



# Are There Still Angels Today?

by Arthur E. Zannoni

**D**o angels still exist today? Of course they do. Can you imagine God telling the heavenly host of angels, “You’re all done with your work”? I have heard dozens of stories about angel appearances in our age.

The reason for wonder about angels today is that we don’t recognize them. That’s nothing new. In the Bible people often didn’t recognize them. Genesis 18 tells us that “the Lord appeared to Abraham.” But Abraham himself “looked up and saw three men standing near him.” It’s not until the next chapter that we learn they were angels.

In Genesis 32, “a man wrestled with Jacob until daybreak,” and after the struggle Jacob claimed that “I have seen God face to face.” It’s not until centuries later that the prophet Hosea informs us that it was an angel: “He strove with the angel and prevailed” (Hosea 12:4). The parents of Samson are informed by an angel of his forthcoming birth (Judges 13:21).

Even the reports of Easter’s empty tomb are ambiguous. In Mark 16:5 the women coming to the tomb saw “a young man.” Matthew 28:2 tells us it was an angel. Luke 24:4 describes “two men in dazzling clothes,” and later identifies them as angels (Luke 24:23). Finally, in John 20:12 Mary Magdalene “saw two angels in white.”

## Messenger Angels

Angels in the Bible have three job descriptions. First and foremost, the word “angel” means “messenger.” They deliver God’s message. The three “men” who visited Abraham informed him that Sarah would have a child, news which Sarah thought was so incredible that she laughed. The angel Gabriel informed Mary that she would give birth to the “Son of the Most High” (Luke 1:32). Mary was so perplexed by this that she asked, “How can this be?” Angels also informed the shepherds as to where Jesus was born (Luke 2:10-14). In the Gospel of Matthew it was an angel who appeared to Joseph in three dreams with messages. The first to take Mary as his wife, the second to take the child Jesus and his mother to Egypt, and the third to return with them to the land of Israel (Matthew 1:20; 2:13, 19).

## Avenging Angels

The second task of angels is to be “avenging” angels. The most prominent of these are the two angels who leave Abraham and go on to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). In the book of Revelation, “Michael and his angels” defeat Satan and the fallen angels (Revelation 12 and 20).

## Guardian Angels

The third job of angels is as guardians. “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up...” (Psalm 91:11-12).

One of my favorite stories about guardian angels is the account of Abraham sending his servant to his relatives to find a wife for his son Isaac, telling the servant that God “will send his angels before you” (Genesis 24:7,40). The servant goes, confident in the angel’s protection, and is successful in finding Rebecca, Isaac’s future wife.

An angel freed the apostle Peter from prison, although Peter himself didn’t realize it and “thought he was seeing a vision.” It wasn’t until the angel led him past two guards and through the gate that Peter “came to himself and said, ‘Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me’” (Acts 12:7-11). People in the Bible often didn’t realize they had been visited by an angel until afterward, when what the angel said or did came true.

People have told me about appearances of total strangers who have helped them out of difficult and terrible circumstances. Are they angels? Who knows? Did they deliver a message from God and rescue? Yes, they did.

Could the people who appeared and did these things be human beings, not angels? Of course. But they are doing what angels in the Bible do. Another well-known Bible verse about angels is, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

God uses people to do God’s work: to deliver messages, to help and guard other people, and to warn and admonish people. In other words, in a large sense, God uses us to do the work of angels. You may have done an angel’s work for somebody.

## Angels in Church Tradition

Catholic tradition has maintained a belief in guardian angels; it is said that each person has assigned to him or her an angel who acts as guide and protector. The biblical evidence for the existence of guardian angels comes from Matthew 18:10, where Jesus admonishes his followers: “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.” In Catholic piety this belief is proclaimed in the prayer: “Angel of God, my Guardian dear, to whom God’s love entrusts me here, ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide.”

