

## God's Angels

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### Chapter 1\*

#### The Existence of Angels

*The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection,  
and that there are neither angels nor spirits,  
but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.  
--Acts 23:8*

Professor George Ernst Stahl (1660-1734), in addition to being a practical scholar and personal physician to the king of Prussia, was also an especially ingenious chemist and profound thinker. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, he drew attention to himself by creating a theory about sickness and healing that is known by the term "Animism." He published a three-volume work under the title *Theoria Medica Vera* (Halle 1707), which even at the beginning of the nineteenth century still had enough prestige to be retranslated and republished in both German and Latin. The German edition is by Von Ideler and appeared in three volumes in Berlin in 1832.

The connection of Stahl's treatment to the subject of this book, namely angels, is clear from his theory itself. Its essence is that sickness is to be regarded as the result of disorder in the relationship between soul and body. Stahl recognized the soul as the centre or fulcrum of the body. The body must serve the soul or spirit. Whenever the body goes astray, the soul will resist and force the body back into its ascribed role. These attempts of the soul to restore the body to its healthful functions were in fact, according to Stahl, directed against the real, powerful serious diseases. The only function of the doctor was to support this movement of the soul and to remove whatever stood in its way.

While we will leave this theory for what it is, it continues to draw attention in an effort to raise the scientific reputation of medical knowledge and intervention. The significance that this theory ascribes to the role of the soul in relation to disease is itself too valuable to dismiss outright. Even though this

Animism enjoys few supporters today (+/- 1900 AD), it does point a finger to what remains *the* open question in medical science, namely psychiatry.

It is striking that the name given to this system, namely Animism, is used in our century for a similar system but in a totally different context. Currently Animism is mostly regarded as an expression of an enchanted world in which ethnic groups around the world ascribe various natural phenomena and all kinds of life experiences they cannot explain through known natural causes, to all kinds of mysterious spirits, either benign or malevolent. This popular worldview played a role not only in previous centuries, but still is adhered to in many traditional societies.<sup>1</sup> The Lama high priest in south China still daily occupies himself with catching evil spirits in bottles or jars, which are then securely sealed to make escape impossible.

This so-called Animistic religion has in common with Stahl's medical Animism that both systems seek to explain a *physical or natural* phenomenon by *spiritual* causes, which are then sought in the effects of unseen agents acting on the material. With Stahl that unseen being was seen as the *soul* that affects the body, while in the world of ethnic Animism these invisible spiritual beings were seen as either good or evil spirits that influence the life and adventures of those whom these spirits either threatened and pursued or protected and blessed.

Thus one can instantaneously recognize the relationship between those two systems with the teaching about angels. With angels we also come in touch with an enchanted world of spiritual beings that, according to God's Word, have a powerful effect over our human lives, whether beneficial or malevolent. The angels who remained in their original holiness have beneficial effects on us; the fallen and demonized angels under the leadership of satan<sup>2</sup> are our malevolent tempters.

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<sup>1</sup>This remains the dominant popular view in much of Black Africa in the twenty-first century. See Jan H. Boer on <[www.SocialTheology/boeriana](http://www.SocialTheology/boeriana)> for various publications on wholistic health care in the enchanted world of Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup> Because of his totally negative role, I have long refused to capitalize "satan" in all my writings and translations. He does not deserve such respect.

Not everyone believes in the real existence of such spiritual beings or in their ability to influence our human lives. What we read in Acts 23:8 about the majority worldview has been the reigning view for all times and continues even till today. It can be said that those whose belief is restricted to the empirical, still do not believe in a resurrection of the body or in the existence of angels. The other side of the coin is also true: Those who believe in a resurrection also accept the existence of angels. There is indeed a connection between accepting the resurrection and the existence of angels. The secularists for whom there is nothing beyond the physical, believe that life ends as soon as the physical stops functioning. For them, belief in the existence of creatures *without* a physical aspect, whether dead humans or angels, is simply absurd. The reverse is also true: All those who believe in a resurrection also accept that a person is more than her physical appearance that we can observe; that after death this spiritual aspect, though separated from the body, continues to exist and that thus the existence of a spiritual being without a body is quite possible. From that perspective there is nothing strange in accepting the existence of angels, who are purely spiritual beings without physicality.

In the battle between these opposite convictions, believers have noticeably been pushed back and daily lost terrain. By the end of the nineteenth century, life, having become very flat, plain and pedestrian, had neither eye nor heart for a world of divine poetry that hides behind the curtain of the visible.

When this flat and dull spiritual, disenchanted atmosphere penetrated the world of theologians, it was no surprise that belief in angels was increasingly pushed back. As was the case with Balthasar Beckler,<sup>3</sup> the attack would usually begin by denying the existence of demons and of satan. Once the stage had been reached where belief in evil spirits was so thoroughly mocked that public opinion wanted no part of it, the attack on good angels took hold so that people could not rest before the heavens were also totally depopulated and disenchanted, with nothing but an unending empty space remaining.

That which theologians initiated along this line, was perfected by natural scientists. From there on everything was to be explained according to the patterns of natural

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<sup>3</sup> **Balthasar Bekker** (1634 – 1698), born in Metslawier, Dongeradeel, Friesland, was a Dutch minister and author of philosophical and theological works. Opposing [superstition](#), he was a key figure in the end of the [witchcraft](#) persecutions in [early modern Europe](#). His best known work is *De Betoverde Weereld* (1691), or *The World Bewitched* (1695). [Balthasar Bekker - Wikipedia](#).

life. The explanation of all phenomena was to be sought in empirical causes. Materialism was enthroned. This talk of spiritual angels was considered temporarily sufficient for the time the operations of natural forces were not yet known. Thus they were ascribed to mysterious causes.

That even allowed for witches with all their abominations.

But now that the natural sciences have made such phenomenal progress and are able to explain nearly everything according to natural causes, faith in angels and spirits was herewith totally routed. Of course, not *everything* could now be explained, but the natural sciences were making such gigantic strides that there was no doubt that before long almost everything that was considered mysterious would soon be subject to rational explanation from observable causes. All belief in the existence of the enchanted spiritual world was now to be dismissed as preposterous and out of date. That was all medieval and obscurantist which our enlightened age had forever done away with.

For theologians this created more than a trifling difficulty. Even though belief in the infallibility of Scripture had been abandoned, it could not be denied that Scripture affirms belief in angels and spirits and that it disapproves of their rejection. Even in the life of Christ in His sayings and parables there are frequent references to angels. In the Gospels this occurs no less than forty-two times; in Acts, twenty-one; in the Pauline epistles, twenty-eight; and on nearly every page in the book of Revelation.

This phenomenon demanded an explanation. Attempts to explain this were made with the final conclusions being as follows. Animism undoubtedly existed in Israel from the beginning as well as among its neighbours, but Israel did not create an actual doctrine of angels of her own. This perspective was developed by the Persians, while the Jews, following the example of others, developed theirs after the Babylonian exile in a style all their own. During the centuries between the exile and John the Baptist, this foreign teaching of angels took deep roots in Israel and became part of their worldview. Hence, Jesus' contemporaries fully accepted this spiritualistic assumption of good and evil spirits that influence human lives. Only the Sadducees, being more developed and civilized, kept themselves free from such superstitions.

However, in the areas of Nazareth and Capernaum, where Jesus and his disciples grew up, this perspective was popular and common. Thus it was that Jesus adopted this popular viewpoint and shared it with the disciples. Those among moderns who had more respect for Jesus and could not view Him as a product of His time, taught that Jesus knew better and did not personally believe in angels or spirits, but adjusted himself to popular opinion, because the existence of angels had been totally embedded in the religious world of His contemporaries.

Without going into deeper explanation here, it should be recognized in passing that the most recent research has effectively knocked the bottom out of these theories. Though he was an unbeliever himself, James Darmesteter,<sup>4</sup> a learned scientist, wrote a completely opposite conclusion in his French book. According to him, it was not the Jews who borrowed their view of angels from the Persians, but that the Jewish perspective was taken over in Persia. Though these arguments went back and forth, in the meantime, while awaiting further developments in this area, it will be well to stay clear of these theories about angels in the Scripture that were even taught children in catechism classes.

