The material remains of the culture of late antiquity—the art, the texts—locate angels as exceptional creatures existing with and among human beings yet different from humanity in ways that expand and complicate the range of possibilities available to both species. Late ancient cultural products of all sorts conveyed the message that angels were special but also familiar. When a person attending a Christian ritual in late fourth-century Ravenna looked up, he saw the faces of human figures looking back at him from the mosaics on the walls of his church. He also saw the faces of angels, in form much like human beings but with additional appendages, wings, that were theirs alone. When a curious reader perused one of the many collections of stories about ascetic feats accomplished in Egypt that were produced in the fifth and the sixth century, he learned that angels often appeared in the company of ascetic practitioners, frequently there to help out by exercising abilities that no human being, even the most disciplined, could claim. So, when the modest monk Amoun of Nitria needed to ford a river but would not disrobe to do so, an angel appeared in order to carry him across, dry and dressed. Even the more pedestrian letters that survive from ascetic leaders support extraordinary expectations about how angels could act among human beings: when the head of an ascetic collective needed to know the nighttime activities in his community but loyalty and dignity required that he not pry, an angel appeared to reveal to him the secret practices taking place among monks in their cells at night. When a city dweller decided to go through the initiation that would prepare him to participate in the central ritual activities of his community, he was trained to see in his mind’s eye the angels who attended the service—spectators just like the human participants surrounding the person who performed the ritual. And when a budding
mystic studied the paths of others to learn how to gain entrance into the heavens, he came to understand that angels guarded the entrance to specific levels of heaven, their extraordinary divine status granting them the power to be guides to less adept, human travelers. In all these cases, readers of texts could infer how angels acted and on what motivations, learning from their inferences that angels were very much like the human beings with whom they mingled; and yet angels displayed novel characteristics. Those novel characteristics were often so closely aligned with unexpected events that occurred in late ancient texts—heavenly tours, miraculous actions—that a modern reader may be tempted to conclude that angels were simply narrative devices, employed in late ancient religious literature to mark the intractable problem surpassed or the divine made accessible.

That temptation could be amplified by the fact that the majority of what we can retrieve of late ancient knowledge about angels is itself preserved in narrative form. Such sources as those that I have just listed were all rhetorical constructions in which angels acted as characters. Shortly put, they were stories or could be read as stories, their words establishing situations and landscapes in which angels appeared and acted. Late ancient thinkers rarely engaged questions about angels in any other rhetorical register besides narrative. There was no industry of persuasive or polemical treatises aimed at establishing the nature of angels as there was an industry of persuasive or polemical treatises written to establish one or another understanding of the nature of God. In expository terms, angels were undertheorized in late ancient culture, particularly when compared to other, highly theorized divine beings like God but also when compared to other topics, such as the constitution of the human person or the proper exercise of a virtuous life. Though forensic philosophical methods were not frequently employed in late antiquity to explore the meaning and essence of the category “angel,” we can still imagine how late ancient people may have known angels otherwise than in the narrative form. Two possibilities that are attested from late antiquity are direct visionary experience and magical collaboration; yet the media through which we know about them limit the information that they deliver. For example, angels may have been known to appear directly to human beings, establishing contact and a certain level of intimate knowledge, but the late ancient sources that point to such experiences are already narrativized. Recorded in stories, whether in first-person or third-person voice, such experiences are not available for us to investigate in any other form. For a second example, angels may have been known to be conjurable through ritual practices undertaken by individuals; and indeed they appear frequently in the magical material that survives from late antiquity. Yet even these sources allow us scant perspective on how such angels may have been known to those who conjured them. The form in which their presence survives, the spell, was itself a type of narrative in waiting, a formula containing of the hope of future behavior by certain characters, linked to the establishment of certain conditions and proffering
certain results. Thus the kinds of sources that could allow modern readers to explore other, nonnarrative ways of knowing angels in late antiquity—conjuring, deriving them logically, taking up bodily practices to induce their presence: these are things not accessible to us in the remains of late ancient culture in forms that convey the alternative ways of knowing that visionary experience or magic seems to indicate. And so the material by which we can investigate late ancient ways of knowing about angels comprises largely stories—texts that present angels in action among other agents, inaugurating new actions and responding to others’ activities.

