

Christmas Angels

December 25, 2015; Dec 24, 2023

Introduction

You may have noticed how often in the Revelation we encounter angels. The Revelation mentions angels 69 times, more than any other book of the Bible (Figure 1). The word ἄγγελος *aggelos* G32 is its third most common noun after θεός *theos* “god” (96 x) and γῆ *gay* “earth, land” (82x) (Figure 2).

The scriptures assign three general functions to the angels. They are **messengers**, **worshippers** of God, and **servants** to the saints.

Their very title marks them as messengers. ἄγγελος, like the Hebrew word מַלְאָךְ *mal’ak* H4397 that lies behind it in the LXX, it means “messenger, announcer.”

Hebrews 1 gives us two further details about them, which may be viewed as refinements of their work as messengers.¹

Heb 1:13 But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool?
14 Are they not all ministering λειτουργικός *leitourgikos* G3010 spirits, sent forth to minister διακονία *diakonia* G1248 for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

Note the distinction between the words “ministering” and “minister.” The first refers to sacred worship offered to God, announcing his glory to all creation.² In the Revelation, their function in worship is seen in the praise they offer God in the heavenly throne room (4:9; 5:11-12).³ The second “minister” in Heb 1:14 describes the work of a servant, in this case toward people, and carrying God’s word to his creatures is a great service to them.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, angels are most common in the NT in the Christmas story in Matthew and Luke (Figure 1).⁴ In this history, we meet angels on six occasions. Each time they are *messengers* from God to people. We’ll consider how their work *worships* God, and *serves* God’s people. Let’s review these episodes chronologically.

Before the Birth

If we arrange the historical book of the New Testament chronologically, the first angel we meet is Gabriel (1:19), who appears to Zacharias to announce the birth of John the Baptist (chart):

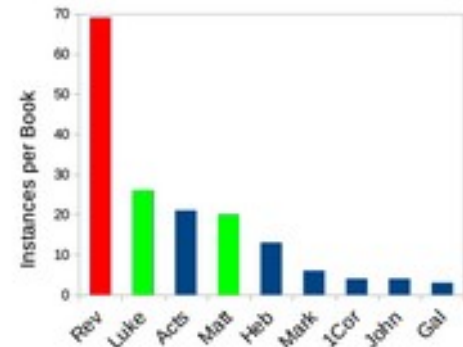


Figure 1: NT books with > 2 instances of ἄγγελος

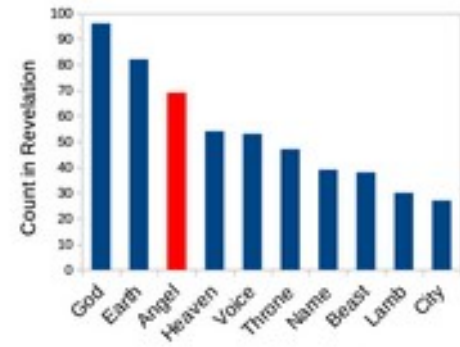


Figure 2: The most common nouns in the Revelation

1 Figure 1 shows that Hebrews also has a good deal to say about angels.

2 Another nuance is possible. λειτουργία is sometimes used to describe the service rendered by believers to one another, viewed as an offering to God (2Co 9:12; Php 2:30), and the angels’ service to believers may be thus understood as well.

3 The ministry they offer to the saints is more complex, discussed in a note.

4 A note reviews the distribution of ἄγγελος in the four books where most of the instances appear.

Christmas Angels

Luk 1:11 And there appeared unto him an [the] **angel of the Lord** standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the **angel** said unto him, **Fear not**, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. 14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. 15 For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall **drink neither wine nor strong drink**; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. 16 And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. 17 And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; **to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.** ... 19 ... I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.

This announcement recalls the announcement of Samson's birth to the wife of Manoah:

Jdg 13:3 And the **angel of the LORD** appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not: but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son. 4 Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and **drink not wine nor strong drink**, and eat not any unclean thing: 5 For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head: for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and **he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.**

In both cases, the angel serves the heirs of salvation, in two ways. First, both sons are miraculous gifts to barren couples. Elizabeth says (Lk 1:25) that by sending a son, God has "take[n] away my reproach among men." Second, in both cases, the son is to be a Nazarite from birth, dedicated to God's service in caring for the people of God. Samson comes "to deliver Israel" from its enemy who had been oppressing it. John comes "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord," and prepare for his coming.

