

Doctrine of Creation

VI. Angels and Demons

We've been looking at the problem of miracles, and I argued last time that there is no “in principle” objection to the identification of a miracle so that in the case of any alleged miracle it's going to be an “in fact” question as to whether it occurred. That is to say, what is the evidence for the miracle? That takes us to Hume’s “in fact” argument that there is no good evidence for the occurrence of a miraculous event in history. Whether you think this is true on the contemporary scene or not is going to depend on how you assess the evidence for modern miracles. Here I would simply suggest you read Craig Keener's two-volume book on miracles in the world today in which Keener provides case after case after case of remarkable miracle stories that he claims meet Hume’s standards for the identification of a miracle. I've argued that in any case the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is such that it is more probable on the evidence and the background information that God raised Jesus from the dead than that he did not. Therefore, I think that Hume’s “in fact” argument simply fails, and that identifying a miracle will be a matter of a case-by-case analysis of the evidence for any particular miracle.

Let’s step back and reconnoiter. We've been talking now for several months about the doctrine of creation. We've examined God's creation of the universe *ex nihilo*, his conservation of the world in being, his concurrence with everything that happens in the world, and we've looked at his ordinary providence in governing the world, and then, most recently, at his extraordinary providence

(that is to say, his miraculous actions in the world). Now we want to turn to an entirely new facet of the doctrine of creation which concerns the reality of angels and demons.

VI. Angels and Demons

A. Angels

1. Definition

When we come to the subject of angels and demons we're dealing with an entirely different order of creation than the physical order. On the Judeo-Christian view, there is another part of the created world that is not part of the physical universe but which nonetheless still depends upon God for its existence. These are the angelic beings that exist. These are encountered in both the Old Testament (where the word in the Hebrew for angels is *malakh*) and in the New Testament (where the word in Greek for angels is *angelos*). Both of these words have the same meaning – they mean a messenger. Angels are messengers of God. These beings serve as God's messengers to humanity. So what we find described here is a higher order of spiritual beings that dwell in the very presence of God and that serve his purposes. We're talking here about incorporeal beings, that is to say, beings without physical bodies, or minds without bodies, that is to say, unembodied minds who serve the Lord.

In addition to the angels that serve the Lord and stand in his presence, there are, apparently, as well evil angels. Matthew 25:41 refers to these. Jesus is speaking here of the Last Judgement, and he says that God, the King of Heaven, “will say to those on his left

hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’” So according to Jesus, there is a devil – a spiritual being of intense evil, as we'll see – who has angels that serve him as well. We're talking about a higher order of reality that is not part of the physical universe but nonetheless is still a part of the created order.

2. Reason for angels

Let's talk then about the reasons for which angels exist. We might ask: why are there angels? Why would God create this higher order of spirit beings? Why are they there? Well, the primary reason seems to be simply to serve God. They are servants of God. In Hebrews 1:14, speaking of the angelic beings, the writer of Hebrews says, “Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?” So the angelic beings serve as ministering spirits who serve God for the purpose of the plan of salvation for humanity.

A second reason that has been suggested for angelic beings is that they are mediators between God and the physical world. According to this view, God is a transcendent being beyond time and space. He is immaterial. He is pure spirit. So the suggestion here is that in order to communicate with and to work in the natural physical world, God has created these angelic beings to serve as mediators between the transcendent, immaterial, non-spatio-temporal realm, and the material spatio-temporal realm which we inhabit.

I think, however, that this is not a good reason for thinking that angels exist because this seems to be susceptible to the so-called “third man argument.” What's that? Plato similarly thought that

there needed to be some kind of a liaison or a mediator between the realm of the Forms (which is the immaterial, eternally existing, abstract objects like geometrical shapes and other mathematical entities) and the physical world which we inhabit. So Plato posited a sort of demiurge, or intermediary, who would serve as the mediator between the immaterial, timeless Forms and the material physical world. But the problem with Plato's view is that it immediately raises the question: well, then, who is the mediator between the timeless, spiritual reality and the intermediary being itself? You would still need to have another mediator between God and the demiurge, or the intermediate being, and so on and so on *ad infinitum*. In other words, it would launch you into a sort of infinite regress of mediators between mediators between mediators and so forth.

So I don't think there's any reason to think that God cannot, and often does not, act immediately in the spatio-temporal world. In fact, when we looked at miracles we saw that this is exactly what miracles are – God's intervention or action in the natural world. So there's really no need of having some sort of a mediator between God and the universe in order for God to act in the universe. Otherwise there would have to be some sort of mediator between him and the angels in order for him to act upon the angels, and that leads to an infinite regress. I think it's better to refer to the angels, not as mediators between God and man, but rather as manifestors of God to man. God is a transcendent spiritual reality, and he can use angels as a means of manifesting his presence in the universe. So they manifest God's being to us in various ways in many cases.

