

Identifying the “Angel of the Lord” in the Book of Judges

A Model for Reconsidering the Referent in Other Old Testament Loci

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The construction “angel of the Lord” appears more times in Judges than any other book in the Hebrew Scripture, but there is no scholarly consensus on the identity of this nameless angel. Some interpreters see this messenger as one of many angelic envoys. Others assert that this angel is a theophany or Christophany, arguing variously that (1) grammar indicates the definiteness of the angel; (2) the angel speaks in the first person; (3) looking at the angel is viewed as looking at Yahweh; (4) many feared for their lives upon encountering the angel; (5) the angel possesses attributes similar to God’s; and (6) the angel no longer appears after Jesus arrives. All but one of these arguments can be applied in identifying this angel in Judges. This article reviews the common lines of evidence by appealing to proper conventions of grammar, ancient Near Eastern customs regarding envoys, and Jewish theology. After reviewing the difficulties with each of these arguments, the article will propose a coherent view that is in keeping with sound hermeneutics and can serve as a model for reconsidering the referent when it appears elsewhere in Scripture.

Key Words: angel of the Lord, theophany, Christophany, Jesus, messenger, envoy, ontological equivalence, deity, Jewish monotheism, ancient Near Eastern customs

INTRODUCTION

An unresolved issue that deserves reexamination is the specific referent of the Old Testament (OT) term *the angel of the Lord*. Interpretations that have been proffered include a theophany, a Christophany, and a messenger¹ from God’s heavenly assembly. “Each interpretation has difficulties,” so

1. The lexical meaning of the term מַלְאָךְ (appearing 215 times in the Masoretic Text) is basically “messenger” or “angel,” and it stems from the Ugaritic verbal root form *lʾk* meaning: “to depute, minister, send a messenger... *the theophanic angel*” (BDB 521; HALOT 2:585–86). An important consideration in discussing the term *angel* or *messenger* is that “It was primarily a functional (as opposed to an ontological) description and, thus, could refer to messengers who were human, angelic, or divine (the best known of the latter being Hermes, ‘the messenger god’)” (Günther Juncker, “Christ as Angel: The Reclamation of a Primitive Title,” *TJ* 15 [1994]: 224).



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that “there is no consensus” among scholars.² Who is the angel of the Lord in the book of Judges? Is there a conclusive way to identify this messenger? The purpose of this article is to examine the identity of the angel of the Lord in the book of Judges and propose a view that is consistent with conventions of proper grammar, ancient Near Eastern (ANE) customs, and Jewish theology of Hebrew Scripture. This view is suggested as a model for understanding the identity of this being in other OT loci.³

THE GRAMMATICAL ARGUMENT FOR A DEFINITE VERSUS INDEFINITE ANGEL

The nouns יהוה and מלאך have an important grammatical relationship in specifying the angel’s identity. If the grammatical construction is more likely to designate a *definite* angel, this angel may be ontologically equivalent to the Lord. However, if the construction favors an *indefinite* angel, it may refer to any of a number of angels sent by the Lord, and it is harder to sustain the theophany view.

A definite angel. The phrase מלאך-יהוה appears in the construct state. Because the construct noun (מלאך) **cannot take a definite article, the absolute noun and proper name (יהוה) in the construct relationship may determine “the definiteness of the phrase.”**⁴ In this case, מלאך-יהוה would be rendered definitely: *the* angel of the Lord, rather than *an* angel of the Lord.

An indefinite angel. While “every proper noun is determinate per se,” this may not always apply to nouns in construct with a proper noun. This is corroborated by Gesenius: “In a few instances [when] the nomen regens appears . . . it often is so before a proper name,” as in . . . *a feast of the Lord* (Exod 10:9) . . . *an abomination unto the Lord* (Deut 7:29) . . . *a virgin of Israel* (Deut 22:19) . . . *a man of Benjamin* (1 Sam 4:12), etc.⁵ Hence, it may be correct to translate the anarthrous construct noun (מלאך) as indefinite, and W. G. MacDonald concludes, “One may therefore translate *m-Y* correctly as ‘*an* angel of the Lord’ or ‘*an* angel of Yahweh,’ and *m-E* as ‘*an* angel of God.”⁶

This point is substantiated in the LXX, which translates מלאך-יהוה as ἄγγελος κυρίου (in various case forms) without the article 24 times and with it 34 times.⁷ Even in arthrous instances in the book of Judges it is so trans-

2. James C. Moyer, “Theophany,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Walter A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1,087.

3. The phrase מלאך-יהוה occurs in the book of Judges 19 times (2:1, 4; 5:23, 6:11, 12, 21 [2×], 22 [2×]; 13:3, 13, 15, 16 [2×], 17, 18, 20, 21 [2×]), far more than in any other book of the Bible.

4. Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 157.

5. E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius Hebrew Grammar* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 412 (emphasis original).

6. W. G. MacDonald, “Christology and ‘The Angel of the Lord,’” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney Presented by His Former Students* (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 330.

7. Without the article: Gen 16:7; 22:11, 15; Exod 3:2; Judg 2:1; 6:11, 12, 22; 13:3, 16, 21; 2 Kgs 1:3, 15; 19:35; 1 Chr 21:12, 18, 30; Pss 33:8; 34:5, 6 [LXX]; Isa 37:36; Hag 1:13; Zech 3:1; 12:8;

lated only to designate the preceding anarthrous reference.⁸ As MacDonald affirms, "the grammatical rule of 'second mention' would always make it proper on the second use to translate, 'the angel of Yahweh.' The LXX does this for [ho] *angelos Kyrious* . . . in Judg 2:4, following the anarthrous use in Judg 2:1."⁹

Furthermore, anyone who argues for the uniqueness of this angel on purely grammatical grounds (definiteness of the construct noun) will encounter other difficulties when surveying the evidence. S. A. Meier argues that "If the . . . [definite] translation is more accurate, then another problem arises: is this figure a unique envoy who is always sent by God, or can a number of different supernatural beings be dispatched as 'the angel of Yahweh'? In other words, is the phrase 'angel of Yahweh' a description of an office held by different creatures, or is the phrase a title borne by only one unique creature?"¹⁰ Note also Hag 1:13, where ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου refers to the prophet Haggai.

THE IDENTITY OF THE ANGEL OF THE LORD IN JUDGES

Many former and contemporary theologians have argued that the OT angel of the Lord was either a theophany or a Christophany.¹¹ Although

Mal 2:7. With the article: Gen 16:9, 10, 11; Num 22:22–27, 31, 32, 34, 35; Judg 2:4; 5:23; 6:21 [2×], 22; 13:13, 15–18, 20, 21; 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Kgs 19:7; 1 Chr 21:15, 16; Hag 1:13; Zech 1:11, 12; 3:5, 6.

