

[Editor. (Accessed May 19, 2023). Angels and Evil Spirits, Vol. 1, Doctrine and Scripture, The Symbol of Faith. The Orthodox Church in America. Source: <https://www.oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith/doctrine-scripture/the-symbol-of-faith/angels-and-evil-spirits>]



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Volume I - Doctrine and Scripture

The Symbol of Faith

Angels and Evil Spirits

All things visible and invisible...

In addition to the visible, physical creation there is an invisible world created by God. The Bible sometimes calls it “the heavens” and other times refers to it as “above the heavens.” Whatever its symbolical description in the Holy Scriptures, the invisible world is definitely not part of the physical, material universe. It does not exist in space; it has no physical dimensions. And so it cannot be located, and it has no “place” which can be “reached” by travel within the galaxies of the spatial, locatable “places” of the physically created universe.

However, the fact that the invisible, created world is purely spiritual and is not discoverable on a map of the created material spaces makes it no less real or truly existing. The invisible creation exists as different from the created material universe and, of course, as totally different from the uncreated, absolutely super-divine existence of the uncreated God.

Invisible created reality consists of the hosts of bodiless powers, generally—and somewhat incorrectly—called the angels.

Angels



Angels (which means literally “messengers”) are, strictly speaking, but one rank of the incorporeal or bodiless powers of the invisible world.

According to Orthodox Scripture and Tradition there are nine ranks of bodiless powers or the Hosts (Sabaoth means literally “armies” or “choirs” or “ranks”). There are angels, archangels, principalities, powers, virtues, dominions, thrones, cherubim, and seraphim. The latter are described as offering continual adoration and glory to God with the incessant and ever-resounding cry of Holy! Holy! Holy! (Is 6.3; Rev 4.8). Those in the middle of the above listing are little-known to men while the angels and archangels are seen as the active workers, warriors, and messengers of Yahweh relative to this world. Thus, angels and archangels are seen to struggle against spiritual evil and to mediate between God and the world. They appear in various forms to men in both the Old and New Testaments as well as in the life of the Church. The angels are those who bring the power and presence of God and who are messengers of His word for the salvation of the world. The best-known of the angels are

Gabriel (which means literally “man of God”), the bearer of the good news of Christ’s birth (Dan 8.16; 9.21; Lk 1.19, 26), and Michael (which means literally “who is like God”), the chief warrior of the spiritual armies of God (Dan 11.13; 12.1; Jude 9; Rev 12.7).

Generally speaking the appearances of the bodiless powers to men are described in a physical way (“six-winged, many-eyed”; or in the “form of a man”). However, it must be clearly understood that these are merely symbolical descriptions. By nature and definition the angels have no bodies and no material properties of any sort. They are strictly spiritual beings.

Evil Spirits

In addition to the created spiritual powers who do the will of God, there are, according to the Orthodox faith, those who rebel against Him and do evil. These are the demons or devils (which means literally those who “pull apart” and destroy) who are also known both in the Old and New Testaments as well as in the lives of the saints of the Church.

Satan (which means literally the enemy or the adversary) is one proper name for the devil, the leader of the evil spirits. He is identified in the serpent symbol of Gen 3 and as the tempter of both Job and Jesus (Job 1.6; Mk 1.33). He is labelled by Christ as a deceiver and liar, the “father of lies” (Jn 8.44) and the “prince of this world” (Jn 12.31; 14.30; 16.11). He has “fallen from heaven” together with his evil angels to do battle with God and his servants (Lk 10.18; Is 14.12). It is this same Satan who “entered Judas” to effect the betrayal and destruction of Christ (Lk 22.3).

The apostles of Christ and the saints of the Church knew from direct experience Satan’s powers against man for Man’s own destruction. They knew as well Satan’s lack of power and his own ultimate destruction when man is with God, filled with the Holy Spirit of Christ. According to Orthodox doctrine there is no middle road between God and Satan. Ultimately, and at any given moment, man is either with God or the devil, serving one or the other.

The ultimate victory belongs to God and to those with Him. Satan and his hosts are finally destroyed. Without this recognition—and still more—the experience of this reality of the cosmic spiritual struggle (God and Satan, the good angels and the evil angels), one cannot truly be called an Orthodox

Christian who sees and lives according to the deepest realities of life. Once again, however, it must be clearly noted that the devil is not a “red-suited gentleman” nor any other type of grossly-physical tempter. He is a subtle, intelligent spirit who acts mostly by deceit and hidden actions, having as his greatest victory man’s disbelief in his existence and power. Thus, the devil attacks “head-on” only those whom he can deceive in no other way: Jesus and the greatest of the saints. For the greatest part of his warfare he is only too satisfied to remain concealed and to act by indirect methods and means.

Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (1 Pet 5.8).

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph 6.11–12).

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH'S TEACHINGS ON ANGELS

June 16, 2020

SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST ORTHODOX CHURCH

<https://www.saintjohnchurch.org/the-orthodox-churchs-teachings-on-angels/>

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We hear about angels quite a bit in the Orthodox Church. In Scripture, in the Liturgy, and even in our prayers. But what does the Church actually teach about them? In this post, we explore the Orthodox Church's different teachings on angels.

Estimated reading time: 12 minutes

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WHAT ARE ANGELS?

Angel translates to mean “*messenger*,” which illustrates their purpose: to help the human race. From the days of man's life in paradise, mankind has known of their existence. In fact, we see an almost universal recognition of them in most other ancient religions.



Figure 1: Icon of the Synaxis [an assembly met for worship] of the Holy Heavenly Bodiless Powers.

Moreover, in the Scriptures, we see many references to angels:

- One of the cherubim with a flaming sword guarded the gates of Eden after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise ([Gen. 3:24](#))
- Abraham encouraged his servant by telling him the Lord would send His angel before him and prosper his way ([Gen. 24: 7, 40](#))
- Jacob saw angels both in a dream and when awake
- Multiple references in the book of Psalms, the Book of Job, and the Prophets ([Is. 6:1-7](#); [Ezek. 10:1-22](#))
- An angel announced the births of both John the Baptist and Our Lord Jesus Christ
- Angels sang the glory of Christ's nativity
- An angel announced His birth to the shepherds and stopped the Wise Men from returning to Herod
- Angels ministered to Christ during His temptation in the wilderness and appeared to Him in the Garden of Gethsemane
- They announced His Resurrection to the myrrh-bearing women; and at His ascension they proclaimed His second coming.
- They loosed the bonds of Peter and the other Apostles ([Acts 5:19](#); [12:7-15](#)).
- An angel appeared to Cornelius the Centurion, telling him to send for Peter who would instruct him in the word of God ([Acts 10:3-7](#))
- An angel announced to Paul that he was to appear before Caesar ([Acts 27:23-24](#))
- The vision of angels is the foundation of the Revelation of St. John.

CREATION OF ANGELS

The first teaching from the Orthodox Church we'll look at regarding angels is their creation. In the Creed, we say: "I believe in One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible". Before God created our visible world, he created the invisible – the angelic world ([Col. 1:16](#)). Many teachers of the Church express that God created the angels long before this world (Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory the Great, Anastasius of Sinai) and when the material universe was created, they already stood before the face of the Creator and served Him.

NATURE OF ANGELS

Secondly, the Orthodox Church teaches that angels are active, incorporeal spirits by nature. God endowed them with reason, will and knowledge; they serve God, fulfill His will, and praise Him. And because they belong to the invisible world, they cannot be seen with our physical eyes. St. John of Damascus writes: "When it is the will of God that angels should appear to those who are worthy, they do not appear as they are in their essence, but, transformed, take on such an appearance as to be visible to physical eyes". In the book of Tobit, the angel accompanying Tobit and his son says of himself: "All these days I was visible to you, but I neither ate nor drank, this only appeared to your eyes" (Tobit 12:19).

DEGREE OF PERFECTION OF ANGELS

Furthermore, angels are the most perfect spirits, superior to man in their mental and spiritual powers. As they are **incorporeal**, they are less confined by space and place and can travel vast distances instantaneously, to appear where it is necessary for them to act. Additionally, in power and strength they transcend all earthly authorities, as St. Peter teaches ([2 Pet. 2:11](#)). They are

also **immortal** ([Luke 20:36](#)); however, their immortality is not divine (that is, independent and unconditional). Instead, it completely depends, like the immortality of human souls, on the will and mercy of God.

Despite the near perfection of angels, the Orthodox Church teaches that they still have limits. For instance, Scripture tells us they do not know the depths of the essence of God, which is known only to the Spirit of God ([1 Cor. 2:11](#)). Moreover, they do not know the future, which is also known only to God ([Mark 13:32](#)). Angels are also incapable of fully understanding the mystery of redemption, which they “desire to look into” ([1 Pet. 1:12](#)) but cannot. They are even incapable of knowing all human thoughts ([1 Kings 8:39](#)), and cannot perform miracles on their own but only by the will of God ([Ps. 71:19](#)). Lastly, they cannot be omnipresent. Scripture depicts angels as descending from heaven to earth **or** ascending from earth to heaven, which gives us reason to believe they cannot be on earth and in heaven at the same time.

