

1. Introduction

On special occasions in the history of the Israelites, the angel of the Lord appeared to individuals. There are several interpretations as to who that angel was. This study explores the all the Scripture references and gives reasons why these were appearances of Jesus before He took on human form.

2. Hebrew

The Hebrew word for angel, מַלְאָךְ - *malaak*, is derived from the root verb לָאָךְ - *laak*, of which it is assumed that it means "to send (as representative)." The word *malaak* means "messenger" or representative."¹

In the Bible, *malaak* is used for two types of messengers: human and supernatural.

a. Human messengers

People were sent somewhere by God or other people with a message. Some examples in the Bible:

- The inhabitants of Beth-shemesh sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjath-jearim to say that the ark of God had been returned (1 Samuel 6:21).
- Queen Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to frighten him (1 Kings 19:2).
- The prophet Haggai was a messenger of the Lord (Haggai 1:13).

b. Supernatural messengers

Sometimes people appeared in Bible times that looked like humans but were not. In these cases, the word angel is used to describe them, instead of messenger. Some examples are:

- An angel met Hagar at a spring in the desert (Genesis 16:7)
- In a dream Jacob saw angels of God ascending and descending on a stairway to heaven (Genesis 28:12).
- Two angels liberated Lot and his family from Sodom and took them by the hand out of the city (Genesis 19:12-17). These angels had previously eaten with Abraham (Genesis 18:2-8).
- The angel of the Lord came and sat down near Gideon (Judges 6:11).

Clearly these messengers were not people, as shown by the following examples:

- The angel who came to Hagar said he would multiply her offspring so they cannot be numbered, something a man cannot make true (Genesis 16:7-13).
- The messenger who visited Gideon let fire come out of the rock and suddenly became invisible (Judges 6:21).
- Moses saw a messenger in a burning bush (Exodus 3:2).
- A messenger went up in a flame of fire in front of Manoah and his wife (Judges 13:20).

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- A messenger called to Hagar (Genesis 21:17) and Abraham (Genesis 22:11,15) from heaven.
- c. A special messenger

The example of the angel who visited Hagar shows that *malaak* sometimes refers to a unique messenger. No creature, man or angel, is able to make people fertile. Of this particular messenger, usually called the Angel of the Lord, we can learn the following:

- i. The angel spoke in the "I" form about things that God did.
 - The Angel of the Lord said to Hagar, "I will greatly multiply your offspring"² (Genesis 16:10).
 - The Angel of the Lord said to Abraham, "I have seen that you have not withheld your only son from Me" (Genesis 22:11-12, 16).
 - Jacob described to his wives how God spoke to him about going back to the promised land. He had a dream in which the angel of God said to him, "I am the God of Bethel" (Genesis 31:3-13).
 - The Angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob ..." (Exodus 3:2 - 4:17).
 - The Angel of the Lord stopped Balaam when he was on his way to curse the people of Israel. He commanded Balaam to only say those words that He would give him (Numbers 22:35). Soon after that Balaam again had a supernatural encounter, which is described as "God met Balaam" (Numbers 23:4). Then God put the words in Balaam's mouth that he should speak. In the end the spirit of God even came upon him, and he prophesied freely about Israel (Numbers 24:2-9).
 - The words of the messenger who spoke to Gideon, are introduced with "the Lord said to him" (Judges 6:16). Gideon only saw the messenger, but understood that it had to be God. As a confirmation, he asked Him for a sign and he got it (Judges 6:17-18). When the messenger disappeared, Gideon was afraid he would die (Judges 6:22). That was not because he had met one of God's many messengers; he believed that this messenger was God himself.
 - The Angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land which I swore unto your fathers" (Judges 2:1).
- ii. The angel had power to bless
 - Jacob blessed Joseph's sons, saying, "the God who has been my shepherd, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys" (Genesis 48:15-16).
- iii. The angel had power to forgive
 - God promised the people of Israel to send out an angel before them. They should not rebel against him, for he would not forgive them, because God's name was in him (Exodus 23:20-21).

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- The high priest Joshua appeared before the Angel of the Lord and the angel said to him, "I have taken your iniquity away from you" (Zechariah 3:4).
- iv. The angel had a secret, wondrous name
- Genesis 32:24-30 describes a fight between Jacob and a man. The man could not beat him, and said, "you have struggled with God and with men, and have overcome" v.28. Jacob then asked for the name of this man, but didn't get to hear it. Jacob then called that place *Peniel*, which means "face of God," because he was convinced that the man was God himself.
 - The Angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah and his wife. When Manoah asked the name of the angel, he was told, "my name is wonderful" (Judges 13:3-6, 17, 22).
- v. Several people concluded that they had seen God
- Hagar said of the messenger who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing" (Genesis 16:13).³
 - At the end of his life, Jacob mentioned to his grandsons that he had experienced the angel several times as God (Genesis 48:15-16).
 - Gideon was afraid to die because he had seen the angel of God (Judges 6:22).
 - After the meeting with the Angel of the Lord Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, because we have seen God" (Judges 13:22).

