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Aristides and Athenagoras of Athens on Angels: From Christian–Jewish Polemics towards Universalism

Serafim Seppälä

The second-century apologists Aristides and Athenagoras of Athens both mention angels rather briefly in their respective apologies. Behind their remarks, however, there exist well thought-through beliefs and profound ideas with scores of subtexts. In their comments on angels, Aristides and Athenagoras are facing completely different needs and questions, which in turn provide some indications on the development of Christianity in the half a century between the two apologies.

Aristides on angels

In the case of Aristides, the immediate context of his reference to angels is one of the most remarkable features in the whole of his *Apology* – that is, his evaluation of Judaism. Most likely written as early as in the 120s, Aristides is contemporary with writings such as the *Letter of Barnabas* that customarily highlight the difference of Judaism and Christianity in almost aggressive terms. The narrative of Aristides, however, is distinguished by its extraordinarily responsive and positive view on Jews and Judaism, even though the context would have admitted, or even demanded, a more polemical approach. In the middle of a harsh critique of Hellenic cults, the author states that the Jews are distinguished by their monotheistic faith that is close to the truth:

> The Jews then say that God is one, the Creator of all, and omnipotent; and that it is not right that any other should be worshipped except this God alone. And herein they appear to approach the truth more than all the nations, especially in that they worship God and not his works.[1]

An early Christian author of course can be expected to admit that a biblically based vision of God is not without its worth. What is more surprising, however, is that Aristides proceeds to praise also the practical and ethical applications by affirming the Jewish way of life as righteous and praiseworthy. And even more, the praise is applied also to Jewish *tradition*, for all the good in the Jewish life-style results from the inherited tradition of their fathers:

> And they imitate God by the philanthropy which prevails among them; for they have compassion on the poor, and they release the captives, and bury the dead, and do such things as these, which are acceptable before God and well-pleasing also to men, […] which (customs) they have received from their forefathers.[2]

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[1] Arist. *Apol.* 14.3.
[2] Arist. *Apol.* 14.3.

This is probably the only praise of this kind in early Christian literature, in which the general intention was to create and preserve certain distance from Judaism. After these positive remarks, however, Aristides states that the Jews, too, have "erred from true knowledge", and in practice their servitude is not to God but to the angels, a rather unusual argument in a theological discourse:

> […] in their imagination[3] they conceive that it is God they serve; whereas by their mode of observance it is to the angels (*malakhē*) and not to God that their service is rendered.[4]

Then Aristides continues to give some concrete examples of the religious activity that is accorded to the angels. Perhaps surprisingly, these are the most evident details of the Jewish law: the Sabbath, feasts, fasts and kosher food.[5] In other words, the most basic constituents of Jewish identity are used as examples of religious observance directed to angels.

In the following account, the aim is to provide a commentary for the above remark, by setting it into a wider context of the early Jewish–Christian polemics. Where did the idea of servitude to angels come from; what kind of background did it arise from? What kind of theological interests did the remark serve, and what kind of needs did it fulfil in the second century? And finally: how did the interest in angels develop in Athens during the second century, as witnessed by Athenagoras' remarks on angels some five decades later.

In addition, the textual history of Aristides' *Apology* compels us to ask not only where did the idea come from, but also, where did it go to? In the Greek version of the text, embedded in the famous legend of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, the basic version of which dates from around the tenth century, the reference to angels has been omitted altogether, indicating that the line of thought was inconceivable or unfitting in the early Middle Ages. The fact that the original reading has been preserved in Syriac is not extraordinary, due to the extremely peculiar textual history of the text: the Greek version is shorter by a half, abbreviated to fit the Indian context of *Barlaam*. The Syriac version, on the other hand, is known to contain its own additions and pecularities. Unfortunately, the Armenian fragment of Aristides does not cover the chapter in question and thus does not provide assistance.

In the Greek version, the Jews are depicted as "stubborn and ungrateful" (φανέντες καὶ ἀχάριστοι) instead, and it is even stated that they "often served the idols of the nations". The Greek version, while admitting that "to this day they worship the one God Almighty", observes that this does not take place "according to knowledge" (κατ᾽ἐπίγνωσιν). The Greek text concentrates on the Jews' denial of Christ: instead of elevating them above the heathen, the text rather stresses the lack of any substantial qualitative difference.[6]

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[3] Syriac *tar῾ītā* refers to cognitive activity in a wide sense: it may be translated as thinking, mind, thought(s); in this context, 'imagination' is not impossible.

[4] Arist. *Apol*. 14.4.

[5] After enumerating "Sabbaths, beginning of months, feasts of unleavened bread, a great fast, fasting and circumcision" and "the purification of meats", it is added that Jews do not observe these perfectly.

[6] The description of Jews in the Greek text ends up likewise: "For they deny that Christ is the Son of God; and they are much like to the heathen, even although they may seem to make some approach to the truth from which they have removed themselves" (Arist. *Apol*. 14).

