

ANGELS

WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY SAYS
ABOUT GOD'S HEAVENLY HOST

MICHAEL S. HEISER



LEXHAM PRESS

Angels: What the Bible Really Says about God's Heavenly Host

Copyright 2018 Lexham Press

Lexham Press, 1313 Commercial St., Bellingham, WA 98225
LexhamPress.com

All rights reserved. You may use brief quotations from this resource in presentations, articles, and books. For all other uses, please write Lexham Press for permission. Email us at permissions@lexhampress.com.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®)*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture translations marked (LEB) are from the Lexham English Bible (LEB), copyright 2013 by Lexham Press. Lexham is a registered trademark of Faithlife Corporation.

Scripture translations marked (NRSV) are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Print ISBN 9781683591047

Digital ISBN 9781683591054

Lexham Editorial: Douglas Mangum, Abigail Stocker

Cover Design: Brittany Schrock

Interior Design and Typesetting: Beth Shagene

Contents

Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	xiii
1 Old Testament Terminology for the Heavenly Host	1
2 The Heavenly Host in Service to God	28
3 Important Angels	57
4 The Language of the Heavenly Host in Second Temple Judaism ...	74
5 Second Temple Jewish Angelology	85
6 The Heavenly Host in the New Testament	116
7 Special Topics in New Testament Angelology	141
8 Myths and Questions about Angels	163
Bibliography	179
Index of Subjects and Modern Authors	193
Index of Scripture and Other Ancient Literature	203

Introduction

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT THE LOYAL MEMBERS OF GOD'S HEAVENLY HOST. Most Christians will refer to them as angels, but, as we'll learn, that's just one of many terms the Bible uses for supernatural beings who serve him.

To clarify, this is not a book about demons. While angels' failures are discussed here and there, fallen angels are nowhere the focus. In this book, I'm really only concerned with what the Bible says about the good guys.

What you'll read here isn't guided by Christian tradition, stories, speculations, or well-meaning myths about angels. Instead, our study is rooted in the biblical terminology for the members of God's heavenly host, informed by the wider context of the ancient Near Eastern world and close attention to the biblical text.

WHY BOTHER?

But enough defending of our approach. We need to ask a more important question: Who cares? To be sure, popular interest in angels and angel stories is high, which is symptomatic of our culture's insatiable appetite for the supernatural. It seems every other movie or television show features a paranormal theme, alien superheroes, or some mischievous or malevolent deity. Bookstore shelves are well stocked with books about aliens, preternatural creatures, and, of course, angels and demons. That wouldn't be the case if they didn't sell, but sell they do.

Unfortunately, the content isn't very biblical, even when it tries. Hollywood does its best to mesmerize without informing, splattering CGI

effects (and plenty of gore) over the screen as some unsuspecting human fights the forces of darkness in a reluctant-but-successful effort to save the world or win a heart.

Christian media contributes little that is innovative or even thoughtful in this arena. The Christian voice is usually divided between criticism of “demonic” media (a label that is occasionally accurate) and carefully mining Hollywood’s creative output for Christian themes and images. That’s a noble pursuit for sure, but such observations are only as useful as they are truly biblically informed. Unfortunately, they rarely are.

Much of what Christians think they know about angels is more informed by Christian tradition than Scripture. The angelology¹ of Christian tradition is, to say the least, quite incomplete and, in some ways, inaccurate.

But again, why should we care?

The simple answer is that, if God moved the biblical writers to take care when talking about the unseen realm, then it matters. But these days, that often doesn’t satisfy, since rarely we are taught to think theologically in church. The Sunday experience of most of you reading these words is that the Bible is presented as though its content is little more than children’s Sunday school stories with adult illustrations or perhaps pithy maxims about marriage, parenting, recovery, confession, and fortitude. Of course the Bible can, does, and should speak to these personal issues. Scripture is applicable to every season of life, with all of its joys, challenges, and failures. But there’s more to the Bible than that—a lot more. To be blunt, Jesus is more than a cosmic life coach, and the God of the Bible had more in mind than a list of basic spiritual coping skills when he inspired its writers.

But learning about angels isn’t practical—or so I’ve been told. I disagree, and I think that if you read this book you will as well. Think with me for a moment. A life well lived extends from wisdom. Biblical wisdom involves not only practical, principled, decision-making skills but eternal perspective. Eternal perspective requires understanding what makes God tick. That’s only discoverable with a firm grasp of who God is, what he’s

1. “Angelology” refers to theology related to angels and the rest of the heavenly host. It involves the development of ideas concerned with the heavenly host, such as their roles, hierarchy, names, and powers.

done, why he's done it, what else he intends to do, and why he doesn't want to do it alone. Grasping biblical theology is the means to these discoveries. And grasping biblical theology is impossible without knowing the Bible broadly and deeply.

Why should we care about angels? Because angelology helps us think more clearly about familiar points of biblical theology. God's supernatural family is a theological template for understanding God's relationship to his human family of believers—and our greater importance compared to them. Learning what the Bible says about angels ultimately is tied to thinking well about how God thinks about us. What God wants us to know about angels contributes to our eternal perspective. Several specifics come to mind.

