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No More Mr. Nice Angel

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No More Mr. Nice Angel

Abstract
Angels have occupied a prominent role in world religions and Western culture for centuries. The existence of multiple supernatural beings with varying degrees of hierarchical standing was a given for the polytheistic cultures that represented the majority of religious expressions in the ancient world. The inclusion of these supernatural beings in the three great monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam was significant because these faiths sought in every way to emphasize the supremacy of the one God in contrast to the crowded spiritual field of polytheistic faiths. Angels could be problematic because they potentially provided a host of supernatural entities competing alongside the one God.

Keywords
angels, supernatural, legends, Paradise Lost, demonology

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As the hit CW show *Supernatural* began its fourth season in 2008, angels joined the host of other supernatural creatures, most of them clearly evil, that Dean Winchester (Jensen Ackles) and his brother Sam (Jared Padalecki) “hunt” to protect humanity. Dean finds his assumptions about angelic ethics challenged in the form of the mysterious angel Castiel. Finding Castiel’s prickly nature not to his liking, Dean grumbles, “I thought angels were supposed to be guardians. Fluffy wings, halos, you know, Michael Landon.” Castiel responds, “Read the Bible. Angels are warriors of God. I’m a soldier. I’m not here to perch on your shoulder. We had larger concerns.”¹ The angelic mythology *Supernatural* created starting in season four presented God’s emissaries as wholly alien with their own agenda, simmering civil wars, and, at times, questionable ethics. This creative choice signified yet another evolution for the long tradition of angelic depictions in Western culture.

Angels have occupied a prominent role in world religions and Western culture for centuries. The existence of multiple supernatural beings with varying degrees of hierarchical standing was a given for the polytheistic cultures that represented the majority of religious expressions in the ancient world. The inclusion of these supernatural beings in the three great monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam was significant because these faiths sought in every way to emphasize the supremacy of the one God in contrast to the crowded spiritual field of
polytheistic faiths. Angels could be problematic because they potentially provided a host of supernatural entities competing alongside the one God.

In the dualistic Zoroastrian religion of ancient Persia, the Yazata (Adorable Ones) and the Amesha-Spenta (Immortals) were sometimes comparable to the Western conception of angels. The Amesha-Spenta were three male and three female personifications of the attributes of Ahura Mazda, the supreme deity. They represented characteristics such as love, piety, knowledge of the law, and immortality. The Yazata were beings who served Ahura Mazda and humanity at Ahura Mazda’s directives. Forty were mentioned specifically in Zoroastrian texts with the mighty soldier Mithra or Mithras having the most impact on Western culture through the cults established in his name throughout the Roman army.  

The Hebrew Bible or Tanakah (Christian Old Testament) avoids this confusion of powers by emphasizing clearly the subordinate status of the angelic hosts. Mal’akh, a term that is usually translated as simply “messenger,” is the word used in the Hebrew Bible to describe angels. The Hebrew Bible does not distinguish between a divine or human messenger, leaving the reader to do so based on the context. They are messengers of God and warriors in the heavenly armies who are completely subordinate to Yahweh, who rules unchallenged over all of creation. Angels deliver messages for God and protect Abraham’s nephew (Lot) in the midst of God’s judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis. The “angel of the Lord,” a mysterious figure that appears several times in Genesis, wrestles with the Hebrew patriarch Jacob throughout the night in preparation for his meeting with his brother Esau. Creatures called cherubim and seraphim appear in the prophetic book of Isaiah as attendants at the throne of God. It is not clear whether these creatures are synonymous with angels, but their description in Isaiah as having wings later has a significant influence on the depictions of angels in Western art. In the Book of Job, the angelic hosts gather in a heavenly court to attend Yahweh when an angelic figure referred to as “the Adversary” demands permission to test the faithful Job. The Adversary has typically been identified with Satan in Christian theology and clearly marked as an opponent of God. The Book of Job is a little more ambiguous, prompting some scholars to identify “the Adversary” as still a member of the heavenly court.  

