

# OpenTheo

## Is the Angel of the Lord the Pre-Incarnate Christ?

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### Transcript

Is the Angel of the Lord to be identified with the Pre-Incarnate Christ? Many in the tradition have given an affirmative answer to this question, yet the identification of the two is far from universally made, and continues to be a matter of debate. There are a few initial points that we should have as clarification. First of all, in Scripture, not every reference to the Angel of the Lord is a reference to THE Angel of the Lord with a capital A. Secondly, the claim that the Angel of the Lord is the same as the Pre-Incarnate Son does not mean that the Son took angelic nature as he took human nature, or that he is an angelic spirit.

Rather, he is the archetypal angel or messenger of the Lord, as he is the very word of the Lord. In arguing for the identification of the Angel of the Lord and the Pre-Incarnate Christ, I believe that a cumulative case is the strongest, taking into account some of the details that we have of the Theophanies in the Old Testament, of other appearances of the Lord, and of various figures such as Michael, the commander of the army of the Lord, the Angel of the Lord, the messenger of the covenant, and the Angel of the Presence, I think we can put the pieces together to get a composite picture of a figure who is rightly identified with Christ. Such an identification based not upon just detached proof texts, but the bringing together of various lines of biblical argumentation, I believe can be quite a strong one.

We might think, for instance, of Genesis chapters 18 and 19. In chapter 18, three men

visit Abraham. In chapter 19, we read of the two angels.

We are, it seems, presumed to know who these angels are. And as we go back to chapter 18, the picture begins to make a bit more sense. In verse 1 of chapter 18, it speaks of the Lord himself appearing to Abraham.

And in verse 10 of the chapter, it speaks of the Lord foretelling the birth of Isaac. Once we realize that one of the three men is identified with the Lord himself, and that he stays and speaks with Abraham while the other two go on, the identity of the two angels becomes clear. The appearance of the Lord with these two angels, and the fact that the three are spoken of as three men, suggest that it is reasonable to see the Lord as appearing here as one of the angels in human form.

We should also note the way that the angel of the Lord speaks of himself as God in the first person, in places like Genesis chapter 16, verses 7 to 13, or chapter 31, verses 11 to 13, or Exodus chapter 3, verses 2 to 6, or in places like Judges chapter 2. In Genesis chapter 32, the one who wrestles with Jacob is described as a man, and also as God, and in Hosea chapter 12 is spoken of as the angel. Jacob sees the Lord standing above the ladder at Bethel in chapter 28 of the book of Genesis. Once again, here we have a seemingly visible appearance of the Lord in some form alongside angels.

The Lord speaks of the angel that he sends before his people in Exodus chapter 23, verses 20 to 22. In Joshua chapter 5, the commander of the army of the Lord appears to Joshua. There, as in the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Moses in Exodus chapter 3, Joshua is told that the ground that he is standing upon is holy ground, and he worships the angel in that place.

Putting a few pieces together here, we begin to see that there is a mysterious figure, sometimes referred to as the angel, who speaks in the first person with the voice of the Lord, who is said to have the name of the Lord in him and the power to forgive transgressions, who acts in the moment with the authority and voice of the Lord, not merely seeming to bring a message that he has previously received, receiving worship from human beings, and having the space around him being described as holy ground. In Genesis chapter 48, verses 15 and 16, this figure of the angel is spoken of in direct relationship to the Lord himself. And he blessed Joseph and said, In Isaiah chapter 63, verses 8 to 10, we already see the figures of the Lord, the angel of his presence, and the Lord's spirit in the undivided work of the redemption of Israel.

For he said, And he became their saviour. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and in his pity he redeemed them.

He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. Therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.

We might also think about the way in which identifying the angel of the Lord with the pre-incarnate Christ can help us to understand some difficult texts, like Malachi chapter 3, verse 1, where we have the challenge of identifying the speaker, the Lord of hosts, the Lord whom you seek, and the messenger of the covenant. Behold I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight.

Behold he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. Seeing Christ as the messenger, or more literally the angel of the covenant, really helps us to make sense of a text that might otherwise be confusing, and gives weight to the idea that we can meaningfully speak of Christ as the messenger or angel of the covenant. In light of such an identification, a number of details in the New Testament would also make more sense.

