Angels: Myths and Misconceptions

In Genesis 6:1-4, Holy Scripture uses the phrase “sons of God” to refer to angels. Let’s notice that passage:

“Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose. And the LORD said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he is indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.’ There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown.” Myths and misconceptions about angels, after our song...

Contextually, the first problem with equating sons of God to angels is that the “sons of God” are the ones initiating the wrongdoing by “taking wives…whom they chose,” yet we find that men, and not angels, are rebuked. “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever…”

Although angels can appear in human form, they are spirits and do not have actual human bodies that are equipped for procreation. Evil angels have done evil deeds but this is not one of them.

Burton Coffman adds, “There are only two classes of angels, the holy angels, and the angels of Satan (fallen angels); and neither class could be viewed here. Holy angels would not have induced men to sin; and the fallen angels, in a million years, would never have been designated by the Holy Spirit as "the sons of God!"

Keil and Delitzsch discuss this question thoroughly:

The genealogies in Genesis 4 and 5…trace the development of the human race through two fundamentally different lines, headed by Cain and Seth…accompanied by a description of their moral development, and the statement that through marriages between the “sons of God” (Elohim) and the “daughters of men,” the wickedness became so great, that God determined to destroy the men whom He had created. This description applies to the whole human race and presupposes the intercourse or marriage of the Cainites with the Sethites…Three different views have been entertained from the very earliest of times: the ‘sons of God’ being regarded as (a) the sons of princes, (b) angels, [and] (c) the Sethites or godly men; and the “daughters of men,” as the daughters (a) of people of the lower orders, (b) of mankind generally, (c) of the Cainites, or of the rest of mankind as contrasted with the godly or the children of God. Of these three views, the first, although it has become the traditional one in orthodox rabbinical Judaism, may be dismissed at once as not warranted by the usages of the language, and as altogether unscriptural.

The second, on the contrary, may be defended on two plausible grounds: first, the fact that the ‘sons of God,’ in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; and in Daniel 3:25, are unquestionably angels… and secondly, the antithesis [or opposites], ‘sons of God’ and ‘daughters of men.’ Apart from the context and tenor of the passage, these two points would lead us most naturally to regard the “sons of God” as angels, in distinction from men and the daughters of men. But this explanation, though the first to suggest itself, can only lay claim to be received as the correct one, provided the language itself admits of no other. Now that is not the case. For it is not to angels only that the term ‘sons of Elohim’ or ‘sons of Elim,’ is applied; but in Psalm 73:15 in an address to Elohim, the godly are called ‘the generation of Thy sons,’ i.e. sons of Elohim; in Deuteronomy 32:5 the Israelites are called His (God’s) sons, and Hosea 1:10, “sons of the living God;’ and in Psalm 80:17, Israel is spoken of as the son, whom Elohim has made strong….If in the olden time there were pious men who, like Enoch and Noah, walked with Elohim, or who, even if they did not stand in this close priestly relation to God, made the divine image a reality through their piety and fear of God, there were sons (children) of God, for whom the only correct
appellation was ‘sons of Elohim’. [Also], the pious, who walked with God and called upon the name of the Lord, had been mentioned just before, whereas, no allusion had been made to angels, not even in their creation.

Now...(to take a wife) is a standing expression throughout the whole of the Old Testament for the marriage relation established by God at the creation, and is never applied to porneia [fornication], or the simple act of physical connection. This is quite sufficient to exclude any reference to angels. For Christ Himself distinctly states that the angels cannot marry (Matthew 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34).

Boiling it down to a simple statement: the real problem in this passage is that the sons of God—otherwise godly men--were not seeking godly mates, but instead the most beautiful women they could find even when it often meant that these women would be worldly.

Another popular myth about angels is that godly people who die become angels. Jesus teaches instead (Matthew 22:30) that “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are LIKE angels of God in heaven.”

In addition, the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:3, "Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life?" It would not make sense to say that men will judge the angels if angels were really men who were transformed into angels at death.

Another misunderstanding is that angels are eternal. Angels, in fact, are created beings according to Colossians 1:16. We read in Colossians 1:16, “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.” Thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers refer to different rankings of angelic beings.

Moreover, the Bible says in Psalm 148:2, 5, “Praise Him, all His angels; Praise Him, all His hosts!...Let them praise the name of the LORD, For He commanded and they were created.” Angels are clearly created beings and therefore not eternal.

Angels are powerful, but they are not all-powerful or omnipotent. That can only be said of God. Psalm 103:20, “Bless the LORD, you His angels, Who excel in strength, who do His word, Heeding the voice of His word.” 2 Peter 2:11, “whereas angels, who are greater in power and might, do not bring a reviling accusation against them before the Lord.”

Angels are much mightier than man. In Genesis 19:12-16, angels are used by God to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

When Jesus was on the According to Matthew 28:2, an angel moved the stone from Christ’s tomb. In Acts 12, an angel entered a locked prison and released Peter. In Acts 12:23, we read that an angel killed Herod in a most gruesome way.

In 2 Kings 19:35, one angel is empowered to kill 185,000 Assyrians without any word of injury or fatigue. When Judas betrayed Jesus to the authorities and Peter cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant, Jesus said in Matthew 26:52-53, “But Jesus said to him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve
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Legions of angels? A Roman legion consisted of 6000 foot soldiers, so twelve legions would be 72,000 angels responding at the snap of Jesus’ fingers. 72,000 x 185,000 killed by one angel is equal to a minimum human killing power of 13.3 billion. We know, in fact, from Hebrews 12:22 that there are an innumerable company of angels in heaven.

