

The Angel of Yahweh: A Biblical Appellation for the Second Person of the Holy Trinity

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Abstract: *The Angel of Yahweh is a prominent actor in the OT and exhibits many of the same qualities, functions, and attributes as the Son of God. This paper addresses some of the introductory considerations regarding the Angel of Yahweh and demonstrates that the Angel is both divine, personally distinct from God, and identified as the Son of God in the NT.*

Keywords: Old Testament; New Testament; theology; exegesis; christology; angeology

Within the text of the Old Testament, there exists Yahweh, Israel's covenant God, and another figure who is identified variously as the Angel of Yahweh, the Angel of God, or simply as Yahweh or God.¹ The Angel of Yahweh appears both in the Pentateuch, the histories, the Psalms, and in many of the prophets and in most of the key narratives of the OT the Angel of Yahweh plays the leading role. Among ancient Christian exegetes, that the Angel of Yahweh was the pre-incarnate Son of God a given.² However, such a conclusion is no longer a live option for most modern interpreters.

The purpose of this study is to validate the interpretive impulse of those early Christian exegetes. By way of a fresh consideration of the biblical data, it will be shown that the Angel

¹ A related consideration is the Targumic *Memra*. The Targums often substitute *Memra* (i.e., "Word") for the Angel of Yahweh: Tg. Neo. and Ts. Ps.-J. Gen. 16:13; Tg. Onq. Gen. 22:11; Tg. Onq. Exod. 3:4-5; Tg. Neo. Exod. 12:12; Tg. Ps.-J. Deut. 31:6; Tg. Ps.-J. Isa. 63:7-10; Tg. Neb. Mal. 3:1. Cf. Tg. Ps.-J. Dan. 7:13.

² Günther Juncker, 1994. "Christ As Angel: The Reclamation of a Primitive Title," *Trinity Journal*, 15:2, 221-50.

of Yahweh is a figure who possesses full deity and is personally distinct from God. Further, several passages from the NT will be examined in order to demonstrate that the Son of God is the divine Angel of the OT.

Introductory Considerations

Prior to assessing the NT a few initial issues require consideration. First, the term “angel” (Heb. *mal’āk*) typically connotes a winged celestial being in popular usage, but in the OT this term denotes the function of someone and not a taxonomic category. The term “angel” is defined as “messenger”³ and thus explains a function and not an ontology.⁴ That the title “Angel of Yahweh” does not in any way imply the ontological inferiority of the messenger is seen by the fact that Yahweh himself is identified as the *Mal’āk*.⁵

Second, some scholars have argued that the phrase “the Angel of Yahweh” ought to be rendered indefinitely (i.e., “an angel of Yahweh”), thus denoting that there isn’t a single individual who is the Angel of Yahweh, but several who serve in that role.⁶ Other scholars such as Poythress, have argued that the Angel of Yahweh is at times God himself, but is at other times a created being.⁷ There are, however, several good reasons to affirm the traditional view that *the* Angel of Yahweh is a single divine person and that the phrase *Mal’āk* Yahweh ought to be rendered definitely. Typically, whenever a definite noun such as “Yahweh” modifies another noun, that noun functions in grammatical agreement and is thus definite.⁸ That the plural

³ HALOT, 585-6.

⁴ Michael S. Heiser, 2014. “Monotheism and the Language of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible and Dead Sea Scrolls,” *TynBul*, 65.1, 91.

⁵ E.g., Gen 48:16; Ecc 5:6; Mal 3:1.BD

⁶ René A. Lopez, 2010. “Identifying the ‘Angel of the Lord’ in the Book of Judges: A Model for Reconsidering the Referent in Other Old Testament Loci,” *BBR*, 20, 2.

⁷ Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God’s Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 417.

⁸ Waltke, Bruce K., O’Connor, M., *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*

construction “angels of Yahweh” never occurs in the OT is good evidence that the term ought to be rendered definitely. Moreover, many of the narratives in which the Angel of Yahweh occurs notes his unique and exalted position. The Angel of Yahweh is said to possess the name of Yahweh (“My name is in him,” Exod. 23:21) and the ability to forgive sins (“for he will not pardon your transgression,” Exod. 23:21). When Gideon saw the Angel of Yahweh, he remarked, “Alas, O Lord Yahweh! For now, I have seen the Angel of Yahweh face to face” (Judg. 6:22b; cf. 13:22; Gen. 32:30). Gideon’s reaction implies that he was surprised to have survived the visitation, thereby indicating that the Angel of Yahweh was no ordinary angel and that he held a specific and identifiable role in the divine economy. Indeed, given that the Angel of Yahweh was the one in the burning bush, in the pillar of cloud and fire, and the one who went before the people of God into the land of promise is a good indicator that he is a specific individual. Because of these considerations and the consistent testimony of the OT, it is certain that the Angel of Yahweh is a single, specific individual, and it will be shown below that this Angel is, in fact, the Son of God.