8. See Judg 2:1 (anarthrous) followed by 2:4 (arthrous), 6:11–12 (anarthrous) followed by 6:21 [2×] (arthrous), 6:22 (first mentioned anarthrous) followed by the second reference within the same verse (arthrous), 13:3 (anarthrous) followed by 13:13–16 (arthrous), 13:16 (anarthrous) followed by 13:17, 18, 20, 21 (arthrous), concluding with an anarthrous citation that may imply Manoah understood that it was "an angel of the LORD" that appeared and not just a human messenger. The only appearance of the phrase ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου without a preceding anarthrous reference still seems to refer back to the first anarthrous occurrence in the book.

9. MacDonald, "Christology and 'The Angel of the Lord,'" 330. He goes on to speculate that "Justification for including the article might also be theological as is done in the RSV for all instances except one (1 Sam 29:9). . . . [T]ranslators . . . are inclined to designate with the article anything that belongs to God. For instance . . . 'the finger of God' sounds more majestic than 'a finger of God.'"

10. S. A. Meier, "Angel of Yahweh," *DDD* 54. John M. Baze Jr., who argues for the former view, also admits "the Hebrew construct relationship, 'the Angel of the Lord', may be [translated by] the anarthrous phrase *angelos kuriou*. . . . So, it would be difficult to determine conclusively that the Alexandrian Jewish translators understood a distinction that this 'Angel' had a unique identity or that he was only one of the innumerable host at the providential disposal of the sovereign God" ("The Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament—Part 2," *Conservative Theological Journal* 4 [1998]: 66–67). Dorothy Irvin notes this as well (*Mytharion: The Comparison of Tales from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* [ed. Kurt Bergerhof, Manfred Dietrich, and Oswald Loretz; AOAT 32; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978], 92). As is common in the ANE, the angel of the LORD could be a "single messenger" that may head up a "delegation of messengers" (Wolfgang Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari: A New Translation, with Historical Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* [ed. Jerrold S. Cooper; Mesopotamian Civilizations 12; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003], 403–4, 588).

11. *Former theologians*: For a list of church fathers and others who began equating the angel of the LORD with an OT Christophany of the preincarnate Jesus Christ, see Juncker, "Christ as Angel," 224–48. *Contemporary theologians*: See Douglas McCready, "'He Came Down From Heaven': The Preexistence of Christ Revisited," *JETS* 40 (1997): 433–44; Noel D. Osborn,

the latter view is more popular, the common denominator for both views is that מלאך-יהוה is ontologically identified with deity. However, a different interpretation of the construction may better suit the grammar, ANE customs, and authorial intent in accordance with proper Jewish theology. Five basic arguments are commonly deployed to help identify מלאך-יהוה in the book of Judges and can serve in turn as a model to identify this being elsewhere in the OT.

The angel speaks in the first person. The angel of the LORD speaks in the first-person singular (“I”) no fewer than seven times the first time he appears (Judg 2:1–3)¹² and makes historical claims that seem to apply only to God: “I will never break My covenant with you” and “I led you out of Egypt” (2:1).¹³ Hence, some have viewed this angel as one and the same with God.¹⁴ Others cite Judg 6:11–12, 14, 16 as evidence that seeing מלאך-יהוה amounts to seeing God, because the angel seems to speak in the first-person singular.¹⁵ Moreover, when the angel of the Lord appears to Manoah in Judg 13:13–14, he refers to himself in the first-person singular: “I said” and “I commanded” refer to his previous address to Manoah’s wife.

While this kind of language of personal appropriation may seem to us unsuitable for mere messengers,¹⁶ ANE customs and texts indicate that envoys who came as agents of a god typically spoke in the first person and were addressed in the second person, just as the deity they represented. For

“Who Is the ‘Angel of the Lord?’” *BT* 39 (1988): 438–48; Gary Simmers, “Who Is ‘the Angel of the Lord?’” *Faith & Mission* 17 (2000): 3–16; Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (London: SPCK, 1992; repr., Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992); Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (SBT 2/17; Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1970), 19. For a discussion on the meaning and history of the use of the terms *theophany* and *Christophany*, see James A. Borland, *Christ in the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 5–10.

12. אעלה (I brought); אביא (I led); נשבעתי (I swore); אמר (I said); לא אפיר (I will not break); אמרו (I said); לא-אגרש (I will not drive out).

13. The phrase “my covenant” occurs 54 times in Scripture, nearly always in reference to God as the owner of the covenant (see, e.g., Gen 6:18; 9:9, 11, 15; 17:2, 4, 7, 9–14, 19, 21; Exod 6:4–5; 19:5; Lev 26:9, 15, 42, etc.). Compare the explicit reference to God in Exod 20:2, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

14. See James Muilenburg, “The Speech of Theophany,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 28 (1964): 38; Leon Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 231 n. 12; C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges with Introduction and Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings with an Introduction and Appendix* (ed. Harry M. Orlinsky; Library of Biblical Studies; New York: Ktav, 1970), 35–36.

15. Dale Ralph Davis, *Such a Great Salvation: Exposition of the Book of Judges* (Expositor’s Guide to the Historical Books; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 96 n. 2; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (vol. 1; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 287; J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 167–70.

16. Osborn notes that reactions to this angel (Gen 16:13; Judg 6:22–23, 13:22), statements about this angel as apparently being God (Gen 48:15, 16; Exod 3:4–22; Judg 6:14–24), and peculiar claims made by this angel (Gen 31:13, 32:29; Judg 13:18) are never predicated of any other angel (“Who Is the ‘Angel of the Lord?’” 436–37). However, this argument assumes (because it cannot be proven grammatically) that the same angel is always dispatched with the same title; moreover, if it is an official title for an office that any of a host of angels can occupy, then there is nothing unique about this angel.

example, in the Ugaritic Baal myth, Yammu's (Yam's) messengers came: "(Like) a fire, two fires they appeared."¹⁷ They spoke, "their [tongue] like a sharpened sword."¹⁸ This is strikingly reminiscent of the way the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush.¹⁹ Note that ʾIlu (mentioned eight lines before) responds as though Yammu is personally present when he is obviously not, which suggests that to see the *messenger* is *like* but not equal to seeing the *deity*:

<i>tḥm . ym . bʿlkm</i>	Message of Yammu, your master,
<i>[ʾādn] km . tḥt nhr .</i>	of your [lord], Ruler Naharu:
<i>tn . ḥlm . dtqh .</i>	Give (up), O gods, the one whom you
	obey
<i>dtqynh [hml]t .</i>	the one whom the [hordes (of the earth)]
	fear.
<i>tn . bʿl . wʿnnh .</i>	Give (up) Baʿlu and his attendants,
<i>bn . dgn . ʾartm pžh</i>	(give up) the Son of Dagan, that I might
	take possession of his gold.
<i>[wyʿn.] tr . ʾbh . ḥl .</i>	The Bull, his father ʾIlu, [replies]:
<i>ʿbdk . bʿl . yymm .</i>	Baʿlu (is) your servant, O <i>Yammu</i> ,
<i>ʿbdk . bʿl [ynhr] m .</i>	Baʿlu (is) your servant, [O <i>Naharu</i>], ²⁰
<i>bn . dgn . ʾ[s]rkm .</i>	the Son of Dagan (is) your prisoner.
<i>hw ybl . ʾargmnk . kilm</i>	He will indeed bring you tribute,
<i>[hw .] ybl . wbn . qdš . mnhyk .</i>	like (one) of the gods he will bring
	[you a gift],
	like one of the sons of the Holy One (he
	will bring you) presents ²¹

Two biblical passages also demonstrate that messengers in the same context can speak of the same referent in both the third and first persons:

"With whomever of your servants it is found, let him die, and we also will be *my lord's slaves*." And he said, "Now also let it be according to

17. Translated by J. C. L. Gibson (*CML* 42).

18. "The Baʿlu Myth" (trans. Dennis Pardee; *COS* 1.86:246; *CTA* 2.I:34). Some biblical loci reflect this same ANE terminology designating messengers (cf., e.g., Pss 57:5[4]; 64:4[3]).

