



A Brief Study of the Angel of Jehovah

Who is the Angel of Jehovah in the Old Testament?

By Wayne Jackson | Christian Courier

One of the most intriguing inquiries into the literature of the Old Testament has to do with that mysterious being that is referred to as “the angel of Jehovah” (KJV; Gen. 16:7-14) or “the angel of God” (Gen. 21:17-19). The two expressions have to do with the same entity (cf. Judg. 6:20, 21).

Exactly who was this person?

What Is an Angel?

One of the first issues that must be addressed is the significance of the term “angel.” The Hebrew word is *malak* and it “simply signifies a messenger” (Girdlestone 1973, 41). The nature of the messenger **must be determined by the context.**

It could be a messenger of a heavenly order — an angel as we ordinarily think of that term (Gen. 32:1). Or it may denote a human messenger operating on behalf of someone else, as in the case of Jacob’s emissaries (Gen. 32:3).

On the other hand, the “angel [better rendered ‘messenger’] of Jehovah” stands in a **class by himself.**

A consideration of the relevant Old Testament data, we believe, will lead to the following conclusion:

1. The “messenger of Jehovah” himself possessed characteristics that can **only be ascribed to deity.**
2. Yet this being is distinguished from **another person** who is also designated as Jehovah.
3. The messenger of Jehovah is to be identified with the **pre-incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.**

Let us address each of these propositions.

The Messenger of Jehovah: A Divine Being

A careful consideration of various texts relating to the messenger of Jehovah will reveal that he is not of the common angelic class. For example:

1. He promises to multiply Hagar’s seed, and she confesses, “You are a God who sees” (Gen. 16:10, 13).
2. The messenger called unto Abraham, saying, “By myself I have sworn, says Jehovah” (Gen. 22:15, 16).
3. He said to Jacob, “I am the God of Bethel” (Gen. 31:11, 13).

4. It was this messenger who wrestled with Jacob (cf. "angel" in Hos. 12:4) at Peniel, and yet the sacred text identifies this person as God (Gen. 32:28-30; Hos. 12:3-5).
5. This messenger spoke to Moses from the burning bush, referring to himself as God (Ex. 3:2ff).
6. The messenger attributed to himself the divine oath (Judg. 2:1-3).
7. This "prince of Jehovah" accepted worship and spoke as God (Josh. 5:13-6:2; cf. Judg. 6:19-27).
8. Ordinary angels **refuse worship** (Rev. 22:8, 9), but a number of Old Testament worthies called this person "God" and the designation was **never repudiated** (cf. Gen. 16:7ff; 22:11, 14; 48:15ff; Judg. 13:21, 22; Zech. 3:1ff).

There is, therefore, a vast amount of evidence leading to the conclusion that the messenger of Jehovah was a **divine being**.

The Messenger of Jehovah: Distinct from Jehovah

In spite of the fact that the holy messenger is endowed with the traits of deity, he is also distinguished from Jehovah. Repeatedly, he is designated as the "messenger of Jehovah." He is Jehovah himself and he is acting on behalf of another who is **also Jehovah**.

In Exodus 23:20ff, Jehovah promised the children of Israel that he would send an angel (i.e. messenger) before them as they sojourned in the wilderness of Sinai. This messenger would keep them safe and bring them finally to Canaan. The Hebrews were warned to listen to his voice and not provoke him. Otherwise, he would not forgive their transgressions.

Jehovah said, "for my name is in him" (v. 21), which suggests the messenger is a supernatural being (cf. Cole 1973, 181). Yet, note the distinction between "my" and "him."

It would be appropriate at this point to anticipate a question that many sincere students doubtless have. Namely, how can this being be both Jehovah and yet be a messenger from Jehovah?

Is the designation “Jehovah” applied to more than one divine person? The answer is yes.

The name Jehovah (Yahweh) is derived from a root form, *havah*, which means “to be” or “being.” It suggests that deity is absolutely **self-existent** (Stone 1944, 15). It thus is a fitting appellation for **each of the persons within the holy trinity** since each of these is characterized by uninitiated existence.

We are not surprised, therefore, to see references to more than one person who is designated as Jehovah, sometimes in the same passage. Isaiah declared: “Thus saith Jehovah, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, Jehovah of hosts” (Isa. 44:6).

The Messenger of Jehovah: The Pre-incarnate Christ

A very strong case can be made for the fact that the messenger of Jehovah who operated in the interests of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament was none other than the divine Word who later became flesh and dwelt among men (Jn. 1:1, 14) — the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Consider this argument:

As the Old Testament narrative draws to a close, the last prophet speaks of the coming ministry of John the Baptizer (Mal. 3:1; cf. Mt. 11:10). Concerning John, Jehovah says:

“[H]e shall prepare the way before me; and the Lord, whom ye seek, will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant, whom ye desire, behold, he cometh.”

Note that expression, “messenger of the covenant.” The ancient Jews held this passage to be a reference to the coming Messiah (Henderson 1980, 457). The New Testament, of course, makes that point quite clear.

And so, conservative Bible scholars are fairly well agreed that the angel of Jehovah, or the messenger of the covenant, so prominent in the Hebrew Scriptures, was the Lord Jesus himself in his pre-incarnate state.

To this may be added the inspired testimony of Paul, who affirmed the actual presence of Christ as a sustaining companion of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai (1 Cor. 10:4). W. E.

Vine comments on this text:

“The statement ‘the rock was Christ’ signifies that it was typical of Christ; but there is more than this, for the Apostle does not say that the rock is Christ, using the present tense as in Gal. 4:24-25 concerning Sarah and Hagar, as representing two covenants, and as in the parables in Matt. 13:19-23 and 37-38. The past tense ‘was’ implies that the water was provided by the personal presence of Christ; for the Angel [Messenger] of His presence was with the Israelites through all their wilderness journeyings (Isa. 63:9)” (131-132).

No study of Christ, therefore, can afford to overlook the angel of Jehovah in the Old Testament. Such was a preview of the approaching Messenger from God.

Sources

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