

Genesis 16:7-13

“Hagar Encounters the Angel of the Lord”

“Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. He said, ‘Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from and where are you going?’ And she said, ‘I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.’ Then the angel of the LORD said to her, ‘Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority.’ Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, ‘I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count.’ The angel of the LORD said to her further, ‘Behold, you are with child, and you will bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has given heed to your affliction. He will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand *will be* against everyone, and everyone’s hand *will be* against him; and he will live to the east of all his brothers.’ Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, ‘You are a God who sees’; for she said, ‘Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?’”

While there are a number of reaching issues present in the preceding narrative, detailing how being barren, that Abraham’s wife Sarah permitted her husband to have relations with her handmaiden Hagar to produce a child (Genesis 16:1-6)¹⁰—some significantly more important issues and questions about the nature of God, and God communicating important messages to various people, are posed in the events that followed. Hagar, having been impregnated by Abraham, finds herself being despised by Sarah (Genesis 16:6b). So that she may be consoled, she is met by a figure labeled to be the *malakh ADONAI* or *malakh YHWH* (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה), which most Bibles designate as “the angel of the LORD,” but given how the Hebrew *malakh* more neutrally means “messenger” (*BDB*),¹¹ is seen as “the LORD’s messenger” (Alter) or “YHWH’s messenger” (Fox). This is not the only place in the Tanach where the figure of the *malakh YHWH* or “messenger of the Lord” appears, and given some of the actions which are witnessed between this entity and various humans, inquiries have been made as to whether or not this is just a supernatural intermediary between God and mortals, or something significantly more.

There is a long history of interpretation, going back to some of the early centuries of emerging Christianity, which has sought to identify the figure of “the messenger of the Lord” with a pre-Incarnate Yeshua the Messiah, although others have simply seen “the messenger of the Lord” as only being an angelic intermediary, and nothing more.¹² (The English term “angel” is simply derived from the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *malakh*, *angelos*, ἄγγελος, “a messenger, envoy” [LS].¹³) A semi-liberal resource, such as the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, actually indicates how there are Biblical “texts [which] refer to a single ‘messenger (*malakh*) of YHWH,’ who serves as God’s presence among God’s people and is difficult to distinguish from God.”¹⁴ The *ISBE*, which is relatively more conservative, is more cautious when it comes to the figure of “the angel of the Lord,” offering the broad guideline,

“It is certain that from the beginning God used angels in human form, with human voices, in order to communicate with man; and the appearances of the angel of the Lord, with his special redemptive relation to God’s people, show the working of that divine mode of self-revelation

¹⁰ Some of these issues are explored in the author’s commentary on Galatians 4:22-26 in *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, as well as his article “Is Polygamy for Today?” (appearing in *Men and Women in the Body of Messiah: Answering Crucial Questions*).

¹¹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 521.

¹² Cf. Walton, 462-466 for a summary.

¹³ LS, 4.

¹⁴ “angel,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 34.

which culminated in the coming of the Savior, and are thus a foreshadowing of, and a preparation for, the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Further than this it is not safe to go.”¹⁵

It is hardly required for every usage of *malakh ADONAI* or *malakh YHWH* in the Hebrew source text, to be or imply that the figure encountered is supernatural, much less is some manifestation of God proper. In Haggai 1:13, for example, it is witnessed, “Then Haggai, the messenger of the LORD [*malakh ADONAI*], spoke by the commission of the LORD to the people saying, “I am with you,’ declares the LORD.” The context of this statement is clear enough to indicate that this “messenger/angel of the Lord” is speaking for the Lord, but is not the Lord. Still, there are multiple places witnessed throughout the Tanach (i.e., Genesis 21:17-18; 22:11-18; 31:10-13; 23:5; Judges 2:1-4; 6:11-24; Judges 13), all worthy of some analysis, in order to deduce whether or not “the messenger/angel of the Lord” is something more than a mere created angel.

