

Archangels

Orders of Angels · Biblical Angels

The term 'archangel' (Greek ἀρχάγγελος, archagelos, from ἀρχή arche, 'chief' or 'ruler,' and ἄγγελος aggelos, 'messenger') designates angels of the highest rank, functioning as commanders or princes within the celestial hierarchy. Despite archangels' evident importance in both biblical and extra-biblical Jewish literature, canonical Scripture proves remarkably reticent regarding their number, names, and specific roles. Only Michael receives the explicit title 'archangel' in the biblical text (Jude 1:9), though tradition and apocryphal sources enumerate seven archangels, including Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel.

This terminological sparseness reflects Scripture's characteristic restraint regarding angelology. While contemporary Judaism (particularly apocalyptic literature like 1 Enoch, 2 Esdras, and Tobit) developed elaborate angelic hierarchies with named archangels governing specific spheres, canonical Scripture maintains studied silence. The reasons prove instructive: God reveals sufficient truth regarding angels for practical godliness and correct worship, but withholds unnecessary details that might tempt believers toward angel-veneration. Colossians 2:18 warns against 'worshipping of angels,' suggesting such temptation existed in the early church. By limiting information regarding archangels, Scripture keeps attention focused on God rather than His servants.

Note: Post-biblical Jewish tradition identifies seven archangels, though lists vary. 1 Enoch 20:1-8 names Uriel, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sariel, Gabriel, and Remiel. Tobit (deuterocanonical) features Raphael prominently. Christian tradition, drawing partly on these sources, commonly recognizes Michael and Gabriel as certain archangels, with debate regarding others. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions affirm Raphael; Protestants generally restrict recognition to biblically-named angels. The

seven angels before God's throne in Revelation 8:2 might represent archangels, though Scripture doesn't explicitly identify them as such.

Jude 1:9 provides the sole explicit identification of an archangel: 'Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee.' This passage establishes several truths about archangels: First, they engage in cosmic spiritual warfare beyond human perception—Michael's contention with Satan concerned Moses's body, an incident not recorded elsewhere in Scripture but known through tradition. Second, even archangels observe proper protocols regarding authority; despite Michael's superior rank and righteousness compared to Satan's fallen state, the archangel deferred judgment to God rather than pronouncing curses in his own authority. Third, archangels possess distinct roles and responsibilities—Michael appears specifically as Israel's defender (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1).

First Thessalonians 4:16 references 'the voice of the archangel' in connection with Christ's return: 'For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.' The singular article—'the archangel,' not 'an archangel'—has generated interpretive debate. Does it imply only one archangel exists, namely Michael? Or does it refer to a specific archangel (presumably Michael again) whose voice will herald Christ's return? Or does 'the archangel' function as a class designation, meaning 'with the voice characteristic of archangels'?

Note: Three interpretive options exist regarding 'the archangel' in 1 Thessalonians 4:16: (1) Only one archangel exists—Michael—whose voice will announce Christ's return; (2) Multiple archangels exist, but Michael, as prince over Israel and associated with resurrection (Daniel 12:1-2), specifically announces the rapture; (3) 'The archangel' serves as a class designation, with the definite article functioning generically. The first option best explains the singular construction and aligns with

Michael's biblical role. Revelation 12:7 also uses singular 'Michael and his angels,' suggesting Michael's supreme command over the faithful angelic host.

Daniel provides additional context for understanding archangels' role in cosmic government. Daniel 10:13 describes Gabriel's explanation to Daniel regarding delayed answers to prayer: 'But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia.' This passage reveals a hierarchy among fallen angels—the 'prince of Persia' being a demonic power influencing that empire—and a corresponding hierarchy among holy angels, with Michael designated as 'one of the chief princes.' The Hebrew phrase (הַשָּׂרִים הַרְאָשָׁנִים, *achad hasarim harishonim*) literally means 'one of the first princes,' indicating Michael's position among the highest-ranking angels.

Daniel 10:21 identifies Michael as 'your prince,' referring to his special relationship with Israel: 'But I will shew thee that which is noted in the scripture of truth: and there is none that holdeth with me in these things, but Michael your prince.' This designation appears again in Daniel 12:1: 'And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people.' Michael thus serves as Israel's celestial patron, defending God's covenant people against spiritual enemies. This role parallels the demonic princes over earthly nations mentioned in Daniel 10, suggesting a cosmic struggle between angelic and demonic powers over nations and peoples.

Revelation 12:7-9 depicts Michael's climactic victory: 'And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any

more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan.' Here Michael commands angelic armies in eschatological warfare, executing God's decree to expel Satan from heaven permanently. The phrase 'Michael and his angels' indicates command authority—these angels belong to Michael's charge and follow his leadership in combat.

Gabriel, while never explicitly called an archangel in Scripture, functions in ways suggesting archangelic rank. His self-description as one 'that stand in the presence of God' (Luke 1:19) indicates exalted position. His role delivering the most momentous announcements in redemptive history—interpreting visions to Daniel, announcing John the Baptist's birth, proclaiming the incarnation—suggests authority and trustworthiness befitting an archangel. Jewish tradition consistently numbered him among the archangels, and Christian tradition has generally followed this identification, though with recognition that Scripture doesn't explicitly confirm it.

The archangels' biblical portrait serves several functions: First, revealing that God governs creation through hierarchical order, with ranks and authorities among angels as among humans. Second, demonstrating that spiritual warfare occurs at levels beyond human perception, with angelic princes contending over nations and peoples. Third, providing assurance that God assigns powerful defenders to His people—Michael stands for Israel, and believers may infer angelic protection for the church (Hebrews 1:14). Fourth, modeling proper submission to divine authority even when possessing great power—Michael defers judgment to God. Fifth, pointing toward Christ's return, when the archangel's voice will summon the dead to resurrection and the living to glorification.

Key Verses

Daniel 10:13

But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia.

Daniel 10:21

But I will shew thee that which is noted in the scripture of truth: and there is none that holdeth with me in these things, but Michael your prince.

Daniel 12:1

And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book.

1 Thessalonians 4:16

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:

Jude 1:9

Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee.

Revelation 12:7

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels,