

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

One of the most well-known Christmas hymns is a song named “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” Its first verse goes like this:

*Hark the herald angels sing
“Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled”
Joyful, all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With the angelic host proclaim:
“Christ is born in Bethlehem”
Hark! The herald angels sing
“Glory to the newborn King!”*

This beautiful hymn repeats the widely-held belief that angels sang at the birth of Jesus. In countless plays, hymns, and sermons, the message is the same: angels sang the news of Christ's birth to the world.

However, this is actually not the case. Angels did *not* sing at the birth of the Messiah. Take a look at Luke to see what I mean:

Luke 2:8: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Do you see what verse 13 says? We are told that there was a host of angels that praised God *and said*, “Glory to God in the highest.” They did indeed proclaim the news, but they did not sing it. In other words, the famous “herald angels” did not actually do any singing!

In fact, it's very difficult to find evidence of angels singing anywhere in the Bible. In the famous Christmas hymn “Angels From The Realms of Glory” we are told this:

*Angels from the realms of glory
Wing your flight over all the earth
Ye who sang creation's story
Now proclaim Messiah's birth*

Did the angels sing at the creation of the world? Well, look at Job 38:

Job 38:4: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.

5 Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it?

6 Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof;

7 When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God **shouted** for joy?"

We are told that the angels (which are here called the sons of God) shouted for joy, but it doesn't say they did any singing. The real challenge is the identity of the morning stars. The only being the Bible ever calls the "bright and morning star" is Jesus (Revelation 22:16) – but there is only one Jesus, so He cannot be a group of morning *stars* (plural).

I have researched this passage and discovered that there is a lot of disagreement over what it means. Some say that the morning stars are angels, and some say they're not. Some say it is a poetic reference to actual stars. Other commentators have even stranger theories. If the morning stars are angels then this would represent the one time in the entire Bible where they sing – but there is just no agreement on how verse 7 should be interpreted. If the Bible ever referred to angels as "morning stars" in some other passage then the answer would be clear, but it never does that. This is the one and only time that this particular phrase is used.

What about in Heaven? Well, in Revelation we are told that the elders (which represents the Church) and the four beasts sing a song to the Lord:

Revelation 5:8: "And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.

9 And they **sung** a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;

10 And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth."

In the next verse the angels join in, but notice that they don't actually do any *singing*:

Revelation 5:11: "And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands;

12 **Saying** with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing."

As you can see, the angels praise God and shout for joy, but we don't actually find any evidence of them singing. Now, this is not to say that angels are incapable of singing. It is entirely possible that angels sing all the time and the Bible simply doesn't tell us. (For all we know, angels may do all sorts of things that we don't know about!) What I am saying is that our popular idea of angels singing is incorrect. There is no evidence that they sang at the birth of Christ. (Of course, I will admit that "Hark the Herald Angel Said" doesn't have quite the same ring to it!)

I doubt that this has any deep significance but it is something to think about. It does make you

wonder how much of our image of angels is actually real. Angels are regularly depicted in our culture as tall women with wings who spend their time strumming golden harps. Here's a fun activity for you: go through the Bible and try to find a reference to a female angel. You may be surprised at what you find – or in this case, what you *don't* find!