

ANGELS *of the* BIBLE

FINDING GRACE, BEAUTY,
and MEANING

KATE MOOREHEAD
with SCOTT BROWN



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Introduction

Angels stand at the edges of our consciousness. For a variety of reasons, we tend to avoid discussion of them among intellectual circles. But they are there nonetheless, in the greatest of the biblical moments: at the gates of the Garden of Eden, at the birth of Christ, at the tomb of the resurrection. Might it be time to wonder who they are?

Sir Isaac Newton and other enlightenment thinkers drew the conclusion that reality must be based on what can be seen and proven. All else could be considered myth, story, narrative. Protestant theologians in the twenty-first century sought to find a way to take both scripture and Newtonian science seriously. But how could some of these things described in the Bible be true when no one had ever seen them? So we quietly brushed off the miracles of Jesus, the possession of demons, and the appearance of angels. Maybe they happened back then but they don't happen now. As intellectual people, we wondered: Who can take angels seriously while embracing the profound progress of science?

The past few decades have seen the rise of quantum physics—scientific principles that help us understand the wacky and weird behavior of photons, electrons, and other particles that make up the universe. As we have collectively explored quantum physics, we have begun to embrace the idea that not everything has a common-sense answer. Some of the ways of the world are unpredictable and mysterious. This approach to science has led theologians and biblical scholars to

wonder once more about the intersection of science and faith. If we perceive reality in only three dimensions but in quantum physics, we accept that there are many more dimensions, could it be possible that angels are flying in front of our faces and yet we cannot see them? What if our perception is limited and miracles and healings and exorcisms and angels are quite possible? What if science has gotten so large and so cosmic that we, in fact, must entertain a reality beyond our visible sight? It seems that we have re-opened the door to miracles and to the awe and wonder of the cosmos.

Though I will occasionally refer to biblical scholarship, this book is primarily devotional. These devotions explore the realm of the mystical, the cosmic, the *mysterium tremendum*. They ponder the *numinous*, as the German theologian Rudolf Otto once described it, the place where God dwells, the realm of the angels.

The devotions include most of the appearances of angels in the Bible (the Old and New Testaments but not the Apocrypha). I have tried to cover all major and significant apparitions to give both a broad and deep exploration of angels in the Bible. If you want to look at every time the word angel appears in either the Hebrew or Greek, I recommend a concordance.¹

I have designed this book to be used as a daily companion, read in any season, but perhaps particularly poignant during the seasons of Advent and Christmas or Easter, when the appearances of angels in scripture are numerous. I want us to move into the heart of theological reflection and try to uncover the nuances of these appearances. I believe in order to consider the realm of angels, we must approach these passages from a contemplative state, to meditate on them as one would gaze at a piece of art. Angels cannot be grasped with raw intellect alone. But they can be known relationally as friends, and we can stand in awe of their beauty as we do the stars.

I struggled with how to address angels in regard to pronouns. Many of the angels are described as looking like men in both the Old and New Testaments (Abraham welcomes three men to his table; Mary Magdalene

sees a man—or two—in the tomb). Several of the angels are also given male names such as Michael and Gabriel. However, angels are never specifically given gender in scripture, and since they are immortal, it can be assumed that they do not reproduce. It is my assumption that angels somehow transcend gender. With this understanding as the foundation, I use a male pronoun if an angel is described as looking like a man or has a male name. But if the gender is not specified, I will alternate between male and female. The neuter pronoun doesn't work for me simply because angels are so alive and are not inanimate objects.

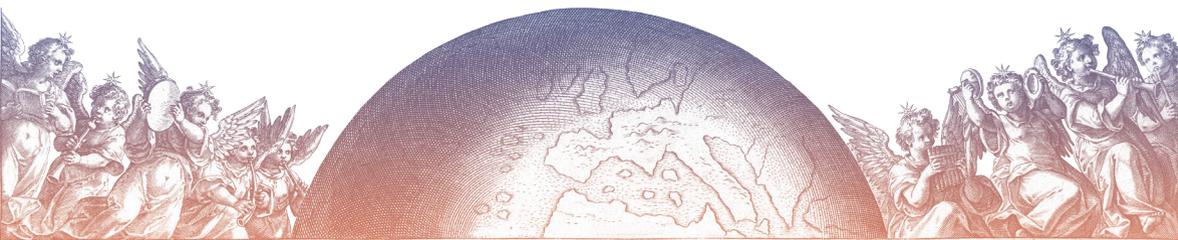
In order to assist in your contemplation, I have also included depictions of angels through art. We live in a day in which language is shifting. Images are on the rise. The icon of the Starbucks lady speaks louder to us than the words “good coffee.” When we see the Starbucks lady, we can taste the coffee. She touches our senses without a word. That is the power of imagery. With each passing year, I increasingly wonder if we are returning to hieroglyphics. From emojis to memes, we are placing images where words once were. Images are faster and more immediately vibrant. They reach us in the blink of an eye and on multiple levels. This is why it seemed futile for me to write a book about angels without including art.