THE NUMBERS AND RANKS OF ANGELS

Thirdly, the Orthodox Church teaches that the world of angels is immeasurably vast and that the angels are divided into nine different ranks. The Scripture supports both of these teachings. First, let's take a look at the vastness of the angelic world.

VAST NUMBERS OF ANGELS

When the Prophet Daniel saw the Ancient of Days in a vision, he saw that “thousand thousands ministered unto Him, and ten thousands of myriads attended upon Him” ([Dan. 7:10](#)). St. Cyril of Jerusalem writes:

Imagine how great in number is the Roman people, imagine how great in number are the other barbarian peoples that now exist, and how many must have died

even! In a century, imagine how many have been buried in a thousand years, imagine all mankind, from Adam to the present day. Great is their multitude, but it is small in comparison with the angels, whose numbers are greater. They are the ninety-nine sheep, whereas the human race is the one lost sheep. [...] If it is written that 'a thousand thousands ministered unto Him, and ten thousands of myriads attended upon Him' this is only because the prophet could express no greater number.

When the numbers of the angels are so great, it is natural to assume that in their world – as in ours – there are various degrees of perfections and therefore various ranks of the heavenly powers. A hierarchy, in other words.

NINE RANKS OF ANGELS

Orthodox teaching divides the world of angels into nine ranks, all of which we find in Scripture. Because Scripture lists only nine, the Orthodox Church does not teach more than these:

- ***First Hierarchy***
 - [Seraphim](#)
 - [Cherubim](#)
 - [Thrones](#)
- ***Second Hierarchy***
 - [Powers](#)
 - [Dominions](#)
 - **Authorities**
- ***Third Hierarchy***
 - **Principalities**
 - [Archangels](#)
 - **Angels**

You can also find the listing of these ranks in the “Decrees of the Apostles”, and in the works of many saints, including Ignatius the God-bearer, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, Gregory the Dialogist, and John of Damascus. St. Gregory the Dialogist shows us where we can find the ranks of angels in Scripture:

The existence of angels and archangels is witnessed throughout Holy Scripture; it is principally the books of the Prophets which mention cherubim and seraphim. The names of yet another four ranks are listed by the Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians (1:21) [...] and also in his Epistle to the Colossians (1:16) [...] Thus, when to those four of whom he speaks to the Ephesians—that is to the principalities, authorities, powers and dominions—we add the thrones, mentioned in the Epistle to the Colossians, that adds up to five ranks of angels; and when to them we add the angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim, we can see that there are nine ranks of angels.

ARE THERE MORE THAN NINE RANKS?

Some Fathers of the Church believe the division of angels into nine ranks covers only the names and ranks revealed to us in *this* life. St. John Chrysostom explains:

But what evidence is there that there are more powers than those whose names are known to us? The Apostle Paul, when he mentions one of the series of ranks we know, also reminds of the others which we do not, when he writes of Christ: ‘He ... set Him at His own right hand, in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come’ (Eph. 1:20-21; emphasis added).

Ideas like these from the Fathers are not regarded by the Church as [dogma](#), or beliefs that cannot be disputed. Rather they are simply personal opinions of

individual Fathers. Overall, the writers and teachers of the early Church regarded the doctrine of the heavenly hierarchy as something mysterious. St. Dionysius writes in his *On the Celestial Hierarchies*:

How many ranks there are of heavenly beings, what their nature is and in what manner the mystery of holy authority is ordered among them, only God can know in detail. [...] All that we can say about this is what God has revealed to us through them themselves, because they know themselves.

And St. Augustine likewise writes: "That there exist thrones, principalities; dominions and powers in the heavenly mansions, I believe most firmly, and I hold it as an undoubted fact that there are distinctions between them, but what exactly they are like and what exactly are the distinctions between them, I do not know."

THE SEVEN ARCHANGELS

Fourthly, the Orthodox Church also teaches that there are seven archangels, all of whom have their own names. In Holy Scripture we find five of them:

- **Michael** (lit. *Who is like unto God?*) – Dan. 10:13; 12:1; Rev. 12:7-8)
- **Gabriel** (lit. *Man of God*) – Dan. 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19-26
- **Raphael** (lit. *The help of God*) – Tobit 3:17; 12:15
- **Uriel** (lit. *Fire of God*) or **Jeremiel** (lit. *The highness or mercy of God*) – 2 Ezra 4:1, 36
- **Salathiel/Phaltiel/Psaltiel** (lit. *Prayer to God*) – 2 Ezra 5:16

Apart from these names, pious tradition gives yet another two names of angels: **Jehudiel** (*The praise of God*) and **Barachiel** (*The blessing of God*), although these names do not appear in Holy Scripture. Various listings exist with alternative names. However, in all cases only *seven names* are actually given/known. This is in agreement with the words of St. John in the Revelation: "Grace be unto you and peace, from Him Which is, and Which is to come: and

from the seven spirits which are before His throne ” (Rev. 1:4).

