

## Angels in Early Monotheism

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An essay I wrote for my Religions of the World class on Angels in Early Monotheism.

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Rated: [Fiction K](#) - English - Spiritual - Words: 3,124 - Published: 08-07-12 -

Status: Complete - id: 3048690

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### Angels in Early Monotheism

Throughout the course of human history, angels and flying spirits have been a source of fascination and religious belief. They are the focal point of uncountable works of art and theological debates (Gauldie 13) and have played large roles in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism to name a few. (Gauldie 15) This essay will follow the development of angels from a historical perspective, examining their role in early monotheism and the part YHWH played in their development and survival in mythology.

The bible itself infers the existence of deities, if not other gods. In Genesis God says, "Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness." (*Tanakh*, Genesis 1.26, italics added). While it is possible that this could be the 'royal we' it is more likely that this is a derivative of previous religious thought. Early monotheism was very possibly not monotheistic, but monolatrous, which is the devotion to one god but acknowledging many (Lemaire 9). This, too, is supported in the Bible: the first commandment is that "You shall have no other gods besides Me," (*Tanakh*, Exodus 20.3) as though belief in other gods is a possibility (Johnston 402). Were Judaism originally a monotheistic religion that did not believe in other gods, it would not be necessary to command the people of Israel not to worship other gods. More importantly, the existence of other gods would not even be acknowledged. The commandment says "other gods besides me," not simply 'I am the only god'. However, before monolatry it is possible that the people who later came to form the Jewish religion belonged to the general Levant. Their text was found in the ancient city of Ugarit in the 13th century (Lemaire 12). The religion consisted of a family of deities headed by El and Asherah, with their children on the second tier. Finally, on the bottom tier were messenger deities who delivered messages between the gods. These messenger deities were "essentially slaves on the divine level," (Johnston

399) but they were *deities*. Not only do these messenger gods share a role with angels, but the very word 'angel' in English literally means messenger. (Smith 49). Angels were, then, already a part of the culture's mythology, only in a vastly different form.

Ancient Israel had a similar pattern in its own mythology. There were two ranks of the divine household, and beneath them were two ranks of messenger gods which later come to be known as angels (Johnston 402). The head of the divine family was El, and YHWH was one of his seventy sons. Asherah was the wife of El and sometimes the wife of YHWH.

(Johnston 403) However, a paradigm shift occurred, which removed the familial aspect of the gods in Yahwism, and the structure instead became two-tiered, with only YHWH and servile figures like angels (Johnston 402). What is interesting about this is that while many other important figures within the religion were shorn, the messenger gods were not. This could be due in part to the fact that a ruler has no power unless he has power over someone. These servile beings were likely used to demonstrate YHWH's power through their servility. Their role as a servile being did not grant them the awesome power that they are later given in the biblical texts. They could act only for and because of their deity's power (Smith 50). Nevertheless, it is important to note that they were still considered *gods*, instead of lesser corporeal beings like demons.

Demons, however, were not always so diametrically opposed to angels. Some angels could be confused as devils, hinting that this polarization must have occurred at some point after the Bible was written. It is argued, for example, that the Destroyer in Exodus 12.23 is in fact a demon working for YHWH (Johnston 402), and that the "band of deadly messengers" found in Psalm 78.49 (*Tanakh*) are truly a group of demons sent to kill the firstborns (Johnston 402). In addition, there is a spirit that offers to lie for YHWH in Kings 22.22 (*Tanakh*) that is somewhat ambiguous in its nature. It is vague as to whether this spirit is in fact a demon, an angel, or a variation on YHWH's messenger gods. However, whatever sort of being the spirit is, it seems apparent that it is a part of a pantheon of gods, or god-like beings in a collective body (Smith 47).

The divine council appears to be a deliberative body<sup>1</sup> (Garr 73) comprised of a group of 'divinities'<sup>2</sup>, a term which is often used interchangeably with 'angels'<sup>3</sup>, 'gods'<sup>4</sup> or an identification characterized by a property of their existence, like "(divine) spirit"<sup>5</sup> (Garr 66). Those in the council can be accounted for either as countable individuals, or only as a collective (Garr 66). However, YHWH is always the head of these gods, and although there are incidences of disobedience<sup>6</sup>, these are quickly quashed<sup>7</sup> (Garr 73-4).

Two appearances of this council in accepted scripture are in I Kings 22 and Isaiah 6. In both cases, God is described as sitting on a throne. This throne is described as "high and lofty" (*Tanakh*, Isaiah 16.1), and surrounded by "all the host of heaven" (*Tanakh*, I Kings 22.19) or Seraphs (*Tanakh*, Isaiah 6.2). With a modern understanding, it is presumed that this host consists of angels or other heavenly underlings, but there is evidence that this host was originally composed of gods. For example, the divine council seems to be invoked in the creation of mankind in Genesis 1.26 (*Tanakh*) where the decision to make humanity in their image is presented as a decision made by a king over his subjects (Garr 203). Job 38.7 also indicates the presence of divinities at creation (Garr 209), saying that "all the divine beings shouted for joy" (*Tanakh*, Job 38.7). However, at some point, despite the textual evidence for these other divinities, presumably as remnants of the divine family of El and Asherah, other divinities stop being recognized as such.

