

## **ANGELS IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITIONS: AN IMPRESSIVE LOGIC AND THE IMPOSING PROBLEM OF THEIR HYPERPCOMPLEX REALITY<sup>1</sup>**

In a way hardly paralleled by any other object of theological reflection, angels seem to be constructs of pure fantasy which belong to a culture of the past which was not overly precise about truth and reality. Schleiermacher noted in the Glaubenslehre (§§ 42ff) that the formation of differentiated conceptions of angels belonged primarily to an age "where the knowledge of the powers of nature was still minimal." It belonged to an age "when the connection of human beings with nature was not yet ordered, and not yet developed."<sup>2</sup> In the framework of 19th-century science, in the framework of any field of knowledge determined by or at least compatible with 19th-century natural science, in the framework of any theory of the world possible in Schleiermacher's day, angels are out of the question, with the exception - according to Schleiermacher - of liturgy and personal piety. The scientific and cosmological conceptions of reality given at the time leave as little room for angels as for the doctrine that the earth is a disc.

In what follows I would not like simply to contradict Schleiermacher. I would not like to maintain that in our contemporary culture angels are compatible with the dominant understandings of reality of either common sense or more elaborate forms of experience. To be sure, our conceptions of rationality and of reality, and our understanding of science, have changed since Schleiermacher. To be sure, today we are more tolerant towards forms of experience which do not correspond to the dominant ways of acquiring knowledge about the powers of nature. Indeed we have even lost the belief in a homogeneous continuum of rationality and of reality. Yet that does not mean that we are in a position simply to integrate an understanding of angels into our conceptions of reality. In what follows I would like to draw attention to the problem of forms of experience and assumptions about reality which can not be neatly fit together. I would like to do so by attempting to show the high degree of

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1 Translated by John Hoffmeyer.

2 Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, Bd. 1, hg. v. M. Redeker nach der 2. Auflage, Berlin, 7. Aufl. 1960, 309 und 310.

consistency, the high degree of "logical" structure which characterizes the ways in which very diverse traditions hang together which speak about God's angel or God's angels.

The logical character of the doctrine of angels is comparable to the logical character of forms of mathematical thought for which we do not have any realm of application. As Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell were working on the Principia Mathematica, they were astounded at the plethora of theories which emerged which: 1) were consistent within themselves; 2) stood in connection with other theories which clearly provided a guide for experience or were capable of opening up experience; but 3) provided no foreseeable realm of application. Research into talk about God's angels has given rise to similar feelings in me. That research has strengthened my conviction that in a theology which takes its orientation from the Biblical traditions, we never have to do in the long run with purely idiosyncratic thoughts and experiences. We do, however, encounter experiences which either can no longer be fit into our dominant view of reality and into our forms of experience, or can not yet be fit again into our dominant view of reality and into our forms of experience. At the same time, those unusual experiences in their logical consistency cast light upon other realms of faith's experience which are amenable to being brought into connection with our natural experiences. The doctrine of angels illumines in its way God's particular glory, God's particular personality, and the particular ways in which God takes up contact with what is creaturely, and the particular problems of taking up that contact. It is thus with good reason that angelology has always been anchored in the doctrine of creation, although angels do not clearly fit into the structures of that which is created.

In the first section I would like to talk about God's angels in so-called "messenger angelology." I would like to talk about the problem of God's withdrawal and finitization of self in the visible process of taking up specific contact with what is creaturely. In the second part I shall treat God's angels in "court angelology" and the conception of God's glory "in the heavens."<sup>3</sup> In doing so I am taking up - in the first part - an idea from the Tübingen Old Testament scholar Hartmut Gese. Gese holds that in specific layers of the Old Testament we need to reckon with an identity of Yahweh with Yahweh's angel. Gese warns against simply assuming the angels' inferiority to Yahweh. This recognition impelled me to pose the

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3 Cf. Geddes MacGregor, *Angels: Ministers of Grace*, Paragon House Publishers: New York 1988, 25.

question: What is characteristic for God's revelation--precisely through angels?

