

Doctrine of Created Spiritual Beings

The Spiritual Realm and the Biblical Story

1. The main perspective of the biblical story is the triune God's partnership with humans in the rule of the physical world, the earth. Scripture is also clear that there is a spiritual dimension, often called "heaven" or "the heavens," which has been created by God, over which he rules, and which overlaps and interacts with the physical realm throughout the biblical story (Gen 1:1; Ps 8; 103:19; Isa 37:16; 66:1; 1 Chron 29:11).
2. The spiritual realm is populated by spiritual beings who have also been created by God (1 Kgs 22:19; Ps 148:1-5; Neh 9:6; Col 1:16). Some of these spiritual beings serve the triune God, while others are in rebellion against him (Heb 1:14; Eph 6:12; Rev 12:7).
 - a. Jesus Christ won the decisive victory over rebellious spiritual beings through his death and resurrection (Matt 28:18; Col 2:15; 1 John 3:8; Heb 2:14-15).
 - b. Jesus Christ is presently seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven, from where he rules over all spiritual beings, including those who are in rebellion against him. Though their ultimate defeat is sure, for now these beings continue in their rebellion against God, exercising authority over unregenerate people and seeking to oppose God's people (Eph 1:20-21; 2:1-2; 6:12; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 2:10; Heb 1:1-4; 1 Pet 3:22; 5:8; 1 John 5:19).
 - c. At the final judgment, all rebellious spiritual beings will be subdued by Jesus Christ and cast into the Lake of Fire for all eternity (Matt 25:41; Philip 2:10-11; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6; Rev 20:10).
3. In the eternal state, the physical and spiritual realms of God's creation will be fully renewed and reunited, and all God's created beings will live in peace under his good rule (Isa 65:17; 66:22-23; 2 Pet 3:13; Eph 1:10; Col 1:19-20; Rev 21:1-5).¹
4. The Bible says much about the spiritual realm. However, because it is not the main perspective of the biblical story, much remains unknown about the nature of this realm, its interactions with the physical realm, and the distinctions and hierarchies of beings within it. Therefore, this section will state that which can be clearly understood about spiritual beings in Scripture, while also acknowledging how things *may* be or *seem* to be, due to the limited information that God has revealed to us in his Word (Deut 29:29).

The Heavenly Host

1. Spiritual beings who worship and serve the triune God may be generally identified by the term *heavenly hosts* ² (Ps 103:19-21; 148:1-3; 1 Kgs 22:19; Luke 2:13). Scripture identifies several types of spiritual beings who comprise the heavenly hosts, including angels, cherubim, seraphim, and the living creatures.
2. Angels are God's servants, ministering as he directs them. The word *angel* comes from the Greek word *angelos*, meaning messenger.³ Accordingly, angels most often function in the

¹ For more on the Eternal State, see *Doctrine of Last Things*, Eternity and New Creation.

² The Hebrew word *host* (*tsevaot*) means "company" or "army." In the Bible, the phrase "heavenly hosts" or "hosts of heaven" can also refer to the sun, moon, and stars (Deut 4:19), but in a number of texts this phrase clearly refers to spiritual beings (Ps 103:20-21; 148:2; 1 Kgs 22:19; Luke 2:13). The divine title, *LORD of hosts*, occurs frequently throughout the Old Testament (1 Sam 17:45; 2 Sam 7:26; Ps 24:10; 89:8; Isa 5:16; 6:3, 5; 24:23; 37:16; 47:4; Jer 31:35; Mal 1:11), and refers to God's almighty power and authority over all created beings in both the physical and spiritual realms.

³ In the Old Testament, the most common Hebrew word for angel (*malak*) also means messenger.

biblical story as messengers from God to humans, communicating with and assisting them in various ways⁴ (1 Kgs 19:4-8; Neh 9:6; Ps 91:11-12; 103:20-21; 148:2; Dan 3:24-28; 6:22; Matt 1:20-22; 2:13, 19-20; 4:11; 28:2-7; Luke 1:11-20, 26-38; 2:8-15; 22:43; Acts 8:26; 10:1-8; 12:6-11; 27:21-25; Heb 1:7, 14; Rev. 1:1; 7:11-12; 22:16).

