

Book Review

Dr. Kenneth M. Gardoski

Associate Professor of Systematic Theology
Baptist Bible Seminary
Clarks Summit, Pa.

Angels of Glory and Darkness. John Woolmer. Oxford, U.K. & Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2006.

“Nowadays,” notes Woolmer, “angels are either dismissed as part of a belief system that is no longer sustainable or welcomed, uncritically, as the gateway to an exciting spiritual world” (9). Rejecting both extremes, Woolmer defends the existence of angels and warns against “seeking spirit guides and other psychic phenomena, which pretend to lead people to God [but] ensnare them in false spiritual self-fulfilment” (10).

Angels of Glory and Darkness is comprised almost exclusively of anecdotal accounts of angelic encounters; those looking for a biblical treatment of angels will be disappointed. Woolmer does provide biblical material in another book (*Angels*, Thinking Clearly Series [London: Monarch Books, 2003]), but the anecdotal material is the same.

Woolmer judges angel stories by a twofold process. First, he looks for simple solutions; thus, “it is simplest to accept [these accounts] at face value and to believe that God did send an angel” (9). He accepts a person’s word if the person seems to be a reliable witness. Interestingly, Woolmer himself has never seen an angel (212). Second, he examines the fruit of angelic encounters: if they glorify Jesus (170) and help people (strengthen their faith, lead them to Jesus, or inspire them to help others) then he accepts them as genuine (25, 153–54, 215–16).

Woolmer accepts God’s sovereign right over our lives. God chooses when to deliver, protect, or heal, and when to allow pain and suffering in our lives. When tragedy strikes, we must accept it as part of God’s sovereign plan. We must “respond in faith believing in God’s providential protection *and accept that accidents, persecutions and tragedies are also part of the world in which we live*” (89–90, emphasis original).

Woolmer rightly warns against deceiving psychic experiences which are not from God. He discusses several contemporary books and accounts that encourage the pursuit of spirit guides and psychic gifts, and promote such unbiblical ideas as reincarnation and knowing when Christ will return. These things discerning believers must shun.

But Woolmer’s book troubles me. I know that this is a book of anecdotes, and that his other book demonstrates his care for Scripture, but he seems to give priority to stories over Scripture. He claims that if he can believe stories of contemporary angel sightings, then he can “more easily believe” the angelic appearances of Scripture (66; cf. 217). This is backwards. We should not need angelic visitations today in order to believe those recorded in the Bible.

Related to this, although Woolmer claims we cannot build a theology from anecdotes (150), he does just that. The book is full of “truths” not from Scripture but stories. Here are some examples: the “prickling and pressing” sensation of the Holy Spirit (22); angels made of a “fluid,” “metallic substance” (32); the “wonderful aroma” of angels (43); feeling the brush of angels wings like feathers (46); children being particularly aware of angels (68, 79); “incubus” spirits (176); exorcising buildings with holy water (192); and praying for the troubled dead to be at peace (193–96). Woolmer criticizes people who claim to receive new revelation from God (174), yet fills his book with asserted truths allegedly revealed through angelic encounters.

Finally, Woolmer seems to blame evil spirits and not mankind for all the woes of our world. While acknowledging that we live in a fallen world (206), he asserts that evil spirits are the reason for the mess we are in (178), and that without them “the cross becomes an unnecessary tragedy” (203). It is true that Satan was behind the fall; however, our fallen world suffers because of man’s sin and the curse that resulted, and the cross has great value for the redemption of fallen man even apart from the consideration of evil spirits.

While the stories in this book are intriguing, I remain skeptical. Woolmer displays too great a willingness to accept as true that which does not accord with Scripture. I do not doubt the existence and ministry of angels today, but I do not need so-called angelic encounters to convince me. We have the Scriptures; let us hear them (Luke 16:29).