

## With All the Company of Heaven

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"*

Luke 2:13-14 NKJV

*Therefore we praise You, joining our voices with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven who forever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of Your Name.*

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Somewhere in the Fifth or Sixth Century A.D. a great Christian lived who wrote very influential books on spirituality. He was a humble man, and rather than sign his own name to his works, he took upon himself the pseudonym "Dionysius the Areopogite" after the name of St. Paul's convert in Athens, the city of philosophers (Acts 17:34). One of his books, titled the *Celestial Hierarchy*, brought together all the known knowledge of the time about angels, and this book formed the basis of the Church's teaching on angels for centuries to come. Unfortunately, much of this knowledge has been lost to our culture that has labored under the stupors of rationalism and anti-supernaturalism since the Enlightenment. In this article, we will explore some of the basic ideas found in this work and develop them so that we can appreciate angels and how they relate to God and us.

Dionysius thought of the spirit world as having three levels of angelic existence; one close to the earth, one far out on the outer-rim of the "heavens" touching the transcendent abode of God, and a mediating level in between these two. We must be careful, however, not to think of these levels spatially as if we could acquire a spiritual rocket ship and fly off through the three levels to God's Throne. Rather, we must think of these levels as "dimensions" of angelic existence that can be penetrated as instantly as our risen Lord passed through walls. Moreover, we must not think of the "heavens" as God's proper, eternal abode, for we know that "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth", and is therefore a creation of His as well as all the angels that dwell in it, along with our material world. God is said to dwell in "heaven", or the created realm

of spirits, only in that this realm touches on His transcendent, uncreated realm which is infinitely beyond angelic and human understanding. The physical heavens with all its stars symbolizes this realm of spirits.

Each of these three levels are populated by three kinds of angles. The third level, the “outer” dimension closest to divine Transcendence, is inhabited by angles referred to by “*thrones*” in Scripture (Col. 1:16). We do not know much more about them other than what their name suggests: they are closely associated with God’s throne, and therefore are in the immediate presence of the Transcendent God. *Cherubim* also inhabit this dimension. We know that God’s Transcendence rests upon the wings of the cherubim in the Tabernacle and Temple (Ex. 25:18-20, I Kings 6:23-28), and that they are given the honor of being “God Bearers” when the Theophany of God rides them like a divine chariot in Ezekiel 1 (See also chapters 9-11). They are associated with great knowledge in that the wheels of these creatures have many eyes that can see all things created. Finally, we have the *seraphim* of Isaiah’s great Temple Vision (Isa. 6). They are the “burning ones” as their name in Hebrew suggests, and continually give forth the *Sanctus* before the Throne. We do not know exactly what St. Paul meant, but this realm could very well be the “third heaven” to which he was transported, whether in his body, or spirit (II Cor. 12:22). This third level of angelic existence is holiest of all.

The second sphere of angelic existence is an intermediary one that links the third and the first levels. It is inhabited by *authorities* (I Peter 3:22), *dominions* (Col. 1:16), and *powers* (Eph. 6:12, Col. 1:16, and I Peter 3:22). Scriptures do not give us much information about these angels. Dionysius places them in this second level as intermediaries. They draw grace and enlightenment from the third sphere of angels, and empower and enlighten the lower sphere of angels.

Finally we come to the lower level of angelic beings, those most closely associated with the earth and human affairs. These are named *principalities* (Eph. 6:12, Col. 1:16, and I Peter 3:22), *archangels* and *angels*. These have the distinct identity of being agents of God’s immanence. Of

the archangels, we know of two by name in Scriptures. One is Gabriel who enlightened Daniel by giving him “skill to understand” (Dan. 8:16, 9:20-23). Gabriel also was the one through whom God encountered Mary and Zachariah in Luke 1. We also know of Michael, one of the “chief princes” who helped an angel who was held up for 21 days by an evil spirit, the “prince of the kingdom of Persia” (Dan. 10:13). Michael is expressly called an “archangel” in Jude 9, and is the one who will cast down Satan and his hosts in the end (Rev. 12:7-9 with 20:1ff.). From the Apocrypha we know of two other archangels, Uriel and Raphael.

