

***Angelo o Angela?* Issues of Degenderization in the Depictions of Angelic Beings in the Bible**

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ABSTRACT

Most studies of angelic beings in the Bible do not attempt to interrogate their gender presumably because of Jesus' statement in Matt 22:30 that angels do not marry neither are they given in marriage. Therefore, this article offers a textual review of biblical women's encounter with angelic beings and of instances in Scriptures in which angelic beings appear in what appear to be gendered forms which call into question the assumption that angels are sexless or genderless. It is argued that some form of degenderization is discernible in the depiction of these celestial beings in the Bible which could have significant implications for feminist biblical discourse of the ancient texts.

KEYWORDS: Angelic Beings; Gender; Degenderization; Angelophany; Bible.

A ANGELIC BEINGS IN THE BIBLE – AN OVERVIEW

Belief in angels is widespread across various cultures of the world¹ and the existence of angels is widely attested in the biblical world, as both the Old and the New Testament support the existence of angels. In the OT, the Hebrew word מַלְאָכִים is translated as messenger whilst in the NT, the Greek term ἄγγελος is translated as angels but both may refer to either divine and human beings who serve as messengers of Yahweh and include prophets and priests (Hag 1:13; Mal 2:7).² Recent developments in biblical angelology have focused on several issues such as angelophanies, the biblical view of angels *vis-à-vis* the broader ANE context in which Israel operated, angelic names, titles and hierar-

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¹ Matthew Fox and Rupert Sheldrake, *The Physics of Angels: Exploring the Realm Where Science and Spirit Meet* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), xii.

² Carol A. Newsom, "Angels," *ABD* 1:248-249; Saul M. Olyan, *A Thousand Thousands Served Him: Exegesis and the Naming of Angels in Ancient Judaism* (Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr, Paul Siebeck, 1993), 15 fn 7; Erik Eynikel, "The Angel in Samson's Birth Narrative," in *Angels: The Concept of Celestial Beings – Origins, Development and Reception*, ed. Freidrich V. Reiterer, Pancratius C. Beentjes, Núria Calduch-Benages and Benjamin G. Wright (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 110-111.

chies, the ministry of angels,³ the dichotomy between good and evil angels,⁴ the identity of the angel of the Lord (*mal'āk Yahweh*), and the discussion of angels in apocalyptic literature,⁵ among others. Much has been written on these issues and evidence from Scriptures show that biblical angels are created spiritual beings who are portrayed as immortal, strong, innumerable in number (Job 38:7; Ps 46:7, 11; 148:1-3; Matt 18:10; 26:53; Luke 2:13-15; Heb 12:22; Rev 5:11; 9:1-2; 12:3-4, 7-9), taking orders from God, and operating from the spiritual or celestial realm.⁶

I wish to touch briefly on some of these issues as they relate to the subject matter of this article and in the context of the biblical world from which the data is drawn. Although a few scholars argue that seraphim and cherubim are heavenly beings that should be distinguished from angels in general,⁷ a number of discussions of the angelic order recognise three major brigades – the cherubim (Gen 3:24; Exod 25:17-22; Ezek 1:1-14, 28; 10:4, 18-22; 28:12-13, 17; Heb 9:5), the seraphim (Isa 6:3-9) and the living creatures (Rev 4:6-9; cf. Ezek 1).⁸ In my view, the three categories seem to omit the ordinary *mal'ākīm* who run most of Yahweh's errands on the earth and who are neither cherubim nor seraphim. Therefore, in the discussion which follows, the term angelic beings will be employed to refer to celestial beings in general including cherubim, seraphim, living creatures, *mal'ākīm*, *etcetera*, whilst the term angel will be used loosely to refer to the מַלְאָכִים. However, some form of hierarchy is also observed among angelic beings (cf. Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10) with the archangels ranked as the highest angels and Michael seen as the chief archangel.

