Five Impossible Things to Believe Before Christmas

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Alice and the Queen

‘Oh, don’t go on like that!’ cried the poor Queen, wringing her hands in despair. ‘Consider what a great girl you are. Consider what a long way you’ve come to-day. Consider what o’clock it is. Consider anything, only don’t cry!’

Alice could not help laughing at this, even in the midst of her tears. ‘Can you keep from crying by considering things?’ she asked.

‘That’s the way it’s done,’ the Queen said with great decision: ‘nobody can do two things at once, you know. Let’s consider your age to begin with—how old are you?’

‘I’m seven and a half exactly.’

‘You needn’t say “exactly,”’ the Queen remarked: ‘I can believe it without that. Now I’ll give you something to believe. I’m just one hundred and one, five months and a day.’

‘I can’t believe that!’ said Alice.

‘Can’t you?’ the Queen said in a pitying tone. ‘Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.’

Alice laughed. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she said: ‘one can’t believe impossible things.’

‘I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed in as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’

FROM THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS BY LEWIS CARROLL (1871)
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I have a friend who hates Christmas. It is probably because of an amalgam of experiences: the rampant commercialism, things that once went wrong in his life at that time of year, the general bonhomie which runs so counter to his inner Ebenezer Scrooge, even the fact that a number of times as an actor he has had to resort to donning padding, a red suit and a white beard to get some income. Whatever the reasons, it sticks in his craw.

He has a range of defences to deal with his dissatisfaction brought on by the season-to-be-jolly: alcohol, a heightened sense of frustration and dissonance with his fellow human beings, obsession with non-seasonal features, a black Santa’s helper’s hat emblazoned with ‘Bah! Humbug!’ but mostly the repeated expression of the opinion that it is all being done only because it is expected of us.

This was all fine until one year he found himself playing (and loving it) an Ugly Sister in a pantomime. As an adjunct to the fright make-up, the singing and dancing, the calls of ‘It’s behind you!’ and the perennial banter of ‘Oh, yes it is!’ and ‘Oh, no it’s not!’, he was required to do a party piece at a side function. It was then he found the perfect revenge.

He told a story he was given by a friend who knew his take on Yuletide. It is a presentation about how Santa Claus could not possibly exist. It draws on what some call a scientific view. It quotes physics and uses mathematics. It goes something like this: Santa has 31 hours to do his work among two billion children, of whom at least some are presumed to have been good in the preceding twelve months and therefore worthy of a visit. The gravitational factors of the world, combined with the speed needed to carry out the tasks on a vehicle weighed down by presents, towed by hitherto earthbound
animals, culminate in a fireball of energy that leads to the destruction of sleigh, reindeer and the fat man himself. Conclusion? If Santa ever did try to deliver presents, he is dead now.

The story does its work well. It addresses the nonsense of believing in impossible things—and there is no shortage of them around Christmas. It is hard to know where to start. Just look at the number of people who take their children off on package holidays to Lapland to see snow, reindeer and the old man in red with a white beard.

Such enticements invite competition. There is even a company based in Kent that offers, according to a billboard on London Bridge station, a ‘traditional visit to the mystical home of Father Christmas’ as part of its experience for the whole family. (Attempts to do something similar in other parts of Britain were not so successful.) It claims to provide a four-hour child-centred event: it starts with a wax-sealed invitation from Santa himself; it includes an apprenticeship with the elves in the old man’s toy factory, a hot lunch and a chance to assist in the decoration of a gingerbread house; you can see huskies and real reindeer; it culminates in a ‘personal audience’ with Father Christmas in his snowy woodland home. All this happens in the garden of England. This, we are assured on the company’s website, will fill people with awe and wonder. One selling point is ethical tourism. Potential punters are informed that a family’s carbon footprint in a car trip to Lapland in the United Kingdom is substantially less than that of a journey made by aeroplane.