The Christian New Testament as well as the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, used the term ἄγγελος or angelos to refer to messengers, both divine and human. The divide between supernatural beings who serve God, the angels, and supernatural beings who set themselves against the will of God, δαίμων or daimonion (demons) is displayed more explicitly in the New Testament. The Greek equivalent of “adversary,” Satan, is used to refer to the leader of the demonic forces arrayed against God and his people. The cosmic conflict between God
and Satan is defined more explicitly in the New Testament with numerous references to the invisible clash of powers waging behind the scenes of human history. The Book of Revelation contains a dramatic vision of Satan’s rebellion against God set in the imagery of a dragon casting stars from heaven with his tail. The dragon is opposed by the Archangel Michael and the heavenly hosts in Revelation until he is ultimately defeated by the return of Jesus Christ. The New Testament indicates that fault lines between the angelic and demonic forces were set at some time in the distant past with no possibility presented for the redemption of the demonic or fallen angels. While the ethical teachings of the New Testament warn that humans are always susceptible to temptation, there is no indication that faithful angels still fall from their service to God.

In terms of function, angels appear at every pivotal movement of Jesus’s life and ministry. The angel Gabriel announces the birth of Christ in the Gospel of Luke, angels announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds, angels protect the holy family by warning Joseph of danger in dreams, and angels minister to Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. Angels also comfort Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his arrest. They are reported in the three synoptic gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) to be present at Christ’s resurrection. Angels announce the resurrection of Christ to the women in the synoptic gospels. They continue to appear in the story of the early church recorded in the Book of Acts and throughout the letters of the apostle Paul. The fourth-century Christian theologian and biblical scholar Jerome was the first translator to make the distinction between human and divine messengers linguistically explicit in his Latin Vulgate translation. Jerome used the Latin term angelus, based on the Greek angelos, to identify divine messengers while using other terms to distinguish human messengers from the divine. Terms that had once denoted only a generic messenger now became linked specifically to God’s heavenly hosts in Western culture.

With its foundational connections to the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Christianity, it is not surprising that Islam also included subordinate supernatural powers. The archangel Gabriel plays a major role in Islam as the first intermediary between Allah and the prophet Muhammad. Gabriel reveals the suras of the Quran to Muhammad. The Quran and the Hadith include a number of other angels who serve God faithfully with seemingly no free will to choose disobedience. Muslims also believe in the existence of Satan and demonic spirits.

Early Christian images of angels generally imagine them as male in appearance. There are no wings or halos in these early versions. The first examples of angels with wings in Western art date from the late fourth century. From that point forward, angels increasingly appear in medieval art with wings. The inclusion could possibly have some association with the role of angels as messengers and the long tradition in Greco-Roman
culture of depicting the messenger god Hermes (Mercury) with winged feet.\textsuperscript{14}

Besides the appearance of angels, their organizational structure was also a topic of debate during the medieval period. The anonymous Christian writer Pseudo-Dionysius advanced the quest to define an angelic hierarchy based on scripture in his \textit{De Coelesti Hierarchia} (On the Celestial Hierarchy), written in the late fourth or fifth century. Thomas Aquinas later refined the categories of Pseudo-Dionysius and expanded on them in his \textit{Summa Theologica} in the thirteenth century. These categories included a threefold division of the heavenly hosts with the archangels occupying the highest rung at the third level and creatures like the cherubim occupying the lowest level. Aquinas also expressed his opinion that after Satan’s original rebellion, the blessed angels are not able to sin.\textsuperscript{15} The archangels Michael and Gabriel, though there is some debate on whether Gabriel should be categorized as an archangel, both appear in the New Testament. Raphael, the healer, entered the pantheon of archangels based on his role in the book of Tobit, a Deutero-Canonical text accepted by Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, but not by Protestants.\textsuperscript{16} Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael are the only three archangels officially recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, but some traditions such as the Coptic tradition list as many as seven. The tradition of seven archangels may go back as far as the apocalyptic Jewish book of 1 Enoch, which was possibly composed two centuries before the birth of Christ. Enoch includes a sevenfold division of angels as well as seven archangels.\textsuperscript{17} The Italian poet Dante Alighieri included many of these medieval angelic motifs in his epic poem \textit{Divina Commedia} (The Divine Comedy).\textsuperscript{18}