THE PURPOSE OF ANGELS

Fifthly, the Orthodox Church teaches that angels all have a purpose. Angels of the ranks closest to us (the third hierarchy) appear in Scripture as messengers or heralds of the will of God, guides for people and the servants of their salvation ([Heb. 1:14](#)). Not only this, but they also hymn the glory of God and serve Him in the plan of His Providence for the material world. The Fathers of the Church often speak of this service:

Some of them stand before the Great God, while others by their action support the whole world.

St. Gregory the Theologian, “Songs of the Mysteries”

Angels are set in command of the elements, the heavens, the world, and all within it.

St. Athenagoras

Each of them has received under his control some particular part of the universe, or is attached to some particular thing or person in the world, as is known to Him Who arranges and orders all things, and all work towards one goal, by command of the Builder of all things.

St. Gregory the Theologian

Some ecclesiastical writers, like Origen and Augustine, express that certain angels are in charge of particular aspects of the kingdom of nature. This idea comes from the Revelation, where we read of angels set in charge of certain physical elements by the will of God ([Rev. 7:1](#); [14:18](#); [16:15](#)). Moreover, according to the vision of the Prophet Daniel, there are angels to whom God entrusts the fate of the kingdoms and peoples of the earth (Dan. 10-12).

The Orthodox Church also teaches that every person has his or her own **Guardian Angel**, unless he or she has driven him away by an evil life. The Lord Jesus Christ said: "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones, for I say unto you, that in heaven *their angels do always behold the Face of My Father Which is in heaven*" ([Matt. 18:10](#), emphasis added).

GOOD VS. BAD ANGELS

Lastly, the Orthodox Church teaches a distinction between "good" and "bad" angels, and affirms the existence of both. As beings with reason, angels also possess free will. In other words, they are free to choose to do good and perform the will of God, and are not merely forced to do so. However, the freedom to choose to do good also comes with the freedom to do evil. Having this freedom, one of the angels chose wickedness before the creation of our visible world. And by so doing, from an angel of light he became the devil.

The devil, also called "Satan" or "the enemy," was created as a mighty and beautiful archangel, one of the most perfect and radiant. For this reason the Lord gave him the name Lucifer, "the light-bearer". But he chose not to do the will of God. Lucifer lost sight of the path toward Truth and Life and Light, and concentrated his attention on his own perfection. He fell in love with himself and forgot that all his perfections were the gift of God. Instead, he was so blinded by the idea of his own greatness that he rose against his Lord and took with him a large number of spirits who accepted his authority.

The Archangel Michael took command of the angels who remained faithful to God, and waged war with the fallen spirits (again, long before the material world existed). Ultimately, light conquered darkness, and the rebels were hurled into the abyss.

COULD SATAN BECOME GOOD AGAIN?

Satan's hardness of heart continues, further and further downwards, to this day. One sin leads to another, pride leads to envy and spite, which resort to lies and false witness, and so on.

But can't he repent? After all, our merciful God accepts our repentance, so wouldn't He also receive Satan's as well? One hermit, who pondered over this, received a revelation from an angel, who told him that forgiveness is always possible for those who repent. When the devil appeared before this holy man sometime later, the hermit repeated the angel's comforting words. But the devil merely burst into laughter in response. Stubbornness, hardness of heart, and pride can eventually reach such a level that a sinner no longer wishes to make use of the means of salvation. This is the curse of pride: it no longer desires salvation and perishes.

Thus the angelic world of light divided; some angels, faithful to the Lord, remain in light, joy, love and gratitude, piously serve God and continue to make progress toward closer union with the Lord. And they have gone so far in their work and in the path of grace, and have developed such a habit of goodness, that none of them can or will rebel against God now.

CONCLUSION

The Orthodox Church teaches various things about angels regarding their creation, nature, purpose, and names. She also takes care to distinguish those angels who choose good and those who choose evil, highlighting the concept of free will. Have any questions about these teachings? Share your questions in the comments below!

Read More: [Other Teachings of the Orthodox Church >>](#)



Figure 2: Icon of the Synaxis [an assembly met for worship] of the Holy Heavenly Bodiless Powers.