

The Trouble With Angels



No, this detailed depiction doesn't come from the ABC hit series, *Touched by an Angel*. It was written, in Latin, by none other than Cotton Mather, arguably one of New England's most renowned and learned ministers. Recorded in his diary probably in 1685, Mather's vision of a winged, beardless angel sporting a "splendid tiara" is surprising, virtually unprecedented. Puritan divines like Mather usually read portents and wonders negatively, as signs of God's displeasure. They could accept that devils came to earth. Angels or God's direct intercessions were another matter. Cotton's father, Reverend Increase Mather (the first president of Harvard College and a prominent Boston minister) warned that angels must never be worshipped, and of this much he was sure: "[T]he Angelical Nature is *invisible* to bodily eyes." Yet despite his father's reservations (and no doubt even his own), Cotton Mather saw an angel in glorious splendor.

Why were Puritans more skeptical of benevolent angels than of fallen ones? And why did they doubt *women's* sightings of these dubious creatures even more than men's? These are important questions, ones that shed light on the pessimism of Puritan theology, on the misanthropy with which they interpreted the doctrine of predestination, and on their practical devaluation of women. All humans, they believed, were either doomed or saved, but it was far easier for a person to earn damnation than it was for any man or woman to merit salvation. Indeed, merit had nothing to do with it; you could effortlessly slide into hell, but you could not climb into heaven however many good deeds and works of charity you stood upon. Puritan fears were darker than their faith was bright, and consequently, they thought a spirit purporting to be a good angel was far more likely to be the devil in disguise. And, as we shall see, they believed women more susceptible than men to Satan's subterfuge.

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Puritans treated angels skeptically, yet because of their ubiquitous presence in Scripture, they could not be discounted entirely. Ministers sometimes attributed miraculous healing to divine intervention, tentatively linking curing to angels. Increase Mather pointed to the ways in which biblical characters, such as Daniel, had been healed and suggested that ordinary people might also benefit from angels. In *The Angel of Bethesda*, the colonies' first complete medical guide, Cotton Mather recounted tales of several people who had remedies presented to them in dreams as they slept, or of men and women so miserably ill that doctors could do nothing more for them, yet who achieved full and dramatic recoveries due to "the Wonderful Work which He had wrought

upon" them. Mather cautiously, but unshakably, suggested the direct involvement of angels, though he feared arousing "Unwarrantable *Superstitions, or Affectations.*" Nevertheless, he admitted that "It is possible there may be more of the *Angelical Ministry*, than we are *Ordinarily* aware of." Angels operated covertly, "*Behind the Curtain,*" he suggested, by leaving "Impressions on the Mind" of physicians, providing them with information about cures available only through this "Insensible Manuduction." Indeed, he hinted, his very own book, *The Angel of Bethesda*, might in fact have been a product of the angelic ministry's guiding hand.

Angels' powers were as broad as they were elusive. Increase Mather denied them any independent activity but nonetheless suggested they could be useful to the faithful. "There are *Thousands of Thousands*, yea, *Myriads of Myriads* of them," he contended. "This we are sure of." Angels were "serviceable" to believers, in order that they might better serve God, and thus wielded extraordinary power, enough "to manage and apply all the *Elements*, to make *Thunders and Lightenings*, and *Earthquakes!*" They answered believers' prayers; they protected them from enemies; and they relieved people of "Wants, of Straits, of Difficulties." Like God, angels watched over. Yet they also simply watched. Increase Mather warned, "Remember, that the Angels are the Spectators of your Behavior. Behave your selves, as having the Eyes of the Angels on you. Often think, *Is not an Angel standing by?*"

How could one know if supernatural interference was demonic or angelic? Ministers and laity alike struggled with this question. According to Paul in Corinthians, Satan frequently disguised himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). Satan may indeed attempt this transformation, Puritans believed, in order to disarm his victims and lure souls away from Christ. Believers had to be on guard for such dangerous deceptions. Increase Mather was particularly concerned with trickery. "How easy then is it for *Daemons*, who have a perfect Understanding in *Opticks*, and in the Power of Nature to deceive the Eyes, and delude the Imaginations of Silly Mortals?" Despite angels' invisibility, Mather believed that "Good Angels do not hide themselves in the dark under ambiguities, but declare their messages clearly." Yet for Increase and Cotton Mather alike, an angel's credibility seemed to depend on what the apparition's messages were and to whom they were offered.



"Jacob Wrestling with the Angel." From *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testament: Translated out of the Original Tongues, and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised* (Hartford, 1818). Image courtesy the AAS.