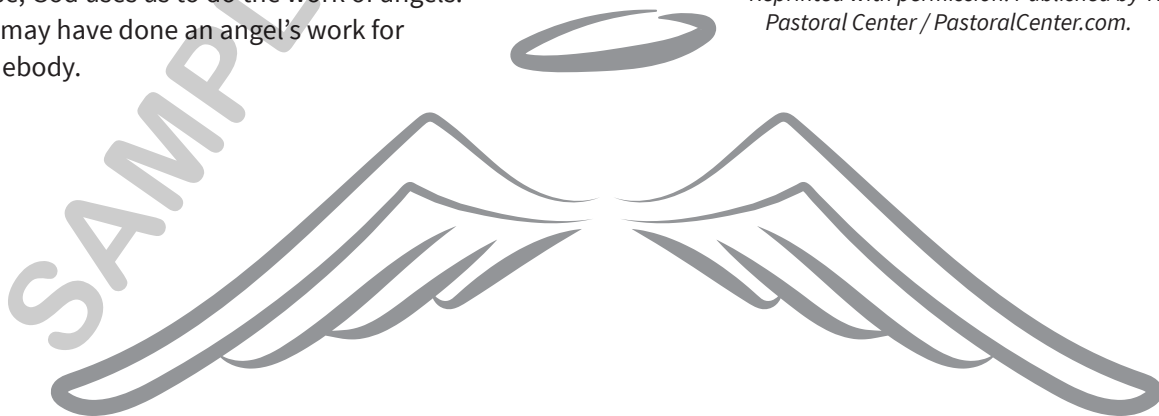
In the Eucharistic liturgy, the church joins with the angels to adore God. In Eucharistic Prayer #1, the church invokes angelic assistance: “In humble prayer we ask you, almighty God: command that these gifts be borne by the hands of your holy Angel to your altar on high....” In the funeral liturgy the Church prays: “May the angels lead you into paradise...”

The challenge that emerges from this rich source of Sacred Scripture and Church tradition is to be open to being touched by God’s angels in our lives. For most of us, they do not show up as supernatural beings with wings, but rather as those fellow human beings whose faith commitment and lifestyle provide a real message from God. Being touched by them is to be touched by God.

So are there still angels today? Of course there are.

*Arthur E. Zannoni is an award winning freelance writer, Scripture scholar, teacher, theologian, workshop leader and consultant in the areas of biblical studies and Christian-Jewish Relations. He is the author of a number of books and resources, including Journey through Advent and The Gospel’s Legacy.*

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# Entering the Christmas Crèche

by Arthur E. Zannoni

There is no more familiar scene to Christians than the crèche — with its mother and father bending protectively over the baby. They are in a stable, watched by animals and kneeling shepherds. Above the tableau is a hovering angel. In the background are the twinkling lights of the little town of Bethlehem. But, wait, a star now rises in the night sky. Shortly, a caravan of camels arrives, the treasure-laden entourage of the Magi. Elements from Matthew's Gospel have been mixed in with the Gospel of Luke.

The origin of the Christmas crèche comes from St. Francis of Assisi, who in 1223 presented a kind of panorama of Christmastide near the village of Greccio, Italy. The picturesque crèche iconography is a combination of the descriptions of Christ's birth found in two Gospels, Matthew and Luke.

## Luke's Version of the Nativity

Luke is a master at creating vivid, carefully arranged scenes, and his account is a skillfully crafted story. Some characters only appear in Luke's account: Zechariah, Elizabeth, John the Baptist, shepherds, angels, Simeon, and Anna.

Luke's infancy story is structured around seven scenes, each of which is laid out in two pairs of stories. The basic pattern is two annunciations (to Zechariah and Mary), followed by a visit of two mothers (Elizabeth and Mary), and then two births (of John the Baptist and Jesus).

For Luke, the action starts with the decree of Emperor Augustus (Luke 2:1). This brought Joseph and pregnant Mary to Bethlehem, as Joseph "...was descended from the house and family of David" (Luke 2:4). Five miles south of Jerusalem, Bethlehem was the hometown of King David and the place where Samuel anointed David king. Both Matthew and Luke placed

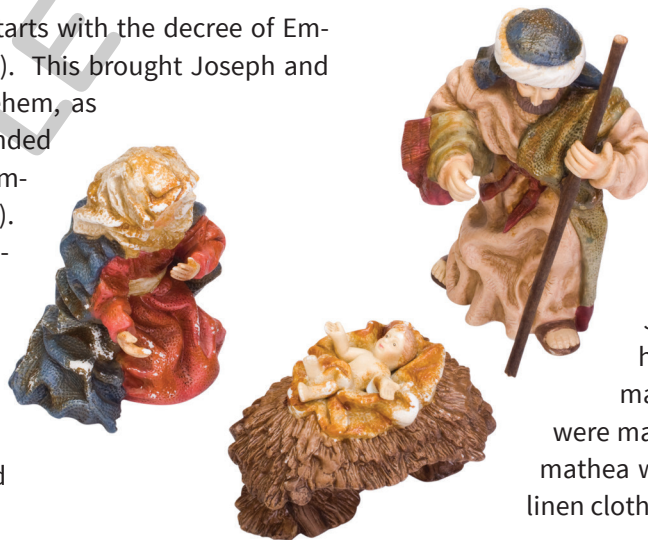
Jesus' birth in Bethlehem to affirm his status as the longed-for Davidic king.