In another sense, dualistic theology or dualism also classifies angels into good (Mark 8:38; 1 Joh 1:51; Tim 5:21) and bad angels (Luke 8:2; 11:24, 26; Rev 12:7) or angels of light versus forces of darkness. Like the angels of Yahweh, the evil angels or devil's angels who are described as fallen angels are also ranked and Satan is seen as their head (Matt 25:41).⁹ On the subject of the names of angels, only two angels are named in both Testaments, that is Gabriel (Dan 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:11-17; 19, 26-29, 31-35) and Michael (Dan 10:10-14,

³ Maxwell J. Davidson, "Angel," *NewIDB* 1:149; Fred C. Dickason, *Angels, Elect and Evil* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 90-101. Annette H. M. Evans, "The Development of Jewish Ideas of Angels: Egyptian and Hellenistic Connections, ca. 600 BCE to ca. 200 BCE," (PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2007), 1-255.

⁴ Olyan, *A Thousand Thousands*, 3.

⁵ Peter R. Carrell, *Jesus and the Angels: Angelology and the Christology of the Apocalypse of John*, SNTSMS 95 (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

⁶ Dickason, *Angels*, 24, 33-34, 85-86; Davidson, "Angel," 154.

⁷ Newsom, "Angels," 248-249; Davidson, "Angel," 149.

⁸ Olyan, *A Thousand Thousands*, 15-16; cf. Dickason, *Angels*, 61-67.

⁹ Dickason, *Angels*, 39; Newsom, "Angels," 253; Duane F. Watson, "Angels: New Testament," *ABD* 1:254.

20-21; 12:1; Jer 30:7; 2 Pet 2:11; Jude 9; Rev 12:3-17) but some extra-biblical and Jewish literature contain names of at least four other angels. Both Gabriel and Michael are presumably male names and those who bear them today among human offspring are also generally male.

It is interesting however, that studies of angelic beings in the Bible do not attempt to interrogate their gender perhaps because of Jesus' statement in Matt 22:30 that angels do not marry neither are they given in marriage. Hence, most discussions of angels in the Bible overlook the question of their gender. And few of those which contain scattered references to the issue often offer a one-line remark such as "Angels are asexual," "Angels are apparently without sex ..." or "Angels are sexless," *etcetera*, without actually probing the veracity of such statements.¹⁰ The question that is raised in this paper is, what can we actually glean from the Scripture about the gender of angelic beings? Given the patriarchal cultural context from which the Bible emerged as well as the influence of angelic ideas extant in the larger ANE cultural environment, it is important to also ask: is the Bible silent on the gender of angels and is it correct to assume that they are without gender? To fill the gap of the paucity of literature on the gender of angels (at least in part), I will attempt to carry out a textual study of references about encounters between women and angels in the Bible and consider in addition texts about angels that have a possible gender undertone.

B WOMEN AND ANGELIC ENCOUNTERS

Angelic appearances in the Bible involve encounters with the patriarchs (Abraham, Jacob) and with the leaders of the people such as kings and prophets (David, Zechariah) as well as those who would become leaders (Gideon) but there were also encounters with ordinary people (Manoah and his wife or Mary and Joseph).¹¹ The encounters show that angels appeared to both men and women in the Bible. Of course, most of the interactions were with men and it is not necessary to recall them all here. In the case of women as of men, angelic encounters could be indirect or direct. For instance, although the angelic encounters centred on Abram and Lot in Gen 18-19, one may assume that in an indirect way both Sarai and Lot's wife also had angelic encounters because they featured in the two scenes where the two angels played major roles. Women also had indirect encounters with angels in cases where the angel of the Lord is said to guide the whole congregation of Israel which presumably included women (Exod 14:19; 23:20, 23; 32:34; Judg 2:4).

However, the first personal and direct engagement between a woman and an angel is found in the story of Hagar in Gen 16:7-14. In this text, the

¹⁰ Watson, "Angels," 245; Dickason, *Angels*, 34, 222.