I asked Professor Scott Brown, a friend and colleague, to enrich us with his extensive knowledge of Christian art by selecting paintings to highlight seven pivotal angelic appearances: cherubim at the gates of Eden, Abraham's three guests, Satan testing Job, Isaiah and the seraphim, the annunciation, final battle from Revelation, and the celestial hierarchy. Along with the images, Scott shares the historical and theological context of the paintings. Please take time to meditate on these images. It is my hope that by giving you a taste of the visual, you will become hungry to search for angels in your own lives. I believe that they are there to be found—and can even be seen from time to time.

The Bible asks us to read and digest its stories, not only to recall what God has done before but also to watch for what God is doing now. The Bible is a strange, frustrating, and miraculous text. It contradicts itself

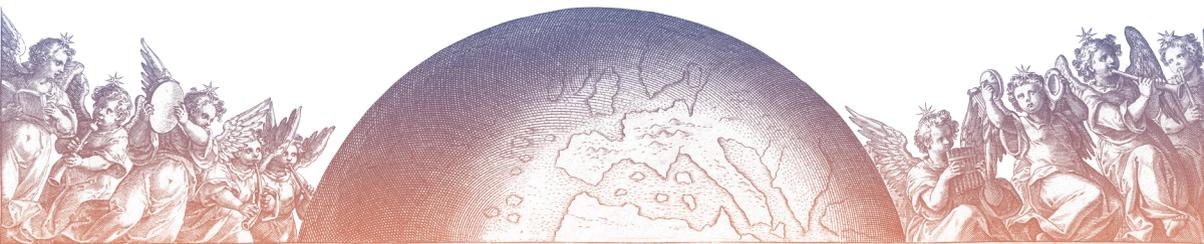
and depicts scenes that scare the heck out of me, and yet I truly believe scripture has the capacity to change my life—and yours. If we are to take the Bible as something more than a history book, we must open our minds to the continued existence of angels, and we must look at these apparitions with an eye to understanding our own lives and the role of angels within them.

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All Christians are called to ponder the impossible, to look between the worlds at the mystical possibilities that made the incarnation possible. Angels brought the message about Jesus to Mary. Angels sang before the shepherds and appeared to Joseph in dreams. Let us find them amidst the pages of scripture and wonder at their variety and magnificence, for these are the messengers of God.



THEY SHOULD HAVE SENT A POET

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.

Genesis 2:1

This magnificent verse comes at the end of the first creation story. God has called the world into being in six days and is about to rest on the seventh day. It seems that this new world has been articulated in the six creation proclamations: *Let there be...* light, heavens, dry land and vegetation, stars, aquatic animals and birds, beasts of the earth and humans. But in this beautiful phrase, scripture refers to a mysterious vastness beyond the aforementioned creation, a multitude that is not specified in the language of the ancient writers of Genesis. In other words, there is much more to God's creation than what meets the eye.

Angels are not named as part of God's creation. They simply appear in scripture, sent by God to help humans understand a divine message. Did God create them? Are they uncreated beings, somehow coexisting as part of the very being of God? Since angels are not God, they must be part of the creation, part of the vast array that is mentioned here.

Scripture never tries to explain angels: It simply records their appearances, and these appearances are sporadic and mysterious. Perhaps we are not capable of understanding angels. They seem to be part of a mystical world that transcends our understanding. We are asked only to behold and to listen. Not once in scripture are we asked to understand or rationalize the angelic beings that appear. The Bible never explains who angels are or where they come from; the words of scripture simply direct us to listen to their message, nothing more. For modern American

minds, this kind of mystical observation without understanding is frustrating. It is hard to swallow. No wonder we often want to deny the existence of angels. If we can't understand them, it's easier to dismiss them or assume they don't exist at all.

