

Did Jesus Preexist as “the Angel of the LORD”?

by Servetus the Evangelical

The most mysterious and enigmatic figure in the Old Testament (OT) is “the angel of the LORD.” It occurs 56 times, and “the angel of God” occurs 10 times. He appeared to Abraham, Hagar, Isaac, Jacob, Manoah and his wife, Moses, Joshua, and many others.

There has never been any consensus in Judaism about the identity of this figure. The three eminent rabbinic Bible commentators in medieval times interpreted it as the “angel” of Exodus 23 and 33, whom God said he would send to guard Israel on its way to the promised land and taking possession of it. Many Jewish scholars have identified this angel as the captain of God’s angelic armies, and some claim he is Michael the archangel.

Church fathers generally interpreted “the angel of the LORD” in the OT as the Logos-Son. Since they also identified this Logos-Son as the preexistent Jesus Christ, they deemed “the angel of the LORD” as substantial OT evidence that Jesus Christ was God.

Justin Martyr, a 2nd century church father, trumpeted this interpretation more than anyone. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, a seemingly fictitious Jew, he frequently calls Jesus “the Angel.” The church later condemned such an identification. In fact, the author of the New Testament (NT) book of Hebrews tries strenuously to prove that Jesus is superior to angels, describing him as “having become as much better than the angels” (Hebrews 1.4).

Regardless, the majority of Christians have believed that “the angel of the LORD” in the OT was the preexistent Christ. For instance, preeminent Protestant Bible teacher John Calvin led the pastors of Geneva in condemning Michael Servetus as a heretic and getting him executed for a laundry list of allegations that included his denial of this belief.

Those who believe that Jesus is God are called “traditionalists.” Most contemporary, traditionalist Bible scholars do not believe that “the angel of the LORD” in the OT was the preexistent Jesus, although many Evangelicals still do. Most agree with historical critics that this figure was Yahweh himself. The two main reasons are that some OT narratives interchange “the angel of the LORD” with “the LORD” and present “the angel of the LORD” speaking in the first person on behalf of Yahweh. Therefore, James Dunn explains that “the angel of Yahweh is simply a way of speaking about Yahweh himself.” Yet these texts can be understood as an actual angel serving as Yahweh’s agent and therefore sometimes being depicted as Yahweh himself when in fact he is only Yahweh’s agent.

So, the three primary interpretations of “the angel of the LORD” in the OT are that this figure depicts Yahweh himself, the preexistent Jesus Christ, or an actual angel.

Some OT narratives relate that Israelites literally saw “the angel of the LORD.” Even Balaam’s donkey did (Numbers 22.25, 27). These texts include conversations between the angel and people. Some texts identify the figure as “a man” who is at first mistaken as a man. (The Bible records many other events when humans literally saw and conversed with an “angel(s),” and some of these narratives describe the angel(s) as a “man/men.”) Other narratives tell merely that “the LORD appeared,” without mentioning an angel. In such instances, “the angel of the LORD” probably should be presumed.

For example, Jacob wrestled all night with “a man” (Genesis 32.24). Jacob sensed his supernatural status and asked him for a blessing. When he gave it and departed, Jacob exclaimed, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (v. 30).

The first biblical clue that “the angel of the LORD” in the OT is not Yahweh himself is that some of these narratives present people literally seeing him and thereafter worrying that they would die because they believed that no human being could literally see God and live. Indeed, the Bible well attests to this truth. It is because God is unapproachable by mortal humans, dwelling in a glorious light, and thus is “invisible” to them. Similarly, theologians describe God as “transcendent”—existing beyond the material universe.

The best evidence that the angel of the LORD in the OT is to be distinguished from Yahweh is those narratives in which these two communicate with each other. It occurred when King David sinned by numbering Israel, and the angel appeared to him with raised sword for judgment (1 Chronicles 21.15-16; 2 Samuel 24.15-16). When David offered a sacrifice, “the LORD commanded the angel, and he put his sword back in its sheath” (1 Chronicles 21.27). Another time was when Yahweh and his angel spoke to each other in Zechariah’s vision of four angels riding horses to patrol the earth (Zechariah 1.12-13).

The most important OT texts about the angel of the LORD, without being mentioned, are those that tell about God informing Moses that he was going to “send an angel before you to guard” Israel, making him Israel’s guardian angel (Exodus 23.21-23; 32.34; 33.2).

There is a progressive revelation in narratives containing the expression “the angel of the LORD/God” and some other texts in the OT which lead to the identity of this figure. Therefore, Gerhard von Rad rightly concludes, agreeing with some rabbis, “Michael [the archangel] is the guardian angel of Israel.” The evidence can be summed up as follows:

- The angel of the LORD in the OT was associated exclusively with Israel.
- The angel of the LORD in the OT was not God himself but his personal representative.
- God appeared to certain Israelites by means of the angel of the LORD as his agent.
- God did not appear literally to these Israelites or they would have instantly died.
- God sent an angel as his intermediary to guard Israel (Exodus 23, 33).
- The OT angel of the LORD is the guardian angel of Israel (Exodus 3; Acts 7.30-35).
- The guardian angel of Israel is chief of the angelic armies of heaven (Joshua 5.13-15).
- The chief of heaven’s angelic armies is Michael the archangel (Revelation 12.7-9).
- Therefore, the guardian angel of Israel is Michael the archangel (Daniel 10.21; 12.1).
- Michael is the OT angel of the LORD, and God’s name is in his name (Exodus 23.21).

In my book, *The Restitution of Jesus Christ*, I devote 17 pages to an examination of “the angel of the LORD” in the OT.