In other words, the appreciation for Jewish monotheism was kept to the absolute minimum, and all praises for Jewish ways of life were dropped altogether by the editor of the tenth-century Greek text. As a side-effect of this purge, the reference to Jewish worship being directed at angels disappeared likewise. The omission is understandable as such, for the ideological context of the remark had withered away by the seventh century.[7]

Angels in 'half-biblical' literature: Substituting God for the Nations?

What, then, was the original context of the idea? It is well-known that during the emergence of Christianity there was a huge interest on angels in many sectors of Judaism. Angels are a central theme in a good portion of deuterocanonical literature, especially in *First Book of Enoch*, *Second Book of Enoch*, *Book of Jubilees*, *Apocalypse of Abraham* and *Ascension of Isaiah.* These books probably had more relevance in second-century Christianity than is usually recognised. It is not necessary to go into details here, but it is worth recalling that the first Christians did not consider these kinds of books as 'non-canonical'. This is not only because *Enoch* and *Jubilees* were later considered canonical in Ethiopia, and not even because *Enoch* is quoted in the New Testament, but rather because the whole idea of texts being strictly canonical or not was neither significant nor fundamental among the first Christians, nor in the first century (pre-Yavneh) Judaism.

In the Apocrypha, the idea of angel-worship appears in a rather surprising context: the function for which it was used was no less than to provide an answer to the mystery of the linguistic, cultural and religious diversity of the world. In the Hebrew text of the *Testament of Naphtali* (not the Qumran fragment, but the one published by Gaster in 1899), there is told the story of the emergence of languages, inspired by *Gen*. 11. According to the story in *T. Naph.*, seventy angels taught languages to seventy nations respectively; consequently, all the non-Jewish nations chose to be protected by the angel who had taught them their language, but Abraham refused to ask for an angel and chose to worship his Creator alone. The implicit message is that in all the other religions, the worship and servitude is limited to the angel who protects them.[8]

The same idea appears also in the *Book of Jubilees*, dating to the first century BC, which seems to have been popular reading, or perhaps rather, a collection of popular stories and interpretations. In *Jub*. 15:27 it is stated that Israel was sanctified before the angels. God did not appoint any angel for Israel, but personally took care of them:

> But over Israel He did not appoint any angel or spirit, for He alone is their ruler, and He will preserve them and require them at the hand of His angels and His spirits, and at the hand of all His powers in order that He may preserve them and bless them, and that they may be His and He may be theirs from henceforth for ever.[9]

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[7] For a detailed discussion on the textual process between the Greek *Vorlage* and the existing Syriac and Greek versions, see Rutherford 2013.

[8] *T. Naph.* 12–14, translation by M. Gaster 1899.

[9] *Jub*. 15:32. Cf. *Ben Sirah*: "For each nation he appointed a leader, and the Lord's portion is Israel" (17:17, *NETS* translation). The latter sentence could be translated "but Israel is the portion of the Lord".

For the other nations, however, God "placed spirits in authority to lead them astray from Him".[10] If the piece sounds like collective self-praise, one should note that in the very same context it is stated that Israel will forsake the covenant: "the children of Israel will not keep true to this ordinance" and even that "there will no more be pardon or forgiveness unto them […] for all the sin of this eternal error".[11] Yet the main argument is clear: the worship of other nations is based on the (misleading) activities of angels, which implies that their worship is directed at their angels.

We cannot say precisely how general this way of thinking was. Due to the peculiar reception history of *Jubilees*, it is even difficult to estimate whether the story was more popular among the Semitic Judaism of the Middle East, or whether it was more typical of the Hellenistic Jews.[12] In his discussion on *Gen*. 11 in *De Confusione Linguarum*,[13] Philo does not refer to the angels of nations, or cults arising thereby, but elsewhere he does present the idea that the number of nations corresponds to the number of angels, arguing that each angel has a particular virtue, but the portion of God is his chosen people Israel.[14] Given the popularity of (Hebrew) *Jubilees* in Qumran, however, one may suppose that the idea had come to Athens rather from Jerusalem than from Alexandria.

However this may be, the idea must have been present among the Jews more widely than in a couple of detached literary notions only. Theologically, the story of national angels behind the cults of nations obviously serves to fulfil two distinct functions. On the one hand, it secures the supremacy of One God, as well as that of Jewish monotheism; and on the other hand, it does grant some spiritual value to the existing religions, their cults and traditions, and even explains the existence of supra-natural or miraculous phenomena in these traditions. To combine these two aspects has usually been painstakingly difficult for the monotheistic religions, but angels did serve as a functional answer for the tension between the demands of one-cult monotheism and the existence of local cults and spiritualities.

