

A BRIEF EXAMINATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CATHOLIC CONCEPT OF GUARDIAN ANGELS IN THE PRE-EDICT OF MILAN PERIOD

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Introduction

Angele Dei, qui custos est mei, Me tibi commissum pietate superna; (Hac nocte, hodie) illumina, custodi, rege, et gubernata. Amen.

Above is a prayer that has been taught to many Catholic children for some time. The concept of guardian angels is widely held in both scholarly and popular Catholic thought. The belief in angels is and has been a dogmatic pronouncement of the church since the Fourth Lateran Council. The concept of guardian angels, at least by the beginning of the early twentieth century, is not a dogmatic pronouncement but is, as it were, “in the mind of the church.”¹ The belief in protective spirits goes back to the earliest recorded civilizations nestled in the Euphrates and Tigris river valleys, where a tutelary spirit was known as a *lammassu*.² The concept of a *lammassu* refers to either a personal protectorate or to a tutelary deity of the land.³

What are the early Christian origins and development of the theories in regard to guardian angels? This paper intends to briefly investigate the early Catholic, pre-edict of Milan, development of the concept of guardian angels. First, an overview of etymological considerations will be discussed. Second, the development of theories concerning guardian angels developed from the Christian New Testament and other early Catholic literature will be examined. Finally, conclusions as to the overall developments in regard to guardian angels in the pre-Edict of Milan period will be recapitulated. Do to the brevity of this work, the Jewish influences of the concept of guardian angels, which the Christian belief is a continuation and

¹ Hugh Pope, "Guardian Angel," *Catholic Encyclopedia* VII (1910), 51. The dogmatic status of doctrine of the existence of guardian angels may have changed. Article 336 of the New Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "From its beginning until death, human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession."²⁰² "Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life."²⁰³ Already here on earth the Christian life shares by faith in the blessed company of angels and men united in God."

² R. Campbell Thompson, *Devils and Evil Spirits in Babylonia*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 1903; reprint, 2003), 173.

³ Jeremy Black, *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), 177.

development of, will not be discussed at length.⁴ Following the lead of Holy Scripture the masculine “him” will at times be used as an appellation for an angel, although being pure spirit an angel does not intrinsically possess gender.⁵ In this paper the term “Catholic” and the term “Christian” shall be used synonymously.

Etymological Considerations

What exactly is meant by the term guardian angel? In order to proceed one must first understand the meaning communicated by the words translated “guardian” and “angel,” both in isolation and in conjunction, at the time the author used them. It is a given fact that meanings of words can and do evolve, even radically change, over time. Thus, understanding the authorial intent of the words an author chose to use is crucial to truly understanding what he wished to communicate. One of the first Christian authors who used the terms translated as guardian or tutelary angels was Clement of Alexandria circa A.D. 195 (*Stromatum* 5.14). Clement constructed a difficult phrase in the Greek text which reads ἀγγέλων τῶν ἐφειστωτων ἤκουσαν.⁶ This phrase can literally, although awkwardly, be translated “angels the ones having been set near and continue to remain, completely hearing.” The Latin text, which is a later translation, uses the nouns *tutela* and *angelus*. Of the two, the Greek text certainly contains the *lectio difficilior*.

Ἐφειστημι has the basic meaning of “set upon or near.”⁷ The inflection found in the text is a perfect participle communicating a past action whose effects continue into the present.⁸ In the current context this participle best communicates the concept that the angel is near to his ward.

⁴ William Babcock, "Angels," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishers, 1997; reprint, 1999), 53.

⁵ Peter Kreeft, *Angels & Demons: What Do We Really Know About Them?* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 76-79.

⁶ Clement of Alexandria, "Stromata," in *Patrologiæ Græcæ*, ed. Jacques Migne, *The Patrologiæ Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* (Paris: 1857-1866), 9:135.

⁷ Henry George & Robert Scott Liddell, *A Greek English Lexicon*, 9th edition ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

⁸ James Hewett, *New Testament Greek: A Beginning and Intermediate Grammar* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1986), 74.

