

11

Choirs of Angels

Let us consider the whole multitude of angels—
how they stand always ready to minister to his will.
For the Scripture says, “Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” (Dan. 7:10).

— CLEMENT OF ROME, FIRST CENTURY

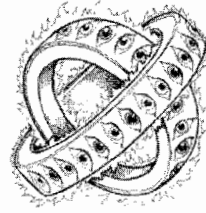
In the eighth century BC the prophet Isaiah unexpectedly witnessed God’s glory. While praying in the temple, his eyes opened to a heavenly vision. Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a glorious throne, “high and exalted” (Isa. 6:1). Surpassing the splendor of priestly liturgical vestments, the Lord’s robe overflowed the temple. A thundering whoosh of six-winged creatures flew above the throne, calling to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3). Their voices shook the doorposts and thresholds of the smoke-filled temple.

Faint and distraught, Isaiah cried, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (6:5). Then one of the creatures flew to Isaiah, holding a fiery coal pulled from the altar. The creature touched the prophet’s mouth and proclaimed, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (6:7).

The six-winged creatures were seraphim. They belonged to a vast hierarchy of angels, the wondrous and terrifying creatures who obeyed and ministered, warned and protected, worshiped and celebrated in heaven and earth.

Like the ancient Jews, the burgeoning number of Christians believed in angels and their interactions with the divine and human. However, few people beyond the clergy understood the many types of angels hovering in the universe. Accordingly, artists portrayed the wonder of angels from the following three spheres of responsibility.

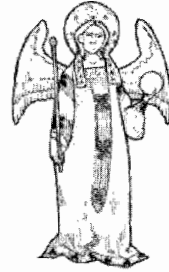
T H R O N E S Col. 1:16. In the Bible, thrones symbolized God's justice and authority and expressed peace, humility, and submission. These high celestial beings allowed the lower angels access to God. Also called *ophanim* (Hebrew), the thrones don't fit the common perception of angels. They took the form of fiery wheels with multiple eyes. **E X A M P L E**: *The Choirs of Angels*, mosaic by unknown artists, thirteenth century. Saint John Baptistery, Florence, Italy. Venetian mosaicists amplified the Last Judgment in this ceiling dome, with an enormous Christ flanked by two Judgment Angels, and grisly images of sinners suffering in hell. However, the artists also pieced together seven tiers around the ceiling's uppermost lantern, and the first row depicted thrones, dominions, and powers on a gilded background.



Second Sphere

Artists also represented angels of the second sphere, who served as heavenly governors.

D O M I N I O N S Eph. 1:21. In early Christian belief, dominion angels announced God's commands. In a leadership role over created matter, they ruled as the highest angels in the cosmos watching over order, discipline, and human happiness. They also regulated the duties of other angels. **E X A M P L E**: *Madonna and Child with Saints and Angels*, painting by Lippo Memmi, fourteenth century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. Memmi painted the nine choirs of angels holding their visual attributes and surrounding the Madonna and Child. Although artistic tradition usually depicted dominions holding swords or scepters, Memmi painted them carrying censers, which usually represented the people's prayers. This panel formed a diptych with the Crucifixion panel at the Louvre in Paris, France.



V I R T U E S Eph. 1:21. Early Christians believed virtues managed the elements of nature, primarily supervising the movements of the heavenly bodies so the cosmos remained orderly. They controlled seasons, stars, the moon, and the sun. These almost transparent angels also created miracles and offered grace and courage. **E X A M P L E**: *The Assumption of the*



Virgin, painting by Francesco Botticini, fifteenth century. National Gallery, London, England. Botticini detailed his painting with colorful choirs of angels, divided into three hierarchies, witnessing the Virgin Mary's entrance into heaven. In an unusual stroke, for the second tier he mingled saints with the angelic dominions, virtues, and powers. Perhaps he illustrated the belief that virtues encouraged saints.



P O W E R S Eph. 1:21. In Scripture and tradition, the powers served as warrior angels who protected humans and the cosmos. They fought evil spirits who stirred up chaos through humans, and they distributed earthly power among the world's peoples. Some scholars believe no power angel ever fell from grace; others think Satan was a power before he left heaven (Eph. 6:12). **EXAMPLE:** *Chasuble*, Gosser Ornat Pontifical Set, embroidery by unknown artists, thirteenth century. From the Goess Convent, Styria, Austria. Austrian Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria. Aside from archangels, specific angels in art usually appeared in illustrations of the nine choirs, crowded together around Christ or his mother.

Unusually, this chasuble designer represented each of the choirs with a single angel standing underneath nine arches, including a power. However, this artist differentiated the angels more by color and size than by visual attributes.

Third Sphere

Most frequently mentioned in Scripture and depicted in art, angels in the third sphere worked as heavenly messengers and soldiers.



A R C H A N G E L S Jude 1:9. Artistic renditions of the archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael varied, but they almost always revealed splendor, especially with their magnificent demeanors and wings. Translated from ancient Greek, archangels meant "chief angels" and "messengers." In Scripture they delivered messages at important times in spiritual history, such as the Annunciation and the Apocalypse. **EXAMPLE:** *The Three Archangels and Tobias*, painting by Fra Filippino Lippi, fifteenth century. Sabauda Gallery, Turin, Italy. Looking more feminine than