

Jewish Literature and Angels

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Angels in Early Rabbinic Literature

Rabbinic literature expounds significantly on the nature of angels and their roles in biblical stories. **The Midrash¹ identifies Michael, Gabriel, Uriel and Raphael** as the four chief angels who surround the divine throne, each of whom has particular attributes. **The Talmud identifies Michael, Gabriel and Raphael as the three angels who visited Abraham to deliver the news that his wife will bear a son.** Though the Bible records that the men ate a meal that Abraham had prepared for them, the rabbis stipulate that the trio only appeared to eat — since, being angels, they are not physical beings, but merely resemble them.

The Midrash includes many fanciful portrayals of angels. **According to one source, Michael is made entirely of snow and Gabriel entirely of fire, but despite their proximity they don't harm one another — a symbol of God's power to make peace in his lofty heights.** Multiple midrashic sources identify Michael as the heavenly defender of Israel at odds with the demon Sama'el. And another Midrash describes a debate among the angels over whether human beings should be created. In this debate, the angel of love is in favor of creating humans, because of the human capacity for expressing love, but the angel of truth disagrees, fearing that humans will be prone to falsehoods. In support of creating humans, God shows the angels examples of righteous people from the Bible, but the angel of earth rebels and denies the angel Gabriel the dust he needs for the creation of people, fearing that humans would wreak devastation on the earth. The angel of Torah argues against human creation too, contending that people should not be created because they will suffer.

The Talmud² records a teaching that **two ministering angels — one good and one evil — accompany a person home from synagogue on Shabbat evening.** If they find the person's home prepared for Shabbat, the good angel declares: "May it be Your will that it shall be like this for another Shabbat." And the evil angel answers against his will: "Amen." If the home is not prepared, the reverse happens: The evil angel voices a wish for it to be this way for another week and the good angel responds "Amen." Shalom Aleichem, a liturgical song welcoming angels into the home before the Sabbath meal, is inspired by this teaching.

As in the Midrash, angels in the Talmud occasionally argue with God, affording them a degree of independent agency that complicates the notion of angels as mere messengers carrying out divine objectives. The rabbis of the Talmud may have been concerned that angels would become the objects of worship in and of themselves, a concern that some understand to be behind various talmudic texts indicating that righteous people can equal or even surpass the holiness of angels. In Tractate Sanhedrin, the Talmud states that righteous people are greater than the ministering angels.

Maimonides' Angelic Hierarchy

Maimonides, the 12th-century scholar, devotes a section of his Mishneh Torah to the nature of angels. They are incorporeal beings, he writes, possessing form but no substance. Descriptions of angels as winged or made of fire, Maimonides says, are merely "enigmatical" prophetic visions — that is, inevitably inadequate attempts to describe the formless and the spiritual within the confines of human language.

¹ Midrash - In its broadest sense, midrash is interpretation of any text; in its strictest sense, it designates rabbinic biblical interpretation, the modes of exegesis, as well as specific corpora of rabbinic literature from Antiquity to the early medieval period.

² The Hebrew term Talmud ("study" or "learning") commonly refers to a compilation of ancient teachings regarded as sacred and normative by Jews from the time it was compiled until modern times and still so regarded by traditional religious Jews.

Maimonides describes a 10-level hierarchy of angels, with different types such as holy creatures (chayot hakodesh) flying serpents and chariot bearers. All of these forms are alive and know God intimately, **Maimonides writes, but while they all know God more deeply than human beings do, even the highest among them, knowing more than all those below, cannot know the full truth of God.**

Angels in Kabbalah

The Jewish mystical tradition expounds even further on the nature of angels. Kabbalistic sources portray angels as forces of spiritual energy. Rabbi David Cooper, who has written extensively about Kabbalah and Jewish meditation, has described angels as “invisible metaphysical energy bundles” that act like magnets, causing physical changes by means of forces that are invisible to the eye.

In Kabbalah, angels reside in the worlds of beriah (creation) and yetzirah (formation) — the middle two of Kabbalah’s four worlds, which represent the spiritual stages through which divine energy is conducted down to the material world. In his classic work on Kabbalah, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes that human behavior can create angels. In a counterpart to the way biblical angels bear messages from the divine realm down to humanity, the angels created by human actions carry the energies of humankind upwards into the higher spiritual realms.

Angels are singular and unchanging in their essences, Steinsaltz writes, and can be either good or evil (demons), the latter the product of human beings doing the opposite of a mitzvah — harboring evil thoughts or committing acts of wickedness. Like good angels, evil angels also act in a dual fashion — bringing evil from the spiritual to the material world by inspiring sin or causing suffering and punishment, while also receiving energy from the misdeeds of human beings. “To be sure, were the world to root out all evil completely, then as a matter of course the subversive angels would disappear, since they exist as permanent parasites living on man,” Steinsaltz writes. “But as long as man chooses evil, he supports and nurtures whole worlds and mansions of evil, all of them drawing upon the same human sickness of soul.”