

September 29: Saint Michael and All Angels

This is not a Hebrew lexical, syntactical, and grammatical study. Sorry.

The Old Testament reading for Saint Michael and All Angels is Daniel 10:10-14, and Daniel 12:1-3:

10 And behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. 11 And he said to me, "O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you." And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. 12 Then he said to me, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. 13 The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia, 14 and came to make you understand what is to happen to your people in the latter days. For the vision is for days yet to come." ...

1 "At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. 2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above [Hebrew: the expanse]; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."

A necessary contextualization for these passages is provided by the verses that immediately precede the chapter 10 text, Daniel 10:2-9:

2 In those days I, Daniel, was mourning for three weeks. 3 I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine entered my mouth, nor did I anoint myself at all, for the full three weeks. 4 On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris) 5 I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. 6 His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude. 7 And I, Daniel, alone saw the vision, for the men who were with me did not see the vision, but a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled to hide themselves. 8 So I was left alone and saw this great vision, and no strength was left in me. My radiant appearance was fearfully changed, and I retained no strength. 9 Then I heard the sound of his words, and as I heard the sound of his words, I fell on my face in deep sleep with my face to the ground.

Besides these references to Michael in the Book of Daniel, Michael by name also appears in the Epistle of St. Jude and in the Revelation to St. John. Jude 8-9 states:

8 Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. 9 But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."

And in Revelation 12:7-12 – which is the Epistle lesson appointed for the Day of St. Michael and All Angels – we are told this:

7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. 11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. 12 Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

Luther and most of the Reformers interpreted some or most of these references to “Michael” as references to the pre-incarnate Logos, or Christ. The literal meaning of the name is “Who is like God?,” but that in itself was not the determining factor in their interpretations, because all of them did at least consider the Michael of Jude’s Epistle to be a created archangel. But Luther himself considered both of the “Michael” references in Daniel, and the “Michael” reference in Revelation, to be references to Christ. Some Reformation-era exegetes were willing to say that Michael in Daniel 10 is a created angel, while Michael in Daniel 12 (and in Revelation) is Christ.

I will admit that I have always found these interpretations very bizarre. These approaches toward the respective texts do not seem to honor the literary integrity of the Book of Daniel, or the thematic integrity of Scripture as a whole. It seems as if the Scriptures are being read as a series of proof-passages, and not as works of literature that are intended to make sense internally, and to communicate a message that is coherent and that does not require an esoteric decoding process on the part of the reader. The reason why Michael in Daniel and Revelation was considered by Luther and others to be Christ, and not a created angel, was because Michael in those books is seen to be doing the work of Christ in defeating Satan, in ejecting Satan from heaven, etc. But this does not hold up as compelling in my mind, because an angel – especially one as powerful as the archangel Michael – can certainly act as the agent and instrument of God in general, or of Christ in particular, in accomplishing these divine tasks. I refer you to a good summary of the history of the exegesis of the Michael passages by Luther, Melancthon, and other influential Lutherans: “Michael as Christ in the Lutheran Exegetical Tradition: An Analysis,” by Christian A. Preus (*Concordia Theological Quarterly* 80 [2016]: 257-67).

I would note, however, that Chemnitz does not follow this exegesis. In his “Treatise on Angels,” appended to his *Loci Theologici*, he embraces the traditional pre-Reformation identification of Michael, in all of the Biblical passages in which he appears by name, as a created archangel. He writes:

But because Scripture has spoken of certain angels by name, such as Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, we have a feast called the feast of the angel Michael, in order that by this very name itself we should be instructed in the most important things to be learned in this life about angels and what we ought to believe and know about them. For example, in regard to Michael the Scriptures tell how he fought against the dragon and his angels on

behalf of the church, Rev. 12:7 and Jude 9, and how he was sent to minister in the affairs of the government in Dan. 10:13, 21, and 12:1. Thus the festival of Michael instructs us to teach about evil and good angels. We should also teach how Satan “walks about as a roaring lion,” 1 Peter 5:8, and how the good angels “encamp around them that fear the Lord,” Ps. 34:7.

I will follow Chemnitz in my interpretation of Daniel chapters 10 and 12, and not Luther. But I will also observe that Chemnitz lists the traditional three archangels – “Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael” – because, as he says, “Scripture has spoken” of them. Yet Raphael is mentioned only in the Apocrypha, in the Book of Tobit. And while the canonical Scriptures do name Gabriel, they identify only Michael as an *archangel*. Our focus, though, is on Michael. And our focus will be specifically on what the Book of Daniel tells us about him.

A reenforcement of the conclusion that “Michael” is not a reference to, or a name for, the pre-incarnate Christ, is the fact that in the very context where Michael is described by Daniel, the pre-incarnate Christ is also described – but clearly as a different personage. In Daniel 10:5-6, Daniel reports his vision of “a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.” John the Apostle, in Revelation 1:12-15, describes Jesus in very similar terms:

12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.

In Daniel 10:18-21, the “man clothed with linen” makes another appearance, described this time as “one having the appearance of a man.” And he describes Michael, not as a reference to himself, but as another, who joins him in contending against the demons that control Persia and Greece. We read:

18 Again one having the appearance of a man touched me and strengthened me. 19 And he said, “O man greatly loved, fear not, peace be with you; be strong and of good courage.” And as he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, “Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me.” 20 Then he said, “Do you know why I have come to you? But now I will return to fight against the prince of Persia; and when I go out, behold, the prince of Greece will come. 21 But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth: there is none who contends by my side against these except Michael, your prince.”

In Daniel, I would like to focus now on the first verse of chapter 12, and on what this verse means for us as members of the Christian church – the “new Israel” of God – in the times in which we now live:

“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.”