The early Christian takeover of the idea: Apologists on Jews and angels

It seems that the early Christians quickly turned the argument against Jews themselves. Determinedly aiming to be more universalistic, the Christians assumed that they had a full approach to God in Christ, and the ordinary Jews were seen to be limited in their worship correspondingly. Nevertheless, it was inappropriate to consider Jewish worship as totally wrong or worthless, given that it was the worship of patriarchs, prophets, even of Christ and the apostles themselves. But what, then, was the spiritual value of prayers performed with an understanding of God which was essentially incomplete, lacking and outdated? Where were such prayers going to? This limited character of Jewish worship was expressed and interpreted with the help of the existence and role of angels.

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[10] *Jub*. 15:31.
[11] *Jub*. 15:33–34.
[12] The Hebrew original was popular in Qumran, and the Greek version was rather well known to the early church fathers; yet it has survived only in Ethiopian, not in Rabbinic Judaism or in Greek.
[13] For Philo, angels serve as the explanation for the origin of evil (*Conf. ling.* 8 [28]) or are a symbolical expression for 'company of incorporeal souls' (*Conf. ling.* 34 [103]).
[14] Ph. *Post.* 91–92.

The earliest Christian remark for such discussions is almost certainly in *Col*. 2. Paul, in his project of developing a Christ-centered re-interpretation of the Jewish law, warned of those who delight in "worship of angels" (θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων). This has often been read as a warning against angel-worship, perhaps of some obscure Gnostic cult, but literally speaking, Paul did not warn about angel-worship as such, but against *those who* go in for a "religion of angels" or "cult of angels", as the expression in question could also be translated. In the context, the warning is in fact a rhetorical conclusion for the description of those Jews who basically pay attention to kosher rules ("eat or drink"), festival days and Sabbath observance. In other words, Paul seems to label the traditional Torah-based religiosity as θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, thus reusing the idea mentioned in *Jubilees* and turning it inside out.[15] Moreover, Paul takes it for granted that such Christless Judaism will be comprehended as θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων among his readers, for he does not explain his remark at all.

Another early witness is the splendid discussion in *Heb*. 1–2, in which the focus is on the fact that Christ is essentially superior to the angelic beings, a most serious early Jewish-Christian concern. It is fundamentally related to our topic, for the discussion in Hebrews implies that one central interest underlying the text is to show that to worship Christ is essentially more than to worship angels.

Another set of reactions to the same topic is the angelic perspective accorded to the incarnation, as portrayed in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, a possibly second-century Christian version of a Jewish text. The Messiah descends from the highest divine reaches of heaven to his incarnate form on earth by passing through the angelic realms: he becomes an angel, a less glorious one in each realm, thus losing his divine light step by step.[16]

Aristides of Athens was, most likely, from a non-Jewish background and therefore perhaps not familiar with Jewish traditions in great detail, but one may assume that the Jewish 'half-biblical' stories, such as those in *Jubilees*, were well-known among the very first generation(s) of Christians – and in any case, among the Jewish opponents in the early second century. Thus, the idea of 'servitude to angels' could even have been brought to Athens by Paul himself, as the narrative in Colossians suggests. In fact, the topic could hardly have been avoided in the first-century discussions about Judaism and universal truth in Athens. Most probably, Aristides just followed his Christian teachers in using the argument (the much less likely option is that he had heard the basic claim from the Jews in the beginning of the second century and reacted to it by turning it back on them). In fact, such *topoi* easily survive for decades after the times of their most urgent usage. Indeed, it may be that they continue to live on in the other traditions (in this case, Christianity) by being opposed, even when the original community (in this case, Judaism) has already forgotten or abandoned the notions in question.

Obviously, Aristides was not alone in stating that the Jewish servitude is not to God but to the angels. Angels in general had a considerable role in Jewish-Christian

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[15] *Col*. 2:16–19 (NIV). "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow."

[16] *Asc. Is.* 10, translation by Sparks 1984.

debates. It is telling that whilst Justin Martyr mentioned angels in his *Apologies* on fifteen occasions, in his *Dialogue* with his (imagined) Jewish opponent angels come up about eighty times.[17] The numbers speak for the relevance of angelology in Jewish-Christian debates. For Justin Martyr, the main concern in this regard was the presence of Logos in the ancient angelophanies of the OT; he also stressed the free will of angels and men.

The early Christian angel-Christology, famous from the *Shepherd of Hermas* and Justin Martyr, was basically an outgrowth of an Old Testament exegesis concerning the appearances of Logos in the Old Covenant. As the *Ascension of Isaiah* in its own way shows, for God both to become human and to become an angelic being can be seen as variations of the same principle, that of *kenosis*. Justin stated that "He who is called God and appeared to the patriarchs is called both Angel and Lord, in order that from this you may understand him to be minister to the Father of all things."[18] Justin underlined that as the Logos of God, the Son has appeared "sometimes in the form of fire, and sometimes in the likeness of angels (εἰκόνος ἀσωμάτου)".[19] For Justin, the Triad that appeared in Mamre was the Logos with two angels; thereby Justin managed to explain in logical terms why it was that the Lord himself was at times speaking in the Biblical narrative.[20]