19. Exod 3:2; Mark S. Smith ("Remembering God: Collective Memory in Israelite Religion," *CBQ* 64 [2002]: 637) and others note the tie between angels and fire. See also Ezek 8:2 and Dan 10:6, as well as the account of God's deliverance of his three servants from the fire by his messenger in Dan 3:24–26.

20. Yammu and Naharu (emphasized in the passage) are the same person; see Patricia Turner and Charles Russell Coulter, *Dictionary of Ancient Deities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 511.

21. Ugaritic text transliterated by Gibson (*CML* 42); translated by Dennis Pardee (*COS* 1.86:246; *CTA* 2.I:35–37). Meier also notes that envoys can speak in the first person as though the one who sent them were speaking, "The only time before this formula [i.e., "Thus said"] is the isolated case of Gapnu-wa-Ugaru sent to Anat; her trauma is eased by their opening words, 'No foe rises to oppose Baal, no enemy against the Cloud-Rider' [citing *CTA* 3.4–6]. Otherwise, no further additional comments or expansions are made by any messenger who simply delivers the message exactly as he received it (i.e. in the first person)" (*The Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World* [HSM 45; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988], 184).

your words; he with whom it is found shall be *my slave*, and you shall be blameless." (Gen 44:9–10)

Now Moses called all Israel and said to them: "You have seen all that *the LORD* did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land the great trials which your eyes have seen, the signs, and those great wonders. Yet *the LORD* has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day. And *I have led* you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn out on your feet. You have not eaten bread, nor have you drunk wine or similar drink, that you may know that *I am the LORD your God.*" (Deut 29:2–6)

In both narratives, the speakers (Joseph's messenger and Moses) switch from the third to the first person with no introductory formula, as though they were the primary referents of the dialogue.²²

As in many ANE accounts that lack an introductory formula,²³ messengers are not contextually distinguished from the sender in two other biblical narratives. With no introductory formula, Gen 19:15–26 describes two envoys who speak as if they were God. This convention seems to be extant, even by the New Testament (NT) period. Whereas Matt 8:6–9 records a *centurion* asking Jesus to heal his servant, it is the centurion's *messengers* who ask Jesus to heal the servant in Luke 7:3–8. These accounts are reconciled by an awareness of the role of ANE messengers. Whereas Matthew addresses a Jewish audience that was aware that messengers spoke on behalf of a person as though the person/sender were present, Luke's mixed audience may not have understood this custom. Thus, for Matthew's Jew-

22. MacDonald, "Christology and 'The Angel of the Lord,'" 331–32. Meier insists "that such speech, in unequivocal messenger contexts, is *always* preceded by a prefatory comment along the lines of 'PN [the sender] said to you' after which the message is provided; thus, a messenger always clearly identifies the words of the one who sent the message. A messenger would subvert the communication process were he or she to fail to identify the one who sent the messenger on his or her mission" ("Angel," *DDD* 49, emphasis added). However, this is not always the case. Even if we do not find a specific introductory formula, we may assume from the language being employed by the envoy that he speaks for the sender without causing any confusion, especially if this is the common ANE custom. For example, the Law was given through angels (cf. Acts 7:53, Gal 3:19, Heb 2:2), yet it appears as though God delivers it himself in Deut 33:2 (For a discussion of the interpretive issue related to Deut 33:2, see F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, "The Blessing of Moses," *JBL* 67 [1948]: 198–202; and E. Theodore Mullen Jr., "The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature [HSM 24; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980], 190 n. 133; see also pp. 191–93). The opposite occurs in Gen 48:15, where אלהים is the referent, yet the word מלאך appears in v. 16 without the terms אלהים or יהוה. Hence, the NET Bible correctly concludes, "Here he [Jacob] so closely associates the two that they become virtually indistinguishable. In this culture messengers typically carried the authority of the one who sent them and could even be addressed as such."

23. So in certain inscriptions of Assyria, Hatti, Lachish, and Egypt (see John T. Greene, *The Role of the Messenger and Message in the Ancient Near East. Oral and Written Communication in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Scriptures: Communicators and Communiques in Context* [BJS 169; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989], 45–75).

ish audience, the messengers are presented without specific mention, as though the centurion himself speaks to Jesus.²⁴

Moreover, it is incorrect to claim that the only occasions in which sender and messenger are not distinguished in either ANE literature or the Bible are those when מלאך-יהוה represents the Lord.²⁵ On the contrary, Blenkinsopp notes how Zechariah distinguishes מלאך-יהוה from the Lord by "the traditional prophetic functions of intercession (1.12–13) and issuing oracles under similar rubrics—thus says Yahweh' (1.14, 16, 17), 'oracle of Yahweh' (2:9, 10, 14), as well as the less traditional prophetic function of interpreting older prophecy (2:1–6 [see also 3:2, 6–7])."²⁶

Evidence from ANE customs and biblical texts may explain the confusion that still exists in viewing מלאך-יהוה as a deity and not as a mere representative who speaks *for* God but is addressed *as* God. Thus, Daniel I. Block notes how in numerous contexts "Yahweh/God and *mal'ak YHWH* are freely interchanged" (Judg 2:1–3, 6:22–23; cf. 13:3–22).²⁷ Further evidence shows how the angel and Yahweh ought to be distinguished as separate beings, though this may not be apparent at first blush. In Exod 32:34–33:17, Moses intercedes for the people after they violated the covenant. Yahweh replies by promising to "send My angel before you" (32:34, 33:2) but later says "My Presence will go with you" (33:14), thus making a clear distinction between the angel and Yahweh's presence *through* the angel who exercises the sender's authority.²⁸ As James F. Ross says, "It would seem that the question of the messenger's authority could be answered simply: it is that of the one who sends him. Thus a messenger is to be treated as if he were his master."²⁹ In the ANE context, kingly messengers often addressed others in the first person and were treated as if the actual king

24. Darrell L. Bock, *Can I Trust the Bible?* (Norcross, GA: Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 2001), 19.

25. Meier concludes this ("Angel," 49).

26. Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Social Roles of Prophets in Early Achaemenid Judah," *JOT* 93 (2001): 44.

27. Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC 6; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 110–11.

