

The Angel of the LORD: Yahweh's Divine Messenger

After 15 chapters in Genesis, the reader meets a new and especially significant character in the narrative – “the Angel of the LORD”. The word “LORD”, in small caps, is the English translation of the Hebrew word Yahweh. The story is about Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl Sarai put forth to give Abram and her a child. (Sarai had been barren up to this point in her life). Abram slept with Hagar and she got pregnant to the disdain of Sarai. Having been mistreated by Sarai, Hagar fled to the wilderness to escape. It is in the wilderness, by a spring of water, where “the angel of Yahweh” finds Hagar, and he gives her a message from the LORD (Yahweh) (Gen 16:1-13). Hagar names the LORD that spoke to her “a God of seeing” (16:13). Nothing in the text refutes what Hagar said as not being true. The angel is a God of seeing.

Five chapters later, “the angel of God” shows up again to deliver a message to Hagar. God has heard the voice of Ishmael, and the angel states, “I will make him into a great nation” (21:18). God has heard his voice, but the messenger from God states he will make Ishmael into a great nation. We can call the angel a messenger because the Hebrew word, *mal'āk*, (Hb.), translated as “angel”, is also translated as “messenger” (90+ x) throughout the OT. He is a divine messenger if He can promise to make one man into a great nation. Then, in the next chapter, Yahweh's divine messenger shows up just when Abraham is ready to end Isaac's life. The angel of the LORD called to him from heaven to tell Abraham not to end Isaac's life. Then interestingly, the messenger said, “For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your only son from me.” The angel of the LORD calls from heaven a second time, telling Abraham: “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this [almost sacrificing Isaac] and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice” (22:16-18). At this point, the angel of the LORD has promised to make Ishmael a great nation and fulfill all the promises Yahweh made to Abraham.

In Genesis 31, this divine messenger communicates to Jacob in a dream that He is the one blessing the mating habits of the flocks to produce striped, spotted, and mottled goats, all of which become Jacob's property. Then the angel of God tells Jacob, “I am the God of Bethel, where you made a vow to me” (31:13). But when you read Jacob's vow in chapter 28, he isn't vowing to the angel. His promise is to Yahweh (“the LORD” v.21). Yet this divine messenger claims to be the God of Bethel, the one Jacob made his vow to at Bethel. The last reference in Genesis to this angel occurs in chapter 48:16, where Jacob gives credit to the angel for redeeming or delivering him from all evil or harm.

Yahweh's divine messenger continues to appear throughout the OT in Exo 3 and 14; Num 22; Jud 2, 5, 6 and 13; 2Sa 14, 19, and 24; 1Ki 19; 2Ki 1 and 19; 1Ch 21; Psa 35; Isa 37 and 63; and Zec 1, 3, and 12. A study of these passages reveals that Yahweh's messenger continues to communicate as God and involves Himself in the affairs of the people of God like Yahweh. Perhaps the most significant passage concerning the potential identity of the angel of God occurs in Zechariah. In chapter 3, the angel of the LORD does three things that associate him with Jesus' work of salvation. First, He removes Joshua's filthy garments; second, He takes away his iniquity; and third, He clothes him with pure vestments (a ceremonial robe). This angelic work beautifully pictures Christ's salvific work of forgiving, justifying, and sanctifying the believer. Then the angel says, “this is what the LORD of hosts says”. In verse seven, He is the LORD of hosts' messenger.

Who is the angel of the LORD? The angel of the LORD is either Yahweh or the Son of God. If “the angel” is a manifestation of Yahweh, God, the Father, they are theophanies. But if the appearances were theophanies, one might expect they would continue into the NT. But they don't. After the birth of Christ, the angel of the LORD ceases to appear in the NT. Moreover, Yahweh can't be His own messenger. A messenger speaks on behalf of someone else. In John 12, Jesus says the words that He speaks are not His own but instead are the Father's words (12:49). Therefore, the soundest theological conclusion is Yahweh's messenger in the OT is the second person of the Triune God, Jesus, and these are pre-birth (or pre-incarnate) appearances of the LORD's Christ (Luke 2:26) often called Christophanies.

The angel of the LORD is Yahweh's deputy. He is his exclusive emissary, his ambassador, and divine messenger. As his Son, the angel speaks on behalf of Yahweh and actively works to accomplish the will of God. In the NT, the Word will reveal Him to be the LORD's Christ, Jesus, the Son of God; but in the OT, he is the LORD's divine messenger.