

Behold, *a Host*

By Paul Anderson

“Faster than a speeding bullet...more powerful than a locomotive... able to leap tall buildings with a single bound...” Who? Superman? No, angels!

They show up at Christmastime in our songs, hanging from trees, or announcing concerts on billboards. Our first encounter with these heavenly creatures often comes in the annual Sunday School Christmas pageant. Angels are usually between four and eight years old, always girls, and about three feet tall. Or we are introduced to the cutie in the baby stroller appearing radiantly innocent, and we hear her called a little angel. Our vocabulary is sprinkled with angel talk: angel food cake, angel’s hair, angel’s dust, angel fish, the City of the Angels, and the California Angels. But that only hinders a true understanding of their nature and purpose. If they are as important to our welfare and to God’s ongoing program as 275 Bible references to them suggests, we ought to brush up on our angelology!

Who are these superhuman beings, glorious and terrible, who share God’s joy when sinners repent, and who wipe out a third of the earth’s population near the end of time; who gather as a 100,000,000-voice choir singing to the Lamb in the Apocalypse and who join with the archangel Michael in warring with the dragon and his angels?

Who are these heavenly messengers, not bound by time or space as earthbound creatures, one moment before the throne, the next moment announcing the birth of God’s Son, traveling much faster than the speed of light? Are they omnipresent? No, but they can get from here to there a lot quicker than we can. Are they all-knowing? No, but they know many things we don’t know. They are the army of God, the militia of the Ancient of Days. Scripture says that when the announcement to the shepherds was finished, *“a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel”* in a chorus of praise (Luke 2:13). The word “host” means “army.” The “Lord of hosts” is the Lord of the army.



**“...A GREAT COMPANY
of the heavenly host
appeared with the angel”
in a chorus of praise.**

Luke 2:13

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If heaven includes an innumerable company of these warriors, any one of which could clean up the United States in seconds, you begin to appreciate the awesome power of these amazing creatures—hardly the Christmas pageant variety. One can appreciate why people felt like worshipping them; they appeared like gods. One can also understand that when an angel appeared unannounced to Zechariah in the temple, he didn't respond, "You little cutie." Instead, *"he was startled and was gripped with fear"* (Luke 1:12). We have effectively emasculated these glorious creatures, who are genderless but far from powerless. Try saying to Brian next month, "Heh, guess what? You get to play an angel in the Christmas play." The angels we envision could not take out one fifth grader, let alone an entire army. Boys should be begging, "Please, let me be one of those warrior angels."

These immortal beings serve God and help in the administration of His universe. They figure prominently in the Old Testament, often as instruments of God's judgment. They destroyed Sodom and rescued Lot. An angel led Israel through the wilderness and gave them the law. One angel smote the entire Assyrian army of 185,000 soldiers, and an angel saved Daniel from the lions. God allowed Elisha to see a mighty host of these invisible fighters. They often appear unannounced. They paid a visit to Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David, Elijah, Zechariah, Joseph, Mary and Peter.

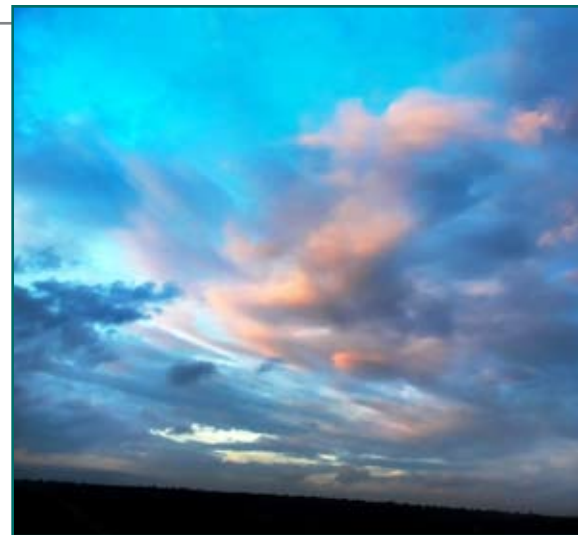
God allows some on earth to see God's secret service agents. One such fortunate person, the special ed daughter of a pastor friend in Norway, sees angels regularly—and thought everyone did. Once when she was traveling with a young adult group from her church, they found themselves hopelessly lost. They decided to ask her if she, perhaps, knew the way. She said, "Go left at that corner. Now go right, then go left down there." She could see angels at these streets. This went on for some time and they wondered but kept following her directions. Then they asked her, "Are we near the building?" She said, "It's right there." She saw an angel sitting on top of the building. And it was the place where they were going. In heaven we will meet the beings who have been silently serving us all our lives, usually without our seeing them, like when the angels kept our loaded car from a serious accident when we began fishtailing in a snowstorm on Interstate 35-W. Angels are good at that—and in heaven we will join their ongoing celebration.