28. J. M. Wilson, "Angel," *ISBE* 1:125. Lowell K. Handy notes distinctions in nonbiblical ancient texts that militate against viewing the angel as deity: "When the gods sent messengers to humans, they themselves appeared, whereas in the biblical texts, messengers function to allow Yahweh to confer with mortals without having to appear . . . himself" (*Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994], 154). After thorough documentation, Greene concludes, "It has been demonstrated thus far that the messenger existed in the ANE primarily for the purpose of extending temporally and geographically the existing power of another's spoken/written words of will" (*The Role of the Messenger*, 41; see pp. 3–40).

29. James F. Ross, "The Prophet as Yahweh's Messenger," in *Prophecy in Israel: Search for an Identity* (ed. David L. Petersen; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 114. Mullen also says, "The form of the message, as repeated, leaves no doubt as to the concept of the authority of the messenger—the envoy had the same authority as the deity who dispatched him" (*Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, 210). See also James F. Ross, "The Prophet as Yahweh's Messenger," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson; New York: Harper, 1962), 101–7.

were present.³⁰ Semitic culture thus supports understanding the angel of the Lord as a messenger who represents God but is *not* God himself.³¹

Seeing the angel is viewed as seeing Yahweh. People declare they have seen God when they see the angel of the Lord, even though this may not be self-evident, because this peculiar angel comes in the form of a man. When the angel of the Lord appears to Gideon (Judg 6:11–13), he addresses the angel as אֲדֹנָי (“my lord”), the term of address typically used by one man to address another. Yet, in v. 14 we find that the Lord answers, with no textual clue to signal a change of speaker.³² Gideon’s response in v. 15 then changes to אֲדֹנָי (“my Lord”), the standard way to address God.³³ In the context of vv. 15–23, it appears that Gideon is addressing the angel and the Lord as the same person.³⁴

While this exchange seems to compel us to identify the envoy with the Lord,³⁵ several linguistic factors help to distinguish the two. In 6:11–14, the

30. Meier notes, “If there are no initial comments about the message to follow, the message then begins immediately with the messenger normally speaking as if he were the sender, that is, in the first person” (*Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, 182). Ronald Youngblood also says God’s angel could speak as though he were God himself (*The Heart of the Old Testament: A Survey of Key Theological Themes* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 17).

31. Osborn (“Who Is the ‘Angel of the Lord?’” 437) acknowledges the legitimacy of this argument that may explain numerous passages (see Gen 16:10, 21:18; Num 33:32–35; Judg 2:1–3; and Zech 3:4). See also MacDonald, “Christology and ‘The Angel of the Lord,’” 331.

32. See Gen 21:17, where God hears Hagar’s son, and the angel of God responds to Hagar. Contextually, it seems that God and this angel are the same person. See Baze, “The Angel of the Lord in the OT—Part 2,” 79.

33. HALOT 1:13; BDB 10-11.

34. Jarl E. Fossum, “The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origin of Gnosticism” (WUNT 36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), 177. Yet, Johannes Pedersen (*Israel: Its Life and Culture* [ed. Jacob Neusner, William Scott Green et al.; South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991], 496–97) notes how “later, when Yahweh’s personality and unity became strongly accentuated, a change occurred in the conception, and Yahweh’s *mal’ākh* became an independent divine personality, subordinate to Yahweh, the highest heavenly servant or angel.”

35. Albert Barnes calls this shift “remarkable” but still seems to equate the angel with God (*The Bible Commentary: Judges* [ed. F. C. Cook and J. M. Fuller; Barnes’ Notes 2; London: Blackie, 1879; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 431). Indeed, the LXX may have tried to alleviate the difficulty by replacing the MT’s “יהוה” with “ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου.” Block thus asserts that “[t]he MT, which is preferred as the more difficult reading, highlights the identification of Yahweh’s envoy with God himself” (*Judges*, 260 n. 521). While George F. Moore suggests that the LXX reading is evidence that the “Messenger is Yahweh himself” (*A Critical Exegetical Commentary on Judges* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895], 185), it actually “reflects the opposite solution to the problem of the three-way conversation and has ‘Yahweh’s envoy’ speaking in both verses” (Robert G. Boling, *Judges* [AB 6A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975], 132). Osborn argues that it is God speaking in both places, noting that “often when God is clearly speaking in the Old Testament, he will refer to himself in the third person,” as in Gen 9:16, Lev 6:2, and Amos 2:4 (“Who Is the ‘Angel of the Lord?’” 437). However, in all three of these cases a formal covenant is in view; this differs from a straightforward narrative in which God refers to himself in the third person but *without* a covenant in view. The Lord seems to refer to himself in the third person as a formal way to designate the name that bears the covenant. Hence, H. C. Leupold says “When God speaks and says the covenant is ‘between God and,’ [Gen 9:16] etc., this is merely a more formal type of expression appropriate for a covenant” (*Exposition of Genesis* [vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942], 342, emphasis original).

narrative shifts from the messenger speaking in the third person to the first person, suggesting that the Lord had entered into the conversation. Gideon accordingly shifts his form of address from the polite reply "my lord/sir" (אֲדֹנָי) in v. 13 to the divine reference "my Lord" (אֲדֹנָי) in v. 15 to distinguish creature from deity.³⁶ This shift in referent from an "angel of the LORD" (vv. 11–12) to "the LORD" (v. 14) seems to suggest that the Lord had remained in the background, while his angel occupied the foreground; as Boling explains, "Yahweh himself remains invisible. . . . [But He] has [now] caught up with his envoy, and Gideon is in a three way conversation without realizing it."³⁷ Not until the messenger disappears in v. 21 does the Lord emerge in v. 23 to calm Gideon's fear³⁸ and then again in vv. 25–26 to instruct Gideon about the proper system of worship (vv. 27–35).

Linguistic distinctions similar to those in Judg 6:11–26 are also found in Exod 3:2, Gen 21:17–19, and Zech 3:1–2. Robert Chisholm argues that "One can detect this same distinction between the Lord and his angel in Exod 3. The angel gets Moses' attention (v. 2) and the Lord then speaks to him (vv. 4ff.). In Gen 21:17–19 it is possible to distinguish between God and his angel."³⁹ Chisholm also notes in Zech 3:1–2 that "the angel of Yahweh and Satan stand in Joshua's presence. The introductory formula in v. 2 suggests that Yahweh speaks the following words, but the content of the speech (an imprecation offered in Yahweh's name) seems inconsistent with the formula. However, if Yahweh speaks through the angel, the speech is more understandable. The angel appeals to Yahweh in the third person, yet

36. BDB 10–11. For a thorough analysis showing the distinction between "my lord/sir" (אֲדֹנָי in v. 13) and the divine reference "my Lord" (אֲדֹנָי in v. 15), see Marc Zvi Brettler, *God Is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor* (JSOTSup 76; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 40–41.

37. Boling, *Judges*, 131. Smith ("Remembering God," 637) also acknowledges that the distinct departure of the angel in Judg 6:21 and appearance of Yahweh in 6:23 points to "their separate identities." See also Adele Reinhartz ("Why Ask My Name?": *Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 174–75), who treats this issue thoroughly but leaves it open for the reader to decide.

