

The Identity of the Angel of the LORD

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Abstract

This article presents an overview of scholarship about the identity of the Angel of the LORD and evaluates the exegetical evidence for the plausibility of the interpretations. Especially the grammatical issues are considered. The conclusion is that it is impossible to distinguish a special angel. The emphasis is not on the messenger, but on the message of the divine Sender.

Introduction

The figure of 'the angel of the LORD' as a messenger is a familiar one throughout the Bible. He is mentioned fifty-six times in the OT, 'the angel of God' ten times.¹ In a number of passages the angel speaks, acts, and is addressed not as a messenger, but as God himself. In some passages, the text switches from the angel of the LORD to God, and in others, there is a juxtaposition of God and the angel of the LORD. What are the interpretations of the identity of this angel?

The Church Fathers identified him with the *Logos*. Modern scholarship has seen the angel as a creature representing God, as a hypostasis of God, as God himself, or as some external power of God. NIDOTTE summarizes: 'While it may be anachronistic to speak of the *mal'ak yhwh* as a hypostasis of God, he does provide a provocative image of divine agency and hence a proleptic type for NT Christology'.²

In this article, I will evaluate the exegetical evidence for the plausibility of these interpretations. Emphasis will be laid on grammatical issues, while these are neglected in most studies. Therefore the grammatical features will be evaluated in the first part and a proposal will be formulated. Then the content of the narratives serves as a check about the proposal. At the end of the article the later developments, after the time of the Old Testament, will be mentioned.

¹ R. Ficker, 'mal'ak Bote', *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, eds. E. Jenni and C. Westermann, Band I (München, 1971) 901. D.N. Freedman and B.E. Willoughby, 'mal'ak', *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* eds. G.J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren, Band 4 (Stuttgart) 896. Stephen L. White, 'Angel of the LORD: Messenger or Euphemism?', *Tyndale Bulletin* 50 (1999) 300: 48 times in 45 verses.

² Stephen F. Noll, 'mal'ak', in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. W.A. VanGemeren. Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 942. This approach is elaborated by G.H. Juncker in *Jesus and the Angel of the Lord: An Old Testament Paradigm for New Testament Christology*. Ph.D. Diss. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, 2001.

1. Grammatical Issues

1.1. Translation of the Word *Mal'ak*

In general the Hebrew word מַלְאָךְ means ‘messenger’. The word comes from the verb *l-'k*, which means: to send.³ This stem is found in Arabic and Ugaritic. The word מַלְאָךְ is found 213 (or 214) times in the Old Testament.⁴

	Singular	Plural
Human messenger	17	73
Designation for the people	1	--
Designation for a priest	2	--
Designation for a prophet	2	3
Designation for the wind	-	1
1Chr.21:20 (scribal error?)	1	--
Comparison with David	5	--
As designation for an angel	99	10
Totals	127	87

The word מַלְאָךְ means messenger or representative, either human or divine. In about half of the texts, a human messenger is meant. It is important to understand that Hebrew uses this word for messengers in general, and that usually no distinctive word for a celestial messenger is used (e.g. seraph, cherub). Maybe the content of the message, or the appearance of the messenger, is more important than the exact identity of the representative. Perhaps there are other ways to indicate the identity. In Greek language, used in the New Testament, the same situation appears: there is one word for a human and a heavenly messenger: ἄγγελος. In later times, the Vulgate differentiated between *nuntius* for the human beings and *angelus* for the supernatural beings. From that word *angelus*, the word ‘angel’ in English is derived. Maybe this distinction was prepared through the Greek text in the New Testament, where ἄγγελος usually is reserved for a heavenly messenger. However, in Luke 7:24 (the messengers of John); 9:52 (the messengers of Jesus to a village of the Samaritans) and James 2:25 (the spies of Joshua in Jericho) human persons are implied.⁵

In the OT, in many passages מַלְאָךְ refers to human beings. The question arises how the Israelites could understand whether or not a heavenly messenger was indicated. There are several methods for interpreting which kind of agent was intended:

1) Usually, the identity of the messenger is revealed by the context. E.g., in Gen. 18 the LORD appeared to Abraham. Three men stood with him; two of them continued their journey to Lot in Sodom and told him that they would destroy the city (Gen. 19). From the story, it is clear that Lot was not addressed by human persons, but by heavenly messengers, appearing as men.