¹¹ Read Gen 19:1; 22:11; 31:11; 2 Sam 24:16-17; Zech 1:9, 12; Judg 6:11-27; 13; Matt 1:20-24; Luke 1:26-45.

angel of the Lord whose identity as in several other instances in Scriptures is blurred with that of Yahweh himself, appeared to Hagar by a fountain of water and commanded her to return to her mistress Sarai. The interaction between Hagar and the angel was verbal – he spoke to her and she responded. In Hagar's second epiphany in Gen 21:17-19, the general assumption is that the angel of the Lord is in fact a manifestation of Yahweh himself. Similarly, Manoah's wife had an encounter with the angel of the Lord in Judges 13 but she admitted to her husband that the conversation was rather one-sided; she did not ask the angel any questions (Judg 13:6). She was probably too much in awe of him. We do not know where this encounter took place but after Manoah prayed, the angel re-appeared to the woman while she sat in the field (Judg 13:9). Again, she did not engage in any conversation with him but ran to inform her husband that "the man" had returned. Manoah then took up a conversation with the angel (Judg 13:8-20).

In the NT, Mary was the first woman to experience angelic visitation. Gabriel who is mentioned as one of four archangels in early Jewish literature outside the OT – the others being Michael, Raphael and Uriel (cf. *1 En.* 9, 54:6)¹² – brings her "good news" of the birth of the Messiah (Luke 1:26-38). Unlike his visit to Joseph in the dream (Matt 1:20), Gabriel's appearance to Mary was to natural sight. Although Mary was troubled by his message, she did not seem to be so much in awe of him that she could not talk. She asked questions, he answered her assuring her that she was indeed a chosen vessel that would produce the Messiah. We should note that Gabriel appeared to Mary personally and not to her husband-to-be as he did with Elizabeth (Luke 1:10-22) whose high priest husband he visited in the Temple.

Another angelic encounter by females in the NT is related in the resurrection announcement in Matt 28:1-7 (cf. Mark 16:6-7//Luke 24:4-7). Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were told by this angel with dazzling robe not to be afraid but to go and tell the disciples that Jesus had risen and he would go ahead of them to Galilee. These instances demonstrate that angelic experience was not an exclusive preserve of men in the biblical world. What is remarkable about them is that in each of the cases in which women had personal encounters with angels, it was not in a dream or vision as in the experiences of many men (cf. Jacob, Gen 31:11; Joseph, Luke 1:26-29). Rather, the angels appeared to the women in natural sight.¹³ Also, the angels did not appear to them because there were no men in their lives but chose to appear to the women rather than

¹² Hans Klein, "The Angel Gabriel according to Luke 1," in *Angels: The Concept of Celestial Beings – Origins, Development and Reception*, ed. Freidrich V. Reiterer, Pancratius C. Beentjes, Núría Calduch-Benages and Benjamin G. Wright (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 314.

¹³ Of course, this is not to say that men did not see angels with their natural eyes (cf. Num 22:23, 31; Judg 6:11-12, 21-22; Dan 8:15-17; Heb 13:2).

their men as the examples of Manoah's wife and Mary show. The angels appeared to the women alone without the presence of men to show that there were no gender restrictions regarding whom they were sent to. Klein seems to pick up an interesting dynamic in Gabriel's dealing with Mary which contrasts with his dealing with Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband. He says:

One has the impression that he feels questioned by the priest, and therefore exercises his authority and punishes Zechariah. However, the angel greets Mary courteously and responds to her question with an explanation. The angel is thus described like a human being who treats men and women differently. Perhaps this is an expression of a gender specific treatment of men and women in early Christian mission or prophetic teaching.¹⁴

The messages that the angels conveyed to these women were also varied like those of men. The angel who appeared to Manoah's wife and Gabriel announced respectively the birth of Samson and of Jesus, and Hagar learnt for the first time from the angel of the Lord that she was with child and would give birth to Ishmael. However, the women by the tomb of Jesus were charged with an evangelistic task and the angel's second contact with Hagar was to assure and encourage her, and provide water for her. Clearly, there was no celestial or divine prejudice against women when it comes to the question of sending angels to human beings on the earth. Angels related well with women as with men.

