

Tom Boogart, "Angels in brown boxes." *Reformed Journal*, December 18, 2023.

At the beginning of every Christmas season, I descend the stairs to the basement and search the backroom for a large brown box marked "Christmas." In it are ornaments, crèches, candles, ribbons, and tinsel. Prominent among this paraphernalia are angels. I ascend the stairs and carry the box to the living room where Judy and my grandchildren eagerly wait to open it and place its contents on our tree and throughout our house. Suddenly, angels are everywhere. Their appearance in our house reenacts the story of the angel Gabriel, who came to Mary and announced the birth of Jesus; the angel who came to the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks by night; and the choir of angels who sang to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth among those whom he favors." When the Christmas season is over, I repack the brown box, descend the stairs, and place it on the shelf, not to be opened again until next Christmas.



When I stop to ponder my family's Christmas ritual, I feel unsettled. Angels were very real to ancient believers and very significant. As we shall see, they were the embodiments of the love of God, and they depicted how this love flowed from the heart of God and gave life to the world. The story of Jesus' birth cannot be meaningfully told without them. But angels are not real to believers living in the 21st century. They have

taken their place with Santa Claus and the Grinch as chimeras that help us make the Christmas season merry and bright. Angels reside in boxes in the basement of our consciousness.

The story of how angels have ended up in the basements of our consciousness is an interesting one, and its telling is necessary if we ever hope to counter the forces that have disenchanting our world and to address the growing anomie among believers today.

The Ladder

For thousands of years, from the time of Abraham to the time of Paul, from the time of Augustine to the time of John Calvin, from the time of Ptolemy to the time of Galileo in the late middle ages, believers shared essentially the same cosmology. They all believed that a ladder connected heaven and earth. Above this ladder stood God, and upon this ladder the angels of God ascended and descended.

This cosmology depicted how the love of God flowed from the heart of God to the world. The love of God was not just a feeling; it was energy, generative and glorious, inexhaustible and infinite, like a bush burning and not being consumed. The love of God overflowed. Ancient believers understood angels to be the embodiments of this overflowing love. The relationship between God and the angels was so intimate that believers called them *Elohim*, divine ones (Psalm 82), and *bene Elohim*, "sons/children" of God (Job 1). The angels gathered around God, whom believers frequently depicted as a sovereign sitting on the ark/throne in the temple, the house of God. God assigned the angels different tasks. The *seraphim* (cf. Isaiah 6) were the attendants of God, the *cherubim* were the sentinels of God (cf. Genesis 3), and *malachim* were the ambassadors of God who were sent down the ladder to sustain life on earth with love. As embodiments of God's love, angels shimmered and shined, and the gathering of angels could be seen in the night sky as the host of heaven.

The stars and angels were one and the same (cf. Job 38:6).

This ladder cosmology proved remarkably adaptable, at least initially. As the culture changed over centuries, and believers encountered first the Greek and later the Roman world, they were able to fit their cosmology seamlessly into the "scientific" cosmology of Ptolemy and Aristotle. These ancient cosmologists taught that the earth was a round sphere and orbited by seven "stars" on celestial spheres: the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Believers identified the seven spheres as rungs on the ladder and footholds for the angels in their ascending and descending to earth.

Traffic on this ladder between heaven and earth was two-way. Angels descended through the spheres and filled the earth with the glories of heaven, and human beings ascended through them and came into the presence of God, sometimes in life, and hopefully in death. Isaiah had so ascended, as had Elijah in a chariot of fire, and Paul on the road to Damascus.



Jesus, of course, had both descended and ascended. Announced by a brilliant star in the East (a John the Baptist among the angels), Jesus emptied himself to be born in a manger in Bethlehem and returned to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father in the divine council. Jesus was a "son" of God, far greater than all of the other "sons" of God, for he was the perfect embodiment of both God and humankind, fully God and fully human. As the Great Angel, Jesus was the connecting point between heaven and earth; he was in fact the ladder itself, as he revealed to Nathanael: *"I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man"* (John 1: 51).

I realize that viewing the stars as angels and the seven crystalline spheres as rungs on the ladder connecting heaven and earth makes no sense to Christians in the 21st century; even more, it sounds like unbiblical nonsense and pure superstition. Although we have many biblical texts referring to these angelic stars and to a ladder connecting heaven and earth, when we cast our interpretative net over scripture, it is not fine enough to draw them into our boat.

For example, we read in the revelation to John of the resplendent Son of Man in whose hand are the seven stars who are the seven angels of the seven churches (1:20). The life-giving energy of God moves from the hand of the cosmic Christ to the hands of the starry angels and finally to the churches. Churches, by the way, were not the only institutions so graced by God. Every institution on earth, every nation (Daniel 10:12ff.), and every person (Psalm 91:9ff.) were sustained by angelic energy in the biblical and medieval cosmology.

In another example, God brings Abraham outside at night to count the stars and says to him: "So [numerous] shall your children be" (Genesis 15). Christians today realize that the number of stars is important in this encounter but fail to realize that their being is also important. The ancient Israelites saw the stars as the angels, the myriad children of God.

