

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, teaches us many things about holy angels and fallen angels.

Satan as tempter

Satan's appearance in the garden at all tells us a few things. First, it must have been God's permissive will that allowed Satan to enter the garden and approach Eve. Nothing happens outside of God's awareness as he is omnipresent. So, God wanted Adam and Eve's obedience to be tested. Recall that God wanted the holy angels obedience tested as soon as they were created. So, God wants his creatures with a rational mind to be given the chance to exercise their free will. Satan serves in spite of himself here.¹

Satan essentially tempts Eve that her and Adam will become like gods if they eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God had said they would die, but God meant spiritually die. They would lose their place in the direct presence of God and eventually return to the dust from which they were made.

The Cherubim and the flaming sword

Recall that in Genesis God creates the spiritual and the physical, angels, mankind, all the animals, etc. The first angel we actually are told about in scripture is a fallen one, Satan. Satan tempts Eve to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan introduces an inclination to disobedience in her mind that was not there before. That is temptation. Once she eats of the fruit, she becomes self aware of her actions and feels shame for her sin, and for her nakedness. Adam eats the fruit also, and they are expelled from the garden for disobedience.

Then we get the one reference to the Cherubim being associated with a flaming sword.² Cherubim, as we will see later, are specifically associated with the throne of God in heaven. Right after Adam is expelled from the Garden of Eden we see the first appearance of a holy angel:

He expelled the man, stationing the cherubim and the fiery revolving sword east of the garden of Eden, to guard the way to the tree of life.³

1 Satan appearing as a "cunning" snake is a play on words as the Hebrew arum can mean both cunning and naked. The snake is already in a state of nakedness from it's sin, and Adam and Eve find themselves aware of their nakedness after they sin.

2 Genesis was written during the Babylonian captivity during the 6th century BC. It was written for Jewish readers who were losing touch with their faith and being influenced by the Babylonian creation myth. The Jewish readers would know the Cherubim from the Ark of the Covenant (two on top of the Ark), and the stories of the throne room of God (four, one at each corner of the throne). They would know the sword as a symbol of the Word of God. Fire represents the presence of God in the Old Testament. Recall the burning bush, and the pillar of fire.

3 <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/genesis/3>

Note that Cherubim is plural, the singular is Cherub.

The fact that a number of cherubs were there means God was present there in a special way, because Cherubim are attendants to the actual presence of God. So, this flaming sword is a symbol for God's presence, justice, and power utterly blocking the way back into the garden. This is the establishment of the problem that leads to the whole salvation story: the restoration of our direct access to God. An angel stands at the beginning of the salvation story, blocking that access. We see here a holy angel acting as an expression of God's justice.

The Lord's Angel, and Angel of the Lord

When we see these two titles it basically refers to God himself appearing to people. In Genesis 16 we have the Lord's angel promising Hagar that he will make her descendants numerous. At the end of their encounter Hagar calls this angel "You are God who sees me," meaning "Have I really seen God and remained alive after he saw me?"⁴

Two angels ate under the Oak tree

One day Abraham is visited by "The Lord" and two angel who accompany him (likely Cherubim). We read:

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oak of Mamre, as he sat in the entrance of his tent, while the day was growing hot.

Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them; and bowing to the ground,

he said: "Sir, if it please you, do not go on past your servant."⁵

Before they leave to examine the city of Sodom, they eat food with Abraham. This is a good reminder that we should not get too absolute in our statements about angels. God can do whatever he wants. Angels are purely spiritual beings, that is dogma. Did God create the illusion that they ate? Did he make them physical in those moments? We don't know.

The Lord departs, sending two angels to deal with the city of Sodom.

After Abraham pleading for mercy for the city of Sodom if a few good men are found there, the Lord departs. The two angels with The Lord go on to Sodom alone. The two angels seek out Lot, a good man. Again, they seem to eat with Lot and then they want to spend the night observing the people of the city. The men of the city come pounding at the door demanding the strangers be brought out to them. Then we see a supernatural angelic action:

4 <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/genesis/16>

5 <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/genesis/18>

But his guests put out their hands, pulled Lot inside with them, and closed the door; they struck the men at the entrance of the house, small and great, with such a blinding light that they were utterly unable to find the doorway.⁶

Lot now knows for sure these are not regular men. They tell him that they are about to destroy the city, but they will give him that night to get his family together and get out. Sometime after sunrise the next day:

The sun had risen over the earth when Lot arrived in Zoar, and the LORD rained down sulfur upon Sodom and Gomorrah, fire from the LORD out of heaven.

He overthrew those cities and the whole Plain, together with the inhabitants of the cities and the produce of the soil.⁷

6 <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/genesis/19>

7 <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/genesis/19>