Third, there is a strong and consistent claim in the entirety of the Bible which asserts that God cannot be seen. For example, Yahweh told Moses, “You shall not see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). The New Testament continues this claim in even stronger terms: “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18; 6:46; 1 John 4:12a, v. 20) and “whom [i.e., God] no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim. 6:16). Jews of the second temple era read these texts and concluded that, indeed, God cannot be seen.⁹ Simultaneously, the OT states

(Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 239 and 156 resp. Vos noted, “The Hebrew has a way of saying ‘an Angel of Jehovah.’ All that is necessary is to insert the preposition *lamed* between Angel and Jehovah: ‘an Angel to Jehovah.’” Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PN: Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 73. Cf. Mart-Jan Paul, 2007. “The Identity of the Angel of the LORD,” *Hiphil* 4, 3-4.

⁹ 2 En. 24.2; cf. 65.1; *APM* 35.3; *T. Ab.* 61.2-3; Philo, *Mos.* 1.158

explicitly that people have seen God, even seeing God's face directly: e.g., "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered" (Gen. 32:30). This creates a dilemma that requires a resolution. Some writers have suggested that the prohibitions against seeing God don't really prohibit seeing God, but instead, prohibit seeing God only in his fullness. Malone has argued this way:

We cannot automatically assume that God's glory is unseeable. Exodus 33:20 does not disallow God's ability to render himself visible; it merely reinforces that he can make himself too visible for human survival.¹⁰

When it comes to the NT's claims that God is unseen, Malone contends that these texts don't really mean that God cannot be seen. For example, when it comes to the relevant portion of Paul's doxology in 1 Timothy 6:16 (i.e., "whom no one has ever seen or can see"), Malone has argued that this is a bit of hyperbole; a "superlative" expression that must be taken in a "relative sense."¹¹ When Paul calls God "invisible" (Col. 1:15), Malone suggests that this term "does not contradict the visibility of God" and that Colossians 1:15 could merely mean "The incarnate Jesus...now speaks on behalf of the entire Trinity."¹² One wonders why Jesus couldn't "speak on behalf of the entire Trinity" while God is simultaneously invisible. In any event, Malone's claims amount to a massive case of special pleading. He has divulged a penchant for eisegesis and he dismissed the traditional explanation for this dilemma (i.e., no one can see God the Father, but God the Son is the Word-Messenger-Image of the invisible Father) out of hand. Moreover, Malone failed to recognize the import of John 1:18:

¹⁰ Andrew Malone, *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament? A Fresh Look at Christophanies* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹² *Ibid.*, 77.

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (ESV)¹³

John doesn't merely assert that 'No one has seen God,' but instead, he says "No one has ever (*pōpote*) seen God." Instead of explaining away this absolute claim, recognizing the two following clauses provides a solution to the aforementioned dilemma: "The only God (*monogenes theos*)...has made him known (*exegesato*)." John is here not merely appealing to the Son of God's incarnate ministry, but to his role as the Exegete of God, a role which he possessed before and after the incarnation. This is precisely why John characterizes the Son of God as the Word, as he is the revelation of God unto mankind. So too, this conclusion is confirmed by the NT's continual attribution of invisibility to the Father and by the ways John depicts Christ as both Yahweh and the Angel of Yahweh, identifying him as the subject of notable theophanies. But this will be explored below. Suffice it to say that the resolution John provides is that no one has seen God (the Father), but people have seen God (the Son), even face to face.

By implication of the above principle (i.e., the Father is invisible and the Son/Angel is his image) those passages wherein Yahweh appears to men without specific mention of the Angel of Yahweh (e.g., Gen. 17:1; 18:1; Exod. 24:9-12; Isa. 6:1; cf. John 12:41) are sightings of the divine Angel. This conclusion is confirmed below by Jacob/Israel's interaction with the Angel of Yahweh and the prophetic interpretation of that event.

¹³ There exists a significant textual variant that has "the only Son" instead of "the only God." The earliest reading is "God," occurring in several papyri (p⁶⁶, p⁷⁵) and a number of important uncials (Ⲙ, B, C, L) "Son" occurs in A, C³, K, Γ, Δ, Θ, Ψ. Both "God" and "Son" have support in patristic literature. Since "only Son" occurs elsewhere in the Johannine corpus (John 3:16, v. 18; 1 John 4:9), we would expect the fathers to affirm both readings—and many do (e.g., Basil, Clement of Theo., Cyril, Origen). Because of its difficulty and early attestation "only God" is preferred.

Certain subordinationist writers have argued that since the canon consistently claims that God is invisible, the Angel of Yahweh cannot be God by definition. Cunningham, a 'biblical' unitarian has argued thus:

He [i.e., the Angel of Yahweh] has been seen on many occasions and therefore is not invisible. Since he is not God Himself nor an appearance of Jesus Christ we are driven back to the only conclusion possible: that the Angel of the Lord really was an angel, one of the class of supernatural beings employed to carry out the will of the invisible God.¹⁴

Cunningham assumes a definition of "angel" that is both anachronistic¹⁵ and fails to account for the biblical text. In assessing the biblical data, one must take into account that God is explicitly said to be visible in the Angel of Yahweh in precisely the way that Scripture states Yahweh to be invisible (i.e., seeing God's face).¹⁶ Cunningham accepts the first and disregards the last.

