

The Theology of the “Angel of Yahweh” as it Relates to Old Testament Believers

Introduction

The famous prophecy Micah 5:2 is widely known for pinpointing the city in which the Savior/Ruler Messiah was to be born. One particularly interesting feature of this verse is that the last three lines connect the Divine mission of the Incarnation with other Divine missions in past redemptive history. Micah 5:2c-e states it this way: “from you One will *go forth* for Me... His *goings forth* (from the same Hebrew root) are from long ago (*mikedem* - ‘the beginning of the created state or ‘earliest time’), from the days of eternity (*olam* - ‘eternity’ or time so far away as to be hidden from view, probably from *alam*- ‘to be hidden’). Thus, the incarnation did not mark the *beginning* of Christ’s work on earth for His people, it merely *climaxed* it. The birth, ministry, and death of Christ was the supreme “going forth” for God which culminated in a new and full expression of God and His purposes—the complete remedy for sin, a new and better covenant, a new age, and a new people. There is a sense in which Christ has always been the ‘Sent One,’ representing God and performing his tasks.¹ This is why ‘The *Angel* (i.e., messenger) of Yahweh’ is such a fitting designation for Christ in His pre-incarnate state. He was *The* (one of a kind, unique) messenger of Yahweh in the Old Testament, as He was the Unique Son (‘only begotten’ – John 1:18) in the New Testament. As God’s Divine Messenger, He had *gone forth* many times on behalf of His covenant people. The various theophanies were but small glimpses of the continual presence and work of Christ among them that was beyond their purview, and that usually went unnoticed.

At various times the Old Testament featured the enigmatic appearances of this mysterious Personage, who was both distinguished from God and also distinctly referred to as “God” or “Yahweh.” This same Being is designated in Scripture by various names such as: “The Angel of His Presence,” “Mine Angel,” and “The Angel of God.”² The most likely candidate for this supernatural Being is Jesus Christ, who said that Moses wrote of Him (John 5:46) and likely alluded to His presence in the midst of the burning bush (John 8:58). As Walter Kaiser has pointed out:

The identity of this particular Angel appears to be more than just an angelic messenger from God. So frequently he received the respect, worship, and honor reserved only for God; yet He was consistently distinguished from God....Thus He carried an identity with God; yet he was also sent from Him! ... And He acted and talked as the Lord. There the matter apparently rested until revelation clarified the enigma.³

¹ John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago, 1969), p. 46.

² Daniel Finestone, “Is the Angel of Jehovah in the Old Testament the Lord Jesus Christ?”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Dallas, 1938), pp. 372-323.

³ Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1978), p. 85.

Leupold, the respected German commentator, has a classic five-fold proof for the deity of this Angel:

1. He explicitly identifies Himself with Yahweh on various occasions.
2. Those to whom He makes His presence known recognize Him as divine.
3. The Biblical writers call Him Yahweh.
4. The doctrine here implied of a plurality of persons in the Godhead is in complete accord with earlier foreshadowing.
5. The organic unity of Scripture would be broken if it could be proved that the central point in the Old Testament revelation was a creature-angel, while that of the New Testament is the Incarnation of the God-Man.⁴

Exodus chapter 3 is one of the clearest examples of the name "Angel of Yahweh" and the terms for God being so blurred as to be indistinguishable. The infinite distance between God and His creation taught in Isaiah 40-46 would never allow for a created being to be referred to in the phrases expressed here:

Exodus Chapter 3

- v. 2 – "And the angel of Yahweh appeared to him...from the midst of a bush"
- v. 4 – "When Yahweh saw...God called to him from the midst of the bush"
- v. 6 – "He also said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham...'"
- v. 6 – "Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."⁵

The Jews have recognized this phenomenon (partly due to disputations with "the heretics") and refer to this enigmatic Personage as "Metatron," from the Greek words 'meta' ("with," "in the company of") and 'thronos' ("throne") "in the sense of 'one who serves behind the throne.'" Jewish writers who are honest enough to deal fairly with the texts of Scripture regarding the Angel of Yahweh have been forced into some uncomfortable conclusions. From the text of Exodus 23:21 in the tractate *Sanhedrin* they give Metatron a "supernatural status."⁶ Other Jewish writers from this text have even posited the concept of a "greater YHWH" and a "lesser YHWH" (**Nfqh hwhy**).⁷ The Encyclopedia Judaica writes, "In the *Haggadah* it is said that the *tanna* Elisha b. Avuyah saw Metatron seated and said, 'perhaps there are two powers', as though indicating Metatron himself as a second deity," and admits that "speculations about Metatron might lead to dangerous ground."⁸

Theology of the Angel of Yahweh

The Angel of Yahweh appearances in the Old Testament frequently have a covenantal aspect, either directly or indirectly. From Judges 2:1-2 we learn that it was this Divine Angel that

⁴ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), pp. 500-501.

⁵ Marc Mueller, The Master's Seminary Theology notes, 1987.

