

Who is the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament?

Martin Zahn

The angel of the Lord is mentioned several times in the Old Testament. We want to briefly answer the question as to his identity.

First we read about the angel of the Lord in the burning bush and show that he is God but cannot be the Lord himself. Additional information about his identity are in the reports of how the angel of the Lord announced the birth of Samson and how he met Hagar and Balaam and also in the Bible passage of his speaking in Bokim.

Finally, there are references to other appearances of Jesus in the Old Testament and a brief summary.

The angel of the Lord in the burning bush

Let's read the beginning of the report of the burning bush:

¹ Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the **angel of the Lord** appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." ⁴ When the **Lord** saw that he had gone over to look, **God** called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." ⁵ "Do not come any closer," **God** said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ Then he said, "I am the **God** of your father, the **God** of Abraham, the **God** of Isaac and the **God** of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at **God**. ⁷ The **Lord** said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. (Ex 3:1-7 NIV)

The name of God "**Yahweh**" or "**Jehovah**" (exact spelling unknown) denotes God, our heavenly Father, and is translated as "**Lord**."

God was within the burning bush (verses 2+4) and spoke to Moses. Moses was afraid to look at God whom he saw (see also Ex 4:1+5). He saw **God** (in Hebrew "**elohim**"); it is not written that he would had seen Yahweh.

Later Yahweh said to Moses: "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." (Ex 33:20); so it is not possible that Yahweh would had shown him his face. It is written here that he saw God and not that he would had seen a part of God; so I do not believe that he saw a part of Yahweh like his back or a part of his front. Further, if he had seen Yahweh (or a part of him), he would not have asked Yahweh later "show me your glory" (Ex 33:18); later Moses was greatly honored by Yahweh passing by and allowing him to gaze upon him (Ex 33:19-23). Also Jesus said that no one has ever seen Yahweh (Jn 1:18; see also 1Jn 4:12).

Moses didn't see Yahweh in the bush, but he saw God. So whom did he see? I only know one who comes into question: Jesus is God (Isa 9:5; Ps 45:7-8 with Heb 1:8-9; Isa 40:3 with Mt 3:3; Ps 50:6 or Ps 82:1+8 with Jn 5:22; Lk 17:18; Jn 20:28-29; Rom 9:5; Tit 2:13; 1Jn 5:20; Rev 1:8

with Rev 22:13) and he already existed “before the creation of the world” (Jn 17:24; Jn 8:58; Jn 1:1-3 with 1Jn 1:1 or Rev 19:13).

So Jesus is the angel of the Lord.

The Hebrew word for God (“**elohim**”) is in the plural. Therefore, verse 6 literally says:

Then he said, “I am the **Gods** of your father, the **Gods** of Abraham, the **Gods** of Isaac and the **Gods** of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at **Gods**.

Jesus said:

... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father... (Jn 14:9 NIV; see also Jn 12:45)

Moses saw Jesus and indirectly Yahweh; to that extent he saw gods.

The angel of the Lord announced the birth of Samson

There is more evidence that Jesus is the angel of the Lord: The angel of the Lord announced the birth of Samson, informed his parents about his calling and instructed them. Then the following happened:

¹⁷ And Manoah said to the **angel of the Lord**, “What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you?” ¹⁸ And the **angel of the Lord** said to him, “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is **wonderful**?” ¹⁹ So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the Lord, to the one who works wonders, and Manoah and his wife were watching. ²⁰ And when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the **angel of the Lord** went up in the flame of the altar. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they fell on their faces to the ground. ²¹ The **angel of the Lord** appeared no more to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he was the **angel of the Lord**. ²² And Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen **God**.” (Judg 13:17-22 ESV)

Manoah realized that they did not just see an angel sent by Yahweh, but even God. He realized: The angel of the Lord is God. Here, as in most other Old Testament passages, the Hebrew word for God (“**elohim**”) is plural. Like Moses, Manoah could not have seen Yahweh, but “only” Jesus.

The angel of the Lord said that his name is wonderful (verse 18). Let us read what Isaiah prophesied about Jesus:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called **Wonderful**, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. (Isa 9:6 KJV)

Here the noun “pele” is written in Hebrew, which means “wonder;” with the associated adjective “pili” the angel of the Lord had described his name (Judg 13:18). Paul wrote about Jesus:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, (Phil 2:9 NIV)

So Jesus’ name is very unique and Isaiah prophesied about Jesus a name that the angel of the Lord bears. So Jesus is the angel of the Lord.

The angel of the Lord met Hagar

Also the following scriptures show that the angel of the Lord is God. First, we read the Bible passage where the angel of the Lord met Hagar, the slave of Abram's wife Sarai, after Hagar became pregnant by Abram:

¹¹ And the **angel of the Lord** said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael..." ¹³ So she called the **name of the Lord** who spoke to her, "You are a **God** of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." (Gen 16:11-13 ESV)

So the angel of the Lord is a "name of the Lord," that is a name of Yahweh, that is a name of God. Hagar also recognized that she met God.

