

THE BIBLICAL MINISTRY OF ANGELS IN THE THEOLOGY OF THE CHERUBIM AND SERAPHIM CHURCH

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Abstract

The Cherubim and Seraphim Church is one of the earliest indigenous churches in Nigeria. The foundation of the Church is credited to the peculiar combination of a fairly old man in person of Moses Orimolade Tunolase and a young lady called Abiodun Akinsowon. The Church started in September 1925 following the celestial journey of Abiodun which culminated into the establishment of the Church. The Church has also grown into Europe and America. This Church has over the years embarked upon the mission of contextualizing Christianity in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. In this vein, the Church has certain approaches to some of the teachings in the Bible that may not agree with the popular usage as found in other orthodox Churches. One of these is their doctrine on Angels. They accumulate so many things on their perception of the angels. Besides, like the gods in their traditional religion from where they were initially converted, allusions to angels feature regularly in worship. This paper in its aim seeks to examine the place and the personalities of angels as represented in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church. This qualitative methodological approach is used in the elucidation of the research. Ethnographic tools were used for data collection where focus interview, participant observations, recording of proceedings revealed how the members of this Church perceive the angels. The researchers also visited places of worship, sacred sites like hills and beaches where members of the Church visit across Southwest, Nigeria. It was discovered that their approach to angels is not very different from the expositions in the bible as angels are ministering spirits to them. It was also discovered that they do not worship angels as other Christians have come to talk about them. They recognized the ministry of angels and such angels like Michael and Gabriel.

Keywords: Moses Orimolade Tunolase, Abiodun Akinsowon, Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Angels

Introduction

The Cherubim and Seraphim Church belongs to one of the earliest indigenous churches in Nigeria that arose in the early part of the twentieth century. Throughout its inception to the present time, the church has retained its independence and peculiarity among the other churches in Nigeria. By the middle of the 20th century, it had spread into every nook and cranny of Nigeria. As an African initiated church that has refused affiliation with other churches both within and outside the African continent, the church has attracted both curiosity and admiration of Christians and scholars alike. This is as a result of contextualization insistence and peculiarity. In effect, many have given the church descriptions that are prejudicial. Indeed, some have chosen to regard the church as one that is not a church or even a syncretism of Christianity and Yoruba religion.

One of the phenomena given prominence by this church is the concept of angels. The Church regards with deep respect and has accorded them a place in her liturgy. In a peculiar fashion, it has been observed that the name of the church is a reflection of two different groups of angels. Incidentally, angelic beings are actually invoked in their liturgy. This work attempts an examination of the concept of angels as perceived in the church against the background of Biblical angelology.

Most books written on biblical angelology seek to inform readers about the existence and ministry of angels. They acquaint us with the active presence of the good and bad angels. Worthy of mention are the works of Lindsay¹, Gaebelien², Jopple³, and Whyte⁴. Others include Graham⁵, Needham⁶, and Dickson⁷. All these and many others offer arguments, expositions and illustrations about the interesting beings called angels in the Bible. They say very little about contemporary conception of angels as we have it today. On the other hand, are materials focusing on the history of the church. These offer us the belief and practices of members of the church. The studies of Omoyajowo⁸, and Peel⁹, are particularly instructive on the faith of church members. With regards to the belief on angels, Peel's combination of two indigenous churches gives very little on the angels as conceived by the Church. His position is rather sociological than theological. Omoyajowo's attempt gives a little more than Peel but his overview of the church makes in-depth study on angels rather inadequate. Readers are still not sure whether the church worships angels. The sources of their conception of angels are also left unexplored.

Some consider angels as creatures relegated to the sphere of legend, fairytale and child's fancy,¹⁰ other even reject angels wishing to view the idea as demythologization.¹¹ This chapter aims at establishing the reality of angels as conceived by an African Initiated Church, hoping to contribute to the knowledge of these intriguing spiritual beings. Our approach in this exercise is therefore theological and phenomenological. We will not dissipate energy on the history of the church except as it affects our subject matter.