C ANGELIC APPEARANCES OR FORMS

The type of body that an angel being has is said to be indeterminate but possibly spiritual,¹⁵ but angelic beings do appear in different forms. Many of the appearances of angelic beings in the Bible are in human form and sometimes they appear in "the form of composite beings."¹⁶ Cherubim and seraphim for example have been "described as the animals of the heavenly world" because of their appearance.¹⁷ But generally, when an angel appears in human form, it appears as a man (Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4; Acts 1:10) or an unusual man, that is, in terms of splendour or in the sense that they cause fear (Dan 10:5-6; Acts 6:15; Matt 28:3; Luke 24:4), hence the confusion between the מַלְאָךְ as angel or as human. Oftentimes in Scriptures when an angel appears to humans, the figure is actually assumed to be a man. For instance, Jacob wrestled with the character he initially thought to be a man before he realised it was an angel. Joshua saw a man with a sword drawn towards him and went to challenge him but he realised that this was no ordinary man; it was a celestial being (Josh 5:13-15;

¹⁴ Klein, "Angel Gabriel," 321.

¹⁵ Dickason, *Angels*, 33-34.

¹⁶ Olyan, *A Thousand Thousands*, 15-16, 18; cf. Dickason, *Angels*, 34.

¹⁷ Newsom, "Angels," 251.

cf. Judg 6:20; Deut 33:2; Gen 18-19; 1 Kgs 22:21; Isa 6; Ezek (10); Gen 3:24; Ps 18:11//2 Sam 22:11).

Another area of confusion occurs in several instances in which it is difficult to distinguish angelophany from theophany for example in parts of Ezekiel.¹⁸ The form of the angel, the speech or the designation blends with that of Yahweh. In several texts, there is ambiguity in the identity of the *mal'āk* Yahweh, that is, whether he is Yahweh himself or his messenger (e.g. Gen 16:7-13; 21:15-21; 22:11-12; 31:11-13; Exod 3:2-16; Judg 6:11-24). In other words, the term *mal'āk* Yahweh is used interchangeably to refer to both Yahweh and the angel. But then, there are several other texts in which the *mal'āk* Yahweh is clearly distinguished from Yahweh.¹⁹

Because of the frequent appearance of angels as men, the tendency also is to refer to them in masculine terms whether in the original biblical languages or in the translations. But does this mean that angelic beings are males? In Matt 22:30//Mark 12:25, Jesus explained to the Sadducees that the candidates of resurrection would be as angels of God in heaven who neither marry nor are given in marriage. Based on this remark, many exegetes and indeed traditional church interpretations conclude that angels are asexual or sexless. The validity of this assumption is however debatable. At this point, I wish to consider a number of texts from both the OT and NT that may throw some light on the issue of gender with respect to angelic beings before I return to Matt 22:30.

D ANGELIC BEINGS AND GENDEREDNESS

Genesis 6:1-4 which together with 6:5-8 serves as the conclusion to the *tōlēdōt* of Adam reports what interpreters consider a puzzling account of interbreeding between celestial beings and humans.²⁰ The account notes that there was a population explosion in the world of that time which saw an increase also in the number of many beautiful (perhaps glamorous girls) whom the sons of God (*beni' ha elohim*) found difficult to resist. The *beni' ha elohim* (assumed to be angelic beings) began to marry these women and the union produced giants (*Nephilim*) thereby corrupting the earth and its inhabitants. Arnold points out that the idea of population increase is natural but, "What is entirely unnatural is the attraction these fair creatures held for the sons of God and the resultant marriages and births of superhuman warriors, the Nephilim."²¹ The book of 1 Enoch (6-16) relates that this problem prompted the intercession of the archan-

¹⁸ Carrell, *Jesus and the Angels*, 28.

¹⁹ Newsom, "Angels," 250; Davidson, "Angel," 150.

²⁰ Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, NCB (New York: CUP, 2009), 89.

