

Angels Messengers of Grace.

by the Revd Dr Martin Israel. Published by SPCK at £9.99

There are plenty of books on Angels being published now. There is a whole display area on angelic books set up in the SPCK bookshop in York at the moment. And in preparation for this review I have read not one but three books on the topic.

Where Angels Walk by Joan Wester Anderson is described as a New York Times bestseller. Subtitled *True stories of heavenly visitors* it is a collection of well written accounts of people being helped by supernatural powers and presences. It leaves one with a warm feeling in much the same way as watching '999-True Life Rescues' does on BBC 1. This book is lacking in explicit discussion of how to understand such material.

The second book, also American, is *Touched by Angels* by Eileen Elias Freeman. She has two theological degrees and runs the AngelWatch Network in New Jersey. This work similarly tells of miraculous – that is 'causes us to wonder' – savings from disaster and healings, but goes further. Ms. Freeman has several chapters reflecting on angelic encounters. One woman describes the eventual result of being saved from almost certain death: 'In time I was able to resume my life, but a wiser, more aware, and I hope a more loving life than ever before.'

Here we touch on a genuinely spiritual theme and one which runs throughout the whole of Dr Israel's splendid work on Angels. Here is writing of deep quality, full of pearls of wisdom which will well repay a slow and thoughtful reading. As with the other books there are personal accounts of angelic interventions and messages and much, much more. The first chapter says all that I said in a sermon in St. Mary's years ago and puts angels in a mystical context. They transmit God's will to his creatures so that divine love inspires human service. Two chapters on angels in the bible are full of gems of insight. Dame Cecily Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement, claimed that when we die we become angels. Commenting on Luke 20:34-6 Dr Israel remarks 'It is worthy of comment that the resurrected dead are not actually angelic, but merely resemble angels in their proximity to God. Unlike the angels they have much work of character-building to perform.' Whereas Ms Freeman's work encourages its readers to AngelWatching, in a manner which may seem akin to navel-gazing, Dr Israel never strays from the truly spiritual points. For example, 'An open heart and a generous attitude to life are features that make us especially amenable to angelic communication; the closed mind and stony heart resist the ingress of angelic activity.'(p.35)

There is discussion of the directive force of conscience as one's guardian angel and one's inner voice. This is distinguished from the kind of unconscious psychic complex known as a Jungian archetype. Sanity and balance pervade these relatively little discussed facets of human experience. Objections to belief in angels, parapsychological studies and their inherent difficulties, theosophical and other offerings are laid before us against a strongly biblical (not literalist) and mystical Christian understanding.

We are given the gift of this life that we may grow in love and in service to others. One does not come without the other and both normally come after crisis and/or humiliation. Equally the gift of spiritual awareness, most pronounced in the mystics, is the burden of awareness of the pain and darkness in human life and in the world. Necessary chapters on 'Angels of Darkness' and 'The Light and the Darkness' save us from glorying in psychic experiences and a saccharin-sweet, false understanding of the transformations needed in all our lives. We are left in no doubt that it is the work of the same Holy Spirit that Jesus incarnated most fully that we need to save us from our sins of pride, fear and so on. Angels are the useful but greatly limited messengers of either divine light or divine darkness. Assessment of angelic activity is by the effect on our emotions and by the fruits that follow from our lives subsequently. Wise words on the ministry – that is the service – of deliverance into God's loving care and provision are scattered throughout the book.

Dr Israel's magisterial work on Angels is hardly likely to enter the bestseller lists: many folk may find it too complex a read. But to my mind this is the one to buy if you want a book on angels. We can dip into it and get more and more out of it as we grow in love and service. It is worth the asking price for St. Teresa of Avila's criteria to evaluate her visions alone.

There is so much spiritual wisdom in this work that its author must truly have been inspired by angels – messengers of grace.

The Reverend Neil Broadbent