

Christian angelology

For other angelic hierarchies, see [Hierarchy of angels](#).

In [Christianity](#), [angels](#) are agents of God, based on [angels in Judaism](#).^[1] The most influential Christian angelic hierarchy was that put forward by [Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite](#) in the 4th or 5th century in his book *[De Coelesti Hierarchia](#)* (*On the Celestial Hierarchy*).

During the [Middle Ages](#), many schemes were proposed about the hierarchy of demons, some drawing on and expanding on Pseudo-Dionysius, others suggesting completely different classifications.

According to [medieval Christian theologians](#), the [angels](#) are organized into several orders, or "Angelic Choirs".^{[2][3]}



The Assumption of the Virgin by Francesco Botticini at the National Gallery London, shows three hierarchies and nine orders of angels, each with different characteristics.

Pseudo-Dionysius (*On the Celestial Hierarchy*) and Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*) drew on passages from the [New Testament](#), specifically in the [Galatians 3:26-28](#), [Matthew 22:24-33](#), [Ephesians 1:21-23](#) and [Colossians 1:16](#), to develop a schema of three Hierarchies, Spheres or Triads of angels, with each Hierarchy containing three Orders or Choirs. Although both authors drew on the New Testament, the Biblical canon is relatively silent on the subject, and these hierarchies are considered less definitive than biblical material.

As referred to the theological doctrine of the [communion of saints](#), in Paradise there is a common and unique vision of the truth and [contemplation](#) of the [Face of God](#), without any kind of difference between angels or human souls. The *Summa theologiae* states that there exist different degree in respect of the creation, about the power of [intercession](#) to God and of direct entrustment in the human lives.

Contents

First Sphere

- Seraphim
- Cherubim
- Thrones

Second Sphere

- Dominions or Lordships
- Virtues or Strongholds
- Powers or Authorities

Third Sphere

Principalities or Rulers

Archangels

Angels

Personal guardian angels

Choirs in medieval theology

Individual angels and demons from the choirs

See also

References

Bibliography

Further reading

First Sphere

The **first sphere** angels serve as the heavenly servants of God the Son incarnated.

Seraphim

Seraphim (singular "Seraph") literally translated "burning ones", the word seraph is normally a synonym for serpents when used in the Hebrew Bible.^[4] Mentioned in Isaiah 6:1-7, Seraphim are the highest angelic class and they serve as the caretakers of God's throne and continuously shout praises: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" According to Isaiah 6:1-8, the Seraphim are described as fiery six-winged beings; with two wings they cover their faces, with another two they cover their feet, and the last two they use to fly. In the throne of God, there's no day or night, the radiance of His Glory gives light, for He is the creator of all and everything, in Him there's no darkness at all.

Cherubim

Cherubim have four faces: one of a man, an ox, a lion, and an eagle (later adopted as the symbols of the four evangelists). They have four conjoined wings covered with eyes (although Revelation 4:8 appears to describe them with six wings like the seraphim), a lion's body, and the feet of oxen. Cherubim guard the way to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24)^[5] and the throne of God (Ezekiel 28:14–16).^[6]



Orthodox icon of nine orders of angels.



Seraphim surround the divine throne in this illustration from the *Petites Heures de Jean de Berry*, a 14th-century illuminated manuscript.



A cherub, as described by Ezekiel and according to traditional Christian iconography.

The cherubim are mentioned in Genesis 3:24;^[5] Exodus 25:17–22; 2 Chronicles 3:7–14; Ezekiel 10:12–14,^[7] 28:14–16;^[6] 1 Kings 6:23–28;^[8]

Modern English usage has blurred the distinction between cherubim and *putti*. *Putti* are the often wingless (sometimes winged) human baby/toddler-like beings traditionally used in figurative art.

St. Thomas Aquinas imagined Satan as a fallen Cherub.^[9]

Thrones



One traditional depiction of the chariot vision, based on the description in Ezekiel.

The "Thrones" (Greek: *thronoi*, pl. of *thronos*), or Elders, are a class of celestial beings mentioned by Paul the Apostle in Colossians 1:16 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Colossians+1%3A16&version=ESV>) (New Testament). They are living symbols of God's justice and authority, and have as one of their symbols the throne.