The preponderance of narrative sources from late antiquity seems to limit our ability to reconstruct how and what late ancient people knew about angels (or truly, what any people in the past knew about subjects in their world). And indeed, even late ancient people recognized the insufficiency of language to convey knowledge of those beings that exist in the divine realm, angels included. But the fact that angels appear in narrative at all allows us to discern something blindingly important about late ancient knowing, about angels conceived as subjects and objects of knowledge, and about the way that we as moderns make sense of intellectual cultures equipped with actors and categories of being not viable in our own culture. Among the insights that acceptance of the narrative nature of most late ancient sources delivers is this: such representatives suggest that interaction with humanity was possible for angels. Though many texts from the late ancient period recount interactions among divine beings, few are the texts that focus on angels’ interactions with each other. Instead, the relationship between angels and humanity is almost always on display; in the absence of philosophical treatises that define it otherwise or narrative scenarios that offer an alternative, such a fact suggests that interaction with humanity was the angels’ primary mode of action.

This chapter explores the parameters and consequences of that relationship, seeking to illuminate how late ancient assumptions about angels fostered particular cultural perspectives and products among human beings. My argument explores late ancient knowledge of angels and our estimation of it in two parts. In the first, I demonstrate that the presence of angels in narrative reveals that they had the capacity to communicate with humanity, an observation that on its face seems simple but in fact leads to several complex realities about both species. Late ancient thinkers, in ways both explicit and implicit, followed the potential for communication to rarified logical ends. They understood angels to share a common psychology with humanity yet held them to be a different class of being, with natures and motivations often beyond human understanding. Angels were not precisely the same as human beings, but they were familiar to them. The best way to conceptualize this relationship is to say that for late ancient Christians, angels were in the same ontological circle as human beings. As I explain, an ontological circle is a shifting cultural construction that can comprise members of different species but one wherein all members possess the potential for real contact with
each other and thus for consequential communication, resulting in positive or negative outcomes. In the second part, I describe the consequences of the late ancient disposition of imagining angels as members of the same ontological circle as human beings. Although angels do illumine possibilities and limitations for humanity, they are far more than just tools “to think with,” as an oft-adopted scholarly phrase would have it. Instead, they occupy a place of potential and, as messengers, bring new ethical models to humanity. Knowledge of angels in late antiquity, and contact with them, produced and reproduced cultural forms that ultimately changed ways of being human in that they introduced new forms of moral life and religious devotion.

THE ONTOLOGICAL CIRCLE

In the fourth and fifth centuries, both Christian and non-Christian writers participated in a trend of philosophical thought that removed God, the highest divine being, from similarity with the material world and any beings associated with it. Whereas intellectuals influenced by Platonic traditions had long assumed a division between what was material and what was immaterial, and followed that assumption by locating the divine in the immaterial, late ancient thought experiments redefined the highest divinity as even more remote from the material world. For although many ancient ideas about the immateriality of the highest god included a corollary assumption about limited contact with the world, God appearing to a few select human beings in only a handful of situations, late ancient philosophers pushed the highest god out of the realm of incomprehensibility toward the truly alien. At the start of the fifth century, for example, the Christian writer Augustine argued that it was inaccurate to think that God, the highest divinity, had appeared to human beings in material form throughout history. For him, Christian writings, especially the Epistles of Paul the Apostle, described a single moment when God chose to interact with humanity in one particular form, by sending the incarnate Christ. The incarnation was so definitive for Augustine that he vacated centuries of Christian reading practice to declare that God, the highest god, had not appeared in the material realm before the birth of Jesus—this despite numerous descriptions of God interacting with humanity in the books Augustine held to be sacred scripture, especially the books of the Old Testament. Similarly, for the philosopher Proclus, active in the latter half of the fifth century, it was not just inaccurate but inadequate to think, as had previous philosophers, that the highest divinity could be described even as a separate being, a god who existed in the realm of the immaterial and who communicated with the world through words or ideas. Instead, the highest divinity was so far beyond the human capacity to understand that it was necessary for Proclus to make a concession to the limited nature of the human mind. He advised that those seeking to understand the highest god should...
conceive, as best a human being could, a One residing “beyond being” and thus beyond any contact with (however far removed from) the material realm, characterized by multiplicity, decline, and the lack of the Good. For both Augustine and Proclus, developments in the qualities by which they defined the divine world had pushed them to conclude that God was irretrievably separate, essentially unable to be in contact or communicate with the world, because of the dissonance existing between his unity and the world’s multiplicity. They both felt so strongly about the discontinuity between the nature of the highest god and the nature of the rest of existence that they self-consciously argued for the abrogation of the methods by which their own teachers and traditions had understood that god.