HOW GOD LOOKS AT US: Imagers of God

In our discussion of Old Testament angelology, I'll draw your attention to the plural language of Genesis 1:26 ("let *us* make humankind in *our* image," LEB). That language isn't a cryptic reference to the Trinity. God is speaking to his heavenly host. He is sharing a decision with them—decreeing his will, as it were. If he were speaking to the members of the Trinity, they would already know what's in God's mind, because they are coequal and coeternal with him. Instead, the plural language of Genesis 1:26 intentionally connects humanity, God, and the members of the heavenly host with respect to an important biblical concept: imaging God. Imaging God is about representation—acting on God's behalf at his behest. Humans image God on earth. The heavenly host images God in the spiritual, non-terrestrial world. The two are connected by design—and that has amazing ramifications.

The cliché concept of "being Jesus" to a lost person who needs Christ also captures this idea. Imagers function in God's place—not because God needs a break or is incapable, but because God has decreed that role. He has designed his supernatural creatures and humanity to fulfill that role. Humans were tasked to make the whole world like Eden: a place where God's goodness was known and his presence experienced; where humanity's needs were met and God's created world could be fully known and enjoyed; where imagers related to each other the way God related to

them, with joy and love. God intended humanity to finish a task he had begun. He wanted participation—and that should sound familiar if one is familiar with the heavenly host, God’s initial family.

Understanding this status provides an answer to questions like, “How should we then live?,” “How do we image God?,” and “How should we see and treat each other?” We image God by doing what he would do, when he would do it, and with the motivation he would have for doing it. Yes, we are lesser than God and will fail. But God forgives—another lesson on what imaging means. We image God when we imitate God, acting on his behalf. It’s difficult to see how any facet of this could be deemed impractical for Christian living.

Many illustrations show that imaging theology is crucially needed. There would be no racism if we saw each other as imagers of the same God; imagers estranged from God are still imagers. Injustice and abuse of power would find no place if we valued the fact that we all image God equally. All our relationships—personal, home, business, work, church—would be different if we consciously remembered our equal status as imagers of God. Imaging God is not leashed to church ministry. It can and should occur wherever our lives intersect with others’.

You may not have realized it while you were reading, but we just thought theologically, by means of an insight about God’s heavenly host. Believe it or not, the significant, practical idea of *imaging God* extended from a more insightful angelology—drawn from the plurals of Genesis 1:26, where God speaks to his heavenly host. That insight helped us think about practical holy living. Surprise!

WHERE GOD WANTS US: At Home with God

The second way a biblical theology of the heavenly host helps mold eternal perspective is to remind us that the terrestrial world as we know it isn’t our true home. We are children of God. They were children of God before us. Though there was no weakness or need in God (like loneliness) that our own creation was meant to fill, the Bible makes it clear that God wanted more children. Humans could not traverse to his home, but God could reside in their home. And so the presence of God descended to earth to take up residence.

The point is that God wants to be with his children. *He wants us where he is.* The plan was to blend his divine and human families on earth in deference to the limitations of human embodiment. Home is supposed to be where God is. But there's more to it than that.

The fall disrupted the home life God intended for his human children. Nevertheless, the intention stayed secure. God had anticipated the fall. In his foresight, God had already determined that he would become a man in Jesus Christ so that humankind could come home after the fall (1 Pet 1:19–20; compare Eph 1:4). The wonder of God's decision is amplified when we superimpose what we know of angels onto it. God did *not* create a plan with their rebellions in mind. Instead, God devised a plan of redemption focused on humanity. As we've seen, the writer of Hebrews explains this powerfully: "For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come," but it was Jesus, who

for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. . . . For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Heb 2:9, 16–17)

Acknowledging that our supernatural siblings were part of God's original desire to have human children—so much so that he would act at the expense of the heavenly ones for our benefit—helps shape eternal perspective. If God wants us home to that degree, why would we fear departure from this terrestrial ball? As Psalm 116:15 puts it, "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones" (NRSV). It is incoherent to think that God is less interested in us now, after the cross, than he was before when our redemption is what the cross accomplished. We need not fear death, because we who believe have been granted eternal life—and we will still be in God's presence after supernatural rebels have long been judged.

If we should not fear death, we should not be so distracted by the affairs of a life that is not being lived in our real home. Do we really believe that life in this world, as wonderful as it can be, can compare to

what is to come? Do we really believe that the pain and disappointment that are inevitably part of life in this world is where our story ends? We can mouth the right answers to both questions, but what we *really* believe about our future can be seen by how we live in the present.

WHAT GOD HAS PLANNED FOR US: Eternal Rule with Christ

I've met a number of Christians who will admit that, while they're glad to have eternal life, they find descriptions of heaven boring. I agree. The popular notion that heaven means floating around on clouds, gazing at God, and singing endless praise anthems is deeply flawed. The imagers of God, eternal members in his family, have a lot more to do than cloud-lounging and singing. But discerning that requires grasping heavenly host ("angelic") participation and reclaiming the nations currently under the dominion of evil, supernatural beings. A theology of the heavenly host is indispensable for conceiving our eternal destiny as co-rulers with Jesus.

First, "heaven" will be on earth. This is where Revelation 21–22 locates the eternal state, but that fact often is missed by Bible readers. Eternal life will be lived out in a new Eden—a global paradise that fulfills God's original intention. The presence of God and the glorified messianic king, Jesus, will be there. We're there, too, but we're not passive (or bored).

