

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 tells us 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, that's actually not what happened. Angels did *not* sing at the birth of the Messiah! Take a look at Luke to see what I mean:

Luke 2:8-14: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign

unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

Do you see what the passage says? There was a host of angels that praised God *and said*, “Glory to God in the highest.” They did indeed proclaim the good news but they didn't sing it! In other words, the famous “herald angels” didn't actually do any singing.

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

Job 38:4-7: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof; When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God **shouted** for joy?”

We're told that the angels (which are here called the sons of God) shouted for joy, but it doesn't say they did any singing. Who are the morning stars? Well, the only being the Bible ever

calls the “bright and morning star” is Jesus (Revelation 22:16) – but there's only one Jesus so He can't be a group of morning *stars* (plural).

I've researched this passage and discovered there's a lot of disagreement over what it means. Some say the morning stars are angels, and some say they're not. Others say it's a poetic reference to actual stars. If the morning stars are angels then this would represent the one time in the entire Bible where they sing – but there's no agreement regarding 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 doesn't do that. This is the one and only time this particular phrase is used.

What about in Heaven? Well, in Revelation we're told that the 24 elders (which represents the church) and the four beasts sing a song to the Lord:

Revelation 5:8-10: “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. 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; 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 5:11-12: “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; **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.”

The angels praise God and shout for joy, but we don't actually find any evidence of them singing. Now, this doesn't mean angels are incapable of singing. It's 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 the Bible doesn't mention!) What I'm saying is that our popular idea of angels singing is incorrect. There's no evidence that they sang at the birth of Christ. (I'll admit that “Hark the Herald Angel Said” doesn't have quite the same ring to it!)

All of this makes me wonder how much of our mental image of angels is actually correct. Our culture generally depicts angels as tall women with wings who spend their time strumming golden harps. Here's an 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!