³ Related words are *mela'ka* and *mal'akut*. Maybe there is a relation between the verbs *h-l-k* (to go) and *l-'k* going back to an original root with two consonants. Cf. S. Moscati: ‘It is a more likely supposition that originally there existed roots with either two or three consonants ... and that at a certain stage in the development of the Semitic languages the triconsonantal system prevailed – extending by analogy and thus bringing into line biconsonantal roots through the adoption of a third radical.’ *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1964, 1969²) 74.

⁴ F. Guggisberg, *Die Gestalt des Mal'ak Jahwe im Alten Testament* (Neuenburg, 1979) 17: 214 times. R. Ficker, 901 and D.N. Freedman and B.E. Willoughby, 888: 213 times.

⁵ This ambiguity of *mal'ak* seems to carry over into the LXX, where *angelos* is used for angels or men but *presbus* is often used for human messengers.

2) The second possibility is the explanation in the story that the messengers are representatives of God. This is the case in the dream of Jacob. He saw messengers of God ascending and descending on a staircase or ladder (Gen. 32:12).

3) Many times, the name of God is attached in a genitive (construct state), or there is a reference to God through a personal pronomen, e.g. 'My messenger'.

If there are no references from grammar or content of the chapter, then usually human messengers are meant. Only in a very few instances, there is uncertainty (e.g.: Is. 44:26; Mal. 3:1; Job 4:18; and Eccl. 5:5).

From these facts it appears that, without qualification, מַלְאָךְ usually is a human messenger. When a representative of God is meant, the context indicates that this is the case. It seems therefore that the translation 'angel' (in stead of 'messenger') depends more on interpretation of the context than on a literal reproduction of the word. Recall that the word 'angel' is reserved for a heavenly messenger. Especially when the Hebrew speaks of a מַלְאָךְ of God, it is better for our own understanding to translate as: 'a messenger of God', and interpret both words together as 'angel'. The translation 'angel of God' is in fact a pleonasm. Maybe the same can be said about מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה: it is an indication of a heavenly messenger, an angel. The translation 'angel of the LORD' is tautological.

In passing, I note that the same principle applies to the word 'house'. Many times, the word *bet* refers to a house of an Israelite, but 'the house of the king' is the palace and 'the house of the LORD' is the temple. Of course, it is possible to translate 'the palace of the king' and 'the temple of the LORD', but that is not necessary.

1.2. Translation of the Article (Determination)

A second question is, whether or not we have to translate 'the angel', with the article. Would 'an angel' qualify as a better translation? We have to investigate the determination of the word. I agree with W. Schneider, that the expression 'determination' for the use of the article can give rise to misunderstanding, because it wrongly suggests that a noun with article is a clear and decisive identity, and a noun without article is vague, but most grammars use this expression.⁶

Even when the translation 'messenger' is preferred over 'angel', the question arises: is the word determined? This expression refers to *definiteness* ('the') or *indefiniteness* ('a, an'). In English, we (mostly) express definiteness by use of the article 'the', but in Hebrew there are also other ways for indicating this. A normal Hebrew way for combining words is the construct state. The expression מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה is such a construction and the words have to be taken together. Usually in a construct state in the Hebrew language, the determined nomen rectum or a personal name (יְהוָה) gives the regens (מַלְאָךְ) a determination. On the base of this rule, the translation 'the messenger of the LORD' is likely. In the case of an indefinite thing, usually a construction with *lamed* is used. So, the phrase 'a psalm of David' (with David as a name being definite, obviously) has to use a *lamed* preposition to 'distantiate' the definite 'David' from the indefinite 'psalm' (מִזְמֹר לְדָוִד). This construction of 'an angel of Yhwh' does not occur in the Hebrew bible at all. However, years ago, Eduard König stated in his *Theologie des Alten Testaments* that from a purely grammatical point of view the expression מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה, could be translated as: an angel of the LORD.⁷ Brockelmann explains

⁶ W. Schneider, *Grammatik des biblischen Hebräisch* (München: Claudius, 1974) 244.

