

# The Book of Angels



# The Book of Angels:

*Seen and Unseen*

By

Stephen Miller

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The Book of Angels: Seen and Unseen

By Stephen Miller

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*For Winifred Elsie and Edward Ernest  
my mother and father*

For he shall give his angels charge over thee,  
to keep thee in all thy ways.

**Psalm 91:11, *KJV***



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This study is an exploration of the various traditions and associated lore and legends surrounding angels and looks at how angels have been depicted in the major monotheistic religions over the past two millennia, or so. It attempts to relate those traditions to human expression in primarily the visual arts and to consider the dialogue that might arise as a result of that examination. While this is a separate undertaking from my previous book, it can also be seen as an offshoot of many of the themes and ideas of that book. Consequently, several of the acknowledgements I made then apply now. In addition to the *Christianity and the Arts* course leader, at King’s College, Professor Ben Quash, I am indebted to several members of the Theology and Religious Studies department, through various seminar groups and discussions, including: Revd. Professor Richard Burridge, Revd. Vernon White (the former Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey), Professor Paul Joyce, Professor Eddie Adams and Dr. Jonathan Stökl, among others.

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# INTRODUCTION

Both collectively and individually we have a deep and abiding fascination with angels. They have recurred in scripture and apocryphal and mystical writings, as well as in poetry, literature and the visual arts. And yet little is categorically known of these enigmatic and elusive creatures, of their nature, jurisdictions, habitat and various and several functions and responsibilities. Being creatures of spirit, they are generally invisible to us, despite on occasion revealing themselves, in disguised form, as messengers and heralds to a select few unsuspecting humans. What is known has been pieced together from tradition, lore and legend, scattered documentation, witness, testimony and theological, philosophical and artistic meditation, insight and imagination.

*The Book of Angels: Seen and Unseen*, includes biblical, deuterocanonical, apocryphal and mystical depictions of angels in writings and the visual arts from before the coming of Jesus Christ to the present day—through the Hebrew and Christian Bibles as well as Islamic, Zoroastrian, Mesopotamian, ancient Greek, and latter-day accounts. It explores not only how the church fathers have appreciated angels, but how visionaries, poets and visual artists, from a variety of traditions and backgrounds, have expressed and pictured them. We explore especially the visual clues, artistic conventions and attributes that have been set down to help us to recognise them in their particular roles and functions. Certain writings have had influential bearing on our understanding of angels. We focus on the hierarchies and orders proposed in a number of influential texts (including those proposed by the likes of Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Thomas Aquinas and others), as well as on subsequent interpretation.

This book is written for those who want to understand what angels are and what their relationship and significance to us might be. In a new age of fascination with the metaphysical and supernatural (in film, television, popular mythology and literature) are we cementing or losing our connection with the authentic meaning and purpose that such vibrant and energised beings bring to our table?

Few books have attempted to look at the connection that the various traditions of angels have with literature and the visual arts and fewer, if any, have valued how human sensibilities and imaginative reasoning have enriched the subject. This book starts with a consideration of the nature of angels and is followed by a chapter on the various hierarchies and orders (drawn from the likes of Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Thomas Aquinas and others), followed by an exploration of the localities where such creatures might be found. A detailed chapter on the known and assumed *Archangels* deals with not only those mentioned in scripture, but draws on a number of other archangel candidates from a variety of sources, in close detail, with examples of the art in which they feature (wherever possible). Two overspill chapters follow, on *Other Angels*—which includes examples of the forerunners of angels in, for example, ancient Mesopotamian and Greek cultures, as winged protective spirits—and on *Fallen Angels*. A chapter on contemporary references to angels in popular literature, film and television follows this, before moving to a concluding chapter eight.

This monograph contains more than 30 illustrations in a central colour plates section. It also has a useful glossary of the terms used throughout this study included at the end. It is with great gratitude that I acknowledge the support and encouragement I have received from several quarters in this venture (see particularly my *Acknowledgements* for a more precise breakdown of these).