Resume of Angels in the Bible

The word angel is derived from the Latin word *angelus*.¹² Its equivalence in Greek is *angelos*,¹³ and in Hebrew, *Malak*,¹⁴ all of which connote a servant or a messenger. They are called several names in the Bible. These include heavenly hosts (Ps. 148:2-5), sons of God (Job 1:6) and ministers (Ps. 104:4). To mention only a few. Bible teaches that they were created before the creation of man and the earth,¹⁵ by God for the purpose of serving Him.¹⁶ The angels are innumerable (Neh. 9:6). As spirit beings, they are invisible though can appear to man if so desired. They cannot die and can neither procreate nor marry. They live in heaven where they worship God. The Bible teaches that the angels are superhuman who have the ability and strength to perform what human beings cannot do. They have great knowledge and are not limited by space. They can travel to anywhere they choose. They are holy (Mark 8:36) and unique in position (Heb. 2:6-7, Rev. 8:1).

The Bible further mentions a few of these interesting beings by name. These include Michael who is regarded as an archangel. He assists Gabriel and will blow the trumpet before the rapture. He fought the dragons and demons (Dan. 10:13, 1Thess. 4:16, Rev. 12:7). Gabriel is another angel who was sent to Daniel, Zachariah and Mary to bear messages of goodwill (Dan. 10:10-15; Luke 1:19). Other angels include Cherubim. These are groups of angels mentioned several times in the Bible. In relation to Adam and Eve, they were useful in guarding the garden (Gen. 3:24). The Seraphim are another set of angels mentioned only once in the Bible (Is. 6:1-10). They are portrayed as having three pairs of wings, surrounding the throne of God. Besides all these, an angel called the angel of Jehovah is mentioned in the Old Testament.

He is peculiar and is never mentioned in the New Testament. Another angel that is mentioned is Lucifer (Ezek. 28:12-16). He lost his position and he became Satan.

With regards to angels, a few things must be said. There is evidence in the scripture that the concept of angels developed in the Bible. At first, they possessed no name but literature in the exilic period records names like Michael and Gabriel making Michael the prince of the Israelites (Dan. 12:1). By the intertestamental period there existed varieties of angelic names, though not recognized in the New Testament. Secondly, the Bible polarizes the angels into two, vis-à-vis the elect and fallen angels. The elect angels belong to God while the fallen ones, the demons are under Satan. Again, the Bible speaks of veneration of angels (1Cor. 11:10; Gal. 4:14) but also cautions against excessive veneration (Col. 2:18). In fact, when John attempts to worship the angel, he was told to desist. Rather, Christ should be the receiver of worship (Rev. 22:8).

The Bible leaves no one in doubt about their duties. In the first instance, they worship God in heaven and wait upon Him continually (Is. 6:1-10; Rev. 4:5). We are, however, told that they are to minister to the elect (Heb. 1:14). They are interested in human affairs as we are a spectacle to them (1Cor. 4:9). They guard and protect the elect (Ps. 34:7; 91:11). They are guardians of little children (Matt. 18:10). They strengthened the people of God in diverse ways (Luke 22:43; 1Kgs. 19:5-8). In moments of danger, they deliver people from oppression (Gen. 19:11; 2Kgs. 6:17-18). They are instruments through which prayers are answered (Dan. 10:12; Luke 22:42-43; Acts 12:5-7). At death, the Bible teaches that they bear the souls of the elect to heaven (Luke 16:22). God uses them to carry out His judgment (Gen. 19:13; Rev. 8:9). During the rapture, they will accompany Christ (1Thess. 4:14; Matt. 24:10-16) when He appears in the cloud.

One group of spiritual beings worthy of mention are the demons under Satan. They are formerly angels but when they rebelled against God, they were sent out of heaven. Some of them are imprisoned (2Pet. 2:4; Jude 6), while others are in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:2; 3:10; 6:12). They are powerful (Zech. 3:1; 2Tim. 2:26) and control wickedness (1Kgs. 22:21-25; 1Cor. 5:2-5). The Bible speaks of their defeat and damnation (Rom. 16:20; Rev. 20:10). At their head is Satan called Serpent (Gen. 3:1-4), Devil (Matt. 4:1) and Beelzebub (Matt. 10:25), to mention only a few names. He occupies the heavenlies (Eph. 2:2; 6:12; Rev. 12:7), having dominion over the earth (Matt. 4:8-9; 2Cor. 4:4; 1Pet. 5:8). He is a liar (John 8:44), deceiver (2Cor. 11:4). An accuser (Zech. 3:10, and a devourer (1Pet. 5:8). Since his expulsion from the presence of God, he has made himself the archenemy of God while the demons are his accomplices. They are devoted to the destruction of God's work on earth. The Bible, however, speaks of the limitation of his prowess. His power is limited (Luke 22:31-32), broken (Luke 11:21-22), and doomed (Rev. 20:10). He will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:7-10).