⁷ E. König, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Belser, 1923⁴) 189, Anm. 2.

that there are situations in which 'ein individuell determiniertes Nomen sein Regens indeterminiert lassen kann'.⁸ Examples are:

1) Judg. 13:6. 'Then the woman came and told her husband: A man of God came to me, and his countenance was like the countenance of the / an angel of God, very terrible; I did not ask him whence he was, and he did not tell me his name.' (RSV). In this case 'a man of God' (אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים) is undetermined (as in 1 Sam. 2:27).

2) Deut. 22:19 'and they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver, and give them to the father of the young woman, because he has brought an evil name upon a virgin of Israel.' (RSV). In this case, 'a virgin of Israel' (בְּתוּלַת יִשְׂרָאֵל) is undetermined.

The same situation occurs before a proper name:

Ex. 10:9 'a feast of the LORD' (חַג־יְהוָה)

Deut. 7:25 e.o: 'an abomination to the LORD' (תועבת יהוה)

Gen. 46:34 An abomination for the Egyptians (תועבת מצרים)

1 Sam. 4:12 A man of Benjamin (איש־בְּנִימִן)

Prov. 25:1 Proverbs of Solomon (מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה)

Cant. 2:1 a rose of Sharon (חֲבַצְלֶת הַשָּׁרוֹן)

Cant. 3:9 from trees of the Libanon (מִעֲצֵי הַלְבָּנוֹן).

These examples suggest that from a pure grammatical point of view, it is not clear whether the expression מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה is determined. Combined with earlier insight (par. 1.1.), it is possible that the addition of the name Yhwh, or Elohim, is used to convey that a heavenly messenger is meant instead of a human messenger. The grammar of Joüon-Muraoka says: 'Even the use of a proper noun as nomen rectum does not necessarily mean that the entire phrase is determined, just as בְּנִי can mean 'a son of mine' ...: thus for the narrator מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה is "the angel of the Lord" after the first mention in Jdg 6.11, but for Gideon who only later discovered the identity of his interlocutor he must have been perceived as "an angel of the Lord" (vs. 22 ...).'⁹ However, some exegetes, while acknowledging the point of this paragraph, give preference to the general rule, and favor the translation 'the Angel of the LORD'.¹⁰

It is illuminating to have a look at the LXX. In about the half of the occurrences, the expression מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה is translated as ἄγγελος κυρίου. The translation ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου is used too, but especially in the cases when the angel is already introduced in the story. The second and third occurrence with the article refer therefore to the angel who is mentioned earlier.¹¹ This grammatical rule is the same as in English. Therefore the LXX does not favor the determination of the expression מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה or the idea of one angel with a special identity.

⁸ C. Brockelmann, *Hebräische Syntax* (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1956) 68. Cf. W. Gesenius, *Gesenius Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910) par. 127-e and P. Joüon, *Grammaire de l'Hebreu Biblique* (Rome: Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1923) par. 139-bc.

⁹ P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*. (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2003) par. 139a, p. 517.

¹⁰ V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*. NICOT. Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) Gen. 16.

¹¹ V. Hirth, *Gottes Boten im Alten Testament* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1975) 26-27.

1.3. Determination in Hebrew and English

The next step is a more general comparison of determination in Hebrew and English. It is possible that an expression in Hebrew is considered as determined, while in English we see and translate it in a more indefinite way. Peculiar to Hebrew and Aramaic is the employment of the article to denote a single person or thing (primarily one which is as yet unknown, and therefore not capable of being defined) as being present to the mind under given circumstances. In English, in such cases, the indefinite article is used mostly.¹²

Gen. 8:7-8 Noah sent forth a raven and a dove.
Gen. 14:13 One who has escaped came, and told Abram
Gen. 15:1 The word came to Abram in a vision
Gen. 18:7 Abraham gave the calf to a servant
Gen. 19:30 Lot and his daughters dwelled in a cave
Gen. 42:23 An interpreter between Joseph and his brothers
Ex. 2:15 Moses fled to Midian and sat down by a well
Ex. 3:2 He appeared to Moses out of the midst of a bush
Ex. 4:20 They rode on an ass

These examples show that the article is used, or more generally, that determination is used, in cases where we do not do that. In English, we can better use the indefinite article. James Barr wrote an article about determination, in which he is very negative about this word. He argues that the Hebrew definite article is not strictly, but only loosely and generally related to determination.¹³ He preferred to use the term 'deictic elements'. 'We can think of this deictic as meaning something like "Look!" or "There!"'.¹⁴ This is another line of evidence to question the general accepted translation 'the angel'.