We begin in the following chapter with a consideration and outline of the nature of angels handed down to us through tradition.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## ON THE NATURE OF ANGELS

We might reasonably describe angels as a breed apart from humankind. Although often implicated in our spiritual and physical wellbeing, they typically, in the very act of their appearance to us, present a somewhat daunting, not to say terrifying aspect, that proves challenging to our comprehension. They are driven, dispassionate, dutiful and inflexible in their attitude, yet, like us, created beings, coexisting as part of created nature. The seventh to eighth century Syrian monk and priest, John of Damascus (St. John Damascene) summarised the dogmatic writings of the early Church Fathers in his *Ékdosis akribès tēs Orthodóxou Pisteōs* (*An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*), the first study of systematic theology in Eastern Christianity. John tells us that the ‘Maker and Creator of the angels’,<sup>1</sup>

...brought them out of nothing into being and created them after His own image, an incorporeal race, a sort of spirit or immaterial fire.

They are described as ‘spiritual’, ‘immaterial’, or as John also often refers to them, as ‘mental essence’, and the highest of all created beings. Indeed, they were here from the very dawn of creation, before man, and they were singing the praises of God at the very foundation of the cosmos and of all creation. As we hear in *The Book of Job*, when the Lord speaks to Job from out of the whirlwind:<sup>2</sup>

‘Where were you...<sup>7</sup> when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings [or, *sons of God*] shouted for joy?’

**Fig. 1-1 William Blake, *When the Morning Stars Sang Together*, pen & ink and watercolour, ca. 1804-1807, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York**

See Colour Plate Section

The rebuke here is for all mankind, not just Job, when the angels were created we were still scarcely a twinkle in God’s eye. Angels are traditionally pictured, day and night, before the face of God in heaven, continually praising His presence. John Damascene speaks of their ‘ardour,

and heat, and keenness and sharpness with which they hunger for God and serve Him'.<sup>3</sup> In the context of heaven, they are shown as obedient and loving beings ministering to the Lord, while in the context of their interactions with mankind on earth, they act primarily as messengers (as in *angelus*), or as delegates or ambassadors, as the Hebrew *malak* signifies, but also as heralds, intercessors, protectors, guides and enablers (of the power of healing, for instance, particularly of the contrite). They tend to appear somewhat dispassionate in the execution of their earthly duties, but evidently also show glimpses of genuine engagement and concern for mankind's destiny and salvation. They do not perform miracles on their own account, or by their own reckoning, but only through the will and grace of God. Angels marked the incarnation of Jesus Christ, clearing the way for the descent of the Son of God to earth, they ministered to him in his life and death, in his abasement and in his glory. They also appear to be capable of sympathy (even empathy) with us fellow creatures, despite their collective horror at the brutality inflicted by humanity on the incarnate Son, and appear to have some insight into the mystery of redemption. However, they do not see everything and cannot look into the future. Only God knows and fully understands the outcome of created history and yet the angels look to support and celebrate the fulfilment of God's plan for us, and all creation, in all they are tasked to do, even if they do not know exactly what the end of creation will look like, or when that culmination will come. The angels, like us, must remain vigilant.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>32</sup> But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

While part of human nature is spiritual, in our earthly existence of living in the flesh we are demonstrably more material than spiritual. Angels, on the other hand, are cast as more spiritual than material and are often referred to as 'spirits', since, from our perspective at least, this would appear to be the functional part of their nature. They are invisible to us in our corporeal form and are not constrained by many of the physical restraints that currently restrict us. Angels possess neither the tangible mortal bodies we now inhabit, nor the perfect immortal bodies which shall be ours on the day of resurrection, when we will be changed in an instant. Yet the angels preceded us and enjoy a more direct relationship with God than we currently enjoy. The fourth century Archbishop of Constantinople, St. Gregory of Nazianzus (also known as Gregory the Theologian), reasoned that God first created the angelic powers as an extension of his presence:<sup>5</sup>

Since for the goodness of God it was not sufficient to be occupied only with the contemplation of Himself, but it was needful that good should extend further and further, so that the number of those who have received grace might be as many as possible (because this is characteristic of the highest Goodness)—therefore, God devised first of all the angelic heavenly powers; and the thought became deed, which was fulfilled by the Word, and perfected by the Spirit.