The seventeenth-century English author and political activist John Milton shaped many common Western assumptions about angels in his epic poem \textit{Paradise Lost}. Milton sought, like Dante, to mirror the epic style of Greek and Latin poetry in a work that blended classical and Christian themes. The poem he created recounted the falls of Satan and of humanity with vivid imagery that would set the tone for the way these events would be portrayed in popular media for centuries to come. \textit{Paradise Lost} begins with the forces of Satan after their fall from heaven adjusting to their new home in Pandemonium. Milton actually invented this term, which later became a standard reference to chaos. Satan and his former angelic, now demonic, hosts are portrayed regrouping and determining whether they can rise again after their inglorious defeat by the heavenly armies. Satan determines to strike at God by tempting his new creation, humanity. In the course of narrating the fall of humanity over twelve books, Milton also introduced a number of angelic personages and provided a detailed history of the war in heaven that brought the demons to hell.\textsuperscript{19}

The archangel Raphael undertakes a mission to warn Adam and Eve that Satan intends to harm them. While Eve sleeps, he also has an ex-
tended conversation with Adam, lasting from Book 5 to Book 8, about the prehistory of the universe. Adam refers to Raphael as “divine Historian.” In Milton’s epic, the perfect concord between humanity and God in Eden extends to the relationship between humanity and God’s angels as well.

Raphael’s account of the war in heaven reveals the power of the angelic hosts. Michael and Gabriel are sent to battle Satan, who employs a form of armed siege engine on the second day of the conflict. The archangels respond by tossing hills and mountains at their foes. Victory is achieved on the third day as the Son of God ends the conflict in a symbolic allusion to Christ’s resurrection after three days.

The fall of Satan stands as the critical point of angelic ethical choice for Milton. The fallen angels reject God because of their pride and incur the penalty, falling for nine days until they reach hell. Those angels who remain yield total obedience to God. Despite his goal to magnify the works of God, Milton’s best realized character may be his version of Satan. Satan’s famous statement, “Better to reign in hell than serve in Heaven,” summarizes well the contempt he bears for the servile angels who continue to faithfully serve God. Milton imagines the consternation of the obedient angels as they enter heaven “mute and sad” after the fall of humanity. God assures the angels that they could not have prevented the entrance of Satan into paradise.

Michael descends to earth to oversee the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. Before they are forced to leave, Michael relates to Adam the future history of his descendants. This narrative includes the promise that Abraham’s seed, the Son of God, would bring redemption for the human race. His narrative of the future hope complete, fiery cherubim descend to guard the entrance to Eden. Michael leads the humans to the edge of the garden and disappears as the humans walk hand-in-hand into an imperfect world.

Milton’s account was intended to “justify the ways of God to men” according to his own introductory verse. His Reformed Protestant belief in God’s absolute sovereignty led him to the conclusion that the ways of God were always just and best. While Milton emphasizes the moral conflict of the angels at the time of the Satanic rebellion with intense drama, his angels afterward show no sign of an inclination to question God. Their perfect obedience, goodwill to humans, and dazzling strength are attributes of Milton’s angelic hosts that frame depictions of angels for the next few centuries. These attributes are generally unquestioned in Western culture, just as Milton did not truly probe the complexities of
them in his poem. What if there was a conflict between an angel’s duty to God and their fidelity to promote human flourishing? Milton’s assumption, and that of most artists after him, was that God’s perfect will for humanity always promoted what was best even if it did not appear so from a human perspective. Such a conflict between angelic duty and guardianship was not a live possibility in Milton’s perspective. Could angels still choose to disobey God after the Satanic rebellion? If not, did they lose free will at some point? Or was the example of Satan’s punishment so searing that no one dared follow the demons’ destructive course again? Milton never really explores these questions either. Nor will other creative artists truly explore those ideas until the late twentieth century when people without Milton’s theological commitments began to imagine angelic worlds outside the theological box.