2. The Expression מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה in the Contexts of the Narratives

2.1. Texts about a מַלְאָךְ without a Clear Determination from the Context

In cases grammar does not suggest 'the angel' as most plausible translation, the stories' content can nevertheless do so. In many cases, an undetermined translation seems possible. Hagar fled for Sarai, and a heavenly messenger saw her and spoke with her, but the beginning of the story gives no clues as to think about a special angel. 'An angel found her by a spring' (Gen. 16:7). The same applies to the expressions מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים and מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה in Gen. 21:17; 31:11 and Ex. 14:19.

When a pronoun is used, there too is no necessity to translate with determination. In Ex. 23:20; 33:2, and Num. 20:16 it seems better to translate indefinitely with 'a messenger'. God promised to send out a messenger before the Israelites to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan. Of course, from the content of the narratives, it is possible that a certain angel received this task, but from a grammatical point of view, this is not necessary.

2.2. The Angel as a Speaking Messenger

After the purely linguistic features, we have to look at several arguments with regard to the content of the narratives. Several times the angel speaks as if he is God himself. Maybe it is possible, from a grammatical point of view, to interpret as 'an angel', but several times a

¹² W. Gesenius, par. 126q,r.

¹³ Barr, James, "'Determination" and the definite article in Biblical Hebrew' *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34 (1989) 309.

¹⁴ Barr, 322, quoting J. Lyons. J. Barth, *Die Pronominalbildung in den Semitischen Sprachen* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1913) 72. The development of the article is late in Hebrew. See Barth, 132 and Joüon-Muraoka, 507.

divine message is delivered as if God himself is speaking. Is this an argument for assuming, that in these cases, the same heavenly messenger appeared?

1) In Gen. 16:10 the angel promised Hagar: 'I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count.'

2) Gen. 22:11-12 describes the binding of Isaac. The angel called out to Abraham from heaven: 'Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.'

3) Ex. 3 offers a description of an appearance of God to Moses. It is stated first that the angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in flames of fire from within a bush (vs.2). In the following verses we can read 'God called' and 'God said.' Moses heard the voice speaking 'I am the God of your father.'

4) Judg. 6:11-18 mentions that the angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah. Vs. 14 'The LORD turned to him and said: "Go in the strength you have."

These examples juxtapose between 'the angel of the LORD' and 'the LORD': they are used in an interchangeable way. Even complete identity of the Lord and his angel can be derived from this evidence. The angel has to be God himself. However, there is another possibility. In text of the Ancient Near East and in the Bible, there are indications that a messenger could use the words of his lord.

1) In Gen. 44 Joseph sent his steward after his brothers. In the dialogue with the steward, the brothers used several times the expression 'my lord'. They offered to become the lord's slaves. Do they mean the steward's slaves or Joseph's slaves? Later in the story, it becomes clear that they mean Joseph, because they repeat their words to him. But in the encounter on the way, the steward answered: 'Whoever is found to have it will become my slave.' So there is an identification between Joseph and his steward. The servant spoke the words of his master.

2) A second example can be found in Judg. 11:12-13. Jephtah sent messengers (מְלָאכִים) to the king of Ammon, saying: 'What to me and to you, that you came to me to fight against my land?' The NIV translates in plural ('us'), but in the Hebrew the words indicate a singular. So words of Jephtah are quoted by the messengers (who were in plural). The king of Ammon answered in the singular: 'Because Israel on coming from Egypt took away my land.' And: 'Now restore (singular!) it peaceably.' It seems as if Jephtah and the king of Ammon were speaking with each other directly. But from the story we know that this dialogue was mediated by their messengers. The next verses use a formula that explains the situation: 'And Jephtah sent messengers again to the king of the Ammonites and said to him "Thus says Jephtah: Israel did not take away".' The formula 'Thus says Jephtah' indicates that a quotation will follow. Cf. vs. 27: 'I therefore have not sinned.... you do me wrong by making war on me.'

3) An example from the Adapa-myth in Ugarit.¹⁵ Adapa broke the wing of the southwind. Anu called his vizier Ilabrat, and he told what Adapa did. Then Anu ordered to arrest Adapa

¹⁵ J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 101-103.

and bring him. When the messenger of Anu arrived, he said to Adapa: 'Adapa the south wind's wing has broken, bring him before me (= Anu).'