38. Block (*Judges*, 264) thus logically comments, "In the absence of any reference to the messenger, one may ask whether Gideon hears Yahweh's voice from the sky, without any visible sign of his presence."

39. Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Judges," unpublished class commentary (Dallas Theological Seminary, 2003), 14 n. 313. One can also interpret Yahweh as speaking through the envoy, because the messenger appears in a burning bush reminiscent of both ANE imagery and biblical passages that associate messengers with an appearance like fire or terminology referring to fire (see COS 1:246; Saul M. Olyan, *A Thousand Thousands Served Him: Exegesis and the Naming of Angels in Ancient Judaism* (ed. Martin Hengel and Peter Schäfer [Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993], 71; 1 Kgs 18:24; Ezek 8:2; Dan 3:24–26, 10:6; Ps 104:4; Heb 1:7). Chisholm's point in comparing the distinctions noted in Judg 6:11–26 with the Lord's revelation to Moses in Exod 3 is substantiated by Meier: "God's revelation to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:2–4:17) encompasses 38 verses in which Yahweh is explicitly and repeatedly described as speaking with Moses. But the entire account is made problematic when it is prefaced with the phrase, 'mal'ak YHWH appeared to him in a blazing fire' (Exod 3:2), which is quoted in the NT as an indefinite 'an angel' with no reference to 'the Lord' (Acts 7:30; cf. vv. 35, 38). On the other hand, the Vulgate simply reads, 'Yahweh appeared . . .' preserving no reference to *mal'ak* (Josephus refers only to a 'voice' that speaks from the bush before God is identified in *Ant.* II.264–2)" ("Angel," 56).

his imprecation is divinely inspired and expresses Yahweh's sentiment."⁴⁰ Zechariah 3:6-7 further depicts the angel as distinguishing himself from the Lord.

Manoah and his wife also have an experience like Gideon's. The angel of the Lord appears to Manoah's wife in Judg 13:3 to announce Samson's birth, but in v. 6 she calls the angel "a man of God" (NIV). Likewise, when Manoah speaks to the angel he refers to him as "הַאִישׁ" (v. 11). Manoah does not realize he had seen "the angel of the LORD" until the messenger ascends in the flames of the sacrifice (vv. 19-22), an apparent theophany. However, we need not accept Manoah's testimony as *literally* having seen the "LORD" (13:22), although it is *theologically* correct (cf. Exod 24:11, 33:20; Isa 6:1-5; 1 Tim 6:16). He could have meant that seeing "הַאִישׁ" was *equivalent* to seeing God. Indeed, his wife corrects him in the following verse: one who saw God should have died, and he lived (13:23). Thus, we need not understand this angel as ontologically equivalent to God himself, whether Manoah made an erroneous assumption or in fact recognized the association of messenger with sender attested in ANE culture, as demonstrated above.

Sufficient linguistic evidence is adduced from Judg 6:11-26 and 13:1-35 to conclude plausibly that the messenger can be distinguished from deity. Hence, dogmatic claims that this angel and God are indistinguishable in these contexts are unwarranted.

People lived after seeing the angel of the Lord. Upon seeing this angel, people such as Gideon and Manoah feared for their lives (cf. Judg 6:22-23, 13:22). Because it is written that anyone gazing on God would die (Exod 33:20),⁴¹ and the protagonists were amazed that they lived after seeing the angel of the Lord, the audience would have assumed that they saw God:

- Major premise: No one can see God face to face and live.
- Minor premise: Anyone seeing the angel of the Lord face to face feared for his or her life.
- Conclusion: This messenger must be God.

Yet, amazed as Gideon and Manoah were after seeing the angel of the Lord, they *did* live. If we accept the ample biblical testimony that humans cannot live upon seeing God (cf. Gen 32:30; Exod 33:20; Judg 6:22, 13:22; Deut 4:33), then the angel must *not* have been God, because the protagonists would

40. Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "The Heavenly Assembly and the Messenger of Yahweh" (unpublished class notes, "Exegesis in the Prophets," Dallas Theological Seminary, 2003), 3. Tammi J. Schneider also notes a distinction in Judg 6:15 between God and the messenger through whom he speaks: "The deity, *through the messenger*" (*Judges: Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* [ed. David W. Cotter; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000], 105, emphasis added).

41. Jacob expresses the same concern prior to the Mosaic law: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Gen 32:30). The rabbis record in *b. Hul.* 92a that the angel who wrestled with Jacob admits to being created. Thus, typical Jewish thought did not assume that when Jacob or anyone else claimed to have seen God face to face, he or she literally saw God. This may well have been the common ANE belief.

have died. One might respond by suggesting that the messenger came in veiled form (not in full splendor), like Jesus Christ in the NT. But if seeing this angel was tantamount to seeing God—just as Jesus himself testified that to see him was tantamount to seeing the Father (John 14:9b), then why did Moses ask to see God's glory, when the angel of the Lord had appeared to him numerous times before, especially at the burning bush? Moreover, if this angel was the anonymous preincarnate Christ, who then would be more suited to reveal God's glory?

On the other hand, if the linguistic details parallel ANE custom regarding the role of messengers and in fact *distinguish* the two entities, this would explain why people did not die upon seeing the angel. Thus, while in one sense to see the angel is *like* seeing God, because he has authority to speak for God, in another sense to look at this messenger is *not* to look at God literally, because he is *not* ontologically equivalent to God.⁴²

This angel possesses attributes similar to God's. Some theologians argue for deity based on the same attributes possessed by the angel of the Lord (omniscience by prophesying [Judg 6:11–24], omnipotence by fulfilling the prophecy, omnipresence by physically appearing while speaking from heaven [vv. 12–23; cf. 13:1–25] and by apparently being worshiped as he consumes sacrifices offered to God [cf. 6:21–22, 13:19–20]).⁴³

However, to equate the angel with God by citing his ability to foretell prophecy (omniscience), his power to fulfill prophecy (omnipotence), and his apparent simultaneous presence as both a man and the Lord speaking from heaven (omnipresence) is not a convincing argument. First, no one can prove that it was solely through this angel's omnipotence and omniscience that any prophecy came to pass. One can just as easily portray the angel, as God's representative, communicating God's plan in the first person. Thus, while the angel *appears* to initiate the prophecy, this understanding portrays God as the *source* of the prophecy and the angel as the *agent* who delivers it.

Second, if the linguistic features discussed above do create valid distinctions, then the *omnipresence* or *messenger merging with God* arguments are nullified. Prophets served a similar role whether or not they used the

42. Arthur H. Lewis (*Judges/Ruth* [Chicago: Moody, 1979], 75) presumes to solve the identity of the angel appearing in 13:3–5, 9–20 by suggesting that the visitor may be the archangel Gabriel who appeared to Mary under similar circumstances (Luke 1:19). However, this is highly unlikely, since the angel never uses a personal name other than the title מלאך יהוה. Rather, as Smith suggests, it is more likely that Manoah did not consider this angel to be deity: "In v. 22 Manoah characterizes the figure as an ^{2e}*lōhīm*, probably not God, but a divine figure of some sort that they have seen." Thus, "the narrative never says that Manoah did not think that the figure might be a divinity of some sort, only that he did not recognize the figure to be a messenger of Yahweh" ("Remembering God," 639).