Having been transformed to be like the risen Christ (1 John 3:1–3; 1 Cor 15:35–49), believers in the new Eden inherit the rule of the nations. Jesus himself quotes a messianic psalm (Ps 2:9) and *applies it to us* (Rev 2:27). Jesus grants us the privilege (and duty) of sharing his throne with him to rule the earth (Rev 3:21).

How is it we have this authority? John tells us: "all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). We are the children of God who rule the nations. Old Testament angelology makes the meaning of this clear—the nations are currently ruled by fallen sons of God, who oppress their populations (Deut 32:8; Ps 82:1–5). The psalmist recounts God's judgment in his heavenly assembly, that these sons of God will die like men (Ps 82:6–7)—they will be cast away and replaced when the Most High rises up and takes back

the nations (Ps 82:8). Paul describes the eternal destiny of the believer in this light: we will judge angels (1 Cor 6:3), language that anticipates their removal and our installation as lords of all the earth with Jesus, who is not merely our king but our brother (Heb 2:11–13). I tried to capture the idea in my book *Supernatural*:

The members of God’s family have a mission: to be God’s agents in restoring his good rule on earth and expanding the membership of his family. We are God’s means to propel the great reversal begun in Acts 2, the birth of the church, the body of Christ, until the time when the Lord returns. As evil had spread like a contagion through humanity after the failure of the first Eden, so the gospel spreads like an antidote through the same infected host. We are *carriers* of the truth about the God of gods, his love for *all* nations, and his unchanging desire to dwell with his family in the earthly home he has wanted since its creation. Eden *will* live again.²

Why should we care about angels? Because knowledge of God’s heavenly host helps us think more clearly about our status, our purpose, and our destiny. *That’s* why.

WHAT TO EXPECT

I’ve already shown my hand here: you won’t get church tradition or talk about how angels got their wings (they don’t have any). Instead, our focus will be the biblical text, and our doctrine will be informed by what we see in that text.

Our discussion naturally will begin with Old Testament terminology. That terminology then will serve as the basis for framing an Old Testament theology of the heavenly host. The Old Testament section of the book concludes with a chapter on important angels in the Old Testament.

Rather than jumping to the New Testament, the book will move from the Old Testament to Second Temple (“intertestamental”) period literature.³ During the years between the end of the Old Testament and Jesus’

2. Michael S. Heiser, *Supernatural: What the Bible Teaches about the Unseen World—And Why It Matters* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 163.

3. The Second Temple period gets its name from the time the temple was rebuilt (516 BC) after Jews returned from Babylonian exile to the destruction of that second temple (AD 70).

ANGELS

birth, Jewish scholars were thinking and writing a great deal about their Bible, the Old Testament. A lot of what they wrote influenced how the Jewish people—writers of the New Testament among them—thought about many things, including angels.

The third section of the book then turns to the New Testament. After surveying New Testament language for the heavenly host, noting its relationship to both the Old Testament and Second Temple period, we will devote a chapter to special topics in New Testament angelology. Finally, we will bring our study to a close with a fascinating (and hopefully fun) analysis of Christian myths about angels.

Old Testament Terminology for the Heavenly Host

NOT SURPRISINGLY, UNDERSTANDING WHAT THE HEBREW BIBLE (OLD Testament) says about the members of God's heavenly host must begin with the biblical text. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that merely detecting all the references in the Old Testament to angels accomplishes that task. As will become clear, there are a number of terms aside from "angel" that need discovery and consideration. But there is a preliminary step to casting that wider terminological net.

Before we encounter the range of terms for the beings who serve God in the spiritual world, we need to grasp the fact that a given word will not necessarily yield the same *kind* of information about those spirit beings. To illustrate: the label "spirit being" tells us only about the *nature* of a particular being (it is not embodied), not what that being *does* in God's service or its particular *status* in God's heavenly bureaucracy. This last sentence directs our attention to three kinds of information, all of which are relevant to the terms we'll consider in this chapter:¹

- Terms that describe **nature** (what the members of the heavenly host *are* or *are like*)
- Terms that describe **status** (the hierarchical *rank* of the members of the heavenly host with respect to God and each other)
- Terms that describe **function** (what the members of the heavenly host *do*)

1. The terms we'll discuss in this chapter will also be relevant to rebellious spiritual beings (part 2, chapter 5), but there are additional terms for spiritual beings who are hostile to God.

Old Testament descriptions of the members of God’s heavenly host typically fall into one of these categories, with occasional overlap. Our task in this chapter is to survey the terms in each category. We will reserve lengthy discussion of what these terms teach us about the heavenly to chapter 2.

TERMS THAT DESCRIBE NATURE

1. “Spirit” (*rûah*; plural: *rûahôt*)

The Old Testament makes it clear that the members of God’s heavenly host are spirit beings—entities that, by nature, are not embodied, at least in the sense of our human experience of being physical in form.² This spiritual nature is indicated in several passages. The prophet Micaiah’s vision of Yahweh, the God of Israel, reads as follows:

I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the LORD said, “Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?” And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit [*rûah*] came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, “I will entice him.” And the LORD said to him, “By what means?” And he said, “I will go out, and will be a lying spirit [*rûah*] in the mouth of all his prophets.” And he said, “You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.” Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit [*rûah*] in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you. (1 Kgs 22:19–23; compare 2 Chr 18:18–22)