Angels appeared to Jesus at important points in His life. He spoke a good deal about them, indicating that little children have guardian angels (maybe adults do, too), that angels cannot die, that they will separate the righteous from the wicked on the final day. They play a prominent role in the last book of the Bible. They dictated the letter to John. An angel is used in answering the prayers of the saints. An angel will bind Satan near the end of history. These servants of God will return with Jesus in flaming fire. Hell will be populated to a large extent by the devil and his angels.

Angels do not originate any plans; they carry out God's. They do not marry, nor do they procreate. The Apostle Paul says, *"In him (Christ) all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities..."* (Col. 1:16).

"Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who obey his word"

Psalm



God's creation includes a realm on earth where visible beings exist and a heavenly sphere invisible to us. Angels appear to have ranks, just as armies do. The book of Daniel tells us that the archangel Michael serves as the prince of Israel, overseeing its affairs and standing in defiance of powers arrayed against it.

Satan, formerly Lucifer, apparently chief-of-staff in Yahweh's army, imitated God's pattern of government when he was thrown out of heaven. Michael, on the way to answer Daniel's prayers, was interrupted by the prince of Persia, who battled with him for twenty-one days. Satan is one of a multitude of demons, but he has more authority than any of them, just as in heaven he exercised more power. This might explain why Michael, when fighting with the devil over the body of Moses, did not personally confront him but said, "*The Lord rebuke you*" (Jude 9).

hty ones who do his bidding, ord."

103:20



There exists, then, a great ongoing cosmic conflict, not star wars, but angel wars, not World War III but a titanic struggle of far greater magnitude and with much more at stake—the armies of heaven and hell in constant battle over the lives of people on earth, the planet visited by a Babe. St. Paul tells us mortals that "*we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the wickedness in the heavenly places*" (Eph. 6:12). Destinies of nations are not settled in legislative assemblies, or on thrones, or in an oval office, but in heavenly places. 9-1-1 prayers are often answered by angels.

Heaven was never more excited than with the birth of God's Son. Now they wait for the next big day, the marriage of that Son, the desire of the ages, the Beloved. They are not given the full picture. They love probing the depths of the Gospel to find further clues of God's outrageous love for humans (I Pet. 1:12). They will never call God "Father" as the redeemed are privileged to. Jesus did not become an angel. He was born into the race of humans to rescue us from the clutches of an angel once called Lucifer. The Child came, according to John, "*to destroy the works of the devil*" (I John 3:8). The birth of Jesus was an act of aggression.

Gabriel appeared to Mary in Nazareth to announce how God was going to use her to give birth to the Messiah. This visit proved more pleasant than the one five months before in Judea with a doubting priest. An unnamed angel appeared to Joseph in a dream to give him the go-ahead with his betrothed. The star that led the wise men to the Child could very well have been an angel (Jude 13, Rev. 1:16, Rev. 9:1, 12:4). When they left, "*an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream*" to save Jesus from the slaughter of infants by Herod. When he died, an angel guided the family back to Israel. And, yet, another dream (and perhaps an angel) warned Joseph not to live in Judea. How remarkable are these servants of God, who figure often in stories surrounding births, and especially in the birth of the ages. How reverently they carry out the will of the Most High God.

Births are critical times, new beginnings, when important breakthroughs take place—for individuals, families and nations. Could it be that when angels proclaimed the birth of heaven's hero, God emptied out the place? Some believe that His army includes as many angels as there are stars. So if 17 trillion members of God's Air Force filled the atmosphere surrounding Bethlehem one night, we can understand why "*the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified*" (Luke 2:9). And if "*all the angels shouted for joy*" at the creation of the world (Job 38:7), we can only imagine the deafening cataclysmic roar at the birth of God's Son.

The mysterious invisible realm is no less real than the visible realm. Ceaseless activity of good and evil surrounds us and is only apprehended through eyes of faith. But we easily over-spiritualize that realm. We have re-crafted them so mellow as to tame them out of sacred terror. And, yet, we cannot focus for long on them or we might worship them. They are here momentarily, then gone as quickly. We focus on what they focus on, the God of glory and the Lamb! Worship is central in heaven, and angels are non-stop worshippers. These holy creatures, strong, swift, and subtle as wind, obey God implicitly. *"Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word"* (Ps. 103:20).

May we join them this beautiful Advent season in giving praise to the Child of Bethlehem, the Savior of the world, and may we, like these ministering spirits, serve as dutifully and as accurately as they. And maybe you, like the servant of Elisha, will sometime have your eyes opened to see one of these mighty ones!

