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Angels

Dan Ben-Amos

University of Pennsylvania, dbamos@sas.upenn.edu

Menachem Kallus

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Angels

Abstract

Jewish tradition considers angels to be messengers of God, but holds that they must not be substituted for God. Isaiah 63:9 speaks of the angel of God's divine countenance—an important designation in Jewish mysticism that has variously been taken to mean the archangel Metatron, the Shekhinah (or immanent divine presence), or the redeeming angel and was understood by some to be an extension of God and a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The Talmud (*Hagigah* 13b) declares that each divine angelic legion is formed of a million members, but that the legions themselves are numberless.

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Angels

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Jewish tradition considers angels to be messengers of God, but holds that they must not be substituted for God. Isaiah 63:9 speaks of the angel of God’s divine countenance—an important designation in Jewish [mysticism](#) that has variously been taken to mean the archangel Metatron, the Shekhinah (or immanent divine presence), or the redeeming angel and was understood by some to be an extension of God and a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The [Talmud](#) (*Hagigah* 13b) declares that each divine

angelic legion is formed of a million members, but that the legions themselves are numberless.

Scripture and Jewish tradition use numerous terms for angels: *ofanim*, *hayot*, *mal’akhim*, *’erelim*, *tarshishim*, *keruvim*, *serafim*, *shanim*, *hashmalim*, *ishim*, *bene Elohim*, *elim*, and *sarim*; these are variously construed as different classes of angels and are placed in various orders. Angelic names may have originated in esoteric mystical or magical rabbinic (or other Second Temple) traditions associated with Merkavah mysticism—speculations on the divine chariot, based on Ezekiel—and Hekhalot (heavenly halls) mysticism.

From the Hellenistic period, there were professional amulet writers whose products were considered effective enough by the community to permit “proven amulets” (as opposed to those whose efficacy had not been “proven”) to be carried in public on the [Sabbath](#) without contravening the [Sabbath](#) prohibition against carrying (*Shabat* 60a). Amulets employing divine and angelic names were written for either prophylactic purposes—to protect against destructive angels (*mal’akhe habalah*), who cause illness and who entered the world as the result of Adam’s fall—or for positive psychic enhancement. Instructions for amulet writing—including angels appointed for specific or auspicious times—along with prescribed ritual practices for preparing them survive in medieval manuscripts.



“This is the angel coming to Hagar.” Woodcut illustration from *Tzene-rene* (Lvov: Verlag v. B. L. N., 1872). (Gross Family Collection)

Angels are regarded by classical rabbinic midrash as having been brought into being during the process of creation. They are esteemed as extensions of divine power; in some esoteric rabbinic texts, angels are regarded as direct and timeless extensions of divinity. Some are seen as having been created for specific, limited functions, and as having ceased to exist afterward; others remain for the duration of created existence. Still others are created as the direct result of human thought and action, exemplifying the causal consequences of human action and intent. And there are angels appointed to preside over each and every function of nature.

In the early Middle Ages, in the classic Merkavah text known as *3 Enoch* (or *Hekhalot de-Rabi Yishma’el*; probably sixth-century Babylonia), the conceptualization of angelology reached a developed and complex stage. Here, the angels of the nations constitute a heavenly Sanhedrin, each with the honorific title YaH Yahveh Tseva’ot. In the early kabbalistic work *Sefer ha-bahir*, angels are also equated with the 70 names of God. The elaborate angelology in *3 Enoch* contrasts sharply with earlier texts, such as *Hekhalot rabati*, where the conceptual and structural elements of angelology are extremely opaque.

Another classic text of early Jewish mysticism that contains a rudimentary angelology, *Sefer yetsirah*, does not indicate any knowledge of these Merkavah–Hekhalot traditions. In some later medieval formulations that rely on rabbinic statements (e.g., those in BT *Sanhedrin* 93a), angels are regarded as the “external” manifestations of divinity, in contrast to the realm of the human soul, which is regarded as its “inner” expression. At the same time, in accordance with traditions inherited from Talmudic times, sages sought and believed they received revelations from the Angel of the [Torah](#)—or from the Prophet Elijah, whose physical form underwent an apotheosis as he was transformed into divine, angelic form (2 Kings 2:1). In the sixteenth century, when the question of the permissibility of praying to angels as intercessors to God was widely discussed, there was no universal rabbinic consensus.



Amulet to protect a woman and her newborn son, with invocations of Adam and Eve, Lilith, and several angels; Podolia or Ukraine, late nineteenth or early twentieth century. (The Russian Museum of Ethnography, St. Petersburg, Russia)

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Ashkenazic Traditions

The classical Ashkenazic angelological tradition, which preserves the entire known rabbinic and early medieval corpus, was transmitted by the twelfth-century Ashkenazic pietists (*Haside Ashkenaz*). The best-known compendium of Jewish angelology, *Razi'el ha-mal'akh* (1701), is attributed to the angel Razi'el (meaning "divine secrets"), who is said to have taught the traditions to Adam following the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and contains traditions of Talmudic angelic astrology along with later, fourteenth-century traditions from the school of the anonymous *Sefer ha-temunah*. There are thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Ashkenazic manuscripts bearing the title *Sefer Razi'el* that predate *Sefer ha-temunah* and contain early, as yet unpublished, angelological dictionaries and alphabets.