We must always remember that this conception of the three levels or spheres of angelic existence is merely a way talking about things that are beyond words. It is meant to leave us with an understanding and feeling of order and belonging in a universe that has grown cold to us in our time. Our materialistic culture constantly informs us that we are products of chance, that we are on our own, and that we can expect no help from a “spiritual realm”, leaving us feel alienated in our environment. Dionysius’ *Celestial Hierarchy* opens up for us a new way, or rather, an old way long lost and abandoned by modern men, to look at our world. Let us consider some of the implications of this celestial hierarchy for us as we live from day to day.

The outer sphere of thrones, seraphim and cherubim are associated with the throne of God. They are creatures that exist on the very edges of Transcendence. The seraphim cover their face so as not to look upon God, for even the fiery ones, the ones who burn with complete purity, cannot look upon God, for they are but creatures before their Creator. They sing “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory”. Mystics in the Church who have contemplated deep things see these angels in divine dance, or movement, around the throne, constantly bursting out in songs of praise.

Angels in the lower sphere closest to us in the material realm, especially archangels and angels, assist God in the affairs of men directly. Divine grace, revelation, illumination and protection flow through them to us. “The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them” (Psalm 34:7). In death, we are assisted to our place in the spirit realm by angels,

as Lazarus was carried by angels to Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:19-22). It is, in fact, an enlightening project to look into a concordance and behold all the references in both the Old Testament and the New Testament that describe how integral angelic life is with our lives. Many of us would be surprised at what they would find.

For instance, angels tend to be territorial, just as we humans are. It is very difficult to think of ourselves apart from our country, just as it is difficult to think of ourselves apart from our gender. When we study the Bible closely, we find that even in the new heavens and new earth, when the New Jerusalem which comes down to earth from the spirit realm, peoples will still retain their nationalities. People are always deeply connected to their land in the Bible, and Jesus is the Messiah not only for individuals, but of the whole of nations and their lands. For the most part, national boundaries are inviolable, and in the end, the nations will stream up to Mount Zion to pay homage to their King (Isa. 2). We see this when we read the great oracles to the nations in the Prophets (Isaiah 13-23 , Jeremiah 46-51 , Ezekiel 25-32). Though we cannot imagine what the glorified earth will look like, it most certainly will retain some connection to our earth as it is today, and will not be totally unfamiliar to us both geographically and culturally.

Likewise, angels on this lower level seem to be associated with specific earthly territories. We read in Deuteronomy 32:8 that God set the boundaries of the nations according to the number of the sons of "Israel". Actually, the Greek Old Testament reads "according to the sons of God", which means, "according to those belonging to the realm of God", i.e. angels. This reading is probably the more correct one, for it corresponds to the ancient notion that when God created the nations, He did so in a way that parallels the placement of angels in the spirit realm. This explains why there is an angelic spirit associated with the land of Persia, called the "Prince of Persia", that hampered the efforts of Daniel's prayers (Daniel 10:13). It is the biblical understanding that whatever happens in the spirit realm is paralleled in the physical world, for the spiritual and the physical are deeply connected. If there is war on earth, there is war in heaven. Spirits and men contend over territories. This is why earthly politics often seem so unfathomable to us, because more is happening than meets the eye.

Having said this, we must speak of demons. Again, what happens on earth has a parallel in heave; if there was an earthly fall when Adam and Eve sinned, then there most assuredly was an angelic fall in heaven. We have a symbolic account of this fall in Ezekiel 28:11-19. On one level, the prophet is pronouncing a judgement against Tyre, the Phoenician city along the shore of Mediterranean Sea famous for its trade, because of pride. On a symbolic level, it is a description of Satan and his fall from his high position in the celestial hierarchy. Satan is styled as a “cherub”, and as such, belonged to the highest sphere, on the “holy mountain”, walking in the midst of “fiery stones.” When he fell through pride, he took with him a third of the angelic hosts. However, though Satan and his angels “fell”, they still inhabit places in the celestial hierarchy in some very real sense. Evidently, Satan can in certain times come even before the throne of God to accuse sinners and make claims (I Kings 22:20-23, Job 1:6).

These fallen spirits roam the earth seeking its destruction, even though by destroying it they would destroy themselves, for they like cancer must feed on the good to live. But they will never succeed in their destruction, for hell awaits them. It seems many of the fallen angels were cast into it as judgement for their sin at the time of the Flood (II Peter 2:4, Jude 6). Hell must be a fearful place given the demons who were cast out of the demoniac, who begged Jesus not to send them into the abyss (Luke 8:31). It is a “bottomless pit”, a metaphor for a place where a being forever falls away from God and His original purpose for them. In our chart it is represented by a little hole in the middle of the cosmos, for it is a place of diminishment, and ultimately small in the total scheme of things. This is why C.S. Lewis, in his book *The Great Divorce*, describes Hell as a small crack in the pavement.