Only then, ‘inasmuch as the first creatures were pleasing to Him, He devised another world, material and visible, the orderly composition of heaven and earth, and that which is between them’.<sup>6</sup> The Russian Orthodox priest, Bishop Alexander (Alexander Vasilievich Mileant), tells us that man has always known of angels, which appear in ancient religions (see *Chapter Five*), and talks of angels as ‘our elder brothers’, sent to reveal to us the will of God and to assist us in reaching salvation.<sup>7</sup> While it seems understandable that we associate angels with the ‘spiritual’ realm, according to John of Damascus, angels are called spiritual (or immaterial) and incorporeal only in comparison with us. In comparison with God all is ‘dense’ and material, ‘For in reality only the Deity is immaterial and incorporeal’.<sup>8</sup>

Scripture and the associated writings in all of the Abrahamic religions describe angels as either descending from heaven to earth, or ascending back to heaven (see *Chapter Three* on the layering of the heavens). While they are created immortal (*Luke 20:36*), their immortality is not a property of their nature, nor is it unconditional, but depends wholly upon God’s grace, ‘not by nature but by grace’, as John of Damascus puts it.<sup>9</sup> John adds that God ‘is above the Eternal: for He, the Creator of times, is not under the dominion of time, but above time’.<sup>10</sup> Bishop Alexander tells us that angels are capable of inward self-development, that their intellect is higher than that of humans, and that by their might and power they surpass all earthly authorities and governments (see *2 Peter 2:11*). And yet they are also limited in their power, as we have said, they do not know or see everything and cannot perform miracles by virtue of themselves. Angels and Archangels, being the nearest to us (in a sense the most mundane of the celestial hierarchy, albeit the most immediately important to human beings) are mentioned throughout holy scripture. The books of the prophets mention the *cherubim* and *seraphim* as well as other celestial orders and St. Paul also refers to an assortment of celestial beings (*dominions, powers, virtues, principalities*, and what have you) in his *Epistle to the Ephesians*, saying that Christ is in the heavens:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. <sup>22</sup> And

he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things...

Indeed, the Church Fathers have expressed the opinion that dividing the angels into their several orders or choirs touches only upon those identities and jurisdictions that are revealed through holy scripture, but that we should not expect this to be an adequate reflection of the full reality of the possibilities of the names and orders of celestial beings yet to be revealed to us. For example, *The Book of Revelation* makes reference to mysterious creatures and spirits surrounding God that do not readily fit our understanding of such beings elsewhere in scripture and St. Paul also hints in the verses from Ephesians (see above) that there are celestial creatures whose identities are not yet known to us. It is implied that these ‘spiritual’, or ‘non-material’, powers and ‘essences’ are at work around us. The suggestion also is that not all of these powers are necessarily forces for good. Indeed, Paul urges us to put on the ‘whole armour of God’ in our dealings with such celestial entities:<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Such unseen forces are engaged in the battlefield of the created cosmos, for the hearts and minds (and souls) of humans, supernatural influences ranging alongside the natural order, both angels and demons, forces for good as well for as for ill. Tradition insists that all was created by God and all was ‘good’, the demonic forces were themselves created angels, but through their own free will fell from the grace of God through pride, vaulting ambition, envy, etc. John of Damascus comments on the nature of angels and how it is that some may have turned in this direction:<sup>13</sup>

With difficulty they are moved to evil, yet they are not absolutely immovable: but now they are altogether immovable, not by nature but by grace and their nearness to the Only Good.

