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Angels

Dan Ben-Amos

University of Pennsylvania, dbamos@sas.upenn.edu

Menachem Kallus

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Abstract
Jewish tradition considers angels to be messengers of God, but holds that they must not be substituted for God. Isaiah 63:9 speaks of the angel of God's divine countenance—an important designation in Jewish mysticism that has variously been taken to mean the archangel Metatron, the Shekhinah (or immanent divine presence), or the redeeming angel and was understood by some to be an extension of God and a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The Talmud (Hagigah 13b) declares that each divine angelic legion is formed of a million members, but that the legions themselves are numberless.

Disciplines
Biblical Studies | Cultural History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

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Angels

Jewish tradition considers angels to be messengers of God, but holds that they must not be substituted for God. Isaiah 63:9 speaks of the angel of God's divine countenance—an important designation in Jewish mysticism that has variously been taken to mean the archangel Metatron, the Shekhinah (or immanent divine presence), or the redeeming angel and was understood by some to be an extension of God and a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The Talmud (Hagigah 13b) declares that each divine angelic legion is formed of a million members, but that the legions themselves are numberless.

Scripture and Jewish tradition use numerous terms for angels: ofanim, hayot, mal'akhim, 'ere'elim, tarshishim, keruvim, serafim, shananim, hashmalim, ishim, bene Elohim, elim, and sarim; these are variously construed as different classes of angels and are placed in various orders. Angelic names may have originated in esoteric mystical or magical rabbinic (or other Second Temple) traditions associated with Merkavah mysticism—speculations on the divine chariot, based on Ezekiel—and Hekhalot (heavenly halls) mysticism.

From the Hellenistic period, there were professional amulet writers whose products were considered effective enough by the community to permit "proven amulets" (as opposed to those whose efficacy had not been "proven") to be carried in public on the Sabbath without contravening the Sabbath prohibition against carrying (Shabat 60a). Amulets employing divine and angelic names were written for either prophylactic purposes—to protect against destructive angels (ma'akhe halalah), who cause illness and who entered the world as the result of Adam's fall—or for positive psychic enhancement. Instructions for amulet writing—including angels appointed for specific or auspicious times—along with prescribed ritual practices for preparing them survive in medieval manuscripts.

Angels are regarded by classical rabbinic midrash as having been brought into being during the process of creation. They are esteemed as extensions of divine power; in some esoteric rabbinic texts, angels are regarded as direct and timeless extensions of divinity. Some are seen as having been created for specific, limited functions, and as having ceased to exist afterward; others remain for the duration of created existence. Still others are created as the direct result of human thought and action, exemplifying the causal consequences of human action and intent. And there are angels appointed to preside over each and every function of nature.

In the early Middle Ages, in the classic Merkavah text known as 3 Enoch (or Hekhalot de-Rabi Yishma'el; probably sixth-century Babylonia), the conceptualization of angelology reached a developed and complex stage. Here, the angels of the nations constitute a heavenly Sanhedrin, each with the honorific title Yah Yahveh Tseva'ot. In the early kabbalistic work Sefer ha-bahir, angels are also equated with the 70 names of God. The elaborate angelology in 3 Enoch contrasts sharply with earlier texts, such as Hekhalot rabati, where the conceptual and structural elements of angelology are extremely opaque.

Another classic text of early Jewish mysticism that contains a rudimentary angelology, Sefer Yetzirah, does not indicate any knowledge of these Merkavah–Hekhalot traditions. In some later medieval formulations that rely on rabbinic statements (e.g., those in BT Sanhedrin 93a), angels are regarded as the "external" manifestations of divinity, in contrast to the realm of the human soul, which is regarded as its "inner" expression. At the same time, in accordance with traditions inherited from Talmudic times, sages sought and believed they received revelations from the Angel of the Torah—or from the Prophet Elijah, whose physical form underwent an apotheosis as he was transformed into divine, angelic form (2 Kings 2:1). In the sixteenth century, when the question of the permissibility of praying to angels as intercessors to God was widely discussed, there was no universal rabbinic consensus.
Ashkenazic Traditions

The classical Ashkenazic angelological tradition, which preserves the entire known rabbinic and early medieval corpus, was transmitted by the twelfth-century Ashkenazic pietists (Haside Ashkenaz). The best-known compendium of Jewish angelology, Razi’el ha-mal’akh (1701), is attributed to the angel Razi’el (meaning “divine secrets”), who is said to have taught the traditions to Adam following the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and contains traditions of Talmudic angelic astrology along with later, fourteenth-century traditions from the school of the anonymous Sefer ha-temunah. There are thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Ashkenazic manuscripts bearing the title Sefer Razi’el that predate Sefer ha-temunah and contain early, as yet unpublished, angelological dictionaries and alphabets.