### 1. GOD'S ANGEL IN "MESSENGER ANGELOLOGY" AND GOD'S WITHDRAWAL AND FINITIZATION OF SELF

Angels mark the particular problem of God's visible process of taking up contact with what is individual and creaturely. How can God, whom the heavens can not contain, intentionally enter into visible contact with individual creatures who can not be everywhere at once? How can God do this without surrendering God's deity, without becoming unrecognizable in this process of taking up contact with what is creaturely?

Dialogical theologies mask this problem by directly appropriating God as a "Thou," as a communicating partner. They neglect the problem how the fullness of God's glory can be grasped in this model. Theistic theologies mask the problem by raising the process of God's guaranteed taking up contact with human beings to highly abstract, intellectual epistemic achievements. Mystical theologies mask the problem by dissolving into indeterminacy the determinacy of the process whereby God takes up contact. Several Biblical traditions, especially those of the Old Testament, give answers to our question by talking in various passages about "Yahweh's angel" or "God's angel." The God whom the heavens can not contain communicates with that which is creaturely and which can not be everywhere at once, in that God, in God's angel, is attentive to what is creaturely. This is by no means the only instance of God's attentiveness to human beings reported by the texts. But it is an instance of attentiveness which is particularly highlighted, particularly interesting and indeed particularly offensive. Does this instance of God's attentiveness to human beings, or the account of this attentiveness, compromise the Biblical traditions? Or can the statements about angels cast light on God's person, on God's way of communicating with creatures?

The angel who enters the scene as a messenger of God is to be regarded as a **withdrawal of self**, a **contraction of self**, a **concretion of self** on God's part for the benefit of a revelation to determinate human beings in determinate situations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gerhard von Rad saw this state of affairs, but understood it as a problem of human perception: As soon as God enters into the apperception of a human being, God's angel appears (ThWNT I, 1933, 75ff.).

Human beings can by sending messengers make themselves relatively multiplied. Human beings can through messengers become relatively "multi-present." By contrast, when God becomes present in angels it amounts to God's relative finitization of self. Therefore this self-finitization of God in revelation by means of God's angel is never put forward as enduring and repeatable. This perspective is very important, since it is for this reason that it is essential to angels that they disappear and do not return. In the language of our century one could say that angels are "existential figures." That is to say that angels are not empirical in the strict sense. As such they can not be pinned down and measured. The reality of angels is that of a singular event. But the empirical status of singular events remains controverted. If angels are creatures, they are not at any rate to be regarded as **natural** creatures in the usual sense. Although according to the report of the Biblical traditions they **appear** as natural creatures, their reality is more closely related to that of cultural creatures, for example performances of works of art.

I would like to note as a first important point that the angels who appear on the scene as messengers are, contrary to human messengers, not the appearance of a ruler's extension of power. Rather they are the appearance of a contraction of power on God's part. This contraction of God's power needs itself to be retracted; it must itself disappear. Second, though, we must attend to the fact that although this contraction of power in God's messenger operates in the midst of creaturely being on earth, operates determinatively upon creaturely being on earth, it does not become an instance of such creaturely being on earth. Angels appear, but they do not take up residence. Angels disappear, but they do not die.

In his book *GOD'S ANGELS DO NOT NEED WINGS*<sup>5</sup> Claus Westermann has characterized angels as "God's possibility for us." But this is formulated in too indeterminate a manner. If in angelology one speaks of God's possibility, one must say the angel concretizes and materializes the fullness of God's glory, which we may describe as a fullness of possibilities, for determinate human beings in determinate situations. The angel carries through this concretion without masking or negating the fullness of God's glory in this concretion. One of the ways in which that is brought to expression is that in one and the same story God takes the

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5 Claus Westermann, *Gottes Engel brauchen keine Flügel*, Stuttgart 1957, 2. Aufl. 1980.

place of the angel, and the angel takes the place of God.

If we describe this exchange in contemporary terminology, we can conclude that Biblical stories can express by means of an "identity switching" between God and God's angel this process of God's making Godself present for the good of what is creaturely and finite, and under the conditions of what is creaturely and finite. At issue is an admittedly imperfect - but in principle appropriate - form of presentation. Especially in the story of Hagar (Gen. 16) and in the story of Gideon's call (Jg. 6; but also for example Jg. 13:22) we encounter this confusing exchange: And God spoke, ... and the angel spoke. One and the same agent is meant, and yet according to conventional understanding the reference seems to change.<sup>6</sup> As Jacob dies he pronounces a blessing with these words:

The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked,  
the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day,  
the angel who has redeemed me from all harm.ú.ú.ú.

