Angels in Jewish Mysticism

Theolyn Cortens Cert.Ed. M.A.
Ph.D. Researcher University of Winchester

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But if the archangel now, perilous, from behind the stars took even one step down towards us: our own heart, beating higher and higher, would beat us to death. Who are you?

And it came to pass... that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming... and suddenly I understood the meaning of the expositions of the books...

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)
Sandalphon by Theolyn Cortens
Hanael from Doreen Virtue’s *Messages from your Angels* oracle cards (2004)
Stone relief from the throne room of Ashurnasirpal II, Nimrud (870–860 BCE)
Primary texts of Jewish mysticism

- **Sefer ha’Yetzirah (The Book of Creation or Formation)**, 1st century CE.

- **Hekhalot** (Heavenly Halls literature), c. 1st–2nd century CE.

- **Sefer ha’Bahir (The Book of Illumination)**, 12th century CE.

- **Sefer ha’Zohar (The Book of Splendour or Radiance)**, late 13th century CE.
Sefer ha’Yetzirah
(The Book of Formation or Creation)

- Earliest kabbalah text with neo-Platonic overtones, c. 1st century CE.

- The ‘Gra’ version only 2,000 words: six chapters.

- Describes the process by which God creates the Universe.
...engraved and carved
The Throne of Glory,
Seraphim, Ophanim and holy Chayot
and ministering angels

— Ezekiel 1

as it is written,
‘He makes his angels of breaths
His ministers of flaming fire’

— Psalm 104

- seraphim = angels with six wings, also in Isaiah 6
- ophanim = wheels
- chayot = creatures
- malakhim = ministering angels
Sefer ha’Razim
(The Book of the Mysteries)

Historically parallel with Sefer ha-Yetzirah: magical manual, divine names, angelic adjurations, seals and diagrams.

Sefer Raziel ha’Malakh
(The Book of the Angel Raziel)

13th century grimoire, duplicates much of the above. Published Amsterdam, 17th century.
**Hekhalot (Heavenly Palaces or Halls) c.200 CE**

- **Hekhalot Zutartey** (*The Lesser Palaces*), which details an ascent of Rabbi Akiva.
- **Hekhalot Rabbati** or **Pirkei Hekhalot** (*The Greater Palaces*), which details an ascent of Rabbi Ishmael.
- **Ma’aseh Merkhavah** (*Account of the Chariot*), a collection of hymns recited by the ‘descenders’ and heard during their ascent.
- **Merkavah Rabba** (*The Great Chariot*).
- **Sefer Hekhalot** (*Book of Palaces*, also known as *3 Enoch*).
Ma’aseh Merkhavah
(The Work of the Chariot)

Offers mystical opportunity for ‘descent’ to the Throne of God through seven heavens, meeting:

Angels, Cherubim, Chayot, Seraphim

In the seventh heaven are seven palaces, jealously guarded by hostile angels, or archons, with names such as:

Dahaviel, Tofhiel, Tagriel, Mathpiel, Shaburiel, Ratzutziel
Metatron

(from Metathronios — ‘He who stands before the throne’). Also known as Yahoel.

Ishmael journeys to the Throne and meets Metatron, who describes his metamorphosis from human prophet Enoch to Archangel.
Fallen Angels

First Book of Enoch, 300 BCE.

Shemhazai and 200 ‘Sons of Heaven’ mate with the ‘daughters of men’ (1 Enoch). They give birth to the nephalim, the ‘great men of old’ (Genesis 6:1–4).

Satan (‘the adversary’) = Belial, also Samael in later texts.

Illustration of Satan by Gustav Doré for Milton’s Paradise Lost.
Mediæval kabbalah

- Hasidei Ashkenaz, German mystics (12th–13th century CE).
- Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (1165–1230 CE) author *Secret of Secrets*.
- Jacob of Marvege (12th–13th century CE).
Unique Cherub School

‘The glory (*kavod*) of God went up from the cherub’ (Ezekiel 10:4).
Sefer ha’Bahir (The Book of Illumination)  
Southern France, 12th century

- Concepts from Sefer ha’ Yetzirah.
- Establishes roles played by named angels.

*Strength* (gevurah) is the officer of all the Holy Forms to the left of the Blessed Holy One. He is Gabriel.

The officer of all Holy Forms to His right is Michael.

In the middle is Truth. This is Uriel, the officer of all Holy Forms.
There is no reckoning of his troops, as it is written, “Is there a number to his troops?” (Job 25:3).

The *chayot* and the *ophanim* exist in the second dominion where they:

*bless, exalt, glorify, praise and sanctify the mighty King with the Kedusha.*

The *seraphim* are to the left and right of the *chayot*:

*They are the pleasant ones who ascend higher and higher, as it is written, “And one higher than they”* (Ecclesiastes 5:7).
All agree that none were created on the first day. It should therefore not be said that Michael drew out the heavens at the south and Gabriel drew it out of the north while God arranged things in the middle.

It is this written (Isaiah 44:24), “I am God, I make all, I stretch out the heavens alone, the earth is spread before me”. Even though we read the verse “from me” it can also be read “Who was with me?”

I am the One who planted this tree in order that the world should delight in it. And in it I spread All.

I called it All, because all depend on it, all emanate from it, and all need it. To it they look, for it they wait, and from it souls fly in joy.

Alone was I when I made it. Let no angel rise above it and say, “I was before you”.
tzurah = form

komah = structure

manhigim = directors

pekidim = functionaries
Pseudo Dionysius — 6th century neo-Platonist

Trinitarian system of angelic hierarchies, each of which contains three orders, based on their proximity to God.