Related to this second rationale might be a similar reason for the existence of angels that was very prominent in medieval theology often referred to as The Great Chain of Being, to borrow the words of the author Arthur Lovejoy.¹ Lovejoy points out that for medieval theologians creation imitates God, and God (as an infinite being) is manifested in the world in manifold ways whereby the creation imitates his greatness and power and goodness and so forth. So there is this Great Chain of Being descending from God as the ultimate spiritual reality all the way down to the lowliest non-sentient physical things in the world. In between we find all sorts of different beings. For example, above the inanimate beings, we find animate beings. Above the non-sentient physical beings you would have sentient physical beings like ourselves – beings which are unions of body and soul. So human beings would occupy that link in the Great Chain of Being between God and non-sentient physical things. But then higher than human beings would be creatures that are pure spirits without bodies like angelic beings who are finite spirit beings. And then even higher than them you would have God who is an infinite spirit being. So we, as human beings, are spirits which are corporally embodied, but angels would be spirits which are not embodied – they are pure spirits, pure minds that are not embodied in any sort of physical way. So there is a kind of chain of being that descends from God as pure infinite spirit down to purely material objects in which angels occupy an intermediate position in this Great Chain of Being. I'm not suggesting that they need to exist in order for God to mediate himself to creation. I have already rejected that suggestion. Rather

¹ see Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, (Harvard University Press, 1936).

that they simply express the fullness of creation in imitating God and in reflecting his manifold greatness.

Finally, the third purpose which angels can be thought to exist is the purpose of glorifying God. According to the Scripture, the throne of God is surrounded by angelic beings who constantly worship him singing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts” (Isaiah 6:1-4). Indeed, one of the names of God in the Scriptures is “The Lord of Hosts” thereby referring to the innumerable angelic beings that worship and glorify God – the hosts of heaven. So even in the absence of human praise and worship, there is an incomprehensible horde of angelic beings that constantly glorify and worship God.

So those would be three reasons for which angels might be created by God: to be servants for him for the sake of human beings whom he is bringing to salvation, as manifestors of his presence in the universe, and then simply to glorify and worship him.

3. Nature of angels

Let's go on and talk further about the nature of angels.

The first point that I want to make is that angels are indeed created beings. Angels are not eternal. They have not existed forever. Nor are they metaphysically necessary in their being – they are contingent beings; they are part of the created order. They're just not part of the spatio-temporal universe, but nonetheless they are a higher spiritual sphere of reality that exists in addition to the universe. So they are part of creation even though they're not part of the universe. Colossians 1:16 speaks of this sphere of reality. Paul is talking here about how all things are created in Christ, and

he says in Colossians 1:16, “in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him.” So in differentiating between the visible and the invisible, between things in heaven and things on Earth, Paul is clearly talking about these two spheres of reality – the spiritual, invisible, heavenly sphere and then the physical, visible, tangible sphere. So the thrones and dominions and principalities and authorities that Paul speaks of are not simply physical rulers or governments here on Earth; rather, they are spiritual realities – the hosts of angelic beings which are the principalities and powers that God has also created.

Secondly, these beings are innumerable. That is to say, there are so many of them that no human being can count them all. In Daniel 7:10 we have described Daniel’s vision of God as the Ancient of Days and the presentation before God of the Son of Man. In Daniel 7:10 he says of God, “A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.” Here Daniel sees this angelic horde that is beyond description in its multitude – thousands and thousands, ten thousand times ten thousand – more than Daniel can even count. Also in Hebrews 12:22 we have this adjective used to describe the angelic plenitude: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.” Here in the vision of the heavenly city there is also this host of angels which he calls innumerable – innumerable angels in festal gathering. So there aren't just a few of

these angelic beings; rather, there is a plenitude that is beyond human counting.

Moreover, thirdly, these angelic beings are of different orders and ranks. They are apparently not all the same. Rather, there are some that are more powerful and authoritative whereas others are weaker and subordinate angelic beings. We've already seen this suggested in Paul's referring to the principalities and thrones and powers. But we see this illustrated very clearly in Daniel 10:13. This is a very peculiar passage where Daniel has been praying for a certain request, and the answer to his prayer has been delayed. Then he receives an angelic visitor who says in Daniel 10:12-14a,

Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, so I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia and came to make you understand what is to befall your people in the latter days.