The Romanticism of the nineteenth century encouraged a renewed celebration of angels as creatures of beauty and strength in art. The English artist William Blake (1757–1827) celebrated angels in both his poetry and his art. Blake renewed interest in Milton by reprinting Paradise Lost in 1808 complete with new illustrations by Blake. These illustrations evoked classical styles while also infusing Milton’s humans, angels, and demons with the evocative emotionalism so typical of Romanticism. The image of Raphael and Adam captured the imagination of nineteenth-century readers, who cultivated the image of angels as strong and gentle guardians of the human race. The Victorian age was an age of sentimentality and this tendency was extended to Victorian perceptions of the angelic. The myth of humans becoming angels when they die, an idea that is never taught in any of the three monotheistic faiths, became popular as a means to comfort those who lost loved ones. This comfort was extended most often when the deceased was a child, who was thought to become an angel in heaven by virtue of its innocence.

Depictions of angels in the twentieth century tended to be fairly straightforward for most of the period and forged from the same mold as the Victorian concept of the gentle guardian angel. The advent of cinema brought angels to the silver screen. One of the most memorable cinematic portrayals of an angel is the inept guardian angel Clarence Odeny in Frank Capra’s classic It’s A Wonderful Life (1946). Clarence (portrayed by Henry Travers) undertakes a mission to convince George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart), the model citizen of Bedford Falls who stands in peril of losing everything, not to commit suicide. If Clarence succeeds, George lives to continue doing good deeds while Clarence will “earn his wings,” an angelic rite of passage that becomes a common plot device in fictional portrayals of angels. George chooses to live, and viewers are informed at the end of the film by George’s daughter Zuzu (Karolyn Grimes) that “every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings,” confirming that Clarence has gained his reward as well.
The angel as protector and guide for the human protagonist is the typical role angels play in most early Hollywood portrayals. An angel named Dudley (Carey Grant) is dispatched to assist struggling Bishop Henry Brougham (David Niven) in *The Bishop’s Wife* (1946).\(^{30}\) Complications ensue when Dudley finds himself falling in love with Henry’s wife, Julia (Loretta Young). Dudley resolves this temptation by working to bring Julia and Henry closer together. He chastely avoids giving in to his feelings and ultimately teaches Henry that there is more to ministry and life than building grand cathedrals. *The Bishop’s Wife* was later remade as *The Preacher’s Wife* (1996), a film that will be discussed in more detail later. Celluloid angels were not only helping struggling bishops, they were also supporting the Pittsburgh Pirates in the original *Angels in the Outfield* (1951).\(^{31}\) Americans who had always known that God cared about America’s game were gratified to watch a tale where an angelic voice guides hardscrabble Coach “Guffy” McGovern to mend his ways and lead his team to victory. The angels abandoned the Pirates for the California Angels in the 1994 remake with Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Tony Danza, and Christopher Lloyd.\(^{32}\)

The 1960s and 1970s were periods where artists tended to emphasize the darker side of the angelic with films like *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), and *The Omen* (1976) that focused more on the demonic. The lighter image of guardian angels watching out for humans did not seem to hold the same appeal for audiences in the darker climate of the tumultuous 1970s. The more optimistic 1980s featured the return of sentimental tales of angels seeking to better the fates of humans. In addition to this return to sentimentality and the quest to earn angelic promotions, movie and television depictions of angels also tackled broader issues and created angels who had formerly been human.

