

BIBLE TRIVIA: ANGELS NOT SINGERS

Here's a bit of Bible trivia that catches most people by surprise: The angels don't sing! They speak; they shout. They praise God; they talk to people. But there's not a single passage in the entire Bible which says in so many words that the angels "sing."

Admittedly there are a few modern English translations of the Bible which mention the singing of angels. But if these are studied carefully, it will be seen that at those points they have paraphrased the more literal renditions.

The proper Hebrew and Greek words for "singing" are never associated with the angels in the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

Consider a few examples. There are angels in the story of Jacob's Ladder. According to Genesis 28, Jacob had to flee for his life after he had cheated his brother and tricked his father into giving him the largest slice of the family blessing. On the first night of his escape he has a weird dream.

He sees a long ladder or staircase connecting his campsite with heaven, and the angels of God are going up and down the steps. The Lord himself speaks to Jacob.

But the angels don't do anything else in this case. They don't even speak, much less do any singing. They just go up and down.

Try again. The story about how the people of Jerusalem are saved from an invading army of Assyrians is told twice, in Isaiah 38 and 2 Kings 19 (or 4 Kings 19 in some Bibles).

When the Jewish king Hezekiah has all but given up hope of defending his capital, the prophet Isaiah comes to him with some upbeat news.

That night, we are told, the angel of the Lord goes into the Assyrian camp and kills 185,000 enemy troops. The next morning the survivors see the carnage, turn tail toward Nineveh, and spare Jerusalem. But it isn't because of some angel's song. It's because that particular angel is skilled in the lethal arts.

Perhaps the most familiar story with angels is in Luke 2, the account of the birth of Jesus. According to this gospel, the baby's birth is first announced to some sheep herders in the hill country around Bethlehem.

First an angel appears to quiet them down and direct them to the manger. Then that solo angel is joined by a crowd of heavenly troops who are "praising God and *saying*, 'Glory to God in the highest'" (verse 13).

Note that even in this crucial Christian tradition the crowds of angels are speaking, not actually singing.

The last book of the Christian scriptures has more angels than you can count. Every page of Revelation has them. Yet none are pictured as singing.

A good case in point is chapter 5. Here's the scene: Four "living creatures" and a dozen "elders" are gathered around God's heavenly throne, where they are described as "singing a new song" (verse 9).

In the next verse they are joined by about a million angels who are also voicing their praise. But in this case there's no mention of their singing any song; they are described as "*speaking* with a loud voice" (verse 12).

So what's the point of this piece of biblical trivia? It merely shows how unquestioned traditions and preconceptions can distort our reading. You usually think of angels as rather effeminate creatures with long robes and wings like pigeons. They flit among the clouds, yodel sweetly, and pluck at golden harps.

If so, then you miss the point of angels. For the biblical writers, angels are the messengers of God, his "go-fers." When they wanted to show that God has a hand in human affairs, they could include an angel or two in the story.

As far as the Bible is concerned, angels are not innocuous pious inventions. They are the agents of God's intervention in the nuts and bolts of human history.

And by the way, they are all male.