In summary, the word *malaak* is used for different types messengers. One stands out, who appears in such a way as if he is God himself in human form. The characteristics of this Angel of the Lord point to Jesus Christ.

- Jesus had the power to forgive (Luke 5: 20-25).
- He had a wonderful name, more excellent than the angels (Hebrews 1:4); the name above all other names (Ephesians 1:21, Philippians 2:9).
- He lived before Abraham (John 8:56-58), and existed even before creation (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16-17), and was God himself (John 1:1, Philippians 2:6; Colossians 2:6).

In church tradition therefore, the Angel of the Lord is seen as a pre-incarnation of Jesus Christ.

3. Greek

The English word "angel" is derived from the Greek *ἄγγελος* *aggelos*, which means "messenger." Just as *malaak*, *aggelos* refers to both human and supernatural messengers of God.

For example, John the Baptist is described as the messenger who would prepare the way for Christ (Matthew 11:10), and John sent messengers to Jesus to ask if He really was the Messiah (Luke 7:24).

Most references however, are to supernatural messengers, such as Gabriel who announced the births of John the Baptist and of Jesus (Luke 1:11-19, 26-38) There were angels who appeared to

the shepherds (Luke 2:9-15), and who strengthened Jesus (Matthew 4:11, Luke 22:43), and an angel who took Peter by the hand and led him out of prison (Acts 12:7).

a. Angel of the Lord

Regularly "an angel of the Lord" is mentioned, for example in Matthew 1:20,24; 2:13; 19; 28: 2; Luke 1:11; 2: 9; Acts 5:19; 7:30; 8:26; 12: 7 and 12:23. There is never any reference to 'the angel of the Lord,' so it looks like that particular messenger was not there in the New Testament period. This fits with the Angel of the Lord being an appearance of Jesus. It is only natural that Jesus didn't announced His own birth and that God tasked another angel with this. Furthermore, after he emptied himself of his divine form and took on the appearance of a man of flesh and blood (Philippians 2:6-8), Jesus couldn't and didn't need to appear as a special messenger. From then on he was the Incarnate Word of God (John 1:1-3, 14).

When Stephen spoke to the Jewish leaders, he recalled events from the life of Moses. Remarkably, he spoke of Moses at the burning bush meeting "an angel of the Lord", rather than "the angel of the Lord" (Acts 7:30). At the same time, Stephen talked about 'the angel' who spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai (Acts 7:38), of whom it is consistently said in Exodus that the Lord spoke to him (Exodus 24: 16-25: 1; 30 : 11, 17, 22, 34, 31: 1, 12,18, 32: 7-14). This indicates that this angel was an appearance of Jesus. For an explanation of why Stephen did not refer to *the* angel but *an* angel in the burning bush, see the endnote.⁴

4. The indefinite article in Hebrew

In Hebrew there is no indefinite article, only the definite article exists. In English, to make the sentence 'a donkey from a farmer' definite, the definite article is added to both nouns, resulting in "the donkey of the farmer."

In Hebrew, the definite article is only placed before the second noun, and the preposition "of" is omitted, so 'donkey the farmer.' In the case of a proper noun (names of people and places), the article isn't used in English, for example, 'the ass of Jacob.' In Hebrew the article is omitted as well, and the phrase simply becomes "donkey Jacob." Thus in Hebrew, the phrase 'the Angel of the Lord' is *malaak Yahweh*, where Yahweh is the name of God.

The phrase "an angel of Yahweh" does not occur in the Bible. That means that any reference to *malaak Yahweh* speaks about one and the same angel of the Lord - the particular messenger described under 2c.⁵

Now there are instances where Bible expositors believe that this angel cannot refer to God. For example, in Judges 2:1 the angel of the Lord⁶ went up from Gilgal to Bochim. They feel it is more likely that this refers to a human messenger; a prophet who passed on the word of God. For more on this, see the endnote.⁷

5. Whoever sees God, will die

According to several passages in the New Testament, no one has ever seen God (John 1:18, 1 Timothy 6:14-16, 1 John 4:12). This corresponds to God's words to Moses, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Exodus 33:20).

Yet Moses and Aaron with two of his sons, and seventy leaders of the people saw God without dying (Exodus 24: 9-11). And God visited Abraham and ate with him, and talked extensively with him (Genesis 18:1-33).

This indicates that they all saw an appearance of Jesus, and not of God the Father.

6. Conclusion

Throughout the centuries *malaak Yahweh* has been seen as the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ.

There are powerful arguments that substantiate this interpretation.

It may not be possible for every situation to determine with certainty whether the Angel of the Lord refers to God's special messenger. However, it is justifiable to see in him the appearance of Jesus before he became a human, especially where the context gives reason to it.

This is the case with the meetings of the Angel with Hagar, Ishmael, Abraham and Isaac, and makes these a unique expression of God's love to them.