Angels in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church

The Cherubim and Seraphim is one Church with a peculiar conception of angels. This may be the result of the origin of the church as an indigenous and independent one. The establishment of the church is not unconnected with the adventurous encounters of Lady Abiodun with an angelic friend who eventually took her on a celestial journey. During her trance, she spoke of myriads of angels who attended to her.¹⁷ They served her during and after the journey. By the time the decision was made to give the church a name, all members waited upon the Lord. In a vision, a little girl saw some letters in the sky that was interpreted as SERAFU. Consequently, this angelic name became the name of the church. This was on September 9,

1925. Omoyajowo reports the incidence of groups of children who informed a visioner that the name KERUBU should be included.¹⁸

The Church increased in membership.¹⁹ It was decided that a captain should be chosen for the Church. On September 29, 1925, archangel Michael was made the captain. Later, the Baba Aladura Moses Onmolade made angel Gabriel, the deputy captain of the fold. Since the inception of the Church until now, this place of angels has remained distinct, peculiar and unique among other African Churches. It is generally believed that messages sent through angels are meticulously dispatched. In their liturgy, members of the Church invoke angels either by name or collectively. They are summoned to be partakers in the worship, or bring messages from and carry the needs of Church members to the throne of grace.

The naming of the Church after angels or angelic patriarchs and the invocation of angels are a clear testimony to the belief in the reality and existence of angels among members. The members of the Church further believe that the angels are the creations of God, whom they worship continually. They are commonly called *angel* (angels), *Moleka* (from Arabic *Malaika*) and *Iranse* (messenger). Often times, they are also looked upon as *awon oogun orun* (the hosts of heaven) or *agbagba orun* (the elders of heaven). The Church believes that the angels are innumerable, ageless, ubiquitous and do not procreate. As many as the angels are, it is strongly believed that they all possess names and members and may be given the privilege of calling them certain things through the knowledge of their names. Most names, however, are names of God in Hebrew or Greek. For example, we have gathered names like Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Agrantete, Robi and Kase. Enquiries have revealed that most names given in visions are for specific functions. The names cease to be useful immediately the duty is accomplished.

In addition to the above, the angels are believed to be intelligent, mighty, powerful and holy. They are so holy that the auditorium is sanctified before the angels are invited to partake in worship. They detest impurities and might punish the unclean. In support of this is the encounter between Abiodun and the angel she insulted before her celestial journey.²⁰ The angels are invisible but they may choose to appear in whatever manner God wants. In effect, they are portrayed as possessing wings, and may be male or female, young or old or even babies. Usually, visioners, prophets and dreamers recall seeing them in white or black figures. Some even claim that angels may appear in the form of animals to fight the enemies of church member. Members also hold that the angels are in a hierarchy. At the apex are four angels, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel. According to Omoyajowo, Michael is the defender of Christians, he is stationed in the west with the breeze under his jurisdiction. Uriel assists in evangelism. He is in the North and is in charge of the earth, while Raphael heals the sick from the south where he commands water. Next to these are the Cherubim. These are believed to be the warriors who assist members of the Church. The Seraphim belongs to another group of angels as the Cherubim. They praise God continually. Also, there exist myriads of angels with varying degrees of power and prominence.

The Church posits that the angels have a dual role. In the first place, they are believed to have been created to worship God. Many who have gone into trances inform us that the angels worship God in heaven by singing to Him. This takes place in heaven. The other role is here on earth. This is related to their activities with men. The most important of their work is the fact that they are believed to be in charge of every conceivable phenomenon in the world. In effect, rivers, mountains, rain, towns, villages, countries and continents are believed to be under one angel or the other. There are some who are placed in charge of schools, places of work and even houses. By extension, members strongly believe that each person has, at least, an angel attached to him to guide and guard him.

