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## Angelaki

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## ANGELS

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I

Perhaps, in modernity, nothing has had so much been written about it, and with so little perspicacity, as angels. Their image, at the same time beautiful and exhausted, thoughtful and efficient, has so deeply penetrated not only the daily prayers and liturgies of the Occident, its philosophy, literature, painting, and sculpture, but also its day-dreaming, subcultures, and the *Kitsch*, that even a merely coherent comprehension of the topic seems out of question. And when, in the twentieth century, the angel forcefully re-emerges in Rilke's *Elegies* or in Klee's paintings, in Benjamin's *Theses* or in Corbin's gnosis, his gesture does not appear to us today to be any less enigmatic than that of the seraphims who, in the *etoimasia tou thronou* of Palaeochristian and Byzantine basilicas, seem to protect in silence the empty throne of glory.

The situation is completely different if we open the treatises on angels of the Church Fathers and of the Scholastics, from the Pseudo-Dionysius to Alain of Lille, from Bonaventure to Thomas Aquinas, from Dietrich of Freiburg to Eiximens. Here angelology finds its proper place in the economy of the divine government of the world, of which angels are ministers. Not only is Thomas's most extensive treatment of angelology an integral part of the section of the *Summa theologica* dedicated to the government of the world, but the very names of the angelic hierarchies coincide to a large extent with the terminology of power: "Domination, principalities, powers [*potestà*], thrones"; not only is the Pseudo-Dionysius's treatise on angels entitled *Of Celestial Sacred Power* ("sacred power" being the original meaning of the word "hierarchy"),<sup>1</sup> but the very hierarchies of worldly power, both ecclesiastical and profane, regularly

giorgio agamben

translated by lorenzo chiesa

## ANGELS

present themselves as an imitation of the angelic. The very terminology of modern public administration finds its first formulation in the "offices," "ministries," and "missions" of the celestial functionaries studied by angelology: the concept of hierarchy is an invention of the Pseudo-Dionysius, and the term "ministry" first assumes its modern meaning of "set of functionaries and offices" in a letter by Saint Jerome, in which he asks: "When did God create thrones, dominations, powers, angels and all the celestial ministry [*totumque ministerium coeleste*]?"<sup>2</sup>

2

From this perspective, the distinction between angels and bureaucrats tends to become blurred.

Celestial messengers are organised into offices and ministries just as worldly functionaries assume angelic qualities in their turn and, in the same way as angels, become capable of curing, enlightening, and perfecting. Moreover, because of an ambiguity that characterises the history of the relation between spiritual and secular power, the paradigmatic relation between angelology and bureaucracy runs in both directions. Sometimes, as in Tertullian's and Athenagoras' writings, the administration of the worldly monarchy provides the model for the angelic ministries, whereas in other cases, as in the writings of Clement of Alexandria and Thomas Aquinas, the celestial bureaucracy furnishes the archetype of the worldly.

It is true that the theological tradition distinguishes between two aspects or functions of angels: a properly "governmental" or administrative one, and one of "assistance," in which they contemplate and glorify God (in Dante's words, "contemplative blessedness" and the "blessedness of governing the world"<sup>3</sup>). But one of the essential results of our investigation of the genealogy of government is that these two functions are the two sides of the same governmental machine, which we can call, respectively, "economy" and "glory," "government" and "kingdom." In this sense, each angel is twofold: the ecstatic choirs that chant the eternal glory of God in heaven are nothing other than the ceremonial and liturgical other side of the scrupulous winged functionaries who carry out on earth the "historical" decrees of providence. And it is precisely this co-substantiality of angels and bureaucrats that the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka, perceived with visionary precision, presenting his functionaries, messengers and servants as disguised angels.

### 3

The difficulty that the Fathers had to confront in the early centuries of the history of the Church amounted to the reconciliation of Marcion's and the Gnostic god, who is foreign to the world, with the demiurge who creates and rules it, of the *deus otiosus*, who does not look after the fate of

creatures, with the *deus actuosus*, who provides for their eternal salvation by means of history. More generally, the ineluctable question that Gnosis bequeathed to the three so-called monotheistic religions was the following: is the Divine, the Highest, separated from the world or does he govern it? The Gnostic theological dilemma does not so much concern the opposition between a good and an evil god as that between a god who is foreign to the world and one who governs it.