Yet neither man gave up the premise that there was some type of contact between the material world and the divine world. As the highest being was philosophically removed from communication with existence, angels were elevated to maintain the possibility of contact between the remainder of the divine world and humanity, and even to manage that contact. For Proclus, angels were necessarily lacking in evil, because they kept contact with the multiple gods below the One, interpreting and conveying knowledge of them to the order below. As he argued, “the class that is the interpreter of the gods stands in continuity with the gods, knows the intellect of the gods, and reveals the divine will.” That class “is nothing other than the good proceeding and shining forth first from the beings which remain inside the One.” At the same time, for Augustine, angels accomplished the visitations of God to the material world before the incarnation, executing their duties as a clerk would make announcements for a judge. Those angels have no will of their own and exist solely to enact the material appearances of the divine. In both cases, as the highest god was being written out of contact with humanity, neither writer abandoned the prospect that human beings could communicate with some part of the divine world. Consequently, their theories maintained that the quintessence of angels was that they were in contact with humanity.

Augustine and Proclus were heavy thinkers, developing philosophical theories of the divine, but even late ancient readers unengaged in philosophy had resources by which they could arrive at much the same conclusions about angels; the most accessible of these resources were the narratives that I discussed at the start of this chapter. Reading a narrative is an act of the imagination, which forces a reader to entertain the possibilities that the characters of the text are compatible enough to exist in the same space and perhaps to communicate. In this way, any act of reading is an instance of cultural training, porting its own philosophical and epistemological lessons, implicit though they may be. To understand how and what reading teaches, consider what a reader could learn from a simple dialogue. What follows is an exchange between Mary, the woman about to become the mother of Jesus, and Gabriel, an angel who comes to announce to her the events that will happen to her (Luke 1:28–38, New Revised Standard Version):
And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Though this story originated in the late first century, it was circulated and reimagined extensively in late antiquity, entering late ancient discourse, especially Christian discourse, again and again: in texts that situated it and other Christian stories from the New Testament gospels with respect to Jews and Jewish religious culture; in explorations of the Holy Spirit and its place in the Trinity; in homilies reflecting on the birth of Christ; in discussions about and advice to virgins; as a lens for interpreting older stories of announcement from the Old Testament; and, of course, in commentaries on the gospel of Luke itself. What does not immediately stand out but does come gradually to impose on the reader is the fact that Mary and Gabriel are engaged in a conversation. They exchange greetings; they size up each other’s responses; they respond to likely but unstated emotional responses of their interlocutor. They possess common communication skills; to verge toward the technical for a moment, those skills depend on the ability of each to hold a theory of mind for the other. Mary has a theory of mind for Gabriel, estimating that when she asks him about what seems an impossible situation he will comprehend and answer her question. But Gabriel also holds theory of mind for Mary, for as the story narrates, he sees her reaction to his appearance, understands what it means, and takes the initiative to reassure her: “Do not be afraid.” Though it was an extremely popular story in late antiquity, readers rarely subjected its characters to the same kinds of interpretive adjustments that, say, Augustine applied to appearances of God. Readers of the gospel of Luke—and there were many—engaged in worldmaking when they read the text, representing to themselves a realm in which productive, emotionally complex contact between human beings and angels was possible, even expected.