*The Heavenly Kid* (1984) was typical of the style 1980s and 1990s filmmakers took in their portrayal of angels. Bobby Fontana (Lewis Smith) is killed in a car crash in the 1960s only to be sent back to earth several years later to earn his ticket to “Uptown” or heaven by acting as a guardian angel for high school student Lenny Barnes (Jason Gedrick). Bobby teaches Lenny to be cool and stand up to bullies, but he is troubled by Lenny’s increasingly rebellious attitude. Bobby’s mission is complicated when he discovers that Lenny’s mother is his former girlfriend and that Lenny is his son. Despite some stumbles, Bobby secures his ticket to “Uptown” by demonstrating that he can care for someone besides himself. The final scene shows Bobby riding a motorcycle through the sky and then an escalator to “Uptown” while Lenny watches below.\(^{33}\) Films like *The Heavenly Kid* departed from ancient texts by hinting that angels were human souls and from Christian theology, with the possible exception of Roman Catholic understandings of purgatory, by imagining a heaven where second chances were earned by good works. This campy sentimental ap-
proach at the movies to angelic guardianship mirrored the better-known television versions of the 1980s and 1990s.

*Highway to Heaven* (1984–1989) and *Touched by an Angel* (1993–2003) served as the foremost examples of this sentimental portrayal of guardian angels. Both of these shows tended to follow a weekly formula where the angel would be tasked to help a person with a particular problem. These problems were often individual, but the angels could tackle bigger social issues such as in the *Highway to Heaven* episode, “Merry Christmas from Grandpa,” where angel Jonathan Smith (Michael Landon) addresses the future consequences of pollution on the environment. The series also addressed the tragedy of the Holocaust in the second season episode, “The Torch.” *Touched by an Angel* also included episodes where guardian angel Monica (Roma Downey) addressed larger social issues as well as personal problems. She becomes a substitute teacher for a class with serious learning disabilities in “The Word,” which shines a spotlight on the challenges students with disabilities face.

The premise of *Highway to Heaven* was that Jonathan Smith (Michael Landon) must earn back his wings because he had committed some unspecified offense that caused him to lose his wings. On earth, he meets Mark Gordon (Victor French), who becomes his partner and friend. It is revealed in the season two episode, “Keep Smiling,” that Jonathan had a former mortal life when he is sent to help his own widow cope with life after his death. Jonathan later rebels against the “Boss,” *Highway to Heaven’s* version of God, when his wife dies, but he is not allowed to return to heaven to be with her because he is still needed on assignment. “The Boss” strips Jonathan of his powers and temporarily makes him mortal again until he regains his faith and trust, ironically through the influence of his wife who had herself become an angel.

*Touched by an Angel* follows Monica and her angelic supervisor Tess (Della Reese) as they seek to bring messages from God and help to people who are struggling. Just as Jonathan and Mark travel the highways on *Highway to Heaven*, Monica and Tess run the roads in a red 1972 Cadillac Eldorado. God is alluded to in the series, but he never actually appears until the final episode. Various angels of death appear in the series, with the death angel Andrew (John Dye) appearing in season two and becoming a series regular from season three. Monica is depicted as being in the process of learning her mission. She is an imperfect character, but generally one with the best of intentions. Monica does not display the rebellious streak that Jonathan Smith sometimes revealed.

In most of these 1980s and 1990s depictions, angels are flawed creatures but not ethically or morally compromised. Just as Clarence Odbody could bumble, Jonathan Smith can stumble, but they are still clearly on the side of good. It is never really clarified what being “on probation” means for Jonathan. Is he in danger of losing his place in God’s kingdom or just of being benched? What happens if Monica does not advance to
the next level? There is a definite order or angelic hierarchy that is not static in these depictions. Angels can move up and down on the ladder based on their performance. Monica tops off her run on *Touched by an Angel* by earning a promotion to supervisor for protecting God himself in disguise.40

One final example of angels idealistically portrayed was *The Preacher's Wife*, the 1996 remake of *The Bishop's Wife*.41 Once again Dudley (played by Denzel Washington this time) is sent by heaven to help the Reverend Henry Biggs (Courtney Vance). Henry is being pressured to sell his struggling congregation's worship facility to an unscrupulous developer. In this version as well, Dudley finds himself falling in love with Henry's wife Julia (Whitney Houston). Dudley saves the day and works to bring Julia closer to her husband rather than follow his own desires. The next generation of cinematic angels will make different choices.