- a. Angels are a separate order of being, distinct from both God and humanity. They are more powerful than humans, have great wisdom and exercise moral judgment, but are still limited in power and knowledge and are subject to judgment by God for their actions (2 Sam 14:17, 20; Ps 8:4-5; Matt 24:36; 25:41; 1 Cor 6:3; Heb 1:3-14, 2:5-9; 1 Pet 1:12; 2 Pet 2:4, 11; Jude 6; Rev 7:1; 18:1).
 - b. As spiritual beings, angels do not have physical bodies, and are not susceptible to physical death. However, angels can and do occasionally appear in the bodily form of humans. They can even communicate with people without the individuals being aware that an angel is in their presence (Gen 18-19; Matt 28:2-7; Mark 16:5-7; Luke 20:34-36; 24:4-7, 39; Acts 1:10-11; Heb 13:2).
 - c. Two angels are specifically named in Scripture: Gabriel (Dan 8:16; 9:20-27; Luke 1:19) and Michael⁵ (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; Rev 12:7). Michael is called an archangel (or chief angel) in Jude 9 and a “chief prince” in Daniel 10:13 (cf., Dan 10:20; 12:1), and he is seen leading angels into battle in Revelation 12:7-8. Thus, there is an apparent hierarchy of authority among the angels, but no further details are given.
 - d. The Bible does not specify the total number of angels, but it is evidently a very large number (Deut 33:2; Matt 26:53; Heb 12:22; Rev 5:11).
3. The cherubim, the seraphim and the living creatures⁶ are spiritual beings who always appear in close proximity to God in Scripture.⁷ It appears that their primary function is to serve God in his immediate presence, in contrast to angels who mainly serve as messengers to humans (Gen 3:24; Ps 18:10; 80:1; 99:1; 2 Kgs 19:15; Isa 6:2-7; 37:16; Ezek 1:5-14; 10:1-22; 11:22; Rev 4:6-11).
4. Other titles for heavenly hosts include the divine council (Ps 82:1; Jer 23:18, 22; Job 15:8), the sons of God (Gen 6:2, 4; Deut 32:8; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7), holy ones (Deut 33:2-3; Ps 89:5-7; Dan 4:13, 17, 23; Zech 14:5; Jude 14), heavenly beings (Ps 8:5; 29:1; 89:6), and watchers (Dan 4:13, 17, 23). These may refer to additional types of spiritual beings, or they may be alternate titles for those already described above.

The Angel of the LORD

The Angel of the LORD appears frequently in the Old Testament. He is unique from other angels, because he is described both as distinct from the LORD and as the LORD himself. Thus, it is

⁴ In this way, angels function as “...the spiritual counterpart to the human biblical prophets. Both function as messengers of God...” BibleProject, *Spiritual Beings: Video Notes Collection*, 29. Available online at: www.bibleproject.com.

⁵ In Hebrew, Gabriel means “God is my strength,” and Michael means “Who is like God?”, indicating that these angels, for all their glory and power, exist to serve and glorify God and not themselves.

⁶ These terms may refer to different types of beings or may be interchangeable terms for the same beings.

⁷ God instructed Moses to include images of cherubim on the curtains of the tabernacle, and especially on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant, which is where God’s presence was manifested within the tabernacle (Ex 25:18-22; 26:1, 31; Num 7:89; 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 1 Chr 13:6; Heb 9:5). These man-made images represented the actual cherubim who accompany God’s presence (Ezek 10:1-22).

apparent that the Angel of the LORD is God himself appearing in human or angelic form⁸ (Gen 16:7-13; 22:11-18; Ex 3:1-10; 23:20-22; Num 22:22-38; Judg 2:1-5; 6:11-24; Zech 1:7-17; 1 Chron 21:14-30; Mal 3:1).