2. This point is not contradicted by passages that refer to angels as men and that have them performing physical acts (e.g., Gen 6:1–4; 18:1–8, 16, 22; 19:1, 10–11, 16; 32:24 [compare Hos 12:4]). When angels interact with human beings, appearance in human form or actual embodiment is normative in Scripture. Without taking some form that could be detected and parsed by the human senses, angelic presence and interaction would be incomprehensible. The words of Jesus in Matt 22:23–33 do not forbid the inclusion of Gen 6:1–4 on this point. Jesus was speaking about angels *in heaven* (v. 30)—the spiritual world—not on earth among humans. Jesus could just as well have said angels do not eat or breathe in heaven, since there is no need for a stomach, lungs, and heart in the spiritual world. On understanding Gen 6:1–4 as part of the supernatural worldview of the biblical writers, see Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), chapters 12–13, 23. For a discussion of Gen 6:1–4 against the backdrop of its ancient Mesopotamian context, see Michael S. Heiser, *Reversing Hermon: Enoch, the Watchers, & the Forgotten Mission of Jesus Christ* (Crane, MO: Defender Publishing, 2017), 37–54.

There are two important observations to make in this passage. First, the members of the host of heaven are identified as spirit beings in this passage (v. 21). Second, this spirit being is sent by God to “be a lying spirit” in the mouth of Ahab’s prophets (vv. 22–23). We are therefore *not* supposed to read this passage as though its point was that God gave Ahab’s prophets some sort of internal emotional anxiety or psychological confusion—as though God was troubling *their* individual spirits, their minds and thoughts. While *rûah* can certainly be used to describe a person’s intellect and emotional state (e.g., Mal 2:16; Ps 32:2; Prov 15:13),³ 1 Kings 22:19–23 clearly identifies the lying spirit as a member of “all the host of heaven,” who await instruction from their King. This spirit either took control of the minds of Ahab’s prophets or influenced them to speak unanimous deception to the wicked king.⁴

The divine throne room scene in 1 Kings 22:19–23 is therefore useful for considering other instances where *rûah* may point to an unembodied entity but where ambiguity exists. In this regard, the following passages are relevant:

Abimelech ruled over Israel three years. And God sent an evil spirit [*rûah*] between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, and the leaders of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech. (Judg 9:22–23)

Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit [*rûah*] from the LORD tormented him. And Saul’s servants said to him, “Behold now, a harmful spirit [*rûah*] from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit [*rûah*] from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well.” (1 Sam 16:14–16)

The next day a harmful spirit [*rûah*] from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house while David was playing the lyre, as he did

3. HALOT, 1199–1200.

4. Some readers may have difficulty with God’s use of deception to judge evildoers, but it is plainly taught in Scripture. At times the deception is in the context of warfare (Josh 8:1–9). In other instances, God uses deception to set the stage for his judgment (1 Sam 16:1–5). It is up to the righteous Judge to determine how evil is punished. By definition, his punishment of evil is just and not unjust. See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983): 225–27; Geoffrey David Miller, “The Wiles of the Lord: Divine Deception, Subtlety, and Mercy in I Reg 22,” *ZAW* 126.1 (2014): 45–58; Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Does God Deceive?” *BSac* 155.617 (1998): 11–28.

ANGELS

day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand. And Saul hurled the spear, for he thought, "I will pin David to the wall." But David evaded him twice. (1 Sam 18:10–11)

The princes of Zoan have become fools,
and the princes of Memphis are deluded;
those who are the cornerstones of her tribes
have made Egypt stagger.

The LORD has mingled within her a spirit [*rûah*] of confusion,
and they will make Egypt stagger in all its deeds,
as a drunken man staggers in his vomit. (Isa 19:13–14)

When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, "Say to your master, 'Thus says the LORD: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the young men of the king of Assyria have reviled me. Behold, I will put a spirit [*rûah*] in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.'" (Isa 37:5–7)

In each of these passages, a "spirit" (*rûah*) is sent from God and that spirit affects an individual or group in an adverse way. Are these descriptions best understood as God in some way affecting the internal state of mind of the individuals in view or dispatching an unembodied entity to affect behavior?

One could easily conclude, based on the usage of *rûah* to describe a person's thoughts, feelings, and decisions, that the latter perspective makes sense. However, in light of 1 Kings 22:19–23, which uses quite similar language to that found in these passages, it is at least possible that unembodied divine spirits in the service of Yahweh are in view.⁵

5. For our purposes, there is no need to launch into a detailed exegetical defense of a divine entity interpretation and rebuttal of the alternative. Rather, these and other passages are clear enough to establish the fact that the Old Testament presents the members of the heavenly host as spirits in the same way the New Testament will. In Rev 1:4, for example, the seven angels of the churches addressed in Rev 1–3 are referred to as spirits. As Aune notes, "A second important view, in my opinion certainly the correct one, understands the seven spirits as the seven principal angels of God. In early Jewish literature the term 'spirits' was used only rarely as a synonym for 'angels' (*Jub.* 1:25; 2:2; 15:31–32; 1 *Enoch* 61:12, 'spirit of light'), or of various types of heavenly beings (1 *Enoch* 75:5, 'the spirit of the dew'; see 2 *Enoch* 12:2 [J], 'flying spirits'; 16:7, 'the heavenly winds, and spirits and elements and flying angels'). ... The seven ἄγγελοι, literally 'angels,' are those to whom the seven proclamations in Rev 2–3 are addressed" (David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* [WBC 52A; Dallas: Word, Inc., 1997], 34, 108).