Next, Gabriel is sent to tell Mary that she will bear the Messiah (chart):

Luk 1:30 And the **angel** said unto her, **Fear not**, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. 31 And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. 32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: 33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Again, the angel is a messenger, announcing the coming of the promised Messiah. Again, this message is a great encouragement to God's people. At first glance, it must sound to Mary more like a threat than a blessing, for an unmarried woman who conceives a child will be at best shamed and rejected, and perhaps even stoned. But God cares for that concern with an angel as well, sent to her fiancé Joseph:

Mat 1:18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. 19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. 20 But while he thought on these things, behold, the **angel** of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, **fear not** to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. 21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

This appearance serves the heirs of salvation in three ways.

Christmas Angels

1. It protects Mary from being put away, which righteous Joseph otherwise would have done.
2. It reassures Joseph that his bride is pure, and he will not displease God by taking her.
3. It announces God's great gift of saving his people, not just from their guilt, but from their sins as well, enabling them to live righteous lives.

These instances show angels as messengers and as servants to God's people. We may consider that they also glorify God by recounting his faithfulness to his promises. Their function in worship is most clear in their next appearance.

At the Birth

Seven hundred years earlier, the prophet Micah predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth. Luke relates how the Lord uses an administrative decree by a Gentile emperor, a reminder of Israel's subject status, to fulfill Micah's prophecy. After Joseph and Mary are married, they travel to Bethlehem for the census, and there the Messiah is born. The Lord sends an angel to tell shepherds of the event, and to emphasize the importance of the message, many more angels appear as they praise God for the news (chart):

Luk 2:8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the **angel** of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the **angel** said unto them, **Fear not:** for, behold, **I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.** 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13 And suddenly there was with the **angel** a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will *εὐδοκία eudokia* G2107 toward men.

The point of this appearance is to "bring ... good tidings of great joy." The angels announce the coming of "a Savior," comforting the heirs of salvation.

So far, we have seen angels as messengers, and servants to God's people. But Heb 1:14 says that first of all they worship God, and this appearance shows them in this function. Many more angels join with the one who brings good news, in threefold praise to God, arranged chiastically (Figure 3).

Glory to God In the highest
On earth Peace, Good Will

Figure 3: Chiastic structure of Lk 2:14

In heaven, God is glorified. Evil has not overcome him. He has kept his promise to send the redeemer.

On earth, there is peace and good will.

The peace is not political, but a person, the one promised through Micah to be born in Bethlehem:

Mic 5:2 But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; ... 5 And **this man shall be the peace**, ...

Eph 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. 14 For **he is our peace**, ...

Christmas Angels

The good will is not from man to man, but God's good pleasure in sending the Savior among them:⁵

Eph. 1:5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to **the good pleasure εὐδοκία eudokia G2107** of his will, E ...

Eph. 1:9 Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure **εὐδοκία eudokia G2107** which he hath purposed in himself:

The responsibility of angels to serve God's people is particularly clear in the next two instances. When Herod plots to destroy the infant, an angel warns Joseph to take the family into Egypt (chart):

Mat 2:13 And when they were departed, behold, the **angel** of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

And after Herod's death, the angel announces that it is safe to return:

Mat 2:19 But when Herod was dead, behold, an [the] **angel** of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life.

Herod's army and counsellors are no match for the angels charged to watch over the holy family, guiding them each step of the way and instructing them at crucial points what step to take next. They experienced what David reports in the Psalms,

Psa 34:7 The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.

Conclusion

Martin Luther's hymn reminds us of "this world with devils filled." The Christmas story reminds us that this world is also filled with angels. They do not always show themselves to us, and when they do, we may not recognize them. Sometimes, like Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18, we may "entertain angels unawares" (Heb 13:2). But they are there, watching over us, charged with taking care of us.