Another prominent function is the communication of divine revelations to man. The Church believes that there are several ways by which God can speak to man, for example, through dreams or spirit possession but he certainly sends angels to man to warn him or bring him message of hope and joy. When visions are relayed or spiritualists are under possession, records of angelic messages are often given. Sometimes it is generally held that the angels will write messages on slates. These are read and then recorded. These occur usually under ecstasy. This may be one of the reasons for the name *iranse* (messenger). Closely following the above is the strong belief that if these angels can bring messages, then they can carry members' need to the altar of grace. Hence, they tell the angels to carry their urgent needs to God.

Within the context of divine revelation, these angels often guide and instruct recipients of such messages. They announce and forewarn the people about impending happenings. They also protect and deliver people from oppression. They are constantly on divine surveillance to protect God's loved ones. They assist strongly in the spread of evangelism, and in guidance, protection and provision. We may also add that the church accepts everything said about angels in the Bible. Their activities in the Bible are accepted to be true and the promises of their assistance are not doubted. Even the church agrees totally with their duties at the end of time.

It is important to add that the church believes that angels of God will depart from erring and unrepentant members or false prophets. All facilities that they previously enjoyed through the agency of the angels will be denied them. However, God can, in his prerogative, send his angels to whomever he may choose. In addition to this the church insists that angels are messengers, so they are not to be worshipped.

Angels in the Bible and the C&S Compared

With reference to the nature, existence and functions of angels, there exists striking similarities between the conception of angels in the Bible and the Cherubim and Seraphim Church. To a large extent, both agree on the multiplicity of the angels, their habitation and createdness. Both also agree that the angels have superior intelligence, superhuman abilities and purity. The idea that there exist certain angels with names in the Bible finds agreement in the Church's position about Michael, Gabriel, as well as Cherubim and Seraphim. An examination of the function also reveals the fact that there are similarities in both conceptions. Angels protect, guide, provide and assist people in the Bible. The church, too, holds that the angels are ministering spirits, sent forth for the salvation of the elect. Members of the church as a matter of course also accept the eschatological functions of the biblical angels.

However, in spite of these striking similarities, there exist areas of divergence. It is true that the church accepts the names of biblical angels, just as they recognize other names like Raphael and Uriel that are not in the Bible. It is, however, not doubted that these names may be found in the Apocrypha. Similarly, the opinion that these names are divinely revealed is not scripturally based. Although the Bible records that in the last days, there will be the expression of gifts (Joel 2:28), the claim that the angels are in charge of every conceivable phenomenon appears to be post-biblical. One other thing that is worth mentioning is that there is nowhere Bible characters invoke or are commanded to invoke angels. Rather God sends angels to man to assist him. But the church invites angels to join in worship, calls them to fight against their enemies and sometime write angel's names in their houses. These differences pose some problems. The constant appeal to angels seems to contradict the position of Christ as intercessor. If the angels have many names, then the demons must have names too. The difficulty here is how does one know which of them are invoked? It is on the basis of this that it is imperative to examine the reasons for these peculiarities. It is apparent that their sources of angels and the socio-cultural factors will influence their perception of angels.

One of the major sources of angels is rooted in divine revelations given to members. On some occasions, names are revealed in dreams, visions or prophecies. These will then be put into use. Another source is the available extra-biblical literature. For example, the apocryphal book Tobit mentions angel Raphael as a healer (12:18-20). The Church also holds that angel Raphael is a healer, as earlier revealed. There exist very many other extra-Biblical books that may affect the conception of angels. There are other sources of information. Converts from the Roman Catholic Church who had hitherto been exposed to the concept of saints and angels may in a way colour the people's conception of angels. It is informative to know that Michael mass is celebrated on September 29, same day as Holy Michael's day. It is possible that the apocryphal books are common in those days. Another influence is Islam. Islamic concept of angels is similar to that of the Christians. Yet Islam had been entrenched in Yorubaland by the beginning of the twentieth century when Christianity was introduced. Incidentally, members of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church call angels *Moleka*, an adulterated form of *Malaika*, the Arabic word for angel. However, we wish to put on record that the area of influence with regard to Roman Catholicism and Islam is rather negligence and debatable. We must place on record that some early converts or members of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church were drawn from the Mission Churches. In fact, many of them were clergymen.

