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## Angels

Diverse cultures share the belief that angels are spiritual beings who act as intermediaries between humans and a deity. Some scholars argue that whenever the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, mentions that an angel spoke to a human being, that angel was really God himself. These scholars believe that the people who copied the Old Testament over the years were uncomfortable with the idea of God talking directly to people, and so they inserted an angelic intermediary.



The Annunciation by Fra Angelico, c. 1432

The New Testament includes many references to angels, and the angels have more prominent roles than in the Old Testament: An angel named Gabriel brings the news to Mary that she is to be the mother of Jesus, and an angel

announces the birth of Jesus to the shepherds.

Ever since people first began to speak of angels, writers and artists have attempted to identify what angels look like. The angels of the Old Testament are most commonly said to look like people with no unusual attributes. In medieval Christian art angels are usually clothed in a long, white garment, symbolizing light, or the clouds, or purity. The angels mentioned in the Bible are male, but during the Renaissance, artists began to show angels as fe-

males, and by the end of this epoch angels had become predominantly female. Even angels like Gabriel, with his masculine name, were sometimes shown as female. Some scholars have suggested that this change in gender

was made because artists believed that females were more beautiful than males. Other scholars suggested that Gabriel's gender was changed because Renaissance people were uncomfortable with the idea that a male angel would have appeared in Mary's bedroom.

Wings are not a recent addition to angel images. The earliest winged angel in Christian art appears in a fifth-century mosaic in a Roman church. From this point on, wings gradually became a standard feature in portrayals of New Testament angels. In addition to wings, another common feature of Renaissance angels is the halo. This circle of gold and/or white, which sometimes has rays emanating from it, was first associated with angels during the fourth century.

*from P. D. Netzley: Angels*

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