A potential ambiguity of another sort is produced by the fact that the Hebrew word *rûah* can also mean “wind.”⁶ This semantic possibility produces uncertainty in regard to interpreting Psalm 104:4.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!
 O LORD my God, you are very great!
 You are clothed with splendor and majesty,
 covering yourself with light as with a garment,
 stretching out the heavens like a tent.
 He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters;
 he makes the clouds his chariot;
 he rides on the wings of the wind [*rûah*];
 he makes his messengers [*mal`akim*] winds [*rûhôt*],
 his ministers a flaming fire. (Ps 104:1–4)

The term *mal`akim* is the plural of the Hebrew word translated “angels” throughout the Hebrew Bible (*mal`ak*). In the ESV translation, that plural is rendered “messengers.” These messengers are referred to as “winds” in the ESV, but the Hebrew (*rûhôt*) could just as easily be translated “spirits.”

It isn’t uncommon for commentators to understand Psalm 104:4 as referring only to winds—elements of nature or the weather—and not divine beings. The ESV reflects this perspective, as its translation effectively has God poetically making the winds his messengers. Goldingay’s comments are representative of this approach: “Other aspects of creation then form the means whereby God affects other aspects of this management. The clouds are Yhwh’s limousine, the winds its means of propulsion, both the winds and the lightning Yhwh’s aides and officers (Ps 104:3–4).”⁷ This perspective is what leads scholars like Aune to conclude, “The plural term רוחות, *rûhôt* ‘spirits,’ is never used of *angels* in the OT.”⁸

6. HALOT, 1198–99. Job 4:15 is another instance where *rûah* may refer to either a spirit or a wind. Alden notes: “It is not certain whether the ‘spirit’ should be understood as a divine spirit or whether we should read ‘breeze/wind’” (Robert L. Alden, *Job* NAC 11; [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993], 87).

7. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume One: Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 84–85. Another scholar notes: “These prophets knew that many forces exist in nature which can affect humans. But they believed that these were under God’s control. Wind (Exodus 10:13; Psalm 104:3–4; Isaiah 59:19) and water (Genesis 6:17; Psalm 29:3; Isaiah 40:12), fire (Exodus 13:21–22; 1 Kings 18:24; Jeremiah 21:14) and frost (Psalm 78:47; Zechariah 14:5–6)” (David Francis Hinson, *Theology of the Old Testament* [London: SPCK, 2001], 59).

8. Aune, *Revelation* 1–5, 33.

ANGELS

This interpretation of Psalm 104:4 is unconvincing. The preceding psalm and comparative ancient Near Eastern descriptions of angels compel the conclusion that Psalm 104:4 is describing angels as spirits. Psalm 103:20–22 reads:

Bless the LORD, O you his angels [*mal'akim*],
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!
Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!
Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the LORD, O my soul!

The observation to make here is that the angels are referred to as “ministers” (v. 21). The Hebrew word thus translated is identical to that which occurs in Psalm 104 (“his ministers a flaming fire,” v. 4). Why translate *mal'akim* as “angels” in Psalm 103:20 but “messengers” in Psalm 104:4? The angels in Psalm 103:20 are also called “mighty ones” who obey the command of God, obeying his voice. “Mighty ones” (*gibborim*) is a term used of human warriors throughout the Hebrew Bible. It is nowhere else abstracted to speak of the forces of nature. It does not seem reasonable to make Psalm 104:4 an exception, especially since, as we’ll discuss below, angels are described as men and as a warrior host in the Old Testament.⁹

Further, other scholars have pointed out that another descriptor in Psalm 104:4, that God has made his ministers “a flaming fire” (*'eš laḥaṭ*), is vocabulary used to describe divine servants in ancient Near Eastern texts. For instance, two messengers of Yamm sent to a meeting of Canaanite El, the high god of Ugarit, are called “two flames.” Miller writes:

The messengers of Yamm appear as warriors, flaming and with swords. There is no reason in this instance to assume that the figures represent lightning, but they indicate that both sides in the Baal—Yamm conflict were disposed to use fire of some sort. There can be

9. This is hardly an idiosyncratic perspective. For example, Kraus writes: “In Ps. 103:20 and 148:2 the מלאכים ('angels') belong to the circle of heavenly powers around Yahweh who praise and honor him. But God also sends out 'messengers' and 'servants' (Ps. 104:4). He charges his angels to protect his servants in all their ways (Ps. 91:11)” (Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 49).

no question that these messengers are warriors. ... This suggestion was made ... by Father D. Shenkel, who also relates the messengers of Yamm to the messengers of Yahweh called 'ēš (*wā*) *lahaṭ* in Ps 104:4.¹⁰

2. “Heavenly Ones” (*šamayim*)

The Hebrew word *šamayim* occurs over four hundred times in the Hebrew Bible. In nearly all cases, the referent is either the visible sky, the space above the earth (Gen 1:8; Deut 4:32; 33:26) or the spiritual realm beyond or above the visible sky in which God dwells (Ps 115:3; Isa 66:1). The Hebrew word is found always in plural form.¹¹ In a handful of passages, *šamayim* describes the members of God’s supernatural host and should be translated (though it often is not) as “heavenly ones” for clarity on that point.¹² This usage should be no surprise, since it makes perfect sense that members of the heavenly host should be called “heavenly ones.” Psalm 89:5–7 (vv. 6–8 in Hebrew) is a case in point:

Let the heavens [*šamayim*] praise your wonders, O LORD,
 your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!
 For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?
 Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD,
 a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones,
 and awesome above all who are around him?

