



20. Cherubim, Seraphim And The Rest

In the last of these notes, I mentioned that some of the Angels in the Bible are given names. Raphael, who accompanies Tobias on his journey in the apocryphal Book of Tobit disguised as a man, eventually reveals that he is 'one of the seven angels who stand in attendance on the Lord and enter his glorious presence.' This implies that there are some who do not; that there are different ranks of angels.

A Jewish mystical writing called 'The Third Book of Enoch' tells of a mysterious being, 'the angel Metatron, Prince of the Divine Presence'. 'Metatron' is Greek for 'beside the throne', i.e. the one who is next to God. For a Jew, this line of thought was dangerously near to a blurring of the distinction between an angel, i.e. a superhuman but created being, and single divinity of the One God. 3 Enoch was not included in either the Jewish or the mainstream Christian Canon of Scripture.

In the sixth chapter of Isaiah, we read of the Seraphim, the six-winged creatures who attend immediately upon the presence of God. The meaning of the word 'seraph' is uncertain. It may be related to the Hebrew verb 'saraph', meaning 'to purify with fire' (a seraph purifies Isaiah's lips with a burning coal). There is also a Hebrew noun, 'saraph', which means a winged fiery serpent; if that is what is intended, a seraph would be a sort of dragon.

The Psalms speak of God as seated or riding upon the Cherubim; Cherubim are also mentioned as guarding the way into Paradise, and as part of the decoration of the Temple and the Ark of the Covenant. However, they are nowhere fully described. The one thing that we can be sure about is that they were not baby angels. It has been suggested that a Cherub (pron: 'Kherub') was a sort of winged sphinx. It seems that they are to be considered as the bearers or supporters of the throne of God.

It was taken for granted in mediaeval thought that there could not be a direct interface between one entity and another; there must always be a third link between them. The distance between the divine and the human was such that it was thought that there must surely be a large number of grades of being between the two.

St Gregory the Great points out that St Paul in writing to the Ephesians (1.21) says that Christ is 'far above all Principality, and Power, and Virtue, and Domination'. In the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul says all things in heaven and earth were created for Christ, 'whether Thrones, or Dominations, or principalities, or Powers'. Gregory adds these two lists together with Seraphim, Cherubim, Angels and Archangels, to get nine orders of angelic beings between God and Mankind. Nine is the perfect number, being three, the number of the Trinity, multiplied three times.

Another writer, who called himself 'Dionysius the Areopagite', wrote a treatise 'On the Heavenly Hierarchies' in which he explained the organisation of the heavenly beings. Only the Angels and Archangels, he explains, have to deal directly with humanity, so they must be lowest in rank; seraphim and cherubim are nearest to God. The angelic powers are therefore ordered in three hierarchies: the highest, Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones; next, Dominations, Virtues, and Powers; and lowest, Principalities, Archangels and Angels.

Though this scheme was adopted by St Thomas Aquinas, it is not an essential of Christian doctrine. Angels form part of the Biblical narrative and we have no reason whatever to assume that humanity is the pinnacle of God's creation. Speculation about the nature of angels, their appearance and their function (beyond that of heavenly messenger) remains speculation.

PS: Late News on Angels. Since writing the above, I have learnt why the Great Angel Metatron was mistaken for God. Metatron is, apparently, the mysterious Patriarch Enoch (Genesis 5. 18-24) promoted to Angelic status. But in Jewish mystical lore angels have no joints in their limbs, so never sit. Rabbi Elisha ben Avuya, meeting Metatron in a vision, saw that he, being partly human, remained seated while the other angels stood. The Rabbi therefore assumed that this supernatural being was another God besides Jehovah, and was thereafter known as the heretic Aher, which means 'Other'.