Two examples illustrate both Mathers' wariness when it came to angels visibly or audibly declaring their messages clearly to ordinary people, especially women. In 1694, an unnamed female congregant in Boston's North Church heard a voice which she initially assumed was that of an angel, but which Cotton Mather ascertained most likely was not. At first suspicious that the woman might be the victim of a "loose Imagination," Mather came to believe the "Invisible Whisperer" was indeed angelic when it told the woman secrets that she otherwise could not have known. But later two factors caused Mather to change his mind and ultimately doubt the vision's genuineness. First, under the alleged angel's guidance, it seemed that the young woman no longer wanted to visit Mather, believing as he put it, "the Lord had made her *Pastor*." In addition, the spirit apparently spread malicious gossip that Mather deemed inconsistent with the behavior of a benevolent angel, and so he became convinced that the voices "had no Angelical Aspect." He warned his parishioner to ignore the voice. Heeding his advice, she said to her apparition, "I desire no more to hear from you; Mr. Mather saies you are a Divel, and I am afraid you are. If you are an Angel of the Lord, give mee a Proof of it." The spirit apparently could not provide the evidence and never returned, satisfying Mather that he had successfully aborted "Witchcraft of the most explicit sort."

Another unnamed female North Church parishioner saw an angel while she sat in Cotton Mather's study for religious counseling. After entering a trance-like state, she revived to describe "a most Glorious Appearance of An Angel in a Shining Apparel." Mather admonished her to be cautious of diabolical appearances; after she left him he shared his apprehensions with his father, who concurred that Satan might be involved. Later at a women-only prayer meeting, she was visited again, this time by more than one angel, with a message for both her and Mather. One of the spirits directly confronted Mather's skepticism: "Our Friend Mather is Apt to doubt we are good Angels, but tell him for to Convince him that we are these things, for he'll be here in half an hour, that he's now Studying Such a Sermon on Such a Text, and that

such and such Thoughts have occur'd to him lately, for we are assisting him in his Composure of and lately Suggested such thoughts to his Mind[.]” The angel’s prophecy turned out to be accurate; upon his arrival, Mather admitted that he had been studying that particular sermon. In the end the angels told the woman that because their appearance troubled Increase Mather, “we will[,] because we loath to grieve him, never visit you anymore.”

In both of these cases, the sighted angels authenticated themselves by knowing things otherwise unknowable to their subjects. But it was precisely this kind of secret knowledge that made angel sightings suspect. Puritans construed any sort of providential experience as a revelation, a dangerous step toward claiming certain knowledge of God’s plans for the future. Given their belief in predestination, where one’s spiritual destiny—election or damnation—remained unknown to mortals until Judgment Day, Puritans simultaneously searched for divine knowledge and shunned alleged demonstrations of spiritual assurance. They wanted to know their futures after death but contented themselves with ambiguity, searching instead for signs that might provide hints (but never absolute certainty) about their ultimate fate.

Cotton Mather’s own dramatic angel sighting remained within the bounds of theological plausibility because the spirit did not speculate on Mather’s destiny. Instead the shining, winged figure dressed in white foretold Mather’s great influence on earth through his writings and publishing. “[T]he fate of this youth should be to find full expression for what in him was best,” said the angel, and he predicted Mather’s authority would spread “not only in America, but in Europe” as well. Mather had no trouble justifying his own angel sighting, even though it contradicted his father’s insistence on angel invisibility. “I do now believe,” he wrote, “that some *great Things* are to be done for mee, by the *Angels* of God.” If angels did help him, he promised not to abuse that privilege; he would continue to do God’s work by making himself more useful to the sick and poor, for example. In addition, Mather was quite conscious of his responsibility to be discreet, confiding in his diary that he would conceal “with all prudent Secrecy, whatever extraordinary Things, I may perceive done for mee by the Angels, who love Secrecy in their Administrations.”

Mather, as a powerful minister, had confidence in what he saw, and in his right to see it. He had less confidence in the visions of his parishioners, especially if they were women. Precisely because women were considered *more* likely to succumb to Satan’s temptations, they were thought *less* likely to be the direct or particular beneficiaries of angelical apparitions. Increase Mather doubted especially those reports in which women *alone* had seen angelic visitors; in his view, the chances that Satan had simply deluded these women were high. Mather reasoned, “if those White Angels appear to Females only, who are the weaker Sex, and more easy to be imposed on, that renders the case yet the more suspicious.” In “former dark ages,” he explained, many women achieved fame due to “pretended Angelical Apparitions and Revelations.” A noted anti-Catholic, Mather likely referred to female Catholic mystics, like Teresa of

Avila, whom he presumed received spurious revelations. Mather urged his Protestant readers to rest assured: "if ever an Age for Angelical Apparitions shall come, no question but men, and *not women only* will be honoured with their Visage."