Angels in this realm of contact followed the logic of interaction with beings in the material world, even if they did not always follow the normal expectations for the human capacity for action in the material world. Though the angel comes to
Mary with miraculous news, he delivers it in a regular, if frightening, conversation, an exchange whose development nevertheless follows the rules of more normal conversation. Even in the miraculous stories that I recounted at the start of the chapter, angels do extraordinary things. They accomplish those things that human beings could be able to do were they only powerful enough: the monk could cross the river if only he were not hampered by his code of conduct; the monastic leader could have discovered the secrets of his monks were decorum not an issue. I mean to say that angels do not appear in late ancient texts in order to accomplish truly unimaginable acts or introduce truly novel situations. Their actions were surprising but not incomprehensible; their motivations were legible to others—both to the other characters in their own narrative contexts and to the readers who engaged these stories. Indeed, angels produce acts that meet expectations in most cases yet exceed or defy them in one or two aspects. As I mentioned above, this limited exceptionalism may signal to the skeptical reader nothing more than the convenience of angels as plot devices, but the consistent inclusion of angels in narrative in reality reinforces how truly normal angels are to late ancient readers in their abnormality. Perhaps the best indication of their normality is the consistent application of moral evaluation to angels: Proclus, Augustine, and other late ancient thinkers judged angels in moral terms, drawing a boundary between evil angels and good ones. By including them both in the logic of interaction and in the expectations of interaction that obtain among human beings, such intellectual projects signal that the nature of angels was understood to be quite close to that of humanity.

In certain instances, angels were not just close to humanity; they were expected to interact with human beings immediately, by voicing their words inside the minds of human beings. Magical texts often point to this expectation. For example, consider this spell for garnering a companion angel, which is preserved in a Greek magical papyrus. It ensured the person who executed the spell a guide and guaranteed that no observer could tell the difference between the beneficiary of the spell and the angel he had gotten to direct him:

When you go abroad, he will go abroad with you; when you are destitute, he will give you money. He will tell you what things will happen both when and at what time of the night or day. And if anyone asks you "What do I have in mind?" or "What has happened to me?" or even "What is going to happen?" question the angel, and he will tell you in silence. But you will speak to the one who questions you as if from yourself.

Identified as a “mighty angel,” this guide meant safety and financial security for the one who conjured it, but it also meant knowledge of the future, mind-reading abilities, and, perhaps best of all, no way for others to detect its presence. The conjurer would naturally seem to have the abilities that in reality were the result of the angel’s help. More important, although we may assume that an angel got by magic
would then assist with one or two discrete acts of more magic, it appears that this
is not the case with the “mighty angel” garnered by this spell. Instead, the intent of
the spell is to acquire, seemingly permanently, such a personal guide, seer of the
future, and internal helper as we all might want. Whether the spell was successful
or not is immaterial, because even simply reading the spell taught a reader that
angelic companions existed to be harnessed. And consulters of spells were only
one of many groups to hold this expectation; personal angelic companions were a
regular, if infrequent, topic in certain types of Christian literature. Evagrius of
Pontus, for instance, was part of a tradition that considered angels a normal part
of the program of ascetic advancement for monks. Angels were assets to those
attempting the difficult practices that Evagrius taught his students. In his treatise
On Prayer, Evagrius describes how an angel can, “with a single word, [put] an end
to every opposing activity within us.” Its presence “moves the light of the mind to
an unerring activity,” so that “the mind stands thereafter free of all turmoil, acedia,
and negligence.” Angels could communicate so closely as to incline the mind
toward certain dispositions and could meld with one’s desires in order to reveal all
the answers a human being could ever wish to know, from the motivations of oth-
ers to the events of the future.

These moments of communication between angelic and human subjectivities
signal a peculiar late ancient assumption, namely that the two species, though dif-
ferent, were psychologically similar. Evagrius’s theory of the deep compatibility
between the two is the most detailed and precise late ancient evidence for this
assumption: during his time as an ascetic, Evagrius elaborated a complex working
theory of the common psychological constitution of angels and of human beings—
and of demons, for that matter. All these were rational beings, having the faculty
of the intellect in common; what distinguished them from one another was the
peculiar mixture of other components; angels were predominantly composed of
intellect, whereas human beings were less so, yet their practices of fending away
the passions helped them cultivate their intellect. For Evagrius in particular,
angels were capable of immediate congress with the human mind because of their
sympathy to the human intellect, a faculty that they shared with humanity. Angels
could communicate directly with human beings and could even seem to speak
inside human minds, then, because they were of one kind with and continued to
share a basic nature with humanity.

