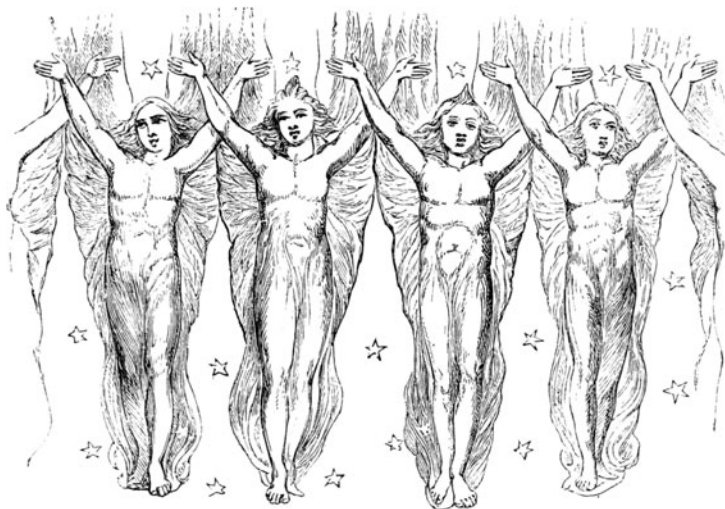


Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05178-1 - Sacred and Legendary Art: Volume 1

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Excerpt

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1

ANGELS.

“The morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God
shouted for joy.”

Of Angels and Archangels.

1. THE ANGELS.

THERE is something so very attractive and poetical, as well as soothing to our helpless finite nature, in all the superstitions connected with the popular notion of Angels, that we cannot wonder at their prevalence in the early ages of the world. Those nations who acknowledged one Almighty Creator, and repudiated with horror the idea of a plurality of Gods, were the most willing to accept, the most enthusiastic in accepting these objects of an intermediate homage, and gladly placed between their humanity and the awful supremacy of an unseen God, the ministering spirits who

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were the agents of his will, the witnesses of his glory, the partakers of his bliss, and who in their preternatural attributes of love and knowledge filled up that vast space in the created universe which intervened between mortal man, and the infinite, omnipotent LORD OF ALL.

The belief in these superior beings, dating from immemorial antiquity, interwoven as it should seem with our very nature, and authorised by a variety of passages in Scripture, has descended to our time. Although the bodily forms assigned to them are allowed to be impossible, and merely allegorical, although their supposed functions as rulers of the stars and elements have long been set aside by a knowledge of the natural laws, still the coexistence of many orders of beings superior in nature to ourselves, benignly interested in our welfare, and contending for us against the powers of evil, remains an article of faith. Perhaps the belief itself, and the feeling it excites in the tender and contemplative mind, were never more beautifully expressed than by our own Spenser.

And is there care in heaven? And is there love
 In heavenly spirits to these creatures base,
 That may compassion of their evils move?
 There is!—else much more wretched were the case
 Of men than beasts! But O th' exceeding grace
 Of highest God that loves his creatures so,
 And all his workes with mercy doth embrace,
 That blessed angels he sends to and fro
 To serve to wicked man, to serve his wicked foe!

How oft do they their silver bowers leave,
 And come to succour us that succour want?
 How oft do they with golden pinions cleave
 The flitting skies, like flying pursuivant,
 Against foul fiends, to aid us militant?
 They for us fight, they watch, and duly ward,
 And their bright squadrons round about us plant,
 And all for love, and nothing for reward!
 Oh why should heavenly God to men have such regard!

It is this feeling, expressed or unexpressed, lurking at the very core of all hearts, which renders the usual representations of angels, spite of all incongruities of form, so pleasing to the fancy: we overlook the anatomical solecisms, and become mindful only of that emblematical significance which through its humanity connects it with us, and through its supernatural appendages connects *us* with heaven.