The crucial moment arrives: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). The note about the inn has colored the setting, but it is ambiguous. Was the inn too crowded or was the inn unsuitable for giving birth to a child? In any event, the implication is that Jesus was born in a place where animals were kept. This supplied the framework for the "signs" that indicate the meaning of the birth.

But what were the references to "bands of cloth" ("swaddling clothes") and "a manger," to tell the reader? Mention of a "manger" would bring to the reader's mind the lines of the prophet Isaiah: "The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib [manger]; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Isaiah 1:2-3). The shepherds, who were considered one notch above criminals, are apt symbols for those who were to become Christ's followers. It is they who know their "master's crib" (manger). Further, Jesus does not dwell in a place of lodging in Luke's Gospel, but comes as spiritual food for his people housed in a manger—a feeding trough.

Wrapping "in bands of cloth," in "swaddling," seems an odd note. But it, too, has Old Testament references. Failure to swathe a newborn would be understood as a sign of neglect (Ezekiel 16:4). In the book of Wisdom, King Solomon says: "I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths" (7:4-5).

For Luke, Mary's care for Jesus at his birth foreshadows the care shown for Jesus at his death. As Mary wrapped Jesus in bands of cloth and laid him in the hollow rock of the manger (in biblical times mangers were made out of stone), Joseph of Arimathea wrapped the body of Jesus in a linen cloth and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb



(Luke 23:53). The angels proclaimed to the shepherds that the wrapped infant was a sign of the good news (Luke 2:12).

In Luke's infancy story, Mary is presented as the ideal disciple. She is the first to respond to God's activity in her life, even though she does not completely understand it (Luke 1:38). Mary did not understand what Jesus said about directing his life to the Father (Luke 2:50). Though she was unable to fully understand the implications of Jesus' identity and ministry, she accepted them. Her actions are those of a faithful disciple open to the activity of God in her life, regardless of her ability to comprehend it.

### Matthew's Version of Jesus' Birth

In a meticulously crafted genealogy, Matthew traces the ancestry of Jesus — “the Messiah, the son of David” — by beginning with the father of the Jewish people, Abraham. The purpose of Matthew's genealogy is to authenticate Jesus' Davidic roots and thus the fulfillment of the Jewish hopes for a messiah. Further, there are characters and events that appear only in Matthew's account: five women in Jesus' genealogy, the Magi, the star, King Herod, chief priests and scribes, the “Holy Innocents,” and the flight into Egypt.

Whereas Mary was the focus of Luke's infancy story, Joseph dominates the Matthean version. It is he who was told in a dream about the conception of Jesus (Matt 1:20). Matthew makes extensive use of dreams throughout his infancy narrative. Joseph has dreams and the Magi have a dream. Matthew not only has God reveal through dreams but shows Joseph as the model of an obedient disciple.

We are informed that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea (Matthew 2:1). According to Matthew, Joseph and his family were inhabitants of this city of King David's origin. In Matthew, there are Magi traveling west. They are Gentiles (non Jews) from the East who were guided to Jesus by a star. Matthew's community included non-Jewish (Gentile) members. The



Magi mirror these people. The star guides the Magi to Jerusalem where they learn that the child is to be born in Bethlehem. Matthew is quick to convey that God reveals through dreams, nature (the star), and sacred scripture. Ingeniously, the Gentile Magi discover the birth through astrology and the Jewish leaders who told them what the prophet Micah had to say about Bethlehem.

On the road to Bethlehem the star reappears. “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:9-11). The gifts of frankincense and gold imply that the Magi understood the newborn baby to be a king or god; myrrh was a kind of ointment often used in preparing a body for burial, Matthew's way of preparing us for the fact that there will be no time to anoint the body of Jesus prior to his burial.

### Brought Together in the Crèche

Each of these gospels tells the story of Jesus' birth from a different perspective. Luke's version wants the reader to know that Jesus is the universal savior of humankind, whereas Matthew's version wants the reader to know that Jesus is the long awaited and promised Messiah of ancient Israel. Put together, we get the traditional scene of Christmas crèches down through the ages.

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