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It is much more surprising that in our age, just now that science has broken with all enchanted belief in the existence of angels and spirits, a mighty movement out of the mystery of life has emerged that feverishly defends the existence of invisible spirits and their effect on us. We refer to so-called “Spiritism.” It is remarkable that, while scholars began to debunk the belief in angels and spirits, in Emanuel Swedenborg a seer arose who, on basis of his own experience, plead the reality of the effect of invisible spirits in his life. However, Swedenborg remained largely independent and gathered only a small circle around him that was prepared to affirm his perception of eternal things. But what remained a largely static phenomenon with him, in our day grew into an extensive movement. In country after country, then here, then there, men and, especially, women arose who announced that, whether by knocks or some other way, they were in touch with beings they did not see nor were they visible to the eye, and who introduced themselves as spirits from the invisible world. Initially, the reaction was one of unbelieving smiles, but they insisted on their assertion. Nothing could dissuade

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<sup>4</sup> James Darmesteter (1849-1894) was a French author, [orientalist](#), and [antiquarian](#).

them that they really had contact with the world of spirits. And seeing that the manifestations of these spirits did not restrict themselves only to the mysterious but revealed themselves by knocks, by movement and dancing of tables and, finally, by the movement of a pencil and pencil writing, they soon succeeded in attracting a sizable crowd of believers, including both followers of Christ and deniers of His Name, and more or less convinced them of their assertions. Christians who allowed themselves to be caught up in this net were, of course, not believers who lived close to the Scriptures; they were more of the emotional type.

Soon two different schools of thought emerged. On the one hand, there were those who grabbed hold of these manifestations only as a welcome proof of a supernatural world. On the other hand, there were those who constructed a system based on this Spiritism. Though they did this in a great variety of ways, the result was that they turned Spiritism into a separate faith, almost into a sect. Now this group of Spiritists in our country, the Netherlands, is very small, but it does have a talented speaker in the retired preacher Roorda van Eysinga,<sup>5</sup> whose thoughts went deep and whose style would involuntarily pull you along.

But abroad, especially in America, the number of these Spiritists is impressive and their literary output puts us to shame. They are publishing an extensive series of magazines in many languages. Their publications make up a fairly large library. We no longer count them in tens of thousands, but in the millions. Even more surprising is that this Spiritism finds few adherents among the lower classes, but mostly among the wealthy and cultured people who are not satisfied with the materialism of this age.

If you wonder about the connection between this Spiritism and the doctrine of angels, the answer is not far sought. As we already saw with the Sadducees, denial of resurrection and of angels goes hand in hand. The question about whether souls have a posthumous existence and whether there are angels is basically one and the same. Understand well: angels are not dead persons, not in the least. Angels have an independence of their own. However, belief in angels depends wholly on whether one believes or rejects the existence of immaterial, spiritual and invisible

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<sup>5</sup> Roorda van Eysinga (1870-1925) Born a Dutchman, he was raised amidst revolutionary ideals: when he was a child, his family had to relocate to Switzerland after his father was declared persona non grata by the Dutch government, and there his parents befriended the anarchist thinkers.... He published his intention of committing suicide and did so in 1925.

beings. If one accepts such existence, one can also accept a posthumous existence of the soul as well as of angels. On the contrary, if one rejects all this, belief in resurrection and in angels both fall by the wayside. Though Spiritism does not directly concern itself with angels and appears to occupy itself exclusively with the spirits of the dead, this recognition of the continued existence of the non-physical spirits of the dead paves the way for accepting the possibility of angels.

It is necessary to point to this connection in this context, because it demonstrates how indestructible the need of our human nature is to acknowledge the existence of a spirit world. For what purpose is there in philosophers, theologians and scientists, after having harnessed their best efforts, then to disavow the living species of angels as they are revealed to us in God's Word? Soon, through the back door, a similar belief in the spiritual world would once again assert itself, but now in a much more drastic format. Belief in angels continued to quietly and inspiringly permeate the Church of God. It hurt no one and was no obstacle to anyone. And now, after scholars have exhausted themselves in destroying this elevating belief in angels, it has been replaced with the noisy, ever expanding movement of Spiritism. One does well to recognize that with the emergence of Spiritism, theologians who are not too far out in left field, once again turned to the old enchanted view and asked themselves whether they would not do better to restore that old perspective to honour, rather than to engage in Spiritism. In the first print of *Herzog's Real Encyclopaedie*, one Lic. Bohmer proposed that the assumption of angels was nothing but a passing impression of our *sensus divinitatis*, but in its second edition of 1897, Robert Kubel enthusiastically defends the old belief. There really is no other choice. You will acknowledge the angelic world as God has revealed in His Word or, as soon as you reject the latter, you will revert to the Animism of idolatrous peoples, not directly, but step by step, the first step being the search for communion with the dead who have already left us.

## Chapter 2\*

### Angels in Oblivion

*Do not let anyone who delights in false humility  
and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize.  
Such a person goes into great detail what he has seen,  
and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.  
--Colossians 2:18*

It cannot be denied that among the *Gereformeerden*<sup>6</sup> of our day, i.e. Kuyper's time of writing, as well as among Protestants in general, angels do not enjoy the attention one might expect from Scripture. True, one does not find people among faithful Calvinists who, like the Sadducees of old and the free thinkers of our time, deny the existence of angels. Nor are there those who incredulously shake their heads at what Scripture tells us about angels. But that does not mean that angels take a significant place in their faith life and perspective.

To be sure, we listen ecstatically and in awe to the song of angels in the fields of Ephrata; we know that angels served our Saviour after His temptation in the wilderness and in Gethsemane; on Easter we remember how angels descended and rolled the stone from the grave; at the Ascension we hear the angels speak to the Apostles; and in the book of Revelation the future with the Lord is often depicted in the company of angels. We can confess and accept all this without having answered the question for ourselves about the place of angels in God's creation, which service they provide in the great work of grace and what is their relationship to us personally and to the salvation of our own souls. This is the precise point where we have to seriously complain that our awareness of God's angels has shriveled far too much at the expense of the quality of our lives and of our souls.

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<sup>6</sup> *Gereformeerd*—This refers to the denomination established by Kuyper under the name "*Gereformeerde Kerken*." Its adjective is "*Gereformeerd*," same as its adherents. Since there are so many Reformed denominations in the country, we will use the Dutch term to refer to this particular denomination, its people and traditions. This denomination has recently re-merged with the historical national state church, the *Hervormde Kerk* (Reformed Church), from which it seceded in the nineteenth century, to form the *Protestantse Kerken van Nederland* (Protestant Churches of the Netherlands). *Be it known that, with a few exceptions, all the footnotes in this translation are the translator's, not Kuyper's.*



Our Heidelberg Catechism, in its explanation of the third petition in the Lord's Prayer, *consciously* assumes, that "Your will be done" means among other things, "Help everyone carry out the work he is called to as willingly and faithfully *as the angels in heaven.*"<sup>7</sup> This has almost been totally forgotten. *Out of the hundred who pray the Lord's Prayer, we dare claim that there are at least ninety who regularly pray along with this third petition or even pray it themselves, but without even for one split second giving any thought to the service angels perform.*

The claim that Calvinists are too far estranged from the doctrine of angels is thus no exaggeration. They hardly ever mention or talk about angels. In our writings, they are largely ignored. In church classes such as Catechism there is hardly any mention of the application of angels to our own lives.<sup>8</sup> It is publicly realized how in all churches angels are mentioned very seldom. True, there is a certain degree of dreaming and fantasizing going on about angels, especially among our women, but this sort of interest in angels basically has nothing to do with Scripture; it is more of an art product. Both in painting and sculpture, artists have conjured up all sorts of charming and graceful angelic figurines who captivate us. Similarly, in poetry writers have gradually introduced these pseudo-angels, even making them sing on their own, but these are very different from the angels in Scripture.

Especially engravings or sketches of dying babies taken out of their crib by an angel has for sentimental reasons become extremely popular. And thus, completely outside of the Confessions or Scripture, these pseudo - or phantom angels gradually came to be seen as a kind of poetic being that populated the world with its construction of winged figurines. That image of pretty angels then gradually infiltrated popular common daily life. There is hardly a young mother who has not called her little darling, "angel." Amongst young couples it is very common to address each other in their letters as "my angel." Out of all of this, it has become crystal clear that people no longer take the actual existence of angels seriously, but that their use of the word "angel" only refers to the poetic name of an attractive

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<sup>7</sup>The Heidelberg Catechism is one of the three doctrinal pillars of many Reformed churches. This third petition is found in the answer to Question 124. This translation was adopted by the CRC in 1975.

<sup>8</sup> During my seminary years (1960s), a very orthodox professor, when asked about the role of angels, obviously did not know what to do with them. Yes, he admitted, they serve us, but we do not depend on angels; we depend on God. End of story.

and pleasantly-imagined being. They use that name only to substantiate their ideal phantasm, whether to express the love in the hearts of young couples or that of a young mother. This distortion is the first to be resisted once we no longer accept that poetic image from the art world but turn to that of Holy Scripture.

