

Prayer Before Study

Grant, O Merciful God, that I may ardently desire, prudently examine, truthfully acknowledge, and perfectly accomplish what is pleasing to Thee for the praise and glory of Thy Name. Amen.
-St. Thomas Aquinas

The Mission of the Angels in the Old Testament

I. Summary

To begin this week's lecture on angels, let us first summarize what we have learned so far.

John Paul II puts the reason for their creation succinctly in this General Audience that he gave on August 6, 1986,

“God created both realities from the very beginning - the spiritual reality and the corporeal, the earthly world and the angelic world. **He created all this at one and the same time (simul) with a view to the creation of man**, constituted of spirit and matter and set, according to the biblical narrative, in the framework of a world already established according to His laws and already measured by time.” (emphasis added)

Additionally, John Paul II then confirms what we have already talked about in regards to the hierarchy of angels,

“Sacred Scripture refers to the angels also by using terms that are not only personal (like the proper names of Raphael, Gabriel, Michael) but also “collective” (like the titles: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, powers, dominions, principalities), just as it distinguishes between angels and archangels. While bearing in mind analogous and representative character of the language of the sacred text, we



can deduce that these beings and persons, as it were grouped together in society, **are divided into orders and grades, corresponding to the measure of their perfection and to the tasks entrusted to them.** The ancient authors and the liturgy itself speak also of the angelic choirs (nine, according to Dionysius the Areopagite)." (emphasis added)

So we have the angels, pure spiritual beings created by God at one time at the beginning of creation, given the task of serving Man and communicating God's divine will throughout Salvation History. Each angel belongs to a particular "choir," which relates their level of perfection and describes the task given to them.

Lucifer, a great angel created good by God, refused to serve God and Man and through a sin of pride, was cast out of Heaven by Michael the Archangel along with a "third" of the angels in Heaven.

Thus, we step out of the creation narrative and step into the remainder of Salvation History by first examining the mission of the angels in the Old Testament.

II. Four Tasks of the Old Testament

John Paul II, one of the only Popes who has written extensively on angels, gives us an outline of four tasks that the angels had during the time of the Old Testament,

"The Old Testament emphasizes especially the special participation of the angels in the **celebration of the glory which the creator receives as a tribute of praise on the part of the created world.** The Psalms are in a special way the interpreters of this voice, when, for example, they proclaim "Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights! Praise him all his angels ..." (Ps 148:1-2).



Similarly in Psalm 102 (103): “Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word!” (Ps 102 [103]:20). This last verse of Psalm 102 indicates that **the angels take part, in a way proper to themselves, in God's government of creation**, as “the mighty ones who do his word” according to the plan established by Divine Providence. To the angels in particular is entrusted a **special care and solicitude for people, whose requests and prayers they present to God** as, mentioned, for example, in the Book of Tobit (Cf. especially Tob 3:17 and 12:12). Psalm 90 proclaims:” “For to his angels he has given command about you... upon their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone”(cf. Ps 90-[91]:11-12). Following the Book of Daniel it can be said that the **tasks of angels as ambassadors of the living God extend not only to individual human beings and to those who have special duties, but also to entire nations** (Dan 10:13-21).” (July 30, 1986, emphasis added)

These four tasks outlined look like this:

1. **Praising God**
2. **Government of Creation**
3. **Intercessors**
4. **Messengers to Individuals and Nations**

III. Praising God & Government of Creation

Coupled with their profound intellect and will, all angels cannot help but praise God for the greatness and beauty of everything created. As already noted by John Paul II, the Psalms is the key source of this task.

“Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights! Praise him all his angels ...” (Ps 148:1-2).”



Angels: Who Are They And How Can They Help Us Become Saints?

“Psalm 102 (103): “Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word!” (Ps 102 [103]:20).”

Jesus later on confirmed that the angels, even those entrusted with the task of being a “guardian” angel, continually see the face of God,

“[T]heir angels in heaven always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 18:10)

In all that the angels do, whether on Heaven or on earth, they see the face of God and praise Him for His wonderful works. It is hard to comprehend this as we currently occupy space and are limited to one particular location. Angels, however, are purely spiritual and do not occupy space as we do and so are always able, in a mysterious way, to see the face of God.

Additionally, as we have already covered in a previous lesson, there are angels that have been given the task of governing creation. I mentioned before how,

“Origen speaks of angels set in charge of the four elements....and of angels presiding over the different domains of the universe, over the stars, the meteors, the plants, and the animals.” (Jean Danielou, *The Angels and Their Mission*, 3)

Saint Thomas Aquinas confirmed this statement when he wrote,

“All corporeal things are governed by the angels. And this is not only the teaching of the holy doctors, but of all the philosophers” (Jean Danielou, *The Angels and Their Mission*, 3).