In this really interesting story the angel says to Daniel, *Don't think that your prayer hasn't been heard because of the delay in its answer; rather, your prayer has been heard right from the very beginning, but for three weeks I've been held up by doing battle with the prince of the kingdom of Persia.* Now, this is clearly not talking about some earthly prince. This is talking about some sort of angelic being which was somehow connected with the kingdom of Persia. And the angel says that fortunately Michael (who is lauded as one of the chief princes) came to help him. So this angel

was able to escape, and he left Michael to fight against the prince of the kingdom of Persia, so that he's now able to come and answer Daniel's prayer. I think that makes it very evident that we're dealing here with a sort of hierarchy of these spiritual beings who are vested with different degrees of power and authority.

We see this same truth in the New Testament in the little book of Jude. If you look at the ninth verse of the book of Jude, it refers again to this same angel named Michael. Jude verse 9 says, "But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'" This is interesting because we have here exactly the same person mentioned – Michael – and he is referred to in Jude not simply as an angel but as an archangel and therefore higher in rank, just as he is portrayed in Daniel as one of the chief princes. He's a powerful, spiritual being who could do battle with the prince of the kingdom of Persia, for he is an archangel. And yet notice that in contending with Satan Jude says that Michael did not dare to pronounce a reviling judgment upon Satan; rather, he said, "The Lord rebuke you." Why? Because he was himself inferior to this powerful spiritual being called the devil. So even Michael couldn't presume to rebuke the devil or to contend with him in his own authority, and so he appealed to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Lord, to rebuke Satan. So we're not dealing here simply with a plenitude of finite spiritual beings all on the same plane. Rather, they are ranked in terms of power and authority.

Fourthly, these beings are extremely powerful. 2 Thessalonians 1:7 speaks of the return of Christ, and Paul says here, "when the Lord

Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire.” It's the adjective “mighty” that I want you to focus on. He refers to these angels as mighty or powerful beings who will accompany Christ at his second return. 2 Kings 19:35 gives us some indication of just how powerful they are. In 2 Kings 19:35, when God delivers the armies of Israel from the army of Assyria, we read as follows: “And that night the angel of the LORD went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.” In this one night the destroying angel attacked the camp of the Assyrians and killed 185,000 of these soldiers. That gives you some indication of the extraordinary power of these angelic creatures. Finally, Psalm 103:20 says, “Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word!” Here again the angels are referred to as mighty ones indicating their extraordinary power. Next, they are, as I've already said, spirits without material bodies. They are spiritual beings who do not properly have material bodies. Hebrews 1:14 again, “Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve?” So these are spiritual beings – just as God is spirit, so these beings are spirit. They're not corporeal entities.

2 Kings 6:8-18 gives us a very dramatic story about the reality of this invisible spiritual realm:

Once when the king of Syria was warring against Israel, he took counsel with his servants, saying, “At such and such a place shall be my camp.” But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, “Beware that you do not pass this place, for the Syrians are going down there.” And the king of Israel

sent to the place of which the man of God told him. Thus he used to warn him, so that he saved himself there more than once or twice. And the mind of the king of Syria was greatly troubled because of this thing; and he called his servants and said to them, “Will you not show me who of us is for the king of Israel?”

[In other words, he’s demanding to know who is the one that is leaking this information. There are leakers in his administration – who is the spy in our midst?]

And one of his servants said, “None, my lord, O king; but Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber.”

[So he says it is the prophet of Israel that has this kind of clairvoyant knowledge – he knows what the king is saying in the privacy of his own bedroom and is able to disclose it to the king of Israel. So there is no spy, there is no one leaking; it is through divine clairvoyance.]

And he said, “Go and see where he is, that I may send and seize him.” It was told him, “Behold, he is in Dothan.” So he sent there horses and chariots and a great army; and they came by night, and surrounded the city.

[So he sends this army of soldiers to seize Elisha and take him back.]

When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was round about the city. And the servant said, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” He said, “Fear not, for

those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

[At this point the servant probably thinks, “What are you talking about? There is nobody with us; we are here by ourselves! And we are surrounded by this Syrian army!”]

Then Elisha prayed, and said, “O LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see.” So 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. And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD, and said, “Strike this people, I pray thee, with blindness.” So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha.

Here is described this invisible horde of the hosts of God – the armies of Yahweh – who are doing battle for Elisha and preserving his life even though to the young man with Elisha, and to the Syrian soldiers who were all around them, it appeared as though there was nobody there at all. They were invisible. They were spiritual beings who were present and powerful, but they couldn't be seen because they don't have bodies and therefore do not reflect photons that could enter anyone's eyes and impinge upon their retinas so that they could be seen. The young man needed to have a vision from God in order to see the hosts of Yahweh that were surrounding them and protecting them.