The concept of angels engaging in romantic or physical relationships with humans is an ancient one. Genesis contains a strange reference to the "sons of God" having sexual relations with the "daughters of humans" and producing the *Nephilim*, a race of mighty men who became "heroes of renown."42 A more detailed account of this tale is given in the first section of the apocalyptic book of 1 Enoch, which is known as the "Book of the Watchers."43 The Watchers in this story are guardian angels who chose to mate with the "daughters of humans" and incurred the wrath of God as a result. The angels also teach humans forbidden arts. Their giant *Nephilim* offspring wreak havoc on the earth. God determines to send the great flood to destroy these giants and dispatches the archangel Uriel to warn Noah about the coming flood. This ancient tale of angels overcome by their desire for human women inspired two interesting cinematic depictions of angels.

The 1998 film *City of Angels*, a remake of the 1987 German film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (released in the United States as *Wings of Desire*), pushes the concept of angelic imperfection and desire to experience humanity to its ultimate conclusion.44 Both films are original in the way they show angels observing humans and acting behind the scenes to influence events in Berlin and Los Angeles. The angels display curiosity about the human condition even as they operate in a world that is both within and above the physical world of humans. The filmmakers reject the stereotypical white angelic garb to clad the angels in black trench coats. Except for a brief shot at the beginning of *Wings of Desire*, the angels appear human and do not have wings. These angels realize every scholar's dream by choosing to live in libraries when they are not observing humans. Their existence is framed by heavenly wonders beyond comprehension and a sweeping bird's eye view of creation. Despite their exalted perspective, or possibly because of it, the angels in these two films long to know what it is like to live in the midst of human experience, sensing and feeling all that humans do.
Scott Culpepper

City of Angels screenwriter Dana Stevens follows Wim Wender’s original plot device by giving her protagonist, Seth (played by Nicholas Cage), the choice of remaining an agent of heaven or choosing to “fall” so that he can enjoy a mortal existence with Maggie Rice (Meg Ryan), a medical doctor who has become the object of Seth’s obsession. “Falling” does not entail an embrace of evil or banishment to hell in City of Angels. It is predicated on free will. All an angel must do is choose to fall, which in Seth’s case involves literally falling from a tall structure. The “fallen” angel is restricted to life on earth and unable to enjoy the harmony of union with God and heavenly beings, literally symbolized by communal harmonizing at evening on the beach. The tradeoff is that Seth, if he chooses to fall, can have human relationships and experience all the sensory pleasures that humans enjoy. Seth finds a mentor of sorts in Nathaniel Messenger (Dennis Franz), a former angel who now lives a human life following his own exercise of free will.

Seth proves unable to resist the inevitable pull of the story and of Meg Ryan. He determines to “fall” with the result that he briefly enjoys a physical relationship with Maggie. But this is the point where Stevens deviates from Winder’s plot. Winder’s character Daniel (Bruno Ganz) is able to fall and enjoy creating a family with trapeze artist Marion (Solveig Dammartin). It is even revealed in the 1993 sequel, In weiter Ferne, so nah! (Faraway, So Close), that they have a daughter. Their fate parallels that of Daniel Messenger rather than Seth’s in City of Angels. After their first night together, Seth and Maggie’s relationship is cut tragically short when she is hit by a car while biking to the store the next morning. Maggie’s death sets up the film’s most provocative question. Was Seth’s sacrifice worth it given the painfully short time he had to experience the benefits of his choice? Did he trade heaven for ashes?