For the interpretation of Aristides' remark, however, the most interesting textual evidence is certainly in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata*, in which he accused Jews of angel-worship:

> Neither worship as the Jews; for they, thinking that they only know God, do not know him, adoring as they do angels and archangels (λατρεύοντες ἀγγέλοις καὶ ἀρχαγγέλοις), the month and the moon.[21]

What makes this interesting is the fact that the text is part of a lengthy quotation from the lost *Kerygma Petrou*. This might hold out to us a possibility of how to explain the origin of the idea in Aristides: it is possible that he had read *Kerygma Petrou* and learned of the idea from it. This may be a bit too technical a notion, however, given that Aristides himself stressed the oral kerygmatic nature of Christian doctrine: in the circulation of Christian ideas, the main vehicle was neither books nor scrolls.[22]

Finally, there is some evidence that the reference to angel-worship should not be seen as an apologetic literary manoeuvre only. The interest in angels seems to have been considerable among the Jews in practice. This is not easy to see from the literature of the second and third centuries, for the earliest Rabbinic authors remained silent on angels – an amazing fact that can be explained only by a conscious counter-reaction to

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[17] Correspondingly, δαιμόνιον (common in Gospels) occurs only four times in the *Apologies*, but twenty seven times in *Dialogue*. Yet δαίμων appears only four times in *Dialogue*, but fifty times in *Apologies*, which is possibly due to the fact that the term was preferred by Greek philosophers. See Grant 1988, 63.
[18] Just. *Dial.* 58.3.
[19] Just. *1 Apol.* 63.10. 'The bodiless ones' is a basic way to refer to angels in the patristic and Orthodox tradition.
[20] Just. *Dial.* 56.1, 56.6, 58.3, 126.5.
[21] Clem. *Str.* 6.5.41.2.
[22] Arist. *Apol.* 2:4. For Aristides, the gospel was in the first place an oral tradition. He can also be understood to mean that the written gospel was a somewhat new phenomenon. The oral character of the Christianity of Aristides is also reflected in the fact that he does not use biblical quotations at all in his argumentation. In his compact summary of the basic teachings of Christianity, Aristides manages to refer twice to the twelve apostles fulfilling the plan of Christ in various regions of the world. The theme of tradition is present also in the Quadratus (Kodratos) fragment. Some time later Irenaeus continued the analysis of Christianity as *apostolic* truth.

the prevalent interest on angels among the Jews.[23] Even during the times of early Rabbinic silence, however, there was a strong connection between Jews and angels in the eyes of outsiders. Namely, not only the Christian polemists, but even the famous archenemy of Christians, Celsus, seem to have claimed that Jews pray to angels – a claim that Origen rejected on a scriptural basis:

> Celsus, who professes to know everything, brings a false accusation against the Jews, when he alleges that they worship angels, and are addicted to sorcery, in which Moses was their instructor.[24]

It is remarkable that the church father who was the most deeply familiar with Judaism did not accept the claim that Jews were worshipping angels.[25] It seems that the claim as such is polemical by nature and exaggerated in character; yet on the other hand, the interest in angels was real and pragmatic, and may be labelled as a 'folk religion'. This is witnessed by the wordings of Jewish incantation bowls in which angels were invoked (see below).

In these discussions, both sides shared a common paradigm and similar assumptions: the highest service and worship, the one in accordance with the truth, is to the Supreme God, while all the other forms of religious and cultic activity fail to reach the Godhead and are limited to the sphere of angels alone. In other words, those who believe that they alone partake of this highest truth are obliged to think that the worship and servitude of the others is limited to the sphere of angels.

The situation is illustrated in Fig. 1 that shows how a worship that is incomplete by its substance remains short with regard to its goal. This also illustrates the central concern of *Heb*. 1–2: if one considers Christ an angelic being, and nothing more than that, his worship correspondingly falls short. On the other hand, since angels belong to the created order, there should be no essential or unsurpassable ontological gap between humans and angels. A peculiar outcome of this view is the idea that human beings can become angels; the idea appears in different forms in Jewish traditions, like the famous transformation of Enoch, but remained less utilized in Christianity, which developed a doctrine of deification instead.[26]