When you think about this, we simply don't know what spiritual hosts might be with us even right now in this very room protecting us from harm, warding off evil and powers of darkness, that would otherwise want to attack and undo us.

Next: these angels, precisely because they are pure spirits and incorporeal, are not bound by physical limitations. They are not bound by the limits of material spatial dimensions or obstacles. Acts 12:5-10 gives us a good indication of this. This is the story of Peter's miraculous release from prison. Acts 12:5-10 says,

So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. The very night when Herod was about to bring him out, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison; and behold, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your mantle around you and follow me." And he went out and followed him; he did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened to them of its own accord, and they went out and passed on through one street; and immediately the angel left him.

Here Peter is locked in prison. He is chained and guarded. There is no way that a physical angel could get in to help him. But what happens is that the angel just appears in the room seemingly out of nowhere. He doesn't pass through the walls. He doesn't go through the doors. He just appears at this point in space. And then after miraculously freeing Peter he just vanishes – he disappears! It's very reminiscent of the way in which the risen Jesus could appear

and disappear in his resurrection body. He seemed to have the ability to step in and out of this space-time manifold as he willed. He could just step into it at one point and then go out of it and step back into it at another point without traversing the distance in between. As spiritual beings these creatures are not bound by the kinds of spatial and physical limitations that we corporeal beings are. So the angel can just appear in the locked cell, and when his work is done he can just dematerialize and disappear again.

Next, these angelic beings are not merely very powerful, they are also apparently very wise. 2 Samuel 14:20b – a woman is speaking to King David and she says to David, “my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth.” Here she speaks of the angel of God as incredibly wise, knowing all things that are going on, and she flatters David by comparing David's knowledge to the knowledge of God's angel.

Finally, as we've already seen, these spiritual beings are capable of assuming human form. Even though they are immaterial spirits, they can, as it were, materialize and assume a human bodily form or some other corporeal form. An example of this would be found in Judges 13:8-20. Here is described an appearance of an angelic being to Manoah and his wife, who were to be the parents of Samson. In Judges 13:8-20 we read the following:

Then Manoah entreated the LORD, and said, “O, LORD, I pray thee, let the man of God whom thou didst send come again to us, and teach us what we are to do with the boy that will be born.” And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the angel of God came again to the woman as she sat in the field; but Manoah her husband was not with her. And the

woman ran in haste and told her husband, “Behold, the man who came to me the other day has appeared to me.” And Manoah arose and went after his wife, and came to the man and said to him, “Are you the man who spoke to this woman?” And he said, “I am.” And Manoah said, “Now when your words come true, what is to be the boy's manner of life, and what is he to do?” And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, “Of all that I said to the woman let her beware. She may not eat of anything that comes from the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, or eat any unclean thing; all that I commanded her let her observe.” Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “Pray, let us detain you, and prepare a kid for you.” And the angel of the LORD said to Manoah, “If you detain me, I will not eat of your food; but if you make ready a burnt offering, then offer it to the LORD.” (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD.) And Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?” And the angel of the LORD said to him, “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?” So Manoah took the kid with the cereal offering, and offered it upon the rock to the LORD, to him who works wonders. And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they fell on their faces to the ground.

In this story, the angel appears to Manoah and his wife as an ordinary human being. He looks so ordinary that Manoah doesn't even realize that he's talking to an angel. He looks just like a flesh-

and-blood human being – a visitor or stranger – who has happened their way and has given them this prophecy. Manoah wants to honor him by preparing a meal for him. He has no idea that he's dealing with the angel of the Lord. In fact, look at what it says in Hebrews 13:1-2: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Maybe the author of Hebrews is thinking of this story with Manoah and his wife. He says, *Show hospitality – you never know who it might be that you're entertaining. The stranger that you're welcoming could well be an angel.* So, although these are spiritual beings, they can assume different forms, so that they would look just like an ordinary person. Admittedly, at other times in the Scriptures (for example, in the book of Revelation), you have them assuming other bodily forms – for example, as having wings or other appendages. So, although they are spirit beings, they can take on a material form in the universe and then do things in the physical spatio-temporal world. And by assuming a human form, they could move objects or destroy things or open prison doors and things of that sort.

Next time we will look at the work of angels, but it's my hope that our discussion this morning has helped to increase your awareness of these unseen realms that surround us, that protect us and guide us, so that we can be given additional confidence and courage to face the obstacles that we do in our day-to-day lives.