43. Baze, "The Angel of the Lord in the OT—Part 2," 79–81. For similar arguments, see also Daniel Finestone, "Is the Angel of Jehovah in the Old Testament the Lord Jesus Christ?" *BSac* 95 (1938): 373–76. Lewis (*Judges*, 44) believes that "At times the Angel of the Lord was addressed as God, worshipped, and believed to be the divine presence (Gen. 21:17; 22:11)—the Angel spoke as God; 31:11, 13—the Angel claimed to be God, 'The God of Bethel.'" Borland sees the removal of Moses' shoes as a sign of worship in Exod 3:5 and Joshua's act of worship in Josh 5:14 as indicative of this angel's deity (*Christ in the OT*, 44–45; see also 42–43).

prophetic formula כה אמר יהוה in the same way as the phrase used for the angel of the Lord in Zech 3:7.⁴⁴ Block notes as well, “Prophets are also often referred to as Yahweh’s *mal’āḳim*.”⁴⁵ Similarly, the angel of the Lord was Yahweh’s envoy who was sent ahead to fight against the Canaanites and “functioned as the alter ego of God” (cf. Exod 23:20–23, 33:2; also see 32:34).⁴⁶ The angel is not God, though he appears to have the attributes of God (such as forgiving sin), “because God’s name, i.e., His character and thus His authority, are in the angel.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, since the phrase “angel of the LORD” was also used to denote a prophet and priest (cf. Hag 1:13, Mal 2:7), it seems irreverent—if the angel of the Lord is in fact God—to use this phrase for someone other than God.⁴⁸

Third, regarding the worship of this messenger, MacDonald accurately states: “The angel-Christ view does not reckon with the true intermediary character of angels as capable of communicating all man’s responses—even worship—to God.” That Paul must warn against angel worship in Col 2:18–19 suggests that people considered this a natural act, perhaps stem-

44. This prophetic formula occurs 420 times in the OT, not counting other variant formulas. See, e.g., Exod 4:22; Josh 7:13; Judg 6:8; 1 Sam 2:27, 10:18; 1 Kgs 11:31; Isa 7:17; Jer 2:2; Zech 1:14, etc. *Angel of the LORD in Zech 3:7*: Barnes (*Judges*, 419–20) is wrong to affirm that the angel of the Lord never uses the prophetic formula. Not only does the angel use this formula (cf. Zech 1:14; 3:6–7) but Greene demonstrates that the prophets also had other ways to introduce God’s message, which Martin J. Buss observes (*The Prophetic Word of Hosea: A Morphological Study* [Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1969], 128). Greene then cites “evidence in several prophetic books—and one apocryphal book . . . which demonstrates that not every occurrence of *kh ’mr yhw* is followed by a so-called message, or that strictly speaking it is even to be called a messenger formula, for other formulae function in the same way whether it (i.e., *kh ’mr yhw*) is present or not. What can be said with certainty is that at best the formula and its variants ‘are used when the importance and the reliability of a prophetic utterance are to be particularly emphasized’” (Greene, *The Role of the Messenger*, 183, 185; see also pp. 74–75).

45. See 2 Chr 36:15–16; Isa 42:19, 44:26; Hag 1:13; Mal 3:1.

46. Block, *Judges*, 110.

47. Wilson, “Angel,” 1:125. Rabbi Eleazar is known to have said “on the basis of the Waw in the beginning of [Exod 23:21] . . . that ‘And YHWH’ refers to both God and his heavenly court” (Jarl E. Fossum, “Kyrios Jesus as the Angel of the Lord in Jude 5-7,” *NTS* 33 [1987]: 229). Furthermore, *Apoc. Ab.* does not ascribe deity to this angel but asserts that he carries God’s authority, since the divine name dwells in him (10:8-9). 3 *Enoch* 12:5 refers to the angel as “the lesser YHWH,” also known as Metatron, who has 70 names (3 *En.* 48d). The Talmud refers to this angel in *b. Sanh.* 38a and concludes that, though Metatron is called by the name of his master, he should not be worshiped and has no right to pardon sin (see also *B. Qam.* 92a–93b). The other Talmudic passage that comes closest to ascribing deity to an angel is *b. Ber.* 62b–63a (“And should you say that it was merely an angel who spoke in this way to Gideon”), but it is hardly decisive and would not be expected to contradict the entire rabbinic corpus that attests otherwise. Apostles (lit., “messengers”) bore a similar authority to convey forgiveness of sins and were understood to represent the sender as the actual one who forgave (Julius R. Mantey, “Evidence that the Perfect Tense in John 20:23 and Matthew 16:19 is Mistranslated,” *JETS* 16 [1973]: 129–38).

48. This point should not be pressed because אלהים can also be used to refer to “rulers, judges, angels, prophets, gods, goddesses, and the God of Israel” (BDB 43–44).

ming from the OT covenant intermediaries who stood for God.⁴⁹ This OT fact surfaces even more clearly when one realizes that the Colossian church was plagued with a predominant Jewish-Christian problem of wanting to continue to keep the Law (2:14–17). Would Jews want to keep the Law and worship angels (Exod 20:5), when the OT forbade any form of worship of "all the host of heavens" (Deut 4:19, 17:3; Jer 8:2; 2 Kgs 21:2–5)? It seems highly inconsistent unless one understands that a certain special intermediary represented God, not with a personal name like other envoys but bearing God's name (Exod 23:20–21). One could also see John's attempt to worship the nameless angel in Rev 19:10 and 22:9 as consistent with acceptable practice under the old covenant, albeit now replaced by the new dispensation. But why would John—familiar with Hebrew Law, mature in age and spiritual wisdom at this point in his life—confusedly worship an angel? The former hypothesis seems to fit best.⁵⁰

Furthermore, in many ANE accounts it was understood that messengers received homage on behalf of the sender.⁵¹ Meier cites various accounts.⁵² For example, Ereshkigal's messenger to Anu stands while others bow to him. In another account: "Tammariu, the king of Elam, said, 'How could Ummanigash kiss the ground before the messengers of Ashurbanipal?'" In a Neo-Assyrian text, one reads: "'To your messenger may they [all lands] do homage' (*ana pān mār šiprika appa lilbinū*). The tradition is old, for Shulgi's envoy expects it when sent abroad, and he notes the insult when such homage is not granted: 'When I came to the

49. For an excellent discussion on this point, see MacDonald, "Christology and 'The Angel of the Lord,'" 332. For a similar dispensational view, see Wendell E. Kent, "The Spoiling of Principalities and Powers: A Critical Monograph on Colossians 2:15," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1962): 13. Kent explains his preferred interpretation of the worship of angels in Col 2:10, 15, 18: "It implies that God 'clothed' with angels . . . at the death of Christ stripped Himself of them. . . . The many references to angels in the Old Testament indicate that angels had a large ministry in those times. It was God's way of revealing Himself until the Son came to be the final revelation of the Father."