What does this God as angel, this angel of God do? The story of Balaam (Num. 22-24), which at first comes across as comparatively fantastic, turns out to be revealing for systematic reflection.

You know the story: Balak, a king who is in conflict with Israel, summons Balaam to pronounce a curse over the Israelite army. Balaam sets out on his donkey--initially it not really clear whether with Yahweh's approval or without it--into the sphere of power of Israel's opponent. In this situation the angel of the Lord appears on the scene.

. . . and the angel of the LORD took up a position in the road as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. The donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in the angel's hand; so the donkey turned off the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn it back onto the road (Num. 22:22-23; NRSV, altered).

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<sup>6</sup> Gen. 21, 22, 32, 48:15ff., Ex. 2f. and Num. 20:16, as well as the picking up of Ex. 3 in Acts 7 also reflect such a double identity.

The donkey repeatedly draws back before the angel, but Balaam does not perceive the angel, and repeatedly beats the donkey. Thereupon, according to verse 28: "The LORD opened the mouth of the donkey." An otherwise inconceivable linguistic or quasi-linguistic understanding arises between human being and animal. After this understanding between human and animal verse 31 says: "Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with drawn sword in hand..."

Balaam realizes that his life has been hanging in the balance and that the donkey has saved him. He wishes to turn around immediately, but is sent onward with the commission: "Goú.ú.ú. but speak only what I tell you to speak." What is going on here? With the angel's appearance on the scene boundaries are drawn at the point of transition into a realm of enemy power. At first these boundaries remain thoroughly unrecognizable to human beings. The angel marks the transition into another sphere of power, into the sphere of power of Israel's opponent. At the same time, in connection with the angel's appearance boundaries are removed, boundaries of communication between creatures are set aside.

More is at stake in this than learning to be sensitive to non-human fellow creatures. Admittedly, in situations of ecological danger there is good reason to deplore the absence of such sensitivity. In situations of ecological crisis there are occasions when such sensitivity is emphatically demanded. But here something more is going on. The text says that Balaam's eyes were opened. Balaam is given the ability to see in a new way. He is given a new perception of reality. Over against this new perception of reality, the old, accustomed perception of reality, which previously had seemed automatic, is to be regarded as blindness or sleep. Balaam now recognizes a dangerous boundary at this transition into the realm of enemy power. He recognizes a boundary which had not shown itself in the natural view of the natural surroundings. Two processes occur simultaneously. On the one hand, boundaries of understanding between what is earthly and creaturely are lifted. On the other hand, there is a sensitization to boundaries and dangers which are not automatically recognizable in the realm of what is earthly and creaturely. Evidently sensitization to boundaries and the lifting of boundaries go hand in hand with the appearing of the angel. Eyes are opened for a view of reality which is both more differentiated and more integrative than is possible with the usual natural and creaturely perception of reality. The natural, unquestioned perception of reality is thereby relativized.

Other texts also present this displacement of boundaries and this calling into question of the so-called natural, accustomed and routine view of things in connection with the appearance of an angel. But these texts present all that in a way which is considerably less fantastic, considerably less along the lines of a fairy tale, and considerably more normal. In these texts the displacement of boundaries and the calling into question of the routine view of things appear in a way which is considerably more strongly integrated into the world of experience, including into the world of a contemporary common sense. In Joshua 5, Joshua unsuspectingly encounters a man with a sword in his hand. Joshua does not know whether the man be friend or foe.

Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?" He replied, "Neither; but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and he said to him, "What do you command your servant, my lord?" The commander of the army of the LORD said to Joshua, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy." And Joshua did so (Jos. 5:13-15).

The angel's appearing breaks through and overcomes the militaristic fixation of the perception of reality upon friend or foe and upon corresponding situations of decision.

