

*The Presence of Angels
in the 20th Century*



By James J. Jorgensen
April 2000

Table of Contents

I – Who and what are angels?

II – How do they fit into history and the media?

III – Do angels exist in the *wired* media of the twentieth century?

IV – Is there any proof of angels?

V – Do I believe in angels?

VI - References

I - Who and what are Angels? The word angel comes from the Greek word *angelos*, which means messenger. I was inspired to imagine a possible comparison to Hermes, the Greek god (On April 10, 2000, in my “Faith in the Twentieth Century” class at New York University). He is usually depicted as the wing-footed messenger of the gods, and since the lore of angels have had a place in the world for so long, I began to wonder if Hermes was perhaps an angel mistakenly seen as a Greek god.

For the most part, an angel is a celestial being or spirit believed to be a messenger, agent, or an intermediary between God and humankind. References to angels can be found in the religious writings of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, and even in ancient Greek religions and those of Mesopotamia. The Bible mentions angels 294 times. Angels are frequently viewed as God’s messengers, sent to aid or to punish. They are often assigned to individuals (as a guardian angel) or to nations. Angels have been known to instruct, inform, and command humans as their time on Earth progressed. An angel can function as protector, guardian, a heavenly warrior, and even as a cosmic power. (Gonzalez-Wippler 41-42)

Pseudo-Dionysius of the sixth century developed *The Celestial Hierarchy* of Angels, classifying them in the following nine ranks or choirs (from highest to lowest)

Seraphim	Dominions	Principalities
Cherubim	Virtues	Archangels
Thrones	Powers	Angels

Seraphim stand the closest to God. They are said to be fire-like. They are aflame with love for God and kindle others to love him. Seraphim is the Hebrew word for flaming.

Cherubim are always radiant in the knowledge of the mysteries and in the wisdom of God. They enlighten others with this wisdom. The name Cherubim in Hebrew means great understanding.

Thrones serve the justice of God, glorifying in it and pouring justice onto the thrones of earthly judges. They help kings and masters to bring forthright judgment.

Dominions dominate over the rest of the Angels that follow behind them in importance. They serve God unceasingly. They also teach self-control and send down power for prudent government.

Virtues are filled with Divine strength. They perform miracles and send the graces of miracle working to people worthy of it, in order for those persons to perform and work miracles. They assist in the overburdened and bear the infirmities of the weakened. Virtues strengthen a human's level and display of patience.

Powers' principal task is to maintain order in Heaven and to restrain the fallen angels from destroying the world. They are said to be in charge of the history of humanity and are present during the birth and death of human beings.

Principalities have command over lower Angels, directing them to fulfill God's orders. They manage the Universe and all its kingdoms, guarding and protecting the leaders. They raise persons to power and teach them how to rule for the glory of God, not for personal glory or gain.

Archangels herald good news, reveal prophecies, knowledge, and understanding of God's will. Archangels strengthen people in faith and enlighten the human mind. They reveal the mysteries of devout faith. Famous Archangels include Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and Uriel.

Angels announce the lesser mysteries and intentions of God. Angels are the closest to humankind and teach humans how to live righteously. Angels guard all who believe. Angels help when asked.

(Gonzalez-Wippler 44-51)

II - Where do these biblical beings fit into the period called the twentieth century? The twentieth century was without a doubt one of the fastest changing, technologically progressive periods known to man thus far. There have been some amazing breakthroughs in medical science, astronomy, and physics. One other thing that has changed tremendously is the media. By my own definition the media is best described as *the diverse ways in which people communicate information with one another*.

Newspapers, books, magazines, and other types of printed data are some of the forms. Still other forms include radio, television, theatre, and film. The newest form of media, which has grown faster than all the aforementioned, is called the Internet. In the last two decades the number of people that own a computer and access the Internet has grown from thousands to multi-millions. All the media forms mentioned here has something in common with a discussion about angels, angels have been constant subjects within all these media types, but more so in the twentieth century than ever before.