But it is necessary to give a brief summary of the scriptural and theological authorities, relative to the nature and functions of angels, before we can judge of the manner in which these ideas have been attended to and carried out in the artistic similitudes. Thus angels are represented in the Old Testament,

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| I. As beings of a higher nature than men, and gifted with superior intelligence and righteousness. | 2 Sam. xiv. 17. |
| II. As a host of attendants surrounding the throne of God, and as a kind of celestial court or council. | Gen. xxxii. 1, 2.
Ps. cii. 21.
1 Kings, xxii. 19. |
| III. As messengers of his will conveyed from heaven to earth: or as sent to guide, to correct, to instruct, to reprove, to console. | Job, i. 6.
Gen. xxii. 11.
Exod. xiv. 19
Num. xx. 16.
Gen. xxi. 17.
Judg. xiii. 3. |
| IV. As protecting the pious. | 2 Kings, i. 3. |
| V. As punishing by command of the Most High the wicked and disobedient. | Ps. xxxiv. 7.
Judith, xiii. 20. |
| VI. As having the form of men; as eating and drinking. | 2 Sam. xxiv. 16. |
| VII. As wielding a sword. | 2 Kings, xix. 35. |
| VIII. As having power to slay. | Gen. xviii. 8.
Num. xxii. 31. |

I do not recollect any instance in which angels are represented in scripture as instigated by human passions; they are merely the agents of the mercy or the wrath of the Almighty.

After the period of the captivity, the Jewish ideas concerning angels were considerably extended and modified by an admixture of the Chaldaic belief, and of the doctrines taught by Zoroaster. It is then that we first hear of good and bad angels, and of a fallen angel or impersonation of evil, busy in working mischief on earth and counteracting good; also of archangels, who are alluded to by name; and of guardian

Calmet.

angels assigned to nations and individuals; and these foreign ideas concerning the spiritual world, accepted and promulgated by the Jewish doctors, pervade the whole of the New Testament, in which angels are far more familiar to us as agents, more frequently alluded to, and more distinctly brought before us, than in the Old Testament. For example: — They are represented,

I. As countless.

II. As superior to all human wants and weaknesses.

III. As the deputed messengers of God.

IV. They rejoice over the repentant sinner. They take deep interest in the mission of Christ.

V. They are present with those who pray: they bear the souls of the just to heaven.

VI. They minister to Christ on earth, and will be present at his second coming.

In the Gospel of St. John, which is usually regarded as the fullest and most correct exposition of the doctrines of Christ, angels are only three times mentioned, and in none of these instances does the word angel fall from the lips of Christ. On the other hand, the writings of St. Paul, deeply versed in all the learning and philosophy of the Jews, abound in allusions to angels, and, according to the usual interpretation of certain passages, he shows them divided into several classes. St. Luke, who was the friend and disciple of St. Paul, some say his convert, is more direct and explicit on the subject of angels than any of the other Evangelists, and his allusions to them much more frequent.

The worship of angels which the Jews brought from Chaldea was early introduced into the Christian Church. In the fourth century the council of Laodicea published a decree against places of worship dedicated to angels under names which the Church did not recognise. But neither warning nor council seems to have had power to modify the popular creed, countenanced as it was by high authority. All the Fathers are unanimous as to the existence of angels good and

Matt. xxvi. 53.
Heb. xii. 22.
Matt. xxii. 30.
Luke, xx. 36.
Matt. xix. 24.
Luke, i. 11.
Acts, v. 19.
et passim.
Luke, xv. 10.
1 Peter, i. 12.
Luke, xvi. 22.
Heb. i. 14.
1 Cor. xi. 10.

Matt. i. 20.,
xvi. 27., xxv.
31.

Rom. viii. 38.
Col. i. 16.
Ephes. i. 21.

A.D. 363.

evil. They hold that it is evermore the allotted task of good angels to defend us against evil angels, and to carry on a daily and hourly combat against our spiritual foes; they teach that the good angels are worthy of all reverence as the ministers of God and as the protectors of the human race; that their intercession is to be invoked, and their perpetual, invisible presence to be regarded as an incitement to good and a preventative to evil.

St. Augustine.

St. Chrysostom.
 St. Bernard.