Daniel describe angels – both good and evil – as “princes” that rule in hidden ways over various nations. Michael is the prince, or guardian, over God’s chose nation. But we interpret and apply this according to St. Paul’s statement in Romans 9:4-8 concerning his “kinsmen according to the flesh,” most of whom are rejecting their Messiah and, in so doing, are at the deepest level thereby rejecting their God. He writes:

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

This Abrahamic and patriarchal promise funnels down to Christ. Galatians 3:16:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.

And from Christ the promise fans out again, into all and including all who are baptized into Christ. Galatians 3:26-29:

...for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.

The essential continuity between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament people of God is illustrated also by St. Peter’s appropriation of Old Testament descriptions of faithful Israel, for his description of the church in 1 Peter 2:9-10:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So, Michael, as the prince of Daniel’s people, is therefore today the prince of the church on earth. *We* are Daniel’s people today. We are the people of promise today, in Christ and because of Christ. Michael is, of course, not the church’s Savior. But under the direction of its Savior he is its protector and guardian, and does battle with “the prince of this world” (John 12:31) in the name of Christ, and on behalf of Christ’s church.

In the Messianic forward-looking context of Daniel’s prophetic revelation, “at that time” in 12:1 points ultimately to the time of Pentecost and of the ongoing extension of the church. We remember that the “last days” began on the Day of Pentecost, when the prophecy of Joel was fulfilled (Acts 2:16-17), so that the end times are concurrent with the time of the church. And Michael is a major figure – behind the scenes – throughout the entirety of the end times in which we live.

Daniel's description of the time of trouble from which the Lord's people will be delivered clearly serves as a model and pattern for Jesus' predictions of the early decades of the church age, involving the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple, which took place in 70 A.D. In Matthew 24:15-28, Jesus issues this warning to his church:

“So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

This tribulation continues to reverberate, and have its enduring effect on the church, for as long as this world endures. This is where we are now. We are in the middle of this. And Michael is in the middle of this with us, battling for us under the command of our king and his, Jesus. Through the supernatural efforts of Michael and his cohort of righteous angels, the elect people of God – “everyone whose name shall be found written in the book” – are delivered.

It is, however, not the calling of Michael and the other angels to preach the gospel to all nations. We see an illustration of this vocational limitation in Acts 10, where an angel miraculously brings Cornelius and Peter together, so that Peter can preach to, and baptize, Cornelius and his household. The angel does not preach the gospel to Cornelius himself, but honors the fact that God has entrusted the Great Commission to the church and its human ministers.

But Michael and the angels do clear a path for the gospel and for the mission of the church. As the devil attacks the church and its ministers, Michael protects them, and counterattacks. Under God's direction, as Jesus exercises his hidden kingly authority in this world for the benefit of his church, Michael pulls the strings of human history, and makes things happen in ways that people generally don't see.

Michael's protection of the church and its members is made very personal in the wording of the Morning Prayer in the Small Catechism: “Let Your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me.” Tradition – not a strong tradition, but a harmless little tradition – even attributes to Michael the role of helping God's people to sleep securely. That tradition is likely the reason why this phrase appears also in the Evening Prayer: “Let Your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me.”

There are no doubt many times when angels have shielded us from harm, but we're not aware of it. Occasionally, though, one hears plausible stories of special angelic interventions in times of spiritual or physical danger, when the angel *was* seen, or when his presence in a particular time

and place was in some other way known. Yet even when angels are not seen – which is most of the time – we know they are there.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, St. Michael's Day was, in practice, a major festival. Special music was composed for St. Michael's Day, since it was such an important day for the church. Consider that among the CDs that have been produced within the past couple decades according to the musical art form of the "liturgical reconstruction," two reconstructions of a St. Michael's Day Vespers service have been issued: "Vespers for St. Michael's Day," featuring compositions by Hieronymus Praetorius, produced by Manfred Cordes; and "Michaelisvesper," featuring compositions by Michael Praetorius, produced by Jorg Breiding. The Reformers – with Luther at the forefront – were very much aware of the reality of the demonic world. Luther in particular was always thinking in those categories, as he was imagining how in and what way the devil was actively working in the world to destroy souls and to silence the gospel. This is why Heiko Oberman entitled his well-known biographical study of the Reformer, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*. But Luther and his colleagues did not live in fear. Far from it. They knew that Christ would protect them. And they knew that Michael and the angels of the Lord, who work under the direction of Christ, are just as much a reality in the supernatural realm as are Satan and the demons.

This changed, however, with the advent of Rationalism in Germany. St. Michael's Day fell by the wayside. The effects of Rationalism, and of the so-called Enlightenment, are still very much with us. One of the chief bits of evidence for this is that, by and large, St. Michael's Day has not been restored to prominence among us. The physical and psychological sciences were and still are believed to be able to explain all or most of those phenomena that Luther's generation believed were explained best by the actions of hidden supernatural intelligences.

But as our own society is becoming ever more a post-Christian society, it's interesting to see that people are not becoming full-blown materialists, but instead are becoming increasingly interested in the supernatural realm and in paranormal experiences. Look at the proliferation of ghost story and ghost hunting shows on television. But most of this modern interest takes its interpretive cues from spiritism. The Christian explanation seems unknown, largely because institutional Christianity – under the influence of Rationalism – has muted its own witness to the reality of the world of angels and demons as Holy Scripture defines and describes this reality. If St. Michael's Day is missing from our congregations' yearly cycle of festivals that are actually observed, we are a part of that problem.

This festival, when restored, would be a useful tool for teaching our members the truth about the supernatural realm, about the deceptive powers of darkness that are at work in that realm to harm them and their faith; but also about the powerful beings of light who serve God's truth, who protect God's people, and who clear a path for the mission of the church in this world.

David Jay Webber
Phoenix, Arizona
August 14, 2020

(All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version)