

The Angel of the Lord

As one reads the Old Testament, he will undoubtedly notice the mysterious references to the angel of the LORD. Is this an angel like Michael who was sent out by the LORD? Or is this some kind of manifestation of deity? Who is the angel of the LORD?

Let's initially examine the term angel (in Hebrew, *mal'ak*). This word can also be rendered "messenger." *Mal'ak* generally indicates one who is sent, a messenger or a representative. It can refer to human messengers sent by human officials (Gen 32:3) or God (Isa 42:19) as well as to supernatural messengers sent by God. In reference to this latter group, it may refer to a created order of supernatural beings, angels (Gen 19:1, 15). The issue for us concerns whether this term can refer to the infinite supernatural Being, God. In order to prove that this term can refer to God, we will need to examine when it is used in connection with the phrase "of the LORD." Though this expression the angel of the LORD is used thirty-nine times in the Old Testament, we will only be able to examine two of these.

The first passage is found in Exodus 3:1-14. While tending the flock of his father-in-law at Horeb, Moses saw that a burning bush was not being consumed by the fire. As he approached the bush, verse 2 clearly states that the angel of the LORD appeared to him in the flames of the bush. Verse 4 says that the LORD spoke to him from within the bush. In verse 6 the Being in the bush further identifies Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As the conversation continues between these two, the Being in the bush announces His name, "I AM WHO I AM" (v. 14). Thus, this passage indicates that the angel of the LORD mentioned in verse 2 is clearly identified by Himself and accepted by Moses as the infinite God.

Zechariah 3:1-10 is our second passage. This is Zechariah's fourth vision, which focuses on Israel's future cleansing from sin and reinstatement as a priestly nation. Five participants are introduced in verse 1: the interpreting angel (the "he" who is referred to in 1:9, 14, 19; 2:3; 4:1, 3, 5; etc.; in light of 1:9 the interpreting angel was apparently present to explain some of the details of these visions to Zechariah), Zechariah ("me"), Joshua the high priest, the angel of the LORD, and Satan. In this verse Joshua is described as standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan is pictured as standing at the right hand of the angel of the LORD to resist him. In this vision the angel of the LORD is the focal point around which the following context revolves.

The first half of verse 2 reads like this: "And the LORD said unto Satan, 'The LORD rebuke thee, O Satan.'" In light of the participants mentioned in verse 1, we could read this verse in this fashion: "And the LORD, that is the angel of the LORD, said unto Satan, 'The LORD rebuke thee, O Satan.'" Therefore, verse 2 identifies the angel of the LORD as the LORD but yet indicates that there is a distinction between the angel of the LORD and the LORD since the angel does not say "I rebuke you" but "The LORD rebuke you." This identification is further substantiated in verse 4. If we follow the context of verses 2-4 carefully, we will notice that it is the angel of the LORD who forgives sin in verse 4. Since God is the only one who forgives sin, it is readily apparent that the angel of the LORD is God. Consequently, this passage provides solid support for both the deity of the angel of the LORD and his distinctiveness from the LORD.

Who is both deity and yet a distinct person from the LORD? Since no one has ever seen God the Father (John 1:18; 1 Tim 6:16) and since the Holy Spirit never takes on bodily form, we must conclude that the supernatural Being to which this expression refers is the second member of the Trinity (also compare Exod 3:14 with John 8:58). Therefore, the angel of the LORD was a temporary manifestation of the LORD Jesus Christ in a preincarnate form. It is important to make a distinction between Christ's perincarnation and incarnation. His incarnation is a permanent union where God the Son took on full humanity becoming the God-man. His incarnation began with His miraculous conception and will continue throughout eternity. Christ's preincarnate form was a transitory visible manifestation of God the Son. After His incarnation, Christ never appears again as the angel of the LORD. As we view the angel of the LORD, we can see how God through progressive revelation provided data in the Old Testament for the doctrine of the Trinity which is more completely elaborated upon by the inspired writers of the New Testament.