



18. Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Angels...

I have had an enquiry about angels - when do they first appear in the Bible? Where do they come from? What are 'Cherubim' and 'Seraphim'?

These are deep waters, Watson. It all depends on what we mean by the word 'Angel'. In both Hebrew and Greek the same word is used to denote both a messenger and a heavenly spirit. So any person entrusted with a message or errand by God may be (in Greek or Hebrew) an 'Angel of God', but an 'Angel of God' may mean a supernatural being. Fortunately, when it is clear which is meant, our Bible translations use different words.

An early reference to what we might think of as an 'angel' in the Bible comes in Genesis 3.24 - '[God] drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.'

There is also a reference at Genesis 6.1-2 to the 'sons of God' who 'saw that [the daughters of men] were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.' This story is expanded and explained in the First Book of Enoch (not accepted as canonical in most Christian churches since the 3rd Century AD, but preserved in the Ethiopian Church.) This strange book explains that the angels whose duty it was to watch over the earth were tempted by the beauty of human women, deserted their posts and came down to earth, bringing with them all the knowledge that has troubled the earth ever since. Their children are the demons that bring disease and decay. This is not an article of faith in any of the mainstream churches.

The first clear reference to a benevolent angel comes at Genesis 16.7. Sarai, Abram's wife, despairs of having a child by him, and gives him Hagar, her Egyptian slave-girl, as a wife. Hagar conceives, and Sarai, now filled with jealousy, ill-treats her. Hagar runs away. The angel of the Lord finds Hagar by a spring, and encourages her to return to her mistress.

Thereafter angels occur frequently in the story of Abraham and his family - there are the angels who visit Lot in Sodom, and destroy the city, and the angel who stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac; the angels whom Jacob sees ascending and descending

the ladder to Heaven, and the angels who meet him as he returns home.

One has to remember that the books of the Old Testament were written and re-written over many years and the beliefs they embody developed over an even longer period. In further articles, I will look at how the idea of angels developed, and became more elaborate.