Anyone expecting a lesson on the futility of choosing the temporal over the eternal at the conclusion of City of Angels is in for a surprise. When his angelic friend Cassiel (Andre Braugher) asks Seth if his sacrifice was worth it, Seth replies, “I would rather have had one breath of her hair, one kiss of her mouth, one touch of her hand, than an eternity without it.” Weighing both the good and the bad, Seth celebrates his choice at the end of the film by leaping into the ocean, an experience that the angelic hosts can only imagine. The scene is even more poignant because the hosts of heaven are standing on the beach enraptured in their evening song when Seth breaks their focus with his act of rebellion. Seth’s act prompts joyous laughter from Cassiel. The message of the film seems to be that the very temporality of relationships, experiences, and feelings are what make them meaningful. One moment of true happiness experienced is worth more than an eternity of monotonous heavenly bliss.

Wings of Desire and City of Angels represented a turn toward a grittier and more flawed portrayal of angelic beings in popular culture. The angelic longing portrayed in scripture to understand the workings of God’s
grace with humans became a longing to experience the sensation of being human. In contrast to the mischievous angels depicted in shows such as *Highway to Heaven* or *Touched by an Angel*, newer portrayals showed angels whose acts of disobedience could have real consequences that could not be cured by a simple goodwill mission to earth. These angels were capable of sliding up and down the moral spectrum from good to evil and sometimes back.

The CW series *Supernatural* (2005 to the present) has developed one of the most complex and interesting television treatments of angelic morality starting in its fourth season. *Supernatural* features the exploits of Sam and Dean Winchester, two young “hunters” who are carrying on their family legacy by fighting the forces of evil in the form of ghosts, vampires, monsters, and a host of other creatures. The show began as a celebration of American urban legends with the Winchesters battling threats from popular ghost stories as they cruise in their 1967 black Chevrolet Impala across the American heartland. The introduction of demons in the early seasons led to an expansion of the mythology of the series to include a whole host of demonic adversaries with their own hierarchy and rules.

While the inclusion of demonic characters had long been a staple of shows that dealt with the supernatural, *Supernatural* ambitiously determined to include the other side of the coin as well. At the end of the third season, Dean had been killed and literally dragged to hell by “hell hounds” due to a pact he had made with a “crossroads demon” in order to resurrect Sam at the end of season two. As the fourth season began, Dean miraculously emerged from his grave with no idea how he escaped from hell. After reuniting with his brother and mentor Bobby Singer (Jim Beaver), Dean sets out to discover what forces had brought him back.

The answer to Dean’s question is revealed at the end of the fourth season’s first episode “Lazarus Rising” when he and Bobby attempt to trap the force that has been shadowing Dean since his resurrection. A mysterious figure appears dressed in a brown trench coat, apparently the default modern fashion accessory for angels, who identifies himself as Castiel (Misha Collins), an “angel of the Lord.”

Castiel informs Dean that he raised him from perdition because God has work for him. He also reveals that angels have been absent from the earth for two thousand years but have now returned because the apocalypse is imminent. The developing storyline over the course of seasons four and five establishes that the angels in *Supernatural* are complex creatures who do not necessarily intend to help the Winchesters or serve the best interests of the human race.

The Winchesters discover how ruthless the angels can be when they attempt to help a young woman named Anna Milton (Julie McNiven), a nod to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, who has been confined to a psychiatric ward with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. She is actually disturbed because
she can hear angelic voices. The angels become a threat as it becomes clear that they intend to kill Anna. Anna finally comes to the realization through hypnosis that she is a fallen angel herself. During a climactic battle with Castiel and his fellow angel, Uriel, Anna seizes her “grace,” the mysterious element that gives angels their power, from Uriel and returns to her angelic form. She reappears at various points throughout the fourth season. When she returns for her final appearance in season five, Anna has made a deal with the angels in return for her freedom to go back in time and destroy the Winchesters by killing their parents before they were born. She is killed, angelic “death” being part of the mythology in *Supernatural*, by the archangel Michael before she can kill the Winchesters’ mother, Mary.

