

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #79: THE MYSTERIOUS “ANGEL OF THE LORD”

By John Temples

Angels have always fascinated readers of God’s word. The Bible speaks of heavenly angels, an archangel, fallen angels, and human angels.¹ But several times in Scripture, a unique and mysterious angelic figure appears in human history--“the Angel of the Lord.”

This “Angel of the Lord” is distinguished from other angels by the name--no other angel is ever called that--but also by several other interesting characteristics, the most interesting of which is that He accepted worship, something no ordinary angel² would do. Observe:

ORDINARY ANGELS	THE ANGEL OF THE LORD
Are innumerable (Heb 12:22)	Is singular and unique (“THE” Angel of the Lord)
Speak and act only as authorized by God (Gen 19:1,13)	Speaks as God (Gen 16:10, 22:15-18)
Reject worship (Col 2:18, Rev 19:10, 22:8-9)	Receives worship (Ex 3:1-5, Josh 5:13-15, Judg 6:11-21)
Cannot create life (angels are created beings, Neh 9:6)	Has power to give life (Gen 16:10)
Cannot forgive sins (Acts 11:13-14)	Has authority to forgive sins (Gen 48:16, Ex 23:20-21)
Are not all-knowing (1 Pet 1:12)	Is all-knowing (Gen 16:11-13, Ex 3:2, 7)

¹ The word “angel” in Greek is *angellos*, which means “messenger.” A messenger could be a heavenly angel or a human one. John the Baptist is called an “angel” in Matthew 11:10, the word “messenger” being in Greek *angelon*. The “angels” of the seven churches of Revelation were probably their messengers or preachers.

² I hesitate to use the term “ordinary angel” in speaking of glorious heavenly beings, but I can’t think of a better one.

Let us examine several accounts of appearances of the Angel of the Lord and note some facts that clearly show this Angel to be different from other angels of God.

THE APPEARANCE TO HAGAR

The first recorded appearance of the Angel of the Lord was to Hagar, Abraham's concubine and the mother of his son Ishmael. The record says, "The Angel of the Lord said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand.' Then the Angel of the Lord said to her, 'I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude'" (Genesis 16:9-10).

Notice that this Angel does not merely say, "You will have multiple descendants"; this Angel promised that He Himself would multiply the descendants of Hagar. Hagar's response after the appearance of the angel is stated in verse 13: "Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, Have I also here seen Him who sees me?" She believed that she had been in the presence of God.

THE APPEARANCE TO ABRAHAM AND SARAH AT MAMRE

Three men appeared to Abraham and Sarah. They had two missions: to inform them that the son God had promised them would be born in the next year, and to let them know that the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed. Two of these three visitors were angels (Genesis 19:1). The third one is specifically called the Lord (Genesis 18:1, 13, 22, 33).

THE APPEARANCE TO ABRAHAM ON MOUNT MORIAH

God commanded Abraham to bring his son Isaac to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him. Abraham obeyed and was about to slay Isaac when the Angel intervened. Genesis 22:11-13 reads: "But the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' So he said, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'" Once again, the Angel speaks not as a created angel but as God Himself.

APPEARANCES TO JACOB

This Angel of the Lord appeared several times to Jacob. “Then the Angel of God spoke to him in a dream, saying, ‘Jacob.’ And I said, ‘Here I am’” (Genesis 31:11). In verse 13, the Angel identifies Himself as “the God of Bethel.”

Genesis 32 records the famous encounter and “wrestling match” between Jacob and some divine personage (called simply “a Man” in verse 24). Even though his opponent is not specifically called “the Angel of the Lord,” they appear to be the same. The next morning Jacob understood that he had wrestled with God Himself. “So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: ‘For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved’ (verse 30).

At the end of his life, Jacob spoke of God and the Angel of the Lord as one and the same (Genesis 48:16).

THE APPEARANCE TO MOSES

The Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a burning bush. Exodus 3:2 says, “And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush...” He is called an Angel in verse 2, but verse 4 identifies Him as “the Lord” and “God.” And in verse 6, He flatly declares, “I am the God of your Father.”