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The answer to the question how it came about that among us Protestants-- and thus also among Calvinists--spiritual involvement with the angels of Scripture retreated so drastically, is undoubtedly that this is to be sought especially in our opposition to both Catholic practice and doctrine. During the Reformation, people had the sad spiritual experience of all sorts of intrusive barriers distorting the relationship between souls searching for salvation and Christ. The personal, self-conscious and direct communion between the Christ and one's soul was much weakened. A few people of stronger spirit, including certain Catholic orders, continued to relate more directly to Christ, but for the larger crowd of believers direct communion with Christ had almost become an unknown issue for the soul. There were all kinds of barriers inserted against communion with the Saviour: priests, bishops, the Pope in Rome, Mary, the saints and (romanticized) angels. It was only after overcoming all these links in the chain that a certain degree of communion with the Saviour was (re-)established, but it was a much weakened version that had lost its vitality and intimacy because of all these barriers. This situation externalized the religion and explains that a truly searching spirit that was free of superstition, could not find peace with God.

With Martin Luther in the lead, many thirsted for this peace, and dared to make heroic attempts to break up that chain of barriers and to commune directly with Christ and thus find a peace that neither the church establishment nor the creaturely heaven could help them achieve. In the course of this history they undermined the dependence of the conscience on the clerics, upended the worship of Mary, pushed aside the (imagined) service of the saints and banned the worship of angels from the church. All these factors had created barriers between the soul and the Mediator. It was only out of spiritual thirst for free communion of the soul with the Saviour that all of this was exorcised without hesitation, in the full awareness of sure consequences to come.

It is from the above perspective that the attitude of the Gereformeerde churches in the Netherlands concerning the worship of angels as evidenced in Article 26 of the Belgic Confession must be seen and evaluated.<sup>9</sup> Though this article inveighs only against the mediating role of the saints, in this context the saints must be seen on one line with angels; what holds for saints, also holds for angels.

When you read this beautiful Article 26 in one sitting, you will not detect even the slightest hint of hostility towards Rome. Instead, this confession speaks of the *sole advocacy or intercessory function of Christ* only in terms of the blessed triumph in the heart of God's elect, from where it then moves on to confess that finally, finally all intermediaries have been removed and full communion with the Saviour restored. It reads in full,

*For neither in heaven nor among the creatures on earth is there anyone who loves us more than does Jesus Christ. Although He was “in the form of God,” He nevertheless “emptied Himself,” taking the form of “a man” and “a servant” for us, and made himself “completely like His brothers.” Suppose we had to find another intercessor, who would love us more than He who gave His life for us, even though “we were His enemies?” And suppose we had to find one who has prestige and power, who has as much of these as He who is seated “at the right hand of the Father” and who has “all power in heaven and on earth?” And who will be heard more readily than God’s own dearly beloved Son?*

*So then, sheer unbelief has led to the practice of dishonouring the saints, instead of honouring them. This was something the saints never did nor asked for, but which in keeping with their duty, as appears from their writings, they consistently refused.*

*We should not plead here that we are unworthy—for it is not a question of offering our prayers on the basis of our own dignity but only on the basis of*

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<sup>9</sup> The Belgic Cpnfession is the oldest confession of the Christian Reformed and related denominations, written by Guido de Bres back in the sixteenth century. Article 26 is reproduced here in its entirety. For the full Confession go to < [< BelgicConfession.pdf \(crcna.org\) >](http://BelgicConfession.pdf(crcna.org)) . I have introduced a few changes in punctuation and capitalization to conform to this entire essay as well as to the entire website. Throughout this translation I capitalize every reference to divinity and decapitalize every reference to satan, the devil c.s.

*the excellence and dignity of Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is ours by faith.*

*Since the apostle, for good reason, wants us to get rid of this foolish fear—or rather, this unbelief—he says to us that Jesus Christ was “made like his brothers in all things,” that He might be a High Priest who is merciful and faithful to purify the sins of the people. For since He suffered, being tempted, He is also able to help those who are tempted.*

*And further, to encourage us more to approach Him, he says, “Since we have a High Priest, Jesus the Son of God, who has entered into heaven, we maintain our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to have compassion for our weakness, but one who was tempted in all things, just as we are, except for sin. Let us go then with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace in order to be helped.”*

*The same apostle says that we “have liberty to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus. Let us go then in the assurance of faith....”*

*Likewise, “Christ’s priesthood is forever. By this He is able to save completely those who draw near to God through Him, who always lives to intercede for them.”*

*What more do we need? For Christ Himself declares: “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to My Father but by Me.” Why should we seek another intercessor? Since it has pleased God to give us the Son as our Intercessor, let us not leave him for another—or rather seek, without ever finding. For, when giving Christ to us, God knew well that we were sinners.*

*Therefore, in following the command of Christ, we call on the heavenly Father through Christ, our only Mediator, as we are taught by the Lord’s Prayer, being assured that we shall obtain all we ask of the Father in His Name.*

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We may not delete anything from this stirring Confession, because it provides convincing proof of how, entirely without aversion to or unbelief in angels, but exclusively and only out of spiritual thirst for the Saviour, it has pushed aside the worship of and advocacy by angels. After all, the service provided by angels is clearly and emphatically affirmed in Article 12 of the Confession, where it states, “*He has also created the angels good, that they might be His messengers and serve His elect.*”

Similarly, Question 124 of the Heidelberg Catechism, another Reformed confession, holds up the angels as an example for us in the prayer that everyone of us “carry out the work he is called to as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.” However firmly this has been affirmed, it cannot be denied that the spiritual decisiveness with which we in this way opposed the worship of angels in the Catholic Church, unnoticeably led us to focus too much on the contrast and, therefore, pushed the positive confession of angels and their service to the background.

That’s just the way it is with our sinful nature. We, human beings, have difficulty maintaining the correct measure of things. Maintaining balance is a gift few people have. And thus we swing from one extreme to the other. This is the source of that communal sin either to exaggerate or to underestimate; either to overrate or to minimize; or what academics call in Latin *per excessum* or *per defectum*. Now Rome succumbed to exaggeration and excesses where angels are concerned, but it cannot be denied that, in their zeal to combat this excess, Calvinists on their side also failed to maintain the right balance and similarly fell into excess, but into the *defectus* side of things. As we pointed out above, that is how certain images of (phantom) angels were adopted more from the world of poetry and romance than from God’s Word. It is even the case that among those that have distanced themselves from God’s Word, we hear more references to angels than in families that live close to God’s Word. And this is just where, when Spiritism emerged from its mysterious background, it found its most fertile soil in Protestant countries.

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If you wonder what Rome has taught with respect to the veneration of angels, you must acknowledge that the Council of Trent expressed itself soberly. It determined that “the worship of and calling upon the saints, the angels and the sanctified souls who taste heavenly delight is not against the first commandment.”<sup>10</sup> This is then demonstrated with this question, “In reaction to a royal decree prohibiting anyone from behaving like the king or from seeking royal splendour, who would be mad enough to deduce from that decree that showing any respect to magistrates was prohibited? Though in the Catholic scheme of things Christians are instructed to adore angels after the example of the saints in the Old Covenant, they thereby do not honour them with the level of veneration they bring to God.”<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Rome repeatedly pointed out that the saints of the Old Covenant venerated even (human) kings.<sup>12</sup> And then the question would be raised whether the veneration and honour accorded to earthly rulers should not also be accorded to these high beings whose glory outshines that of kings. “Even love ... must force us in view of the fact that the angels pray for us, protect us, and carry our prayers to God’s throne. From this perspective we must call upon them, for they constantly see the Face of God, and have willingly accepted their assignment to support our salvation.” The Catholic *Catechism* continues, “Not in the least is meant here a veneration that would be at the expense of or in competition with God’s honour. To the contrary, the honour of God is elevated the more this service of the saints and of angels elevates humans and challenges them to the imitation of the saints.”

As you can see, this is all expressed very soberly. It is emphatically taught that the honour shown to angels must be something totally different from the veneration accorded to the Eternal Person. The honour accorded to angels must be comparable to the respect we have for the magistrates whom God has placed over us. That honour must be far from competing with or reducing the glory of our God. It is

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<sup>10</sup>Kuyper quotes from *Cat. Rom. P. III.c.II. 9.4.*—a reference the translator has not traced. This Catechism was composed by Pope Pius V in follow up of the Council of Trent. We Protestants would refer here to the first instead of the second commandment.

<sup>11</sup>The translation of this quote is from Kuyper’s Dutch version, not directly from the Latin original. This holds true as well for the next few quotations from that document.

<sup>12</sup>Genesis 23:7, 12; 42:6; I Kings 24:9, 25:23; II Kings 9:6,8; I Chronicles 29:20.

said that nothing glorifies the Most High more than continuing in the same service as the angels and saints. In addition, every declaration that supports these considerations is richly highlighted and supported with examples from the Scriptures and is organized in such a way that it is almost impossible not to recognize the intention of preventing misuse. Unfortunately, none of this has helped. As of now, misuse of the word remains a common practice. And what's more, this misuse arose definitely from official dogma.