Other writers were more cautious, positing a close similarity between angels
and humanity only in the distant past or the distant future. Christian thinkers who
narrated the origins of the cosmos often aimed to explain the contemporary state
of humanity, and their explanations often hinted at the latent potential within
humanity either to have been or to have become something else. Gregory of Nys-
sa’s treatise On the Making of Humanity, written in the late 370s C.E., argued that
God originally intended human beings to participate in a rational existence like

<i>Late Ancient Knowing: Explorations in Intellectual History</i>, edited by Catherine M. Chin, and Mouli Vidas,
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the one that angels enjoyed. It was only after humanity’s disobedience became evident that human beings were changed and given passions that overrode their originally rational nature. According to Gregory, at the resurrection humanity would return to unity with the angels and with God.16 Whereas this version of the beginning of the world suggested that the actions of humanity had precipitated the different statuses of angels and of human beings, still other explanations located the cause in the actions of angels. In contrast to Gregory, Augustine of Hippo suggested that angels had received their status, different from humanity both morally and ontologically, as a result of the choices that they exercised at the start of the world. Angels were currently stable in their essence and their will, never departing from the will of God, but this was a result only of their having not abandoned God when other angels did. That is to say, angels acquired their status only because of the choices they exercised, or rather did not exercise, at the beginning of time.17 Although Gregory and Augustine gave different reasons for the contemporary division that they posited between the nature of angels and the nature of humanity, they shared an understanding that there was a moment in the archaic past when angels and humanity were essentially similar. Put a different way: many late ancient people, whether Christians or non-Christians, philosophers or lay readers, assumed that angels were in a certain sense kin to humanity. I mean not that ancient people included angels in their tightly conceived kinship structures but that they recognized angels as related familiars. Either human beings and angels continued to be in a close relationship, possessing psychologies similar enough to each other to work in concert to advance toward unity with God, or they were at some other point in history close, until their actions separated them and made them distinct in essence in the present.

ANGELS, HUMANITY, AND THE ETHICAL PRODUCT OF KNOWING

The observations that I have made in the previous section about angelic communication with humanity, and the diverse ways that late ancient Christian thinkers imagined congruity with angels, translate in reality to a more precise theoretical observation. Together they suggest that in a wide range of late ancient Christian discourses angels and human beings were known to occupy the same ontological circle. By “ontological circle” I refer to a cultural construction that comprises all beings whose constitutions, as defined by the culture they inhabit, are alike enough to allow communication among them. The members of such a circle are independent of one another; they can all exercise agency to some degree. Furthermore, members of the same ontological circle are not necessarily members of the same species as categorized by the culture in which they take shape. The combination of differences among members and their similarities allows for productive, even
unpredictable, interactions. Indeed, the beings in any given ontological circle have real contact with one another; that is to say, the circle is not the precipitate of a thought experiment but is the set of implicit or explicit assumptions in a culture about the types of interaction possible among beings in the world.

The parameters of an ontological circle are constructed and thus vary from one cultural context to another. In the contemporary North American context, some animals share the ontological circle with human beings, particularly domestic animals. The theorist Donna Haraway has written extensively about the relationship between humanity and multiple “companion species,” operating on the assumption that human beings are accompanied by, even constituted with, any number of other organisms, as are all other types of life. Haraway is one important early voice in a wider contemporary turn among scholars toward investigating animal-human relationships as imagined in the products and processes of different cultures. Yet there are several other configurations of the ontological circle to be explored; that is to say, human beings have often been paired with animals in an ontological circle—Beth Berkowitz’s chapter in this volume is an excellent illustration of the complex negotiations that such pairings can inspire—and yet other cultural contexts have included other types of nonanimal agents among the actors in the ontological circle: agents who were immaterial, or artificial, or alien. In all these cases, what is common is this: existing as members of the same circle with other beings holds the promise of transformation, the potential of surpassing the capacity of any individual member or even kind, as well as the threat of unforeseen consequences of interaction. As a logical result, part of a culture’s construction of its circle is the development of rules about how to manage contact among members, especially members otherwise thought to be of different kinds. The exchange between members is therefore often culturally regulated in an intense way, to the point that the transfer of certain kinds of information among members—a natural eventuality of the communication common to members of the same circle—and even physical contact, especially sexual contact, are problematized. Indeed, the persistence of explicit rules about contact with other beings in a culture can often signal the implicit assumption of an ontological circle, in that such rules necessarily imagine both that the contact is possible and that such contact is not under the full control of the human member. Insistent talk about other species, especially about the types of contact that are taboo, is as much a negative marker of the existence of an assumed ontological circle as the positing of the possibility of communication is a positive one. In late antiquity, for example, tales about angels and their interaction with humanity warned about the corruptive potential of the knowledge that they shared and the moral consequences of sexual contact with them. Those specific late ancient contexts in which angels were assumed to be likely to come into contact with human beings were often flush with instructions about how to deal with angelic visitors. The resulting structures harnessed
the power of interactions, now guarded, among members. For late ancient people, meaningful contact with angels was unpredictable in its outcomes yet often productive, resulting in new cultural forms. Understanding that angels existed in the same ontological circle as human beings in much of late ancient culture allows us to understand the transformative potential latent in the contact between them.

