



This Dec. 12, 2021, photo shows the biblically accurate angel Christmas tree topper created by the Rev. Kira Austin-Young and her puppet-maker husband, Michael Schupbach, atop the tree in their former home in Nashville, Tenn. (Kira Austin-Young via AP)

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It was during the pandemic when the Rev. Kira Austin-Young and her puppet-maker husband, Michael Schupbach, were going a little stir-crazy that they came up with the idea. Instead of a star or some stylized humanoid angel to top their Christmas tree, why not create a biblically accurate angel?

The result was a pink, blue and gold-feathered creature with six wings and dozens of eyes that went a little bit viral.

"I think in, particularly, the times of the world that we're in, where things seem kind of scary and weird, having a scary and weird angel sort of speaks to people," she said.

There are a number of different kinds of angels that show up in the Bible, said Austin-Young, associate rector of the Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin in San Francisco. For the most part, we don't get a lot of description of them, but both Revelations at the end of the Bible and some of the books of the prophets in the Old Testament describe strange creatures around the throne of God.

"Some of them have six wings with eyes covering the wings," she said. Others have multiple animal heads. "I think one of the delightful things about the Bible and the Scripture is just kind of how bizarre it can be and just how kind of out there it can be."

About 7 in 10 U.S. adults say they believe in angels, according to a poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research conducted last year. Still, there's no agreement about what they look like or even exactly what they are.

Social media is full of various interpretations of "biblically accurate angels" imagined not just in tree toppers but also drawings, tattoos, even makeup tutorials. The many-eyed creatures reject traditional portrayals of angels in Western art, where they often look like humans with wings, usually white and often blonde or very fair.

Esther Hamori, a professor of Hebrew Bible at Union Theological Seminary, makes a distinction between angels and other "supernatural species" in the Bible like

seraphim and cherubim, but she said she loves the biblically accurate angel trend, even if it conflates them.

"It shows that people are thinking about ways in which the Bible contains far stranger things than what's often taught," the author of "God's Monsters: Vengeful Spirits, Deadly Angels, Hybrid Creatures, and Divine Hitmen of the Bible" wrote in an email.

"The biblical heavens are filled with weird, frightening figures. In the Bible, God has an entourage of monsters."

One of Austin-Young's favorite portrayals of the annunciation — a favorite theme of Christian art depicting the archangel Gabriel's appearance to Mary to announce that she is going to bear the son of God — is by Henry Ossawa Tanner. It conceives of Gabriel as a vaguely humanoid shaft of light.

"It kind of makes you rethink, 'What would that be like to be approached by an angel?'" she said. "If it's somebody you don't know, or if it's a strange creature, or if it's just this kind of manifestation of God's message to you. ... That could be anything."