Of course, it is possible to argue that the stories do not give all the details, and so it is possible that the official formulas to introduce the speech are left out. However, in the dialog with the steward of Joseph the brothers spoke: 'Why does my lord speak such words as these?' (vs. 6).¹⁶

In most cases, the message is delivered as a strict quotation, but sometimes there is some freedom to react and to discuss, of course in agreement with the original message. This is the case with the words of the Rabshakeh to Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 18:19-35). He delivered the message of Sanherib, but also he reacted negatively on the proposal to speak Aramaic, without first asking his master. His declarations look as elaborations on the one great theme of surrendering. He reacts in detail on several actions of Hezekiah that may have been unknown to king Sanherib (e.g. the centralisation of the cult). In this case, there is some freedom for a delegate to react on proposals.

2.3. The Angel as a Personal Representative

All cases discussed so far suggest that the messengers or delegates represent their principals. They deliver the messages and in their words they can identify themselves with their masters. This custom can explain some of the texts about the relation between God and his angel. However, it is not enough to look at the transfer of words. There are also texts in which appearances are described. In those cases, the messenger seems to appear as God himself. Manoah and his wife think they have seen God. And Moses has to take off his shoes, because the place is holy. In this context, it is interesting to see that a messenger in the Ancient Near East is treated as his principal would have been treated. Not only the words of the messenger are important, but also his appearance and the conduct towards him.

1) In an Ugaritic text,¹⁷ the god Yamm or Yammu sent messengers to the gods on mountain Lala (= of El?) to request the handing over of Baal or Ba'lu. These messengers are not allowed to bow down for El ('Ilu) or for one of the other gods, because they represent Yammu, who is not willing to bow down for them. When the messengers arrive, Baal stands near El. All the gods bow their heads down upon their knees for the messengers, because they revere Yamm in his messengers. Only Baal refuses to give this honor and rebukes the gods for their submissive attitude. The answer of Baal to his father El is:

'Your (singular) slave is Baal, o Yamm
Your (sing.) slave is Baal [o Yam]m
Dagon's son is your captive.

2) 2 Sam. 10:4 gives another example. 'Hanan took David's servants, and shaved off half the beard of each, and cut off their garments in the middle'. Hanan insulted / dishonored the messengers and so he insulted David.¹⁸

3) In the New Testament Jesus gave his disciples authority. Accordingly, it is not insignificant how their audiences treat these disciples. 'He who receives you receives me, and he who

¹⁶ Cf. S.F. Noll, 941. These human messengers are fully equated with their senders. E.g. 2 Sam. 3:12-13; 1 Kgs. 20:2-40. In Num. 22:5 *lemoor* is used in stead of the more elaborate formel in vs. 16.

¹⁷ CTA 2. Translation in Pritchard, *ANET*, 130, and W.W. Hallo, and K.L. Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture*. Vol. I (Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 2003) 244.

¹⁸ The men were very thoroughly humiliated (NIV); a better translation then: greatly ashamed (RSV).

receives me receives him who sent me' (Mat. 10:40; cf. 41-42). Thus, receiving the disciples is considered as receiving Jesus, and receiving Jesus is seen as receiving God the Father, who sent Jesus. And: 'He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me' (Luke 10:16). (Cf. Mat. 10:41f.; 25:35ff.; Mark 9:37,41; Lk. 9:48; Jn. 13:20). Negligence of these implications will have serious consequences. 'And if any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.' (Mat. 10:14f.). (Cf. Mk. 6:11; Lk. 9:5).¹⁹

2.4. The Angel as a Visible Representative

In previous sections, I have emphasized the conduct towards an ambassador or messenger is emphasized. Subsequently we will proceed and to investigate how it is possible that an appearance of an angel could be interpreted as an appearance by God himself.

Gideon was afraid, because he had seen an angel from face to face. But he received the answer that he would not die (Judg. 6). The wife of Manoah saw an angel. 'His countenance was like the countenance of an / the angel of God very terrible' (Judg. 13:6). And in vs. 22 Manoah draw his conclusion: 'We shall surely die, for we have seen God.' (Cf. Gen. 16).