Spiritual Forces of Evil

1. Spiritual beings who rebel against the triune God are called *spiritual forces of evil* (Eph 6:12). Among these are Satan and demons.
 - a. These spiritual beings were created by God (Col 1:16) and therefore were originally good (Gen 1:31). However, by rejecting their created purpose to worship and serve God, these beings became evil and stand under God's judgment (Matt 25:41; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6).
 - b. Presently, the spiritual forces of evil exert great power and authority over the created world and over unredeemed humans, who joined them in rebellion against God (Gen 3:1-6; Eph 2:1-3; 6:12; 1 John 5:19). Nevertheless, because they were created by God, evil spiritual beings are still under his sovereign authority, despite their resolute opposition to him (Gen 3:14-15; Job 1:12; 2:6; Zech 3:1-2; Mark 1:23-27, 32-34; 5:1-13; Luke 4:36).
 - c. The ultimate destiny of the spiritual forces of evil is the Lake of Fire, which has been prepared for them (Matt 25:41; Rev 20:10).
2. The evil spiritual being known as Satan is portrayed in Scripture as the initiator and leader of rebellion against God and therefore as the cause of the corruption, destruction and death that have resulted from this rebellion (John 8:44; Eph 2:2; Heb 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8).
 - a. This being first appears as the serpent who deceives Eve in Genesis 3 (cf., Rev 12:9; 20:2).
 - b. The term *satan* is a Hebrew word meaning "adversary" or "opponent." It is a title, rather than a proper name,⁹ indicating this being's role in the biblical story as the lead enemy of God and his people.
 - c. This being is given several other titles in Scripture, including the *devil*, meaning the "accuser" or "slanderer" (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13), the evil one (Matt 13:19; John 17:15; Eph 6:16; 2 Thess 3:3; 1 John 2:13-14; 3:8), the tempter (Matt 4:3; 1 Thess 3:5), *Beelzebul*, meaning "lord of the house" (Matt 10:25; 12:24-27; Mark 3:22-27; Luke 11:15-19), the prince of demons (Matt 9:34; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15), the father of lies (John 8:44), the ruler of this world (John 12:31), the prince of the power of the air (Eph 2:2), the god of this age (2 Cor 4:4), the deceiver of the whole world (Rev 12:9), and the dragon (Rev 12:9; 20:2).
 - d. These titles also describe the main methods that Satan uses to oppose God and his people: by *tempting* people to desire and do what is evil (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13), by *deceiving* people to believe lies (especially the lie that what God says is evil is actually good, as in Gen 3:4-5 and 2 Thess 2:9-12) and by *accusing* people of their guilt and shame for their evil actions (Zech 3:1; Rev 12:10).

⁸ Similarly, John wrote that, in the beginning, Jesus Christ was "with God" and "was God" (John 1:1, 18). Jesus likewise spoke of his oneness with, and distinction from, the Father (John 6:57; 8:18; 10:29-30; 37-38; 14:8-11; 17:20-23). However, New Testament authors likely refrained from identifying Jesus as the Angel of the LORD in order to protect their readers from viewing him as merely an angel (see Heb 1:1-14) or as just another appearance of the Angel of the LORD. "The angel of Yahweh is God appearing as a human, while Jesus is God become human" (BibleProject, *Spiritual Beings: Video Notes Collection*, 45. Available online at: www.bibleproject.com). For more on the deity of Jesus Christ, see *Doctrine of the Trinity, The Son*.

⁹ The word *satan* most often occurs with a definite article: "the satan."

3. The term *demon*, from the Greek word *daimonion*, refers to lesser evil spiritual beings (also called “unclean spirits”) who joined Satan in rebellion against the triune God, and are under the rule of Satan, the “prince of demons” (Matt 9:34; 10:1; 12:24, 43; Mark 1:23-27; 3:22; 5:1-13; Luke 11:15).
 - a. In Scripture, demons seem to operate similarly to angels¹⁰ in that they interact with humans within the physical realm.
 - b. However, while angels assist and communicate with people on God’s behalf, demons seek to oppress, torment and dominate them (Matt 4:24; 8:16; 15:22; Mark 5:1-5; 9:17-22; Luke 9:38-42; Acts 10:38).
4. In addition to demons, the Bible also speaks of other “thrones,” “dominions,” “rulers,” and “authorities” (Col 1:16), which indicate a hierarchy among the spiritual forces of evil (Gal 4:3, 8-9; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col 2:8, 10, 15, 20). Evil spiritual beings are associated with human governments, and perhaps are even assigned roles of authority over specific nations or geographic regions (Deut 32:8; Dan 10:13, 20; 1 Cor 10:19-20).

The Christian and the Spiritual Realm

1. The Bible instructs Christians how to interact with spiritual beings. Generally, Christians should live with awareness of the spiritual realm and of the beings that inhabit it (Matt 18:10; Heb 12:22-24; 1 Cor 4:9; 11:10; 1 Pet 1:12).
 - a. The church displays God’s wisdom “to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph 3:10).¹¹
 - b. Angels are “sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation” (Heb 1:14), and they rejoice when humans repent and trust in Christ (Luke 15:10).
 - c. One reason that Christians are encouraged to show hospitality to strangers is because some may be angels (Heb 13:2).
 - d. At the final judgment, Christians will join God in judging the angels (1 Cor 6:3).
 - e. Yet, Christians are never instructed to *seek out* contact with spiritual beings, whether good or evil. Rather, we are instructed to not believe every spirit but to test them to see if they are from God¹² (1 John 4:1-6; Gal 1:8), and we are clearly forbidden from worshiping them (Col 2:18; Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9).
2. Christians must be mindful that we live in the midst of a cosmic war between the kingdom of heaven and the spiritual forces of evil, which is waged in both the spiritual and physical realms (Eph 6:12).
 - a. God has delivered those who have trusted in Jesus Christ “from the domain of darkness and transferred [them] to the kingdom of his beloved son” (Col 1:13).
 - i. Therefore, Christians are no longer under the authority or domination of the devil, (Eph 2:1-7; Heb 2:14-15; 1 John 5:18-20), but are rather indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9-16; 2 Cor 1:21-22; Gal 4:6; Eph 1:13-14; 1 John 4:4).
 - ii. However, a Christian’s confidence that they have been freed from Satan’s dominion rests not only in a verbal profession of faith in Christ, but also in a lifestyle of