Cunningham has also appealed to the so-called "principle of representation," or what is sometimes referred to as the "law of agency" in order to explain how the Angel of Yahweh speaks of God in the first person.¹⁷ He has demonstrated via several passages (e.g., Gen. 44:1-10; Judg. 11:12-13) that a

¹⁴ John Cunningham, 1997. "Christology and the Angel of the Lord," *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, 6.2, 6.

¹⁵ Cunningham has assumed a definition of *mal'āk* from the Second Temple period and he has anachronistically applied it to the entire canon. This neither accounts for the development of the term nor its diverse usage in the OT. See Robert North, 1967. "Separated Spiritual Substances in the Old Testament," *TCBQ*, 29.3, 423-4; Wojciech Kosior, 2013. "The Angel in the Hebrew Bible from the Statistic and Hermeneutic Perspectives. Some Remarks on the Interpolation Theory," *TPJBR*, 12.1(23), 57-8.

¹⁶ Exod. 33:20; cf. Gen. 32:10, v. 30; Exod. 24:10-11; 33:11; Num. 12:7-8; 14:14; Deut. 34:10; Judg. 6:22-23; 13:22.

¹⁷ See the oft cited R. J. Werblowsky et al., *Encyclopedia of Jewish Religion*, Rev. Ed. (New York: Adama Books, 1996), 15.

commissioned messenger can speak in the first person on behalf of the sender (i.e., agency metonymy) and upon that basis, he concluded that the Angel is necessarily a non-divine agent. In the same way “Moses is called God and the judges of Israel are also called by this title,”¹⁸ the Angel of Yahweh, on this view, is called God and Yahweh. This sort of argumentation is circular since it imports ontological significance into the term “messenger.” So too, Cunningham has assumed his own conclusion (i.e., unitarianism) in that he has presupposed that the one who is sent by God cannot necessarily be God.

The manner in which the OT presents the Angel of Yahweh is completely unlike that of other messengers and agents.¹⁹ Hundley has observed that in the ANE, “When the messengers arrive, in both the human and divine spheres, they first identify their sender, thereby distinguishing themselves from him via a messenger formula...before delivering the message in the first person.”²⁰ Taking Cunningham’s example, although Moses is likely the most notable and important human agent in the OT, he never presents like the Angel of Yahweh. Whereas Moses spoke to Pharaoh while making an explicit distinction between himself and God (“Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, *sent me to you*, saying, ‘Let my people go,’” (Exod. 7:16; cf. 3:13-15; Num. 16:28), the Angel of Yahweh presents as God. While he is called a “messenger” he doesn’t deliver a message from another but rather speaks on his own.²¹ There simply isn’t a parallel among

¹⁸ Cunningham, “Christology and the Angel of the Lord,” 14.

¹⁹ “It must be underscored that the angel of YHWH in these perplexing biblical narratives does not behave like any other messenger known in the divine or human realm. Although the term ‘messenger’ is present, the narrative itself omits the indispensable features of messenger activity and presents instead the activities which one associates with Yahweh or the other gods of the ancient Near East.” S. A. Meier in Karel Van Der Toorn et al. eds. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 2nd Rev. Ed. (Leiden, NL and Boston, MA: Brill and Eerdmans resp., 1999), 48.

²⁰ Michael B. Hundley, 2016. “Of God and Angels: Divine Messengers in Genesis and Exodus in Their Ancient Near Eastern Contexts,” *JTS*, NS, 5-6.

²¹ After an evaluation of the “entirety of the narrative material of the

agents in the OT with the Angel of Yahweh; he can forgive and judge sins (Exod. 23:21a-b), he receives religious devotion (Gen. 28:18; cf. Deut. 16:22), worship (Judg. 6:20-21; 13:19-20; cf. Lev. 9:24; 1 Kings 18:38), prayer (Gen. 48:15-16), and the people of God are called to obey him and put their trust in him: “The Angel of Yahweh encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them” (Psa. 34:7). We should add that God calls the Angel of Yahweh “Yahweh your God” (Exod. 23:25) and simply “God” in the third person (Gen. 35:1). Even more significantly, Yahweh stated “my name is in him” (Exod. 23:21d). The Angel’s possession of God’s name explains why he can speak and act as God, for he possesses the very nature of God.²²

Christ, the Angel of God

Given the prominence of the Angel of Yahweh in the OT, it would be surprising if he was completely absent in the NT. However, as one might anticipate, the NT specifically and implicitly identifies the Angel as the Son of God. Prior to evaluating a few of the passages which make this identification, a comparison

Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Hittite, Ugaritic, and Egyptian literature,” Irvin concluded that the Angel of Yahweh in Gen. doesn’t function as a conventional messenger, but as God. She notes, “The role of the *mal’ak* in the Genesis messenger stories is that of a god. The word *mal’ak* as used there is empty of content, other than the concept identical to the role played by the deity in similar extra-biblical stories. Nothing of the belief in the angel as we know it from post-exilic thought, the angel functioning as an intermediary, is found in our stories.” Dorothy Irvin, *Mytharion: The comparison of tales from the Old Testament and the ancient Near East* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, HR: Neukirchener Ver., 1978), xv and 103 resp.

²² “The ‘name’ (נשׁ) of Yahweh refers to the person, presence, being, and divinity of YHWH. The word נשׁ is obviously not suggest of (delegated) authority and is not glossed with this meaning in any lexicon. Most likely, if the goal was to affirm the (delegated) authority of an agent, the customary idiom for delegated authority would have been used. That is, it would have been said that the people should listen to the voice of this angel on pain of punishment because he speaks “in the name of” נשׁ YHWH. This, however, is precisely not what is said.” Günther H. Juncker, *Jesus and the Angel of the Lord: An Old Testament Paradigm for New Testament Christology*, Ph.D. Diss. (Deerfield, IL: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2001), 91.

between the attributes and functions of the Angel and Christ will provide a helpful illustration. While the chart below is not comprehensive, it provides a clear pattern of evidence that demonstrates both the functional and theological sameness between the divine Angel and God the Son,

Point of Comparison	The Angel of Yahweh	The Son of God
Identified as God and Yahweh	Gen. 16:13; 22:16; 48:15-16; 28:20-22; 31:13	John 1:1, v. 18; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:10-12; 2 Pet. 1:1
Functions as God’s Image	Gen. 16:13; 32:30; Judg. 13:22	Col. 1:15
Employed “I Am”	Exod. 3:14; cf. Deut. 32:39 and Isa. 41:4; 43:10, v. 25; 46:3-4; 51:25 LXX	Mark 6:50; 14:62; John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, vv. 28, 58; 13:19; 18:6
Receives prayer	Gen. 48:15-16	1 Cor. 1:2; 16:22
Receives worship	Gen. 28:18; Josh. 5:14	Matt. 2:2; Rev. 5:7-14
Saves the people out of Egypt	Num. 20:16; Judg. 2:1	Jude v. 5
Accompanied the Israelites	Exod. 13:20-21; 14:19-24; 40:36-38	1 Cor. 1:1-10
Possesses God’s Name/Nature	Exod. 23:21d	Matt. 21:9; John 5:43; Heb. 1:2
Forgives Sins	Exod. 23:21c	Mark 2:5-11
Imputes righteousness to his people	Zech. 3:1-5	Rom. 4:1-8
“Obey him”	Exod. 23:21 a-b	Matt. 17:5
Has a “Wonderful” name	Judg. 13:22	Isa. 9:6
Mediates Between God and Man	Acts 7:38; cf. Exod. 19:3	1 Tim. 2:5
Cleanses the Temple	Mal. 3:1-4	Mark 11:15-19
Controls the Sea/Rescues God’s People	Exod. 14:19-24	Mark 6:45-52

Table-1

Christ, the Angel of God: Zechariah 3:1-5

Zechariah’s fourth vision consists of a courtroom setting wherein Satan (lit. the “Accuser”) accuses the High Priest, who is identified as “Joshua” (v. 1). The Angel of Yahweh serves as the High Priest’s defense attorney. Zechariah identifies the Angel of Yahweh as Yahweh and records his rebuttal to Satan’s accusations: “Yahweh rebuke you, O Satan! Yahweh who has

chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this not a firebrand?” (v. 2). Following his rebuke, the Angel commands that Joshua’s “filthy clothes” be replaced with “pure garments” including a clean turban (vv. 4-5). The text then describes the Angel of Yahweh standing by Joshua as in a protective stance (v. 5).

This pericope is a typological portrayal of the salvific work of Christ wherein he cleanses God’s elect of their sin. Joshua, who here acts as the federal head of “chosen Jerusalem” (cf. Rev. 3:12; 21:2), represents those who have broken covenant with God, just as those who possess the Adamic nature have violated God’s moral law (Rom. 3:9-18). The name Jesus is a Latinized form of the Greek *Iēsous*, which is in turn, a rendering of the Hebrew *Jeshua*, or in English, Joshua.²³ That the High Priest is here named Joshua serves as a typological portrayal of the federal headship of Christ, the second Adam (Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:45). So too, the pure garments issued by the Angel serve as a type of the imputed righteousness of Christ (Rom. 4:1-8). The Angel functions precisely in the way Jesus does in the NT. He is called Yahweh like the Angel (Rom. 10:13) and he speaks for God and of God in the third person. Whereas Jesus serves as the Protector and Mediator of God’s people (John 10:28; Heb. 9:15), the Angel of Yahweh stood by the High Priest and by implication, all of God’s covenant people.

