Visions of Angels

Angels often manifest themselves in unexpected ways. The English poet William Blake, for example, had a vision of angels in Peckham Rye, then a rural suburb of London, when he was about ten years old. His biographer Alexander Gilchrist, who knew Blake, described the incident thus: "Surrounded by the boy looks up and sees a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every branch. Returned home he relates the incident, and only through his mother's intercession escapes a thrashing from his honest father, for telling a lie." A little later, he had another vision of angels walking towards him through the fields.

Both poets and saints seem to have been particularly susceptible to angelic visions. In an early poem, written in 1899, the German Symbolist poet Stefan George (1868–1933) described how he was freed from a period of being unable to write by the appearance of a naked angel who instructed him "to learn his art from the simpler and more straitened lines of gentler landscapes" rather than from the rougher, more romantic scenery of cliffs and rocks.

Women are among the most celebrated of saintly visionaries. The astonishing career of Joan of Arc, for example, was conducted in obedience to what she called her "voices." One of these voices was a personification of the Archangel Michael. St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) gives a vivid description of her own visionary experiences in her autobiographical writings. She describes, for example, how an angel drove the point of a golden lance repeatedly through her heart, causing a pain that was both spiritual and bodily. The agony caused by this visionary event helped Teresa to identify more closely with the sufferings of Christ. This mystical experience is vividly represented, in close accordance with the saint's own description, in a sculptural group by the great Baroque artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini, in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. Teresa's account stresses the fact that a vision of this kind can be an agonizing rather than a comfortable experience. Modern angelology to the contrary, a meeting with an angel or angels always carries with it an element of spiritual risk.
The archangel Michael is one of only three angels mentioned by name in the Bible, the others being Gabriel and Raphael. His chief role is to be commander-in-chief of the angelic host and this is how he appears in the Book of Revelation (12:7–8): “And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.”

Michael is also the angel who carries the souls of the deceased to heaven, where they are weighed in his scales. He appears in the Old Testament as the special protector of Israel, appearing to Joshua, though without being specifically named, before the fall of Jericho, then in the Book of Daniel, where he helps the Archangel Gabriel defeat the Persians. A little later he is described to Daniel in a vision as “the great prince who protects your people” (Daniel 11:1). In the New Testament Book of Jude, he struggles with the devil to protect the body of Moses (Jude 1–9). Tradition suggests that he was the angel who instructed Moses on Mount Sinai. Michael is prominent in the Apocrypha. In the Vision of Paul, he speaks in person “Hear Michael speak! I am he who stands in the sight of God every hour. As the Lord Lives, in whose sight I stand, I do not stop one day or one night praying incessantly for the human race.” In the Book of Enoch, he is described as the angel of forbearance and mercy, who teaches Enoch about true justice.

In art he appears in several guises—often fighting the dragon, or Satan in some other form, or leading a host of angels in battle against the forces of evil. He is also shown as a weigher of souls, and as a world ruler—a prince in splendid robes, holding an orb in his hand. This echoes the fact that his name is a variant of the Hebrew Micah, which means “he who is like God.”
“A man does not always choose what his guardian angel intends.”

Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274)
On his wife Sarah’s instructions, Abraham conceived a child with his servant Hagar (Agar) because Sarah herself appeared to be infertile. Later Hagar was banished for insolence and fled to the wilderness. When she was about to die of thirst, God sent an angel to find water for her. This story is told twice: in Genesis 16, Hagar is pregnant when she flees. In Genesis 21, her son is with her.

Psalm 91:10-11

“He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.”