The angel of the Lord met Balaam

Another Bible passage is about Balaam when Balak, king of Moab, wanted him to curse Israel. Balaam met the angel of the Lord on his journey:

The **angel of the Lord** said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you." So Balaam went with Balak's officials. (Num 22:35 NIV)

A few verses after that we read:

⁴ and **God** met Balaam... ⁵ And the **Lord** put a word in Balaam's mouth and said... (Num 23:4-5 ESV)

Balaam was only allowed to speak what the angel of the Lord would tell him. He announced to Balaam that **he** would tell him what he was allowed to speak. And then God met him and Yahweh told him what he should speak (also in Num 23:16; see also Num 24:2+4). So the angel of the Lord is God and he is one with Yahweh.

The angel of the Lord in Bokim

Finally, we look at the following scripture:

¹ The **angel of the Lord** went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, 'I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your ancestors. I said, "I will never break **my** covenant with you... ²..." Yet you have disobeyed **me**... ³ And I have also said, "I will not drive them out before you; they will become traps for you, and their gods will become snares to you." ' ⁴ When the **angel of the Lord** had spoken these things to all the Israelites, the people wept aloud, (Judg 2:1-4 NIV)

Who brought the Israelites out of Egypt and with whom did the Israelites make a covenant? It was Yahweh. The angel of the Lord delivered messages from Yahweh in the first person. So it shows again that the angel of the Lord and Yahweh are one.

Above we have shown in the context with the report of the burning bush that the angel of the Lord cannot be our heavenly Father Yahweh himself.

Of whom it is written that he is one with Yahweh? Jesus said:

I and the Father are one. (Jn 10:30 NIV)

Other appearances of Jesus in the Old Testament

There are several other scriptures which mention the angel of the Lord. We read about Jesus' encounter with the disciples on their way to Emmaus:

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Lk 24:27 NIV)

Thus, it is not surprising that we already read something about Jesus in Genesis, the first book of Moses. But Jesus appeared in the Old Testament not only as the angel of the Lord.

- I assume that also Melchizedek, who brought bread and wine to Abram, was an appearance of Jesus. On this subject see my article "The Lord's Supper – The Meal of the New Covenant," Additional Comment "The first Scripture with Bread and Wine".
- I suspect that Jesus was one of the three men who took a covenant meal with Abraham. See the section on "The Covenant Meal with Abraham" of the same article on the Lord's Supper.
- Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel saw Jesus when they ate the covenant meal at the Old Covenant. See the section "The Covenant Meal at the Old Covenant" of the same article on the Lord's Supper.
- Jacob wrestled with Jesus; he also realized that he had seen God (Gen 32:24-30; Hos 12:3). The second time, after Jacob had left his father-in-law Laban in Paddan-Aram, Jesus appeared to him in Bethel (Gen 35:9-15).
- God sent an angel before Moses, in whom was his name, that is, God's name (Ex 23:20-22). The name stands for the person himself. For example, to praise God's name means to praise him himself (Ps 34:3; Ps 103:1; Ps 113:1). So God was in the angel. So the angel must have been Jesus.
- I reckon that Jesus is also the "commander of the Lord's army" who met Joshua (Jos 5:13-15). This is also supported by the fact that he allowed himself to be worshiped (Jos 5:14) and that Joshua should take off his shoes because he was standing in a holy place (Jos 5:15), just like Moses before when he saw the angel of the Lord (Ex 3:5).
- Jesus was probably the fourth man Nebuchadnezzar saw walking freely in the fire unharmed (Dan 3:25).
- Daniel saw certainly Jesus "dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz round his waist. His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude." (Dan 10:5-6 NIV) Because the description of this man is very similar to the description of Jesus in Revelation (Rev 1:13-16 and Rev 19:12+14).

Also, the effect on Daniel, namely that he had no strength left and he fell into a deep sleep, his face to the ground (Dan 10:8-9), was similar to what John experienced, namely that he fell at Jesus' feet as if he was dead (Rev 1:17).

There are some other appearances of Jesus in the Old Testament where sometimes it is not so easy to recognize Jesus.

Summary

We have shown in several ways that the angel of the Lord is Jesus:

Moses and Manoah saw God. They could not possibly have seen the Lord, that is, our heavenly Father Yahweh. So they saw Jesus, who is God and who already existed.

Also Hagar had recognized that the angel of the Lord is God. From the report with the encounter with Balaam it becomes clear that the angel of the Lord and Yahweh are one, likewise with the speaking of the angel of the Lord in Bokim, where he delivered messages from Yahweh in the first person. So the angel of the Lord is one with Yahweh, but not Yahweh himself. Thus, he can be only Jesus.

Moreover, Isaiah prophesied about Jesus the very unique name “Wonderful,” which the angel of the Lord bears.

In addition, there are other appearances of Jesus in the Old Testament.

Author

Please address questions and feedback to:

Martin Zahn

Herbert-Ewe-Str. 18

18435 Stralsund

Germany

E-Mail: contact@mzahn.eu

Website: www.mzahn.eu/en