

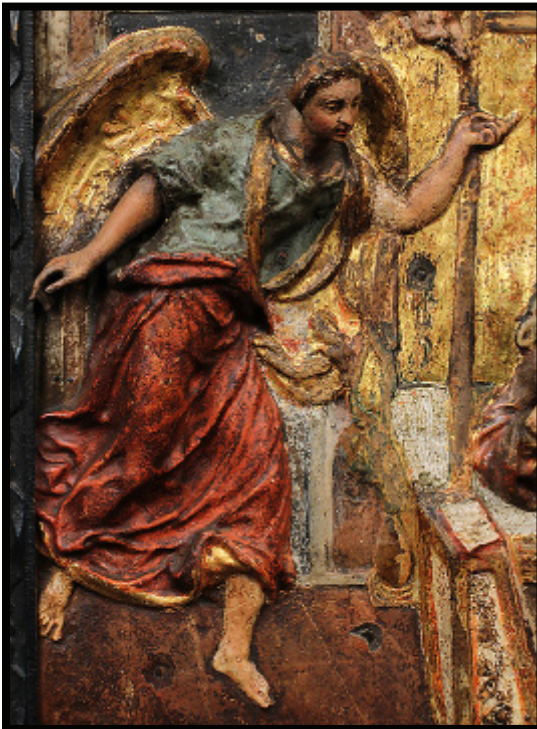


Angels

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

Forget not to show kindness unto strangers, for in so doing some have entertained angels unawares.

—Hebrews 13:2



Francesco Segala (Italian, active 1552–1592)
The Annunciation (detail of Gabriel), after 1573
Carta pesta, wood, polychrome, and gilding
Chorn Memorial Fund (65.19)

By Segala's time, angels had a long tradition of androgynous representation.

Among the holdings of the Great Library of Alexandria was the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which came to be known as the Old Testament to Christians. Ancient sources report that King Ptolemy Philadelphos (r. 283–246 BCE) assembled seventy (Latin: *septuaginta*) scholars to translate the ancient Hebrew text into Greek. Today's scholars still squabble over the accuracy of the translation but the Hebrew *malak*, or “messenger,” had a direct Greek equivalent: *angelos*. The Greek ending would drop off in English, leaving us with “angel.” These fabled messengers of God became some of the most iconic figures of the Bible, and their popularity has waned little today. Angels are, however, somewhat mysterious and the biblical passages that reference them can be both vague and inconsistent.

References to divine beings that form God's heavenly court are plentiful in the Hebrew Bible. Such beings are often interpreted as angels, but the Book of Daniel is the first to name any. Key names such as Gabriel and Michael are introduced as part of Daniel's apocalyptic visions (9:21, 10:13, 21). Angels are variously described as God's sons, messengers, and warriors. Some hold that God himself created them, and thus angels are divine beings. According to rabbinical Judaism, angels are not flesh, but rather created of fire; other references seem to portray them with physical bodies. The gender of angels has also been the subject of some debate. If the “sons of God” can be interpreted as angels (Genesis 6:1–2), they are males who take wives, and the named angels that follow later have masculine names. But a New Testament passage (Matthew 22:30) seems to represent angels as asexual beings who do not marry. The passage explains that resurrected souls will be the same, or “like angels in heaven.” That idea may have led to the persistent androgyny of angels in art.

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Various types of angels are also referenced in biblical passages (such as the books of Ezekial and Isaiah), which describe them with different appearances (such as a varying number of wings). Much later, the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1138–1204) listed a hierarchy of ten types of angels, placing some recognizable names, such seraphim and cherubim, in the middle of the order. The concept of guardian angels is also apparent in the Hebrew Bible. These are God’s emissaries assigned to specific individuals, groups, or even countries. Lot, Jacob, and Moses all have angels assigned to them. Two guard Lot from danger (Genesis 19:15), God encourages Moses with “my angel shall go before you” (Exodus 32.34), and one prompts Jacob to leave his uncle Laban and return to his homeland (Genesis 31:11–13). Psalm 91:11 sums the concept: “...for God will command his angels...to guard you in all ways.”

