CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE WORDS OF ANGELS

On the Via Appia outside of Rome there is an extensive network of catacombs and tombs collectively called the Catacombs of Praetextatus, after an early Bishop of Rome. A visitor to the Catacombs of Praetextatus will find wall paintings that depict scenes familiar from Christian tradition, such as Christ with a crown of thorns and Susanna from the book of Daniel. The visitor will also find thousands of Christian burials and reminders of Christian suffering in the face of persecution. While quite remarkable, none of this would be too surprising for the visitor. This is what one expects to find in a Christian catacomb. However, if the visitor should journey nearby, to one of the older underground tombs built in the late second and third centuries, he or she could come upon the tomb of Vincentius and his wife Vibia. There, the visitor would see a depiction of the deceased Vibia being led to a banquet in the afterlife.\(^1\) The visitor would also see a man identified by an inscription as an *Angelus Bonus*, or “Good Angel,” leading Vibia to the feast. A first glance, the scene could be a Christian one; a figure identified as an *angelus* is leading a pious woman to a blessed afterlife. However, if the visitor looked more closely, he or she would notice that in other scenes Vibia is escorted by the god Mercury, and that her husband Vincentius is a priest of Sabazius. What at first glance appeared to be a Christian scene of angelic escort to the afterlife is in fact not Christian at all. The visitor might feel some confusion, as some scholars have when viewing the images. What is an *angelus* doing in a pagan painting? The confusion would be understandable because most viewers would associate such beings with Christianity and Judaism, or, in a later period, Islam.

Nevertheless, the images and the title *angelus bonus* are there, and there is other evidence for the belief in *angeli* in non-Christian

and non-Jewish contexts in the Roman era as well. The evidence comes from later Roman literary sources, artistic depictions like that described above, Greek and Latin inscriptions, engraved amulets, and inscribed votives. These objects are sometimes explicitly non-Christian, sometimes they may be Jewish, and sometimes they are religiously ambiguous, like the title *Angelus Bonus* in the Catacomb of Vincentius. Literary evidence indicates that there was considerable discussion among Roman-era philosophers concerning the nature of *angeli* (Greek: *angeloi*) and their relationship to a supreme god in the second century CE and afterwards. We know of this discussion from the texts of the philosophers themselves and from the works of Christian theologians who attempted to distinguish between orthodox Christian beliefs about *angeli* and the beliefs of their pagan opponents.

The literary and archaeological evidence indicates that *angeli* (*angeloi*) were a significant aspect of religion in the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, few readers will associate *angeli* with Roman religion. The present study attempts to change that by showing that such beings should be associated with later Roman religion. In order to do so, the following chapters present several case studies that examine the archaeological and literary evidence for *angeli* in later Roman religion and the manner in which Christian authorities sought to define orthodox Christian conceptions of *angeli* and establish the proper manner for Christians to call upon, pray to, or invoke an *angelus*. The study suggests that the prominence of *angeli* in early Christianity is due to the success of early Christian authorities in defining a system of orthodox Christian beliefs about, and attitudes towards, *angeli* that were distinct from non-Christian, and other Christian, beliefs about such beings.

**Defining Angels**

Before beginning a detailed examination of the evidence for the conceptualization and invocation of *angeli/angeloi* in the Roman Empire, it is necessary to discuss briefly the Greek word for angel, *angelos*, and its Latin transliteration, *angelus*. The word that later came to mean “angel” may seem like a term that needs little introduction. After all, many readers probably have some image in mind when they encounter the term, whether that image is a medieval depiction of the Archangel Michael slaying the dragon, or television’s Michael Landon on an