Particular angels, then, have been entrusted by God to govern creation and to keep it in order. According to our hierarchy that we established last



week, it would appear that the “virtues” are the ones who have been given this task,

“The *virtues* receive their orders from the dominations and “run” the universe, so to speak, especially the heavenly bodies. (“Virtue” used to mean power, might, or energy.)”

IV. Intercessors

Generally speaking, angels, like the saints in Heaven, have a particular task of interceding for us and bringing to God our prayers. As John Paul II mentioned, this is most especially seen in the Book of Tobit in the Old Testament.

The Book of Tobit contains one of the longest episodes with an angel recorded in the Bible. God sends “Raphael,” an archangel, to assist Tobit, his son Tobias and his wife Sarah. At first Raphael’s identity is concealed, but he later on reveals that he is an angel from God.

In any case, in it Tobit and Sarah both pray to God separately in Chapter 3 and at the end of the chapter we see this verse,

“And the holy angel of the Lord, Raphael was sent to heal them both, whose prayers at one time were rehearsed in the sight of the Lord.” (Tobit 3:25)

Later on when Raphael reveals to them his true identity, he confirms his role as intercessor,

“When thou didst pray with tears, and didst bury the dead, and didst leave thy dinner, and hide the dead by day in thy house, and bury them by night, I offered thy prayer to the Lord.” (Tobit 12:12)



V. Messengers to Individuals and Nations

The final task of the angels in the Old Covenant was that of messenger. This was one of the most important tasks of the angels as it meant transmitting God's divine plan of salvation to the People of Israel, leading them along the path that God laid out for them.

The first example of this is in the life of Abraham, for it is through an encounter with an angel that Abraham is promised numerous generations,

“And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, saying:

By my own self have I sworn, saith the Lord: because thou hast done this thing, and hast not spared thy only begotten son for my sake:

I will bless thee, and I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand that is by the sea shore: thy seed shall possess the gates of their enemies.

And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice.” (Gen. 22:15-18)

Later on in the Old Testament we see again how an angel visits to communicate to the mother of Samson that she will bear a son,

And an angel of the Lord appeared to her, and said: Thou art barren and without children: but thou shalt conceive and bear a son. (Judges 13:3)

It is interesting to note how often angels are the ones to deliver messages to the People of God about the promise of bearing children. As we shall see in



the New Testament, this is repeated again with St. John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.

What is most fascinating is that the Jewish people would later hand on a tradition that the “whole economy of the Old Testament was communicated through the medium of the angels” (Jean Danielou, *The Angels and Their Mission*, 5).

The Jewish people would go even so far as to say that the angels assisted in the communication of the Law on Mount Sinai. Josephus confirmed this when he wrote: “It is from God, through angels, that we have learned the most beautiful of our doctrines and the most holy sections of our laws” (Jean Danielou, *The Angels and Their Mission*, 6).

This concept is even found in the letters of St. Paul, where he writes in his letter to the Galatians:

“Why then was the law? It was set because of transgressions, until the seed should come, to whom he made the promise, being ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.” (Galatians 3:19)

The mediation of the angels does not lessen God’s power or involvement in the affairs of Man. When viewed in the larger picture of Salvation History, it makes sense that after the Fall God would send angels to be a sort of guide, paving the way for the Incarnation, when God would come down Himself and communicate His law. It was because of Man’s attachment to sin that God needed to bring His people along gradually, revealing Himself slowly overtime, culminating in the Incarnation.

This particular belief in the role of the angels as a sort of “teacher” or “guardian,” who guided the People of God in the Old Testament is again found in the writings of St. Paul. He writes in his letter to the Galatians,



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“As long as the heir is a child, he is under guardians and stewards. So we, too, when we were children, were enslaved under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of time came, God sent His Son.” (Galatians 4:1-6) (Jean Danielou, *The Angels and Their Mission*, 10)

So the angels were there in the Old Testament as God’s instruments in preparing the way for His Son, Jesus Christ.

Concerning the role of the angels in the protection and guidance of the nation of Israel, it is viewed in the Jewish tradition that Michael was appointed protector of the nation. This teaching finds its roots in the book of Daniel, where the archangel Michael appears and reveals his God-given duty (Daniel 10:13-21; 12:1).

In summary, the angels were given many tasks in the Old Testament, but mainly revolved around these four areas:

1. Praising God
2. Government of Creation
3. Intercessors
4. Messengers to Individuals and Nations

That is it for this week. Next week we will dive into the role of the angels in the New Testament and see how their mission changes with the coming of Jesus Christ.

***Please be sure to participate in the online discussion!**