The appearance was impressive, but not abnormal. Of course, no wings were visible. The conclusions were drawn afterwards, when the angel was gone away.²⁰

Ex. 3 is the most difficult passage to explain. Here is not only a messenger who delivered a message, but an appearance in glory and majesty. Then, the question is, whether or not this messenger is God himself. Several other Old Testament passages suggest that angels can indeed appear in God-like majesty.

1) David saw an angel at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. 'And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem' (1 Chr. 21:16; cf. 2 Sam. 24). [NB.: David spoke to the LORD, seeing the angel, translated in 2 Sam. 24:16 'the angel of the LORD.']

2) In a vision, Daniel saw a man: 'His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the noise of a multitude' (Dan. 10:6). It turns out to be a heavenly messenger.

3) Mat. 28:3-4 describes an angel of the LORD: 'His appearance was like lightning and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.'

In these three cases, God's glory accompanies the appearance of his messengers. In Ex. 23:20-21 the Hebrew word **מַלְאָכִי** is mentioned as an explanation: the Name of God is in the angel. 'Behold, I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the

¹⁹ Cf. Ananias (and Sapphira) lied not to men but to God; Acts 5:4. Elisa cursed small boys who jeered at him; 42 boys were killed. As an ambassador of God he was insulted (2 Kgs. 2:23-25). Isaiah delivered a word of God concerning Sanherib, king of Assyria. 'By your messengers you have mocked the LORD' (2 Kgs. 19:23). This mocking is done through the words of Rabshakeh (2 Kgs. 18f.) and the messengers that delivered a letter to Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 19:14).

²⁰ Balaam saw the angel, with a sword in his hand (Num. 22:22-23,31).

place which I have prepared. Give heed to him and hearken to his voice, do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him.²¹

The Shem of God often denotes the glory and majesty of God, as they appear in creation (Ps. 8) and history (Ex. 9:16). The name is an expression of character. Therefore, God is personally present in the messenger. The principal is present in the delegate. The elevated LORD will bridge the distance to humankind. Through the image of the messenger, who represents his lord, but is not identical with him, the distance between God and man is guaranteed.²²

3. Later Developments

3.1. The Intertestamental Period

After evaluating the translation of the LXX, Juncker states: 'If one can speak of 'the Angel of the LORD' in the LXX at all, that is if the Angel of the LORD is a single distinct figure in the LXX, he is simply one angel among many. He is no longer divine and the expression 'the Angel of the LORD' is no longer a way of speaking about YHWH.'²³

This phenomenon also pervades the intertestamental period. In the last centuries B.C., Jewish writers used the expression 'angel of the LORD' for several angels (e.g. for Gabriel, Raphael and Phanuel).²⁴ Therefore, the evidence does not suggest the existence of one special angel with this designation.²⁵

In Qumran the expression 'Angel of the LORD' is only mentioned in the biblical manuscripts. Other writings have 'the Angel of His Truth' and 'the Prince of Light(s),' and sometimes these phrases seem to designate the angel Michael. There are also speculations about Melchizedek, but nowhere an angel is seen as divine.²⁶

3.2. The New Testament

In the NT, the expression 'the angel of the LORD' is used in several cases. In Greek: ἄγγελος κυρίου. Rendered 'the angel of the LORD' in the King James Version, modern translations usually have 'an angel of the LORD'. In Mat. 2:13,19 an angel commanded Joseph and Mary to go to Egypt with the child Jesus. Of course, in this case, it is not possible here to identify the angel with the Logos, the pre-incarnate Christ.

There are several passages that refer to Old Testament stories and make reference to an angel:

1) In Acts 7:30 Stephen referred to Moses in the desert. 'Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush.' In Greek: ἄγγελος; in several manuscripts: ἄγγελος θεου. If the choice of Nestle-Aland is the best one, then the indefinite translation 'an angel' is correct.

²¹ C. Houtman, *Exodus*. COT. Vol. (Kampen: Kok, 1986) 271 translated in Dutch: 'een bode.... Jullie wandaden kan hij namelijk niet vergeven, ook al is hij mijn vertegenwoordiger'. In English: representative.

²² Cf. Houtman, 319.

²³ G.H. Juncker, *Jesus and the Angel of the Lord*, 205.

²⁴ F. Stier, *Gott und sein Engel im Alten Testament* (Münster: Aschendorffschen Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1934) 47-48.