Menahem Tsiyoni traveled to the Land of Israel in the mid-fourteenth century and returned to Germany with Arabic magical traditions. These are apparently preserved in a large (650-page) Ashkenazic manuscript written in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Arabic (likely from Poland) on magic and related topics (Schocken Collection, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, #15927), including rare detailed instructions on amulet writing and manufacture. The important visionary, magical, and mystical (Spain; late fourteenth century?) work Berit menuhah, which entered Ashkenazic Europe via Shoshan sodot (1784), by Mosheh ben Ya’akov of Kiev (1448–1520), was important for early Hasidism. Berit menuhah also received a commentary, titled Derekh ha-kodesh (published in Jerusalem, 1999), by Menahem Mendel of Shklov, a disciple of the Gaon of Vilna. From the Gaon, we have an extensive commentary on the Hekhalot sections of the Zohar, published in Yahel’or (1882).

In 1945, Reuben Margoliot published the only extant fully annotated dictionary of angels, Mal’akhe ‘elyon. An important sourcebook on angelology is Sefer shorshe ha-shemot (1999) by Mosheh Zakuto of Amsterdam (ca.1620–1697), who collected angelic traditions in Poland; it is a dictionary of divine and angelic names.

Significant practitioners of angelic mysticism whose works have been published include Eliyahu Ba’al-Shem and Yo’el Ba’al-Shem, both of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (the magical compendium Toldot Adam [1720] is attributed to them both); Natan Spira, author of Megaleh amukot (1637); and Shimshon of Ostropolye, who wrote Sefer ha-karnayim (1709). These works all transmit many Ashkenazic angelic traditions of the seventeenth century and earlier.

The most comprehensive philosophical–mystical treatise on angels was written in mid-sixteenth-century Safed by Mosheh Cordovero and is titled Derishot be-‘inyene mal’akhim (it was published as an appendix to the first edition of Margoliot’s Ma’lakhe ‘elyon). It entered eighteenth-century Eastern Europe abridged, via an anthology compiled by Ya’akov Tsemaḥ and published as Tsemah tsadik (1785). The nineteenth-century Lurianic magical work Adam yashar (1855), by Yitsḥak of Komarno (1806–1874), was written in response to a widespread plague in Eastern Europe. It illustrates the impact of Lurianic Kabbalah, its prohibition of angelic abjuration, and the substitution of alternative ways of employing angels.

Folklore

By the nineteenth century in East European Jewish folklore, the vast array of angels had been reduced to two opposite groups of helpful and harmful angels; they managed the upper worlds and mediated between God and man. Chief among the harmful angels was the mal’akh ha-mavet, or angel of death. In the folk beliefs of the shtetts, and in contrast to the attitude toward angels in esoteric traditions, angels were thought of with irony, cynicism, and, occasionally, humor. In fact, proverbs, folktales, and folk songs include relatively few references to angels.

In folk tradition, angels demonstrated competence and moral aptitude only in the upper worlds. Their role as managers of these realms is apparent in a religious ballad about poor and rich brothers (Y. L. Cahan, Yiddish Folksongs, no. 495). The angels take the poor brother, whose rich sibling mistreated him, to paradise, protecting him from the harmful angels of hell, and welcome him warmly into heaven. By contrast, the angels shut the gates of heaven tightly before the rich brother, whose life on earth was steeped in luxury, and open the gates of hell for him.

While in the upper worlds, angels in folklore perform their duties well as mediators between God and humanity; on earth, they are complete failures and, except for the angel of death, unreliable. East European Jews expressed the futility of relying on angels in Yiddish proverbs such as: az men ruft dem malekh, kunmt der galekh—when you call for an angel, a priest comes; and a malekh ken oykh keyn tsvey shlikhesn nit ton—an angel cannot perform two tasks (see Midrash Geneseth Rabah 50:2). Another proverb reflects complete disappointment in angels: frier zaynen di malekhim arumgegen af der erd, haaynt zaynen zey afle in himl nito—earlier, angels walked on earth, today they are not even in heaven. Only the angel of death is reliable—and inevitable—and from his watchful eyes nothing escapes: Der malekh-hamoves hot a sakh oygn—the angel of death has many eyes (see BT ‘Avodah zarah 20b); or Mit dem malekh-hamoves traybt men nit katoves—one does not fool around with the angel of death.

Suggested Reading

http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Angels

**Author**

Dan Ben-Amos, Menachem Kallus