Angels were seldom represented in Christian art before Constantine. The oldest fresco in which an angel appears is the Annunciation scene (second-century) of the cemetery of St. Priscilla. In the cemetery of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus, Wilpert discovered a third-century painting of this same subject. In both representations the Archangel Gabriel is depicted in human form, robed in tunic and pallium. The "Good Angel" (*angelus bonus*) of the fourth-century syncretistic fresco representing the judgment of Vibia is also depicted in human form, dressed as a sacred personage. (Appleton, Internet reference)

The winged angel has abundant scriptural references that could be revealed, and yet has not appeared in any discovered pre-Constantinian Christian art. The possible reason is that such figures might too readily recall certain favorite subjects of classic pagan art, like Pegasus the winged horse of Greek mythology. Another fact worthy of note in this regard is that angels in this first period of Christian art were never represented unless historically necessary, as in the Annunciation scene referred to -- and not always even then.

In a third-century fresco of the Hebrew children in the furnace, for instance, in the cemetery of St. Priscilla, a dove takes the place of the angel, while a fourth-century representation of the same subject, in the *coemeterium majus*, substitutes the hand of God for the heavenly messenger. A new type of angel, with wings, appears in Christian art during the reign of Constantine. The four angels with spears on the ciborium of the Lateran Basilica were probably of this order. This innovation was evidently suggested by the "Victories," and similar figures of classic art; but the danger of idolatrous suggestion in such figures was now remote, and historic art, which gradually replaced symbolic, demanded angels with wings.

The oldest existing examples of winged angels are seen in some bas-reliefs of Carthage and a representation on ivory of St. Michael, both attributed to the fourth century. The latter, part of a diptych in the British Museum, shows the Archangel Michael standing on the upper steps of an architecturally adorned doorway, with a staff in one hand and a globe surmounted by a cross in the other. The figure is splendidly created. From the fifth century angels became a favorite subject in Christian art, no longer merely as figures demanded to complete a historical scene, but very often as attendants on Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin. The mosaic of St. Mary Major's mentioned above, as well as two mosaics of St. Apollinare Nuovo and St. Vitale (sixth century), Ravenna, are examples of angels in this character.

The Archangels Michael and Gabriel dressed in the military chlamys and bearing military standards inscribed with the word *Agios* (holy) are represented in mosaics at St. Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna. The *Hierarchia coelestis* of pseudo-Dionysius exercised an important influence on the artistic conception of angels from the sixth century, and prior to that time a distinction was made between different categories of the angelic host, but now the relations of angels to God were represented in the East after the manner of the various levels of court functionaries rendering their homage to the Emperor.
(Appleton, Internet reference)

III – Where in our *hard-wired* world do angels fit in? While researching the word *angels* on the Internet I found some amazing statistics. Searching for data at *Amazon.com* I discovered a list of 2067 books that had the word angel in the title. Tower Records lists at least 100 song titles with the word angel included, and an employee informed me there were at least a thousand in the Tower Records central database.

At another site for film purchases, *Reel.com*, I could order at least 128 movies that had the word angels, or angel, in the title or in the theme. To demonstrate this I have provided a list on the next page based on this search request: Find a movie with "angels" in the title.

This is only a partial list from one web page:

Angels and Insects (1995)

Starring: Mark Rylance, Kristin Scott Thomas

Director: Philip Haas

Angels with Dirty Faces (1938)

Starring: James Cagney, Pat O'Brien

Director: Michael Curtiz

Angels Die Hard (1970)

Starring: William Smith, R.G. Armstrong

Director: Richard Compton

Almost Angels (1962)

Starring: Vincent Winter, Peter Weck

Director: Steve Previn

Angels in the Endzone (1998)

Starring: Christopher Lloyd, Matthew Lawrence

Director: Gary Nadeau

Band of Angels (1957)

Starring: Clark Gable, Yvonne De Carlo

Director: Raoul Walsh

Angels in the Outfield (1994)

Starring: Tony Danza, Danny Glover

Director: William Dear

Charlie's Angels: Angels Under Covers (1976)