We might consider, for instance, the way that Jesus' own I have come statements could be read in terms of this mysterious, theophanic angel of the Lord, who has been working incognito throughout the Old Testament, but is now stepping forward into the light in human flesh, so that we know him not merely as this agency of the angel of the covenant, but more personally as Jesus Christ. Understanding these various theophanic appearances of the angel of the covenant in the Old Testament as appearances of Christ is also a way in which the event of the transfiguration can serve as a key to the story of Scripture more generally. The glory of God seen in the face of Jesus Christ helps us to see that the one who was seen at various points in the Old Testament is also Jesus Christ.

It was the pre-incarnate Christ that Jacob saw at the top of Jacob's ladder. It was the pre-incarnate Christ that Moses saw on the top of Sinai. It was the pre-incarnate Christ that Isaiah saw in his temple vision.

It was the pre-incarnate Christ that Ezekiel saw in his vision by the Kibar Canal. It was the pre-incarnate Christ that Joshua saw near Jericho. In Daniel chapter 12, the Lord speaks of the time when Michael, the great prince of the people, will arise.

This will be the time when the long-awaited deliverance of the people will occur. In Revelation chapter 12, we have the vision of the woman in heaven who bears this son, and the son is snatched up to God's right hand. Then in the verses that follow, we read of the battle between Michael and his angels against the dragon and his angels, and the victory that they achieve.

Going back to the context of Daniel chapter 12, in Daniel chapters 10 to 12, Daniel's final vision is narrated. Daniel sees a vision of the man at the river Tigris. It's described in chapter 10 verses 5 to 9. In Revelation chapter 1 verses 12 to 17, John receives a remarkably similar vision, and I believe it makes sense to identify these two figures.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven

golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands, one like a son of man. Again, we should remember the vision of the son of man in Daniel chapter 7. Clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest, the hairs of his head were white like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire.

His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. While one might challenge these various strands of biblical evidence taken by themselves, taken together they present us with a figure who is associated with angels, sometimes called Michael, sometimes called the angel of the Lord, who is so closely identified with the Lord that he can speak and act with the Lord's own authority and name. It seems to be reasonable to hypothesize the presence of this figure on various occasions when we are told that the Lord himself appeared to someone.

Likewise, the similarity between the description of Christ in places like Revelation chapter 1 and the son of man in Daniel chapter 7 or the man at the tigris in chapter 10 is best accounted for by the claim that the Lord made himself known in the Old Covenant through the theophanic angel, and that this theophanic angel is Christ pre-incarnate, appearing as one of the angels in normal human form or in a glorified form, as we see in places like the book of Daniel. By far the most significant thing to arise from this identification is a different way of reading the Old Testament texts. When we read the story of Genesis chapter 18, as Christ in pre-incarnate form telling Sarah and Abraham that they're going to have a child, the one who will be the true seed of Abraham, declaring the birth of Isaac, it changes the way that we read the story.

The same can be said of the angels staying the hand of Abraham on Mount Moriah in Genesis chapter 22. The one who will himself be the son sacrificed on the mountain stops Abraham from killing his son. In Genesis chapter 32, Jacob wrestles with the one in whom all the great promises that have been made to him will be fulfilled.

The pre-incarnate Christ appears to Moses at the top of Mount Sinai in chapter 33 and 34 of Exodus, and in the story of the Gospels, the one whose glorious appearance Moses' face once reflected will appear with him in incarnate form on the top of another mountain, the Mount of Transfiguration. The one who appears as the commander of the army of the Lord to Joshua near Jericho in Joshua chapter 5 will one day be incarnate in human flesh as Joshua's own namesake and will lead his people into a greater promised land. Making this identification then, in these and many other places, will help us to recognize that the story of Scripture is very much a single story, a story that focuses upon the character of Christ, and a story that is brought together by the fact that the glory of God is seen in his face and that he is the ultimate messenger or angel of the

Lord, the word with a capital W in whom the Lord makes himself known.

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