These nine orders of angels were adopted by Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologicae*, I.108) and follow the *Hierarchia* (6.7).

Also recognized by Pope St Gregory I:

1. Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones.
3. Principalities, Archangels, and Angels.
Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)
Moses Maimonides 1135–1204
Maimonides Celestial Hierarchy

- *Chayot ha’Kodesh* — holy living creatures, as in Ezekiel 1.
- *Ophanim* — wheels, as in Ezekiel 1.
- *Erelim* — as in Isaiah 33.
- *Hashmallim* — as in Ezekiel 1.
- *Seraphim* — as in Isaiah 6.
- *Cherubim* — as in Ezekiel 1.
Abraham Abulafia (1240–c.1290)

Combined letters from the Hebrew alphabet, the *evenim* (‘God’s building blocks’) to create divine names for magical effect.
Joseph Gikatilla (1238–c.1325) Sha’are Orah (The Gates of Light or Portae Lucis)
Sefer ha’Zohar (The Book of Splendour)  
Spain, late 13th century

Moses de Leon (1250–1305) claimed to receive the wisdom from 2nd century Palestinian, Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai.

Introduced ‘left emanation’, a ten-fold hierarchy of evil, counterpart to holy sefirot.
Elaborates on Hekhaloth descriptions of the Throne and the four archangels — Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel:

Four holy angels accompany the Holy King’s throne of Glory when it moves. Who are these angels? They that are called ‘the holy creatures’. And these four are the most distinguished and exalted above all the other angels, except one.

More ‘exalted’ is Metatron.
‘Speaking creatures of fire conceal the great mystery’ (Ezekiel 1:4).

The hashmal — a translucent mirror accessible to a great prophet.

Guarded by Gallitsur — keeper of mysteries or keeper of the ‘rock’. Also known as Raziel.

Anael is chief guardian angel of six million gates.
The Shekinah, feminine presence of the divine, is not an angel although sometimes named Rachael, or Matrona — consort of Metatron.

The Shekinah is the Throne of Glory in the Zohar.

Four angels travel with her to receive blessings and influence, to be dispersed via other angels to lower world inhabitants.
Six hundred million angelic messengers created on the second day. They grow like grass, are cut down every day and grow again.

Cherubim beat their wings when the sun sets. The angels sing songs of praise, which are taken up by stars and planets.

At dawn the stars of light sing and Israel takes up the song.
The three ‘men’ who visit Abraham and Sarah are Michael, Gabriel and Uriel (Genesis 18):
Michael = silver. Priestly role at right side of God.

Gabriel = gold. Messenger role at left side of God.

Uriel = copper and scarlet.

Raphael (Boel) = purple (silver and gold combined). Has four keys from four corners of the world, inscribed with yod he vav he and placed at foot of Tree of Life.

Evil angels Uzza and Azael instruct men in magic, witchcraft and sorcery.

Metatron, the High Priest. He is the ‘primal light’. Has twelve celestial keys, is higher than the chayot by five hundred years, commands thousand of rivers, halls, firmaments and ‘myriads’ or camps, which flow out of a single, shining flame engraved with the ineffable name of God.
Nature is the garment of the divine. Every iota, from stars to blades of grass, is inhabited by an angel:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him (i.e. Adam), “I have made you an exalted being, and I have crowned you king over all my creatures, and I have given you power from the angels, and power from those who minister above”.
1492 — Expulsion of Jews from Spain
The Safed Circle in Israel

- Joseph Caro (1488–1575).
- Moses Cordovero (1522–1570).
- Isaac Luria (1534–1572).
Joseph Caro

Nightly visits from the maggid who speaks through him:

The voice of my beloved began to knock on my mouth, saying: “Although you imagined I had forsaken you and left you, do not think I will leave you before I have fulfilled my promise not to withhold good from your mouth. You must cleave to me and to the fear of me, as I have said, and then you will be elevated, lifted up, and made high before all the members of the heavenly academy, all of whom send you greeting because you busy yourself all the time with the Talmud and the codes, and combine the two.”
Moses Cordovero

Process of emanation:

*or yashar* — downward light

*or hozzer* — reflected light

Human activity — free will — can change interaction between Heaven and Earth.
Isaac Luria

God’s creation faulty from the outset — we can co-create the improvements.

Olam ha’tikkun — the repair of the world.
The Four Worlds — *olamot*

- First World — *Atziluth*. The world of emanation.
- Second World — *Beriah*. The world of creation.
- Third World — *Yetzirah*. The world of formation.
- Fourth World — *Assiyah*. The world of making.
The Four Worlds
The Four Worlds on the Tree of Life
Israel ben Eliezer Baal shem Tov
‘Master of the Good Name’ (1698–1760)

He who serves God in the great way assembles all his inner power and rises upwards in his thoughts and breaks through all the skies in one act and rises higher than the angels and the seraphs and the thrones, and that is perfect worship.
Elijah ben Schlomo Zalman
‘Vilna Gaon’ or ‘The Gra’ (1720–1797)

When heaven wanted to deliver to him supreme mysteries without any labour or effort... through maggadim, masters of the mysteries and princes of the Torah, he did not desire it... I heard it from his holy mouth that many times maggadim from heaven appeared to him, requesting him to deliver mysteries of the Torah, without any effort, but he would not listen to them. (Hayyim of Volozin, 1749–1821).
Rabbi Levi Yitzhak Berdichov (1740–1810)

Concentration on Nothingness, or focusing on a holy name, acts perhaps like a mantra and requires no intervention from angelic beings.
There are numerous accusers and antagonists on high who wish to hinder him (the zaddik) in his ascent to the heavenly halls.