However, outstanding among the religions which have influenced the Cherubim and Seraphim Church is the Yoruba Religion. Many of the early converts were converted into Christianity from Yoruba Religion. In addition to this, the Church's claim to contextualizing Christianity cannot be strictly devoid of expressing the new faith in the context of former one. Besides, the Yoruba world-view²¹ will certainly be carried on into the new religion. In their world-view, the Yoruba believe that the supersensible world is populated by spiritual entities that may be either malevolent or benevolent. This idea is corroborated by Mbiti who says that the Africans believe in existence of spirits.²² The *Orisa* or divinities are believed to be emanations from God. They are delegated with the responsibilities of governing the universe while some are in charge of creating the physical parts of man. So are others in charge of carrying out the wrath of *Olodumare*, *Orunmila* is placed in charge of the oracles and the destiny of man. We also have divinities that govern over lands, rivers and every phenomenon. This world-view may have been carried into Christianity in their conception of the angels against the background of the divinities. Similarly, Modupe Oduyoye recognizes the attempt of Yoruba Christians to combine the activities of angels Gabriel and Michael in the personality of *Esu*.²³ By extension, the importance attached to prayers by church members is in consonance with prayers in Yoruba Religion. This assists us in evaluating the Church's perception of spiritual warfare. This is the reason for portraying the angels as being imbued with power to assist the Christian in waging war against enemies who are out to destroy a man's property or life.

Conclusion

This chapter attempts to examine the concept of angels as understood by the cherubim and Seraphim Church in the light of the Holy Scriptures. The foregoing has revealed that the Church's idea bears similarities with that of the Bible, though there exist fundamental differences. The differences are attributable to the attempt of the Church at contextualizing Christianity in Yorubaland. According to Peel "Man's beliefs are nearly always syncretic in their content shifts in response to new experiences and that some attempts are made to harmonize the old and new."²⁴

The Cherubim and Seraphim Church expresses its Christian faith in a way that is understandable to the Africans. Any religion alien to the culture in which it is planted will surely die. This is because culture provides the religion with the necessary ingredients for survival. It is as a result of this acculturation that the Church's view on angelology differs slightly from that of the scriptures. Besides, most of the differences are

not explainable from the viewpoint of the scripture. The idea of personalizing and recognizing names of angels finds basis in angel Michael being regarded as the one who has charge of the Israelites (Dan. 12:1). While the Bible does not point to names of other angels, the church insists that God speaks to them as they are recipients of the promise recorded in Joel 2:28.

With regard to worship of angels, Omoyajowo says: "There is enough emphasis on the sublime on the supernatural and on spiritual revelation that a cursory observer could easily mistake the religion of the C&I for worship of angels."²⁵ An objective study will reveal that members of the Church do not worship angels. Their faith is deeply rooted in Christ. All hymns conveying angels show that Christ is supreme and He only is the object of worship in the church.²⁶ Angels are considered as ministering spirits sent to assist believers by their loving God. Jesus Christ is regarded as *Olugbala*, Saviour, *Oludasile*, Founder and *Alasepe-igbagbo-wa*, The Finisher of our faith.

From the above, it is apparent that the position of the C&S Church on angels is unique. Members are well familiar with Biblical tenets. So whoever worships angels may be doing this in ignorance of the church's position. We must, however, say that the position of angels may be turned into an end, rather than a means to an end. This is the danger in the cult of the divinities where their priests may turn the divinities into ends in themselves.²⁷ We suggest that in order to avoid the danger of priest craft, the Church should embark upon training their clergy and then systematize her practice in a way that can be understood by any unwary investigator. This will expose scriptural teachings to the ignorant and the Church will be able to reduce her theology into writing in understandable and meaningful terms.

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