⁶ Encyclopedia Judaica, vol. 11, 1971.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

appeared to the patriarchs and gave them the original covenantal promises. Judges 2:1-2 says, "I brought you up out of the land of Egypt and led you to the land *which I have sworn to your fathers*; and I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you.'" In Exodus 3:6 the Angel identifies Himself with these patriarchs, and hence, with the covenant, "I am the God of your father, *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*" In verse eight of the same chapter He states that it is *He* who will fulfill these promises to bring them into the land. Many of the later appearances of the Angel are illustrations of His care, provision, power, and sovereign dealings with His covenant people (which included curses for disobedience—Deuteronomy chapter 28).

Major Thematic Elements of the Angel of Yahweh Theophanies

Three themes stand out in the theology of the Angel of Yahweh in Scripture: *presence, promise, and providence. The presence motif is particularly prominent.*⁹ The very fact that He appears at will, demonstrating His omniscience and omnipresence, alerts men to the reality that He is *always there*; people only see Him if and when He decides to manifest His presence in visible form.

Presence Motif

The episode with Hagar, the first time the name "Angel of Yahweh" occurs, was a dramatic lesson to her and profound revelation to man that the invisible God sees and hears (cares) for His people. The name that the Angel gave to her future son (Ishmael, from *shamah*, "to hear") was to be for her a lifelong lesson, "divine pedagogy"¹⁰ illustrating the fact that He *hears* His people and *knows their afflictions* (Genesis 16:11).

Exodus 3 places a great deal of emphasis on the theme of presence. Note also the similarities to Genesis 16, where in both cases God *hears* the cry of His people and *sees* their affliction—Genesis 16:11, 13; Exodus 3:7). Thus we observe:

Exodus 3

- v. 8 – "So I have come down"
- v. 12 – "Certainly I will be with you" (the word for "will be" is 'ehiyeh' which anticipates the "I am/will be that I am/will be") of verse 14.
- v. 16 – Literally, "visiting I have visited you", an emphatic way of saying that God was *certainly* coming to earth to bring about a great deliverance.

In a similar way Gideon was told by the Angel of Yahweh in Judges 6:16, "Surely I will be with you." The Angel's presence = God's presence, and His presence is a guarantee of success against Midian, despite great odds.

There is an unusual case in 1 Kings 19:5-14 where the Angel of Yahweh comes to sustain and encourage Elijah after he fled from Jezebel. After the Divine Messenger fed and

⁹ Marc Mueller. The Master's Seminary Syllabus notes, 1987.

¹⁰ Leupold, p. 503.

instructed Elijah, He ordered him to stand on a certain mountain where Yahweh would pass by. Although much is uncertain about this event, it does show a correlation between the presence of the Angel of Yahweh and God dwelling with His people in a special way.

Promise Motif

There are many examples in the Old Testament where the appearance of Christ had something to do with making or fulfilling of a promise. Since the Angel of Yahweh in Judges 2:1-2 stated that *He* made the promises to the patriarchs (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-16; 15:4-21; 18:4-16), then it was He who instituted both the *Abrahamic* and the *New Covenants*. He is even referred to in Malachi 3:1 as the *Angel/Messenger of the Covenant*.

In Genesis 16:10-11 the Angel sought out Hagar and gave her a promise of a vast posterity. In Exodus 3:8 He promised to *fulfill* the covenantal promises (that He Himself had made) by delivering His people out of Egypt and bringing them into the promised land. The Angel would personally be involved in the guidance and rulership of the people in the desert (Exodus 14:19) and in the fulfilling of the promise to dispossess the nations from the land. The reality of this promise (and the Angel's presence), however made the responsibility for obedience and the penalty for disobedience of greater consequence (Judges 2:2-4).

We also see the Angel of Yahweh in connection with promise in Gideon's assurance of victory against the Midianites (Judges 6:14) and in the birth announcement to Samson's parents (Judges 13:7).

Providence Motif

The providence motif is an especially prominent and remarkable feature of many Angel of Yahweh appearances. We see this first in the case of Abraham in Genesis 22 where the angel halted him from plunging the knife into Isaac, and right after He speaks, Abraham notices a ram caught in the thicket (v. 13). This providential element in the theophany was the basis for Abraham naming the place "Yahweh will provide" (v. 14). In Genesis 24:40 the Angel's presence assures that providence will make Abraham's servant successful in finding a suitable wife for Isaac. The power of the pre-incarnate Christ is seen in His absolute control over all aspects of life—not only the external manifestations of power, but also in the internal operations of human thinking (including the will). There are at least three remarkable instances of the Angel's power over the human mind in the Exodus account. First, there is the case of Pharaoh, whom He hardens and then causes him to let the Israelites go. Secondly, He makes the Egyptians esteem the children of Israel and desire to give them precious metals and clothing. Thirdly, He "brought the army of Egyptians into confusion" (Exodus 14:24), and "caused their chariot wheels to swerve, and He made them drive with difficulty" (14:25).

