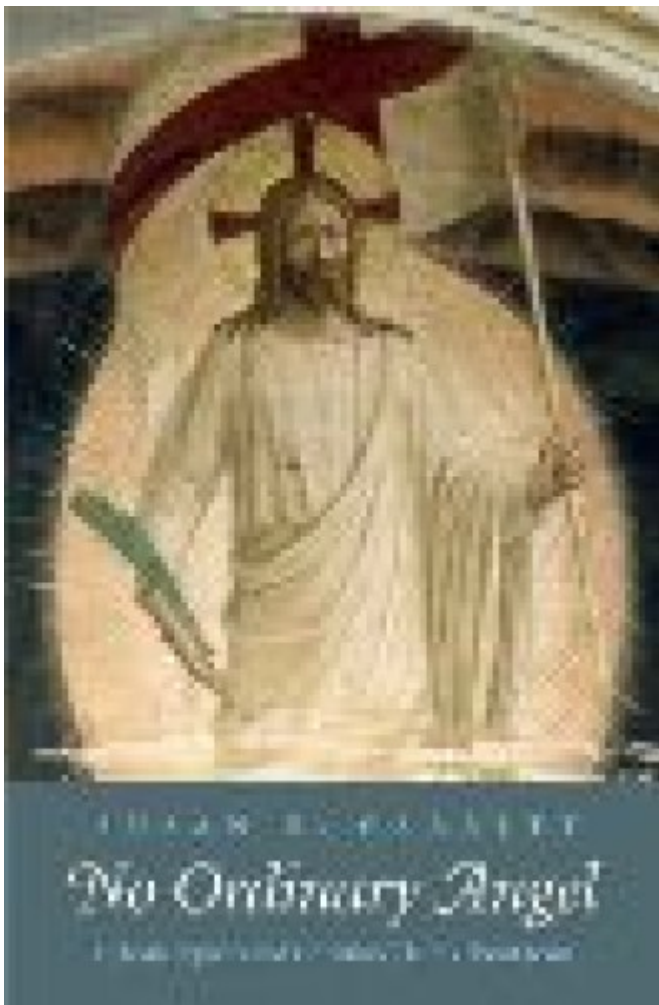


No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims About Jesus

reviewed by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [April 7, 2009](#) issue

In Review



No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesus

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Yale University Press

Theologians and biblical scholars don't usually trespass into popular religion. That tends to be the territory of religion scholars. The difference is part of the implicit and sometimes explicit distinction between those who study divinity in order to articulate the way things should be under God, and those who study piety in order to discover how things actually turn out in human hands.

The most impressive thing about Susan Garrett's wide-ranging and lucid six-chapter discussion of angels is that it takes a subject that scholars generally consider to be on the fluffy end of popular piety and integrates it into ecclesial and academic reflection. The real energy of the book is how close it remains to the netherworld of angelic appearances, miraculous rescues and near-death experiences—in short, a theology based on the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. Never condescending, never scaremongering, Garrett shows both an admirable grasp of and critical distance from the ways angels have captivated and continue to stimulate the popular imagination.

At the outset Garrett acknowledges the three broad constituencies in the conversation: Billy Graham-style ingenuousness toward the scriptural record, including the (erroneous) assumption that the Bible has a single consistent view of the nature and role of angels; Rudolf Bultmann-style skepticism about the abiding value of angel imagery, supplemented by Walter Wink-characterized disenchantment of the world into physical phenomena of assorted powers; and New Age "enchanted-world cosmology," sometimes called a "Third Great Awakening," full of spiritual presences and inexplicable powers, largely centered on and designed to bolster the self.

Garrett starts, as one would expect, with the notion of messenger. It seems odd that she does not offer a fuller account of Gabriel and the role of angels in the Christmas and resurrection narratives, since these seem to be at the core of the scriptural record, but her concern at the outset is more with showing Jesus' similarity to and difference from angels. (In brief, Jesus ate, suffered and died in a way that angels never do.) She goes on to explore the role of angels in naming and mediating God's presence, still focusing largely on Jesus, and she provides helpful notes on the way in which understanding of the divinity of Christ emerged from reflection on other motifs, such as God's word, glory, wisdom, power, spirit and name.

After the first two chapters Garrett dwells more on popular conceptions of faith and spirituality. The middle two chapters deal with the negative aspects of the spiritual world—fallen angels and Satan as *the* fallen angel; the final two deal with concerns of piety—guardian angels and experiences and beliefs surrounding death.

The book is exceptionally well structured, with conclusions to each chapter that perfectly summarize the foregoing material, and very engagingly written, with hosts of examples from ancient literature and contemporary culture. It is disappointing not to see more positive examples from contemporary experience and culture; almost without exception Garrett's contemporary material scrutinizes the self-centered, death-denying character of popular spirituality. This is not necessarily a criticism of the author; it is more a lament about the material she has at her disposal. There are glimpses of helpful historical narrative, particularly where she draws out the way that Calvin's theology, with its conviction that the finite cannot contain the infinite, enhanced the material-spiritual duality that undermined Protestant belief in the intimate presence of angels.

This volume is not entirely what it appears to be. In many ways it is an impressive survey of the significance and dimensions of angelology in Christian theology, set against a backdrop of Hellenistic/Judaean thought and contemporary spirituality. But much of it is better read as an exploration of abiding themes in theology—such as theodicy, the afterlife and Christology—with particular reference to scriptural and cultural references to angels. Because of this extraordinarily broad scope, the book tends to lose its focus; though it is full of helpful and pastoral reassurances and conclusions, it lacks the backbone of a strong, consistent thesis, a firm direction that would make it more than a lively and engaging survey. Nonetheless, perhaps the most helpful aspect of this volume for the preacher or teacher is just how close it remains to the concerns of everyday Christians and others who might express an interest in spirituality. If in recent months you who are pastors haven't engaged with the subjects that Garrett raises, you may need to ask yourself if you're scratching where your people are itching.

The theological absentee from the book is the Holy Spirit. Garrett helpfully points out how belief in angels thrives in a milieu where God seems to be distant from the world, either experientially or philosophically. Belief in angels—particularly guardian angels—seems to be a way in which people understand the divine drawing close to the human in everyday and crisis situations. This is exactly where the Holy Spirit fits into Christian theology. If, as Calvin insists, Jesus is fully human and thus after the

ascension can only be in one place—heaven—then the Holy Spirit is the One who makes “Christ and his benefits” present to the believer.

It is Pentecost, rather than Bultmann, that seems to make belief in angels superfluous. Angels amplify, illustrate, invigorate, add color to and make vivid the gospel narrative and the world of the discipleship community, but they are not the hinge of salvation; nor are they the principal way in which God is made known in the world today. These are the roles of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It makes complete sense that angels emerged in Judaism as the faith searched for a vocabulary to describe God’s communication with Israel, both corporately and in the experience of believers. But in the Christian era, emphasis on angels sounds suspiciously like an abandonment of the Trinity in favor of a unitary God who has a portfolio of alternative methods of communicating with the world.

These questions don’t quite get the treatment they deserve in this otherwise highly readable and in many ways intriguing account of popular piety and historic faith.