Colossians affirms that the eternal Son is set above all things (angels and other sorts of celestial beings included) in heaven and on earth:<sup>14</sup>

<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup> for in [or, by] him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

*Angels* (in the narrow or specific sense of the word) and other classes of celestial being (in a wider sense) are it seems at liberty to move between the physical (material) world and the spiritual (immaterial) realm.<sup>15</sup>

They are mighty and prompt to fulfil the will of the Deity, and their nature is endowed with such celerity that wherever the Divine glance bids them there they are straightway found.

In consequence of this, angels are able to accomplish more than humans, our earth-bound existence being relatively restricted.<sup>16</sup>

They are above us for they are incorporeal, and are free of all bodily passion, yet are not passionless: for the Deity alone is passionless [i.e. unmoved by passion].

The Bible describes angelic beings as having supernatural power and strength, but not more than the boundless and uncreated Creator of all things. Angels are a heavenly order of beings, below God (see *Hebrews 1:6*), but above (if only a little above, and if only for the present time) humanity (*Hebrews 2:7*).

From this introductory outline on the nature of angels we now turn to the several hierarchies and orders of angels in the following chapter.

\*\*\*

## Notes

- 1) John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Ed. Paul A. Boer Sr., trans. L. Pullen & E. W. Watson, 2012. See opening of ‘Concerning Angels’, bk. 2, ch. 3
- 2) Job 38:7, *NRSVA*
- 3) John of Damascus, op.cit., bk. 2, ch. 3
- 4) Mark 13:32, *NRSVA*
- 5) Bishop Alexander (Vasilievich Mileant) cites St. Gregory the Theologian, in his article: ‘The Nature of Angels—Their Hierarchy and Ministrations’, 20 Nov. 2011, see Orthodox Christianity website: <http://orthochristian.com/42954.html>
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) Ibid.
- 8) John of Damascus, op.cit., bk. 2, ch. 3
- 9) Ibid.
- 10) Ibid.
- 11) Ephesians 1:21-22, *NRSVA*
- 12) Ephesians 6:12, *NRSVA*
- 13) John of Damascus, op.cit., bk. 2, ch. 3

- 14) Colossians 1:15-17, *NRSV*
- 15) John of Damascus, op.cit., bk. 2, ch. 3
- 16) Ibid.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ON THE HIERARCHIES AND ORDERS OF ANGELS

There is a general consensus across traditions (if at odds in the particular) that angels, and heavenly beings of a similar ilk, are divided into nine basic choirs or orders, derived from holy scripture (although this number is not constant in all traditions and authorities), within three spheres or hierarchies (derived from theological speculation rather than scripture), each sphere having its own triadic arrangement of three orders/choirs. Within such an arrangement it seems that individuals are not necessarily confined to a particular order (or sphere) but may participate in more than one group, according to their nature and according to the roles to which they are variously assigned. Gabriel, for example, is included in the orders of *cherubim* (apparently not *seraphim*), *virtues*, *archangels* and *angels*, and evidently operates (according to a number of authorities and traditions) within each of the three hierarchical spheres, as does Archangel Michael who is a *seraph*, rather than *cherub*, and also included in the order of *virtues*, as well as operating in the role of *archangel*. Satan, before his fall from grace when often referred to as Lucifer (erroneously so according to some sources, see *Chapter Four*), was typically seen as an *archangel* and also considered to be from one or other of the orders of *cherubim* or *seraphim* (according to source), as well as being included in the second hierarchy in the order of *powers* (or *authorities*). We might understand these designations as divisions of responsibility, as well as implied status, among the ranks of angels. The angels of the first sphere are said to attend in heaven, in the presence of God, with second sphere angels, or archons, working as the celestial governors of creation, guiding and ruling the ‘spirits’, or angelic beings. A third sphere of the angelic host function as messengers, guides and protectors, engaging in the world of humans. This lowest-tier of angels are those that we might most commonly and appropriately have dealings with. Personal or so-called ‘guardian angels’ would be included in this group, for example, together with those tasked with bringing tidings and messages relating to the revelation of parts of God’s cosmic plan.