When taken as members of the same ontological circle as human beings, angels introduce their own capacities into the field of potential from which all in the circle may draw. For instance, in the stories that I shared at the start of this chapter, angels accomplished miraculous things, creating situations and results that had remained out of the reach of the human actors in their midst. Yet the promise of sharing the ontological circle with angels extended further, bearing the suggestion that some aspects of angelic existence could also obtain for others in the circle. We know, for example, that late ancient Christians assumed that angels had an extensive capacity for vision, one that outstripped the human faculty of sight. They were capable of seeing other divine beings, which human beings could not see.21 Given how closely angels and humanity were held to be related, it is not surprising that this widespread assumption about angelic vision led to deliberate exploration of what such sensibilities meant for humanity. A collection of homilies from late ancient Syria, now identified with the single author Pseudo-Macarius, explored the latent potential of angelic visual acuity. For this homilist, Ezekiel’s vision of the special angels known as cherubim was the fodder for an entire discussion of the nature of angels, which was completely visual: angels were “entirely eye,” or “entirely vision.” He urged readers to understand this fact not just as a distinctive feature of the angelic class but as a trace that pointed toward a real transformation available also to them. Speaking directly to the most advanced religious practitioners, he explained: “When you become a throne of God and the heavenly charioteer has mounted you, and your whole soul has become a spiritual eye, . . . then you too are a living being.”22 The constitution of human beings was close enough to angels’ that human beings might become like them, gaining the sensibilities that angels already possessed. Being part of the same ontological circle as angels, then, allowed writers like Pseudo-Macarius to imagine how they might extend normal human faculties to develop in new, unpredicted ways. The expansion of human possibilities—in this case, of vision, or of developing the intellect, or of someday returning to the unity of rational thought that God originally designed—all these are possible only if humanity is ontologically contiguous with angels, in contact with them. We need to be meaningfully like those other beings that we interact with for the promise of angelic transformation to be real.

While contiguity among members is the foundation of ideas that expand the potential of members of the same ontological circle, at the same time it means that actions taken among the members have consequences. Being part of an ontological circle means being exposed to the ideas and influences of the other members.
As I have mentioned, the possibilities that such a state brings are also paired with dangers; those dangers exist because the mores and motivations of the others in one's ontological circle are not always well known. As nonhuman beings, angels work by their own unpredictable processes. On the one hand, this is just a logical observation: if angels worked and acted like human beings, they would be human beings. But on the other, there is evidence from antiquity to prove that ignorance of the nature of angels was an assumption commonly voiced in late ancient discourse—that it was historically a part of late ancient knowledge of angels. For each late ancient thinker who tried to describe angelic vision, angelic appearances, angelic creation, or angelic morality, there was another who simply threw up his hands and admitted ignorance with respect to angels, their abilities, and their motivations.23