This however was not enough. Taking for their foundation a few scripture texts, and in particular the classification of St. Paul, the imaginative theologians of the middle ages ran into all kinds of extravagant subtleties regarding the being, the nature, and the functions of the different orders of angels. Except as far as they have been taken as authorities in art, I shall set aside these fanciful disquisitions, of which a mere abstract would fill volumes. For our present purpose it is sufficient to bear in mind that the great theologians divide the angelic host into three hierarchies, and these again into nine choirs, three in each hierarchy: according to Dionysius the Areopagite, in the following order: 1. Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones. 2. Dominations, Virtues, Powers. 3. Princedoms, Archangels, Angels. The order of these denominations is not the same in all authorities; for according to the Greek formula, St. Bernard, and the *Legenda Aurea*, the Cherubim precede the Seraphim, and in the hymn of St. Ambrose they have also the precedence,—*To thee Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry*, &c.; but the authority of St. Dionysius seems to be admitted as paramount, for according to the Legend he was the convert and intimate friend of St. Paul, and St. Paul, who had been transported to the seventh heaven, had made him acquainted with all he had there beheld.

Desire

In Dionysius, so intensely wrought
 That he, as I have done, rang'd them, and nam'd
 Their orders, marshall'd in his thought:

For he had learn'd
 Both this and much beside of these our orbs
 From an eye-witness to Heaven's mysteries.—DANTE, *Par.* 28.

The first three choirs receive their glory immediately from God, and transmit it to the second: the second illuminate the third: the third are placed in relation to the created universe and man. The first Hierarchy are as councillors; the second, as governors; the third, as ministers. The Seraphim are absorbed in perpetual love and adoration immediately round the throne of God. The Cherubim know and worship. The Thrones sustain the seat of the Most High. The Dominations, Virtues, Powers, are the Regents of stars and elements. The three last orders, Princedoms, Archangels, and Angels, are the protectors of the great Monarchies on earth, and the executors of the will of God throughout the universe.

St. Dionysius. The term angels is properly applied to all these celestial beings; but it belongs especially to the two last orders who are brought into immediate communication with the human race. The word angel, Greek in its origin, signifies a messenger, or more literally *a bringer of tidings*. In this sense the Greeks entitle Christ, "The great Angel of the will of God;" and I have seen Greek representations of Christ, with wings to his shoulders. John the Baptist is also an angel in this sense; likewise the Evangelists; all of whom, as I shall show hereafter, bear, as celestial messengers, the angel-wings.

In ancient pictures and illuminations which exhibit the glorification of the Trinity, Christ, or the Virgin, the Hierarchies of angels are represented in circles around them, orb within orb. This is called a glory of angels. In pictures it is seldom complete: instead of nine circles, the painters content themselves with one or two circles only. The innermost circles, the Seraphim and the Cherubim, are in general represented as *heads* merely, with two or four or six wings, and of a bright red or blue colour; sometimes with variegated

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Seraph, Greek; wings of gold and crimson. 9th century.

wings, green; yellow, violet, &c. This emblem, intended to shadow forth to human comprehension a pure spirit glowing with love and intelligence, in which all that is bodily is put away, and only the head, the seat of soul, and wings, the attribute of spirit and swiftness, retained, is of Greek origin. When first adopted I do not know, but I have met with it in Greek MSS. of the ninth century. Down to the eleventh century the faces were human but not childish; the infant head was afterwards adopted to express innocence in addition to love and intelligence.



3

Cherubim, Italian. 14th century.

Such was the expressive and poetical symbol which degenerated in the later periods of art into those little fat baby heads, with curly hair and small wings under the chin, which the more they resemble nature in colour, feature,



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Cherub Heads.

and detail, the more absurd they become, the original meaning being wholly lost or perverted.

