Foreword

Among contemporary religious believers treatment of angels tends to lie at one or other of two extremes: an enthusiastic endorsement in which their presence is detected everywhere, or else relegation of them to a now redundant past worldview, perhaps seen as inspired by Persian mythology. It is one of the great merits of the discussion that follows that Dylan Potter rejects both extremes. Instead, readers are offered a carefully nuanced account of how angels have functioned symbolically at various key points in their development, not, however, with the intention of dismissing them as "mere symbolism" but rather as a way of working through their meaning to a more profound grasp of why their existence might after all be deemed important to religious belief.

Accordingly, three key moments in history are chosen for further examination: at the origins of the Christian tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures, and then subsequently in the writings of two major theologians of later Christian history, St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century and before him the anonymous sixth-century figure now known as Pseudo-Denys because of his once presumed identification with the Greek Dionysius who heard Paul preach on the Areopagus Hill in Athens (Acts 17:34). In each case Potter offers powerful challenges to any simplistic account of why angels appear so prominently in each of the three cases. His suggestion in the case of the Hebrew Scriptures is that the intention was to augment a growing sense of divine transcendence while with Pseudo-Denys the aim was the exact opposite: to draw God closer in the celebration of the liturgy. Both accounts challenge commonly accepted views, especially in the case of Pseudo-Denys where he is often presented as a Neoplatonist concerned to use angels as a way of enhancing the distance and mystery of God. Equally when Potter turns to Aquinas he insists that interpretation has focused too narrowly on his

more philosophical works and that this has resulted in a distorted account that can only be corrected by turning to Aquinas' neglected biblical commentaries.

To the general reader such disputes about the interpretation of past writings may seem of little significance, but in fact what Potter succeeds brilliantly in doing is demonstrating how important it is to note context before commenting on how angels might contribute to Christian theology. That is why his final chapter is of such importance, for there Potter shows how contemporary theology weakens the case for the existence of angels by ignoring those earlier connections, and this is true not only of those with a more liberal agenda, such as New Age theologians, but also even of a theological giant such as Karl Barth. Barth, Potter suggests, actually undermines his claims for a transcendent God by loosening the original Hebrew undergirding of such transcendence through angels.

I was privileged to supervise this work while Dylan was studying at the Divinity School at St. Andrews, and learnt much in the process. Dylan's examiners were also fulsome in their praise. While such esteem can be partly explained by his careful attention to detail and to historical context, no less important was the quality of his chosen theological method which could easily be applied more generally. In an age when Christians so often divide into liberal or conservative Dylan offers an alternative way forward, one in which the contingencies of history are fully accepted but then not used to cast aspersion on the past. Instead, parallels are seen in our own present circumstances that can then be used to deepen theology in our own day, certainly in respect of angels but also potentially much more widely.

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