The elder Mather apparently had hidden talents as a diviner of the future, for an age of angelical apparitions did come in the eighteenth century. And, as he predicted, both men and women claimed to see these divine beings. Eighteenth-century didactic verses and spiritual narratives betray a shift in religious world view: through the miraculous intercession of a heavenly messenger, hopeful souls searched more actively and optimistically for their ultimate destination and more often became convinced, because an angel told them so, that they were among the saved.

The story *Heavenly Damsel*, published anonymously in the 1750s, portrayed a girl's active search for her ultimate destination, rather than a passive wait for divine grace: "Her Thoughts her Words her Actions were divine / *How to gain Heaven she spent all her Time.*" And for this she was rewarded. She had stopped to read and contemplate chapter 27 of Matthew on her way home from school one day when, out of nowhere, a "Person in bright Rayment, whose Hair was as White as Flaxen and whose Face shone like Gold approached her, and spake unto her." The angel said to her, "Dear Child when thou of Life are dispossesst, Thy Soul shall go into eternal Rest, With God and Christ, with Saints and Angels dwell." Surprised by the angel's presence and ecstatic about his message, the girl related to her mother the unusual happenings and went to bed. True to the angel's word, the next day she became ill and later died, calling for the blessed angels to guide her to the hereafter.

The democratization of American religion has been well documented. Ministerial authority eroded, established churches felt the challenges of new denominations like Baptists and Methodists, and church membership expanded as the religious world became diverse and inclusive. Widespread angel sightings suggest that an increased sense of access to the supernatural as a means of knowing one's ultimate destiny must be considered a part of that popularizing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trend. In the seventeenth century, certain knowledge of one's future, however conveyed, signaled indisputable damnation, something believers hoped to avoid. By the beginning of the Great Awakening in the 1730s, angel sightings and accompanying divine revelation no longer carried the negative connotations of a century earlier.



"Angel," 1887. From the Bowen Family Papers, Octavo vol. "B." Image courtesy the AAS.

As the religious climate changed, not only did the gender of angel witnesses change; so too did the gender of the angels themselves. By the nineteenth century, believers usually claimed to see or hear female angels with long flowing hair and white robes, a far cry from Mather's masculine, loin-girded angel. The feminization of angels was a gradual process, and by no means completely consistent. It developed in unison with a kinder, gentler religious sensibility, one in which salvation was available potentially to all believers, and in which women and men alike could justify their optimism about their futures by claiming an angel of their own.

Today angels seem to be everywhere in American culture, as a glance at the "Spirituality" section of any mainstream bookstore or a look at this week's television listings will attest. Contemporary observers "see" angels regularly, whether as personal guardians, spiritual leaders, healers, or comforters. Countless books and workshops promise to help the hopeful, primarily women, connect with these messengers from heaven. While the Hallmark card version of angels tends to be female or feminine, witnesses describe their own spirits variously: some are genderless beings, others mysterious voices or invisible hands, still others female or male strangers that help them out of impossible binds, even life-threatening situations. Grace is the order of the day; rarely do today's apparitions prophesy doom. Today's angels signify and confirm ordinary people's intimate and favorable relationship with the divine, affirm the certitude of their salvation, and offer therapeutic personal assistance, all spiritual messages that were anathemas in the Mathers' world.

Further Reading

On the dating of the angel sighting, see David Levin, "When Did Cotton Mather See the Angel," *Early American Literature* 15 (1980-81): 271-75, and Kenneth

Silverman's review of Mather's *Paterna*, in *Early American Literature* 15 (1980): 80-87; on the Puritan mistrust of miracles in the modern age, see Robert Bruce Mullin, *Miracles and the Modern Religious Imagination* (New Haven, Conn., 1997). Increase Mather wrote about angels in several sermons, most fully in *Angelographia, or A Discourse Concerning the Nature and Power of the Holy Angels, and the Great Benefit which the True Fearers of GOD Receive by their Ministry* (Boston, 1696). Cotton Mather explained the connection between healing and angels in his comprehensive medical manual, published posthumously, *The Angel of Bethesda: An Essay Upon the Common Maladies of Mankind* (Barre, Mass., 1972). Mather's sermon notes, located at the American Antiquarian Society, also contain his thoughts on angels. I'd like to gratefully acknowledge the American Antiquarian Society for their assistance and support.

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Elizabeth Reis is the author of *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca, NY., 1997) and the editor of *Spellbound: Women and Witchcraft in America* (Wilmington, Del., 1998) and *American Sexual Histories: Blackwell Readers in American Social and Cultural History* (Malden, Mass., 2001). Reis teaches at the University of Oregon and is writing a book about the history of angel belief in America.