Ἀκούω is a verb which communicates the lexical meaning of “hearing.” In the portion of Clement’s text under consideration it is inflected as an aorist active plural. This inflection communicates an action viewed as “complete and undifferentiated process” irrespective of the temporal duration.⁹ The concept would appear to be that the angels always and continuously hear his charge. It is interesting to note that one appellation assigned to certain angels in Holy Scriptures was, in Aramaic ܘܝܪ, LXX ἄγγελος, Vulgate *vigil* (Daniel 4:13, 23). The Aramaic ܘܝܪ literally means “waking or watchful.”¹⁰ This title emphasizes that these angels see all things in regards to their charge be it an individual or a group of people. In the *Stromata* we have a Catholic author communicating that certain angels hear all things in regards to their ward. Clement’s tone seems beneficial. An inference that Clement may have wished to specifically communicate is that one’s guardian angel always hears one’s prayers.

Tutela communicates the basic lexical meaning of “a watching, keeping, charge, care, safeguard, defense, protection.”¹¹ In specific legal terminology of the author’s period the word meant “the office of a guardian, guardianship, wardship, tutelage.”¹² In 4 Esdra the noun *tutela* is used to translate the LXX’s use of the Koine Greek noun ἀσφάλεια “security from enemies and danger.” It is interesting to note that the Latin translator used this single noun *tutela* to replace a participle (ἐφιστημι) and a verb (ἀκούω).

Angelus is a Latin term derived for the Greek ἄγγελος. The Latin word therefore communicates the same concept of *messenger*, as does its Greek counterpart.¹³ The Greek ἄγγελος has independent development in Hellenistic literature before being employed in the Septuagint. From its use in Homer and other classical Greek writings it conveys the concept of an *envoy* who

⁹ Stanley Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., *Biblical Languages: Greek* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992; reprint, 1999), 21.

¹⁰ Harris Laird, *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*, ed. Harris Laird (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2000).

¹¹ Charlton & Short Lewis, Charles, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1879; reprint, 1995), 1921.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 118.

was conceived of as being primarily human in nature.¹⁴ It was not principally until the time of the development of the Platonic philosophical tradition that the term ἄγγελος communicated the concept of an envoy who could be a preternatural being akin to the Hebrew concept of מַלְאָכִים.¹⁵ The authors of the New Testament were primarily from a Semitic background, thus the Hebrew concept of מַלְאָכִים must be touched upon. מַלְאָכִים communicates the concept of *envoy* or *messenger*.¹⁶ To the Semitic mind the concept was not merely that of an errand-boy but of one who had ambassadorial powers of an emissary, who fully represented the party on whose behalf he was sent.¹⁷ The term *angelus* could apply to either spiritual or human agents; however, during the patristic period under investigation the word seems to have acquired a technical aspect reserved specifically for beings with a purely spirit essence.¹⁸

From the above etymological analysis it can be deduced that when the terms are combined in their respective languages they become an appellation for a spiritual being who is sent as an envoy, guide and guardian, who is near and attentive to whomever God has assigned him. To paraphrase Augustine, whose writings are anachronistic to this paper's chronological parameters, the term guardian angel, in and of itself, refers to the being's office and not its nature.

A cursory selection from the New Testament Scriptures and other early Christian literature

Our Lord pronounced one of the key passages in the Christian development of the concept of guardian angels:

Ὅρατε μὴ καταφρονήσητε ἐνὸς τῶν μικρῶν τούτων· λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτῶν ἐν οὐρανοῖς διὰ παντὸς βλέπουσι τὸ πρόσωπον τοῦ πατρὸς μου τοῦ ἐν οὐρανοῖς.
(Matthew 18:10)

¹⁴ Gerhard Kittle, "Ἄγγελος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964; reprint, 1995), 74.

¹⁵ Babcock, "Angels," 54.

¹⁶ Francis Briggs Brown, Charles, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew & English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1906; reprint, 1999), 521.

¹⁷ R Ficker, "Mal'ak," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst & Westerman Jenni, Claus (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 668.

¹⁸ Kittle, "Ἄγγελος," 83.