Nor should we be misled by artists' conceptions of angels as chubby baby-boy cupids, or sweet young girls with flowing flaxen hair. Three times in the Christmas appearances, the angels must reassure those to whom they appear, "Fear not."⁶ The angel who appears to Zacharias and Mary in Luke 1 is named "Gabriel," which means "God's mighty hero." These are fearsome creatures, overpowering all those who oppose them. They form a great army—that's what the word "host" means in Luke 2:13.

People sometimes speak of a person's "guardian angel." There's no reason to limit the number to one. Our Lord, at the time of his arrest, indicated that more than twelve legions of angels were ready to intervene on his behalf. There were about 5000 soldiers in a Roman legion, so the Lord has in mind a personal bodyguard of 60,000 or more angels. They stood back only because the Father's purpose, and

5 The older mss read the genitive, "men of good will." Metzger's Textual Commentary notes that this is a Semitism, documented at Qumran, indicating people with whom God is well pleased: "The meaning seems to be, not that divine peace can be bestowed only where human good will is already present, but that at the birth of the Saviour God's peace rests on those whom he has chosen in accord with his good pleasure."

6 To Zacharias, Mary, and the Shepherds. The angel also tells Joseph "fear not," but that is with respect to marrying Mary, not his response to the person of the angel.

Christmas Angels

thus our Lord's, required that he be delivered into the hands of sinful men for our redemption (Matt 26:53-54).

Our Lord was not alone in enjoying the watchful protection of this heavenly army. When the Syrians sent to Dothan to capture Elisha, his servant was terrified to see their army surrounding the city. But Elisha assured him,

2Ki 6:16 Fear not: for **they that be with us are more than they that be with them.** 17 And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain *was* full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.

Later, a huge Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem. We don't know its total size, but their casualties alone were 185,000 (2 Kings 19:35). That's probably several times the total population of Jerusalem. Yet Hezekiah encouraged the people,

2Ch 32:7 Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that *is* with him: for **there be more with us than with him:** 8 With him *is* an arm of flesh; but with us *is* the LORD our God to help us, and to fight our battles.

The history goes on to record,

2Ch 32:21 And the LORD **sent an angel**, which cut off all the mighty men of valour, and the leaders and captains in the camp of the king of Assyria. So he [the king of Assyria] returned with shame of face to his own land. And when he was come into the house of his god, they that came forth of his own bowels slew him there with the sword.

In "this present evil world" (Gal 1:4), we may be tempted to be discouraged at the spiritual forces of wickedness that are growing increasingly bold. Let us never forget that "they that be with us are more than they that be with them." God's angels are all around us, watching over us and protecting us. If he allows us to suffer, it is only for his glory, our growth, and to allow us the privilege of knowing the fellowship of our Savior's sufferings (Phil 3:10). The angels witness the prayers offered up from the altar of the martyrs, and will one day set right the wrongs of this life. Our situation is never out of control. Because our Savior has purchased us, we are God's chosen possession, his precious jewels, and he has charged all the host of heaven to care for us.

Notes

ἄγγελος in the NT Books

Revelation (69), Luke (26), Acts (21), Matthew (21), and Hebrews (13) account for more than 80% of the instances in the NT. Where are the concentrations?

Matthew:

- 1-4, birth narratives
- 13, angels as reapers at the end of the world
- 24-25, angels at the end of the age
- 28, at the resurrection

Luke:

Only at birth narratives

Acts:

- 7, Stephen's sermon: angels at Sinai, commissioning Moses and giving the law
- 10, angel to Cornelius
- 12, angel delivers Peter from prison

Hebrews:

concentrated in 1-2, Christ better than the angels.

Ministering vs. Judging

Heb 1:14 describes the purpose of all angels as ministering to those who shall be the heirs of salvation. The main responsibility of angels in the Revelation seems to be judgment. emphasis on judgment in the Revelation seems at variance with this. The colors in Figure 8, distinguish the different roles of angels. Orange dots are the human representatives sent by the churches to John on Patmos. Green dots show angels as guides and interpreters for John. Blue dots show them in heaven, worshipping God. Most angels in the Revelation announce God's judgments (red), which both punishes the wicked and avenges the saints.

