

Michael's Transition from Legend to the History of the Fading Middle Ages

It is a striking fact that, from the 10th century on, Michael Legends become rarer and rarer. Their place is taken by stories telling us how Michael has interfered here or there in the course of history. Inside the German-speaking territory, very few legends exist. Instead, Michael appears on the Imperial Banner and is seen in visions as a leader of armies.

Michael as Friend of Mankind

At the end of the 10th century after the birth of Christ, the German Tangbrand sailed at the behest of King Olaf Trygvessoens from Norway to Iceland, so that he might preach the Gospel of Christ. He was received by Sidu Hall, who was well known in Iceland and lived on the Fjord of Aalpta. And the following is told in the great Olaf Trygvessoens saga: It was in the autumn, the day before Michaelmas, when Tangbrand and his companions celebrated the holy eve of the festival. Sidu Hall came and asked why they had stopped working so early.

Tangbrand answered: "The morrow is sacred to us as the day dedicated to Michael, the Archangel of God."

Hall said: "Who was Michael and what is told concerning him?"

Tangbrand answered: "Michael is no mortal, but a spirit created by the Almighty and placed as Prince above all the other angels, whom God has appointed to fight with the devil and his evil henchmen and to protect all righteous Christians from the blind weapons of impure spirits. And God has given unto the Archangel Michael the special mission to receive the souls of Christians when they leave the earthly world and guide them to the realm of the great peace."

And the Njaals saga continues in this wise: Thus spake Tangbrand to Hall: "Michael will weigh all that thou doest, the good as well as the evil. But he has so much affection for mankind that he weighs the good rather than the evil."

Then said Hall: "Him I would like to have as friend." And soon afterwards he was baptized in the brook flowing near his homestead. And Hall made a vow that henceforth Michael should be the angel he would follow.

– Icelandic Legend

Michael Leads the Army of Barbarossa

During the Crusade undertaken by the Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa, the opposing armies met after the holy festival of Pentecost. The Crusaders defeated the enemy. The victorious outcome of this great battle, during which four renowned generals of the Turks were slain and even the son of the Sultan unhorsed, was attributed to a memorable event. For, on this day, the knight Ludwig of Helfenstein saw St. George* ride in front of the Crusaders. This was publicly affirmed, in the presence of the Emperor and the army, by Ludwig of Helfenstein who swore on his vow as a Crusader that he was speaking the truth. And the Turks themselves said that some of them had seen a number of warriors clothed in white garments and riding on white steeds.

– German Legend

*St. George represents in the legends the Michaelic force within the human soul.

To St. Michael

Since we possess thee
As mighty protector, Oh Michael,
Of our companions in Heaven,
We pray thee—
Since we endeavor to serve God—
To let us take part
In these companions' indescribable bliss
Which, as we firmly believe,
Is granted to them
By the vision of God.
For this alone
Is the Saints' true and eternal bliss.
But we know:
This will be granted to us only
If we strive to do good deeds.
Therefore we implore thee
To pray to God
That He may teach us
The ways of the Saints,
So that we may enter into the forecourt
Where only those are admitted
Who live without blemish.
Thou, who hast forever

Held fast the Love of God
And remained immortal for all time:
Ask that we may be given
After death eternal peace.

– Latin Hymn of the Middle Ages, 11th century

How Henry II Beheld Michael on Monte Gargano and How He was Touched and Lamed by Him

Anyone desirous to know how the renowned Emperor Henry II was lamed—although at first possessing a sound body—should now be told the cause. For when he had come to Apulia to order affairs of state, he climbed up on Monte Gargano, on whose summit lies a settlement. In a vaulted cave at the side of the mountain is a Cathedral, neither built nor consecrated by men. For it was miraculously built through divine help and overflowing virtue. And it was reverently consecrated through divine blessing. The patron saint of this Cathedral is the Archangel Michael. And it is said that the angel appears in this church, which is opened once a week, to all those calling unto him in a worthy manner.

And so the pious Emperor, together with other faithful Christians, entered the Cathedral to say his prayers. And after they had sung hymns in praise of the divine and, full of reverence, made their vows to God, the time was come when the Heavenly Hosts were wont to enter the sacred Temple, so that the divine ritual might be worthily concluded. When all the people had left and those who were loitering urged to leave the Cathedral, the holy Emperor asked whether it would be possible for him to remain inside. And when all were gone, he resolved to remain inside and trust in the mercy of God. Saying one prayer after the other, he bent his knee to the ground. Now he dedicated himself, amidst many tears, to God's mildness; then he endeavored to confide his soul into the keeping of the blessed Archangel Michael. When the pure prayer of the pious Emperor arose to God like unto incense, he was granted a vision by the God of Israel, Who works miracles amidst the Saints. For he saw the numerous host of angels, who gleamed like the sun, entering the Temple. Two of them solemnly adorned the altar. Then he beheld innumerable hosts of divine beings. They were radiant like palpitating lightning and revealed their leader in all the brilliance of his splendor. This was doubtless the Archangel carrying the banner of the Heavenly Hosts. At last the Emperor could see the One who is the master, the King of Angels, coming with greatest might and force. The countless Heavenly Host, in all its indescribable radiance, obeys Michael whose beckoning guides all that happens in Heaven and on earth. Then the Chorus assembled in the holy Cathedral praised the New

Jerusalem and celebrated the services in the most exalted fashion. When these had been concluded, one of the angels handed, most reverently, the text of the Holy Gospel to the divine personage who kissed the Gospel and commanded the angel to pass it on to the Emperor, who lay in a corner, so that he too might kiss it.