From this pericope it is obvious that each little one has a guardian angel. Yet, who exactly are the μικρῶν “little ones?” Origen commented that the term referred to newly baptized Christians (*De Liber Matthaeum* 27); however, from the original context it appears that Matthew in his use of the term “little ones” is referring to παιδίον. In chapter eighteen verse ten Matthew does not use the qualifier τῶν πιστευόντων εἰς ἐμέ that he uses in verse six. From this lack of the qualifier in verse ten, it may be speculated that all little ones have a guardian angel and not just the baptized ones.

From certain of Origen’s writings it seems that he believed that, in regard to individuals, only those who were Christians had good guardian angels (*De Liber Matthaeum* 28). He specifically alludes to Titus 3:5 and 1 Peter 2:2 in his rationale as to why one must first become a Christian in order to be assigned a good attending angel (*De Liber Matthaeum* 29). It is also possible to base such ideology on another passage of Holy Writ:

οὐχὶ πάντες εἰσὶν λειτουργικὰ πνεύματα εἰς διακονίαν ἀποστελλόμενα διὰ τοὺς μέλλοντας κληρονομεῖν σωτηρίαν; (Hebrews 1:14)

In the above passage the author of Hebrews appears to have stated that the angelic ministry is reserved to those who will inherit salvation. Nothing is mentioned concerning those whom God foreknows will choose the perceived good over the true good. One must ask, does this pericope teach that only those who accept salvation are assigned guardian angels? The concept of exactly who does and does not have a guardian angel assigned to them is not fully developed in the early patristic period. There are conflicting ideas even within writings attributed to the same authors.

Two other questions that arises from Hebrews 1:14 that the early patristic writers did comment upon are: What exactly is meant by the term ministering (λειτουργικός)? What kind of service (διακονία) do these beings render? The author of the Shepherd of Hermas stated that there are two angels assigned to each person, one good the other evil, whose duties are to persuade their ward respectively (*Mandatum* 6.2.1-10).¹⁹ Origen speculated that only one angel was assigned but would change in nature depending upon the baptized condition of his ward (*De*

¹⁹ Hermas, "The Shepherd of Hermas," in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913; reprint, 1992), 96-98.

Liber Matthaicum 13.28). Clement of Alexander wrote that angels were distributed (νέμω) being given oversight of ἔθνη, πόλεις and τινες (*Stromata* 6.17).²⁰ These guardian angels are placed near their charges and constantly hear their charges. Origen stated that a primary purpose of guardian angels is to carry the prayers of their wards to the throne of God where they join their prayers to those of their human dependents (*Contra Celsus* 8.36).

A question that should be addressed is whether or not the ministering spirits have an affinity for those to whom they are sent to serve. One scriptural pericope that may give insight into the answer for this question is found in the book of Joshua.

<p>^{NAU} Joshua 5:13-14 Now it came about when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand, and Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us or for our adversaries?"¹⁴ He said, "No; rather I indeed come now <i>as</i> captain of the host of the LORD." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and bowed down, and said to him, "What has my lord to say to his servant?"</p>	<p>בִּירִיחוֹ וַיִּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ עֹמֵד וַיְהִי בְהִיּוֹת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּלֶךְ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לְנַגְדוֹ וְחָרְבוֹ שְׁלוֹפָה ¹⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא כִי אֲנִי שָׂר־צְבָא־יְהוָה הֵלֵנּוּ אֶתְּךָ אִם־לְצָרֵינוּ אֶל־פָּנָיו אֶרְצֶה וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ עֲתָה בְּאֵתִי וַיִּפֹּל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ מִזֶּה אֲדֹנָי מִדְּבַר אֶל־עַבְדּוֹ (Joshua 5:13-14)</p>
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²⁰ Alexandria, "Stromata.", 389.

It is imperative to note the response given by the angel to Joshua's inquiry as to whom the angel is "for." The angels response is **לֹא** usually translated as "neither," but literally "no."²¹ What is especially interesting about the angels use of **לֹא** is that it is the Hebrew durative negation as opposed to **לֹא**, which negates a particular instance.²² This means that the angel was not responding to just the specific circumstance, but omnitemporal circumstances.²³ From this passage in divinely inspired, inerrant Scripture it seems that a good angel's only delight is to do the will of God and to carry out his commands. As to which mortals benefit or suffer from his services for the Almighty seems to be of little concern to a good angel.