This Kuhnian paradigm shift could have correlated with two things. The first is the rise of empires. It is possible that people believed that gods were powerful only in their own nations. However, when the Assyrian and then Babylonian Empires conquered Israel and then Judah, this may have destroyed this belief, as the act of conquering their land showed the work of another god outside of their boundaries. It is possible then, belief changed towards thinking that their god was still powerful because their god did not have power over only their nation, but *all* the nations because their god was the only god (Johnston 403). The other possible reason for the shift may have been a loss of traditional patrimonies due to war and economic struggle. Jeremiah 31.29-30, Ezekiel 16, and Deuteronomy 24.16 all reflect this shift from familial to individual accountability (*Tanakh*). Perhaps this shift is related to the belief in the accountability of a single god, versus a patrimony of gods (Johnston 403). Whatever the reasons, people did begin to believe that there was only one deity, and this belief had vast affects on biblical literature and the presentation of YHWH's servile beings.

Specifically, this paradigm shift in belief means that YHWH's heavenly host could no longer be depicted as gods of their own right. They are stripped of identity, history, and character (Garr 216). Furthermore, there must be justification for the disappearance of the gods. Finally, there is a vacuum left by the gods that must be filled (Garr 222).

The gods once stripped of their godliness change from independent agents under a common ruler to subordinate beings existing solely for and because of a common ruler. These gods are reborn in the form of angels.

These angels can conveniently perform virtually all of the functions of the gods: they can act as intermediaries between YHWH and humanity (*Tanakh*, Genesis 18, 19), they can administrate certain parts of the cosmos as is shown by the designation of their functions (*Book of Enoch*, 20), and they have the power to act in demonstration of YHWH's will and power. Furthermore, in showing their power, and then demonstrating YHWH's power over them, YHWH's power as an individual is ever more pronounced due to having such powerful beings in subordination to him. The roles of administration and mediation in particular are reminiscent of the roles of gods in polytheistic traditions. YHWH in the Ugaritic texts was considered a god of war and judgment (Beyerlin 194), just as the god Baal's wife Anat is a goddess of war (Beyerlin 196) and Baal himself is a fertility god (Beyerlin 196). Gods have functions, and so angels, in fulfilling the need for purveyors of order, have functions too. Likewise, the role of messenger fulfills the need to have divine word given to humanity. YHWH cannot bring the word himself, as humanity cannot see YHWH's face and live (*Tanakh*, Exodus 33.20), but they can do so with angels. In addition, YHWH would not act as a messenger simply because in power relationships, the leader is almost always the delegator, while the follower acts upon the leader's delegations. Furthermore, the device of the winged messenger is not an unknown one. The characteristics of angels share many similarities with the Greek messenger god, Hermes. Like angels, who are stationed at boundaries between spheres of holiness (Garr 217), Hermes marks boundaries between places (Lenardon 293). As well, both are depicted with wings. Angels have wings on their backs,<sup>8</sup> and Hermes may have wings on his hat, sandals, or wand (Lenardon 293). In addition, both carry messages for the supreme god (in the case of Hermes, this is Zeus) (Lenardon 293) and go where other divinities cannot or will not go. For angels this can include earth, and for Hermes this can range anywhere from earth to Tartarus to mediation between different gods (Lenardon 294).

The removal of deity figures from the mythology does not occur without justification. However, in order to preserve YHWH's singularity, this justification is given more thematically. In essence, it states that no other divinity but YHWH is fit to rule because even His servants are capable of disobeying him and provoking violence (Garr 218), and only YHWH has the right to judge and preside over the world. In Psalm 82 YHWH proclaims, while standing in the divine assembly, that "I had taken you for divine beings,/sons of the Most High, all of you;/but you shall die as men do" (*Tanakh*, Psalm 82.6-7) while pronouncing judgement among these divine beings. Psalm 58, too, pronounces the wickedness of the other gods, asking if they "really decree what is just" (*Tanakh*, Psalm 58.2a), and then requesting divine justice on earth. In justifying the execution of the other

gods (*Tanakh*, Psalm 82.7), YHWH further legitimizes and solidifies His own position as the sole ruler of the universe. This must have been especially important during a time of transition between a belief in a plurality of gods in which YHWH was the leader, and a belief in one god.

However, upon removing nearly all indications of other gods from the scriptures, the ability to demonstrate YHWH's divine power over other divinities is lost. So instead, this demonstration was given to the angels. YHWH's ultimate power was shown through his dominion over angels and they were further developed in a fashion that would reflect the divine perfection of YHWH in contrast with their divine comparative inferiority.