What about Satan? Should we consider Satan an angel? Satan is called devil or accuser (Matthew 4:1); Tempter (Matthew 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:5); god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4); prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:2); ruler of the demons (Matthew 12:24); serpent (Genesis 3:1); Beelzebub (Matthew 12:24); Enemy or Adversary (Matthew 13:39; 1 Peter 5:8); Evil One (Matthew 13:19,38; 1 John 5:18); Belial (2 Corinthians 6:15); great fiery red dragon (Revelation 12:3); Deceiver (Revelation 12:9); Father of Lies (John 8:44); Murderer (John 8:44); Sinner (1 John 3:8).

Although he is not directly identified, Satan certainly seems to be under consideration in Revelation 9:11, “And they had as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, but in Greek he has the name Apollyon.” The word Apollyon means Destroyer. Abaddon, Apollyon, the angel of the bottomless pit is apparently the same one spoken of in Revelation 9:1, “Then the fifth angel sounded: And I saw a star fallen from heaven to the earth. To him was given the key to the bottomless pit.” If so, Satan is the angel of the bottomless pit.

In Matthew 25:41, Jesus speaks of “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels…” We read in Revelation 12:9, “So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.” Finally, we read in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, “For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.” So, the parallels are as follows: false apostles transform themselves into the apostles of Christ; Satan’s ministers transform themselves into ministers of righteousness; and Satan—an angel of darkness, we can conclude—transforms himself into an angel of light.

What, though, about the conclusion that Isaiah 14:12-14 describes Satan? Satan, of course, is the most powerful evil angel.

“How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.’”

Some people insist that the passage uses Lucifer to refer not only to the king of Babylon, but to Satan because 1) the king is spoken of falling from heaven and Satan fell “like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). And, 2) the king of Babylon made claims a man would not ordinarily make. "I will ascend into heaven...I will exalt my throne above the stars of God…”

While these grandiose claims are unusual, remember that it was not uncommon in ancient times for kings and emperors to make highly exaggerated claims as if they were Deity. Mesopotamian king Naram-Sin claimed divinity in 2200 BC. The people of Egypt considered the Pharaohs gods. The cities of Asia Minor called Seleucid ruler Antiochus II Theos or God. Acts 12:21-23, “So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, ‘The voice of a god and not of a
man! Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 of “the man of sin...the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.”

Keep in mind also that in Isaiah 14:5 this passage is introduced as “a proverb against the king of Babylon.” A proverbial passage is poetic and should not be viewed in the same literal fashion that one would read a plain doctrinal or historical passage.

Notice also in Isaiah 14:16 that this king is called “a man” who no longer torments or terrorizes man. The language of Isaiah 14:19-20 sounds much more like an egotistical, earthly king who has died than it does Satan: “But you are cast out of your grave Like an abominable branch, Like the garment of those who are slain, Thrust through with a sword, Who go down to the stones of the pit, Like a corpse trodden underfoot. You will not be joined with them in burial, Because you have destroyed your land And slain your people.” Satan hardly seems so vulnerable as one who can still “take advantage of us” (2 Corinthians 2:11) and still “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

Satan will be defeated and banished to the lake of fire, but that hasn’t happened yet and it certainly had not happened in Isaiah’s day. Revelation 20:10, “The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” What a glorious day that will be!

What about Ezekiel 28:11-19? Is this passage focused on Satan and his downfall or the downfall of the King of Tyre? This passage is more complicated than the one in Isaiah. When one reads the descriptions associated with the King of Tyre, he can’t help think that this is a reference to Satan and not a man:

“You were the seal of perfection, Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; Every precious stone was your covering….The workmanship of your timbrels and pipes Was prepared for you on the day you were created. You were the anointed cherub who covers...You were on the holy mountain of God...You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, Till iniquity was found in you.”

Taking this language at face value and assuming that the prince of Tyre earlier in the chapter and the King of Tyre here refer to different individuals, one would assume Satan is under consideration. There are, however, reasons not to accept this conclusion and consider it, instead, to refer to the literal King of Tyre.

1. The passage is introduced with plain language: “Son of man, take up a lamentation for the king of Tyre.” Why not interpret this literally? If you take the immediately preceding reference in the same chapter to the prince of Tyre to be directed at the same individual, this certainly seems like a man.
2. Notice how the earlier reference to the prince of Tyre serves as a perfect introduction to the same individual (Ezekiel 28:2-5): “Because your heart is lifted up, And you say, ‘I am a god, I sit in the seat of gods, In the midst of the seas,’ Yet you are a man, and not a god, Though you set your heart as the heart of a god (Behold, you are wiser than Daniel! There is no secret that can be hidden from you! With your wisdom and your understanding You have gained riches for yourself, And gathered gold and silver into your treasuries; By your great wisdom in trade you have increased your riches, And your heart is lifted up because of your riches)...”
3. This language sets up the satirical language applied toward the King of Tyre a few verses later.
4. Still speaking to the prince of Tyre, the Lord makes it clear that this reference is to a man: Ezekiel 28:9-10, "Will you still say before him who slays you, 'I am a god'? But you shall be a man, and not a god, in the hand of him who slays you. You shall die the death of the uncircumcised By the hand of aliens; For I have spoken," says the Lord GOD."

5. Next, notice that the link between the prince and King of Tyre (verse 5 and 16), trading, is also listed as the root cause of the King of Tyre's fall (Ezekiel 28:16, 18). It's hard to reconcile trading as the crucial flaw with Satan, but it fits perfectly with a ruler in a key trading seaport.

6. The following wording appropriately describes a disgraced king much better than it does Satan: "I cast you to the ground, I laid you before kings, That they might gaze at you....I turned you to ashes upon the earth In the sight of all who saw you…. All who knew you among the peoples are astonished at you; (17-19)

7. Finally, while we can and should resist the devil" (James 4:8), in Scripture, men rebuke men but never angels or the devil. In fact, we read in Jude 9 that even "Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee."

We'll be right back, after our song...

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