An influential book on the hierarchy of angels, *De Coelesti Hierarchia* (*On the Celestial Hierarchy*), was compiled in the late-fifth century by the Christian Neoplatonist called Pseudo-Dionysius (not to be confused with the first century Dionysius the Areopagite, of the Athenian judicial council, mentioned in *The Acts of the Apostles*, with whom the author pseudonymously identifies). This treatise set the model of nine orders divided into three spheres, which was copied and elaborated on throughout the middle ages. The first sphere, and the most exalted, comprised the orders of *Seraphim*, *Cherubim* and *Thrones*. The second sphere included *Dominions* (or *Dominations*, also translated as *Lordships*), *Virtues* (also translated as *Powers*) and (somewhat confusingly) *Powers* (also translated as *Authorities*). The third (and lowest) sphere included those responsible for regulating the world and, if called upon to do so, interact with humans, the *Principalities*, *Archangels* and plain common-or-garden *Angels*.

Before Pseudo-Dionysius, Pope Clement of Rome had proposed 11 orders/choirs of angels in the first century, St. Ambrose nine and St. Jerome seven. Following Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, developed a similar arrangement to that of Pseudo-Dionysius, of three hierarchies, with each hierarchy containing three choirs of angels. This kept to the model of *seraphim*, *cherubim* and *thrones*, followed by *dominions* (*dominations*), *virtues* and *powers*, and *principalities*, *archangels* and *angels*.

Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon), a prolific and influential scholar of the Torah in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, counts 10 ranks of angels in Jewish angelic hierarchy, in his *Mishneh Torah: Sefer Yad ha-Chazaka* (*Book of the Strong Hand*). These were: *Chayot Ha Kodesh* (holy living ones, see *Ezekiel* chapters 1 and 10), *Ophanim* (the wheels, also *Ezekiel* chapters 1 and 10), *Erelim* (brave ones, *Isaiah* 33:7), *Hashmallim* (glowing/amber ones, *Ezekiel* 1:4), *Seraphim* (burning ones, *Isaiah* 6), *Malakim* (messengers/heralds, angels), *Elohim* (godly beings), *Bene Elohim* (sons of godly beings), *Cherubim*, and finally *Ishim* (man-like beings, *Genesis* 18:2 and *Daniel* 10:5, ‘a man clothed in linen’). In *Maseket Azilut* (an anonymous Kabbalistic work of the early 14<sup>th</sup> century), the 10 ranks of angels are given as: *seraphim*, with Shemuel or Jehoel as chief; *ofanim*, with Raphael and Ofaniel as chiefs; *cherubim*, with Cherubiel as chief; *shinannim*, with Zedekiel and Gabriel as chiefs; *tarshishim*, with Tarshish and Sabriel chiefs; *ishim*, with Zephaniel as chief; *hashmallim*, with Hashmal as chief; *malakim*, with Uzziel chief; *bene elohim*, with Hofniel as chief; and *arelim*, with Michael as chief. These are the archangels created before all others and



over them is set ‘Metatron-Enoch’, transformed from human flesh and blood into flaming fire.

In addition to such divisions, extensive lists of individually named angels (including fallen angels and demons) belonging to (or excluded from) the various orders can be found in such sources as, *The Book of Enoch* (written over an extended timeframe from the period BC to first century AD), *The Lemegeton* (compiled in the 17<sup>th</sup> century from older material) and the so-called *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* (an 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century text, allegedly written by Moses and secretly passed down). Despite there being little to go on in the canon of the New Testament, Pseudo-Dionysius (in *De Coelesti Hierarchia*) followed some 700 years later by Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*) drew on certain passages (notably from the epistles of *Ephesians* and *Colossians*), to develop the triadic model of three spheres, each subdivided into three orders or choirs.