The appearance of an angel can likewise effectively remove attitudes of powerlessness which have been ingrained by resigned repetition. This is shown, for instance, by the story of Gideon's call in Jg. 6. Claus Westermann gives this striking summary.

It is told that once in the early history of Israel the son of a farmer was threshing grain. He was not doing that on the threshing-floor, but in the winepress, a narrow trough hewn into the stone in the vineyard. He was doing it there because it was too dangerous on the open threshing-floor. The land was occupied. A soldier of the occupying army could come by--then the grain would be lost. There a messenger of God approaches him. The messenger was not recognizable as such. He looked like a usual human being. He greets the young farmer: "God be with you, you mighty hero!" The other takes the greeting literally. He answers the stranger: "What is with this 'God be with you'? I don't see any signs of it. Where have all God's deeds

gone, which God used to do for God's people?" The messenger answers: "You have been selected to begin again these great deeds in your people!" The young man very soberly objects that he has none of the necessary prerequisites for the job. The stranger says: "It is precisely in this powerlessness that God wills to do what God intends for you and your people." The young farmer listens to all of this, but remains critical. "Who will tell me," he says, "whether all this is true? I don't know you; I am a lowly person. It could all be a sham." And now comes the most astounding part of the story. The messenger recognizes that this critical question is justified. He gives a sign to the one to whom he is sent. Specifically, he gives a sign out of the young farmer's immediate reality, by which the latter can recognize that it is true, that the message is dependable. Only in disappearing does the man prove to be a messenger from another world, and the young man bows down to the ground. Then what the messenger said, happens. The young farmer, conscious of his mission, calls together a band which drives the enemies out of the land.

It is very important to see that the appearances of angels, as marvelous as they themselves and many of their accompanying circumstances might be, do not in principle change the natural, accustomed view of reality--e.g., the accustomed evaluation of relations of political power--so as to sail away on wings of fantasy. Gideon remains realistic, even skeptical. The angel's appearance prompts Gideon to question--as we would say today--what lies behind the formula of greeting and the promise of ways out of the situation. That which is improbable and unbelievable in the situation is clearly also submitted to reflection. Yet the encounter with the angel and the angel's promise then leads to calling into question and changing the situation, including the given political situation. A new view of reality sets in, which leads to a change of reality.

Summarizing these first pieces of knowledge, one should note that God's angel appears in the midst of recognizable or unrecognizable complications and discontinuities of natural relations of life, in the midst of menace, oppression and war. God's angel makes possible a relativization and dissolution of the old perception of reality by means of a new perception of reality, which then leads more or less directly to a change of reality.

Change in the perception and evaluation of self, change in the perception of reality, and momentous changes in the realities of social and historical life are also triggered by God's



angel appearing on the scene in the birth announcements to Hagar, Samson's mother and Mary (Gen. 16, Jg. 6, Lk. 1).

With its improbable message, God's angel transformatively anticipates experiences of self and reality which are as yet inaccessible. God's angel intervenes in the world of experience which is near yet inaccessible, and in the world of experience which is distant, complex and superindividual. Corresponding to the message of deliverance from political distress in a situation of hopelessness, resignation and deprivation, before the angel's entrance it is simply not foreseeable how the present could be perceived differently than it currently is. It is simply not foreseeable how the future could be looked at other than in indeterminate, passive expectation and continuation of the usual.

Westermann has suggested that initially in prehistorical periods questions of family formation and maintenance were the primary questions in giving shape to life and in coping with reality. The familial world functioned as the representative world; the familial orientation, as the primary "code" of the perception of reality. Only later did an endangered political structure and reality which continually had to reaffirm itself in armed conflict follow as the primary world, as the representative reality. To be sure, we must give these perceptions and descriptions of reality considerably greater refinement, development and precision. Yet in any case it is important to observe that the angel's message not only goes out to human individuals in concrete, individual situations. Rather the message in these individual and concrete situations is **a message which responds to typical situations of distress and affliction of the people**. Despite the individuality and singularity of the situation, the message of the angel opens up typical, communally or even universally relevant, representative and yet inaccessible experiences of reality.

