

The Angel of the Lord

In our last post we looked at the long process whereby angelology developed in the Bible. Now we will look at one particular aspect of this: the *mal'ak Yahweh*, “Yahweh’s messenger”, usually translated “the Angel of the Lord”.

We have seen that the Hebrew word *mal'ak* could mean several things. In *Genesis 32:3* it meant the human messengers that Jacob sent on ahead to meet Esau. In *Psalms 104:4* it referred to the winds and lightnings that Yahweh used as the messengers of His wrath and power. Later on in *Zechariah 1:9* it referred to a heavenly being created by God which functioned as His messenger and which had a particular task (such as revealing things to the prophet Zechariah, or patrolling the earth). Later still in the Book of Daniel (according to some scholars’ dating) these angelic beings would have not just their own tasks, but their own names, such as “Michael” or “Gabriel”. So we see not only some development in angelology, but also some fluidity in the meaning of the word *mal'ak*/ messenger/ angel.

This should be kept in mind when we read about the mysterious *mal'ak Yahweh* in the Pentateuch. In some places in the Pentateuch the phrase *mal'ak Yahweh* refers to a member of a class of beings created by God, angels in the classic sense. Thus in *Genesis 28:12* we read of Jacob’s dream wherein he saw a stairway connecting heaven with earth and God’s *mal'akim* were going up and down on it. But in other places the term *mal'ak Yahweh* seems to refer to God Himself.

Thus in *Genesis 16* we read of the flight of Hagar from Sarai, and of how the *mal'ak Yahweh* found her by a spring in the wilderness (verse 7). The messenger told her to return to her mistress and submit to her. But then the messenger said to her further, “Behold, you are with child and you shall bear a son and you shall call his name Ishmael”. This sounds as if the person speaking to Hagar is Yahweh, and this is confirmed in verse 13, which says, “Then she called the name of Yahweh who spoke to her, ‘*El-roi*’ [i.e. the God who sees], for she said ‘Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?’”

This is not the only time in the Pentateuch that we encounter someone called the *mal'ak Yahweh* or the “angel of Yahweh” who seems to have been Yahweh Himself. In *Exodus 3:2f* we read how the *mal'ak Yahweh* appeared to Moses in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush...and when Yahweh saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush”. Later on, after Israel left Egypt, we read in *Exodus 14:19f* how “the angel of God, who had been going before the camp of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them...and it came about at the morning watch, that Yahweh looked down on the camp of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the camp of the Egyptians into confusion”. Once again we see how the God’s angel seemed to have been identified with Yahweh.

Some examples, though less clear, also point toward the same identification. In *Genesis 48:16* Jacob referred to the Lord who redeemed him from all evil and danger as “the angel who has redeemed me” when he invoked God’s blessing on his grandchildren. In *Exodus 23:20-21* we read that Yahweh said to Moses and Israel, “Behold, I am going to send a *mal'ak* before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious towards him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him”. We note that in all other places of the Pentateuch God says that He is the One who will bring Israel into the Promised Land. We note too the significance of the “name”. God’s Name represented Himself, His power, the might He manifested on the earth (thus *Psalms 54:1*—“save me, O God, by Your name, and vindicate me by Your power”). By saying that Yahweh’s “name” was in the angel, it seems as if God meant that the *mal'ak* would carry His presence.

Then there is the (to us) somewhat perplexing dialogue of Yahweh with Moses in *Exodus 33:1f*. After Israel sinned with the golden calf, Yahweh said to Moses, “Depart, go up from here, to the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanite, for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, lest I destroy you on the way.” Moses then intercedes with Yahweh, and He relents, promising Moses, “My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest” (verse 14). Here we see a distinction: God sending an angel to clear out the Canaanites from the land versus God Himself going with them and being present in the Tabernacle shrine.

What are we to make of all this? I suggest that the term *mal’ak* originally meant any manifestation of God’s power on earth. When men saw someone manifesting divine power, the person doing the powerful work was a messenger, a *mal’ak*.

Yahweh could speak to men from heaven (such as when He spoke to the prophets), or alternately, He could send messengers from heaven, and those on earth would experience the divine power that He sent, such as when God said in *Exodus 33* that He would send His angel before disobedient Israel. When God used this latter form of communication He was called the *mal’ak Yahweh*—the angel of Yahweh.

The confusion arose for later exegetes because (as we saw in our last blog post) the term *mal’ak* underwent some considerable development. At an earlier stage of this development a *mal’ak* could mean either a being sent from God (such as those using the staircase in Jacob’s dream) or it could mean anyone manifesting on earth of God’s presence and power. Later on the term *mal’ak* was confined to this former usage and was only used to designate a particular kind of created being, a holy bodiless power like the ones using Jacob’s staircase.

That is how the confusion arose—along with later debates about the possibility of “two powers in heaven” and the status of the angel Metatron. Exegetes were a bit perplexed about how God could be described as a *mal’ak* when a *mal’ak* clearly meant a being who was not God, but a created being who functioned as His messenger. Recognition of some development in the use of the term *mal’ak* would have helped clear up some of the confusion. It is significant that the term *mal’ak Yahweh* as a description of Yahweh’s earthly manifestation is mostly confined to the earlier books and chapters of the Bible. In the later books, the term *mal’ak* had developed so as to make this term unsuitable for describing God.

Given that the Bible is not a single book but a library of books written over centuries, such development was to be expected as God continued to lead His people and reveal more truth to them. The Church is the beneficiary of this long process.