

Genesis 16:7-13

(7) The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.

(8) And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai."

(9) The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her."

(10) The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude."

(11) And the angel of the LORD said to her: "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction.

(12) He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin."

(13) So she named the LORD who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" (NRSV)

1. It is believed by some Trinitarians that in the Old Testament "the angel of the Lord" is Jesus Christ before he supposedly "incarnated" as a human. This point is disputed by many, and with good reason. There is not a single verse that actually says that Jesus Christ is the angel of the Lord. The entire doctrine is built from assumption. Why then, if the doctrine is not stated, do so many people believe it? The reason is that it is very awkward for Trinitarians to believe that Jesus is co-equal and co-eternal with God from the beginning of time, and yet he never appears in the Old Testament. Since one cannot miss the active role that Jesus plays today as Head of the Church, is it possible that he could have been around throughout the entire Old Testament and yet never have gotten involved with mankind? A Trinitarian answer to this question is to place Jesus in the Old Testament by assumption: he must be "the angel of the Lord."

However, we answer the question by asserting that this is very strong evidence for our position that Jesus Christ did not yet exist during the Old Testament, but was the plan of God for the salvation of man. We believe that physically he *began* when God impregnated Mary (Matt. 1:18). Exactly what are the reasons Trinitarians say that the angel of the Lord is Jesus? Trinitarians differ on the points of evidence (which is to be expected when working from assumptions), but the standard reasons are: he seems superior to other angels; he is separate from the Lord; he is able to forgive sins (Ex. 23:21); he speaks with authority as though he were God; his countenance struck awe in people; he was never seen after Jesus' birth, and, most importantly, he is addressed as God himself. All these points will be considered, and we will start with the last, which is the most essential point of the argument.

2. A study of the appearances of the angel of the Lord reveals that sometimes he is addressed as the angel and sometimes he is addressed as "the Lord" or "God" (see also Judges 6:12 and 16). The Jewish law of agency explains why this is so. According to the Jewish understanding of agency, the agent was regarded as the person himself. This is well expressed in *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*:

Agent (Heb. *Shaliah*): The main point of the Jewish law of agency is expressed in the dictum, “a person’s agent is regarded as the person himself” (*Ned. 72b; Kidd. 41b*). Therefore any act committed by a duly appointed agent is regarded as having been committed by the principal, who therefore bears full responsibility for it with consequent complete absence of liability on the part of the agent. ¹

In the texts in which the angel is called “God” or “the Lord,” it is imperative to notice that he is always identified as an angel. This point is important because God is never called an angel. God is God. So if a being is called “God,” but is clearly identified as an angel, there must be a reason. In the record in Genesis quoted above, the angel is clearly identified as an angel four separate times. Why then would the text say that “the Lord” spoke to her? It does so because as God’s agent or messenger, the angel was speaking for God and the message he brought was God’s message. The same basic idea is expressed when “God” is said to “visit” His people, when actually He sends some form of blessing (see the notes on Luke 7:16). God Himself does not show up, but someone unfamiliar with the culture might conclude from the wording that He did. Also, some of the people to whom the angel appeared, clearly expressed their belief he was an angel of God. Gideon exclaimed, “I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!” (Judges 6:22).

There is conclusive biblical evidence that God’s messengers and representatives are called “God” (see the notes on Heb. 1:8). This is important because, if representatives of God are called “God,” then the way to distinguish God from His representative is by the context. We have already shown that when the angel of the Lord is called “God,” the context is careful to let the reader know that the agent is, in fact, an angel.

3. Another piece of evidence that reveals that the angel of the Lord is an angel and not a “co-equal” member of the Trinity is that he is under the command of the Lord. In one record, David disobeyed God and a plague came on the land. “God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem” (1 Chron. 21:15). We learn from the record that it was the angel of the Lord afflicting the people, and eventually “the LORD was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, ‘Enough! Withdraw your hand.’ The angel of the LORD was then at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite” (2 Sam. 24:16). These verses are not written as if this angel was somehow God himself. There is no “co-equality” here. This is simply the Lord giving commands to one of His angels.

4. Another clear example showing that the angel of the Lord cannot be God in any way is in Zechariah. Zechariah was speaking with an angel about a vision he had. The Bible records, “Then the angel of the LORD said, ‘LORD Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?’ So the LORD spoke kind and comforting words to the angel who talked with me” (Zech. 1:12 and 13). The fact that the angel of the Lord asked the Lord for information and then received comforting words indicates that he is not co-equal with God in power or knowledge. It is unthinkable that God would need information or need comforting words. Thus, any claim that the angel of the Lord is the pre-incarnate Christ who is in every way God just cannot be made to fit what the Bible actually says.