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In Colossians 2:18 there is a declaration about the service of angels that is helpful for our point of departure. It reads: *“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize.”* In that letter, the holy apostle observes how already then there were attempts in this young church to restrict the freedom of believers, to limit it and to insert various intrusions between them and the Saviour. This disturbed Paul greatly. He understood and foresaw the problems this separation of the Head from the members would cause by breaking up the unity of the Body of Christ. With that in view, he encourages the Colossian believers not to allow anyone to impose all sorts of rules about food and drink, or celebrating new moons or Sabbaths, which, though they were all valid in the past, when they were a shadow of things to come, have since been abrogated now that Christ has fulfilled all they foreshadowed. Having said that, Paul continued, *“Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.”*

The above shows that at that time the heresy had already infiltrated the congregation that felt the veneration of Christ did not suffice and therefore introduced the worship of angels. That is, they concocted various ceremonies by which they worshipped angels. This intentional religious honouring of angels was defended by a call to false humility on the part of the faithful. They were to walk in this false humility and on its basis take their refuge in the veneration of angels. So, the very thing that was so powerfully experienced during the Reformation and what Article 21 of the Belgic Confession so movingly countered, namely veneration of angels in the church, was based on the proposition that we were unworthy to approach God directly. He who directly called upon Christ as his Saviour, was considered lacking in humility. He had too high a view of himself as if this could be achieved directly without the assistance of intermediaries. Only

spiritual pride could move us to call upon the Saviour directly; a meek and humble believer would not do so. She had too low an opinion about herself; she did not consider herself justified. She was humble and wanted to remain humble. That is why she would not approach Christ herself but stopped at the gate where she met the saints and angels to have them convey her prayers to the King in His palace through their mediation, and from that palace have the grace and mercy of the Saviour applied to her. Thus this “false humility and service of the angels” are directly related. These heretics sought to instill a false concept of humility into the congregation. Once this false humility had gotten a foothold, the service and veneration of angels automatically followed according to the dynamics of that culture.

The result of this would be that the same things they had so painfully experienced during the age of Reformation, namely that communion with Christ lost its intimacy and, secondly, that through all this veneration of saints and angels that intruded between Christ and the soul, they found themselves distancing more and more from the Saviour. These heretics, along with their provocative practices and the resulting spiritual impoverishment, were to be blamed for instilling the desire to penetrate into things that have not been seen. We know nothing about angels except that which God has revealed in His Word. These heretics were not concerned with what the Holy Spirit had revealed to us, but only with their own alleged spiritual experiences. They thus abandoned the basis of the faith in order to develop their point of departure in the subjective experience of a subjective phantasy.

This is what the holy Apostle calls the fruit of worldly reasoning or logic that is contrary to the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. It is not a true but a false humility that considers a child of God and redeemed of the Lord incapable of approaching his Saviour directly. All veneration of angels or saints that intrudes between the soul and the Saviour, damages the faith. That is why the holy Apostle urges the church of Colossae to turn away from these heretics whose ideas had “an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship..., but they lack any value...” with God (Colossians 2:23).

### **Chapter 3\***



## Ban on Angel Worship

*Then the angel said to me,  
 "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited  
 to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'"*  
*and he added, "These are the true Words of God."*  
*At this I fell at his feet to worship him.  
 But he said to me, "Do not do it!  
 I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers  
 who hold to the testimony of Jesus.  
 Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."  
 (Revelation 19:9-10)*

Remember Paul's warning in Colossians 2:18 not to "let anyone who delights in false humility and in the worship of angels" lure you into angel worship. This definitely cuts off all so-called veneration of and involvement with the world of angels that is based on the assertion that we are too low and too sinful in ourselves to appear before the holy throne of God and therefore need the intercession of saints or angels. Indeed, Rome has sought to assert that Paul was addressing a form of angel worship that had come from Persia, but without any solid basis for this claim. In neither the foregoing nor in what follows does the holy Apostle point in any way to foreign influences, but rather to the attempts of some *within* the church to influence members and to the unworthy means applied to the situation. In this context he summarizes this falsely imbibed "humility" and the resulting worship of angels. That the worship of angels did not need to be imported from Persia becomes crystal clear from the example of the holy Apostle John, who, during the vision he experienced on Patmos, twice prostrated himself before an angel to worship. When something like this happens twice even to an apostle as spiritual as John, what then is more natural than that a similar tendency is also found among the ordinary believers at that time and that some power-hungry members would misuse this tendency to establish power over them? And so, seeing the serious danger to the Colossian church and through her to the church of all ages hiding under this cloak, the holy Apostle Paul warned them not to be lured into such angel worship.

Neither is there even one single word that would indicate that the veneration of angels that is being rejected here was a kind of worship of angels as if they were

gods. This context affirms the very opposite. The use of the word “humility” here indicates clearly that this angel worship at Colossae rests on the false conviction that believers may not directly approach God in Christ but needed the mediation of saints and angels. Calling upon an angel to pray and plead to intercede for him with Christ, and then for Christ in turn to plead with God, already indicates thereby that Paul is not venerating such an angel as a god but, rather, as a *higher* being that exercises influence on the dispensation of grace by the Most High. The distinctions advanced by Catholic theologians between *Latreia*, the highest adoration that belongs only to God and Christ, and *Dulia*, the lower degree of veneration that is applied to angels and their peers, is wholly irrelevant here. It is definitely the case that Catholic theologians also protest the idea that the worship that should be reserved for God the Creator only, may be applied also to any creature. They declare decisively that the highest form of worship, i.e., *Latreia*, is reserved only for God.

However, they also insist that the lower veneration that belongs to angels and falls under *Dulia*, is a *religious* veneration, for the motivation that drives it is religious in nature and thus the basis for this veneration lies in the awe that is applied to God Himself and that compels them to honour in angels the supernatural graces that God has embedded in them, and the dignity wherewith He has dressed them as well as the power with which He has equipped them. Herein it becomes clear that it is an attempt to interpret such angelic veneration as something totally different for example from the honour we reserve for our governments. They regard the latter veneration as a *civil* one, while the veneration demanded here for angels is definitely of a *religious* nature. It is exactly here that both the danger and the cause are found that are embedded in this doctrine to go even further astray in practice.

After all, the saints, no less than angels, are God’s servants whom He equips with power and majesty. We honour them not for their own sake, but for what it has pleased God to embed in them. When it comes to service and qualification, both are on one line. It will not do to contend that angels outrank humans since Scripture frequently declares that humans will judge angels, while the incarnation of the Word has forever elevated our human race above the angelic host. If we still insist that the respect we owe our authorities is merely of a *civil* nature, but that the veneration we owe angels is *religious* in nature, then we make a distinction here

with far-reaching consequences that *must* and does lead to our evaluating them higher and superior to earthly creatures.

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In this context, our forefathers frequently referred to Revelation 19:10 and 22:8. In Revelation 19 we are shown in apocalyptic vision the moment of the final judgement. John hears from afar the joyful cheers of the saved ones in heaven, who shout, "*Hallelujah! Salvation and honour and power belong to our God*" (:1). He sees how "*the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fall down*" before God's face in order to worship Him. This solemn moment grabs John so as to totally move him. As the angel says to him, "*Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'*" John loses control of himself. He feels incapable of obeying such a powerful command and he falls down before the angel to worship him. But the latter will not tolerate this. To the contrary, he immediately responds, gently reprimanding John, "*Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*" (:10). But the vision John beheld was so overwhelming and left him so dumbfounded that, as he came to the end of this apocalyptic vision, he could not resist offering spiritual worship to the angel. After all, in Revelation 22:8-9 we read, "*I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me.*" And again, it is the angel himself that rejects this spiritual worship relentlessly as he warned in chapter 19:10 above.

Now it must be noticed that we are not dealing here with a brother of weak faith, but with someone no less than the holy Apostle John, whom we find here at the zenith of his spiritual experiences, not in a moment of spiritual breakdown but completely taken up into the glorious vision that has overcome him. It is just at such a rich moment that this man, so weak in spirit, is already down on his knees to lose himself in sin. It is an angel that twice rejects such homage and gently chides John, reminding him that only God may be worshipped. Being an angel, he is not a *higher* being but a *fellow servant* who is a peer to the prophets of old and to the faithful who have preserved the word of prophecy. You cannot get away with saying that this angel protests such homage as if he were God. This simply cannot be. It is wholly unreasonable to suppose even for one moment that the holy Apostle

John would have entertained the thought that this angel is either God Himself or one of the false gods. No one will dare to insist on such an atrocious explanation. The angel does not answer with “I am not God,” but he only points out that he is not some sort of higher being but a peer to John, for prophets, angels, apostles and martyrs are together servants and thus also mutual servants of the Lord. Thus John is not reprimanded because he upholds wrong doctrine but only because he unthinkingly allowed himself a sinful deed *in practice*. He did not intend to worship God Himself in this angel, but, lost in respect and awe, he knelt before the angel as if he were a higher sort of being and so came to inadvertently pay a level of homage to the angel that is to be reserved for God alone.