At first glance, this function seems to be at variance with Heb 1:14, which defines the mission of all angels as ministering to the heirs of salvation. But recall the fifth seal:

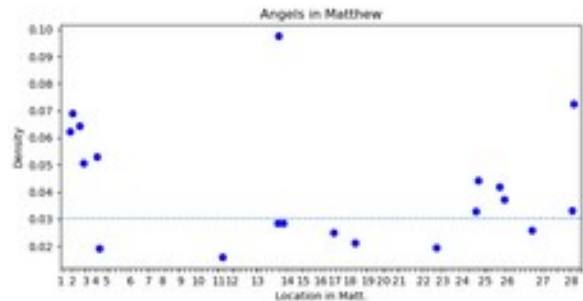


Figure 4: Angels in Matthew

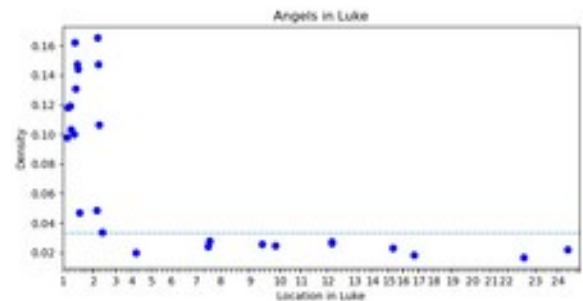


Figure 5: Angels in Luke

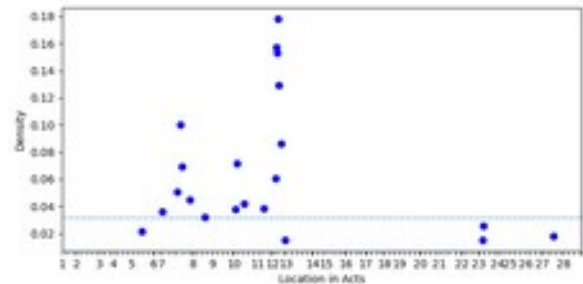


Figure 6: Angels in Acts

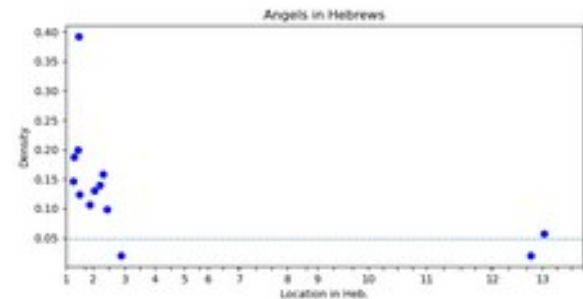


Figure 7: Angels in Hebrews

Christmas Angels

Rev 6:9 And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: 10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

The work of the angels in judgment repeatedly begins at this altar: 8:3-5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7. This work of judgment is thus presented as an answer to the prayers of the martyrs.

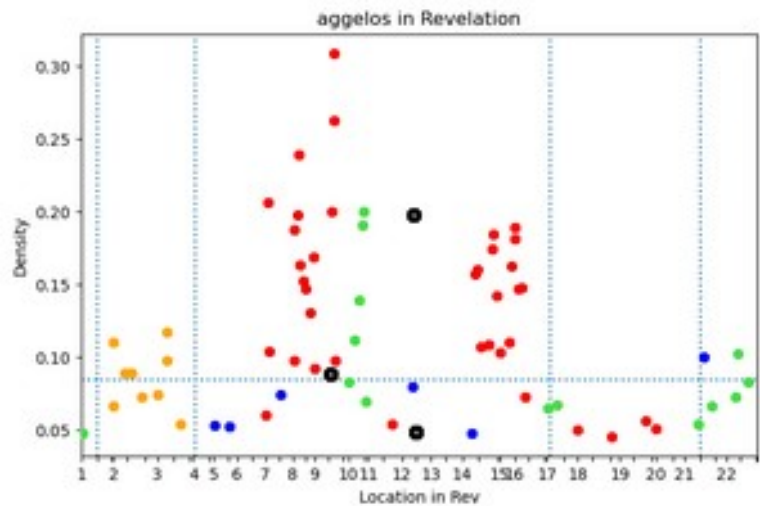


Figure 8: Distribution of ἄγγελος in the Revelation.
Orange: human. Green: John's guide. Red: judgment.
Black: satanic