Postscript

For us humans, it is difficult to understand how God could appear in the garden of Eden and to Abraham and Moses and others, at the same time sit on his throne in heaven. Seeing these as appearances of Jesus, the Word of God, gives much clarification. It also helps to understand how Jesus was able to permanently take the form of a human through the virgin birth, and how it was possible that he, sharing the nature of God, could pray to the Father and could die on the cross as a human being.

At the same time it raises questions. Western analytical thinking leads to the conclusion that God is not one but three, even though God says of Himself that He is One.⁸ So far, not a single interpretation has satisfied the human desire to fully understand God, and here on earth that will probably never happen. Some considerations that may help with the desire to understand are:

a. Creature versus Creator

Like clay does not have the capacity to bend itself into a certain shape, but is formed by the potter, so people are limited and of a different order than God. It is impossible for the created to understand his Creator or for what has been made to understand the Maker.⁹

b. Secret versus revealed

The person approaching the world from himself is capable of a lot. It looks as if many scientific developments are the result of human achievement only. Yet discoveries play an important role. Scientists still make new discoveries, which means that those things were hidden before. The Bible teaches us that God has His hand in all this. He keeps some things hidden from us and permits other things to be discovered and understood.¹⁰ For instance, we have not yet understood the realm of death.¹¹ On the other hand, Peter understood by revelation that Jesus is the Son of God.¹²

c. Faith

Without realizing it, a lot of things we cannot explain we take for granted. In mathematics we accept that the simple sum "1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + ..." continues infinitely. Although we have a definition of infinity, we don't have a concrete concept of the phenomenon. Accepting this is an expression of faith. In a similar way faith is described in the Bible:

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible," and "Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."¹³

Whether we'll get more insight about the nature of God here on earth is not to say. We are encouraged and commissioned by God to accept that He is who He says He is. If we do that then we will supernaturally experience the certainty that God is One and that Jesus is the Son of God.

The church fathers expressed it in the following way:

*"I believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds;
God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.*

*Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man."¹⁴*

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¹ Strong's H4397, accessed in e-*Sword* version 10.1.0, Rick Myers and Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, entry 1068a

² All quotations are based on or taken from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles

³ According to Genesis 3:8-13 God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and spoke with them. This was likely an appearance of Jesus. The stories about God's way of relating to Adam will have been passed on to the following generations and become known to Hagar via Noah and Abraham. Probably that's why she suddenly realized it was God talking to her at the well (Genesis 16:13).

⁴ The omission of the definite article in the reference to the burning bush, is paralleled in John 1:1. According to Greek grammar the definite article is normally placed before God, as in John 1:1 and 2: *ton theon*. Thus the God of gods is distinguished from all other gods. However, in the last clause of John 1:1 the definite article is missing. The New World translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses therefore says, " ... and the Word was a god.

(http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nieuwe-Wereldvertaling_van_de_Heilige_Schrift). Based on Greek grammar most scholars consider this incorrect (<http://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/1161/a-god-or-god-in-john-11>). In most Bible translations then, the choice has been made to translate the Greek clause with "The Word was God," writing *theos* with a capital, like a proper name. If Stephen used *aggellos kuriou* as a proper name, there was no need to use the definite article. In that case the Bible speaks of only one unique messenger with the title "Angel of God," whom we can know personally as Jesus Christ today.

⁵ Modern Bible scholars offer several possibilities, that have been reviewed by Professor M.J. Paul in his article "The Identity of the Angel of the Lord." His conclusion is that no general rule can be given concerning the identity of the Angel of the Lord.

⁶ The King James Version has "an Angel of the Lord," but the English Standard Version, have "the Angel of the Lord."

⁷ Bible Commentator Clarke says about Judges 2:1: "I think it more probable that some extraordinary human messenger is meant, as such messengers, and indeed prophets, apostles, etc., are frequently termed angels, that is, messengers of the Lord. The person here mentioned appears to have been a resident at Gilgal, and to have come to Bochim on this express errand."

One explanation why the Angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal, is that the Angel had gone before the people and brought them to the Amorites and other inhabitants of the promised land (Exodus 23:20-23). When the people arrived at Gilgal His task was finished. From then on the people didn't receive manna either, instead, they ate from the produce of the land (Joshua 5:10-12). So Gilgal was the last place where the Israelites had experienced the Angel. The Angel may literally or figuratively have gone up from Gilgal to Bochim.

⁸ "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." Deuteronomy 6:4 (ESV)

⁹ God used this image with the Israelites (Jeremiah 18:6).

¹⁰ "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever" Deuteronomy 29:29 (HSV). Isaiah 48:6, Jeremiah 33:3 and Daniel 2:22 also speak of things that are revealed by God. There the emphasis is on future happenings.

¹¹ Job 38:17 "Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?" (ESV)

¹² "Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."" Matthew 16:17 (ESV)

¹³ Hebrews 11:1-2, 6 (ESV)

¹⁴ Part of the Nicene Creed <https://www.ccel.org/creeds/nicene.creed.html>