Introduction

THE EXISTENTIAL PROBLEM

Ever since God planted cherubim outside the eastern entrance to Eden's garden, humanity has grappled with a religion of exile and distance, an estrangement neither desired nor entirely understood. Attempts to recover the paradisiacal have led persons to pursue assurances of salvation, secular enlightenment, psychic catharsis, the establishment of civic justice, and even martyrdom. The mythopoeia of a relinquished, verdant garden is symbolic of humanity's collective sense of separation from the divine, and the tenets of myriad religions, sects, and philosophies, even political ideologies, are faint echoes of the innate desire to recolonize this sacred abode.[1] Whether Paradise is an internal or external phenomenon, a present or a future experience, a realm shrouded behind death's veil or the dark clouds of an eschatological future, the longing for undisrupted tranquillity is evenly distributed across the human spectrum.[2]

However, if Paradise is the dwelling of God and angels then theophanies and angelophanies are nothing less than manifestations of this sacred realm. Once our ancestor's pens first scratched sacred parchment, their records of such epiphanic events offered a reminder that glimpses of felicity also exist east of Eden. Christianity affirms that the Son of God, through the cross, ultimately reconciles the inequality between the eternally-edenic and moribundly-mundane. However, efforts to paint

1. The Edenic setting is a common motif in world literature; one example is its role as a *locus amoenus*, described in Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 192–201.

2. Even the atheist may find solace in the idea that life's cessation marks the end of life's struggles and disappointments.

Christ as the one who reconnects the golden chain once severed by the ancient pair must not simultaneously debrush the angels who gilt the biblical panorama. As T. F. Torrance cautioned, "Disregard of the ministry of angels will certainly lead to a serious deficiency in Christian spirituality, bringing many forms of shallowness and instability in its train."[3] Christ's active and passive work provides the definitive solution to the human predicament, but the angels fill numerous lacunae for persons presently absent from his ascended presence. Therefore, the aim of this book is twofold: first, to identify the theological purpose underlying the depiction of angels at certain key points in the history of their use, and, secondly, to explore how far that deeper theological rationale can be reappropriated for our own day.

GAPS IN MODERN ANGELOLOGY

Modern Christian angelologies belong under one of three rubrics: reaffirmation, revision, and rediscovery. There are strengths and weaknesses peculiar to each group. The first group of angelologies, those of reaffirmation, is often produced by conservative writers and systematicians. This approach largely involves collating biblical pericopes about angels. The noble motivation of such works is to derive doctrine from Scripture alone. However, the drawback is that the approach tends to promote an exceedingly narrow ribbon of interpretation, eschews critical scholarship, and is generally unsympathetic toward pre-Reformation angelologies.[4] It is easier to commend the group's convictions regarding the reality of angels than it is to uncover how their methodology, which is usually confined to mere reiteration, contributes to the doctrine.

While many reaffirmers punctuate their topical collection of Scripture verses with broad affirmations about the importance of angels to Judeo-Christian history, others emphasize the modern experience of angelic encounters, such as can be found in Billy Graham's book *Angels:*

3. Torrance, "The Spiritual Relevance of Angels," 122–39.

4. For instance, Schemm Jr., "The Agents of God: Angels," 293–337. Rhodes, *Angels among Us*. Boa and Bowman, *Sense and Nonsense about Angels and Demons*. Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 151–55. Calvin and other Reformed theologians intentionally restrained the scope of their discussion of angels to that which could be affirmed by the Bible itself. See 1:14.3–12; 163–72 in John Calvin, *Institutes Of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge. Also, Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:637–43; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 141–48.

God's Secret Agents, which was a boon for popular interest in celestial beings.[5] Yet when compared to earlier centuries, serious discussions about angels are somewhat thin on the ground, even in conservative, academic circles. Prominent British evangelicals like N. T. Wright and Alister McGrath, for instance, have said little about angels in their works, ostensibly because the subject falls outside their catalog of research interests. McGrath's popular *Christian Theology* does not even retain an index entry for angels, nor does Reformed theologian Robert Reymond's textbook of theology. Similarly, even collaborative works of mainline scholarship, like *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, fail to broach the subject.[6]

Although Karl Barth's discussion of angelology in his *Church Dogmatics* represents an exception to the uncritical and sparse treatment angels typically receive in modern systematics, he reasserts with the Reformers the stifling proposition that angelic *function* is all-important, deeming superfluous all discussions of the angel's form.[7] Needless to say, this approach undermines centuries of theological reflection by Christian theologians who believed otherwise. My final chapter addresses this flaw in greater detail, arguing that Barth exalts God to such an extent that he needlessly marginalizes the angel's function and role. Even in Barth's admirable attempt to relate angelology to Christology, like Calvin and Luther before him, he minimizes the contributions of earlier luminaries like pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas, to whom I have dedicated chapters in this work. So by ignoring angelology, limiting it to the reiteration of biblical verses or invalidating the benefits of earlier models, the reaffirmer unavoidably quashes the motive for further study and inquiry.[8]