What has caused some to see “the messenger of the Lord” in Genesis 16:7-13 as probably being more than just a supernatural intermediary meant to console Hagar? In Genesis 16:10, the *malakh ADONAI* is noted to be the causal agent of Hagar’s progeny: “And the LORD’s messenger said to her, ‘I will surely multiply your seed and it will be beyond all counting’” (Alter). If the text said, “The Lord will greatly multiply your descendants...,” and not the proper pronoun “I,” then this entity could legitimately be viewed as just a supernatural intermediary sent from Heaven to deliver a message to Hagar. But there is enough to conclude that this “messenger of the Lord” is something more, as this entity assumes responsibility for Hagar’s progeny. A mere angel as a created being would hardly be expected to oversee and insure that in human history following, that Hagar’s son Ishmael would have a multitude of descendants. Gerhard Von Rad forthrightly concluded here that the figure of this messenger was none other than YHWH proper:

“Those passages...where he enters the human realm not to act but rather to speak and proclaim, i.e., in the patriarchal narratives, are very strange; for here there is no clear distinction between the angel of the Lord and Yahweh himself. The one who speaks, now Yahweh (cf. chs. 16.10, 13; 21.17, 19; 22.11), now the messenger (who then speaks of God in the third person), is obviously one and the same person. The angel of the Lord is therefore a form in which Yahweh appears (*eiene Erscheinungsform Jahwes*). He is God himself in human form.”¹⁶

Further on, Hagar herself is stated as having declared that God Himself spoke directly to her and saw her: “And she called the LORD who spoke to her, ‘You Are El-roi,’ by which she meant, ‘Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!’” (Genesis 16:13, NJPS). The narrative could have easily said something to the effect that “she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her *through His messenger...*,” but instead God is testified to have spoken directly to her, by means of what readers are to deduce from the identity of the *malakh ADONAI* or *malakh YHWH*. In Hamilton’s estimation, “It is clear...that the angel of Yahweh is a visible manifestation (either in human or fiery form) of Yahweh that is essentially indistinguishable from Yahweh himself. The angel of Yahweh is more a representation of God than a representative of God.”¹⁷

If indeed there is some sort of “messenger of the Lord,” apparently sent by Heaven from God, but is treated as God in speaking (Genesis 16:13) and in being the surety of actions to be performed by God (Genesis 16:10)—then enough is present for Bible readers to fairly wonder whether or not this “messenger of the Lord,” *malakh ADONAI* or *malakh YHWH*, might indeed be a pre-Incarnate Yeshua the Messiah. Kenneth A. Matthews notes that the figure here being deity

¹⁵ J.M. Wilson, “Angel,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. et. al., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:125.

¹⁶ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, revised (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 193.

¹⁷ Hamilton, 451.

Approaching the Nature of Yeshua from the Tanach

can direct examiners in the direction of “the messenger/angel of the Lord” being the Logos or Word of John 1:1ff:

“Traditionally, Christian interpreters ascribed to the appearance of the angel a Christophany, the preincarnate divine Son of God. Exodus 23:20-23 implies that the angel who bears the divine Name has the power to forgive sin, a distinctive feature of deity. It is also striking that ‘the angel of the LORD’ (definite article) is not mentioned in the New Testament. The appellative ‘angel of the LORD’ may not be a technical reference for the divine Logos, but it is clear that the angel is deity in many Old Testament passages, including this Hagar incident.”¹⁸

Many holding to a high Christology of Yeshua the Messiah being uncreated as God, would indeed conclude that various scenes in the Tanach where the figure of “the messenger/angel of the Lord” appears, are pre-Incarnate manifestations of the Savior.

Genesis 18:1-33

“Abraham Encounters the Lord”

“Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw *them*, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, ‘My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant.’ And they said, ‘So do, as you have said.’ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead *it* and make bread cakes.’ Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave *it* to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed *it* before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate. Then they said to him, ‘Where is Sarah your wife?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ He said, ‘I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’ And the LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, “Shall I indeed bear *a child*, when I am so old?” Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.’ Sarah denied *it* however, saying, ‘I did not laugh;’ for she was afraid. And He said, ‘No, but you did laugh.’ Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off. The LORD said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.’ And the LORD said, ‘The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.’ Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD. Abraham came near and said, ‘Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep *it* away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are *treated* alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?’ So the LORD said, ‘If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I

¹⁸ Kenneth A. Matthews, *New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, Vol 1b (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 189.