

# The Christmas Story

## The Cast of Characters

### *Part 1 - The Supporting Roles*

#### #1 - Angels In The Christmas Story

When you examine the gospels of the New Testament, you quickly understand that angels make a significant contribution to the Christmas story. Specifically, in the overall story, there are four separate appearances of angels:

- There is the angelic appearing of Gabriel to Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-20)
- There is the angelic appearing of Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)
- There is the angelic appearing to Joseph in a dream (Matthew 1:18-25)
- There is the angelic appearing to the shepherds (Luke 2:8-15)

Since, the first appearance, that of Gabriel's appearance to Zacharias, relates to the overall story of Christ's coming, and not to the specific settings of the actual birth of Jesus, we will set that angelic interaction aside so we can closely examine the other three.

It would probably be good for me to take just a moment here and give some Biblical teaching about angels overall, since I find even seasoned Christians misunderstand these creatures.

Angels are:

Created, supernatural beings. As wholly spiritual creatures they are free from many human limitations, such as death (Lk 20:36).

They do not marry (Mt 22:30), so they could be regarded as gender-less; however, in all biblical appearances of angels in human form they were taken to be men, never women or children.

Their ability to communicate in human language and to affect human life in other ways is basic to their role in the Bible.

They are powerful (Mt 28:2)

They have an awesome appearance (vv 3, 4) sometimes tempting people to fear or worship them, but the NT does not condone the worship of angels (Col 2:18; Rev 22:8, 9).

Though angels are stronger and wiser than human beings, their power and knowledge are also limited by God (Ps 103:20; Mt 24:36; 1 Pt 1:11, 12; 2 Pt 2:11).

There are multiple classifications of angels, some are described as winged creatures—although not all of them are described that way - the cherubim and seraphim. These an-

gels appear in Ezekiel's visions (1:4–28; 10:1–22) and in Isa. 6:2–6. Cherubim are primarily guards/attendants to God's throne, whereas seraphim attend God's throne and offer praises to Him.

Satan, before his fall, was the highest angelic creation. When he sinned against God, he along with a third of the angels who sided with him were cast from heaven and Satan's followers became designated as demons.

The Bible teaches us that angels serve God in multiple ways. The Hebrew word in the OT is *mal'ak* [mal - ache], and the NT Greek word is *angelos*, from which is actually where we get our English word, "angel." They both mean "messenger."

**In the context of the Christmas Story, their role was to guide and announce.**

### **A. The angelic appearing of Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)**

Clearly, God sent the archangel Gabriel to Mary to *announce* her pregnancy with the Messiah and answer questions she might have. In this announcement, Gabriel gives five predictions about Mary's Son:

1. He will be great, vs. 32
2. He will be called the Son of the Most High, vs. 32. Mary could not have missed the significance of that terminology. The fact that her Baby was to be called the "Son of the Most High" pointed to His equality with Yahweh. In Semitic thought a son was a "carbon copy" of his father, and the phrase "son of" was often used to refer to one who possessed his "father's" qualities.
3. He will be given the throne of His father David, vs. 32. Jesus, as David's descendant, will sit on David's throne when He reigns in the Millennium (2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:3–4, 28–29).
4. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. Jesus' reign over the nation Israel as her King will begin in the Millennium and continue on into the eternal state, vs. 33.
5. His kingdom will never end, vs. 33. These promises must have immediately reminded Mary of the promise of Yahweh to David (2 Sam. 7:13–16). David understood the prophecy as referring not only to his immediate son (Solomon) who would build the temple, but also to the future Son who would rule forever. David stated that Yahweh had spoken of the distant future (2 Sam. 7:19). Mary would have understood that the angel was speaking to her of the Messiah who had been promised for so long.

### **B. The angelic appearing to Joseph in a dream (Matthew 1:18-25)**

This time, the Scriptures don't identify the angel, as it did in Mary's case and the angel appears to Joseph in a dream.

Clearly, this angel's purpose was to **guide** Joseph away from the decision he had made about divorcing Mary, due to her pregnancy. God is Sovereign and He has a plan. Joseph had made a decision to stray from that plan, and God sent an angel to guide him in the right path.

### C. The angelic appearing to the shepherds, (Luke 2:8-15)

The role of the angelic appearance to the shepherds is both similar and yet different to the previous appearances.

It was similar, in that, like the appearance to Mary, the role here was to **announce** the birth of the Savior. Notice in verses 11 & 12 that the announcement came with great detail. The angel gives the shepherds:

- The birth city
- Whose birth was being announced
- Details to identify Him

But, as parts of this appearance were similar to Mary, it was also different than the others. While it begins with a single, angelic appearance - it blossoms into a full angelic chorus and a heavenly worship service erupts over the fields outside of Bethlehem, vs. 13.

Angels played a significant, supporting role in the story of the Savior's birth. The other supporting role in the Christmas Story goes to the shepherds as they tended their flocks in the fields outside of Bethlehem.

### #2 - Shepherds In The Christmas Story, (Luke 2:8-20)

The shepherds were the first human **worshippers** of the Messiah's arrival.

The shepherds may have been caring for lambs which were destined for sacrifice during the time of Passover.

The shepherds understood that the angels were speaking for the Lord. They believed the message and went to confirm it for themselves. This was much like the action of Mary after she had heard the message of Elizabeth. Such an attitude contrasts sharply with that of the religious leaders who knew where the Baby was to be born but did not take the time or the effort to confirm it for themselves (Matt. 2:5).

After seeing the Baby, the shepherds were also the first **messengers** to proclaim the arrival of the Messiah: they spread the word. Those who heard ... were amazed.