²¹ Arnold, *Genesis*, 89.

gels,²² as the union disturbed world order and evoked God's judgement.²³ Newsom notes that,

It has recently been argued that this passage preserves an old alternate introduction to the flood story, in which the flood was sent to eliminate these half-human/half-divine beings who threatened the order of creation ...²⁴

Furthermore, literature shows that legends are attested in various cultures of the ancient world especially in ANE mythologies about sexual intercourse or intermarriage between celestial beings and humans.²⁵ "Antiquity, it is argued, is full of stories in which deities mate with beautiful women by force or persuasion, giving birth to demigods," writes Mathews.²⁶ At issue therefore is the precise meaning of *beni' ha Elohim* in Gen 6:1-4. The various interpretations of the designation include angels, human judges or rulers and descendants of Seth. The oldest of the views is that *beni' ha Elohim* were angelic beings, specifically fallen angels.²⁷ Mathews is also of the opinion that these are fallen angels but he further relates the argument about the *beni' ha Elohim* to Jesus' statement that angels do not marry in Matt 22:30. He says, "Jesus ... asserts that angels do not have sexual relations as humans and implies that they are not sexual ..."²⁸ But did Jesus really say that angels are not sexual? This question will be addressed at the end of this discussion. What is clear here is that although the *beni' ha Elohim* are viewed as corrupt or fallen angels, they allegedly had sexual intercourse with female humans. Were these angels gendered? It may be presumed that fallen angels retained all the features that made them angels when they fell. The question is, if they were asexual, where then did they get the right instrument to carry out their sexual activities – certainly not from a sex shop!

²² Newsom, "Angels," 253; see also Davidson, "Angel," 152, for comments on Gen 6:1-4 and its connection to the *Book of Watchers* in *1 Enoch*. Note that Melvin relates Gen 6:1-4 to a Gilgamesh tradition which he argues predates the *1 En.* 6-16 account. David Melvin, "The Gilgamesh Traditions and the Pre-History of Genesis 6:1-4," *PRSt* 38 (2011): 23-32.

²³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPSTC (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 45.

²⁴ Newsom, "Angels," 250.

²⁵ Sarna, *Genesis*, 45; Arnold, *Genesis*, 90.

²⁶ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, NAC 1a (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 324.

²⁷ For detailed discussions of various views of the *beni' ha Elohim*, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984), 371-373; Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 322-339.

²⁸ Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 327.

Again, in Gen 19:1-11, we read that the two angels who left Abram's tent in the plains of Mamre were accommodated by Lot and his family in Sodom. But just before they lied down to sleep, the men of Sodom surrounded Lot's house and demanded to "know"²⁹ the two angels who must have had all the features of men since their appearance was that of men. The traditional interpretation is that the men of Sodom demanded to have sexual interaction with Lot's two guests. Although it was not these angels who demanded to have intercourse with humans, the question we need to ask is, if the angels had not resorted to using their supernatural powers to blind them, would the men of Sodom have succeeded in having (if I may use the primitive term) carnal knowledge of these angels?

In the controversial NT text of 1 Cor 11:5-17, the apostle Paul advised that women covered their heads during worship "because of the angels" (v. 10). What the apostle meant by the clause, "because of the angels" is however unclear. Some comparative interpretations have related the passage to "Qumran texts 1QM VII 4-6 and 1QSa II 3-11 which focus on bodily perfection in view of angelic accompaniment of and presence in the community" or related it to Gen 6 and *1 En. 7* where angels fell for earth's beautiful daughters (cf. J. A. Fitzmeyer or Dale C. Martin, cited in Hogeterp).³⁰ Richard Hays acknowledges that from antiquity, the widespread view is that the uncovered heads could be a sexual provocation to angels, that is, in reference to Gen 6:1-4, but following the Dead Sea Scroll texts, he argues that the hypothesis that Paul calls for order in the Corinthian church because of the ancient Jewish belief that angels are present with the worshipping community is more likely.³¹ On the interpretation that follows Gen 6:1-4, Jouette Bassler notes that, "It is likely, but not certain, that Paul has in mind evil angelic beings (2 Cor 12:7) who would be sexually

²⁹ Although some postmodern biblical critics argue that what the men of Sodom demanded was not sex, the focus of this discussion does not necessitate an engagement with that point of view. See for example Morschauser's argument that the men of Sodom's demand "to know" Lot's visitors means "to interrogate" them. Scott Morschauser, "'Hospitality,' Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background to Genesis 19.1-9," *JSOT* 27 (2003): 461-485.