50. MacDonald, "Christology and 'The Angel of the Lord,'" 332. This view is opposed by Borland (*Christ in the OT*, 45) and John Owen (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [vol. 3; Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace, 1960], 235–36).

51. When Yam's messengers arrive, the gods bow to them, which incenses Baal (i.e., Ba'lu), and he resorts to attacking the messengers as though they were Yam. However, two of the gods in the assembly ('Anatu and 'Attartu) stop Baal from striking and remind him that these are mere messengers (COS 1.86:246–47, citing CTA 2.I:38). This account appears in Ugaritic, Assyrian, Neo-Assyrian, and perhaps even Egyptian. Before Israel had received the Law, when Moses delivered a message from God, "the people bowed their heads and worshiped" (Exod 12:27; cf. 3:1–9); this was probably directed to God but occurred in the presence of Moses since he acted "as God" to Pharaoh and Aaron (4:16, 7:1). This sort of worship by proxy may indicate a common pattern that Israel had learned and adopted in Egypt after more than 400 years in residence. If we include situations where Israelites living in Canaan worshiped before the angel of the Lord (Judg 6:21–22, 13:19–20), then either this was also a common Canaanite practice, or it was introduced to Israel in Egypt.

52. The ensuing examples are cited in Meier, *Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, 157–58.

gate of the palace, no one took notice of the greetings of my king: those who were sitting did not rise (and) did not bow down.” Thus, accepting worship by the angel of the LORD does not in itself prove deity; as Meier concludes, “Clearly, bowing toward the messenger is a sign of submission to the one who sent the envoy.”⁵³

This angel disappears when Jesus arrives. Interestingly, most theologians believe the phrase “the angel of the Lord” never appears again once Jesus arrives.⁵⁴ While this line of reasoning does not directly pertain to Judges, it bears on who the messenger in Judges might be in light of progressive revelation and how we should handle the entire corpus of Scripture, given this peculiar canonical feature: Why does the angel fade in the NT once Jesus arrives?⁵⁵

By the same token, why do NT writers never mention or even imply that Jesus was typified in the angel of the Lord, as he was in Adam, the high priest, the rock in the wilderness, the prophets, Moses, and other explicit types? This silence begs an answer. Once the incarnation took place, the complete absence of the angel of the Lord in the NT argues that there was no further need for his unique OT role. Hebrews 1:1–2 implies that, once Messiah arrived, all other envoys in this dispensation ceased, thus explaining the total absence of the angel’s appearance in the NT. Jesus became God’s earthly, visible representative once for all, and a temporary heavenly envoy became obsolete.⁵⁶

Furthermore, if מלאך־יהוה in the OT, translated in the LXX as ἄγγελος κυρίου, is the same ἄγγελος κυρίου of the NT that should be translated “the angel of the Lord” rather than rendering it “an angel of the Lord,” the premise of this essay is strengthened. Grammarian Nigel Turner advocates that in the NT “ἄγγελος κυρίου is not *an angel* but *the angel* [of the Lord].”⁵⁷ Daniel B. Wallace concurs with Turner.

One of the many theologically significant constructions is ἄγγελος κυρίου (cf. Matt 1:20; 28:2; Luke 2:9; Acts 12:7; Gal 4:14 [ἄγγελος θεοῦ]). In the LXX this is the normal phrase used to translate מלאך־יהוה (“the angel of the Lord”). . . . Indeed, although most scholars treat ἄγγελος κυρίου in the NT as “an angel of the Lord,” there is no *linguistic* basis for doing so. Apart from theological argument, it is most probable that ἄγγελος κυρίου is *the* angel of the Lord in the NT and is to be identified with the *the* angel of the Lord of the OT.⁵⁸

53. Ibid., 158.

54. Borland, *Christ in the OT*, 29. For a more nuanced view, see Lewis, *Judges*, 44.

55. References to an angel of the Lord in the NT are anarthrous except for Matt 1:24, and this only denotes the antecedent anarthrous construction for an angel appearing in 1:20. Other loci where an angel of the LORD appears include Matt 2:13, 19; 28:2; Luke 2:9; Acts 5:19; 8:26; 12:7, 23.

56. Wilson, “Angel,” 1:125.

57. Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of the New Testament Greek*, vol. 3: *Syntax* (ed. James Hope Moulton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 180.

58. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 252.

Because Jesus appears together with the angel of Lord of the OT, how can this OT angel be the preincarnate Christ?⁵⁹

PROPOSAL: THE ANGEL OF THE LORD IS YAHWEH'S
REPRESENTATIVE OR AGENT

The evidence adduced from grammar, linguistic distinction, ANE custom, and Scripture all points to understanding this angel as a representative of God rather than a theophany. This proposal is further strengthened by evidence from the prevailing context of Jewish monotheism⁶⁰ and by our understanding of how messengers functioned in the ANE as the apparent initiators of action.

Claiming this angel's deity in passages where the Lord is distinguished from the angel creates a problem for a monotheistic audience. Israelite monotheism does not permit interpreting the angel of the Lord as Yahweh in passages that distinguish the angel from Yahweh. What would an OT saint think of these cases (e.g., Judg 6:11–24; 2 Sam 24; 1 Chr 21:15; Zech 1:12, 3:1–10)?

Unique among their ANE neighbors was Israel's monotheistic belief system.⁶¹ Thus, we should reexamine Stuckenbruck's assumption regarding the angel of the Lord: "As long as the term יהוה? מלאך could represent alternative language for God, its presence in passages from the Hebrew scriptures posed no difficulty for monotheistic belief."⁶² If—as we have argued above in many passages—this angel and Yahweh are to be *distinguished*, how could one maintain a monotheistic view while also main-

59. Now if the angel in Matt 1:20, 24 who speaks to Joseph is the same angel named Gabriel who speaks to Mary in Luke 1:26–28, then this could not be the nameless "the angel of the Lord" of the OT.

60. This contradicts theories that posit an evolutionary development of Israel's monotheism. For instance, Irvin postulates that the word *angel* was later added in passages where this being appeared to exercise attributes of deity in order to remove any polytheistic tendencies by reinforcing the concept of a transcendent God who communicates with man through intermediaries (*Mytharion*, 101–4; cf. also Marjo C. A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* [UBL 8; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990], 296, 628–35). For the opposing view, that monotheism was an early development in Israel, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (HSS 31; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); Johannes C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (rev. ed.; BETL 91; Leuven: Peeters, 1997); Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); Michael S. Heiser, "Monotheism, Polytheism, Monolatry, or Henotheism: Toward an Assessment of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible," *BBR* 18 (2008): 1–30. See also Richard S. Hess, who presents evidence against the theory that Yahweh's name is derived from extrabiblical sources, supporting the proposal that Yahweh's personal name existed in the premonarchial period (1000 B.C.) ("The Divine Name Yahweh in Late Bronze Age Sources?" *UF* 23 [1991]: 181–88; idem, "The Name Game: Dating the Book of Judges," *BAR* 30/6 [2004]: 38–41).