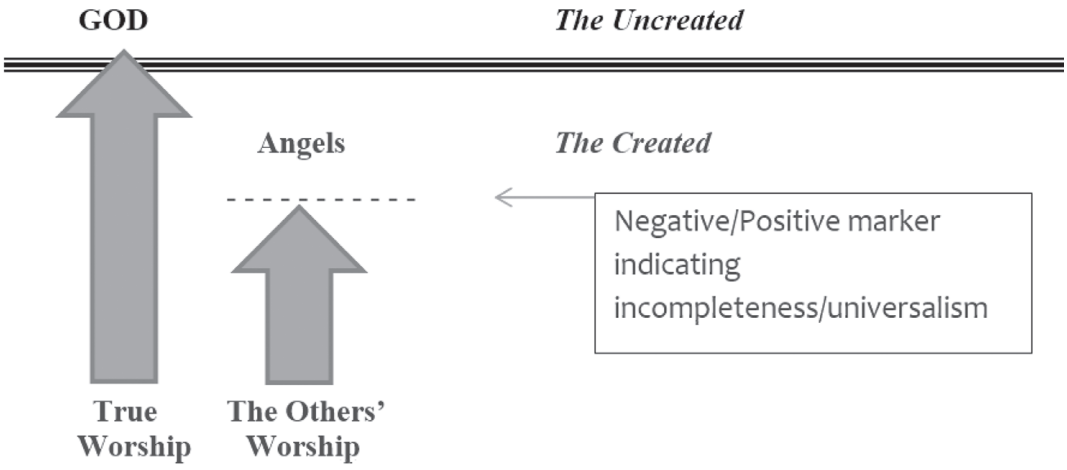

Fig 1. Worship of angels.

Angels and universalism in the early church (*Dt*. 32:8)

So far the 'servitude to angels' has been discussed mostly in a negative light, as an indicator of incompleteness in approaching God. The fact that the worship by others only reaches the angelic realm, however, does not have to be a purely negative estimation: it may also be a positive recognition of the fact that the worship was heading in the right direction, even though falling somewhat short. What is even more interesting, perhaps, is the fact the theme could be applied to other religions as well. The matter of angel-worship is not just some small detail in theological discourse, but rather a way to answer one of the most profound theological questions: what is the value of the other religions? What is the role and relation of God and his divine order to the nations and traditions outside the true religion? No religion with a claim on universal truth has ever fully and thoroughly solved this problem.

The formation of Christian identity took place in an (antithetical) reaction to the ethnic character of 'chosenness' expressed in the Hebrew faith. For the Hellenes and other non-Jewish Christians, however, it was more relevant to find out how the relation between God and other nations had been viewed in the times before Christ. The Old Testament is not a very fruitful source in this respect, but one single verse proved essential for the early church in this respect.

The question of the spiritual value of divergent cultures was read through the prism of *Dt*. 32:8. In the Hebrew text, God set the boundaries of nations "according to the number of sons of Israel" (למספר בני ישׂראל). The oddness of sense generated by the unusual wording strongly suggests that the original reading may have been something else. Indeed, in Septuagint the nations were divided "according to the number of angels" (κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἀγγέλων θεοῦ).[27] The translators of Septuagint most likely offer a literal reading of the Hebrew text as they had it. This is strongly supported by the *benē ʾelohīm* reading in Qumran.[28]

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[23] In the *Mishnah*, the oldest stratum of the Talmud, angels are not mentioned at all; in the other Tannatic sources angels do appear, but the ones with *names* are avoided. It may also be argued that the technical character and legal content of the *Mishnah* makes such references somewhat unlikely. However, in later Rabbinic literature, angels do appear in discussions on the *halakhah*, in addition to the Midrashic tales.

[24] Or. *Cels.* 1.26. The same argument appears again in 5.6. "He next proceeds to make the following statement about the Jews: The first point relating to the Jews which is fitted to excite wonder, is that they should worship the heaven and the angels who dwell therein, and yet pass by and neglect its most venerable and powerful parts, as the sun, the moon, and the other heavenly bodies, both fixed stars and planets, as if it were possible that 'the whole' could be God, and yet its parts not divine."

[25] The classic work on the topic is de Lange 1976.

[26] *2 En.* 22. In addition to the classical examples of Enoch and Eliah, there are also discussions on the angelic transformation of Jacob to Israel in mystical traditions.

[27] Cf. Just. *Dial.* 131. "But I shall quote the passage by which it is made known that God divided all the nations. It is as follows: 'Ask thy father, and he will show thee; thine elders, and they will tell thee; when the Most High divided the nations, as He dispersed the sons of Adam. He set the bounds of the nations according to the numbers of the children of Israel; and the Lord's portion became His people Jacob, and Israel was the lot of His inheritance.' And having said this, I added: 'The Seventy have translated it, "He set the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God." But because my argument is again in nowise weakened by this, I have adopted your exposition'."

[28] 4QDt has בני אלהים and 4QDt^{q} has [ ]בני אל. For discussion, see Heiser 2001.