Christ, the Angel of God: Malachi 3:1

All four of the gospels identify John the Baptist/Witness as the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 and the synoptics identify John as the messenger of Malachi 3:1 (Matt. 1:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27). A straightforward implication of this fulfillment is the identification of Jesus as the Messianic theophany predicted by Yahweh:

²³ Moisés Silva ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 527.

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 Yahweh of hosts. (Mal. 3:1)²⁴

The “Lord whom you seek” and “Angel of the covenant” refer to one and the same person (vv. 2-4), and thus refer to the Son of God by necessity. That this identification serves as one of the initial means given in the NT of identifying Christ should alert readers to the ongoing motif that will be further explored below.

Christ, the Angel of God: John 4

The first mention of the Angel of Yahweh occurs within the narrative that features Abram, Sarai, Hagar, and the unborn Ishmael (Gen. 16:1-16). Despite the promise of Yahweh (Gen. 15:4), Sarai had become convinced that God wouldn't give her a son. Perhaps out of desperation, Sarai gave her Egyptian handmaid to Abram in order to “obtain children by her” (16:2). Abram took Hagar and she subsequently conceived. Sarai's rash and unfaithful decision and Abram's non-existent leadership resulted in a love triangle wherein Hagar, now Abram's wife, looked contemptuously upon Sarai (v. 5). Sarai's bitterness and Abram's passivity resulted in her harsh treatment of Hagar, who then fled into the desert (vv. 6-7). While in the desert, Hagar stopped by a spring “on the way to Shur,” which implies that her ultimate destination was Egypt. At the spring, the Angel of Yahweh confronted her saying, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” (v. 8). This question is reminiscent of other times when God asks questions of this sort: “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9),

²⁴ On the allusion to Exod. 23:20 see *ibid.*, 305-12; Richard M. Baylock, 2016. “My Messenger, the LORD, and the Messenger of the Covenant: Malachi 3:1 Revisited,” *SBTJ*, 20.3, 77-8.

“Where is Abel your brother?” (Gen. 4:9), “From where have you come?” (Job 1:7; 2:2).

After commanding Hagar to return to Sarai, the Angel of Yahweh pronounced that he would multiply her progeny “so that they cannot be numbered for multitude” (v. 10), a sort of claim only given by God in Scripture. The Angel then names Hagar’s son “Ishmael” (“God has heard”) and predicts his life and character (vv. 11-12). V. 13 identifies the Angel in two ways. First, the narrator (i.e., Moses) notes that it was “Yahweh...who spoke to her.” Second, Hagar responded to the Angel’s proclamation by identifying him as *El Roi* (“The God who sees me”). Hagar then stated, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.”²⁵

Later in the narrative (Gen. 21:11-14), Hagar and Sarah conflict again and Abraham sends Hagar out into the wilderness, albeit this time she leaves with rations. When the water is gone, Hagar places Ishmael a “bowshot” away in order that she might not see her son die (v. 16). The Angel of God calls to her once from heaven saying, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation” (vv. 17-18). This statement is a repetition of what God said earlier in v. 13. The narrator then remarks, “Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water” (v. 18). The text is ambiguous as to whether the Angel is the referent of v. 18. That the divine Angel called to Hagar from “heaven” in v. 17 demonstrates that the Angel is not merely a physical manifestation of God which serves to separate God from the material world.

Both accounts are types of Jesus’ interaction with the woman at the well in John 4:1-28. Both Hagar and the Samaritan

²⁵ On the various renderings of Gen. 16:13b see G. J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 3 n. 13.c-c.

woman are dejected, outside God's covenant, have engaged in sexual sin, and both encounter God's divine Messenger at a source of water (i.e., a spring, and two wells). Both needed hope due to their desperate situation and both received that hope from the same individual, the Image of God. Both leave the encounter recognizing that he has understood them well (i.e., "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me" in Gen. 16:13 and "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did" in John 4:29).

Christ, the Angel of God: Galatians 4:14

A consistent thread in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians is his defense of his gospel by means of a defense of his apostleship. The main pericope in this regard is Galatians 1:11-2:14. This thread is picked up in Galatians 4:8, wherein Paul has sought to remind the Galatian Christians of their relationship and history. He reminisces of the way in which they treated him despite his "illness of the flesh" (v. 13), and what is described in v. 14 as "the trial in my flesh." Evidently, the Galatians were placed under a burden due to Paul's illness, and instead of entertaining the temptation to reject him, they treated this situation as a trial and an opportunity to bless the apostle. The Galatians neither scorned or despised Paul, "But received...[him] as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus" (*all' hōs angelon Theou edezasthe me, hōs Christon Iēsoun*).