In systematic accordance with that, God's angel accompanies human beings, indeed an entire people, even in situations of lasting danger, in situations of constantly uncertain expectation and constantly threatening experience of difference. The angel accompanies on the way through the desert; the angel accompanies on a way characterized by chronic unpredictability and constantly threatening affliction.<sup>7</sup> . A solidified, enduring threat to the continuity of

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7 Cf. Ex. 14:19; 23:20 and 23; 32:34 and 33:2, but also Gen. 24.

common life and enduring discontinuous experiences of reality characterize the locations of the angel's entrance into relations of human, creaturely and earthly life.

Private and public self-understanding, private and public perception of reality are changed. According to the Biblical traditions, God's angel does not appear on the scene to give private revelations. More precisely, purely private revelations, encounters with an unearthly being which remain purely personal and individual and have no effects on the community are obviously not encounters with God's angel. In the angel, God transformatively intervenes through individual contacts in relations of superindividual life. Relations of superindividual life are incorporated into individual certainty, contexts of individual action and the course of individual life. This incorporation and change of far-reaching relations of life into the sphere of individual perceiving and experiencing is incomprehensible, improbable, marvelous, inconceivable. The angel and the angel's message do not "fit" into individual experience. In its hypercomplexity the angel explodes the forms and boundaries of the individual capacity for perception and action.

At the same time this reality, which is hypercomplex with regard to the human being confronted with the angel, is to be conceived with regard to God as reduction, finitization and withdrawal of self. God's making Godself present by means of the angel needs itself to be withdrawn and removed in order not to mask the fullness of God's glory. So-called court angelology grasps with great systematic consistency this fullness of God's glory.

## 2. COURT ANGELOLOGY AND THE GLORY OF GOD

For the human being who sends them, messengers make possible a relative multi-presence. The effectiveness of this multi-presence rises in proportion to the strength of the loyalty which the one who sends the messengers centers upon him- or herself, and in proportion to the number of members who share that loyalty. The ruler who sends out a single messenger to put an army together will presumably have little success. But suppose someone sends out 30 or 300 messengers with the message: "While you, good fellow, are being asked here, 29 or 299 other persons are deciding to defend the fatherland!" That ruler has better chances of

winning the numinous "they"<sup>8</sup> or the spirit of the community to the ruler's side and thereby gaining true political power for him- or herself. The Old Testament repeatedly tells of such archaic processes of procuring political power and loyalty.<sup>9</sup>

If we remain within this world of political images, successful, uncontested procurement of power and loyalty is aptly expressed by the picture of the king on his throne surrounded by his court. To be sure, we have here a simple, monocentric image, oriented upon hierarchically divided, stratified societies. But this image, which one can regard as an early, elementary form of "political theology," already possesses great conceptual power. As will be shown, this image makes it possible simultaneously to think God's singular and plural presence of power or different manners of God's determinate and indeterminate presence. Moreover, this image makes it possible to imagine the plural presence of God's power concentrated, packed together as it were around God's throne. In the Biblical traditions this image of the angelological expression of the fullness of God's person is developed in at least four aspects.

1. The angels around God's throne are numerous, indeed too numerous to count. I am indebted to Hartmut Gese for pointing out that a statement like Dan. 7:10: "ten thousand times ten thousand stood before God," means the largest conceivable number. These angels who can number in the myriads can
2. function as representatives of peoples, states, epochs or communities. Thus, angels do not only represent God's power for that which is creaturely, but they represent the creaturely powers before God. The expression "collective person," coined by Max Scheler in connection with Hegel's concept of spirit ("An I which is we, and a we which is I."), and taken over and given wide currency by the young Bonhoeffer<sup>10</sup>, would be very applicable to angels. Abstractly formulated, angels are themselves to be regarded as personified or instantiated centers of power or of the "conferral of religious meaning." These angels, which are too numerous to count and at the same time each embody a social power, are
3. present before God, attentively centered upon God. They serve and are ready to serve: i.e., they are ready to put themselves at God's disposal, to let God put them in action. Yet that is

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8 Cf. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen 15. Aufl. 1979, esp. § 27.

