

A CATALOGUE OF ANGELS:  
THE HEAVENLY, THE FALLEN, AND THE  
HOLY ONES AMONG US  
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### ANGELS GIVE US ENCOURAGEMENT AND INSTRUCTION

*Then an angel of the Lord said to Phillip,  
"Get up and go toward the south to the road  
that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."  
[Acts 8:26]*



The Old Testament prophets frequently received marching orders from angels, whether in person or through dreams and visions. It's as if the angels were filling gaps of knowledge, supplying the information that was impossible to obtain otherwise. When a prophet existed out in the wilderness or among people who had wandered far from God, to what could he turn? During long periods in Israel's history, the written law of God was hidden away or simply forgotten. And wherever God was forgotten, the oral traditions about life with God were repeated less and less. Thus God's voice arrived in other ways. Righteous men and women received otherworldly visions. Or strangers appeared and spoke words that were too strange and true to be mere story and rumor.

In 1 Kings 18 in the Jewish Bible (chapter 19 in the Christian Old Testament), Elijah, prophet of God, challenges the priests of the false god called Baal. The King of Israel at this time is Ahab, who has married Jezebel, daughter of the King of Phoenicia. Jezebel has introduced worship of the Phoenician god Baal to Israel. Elijah sets up a contest between Baal and the God of Israel, saying to the people that they must choose whom they will worship. Elijah proposes that the priests of Baal prepare an altar and sacrifice, and he will do the same. They will see which God responds and burns up the sacrifice. After half of day of prayer and crying out and self-mutilation, the priests of Baal can elicit no response from their god. Elijah prepares a sacrifice, soaks it with water, prays a single prayer, and God sends down fire to lap up the water, the sacrifice, and the altar. This wins back the people of Israel, who put to death the priests of Baal.

Unfortunately, the wicked Queen Jezebel is not intimidated and sends word to Elijah that he will be dead by the next day. So Elijah runs for his life.

*[H]e...went a days journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush and sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. "Enough!" he cried. "Now, O Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.*

*He lay down and fell asleep under a broom bush. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." He looked about; and there, beside his head, was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water! He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, or the journey will be too much for you." He arose and ate and drank; and with the strength from the meal he walked forty days and forty nights as far as the mountain of God at Horeb. There he went into a cave, and there he spent the night. [verses 4-9, Tanakh]*

It is there at Mount Horeb, only after storms and whirlwinds and earthquakes and finally a soft, breezy silence, that Elijah is able to hear God's whisper and have a comprehensible conversation. After his stunning defeat of the prophets of Baal, he had run away, frightened and exhausted and, it appears, quite depressed. He told God, in essence, "just kill me now." But God did not engage with Elijah directly; God sent an angel to feed the prophet and give him instructions for what would come next. It's as if Elijah was not truly ready to engage with God, and in the interim an angel stood by him and made sure he took care of himself and got back on the road. This story is told with such beauty and detail that perhaps we should receive it as a template. In our humanity, which is often weak, over-taxed, confused, angry, and in despair, we are unable to comprehend God's words to us, even if they are spoken audibly in our native tongue. We have to go through a process and be made ready for God's voice. It is often in this space that angels appear. They don't tell us theological secrets or answer our philosophical questions. They see to it that food and water materialize and that we get the road map. They become momentary companions, confirming that we're still going in the right direction. They help us get to where we can encounter God for ourselves.

And so angels appear to Abraham and assure him that what God

promised will in fact come to pass; they appear to Moses with instructions for the grueling journey across the wilderness; they humor Gideon's endless doubts, affirming his being the leader God has called him to be.

During the earthly sojourn of Jesus, angels made significant appearances. They encouraged Jesus after his forty-day fast and subsequent temptation in the wilderness. The night before his death, during which he had to wrestle with his immediate future, he spent tormented hours at prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. While his friends slept nearby, he had to decide one last time: Would he move forward into the awful reality of his impending trial, torture, and death? "Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" [Luke 22:43-44] It's significant that the angel came to encourage Jesus, after which Jesus still had to struggle and suffer and pray.

Jesus' life did not follow any script that people had been taught to expect, and it is no wonder that angels showed up at times to help Jesus' followers understand events as they unfolded. On the morning of his resurrection, when the women came to visit the tomb and found it empty, angels told them what had happened and instructed them to go tell the other disciples about the resurrection. When Jesus later ascended into heaven, angels were at hand (actually, up in the sky) to explain this as well. And in the chaotic days of the forming church, after Jesus' ascension, angels appeared to believers—we have stories from the lives of Paul, Philip, and others—to provide guidance and encouragement.

In the Qur'an, God tells the angels to "encourage the believers." Mohammad considered that angels assisted him along the way, from physical battles to heavenly journeys. And there is much Islamic tradition of Muslims' being helped by angelic visitors.

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