Those fitting the second category, the revisers, are characterized by a willingness to embrace critical scholarship. However, unlike the reaffirming group, these individuals normally shy away from the idea of angels

5. Modern systematicians like Wayne Grudem and Millard Erickson have chosen simply to reassert biblical support for literal angels without entertaining personal accounts. See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 397–411. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 457–78.

6. Similarly, Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. There are less than a dozen uses of the word "angel," most of which are part of quoted biblical verse. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*.

7. See *CD* III/3, 369–418. Pannenberg criticized him for this oblique emphasis. See Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 2:102–8. Also, Osborn, "Entertaining Angels: Their Place in Contemporary Theology," 273–94.

8. There are also scant references to angels in the writings of Thielicke and Moltmann.

as literal beings.[9] For instance, Schleiermacher, Bultmann, and Rahner emphasized the influence of the biblical writer's mythological milieu over against divine inspiration, surmising that angels are essentially relics of an archaic *Weltanschauung.*[10]

Bultmann wrote, "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of daemons and spirits."[11] Schleiermacher was slightly more charitable, admitting that angelology might be valuable for "private and liturgical use," but argued that "for the province of Dogmatics the subject remains wholly problematic."[12] His conclusion was based upon the premise that angelophanies "occurred in that primitive period when the interdependence of man with nature was not yet settled and he himself was undeveloped."[13] Rather than ascribing the same naiveté to Jesus' teaching about angels, however, Schleiermacher reframed it in terms of his own view, recruiting Christ as something of a theological colleague: "Christ and the Apostles might have said all these things [concerning angels] without having had any real conviction of the existence of such beings or any desire to communicate it . . . as, for example, we might talk of ghosts and fairies, although these ideas had no definite sort of relation to our actual convictions."[14]

Schleiermacher was reluctant to censure language about angels in hymnody or liturgy, even though he rejected them as actual, spiritual

9. For example, Tigchelaar, *Prophets of Old and The Day of the End: Zechariah, the Book of Watchers and Apocalyptic*, 69. Also see Harrington's work, where angels are described as "symbols of God's variegated communication with this creation" and "literary mediators in the dramatic unfolding of God's plan for his world." Harrington and Harrington, *Revelation*, 16:29.

10. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 19:250–65. Even Marcus Borg, hardly a traditionalist, acknowledges that "modern biblical scholarship has sought to understand its subject matter in accord with the root image of reality that dominates the modern mind"; and since this root image tends to value the observable, physical world over the imperceptible world of angels, "the aggressive denial of the two-foldness [sic] of reality" has largely been replaced by a "bracketing" or ignoring of the question. Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, 133–34.

11. Bultmann, "The New Testament and Mythology," 5.

12. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 160.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 158.

guardians.[15] Yet more recently, the English theologian J. G. Davies cautioned against liturgical settings that promote a dichotomy between transcendent and immanent realms. Purporting to interact with "another, sacred, world" where congregants imagine themselves singing "praises in company with the heavenly choir of angels, archangels and saints," threatens to reduce "God to the status of a tribal deity," presumably because it removes the tincture of celestial presence within the world.[16] Although revisers attempt to offer scientifically credible and liturgically sensitive angelologies, their angels are religious artefacts whose relationship to the present world and the individual remains uncertain, if not meaningless.[17]

Finally, one encounters in the third category a small assortment of scholars whose research is geared toward the rediscovery of particular facets of angelology, including: studies of the variegated traditions associated with the *mal'ak* YHWH;[18] the role of angels in apocryphal books or ancient enclaves;[19] the roots of angelomorphic Christology;[20] exegetical considerations;[21] or the question of how diverse cultures understood

15. His rationale was that the angel "belongs to a time when our knowledge of the forces of nature was very limited, and our power over them at its lowest stage." Ibid., 159.

16. See, Davies, *Everyday God*, 243–45, 51.

17. The nineteenth-century educator, theologian, and church historian Karl von Hase and his contemporary, D. F. Strauss, echoed Schleiermacher's angelology. Strauss dismissed angels as "simply the ideal of created perfection: which, as it was formed from the subordinate point of view of a fanciful imagination, disappears from the higher and more comprehensive observation of the intellect." Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, 82.

18. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord*; White, "Angel of the Lord: Messenger or Euphemism?"; MacDonald, "Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation."

19. Davidson, *Angels at Qumran*; Frennesson, *In a Common Rejoicing*.

20. Foster, *Angelomorphic Christology and the Exegesis of Psalm 8*; Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*; Hoffmann, *The Destroyer and the Lamb*; Hannah, *Michael and Christ*; Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts*. This is not to suggest that their efforts are unimportant; for example, when modern theological discussions of angelomorphic Christology were in vogue, one learns that despite differences in approach to the subject, nearly all scholars rejected Werner's earlier theories that the first Christians thought of Christ as an angel by nature and that Christianity is essentially a faith built around an angel Christology.

21. McGarry, "The Ambidextrous Angel (Daniel 12:7 and Deuteronomy 32:40)," 211–28.

angelic beings throughout history.[22] This group's strength lies in its ability to analyze and integrate particularly obscure, complex swaths of literature. What one discovers in such volumes, though, is a closed form of conversation between specialists, which is largely inaccessible to the church. It is theology in service of the academy. While there is nothing inherently wrong with the rediscoverer's rationale, tone, or content, their conclusions are generally limited to the exploration of esoteric points of view. Yet in an age of dwindling institutional resources (especially for the humanities), it is questionable whether such a rarefied community will be able to support itself much longer without first demonstrating its value to both the academy and the church.

Consequently, I have attempted to position the present work in the crosscurrents of these three groups by interacting with angelology on a critical level, but without losing sight of the primacy of Scripture, the usefulness of imagination, or the traditions and needs of the church.

While disinclined to separate from those who reaffirm angels as literal beings, the scholarly prospects of the group are hindered by hermeneutical rigidity, a polemical stance toward pre-modern Christian angelologies, and a reluctance to interact meaningfully with ancient Near Eastern influences. Although sympathetic toward those in the second group who wish to revise the doctrine to account for philosophical differences between our era and the biblical age, I find their approach no less reductive than the reaffirming group, albeit for different reasons.

In fact, both camps share several faults. First, each group uses evidence selectively, creating an unnecessary dialectic that caricatures the angel as either pure myth or exclusively real. This law of the excluded middle plays upon the assumption that the mythology and historicity surrounding the angel figure are mutually exclusive, not congruous. Secondly, both groups tend to desacralize the angel by undermining its role as a mediator; the affirmer tends to associate mediation exclusively with either the Second or Third Person of the Trinity, while the reviser pursues a comparatively anthropocentric and Pelagian approach. Finally, both appear unsure what to make of the angels' role beyond the reach of theology or liturgy.

This brings us back to the third and final category of angelologies, which are bent upon neither reaffirmation nor revision, but rediscovery.

22. Tuschling, *Angels and Orthodoxy*; Olyan, *A Thousand Thousands Served Him*; Sullivan, *Wrestling with Angels*; Keck, *Angels & Angelology in the Middle Ages*. Also, see Bucur, *Angelomorphic Pneumatology*.

Unlike the other groups, one can hardly fault their scholarship or desire to follow truth wherever it leads. Yet just as the affirmer is perhaps too focused upon the church and the reviser is too focused upon the *Zeitgeist*, one wonders if in this last group, the study of angels sometimes tips too far in service of the academy. My goal, naturally, is to accommodate and synthesize the strengths of all three positions, while attempting to avoid their weaknesses.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

In light of these conceptual gaps, and because of a nagging sense that the doctrine is presently out of step with its eclectic origins and subsequent history, I have sought answers along more ancient byways. Therefore, my response to the modern paradigm emerges from the respective angelologies of the Hebrew Scriptures, pseudo-Denys, and Thomas Aquinas. There are several ways to interpret this approach. Since the following chapters stress three defining epochs in the evolution of angelology, they may be read as historical theology, although the chapter on Old Testament angelology is a form of biblical theology. This book is also compatible with the objectives of systematic theology, because each chapter profiles one distinct theme related to the doctrine itself. A third alternative would be to interpret the work as an ecumenical theology, attempting to reconcile what may be described as a broad representation of Jewish, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant angelologies. The work's primary objective, however, is to illustrate and contextualize a theological apparatus whereby the angel becomes a means of enhancing divine transcendence and immanence as well as human imagination—ideas absent in much of the current literature on the subject.

