
The academic study of angels has become fashionable in recent years so it was only a matter of time before a book about angels in Byzantium would appear. Images of angels were fundamental to the Byzantine iconographic tradition and their appearance often presented a challenge to both theologians and image-makers, especially during the period of iconoclasm in the eighth and ninth centuries. Icons of Christ, Mary and the saints were justified on the questionable grounds that they were based on historical prototypes and were therefore not products of the iconographer’s imagination. The authenticity of these images was seldom questioned by the Byzantines themselves as they accepted them as true likenesses of their subjects. The problem with the depiction of angels was that they did not come into the same category as images of Christ, Mary and the saints and so their presence was harder to define.

In the fourth century Basil the Great had made the statement:

They (angels) exist in space, and when they are seen by those who are worthy, they assume an appropriate physical form. (On the Holy Spirit 16.38)

The epiphany of angels in the scriptures provided evidence of their metaphysical and elemental nature as well as their capacity to change their appearance. As they took on forms perceptible to those worthy of seeing them they could in theory be depicted iconographically. But because, like pagan idols, images of angels lacked historical prototypes they could be construed as idolatrous. Canon 35 of the Council of Laodicea held in AD 380 clearly equated the practice of offering prayers to angels with idolatry. In addition angelic transfigurations smacked of Origenist and Gnostic claims that Christ did not appear in the same way to all who saw him, but changed his appearance according to each disciple’s power of perception.

In the symbolic theology of Pseudo-Dionysius ‘unlike likenesses’ became a means of gaining insight into spiritual realities. This provided justification for representing angels such as the seraphim and cherubim
according to scriptural descriptions, but such images were strictly referential since they could not represent the real appearance of angels. Peers is right to point out that it was the inability of image-makers to represent the real nature of angels that writers objected to in the pre-iconoclastic and iconoclastic periods. But he is mistaken when he says that:

Hypatius of Ephesus clearly saw a dichotomy between more advanced spirituality and the less perfect that depends upon these material signs, which Pseudo-Dionysius does not distinguish. (99)

In fact Pseudo-Dionysius does refer in one place to images as aids for the less perfect (Ecclesiastical Hierarchy 3.3.2.). This evidence lends weight to the view that not only was Hypatius an early witness to the Corpus Areopagiticum, but that he may also have followed Pseudo-Dionysius' thinking on the question of images. Later on in the ninth century Theodore the Studite repudiated the idea that there was one religion for 'us' and another for 'them' as far as the cult of images was concerned.

The depiction of angels in Byzantine iconography owed much to winged beings from the Graeco-Roman and Persian worlds. Generally it was dress and gender that distinguished Christian angels from pagan victories. From the fourth century flying angels were represented on sarcophagi supporting the cross as a symbol of Christ's victory over death. Examples of this iconographic type are to be found on tombstones of 'Nestorian' Christians in South China a thousand years later. Significantly the three angels in the icon of the Hospitality of Abraham, interpreted in patristic exegesis as representing the Trinity, are usually shown wingless. But what is interesting is the attachment of wings to certain figures who were never angels in the first place. Wings came to symbolize the spiritual nature of certain individuals such as John the Baptist and occasionally even Christ himself was shown with wings. A female example is the personification of Sophia or Divine Wisdom which, in the Russian tradition, became the inspiration for the speculative sophiology of Vladimir Solovyov and others. Christ himself bears the title 'Divine Wisdom' on some Byzantine icons and the dedication of many churches to Hagia Sophia reflects the importance of this concept in the Byzantine world.
Peers spends some time discussing the nature and role of the Archangel Michael in various texts and images. The icon of Michael the Archistrategos was essentially an icon of intercession and his cult enjoyed popular support both during and after the Byzantine period. The shrine dedicated to him at Chonae became a major centre of pilgrimage, but unlike the cult of a mortal saint the cult of a bodiless power did not have relics to perform miracles. Therefore his icon became a particular focus of attention. Michael’s appearance was described in miracle stories according to the iconographic tradition, just as recognition of him in dreams corresponded to his representation in icons and wall paintings. But the fact remains that in the case of his icon the relationship between image and prototype was non-existent. The inscription on his icon read ‘Archangel Michael’ but it was not a likeness of him. Peers shows that the paradoxical nature of such non-resembling images was not lost on the Byzantines themselves and that images of angels had the power to fascinate commentators as well as worshippers.

This is an insightful and wide-ranging study which goes a long way to improve our understanding of the theory of representing angels in Byzantium. It should appeal to all those interested in the development of Byzantine iconology whether they are working in the art historical or theological fields. Anyone who has visited even the most humble of Byzantine churches will have been struck by the presence and immediacy of the angels represented in their time-honoured places. It should not matter to us any more than it mattered to the Byzantines that images of angels are works of a supreme and formidable imagination.

Ken Parry
Macquarie University, Sydney