³⁰ Albert L. A. Hogeterp, "Angels, the Final Age and 1-2 Corinthians in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Angels: The Concept of Celestial Beings – Origins, Development and Reception*, ed. Freidrich V. Reiterer, Pancratius C. Beentjes, Núria Calduch-Benages and Benjamin G. Wright (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 387-388.

³¹ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, IBC (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1997), 188. Note in addition Keener's comment that, "Some think that Paul refers to the fallen angels in Gen 6:1-4; although most later rabbis demurred, this was the most popular understanding in Paul's day (cf. 1 Pet 3:19-20; Jude 6) ... A more common proposal today relates to the expectation that angels were present for worship and could be offended by any breach of impropriety ... such as a wife dishonouring her husband." Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, NCB (New York: CUP, 2005), 94.

tempted by women's self-exposure, and through them gain access to the community."³²

It seems to me however that the two more popular readings of the 1 Cor 11:10 text are actually plausible, that is, angels were present in the Corinthian worship services and Paul enjoined the community to maintain propriety in view of the Genesis situation in which *bene' ha Elohim* found the daughters of humanity sexually attractive. In other words, Paul was charging the Corinthian women not to invite a situation in which angels who were present with them in worship would again be tempted to cohabit with human beings. If this interpretation is followed, would this then suggest that the angels possess the wherewithal to philander with the daughters of men?

We have noted above that when angelic beings appeared in human form, they generally did so as males (Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4). However, there is an exception in Zech 5:9 where angelic beings are depicted as women:³³ "Then I looked up — and there before me were two women, with the wind in their wings! They had wings like those of a stork, and they lifted up the basket between heaven and earth" (NIV). The two women are seen as celestial beings on assignment to Babylon as v.10 shows.³⁴ Zechariah 5:5-6 records the sight of

³² Bassler, Jouette M., "1 Corinthians," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon Ringe and Jacqueline Lapsley, 20th Anniversary, rev. and updated ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 563. Note also that in addition to the interpretation that the angels were good angels responsible for ensuring order in worship or evil/fallen angels who are attracted to women (cf. Gen 6:1-4), a third view has been offered which says that these were human messengers from other churches. For a summary of the three views, see Ekem who also argues that, "The context of 1 Cor 11:2-16 seems to favour the interpretation of τούς ἀγγέλους as angels present in Christian worship." John D. K. Ekem, "Does 1 Cor 11:2-16 Legislate for 'Head Covering'?" *Neot* 35 (2001): 174-175. Nonetheless, Finney argues: "For whether these are visiting human messengers, fallen 'lusting' angels or, most likely, 'good' angels present as guardians of order, the priority of maintaining the honour of the community by the women is vital. The head-covering means that the woman's own honour is safeguarded from the sexual desire of heavenly beings (or indeed the sexual temptations of other men), and, equally, that she maintains the natural order fitting for a worshipping community (whether in the presence of angelic beings or outsiders), which then brings honour to the community." Mark Finney, "Honour, Head-coverings and Headship: 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 in its Social Context," *JSNT* 33 (2010): 52.

³³ Note the claim that the interpretation is not sure – Dickason, *Angels*, 36.

³⁴ Assis, who argues that the two women represent Judah and Israel whilst the woman in the *ephah* represents Samaria, remarks that, "The most common view seems to be that the women are angels of some sort. There are those who associate this vision with the cherubim or with the vision of the chariot of Ezekiel 1 ... the winged women are angels." Elie Assis, "Zechariah's Vision of the Ephah (Zech. 5:5-11)," *VT* 60 (2010): 27.