I have another friend who, for reasons beyond my comprehension, packed a Santa suit into his luggage for a Christmas holiday in Cuba. He got dressed up in the suit and went down to the dining room for Christmas lunch in the hotel where he was staying. People, not surprisingly, reacted with surprise and amusement. He went from table to table asking if the people in the restaurant had been good. He made a particular fuss of any children in the room, who, it seemed, were most appreciative of the gesture. He later described it to me as ‘one the best things I have ever done’! This may be an extreme case but people do indulge in some crazed activities beyond stocking up with more food and drink than is really necessary for one day’s
consumption. For instance, how many people—even good, Christian people—feed their children stories about Father Christmas coming down the chimney at night and delivering presents or indulge in the subterfuge of half-eaten carrots and mince pies? Even within my own family there was an expectation of reindeer excrement—though who was qualified to recognise it was beyond me—in the driveway outside the house.

The Church regularly tries to check some of this craziness. It speaks of the ‘true meaning of Christmas’ and then it plays host to a series of relatively respectable debaucheries: the terminally saccharine nativity plays by tea-towel-headed children and tinsel-lated angels, numerous carol services before the event, the seemingly ubiquitous mulled wine and mince pies. There is one church in the City of London that begins a round of carol services—sometimes up to three a day—in the last week of November. This is a well-intentioned result of double-minded thinking which tries to reach out to people with a gospel message while they are thinking about Christmas. Yet it is also arguably an admission of failure. It is an open acknowledgment of the infectious idea that Advent, rather than Christmas, is the season to celebrate. It also acknowledges the sad reality that by Christmas Day itself the world, unlike the Church, has moved on. Christians start when others seem to have finished—and they don’t like it.

Advent was meant to be a time of sober reflection before the wonder of Christmas. It was a sort of Lent to balance the joy that is unleashed when the faithful gather to celebrate not only that God is good, but that the good and all-powerful God was prepared to become a helpless baby. The Almighty was prepared to become so at one with creation that he joined the ranks of humankind.

For many people it is hard to discern which is the more delusional: the midwinter festival of food, drink and fun or the claims of Christianity. They all have elements of what could be considered the impossible. This book seeks to unravel five impossible things that lead to Christmas. It does this by looking at elements of the pre-Christmas and Christmas stories in the Bible and it tries to relate
them to the world we live in—a world too often looking for thrill and distraction.

This book is an attempt both to provide and to avoid diversions. It seeks to engage with much of what might be considered bizarre to people today: angels, upsetting the social apple cart, accepting life-changing interruptions, a link between heaven and earth, and our ability to recognise all of this. It may not convince anybody. But there is a possibility that it could lead us somewhere different, allowing us to look at Christmas, if not in a new way, at least in a slightly adjusted one.
~ Chapter One ~

The wings of an angel

In the pot pourri of literature we call the Bible, where history rubs shoulders with poetry, prophecy with genealogy, story with theology, there are many surprises. Anyone can point to a long list of seemingly impossible events. A personal favourite of mine involves a man, fleeing a task given him by no less a being than God, who hurts his foot when the animal on which he is riding scrapes him against a wall. Fury has no bounds, and the man starts beats his beast of burden.

Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, ‘What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?’ Balaam said to the donkey, ‘Because you have made a fool of me! I wish I had a sword in my hand! I would kill you right now!’ But the donkey said to Balaam, ‘Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you this way?’ And he said, ‘No.’ (Numbers 22:28–30)

This exchange, not surprisingly, pulls Balaam up, but not in the way you would expect. The incident of Balaam and what many call his ass contains more than a modicum of the unbelievable. For a start, Balaam shows absolutely no surprise when the animal begins to talk. Shock or speechlessness would seem to be the appropriate response to this extraordinary occurrence. Yet Balaam simply proceeds to discuss the issue with the donkey. At the end of this interchange Balaam’s eyes are opened to the cause of his mount’s seeming disloyalty: ‘Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in
his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face’ (v. 31).

The angel then explains to Balaam the reasons behind the donkey’s actions. He tells Balaam how he intended to take Balaam’s life, what he had done to achieve his intention and how the beast of burden had intervened to save him. The incident in Numbers has many bizarre elements, the two foremost being a talking donkey and an angel.