<sup>20</sup> God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>15</sup> He [Jesus Christ, the eternal Son] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup> for in [or, by] him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.<sup>2</sup>

In his *Celestial Hierarchy* Pseudo-Dionysius sets out his intentions to,<sup>3</sup>

...behold the intelligent hierarchies of heaven and we should do so in accordance with what scripture has revealed to us in symbolic and uplifting fashion.

These hierarchies are revealed to us by,<sup>4</sup>

...the Light which, by the way of representative symbols, makes known to us the most blessed hierarchies among the angels.

The author goes on to explain what he means by a hierarchy and why they might be important to us.<sup>5</sup> and<sup>6</sup>

A hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine. And it is uplifted to the imitation of God in proportion to the enlightenments divinely given to it.

...for every member of the hierarchy, perfection consists in this, that it is uplifted to imitate God as far as possible and, more wonderful still, that it becomes what scripture calls a 'fellow workman for God'. [see also, *1 Corinthians* 3:9, *1 Thessalonians* 3:2]

In his fourth chapter, Pseudo-Dionysius turns from a general discussion of hierarchy to consideration of the 'angelic hierarchy' and reminds us that scripture 'teaches us that the Law was given to us by the angels'.<sup>7</sup> In chapters six to nine the author takes us through the previously mentioned various ranks and spheres of the 'heavenly beings'. The 'first hierarchy' comprising *seraphim*, *cherubim* and *thrones*, followed by a 'middle hierarchy' of *dominions*, *powers* and *authorities* and the 'final hierarchy' of *principalities*, *archangels* and *angels*.

While the nine names of the orders are derived from scripture, the author concedes that the triadic structure is adopted from elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

The word of God has provided nine explanatory designations for the heavenly beings, and my own sacred-initiator has divided these into three threefold groups.

Pseudo-Dionysius (we should remember, posing as the first century St. Dionysius the Areopagite) claims that the triadic arrangement of the hierarchies is taken from Hierotheus ('the Thesmothete'), reputed to be the first bishop of the Christian Athenians and reportedly present at the dormition of the *Theotokos* (Mother of God). According to tradition, Hierotheus was instructed, baptised and ordained by the apostle Paul in about the year 53. (See also Pseudo-Dionysius's *The Divine Names* in which 'our famous teacher', Hierotheus, is mentioned together with reference to a work, *Elements of Theology*, ascribed to that 'teacher'.)<sup>9</sup>

As to the first hierarchy we are told:<sup>10</sup>

Here... are the most holy 'thrones' and the orders said to possess many eyes and many wings, called in Hebrew the 'cherubim' and 'seraphim'.

Note the descriptions 'many eyes' (*Ezekiel* 1:18) and 'many wings' (six wings in *Isaiah* 6:2, for the seraphim, and four in *Ezekiel* 1 and 10, in respect of the cherubim). These celestial creatures are to be found, 'Immediately around God and in a proximity enjoyed by no other'. Pseudo-Dionysius claims that his 'famous teacher' notes that these three orders form 'a single hierarchy which is truly first and whose members are of equal status'... 'No other [group or hierarchy] is more like the divine or receives more directly the first enlightenments from the Deity'.<sup>11</sup> He continues, that those, 'with a

knowledge of Hebrew are aware of the fact that the holy name “seraphim” means “fire-makers”, that is to say, “carriers of warmth”. And that, “cherubim” means “fullness of knowledge” or “outpouring of wisdom”.<sup>12</sup>

The first of the hierarchies is hierarchically ordered by truly superior beings, for this hierarchy possesses the highest order as God’s immediate neighbour, being grounded directly around God and receiving the primal theophanies and perfections. Hence the descriptions “carriers of warmth” and “thrones”. Hence, also, the title “outpouring of wisdom”. These names indicate their similarity to what God is...

