

Valery Rees

From Gabriel to Lucifer: A Cultural History of Angels. London, L. B. Tauris, 2013.

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If the reader wants one book that will cover the phenomena of angels from a to z, this is the one to pick up and read, over and over again. It belongs with other books that one keeps ready for quick reference, especially after a first perusal that acquaints one with its contents. Rees's book divides neatly into two parts; the first three chapters provide an overview of the history and the other nine circle around specific attributes and curiosities. Rees deftly indicates her method of inquiry, an examination of the relevant material, the ambiguities of the evidence, familiarity with the cultural contexts, and analysis of what has been said and written about angels over the course of millennia. She thus starts with a nod to the ethnographers and psychologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to situate how contemporary concerns still allow for an interest in angels, whether as signs of culturally distinct modes of thought or of unconscious or preconscious archetypes of Jungian variety. Angels have over the ages had two major functions, messenger or minister, and Rees's charge is to flesh out how those functions play out in the texts we have regarding angels and how people of different times and places have made sense of those texts.

The first chapter, since she restricts herself in the main to Western culture, examines angels as they make their first appearances in the Hebrew Scriptures, starting with Genesis and continuing through the prophets. These appearances already indicate the ambiguities that perdure: as messengers, as guardians of places, nations and individuals, and as ministering before the throne of God. In Genesis 20, three angels visit Abraham, eating the food he prepares for them without difficulty, conveying the promised birth of Isaac and informing Abraham of the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Later, in Genesis 28, Jacob sees angels ascending and descending a ladder reaching to heaven in his flight from Esau and on his return years later wrestles with the angel until dawn. In the book of Judges, angels do not or cannot eat, and so offerings of food are dispatched with the immediate thoroughness of a lightning bolt. In the case of Isaiah 6, the prophet has a vision of the heavenly liturgy to which his worship in the Temple is linked, and one of the seraphim steps out to confirm the message he hears with a burning coal that neither burns the angel's hand nor consumes Isaiah's tongue. Ezekiel is another priestly prophet who has visions of the glory of the Lord abandoning and later returning to the temple. Luke, both in his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, has angels bringing messages to the Virgin Mary and freeing Peter from prison. Angels appear in other writings as well, and Revelation is, as she says, positively crammed

with angels, both engaged in worship and unraveling signs that nonetheless remain enigmatic. Angels similarly play a role in the Qur'an, completing the review of the three religions claiming Abraham as their father.

Chapters 2 and 3 continue with a history of the reflections of these three religions on the angels and their roles. Part of this is interpretation of the revealed texts in the Talmud and the sermons and commentaries of the Church Fathers. This task takes place as well in the context of Greek philosophy, especially Neoplatonism, ranging from the heavenly hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagite to the writings of Thomas Aquinas, with his influence on Dante in the *Comedia*. Rees is particularly good at an overview across the religious traditions, bringing special attention to sources in Judaism and Islam that many in various Christian traditions will find rewarding both for their similarities and the differences in perspective they reveal. Her story ends with the continued fascination for artists in recent years, Paul Klee, Rainer Maria Rilke, Walter Benjamin, Cecil Collins, and Luke Bedford, underlining the continued appeal of angels for our common imagination.

Chapters 4-12 linger over particular aspects that emerge in the depiction and missions of angels. First, Rees considers whether angels have wings, contrasting in lively fashion philosophical or theological caution with artistic embellishment of both the wings and general apparel of the angels, all presumably at the service of conveying in some way the fundamental mission of angels as messengers (Ch. 4). The next three chapters examine other roles that angels have assumed, as protectors of cities, nations, or individuals, as immersed in praise of God, and as present in the mystical and Kabbalistic speculation rooted in Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot and heavenly throne. The Cherubim feature as the great protectors, with various theories about the etymology of the word and their relation to the winged guardians of Babylonian and Assyrian palaces and temples (Ch. 5). The Seraphim mentioned by Isaiah have the different role of constantly praising God, and manifesting the connection between heavenly and earthly liturgies, the heart of Isaiah 6 that is central in the *Kedusha* of Jewish prayer and the *Sanctus* in Christian worship (Ch. 6). The divine chariot and throne of glory are associated with Ezekiel's vision and with the ascents of Enoch and Elijah to the heavens, with some dispute as to whether and how they become angels themselves in the process. Whatever the verdict on that, this particular image proved a rich source for describing the mystical ascent of the soul in Jewish *Kabbalism* as well as in Christian mystics (Ch. 7).

The following group of chapters examines other categories of angels, the difference between ordinary angels and archangels, with a discussion of those named in the Bible, Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael, Azra'il in the Islamic