Starring: Farrah Fawcett, Kate Jackson

Director: John Llewellyn Moxey

Angels in the Outfield (1951)

Starring: Paul Douglas, Janet Leigh

Director: Clarence Brown

City of Angels (1998)

Starring: Nicolas Cage, Meg Ryan

Director: Brad Silberling

Angels Over Broadway (1940)

Starring: Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Rita Hayworth

Directors: Ben Hecht, Lee Garmes

Concrete Angels (1987)

Starring: Joseph Dimambro, Luke McKeehan

Director: Carlo Liconti

One film that has always been very popular is the motion picture *It's A Wonderful Life*, (which is also one of my all time favorite films). During my oral presentation (for Faith in the Twentieth Century, NYU, on April 25, 2000), I compared and contrasted *It's A Wonderful Life* with a more recent film, *Angels in the Outfield*. *Angels in the Outfield* was a Disney remake of a film made in 1951 (see the preceding list).

The reason I compared the two movies was to demonstrate the difference of artistic and angelic interpretation between 1953 and 1994. The main angel in "*Wonderful Life*" is a simple person named Clarence. His first deed is acted out in a very human way. During the film no special effects are required, only an open mind and some faith. Clarence succeeds in convincing his charge that life is well worth living, and that the good fellow has lived a life worth even more than his poor soul ever imagined. By the time the film ends a person would have to be a statue not to feel euphoric.

Special effects are abundant with the Disney movie, *Angels in the Outfield*. The tale has a sweet story line about an orphaned, young boy that prays for the Anaheim Angels baseball team to win in order to have a family. In spite of the warmth the audience might feel, supernatural happenings are the highlight of the film. Some giddy feelings struggle through by films end, although the audience never gets to really know the angels.

One of the more beautiful film scenes depicting an Angel was near the end of the motion picture entitled *Date With An Angel*. It is the scene when the Angel swoops down in a burst of brilliant white light to protect her charge, a young man who is being threatened by other characters in the film. Casting for the film must have been very competitive, for the actress that played the angel was truly a heavenly vision.

The television series *Highway To Heaven* told a number of beautiful and inspiring stories about an Angel, played by Michael Landon, doing work on Earth. A current television series *Touched By An Angel* has also told a number of such stories.

IV - Looking for proof of angels, I found some in the printed word. January 5th, 1986, Parade Magazine, a weekly publication that is delivered to a very large number of families every week with their Sunday newspaper, ran an article titled THE BEST AND WORST OF EVERYTHING. The article was a review of the year 1985. Within that article, under the heading *Best International News* was the following report:

Six Soviet cosmonauts said they witnessed the most awe-inspiring spectacle ever encountered in space - a band of glowing angels with wings as big as jumbo jets. According to Weekly World News, cosmonauts Vladimir Solevov, Oleg Atkov and Leonid Kizim said they first saw the celestial beings last July (July 1985), during their 155th day aboard the orbiting Salyut 7 space station.

"What we saw", they said, "were seven giant figures in the form of humans, but with wings and mist like halos, as in the classic depiction of angels. Their faces were round with cherubic smiles." Twelve days later, the figures returned and were seen by three other Soviet scientists, including woman cosmonaut Svetlana Savitskaya. "They were smiling", she said, "as though they shared in a glorious secret."

(Author Unknown, 8-9)

I recall a poll that was published in TIME magazine a few years ago that showed approximately 69 percent of people believe in Angels. 45 percent, or more, believe they have a personal guardian angel. Descriptions of these angels included a wide range of appearances. Some were only lights or hovering golden halos, while others described their angels as human, half human, or even animals! Angels are said to descend upon those who are in need of salvation (from evil or hell), or who need direction in life, in pain or suffering physically or emotionally, or to those who need simple things such as directions or a winning lottery ticket. Angelic encounters are sometimes life changing, but always leave the experience spiritually, physically, emotionally revived, comforted, and less negative.