Even that ignorance, though, was culturally productive. If I am right that Christians considered themselves part of the same ontological circle as angels, and if they regularly reflected on how much they did not know about angels, then late ancient Christian culture as a whole entertained two seemingly opposite ideas: that angels were like human beings and that angels could act in ways and produce things radically different from how humans acted and what humans could produce. Let me put this point in visual terms by describing the ontological circle for a moment as a physical shape in which all members stand side by side. Ignorance about angels and their abilities created a perspective in which the Christian stood in an exceptionally large ontological circle with other beings, yet the complete contours of that circle, especially the distant place where the curves of the circle joined to form the whole, were hidden from him. In theory, the circle is complete, but in practice much of it exists over the horizon, hidden from view, so that the effect is not so much a circle of known beings but an open-ended curve in which some members can be imagined but must necessarily remain unknown in their basic essence.24 I speculate that this quality underlies the intensity that infuses talk of communication among members of the circle—it is at once exhilarating and frightening to think oneself part of a group some of whose members are partly or entirely obscure in their existence and essence. Simply thinking of different kinds of beings with whom one may interact lacks the charge that characterizes descriptions in late antique literature of meetings between angels and human beings. Knowing as late ancient people did that there are beings like you whose nature remains mysterious, truly incomprehensible, is transformative in a way that no thought experiment could ever be.

The proof of my claim lies with the evidence from late antiquity detailing the role of angels as messengers. The Greek word *angelos* meant “messenger,” and many angelic visitors to humanity were understood to be passing information. Gabriel, for example, when he appeared to Mary, was there to inform her; his visit did not induce or change her situation. In some parts of late ancient
culture, this function of angels dominated. Late ancient Christians in particular began to write about angels as permanent channels of illumination and knowledge, tethering the divine world to the material through a series of interlocking levels of existence, each capable of being in contact only with the levels adjacent to it. In figurations like that created in Pseudo-Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy*, angels were ordered by their closeness to God and vesseled knowledge in sequence among themselves, from highest to lowest, and from the lowest angel to the most advanced human beings. Understanding angels as divine messengers in this way, messengers that can filter and channel information from two discontinuous realms, has extensive practical and cultural ramifications.

As late antiquity progressed, however, the most significant purpose of angelic visits shifted from conveying information to impelling human beings to write new narratives. Two examples from late ancient monastic culture illustrate the change. Sometime in the fourth century, a man named Pachomius received a text from an angel, along with a set of instructions:

One time when he was sitting in his cave an angel appeared to him and told him: "So far as you are concerned, you conduct your life perfectly. It is in vain for you to continue sitting in your cave! Come now, leave this place, and go out, and call the young monks together, and dwell with them. Rule them by the model that I am now giving you." And the angel gave him a bronze tablet on which [the following rule] was engraved.

The angel gave Pachomius a message, but he also insisted that Pachomius begin to institute a community governed both by his authority and by the authority of the rule granted to him. According to this text, the beginning of the Pachomian federation, a large but loose association of monastic communities, can be traced to a prodding angel whose delivery of a communiqué was both direct and directive. Pachomius's experience was repeated: There is evidence that Shenoute of Atripe, the leader of the White Monastery, also received instruction from an angel to write a rule and to gather monks. The document in which Shenoute meets his messenger is badly damaged, but it appears to have an angel speaking directly to Shenoute, saying, "Write! Write!" And write Shenoute did—his collected works reveal the intimate details of the community that he founded, both through rules that he instituted proscribing behavior and through accounts of punishments that he ordained. Both Pachomius and Shenoute headed monasteries or federations of monasteries that were remarkably large in their late ancient contexts, with populations in the thousands. Beyond their absolute numbers, though, the communities that these men founded bore quite an influence on subsequent expressions of Christian monasticism. The monastic systems that these men created changed the landscape of Upper Egypt, remaking the world in which the men and women who joined their federations lived and the villages that supported their communities.
That is to say, angels not only came with messages but in these cases inspired the composition of new texts; and with those new texts, often elaborate, came the creation of entire ethical systems, new habitats in which new human endeavors could flourish.

One more example will make plain the transformative potential of this way of envisioning interaction between angels and human beings. It is difficult to think of a late ancient event with larger cultural consequences than the meeting of the angel Jibril with Muhammad. Jibril, the faithful spirit, pressed Muhammad to recite messages that he had been receiving; Muhammad began to recite and in so doing began the project of revealing the Qur’an to humanity. This account appears in some forms in the Qur’an itself, in other forms in the hadith collections, those accumulated traditions reported about Muhammad by his close companions. In the Qur’an, a discussion of the prophet’s authority in Surah 6 makes it clear that the revelation of the Qur’an was not simply a matter of Jibril’s delivering a previously composed message from God. Rather, it was a collaboration between the angel and the human being. Muhammad was a necessary actor in the Qur’an’s inception: a piece of paper conveying the details of God’s will or an angel speaking them would not have worked. The result of the collaboration between Jibril and Muhammad was, like the Rules of Pachomius and the Canons of Shenoute, adopted by an early community of believers as an important document, one that held open a new way of being, something unprecedented and thus requiring careful preservation. That is because the Qur’an, like the Rules of Pachomius and the Canons of Shenoute, lent itself as a divine scaffold for the enactment of a creative discourse of instructions for living. All these angelic products were ethical documents that encouraged the formation and continuation of ethical communities, in turn anchored in the authority of their message. This is my observation—that the presence of angels in the ontological circle of human beings creates new, unpredicted, and pluripotent options for living for all who are in the circle.

