

Angels, Dreams and Rumours of Glory¹

Modern humanism has taught us to think along the lines of Hegel's "the real is the rational and the rational is the real". What is real is what you see. And what you can't see, either with the naked eye, microscope or telescope, does not exist. This materialistic world view was well expressed by Yuri Gargarin the first Russian in space, who affirmed from his space capsule that there was no God visible up there.

The early Church Fathers and the Reformers had another way of seeing reality, which cannot simply be dismissed as primitive. It is holistic. The uni-verse has two aspects, visible and invisible. The creative decree and acts of God hold together in unity both visible and invisible reality. By his mighty power everything exists purposefully every second of every day.

The Nicene Creed of 381 begins:
I believe in one God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth
and of all things visible and *invisible*.

The *Te Deum Laudamus*, which passed through the hands of Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose of Milan and Augustin, three latin Fathers of the fourth century, exults:

We praise thee, O God: we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.
All the earth doth worship thee: the Father everlasting.
To the all *angels* cry aloud: the heavens and all the *powers* therein.
To thee *cherubim and seraphin*: continually do cry.
Holy, holy, holy: Lord God of Sabaoth.

The things invisible, the angels and powers, the cherubins and seraphins, have the same goal as humankind — that of serving God in praise and worship. All creation unites to glorify the Lord in one harmonious song.

In Scripture the invisible angelic realities are not unsubstantial and ethereal beings with halos, trumpets and wings who surf on clouds. They have concrete and active functions, often linked with divine revelation.

It is not for nothing that angels are *messengers*, as for example the angels of the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Because they are invisible, their interventions are often linked with situations where the visible creation reaches its limits. On the frontier of natural and supernatural reality, angelic activity is present in miracles, visions and dreams. A rumour of divine glory penetrates the visible world as the mystery of divine holiness and power makes itself felt in a way which man can

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bear. Otherwise the divine presence would be annihilating. We think of the mysterious angel of the Lord who appeared to the Patriarchs or the multitude of invisible powers surrounding Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings 6.16,17.

Dreams in the Bible are not the safety valves of the subconscious mind as in modern psychology. Nor are they surrealistic visualisations which have the unreal texture of a Salvador Dali painting with plates dripping over table edges like pancakes.

Just as angelic actions are linked with concrete events, so also dreams are vehicles of divine intervention in human history and have a saving function. As such, they permit the anticipation of a concrete fulfilment of God's promises for the future. Dreams have a premonitory character and are often given in situations of distress, or when the accomplishment of God's promises seems impossible.

Dreams and angelic activity are ways of affirming that "those with us are more than those who are against us" (2 Kings 6.16), or, as the Lord says to Mary in Luke 1.37, that "nothing is impossible with God".

The servants of God in Scripture are not the dream twisters of psychedelic mushroom cultism. Nor are they habitual every-night dreamers. When the scope of God's revelation is considered dreams are limited to relatively short periods; those of the Patriarchs of the Old Testament, of the Judges, the prophets and "see-ers", or the life of Daniel. These moments are times when God calls his people, when he speaks of their establishment in the promised land, exile from it because of judgment, or return to it for blessing. In other words, this form of experience of God is "special", and belongs to the canon of divine revelation, as do his inspired words.

For this reason we might expect, as proves to be the case, that dreams and angelic activity reach their climax in the constellation of events which orbit around the coming of God in his final revelation in his incarnate Son. This is wonderfully recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, in which "angels from the realms of glory" accompany the appearing of the Saviour. Apart from these, there is no concentrated activity related to dreams in the New Testament, with the possible exception of John's apocalypse.

Matthew records, at the start of his gospel, a remarkable series of dreams and angelic activity. In a dream, Joseph is informed by an angel of the Lord that Mary is with child by the action of the Holy Spirit and that she will give birth to the Saviour, Jesus, who "will save his people from their sins" (1.20-24). By a dream also the wise men receive the order not to reveal to Herod that they have found Jesus, and to return to their own country in secret (2.13). Later, the angel appears again to Joseph in a dream and warns him to flee to Egypt, because of the coming massacre of the Bethlehem babies, and to fulfil the prophecy: "out of Egypt have I called my son" (13,15). After the death of Herod, the angel appears to Joseph in a third dream telling

him that the coast is clear, and then guides the holy family to Galilee of the Gentiles, because the world Saviour, according to the prophets, “will be called a Nazarene” (19,22).

What is interesting in these records is the fact that, in each case, not only those who are “divinely warned” carry out the instructions to the letter, but also a prophecy of the Old Testament is realised. Angel activity in dreams proves that Jesus is really the promised one and that God is faithful to his promises and acts in the coming of his Son.

These are no fairy-like “midsummer night’s dreams”. On the contrary, the supernatural activity underlines the tragedy of the world and its history. Only God can save men from men. When God advances his plan of salvation, and particularly in the coming of his Son, the satanic forces of evil are unleashed in an attempt to destroy the work of God. This is why the old liar referred to the protection of the angels when tempting Jesus. After, when the devil departs, “angels came and ministered to him” (4.5,11).

In the babyhood and first testings of the Messiah God watches over the divine child and protects him from satanic assaults. Here we already find a symbol of the victory over death and power of the devil accomplished at Calvary. There is however a difference between the start and the end of Jesus’ earthly life. In the devilish night of Gethsemane, when Jesus’ soul is “overwhelmed to the point of death” and when he wishes the “cup to be taken” away (26.38,39), Matthew records the Saviour’s words to his disciples: “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say that it must happen in this way?” (52,53) In his passion Jesus does *not* call on angels, so as to fulfil Scripture. Only he can die to save from sin and he must do it alone by taking on himself the sins of his people. There are no angelic or saintly go-betweens in Scripture, only the unique and all-sufficient mediation of the Saviour of men.

Why did God act through dreams and angels in this fashion? This is difficult to answer, because the Bible itself never asks or answers this question. However, we can hazard a few ideas on the subject. God works through angels in order to demonstrate that his power and presence are invisibly real in all creation. Nothing escapes the attention or the action of the Lord. Also, the revelations given through angelic means show the authority of God over the whole process. In the continuity of God’s purpose with regard to history his faithfulness in accomplishing his unfailing promises is demonstrated.

As far as dreams go, does not this expression of the human psyche touch what is the most profound, with its needs, its hopes and fears? God is capable of reaching that which is most inaccessible, even that which is the most unworthy in us. In our unconscious mind too, a struggle takes place between good and evil. This is no doubt

why some theologians, like Louis Berkhof, have said that regeneration takes place (in the sense of logical priority at least) in the unconscious mind before disclosing itself in our consciousness. What a wonderful illustration of the nature of divine salvation! God goes to the very depths of our being to defeat the sin which oppresses, to purify and to make us children of God in Christ. From there, salvation extends to all our being, encouraging us to live according to the wisdom, the works and the ways of the Lord.

Most of all, for Christians living in a world threatened by the satanic forces of terrorism, famine and war, meditation on these themes convinces us that in his providence, God is present and reigns through Christ, accomplishing his sovereign will and purposes. “He holds the key to all unknown”, and we can be glad.