Genesis 6 correlates the progeny of Nephilim and humans with the wickedness in the land that impacted YHWH's decision to wipe out humanity in the flood (*Tanakh*, Genesis 6). This story is elaborated in *Enoch*, wherein the angels notice the beauty of the children of men, and a group of 200 decide together that they will go down to earth and procreate with them. These angels teach their wives the secrets of heaven, including the secrets of plants, charms, enchantments, and the cutting of roots (*Book of Enoch*, 6). The children they bore were giants who consumed the acquisitions of man, then mankind, and then sinned against the creatures of the earth, and finally engaged in cannibalism by consuming each others' flesh (*Book of Enoch*, 7). When YHWH learns what is happening he tells Raphael to cover Azazel, their leader, in darkness in the desert on jagged rocks (*Book of Enoch*, 10.4) and the rest of the angels who joined with human women are bound and forced to watch as their sons destroy one another. Only then do they receive their long and severe punishment (*Book of Enoch*, 10.11-14). Later their children, the giants, will turn into evil spirits (*Book of Enoch*, 15.9-12). In essence, the Nephilim do something irreparably bad, which is to combine divinity and humanity which violates the order of the world as ordered in the creation of the world (Nickelsburg 50), and they are punished with all the power of YHWH. Part of the reason for their severe punishment is that they deliberately went behind YHWH's back to accomplish something for their own gain, giving in to the human vices of lust and greed. That the Nephilim are shown to be capable of human sins, and that they weep (*Book of Enoch*, 13.9) shows both the vulnerability and imperfection of even divine beings. After all, it is *heaven* that brings evil into the world. Consequently, it is only YHWH and the other angels that are able to punish those who went against the order of the universe (Nickelsburg 49). This demonstrates YHWH is perfect, and therefore able to preside as judge. Thus, only YHWH deserves the power, only He is worthy of godhood, which is why YHWH deserves to be the One God. The story of *Enoch* serves to further emphasize that YHWH is the God

on High, the Lord of all.

By this point in the development of monotheism, angels have developed into a more important function due to the loss of the gods. Not only do they show the consequences of rebellion, but they grow more important in relation to the rest of the scripture. They develop personas and independent power in order to better serve YHWH. Characteristics of angels vary greatly, especially in regards to Renaissance interpretations of small, plump Cherubim, but common themes include Cherubim as winged bearers of god (*Tanakh*, Psalm 99.1). They are able to transport YHWH from place to place (*Tanakh*, 2 Samuel.11, Psalm 18.11), act as the representatives of YHWH on earth (*Tanakh*, Ezekiel 10.18-19), or as the guardians of Eden. Consistent with the rest of their development, they behave as servants to god. Two constant characteristics of angel imagery are wings (*Tanakh*, Isaiah 6.2) and fire. The purpose of the wings seem clear enough; they serve as transportation and also indicate their belonging to heaven in the sky, which is the home of the winged, that is, birds. The significance of the fire is less clear, however. They are paired with fire on multiple occasions. They guard the eastern gate of Eden with a "fiery every-turning sword" (*Tanakh*, Genesis 3.24) to protect the tree of life from humanity. In Enoch, Cherubim are constantly paired described with fire, especially in relation to YHWH. Chapter 14, for example, tells of a house built of fire, and inside is a crystal throne with YHWH sitting upon it, underneath which are streams of fire coming out (*Book of Enoch*, 14.15-20). The Cherubim are unable to look upon it, but are described as fiery themselves (*Book of Enoch*, 14.11). The significance of the fire may indeed point to the widespread Near Eastern practice of carrying fire ceremonially before kings; a sacred fire which is said to have fallen from heaven (Gaster 293). Therefore, the sheer volume of fire must once again point to the supreme power of YHWH. He is the Lord of all, so therefore he should be brought an immense amount of fire, and furthermore, as the being of divine origin, he should have command over this immensity of fire. Cherubim, therefore, in being so associated with fire not only indicate their master's power by bearing it within His presence, but by doing so for Him. This shows that through his command over his servants he has command over fire, which is a symbol of kingship.

Angels have, then, gained importance throughout the early history of monotheism not because of their independent significance, but because of their relationship with YHWH. They serve to show YHWH's power and perfection. How they have done so has changed, but their function in doing so has not. This is why angels have survived. Angels have survived to serve YHWH; to show His power.

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- 1 Job 15.18
- 2 Job 38.7
- 3 Psalm 103.20
- 4 Exodus 15.11
- 5 Kings 22.21a=II Chronicles 18.20a

6 Isaiah 14.13-14

7 Isaiah 12.15

8 Seraphim have 6 wings, in fact. One pair of wings serve to help the angel to fly, another pair to cover his face, and a third pair to cover his legs.  
(*Tanakh*, Isaiah 6.2)

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