But the Emperor, the disciple of Christ, was beset by fear in his spirit upon beholding this vision of such extraordinary majesty and glory. And all his limbs trembled, as the prophet has said: "My heart is shattered within me and my limbs are trembling." (Jerem. 23,9) When the angel saw this, he lightly touched the Emperor's side, saying: "Fear not, thou man elected by God! Rise quickly and joyously accept the sign of divine peace that is given to thee." And at once his thigh slackened and he became lame henceforth. A similar event is told of the holy patriarch Jacob, whose side was lamed by the angel with whom he struggled.

– German Legend

Prayer

Almighty God,
Mayest Thou redeem me and redeem my spirit from hell.
Almighty God,
Mayest Thou watch over my spirit
And protect it from darkness.
In Thee, Christ Jesus, is founded my faith.
I am the work of Thy hands,
So do not forsake me.
To thee, holy Archangel Michael, in love I pray.
Thou hast the power to receive the souls.
So mayest thou worthily accept and protect my soul
When it will be taken away from my body.
Save it from the violence of my enemies
Who want it to cross the threshold of hell
And walk the paths of darkness.
May not the lion halt my soul
Nor the dragon want to send the spirit to hell
And deliver it to eternal torment.
I pray Thee, Almighty God,
Send to my help the holy Angel.
Help me through his sweet mildness
Ere the jaws of hell will stifle me.

– From old Norway, circa 1300

The Death of St. Elizabeth of Thuringa

In pangs of death and torment lay
The Lady pure for one whole day
And one whole night; this was the time
That first to her had been announced.
And though the Lord had granted her
Much mercy in her earthly life,
And though her life was good and pure,
She did not want to proffer it
To the great splendor of her God.
For worthy she not deemed herself
To let her life flow back to God.
And thus in doubt and care she lay,
Beset by her unworthiness,
Till help and mercy came from God
And ended all her misery.
Soft music of the heavenly spheres,
The sound of jubilating harps,
Was wafted to her tenderly
And brought her gentle quietness.
Upwards arose her soul so pure
So that her God she could espouse,
And slowly downward sank her head
When softly she gave up the ghost.
And then St. Michael came nigh
Amidst the Hosts of Heaven high.
There followed choirs of the Saints
And all the great angelic hosts.
To her St. Michael had come
That her sweet soul he might receive.
And now in triumph she was led
To stand before God's radiant eyes
And to receive her full reward:
Eternally to wear the crown
And glorify Almighty God
And multiply all His Renown.

– German Legend

Lucifer's Crown

Now hear about the splendid crown:
Designed it was by sixty thousand angels
Who wanted to eject the Lord from Heaven.
And thus thine it became, oh Lucifer!
Wherever wise and worthy master priests are found,
They know full well that I the truth do speak.

St. Michael saw God's wrath anent Lucifer's boasts:
His sword to pieces broke the crown
And hurled it from the head of Lucifer.
One of the precious stones fell out of it.
And this on earth was handed unto Parzival.

– From the "Singers' Contest on the Wartburg," 13th century

The Vision of Jeanne d'Arc

In the summer of 1425, at the age of thirteen, Jeanne had her first vision. The day before had been a festival. Around noon, standing in her father's garden, she heard a voice that came from the church which lay at her right side. Thence a bright radiance was wafted to her eyes. Jeanne felt great fear and great doubt, although the voice seemed to her good and worthy. Only after she had heard the voice thrice did she recognize it as an angel's voice. This angel was St. Michael. He was not alone, but surrounded by many angelic beings.

Jeanne understood what the voice said. Michael told her to be a good girl, lead a good life, and go to church diligently. God would help her. Then he spoke of the great misfortune that had befallen France and revealed to her that she should go to Paris and help the King. Finally Michael announced that St. Catherine and St. Margaret would come to her and guide her. Jeanne was to follow their counsels and have faith in their words, for Catherine and Margaret were benevolent spirits who had been commanded to help her and tell her what to do. This was God's Order.

Jeanne believed as firmly in the words and deeds of Michael as she believed that Jesus Christ had suffered and died for us. What moved her to such faith was His good counsel, His wise teaching, and the help that He bestowed on her. If the devil had clothed himself in the garment of a good angel, Jeanne would easily have recognized that it was not St. Michael but a being that aped him.

– Account of Jeanne d'Arc's deposition

Michael, the Angel, Speaketh

God in His Likeness man created,
To share in everlasting life.
And therefore God did not in vain
Create him out of crumbling dust,
So that his body, weak and frail,
Would know how weak his being was
And thus withstand all haughtiness.
Man can do nothing, is not fit
To practice virtue, bring forth art;
But weak and earth-bound was he made
So that in freedom he might know
That the Creator all alone
Man's highest good doth represent.

– From Hans Sachs: Tragedy of the Creation,
Fall and Eviction from Paradise