It is from this perspective that we should understand the decisive character of the function of angels, not only in Christianity but also in Judaism and Islam. In spite of the different configurations assumed by this function in these three religions, in all cases angelology is inseparable from the answer given to the question we posed above and becomes intelligible only in relation to it. Angelology is, in this sense, the most ancient, articulated, and detailed reflection on that particular form of power or divine action which we could call the "government of the world." Each of the three religions answers the Gnostic dilemma in its own way; the anomalies and analogies in the articulation of their respective angelologies correspond to similarities and divergences between the answers they provide.

### 4

The best testimony to the eminent presence of angels in the Judaism of the late Classical world is the obstinate and constant attempt by the rabbinic literature of that time to reduce and limit their importance: "If trouble comes upon someone, let him cry not to Michael or Gabriel, but let him cry unto Me and I shall answer" (Jerusalem Talmud Berachot 9: 12). The perseverance with which the Rabbis insist on the ephemeral and inconsistent character of angels, on the dependence of angelic liturgy on that of the Israelites, who sing the praise of God each hour while angels only do it once a day (or even, according to some sources, once a year), constitutes an eloquent demonstration of the privileged role played by angels in liturgy and in the life of the communities, which is proved extensively by liturgical sources and

apocalyptic literature. Further evidence of this comes from the admonitions of the Pharisee Paul against the “cult of angels” (*thrēskeia tōn angelōn*, Colossians 2: 18) and from his exaltation of Christ “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion” (Ephesians 1: 21).

It is well known that rabbinical Judaism later rediscovered and reassessed the meaning of angelology. This rediscovery takes place by means of the function that angels carry out in the government of the world. Whether they are represented as an infinite army, with its “generals,” its “chariots,” and “camps” corresponding to the seven celestial spheres – as in the *Sefer Ha-Razim* – or as “doorkeepers,” as “ministers” who intercede between God and men, as well as tremendous and tireless singers of Glory – as in the literature of the *Heichalot* – the metaphorical register in both cases is that of a sumptuous and immense court, which surrounds the throne of YHWH.

This governmental vocation of angels becomes increasingly more precise and rationalised, and partly loses its visionary character. In the literature of the Karaites, angels are arranged in four classes, hierarchically ordered according to their function: the servants or ministers, the armies, the powers, and the messengers. The old Talmudic motif according to which angels are created every day and, having sung the hymn of praise, are annihilated in the river of fire from which they originated, is now developed in such a way that these instantaneous angels correspond to the act of government; they are intentionally created by God to accomplish a determined act. Each angel is an act of government, and each act of government is an angel.

The equation between angelology and the government of the world is consolidated by the encounter with Aristotelianism. According to Ibn Daud, God exercises his action on the celestial spheres and on the sublunar world through the mediation of angels, who emanate from him and coincide with the separated intellects of the Arabic-Aristotelian tradition. Maimonides himself accepts the Aristotelian principle according to which God governs the world through the separated intellects that move the spheres; however, he specifies that

## agamben

“Aristotle speaks of separated intellects, while we speak of angels.” Divine government coincides with angelic mediation to the extent that Maimonides can write that “you will always find God accomplishing an action at the hand of an angel; and one already knows that the meaning of ‘angel’ is that of envoy, so that anybody who follows an order is an angel.” And the identity between angels and the divine government of the world is, for the physician Maimonides, so absolute that the two can be resolved fully in the very virtues and faculties that form and govern the living body: “God put in semen a formative function that gives a figure and a specification to the limbs, that is, the angel [...] Each faculty of the body is an angel and even more so the powers disseminated in the world...” From the perspective of the divine government of the world, physiology is an angelology.

If, in the rationalism of philosophers, angels seem to lose all autonomous consistency by being identified with divine action, rabbinical Judaism has never become unaware of a substantial extraneousness between angels and God. Nowhere does this extraneousness appear more strongly than in the book of Enoch, which, according to Scholem, originated in the context of rabbinical Gnosticism. The patriarch Enoch is here transformed into the archangel Metatron, the Prince of the Face, a sort of personification of angelic power. Identified, according to the Talmud, with the “angel of YHWH” (from Exodus 23: 21) and “bearing the same name as his Lord,” Metatron is the only angel who sits on a throne in the presence of YHWH. He concentrates in himself so many powers and functions that seeing him is what possibly inspired the apostasy of Elisha Ben Abuyah (Acher in the well-known episode from the Talmud about the four rabbis who enter Paradise). Such apostasy should be interpreted in this context as a fall into Gnostic ditheism. Metatron tells us that

when Acher came to behold the vision of the chariot and lay his eyes upon me, he was afraid and trembled before me [...] When he saw me seated upon a throne like a king, with

ministering angels standing beside me as servants and all the crowned princes of the angelic realms surrounding me, he opened his mouth and said: "Yes, there are two powers in heaven."<sup>4</sup>

