

RAW MATERIAL

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

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Chapter 20

Like Angels in the End

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Like Angels in the End

“For in the Resurrection they neither marry nor are married, but are like the angels.”

Matt 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:35-36

A common misconception in today’s society, believed to be a Bible teaching, holds that the righteous dead will become angels. A familiar example is the Frank Capra movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. In contrast, Bible texts consistently treat angels and resurrected humans as separate categories. However, they are not altogether dissimilar, and we have this statement from Jesus which declares one similarity following the resurrection.

A possible background to this statement of Jesus is the ancient idea that the angels are stars, or vice-versa (Davies & Allison 228). A popular image for the resurrected saints is the stars (e.g. Daniel 12:3). Because the resurrected saints will be luminous like stars, they will be, in some sense, angelic. Other angelic traits are attributed to the resurrected, such as access to God’s presence, the power of flight, and angelic duties – usually priestly. The idea that we will be like angels sexually rounds out this picture of the resurrection.

But is this a good thing, something to be sought in eager anticipation?

In conservative churches this statement of Jesus has been used almost like a weapon of vengeance in the hands of divorced members (forbidden to remarry) and gay activists. Church-enforced celibacy is not always accepted with grace and goodwill, and there are those who find some solace in the idea that today’s non-celibate married church-goers someday will share the state of enforced celibacy. Meanwhile, happily married heterosexual churchgoers reassure each other that, whatever Heaven is like, somehow it will certainly be better than sex. Therefore sexuality will not be missed.

But our sexuality is something many are reluctant to leave behind, including celibate single churchgoers. In *Purgatorio* 27 Dante describes the last circle before entering the earthly Paradise, gateway to the heavenly Paradise. The last cornice is sexual lust, which is cleansed by fire, and all souls must stop here for these flames. All humans have lust, and lust must not be allowed to enter the deathless paradise or the company of angels. First Dante treads the edge of the cliff to avoid the flames, but then he is commanded to pass through these flames to reach his goal. Dante fears this cleansing like he fears being buried alive (27.14-15). He is assured that

the flames will not harm him physically, but that does not remove his fears. Threats do not work. Finally, only the promise of meeting Beatrice can lure Dante to pass through this cleansing. Beatrice he loves with a spiritual love, a love which can survive these flames and even entice him to undergo this cleansing. Dante describes well the response that many have to this statement of Jesus. Loss of sexuality is a fearful thing, to be endured only for a great and wonderful spiritual goal.

What Are Angels Like?

We return to the question raised in the chapters on Genesis 1-3. Either the angels have no genitals, or their genitals are never used (with the possible exception of the fallen angels). This is the presupposition behind the statement of Jesus. Are angels (and God) sexual beings, and why must they cover their bodies with clothes or wings? We have seen that God is emphatically not sexually active in any way throughout the Bible canon and in all major forms of Christianity. Angels are another matter. Their sexuality is the subject of speculation not only in modern popular fiction, but also in ancient Jewish literature. In some ancient Jewish writings Genesis 6:1-4 is understood as a description of angels procreating with human wives (angels being uniformly masculine). In the popular pseudepigrapha of the Second Temple Period the authors speculate that angels lose their exalted status when they practice sexuality, and some go further to state that sexual activity itself changes angels into mortals (1 Enoch 15:4-7).

In order to be sexual, angels need to possess genitals, and presumably even those angels who never practice sexuality have an unrealized potential to do so. Jubilees 15:27 presupposes angelic genitalia when it tells us that the angels were created circumcised. So the angels, it would seem, have something sexual to cover with their wings or with clothing, if we accept the idea that angels can be sexual with human women.¹ Not all Bible readers understand Genesis 6 as describing sexual angels, and we lack any other examples of angelic sexuality in the Bible. Whether or not the Israelite writers believed that the angels were capable of sexual activity, this was a common belief in 1st Century Judaism when the New Testament writings were composed. But even when the potential for angelic sexuality was presupposed, orthodox thought indicated

¹ Milton complicates things considerably. His fallen angels can take on either gender in order to copulate with humans (*Paradise Lost* 1.423-431). Presumably these angels can be circumcised or uncircumcised at will. The unfallen angels, without benefit of genitals, have what seems to be sexual encounters with each other with no hint of monogamy (8.620-629).

that only a fallen angel would become sexually active, and unfallen angels who remain in God's service consistently remain sexually inactive.

If we turn to the laws of Moses, a man with an emission of semen is unclean until evening and until he washes. Which means that a priest on duty cannot have had a recent emission of semen. Likewise David had to reassure the High Priest that he and his men had no recent sexual activity before they were given the showbread to eat (1 Sam 21:4-6). As angels minister before God, they are often understood as priestly. Therefore, being on duty, they cannot be allowed to have an emission of semen. They cannot be sexually active and be in service before God. This was part of the ancient understanding of angelic sexuality. However, in none of our quotes from Jesus, not even the elaborate one from Luke, is uncleanness or semen emission indicated as the reason for the end of sexuality among resurrected humans, or the lack of sexuality among angels.

Luke provides us with the longest and most elaborate quote from Jesus on how we will be like the angels in the resurrection. Luke almost makes explicit what seems implicit in Matthew and Mark – sexual reproduction is for mortals who die and must replace themselves (Fitzmyer 1985, p 1305). When we are resurrected we will be immortal – like the angels – and therefore will have no need to reproduce – again like the angels. Four centuries earlier Plato defined reproduction as seeking a form of immortality (*Laws* 721 b-e). If you cannot live forever, your life continues in your biological children, and in their children after them. If you lack immortality you need reproduction, but if you have immortality you have little or no need for reproduction.

If we accept this reading of Luke, two related issues are drawn into the discussion at this point. One is the idea that sexual activity is for procreation only. The other is the extreme idea that sexual activity (and its pleasures) is a necessary evil. If sexuality is withdrawn when we receive the gift of immortality, does this imply that sexuality is solely for procreation? If not, then why should sexuality be withdrawn? Is it an evil thing which should be removed as soon as it is no longer necessary?

We have seen that neither Testament of Scripture developed the idea of the necessary evil. Likewise neither Testament limits sexual expression to reproduction. In fact, the New Testament radically separates sexuality from reproduction, and treats sexual expression solely in terms of the marital bond and the use of licit sexual pleasure (in marriage) to ward off the

temptation of illicit sexual activity (1 Cor 7:5). The only places where there is any connection between sexual activity and reproduction in the New Testament are one text which sets aside sexual activity in an act of reproduction (Luke 1:34-35) and this one which speaks of the termination of human sexuality (Luke 20:35-36). In light of these themes, we can safely say that we over-extend the statement of Jesus if we use it to limit sexual expression to procreation only, or worse define sexual pleasure as a necessary evil. Sexual activity is part of the created order, and is therefore “good” (Genesis 1:31). The end of sexual expression indicates a transcendence of sexuality, but not a denial of its goodness.

Some read the statement of Jesus carefully and find no denial of sexual expression for the resurrected. Just because there is no marriage, and probably no procreation, does this necessarily mean there will be no sexual activity? A strong New Testament theme precludes the idea of sexual activity without the marriage bond. Appropriate sexual expression helps create the marital bond, and in one teaching of Jesus the absence of marriage implies the absence of legitimate sexual function (Matt 19:10-12). When Jesus states that the resurrected do not marry, we may assume that he means they will not be sexually active in any recognizable form.