V –Do I believe in angels? From a personal point of view, I would have to say yes. In order for this answer to be better understood, simply read the following:

February 1994, I was walking down a flight of concrete stairs that were covered in ice. The entire city of New York was covered in ice. My boss was at my side when I suddenly lost my footing, and catapulted into the air. I landed hard on my back, and all around me was pain. When I was helped up, I looked behind me, and saw where my head had hit. That one spot was deep with fresh snow. It had not snowed for three days. If not for that spot of snow, I would not likely be here. Perhaps that may seem trivial.

August 1997, my wife was absolutely depressed. Her present boss was not allowing her a chance for a promotion from the secretarial pool, and outright told her she was trapped because of her circumstances at home (meaning me unable to work, and our toddler son). That evening I was doing dishes and a voice clearly spoke into my ear. It said the next day my wife will hear of a new job. The job would not be secretarial, the pay would be in the fifty thousand dollar range, it would be located in mid-town Manhattan, and would involve either travel or relocation to Connecticut. It also said she would have her own office. I stopped washing the dishes and told my wife as much. She didn't believe me.

The next day she went to her human resource department to ask for help with the promotion. The human resource manager asked her to close the door. She told my wife that she was leaving the firm, and that she needed a capable Human Resources Coordinator at her new company.

She described the job as not being secretarial in nature, the base salary would be above fifty thousand dollars per year, the New York office was in mid-town Manhattan, but the main office was in Wilton, Connecticut, which meant the new Coordinator would either have to travel to and from or eventually relocate there. She offered my wife the job right there on the spot. When she came home my wife said she did fall out of the chair, and she took the job. When she started two weeks later, she arrived on her first day to find she had her own office, with a window.

April 1998, I was waiting for the F train to arrive at my Carroll Gardens stop in Brooklyn, New York. I was on my way to New York University to attend a math class. On the same train platform as myself were a few other people. I took note of none of them. I boarded the train, and as I was sitting and reading my algebra textbook, I heard a male voice say clearly “Tell them Joe/John is alright”. I looked around me. No other person was near enough to have spoken to me. My head began to hurt. I put my nose and eyes back into the book.

Again the male voice spoke up, clearer this time. “You have to tell them I am okay”, and he sounded urgent. I closed my textbook. My head was hurting and I thought to myself that I needed a CT scan. The voice spoke again, more forcefully, “If you don’t tell them I’m okay, I’ll make your head hurt worse than this.” Suddenly my head hurt more. I looked to my left and saw two young women that had boarded the train at the same station I did. I knew the voice was referring to them, and I am not sure why I knew that.

I approached them, my head pounding. I could see one of them had been crying. She looked downright desperate. I smiled awkwardly and excused myself for bothering them. I explained that strange things have happened in my life, but nothing quite like this. I asked them if they knew of a Joe or John. I had heard the J sound very clearly. They asked me why I wanted to know, so I told them that Joe/John was in my head. He was going to make my head hurt worse if I didn’t tell them that he was okay. The desperate looking woman burst into tears.

I felt so badly. Then she smiled, and her companion took my hand. I said I was sorry, and they cut me off. The companion hugged her friend and explained to me that they had just come from her cousin Joe’s funeral. The crying woman and Joe had been best friends all their lives. The train pulled into the next station, and I exited. My head was blasting. I turned to watch the train leave and saw the girl drying her tears. She smiled at me and mouthed the words “thank you”. As her lips moved I heard the male voice say those same words, and just like that my head pain stopped.

VI - References:

Gonzalez-Wippler, Migene, Return of the Angels
(St. Paul, Minnesota, Llewellyn Publications, 1999)

Davidson, Gustav, A Dictionary of Angels
(New York, NY, The Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, 1967)

Fearheiley, Don Angels Among Us
(New York, NY, Avon Books, a division of The Hearst Corporation, 1993)

Anderson, Joan Wester, Where Angels Walk
(New York, NY, Ballantine Books, 1992)

Appleton, Robert, and Knight, Ken, The Catholic Encyclopedia
(www.newadvent.org/cathen/01485a.htm) , Online copyright 1999,

Author Unknown, Russian Astronauts Article
(New York, NY, Parade Magazine, 1986)