It is surprising that here the angelic-demiurgic power of government is opposed to God as a different power (if not as a different God). The fact that shortly after Metatron is punished "with sixty fiery lashes of fire" (like in the analogous episode of the fustigation of the angel Gabriel in the Talmud – *Yom.*, 77a) is a further sign of the extraneousness and almost virtual rivalry between the angel and YHWH in Judaism. The angel here is the form in which the Gnostic demiurge is subjected to the divine government of the world.

## 5

The motif of angels called "elements" (*stoicheia*) proves that the archaic figure of the angel as a demiurgic power was constitutively linked to the cosmos. This theme, already present in paganism in the *stoicheiokratores theoi*, the gods who govern the elements, which Simplicius mentions in his commentary on *De coelo*, establishes such a close connection between the elements of the cosmos and the angels that the latter are defined simply as *stoicheia*. An early and decisive occurrence of this can be found in Paul (Galatians 4: 3; 4: 9):

Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world [...] But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how *is it that* you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?

An exegetical tradition, already present in Marius Victorinus and in Jerome, identifies these elements of the world with angels: "Some believe that those [elements] are angels, who preside over the four elements of the world, and it is necessary that, before believing in Christ, we are governed by their arbitrariness."<sup>5</sup> Angels-elements also appear in Clement of Alexandria ("the elements and the stars, that is, the powers that govern them") and in Origen, according to

whom elements ultimately designate the angels that are presupposed by them. From this perspective, it is possible to put forward the hypothesis that angels are originally cosmic powers which the celestial God needs to subject in order to govern the world.

## 6

In Christianity, the dualism between a god who is foreign to the world and a demiurge who rules over it is reconciled by transferring it within divinity. The Trinity is the apparatus by means of which God not only takes creation upon himself but also, through Christ and his incarnation, the redemption and government of creatures. This means that Christianity introjects the angelic power into God himself, and turns the government of the world into a divine figure. It is not surprising, then, that the first elaboration of the Trinitarian paradigm between the second and third centuries (more specifically, in the works of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian) takes the shape of an *oikonomia*, that is, an activity of management and government that the Father entrusts to the Son. Clement of Alexandria clearly expresses this essential solidarity between the Trinity and the economy of redemption when he writes that "being done away with providence [*pronoia*], the economy of the Saviour appears to be a myth [*mythos phainetai*]." In other words, the Trinity is not a mythology, a family story like that of the pagans: it is immediately an economy, a cure and government of the world.

The strong solidarity between Christology and angelology follows from this. Not only are angels the instruments of the economy of salvation, but Christ himself is initially presented as an angel, or rather, in Epiphane's account, "as one of the archangels, but superior to them." In Malebranche's providential theology, Christ, as head of the Church, still appears as the executive head of a *machina mundi* of which God is the supreme legislator; in this function, he is compared with angels and unhesitatingly defined as – even if by now it is only a metaphor – "the angel of the new law." It is significant that this theme of the *Christos-angelos*, to which, in the wake of Werner's monograph, Corbin has

drawn the attention of scholars, is the object of a fierce polemic among the Church Fathers. If Christ is an angel and not a God, then the Trinitarian apparatus, which was founded on the introjection of the angel into divine life, not only cannot work but also threatens the unity of the divine. In spite of the resolute elimination of this angelic nature of the Son by means of the doctrine of the *homousia*, the angelological origin of Christology will continue to act in the history of Christianity as an atheological drift that tends to replace the primacy of the eternal being with the historical economy of salvation, the immanent Trinity, defined by the unity of substance, with the economic trinity, which is essentially praxis and government.

From this follows the ambiguity of angelology in Christianity and the necessity to integrally transform it into a bureaucratic-executive structure of divine providence by firmly confining the angelical ranks to the governmental machine. This transformation is fully accomplished by Scholasticism, in which the treatises *De gubernatione mundi* coincide *de facto* or *de jure* with those on angels. Perhaps, the specifically ecclesial and governmental consistency that defines Christianity with regard to Islam and Judaism also follows from this. It is within the reflection on angelic hierarchies as a model of ecclesiastic hierarchies that, starting with the Pseudo-Dionysius (whose work should not be read, following the equivocation that has dominated its reception in the West, in a mystical way, but as an attempt to found the sacredness of power and of ecclesiastic hierarchies on the Trinity and the angelic hierarchies), the first legitimisation of the Church as a “worldly” structure of the government of souls takes shape. The fact that, on the basis of the celebrated passage from Paul (Colossians 1: 18; 2: 10) on the “cephalic” character of Christ (Christ as the head of the angels and “of the body, that is, of the Church”), the power of the Church (and even any power) was founded on Christ and the pope defined as his “vicar,” eloquently demonstrates the essentially governmental meaning of Christology.