It is not unusual to find that the Thrones are associated, by some, with the Ophanim or Erelim from the Jewish angelic hierarchy. However there is very little evidence, if any, to sustain this idea. The *Ophanim* (Heb. *ofanim*: Wheels, from the vision of Daniel 7:9 (<https://www.biblica.com/bible/?osis=niv:Daniel.7:9-7:9>)) are unusual looking, even compared to the other celestial beings, plus they are said to be moved by the spirit of other beings. Which then raises the question if the Ophanim are spiritual beings at all or if they are purely material beings. They appear as a beryl-coloured wheel-within-a-wheel, their rims covered with hundreds of eyes. They are closely connected with the Cherubim instead: "When they moved, the others moved; when they stopped, the others stopped; and when they rose from the earth, the wheels rose along with them; for the spirit of the living creatures [Cherubim] was in the wheels." Ezekiel 10:17 NRSV.

Christian theologians that include the Thrones as one of the choirs don't describe them as wheels, describing them as adoring elder men who listen to the will of God and present the prayers of men. The Twenty Four Elders in the Book of Revelation are usually thought to be part of this group of angels.

Second Sphere

Angels of the Second Sphere work as heavenly governors of the creation by subjecting matter and guiding and ruling the spirits.

Dominions or Lordships

The "Dominions" (Eph. 1:21; Col. 1:16) (lat. *dominatio*, plural *dominationes*, also translated from the Greek term *kyriotētes*, pl. of *kyriotēs*, as "Lordships") or "Dominations" are presented as the hierarchy of celestial beings "Lordships" in some English translations of the *De Coelesti Hierarchia*. The Dominions regulate the duties of lower angels. It is only with extreme rarity that the angelic lords make themselves physically known to humans.

The Dominions are believed to look like divinely beautiful humans with a pair of feathered wings, much like the common representation of angels, but they may be distinguished from other groups by wielding orbs of light fastened to the heads of their scepters or on the pommel of their swords.

Virtues or Strongholds

These angels are those through which signs and miracles are made in the world.^[10]

The term appears to be linked to the attribute "might", from the Greek root *dynamis* (pl. *dynameis*) in Ephesians 1:21 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130204082854/http://www.blueletterbible.org/cgi-bin/c.pl?book=Eph&chapter=1&verse=21&version=KJV#21>), which is also translated as "Virtue" or "Power". They are presented as the celestial Choir "Virtues", in the *Summa Theologica*.

From Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *De Coelesti Hierarchia*:

"The name of the holy Virtues signifies a certain powerful and unshakable virility welling forth into all their Godlike energies; not being weak and feeble for any reception of the divine Illuminations granted to it; mounting upwards in fullness of power to an assimilation with God; never falling away from the Divine Life through its own weakness, but ascending unwaveringly to the superessential Virtue which is the Source of virtue: fashioning itself, as far as it may, in virtue; perfectly turned towards the Source of virtue, and flowing forth providentially to those below it, abundantly filling them with virtue."^[11]

Powers or Authorities

The "Powers" (lat. *potestas* (f), pl. *potestates*), or "Authorities", from the Greek *exousiai*, pl. of *exousia* (see Greek root in Eph 3:10 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130204082858/http://www.blueletterbible.org/cgi-bin/c.pl?book=Eph&chapter=3&verse=10&version=KJV#10>)).^[10] The primary duty of the "Powers" is to supervise the movements of the heavenly bodies in order to ensure that the cosmos remains in order. Being warrior angels, they also oppose evil spirits, especially those that make use of the matter in the universe, and often cast evil spirits to detention places. These angels are usually represented as soldiers wearing full armor and helmet, and also having defensive and offensive weapons such as shields and spears or chains respectively.

Third Sphere

Angels who function as heavenly guides, protectors, and messengers to human beings.