A donkey features in the surrounding mythology, rather than the biblical texts, of many of the stories involving the baby Jesus: Mary’s journey to her cousin Elizabeth’s house (Luke 1:31–45), the trip to Bethlehem for the census (Luke 2:1–4) and the flight into Egypt (Matthew 2:13–15). As the donkey is not actually mentioned in the Bible, we miss the opportunity to be amazed if and when the animal speaks. There remain, however, a number of incidents in which an angel figures.

Angels are enticing figures, which still have popular appeal. They are alternatively dismissed as impossibilities or heralded as the basis for some of the more weird and wonderful phenomena that parade under the title of ‘spirituality’. A search of the Internet bookseller Amazon produces almost 193,000 titles. Not all of these, of course, pertain to the existence of extraterrestrial visitors. A more detailed search leads to the alluring, the allegorical and the laughable. In short, angels are interesting. They sell.

Why shouldn’t they? They have so much to offer. One book puts forward the wonderful theory that violence—not global violence but personal, potentially harmful, incidents—can be avoided by establishing a four-way conversation. It goes something like this: you encounter a mugger who looks ready to biff you on the nose; you decide to speak to your guardian angel about the matter (angels, in case you did not know, are opposed to violence); your guardian angel has words with the mugger’s guardian angel; the aforementioned aversion to violence results in the other angel counselling his charge against his intended assault. The end result is that you are spared a beating. Truly, I am not making this up. It comes from a reader’s review that was posted for a book on Amazon.
When I was at school, we had on the wall of a classroom a large picture of two impossibly cute children playing in a field. They did not appear to be in too risky a situation: I seem to recall that they were almost gambolling in the near-perfect countryside. But the message was clear: their welfare was well and truly looked after. There was an angel, sculptured wings streaming in the background, reaching out his (it was definitely ‘his’) arms to protect the children from danger. There were a number of variations on this theme, one involving three children in a boat, another with a small boy and girl walking on stones across a brook overseen by an unmistakably female angel. In each of these variations the general well-being of the youngsters was not assured by their actions, whether reckless or foolhardy. They teetered on the edge of accident or disaster. Only the presence of the protective winged bodyguard let us know that all would be well.

There is something deeply appealing about having a personal angelic minder. It can provide a firm foundation for confidence. Confidence does, however, have to rest on a proper relationship between the one being overseen and the person looking out for his charge. I recall, as a boy, sitting in the same room where the picture oversaw the classroom, moving my buttocks to one side of my seat. A teacher asked me what I was doing. She seemed bemused and appreciative of my answer when I told her I was making room for my guardian angel so that he could sit down. I was concerned that mine and those of the other children, not to mention the staff’s, seemed to be on the go and on their feet all the time. I wanted my angel, at least, to have a rest.

Other considerations about this classroom image came with time. The first was a matter of logic: if each of us had a guardian angel, why was there only one on duty in the picture with two or three children? The second was conceptual: how was it that angels always had such a recognisable form, one that was relatively consistent? It took some time to understand that this was a popular cipher with very little basis, especially in scripture.

The first mention of angels in the Bible provides more detail of their weaponry than their appearance. After the first man and woman in
the garden had breached the order not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, ‘the Lord... drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life’ (Genesis 3:23–24).

It is probably worth noting at this point that, for all the claims that angels are genderless, the Bible always uses the male pronoun when it refers to one of their number. We are also led to believe that recognising angels is not that difficult. In the first of many appearances revolving around the fertility of women who are believed to be barren, Manoah’s wife tells him, ‘A man of God came to me, and his appearance was that of an angel of God, most awe-inspiring; I did not ask him where he came from, and he did not tell me his name’ (Judges 13:6).

Despite the lack of information, she seemed to have no trouble in recognising this being as an angel. Unfortunately, the passage provides readers with little to prepare themselves should an angel appear to them. Manoah’s wife could identify him but she does not pass on any pointers.

A similar problem is swept aside by King Nebuchadnezzar, who was tricked into placing three young men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in a situation that was punishable by burning them to death. Despite the furnace being charged to seven times its normal heat, the king is amazed when he looks in: ‘But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a god’ (Daniel 3:25). The king comes to recognise that he has made an error of identification and that the fourth figure is not a god. He goes on to declare confidently, ‘Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him’ (v. 28).

