

KBA 5632

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GOD'S HEAVENLY KINGDOM AND HIS SERVANTS THE ANGELS

AN ACCOUNT OF *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/3 §51 BY KARL BARTH

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MODERN exponents of the doctrine of creation skate as lightly as possible over the thesis that God is Maker of heaven as well as of earth. And St. Matthew's habit of referring to the Kingdom of Heaven does not commend itself as important to most scholars in their elucidation of the Kingdom of God. For Barth, whose doctrine of Providence was outlined in the last issue of this *Journal*, "God's Kingdom which comes to us on earth is the Kingdom of Heaven; and when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven, that is not only a *divine* event, i.e. one established, governed, and consummated by God, but also a *heavenly* event, i.e. one worked out in the presence, power, co-operation, and co-revelation of heaven on earth" (p. 558). Though this is a secondary aspect of the event, a theology which ignores it is gravely impoverished. And a proper recognition of this aspect entails a further recognition that man's encounter with God in His saving act is also an encounter with the angels of God, the creatures who inhabit heaven. Schleiermacher wrote a notable appendix *Of the Angels* (§§42-43 in the Second Edition of *The Christian Faith*) which dismissed the topic from Protestant theology for 150 years, but now it has come back in a treatise which will surely rank with the other two great monuments of angelology, the *Celestial Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius, and the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas (I.50-64, 106-114), both of which are sympathetically evaluated.

Is this a field of knowledge of which Christian theology must take serious account, and if so, with what methods and safeguards? It is clear that the notions of heaven and of angels form part of the framework within which the Christian Gospel is proclaimed and believed, and that the Biblical writers have something to say about the heavenly angelic function which has for them a necessary connexion with their primary theme.

It is equally clear that this has for a long time been regarded as a case for *Entmythologisierung* by those parts of the Church which are not committed to the theology either of John of Damascus or of Thomas Aquinas. Once Dionysius could be branded Pseudo, his theme was relegated to the hands of poets and children. Biblical angelology became a minor theme of study for those concerned to elucidate the mental climate of some Biblical writers. And occasionally a philosophical theologian has proposed an explanation of the patristic or medieval interest in angels to show that some "equivalent concept" would still be of use to us to-day. For my own part, I have been uneasy about treating this theme as dispensable or superficial to the essential Christian Gospel, but at the same time utterly unconvinced by the various kinds of treatment it has received. I now think that Barth is right when he says that a theology which has no account of angels, or a non-Christian account, is an impoverished theology; for the problem of angelology is "the problem of the *mystery* of the presence, the speech and action of God, in our neighbourhood, i.e. in the lower cosmos—the problem of heaven and earth, which is the problem of the significant nearness *and* distance, distance *and* nearness, without which God would not meet the earthly creature as majestic and trustworthy, holy and gracious, and therefore not as God" (p. 605). The story of God's action, incorporating us into His Kingdom by the Holy Spirit, is not fully told until the secondary emphasis is brought out that this Kingdom is the Kingdom of Heaven; and that creatures belonging intrinsically to the Kingdom of Heaven exist in the service of that Kingdom, and their service is precisely to accompany the extension of that Kingdom to earth and effect its purposes, not by any power of their own (it is the mark of demons to claim such power), but because the effective glory of God is reflected in them as the glory of a king is reflected in the ideal ambassador. Such a doctrine of angels, which is significantly different from anything formulated before and wholly Biblical, fills a gap in our account of God's dealings with men which, in default of it, may be filled by exaggerated accounts of Scripture or of Bishops to the undoing of the Church's integrity.