5. It is interesting that two pieces of evidence that Trinitarians use to prove that the angel of the Lord must be the pre-incarnate Jesus are that the Bible clearly states that he is separate from God and that he speaks with God's authority. We would argue that the reason he is separate from God is because he is exactly what the text calls him, *i.e.*, an angel, and that he speaks with authority because he is bringing a message from God. The prophets and others who spoke for God spoke with authority, as many verses affirm. Also, the angel of the Lord speaks about God in the third person. For example, in Genesis 16:11 above, the angel says, "The LORD has heard of your misery." The angel does not say, "I have heard of your misery," as if he were God. In Genesis 22:12, the angel said, "Now I know that you fear God," not "Now I know you fear me." In Judges 13:5, the angel says Samson will be "set apart to God," not "set apart to me." So although the text can call the angel God, which is proper for a representative of God, the angel never said he was God and even referred to God in the third person.

Also, if Jesus were the angel of the Lord who spoke to Moses at the burning bush, then he did not say so in his teaching. Mark 12:26 records Jesus speaking with the Sadducees and saying, "Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'" If Jesus had been the angel in the bush, and was openly proclaiming himself to be "the pre-existent God," he would have used this opportunity to say, "I said to Moses." The fact that Jesus said it was *God* who spoke to Moses shows clearly that he was differentiating himself from God.

6. That the angel of the Lord seems superior to other angels is no reason to assume he is somehow part of the Trinity. Many scholars agree that angels differ in power and authority. The Bible mentions archangels in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and Jude 9, for example. It would not be unusual that this angel would be one with greater authority. Neither is the fact that the angel of the Lord can forgive sins any reason to believe that he is God. God's agents can forgive sins. God gave Jesus the authority to forgive sins, and then he in turn gave the apostles the authority to forgive sins (see the notes on Mark 2:7).

7. Although it is true that the countenance of the angel of the Lord occasionally struck awe in people, that is no reason to assume he is God. A careful reading of the passages where he appears shows that sometimes the people did not even realize that they were talking to an angel. For example, when the angel of the Lord appeared to Samson's mother, she returned to her husband Manoah with this report: "A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name" (Judges 13:6). Note that angels had a reputation for having an awe-inspiring countenance, and the woman thought this "man of God" did too, but she still did not believe he was an angel. When Manoah met the angel of the Lord and the two of them talked about how to raise Samson, Manoah did not discover he was an angel until he ascended to heaven in the smoke of Manoah's sacrifice. Therefore, just because someone's countenance may be awesome, he is not necessarily God.

8. It is also argued that Jesus is probably “the angel of the Lord” because those words never appear after his birth, and it seems reasonable that this angel would appear right on through the Bible. The fact is, however, that the angel of the Lord does appear after Jesus’ *conception*, which seems inconsistent with the premise that the angel of the Lord is the “pre-incarnate Christ.” The record of Jesus’ birth is well known. Mary was discovered to be pregnant with Jesus before she and Joseph were married, and Joseph, who could have had her stoned to death, decided to divorce her. However, “an angel of the Lord” appeared to him in a dream and told him the child was God’s. Matthew 1:24 states, “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.” Two conclusions can be drawn from this record. First, Jesus was already in Mary’s womb when the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph. From this we conclude that “the angel of the Lord” cannot be Jesus because Jesus was at that time “in the flesh” inside Mary. Second, it should be noted that in the same record this angel is known both as “an” angel of the Lord and as “the” angel of the Lord. This same fact can be seen in the Old Testament records (Cp. 1 Kings 19:5 and 7).

There are many appearances of “an” angel of the Lord in the New Testament (Cp. Acts 5:19; 8:26; 12:7 and 23). From this we conclude that it is likely that the same angel who is called both “the” angel of the Lord and “an angel” in the Old Testament still appears as “an angel of the Lord” after Christ’s birth. When all the evidence is carefully weighed, there is good reason to believe that the words describing the “angel” of the Lord are literal, and that the being referred to is an angel, just as the text says.

Endnotes:

1. R. J. Z. Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder. op. cit., Encyclopedia, p. 15.

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