Thus we have every right to turn the angel’s word to John against every form of homage to angels that, without treating them as gods, nevertheless offers them the kind of veneration that is an extension to our worship of the Highest Being. Note well that the angel does not say, “Don’t worship me, for I am only a *creature*.” No, but he deprives John of every idea that he outranked John, as if an angel had such high dignity above a servant of the Lord that he was to be venerated. It is from this perspective that he so forcefully emphasizes that he is a *fellow servant*, i.e., one who is equal to John in the same service cadre. And just as one cabinet minister does not outrank his colleagues, his fellow servants, in respect, but is one with them in status, so also such a display of honour by one servant of the Lord to another is inappropriate.

In order to make this even clearer, he points out that an angel is not higher than a prophet, not even higher than *any* child of God who safeguards prophecy. In other words, the cutting away of all expressions of superiority is based on the fact that this is not about a *higher sort of being*, but that angels and humans are fellow servants and that in the service of God these fellow servants may not accept such honour from each other.

This is expressed even stronger when we compare the angel’s reprimand with the declarations of Peter and Paul in Acts 10:26 and 14:14ff. When Peter arrives at centurion Cornelius’ place in Caesarea and the latter recognizes him, he falls on his knees before Peter and worships him. Peter does not tolerate this. “*Arise,*” he commands, “*I am only a man myself.*” According to Acts 14, after the healing of a

crippled man by Paul and Barnabas, the citizens of Lystra, concluding that the two were gods, wanted to slaughter an animal for an offering to them, Paul and Barnabas were shocked, rushed into the crowd, shouting, “*Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you.*”

It is remarkable that here we meet up twice with the contrast between God and humans. The centurion Cornelius of Caesarea and those citizens of Lystra were Pagans who imagined that there were demigods and many gods who needed to be revered. Over against that false opinion both Peter and Paul declared, “*Do not kneel before us, for we are not gods, but humans just like you.*” But you read nothing of this in Revelation 19:20 or 22:8. Nothing is said here of a contrast between a god and a human being, but exclusively of the assumed contrast between a higher and lower creature. For that reason, John is told that angels and humans all together form one holy company in the service of the Lord and that together and mutually they are fellow servants.

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It is worthy of attention that in the writings of the New Testament there is mention of neither doctrine about nor practice of such veneration of angels as asserted by the Catholic Church, not even one single word. Neither our Saviour nor any of His disciples present us with even one single passage supporting such a veneration of angels. That cannot be explained by a claim that during that time little attention was paid in general to angels. To the contrary, in Jesus’ days on earth, angels appeared very frequently. Jesus often spoke of angels. After His ascension to heaven we see more than once in the Acts of the Apostles that angels intervened salvifically and admonishingly between parties so that we hear much about angels speaking. But no matter how much you read and re-read the New Testament, not even the weakest recommendation can be found about angel worship. Only three times is there mention of angel worship, namely in Colossians 2:8; Revelation 19:10 and 22:8, and every time it is not to recommend such worship, but to disapprove of it and to decisively warn against it.

Catholic theologians have sensed this difficulty acutely and attempted to find support in the Old Testament what could not be found in the New. They even sought support for their opinion in the Apocryphal books. Apart from the apocryphal Tobias 12:12, they depended on Genesis 32:26; Exodus 23:20;

Numbers 22:31; Joshua 5:14 and Judges 13:17. Let us therefore take a closer look at each of these passages.

Firstly, *Genesis 32:26*—Here we find the story of Jacob wrestling at Peniel. In verse 24 we read that at early dawn “a man wrestled with him till daybreak” and Jacob said to the man, “*I will not let you go unless you bless me.*” There, according to Roman theologians, you see how Jacob asked an angel for his blessing, which is proof that he honoured this angel highly. Be it noted:

- Firstly, that nothing is said here about angels, only about a man. It is only in the context of Hosea 12:2, 4 that an angel is mentioned.
- Secondly, Jacob did not worship this man but wrestles with him and tries to force him to bless Jacob.
- Thirdly, even if Jacob had worshipped this man (about which we read nothing), his example is not in the least incumbent upon us. It would be disapproved just as in the example of the Apostle John in Revelation 19:10.

The reasoning process here is all too unconventional: Jacob’s wrestling with an angel would be incumbent upon us, while John’s action earned disapproval?!

With respect to the undeniable fact that Jacob asked for a blessing from this man at Peniel, let us take note of two things.

- First, in Scripture asking for a blessing is very common as Jacob’s own history demonstrates sufficiently: Jacob also expected such a blessing from his father Isaac.
- Secondly, in so far as it is maintained that blessing has a higher sense here, this man with whom Jacob wrestled revealed Himself as God and not as an angel. In *Genesis 32:28* it says, “...*you have struggled with God,*” while in verse 30 we read, “*I saw God face to face....*” This totally invalidates the Catholic appeal to this chapter.

Secondly,<sup>13</sup> in Exodus 23:20 the Lord says to Israel, “*See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since My Name is in him.*” Catholics translate the phrase “Pay attention to him” as “Venerate him” (*observare* / honour). This translation cannot be upheld, for in Hebrew it includes a prefix that means “*from.*” It always alerts us that we must be on our guard against what might come from another person to us. Religious veneration is in no way demanded and there is nothing here that cannot just as well be said of Moses. It is only at the end of this quotation that there is a word that cannot be said of a human being, but therewith demonstrates that it does not refer to an ordinary angel either. Angels cannot forgive sins and neither can it be said that they carry the Name of God within them. For this reason our forefathers have declared this angel a Christophany, i.e., a revelation of the Son of God in human form. Even if veneration were demanded here—which is in no way the case--, there is nothing here that refers to veneration of angels.

Thirdly, Numbers 22:31 tells the story of how the “angel of the Lord” appeared to Balaam and how the latter, upon recognizing the angel of the Lord, “bowed low and fell facedown.” To draw any conclusion from the story about our obligation towards the angel, it must first be shown that we Christians are under obligation to follow this *Pagan* Balaam’s example, something altogether unreasonable.

Fourthly, Joshua 5:14 tells how Joshua, standing by the Jordan River, saw a man there dressed as an army commander with a sword in his hand. Joshua took him to be an ordinary army officer and asked him, “*Are you for us or for our enemies?*” When the man answered, “*Neither. I am the commander of the army of the Lord,*” Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence and asked, “*What message does my Lord have for His servant?*” It is clearly shown here, according to Catholic theologians, that Joshua revered the angel with a spiritual veneration.

Let the following be observed:

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<sup>13</sup>If you find it difficult to follow Kuyper’s number scheme here, be comforted by knowing that Kuyper is no stranger to bemuddled grammar and that he occasionally inserts a secondary sequence within an original one. Confusion by any standard. I have tried to make it easier to follow here by the use of indentations.

- Nothing is said here about an angel;
- Joshua initially failed to show any special reverence until that man introduced himself as “commander of the army of the Lord;”
- This commander of the army of the Lord was Christ. Thus, we acknowledge that Joshua engaged in spiritual reverence here, but deny that this was reverence for an angel.

Fifthly, Judges 13 tells the story of Manoah, who was under the impression that “a man of God” had approached his wife, but he did not realize that it was an angel of the Lord (:16). Nevertheless, Manoah wanted to provide an offering to this man of God, so that the angel himself had to say, “*If you prepare a burnt offering, offer it to the Lord.*” Once he realized he was dealing with an angel of the Lord, he asked, “*What is your name, so we may honour you...?*” He did not make this offer to an angel but to the Lord. After this appearance, Manoah said to his wife that it was not an angel that he saw, but God Himself. Observe the following:

- Manoah’s example is not like a law for us, for he wanted to make an offering to the *man* of God;
- The angel pointed away from himself to the Lord;
- Manoah got the impression that this was not an ordinary angel but, rather an anthropomorphic appearance of God.

So, one can see that these references to the Old Testament in no way confirm Catholic doctrine. Their appeal to the Old Testament cannot deny in the least that neither Jesus nor His Apostles make any mention of veneration of angels, but, instead, the two times the New Testament does refer to it, it is only to disapprove of the practice.



