On 8 November the Bulgarian Orthodox church reveres Archangel Michael and God’s armies – the angels. But what do angels look like and what is their role in traditional belief? How is it that woman is created of the devil’s tail and why are our feet arched with a hollow on the underside? And when Bulgarians say that someone has a feeble angel what does that signify?
In traditional belief, angels are beautiful spirits of light and live in Heaven next to God, the saints and the righteous souls. Some Christmas carols paint a picture of the afterlife using the image of the world tree. In a dream the Holy Virgin or St. Nedelya see an extraordinary tree growing in mid-sea. Its trunk is made of gold, its branches – of silver and its leaves are pearls. When her dream is interpreted by a saint or an elderly abbot, the tree is said to be “God himself, its branches – all of them angels, its leaves – all of them souls, the dead souls of the Orthodox Christians.”

According to another version of the popular belief, the souls of children who have died before reaching the age of 8 become angels. Folklore experts are continually putting down on paper stories told them by local people substantiating this belief. Here is an example: An elderly woman has a dream in which the Holy Mother of God takes her dead grandson and leads him away but tells his loved ones not to grieve because he is now an angel.

Angels are known for their beauty, hence the expression pretty as an angel. According to foremost Bulgarian ethnographer Dimitar Marinov, at the end of the 19th century angels were described as young lads, clad in white gilded shirts, with long blonde hair and wings on their shoulders. They were also said to be very good musicians. With their heavenly voices they constantly sang praise to the Lord. Hence expressions like angel songs, angel’s voice, or angel-voiced used to describe outstanding singers like the Bulgarian saint Yoan Kukuzel (Saint John Kukuzelis).

In popular belief, the angels were God’s servants and were constantly around him. God would constantly be sending them on errands. The seven archangels are the highest ranking among them. Most prominent among them are Michael – the leader of the army of angels and master of the dead souls and Archangel Gabriel – the messenger of God who brings the Mother of God the glad tidings that she would conceive and unto her would be born the Saviour of the world.

The angels were also part of the world’s creation; they are God’s helpers and fight his arch enemy, Satan who is himself a fallen angel because he rebelled against God and was severely punished. According to one legend God made woman out of the devil’s tail by mistake. God told the angel to quietly approach Adam while he was sleeping and take one of his ribs to make woman out of – man’s companion. The angel did God’s bidding but the treacherous Devil snatched the rib from his hands. The angel gave chase but the devil was quick and slipped into a hole with just his tail left outside. The angel started tugging at it; the devil tugged back, the tail snapped and was left in the angels’ hands. Alarmed, God’s messenger decided to go and tell Him what had happened. But God was just waking up and was still feeling drowsy, so he thought the angel had brought him Adam’s rib and quickly blessed it. So that was how the first woman was created – Eve. This story gives the explanation as to why it is thought Woman is more cunning than Man or more of a devil than Man.

According to another legend about “the beginning of times”, at the outset God and the Devil were “partners” and decided they should split the world between themselves: God took the sky, the Devil - the Earth. He asked God to give him a special document to seal their agreement. But in time, the Devil started tormenting the people on Earth – not just sinners but the righteous as well. God realized he had made a mistake and decided to break off the contract and deprive the Devil of his power. He sent an angel to trick him and get the contract back. Disguised as a man, the angel earned the Devil’s trust, grabbed the document from his bosom and flew off to the heavens. The Devil gave chase and reached him just as he was entering the heavens.
He grabbed at him, missed and only just managed to wrench part of his foot off. So, put to shame, the Devil turned back, stripped of all power to become God’s enemy. And when God saw his servant’s mutilated foot he blessed it with the words: “I shall make the feet of all men as yours and you shall feel no shame.” Since that time our feet have been arched, with a hollow, the legend ends.

But the angels are not just up in the heavens, they are all around. There are as many angels here on Earth, as there are human beings. It is believed that when a human being is born, God sends an angel to watch over him, to ward off misfortune and to guide him – a guardian or ministering angel (hranitel in Bulgarian, from the original meaning of hranya, to protect). The demons would send down a devil – a pakostnik (rascal) to do harm and damn his soul. And throughout life the two forces fight over man’s soul; the angel sitting on his right shoulder and whispering in his ear that he should do good, and the devil – on his left shoulder, pushing him to sin and infamy. So, it is said of people who yield to temptation that their angel is feeble. When we have done a good deed, the angel rejoices, when we do evil – he grieves and cries.

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