Principalities or Rulers

The "Principalities" (Latin: *principatus*) also translated as "Princedom" and "Rulers", from the Greek *archai*, pl. of *archē* (see Greek root in Eph 3:10 (<https://www.bible.com/bible/114/EPH.3.10.nkjv>)), are the angels that guide and protect nations, or groups of peoples, and institutions such as the Church. The Principalities preside over the bands of angels and charge them with fulfilling the divine ministry. There are some who administer and some who assist.^[10]

The Principalities are shown wearing a crown and carrying a sceptre. Their duty also is said to be to carry out the orders given to them by the upper sphere angels and bequeath blessings to the material world. Their task is to oversee groups of people. They are the educators and guardians of the realm of earth. Like beings related to the world of the *germinal ideas*, they are said to inspire living things to many things such as art or science.^[12]

Paul used the term *rule* and *authority* in Ephesians 1:21,^[13] and *rulers* and *authorities* in Ephesians 3:10.^[14]

Archangels

The word "archangel" comes from the Greek ἀρχάγγελος (*archangelos*), meaning *chief angel*, a translation of the Hebrew רַב־מַלְאָךְ (*rav-mal'akh*)^[15] It derives from the Greek *archein*, meaning to be first in rank or power; and *angelos* which means messenger or envoy. The word is only used twice in the New Testament: 1 Thessalonians 4:16 (<http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=1+Thessalonians+4:16-4:16&version=nrsv>) and Jude 1:9 (<http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Jude+1:1-1:9&version=nrsv>).

Only the Archangel Michael is mentioned by name in the New Testament.

In most Christian traditions Gabriel is also considered an archangel, but there is no direct literary support for this assumption. It is also worth noting that the term 'archangel' appears only in the singular, never plural, and only in specific reference to Michael.

The name of the archangel Raphael appears only in the Book of Tobit (Tobias). Tobit is considered Deuterocanonical by Roman Catholics (both Eastern and Western Rites), Eastern Orthodox Christians, and Anglicans. The Book of Tobit is not, however, acknowledged by most Protestant denominations, such as Reformed Christians or Baptists. Raphael said to Tobias that he was "one of the seven who stand before the Lord", and it is generally believed that Michael and Gabriel are two of the other six.



Guido Reni's archangel Michael (in the Capuchin church of Santa Maria della Concezione, Rome, 1636) tramples Satan.

A fourth Archangel is Uriel whose name literally means "Light of God." Uriel's name is the only one not mentioned in the Western Christian Bible, but plays a prominent role in an apocryphon read by Anglican and Russian Orthodox Christians: The second Book of Esdras (fourth Books of Esdras in the Latin Vulgate). In the book, he unveils seven prophecies to the prophet Ezra, after whom the book is named. He also plays a role in the apocryphal Book of Enoch, which is considered canonical by both the Ethiopian Orthodox and Eritrean Orthodox Church. The Catholic Church does not regard Uriel (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/1390845/Vatican-bans-rogue-angels.html>) as an angel just as the Book of Enoch is not part of the Catholic Bible (<https://www.catholic.com/index.php/video/why-is-the-book-of-enoch-not-included-in-the-bible>) either.

Another possible interpretation of the seven archangels is that these seven are the seven spirits of God that stand before the throne described in the Book of Enoch, and in the Book of Revelation.^[16]

The Seven Archangels are said to be the guardian angels of nations and countries, and are concerned with the issues and events surrounding these, including politics, military matters, commerce and trade: e.g. Archangel Michael is traditionally seen as the protector of 'Israel' and of the *ecclesia* (Gr. root *ekklesia* from the New Testament passages), theologically equated as the Church, the forerunner of the spiritual New Israel.

Some make a distinction between archangel (with a lower-case a) and Archangel (with an uppercase A). The former can denote the second-lowest choir (arch-angels in the sense of being just above the lowest Choir of angels that is called only "angels") but the latter may denote the highest of all the angels (i.e., Arch-angels in the sense of being above *all* angels, of *any* Choir. The seven highest Seraphim, Michael, being the highest of all).

Angels

The "angels" or *malakhim* (Heb.: מַלְאָכִים), i.e. the "plain" angels (Gr.: ἄγγελοι, pl. of Gr.: ἄγγελος, *angelos*, i.e. messenger or envoy), are the lowest order of celestial beings, and the most recognized. They are the ones most concerned with the affairs of men. Within the category of the angels, there are many different kinds, with different functions. The angels are sent as messengers to humanity. Personal guardian angels come from this class.

Personal guardian angels

Personal guardian angels are not of a separate order but rather come from the order of Angels. It is a common belief that they are assigned to every human being, Christian or not.^[17] It is unknown whether they guard multiple humans during their existence or just one, but the latter is a more typical opinion.^[18]



An angel comforting Jesus, by Carl Heinrich Bloch, 1865-1879.