¹⁰ Revelation 12:7 depicts a war in heaven: “Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back...” This may indicate that demons are evil angels.

¹¹ The terms “rulers and authorities” most likely refer to rebellious spiritual beings (see Eph 1:20-22; 6:12). Ephesians 3:10 indicates that God’s wisdom, displayed through his redemption of sinful humans, is a demonstration of his victory over rebellious spiritual beings.

¹² In fact, 2 Corinthians 11:4 warns us that “even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”

- growing repentance, righteousness, and brotherly love (1 John 3:1-15; 5:18-21; 1 Cor 10:19-22; Gal 5:16-24; Eph 4:17-32; 5:8-11).¹³
- b. During his ministry, Jesus Christ demonstrated authority over demons by the power of the Holy Spirit, commanding them to obey him and rescuing people from their oppression (Matt 9:32-33; 12:22-29; Mark 1:21-27, 32-34; 5:1-13; Luke 4:31-36, 40-41; 8:26-33; 11:14-22). Jesus also entrusted authority to cast out demons to some of his disciples to authenticate their message that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand”¹⁴ (Matt 10:1-8; Mark 3:14-19; 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-2; 10:17-20; Acts 5:12, 16; 8:5-12; 16:16-18).
- i. Demonic oppression continues to this day, because Satan and his forces still exert power and authority over unredeemed humans (Eph 2:1-3; 6:12; 1 John 5:19).
 - ii. However, just as the Spirit empowered Jesus to drive out demons (Matt 12:28), so the Holy Spirit can still demonstrate his power through Christians to free others from demonic oppression, as an authentication of the message of Jesus’ kingdom.
 - iii. When such deliverance occurs, it is due entirely to the power of the Holy Spirit, on the basis of the victory and authority of Christ over the spiritual forces of evil.
- c. Jesus Christ faced and resisted Satan’s temptations by trusting in the Word of God (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). In the same way, though Christians are no longer under Satan’s authority, we may still face powerful satanic temptation and opposition. God has called and equipped Christians to stand firm against Satan and his forces (Eph 6:10-13; 1 Pet 5:8-9), and he has given us the Holy Spirit, who is greater than Satan (1 John 4:1-4).
- i. In his Word, God has provided us with the necessary resources to resist satanic temptations, deceptions and schemes, but we must know and make use of these resources (Eph 6:14-20).
 - ii. Furthermore, God has given us two correlated promises: If we resist the devil, he will flee from us; and if we draw near to God in humility, he will draw near to us (James 4:6-8; 1 Pet 5:6-11).

Resources for Further Study

Beginner

- *Tabletalk Magazine: Angels, Demons, and Spiritual Warfare*, July 2007. <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/issue/2007/07/angels-demons-and-spiritual-warfare/>.
- Billy Graham, *Angels: God’s Secret Agents*, 1975.
- Erwin Lutzer, *God’s Devil*, 2015.
- BibleProject, *Spiritual Beings* video series: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/spiritual-beings/>.

Intermediate

- Wayne Grudem, *Making Sense of Who God Is*, chapters 12-13, 2011.
- Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, sections IV-VI, 1982.

¹³ Indeed, a professing Christian who continues in unrepentant sin is to be confronted and corrected with gentleness, in the hope that “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2 Tim 2:24-26; c.f., 1 Cor 5:1-5; 1 Tim 1:18-20). For more, see *Doctrine of the Church*, pt. 12.

¹⁴ For more on the Kingdom of God, see *Doctrine of the Church*, pt. 5.

- BibleProject, *Spiritual Beings: Video Notes Collection*: <https://bibleproject.com/view-resource/324>.

Advanced

- Michael Heiser, *Angels: What the Bible Really Says About God's Heavenly Host*, 2018.
- Sydney Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons*, 1994.
- Merrill Unger, *Biblical Demonology: A Study of Spiritual Forces at Work Today*, 1994.