Nevertheless, one may also speculate whether it could be possible that the translators interpreted Israel here as a reference to angels. The option, artificial and far-fetched as it may seem, is in fact not totally unfeasible, especially in Alexandria, for there are certain texts of Egyptian origin in which Israel is identified with angels. In the fragment of *The Prayer of Joseph*, Jacob declares himself to be an angel of God and even "Archangel of the Power of the Lord", perhaps a mystical interpretation of the name Israel that was given to Jacob after wrestling with the angel. Thus he became a personification of Israel, as if thereby elevating Israel to the level of angels. There are also Coptic texts in which an angel called Israel is serving God in heaven.[29]

Whatever the origin of the wording, it is clear that the idea of *angels of nations* seems to have developed before the translation of Septuagint, perhaps as an aftermath of the exile in Babylon. The angels of Persia and Greece appear for the first time in *Daniel*.[30] Due to the Septuagint reading of *Dt*. 32:8, the idea was natural in the Greek-speaking Judaism. Philo of Alexandria stated in his interpretation of the verse, "as many angels of God as there are, so many nations and species of virtue are there."[31]

The origins of the idea, or the implications in the influences behind the pre-Christian sources, do not really concern us here. The essential point for the second-century angelology is that the idea of angels behind the various nations – and consequently, behind their cults – was biblically based and thus widely present in common understanding. But what was the actual spiritual function of this presence in early Christian thought, outside the Jewish-Christian polemics?

It is no surprise that the teachers of the early church took the idea of *Dt*. 32:8 and developed it gradually.[32] Clement of Alexandria, to name one, stated that the angelic powers are divided according to nations and cities.[33] The notion that the number of nations and tongues has been set in relation to the number of angels seems to have been also a part of early Armenian catechesis.[34] Similar notions appear later in the most remarkable patristic authors such as Origen, Basil the Great and John Chrysostom.

The Jewish view that the relationship of angels and nations started from the mixing of languages in Babel was taken into the church's thinking at least by Origen, perhaps through his Jewish teacher. Origen also seems to confirm the Jewish tradition that the angels played a role in the emergence of languages.[35]

What were the actual functions of the angels of nations? This is where the second-century Christian dialogue developed some of its most interesting ideas. Clement of Alexandria saw angels and their activity behind no less than everything good: "For by angels, whether seen or not, the divine power bestows good things."[36] This applies also to religious and philosophical enterprises. According to Clement, the angels did

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[29] The *Prayer of Joseph* is preserved only in quotation by Origen in *Comm. Joh.* 2.25. Israel seems to be the heavenly counterpart of Jacob. For more discussion on the sources, see Pesthy 2001, 69–71.
[30] *Dan*. 10:13, 20. According to the famous Talmudic tradition, names of angels were brought from Babylonia (TJ, *Rosh ha-shana*, 6a).
[31] Ph. *Post.* 26 (91).
[32] E.g. Iren. *Haer.* 3.12.9.
[33] Clem. *Str.* 6.17 (157.5) and 7.2 (6.4). Clement was less sure about personal guardian angels.
[34] Agath. *Doct. Gr.* 297, 321.
[35] Or. *Cels.* 5.30.
[36] Clem. *Str.* 6.17 (161.2).

not only deliver the law to Jews, but in a similar fashion they delivered philosophy and jurisprudence to the Greeks. After his remark against the Jewish adoration of angels, Clement proceeds to state: "The same God that furnished both the Covenants was the giver of Greek philosophy to the Greeks, by which the Almighty is glorified among the Greeks."[37] These in fact are among Clement's most famous thoughts, but the role of angels in the process has often remained unnoticed by modern readers and scholars.

This statement in fact opens up a whole worldview. The approach implies that all the essential intuitions of human wisdom are invisibly and unconsciously given by angelic beings as intuitive inspirations, which means that the roots of philosophy and rationality are ultimately located in transcendence. The difference between the biblical Jews and pagans, then, is that the Greek philosophy emanated from angels of lower rank than those who mediated the Law of Moses: God "gave philosophy to the Greeks by means of the inferior angels (ὑποδεεστέρων ἀγγέλων)".[38]

In *De principiis,* Origen has a long discussion on the role of angelic beings, "princes of this world", who deliver wisdom such as Chaldean astrology, Egyptian esotericism or Hindu philosophy. Origen estimated that such forms of wisdom are not delivered by the corresponding angels in order to destroy, hurt, injure or even ensnare humans: "as these princes of this world esteem such opinions to be true, they desire to impart to others what they themselves believe to be the truth." Though their activity may deceive people in practice, yet still Origen seems to suppose that all traditions contain something valuable and that this is due to the angelic beings' role in inspiring various forms of wisdom, albeit in a twisted way.[39] This seems to imply that each angel of a nation had a teaching and cult for his nation, just like in the Jewish traditions.

The universalistic vision opens up a few most interesting questions: should Christians really think that the endless variety of religions and spiritualities is caused by the angels and of their free-will and creativity? Does this not mean that elements of divergent religions could be united to Christianity in one way or another, if their origin is in the same angelic world? Unfortunately, this is where the early Christian authors become silent – or turned the discussion to the demons (in the Christian sense of the word).

Angels and Universalism in Athenagoras

Universalism of angels is not only about cult and worship, but even more so about their role in the cosmos in general. This observation leads us to our latter second-century Athenian apologist, Athenagoras, who composed his apology in 176 for the famous philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius who visited Athens at that time. In a curious twist of history, the religion of Athenagoras triumphed over the imperial faiths, but Athenagoras himself remained virtually unknown in later history. Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* took its place among the classics of the world literature, while his Empire and its religions ultimately collapsed.