Choirs in medieval theology

During the Middle Ages, many schemes were proposed, some drawing on and expanding on Pseudo-Dionysius, others suggesting completely different classifications (some authors limited the number of Choirs to seven). Several other hierarchies were proposed, some in nearly inverted order. Some of those schemes are here presented:



The angelic choirs circling the abode of God, from Dante's *Paradiso*, illustrated by Gustave Doré.

- Apostolic Constitutions (4th century):
 - 1. Seraphim, 2. Cherubim, 3. Aeons, 4. Hosts, 5. Powers (=Virtues, Greek *dynaméis*), 6. Authorities, 7. Principalities, 8. Dominions, 9. Thrones, 10. Archangels, 11. Angels.
- St. Ambrose in Apologia Prophet David, 5 (4th century):
 - 1. Seraphim, 2. Cherubim, 3. Dominations, 4. Thrones, 5. Principalities, 6. Potentates (or Powers), 7. Virtues, 8. Archangels, 9. Angels.
- St. Jerome (4th century):
 - 1. Seraphim, 2. Cherubim, 3. Powers, 4. Dominions (Dominations), 5. Thrones, 6. Archangels, 7. Angels.
- Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in De Coelesti Hierarchia (ca. 5th century):
 - First sphere: 1. Seraphim, 2. Cherubim, 3. Thrones;
 - Second sphere: 4. Dominations (also translated as Lordships), 5. Virtues (also trans. as Powers), 6. Powers (also trans. as Authorities);
 - Third sphere: 7. Principalities, 8. Archangels, 9. Angels.
- St. Gregory the Great in Homilia (6th century)
 - 1. Seraphim, 2. Cherubim, 3. Thrones, 4. Dominations, 5. Principalities, 6. Powers, 7. Virtues, 8. Archangels, 9. Angels.
- St. Isidore of Seville in Etymologiae (7th century):
 - 1. Seraphim, 2. Cherubim, 3. Thrones, 4. Dominations, 5. Principalities, 6. Powers, 7. Virtues, 8. Archangels, 9. Angels.
- John of Damascus in De Fide Orthodoxa (8th century):
 - 1. Seraphim, 2. Cherubim, 3. Thrones, 4. Dominions, 5. Powers (=Virtues), 6. Authorities, 7. Rulers (=Principalities), 8. Archangels, 9. Angels.
- St. Hildegard of Bingen in Scivias ^[19] (1098–1179):
 - 1. Seraphim, Cherubim;
 - 2. Thrones, Dominations, Principalities, Powers and Virtues;
 - 3. Archangels and Angels.
- St. Thomas Aquinas in Summa Theologica (1225–1274):
 - 1. Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones;
 - 2. Dominations, Virtues, and Powers;
 - 3. Principalities, Archangels, and Angels.
- Dante Alighieri in The Divine Comedy (1308–1321)
 - 1. Seraphim, 2. Cherubim, 3. Thrones, 4. Dominations, 5. Virtues, 6. Powers, 7. Principalities, 8.

Individual angels and demons from the choirs

- **Seraphim:** In John Milton's *Paradise Lost* Satan and the Archangels belong to this choir ("archangel" has here the meaning of "most powerful angel", not the members of the second lowest choir). Beelzebuth is also addressed as prince of the seraphim in witchcraft litanies.^[20]
- **Cherubim:** In *Paradise Lost*, Beelzebub and Azazel were cherubim before their fall. St. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* states that Satan belongs to this choir, not to the seraphim.
- **Thrones:** *Paradise Lost* cites the demons Adramelec and Asmodai. Some sources mention Astaroth as well.^[20]^[21]
- **Virtues:** Witchcraft litanies mention Belial.^[20]
- **Archangels:** The archangels Gabriel, Raphael and Michael, and supposedly the other archangels as well, are usually assigned to this choir, for example in the hierarchies of St. Gregory and St. Isidore of Seville.

Beside these, extensive lists of angels and demons belonging to all the choirs can be found in *The Lemegeton* and *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*.

See also

- Classification of demons
- Christian demonology
- Dynamics of the celestial spheres
- Fallen angel
- Heavenly host
- Hierarchy of angels
- Islamic angelic hierarchy
- Jewish angelic hierarchy
- Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones
- Zoroastrian angelic hierarchy

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