As we will discuss momentarily, this passage clearly speaks of the heavenly host as a council or assembly in the service of Yahweh, the God of Israel. This divine council has many “holy ones” as its constituent members. In verse 5, these holy ones are set in parallel structure to *šamayim*. The holy ones are “heavenly ones.”¹³ Goldingay comments on the meaning of *šamayim* in this context:

Alongside the parallelism of “wonders” and “truthfulness” is that of “the heavens” and “the congregation of the holy,” the latter giving

10. Patrick D. Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 19.

11. The pointing of the lemma gives it the appearance of a dual form, but as *HALOT* notes, “שָׁמַיִם [is] apparently a dual, but in reality a pl[ural]” (*HALOT*, 1560; see also GKC §88d; *GBH* §91ff).

12. M. Hutter and M. de Jonge, “Heaven,” *DDD* 390.

13. The ESV “heavenly beings” in verse 6 is not a translation of *šamayim*, but of *benê 'ēlīm* (“sons of God”). See the ensuing discussion on that term.

precision to the former. It is the body called “the divine assembly,” the assembly of the “gods,” in 82:1.¹⁴

Job 15:15 is another example where *šamayim* should be understood as spiritual beings:

Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones,
and the heavens [*šamayim*] are not pure in his sight.

While the impurity of “the heavens” could be abstracted to mean that the spiritual world God inhabits has been tarnished in some way by the holy ones, the Hebrew parallelism makes it clear that “the heavenly ones” are not pure in God’s sight. The apparent meaning is that the heavenly beings of God’s host or council are imperfect, and so God cannot completely trust them. This is reasonable given divine rebellion’s presence in the biblical storyline (Gen 3; 6:1–4; Ps 82).

Deuteronomy 32:43 is well known to scholars as an instance of *šamayim* used to describe divine beings. Here is the passage in that translation:

Rejoice with him, O heavens [*šamayim*];
bow down to him, all gods [*’elōhîm*],
for he avenges the blood of his children
and takes vengeance on his adversaries.
He repays those who hate him
and cleanses his people’s land.

The ESV follows the reading of the Dead Sea Scrolls in this verse. The evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls here and for Deuteronomy 32:8 shows that “gods” is demonstrably the correct reading.¹⁵ The stanza in Moses’ poetic song very clearly aligns *šamayim* with *’elōhîm*, and so a translation of “heavenly ones” is appropriate.

3. “Stars” (*kōkēbîm*)

Since the members of God’s heavenly host are referred to as “heavenly ones,” it should come as no surprise that they are also called “stars”

14. John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42–89*, BCOT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 670.

15. See Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism? Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible,” *BBR* 18.1 (2008): 1–30 (9–10); idem, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *BSac* 158 (2001): 52–74.

(*kōkebîm*). Indeed, the very designation “host” draws on descriptions of celestial bodies in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 2:1; Jer 8:2):

The identification of personified stars with angels of the heavenly hosts is well accepted within a totally monotheistic religious system: the stars stand in God’s presence, to the right and the left of His throne (1 Kgs 22:19; 2 Chr 18:18); they serve Him (Ps 103:21; Neh 9:6). ... At the head of the heavenly hosts stands a “Prince of the army” (Josh 5:14–15; Dan 8:11), probably the highest star and the farthest from the earth, even if the actual leader is God, to whom the starry army belongs. From this conception derives the syntagm “LORD/God of hosts” (*Yhwh ’ēlōhē šēbā’ôt*) occurring in numerous biblical passages.¹⁶

Perhaps the most familiar passage in this regard is Job 38:5–7, where God asks Job:

Who determined [the earth’s] measurements—surely you know!
 Or who stretched the line upon it?
 On what were its bases sunk,
 or who laid its cornerstone,
 when the morning stars sang [*kōkebê bōqer*] together
 and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

As we’ll note later in our discussion, “sons of God” is a term for the divine members of God’s divine family-entourage. The heavenly sons of God who watched the creation of the earth are described as “morning stars.” In Isaiah 14:13, the hubris of the king of Babylon is analogized with that of a rebel who sought to displace the God of heaven: “I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God [*kōkebê ’ēl*] I will set my throne on high.” Scholars have long known that these lines in Isaiah 14 draw on a tale of divine rebellion present in Ugaritic texts, where the gods of El’s council are referred to as the “assembly of the stars [*kkbm*].”¹⁷

16. F. Lelli, “Stars,” *DDD* 813; see also Ida Zatelli, “Astrology and the Worship of the Stars in the Bible,” *ZAW* 103.1 (1991): 86–99.

17. Michael S. Heiser, “The Mythological Provenance of Isaiah 14:12–15: A Reconsideration of the Ugaritic Material,” *VT* 51.3 (2001): 354–59; Mark S. Smith, “When the Heavens Darkened: Yahweh, El, and the Divine Astral Family in Iron Age II Judah,” in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age Through Roman Palaestina*, eds. William G. Dever and Seymour Gitin (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 265–77; Ulf Oldenburg, “Above the Stars of El,” *ZAW* 82.2 (1970): 187–208.