The angels are trying to destroy Sam and Dean in season five because it has been revealed that they are the “vessels” that will house Michael and Lucifer (Satan) for the ultimate conflict of the apocalypse. Both angels and demons in the show must possess a vessel in order to interact in the world of humans. Sam is intended to be the vessel of Lucifer while Dean is fated to house Michael. As usual, the Winchesters resist their fate and find themselves pursued by the angels, who want to stop the apocalypse, and the two archangels, who want to settle their centuries-long dispute by possessing their vessels. Complicating the situation is the fact that the angels do not know where God is. In fact, the nature and location of God is still one of the continuing mysteries of *Supernatural* as the show enters its eleventh season. He is said to have departed from heaven at some point with no one knowing where he had gone or what his will is.

Castiel’s character development from the fourth to the eleventh season is one of the most interesting windows into how the creators of *Supernatural* conceive of their angels. Introduced as a dedicated soldier who follows orders to the letter, Castiel increasingly comes to admire human qualities of loyalty and compassion even when they fly in the face of his heavenly directives. He rebels against the angelic agenda on the eve of the apocalypse and sets out to help Sam and Dean evade their fate as vessels. One of the most interesting recurring story arcs involving Castiel concerns his relationship to Jimmy Novak, Castiel’s human vessel, and Jimmy’s family. In the fourth season episode, “The Rapture,” viewers see the consequences of Castiel’s possession of Jimmy for his family. The family is devastated and even Jimmy, who at one time prayed for angelic possession, expresses a desire to be rid of Castiel. That desire is not granted and the episode demonstrates that the consequences of angelic possession can be just as catastrophic as the results of demonic possession. Those consequences continued for Jimmy’s daughter Claire. Claire’s teenage rebellion prompts Castiel to intervene to get her out of trouble. Castiel’s feeling of obligation to her stems in part from the guilt he feels for possessing her father. The fact that Castiel has the capacity
to feel guilt or compassion underscores how far he has come from the emotionless stoicism that characterized him earlier in the series.

The angelic hosts in *Supernatural* are divided, directionless, sometimes devious, and determined to pursue their own interests despite the collateral damage to the human race. Far from the beneficent protectors of *Highway to Heaven*, *Touched by an Angel*, or even *Paradise Lost*, the angels in *Supernatural* are grasping to define their own morality every bit as much as humans. They are divided between beneficence and antagonism toward humanity. These angels also still have the option to fall, which in the case of *Supernatural* can mean absolute capitulation to evil. Castiel unwittingly causes them all to be expelled from heaven at the end of season eight, necessitating a long and protracted struggle to return to heaven and reorganize their ranks. It will be interesting to see how the series concludes their story. Will they regain some semblance of unity and direction? Will God return, and what will his pronouncement be concerning the events of previous seasons? Is this theme of the absence of God a metaphor for the current culture’s own societal sense of alienation from and uncertainty about spirituality and organized religion?

These same themes of angelic division and propensity to fall were present in the 2010 film *Legion* and the television adaptation of the film *Dominion*. In *Legion*, viewers learn from the archangel Michael (Paul Bettany) that Gabriel (Kevin Durand) is setting out to punish the human race under what he believes to be directives from God. As in *Supernatural*, God is absent in *Legion*, and no one is quite sure where he has gone, and there is confusion about what he desires. *Dominion*, which began airing on the Syfy channel in 2014, is continuing the story of the film with humans and their angel allies attempting to thwart the threat of Gabriel and his army of malevolent angels. This film and television series hint that the philosophical turn for cultural perspectives on angels represented by shows like *Supernatural* may be far from an isolated or temporary shift.

Portrayals of angels in Western culture have changed since Milton first opened the door to Pandemonium and even more so since the first ancient texts were written about them. Both continuities and new directions have marked their characterization in Western culture. As new artists who have an interest in angelic lore without being bound by the cultural expectations or theological restrictions of the past produce new works, the portrayal of angels in popular culture promises to continue reflecting very human struggles and expectations.

**NOTES**


42. Genesis 6:4 (RSV).


