

Myriads of Angels and the Manifold Wisdom of God

Pastor Samuel H. Richards

May 3, 2020

What did Jacob “see” **as he went on his way**? Myriads of angels, in two camps, which is why the name Mahanaim is attached to the occurrence. “Two camps” of angels—which I have divided into a vanguard and a rearguard— with his herds and multitude in-between them. In a marching order, or formation, Jacob heads west towards the mountains of Gilead and the armies of the Lord **came to meet him**. It was a friendly, welcoming meeting. . . and encouragement to him. However, no one else is recorded as having seen this host. And the implications of such a supporting force, seem have been lost on Jacob in that he seems terrified of meeting up with his brother Esau. The phrase **angels of God**, my sources assure me, is used only here in the Jacob cycle—once at Bethel, once at Mahanaim. That turns out to be an *oversimplification*. **The Lord’s army** and the **heavenly host** are used interchangeably with **angels of God** in numerous places throughout Scripture. Jacob was alone when he encountered these angels. So who are they?

Angels are sentient beings; they are personal, intelligent, created beings whose creation precedes the Genesis account. Job relates that the angels were present at the Creation. And the proof of their mindfulness—a characteristic that they share with mankind, lies first in them both knowing certain things and, relatedly, from their desire to investigate **the manifold wisdom of God**. Remember Ephesians 3:8-10 for the New Testament occurrence of this term. They know that God has a plan and they want to be informed about that plan—they are inquisitive beings and are limited in their knowledge (unlike God). They develop educated minds much as we do from observation, listening, studying and so learning. They appear to have a higher intellectual wattage than the best of human beings, but the capacities vary from angel to angel and probably vary from rank to rank (as they are ordered in ranks in heaven).

It follows from this that angels possess higher powers of reason (notably, they remember, and learn from history) than people do. Both men and angels remain dependent upon the same Holy Spirit for obtaining truth and revelation. All angelic intelligence stalls at the threshold of **the manifold wisdom of God which is now being made known**. It is surely “a **mystery hidden in God**” until the time of its disclosure to them, or to us. This is particularly true in the divine plan *of loving redemption*—what with forgiveness, salvation, atonement and justification—neither angels, nor men, were in on the plan until it was unfolded. Then we were told what God had been aiming at—*the greatest of all his works and wonders!*

All sentient beings are in the same position as the Ethiopian servant: **How can I know if there is no one to instruct me?** However, the good angels, the ones who were able to maintain their position in heaven, became aware of the great cost of sin (and its folly and resultant ruin). This knowledge may have deterred them from further rebellion, following the removal of a third of the angels in Satan’s apostasy. Here are five things we know about angels: mindfulness, educable minds, higher powers of reason, exclusion from full appreciation of the manifold wisdom of God (***until instructed by the church!***) and they learn from our experience! (Would that we did as well in that department!.) However, there’s more to know about angels ahead.

We also know that the *good* angels never sinned and never fell from their first estate; they do not need redemption and, correspondingly, it fascinates them. Then we know that

they dwell in shining ranks in heaven, around the throne of God, in such a way that the Son of God had to pass through those ranks to their wonderment on his way to earth, and that he had to return in victory when his work had been completed. Great joy attended his return for the angels now knew better what God had been doing through the ages. The angels have spiritual faculties as opposed to simply natural ones. They think, see, hear and function angelically. We, on the other hand are born natural in our faculties and only transcend the natural when we are saved, redeemed, or born again. Our mixed condition, natural and spiritual astounds the angels. Why would God choose to so glorify dust, that a man sits at the right hand of God the Father! *Closer than any angels would dare sit.* So, ranks, angelic faculties, hardly prepare us to hear of their endowment with great, holy power. They are magnificent spiritual beings, “exalted ones.”

Faithful to God and favored by him for their obedience. There are no lazy, unemployed or slothful angels; they are always eagerly busy about their Creator’s business. So, these empowered beings govern, engage in conflict, and help direct the affairs of this world, of each other, of nations and of mankind. Apparently, they can “shape change,” divert or alter circumstances according to the wishes of Gd, their Master. They worship, honor and praise God, all three persons of the godhead; they exist to make God glorious! And, finally, we may note that while they are not lonely, they appear to yearn for our company—and for the success required to obtain our fellowship. They wish to share heaven and to enter into communion with all the saints forever and ever.

It might be appropriate at this point to explore just *what it is angels had seen* regarding the **manifold wisdom of God** prior to the Son’s appearing in the flesh. They had caught glimpses of God’s **manifold wisdom** in Creation. His invisible attributes, yes. But, more, due to their keener senses and enhanced faculties (un-blunted as it were by sin, and undiminished from the beginning!), they had noted God’s exquisite contrivances of architectural skill, adroitly displayed in all realms animate and inanimate—across the range of angelic/spiritual and the natural. They watched as newly minted stars, in exploding galactic swirls, leapt into being as sparks from a grinder’s disk. Emitted from the foundry of his creativity! Nebulae, stars, and planets. They “saw” his wisdom displayed in that. The greatness of Creation spoke of it. His inventiveness, immensely imaginative patterns and forms . . . so intricate, involved, complex, interconnected, integrated, systematized *from the very start!* Reasoning from the ingenuity of His works, through the excellence of His designing, they could not but reach some conclusions about the capacity and mind of the Creator—for which they praised Him. Note the amazing scale of this angelic survey! They can hold the entire landscape of the entire world in a single view, and, paired with infinite mobility and speed—and yet detain-able(!) as in Daniel. The question of vantage points and perspective is nearly moot. The ends of infinity are as stops on a subway to them! ***With the result that the multi-form, multi-complexity of God is manifest in his marvelous works in such a way as to induce wonder, stimulate awe.*** However, angels have a better, higher, broader, deeper and informed view of God than mere mortals can muster.