My first chapter focuses upon the Hebrew Scriptures, where I argue the angelic motif was a form of theological shorthand used by biblical authors to promote monotheism and *YHWH's* transcendence. By positioning the angels as celestial intermediaries, these writers—particularly in the Pentateuch, Major Prophets, and Daniel—indirectly emphasized God's otherness while simultaneously polemicizing the pantheon of the ancient Near East. Higher-order beings were conceived as actual entities throughout the region, and biblical writers transformed and shaped them in specific ways by the power of the narrative. Various patterns within the Old Testament demonstrate how the theological use and significance

of angels intensified over time.[23] Despite their often-overlooked reliance upon the angel-motif, these writers did not feel an angelic aegis, so closely tied to pagan lore, posed a threat to monotheism. Instead, their literary revolution exalted YHWH, identified patriarchs and prophets as his spokespersons, and provide a means of comfort to a nation in flux.

In chapter 2, I maintain that pseudo-Dionysius's angelology takes seriously the idea that an emphasis upon God's transcendence, like the one seen throughout the Old Testament, must also be complemented by a theology of immanence. My contention is that Denys's angelology was misunderstood by the Reformers and others as a Neoplatonic statement about accessing God's transcendence through angels. It was actually a means of mediating and accentuating divine immanence in light of Christ's physical absence and eucharistic presence. Thus angels, sacraments, liturgy, symbolism, and church offices become a statement of God's unifying activity among his people, serving to bridge all ontological and experiential gaps from a human perspective. Such a conception is often far removed from modern forms of worship, which may appear disjointed as a result. I conclude that the concept of an angelic hierarchy, even as a metaphor, helps to illustrate the sacred value of subtle forms of immanence within the church today. Yet, because pseudo-Denys tends to limit the experience of divine immanence to worship itself, one must look elsewhere in order to appreciate the angel's role within the natural world.

This point leads me to discuss a third approach to angelology in the penultimate chapter, gleaned from Thomas Aquinas's biblical commentaries. Providing glimpses of a forgotten thirteenth-century hermeneutic, these works illustrate how angelology may preserve Christocentric and scriptural dimensions without sacrificing imaginative creativity. Aquinas pushes the semantic range of the word "angel" to include aspects of the physical world itself, which allows him to use the angel to stress the

23. One does not need to be as skeptical about these details as David Jones is in his recent work on angels. Jones' main defence for his rejection of the idea that angels represent "a compromise with polytheism" is that it "is hard to know exactly what people believed in ancient Israel." However, one need not have comprehensive access to an era before advancing hypotheses about it. In fact, the correlation I defend in chapter 1 emerges from a numerous resources: biblical texts, secular histories, the lore of the ancient Near East and archaeological discoveries. Oddly enough, Jones sees no such pattern despite his recognition that "at the same time the Jews were asserting their monotheism, they were also becoming more interested in angels." Jones, *Angels*, 38.

presence of God throughout creation. Theologians during the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries severely limited the angel and criticized Aquinas's angelology, branding him as more of a dry academic than a pastoral theologian; but none, to my knowledge, interacted with his vibrant biblical commentaries, the majority of which remain untranslated. I conclude that by revisiting Aquinas's broad interpretation of what constitutes an angel, the church may again learn to see the physical world as a sacred place that ultimately points to God.

Each of the chapters examines monumental themes in the history of angelology, and my hope is that these issues will continue to cast long shadows down the corridors of theological reflection. Yet the angel's relationship to divine transcendence, immanence, and creativity must also be brought to bear upon more contemporary issues in order to be a compelling model for future theological orientation. This leads me in my final chapter to use the angelologies of the Old Testament, pseudo-Dionysius, and Aquinas to appraise several contemporary approaches. Accordingly, I contrast the relationship between angels and transcendence in the Old Testament with Karl Barth's version, arguing that Barth's emphasis upon divine transcendence does not always reflect the biblical witness about the importance of angels, and risks alienating an already skeptical, modern society. Next, the quality of immanence in pseudo-Denys's angelology is set against that of the New Age movement, which places an emphasis upon angels at the expense of God-ordained means of grace. Thirdly, I propose that modern ecology would be more animated if it maintained Aquinas's creative relationship between angels and the natural world. Finally, I offer a new perspective on angelology that harmonizes the peculiarities of transcendence, immanence, and imagination in the form of eucharistic experience.

Like the seeds of ancient date palms that still retain their fecundity after lying dormant for centuries, these ancient approaches to angelology remain equally potent for the needs of today's church. For that reason, my intention is for these chapters to constitute a series of stepping-stones that allow the reader to ford, perhaps in a new and unfamiliar way, a vast river of angel-related literature. The most critical rediscovery for the present day, however, is that the intricate history of angelology revealed herein is a product of the fluidity that was written into this doctrine from its inception. It is my hope that by reflecting upon the deeper theological purpose of angelology, the church will interpret life outside Eden's garden in a divine and supernatural light.