He adds a little later:<sup>13</sup>

The first beings have their place beside the Godhead to whom they owe their being. They are, as it were, in the anteroom of divinity... They know no diminution at all toward inferior things, for they have their own godlike property an eternally unfailing, unmoved, and completely uncontaminated foundation.

Further, the highest ranks share their understanding of the ‘operations of God’ with the lower ranks.<sup>14</sup>

The theologians have clearly shown that the lower ranks of heavenly beings have harmoniously received from their superiors whatever understanding they have of the operations of God, whereas the higher ranks have been enlightened in initiations, so far as permitted, by the very Godhead.

This first group, ‘imitates, as far as possible, the beauty of God’s condition and activity’.<sup>15</sup>

## Seraphim

*Seraphim* (singular *seraph*) is literally translated as the ‘burning ones’. In the Hebrew Bible *seraph* is interestingly also a synonym for *serpent*. Mentioned in *Isaiah*, seraphim are assumed to be the highest rank of angel and serve in the very presence of the Lord God before His throne. They continually shout and sing God’s praises and are typically described as six-winged fiery beings—two wings covering their faces and two covering their feet, leaving two to fly with.<sup>16</sup>

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup> And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’.

Michael belongs to this order and Satan (before his fall from grace, as Lucifer) was also considered to be a seraph (although Thomas Aquinas insisted that Satan was a cherub, the argument being that cherubim are derived from *knowledge*, which is compatible with mortal sin, while seraphim are derived from *charity*, which is incompatible with mortal sin). St. Thomas notes that:<sup>17</sup>

...the names of two angelic orders, the Seraphim and the Thrones, are not given to devils; for they mean things incompatible with mortal sin, the ardour of charity and the presence of God. But devils are called Cherubim, Powers and Principalities, since these terms denote knowledge and power, which are in the wicked as well as the good.

Notwithstanding St. Thomas's objection, Lucifer is sometimes depicted with 12 rather than six wings, indicating his previous enhanced status amongst the seraphim over even other seraphs.

**Fig. 2-1 Giotto di Bondone, *Stigmatisation of St. Francis*, from *Scenes from the Life of St. Francis*, fresco, 1325, Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence**

See Colour Plate Section

The *Stigmatisation of St. Francis* appears above the entrance to the Bardi Chapel in Santa Croce, Florence, in which Francis receives the stigmata (the five wounds of Christ) from a seraph—a rare illustrative example of a celestial being of such exalted rank interacting with the world.

## Cherubim

*Cherubim* (singular *cherub*, not to be confused with the chubby winged-human infants or *putti* of the visual arts), are described in Ezekiel and according to traditional Christian iconography they have four faces (man, ox, lion and eagle, also adopted as the symbols of the four Evangelists, together known as a *tetramorph*). They have four conjoined wings covered with eyes. They guard the way to *The Throne of God* and to *The Tree of Life* in the Garden of Eden.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>24</sup> He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Cherubim are mentioned here in *Genesis* (guarding *The Tree of Life* with flaming sword); *Exodus* 25:17-22 (in connection with the *Ark of the Covenant*); *2 Chronicles* 3:7 (in connection with Solomon's building of the

Temple); *1 Kings* 6:23-29 (in connection with temple furnishings); *Ezekiel* 10 (see below); and *Ezekiel* 28:14 (in connection with the lamentation over the King of Tyre).

## Thrones

*Thrones* (or *Elders*) are a class of celestial being mentioned in the New Testament. They represent God's justice and have the throne as their symbol. The Thrones are sometimes associated with the *Ophanim* (or *Wheels*) of Jewish angelic hierarchy. The Wheels are unusual looking, even compared with other celestial beings, and are said to be moved by the spirit of other beings, which raises the question whether the Ophanim are spiritual beings at all or something purely material, or mechanical. In *The Book of Daniel* something like a chariot is described (bringing to mind several illustrations by William Blake).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>9</sup> As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One [or, *an Ancient of Days*] took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.