Let us move on from this dark talk of demons; the cloud has passed and we now find ourselves basking in the sun’s warm rays. The beautiful truth is that man and angels were made for each other. One cannot be understood apart from the other, for they were both created to live and dwell in the same cosmos in direct relation to one another. We humans are therefore akin to angels! This is true even though humans are uniquely described as being made in the “image of

God”. In ancient biblical thought, this means the totality of our being, both physical and spiritual, is a sort of “little miniature” of God. True, God doesn’t have a material body as men do, but our bodies correspond in some way to “spiritual bodies” (I Cor. 15:40), and most assuredly compatible to the Divine Essence in some real way. We are “amphibius” in that we belong to both the physical and spiritual realms. However, our proper domain is the physical world, and so it will be in the new heavens and earth, when the new Jerusalem descends and touches the earth, transforming it into glory.

Angels, on the other hand, are not explicitly said to be made in the image of God. However, they are called “sons of God” (Gen. 6:1, Job 1:6). It is implied by this that they also are made in the image of God, but in a different way. Their proper realm, in distinction to humanity, are the “heavens”, or spirit realm in all its spheres, doing God’s bidding, often helping us humans. The fact that Jesus said that we would be like the angels in our resurrected state would indicate that angels are our “brethren”, like distant relatives to us. In J.R.R. Tolkien’s mythology, elves symbolize angels in our realm, and he calls them “Elder Children” in relation to mankind, for both elves and men are “Children of Iluvatar” (i.e. God, *Silmarillion* pp. 41-42, 48-50).

Since angels are fellow creatures and near of kin, we ought to think rightly about them. We must not become obsessed with them to the point where we are more interested in them than our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a human tendency to worship the creature rather than the Creator, and sensationalism over angels is an example of this. In fact, the writer of Hebrews begins his great book with this very issue, devoting the first two chapters trying to convince his readers that Jesus is superior to angles. It seems that even in the early apostolic Church there were those who thought that it was easier, or more beneficial, to deal with angels than with Jesus Christ. Jesus becomes distant and remote, and can only be manipulated by prayers of saints and angels. We then enter the realm of saints and angels acting like the old territorial pagan gods (cf. Col. 2:18).

The other extreme is to avoid all thinking of angels, often in reaction to the abuses we see of those who are obsessed with them. This attitude is usually accompanied with a materialism and

a rationalism that reduces everything in the cosmos down to what can be sensed or that can be reasoned out by our own intellectual powers. Heaven, or the spirit realm, is way “out there” somewhere, , and we are left to work out our lives the best we can by studying the Bible as if it were a manual for how to do life. This is a sort of deism where the world is like a big machine working according to a divine will “out there”. Not only is God remote in such a scenario, but angels are completely superfluous, in spite of the fact of their importance in Holy Scripture.

C.S. Lewis, when comparing the modern view of reality with that of the Medieval view that was deeply conscious of angelic beings, says “In modern, that is, in evolutionary, thought Man stands at the top of a stair whose foot is lost in obscurity; in this [medieval model], he stands at the bottom of a stair whose top is invisible with light” (*The Discarded Image*, Cambridge: University Press, 1964, pp. 74f.). Though we might not be crass materialists, rationalists, and evolutionists, have we not imbibed that cold, hard, impersonal world view that accompanies modern and postmodern thought? Does not Jacob’s ladder filled with angels moving up and down invite us to ascend the ladder with them ourselves (John 1:51)? Surely we should embrace what Scripture tells us about our physical and spiritual environment, that though our universe is very big, it is not infinite, and that it is populated with angels, the majority of whom are actively working for God in our behalf? Is not this what is meant by the words “But you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels” (Hebrews 12:22)?

Let us welcome our elder brothers, the angels, into our lives. Let us rejoice with them as we contemplate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, singing “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” We all were meant to worship and serve our Lord together. We are not alone! Thank you, Dionysius, for being a lover of angels, and bringing them to our attention! Praise God!