Barth realises that this is a field where extreme care is needed if our assent to the Biblical testimony is to develop into

understanding, and he works out the "limits of angelology" in a long section which includes a review of all that has happened in the past. Biblical history, he points out, is always on the verge of "saga", and the theme of angels is always introduced on the very edge where what is proclaimed passes over into the mysterious or non-verifiable region of events. Therefore we have only "poetic indications", savouring of divination or fantasy. But in the Bible they come under the control of that real event, God's grace in Jesus Christ, which also governs the empirical history. This makes them orderly, meaningful, and disciplined, and therefore one can and must think through them, albeit incidentally and with a light touch. But this theological task was distorted almost from the outset, by the desire to answer a question which from the Bible alone is unanswerable. What are angels by "nature"? *Ex eo quod est, spiritus est. Ex eo quod agit, angelus est.* By this remark Augustine confirmed the tendency to build up a background for the Biblical angels, which in time became so interesting as to obscure the sole Biblical interest which is their office. To call them "spirits", as in Heb. 1.14, was originally to confess ignorance about their nature, but it came to suggest that they should be taken generically with the souls of men, and a story was built up on this assumption about the independent mode of existence which may properly be attributed to "intelligent spirits". Rev. 4-5 added force to the adjectives in Heb. 1.14, and the Biblical evidence was sometimes used to suggest that the essential function of angels is to participate in the heavenly cultus which establishes the whole rhythm of creation. But this must not be pressed too hard against the Fathers, for Dionysius, whose great merit was to reduce patristic angelology to some order, felt himself under no obligation to turn an *angelus* into a being whose characteristic function is to sing hymns. To his neo-Platonic mind the angels appear as hypostasised moments in the heavenly motion, the cascade of light which brings knowledge and redemption to men. But at least his account of them was fundamentally "functional", dynamic, and soteriological, whereas in Thomas the counter-tendency comes to full expression, and they become elements in a stable heavenly system, whose "mission" brings them out of their proper sphere. Barth's question is whether this ontology of angels, which has taken

the Church so very far away from the Biblical witness, is necessary to systematic thought. He finds that Protestant theologians who have recognised its alien character have still complained that the Biblical symbols are so obscure that even though they must still control the final story they require to be interpreted in the light of non-Biblical principles. Against all this he insists that there is positive illumination for us in the Biblical silence about the "nature" of angels, and that if we concentrate on the Biblical presentation, and keep our thinking true to its suggestion that they are relative to the God-man relationship and properly knowable *in their office*, we can do full justice to the claim that they are so bound up with the Word of God that any response of faith which ignores them is inadequate. The fundamental weakness of "the Intellectualism of St. Thomas" comes to light very clearly (p. 464 f.) in the theology which earned for him the title of the Angelic Doctor. That theology is the grandest expression of the attempt to produce an anthology of heaven and of angels. Such theology is ill-conceived, but nevertheless Thomas and Dionysius are masters who press upon us the truth of a heavenly part in the created cosmos, whose participation in the history of God's covenant with mankind is an indispensable theme of theology.

Can one, however, work out the theology of the matter if ontological questions cannot be raised in this field? Barth reminds us that the question of heaven is raised by the Biblical witness to God's action, for the sake of which action He has created the cosmos. Though He is apart from His creation and "the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him" (nor yet His Son—Eph. 4.10), He has His throne within the cosmos, in the region of heaven which is the *terminus a quo* for His action here. The action itself is one to which we have become subject. Its central moment is the *coming to earth* of the Word of God in the fashion of a *heavenly man*. We acknowledge it as the coming of the Kingdom of God from heaven to earth, and we cannot evade the intellectual consequences of conceiving the focus of all God's action to be the history of man on this planet. The exegesis of the Biblical witness to this history in which God and man participate must clarify first of all the meaning of "heaven", and no *raison d'être* is ever suggested for heaven or for its inherent created life apart from this action of God the covenanting King.

His will is done in heaven *in order that* it may be done on earth. In the witness to His action, we note a concomitant witness to the action of a heavenly host. The army of Israel, as well as the stars in their courses, are often taken to be tokens on earth of properly heavenly creatures, to whose action their own is related. It becomes clear that within the fundamental theme of God's action, the heavenly host must have within itself ordered variety, multiplicity, and diversity of office, for only so can we acknowledge the detailed particularity with which the Kingdom of Heaven bears down upon earth.

