

# What is an angel?

The word 'angel' simply means 'messenger'. The Bible contains many stories of God speaking to people through heavenly messengers and these encounters are important in the Gospel accounts of the first Christmas. Some images, particularly of the angel Gabriel coming to Mary, show angels carrying the short staff or 'wand' which messengers carried in the classical world.



**RAFFAELLO Sanzio**, The Sistine Madonna (detail)  
1513-14, Oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden

## Angel wings

There are 273 references to angels in the Bible, but none of these describe them as having wings. Often 'angels' are described as looking like people, usually young men, sometimes distinguished by their dazzling appearance or pure white garments, at other times they are likened to fire and flame. The image of angels as winged figures in Jewish and Christian tradition can be traced back to the description of the pair of cherubim on the top of the ark of the Covenant. These figures faced each other, with their wings overshadowing the central 'mercy seat'. These may have resembled the winged heavenly beings depicted by neighbouring

cultures, such as the Shedu or winged bulls of Assyria. The call of the prophet Isaiah describes Seraphim, figures with six wings.

Classical Greece and Rome used winged female figures to symbolise the spirit of Victory, Nike. Early Christian art often showed angels without wings, and sometimes as bearded or bald. The convention of showing angels as young winged men developed in the fourth century, to distinguish angels from people and the pagan figure of Nike. From the early fifteenth-century Renaissance artists revived the classical image of winged babies, originally the companions of Venus, to show appealing and playful angels. These 'cherubs' or 'putti' (meaning little men) are famously pictured in the lower part of the Sistine Madonna. They are sometimes shown simply as a head and pair of wings, as on the case of the Bishop Street organ.

## Angelic actions

Angels are heavenly beings who live in God's presence and serve and worship God. They share God's joy when people repent of their sins. They sing God's praise. Some Bible passages and Christian traditions make a strong connection between the form of the heavenly worship of angels and the worship offered on earth. Medieval and Renaissance artists often showed angels dressed in the liturgical garments worn by priests and deacons or playing instruments, singing hymns and wafting incense. Angels are also described as acting as a 'host' or 'heavenly army'; for example Elisha's servant sees a vision of angels outnumbering a hostile army.



# Heavenly Hierarchy

Bible stories refer to angels, archangels, such as Gabriel and Michael, cherubim and seraphim. Paul's Letter to the Colossians describes a longer list of 'heavenly beings: thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers' (ch. 1 v. 16). Angels fascinated early Christians; indeed the New Testament includes explicit teaching against 'worshipping angels'. Early Church writers used these Biblical names to construct a 'Heavenly Hierarchy' - a 'top nine' list of heavenly beings. The most influential of these was Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite who around 500 AD described nine choirs of angels with seraphim at the top and archangels and angels, closest to humanity, at the bottom.

## Herald Angels

This idea of rank and order chimed in with the image of Heaven as a royal court. The carol, 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing' appeals to this imagery of pageantry, referring not only to heralds and proclamation, but also 'triumphs' (imperial processions) to hail the Prince of Peace. Medieval paintings, screens, roofs and stained glass use this imagery. This window from All Saints North Street compares the Heavenly Hierarchy with the earthly social hierarchy, here showing angels as the guardians of a mixed group of lay men, women and children.



All Saints North Street, York, early fifteenth century,  
9 Heavenly Hierarchies (Angels with civilians)

# Angels and Mortals

The Advent hymn 'There's a light upon the mountains' pictures humans like the heavenly host defending what is good: 'the drumbeats of His army are the heartbeats of our love'. The Christmas hymn 'Hark the Herald angels sing' is one of many which encourages the singers to join the angelic choir in heavenly songs of worship. Its theme of the reconciliation of earth and heaven - the message of the angels to the shepherds of peace on earth and good will to all people - is literally represented in Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* (1500) with images of angels and people embracing.

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**BOTTICELLI, Sandro:** *The Mystical Nativity*, detail,  
c. 1500 Tempera on canvas, 109 x 75 cm  
National Gallery, London