I love the movie *Contact* starring Jodie Foster. A brave young scientist is sent into space using a time/space machine that has been designed by aliens. When Eleanor Arroway, played by Foster, is sent to the outer reaches of the unknown, she sees beauty that she cannot describe with her scientific and mathematical vocabulary. She cries out: "So beautiful! So beautiful! They should have sent a poet." The scientist recognizes her limitations. The phenomena she is experiencing are so vast that they cannot be rationally explained or mathematically calculated; they can only be described with art, poetry, image, and symbol. What she experiences is beyond her comprehension yet touches her senses and moves her heart.

Perhaps angels are best conveyed by poets, painters, and musicians. Perhaps angels will never be fully understood by rational, intellectual minds but only grasped through imagination and the heart. Perhaps, as part of that vast array, angels are meant to be observed but never fully understood or examined. Perhaps they are simply beyond human understanding.



Art Feature



THE ANGEL OF PARADISE AND THE FIERY SWORD

It is a remarkable fact that our introduction to angels in the Bible involves one of the darkest and most painful moments in human history. We often depict angels as beautiful protectors, expressions of God's love, but in Genesis 3:24, we encounter the first angels in the Bible: cherubim sent by God to bar Adam and Eve and their descendants from returning to paradise. In that moment of God's anger and disappointment and of Adam and Eve's desolation, angels appear to remind us of our guilt and of what we have lost. The Bible describes these angels, placed before paradise, with "a sword flaming and turning," to keep watch as guardians of the Tree of Life.

In the religious art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, artists often depicted the cherubim mentioned in scripture as one angel (though there are many variations), standing between paradise and the forlorn figures of Adam and Eve, brandishing a sword to remind Adam and Eve that they cannot return. Representations like these were not usually meant just to depict the words of the Bible. They were often devotional aids, meant to inspire reflection on scripture and its meaning. Like any interpretation of the meaning of a text, such images reflect the way that scripture was read by the artist and his or her audience. Medieval and Renaissance religious art thus offers intimate insight into the history of Christian faith.

In a beautiful painting in a medieval copy of the *Bible historiale* (Fig. 1), for instance, a single angel brandishing the sword gently but firmly raises his hand to Adam's shoulder and urges him away from paradise, which is depicted behind the angel as a green place of trees and grass, ringed by fire. Adam and Eve, slump-shouldered and dressed in tattered animal-skin clothing, look backward over their shoulders at the angel and raise

their hands in distress, as if speaking. Each of these details gives form to a different idea that gives us insight as to how people in the past read and tried to understand this crucial part of the story of the Fall.



Fig. 1

In this image, the angel depicts a tangible reminder of our sin. He is not cruel or punishing, but his firm touch on Adam's shoulder carries a message. This door to paradise is closed to us, but God has opened a new one: repentance, a door of pardon and forgiveness in Christ, who called himself the door and the gateway to heaven (John 10:9). Interpreters of the Bible have often read the cherubim and the fiery sword as symbols of our return to grace through repentance and faith. The Venerable Bede, an English theologian in the early Middle Ages, suggested that the cherubim represent divine knowledge, sentinels of truth through which we come to know and recognize our own sin. The fiery sword, for Bede, is the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God," described by Paul in Ephesians 6:17, by which we must slay our temptations.



Fig. 2

In a famous illustrated psalter from the fourteenth century known as the Queen Mary Psalter (Fig. 2), the angel stands in almost exactly the same manner, placing his hand on Adam's shoulder. Behind the angel, in the hillock of earth beneath the Tree of Life, the tail of the serpent who tempted Eve is depicted disappearing into a hole in the ground, reminding the viewer that God punished the serpent too. God cursed the serpent, saying “dust you shall eat all the days of your life,” (Genesis 3:14), but God also warned us through the words to Eve that the serpent will lie in wait for her heel. The artist's message is that the serpent, in its dark hole in the earth, waits for us still.

First-century historian Philo of Alexandria, who influenced the thinking of the early church fathers, wrote that the cherubim represent God's authority and mercy but that the flaming sword flashing about in every direction represents God's reason, in constant rapid motion sparing what is good and cutting down what is evil. Versions of Philo's vision of God as powerful, merciful, and reasonable have inspired much religious art.