9 Cf. esp. several of the references to the "secular" use of *mal'ak* in Jg. I, II Sam. and I and II Kg.

10 See D. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche*. ed. J. van Soosten, Dietrich Bonhoeffers Werke, Vol. 1, Kaiser-Verlag, München 1986, 229, also 48, 65ff and 74ff.

not yet enough. Angels embody not only potential powers which are at God's disposal, which have placed themselves at God's disposal. A comparison with mercenaries, knights, vassals or allies would remain inadequate. Unlike the members of earthly armies, the members of the heavenly armies demonstrate and concretize the power of God, not by threatening and instilling fear, not by fighting and committing themselves as hungry for victory and prepared to meet death. Instead they demonstrate God's power and glory

4. in praise of God, in doxology. If we give closer attention to this constellation, it becomes evident that God's glorification is not to be understood simply as recognition and approval. It is also not merely an expression of thanksgiving for a specific act of God, or an expression of praise for some specific reason.<sup>11</sup> Doxology goes far beyond specific acts of thanksgiving and praise. In acts of praise and glorification both heavenly and earthly beings point beyond their own perspective on God, beyond their own experiences of God and thus "beyond themselves." This pointing beyond oneself, this relativizing of one's own perspective and experience in the face of God's incalculable glory is structurally related to the disappearing of the messenger angel! As in assertions of truth we both withdraw ourselves and point beyond ourselves (That is so, even independently of my view!), so doxology points beyond the acquired current, concrete and personal experience and knowledge of God, beyond all motives at hand for praise and thanksgiving.

Therefore the praise of God is at the same time a summons to praise: e.g., Psalm 148:2: "Praise God, all God's angels; praise God, all God's host." Therefore the praise of God goes beyond all spatio-temporal perspectives and realms of experience: "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end." The angels' praise of God is contagious, expanding and pointing beyond itself. The heavenly doxology of a great number of angels, who themselves can be regarded as centers and representatives of earthly community and power, reflects the power and glory of God. Paradoxically formulated, in this doxology the power and glory of God become conceivable even in their inconceivability. There is a representation of what it means to say: "Even the heavens and the heavens of the heavens cannot contain you." (I Kings 8:27; NRSV, altered).

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11 Karl Barth's angelology (KD III/3) does not see this clearly enough. Barth does not distinguish clearly between angels as messengers and angels as members of the assembly of those glorifying God. For that reason Barth can not determine with sufficient clarity the relation between God's rule [Herrschaft] and God's glory [Herrlichkeit].

The comprehension of the incomprehensibility and incalculability of the divine potentials for power and glory in the heavens is a fundamental aspect of angelology. To this end the Biblical texts employ in their basic structure simple, monocentric forms of political imagery, which are quantitatively and dynamically potentiated along a trajectory which fades into indeterminacy.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the forms of thought present in messenger and court angelology are maintained in what I consider a consistent and logical manner in the representation of the individual figures standing next to God's throne, in the representation of the seraphim and cherubim. Claus Westermann comments: "The winged seraphim and cherubim, having animal form and usually with the body of a lion, go back thousands of years. We encounter them in a plethora of representations which have been preserved up to the present day. Where they are represented--on temple walls, liturgical implements, the thrones of statues of the gods--they point to the proximity of the divine".<sup>13</sup> Hartmut Gese has spoken of powerful "mixed beings" whom human beings encounter when the latter approach the sanctuary. Gese has called attention to the fact that these figures can not simply be dismissed as such merely because they have been taken over from foreign religious or mythical conceptual worlds. Rather, we have to consider the needs for presentation which caused such forms and figures to be taken over.<sup>14</sup>

How can we arrive at the goal of a theological understanding of these remarkable seraphim and cherubim? Must we not let matters rest with these remarks of Westermann:

God's messengers on the one hand and, on the other hand, the heavenly beings in God's court--seraphim and cherubim...--belong to completely different conceptual circles. Nor do they form two different groups of one class of beings, to which one could give the comprehensive name of "angel." Later it admittedly came to that. The general concept "angel" became dominant. Underneath that general concept one arranged the various species and groups of angels. Thus it happened that all angels gained their wings.<sup>15</sup>

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12 For many details about the "heavenly hierarchy", brought forth in religious and cultural history, see Malcolm Godwin, *Angels*, Labyrith Publishing 1990.

