

## CHERUBIM, SERAPHIM AND DEMYTHOLOGIZATION:



### SOME ASPECTS OF BĀBĪ-BAHĀ'Ī ANGELOLOGY AND THE MALĀ' AL-A`LĀ (SUPREME CONCOURSE).

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#### ABSTRACT

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The English word "angel" derives from the Greek *angelos* and basically signifies, like the Biblical Hebrew mal'ākh which it often translates, 'messenger'. On the most basic level angels are divine messengers though the word "angel" indicates a bewildering variety of largely benevolent spiritual beings with a wide range of functions. Within religious and other literatures penned by thinkers of both the East and the West, a bewildering variety of angels have been pictured, identified with, worshipped, pondered, catalogued and studied. An almost endless number of individual angels as well as myriads of orders of angels has been catalogued. Numerous detailed listings of the variously mapped out angelic hierarchy have been registered by pious and learned Jews, Christians, Muslims and others. Knowledge of the sometimes secret names of specific angels has long formed

part of mystico-magical gnosis. Numerous massive dictionaries of angels have been published during the past few millennia. On an academic level one thinks of the recent over 900 page E.J. Brill publication 'Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible' (2nd edition, 1999). More popular is Gustav Davidson's quite bulky 1960s (with frequent reprints) Dictionary of Angels, including the Fallen Angels. Many similar works including Moolenburgh's Handbook of Angels are noteworthy though such writings cannot possibly all be listed here.

Fascination and concern with "angels" is an important feature of the contemporary new age scene. Identification with angels appears to many to be among the hallmarks of modern spirituality. Many today claim visionary or earthly experience of angels as conveyors of an otherworldly guidance or tokens of a beatific presence. Inspirational books purporting to contain 'angelic messages advising seekers after truth are easily obtained. The spirituality surrounding 'The Angel Within You', 'Guardian Angels', 'Angels in Music', and even 'Angels and Food' are examples of topics covered within modern booklets on matters angelological. The 1993 Guideposts book 'Angel Among Us' is an example of such literature as is Don Fearheiley's 'Angels Among Us' which contains 'Amazing True Stories of Ordinary People Helped by Extraordinary Beings' (Avon Books, NY 1993).

In Victorian times healthy country walking and butterfly collecting were widely considered most appropriate pursuits.

Today, in marked contrast, we could be guided by an almost 300 page book entitled, 'Field Guide to Demons, Fairies, Fallen Angels and Other Subversive Spirits'. The harmless pursuit of etymological beauty has been replaced by guidance respecting association with demonological aberrations! Though somewhat suspicious of new age spirituality, it is no wonder such well-known Christian evangelicals as Billy Graham have been moved to set down their understanding of biblical angels. At the same time such evangelicals have offered Christian guidance on popular angelological pursuits and beliefs. Potentially dangerous books about angels are legion -- to coin something of an angelological phrase. In many modern European bookshops shelves are well-stocked with books about angels. Some of these books call people to very strange behaviour the like of which cannot be surveyed here.

Bahā'ī angelology, the doctrine regarding angels (sing. Ar. malak, pl. malā'ika; Per. firishtih) is rooted in and seeks to interpret references to angelic beings and their roles found in Abrahamic religious scripture and tradition. Though a wide range of angelic beings are mentioned in Bābī and Bahā'ī scripture these references and terminology is essentially that of earlier sacred books. Such references are usually meant to be understood symbolically, "spiritually" or "allegorically". Gabriel and Michael, the Cherubim and the Seraphim, the archangel Michael and Metatron, Azazel and Diabolos and among the myriad angelic or demoniac beings considered essentially symbolic. Gabriel is not a real archangelic figure

but has symbolic import. The angels and archangels are symbolic, archetypal figures as are supernatural demoniac entities which are without metaphysical reality. In simple terms, for Bahā'īs "angels" are signs of divine activity, of assistance and mediatorship. Their satanic counterparts, devils and demons, etc are deemed non-existent indications of opposition divine providence and activity.

In developed Bābī-Bahā'ī sacred scripture belief in "angels", "demons" and their like is demythologized, to use a phrase of the late German Christian theologian Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976) indicative of a quasi-rationalistic rejection of things no longer entirely credible in the light of modern thought and science. For Bahā'īs such aforementioned entities have no reality in the sense of a metaphysical existence or an ontologically verifiable reality. In the Bahā'ī viewpoint "angels" do not constitute a distinct celestial order superior in rank to humankind. Bahā'ī scripture maintains that humans beings can be "angels" by living an angelic spiritual life while "angels" are sometimes a transcendentalization of human activities and propensities as well also as cosmic laws and forces.

Issues touched upon in the above paragraphs will be set out in greater detail in this paper. So too aspects of the Shaykhi and Bābī-Bahā'ī interpretation of specific angelic figures within the Abrahamic religious tradition. Bahā'ī symbolic interpretations of religious angelology and to a lesser extent demonology will be analyzed and summed up. It

will be argued that while there is a demythologization of angels, the jinn and demons, etc this does not mean that there is no Bahāī belief in human immortality or multiple worlds populated by innumerable individuals. There certainly is a clear Bahāī belief in supernatural assistance from angelic humans passed on. Indeed, the Bahāī interpretation of the implications of the Arabic qur'ānic phrase *malā al-a`lā* ("Supreme Concourse") all but replaces the traditional belief in archangels with a new superhuman though very real link with the unseen worlds. In Bahāī scripture traditional angelology is spiritually interpreted though belief in multiple supernatural "worlds" beyond time and space populated by "angelic" humans and "archangelic" *mazāhir-i ilāhī* (Manifestations of God) overseeing universes seen and unseen is fundamental.