Yet it seems that at least some late ancient people reached the same conclusion. Let me close by citing a story that circulated about Muhammad and his understanding of his experience with the angel. Among the ahadith collected in the ninth century by the Iranian scholar Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj is a vignette about a second visit by Jibril, this time to a group of people. Muhammad and several friends were approached by a man in white clothing and with raven hair—a stranger, whom none of them recognized, yet whose body and appearance showed none of the usual wear and tear to indicate that he was a traveler. Familiar yet alien, he quizzed the prophet about several topics: about submission, about faith, about beauty, about judgment. Muhammad patiently and piously answered his questions. The questioner left, and after a while Muhammad asked his close friend Umar: “Do you know who that was?” Umar demurred, and Muhammad said: “That was Jibril. He came to teach you your religion.” This story, the hadith of Jibril, is often presented...
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in pious Islamic sources as the only hadith that one needs to know. It tells us what we need to know about how angels were conceived of in late antiquity and about the deep effects of their being considered to exist in the same ontological circle as human beings. Whereas in the narrative setting of the first century Gabriel appeared to Mary to deliver a bit of news and to prepare her for her experiences, Jibril, understood within the parameters of late ancient knowledge about angels, came to Muhammad to force him to recite a new plan for humanity. Their work together was at once conservative, recalling humanity to an original message from God, and creative at the same time, in that it gave voice to a new cultural form in which human beings could exist and could relate to the divine.

NOTES


4. The text of Zostrianos, bound together with the Letter of Peter to Philip in Nag Hammadi Codex VIII, was alluded to by Plotinus in his work Against the Gnostics (Enneads 3.8, 5.8, 5.5, and 2.9); thus it was known among both philosophers and whatever Christians hid the Nag Hammadi cache.

5. There are a few exceptions: Proclus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Augustine, who will all be discussed below.

6. Isaiah 6 is one exception; Pseudo-Dionysius’s Celestial Hierarchy seems another, but as we will see, that text is as much about humanity as it is about angels.

7. Proclus, Platonic Theology, proposition 138.


11. Cognitive studies of religion have long observed the way that most divine beings fulfill the grand majority of expectations that we hold for human behavior, with one or two


13. For a longer discussion, see “Angels as Equipment for Living: The Companion Angel Tradition in Evagrian Christianity,” in my *Angels* (above, n. 3), 89–118.


17. Augustine, *Enchiridion* 9, summarizes his view of how angels came to enjoy their special status.


19. For an introduction to the force of animal studies in the humanistic disciplines, see Cary Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human: ‘Animal Studies’ and the Humanities,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 124 (2009): 564–75. A large portion of the issue in which this article appears is dedicated to work in animal studies in a wide range of cultural and theoretical contexts. See also Posthumanities, the monograph series that Wolfe edits with the University of Minnesota Press.


21. See, for example, Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 2.13, in which he explains that higher divinities can see what lower divinities cannot.


23. I offer a theory about this ignorance in the conclusion to my *Angels* (above, n. 3), 203–14.


25. Palladius, *Lausiac History* 32 (trans. Meyer, *Lausiac History* [above, n. 1], 92, slightly modified); cf. Gennadius, *De Viris Illustribus* 7, which does not speak of tablets but still has Pachomius producing the rule under the guidance of an angel.

27. For an estimate of their size, see Ewa Wipszycza, Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte (IVe–VIIIe siècles), Journal of Juristic Papyrology, Supplement 11 (Warsaw: Journal of Juristic Papyrology, 2009), 419–29.