From the perspective of the government of the world, Christology and angelology, the Messiah and the angels are inseparable and remain so until

## agamben

the Last Judgement, when the history of salvation is accomplished and they are left, literally, with nothing to do. In Christian theology, the paradigm of the government of the world is, as a matter of fact, essentially finite. After the Last Judgement, when all the elected will be taken to Heaven and all the damned sent to Hell, every activity of government ceases and the angelic hierarchies are deprived of all their functions. Of all but one: Glory, which they will continue to tirelessly sing to God for ever. Glory is the form in which the angelic-governmental function survives itself.

## 7

In Islam, the *tawhīd*, the affirmation of the absolute unicity of God, and the ensuing polemic against the Trinity and the very possibility of Christ having a hypostatic unity composed of a human and divine nature determine the framework in which angelology can carry out its task. The Ash’arite thesis, which in the end prevailed in the Sunni *kalām*, about God’s unceasing operation in every event, about God as the single author of every action – good or bad – of man – whose freedom is thus reduced to the “acquisition” of that which in any case he cannot produce – further conditions the very possibility of an angelic government of the world. This does not mean that, in Islam, the function of angels as messengers and assistants of God is not present; however, the focus here is on the function of glory, in which angels appear as the “precursors of each and every act of cult,” who “extol” and “worship” God at all times without getting tired.

“Heaven creaks,” claims one of the sayings of the Prophet, “and it has the right to creak. There is not in it the space for as much as four fingers without an angel prostrating his forehead there.” A sermon of “Alī, the prince of believers,” quoted by Rāzī in his angelological treatise, distinguishes between the angels who are prostrated, and never bow, those who bow, and never raise their back, those who draw up, and never break their rank, and those who praise, and never tire themselves of glorifying. The very obedience and fear (“fearing him they tremble”) that make it possible for them to scrupulously

fulfil their duties as envoys among men are an integral part of their worshipping (“all angels listen to him and obey, they are always in the process of worshipping him”).

However, even here, the story from the Koran about the dissatisfaction of the angels with the creation of Adam, and about Iblīs’s – the most powerful among them – refusal to worship him, are witness to the irreducible extraneousness of angels with regard to the divine. If, as attested to by some sources, Iblīs corresponded according to this aspect to Enoch-Metatron, the problem concerning the origin and nature of angels emerges in the Islamic tradition especially in the discussions on the superiority of men (and therefore of prophets) over angels (as in the treatises of Rāzī and Tabarī). The opposition between angels – who appear as the representatives of the power of creation – and prophets – who represent the power of the Imperative (or of salvation) – corresponds once again to the Gnostic opposition between a creative and a redemptive God. There are traces of Gnostic dualism even in the most rigorously monotheistic religion.

## 8

If the government of the world is still today in the hands of the Christian Occident (even if we do not know for how long), this is certainly not unrelated to the fact that Christianity is the only one of the three monotheistic religions that has turned the government of the world into an internal articulation of divinity and that has, thus, divinised angelic power. A “government of men” is not possible in Judaism, in which the angelic function remains somehow foreign to God, even though it is subjected to him; or in Islam, in which God intervenes directly at all times and in all particularities in the course of events. The heterogeneity of political models and the resistance (especially evident in Islamic countries) to the acceptance of external paradigms corresponds to the difference between the respective angelologies, according to their more or less stressed governmental inflection and the different ways of realising it. For a government to be possible it is in fact necessary to have the articulation

and the coordination of a bipolar machine made of an immanent angelic power, which operates in particularities as executive, and a transcendent divine power, which acts as a universal legislator. This machine is, in Christian theology, providence, which, by identifying itself with the economy of salvation, binds in an articulation that is equally meticulous and imposing the luminous and immutable plan of the divine mind (*ordinatio* or *providentia generalis*; Malebranche, and Rousseau after him, will speak of “general will”) with the untiring, detailed, and seedy intervention of angelic emissaries (*executio* or *providentia specialis*; Rousseau, following Malebranche, will speak of “particular will,” or “public economy,” or even “government”). In this sense, even if this claim will surprise many, providence, with its angels-bureaucrats, is not the paradigm of absolute power, but of democracy.

