



## 19. Where Do Angels Come From?

Unlike the Koran, the Bible is not and does not purport to be a single revelation transmitted to one infallible Prophet. Scholars now believe that it is the product of many hands, evolved and developed over many centuries (at least, as regards the Old Testament). It is difficult, therefore, to give an unqualified answer as to the origin of the belief in angels, if by that word we mean celestial spirits.

As we have seen, in origin the word represented by 'angel' meant no more than 'messenger of God', who might be a human being. The early Hebrews seem to have believed in many gods, with Yahweh or Jehovah being the particular (and superior) God of the Hebrews. As the idea of Jehovah became more exalted, the idea crystallised that no one might look on him and live. Accordingly, he spoke to humans through an intermediary - the 'Angel of the Lord'.

The idea of an 'angel' also has the sense of 'attendant spirit'. There are differing theories as to precisely how this idea came into Hebrew thought. Some think it derives from Babylonian or Persian religion, though similar conceptions are also found in Hinduism and some forms of Buddhism. Others suggest that 'angels' are in origin subordinate deities. We find in the prologue of the Book of Job (which probably dates from before the exile in Babylon) 'the sons of God' meeting together apparently as a sort of heavenly court. The phrase 'sons of God' has been taken to imply angelic beings rather than deities.

By New Testament times, belief in angels, both as messengers of God and as attendant spirits, was well established, as was the belief that a protecting spirit or what we now think of as a 'guardian angel' is assigned to each one of us. (See e.g. Acts 12.15 - Peter, miraculously released from prison, knocks on the door of the house where some of the other disciples are staying. They refuse to believe it is truly him: 'It is his angel'.) By this time, some of the angels have been given names - Raphael, the charming angel who accompanies Tobias on his journey in the apocryphal Book of Tobit, Gabriel, the Angel of the Annunciation, and, of course, Michael. Members of the Jewish sect of the Essenes vowed to preserve the holy names of the angels of God.

Paul in his Epistle to the Colossians warns against a superstitious cult of angels, detracting from the proper worship of the one God. Despite this, later Christian writers worked out an elaborate system of the hierarchy of angels. We shall look at this in more detail in a third article.