another woman representing wickedness³⁵ who is placed in an *ephah* and now carried to Babylon by these "two women with the wind in their wings." The role of the two women is unclear as some interpreters (e.g. Ollenberger and Conrad) view their portrayal in the text as negative – possibly because storks are supposed to be detestable and unclean birds in the OT or because the object to be carried is wickedness depicted as a woman.³⁶ Alternatively, the two women are regarded as messengers of Yahweh (cf. Meyers & Meyers).³⁷ Smith remarks that, "It is easier to explain on the basis of other scriptures how wickedness could be represented as a woman than to understand how those who removed wickedness from the land could be represented as women."³⁸ However, what is not in dispute is that half animal, half human female winged creatures (*nāšîm*) are attested commonly in ANE iconographic tradition.³⁹

Furthermore, Conrad contrasts these feminine creatures with the cherubim which he calls "masculine creatures."⁴⁰ Meyers and Meyers also recognise an analogy with the cherubim but go further to show that the two women function like the cherub which transports the deity (Ps 18:10). They argue convinc-

³⁵ Different explanations have been offered for the personification of wickedness or evil as a woman in Zech 5:5-6. Harrington writes that, "Some interpreters claim that women are inherently more susceptible to sin and so are an appropriate symbol for evil (see Genesis)." Both Harrington and Petersen among others claim that the depiction is an allusion to Eve in Gen 3 (cf. Ollenburger who also compares her to Eve as well as to the Strange Woman of the book of Proverbs, and concludes that, "The outright misogyny in this text cannot be ignored"). For Conrad however, the image of the woman as wickedness may be linked to the portrayal of Gomer as the backslidden Israel in Hosea. Hannah K. Harrington, "Zechariah," in *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 495. Ben C. Ollenburger, "The Book of Zechariah: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections," in *Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature, Daniel, the Twelve Prophets*, NIB 3, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 781. David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1-8*, OTL (London: SCM, 1984), 257; Edgar W. Conrad, *Zechariah*, Readings (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 119.

³⁶ See Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai-Zechariah 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1988), 305; Conrad, *Zechariah*, 120.

³⁷ See Ollenburger, "Zechariah," 781; Conrad, *Zechariah*, 120. Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai-Zechariah*, 305-306, 313. For a classic citation of the two opposing views, see Mitchell G. Hinckley, Merlin P. Smith and Julius A. Brewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah*, ICC (Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1912), 174.

³⁸ Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 211.

³⁹ Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah*, 260; Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai-Zechariah*, 313, 315.

⁴⁰ Conrad, *Zechariah*, 120; Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai-Zechariah*, 306.

ingly that these “fanciful” winged creatures are Yahweh’s attendants and not the attendants of the goddess in the *ephah* which is identified as wickedness. The creatures are not masculine as those normally encountered in the Bible, they are nonetheless Yahwistic figures.⁴¹ If the interpretation were held to be correct, then it would imply that angelic beings in Scriptures who took up the form of human beings actually did so as either male or female even though there are many more recorded instances of male appearances than of female.

Lastly, in Rev 12:1-17, the figure of a celestial being – *a woman* clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head – appears. She is said to deliver a man-child (12:5), and when she was persecuted by the dragon, she was given two wings of a great eagle to fly into the wilderness (12:13-14).⁴² This “great wonder” with wings, presumably a celestial being, is depicted not as male but female – a woman travailing in birth. It appears that the idea of pregnancy, of labour and of mothering the newborn baby necessitated the femininity of the celestial being with wings in this passage. A male imagery would certainly be inappropriate for the role of the “woman clothed with the sun” in the text. The feminine slant is remarkable especially in a book in which most of the angels engage in or prepare for war (cf. Rev 6-10; 14-18). What then is the significance of these observations?

E CONCLUSION

I wish to summarize my reflections on angelic beings and the issue of gender at this point. We have seen that there is no prejudice on the part of heaven as to the gender of the recipients of angelic visitations – both men and women were visited by angels in the Bible. We have also noted the tendency on the part of interpreters to assume that angels are asexual based on Jesus’ statement in Matt 22:30. However, a textual overview of biblical passages on angels has shown that certain texts insinuate that angelic beings sometimes appeared in situations that point to some form of “genderedness” and that they indeed appeared as both male and female when they were in human form. What then does Jesus’ statement mean?