## 9

Angelology is, in this sense, the oldest and most comprehensive reflection on that particular form of power which, in our culture, goes by the name of “government,” and which Michel Foucault, starting from the mid-1970s, has tried to define in his courses at the Collège de France. Any attempt to separate angels from their governmental vocation is, in this sense, doomed to fail. In the twentieth century, there have been at least two of these attempts, which are not unrelated: Rilke’s poetic project and Corbin’s philosophical Gnostic work. In both cases, it is a matter of separating angelology from history, the glorious function of revelation from the obscure and ambiguous function of the government of the world. This is what Rilke means when he writes to Hulewicz that “in the *Elegies* the angel has nothing to do with the angel of the Christian heaven (possibly it has to do with the angelic figures of Islam).” And when, in the same letter, he states that “the angel is the creature in which the metamorphosis of the visible into the invisible that we enact is already accomplished [...] that being who is the guarantor of the fact of recognising in the invisible a superior level of reality,” the implicit thesis of this affirmation is that angelology – not

history – is the place in which the revelation and redemption of the world are fulfilled. For this reason, the *Elegies* are, in the end, hymns in disguise, songs of praise aimed at angels (“Preise dem Engel die Welt . . .”<sup>6</sup>); for this reason, in the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which contain a kind of exoteric exegesis of the *Elegies*, the task of angels and of men is nothing other than the ceremony of celebration: “Rühmen, das ist!,”<sup>7</sup> “Nur im Raum der Rühmung darf die Klage / gehn.”<sup>8</sup> But glory, with its apparatus of liturgies and acclamations, is – as we have shown – precisely the other side of power, the form in which government survives its exercise. And mysticism, both Judaic and Christian, is – at least in one of its aspects – literally only a “contemplation of the throne,” that is, of power. Benjamin’s opinion about Hoffmansthal, according to which it was Kafka who inherited the legacy of *Lord Chandos’s Letter*, and not its author, is, in this sense, also valid for Rilke: the attempt to separate angelology from history in order to transpose the language of poetry into the register of glory closes with a *non liquet*: the lamentation that transforms itself into a celebration is only the ambiguous protocol of reality.

Similar considerations can be made about Corbin’s essay “The Necessity of Angelology,” which ends, not by coincidence, with a quotation from Rilke. Against Hegel and the theology of incarnation, it is a matter of mobilising the Gnostic theme of the *Christos-angelos* and the Islamic theme of the Shiite *imām* in order to break the connection between angelology and philosophy of history. Redemption is a Gnostic process that does not ever coincide with the level of historical events, for instance, with a revolution, although it can enter into contact with it at some eminent points. But, once again, the theological machine of government is not really neutralised: the hidden and ineffable god, whom the angels have the duty to reveal without offering him any flesh which is not that of an image, is nothing other than the mystical foundation of the power of government, a king who, following a motto dear to Carl Schmitt, “reigns but does not govern.”

It is therefore possible that, by joining the figure of the angel with that of history in Klee’s

## agamben

*Angelus Novus*, Benjamin prepared for our meditation an emblem which is difficult to dispose of. Kafka must have had something similar in mind when he introduced the functionaries of power as angels (one of them is the “Doorkeeper of the Law” from the parable *Before the Law*) and seemed to recommend, in regards to man’s unceasing confrontation with the law, a “long study of the doorkeeper [*jahrelange Studium des Türhüters*].” Angelology and philosophy of history are, in our culture, inextricable, and the possibility of interrupting or breaking their connection – not in the direction of a meta-historical beyond but, on the contrary, towards the very heart of the present – will eventually only open up to those who will have understood it.



## notes

- 1 The title of the work in question is translated into English as *The Celestial Hierarchy*. [Translator’s note.]
- 2 Hieronymus, *Epistolae*, I, 18, 7, in *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina* 22, 365.
- 3 See Dante, *The Banquet*, Book II, chapter 4, 10–12.
- 4 Charles Mopsik, *Le Livre hébreu d’Hénoch ou Livre des palais* (Paris: Verdier, 1989) 110.
- 5 *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina* 26, 371a–b.
- 6 R.M. Rilke, *Elegies* 9, 53.
- 7 Idem, *Sonnets to Orpheus* 7, 1.
- 8 Ibid. 8, 1–2.

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