The point of star language for divine members of the heavenly host should be obvious. The members of Yahweh's host are not of earth. They are celestial, transcendent beings whose home is in the heavenly realm, the abode of God.

4. "Holy Ones" (*qedōšîm*)

Two passages we considered above that designate the members of God's heavenly host as "heavenly ones" also describe them as "holy ones" (Ps 89:5–7 [Hebrew: vv. 6–8]; Job 15:15). The term *qedōšîm* may be used to describe people (Ps 16:3; Dan 8:24), but it is more often used of spirit beings in Yahweh's service (Deut 33:2–3; Job 5:1; Zech 14:5; Dan 4:17).¹⁸

As we shall discuss in the next chapter, the designation "holy ones" does not denote some quality of perfection. God does indeed charge his heavenly host with "error" (Job 4:17–18). They are not infallible. "Holy ones" should therefore be understood in much the same way as earthly "holiness" of people, places, and objects. The nature of holiness has to do with proximity to and association with the presence of God.¹⁹

5. "Gods"/"Divine Beings" (*'elōhîm*)

I've written extensively on divine plurality (the reality of multiple *'elōhîm*) in the biblical text.²⁰ The biblical writers refer to the members of God's heavenly host as gods, lesser divine beings in his heavenly council or assembly.²¹ What follows will briefly summarize that prior research.

We have already noted that Psalm 89:5–7 (vv. 6–8 in Hebrew) describes a council or assembly of "holy ones" and "heavenly ones" under the authority of Yahweh, the God of Israel.²² This council is explicitly

18. The instance in Deut 33:2 is actually a singular form (*qōdeš*) that modifies the plural "myriads," a different Hebrew lemma. The word in Daniel 4:17 is *qaddîšîn*, the Aramaic cognate of *qedōšîm*.

19. See J. A. Naudé, "שִׁדְדָשׁ (*qādaš*)," *NIDOTTE* 3:877–87.

20. For example: Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 21–27; idem, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism, 1–30; idem, "Should *elohim* with Plural Predication Be Translated 'Gods?'" *Bible Translator* 61.3 (2010): 123–36; idem, "Does Deuteronomy 32:17 Assume or Deny the Reality of Other Gods?" *Bible Translator* 59.3 (2008): 137–45.

21. See Michael S. Heiser, "Divine Council," *DOTWPW* 112–16; idem, "Divine Council," *LBD*.

22. Other sources include: E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980); Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994); H. W. Robinson, "The Council of Yahweh," *JTS* 45 (1944): 151–57; David Marron Fleming, "The Divine Council as Type Scene in the Hebrew Bible" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989); Min

placed “in the skies” (v. 6; *baššahaq*), eliminating the common interpretation that the sons of God in Yahweh’s divine council are human beings, Israelite judges. The unambiguous nature of this passage is echoed in Psalm 82:1, 6:

God [*’elōhîm*] has taken his place in the divine council [*’adat ’ēl*];
in the midst of the gods [*’elōhîm*] he holds judgment. ...
I said, “You are gods [*’elōhîm*],
sons of the Most High [*benē ’nē* ’], all of you...”

In Psalm 82:1 the word *’elōhîm* occurs twice. The form (morphology) of *’elōhîm* is plural. The meaning (semantics) of the term, however, is most often singular.²³ In the case of Psalm 82:1, both meanings, singular and plural, are present. The first instance of *’elōhîm* has the singular participle *niššab* (“stands” or “to take one’s place”) as its grammatical partner. That the second *’elōhîm* must be understood as plural in meaning is indicated by the preposition (“in the midst of”; *beqereḅ*) that precedes it. You can’t be “in the *midst* of” a singular entity.

The plurality of the second *’elōhîm* in Psalm 82:1 is made obvious by Psalm 82:6. God tells the other *’elōhîm*, “you are gods (*’elōhîm*), all of you.” Both pronouns (“you”) in the statement are grammatically plural. These *’elōhîm* are “sons” (plural) of the Most High, who must be the God of the Bible, as there is none higher.

Many scholars use these passages to argue that the biblical writers at one point in Israelite history were polytheists. This thinking is misguided and rooted in a mistaken notion of what the word *’elōhîm* means. We tend to presume that the biblical writers thought about *’elōhîm* in the same way we think about capitalized G-o-d. When we see the word “God,” we instinctively assign a unique set of attributes (e.g., omnipresence, omnipotence, sovereignty) to the letters G-o-d. But this presumption is incorrect and leads our thinking astray when we encounter instances where *’elōhîm* is intended to describe a group of beings instead of the lone God of the Bible.

Sue Kee, “The Heavenly Council and Its Type-Scene,” *JSOT* 31.3 (2007): 259–73; S. B. Parker, “Sons of (The) God(S),” *DDD* 798; G. Cooke, “The Sons of (the) God(s),” *ZAW* 35 (1964): 22–47.

23. As a Hebrew morphological-syntax search with Bible software reveals, the Hebrew noun *’elōhîm* occurs with a singular verb/predicator for grammatical agreement over two thousand times in the Hebrew Bible.