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[37] Clem. *Str.* 6.5 (42.1).
[38] Clem. *Str.* 7.2 (6.4).
[39] Or. *Princ*. 3.3.2.

Athenagoras of Athens presented the Christian belief in angels in an important context. In his apology, angels were presented as marking a continuation in the Christian doctrine on God. Christian theology does not come to an end with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but it recognises also a "multitude of angels and ministering beings" (πλῆθος ἀγγέλων καὶ λειτουργῶν).[40] The remark serves to downplay the difference between Hellenistic cults and Christianity somewhat, and its purpose is connected with Athenagoras' attempt to defend Christianity against the claims of atheism. It also happens to illustrate the fact that in Hellenistic religions, 'gods' were usually understood as heavenly beings that cannot be considered essentially 'higher' than angels are in Christianity. Clement of Alexandria in fact used 'gods' (θεῶν) for angelic beings, and Origen counted them as 'divine' beings - that is, god-like, but not uncreated.[41]

In this context, Athenagoras presented the view that after the creation, angels were provided with control over matter and the principles governing the forms of matter**.**

> The common function (σύστασις) of the angels is to exercise providence (πρόνοια) over the things set in order by him, so that God may achieve the universal (παντελικήν) and general providence of the whole, as the particular parts (are controlled) by the angels appointed to watch over them.[42]

Athenagoras' argument is that God, through his Logos, has set in place an enormous number of angels to carry out certain functions that include control over matter and the modes of its existence; that is, activities that sustain the creation and its functions. The situation was so defined by Athenagoras that the general and universal providence belongs to God, but the particular parts of the whole belong to the angels set to watch over them.

Likewise in Alexandria, Origen taught that angels are in charge of (the four) elements, space, plants and animals. "An angel has been appointed also for the sun and another for the moon, another also for the stars." From this basis, Origen could open exciting perspectives for interpreting biblical passages. For example, Jeremiah stated that "the earth mourns" (πενθήσει ἡ γῆ) for the inhabitants in it, and Origen explained 'earth' as referring to the angel of the earth.[43] The idea has also Jewish subtexts, for in books such as *Jubilees* various natural phenomena have their own angels.[44]

Overall, it is perhaps no accident that during the five decades between the two Athenian apologists the relevance and function of angels had shifted from a Jewish-Christian encounter to more universal concerns. The context, orientation and questions of Christians in the 170s were no longer identical to those in the 120s. The distinction from Judaism had become stable; the relation to other nations and worldviews was being processed.

Comparison with Justin Martyr shows certain other related developments in process. For Justin, angels were messengers of God who accompany Christ in his coming on the last day. Athenagoras shows no trace of such Synoptic eschatology.[45] This absence,

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[40] Athenagoras *Leg. pro Christ.* 10.5.
[41] Clem. *Str.* 7.2 (5.6); Or. *Cels.* 3.37, 5.4.
[42] Athenagoras *Leg. pro Christ.* 24.3 according to *SC* numbering (in *PG*, §22). For discussion on Athenagoras and angels, see Barnard 1972, 111–114.
[43] Or. *Hom. 10 in Jer.* 6 (cf. *Jer*. 12:4).
[44] *Jub*. 2:2.
[45] Barnard 1972, 111.

albeit almost unnoticeable, exemplifies the multi-layered process Christianity was experiencing. The profound change that Christianity underwent in order to turn from a Jewish sect into a universal religion did not last three hundred years, as is often supposed, but essentially the change was achieved in the second century, and a good deal of it during the fifty years between Aristides and Athenagoras. Their respective references to angels happen to give an illustrative example of this transformation.

The free-will of angels was self-evident for Athenagoras – a view that was often challenged in Rabbinic Judaism.[46] It also served to explain the origin of evil. Interestingly, Athenagoras did not use any particular name for the Devil but spoke about the "ruler of matter" instead. That particular being is not the opposite of God, but the opposite of God's *goodness*, aiming to subvert the material world into a direction contrary to God's good will. In this way, Athenagoras remained free of dualism, even though he connected evil (angels) to the material reality. He also managed to make his discussion sound less bizarre than Justin, and perhaps even less unbalanced than Philo who defined angels as incorporeal souls hovering in the air.[47] Moreover, by defining 'goodness' as a mere property on the surface of God, Athenagoras – unlike Clement of Alexandria – managed to avoid the Platonic tendency to introduce hierarchies of ideas, or that of *nous* and *psyche*, inside God.