First, it is crucial to clarify the statement that the children of the resurrection will be like angels in heaven which neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matt 22:30). Blomberg’s inference that “God is able to transform us into creatures who do not engage in sexual relations or procreate” appears to be

⁴¹ Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai-Zechariah*, 305-306, 314.

⁴² For various interpretations of the image of the woman in Rev 12:1-17 as a symbol for the church, an echo of Eve, and Israel among others, see Jan A. du Rand and Young M. Song, “A Partial Preterist Understanding of Revelation 12-13 within an Intertextual Framework,” *AcT* 24 (2004): 25-44.

fairly common among scholars.⁴³ However, Hagner who assumes that the statement must have been informed by supernatural knowledge on the part of Jesus cautions that the comparison with angel "must not be generalized to mean altogether or in every respect. The only point made here is that so far as marriage (and sex?) is concerned, human beings will be like angels; i.e. not marrying."⁴⁴

As far as we can see, Jesus never said that angels are genderless. He only said that they do not marry and they are not given in marriage (meaning males marry and females are given in marriage). But does the fact that they do not do these things mean that they have no ability to do them? Possibly, if one thinks of the case of eunuchs for instance. On the other hand, a monk does not marry and a nun is not given in marriage; does it mean that they do not have the abilities to do so? One could argue that such sexual ability is only limited to fallen angels seeing that in most of the texts considered above, the appearance of the angels come with negative connotations. However, we simply do not know of a certainty that this is the case. Dickason confirms that, "We do not know the total powers of fallen angels. Matthew 22:30 does not exclude such cohabitation, but its point is that angels do not cohabit among themselves. Furthermore, angels have taken human form and performed other human functions, such as eating, walking, talking, and sitting."⁴⁵ In other words, angels do not constitute a race that produces offspring after its kind – and even though they are numerous their number is fixed.

Does it then mean that angels are genderless but have sexual abilities only when they appear in human form as either male or female? The answer is not clear. However, angels are said to be spirit beings and in many cultures, and it has been attested, whether in mythological accounts or in legendary traditions, that spirits have sexual intercourse with humans (cf. Gen 6:1-4). Several ancient myths and legends recognise the existence of *incubus* – a supposed male demon that is capable of having sexual intercourse with female humans in their dreams – and its female counterpart, *succubus* which mates with men. For instance, in Zulu/Xhosa mythology, the *tokoloshe/tikoloshe* (medical name *tokoloshe homunculus*), a mischievous water sprite which could be invoked to harm an enemy is known to rape women at night.⁴⁶ Is this sexual ability therefore limited to fallen angels? We are not sure. Perhaps biblical depictions of

⁴³ Craig L. Blomberg. *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1992), 333; cf. Dickason, *Angels*, 39; Newsom, "Angels," 253; Watson, "Angels," 254.

⁴⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, WBC 33b (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1995), 641.

⁴⁵ Dickason, *Angels*, 223.

⁴⁶ Anand Moodley and Neil M. Fournier, "The Tokoloshe Homunculus," *SAMJ* 99 (2009): 278. Lesley Fordred-Green, "Tokoloshe Tales: Reflections on the Cultural Politics of Journalism in South Africa," *CAnth* 41 (2000): 701-712, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/317407>.

angelic beings are simplified ways of characterising beings who are transcendent and in a sense beyond human comprehension.

Are angelic beings gendered? Could it be that because of Jesus' statement about angels in Matt 22:30, possible shoddy exegetical activity, or other cultural assumptions, biblical interpreters over time have engaged in what can be considered a degenderization of angelic beings in the Bible? What implications would our responses to these questions have for the feminist discourse on the masculinization of God? Is the situation examined above similar to Yahweh's presentation as male in Scriptures even though feminine imagery is sometimes used to describe him? Clearly, these questions show that there is room for more research on the subject. But perhaps someone will concur that in a world that is increasingly traumatised on the one hand by terrorists, child traffickers, drug dealers and drug peddlers or corrupt politicians, and on the other hand by wars, poverty, epidemics and natural disasters of unprecedented magnitude, we sure do need angels – and it should not matter that they are gendered, genderless or degenderized!

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