

Christmas Morning, 2015

All the hymns agree that it was “upon a midnight clear” when Jesus was born, and that once the shepherds and sheep had gone back to the hills and it was quiet, the sky was still clear and, as one says, “Royal beauty bright.” Even “the earliest moon of wintertime” seemed pale compared to the brilliance of the stars and the great light that was just now beginning to fade.

That’s the way it was over all the province of Judea, from Arimathea in the north to Beersheba and Masada in the south, about half the land that Abraham was given by God. Blue-black sky without a cloud in sight, waiting patiently for the appearance of the morning star.

Except in one spot. If you stood in Jerusalem and looked up at the pinnacle of the Temple at the highest point on Mount Zion, you might just see the stars occasionally shimmer and dance a little, as if reflected on a pool of water that was just rippled by a penny tossed in. And if you looked around, you would have seen something like a bubble where the stars flickered, surrounded by the larger sky where all was clear.

That disturbance had a decidedly unnatural cause. Gathered together just above the Temple Mount were the four archangels: Michael, the guardian and defender, who accepted the sad task of driving Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden; Gabriel, whose more sanguine responsibilities as a messenger included a visit with the young Mary just nine months earlier; Raphael, the bringer of healing and solace to the ill and downtrodden, who wandered the earth frequently, but cloaked from the view of most people; and finally Uriel.

Uriel: the light of God. The begotten of the first words God spoke aloud, “*Vai-hi Ur,*” “Let there be light.”

Though hardly ever mentioned by name, his ministrations are among the most frequently recounted in the scriptures. Uriel was responsible for bearing and presenting the Shekinah, the glory of the Lord.

It was this glory that Moses encountered on Mount Sinai – such illumination that made his own face shine so brightly that the Israelites begged him to put a bag over his head to spare their own eyes.

It was this glory that made the chariot that swung low to carry Elijah to heaven look like it was blazing with fire.

It was this glory that filled the Inner Sanctum of the Temple when Isaiah was called to be a prophet, and which appeared before Ezekiel when he was called.

That night, the Shekinah glory was brighter and more spectacular than ever before.

The heavenly host that announced the good news of the savior's birth to the shepherds shone like a hundred suns in the brightness of that display.

Michael asked Uriel, "Did you know it was going to be tonight?"

"No, none of us had any clue at all. Not even Gabriel, who got this all started, knew when the birth would actually occur. I had to work fast to amp up some of my usual effects for tonight," Uriel said, a bit of a smile breaking through. "I guess we were all sort of ready, but when it happened it caught us all a little by surprise."

Uriel turned to Raphael, "I didn't see you in the heavens when the host assembled. What were you up to?"

He replied, "I never in my wildest dreams imagined that shepherds would be the first to hear the news! I have spent the last months and days

wandering among the various families that are descendants of David, and apparently none of them were involved.

“But it didn’t take me long to figure out what to do. I went down to walk among the sheep and the shepherds. I figured that the child would need protection from all the stuff they get into, walking in foul mud and harboring everything from ticks to the tiniest of disease bearing creatures. Everyone was so impressed with Uriel’s light show, it didn’t take much cloaking to hide myself.”

“As they turned to the next, great smiles broke out on the faces of Uriel, Raphael and Michael before the latter even finished his question to Gabriel.

“So how was your evening?”

“Hey, hey ... I know you guys had the harder work,” and as he said this three of them looked sympathetically at Michael. “But coming up with a hymn of praise on the spot on absolutely no notice was a stretch for me, let alone flat out improvising the announcement to the shepherds. I saw lots of angels roll their eyes when they realized that the chorus was just one phrase repeated over and over. They practically giggled through the “repeat the sounding joy” as they sang it over and over again.

“You’d think we’d have gotten a little more lead time to dress things up a bit. This was important, after all.”

There was an awkward silence. Michael looked down at the end of his red wings covering his feet. The others looked at him, looked down, and even looked through the gently roiling atmosphere to see what was left of Uriel’s Shekinah glory.

Quietly, Gabriel asked, “Michael?”

Another moment and then a sigh.

“I always figured that when our eternal world touched this mortal earth it would be dangerous. This earth is fragile, and could come apart at the slightest of provocations. And it nearly did tonight.

“The moment Mary screamed with the final push, demons from all around this world shrieked and rose as one to hurry to Judea, Galilee, Samaria and all the surrounding countryside. I have never worked harder to ward off places of safety and to deploy guardian angels to hold off the onslaught.

“The heavens are strong enough to survive the great conflict between our Lord and his adversary, but I fear for this earth. Our former companion, Lucifer, who now fancies himself as the Devil, has set his sights on taking both.”

Uriel winced at the named, knowing that he had been chosen to carry on the ministry of light and glory after Lucifer’s sin of envy.

“Lord knows there has been war in heaven for, well, for eternity. What my angels tell me tonight is that Mary is suddenly a great figure in the heavens, robed in blue, surrounded in stars. But they also tell me that the Devil has shape shifted into the deadliest of dragons and is rushing toward her to devour her.

“I shall go back to heaven with all of my angels, to defend her against the beast, but it will take ... forever ... to accomplish his final downfall.

That will be my task going forward. What about the rest of you?”

Raphael spoke first. “I know that this messiah will show signs and wonders as proofs of his message. I do not think he needs my help with the healings, but so often – as with my friend Tobias – humans need help accepting the healing. So I shall walk close behind him.”

Gabriel spoke next. "I know what he says and especially what he does will be hard for many to accept. It will seem like magic and rhetoric, and the political factions of the scribes and Pharisees and the Sadducees will be all over it. So I will walk ahead of him, planting messages that the people should at least watch and hear him without judgment."

They all looked at Uriel. "Well, I have long planned on creating a special star, and even now it is hovering just below the eastern horizon ready to deploy. I am the archangel of light, but also of the absence of light. I am imagining moments when a great light will need to shine to convince people that he is who he says he is. But there will also be moments when the Shekinah light that they experience every day from sunrise to sunset will need to be withdrawn to get their attention."

Michael looked to Gabriel and said, "You will also need a small cohort of angels in case he fails any of the tests. I will send you one. Satan will tempt him, and the Devil will try to hurt him. Even if his mission fails, his father will, at the last, want him to be protected."

Michael looked down onto the pinnacle of the Temple. "Especially if he is led to a place like this."

Their conversation finished, they left each other.

It's not what you'd expect, especially if you like special effects in the movies.

Gabriel does not raise his mighty wings and arc off into the distance like Superman. Uriel does not explode into a million points of light that shoot into the galaxy, like a character from Star Trek being beamed up. Raphael does not wrap himself in his dark cloak and drop silently and unnoticed among us like Batman. And Michael does not slam the visor of his unassailable helmet nor draw his invincible sword to march ponderously

on to battle like the mighty Thor. But rather they are somehow assumed into eternity in just a little more than an instant.

If you had been looking up above the Temple on Mount Zion and seen the light of the stars shimmer and dim, dancing a little like on the ripples of the pond, and noticed that the stars around that bubble behaved just as they should, you probably would blink and rub your eyes.

When you looked up, that sky would be clear and bright again, as it was all throughout the province of Judea on that, thereafter, silent night. From Arimathea in the north, to Beersheba and Masada in the south, all was calm and all was bright.

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