ISRAEL’S DIVINE “TOUR GUIDE” IN THE WILDERNESS

God promised to send His angel ahead of the children of Israel in the wilderness: “Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him. But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off” (Exodus 23:20-23). Notice that this Angel was to be obeyed because “the name of the Lord” was in Him. Also this Angel had power to forgive sins (verse 21).

OTHER APPEARANCES

The Angel of the Lord also appeared to Joshua, identifying Himself as “the Commander of the army of the Lord” (Joshua 5:14). Joshua fell down and worshipped this Commander of the Lord’s army (verse 14), something no ordinary angel would have allowed.

He appeared also to Gideon (Judges 6:11-12). An interesting aspect of this appearance is that the Angel spoke of Himself as both “the Lord” (verses 14 and 16) and as a personage separate from the Lord (verse 12).

The Angel appeared to a Hebrew woman to announce the birth of a son (Samson), who would deliver the people from their enemies (Judges 13:3). Once again, the text speaks of the Angel as God Himself and also as a personage distinguished from God.

Two other appearances were to David (2 Samuel 24:12-16) and in a vision given to Zechariah (Zechariah 1:7-17).

SO WHO IS THE ANGEL OF THE LORD?

By now it should be obvious that this Angel was no ordinary created angel, but an Angel associated with the Godhead--or even a member of the Godhead. What we are dealing with in these accounts is a *theophany*, a temporary visible manifestation of God to men. The proof is conclusive:

- In several contexts the Angel is identified as God.
- The Angel has power to give life (Genesis 16:10). Only God can give life.
- The Angel is all-knowing (Genesis 16:13, Exodus 3:7).
- The Angel is called “The Judge of all the earth” (Genesis 18:25), a title that belongs to God alone.
- The Angel has power to forgive sins.
- The Angel receives worship.

WHICH MEMBER OF THE GODHEAD?

In these encounters, the Angel of the Lord was clearly God, but which member of the Trinity was He--the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit? The most likely answer is God the Son--Jesus, the second member of the Godhead. Note these proofs:

No one has ever seen God (the Father). John 1:18 declares, "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him." Jesus also affirmed that no one has seen the Father (John 6:46). Since no one has seen the Father, but since people did see the Angel of the Lord, we can know that the Angel of the Lord cannot be the Father.

The Holy Spirit has never taken human form. In fact, rarely does the Spirit take any form. He took the form of a dove when Jesus was baptized (Matthew 3:16), and He appeared as tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4); but He is never said in Scripture to have assumed the form of a man. Therefore, we have no reason to believe that the Angel of the Lord was the Holy Spirit.

Christ is specifically said to have been present with the Israelites in the wilderness. Remember that in Exodus 23 God promised the children of Israel a Guide, an Angel to "keep them in the way" (Exodus 23:20). This Angel had divine authority, for He was to be obeyed (verse 21). Paul tells us who that Angel was in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4: "Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and *that Rock was Christ.*"

The Angel of the Lord never appears in the New Testament. Once Jesus took on human flesh, there was no longer any need for Him to appear in the form of "the Angel of the Lord." The term "the Angel of the Lord" does appear once in the New Testament, in Matthew 1:24; but this angel is identified in verse 20 as "AN angel of the Lord" announcing the conception of Jesus to Joseph. At the time the angel made the announcement to Joseph, Jesus had already been conceived in Mary's womb (Matthew 1:18). We would not expect Jesus to be present in two different forms at the same time. Therefore, the "angel of the Lord" in Matthew 1:24 was an ordinary angel sent to bring good news to Joseph and assure him of Mary's chastity.

CONCLUSION

The mysterious “Angel of the Lord” of the Old Testament is shown to be the Son Himself, appearing to men before He finally came as a true human. We stand in awe at such demonstrations of the awesome power of God and His concern for us. I like to think that Jesus was so anxious to be one with us that He could not wait until His coming in human flesh--He wanted to pay us some pre-incarnation visits! Truly God “demonstrates His love for us” in multiple ways, the appearance(s) of the Angel of the Lord being one more of them. Writer Rick Kirby says, “The appearance of the angel of the LORD signaled that God would one day come in all of his glory and make all things new. ‘God with us’ (Isaiah 7:14) has been the Creator’s intention from Eden, and one day what privileged human eyes have seen only on occasion will break forth in permanent eternal destiny.”

(<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/angels-and-demons/the-angel-of-the-lord.html>)

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