What Paul meant by "received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus" is of considerable debate. The first question is whether the anarthrous *hōs angelon Theou* should be understood definitely (i.e., "as the angel of God") or indefinitely (i.e., "as an angel of God"). Wallace has argued that the essentially synonymous phrase *angelos Kuriou* be rendered definitely throughout the NT as though it always refers to a particular angel.²⁶ This viewpoint is not derived from a grammatical or

²⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 252.

lexical basis, but from his assumption that the Angel of Yahweh in the OT is the same as the angel of the Lord in the NT.²⁷ As noted above, there are significant reasons why the Angel of Yahweh cannot be a creaturely agent. Since the construction *all' hōs angelon Theou edezasthe me, hōs Christon Iēsoun* identifies the Angel of God as Christ Jesus, *angelon Theou* ought to be rendered definitely: “but you received me as the Angel of God, as Christ Jesus.”

There are a variety of grammatical and contextual reasons which demonstrate the above claim. On the grammatical side, the adversative *alla* indicates that Paul is engaging in a comparison between how the Galatians potentially could have despised him and how they actually received him.²⁸ Both occurrences of the adverb *hōs* function as a conjunction indicating the manner in which Paul was received: The Galatians did not despise Paul, but received him as the Angel of God, as Christ Jesus.²⁹ These clauses are in apposition, as both substantives share the accusative case: *hōs angelon Theou* explains how the Galatians received Paul, and *hōs Christon Iēsoun* explains how the Galatians received Paul as the Angel of God.³⁰

This reading of Galatians 4:14 is supported by an examination of the other times Paul uses the *all' hōs...*, *hōs* construction (See Table 2 below).

²⁷ Ibid., n. 97.

²⁸ Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 192.

²⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 675. See also BDAG, 1104-5; “ὡς” in Franco Montanari, ed., *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015), Logos version; Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents & Early Evidence* (Boston, MA: Brill, 1998), 323; Takamitsu Muraoka, 1964, “The Use of ὡς in the Greek Bible.” *Novum Testamentum*, 7.1, 51-72.

³⁰ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 198-9; Andreas J. Köstenberger et al., *Going Deeper with New Testament Greek* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2016), 67.

Location	Construction
1 Cor. 3:1	But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but [<i>all' hōs</i>] as people of the flesh, as [<i>hōs</i>] infants in Christ.
2 Cor. 2:17	For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as [<i>all' hōs</i>] everything we said to you was true, so also [<i>hōs</i>] our boasting before Titus proved true.

Table-2

In the two examples cited, the second occurrence of *hōs* functions epexegetically. This pattern is further reinforced by Paul’s use of an inverted form of the *all' hōs...*, *hōs construction* (i.e., *hōs... all' hōs*) that is brought about when a negative particle is employed (see Table 3 below).

Location	Construction
Gal. 3:16	It does not say, “And to offsprings,” [<i>hōs</i>] referring to many, but referring [<i>all' hōs</i>] to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.
Eph. 5:15	Look carefully then how you walk, not as [<i>hōs</i>] unwise but as [<i>all' hōs</i>] wise.
Eph. 6:6	...not by the way of eye-service, as [<i>hōs</i>] people-pleasers, but as [<i>all' hōs</i>] bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.
2 Thess. 3:15	Do not regard him as [<i>hōs</i>] an enemy, bus [<i>alla</i>] warn him as [<i>hōs</i>] a brother.

Table-3

Just as in Galatians 4:14, in each of the texts cited above, *hōs* functions as a comparative conjunction indicating the manner of the verb. However, because of the negative particle, *all' hōs* explains the negative antecedent in a positive sense.

Given the nature of the argument Paul has made in Galatians 4:14 and the precedent of the *all' hōs...*, *hōs construction* in the Pauline corpus, Paul has intended the clause “as Christ Jesus” to be understood in an epexegetical sense (i.e., in apposition to “the Angel of God”).

Fee believes Paul is using *angelon Theou* in a definite sense: “The evidence seems strongly to favor Paul’s having picked up a common phrase from the Septuagint.”³¹ However, he has argued against taking *hōs Christon Iēsoun* as epexegetical, opting instead to understand the construction as progressive. That is, Fee understands the construction in an ascensive sense: “you received me as an/the angel of God, [even] as Christ Jesus.”³² He wrote, “Christ may very well assume the role of the Old Testament ‘angel of the Lord/God,’ but in light of the rest of the Pauline corpus, it seems unlikely that Paul is intending an absolute identification.”³³ Fee concluded, “There is simply no firm evidence that would lead us to believe that Paul had a kind of ‘angel Christology.’”³⁴ Despite Fee’s certainty, in all of the examples provided above, Paul never uses the *all’ hōs...*, *hōs* construction in an ascensive sense.

³¹ Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 230.

³² Burton, Dunn, and Hannah come down similarly. See E. D. W. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh, SL: T & T Clark, 1921), 242, James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 234-5 *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 156; Darrell D. Hannah, *Michael and Christ: Michael Tradition and Angel Christology in Early Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 155-156. Hannah also argues that taking Gal. 4:14 to mean that Christ is the Angel of Yahweh necessarily contradicts Gal. 3:19 saying, “Paul contrasts the Law given by angels with the promise which was fulfilled in Christ.” Paul, however, says nothing of the Angel of the Lord in 3:19, who is repeatedly depicted as Yahweh and distinct from created angels, having given the law.