A similar scheme is hatched by those around King Darius, the presidents and wonderfully named satraps, aimed at catching out the three young men’s associate, Daniel. Daniel is seen to pray in contravention of an ordinance and interdict which, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, cannot be overturned. A breach of the rule that no one should pray to anything or anybody other than
the king is to result in a mauling by lions. Daniel prays as normal, is seen and, as punishment, is put into the den of lions. He emerges unharmed and informs the king, ‘My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong’ (6:22). It is worth noting that both royal personages exacted a bloody retribution on those who had accused Daniel and his three companions.

For all this, we are none the wiser as to how to recognise an angel. Although they are not named as such, one of the few descriptions of angels in the Bible is of the ‘living creatures’ that feature in the first chapter of Ezekiel.

This was their appearance: they were of human form. Each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another; each of them moved straight ahead, without turning as they moved. As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. (Ezekiel 1:5–11)

It would be hard to argue this description of a ‘human form’ in an introduction to anatomy. It is, however, a key description inasmuch as wings are mentioned. It is odd, given that most angelic visitors in the Bible are recognisably human and are not physically described, that the wings have become the key visual code to their identification.

There are many extra-biblical reports of angels. They vary widely, in much the same way that descriptions of flying saucers or UFOs do. The outward form ultimately is secondary to a greater message: there is life beyond Earth and intelligence is not limited to humankind.

If we cannot find a ready guide to the appearance of angels, we
need to look at what they do. Their tasks can be various, as we can read in scripture. Here are just some of the incidents in which they are involved:

- Implementing an edict or the wrath of God—for example, in preventing Adam and Eve from returning to the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24).
- Leading the people of Israel from slavery (Exodus 14:19).
- Being armed with a sword to deal with the wayward Balaam (Numbers 22:23–31).
- Getting embroiled in heavenly battles (Revelation 12:7–9).
- Extending membership of the Church beyond recognisable practising Jewish people (Acts 10).
- Assisting in the escape or release from prison of a persecuted Christian (Acts 12:7–10).

Despite the range of their tasks, there is a consistency in their work. Biblical angels, very different from some of the bizarre mythology built up around their counterparts from other sources, have a direct link with God. More often than not, they are intermediaries, messengers of the Almighty. Supernatural they may be but, like all creatures, they have their being and reason in the Godhead. They do not exist in a realm of their own, a kind of parallel angelic universe. It is certainly this aspect— their being involved in actions through which God’s purpose can be discerned—that makes them prominent in the New Testament stories leading up to the birth of Jesus.

The longest coherent narrative involving an angel in scripture is in the book of Tobit in the Apocrypha of the Old Testament. (The Apocrypha consists of texts that were not included in the official biblical canon by Protestant reformers.) The writing begins in the first person, with Tobit himself providing information: he regularly ventures to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice in the temple; he is generous in almsgiving to the poor, widowed and orphaned; he buries the dead after warfare (Tobit 1). Despite all this, he is the victim of catastrophe. Having buried the corpse of a murdered man and having chosen to
sleep outdoors one night, bird droppings fall on to his eyes, with disastrous consequences: ‘I went to physicians to be healed, but the more they treated me with ointments the more my vision was obscured by the white films, until I became completely blind’ (2:10).

At the end of the third chapter there is a change. The story begins to be written in the third person. Tobias, the son of Tobit and his wife Anna, is commissioned to call in an investment made by Tobit some time before. Tobit gives a Polonius-like list of good advice (ch. 4) before telling his son to find someone reliable to help him achieve his offices (5:3).

It is at this point that the angel Raphael enters the story. The angel and Tobias, accompanied by a dog, set out. An extraordinary incident occurs by the River Tigris: a fish tries to swallow Tobias’ foot. Raphael urges him to seize the fish, cut it up, set aside and keep some of its internal organs (which become important for plot purposes later) and then eat what is left (Tobit 6:2–5).