Like Abraham of old, the shepherds found themselves gazing at the stars in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. Like Abraham, they understood the stars to be the angels of God. They were accustomed to their twinkling in a distant heaven but unaccustomed to their brightness when they descended to earth. When the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were "sore afraid."

The most detailed depiction of the ladder cosmology is found in the book of Genesis. Jacob has stolen his brother's blessing and birthright and is on the run. Far from home and seemingly far from the protection of God, he is utterly alone. His body rests on a bed of dust and his head on a pillow of stone. But his fate is not as hard and harsh as it appears to be. We read:

And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood above it. (28:10-13)

This is not phantasmagoric revelry. Jacob is seeing past the surface of the world to its deep structure. He sees love flowing from the heart of God in order to sustain the world. In this vision, Jacob learns two things. One, he learns that through the agency of angels God is manifest in the whole of the created order and that no one, despite his or her life circumstances, is ever alone. God assures him: "I am with you" (28:15). Two, he learns that he is called to imitate God. In the same way that God's children infuse the whole of the created order with vitality, so his children are to spread blessings to the west, east, north, and south (28:14).

All this movement, both up and down the ladder, was very real to medieval Christians. In their world, heaven, purgatory, earth, and hell all had observable locations. People could walk outside at night and see the moon and the so-called fixed stars, and they would know that purgatory existed just before the moon and that the abode of God was just beyond the fixed stars. People could look down at the earth and know that the fires of hell were at the center of it, these fires breaking out every now and then in the form of volcanoes.

There was no mystery as to where people went when they died, and the Church was the institution that held the keys to the doors of both heaven and hell. It is hard for Christians today to imagine heaven and hell as fixed locations. But Christians in the middle ages could imagine them, and such imaginings made the biblical threats and promises very real and afforded the Church tremendous power in their lives, a power that it would often abuse and a power that it would slowly lose.

Tearing Down the Ladder

When Galileo took the spyglass, invented by the Dutch for the safe passage of ships on the seas, and turned it toward the starry heavens, he soon discovered that the cosmos was heliocentric and not geocentric. This discovery, along with his later discovery of the laws of motion, tore down the ladder between heaven and earth and shattered the biblical cosmology. He and others began to understand matter and motion in new ways. Angels, the symbol of God's hand and power in the world for centuries, were seen as fabrications of primitive and superstitious people. One hundred years after Galileo, Baron Paul-Henri Thiry D'Holbach (1723-1789), trained at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands and friend of Diderot and Rousseau expressed the new, emerging cosmology with utmost clarity and confidence:

For a being formed by Nature, who is circumscribed by her laws, there exists nothing beyond the great whole of which he forms a part, of which he experiences the influence. The beings his imagination pictures as above Nature, or distinguished from her, are always chimeras formed after that which he has already seen. The universe, that vast assemblage of everything that exists, presents only matter and motion: the whole offers to our contemplation nothing but an immense and uninterrupted succession of causes and effects (System of Nature, 1770).

Christians acquiesced to D'Holbach's assertion that the beings above nature are chimeras, projections into the heavens of things seen here on earth, and to the notion that the world is a self-regulating mechanism consisting only of matter and motion. All the King's horses and all the King's men have not been able to put a shattered, biblical cosmology together again. Angels reside in boxes in the basement of our consciousness.



Slowly over time, Christians accommodated themselves to a ladder-less cosmology and began to argue that heaven and earth were not in fact connected at all. The cosmos consisted of two non-overlapping spheres—a changeless, spiritual sphere where God resides and a changeable, material sphere of matter and motion. And they came to understand that their lives were similarly divided into two non-overlapping worlds—a private, spiritual world of values and beliefs, and a public, material world of fact and science. Many Christians gave up probing how the spiritual and material worlds were connected, and some even doubled down on maintaining a strict division of worlds, arguing that any form of blending violated the integrity of God and put believers on the road to idolatry—worshiping the thing created rather than the creator.

This cosmology has failed Christians because it cannot adequately account for the presence of God in our world. We can sing with the psalmist that all the creatures of the world are filled with good things from the very hand of God (104), and we can affirm the provident hand of God in the Heidelberg Catechism (Q & A 27), but we do not have a cosmology that renders such praise and such a theology plausible. For the psalmist and for Zacharius Ursinus, the angels were the hands of God.

With a tenuous sense of God's presence in the world, we feel an anomie in our hearts and relationships and an apathy in the face of the degradation of the natural world. The scriptures affirm that God is love, that the world is full of the love of God (Psalm 33:5,

119:64), and that the world at the deepest level is a manifestation of the loving relationships between God, humankind, and the natural world. But this love slowly dies in a non-overlapping cosmology because, as we all know, love requires the touch of a hand.

This failed cosmology of non-overlapping spheres has impoverished our lives on many levels. For many Christians, salvation has been reduced to a transaction by which God frees our eternal souls from the prison of the material world and communes with us in some disembodied state somewhere "out there." We continue to recite, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." but such a grand affirmation fails to register very deeply in our hearts or move us to act. Galileo was already leading the church to see salvation this way. Trying to create space for scientific investigation of the natural world while still retaining the authority of scripture, he advanced the argument of Cardinal Baronius: "The Holy Ghost [in the Scriptures] teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go."

