ‘great’ or ‘mighty’. Interestingly, the Cherubim are near to the throne of God, but also used as protectors or warriors. Let’s look at a few examples.

Last week, our opening scripture was from Genesis 3. In verse 24 it says this:

Genesis 3:24

²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

These cherubim were assigned the task of protecting the tree of life, so that humans couldn't eat from that tree, too, like they did from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Cherubim are mentioned 100 times in the Bible. Why so many times? Cherubim were the primary decoration motif for the Tabernacle and the Temple. There were two cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant, and a design of cherubim was embroidered onto the curtains of the tabernacle, and the veil separating the holy of holies from the inner courts. In Solomon's temple, there were two large statues of cherubim in the inner sanctuary, and cherubim and palm trees were carved into the wooden panels and doors of the temple.

Why so many cherubim in the temple and tabernacle? Well, if we look at Hebrews 9:24, it gives us a hint.

Hebrews 9:24

²⁴ For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

The holy places here on the earth, made with human hands, were copies of the true holy place in heaven where God is. And as we'll see, God seems to be surrounded by cherubim.

The scariest and the best description of cherubim is in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 1:4-14

⁴ As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. ⁵ And from the

midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, ⁶ but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. ⁷ Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. ⁸ Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: ⁹ their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. ¹⁰ As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. ¹¹ Such were their faces. And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. ¹² And each went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went. ¹³ As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. ¹⁴ And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning.

Here in chapter 1, Ezekiel doesn't actually call them cherubim, but he describes the same thing in chapter 10, and there he does call them cherubim. If you keep reading in chapter 1 here in Ezekiel, he says that the cherubim are carrying the throne of God. Oh, and, let me just say here that if I was confronted by one of these heavenly beings, I'd be more than terrified!

But they're only one of the non-human looking heavenly beings described in the Bible!

Seraphim

Another of the non-human looking folks are the seraphim. One would be a seraph. The origin of the Hebrew word for seraph is uncertain, just

like cherub, but it could be from a root similar to the word for a burning consuming fire, one that totally consumes whatever is burning.

If you look at Numbers 21:6, it describes what we think are venomous snakes sent by God among the people of Israel while they were in the desert, as a punishment for sin.

Numbers 21:6

⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.

Here, the Hebrew word translated as fiery is seraphim, some think because the bite of those poisonous snakes burned like fire.

So, seraphim are “fiery ones”, or flaming destroyers.

The only place that seraphim are actually mentioned by name in the bible is in Isaiah chapter 6.

Isaiah 6:1-8

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”*

⁴ And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶ Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."

That's all we know about the seraphim. But we know they're in the presence of God, and they praise God continuously.

Ophimim (wheels)

The last group of the non-human looking angels that I could find in the Bible is the Ophimim. In a few places outside the Bible they're also called the Galgalim. I hadn't really thought of these guys as being heavenly "beings" until I read through a few commentaries. To be honest, there's nothing else they could be.

The Ophimim are only mentioned in Ezekiel. In most translations, the word Ophimim is translated as wheels, but a more literal but more imprecise translations would be something like "spinney things".

Ezekiel 1:51-21

¹⁵ Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. ¹⁶ As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl. And the four had the same likeness, their appearance and construction being as it were a wheel within a wheel. ¹⁷ When they went, they went in any of their four directions without turning as they went. ¹⁸ And their rims were tall and awesome, and the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. ¹⁹ And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose. ²⁰ Wherever the spirit wanted to go, they went, and the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the

wheels. ²¹ *When those went, these went; and when those stood, these stood; and when those rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.*

Although it's not a very clear description, you could think of them as possibly two wheels at 90 degrees to each other, like a gyroscope. Or, if they're not really wheel-like but are "spinney things", possibly like a tornado in the shape of a ball, spinning in multiple directions at once.

They're described as being like "the gleaming of beryl". The Hebrew word here is tarsheesh. It refers to a precious stone, but the problem is, we don't know which one! It's translated beryl here, which can be yellow, sea-green, deep green, or even red. Not very helpful. Some translate it as chrysolite or yellow jasper. More than likely Ezekiel was trying to describe a glowing yellowish color, very similar to the color he used to describe the cherubim, gleaming metal in the midst of a fire.

There's no other description of these heavenly beings, either, and Ezekiel is the only person who has written down for us an account of seeing them.

What do they do

So, now we've got a description of what they may look like (sort of). What is it that these heavenly beings do?

Speak for God (messenger)

Well, the biggest example of what we see them doing is speaking for God, as His messenger. Gabriel is a good example of this, speaking to Daniel, Zachariah (John's father), and Mary.

Praise God (Isaiah 6:3)

Another thing they do is praise and worship God. In Revelation 4 we see four "living creatures" that praise and worship God constantly. It's similar to the passage in Isaiah 6:3.

Revelation 4:6-8

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷ the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸ And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

*“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!”*

Do His word and His will

Angels are obedient to God’s will. They do His commands. They are the ones who execute specific aspects of His will.

Psalm 103:20, 21

*²⁰ Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!
²¹ Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!*

How many are there?

How many angels are there? Well, that’s a good question. Luke 25:52-54 gives us a hint at that.

Luke 25:52-54

⁵² Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?”

A Roman legion was about 5000 men, so more than 12 legions would be more than 60,000 angels. But are all the angels designated as warriors?

If you look at Revelation 5:11-12, we get a much bigger number.

Revelation 5:11-12

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice,

*“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”*

What is a myriad? The word myriad comes from the Greek word myrias, which literally translates as 10,000, but implies an uncountable multitude.

But, here’s something to remember about how many angels there are. There’s now 1/3 less than the number they started with. We’ll go into more detail on this next week.

The key thing to remember about angels is this: like us, they were made for a purpose. We should follow their example by worshiping God constantly, praising God constantly, being ambassadors for God, sharing His word, and defending His cause.

Revelation 12:1-9 (Closing)

¹ *And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.*

² *She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.* ³ *And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great*

red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. ⁴ *His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.*

⁵ *She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne,*

⁶ *and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.*

⁷ *Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back,* ⁸ *but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.* ⁹ *And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.*

Questions

1. The descriptions of the powerful, non-human like angels are written by prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, John). They see things and write down things they don't understand. This is one of the reasons that apocalyptic writings in the Bible are hard to understand. What are some of the things that non-believers or marginal believers will ascribe to the descriptions by these prophets?
2. Another difficulty we have is the language problem. Many of the terms used to describe angels and other heavenly beings are extremely ancient, and time has erased or modified the meanings of the words used. What are some examples of that? What are some modern examples of the meanings of words changing, even over a relatively short time?
3. Why do you think that angels have been portrayed more by women in the few centuries, even though there's no Biblical or even extra-biblical reference to female (or male, for that matter) angels?