

Angels in Ancient Judaism and Johannine Christianity

The Case of the Interpreting Angel

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Revelation as Divine Communication

- Visible and direct manifestation of God (**theophanic**).
- Direct communication through God's word (**prophetic**).
- 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (**incarnation**).
- Revelation via heavenly/angelic figure (**apocalyptic**).

Angels and Apocalyptic

- Apocalypse (Greek: *apokalypsis*): disclosure [of that which is hidden].
- Apocalyptic and eschatology (teaching of 'the last things').
- Human seer or visionary
- Dreams and visions
- Symbolism and Mythology
- Decipherment by an otherworldly/heavenly figure: the *angelus interpres*.

The Interpreting Angel

- Messengers of divine knowledge from the world above.
- Mysteries that remain hidden from human beings.
- This knowledge can only be disclosed (and elucidated) by angels.
- Agents of revelation, heavenly expositors; their angelic identity underlines the transcendent character of the revealed knowledge.

Zechariah: 'The angel who spoke with me'

- Cycle of seven dream-visions.
- Interpreting angel explains the visions to the prophet.
- Explanation in the form of allegorical interpretation of the vision's imagery.
- Bridging the distance between above and below.



First Night Vision

The word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, who said: 'In the night I saw a man riding on a red horse. He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen; and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I said, "What are these, my lord?" **The angel who talked with me said to me, I will show you what they are**". So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, "They are those whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth..... Then the Lord replied with gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, "Proclaim this message..."(Zechariah 1:7-15)

Daniel: an Early Apocalypse

‘As for me, Daniel, my spirit was troubled within me, and the visions of my head terrified me. I approached one of the (angelic) attendants **to ask him the truth** concerning all this. So he said that he would **disclose to me the interpretation of the matter**’ (7:15-16)

‘As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever – for ever and ever’ (7:17-18).

Later (noncanonical) Jewish Apocalypses

- Interpreting angels serves as guides through the various heavens during their otherworldly journeys.
- Uriel guides Enoch through various cosmic scenes (I Enoch 72-82).
- See also 2 Enoch, Apocalypse of Abraham.
- Revelation through the medium of dreams and visions, disclosed by an interpreting angel (Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Uriel).
- **Circumstances**
- **Description of the vision**
- **Request for interpretation**
- **Interpretation by an angel**
- **Reaction of the seer**

Johannine Christianity

- The Book of Revelation
- 1-3 John
- The Gospel of John
- The Book of Revelation ('the Apocalypse') is full of interpreting angels (10:1; 11:1; 17:1, 7-19; 19:9), even the risen Jesus (1:20), who elucidate shadowy visions – often through 'showing'.
- What about the Gospel of John?

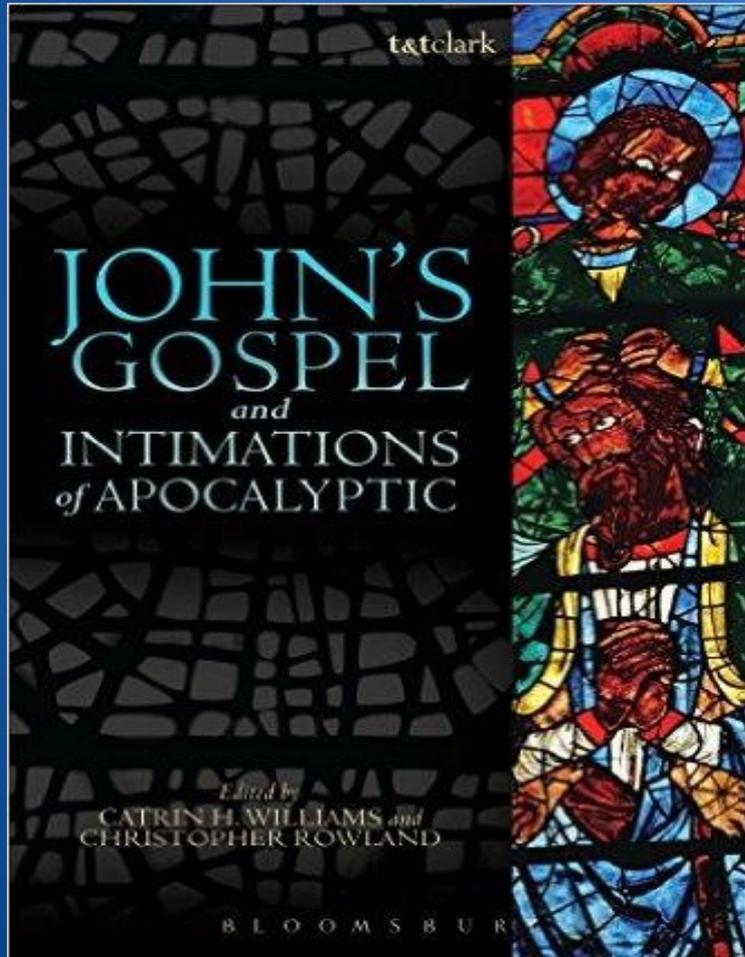
John's Gospel: Where are the angels?

'Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man' (John 1:51)



Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and one at the feet (John 20:11-12).

John: Apocalypse in Reverse



- Revelation is not accessed through heavenly ascents or dreams/visions of that which is above.
- The revealer has come to earth; revelation is found in Jesus, the stranger from heaven.

Apocalyptic Motif in John: Two-Stage Revelation

- Two levels of understanding linked to two different time periods:
 - Jesus' earthly life (pre-Easter) – shadowy and obscure
 - After Jesus' resurrection (post-Easter) – clear and open.
- 'His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him' (John 12:16).
- 'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you' (John 14:25-26).

The Spirit-Paraclete and/as the Interpreting Angel



- New understanding) comes through the Spirit.
- **Revelation in two stages: decoding by a divinely authorised emissary.**
- The role of interpreter is assigned not to an angel but to the Holy Spirit.
- **The opaque (riddling) words and deeds of Jesus, the stranger from heaven, are made open for those with eyes to see.**

Bringing Revelation to Remembrance: Angels > Spirit

‘I have said these things to you **while I am still with you**. But the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, **will teach you everything**, and **remind you of all that I have said to you**’ (John 14:25-26).

While the women were perplexed (about the empty tomb), suddenly **two men in dazzling clothes** stood beside them. The women were terrified and **bowed their faces to the ground**, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. **Remember how he told you**, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must ... be crucified and on the third day rise again’. **Then they remembered his words**. (Luke 24:4-8)

Unveiling Revelation: Angels > Spirit

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, **and he will disclose to you (Greek: *anangelei humin*)** the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine **and disclose it to you (*anangelei humin*)**. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and **disclose it to you (*anangelei humin*)**'.

(John 16:12-15).

Disclosure of Hidden Revelation

- The verb *anangellô* is common in apocalyptic texts: 'reveal/disclose/unveil' the hidden meaning of a dream or mystery (visual or aural).

'At the beginning of your supplication, a word went out and I [Gabriel] and I have come to disclose it to you (*anangelei soi*)' (Daniel 9:23).

'I will disclose to you (*anangellô soi*) what is inscribed in the book of truth.... And now I will disclose the truth to you' (Daniel 10:21; 11:2).

'Old' and 'New' Revelation

Interpretations of previously encountered visions (e.g. 'remembering') and the disclosure of 'new' revelation ('disclosing'): 'I [the revealing angel] will show you the heavenly mysteries; I have been sent before you [Baruch] so that I should disclose (*anangellô*) and show you all the things of God' (3 Baruch 1:4).

- The Johannine Spirit fulfils a similar *twofold* role as the interpreting angel: he interprets already existing revelation and discloses what has so far not been revealed.
- The Spirit is a heavenly being sent by God; he enables recipients to gain insight *within the earthly sphere*.