Yet, all of this advantage of being, of placement, of capability stalls before the **manifold wisdom of God.** It is unattainable by either their intelligence, or by ours. There is much to “heavenly science” yet to be studied and learned, mapped out as it were—and it seems as it will continue to unfold forever.

The next steps: Revelation: Word, Book and Church:

And that endless study is one reason why higher knowledge, deeper wisdom about divine matters, must come through revelation. And, at God's discretion, the chosen vehicle for that revelation *to the angels* is the church, the body of Christ. That is the means God has chosen to use to enlighten the angelic hosts. Ephesians 3:8-10:

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, 9 and to [make all know] bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; 10 so that *the manifold wisdom of God* might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

The church is **the “now”** that brings this instruction to pass. Yes, the wisdom of divine grace was somewhat disclosed in the giving of the Law—all very significant, but perplexing to the best minds of men. It was not even wholly intelligible to the angels(!), not even those who stand over the mercy seat. That leads to some anxiety perhaps of inquiry: what is this **manifold wisdom**? What is this about? But hear their desire to know! Hear the excitement of Paul over his role in sharing this good news! Exhibiting the mystery which was **hidden in God from the beginning** who created all things through Jesus Christ, the Son. They both knew then, *the angels may now be let in on the plan of redemption.*

The angels who saw the long succession of the priesthood, the centuries of temple worship, the stream of sacrificial blood and the clouds of incense had not yet seen the manifold wisdom of God: not fully, not clearly, the spotless mirror of his power was veiled, the reflex image of his glorious perfections (in his Son) had not yet appeared. Why? Because in God's plan all of this was **to be learned from the church.** Since those times, Christ has come. And angels, the students of the manifold wisdom of God, see the wisdom of God as revealed in the Son, in this work towards his people, *for which climax all the rest was prelude.* Until now. Now the Bridegroom *has appeared* and the espousal of the church to him at the marriage feast of the Lamb is at hand! To this marriage feast all believers are bidden to come.

Consider learning angelically—from their point of view (and as mirrored on earth among humans). They have pleasure in the getting of knowledge. We profit by this pursuit, merchandizing it —forgetting that the supreme object of learning is acquisition of the manifold wisdom of God, the truth of God, the truth of Truth. Angels don't fall for that snare. We, humans, market learning as we market clothing, music, gourmet foods. Remember the very high estimate placed on getting wisdom in Proverbs. (See Proverbs 2:1-15; 3:13-18; 4:5-13; 8:1-36). **HOWEVER** with the incarnation, we break up fresh ground. We begin to decipher what has been obscure, We sift out analogies, solve difficulties, follow out the tracks of history in one continuous line—just as the angels are doing. *And our enjoyment of study rises steadily to enthusiasm!*

Then, I wonder, why in the world would Jacob need armies to attend him. Perhaps the answer is this: given his destiny, to become the ruling patriarch of the people of God, he was going to need all the help, protection, guidance and defense he could garner from heaven and from his own people. Living for himself was no longer an option. Yes, he was prosperous and he was rich but unless he gave himself in service to God for the people of God it was possible that his life would become as damnable a life as that of Dives—from the parable of the rich man (Dives) and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) which exposes the perils of riches, or living for oneself in the lap of luxury. It doesn't take armies to live selfishly!

Our sin nature and riches form a toxic brew well enough on their own; they grease the skids into a damnable lifestyle.

Jesus was teaching on the problem of serving two masters (see v. 13) meaning “money and God”—the Pharisees’ dilemma. Or, on the matter of putting loyalty to God above all else—which is the same as letting God rule in our hearts and lives. **Managing** the things of this world and *being a true servant* of God, however, was Jacob’s challenge and, to speak truly, it is our challenge as well. That sustained effort does require armies of angels. It is too easy these days to let a lack of compassion for others settle in. In these days of self-protective alarm, living for self is apparently even more justified. Self-protection can slide into self-indulgence. May the angels keep us from that catastrophe! Living for God requires heavenly assistance. Angels, a slue of them. Myriads even.

The law and the prophets, Moses and the prophets, could not prevail in the rich man’s hard heart—they should have produced compassion. The law was powerless to do so. The gospel was powerless as well chiefly due to their unbelief.

We cannot love God and ignore the needs sitting at our door. The roaming street dogs were kinder to Lazarus than was the rich man! Jacob needed protection from the love of riches, and so might we. Luxury, pleasure and leisure—the temptations of riches—are powerful spiritual adversaries. They can trip us up, or stumble us, or hinder our obedience to God as they did Dives—love of riches, covetousness, envy and treachery were, possibly, in the saddle bags of Esau’s approaching army! But Jacob, **on God’s errand**, needed the encouragement of seeing God’s armies. Do you? Do I?

If you are on God’s errand, may God reveal to you his help, and his back-up even as he did for Jacob.

Amen