The appearance of a beryl-coloured wheel-within-a-wheel mechanism, with rims covered with eyes is described in *Ezekiel* and their movement appears to be closely connected with the movements of the cherubim.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Then I looked, and above the dome that was over the heads of the cherubim there appeared above them something like a sapphire, in form resembling a throne. <sup>2</sup> He said to the man clothed in linen, 'Go within the wheel-work underneath the cherubim; fill your hands with burning coals from among the cherubim, and scatter them over the city'...

<sup>6</sup> When he commanded the man clothed in linen, 'Take fire from within the wheel-work, from among the cherubim', he went in and stood beside a wheel. <sup>7</sup> And a cherub stretched out his hand from among the cherubim to the fire that was among the cherubim, took some of it, and put it into the hands of the man clothed in linen, who took it and went out. <sup>8</sup> The cherubim appeared to have the form of a human hand under their wings. <sup>9</sup> I looked, and there were four wheels beside the cherubim, one beside each cherub; and the appearance of the wheels was like gleaming beryl. <sup>10</sup> And as for their appearance, the four looked alike, something like a wheel within a wheel. <sup>11</sup> When they moved, they moved in any of the four directions without veering as they moved; but in whatever direction the front wheel faced, the others followed without veering as they moved. <sup>12</sup> Their entire body, their rims, their spokes, their wings, and the wheels—the wheels of the four of them—

were full of eyes all round.<sup>13</sup> As for the wheels, they were called in my hearing ‘the wheel-work’.<sup>14</sup> Each one had four faces: the first face was that of the cherub, the second face was that of a human being, the third that of a lion, and the fourth that of an eagle [note that the ox of the more usual *tetramorph* mentioned in *Ezekiel I* has been dropped from the line-up here in favour of *cherub*].<sup>15</sup> The cherubim rose up. These were the living creatures that I saw by the river Chebar.<sup>16</sup> When the cherubim moved, the wheels moved beside them; and when the cherubim lifted up their wings to rise up from the earth, the wheels at their side did not veer.<sup>17</sup> When they stopped, the others stopped, and when they rose up, the others rose up with them; for the spirit of the living creatures was in them.<sup>18</sup> Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house and stopped above the cherubim.<sup>19</sup> The cherubim lifted up their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight as they went out with the wheels beside them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the Lord; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.<sup>20</sup> These were the living creatures that I saw underneath the God of Israel by the river Chebar; and I knew that they were cherubim.<sup>21</sup> Each had four faces, each four wings, and underneath their wings something like human hands.<sup>22</sup> As for what their faces were like, they were the same faces whose appearance I had seen by the river Chebar. Each one moved straight ahead.

Christian rather than Jewish theologians tend to describe the *Thrones* as *Elders* (rather than as *Wheels*), who listen to the will of God and present the prayers of men. The 24 elder men in *The Book of Revelation* are usually thought to be included in this order of spiritual entity. Pseudo-Dionysius explains something about the perceived appearance of such beings set against what we are given in scripture:<sup>21</sup>

They [the celestial beings] are not shaped to resemble the brutishness of oxen or to display the wildness of lions. They do not have the curved beak of the eagle or the wings or feathers of birds. We must not have pictures of flaming wheels whirling in the skies, of material thrones made ready to provide a reception for the Deity, of multicoloured horses, or of spear-carrying lieutenants, or any of those shapes handed on to us amid all the variety of the revealing symbols of scripture. The Word of God makes use of poetic imagery when discussing these formless intelligences but... it does so not for the sake of art, but as a concession to the nature of our own mind.

This ‘concession to the nature of our own mind’ is worth noting at this point. We will return to this later.

The second, or middle group of the triadic arrangements, is made up of the dominions (or dominations) and ‘the astonishing sights of the divine authorities and powers’.<sup>22</sup> The *dominions* are ‘forever striving mightily