This cosmology has impoverished our experience of worship for we are confused about what it means to come into the presence of God. This confusion is especially pronounced during the sacraments. A dramatic moment, for example, in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper is the epiclesis: "Send your Holy Spirit upon us, we pray, that the bread which we break and the cup which we bless will be to us the body and blood of Christ." Yet such a communion of the spiritual and material worlds is implausible to many Christians.

I'll never forget the comment made a few years ago by an elder from a flagship Reformed Church in a large city. I had been invited to make a presentation on the Reformed view of the sacraments, and I emphasized the significance of the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine. I made it clear that while we differed in significant ways from our Catholic brothers and sisters as to what transpired after the epiclesis, we stood closer to them than to our Baptist brothers and sisters because we believed that "something really happened" in the sacrament, that we were being nourished by the body and blood of Christ. The elder was upset and pronounced: "Bread can only be bread. You are espousing hocus-pocus nonsense."



In Baron D' Holbach's world of matter and motion, bread is bread and wine is wine. Without the anticipation that the Spirit may descend the ladder between heaven and earth and actually show up in our sacrament, or, as John Calvin taught, that believers ascend into heaven to commune with the ascended Jesus, the Lord's Supper becomes an empty ritual, and we walk away malnourished.

The cosmology of non-overlapping spheres impoverishes our experience of the created order. It accommodates the current economic arrangements by blessing the notion that the natural world order is raw material for manufacturing and consumption. It has no integrity of its own and, therefore, cannot be violated. We can excavate and extract all we want and no harm is ever done. When our consumptive fever is over, when the earth has become a landfill, when untold species have become extinct, we need not worry for we will fly away to heaven to be with Jesus. This attitude of Christians, more than any other, is the reason they do not care about the pending environmental collapse and do not respond to calls to save what is left of this once abundant world.

Rebuilding the Ladder

A close friend of mine once heard me ruminating on the role of angels in the scriptures and said: "Tom, you don't believe in angels, do you?" For him and for many of my friends, angels are chimeras, part of an ancient cosmology that is now obsolete and best left behind, along with the flat earth, the firmament holding back the blue waters visible in the sky, and the sun standing still.

I get the weight of the question. I have spent my life trying to indwell the ancient world of the scriptures and to explore the archaic consciousness of the Israelites, all the while believing there is truth to be found in the witness of these ancient believers that can inspire believers today. Such an indwelling is fraught. It requires sorting between the spirit and the letter of the text. Some parts of the ancient witness we carry forward and

some parts we leave behind, and it does not take one long to discover that one person's "spirit" is another person's "letter" of the text.

In his question, my friend had relegated angels to the letter of the text. There was a time in which I might have agreed with him, but my long indwelling of the ancient world has made me more sympathetic, slower to judge, and more willing to hang in there and try to go deeper. I do not think that angels are obsolete. In fact, I think that a more sympathetic engagement with ancient cosmology suggests how believers today might recover a more robust sense of God's presence in the world and how they might find a correspondence with the emerging modern cosmology.



Steven Hawking, Brian Swimme, and many others have written popular books about the origins of the cosmos. They have rendered their observations and complex calculations in images that make their work accessible to amateurs like me. Their research suggests that the universe began in a singularity, an incomprehensible concentration of energy. For reasons not yet known, this singularity flared forth and expanded in what is commonly called the "Big Bang." As this energy expanded, it cooled and congealed into elementary forces and particles. Subject to these forces, these particles coalesced over 14 billion years into the various systems, as small as atoms and as large as galaxies, that interfaced to form the universe. These same systems on the planet earth interfaced over four billion years to produce and sustain the abundance of life as we know it. Hawking and others have told us an intriguing story about how energy became matter and how everything in our diverse universe coheres.

The fundamental image that Hawking and others have used to convey this cosmology corresponds to the image that the people of Israel used thousands of years ago in their cosmology. As we have just briefly reviewed, they too explained how energy became matter. They saw God as the singular source of all that exists. God's heart burned with inexhaustible love and this love congealed in the form of angels who then flared forth and formed the systems that created and sustained life on the earth.

Ancient believers understood the world to be the manifestation of the love of God; its air, water, and food were gifts of love sustaining our lives breath by breath, drink by drink, meal by meal. Inspired by this image, they were moved to confess that the love and glory of God filled the earth and to praise God for the gift of life.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have taken angels out of the box in the basement of our consciousness and have tried to show how a sympathetic engagement with the biblical cosmology can help us recover a more robust sense of God's presence in the world and at the same time help us converse more fruitfully with the emerging modern cosmology.

Angels ascending and descending on the ladder connecting heaven and earth depicts how the love of God flares forth and congeals in the created order. If we take this cosmology to heart, perhaps we can begin to expand our understanding of salvation, begin to anticipate the Spirit in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and begin to honor the created order as a gift of the love of God. Perhaps we could overcome our anomie and apathy, and, just perhaps, we could be part of a reformation.