## CHAPTER 4\*

### **Paying Homage at Angelic Appearances And the Matter of Guardian Angels**

*See that you do not look down on these little ones.*

*For I tell you that their angels in heaven  
always see the face of My Father in heaven.*

*Matthew 18:10*

We still need to take a closer look at the Catholic observance that angels are the ambassadors and messengers of the Most High. It is thus in keeping with the angelic status and rank for us to pay them the homage that is proper with the majesty of their Sender. We acknowledge this in principle. When the prime minister or president of a powerful country sends us a representative, our governments receive such an ambassador with more pomp and circumstance than a representative of an international scientific or philanthropic organization. In some countries such traditions run deeper than in others, but in most this calls up all sorts of questions of great interest regarding etiquette and rank. Often a great difference exists between the reception of a powerful and less powerful messenger's sender, if not in etiquette in the case of equal status, then in the manner in which the person is treated. Even though it is unreasonable for us to insist that we can learn the best way to determine our stance with respect to angels from diplomatic traditions, it is acknowledged that there is a generally recognized concept at its basis that should not be ignored in our relationship to angels. In our opinion, a representative cannot be judged or treated according to the dignity of his own person, but, rather, to the splendour of his sender. He does not come to us on his own and does not plead his own cause, but only that of his superiors. That is exactly why it is appropriate that a representative be judged less for his personal rank than for the status of his sender. This is not to say he is to be revered as if he were the sender himself, for then he would no longer be a representative. That is why it never happens that a representative is honoured as one would the sender. The honour with which a government receives an incumbent prime minister is always much higher than the highest honour accorded to a representative.

If we apply all this to angels, it never follows—and the Catholic Church does not hold to this—that we should honour an angel representing God at the same level as we would God Himself. This may never happen. But it does follow from this—and we readily acknowledge this—that an angel representing God needs to be received with the respect consonant with the majesty of his Sender. It would, however, be inappropriate to bow down before and worship an angel, for this is an homage reserved only for God.

The tradition to bow down and worship a human being was originally found only among Pagans when they suspected a person was especially holy as did Nebuchadnezzar to Daniel (Daniel 2:46) and as, later in the New Testament, centurion Cornelius of Caesarea did to Peter. The Scriptures always disapprove of paying such divine homage to a person. Undoubtedly this superstitious tradition penetrated Jewry from out of the Pagan world around them. We repeatedly read that this or that person would bow down before Jesus and worship Him, but this should not lead us to expect that such persons believed in Jesus' divinity. There is no evidence for that. This would be totally inexplicable. Among those who would so bow down and worship, there would definitely be some who did this under the impression of His divinity, but one still has to at least partially explain this attitude as coming out of residual Pagan morality. Those who did so acted literally according to Jesus' divine right, but often without realizing it. They were like Caiaphas, who, *without being aware of it*, glorified the work of the Mediator truthfully, as one who had to die on behalf of the people to prevent the entire nation from disintegrating.

Thus our conclusion can only be that we must regard an angel sent to us by God with the deepest reverence, but that may never be to the same degree of veneration that we reserve for God and His Christ. Now, if you want to call such veneration of an angel "*dulia*" and that of God "*latreia*," well and good, provided the use of *dulia* does not exceed the limit of what we are allowed to ascribe to a creature. The angel also is and remains a *fellow creature* with us. The assignment with which he comes to us from God does not entitle him to a supernatural level of veneration any more than a Government that is clothed with some of the majesty of God may not demand a level of reverence that exceeds creaturely limits. The Government outranks even an angel. After all, it is called "gods" in the Holy Scripture, because

it is assigned sovereignty by God Himself, while angels never behave as sovereign but always as “serving spirits.”

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Even herewith the decisive issue has not yet been determined. The foregoing leads only to the conclusion that when the Lord God sends us an angel as His messenger *and that angel approaches us visibly*, we need to regard him with reverential humility. We really don't need the Catholic Church to preach this to us. Amongst us Protestants, in so far as we faithfully hold to the confession of our forefathers, when an angel appears visibly to us in our house or at our bedside or on the road, who would not be filled immediately with the deepest reverence? This veneration could have such a powerful and overwhelming effect on us that, just like the Apostle John, we would be inclined to fall on our knees before the angel, so that only after realizing that we are facing a mere fellow creature, would we resist excessive and unauthorized veneration.

But, and this is the core of our objection, the Catholic Church speaks not only of such veneration when someone actually experiences the appearance of an angel, but also in general, *when there is no trace of an angel anywhere*, we don't experience one, don't see one, know nothing of his presence, and at most try to draw attention to him on our own initiative. If this only referred to a case in which an angel had indeed appeared at some earlier occasion, and from this memory his presence is imagined and he is thus regarded with a certain degree of reverence, this may be acceptable. An impression of a particular appearance can linger long after. That impression can later be revived. In this manner it is possible that, even after his disappearance, thoughts of veneration for such an angel can remain long afterwards.

But even here the objection holds that such an angel always appears in human form, as a phantom figure, and that this human form is not normal for him in heaven. Nevertheless, it is not wrong to suspect that Mary later would fondly remember that glorious face of angel Gabriel and think about him in silent reverence.

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It is a totally different situation if you have never experienced an angelic appearance and thus have never seen one. Where this is the case, the image of an ambassador from the King of Kings is nothing more than fiction. Then you cannot be conscious of an angel sent to you as ambassador by God. With the lack of such an experience, you will never have an occasion to properly venerate such an angel nor will you be able to draw on your memory for such an image and recall this encounter in the past with reverence. The very comparison to a messenger from an earthly ruler will be meaningless to you. After all, you do not honour a messenger from an earthly ruler who only exists as an illusion, but only when he is actually sent to you or you have a memory of such from the past. No matter how powerful the ruler of a country may be, no one thinks of venerating an ambassador from him from afar simply because we know he exists and is used in the service of his sender for the benefit of his own and other countries. In such a case, the mission is lacking as well as every personal point of contact. Thus there is no call whatsoever for any veneration. Even if such a representative were to enter our home, if he does not come with an assignment from our Prime Minister or was some time in the past accredited by our authorities, every official display of honour will be lowered.

And yet is this the only correct comparison with our relationship to angels? We know the Lord our God uses angels, that they serve Him, that they are employed to aid those who will inherit salvation, but we don't see them, we don't know them, they are no longer sent to us personally in a visible way so that for us they are unfathomable agents. It is only out of a tradition of over eighteen centuries that these angels allegedly appeared to some individuals as well as from a few stories about their activities that we can form a weak and vague image of them from afar, but all concreteness and consciousness of personal contact is lacking. Even an image of such an appearance does not help us, for, since angels are *spiritual* beings, the illusion of visible figures with wings is snatched from fiction, not from reality. Thus the entire comparison of angels with messengers of an earthly authority simply evaporates. It could be valid were there a personal angelic appearance to you, but it lacks all application now that it is not a question of how to receive an angel, but rather how you *in your imagination* would deal with totally *unfamiliar* angels.

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I have one final objection. It is often said that, though we no longer have a direct personal angelic experience, every elect person has her *guardian angel* who is intentionally assigned to her. It is therefore reasonable that we regard this personally-assigned angel with a certain degree of reverence and fear and grant him the mutual love of our heart. We will later deal with the question whether each elect person has such an angel. It must be said ahead of time that even if there were such personal guardian angels, such an angel would always remain hidden from us. Even that personal guardian angel will not appear to us. If he does watch over us, he does so in a mysterious way as an invisible spirit and cares for us remotely. Even if one is convinced that the teaching about guardian angels is indeed found in Scripture, we would still be stuck with the same objection that has occupied us earlier. Here again the unknown prevents all personal veneration. We may believe that there is such an angel. We may believe and accept that God takes care of and protects us in a special way through such an angel, but we don't know him, we have not seen him and from our side we lack all personal contact with him. In addition, even if we could draw any conclusions from our belief in such an angel, this would never cover the Catholic theory. The Catholic Church demands this veneration not only for one's guardian angel but for all angels in general.

In the Gereformeerde Kerken also the congregation addresses the angels when the people sing "Praise, praise the Lord, you His hosts, whose joy it is to wait upon His wings." Thus at least we cannot be accused of being unconcerned about angels or do not have a place for them in our church practices.

But it makes a great difference whether we call upon our heavenly fellow creatures to join us in glorifying our God or whether we stir each other and ourselves to venerate those angels themselves in a religious sort of manner. We can and may try to reflect on the angels. We can imagine their holiness as did Christ in the Lord's Prayer. We may consider ourselves blessed in the awareness that they are advancing our salvation. But all of this is far from an intentional and stately veneration that would blend in with a religious or spiritual reverence aimed not at God but at His creaturely angels.