13 Westermann, 23f.

14 Cf. G. MacGregor, *ibid.* 123ff: "Are angels mere fictions of the religious imagination?"

15 Westermann, 22.

Over against the amicable division into different conceptual circles, it seems important to me to see that the seraphim are "multi-creaturely figures." Perhaps one could even term them figures which symbolize "pan-creatureliness", because they express an association of earthly-creaturely elements which is unthinkable, unimaginable and impossible under earthly-creaturely conditions, and under the conditions of the world of our experience. Not only are the seraphim, inasmuch as they are endowed with wings and the bodies of lions, superior to human beings in terms of strength and locomotive ability. For human beings, the seraphim are uncanny beings, because they break through the familiar order and typology of what is creaturely, and call that order and typology into question. In these beings what is creaturely is joined together in a way which, for human beings, is unknown and neither experienced nor capable of being experienced on earth. The beings who surround God do indeed present recognizable elements of what is creaturely, but they are unlike the creatures found on the earth. They are beings who seem to come from the time in the process of creation before division and determination occurred. In any case the creatures found on earth are poorer in terms of possibilities and power. Some creatures on earth can fight with the strength of the lion; others can fly like birds. But creatures can not do both.

Over against the power which is expressed in the angels' act of praise, and at the same time relativized with regard to God, all earthly power is only an imperfect level of reduction, indeed a vanishing point. Similarly, all earthly creatures are reduced, depotentiated and separated creatures over against the hypercomplex heavenly beings. The angels in heaven represent a combination of power and reality, an interlacing of power and reality, a fullness of power and reality, over against which earthly creatureliness, both natural and cultural creatureliness, must appear as a reduction. Here, too, we have to speak of an overly complex reality. The attempt to perceive these angels in the heavens must lead to overwhelming, incomprehensible images. When individual heavenly beings are nevertheless specified, albeit in improbable form, it must be frightfully uncanny for a human being. Only in doxology can human beings introduce themselves, so to speak, into heavenly relations. Only in doxology can human beings even now anticipate "being like the angels."<sup>16</sup>

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16 E. Peterson has reflected upon this in: *Von den Engeln*, in: *Theologische Traktate*, München 1951, 323ff., bes. 327ff. Cf. K. Berger, *Volksversammlung und Gemeinde Gottes. Zu den Anfängen der christologischen Verwendung von "Ekklesia"*, *ZThK* 73 (1976), 167ff., bes. 194ff.

Does that mean that angelology can at best have a liturgical "Sitz im Leben" and that we have lost once and for all what is a central aspect of messenger angelology: namely, individually mediated deliverance and change of reality? In his book on angels, Claus Westermann has pointed out that a clear, new recognition of our dominant, representative experiences of reality, and a clear, new recognition of the experience of elemental distress would have to precede a new sensitization to questions of angelology. Without a clear experience of elemental distress which is typical and representative, we will not be able to develop any sensitivity to the fundamental experiences grasped in messenger angelology. Westermann warns against appealing to experiences of distress which today are atypical and uncharacteristic. He warns against using such experiences as a foundation for mediating experiences of deliverance and developing a sensitivity to such experiences. It may be that at present global ecological dangers are pushing us into new, clear experiences of elemental distress and elemental deliverance. All human beings feel these dangers and their mechanisms and most persons lament them. Yet like illnesses which are difficult to diagnose or like the dictatorship of the "they" and of the *Zeitgeist*, these mechanisms continually elude attempts to interfere with them. The doctrine of angels provokes us to pose the following questions to theology: To what extent can a doctrine of creation today cultivate sensitivity to clear experiences of distress which is really fundamental and which is typical of our time and our world? To what extent can a doctrine of creation today cultivate sensitivity to clear experiences of God's salvific intervention in relations of human life? In posing those questions I do not wish to claim that our theological undertakings can open eyes which are shut or simply put an end to the sleep of the unquestioned view of the world and of reality. But we can certainly contribute either to distracting from the salvific encounter of what is creaturely with God, or to concentration upon the encounter of earthly reality with God's reality.