Athenagoras was the first Christian author to define the fallen angels as guardians of lowest firmament around the earth, as the unfallen ones remain in charge of the higher spheres. This may be partially inspired by Plato who discussed the random element present in nature, as Barnard has suggested.[48]

Nevertheless, the main reference for the fall of angels in Athenagoras seems to be the story on the origin of giants in *Gen*. 6, which was also the principal biblical reference for the fall in Judaism. As a matter of fact, there is a variant reading in the Septuagint that translates the descending 'sons of God' (*benē ʾelohīm*) as ἄγγελοι τοῦ θεοῦ, which perhaps was the original Greek reading, the later main reading being υἱοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ. Philo uses this particular variant in his interpretation.[49]

Angels in Judaism during the formation of Christianity

Since we started our excursion into the angelology of Athenian apologists from the angle of Jewish-Christian polemics, we shall conclude by asking how the angelic discussions developed on the Jewish side. The answer is clear, simple and short. The discussions disappeared – from literature at least. After all the first-century enthusiasm and speculation on angels, it is amazing that in the oldest, most central and most authoritative part of

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[46] E.g. *BT*, Šabbat 88b. See also *Hagiga* 13b–14a. For further discussion, see Schäfer 1975.

[47] Ph. *Gig.* 6; *Conf. ling.* 176. According to Barnard (1972, 114), Philo in these very places associated certain spirits with earth, water and fire respectively, but his reading seems to be taken too far. Rather, Philo seems to imply that angels/souls are thoroughly present in the air *in the same way* than certain creatures are present in the water etc.

[48] Pl. *Ti*. 34c, 46e. Some discussion in Barnard 1972, 114.

[49] Philo quotes the verse, "And when the angels of God saw the daughters of men that they were beautiful, they took unto themselves wives of all of them whom they chose", and immediately notes: "Those beings, whom other philosophers call demons, Moses usually calls angels." Ph. *Gig.* 2. (6).

Rabbinic Script, the *Mishnah*, angels are not mentioned at all. This of course cannot be due to lack of interest in angels, but on the contrary, the silence is rather a rabbinic counter-reaction to subdue the over-heated interest in angels in many first-century Jewish circles.

In other words, of all the movements of Judaism in the second Temple era, it was the one with the least interest in angels that became the official form of medieval Judaism. Moreover, the silence may also be to some extent in reaction to the polemical accusations by Christian and even pagan intelligentsia, such as Celsus.

The tendency to avoid or not emphasise the role of angels continued from the third century onwards. The rabbis did later start to make references to angels again, but the Tannaitic rabbis avoided mentioning names and did not emphasize the significance of angels.

The silence applies to early Rabbinic authoritative literature. All the other material indicates that the role of angels was still important and there was no lack of beliefs and practices. Concrete invocations of angels have been preserved in Aramean magic bowls,[50] amulets and certain magical texts. The most important text in this respect is certainly *Sefer ha-razim*, which seems to represent a peculiar Jewish magical syncretism of early date. It gives the names of seven hundred fifty angels, arranged according to the seven firmaments, as well as special formulas to influence the angels in various kinds of cases.[51]

Later, there certainly was a rather spectacular re-emergence of angels in Jewish thought in Rabbinic, not to mention Kabbalistic texts. Probably the interest in angels was present in practical (folk) Judaism all the time, and little by little this came to be reflected in Rabbinic texts too.

Conclusion

Aristides' comment on the worship directed towards angels is not an isolated remark or a careless throwaway comment, but a basic constituent of Christian self-definition in relation to Judaism, and indirectly even to other religions. It reflected a wide background of biblical interpretation and theological discussion in the early church, and even in pre-Christian Judaism. The fact that the idea was of Jewish origin was nothing special in the second-century atmosphere, but the universalism inherently present in the thought was more fitting in the Christian context and Christian usage than in Judaism – at least in the apologists' view.

For Athenagoras, angels were already a part of a discussion dealing with more Hellenistic concepts and concerns. Even though his remarks on angels are only minutiae in his presentation, they happen to hit an important note. The basic dilemma of second-century Christian thought was the tension between sectarianism and universalism. Exclusive faith, sacramental mysteries, demanding ethics and the practical situation (persecutions) all spoke for sectarianism. Yet on the other hand, there was the understanding of Christ as

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[50] Dating from third to seventh centuries. Shaked *et al*. 2013.

[51] The magical parts seem to be much older than the final composition of the work. The formulas of invocations give a good overall view on what exactly the angels were needed for: to destroy enemies or to disturb their sleep, in matters of love, for the return of runaway slaves, interpretation of dreams, silencing of adversaries, as well as for protection from wild animals and all perils. *Sefer ha-razim*, II, p. 47.

universal Saviour, the redeemer of humanity, and, to put it simply, of the universalism of the Christian God, and therefore of the whole religion.

This tension required a unifying solution that would explain how the universal truth functions according to, and in relation to, Christian principles. The apologists who had to wrestle with this very challenge used the idea of angels as universal agents to make their worldview more holistic. Athenagoras did this by referring to angels as beings who are present in the creation and take care of its development in a way that in fact is parallel to the basic Hellenistic notions on gods. In that sense, one may say that the angels took the place of gods in this formative period of the Christian worldview.

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