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And now a brief consideration of the question itself about the guardian angel. Belief in guardian angels is fairly common not only among Christians but also among the unbaptized. Pagans from ancient times already entertained such images. Muslims imagine that every person is accompanied by both a good and an evil angel. Even the Church Father Origin<sup>14</sup> imagined that a good angel constantly accompanied him on his right and an evil one on his left. Catholics similarly believe we all have a guardian angel assigned to us. And instead of all Protestants having rejected this belief, it continues to play a minor role even today among Lutherans. Indeed, not a few among respected Reformed theologians consider the thought valid on basis of Scripture. However, the Reformed added the restriction that such holds only for the elect, not for every person. Among our Reformed theologians we have only to mention the names of Hieronymous Zanchius,<sup>15</sup> Andreas Rivetus<sup>16</sup> and Johannes Maccovius,<sup>17</sup> respectively theologians from Italy, France and Poland, to be reminded that belief in guardian angels had its defenders also among our most prominent theologians.

Zanchius wrote in his *Tractatis de Angelis*, “It is most likely true and in accordance with Scripture that every elect, ever since his birth, is assigned a specific and special angel.” Maccovius, known for his participation in the Synod of Dordt, wrote in his *Loci Communes*, “We confess that every elect has assigned to him his own special angel from birth to death.” Rivetus writes in his *Catholicus Orthodoxus*, “It is not against Scripture, nor is it unlikely, that God has assigned to each elect person his own specific angel from birth to death, in addition to other angels that come to his aid under various circumstances.” The Dutch theologian Gisbertus Voetius<sup>18</sup> resisted all of that in his *Tractatus de Angeli Tutelaribus* and since then the idea of a special guardian angel has mostly been given up.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Origin (185 AD-254) is the principal founder of Christian theology who tried to enrich the ecclesiastic thought of his day by reconciling it with Greek philosophy.

<sup>15</sup> Hieronomous Zanchius (1516-1590)-- **Girolamo Zanchi** (Latin "Hieronymus Zanchius," thus Anglicized to "Jerome Zanchi/Zanchius", was an [Italian Protestant Reformation clergyman](#) and educator who influenced the development of [Reformed theology](#) during the years following [John Calvin's](#) death. [Girolamo Zanchi - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Rivetus (1572-1651) professor of theology at the University of Leiden.

<sup>17</sup> Johannes Maccovius (1588-1644) a Polish Reformed theologian who spent much of his time at the University of Franeker, Friesland, the Netherlands. Kuyper wrote a book, published in 1899, about him.

<sup>18</sup> Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676) Dutch Reformed theologian. He was the first to write a comprehensive theology of mission.

<sup>19</sup>These translations are from Kuyper’s Dutch translation, not from their original Latin.

Those who retained belief in guardian angels based that belief on Matthew 18:10, Acts 12:15 and Hebrews 1:14. In Matthew 18:10, Christ warns us not to look down on children, “*for ...their angels in heaven always see the face of My Father in heaven.*” In Acts 12:15 we are told that when Peter returned from prison and knocked on the door of Mary’s house, those praying for him inside did not believe it was Peter knocking. They said, “*It must be his angel.*” And in Hebrews 1:14, we read that angels are “*ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation.*”

It would not be a good idea to deny that these three passages do somewhat suggest that the Lord God not only supports us through His angels in general, but also that among the thousand times ten thousand angels surrounding His throne some individual angels have been assigned to care for the elect in a special way. Hence, we will not judge those who, along with Zanchius, Rivetus and Maccovius, have this belief. It is not that unreasonable to assume there is a certain degree of order in heaven as well as a certain division of labour. It is even difficult to reject the notion that various angels are assigned to specially care for this or that elect. But we resist when the above verses are used to *prove* an ordinance of a personal guardian angel.

That is not what these texts say. When we read that angels are sent out to serve the elect, this is said in all generalities. It only says that the Lord God also uses angels in His work of saving His elect, but without even the least stipulation. The story in Acts 12:15 that Mary’s guests talk of “Peter’s angel” definitely shows that they, in common with their contemporaries, entertained an image of a specific guardian angel. However, this does not in the least assure us that they had it right. If even today, twenty centuries later, there are still all kinds of errors circling around in the Church, how much more would this be the case among the early Christians who had neither Confession nor Catechism and among whom the truth had not had the time to penetrate their consciousness.

Actually, it is only in Matthew 18:10 that one can find a certain level of support for these feelings, but not so much in the words themselves. Jesus’ statement that “*their angels...always see the face of My Father...*,” does indeed say that *this group* of children has *a group* of angels that has a special relationship with them,

but by no means that each one has a *special* angel looking after him. Just imagine a host of ten thousand angels assigned to communal service to the elect. Jesus' words would be equally valid, even though nothing was said about a personal guardian angel.

However, it must be emphasized that in Jesus' environment this belief in a personal guardian angel was common, that Jesus knew this and left the impression that He affirmed this belief. This is definitely not a scientific proof, but it does have a certain weight that supports those classic theologians. Even though this passage does not bear the weight of certainty, God's elect do know that angels also have a role in serving them on their way to salvation, that a host of angels watches over their souls and that these celestial guardians see the face of the Father day and night. This should suffice us, especially since we read or notice nothing of a more personal relationship. But we must be on our guard that this angelic service never tempts us to move our trust in our eternal salvation away from God and place it on an angel who will forever remain a creature.

## Chapter 5\*

### Angelic Appearance Tied to Special Revelation

*It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the Gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.*  
--1 Peter 1:12

For our knowledge about angels we are restricted exclusively to Scripture. In our own dispensation there are no more angel appearances. We do know and believe on basis of the witness of Scripture that God's angels continue to work in us, to affect us, but they do so without our noticing it. As a comparison, we can even say that their works in the spirit are similar to many physical processes in our body.



We are physically able to absorb the virus of contagious diseases such as scarlet fever, small pox or Covid-19 without noticing any of it, but that nevertheless is active within us to develop the disease that may not be noticed till days later. The medical term for that period is called “incubation.” Similarly, fresh air can have a strengthening and healing effect on us without our noticing it directly. That working on our physical body can be beneficial or detrimental without our being aware of the danger, but it is a generally-acknowledged feature.

And so it is generally acknowledged among those who confess the Holy Scripture that even now both good and evil influences from angels and demons affect us, again without being noticed. We are not arguing that we experience no influence from the spiritual world, but only that angels no longer appear to us, that they do not audibly speak to us and that we cannot observe them. In contrast, they *were* observed in the distant past and that’s where we need to be guided by the stories which are told us only in the Scriptures.

It is possible for some to object that also from the Pagan world there are all sorts of myths and legends about the appearance of supernatural beings. There are traditions from all over the world about higher beings affecting people and their fate. However, one cannot regard them as a source of knowledge about the world of angels. It is, of course, perfectly natural that the memory of angelic appearances in the Garden of Eden or to Noah’s family were originally found among all nations and peoples. In connection with this traditional memory, a condition of distraught spirits and fear soon gripped people on their dead-end maze so that under the influence of a distorted imagination, many in good faith have ended up with all sorts of legends about angelic appearances. Thus we readily acknowledge that in this tradition among the nations there may be a kernel of truth. We only deny that these traditions can teach us anything certain and of long effect about angels. For this knowledge we remain always and exclusively dependent on Holy Scripture. It and it only is the exclusive source of our knowledge.

If you ask whether these stories of the angelic world are spread evenly across all of Scripture, we notice immediately the opposite. The appearance of angels in Scripture is sometimes strong and overwhelming, which is then followed by long periods in which there is not a single reference to angels. It can be observed that

one book in Scripture has much about angels, while in another there is almost complete silence. There is no book in the Bible where angels are mentioned more frequently than the Revelation of John, while in Proverbs there is not a single reference to angels. Such difference can also be detected *within* the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses.

Angels appear frequently in Genesis; only a few times in Exodus and Numbers and not at all in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Thus one should not imagine that angels have a powerful and impressive effect throughout Scripture, from the Garden of Eden to the demise of the holy Apostles. To the contrary, angels have a prominent presence during the course of divine revelation, namely at its *beginning*, its *end* and in its *centre*, while during the intervening centuries their appearances are of much less significance. Of course, the centre or midpoint of the entire revelation is the appearance of the Messiah in the flesh, the coming of Christ into this world.