At this point one needs to examine at length the Biblical material in order to deal with the suggestions of a hierarchy of angels, and of named angels with identifiable functions. Barth finds no basis whatever for the suggestion of hierarchical ordering. He interprets Paul's terminology against the background of Daniel where the heavenly creatures are called *sarim* to express their function of imposing upon earth the peace of God; and this activity of the heavenly *sarim* is brokenly reflected, to Paul's mind, in the action of various political ordinances on the human scene. In a long and powerful exposition of Rev. 4-5, Barth makes the point that in every angel God is "represented" in His relation to a particular realm of earthly reality. And it is significant that the immediate guardians of the throne are precisely the "four beasts" which on any showing are the angels most intimately associated with God's movement towards earth, and it is they who initiate the praise of heaven. This in turn helps to clarify the truth in the notion of a "heavenly cultus". To the angels must be attributed perfect knowledge of the whole "mystery of God". Their entire existence is an "exemplary service" to that mystery, not only in their office of accompanying its fulfilment, but also in the antecedent praise which they give because what God has determined in heaven must happen on earth. Thus the angels are the creatures made to inhabit heaven, the region of God's throne in the cosmos, from which His Kingdom is being extended to earth. They exist in the service of this extended Kingdom, which is the service of God and His earthly creatures. That is the definition which we should work with, and it is an exclusive definition for the purposes of Christian theology.

What then can be said of angels on the basis of this defini-

tion? I have space only for a bare list of observations. God's action is mediated to His creatures by His creatures. But, unlike the humblest earthly thing, an angel cannot belong to itself as well as to God. It has no "substance" of the kind sought by ontology, and it is lost to human view in God. (This explains why "to be as the angels in heaven" solves the problems of marriage without annulling marriage.) They are plenipotentiaries because their testimony to God's action is unadulterated testimony. Ambassadors, remember, are not members of the government they represent, but their presence demands the respect appropriate to the government. It is the ministry of angels which alone makes manifest the "Otherness" from which God comes to us. Omit the angels, and you create havoc by ascribing their office either to the Holy Spirit or to Bishops. Their service is to give to God's relation with men its cosmic contours and concreteness.

We must remember, however, that though their authority is something which neither prophet nor apostle can have (though it is precisely the authority claimed by the Pope), theirs is not the most privileged role in creation. As Barth points out, in using the illustration of an ambassador, a business man has greater freedom than an ambassador ever enjoys. And here it is instructive to examine the places where they are introduced into the Gospel story. They come only at the beginning and the end, to mark off the history within which lies all history, but which is itself wrought out by the man Jesus. Before and after that history, it is for human witnesses to take up the tale.

I do not claim to have understood all that Barth has written in this chapter. Nor do I think that the issues he is pressing will come home to us simply by our having available a translation of his work. We must have a book from a British theologian on the subject. But I am persuaded that the God of whom the Bible speaks must be represented to us, when He confronts us, by creatures whose office is clearly indicated in Scripture along the lines which Barth has worked out so magnificently. It is clear to me, though not, perhaps, to the reader of this bald sketch, that here is a clarification in the field of theology which is much nearer to the heart of the Church's *malaise* than one would ever imagine. What has been misrepresented

in the "catholic" tradition, and *entmythologisiert* in the "protestant" tradition is something vital to our apprehension of the Gospel.

I follow Barth's example in respect of demons. He dismisses them in 15 pages, for "a short sharp glance at the waste places is all they should have". They are not bad angels, but opponents of the angels. You don't believe in them for they are the Lie basic to all lies; *der in alle Mythen spukende Mythos*. They represent the dynamism of Chaos, whose reality consists in God's conflict with it. Not created, they are there by the divine No! But they triumph over the angelic ministrations wherever men are persuaded to deny their reality. To deviate from this paradoxical line, and to work out in the name of Biblical realism a demonology alongside angelology, eschatology, soteriology and Christology, is to commit the fundamental mistake which led to the witch-hunts whose major effect was to provoke the Enlightenment. I think that awkward questions remain which cannot be silenced by this line of argument, but fundamentally I believe it is right.