³³ Gordon D. Fee, *Pentecostal Commentary Series: Galatians* (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Pub., 2007), 166. Cf. *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 231. For a discussion of the prologue of Hebrews, which the author takes as Pauline by way of amanuensis, see Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 294-314. Essentially, the prologue precludes the supremacy of “angels” as such, since the Son of God has come in human flesh. As Gieschen notes, however, there are numerous points of similarity in the prologue in its description of Christ and those descriptions of the Angel of Yahweh in the OT.

³⁴ Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 231. Cf. Chris Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 126-7.

Aside from the grammar there is a good contextual reason to reject Fee's reading of Galatians 4:14. In the OT, there are a number of key Angel of Yahweh texts which both affirm the full deity of the Angel and demonstrate human devotion to him by means of hospitality. When the Angel of Yahweh appeared to Abraham at Mamre (Gen. 18:1-33) Abraham responded by arranging a feast and waiting upon him and his companions. When the Angel of Yahweh appeared to Gideon (Judg. 6:18-21), Gideon also prepared a fine meal and it was received as a burnt offering by the Angel. Manoah and his wife, the parents of Samson, also prepared a meal offering to the Angel of Yahweh, who possesses the "wonderful" name (Judg. 13:19-20; cf. Isa. 9:6). Whereas the Galatians could have despised Paul and scorned him, they instead, received him as if he was the divine Angel—just like the saints of old. God's covenant people feared the Angel of Yahweh considering it tantamount to seeing God. This was the sentiment of Jacob, Gideon, and the parents of Samson. The Galatians apparently had good reason in Paul's illness to reject him for fear that they too would become ill. Instead, they received him with great blessedness and hospitality, to the extent that they would have even given Paul their own eyes (Gal. 4:15). Thus, Paul is likely alluding to those passages which depict hospitality to the Angel, even Christ.

While "angel Christology" is not Paul's preoccupation, it does underlie his Christology and shows up from time to time. In 1 Corinthians 10:4, Paul describes Christ as the "spiritual rock" that followed the Israelites, drawing upon the characterization of the Angel of Yahweh with the people as they traveled the desert (Exod. 14:19). The Israelites did not heed the divine Angel as instructed (Exod. 23:20-1), and they "put Christ to the test" and were destroyed by serpents (1 Cor. 10:9; Num.21:6).

The *English Standard Version* (ESV) renders Paul's statement in Acts 27:23, "For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship" (*parestē gar moi tautē tē nukti tou Theou ou eimi hō kai latreuō angelos*).

However, this verse is better rendered, as in the *King James Version*, “For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve.” Typically, the phrase Angel of the Lord/God occurs indefinitely (i.e., *angelos Kurios/Theou*) in the NT, but Luke includes the article with the genitive on occasion (Luke 12:8-9; 5:10; cf. John 1:51). The ESV renders Acts 10:3, “he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in...” (*angelon tou Theou eselthonta pros auton*). If the articular *tou Theou* is the translator’s basis for rendering Acts 27:23 “an angel of the God,” they should have rendered Acts 10:3 similarly. In other words, the translation of *angelon tou Theou* is contextually dependent. In the case of Acts 27:23, there is no contextual reason to render the phrase “angel of the God.” Instead, there is a good contextual reason to render it simply “the Angel of God.” The Angel’s statement, “Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you,” is similar to Acts 23:11 when the Lord “stood by” Paul saying, “Take courage, as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.” Jesus is depicted by Paul as standing with him and encouraging him in 2 Timothy 4:17 as well (cf. Mark 6:50; Luke 5:10; John 6:20; Acts 18:19; 12:7):

But *the Lord stood by me* and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. (ESV, italics added)

Moo agrees with Fee, concluding that “as Christ Jesus” is intended to be taken in an ascensive sense. For Moo, that Paul chose the “Angel of God” and not the “Angel of the Lord” adds to the unlikely nature of an appositive reading:

In this case, ὡς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν (*hōs Christon Iēsoun*) could be a simple appositive: “as the angel of God, that is, as Christ Jesus.” But this interpretation is quite unlikely. If this is what Paul

intends, it is hard to know why he does not use *κυρίου* (*kyriou*, of the Lord) rather than *θεοῦ*.³⁵

While “Angel of Yahweh” is the typical title given to the divine angel in the OT, “Angel of God” occurs with frequency as well (e.g., Gen. 21:17; 31:11; Exod. 14:19; Judg. 6:20; 13:6, v. 9; 1 Sam. 29:9; 2 Sam. 14:17, vv. 20, 27). Thus, there is no reason why the “Angel of God” wouldn’t be just as likely as “Angel of Yahweh.”