61. Considering that the existing ANE pantheon contained lower messenger gods, angels were regarded in Israel as lesser powers and messengers who came in the name of the only God. See Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 49–50.

62. Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology: A Study in Early Judaism and in the Christology of the Apocalypse of John* (WUNT 70; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 67 n. 58.

taining the distinct personalities and deity of both of these beings from an OT perspective?⁶³ Noting this tension, Osborn concedes that “In some passages the Lord addresses the angel of the Lord or vice versa. In 1 Chr 21.15 the Lord tells the angel of the Lord to stop killing the Israelites. This is found in the parallel passages in 2 Sam 24 also. In Zech 1.12 the angel of the Lord addresses the Lord. These passages seem to imply that the angel of the Lord is not the Lord himself.”⁶⁴

This exchange is often explained anachronistically by identifying the angel as the preincarnate Christ or “a reflection of the Trinity.”⁶⁵ This may appear to solve the problem from a *dispensational* perspective but not in a way that reflects consistent historical diachronic interpretation of authorial intent in light of progressive revelation. Neither can it be solved from a canonical perspective: There is nothing in the NT—such as Jesus’ clarification that Abraham and Moses knew (in a limited way) of the promise of His future arrival (cf. Gen 12:3, 15:6, 22:8; Deut 18:15 to John 5:46–47, 8:56; Luke 24:23–27; Acts 3:22–26; Rom 3:21–4:5; Gal 3:16)—that would clarify for the reader any earlier, more ambiguous revelation identifying this angel as the preincarnate Christ.

How could Hebrew authors record passages indicating this angel’s equality with God where the two are distinguished without creating a theological dilemma? God had not revealed the Trinitarian concept to OT saints, yet there is no evidence that the authors or readers who held so tenaciously to monotheism ever objected, which makes suspect this interpretation of the angel. The Hebrews regarded God as so transcendent that neither men nor angels—though they might bear His name and revelation—could ever be ontologically equated with God (cf. Ps 113:5; Isa 40:12–41:4).⁶⁶ This explains why Jesus’ disciples and others were so hesitant to accept not only His death and resurrection but also His deity. For Jews, it was unthinkable that God would become human and die (Mark 4:41, John 14:7–9). Thus, the angel-Christ or theophany view is at best incongruent with monotheistic belief and authorial understanding in the OT *Sitz im Leben*, and at worst patently anachronistic.

63. Handy notes how biblical writers were careful to maintain a monotheistic view: “The careful use of the messengers in the Bible certainly reflects a desire on the part of the biblical authors to present Yahweh as the only ‘god’ and to exclude messengers from this status. It is true, however, that the angels are understood as presenting the words and actions of Yahweh as though he himself were presenting them.” Yet, Handy adds, “No matter what the historical progression of religious beliefs may have been in Judah or Israel, the biblical texts present a picture of the religious world in which Yahweh is the sole recognized deity for Judah and Israel” (*Among the Host of Heaven*, 158). See also von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 210–12; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. John Baker; OTL 1; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 220–27.

64. Osborn, “Who Is the ‘Angel of the Lord?’” 437.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: A Commentary on Books III–V of the Psalms* (TOTC 14b; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 401–2.

Messengers were regarded as the source of executive activity. Culturally, Hebrews understood how one could be *presented* as the source of an action by having a role in the process without actually *being* the source of the action. As told in the Passover Haggadah in commenting on Deut 26:8, "And the Lord brought us from Egypt, not by means of an angel, nor by means of a seraph, nor by means of a messenger."⁶⁷ Thus, Israelite tradition understood that even the angel who led Israel out of Egypt was not necessarily the nation's deliverer (e.g., Judg 2:1, Isa 63:9) but Yahweh himself. That is why Exod 33:1 can refer to Moses as the one who brought the people out of the land of Egypt, while this same action is ascribed to the angel of the Lord in Judg 2:1. Yet, Exod 20:2 says "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." That יהוה was not identical with this מלאך who was sent is corroborated by the admonition that God would annihilate Israel for their stubbornness if he were in their midst (Exod 33:1–5).⁶⁸

The angel as theophany undercuts Christology. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is one of the most unique events in history. What makes it so unique is that God took on human nature and dwelled among men (John 1:1–14). However, if Christ already existed in some body, the incarnation would not in fact be all that unique, for a body, however temporary or angelic in form, is nevertheless a body. MacDonald sums up all the theological and practical Christological dilemmas that arise if the angel-Christ view is accepted:

The argument for the angel-Christ view proves too much, finding Jesus retroactively in every nameless angel the Lord sent. It also falls prey to the Arian arguments for creaturism and essential subordinationism. Additionally, it places the most serious docetic question marks after the incarnation.

Angelomorphic christophanology is threatened by the three main factors: the linguistic phenomena, the cultural understanding of patriarchal and monarchical *malak*, and the theology of the NT that stresses: (1) the uniqueness and historicity of the incarnation; (2) the teaching of the *supra*-angelic character of the Son—not as a superangel but in consonance with Heb 1:1–14; and (3) the methodology of building Christology without ever capitalizing upon some great secret of angelic identities in the OT.⁶⁹

67. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *A Passover Haggadah for Jewish Believers* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1970), 15. Fossum adds that "We must also take note of rabbinic tradition which maintains that although the angel Metatron is to be acknowledged as the Angel of the Lord described in Exod 23:20–21 and the possessor of a name 'like that of his Master', he is not to be accepted as Israel's פרוותיקא, 'messenger' or 'deliverer'" ("Kyrios Jesus as the Angel of the Lord," 234).

68. Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (2nd ed.; vols. 3–4; London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 497; cf. pp. 495–98.

69. MacDonald, "Christology and 'The Angel of the Lord,'" 335. See Ronald F. Youngblood (*Exodus* [Everyman's Bible Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1983; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf

In conclusion, the angel of the Lord represents Yahweh as his agent. We have examined the identity of the angel of the LORD in the book of Judges as a model for understanding the identity of this being elsewhere in Scripture. The *Sitz im Leben* out of which the envoy concept arose must comprise the hermeneutical grid through which we recognize the identity of מלאך-יהוה. Consistent with conventions of proper grammar, linguistic distinction, ANE customs, Jewish theology, and the Hebrew Scriptures, the proposal of this author is that the angel of the LORD represents God like no other OT envoy but is not a theophany. At the very least, theologians should shift the focus of this argument from the identity of the angel to *what* the angel says and *whom* the angel represents.

& Stock, 2000], 32), who also takes issue with the angel-Christ view of the angel as the OT pre-incarnate Jesus and, like MacDonald and I do, concludes that, although the angel-Christ view is possible, “such an interpretation dilutes the uniqueness of Jesus’ incarnation and undercuts the teaching of Hebrews 1:3–14, where God’s Son is said to be superior to all the angels.”