Christianity solidified the importance of angels even further. Writing in the fifth (or sixth) century CE, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite classified God’s messengers in his *On the Celestial Hierarchy*, in which



Francesco Bartolozzi (Italian, 1727–1815)
After a work by Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (Italian, 1609–1664)
Jacob Leaving Laban, 18th century
Etching and drypoint on paper
Museum purchase (64.120)



Christian Rohlfs (German, 1849–1938)
Expulsion from Paradise, ca. 1915–1916
Woodcut on paper
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2011.7)

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MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

he noted three orders of angels. Unlike Maimonides five centuries later, Dionysius placed seraphim and cherubim at the top, with archangels and ordinary angels following in the lower order. Though elevated, seraphim seem to have little role other than flying about God's throne crying out "Holy, holy, holy!" (Isaiah 6:1–8). The all-purpose cherubim are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible nearly 100 times, with a wide array of roles: as God's throne-bearers (Ezekial 10:1), guardians of the Tree of Life who expel Adam and Eve from Eden (Genesis 3:24), emblems on the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:18–22), God's vehicle (Psalm 18), etc. On the contrary, it seems that Dionysius' lower order of angels became most prevalent in the western branches of Christianity. A Hebrew equivalent for archangel (Gr: *archangelos*) is not found in the Hebrew Bible, but the names Michael and Gabriel were assigned the Greek term in Christianity. Though regarded as non-canonical, the Book of Enoch (1:9) refers to Raphael as one of four archangels. Often referred to as a healer, Raphael also appears in the Book of Tobit and heals the title character's eyes (3:17) and then proclaims himself one of seven archangels (12:15). While those seven are sometimes noted, four gained prevalence: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel (the latter mentioned in the apocryphal Book of Ezra, 4:1–8). The Catholic Church recognizes the first three with a day of commemoration (Sept. 29) while Uriel has more presence in the Orthodox Church. Michael is most commonly depicted as leader of God's armies (such as in the Book of Revelation, 12:7) but his roots go back to the Book of Daniel (above). In the Gospel of Luke (1:16), Gabriel is the angel in the Annunciation to Mary but Daniel introduces him as well. Below the archangels, Dionysius includes the vague class known only as "angels." Perhaps those include the kindly guardians, who persist in the New Testament, even comforting Jesus himself (Luke 22:43). St. Jerome (d. 420 CE) wrote that "each one has from his birth an angel commissioned to guard him," and the Catholic Church has observed the Feast of the Holy Guardian Angels (Oct. 2) since the sixteenth century. Still other angels serve as benevolent guides and heralds, announcing the birth of Jesus to the shepherds (Luke 2:9–13), affirming the Resurrection (Matthew 28:2), etc.

Angels came to symbolize the will of God and protection for the righteous. Were there wicked angels? Most Christians know the story that

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Reliquary Cross with Archangel Michael
Byzantine, 10th century
Bronze
Museum purchase (74.146)



Jaspar de Isaac
(Flemish, active 1612–1654 in France)
The Annunciation, 1615–1654
Engraving with hand-coloring and gilding
on paper
Engraved by Jean Messenger
(French, active 1615–1649)
Acquired with funds donated by Dr. John and
Patricia Cowden (2012.1)



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Satan was once an angel, but fell from God's grace and was cast out of heaven. This story, however, is post-biblical, but most likely based on accounts of the fall of two impious kings, one in Tyre (Ezekiel 28:12–19) and one in Babylon, the latter referred to as “Lucifer”* (Isaiah 14:12). Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria (ca. 184–ca. 253 CE) was among the first to equate those accounts with Satan, followed by St. Jerome who concurred in his commentary on the Book of Isaiah. The story has maintained currency ever since. The Book of Enoch also describes fallen angels but the book's exclusion from biblical canon largely discounted its contents (though the Church accepted its account of Raphael as an archangel). ■



Benjamin West (American, 1738–1820)
The Angel of the Resurrection, 1801
Lithograph on paper
Museum purchase (77.8)

*Lucifer (Latin: “bearer of light”) is a name that was commonly used for the Morning Star (Venus), and brilliant celestial bodies were often symbolic of divine kings or gods in antiquity. The Babylonian king's fall in Isaiah is likened to Lucifer (Morning Star) falling from the heavens. The equation of the story with Satan therefore conflated Lucifer with him.