We know this presumption about *'elōhîm* is mistaken by virtue of how the biblical authors used the word *'elōhîm*. Briefly, one will find *'elōhîm* in the Hebrew Bible employed to describe spiritual beings that are clearly lesser than the God of Israel. While *'elōhîm* is used thousands of times for the singular God of Israel, it is used for spiritual beings judged by the God of the Bible (Ps 82:1, 6), gods and goddesses of surrounding nations (Judg 11:24; 1 Kgs 11:33), territorial spirits (Hebrew: *shedim*, often translated “demons”; Deut 32:17), and the spirits of deceased people (1 Sam 28:13).

No biblical author would think that the deceased dead or territorial spirits shared the same attributes and power as the God of Israel. The term is not intended to speak of a unique set of attributes, as though the God of Israel was just one of many equals. Biblical writers were not expressing polytheism; they used *'elōhîm* in contexts that require a plural meaning for the term:

- “Demons” (Hebrew: *shedim*; Deut 32:17)
- The deceased Samuel (1 Sam 28:13)
- Angels or the Angel of Yahweh (Gen 35:7)²⁴

The fact that biblical writers label a range of entities as *'elōhîm* that they elsewhere take pains to distinguish as lesser than Yahweh tells us quite clearly that we ought not understand *'elōhîm* as having to do with a unique set of attributes possessed by only one Being. A biblical writer would use *'elōhîm* to label any entity that is not embodied by nature and is a member of the spiritual realm. This “otherworldliness” is an attribute all residents of the spiritual world possess. Every member of the spiritual world can be thought of as *'elōhîm* since the term tells us where an entity belongs in terms of its nature. The spiritual realm has rank and hierarchy: Yahweh is the Most High. Biblical writers distinguish Yahweh from other *'elōhîm* by means of other descriptors exclusively attributed to him, not by means of the single word *'elōhîm*:

Biblical writers also assign unique qualities to Yahweh. Yahweh is all-powerful (Jer 32:17, 27; Pss 72:18; 115:3), the sovereign king over the other *'elōhîm* (Psa 95:3; Dan 4:35; 1 Kgs 22:19), the creator of the other members of his host-council (Psa 148:1–5; Neh 9:6; cf. Job 38:7;

²⁴. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 29–30.

Deut 4:19–20; 17:3; 29:25–26; 32:17; Jas 1:17) and the lone *’elōhîm* who deserves worship from the other *’elōhîm* (Psa 29:1). In fact, Nehemiah 9:6 explicitly declares that Yahweh is unique—there is only *one* Yahweh (“You alone are Yahweh”).²⁵

This perspective is consistent with very conservative Jewish thinking in the Second Temple (intertestamental) period, which followed the Old Testament era. For instance, there are nearly 180 instances in nonbiblical material from Qumran’s Dead Sea Scrolls where the terms *’elōhîm* and *’ēlîm* (also “gods”) describe members of Yahweh’s heavenly host.²⁶

To summarize our findings thus far, Old Testament writers describe the nature of the members of Yahweh’s heavenly host with terms such as “spirits,” “heavenly ones,” and “gods, divine beings.” We’ll first encounter the more familiar “angel” in the next category.

TERMS THAT DESCRIBE STATUS IN HIERARCHY

Psalms 82 and 89 both refer explicitly to the members of God’s heavenly host comprising a council or assembly under God’s supreme authority.²⁷ A range of terms in the Old Testament describe this heavenly bureaucracy:²⁸

- “assembly” (lemma: *’ēdāh*; construct form: *’adat*)
- “council” (*sōd*)

25. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 32.

26. Michael S. Heiser, “Monotheism and the Language of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *TynBul* 65.1 (2014): 85–100. The approach taken here to *’elōhîm* is also contrary to Mormon doctrine. I have critiqued Mormonism’s understanding of Psalm 82 and divine plurality elsewhere (at invitation): Michael S. Heiser, “You’ve Seen One *Elohim*, You’ve Seen Them All? A Critique of Mormonism’s Use of Psalm 82,” *Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies Review* 19.1 (2007): 221–66.

27. What is being described in the biblical council of Yahweh is not a polytheistic pantheon. See Heiser, “Divine Council,” *DOTWPW* 112–16; idem, “Divine Council,” *LBD*; idem, *The Unseen Realm*, 21–37; Stephen F. Noll, *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 37–38, 126–27.

28. In addition to these lemmas, all of which occur in the Hebrew Bible in at least one context of a gathering of divine beings such as the throne room of God, mention should be made of *dôr* (“circled camp, generation”). This term is not used in the context of a divine bureaucracy, but its Northwest Semitic cognate, *dr*, certainly is. For examples in Canaanite inscriptions, see *KAI* 26A iii.19: *dr kl bn ’lm* (“whole assembly of the sons of the gods”); *KAI* 27:12: *dr kl qdšn* (“whole assembly of the holy ones”). Ugaritic examples include: *dr ’il*, “assembly (circle) of El” (*KTU*² 1.15.III.19; 1.39:7; 1.162:16; 1.87:18); *dr bn ’il*, “assembly (circle) of the sons of El” (*KTU*² 1.40:25, 33–34); *dt šmm*, “assembly (circle) of those of heaven” (*KTU*² 1.10.I: 3, 5); *dr ’il wphr b’l*, “the assembly (circle) of El and the assembly of Baal” (*KTU*² 1.39:7; 1.62:16; 1.87:18). See *DULAT* 1:279–80; *DNWSI* 1:259.