There are some interesting illustrations of the Angel working alongside His people, invisibly, and conditional to their faith and obedience. This is particularly noticeable in the conquest and evidenced in His appearance to Joshua as a man with a sword (the sword itself

being simply pedagogical).¹¹ The apparition of the heavenly Captain was to instruct Joshua that He was working as they were working (in faith and obedience to the will of God) to overthrow the Canaanite kingdoms. The providential element can be seen clearly as He caused the walls of Jericho to collapse at precisely the right time (when the Israelites had accomplished what God had asked them to do). The Angel fought as they fought and stopped when they stopped (Judges 2:1-2; cf. Col. 1:29).

The Mediator/Savior Concept in the Theology of the Angel of Yahweh

The role of Christ as the Mediator between God and man is far less obvious in His Old Testament role of Angel of Yahweh than it is in His high priestly role in the New Testament. His *appearances* in the Old Testament were generally task-oriented and revelatory, not soteriological (dealing with salvation) in the spiritual sense. However, there are some *references and one appearance* that seem to hint at the concept—although some of them may be debatable.

Exodus 23:20-23. This is one of the most important Angel of Yahweh passages in the entire Bible. It is a very clear passage, and one that gives Jewish commentators difficulties. How could an Angel or any being other than God have His Name. i.e., the sacred Tetragrammaton? Yet He not only has that, but also has several other prerogatives of Deity. And to compound the enigma, the passage occurs in the context of not worshipping or serving any other gods (Exodus 23:24-25)! He is the divinely sent ambassador for God to dwell with men on earth, to declare God's word and to carry out His purposes. From this passage we observe that:

- a. He is separate from Yahweh
- b. He is One with Yahweh – there is a deliberate mixing of pronouns and blending of identity: 23:22 “obey His voice” is to “do all I say”
- c. He also is Yahweh – 23:21 – “My Name is in Him” – He shares this Name with God the Father. This is all the more impactful when we realize that the “concept of personal name in the OT often included existence, character, and reputation (1 Samuel 25:25).”¹²

The implications of this passage are that:

1. He is omnipotent, by reason of His ability to protect Israel no matter how serious the danger from an earthly perspective.
2. He is omniscient, in that He knows who is rebellious and therefore guilty (Exodus 23:20).
3. He has the power to *forgive* (to ‘lift away’) sin—the sole prerogative of God (Exodus 23:21). Note also the remarkable statement of Jacob, “...and *Angel who has redeemed me from all evil* Genesis 48:16a.

The Angel-Mediator of Job 33:23-28

¹¹ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, “Joshua, Judges, Ruth,” *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963, p. 63.

¹² Walter C. Kaiser, “**MEv**,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody), p. 934.

Although this passage is a disputable one on the grounds that it simply refers to “an angel,” and, in fact, Elihu may be referring to a human messenger, nevertheless, it does unite the terms ‘angel’ and ‘mediator’ in a context that is replete with New Testament soteriological vocabulary and concepts. It is quite possible, as in the case of David in Psalm 22, that the hyperbolic expressions adumbrated things far beyond the speaker’s mind at the time they were given. The soteriological import of this passage can be seen from the following:

1. Delivering man from the ‘pit’ (vv. 24, 29)
2. Obtaining a ‘ransom’ – (v. 24)
3. Being accepted before God (from *ratsah*, with the idea ‘favor’ or ‘pleasure’)
4. Receiving grace (v. 24)
5. “He redeemed *my soul* from going to the pit” (personal redemption—not collective) – (v. 28)

The section in which all these expressions occur is headed by an *Angel-Mediator who brings about all these things*. The Hebrew word *melits* is worth noting. It comes from the root *luts*, which has the idea “to speak barbarously, i.e., in a foreign tongue, from those who are ignorant of it, as if they babbled and stammered senselessly.”¹³ The Hiphil form of the word, which appears in Job 33:23, means “to act as interpreter,”¹⁴ but still retains the sense that while the intermediary is communicating to the third party (whose language we do not understand), we need someone to be an intermediary to interpret for us. There may be a further hint of this in Job 9:33, “There is no umpire (from *yachach*, “advocate...[one] taking up the defense of the weak or poor, those without resources.”¹⁵ It is striking to realize that in this, the oldest book of the Bible, it is the *Angel-Mediator* (33:23) who is the means through which God *brings back a man’s soul from the pit* to give him the “light of life” (Job 33:30).

Judges 13:19-20

This appears to be the only passage in the Old Testament which links the Angel of Yahweh with a sacrifice to God. While Manoah and his wife were making an offering of a goat and grain, and while they were looking on, He merged into the flame and ascended to heaven in it. In this way He identified Himself with the offering, foreshadowing the offering that He would make to atone for the sins of the world.

¹³ William Gesenius, *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ John E. Hartley, NIDOTTE, Accordance Electronic Edition “Y”2:435.