In painting, where a glory of angels is placed round the Divine Being or the glorified Virgin, those forming the innermost circle are or ought to be of a glowing red, the colour of fire, that is, of love; the next circle is painted blue, the colour of the firmament, or light, that is, of knowledge. Now as the word seraph is derived from a Hebrew root signifying love, and the word cherub from a Hebrew root signifying to know, should not this distinction fix the proper place and name of the two first orders? It is admitted that the spirits which *love* are nearer to God than those which *know*, since we cannot know that which we do not first love: that Love and Knowledge, “the two halves of a divided world,” constitute in their union the perfection of the angelic nature; but the Seraphim, according to the derivation of their name, should *love* most; their whole being is fused, as it were, in a glow of adoration; therefore they should take the precedence, and their proper colour is red. The Cherubim “the lords of those that know,” come next, and are to be painted blue.

Thus, it should seem that, in considering the religious pictures of the early ages of art, we have to get rid of certain associations, as to colour and form, derived from the phraseology of later poets, and the representations of later painters. “Blue-eyed Seraphim,” and the “blue depth of Seraphs’ eyes,” are not to be thought of any more than “smiling Cherubim.” The Seraphim, where distinguished by colour, are red; the Cherubim blue: the proper character,

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where character is attended to, is, in the Seraph, adoration ; in the Cherub, contemplation. So Milton—

With thee bring
Him who soars on golden wing
The Cherub, Contemplation.

I remember a little Triptyca, a genuine work of Fiesole, in which one of the lateral compartments represents his favourite subject, the souls of the blessed received into Paradise. They are moving from the lower part of the picture towards the top, along an ascent paved with flowers, all in white garments and crowned with roses. At one side, low down, stands a blue Cherub robed in drapery spangled with golden stars, and seems to encourage the blessed group. Above are the gates of heaven: Christ welcomes to his kingdom the beatified spirits, and on each side stands a Seraph all of a glowing red, in spangled drapery. The figures are not here merely heads and wings, but full length, having all that soft peculiar grace which belongs to the painter.¹

In a Coronation of the Virgin, a glory of Seraphim over-arches the principal group. Here the angelic beings are wholly of a bright red colour: they are human to the waist, with hands clasped in devotion: the bodies and arms covered with plumage, but the forms terminating in wings; all uniformly red. In the same collection is a small Greek picture of Christ receiving the soul of the Virgin; over his head hovers a large, fiery-red, six-winged Seraph; and on each side a Seraph with hair and face and limbs of glowing red, and with white draperies. Vasari mentions an Adoration of the Magi by Liberale of Verona, in which a group of angels, all of a red colour, stand as a celestial guard round the Virgin and her divine Infant.

Gal. of
Prince Wal-
lerstein.

Vasari,
p. 648. Fl.
edit.

The distinction of hue in the red and blue angels we find

¹ I know not whether it be necessary to observe here, that in early art the souls of the blessed are not represented as angels, nor regarded as belonging to this order of spiritual beings, though I believe it is a very common notion that we are to rise from the dead with the angelic attributes as well as the angelic nature. For this belief there is no warrant in Scripture, unless Mark, xii. 25. be so interpreted.

wholly omitted towards the end of the fifteenth century. Cherubim with blue, red, green, and variegated wings we find in the pictures of Perugino and other masters in the beginning of the sixteenth century, also in early pictures of Raphael. Liberale di Verona has given us in a Madonna picture Cherub heads without wings, and of a blue colour, emerging from golden clouds. And in Raphael's Madonna

Perugino's
 Coronation.
 Fl. Acad.



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Cherubim. Liberale di Verona.

Raphael's
 Coronation.
 Vatican.

di San Sisto the whole background is formed of Cherubim and Seraphim of a uniform delicate bluish tinge, as if composed of air, and melting away into an abyss of golden glory, the principal figures standing relieved against this flood of living love and light—beautiful! So are the Cherubim with many-coloured wings which float in the firmament in Perugino's Coronation of the Virgin; but none of these can be regarded as so theologically correct as the fiery red and bright blue Seraphim and Cherubim, of which are formed the Hierarchies and glories which figure in the early pictures, the stained glass, the painted sculpture, and the illuminated MSS. from the 10th to the 16th century.

The next five choirs of angels, the Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers, though classed and described