The angel brings a new element into the journey, reminding Tobias that his father has recommended that, in addition to recovering his money, he should seek a wife from among Tobit’s kinsfolk. His suggestion is an intriguing one. Sarah, the daughter of Raguel, has suffered from an appalling run of bad luck. Seven men have been married to her but each has died before making it to the bridal bed (3:7–8). Tobias is understandably wary. He addresses Raphael by the name Azariah, who in turn advises the young man on how to use the efficacious organs of the fish. By placing the liver and heart in with the incense in the bridal chamber, pausing to praise God, Tobias achieves what none of Sarah’s previous seven grooms had done: he does not die and goes on to bed with his new wife (ch. 8).

Raphael not only oversees the withdrawal of Tobit’s deposit but, through the marriage of Sarah and Tobias, secures a substantial dowry: ‘So Raguel promptly gave Tobias his wife Sarah, as well as half of all his property; male and female slaves, oxen and sheep, donkeys and camels, clothing, money and household goods’ (10:10).

The successful conclusion of all these worldly affairs is, of course, a mark of God’s blessing. A journey is made safely, a marriage is
entered into, material prosperity is assured and physical health, in the form of sight, is restored (12:3). In recognition of Raphael/Azariah’s role in all this, Tobit agrees with his son’s suggestion that he should pay him, to the tune of half of what has been brought back from the trip. At this point Raphael gives spiritual and religious advice: praise God; let the world know of the blessings on them; pray with sincerity; give alms (12:6).

Then comes a stunning revelation. Raphael divulges that it was he who took the prayers of Tobit and Sarah to God. He was sent to test Tobit’s righteousness to see if he would bury the dead. He was likewise sent to cure both Tobit’s blindness and the curse of a demon on Sarah (vv. 11–14). An even greater surprise is in store for them when he tells them who he is: ‘I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord’ (v. 15).

After reassuring his hearers that they have no need to be afraid, repeating the advice to praise God, he says:

‘Now get up from the ground, and acknowledge God. See, I am ascending to him who sent me. Write down all these things that have happened to you.’ And he ascended. Then they stood up, and could see him no more. They kept blessing God and singing his praises, and they acknowledged God for these marvellous deeds of his, when an angel of God had appeared to them. (vv. 20–22)

The story of Tobit provides a key to the seeming impossibility of angels. It is not so much their appearance—Raphael does not stand out from the rest of humankind—as their deeds that matter. Yet it is not their actions alone that count. What gives those actions importance is their source. As Raphael tells Tobit and his son Tobias, ‘As for me, when I was with you, I was not acting on my own will, but by the will of God’ (12:18). Quite simply, angels on their own have no significance. God is behind the actions of angels. It is the power of God that they reveal, explain and channel when they bring messages and do great acts.

To a Christian this is of key importance. It gives weight to the
appearance of angels in so many of the incidents leading up to the birth of Jesus. In three of them another angel foretells what many would argue to be impossible events. The angel in two of these incidents also bears a name, Gabriel. The first chapter of Luke contains a condensed narrative in which Gabriel appears to an old man and a young woman. Both question the heavenly messenger about the possibility of his prediction proving true: one is struck down, losing the power of speech; the other accepts her fate and erupts into a song of praise. The result of each encounter is a child, the birth of whom is a blessing to their parents and whose life ends in tragedy.

The first event occurs in rarefied surroundings—the sanctuary of the temple, a holy place where only priests are allowed to enter. As one priest, Zechariah, performs his task of offering incense on behalf of the people assembled for prayer in the outer courts of the building, an angel appears to the right of the altar. Luke tells us:

When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. (1:12–15)

Instructions follow as to the rule of life the child is to observe, and predictions are made. He will be a forerunner; he will be possessed by the spirit and the power of the mighty prophet Elijah. His work will bring stunning results: wavering Israelites will return to their Lord; parents and children will be reconciled; the rebellious will be converted to the ways of the righteous (vv. 16–17).

In response to all this, Zechariah tells the angel what the reader already knows: he is an old man and his likewise aged wife has not been able to bear children. It is at this point that the identity and employment of the angel is revealed: ‘The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news”’ (v. 19).