In order to "prove" that angels are concerned with individuals, some may refer to Luke 15:10 where one reads *γίνεται χαρὰ ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀγγέλων τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπὶ ἐνὶ ἁμαρτωλῷ μετανοοῦντι*. Yet what exactly does this mean? While the passage informs us that there will be rejoicing in the presence of the angels, the text is silent as to the intellectual disposition of the angels toward that one sinner. Are the angels rejoicing because they have an affinity toward the person who repented or because they love God and one person has freely accepted God's plan for his or her life (1 Timothy 2:3-4)? Or is it both? In regards to the guardian angels' affections toward us, one modern Catholic philosopher commented, "If anything, we are like pets to them."²⁴ Yet, there are other Catholic writers who claim that our guardian angels are "desirous" of being our closest friends.²⁵ Whatever explanation one gives to abstract the true nature of reality in regards to the above issue the infallible, inerrant authorial intent of God's Word as it is found in Joshua 5:13-14 must not be contradicted or ignored.

Conclusion

While the doctrine of the existence of guardian angels was extant in the writings of the early church fathers, the concepts and perceptions were far from uniform. The speculations and

²¹ Brown, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew & English Lexicon.*, 518.

²² Ibid.

²³ Laird, *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*.

²⁴ Kreeft, *Angels & Demons: What Do We Really Know About Them?*, 105.

²⁵ Paul O'Sullivan, *All About the Angels* (Rockford: Tan, 1990), xi.

development of the doctrine concerning guardian angels during the period examined were not greatly flushed out. One could offer many reasons for this, the ten great persecutions from Domitian to Diocletian, the nascence of the Christian movement, the focus on missionary zeal over and above theological speculation, etc. What was agreed upon was that Catholics had guardian angels, at least from the time of their baptism. Guardian angels were constantly in the presence of God and their charges. They are sent to serve and minister to those whom God assigns them. They carried the prayers of their charges to the throne of the almighty where they added their petitions to those of their charges. The guardian angels communicated the will of God to their protectorates. They provided guidance and oversight while leaving the inalienable freedom of choice of the human person unmolested. One's guardian angel can be ignored and perhaps even silenced if one habitually chooses the apparent good over the true good.

One's guardian angel is not to be the end of ones spiritual speculation, but must lead to the one true and living God. The temptation if one were to see an angel in his angelic splendor is to fear and worship him (Revelation 19:10). Contemplation of one's guardian angel must lead to the creator of all things. The early Christians realized that all providence, be it mediated through an angel or not, originates from the God and Father of all. Origen wrote a profound truth that should touch upon the attitude of Catholics in regard to one's guardian angel in the day-to-day working of things. A truth that is as relevant today as it was in AD 248:

<p>One ought to entrust himself wholly to the supreme God through Jesus Christ, who has given us such instruction, and asking of him all help, and the guardianship of good and righteous angels, to defend us from the demons of the earth intent to bring about lust for fleshly pleasures (συντετηκότων), and blood, and sacrificial odors, and strange sounds (singing /chanting) and other such (sensual) things. (<i>Contra Celsus</i>)</p>	<p>τὸ ἑαυτὸν ἐμπιστεῦσαι τῷ ἐπὶ πᾶσι Θεῷ διὰ τοῦ τὴν τοιαύτην ἡμῖν διδασκαλίαν ὑποθεμένου Ἰησοῦ Ἐριστοῦ καὶ ἀπ' ἐκείνου αἰτεῖν πᾶσαν βοήθειαν καὶ φρουρὰν τὴν ἀπὸ ἁγίων ἀγγέλων καὶ δικαίων ἵν' ἡμᾶς ῥύσωνται ἀπὸ τῶν περιγείων δαιμόνων καὶ γενέσει συντετηκότων καὶ αἵματι καὶ κνισσῇ προσηλωμένων καὶ ἀλλοκότοις μελωδίαις ἀγομένων καὶ ἄλλοις τοιοῦτοις προσδεδεμένων· (<i>Contra Celsus</i>)</p>
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