“Angel of God” accords best with the differentiation utilized by the NT authors as they sought to affirm both the deity of the Father and Son while simultaneously depicting them as personally distinct. The NT authors generally designated the title “God” (*ho Theos*) for the Father and “Lord” (*ho Kurios*) for the Son. In holding to this differentiation, the NT authors were able to avoid either diminishing the deity of the persons or confusing them. The occasional crossover wherein the Father is called “Lord” and the Son is called “God” serves to reinforce the deity of the Son but is not substantial enough to confuse the persons. Hence, it is likely that Paul has, in seizing the title “Angel of God,” kept this apostolic habit.

Drawing upon the *all’ hōs...*, *hōs* construction, Ehrman believes Paul has identified the Angel of the Lord as Christ in Galatians 4:14. Ehrman’s tack was to marshal support for this interpretation from other scholars:

As Charles Gieschen has argued, and has now been affirmed in a book on Christ as an angel by New Testament specialist Susan Garrett, that verse [i.e., Gal. 4:14] is not saying that the Galatians received Paul as an angel or as Christ; it is saying that they received him as they would

³⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 541.

an angel, such as Christ. By clear implication, then, Christ is an angel.³⁶

Ehrman's reliance upon Garrett is inconsequential since she relies primarily on Gieschen for her reading of Galatians 4:14.³⁷ As far as his reliance upon Gieschen, Ehrman has done his readers a great disservice. In response to Ehrman's claims, Gieschen wrote,

This implication, "Christ is *an* angel" (emphasis mine), is quite different from the conclusion of the discussion of this text in my book, which reads as follows: "Paul understood Christ Jesus as God's Angel (i.e., the Angel of YHWH)." My translation of Paul's description of how he was received by the Galatians is "but as God's Angel you received me, namely Christ Jesus."³⁸

Essentially, Ehrman hijacked Gieschen's research for his own preconceived Christology (i.e., Christ is a God-like exalted creature). Tilling notes that Ehrman "uncritically adopts a disputed understanding of Gal. 4:14."³⁹

While Ehrman is correct in acknowledging the identification of Jesus as the divine angel, he is incorrect in his appropriation of that information to his heretical Christological project. Ehrman has argued that Galatians 4:14 ought to be the lens through which "everything Paul says about Christ."⁴⁸ Such a claim is unreasonable at best and with clairvoyance Fee wrote, "One is

³⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: Harper One, 2014), 252-3.

³⁷ Susan R. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims About Jesus* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 11, 245 n. 16.

³⁸ Charles A. Gieschen, 2018. "Misquoting Gieschen," *CTQ*, 82:1-2, 140.

³⁹ Chris Tilling in Michael F. Bird et al., *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature—A Response to Bart Ehrman* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 122.

always wary of a Christological perspective based on one or two texts that themselves are rather obscure.”⁴⁰

Galatians 4:14 must be taken not only with the balance of the Pauline corpus but with the totality of Scripture. Christology is a systematic doctrine, and because of the univocal and progressive nature of Scripture, we should see confirmation and clarification of the teaching of the OT within the NT.

Christ, the Angel of God: 1 Corinthians 10:9 & Jude v. 5

The most significant salvific act in the OT is certainly the exodus. The Angel of Yahweh laid claim to bringing God’s people out of bondage: “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, I will never break my covenant with you” (Judg. 2:1; cf. Num. 20:16). The NT identifies the Son of God as the Angel of Yahweh by attributing to him the same act: “Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe” (Jude v. 5).⁴¹ Similarly, Paul finds Christ in the wilderness narrative in 1 Corinthians 10:9, a clear allusion to the Angel of Yahweh (cf. Acts 7:38): “We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents.”⁴² Instead of obeying the voice of Jesus (Num. 14:22; cf. Exod. 23:20), the Israelites faced judgement.

⁴⁰ Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 231.

⁴¹ Undoubtedly due to the perceived difficulty of locating Jesus in the exodus narrative, there are several variants which replace “Jesus” with “Lord” (ⲛ, Ψ, 1175, 1448), “God” (C², 442, 1243), and even “God Christ” (p⁷²). “Jesus” is the best attested among the MSS (A, B, 33, 88, 1735, 1739, 1881) and the fathers (Origen, Cyril, Jerome, Bede). The reading of the earliest MS, p⁷², indirectly supports “Jesus.”

⁴² A number of MSS have “Lord” instead of “Christ” (ⲛ, B, C, P 33) and a few have “God” (A, 81). “Christ” appears earlier and is significantly diverse (p⁴⁶, D, E, F, G, K, L, Ψ, 630, 1241, 1739). Due to its superior attestation, difficulty, and since there isn’t a variant in v. 4, “Christ” is to be preferred.

Conclusion

The Angel of Yahweh functions in the OT as the main salvific actor in numerous key texts. He functions as God, and while he is a messenger, he is repeatedly identified as both God and Yahweh. In the NT, the Angel of Yahweh is consistently identified as the Son of God. The NT's presentation of the Son of God as the divine Angel should serve as a unifying Christological trajectory for understanding the Son's role as divine Word, Image, Mediator, and Savior, as well as for his personal preexistence and divinity. The OT exhibits comfort with identifying two distinct persons who are simultaneously identified as Yahweh even within a single pericope.

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