And now our attention is inadvertently drawn to the fact that exactly during the central period of this holy history, angels appear more frequently and more powerfully than ever before. It is as if when the King of God's Kingdom makes an appearance on earth, His angelic host accompanies Him and enhances the splendour of His arrival. As was never even thinkable before the central period nor after it, the angels place themselves forefront and centre throughout the history of Jesus' coming to earth. Not only John the Baptist appears as a herald of Christ to announce His coming, but next to John, yes, even before him, you see God's angels appear announcing first the birth of John the Baptist to Zachariah and later the birth of the Son of God to Mary. It is the angels who descend in great hosts to sing to the praise of Emmanuel around the crib of Bethlehem. And again it was the angels who watch over the child Jesus as the sword of Herod searches for the "new born King of the Jews." And just as the angels are prominent at the coming of Jesus into this world, so also at His ascension. In Gethsemane it is angels who comfort and support Him. On resurrection morning it is angels who roll away the stone and guard His grave, while they deliver their heavenly message to the mourning women. And when the days of His appearances are past and Jesus has ascended into heaven, it is once again the angels of God who greet the King of God's Kingdom and shout the heavenly prophecy of Jesus' return in the ears of the

Apostles. And as the demeanour of angels draws attention at the coming of Jesus into this world as well as at His departure, so we see them appear similarly when the years have come when He will openly commence His Messianic work and complete his principal battle with satan. Even at his temptation in the desert the angels came and served Him.

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There really is no room for difference of opinion that during the period of the Revelation, which for us is the heart and soul, and from which the most exact and detailed reports have reached us, namely during Jesus' coming and stay on earth, angelic appearances have been the most brisk and spirited. And if we now move on from Jesus' first coming to earth to what we are told about His *return* on the clouds, we are captivated by the same phenomenon. We have access to the prophecies about His return from Jesus Himself in the Gospels, from the Apostle Paul in his letters and from John in his book of the Revelation. No matter which of these sources we consult, we are informed that the return of the Lord will be accompanied by actual appearances from the world of angels. That these future appearances of angels are described in greater detail in Revelation is to be ascribed to the fact that John's prophecy is that much more detailed. It is important to note a principal point here with respect to angels, namely, that we find exactly the same prophecies in Matthew 25:31, 2 Thessalonians 1:7 and others as were shown John on Patmos in glorious visions.

But if we move away from His coming and return, i.e., from the centre and the end, back to the beginning of it all, it strikes us how angelic acts were frequent and meaningful at that time. We read of the Cherubim in the Garden of Eden, of the many angelic appearances in patriarchal history and of the time Israel was developing into a nation state. This continues at the time the covenant is getting established. But throughout the long centuries during which Israel lived in the land of milk and honey, the Revelation quietly progressed but one notices as good as nothing of angels appearing. As in Jesus' own life, many angelic appearances at the beginning and the end, but very little during the more quiet intervening years of His life on earth. So it was with Israel. At the beginning of the Revelation a wealth of angelic activity; the same at the end, but during the intervening years and

centuries angels appear very seldom. This is, of course, connected to the fact that in many books of Scripture there is not much of an emphasis on the appearance of angels or their significance. Very little in Isaiah, much in Zechariah, also in the Psalms, but most of it as the Kingdom of God has come near and, what is especially noticeable, very much in the teachings of both Jesus and the Apostle Paul whom He called on the road to Damascus to spread the knowledge of His name amongst the Pagan nations.

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The above is associated with another phenomenon to which we also need to pay attention. It is remarkable that, before the Fall, when sin had not yet entered the Garden of Eden and it was splendour all around, there is no mention of angels. In Job 38:7 it is written of the creation that the children of God-- and they can be no one else but the angels—sang joyfully and the morning stars jubilated. In contrast, the creation story makes much mention of the creation of the elements, of spices and plants, of birds and fish and, of course, of human beings, but not a single word about the creation of angels. Were we in our imagination to dress up the Garden, there is no doubt that in our phantasy and fiction we would encircle Adam and Eve with halos and angels and would have populated the still empty Garden with angels.

But that is not how Scripture depicts the Garden. We read of animals being brought to Adam, but not a word about angels. Angels are not mentioned till the glory of the place begins to fade and sin has disturbed its splendor. This is the very first time we read of the Cherubim and that meeting is hardly a friendly and loving appearance, but one that is so terrible that Adam and Eve go into hiding. *It was sin and curse that first elicited an angelic appearance.*

But this is not in the least to say that the service of angels is exclusively the result of the disturbance caused by that sin and curse. That would be absurd. The service of angels to God goes on into eternity and never stops. But what does follow is that we begin to observe this service first after sin has entered. Apart from that, this angelic service is a hidden ministry, a mysterious unobservable service. So, this happens only when the integrity of life has disappeared and turmoil has come that

we see this angelic service in such an extraordinary manner, but always in connection with the deeds of God by which He resists the turmoil, brings healing and prepares for and continues the restoration of all things.

It is especially in the last days, when the battle between that gracious saving power of God and the destructive power of Satan has reached its climax, that the visible and observable appearance of angels comes into renewed vivid display. It would be no exaggeration to assert that, if sin had not come and the integrity of our lives had not been destroyed, angels would pass us by quietly and unobserved without ever adopting visible and external form. Put in opposite terms, this visible and wonderful service of angels took place exclusively in connection with the saving grace of God and thus began only when that saving operation started and did so in the strongest way where that saving operation intervened the most aggressively. What we saw earlier, namely that angelic appearances happened more frequently at the beginning, the centre and at the end of this salvific dispensation, is completely in keeping with the last observation, even about the frequency of these appearances when Christ appeared in the flesh.

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From all of the above we can deduce that angelic appearances are not normal but abnormal, that human beings rank lower when they need such appearances and higher when the need for them has disappeared. Therefore, when there is no further need for such appearances, it is completely natural that under the original old covenant dispensation the people of Israel continually needed these appearances, while in the Church of the new covenant, they ceased. Undoubtedly there is contact between the angels and us even under normal circumstances, but then that contact is purely spiritual and needs no material support. Also in the Kingdom of Glory there will definitely be contact between the mystical Body of Christ and God's angelic hosts, but there is nothing from which we can deduce that these hosts will appear in visible form. This will no longer be necessary, since God's children in this state of glory enjoy a rich spiritual life and have direct contact with angels in a mystical spiritual manner.

This is similar to our worship of God. Looking at the Pagan world in its degraded state, it is clear that the human race has a need for a visible form for God and thus carves for itself idol representations of God. They need to *see* their gods, for otherwise they cannot communicate with them. But God's children, to the contrary, are called upon by Jesus to worship the Father in spirit and in truth and thus can do without such visible representation.

That the Lord our God in His unsearchable mercies finally had His beloved Son appear, who said, "He who has seen Me, has seen the Father," was for no other reason than to meet us in our weakness. In the Garden there was fellowship with the Eternal Being without Emmanuel in the flesh. Apart from sin, the incarnation of the Word was even unthinkable as was the visible appearance of angels. According to divine ordinances, all spiritual communion should be practiced and enjoyed in a *spiritual* way. When the need for visible appearance arises, this is undoubtedly a sign that adherence to God's ordinances has gone awry.

By way of comparison, we can observe the same in our bodily mode. The fact that we carry blood within us and even live out of that blood would under normal circumstances have remained a mystery for us. It is as the fruit of sin and curse that human blood gets poured out through murder, through accident as well as through sickness or healing, through deep distress or mutilation-- and thus becomes externally visible.

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There is a need to add to the last remarks. For our knowledge of the world of angels, in so far as we derive this from Scripture, we must not only note what it tells us about angels, but similarly what it tells us about devils and demons. It is remarkable how our observation regarding angels' appearing most often at the beginning, the centre and at the end of the Revelation, also holds for devils. The principal attack of the devil has three aspects: first in the Garden, then in the desert on our Mediator, and then, later, at the end of days, when the "man of sin" or the Antichrist shall be revealed. Nowhere do we have so many stories about demonic powers and about those possessed by them than from the days of Jesus' first coming and later at His return. As we will see later, we may never regard devils

and demons as anything other than fallen angels, who have not clung to their station but have left their own abode. Even the book of Job makes it look as if Satan still always appears among the children of God, i.e., in the company of angels, as God's disobedient servant but who can nevertheless neither stir nor move without God's will.

Unfortunately, the use of the term "angel" introduces confusion here, in so far as the word has been turned into the clang of sanctified tones for us, for which reason it seems strange to us hearing the devil classified among the angels. Since the Scripture itself provides us with examples as in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude :4, this is not a paramount objection. As criminals and children of God are both human, so seraphs and demons share the same nature, namely that of angels. It is well known that in psychology it is easier to collect data from the history of evil people in the city than it is from the silent majority out in the country. The reason for this is that the former tend to create newsworthy events, while we notice little of our rural folk. It should therefore not surprise us that fallen angels provide us with all kinds of data that we do not receive from the loyal angels simply because of their quiet operating style. Therefore, for knowledge about the nature of angels, their appearance in and disappearance from the world of humans, we must not only search the Scripture about the faithful angels, but pay just as much attention to reports about devils and demons. Though they allow us only a mere glance of dark shadows, even the shadows have weight and interest for gaining knowledge about the angels of light.