Menaḥem Tsiyoni traveled to the Land of Israel in the mid-fourteenth century and returned to Germany with Arabic magical traditions. These are apparently preserved in a large (650-page) Ashkenazic manuscript written in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Arabic (likely from Poland) on [magic](#) and related topics (Schocken Collection, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, #15927), including rare detailed instructions on amulet writing and manufacture. The important visionary, magical, and mystical (Spain; late fourteenth century?) work *Berit menuḥah*, which entered Ashkenazic Europe via *Shoshan sodot* (1784), by Mosheh ben Ya'akov of Kiev (1448–1520), was important for early [Hasidism](#). *Berit menuḥah* also received a commentary, titled *Derekh ha-kodesh* (published in Jerusalem, 1999), by Menaḥem Mendel of [Shklov](#), a disciple of the [Gaon of Vilna](#). From the Gaon, we have an extensive commentary on the Hekhalot sections of the [Zohar](#), published in *Yahel'or* (1882).

In 1945, Reuben Margoliot published the only extant fully annotated dictionary of angels, *Mal'akhe 'elyon*. An important sourcebook on angelology is *Sefer shorshe ha-shemot* (1999) by Mosheh Zakuto of Amsterdam (ca.1620–1697), who collected angelic traditions in Poland; it is a dictionary of divine and angelic names.

Significant practitioners of angelic mysticism whose works have been published include Eliyahu Ba'al-Shem and Yo'el Ba'al-Shem, both of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (the magical compendium *Toldot Adam* [1720] is attributed to them both); [Natan Spira](#), author of *Megaleh 'amukot* (1637); and Shimshon of Ostropolye, who wrote *Sefer ha-karnayim* (1709). These works all transmit many Ashkenazic angelic traditions of the seventeenth century and earlier.

The most comprehensive philosophical-mystical treatise on angels was written in mid-sixteenth-century Safed by Mosheh Cordovero and is titled *Derishot be-'inyene mal'akhim* (it was published as an appendix to the first edition of Margoliot's *Mal'akhe 'elyon*). It entered eighteenth-century Eastern Europe abridged, via an anthology compiled by Ya'akov Tsemaḥ and published as *Tsemaḥ tsadik* (1785). The nineteenth-century Lurianic magical work *Adam yashar* (1855), by Yitshak of Komarno (1806–1874), was written in response to a widespread plague in Eastern Europe. It illustrates the impact of Lurianic [Kabbalah](#), its prohibition of angelic abjuration, and the substitution of alternative ways of employing angels.

Folklore

By the nineteenth century in East European Jewish folklore, the vast array of angels had been reduced to two opposite groups of helpful and harmful angels; they managed the upper worlds and mediated between God and man. Chief among the harmful angels was the *mal'akh ha-mavet*, or angel of death. In the folk beliefs of the [shtetls](#), and in contrast to the attitude toward angels in esoteric traditions, angels were thought of with irony, cynicism, and, occasionally, [humor](#). In fact, [proverbs](#), folktales, and [folk songs](#) include relatively few references to angels.

In folk tradition, angels demonstrated competence and moral aptitude only in the upper worlds. Their role as managers of these realms is apparent in a religious ballad about poor and rich brothers (Y. L. Cahan, *Yiddish Folksongs*, no. 495). The angels take the poor brother, whose rich sibling mistreated him, to paradise, protecting him from the harmful angels of hell, and welcome him warmly into heaven. By contrast, the angels shut the gates of heaven tightly before the rich brother, whose life on earth was steeped in luxury, and open the gates of hell for him.

While in the upper worlds, angels in folklore perform their duties well as mediators between God and humanity; on earth, they are complete failures and, except for the angel of death, unreliable. East European Jews expressed the futility of relying on angels in Yiddish proverbs such as: *az men ruft dem malekh, kumt der galekh*—when you call for an angel, a priest comes; and *a malekh ken oykh keyn tsvey shlikhesn nit ton*—an angel cannot perform two tasks (see Midrash *Genesis Rabah* 50:2). Another proverb reflects complete disappointment in angels: *frier zaynen di malokhim arumgegangen af der erd, haynt zaynen zey afile in himl nito*—earlier, angels walked on earth, today they are not even in heaven. Only the angel of death is reliable—and inevitable—and from his watchful eyes nothing escapes: *Der malekh-hamoves hot a sakh oygn*—the angel of death has many eyes (see BT *'Avodah zarah* 20b); or *Mit dem malekh-hamoves traybt men nit katoves*—one does not fool around with the angel of death.

Suggested Reading

Ignatz Bernstein, *Jüdische Sprichwörter und Redensarten*, 2nd ed. (Warsaw, 1908); Y. L. (Yehuda Leyb) Cahan, *Yidische folkslider mit melodies*, ed. Max Weinreich (New York, 1957), introduction in English; Joseph Dan, *Iyunim be-sifrut ḥasidut Ashkenaz* (Ramat Gan, Isr., 1975); Reuben Margaliot, *Mal'akhe 'elyon: Ha-Muzkarim ba-talmud bavli vi-yerushalmi, be-khol ha-midrashim, zohar ve-tikunim, targumim ve-yalkutim le-sifre kodesh shel ha-kabalah* (Jerusalem, 1945); Peter Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*, trans. Aubrey Pomerance (Albany, N.Y., 1992); Gershom Scholem, *Shedim, ruḥot u-neshamot: Meḥkarim be-demonologyah* (Jerusalem, 2004); Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York, 1939; rpt., with a new intro., Philadelphia, 2004).

Author

[Dan Ben-Amos, Menachem Kallus](#)

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