²⁵ G.H. Juncker, *Jesus and the Angel of the Lord*, 279, concludes: 'A surprising number of OT Angel of the LORD texts are taken up but always with similar results: the angel in those texts is not understood to be divine; and the many angels that are modeled after the angel in those texts are not understood to be divine. (...) The principal angels in this literature, including the angel(s) of the Lord, do not rise above the status of mere agents.'

²⁶ Cf. Juncker, *Jesus and the Angel of the Lord*, 232-247.

2) In the same speech Stephen said: 'you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.' Exodus does not mention such angels, but for Stephen it is clear that God used angels. Is this only a later idea or a later representation of the old history? Another possibility is that the word מַלְאָךְ in Exodus led Stephen to think of angels.

3) In Gal. 3:19 Paul speaks again over the lawgiving at Sinai and says: 'and it was ordained by angels through an intermediary' / 'in the hand of a mediator' (KJV). The tablets were given in the hands of Moses.

4) The Epistle to the Hebrews refers to the same event and compares the Mosaic covenant, with its laws and stipulations, with the later message of Jesus Christ. 'For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?' (Heb. 2:2f.).

The same Epistle makes a sharp distinction between Jesus, the Son of God, and the angels. Several passages in the OT were not spoken to the angels, but to Jesus (Heb. 1). And after being for a little while lower than the angels, Jesus is now crowned with glory and honor (Heb. 2:7).

The NT references do not favor the interpretation of מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה as the Logos, or Jesus.²⁷ They seem to point in the direction of 'an angel' instead of 'the angel'.

4. Several Theories and Conclusion

The texts narrating about appearances of God are usually difficult to explain. Several times we would like to distinguish whereas the Israelites did not feel the necessity to do so. Therefore, it is important to try to understand the world in which the OT is written. To this end, it might be helpful to have a look at other languages and cultures of the Ancient Near East.

The old Logos-theory, assuming that before his incarnation Christ appeared as an angel, has been unproven.²⁸ It seems unlikely, too, that God and the messenger were identical. The representation-theory offers the most likely explanation: a representation of the Sender, not only in words but also in appearance, in several occasions. The words of the messenger have to be taken very seriously, because the messenger bears the Name of the LORD. He represents his heavenly Sender.²⁹

Several years ago, C.A. Newsom suggested that the narrators used the interchangeability of God and the angel to create tension and paradox. In Gen. 16 for example, Hagar is correct; she has seen God. But it is also true that the one who has appeared to her is מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה. 'The unresolved ambiguity in the narrative allows the reader to experience the paradox'.³⁰ Stephan White agrees with this position, but adds the opinion that a writer or editor used the expression for creating distance between Yahweh and humanity, in order to emphasize the transcendence of Yahweh. Accordingly, he considers the expression 'angel of the LORD' as an euphemism for God. However, as shown earlier in this article, it seems better to see the angel not only as a literary device to create a paradox or to create distance, but as a messenger, representing God, but not identical with him.

²⁷ In the NT several OT texts about an angel are used to support the divine identity of Jesus. See Juncker, *Jesus and the Angel of the Lord*, 326-409.

²⁸ See W.G. Heidt, *Angelology of the Old Testament: A Study in Biblical Theology* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1949) and V. Hirth, *Gottes Boten im Alten Testament* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1975) for an overview of many theories.

²⁹ The interpolation theory aims to explain the differences in the text by later interpolations.

³⁰ C.A. Newsom, 'Angels'. In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 250.

As for the expression 'the Angel of the LORD,' I conclude that, from a grammatical point of view, it is very difficult to see this angel as a special one. It is impossible to be sure that in each story the same, special angel is meant. The rules for determination of a word in Hebrew are too different from our rules. The translation 'angel of the LORD' was also questioned, while it is a tautology in English. It seems better to translate 'messenger', and to regard the name of God as a qualifier to denote a heavenly messenger instead of a human one.

With regard to the messages of the angel, there are several ways to explain his utterances in the first person singular as literal quotations of words of God. His appearance is sometimes influenced by his heavenly origin and people are therefore afraid and equate the sight of an angel with seeing God. Several passages in the NT favor this interpretation.

Therefore, maybe, the question about the identity of the מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה is a question unknown to the Scriptures. The emphasis is not on the messenger, but on the message of the divine Sender.

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