

## **A Multitude of Angels**

Recently, just a few days apart, the Church celebrated two angelic feasts – Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael (Archangels) on Sept. 29, and Guardian Angels on Oct. 2. Who/what are these beings, and what do they mean for us today?

Several religions of Middle Eastern origin include a belief in angels, although the details of those beliefs may vary. Some specifics are found in the Sacred Scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; even more developed in the commentaries and traditions of these faiths. Common among them are that angels are created spiritual beings, emissaries between God and humankind.

The English word “angel” derives from the Greek “angelos,” a translation of the Hebrew “mal’ak,” which means “messenger.” St. Augustine wrote that “angel” is the name of their office, i.e., what they do. He said their nature, what they are, is “spirit.”

When angels appear in Scripture, they are messengers or servants of God. Unnamed angels are in biblical narratives from Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden in Genesis to the final victory over Satan in the Book of Revelation. Among those having experiences with angels were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Moses, Isaiah and Ezekiel; and in the New Testament, Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and Jesus. In Luke’s Gospel, the angel of the Lord announced the savior’s birth to the shepherds, and in Matthew’s Gospel, an angel announced the resurrection to the women at the tomb.

Only three angels are named in the Old Testament: Raphael (Tobit), Gabriel and Michael (Daniel). The latter two also appear in Luke (Gabriel) and Revelation (Michael). God sent Gabriel and Raphael on specific missions, and they fulfilled them. God promises that Michael will lead his heavenly forces to victory over evil.

Gabriel, meaning “God is strong” – In Dan 8:16, 9:21ff, God sent Gabriel to explain an apocalyptic vision to Daniel, dealing with the victorious power of God over evil kings. In Lk 1:26-38, God sent Gabriel to announce to Mary that she is to bear a son.

Raphael, meaning “God heals” – In Tob 3:16-17, God answered the prayers of Tobit and Sarah by sending Raphael to heal Tobit of his cataracts and to marry Sarah to Tobiah, then expel from her the demon Asmodeus, who had caused her 7 husbands to die before they could have intercourse with her.

Michael, meaning “Who is like God?” or “Who can compare with God?” – In Dan 12:1, God reveals that Michael, the great prince, guardian of the Jewish people, shall arise to help them escape the world’s turmoil. In the apocalyptic vision of Rev. 12:7-9, Michael and his angels battle and prevail over the dragon (Satan) and its angels.

Although many may associate guardian angels with childhood memories, they are solidly grounded in ancient Persian and Jewish belief. They are an expression of God's care for every person, regardless of position or status in society. It has generally been considered that each person has one guardian angel.

In Sacred Scripture, Psalm 91 – popularized as the hymn “On Eagle’s Wings” – includes these verses (10-12):

No evil shall befall you, nor affliction come near your tent.  
For God commands the angels to guard you in all your ways.  
With their hands they shall support you, lest you strike your foot against a stone.

In Matthew's Gospel, just after Jesus points out the need to become like a little child, and warns against causing one of them to sin, he adds:

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father.” (18:10)

This passage, part of the Gospel reading for the Memorial of the Guardian Angels, assumed the acceptance by the crowd of the idea of guardian angels. It was meant to emphasize the worth of the “little ones” by the fact that even they were represented before God by heavenly beings.

Contrary to some teachings, including that of the Church of Latter-Day Saints and of the New Church (Swedenborgian), people do not become angels, and the angels did not first exist as humans. Nor are they eternal, semi-divine beings. They were created by God and are considered to be intermediaries between God and humans.

Although represented in Christian art since the late 4<sup>th</sup> Century as having wings, they are purely spiritual beings, even though they are described as looking human (never with wings) in various biblical passages. The wings are merely an artistic expression of their special heavenly nature. They are also frequently represented as young men in bright white robes, following Scriptural descriptions in the Synoptic Gospels, Acts, and Revelation.

Our Judaeo-Christian concepts of “angel” reflect certain fundamental realities:

- God is the creator of all things – heaven and earth, visible and invisible, spirits and corporeal beings.
- God cares for us, is near to us, heals us, saves us.
- God is Love – angelic messengers are another expression of God's love for us.