

"The Angel of Jehovah" - An Overview

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Why this study?

John 1:1 claims that the "Word" (Jesus Christ) "was with God," while at the same time he "was God." This study was originally a response to some door-to-door visitors who were part of a religious group that denies this basic affirmation about the deity of Christ. (They also mistranslate this verse, in a "translation" of the Bible which they themselves wrote.)

The purpose of this study was to show that this concept of "being God" and "being with God" (applied to one and the same individual) occurs even in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, these characteristics apply to the one named "Jesus of Nazareth," but in the Old Testament, they apply to an individual who is called "the angel of Jehovah." (In a few passages, he is called "the angel of God," instead.)

Note that this is an just overview. More could be said on the topic!

About the name "Jehovah"

The word, "Jehovah," is an attempt to translate God's Old Testament Hebrew name into English. Many believe that the word "Yahweh" may be a better translation, but "Jehovah" was the word that was first used in some of the early translations of the Bible into English.

In many translations, you will not see the word "Jehovah" (or "Yahweh"). Instead, you may see the word "LORD" (all capital letters). This follows the pattern of an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, which used the Greek word "Lord" ("kurios") in place of God's Hebrew name. To distinguish from the normal word "Lord" (which means "Master" or "Sir"), English translations sometimes use all capital letters, to show us that it refers to God's name.

Note that the New Testament, which was originally written in Greek, does not use the Old Testament name "Jehovah." When the New Testament quotes an Old Testament passage that contains that word, it normally uses the word "Lord" (Greek - "kurios"), following the tradition of the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

Translations used in this study

The translations used in this study were:

- (KJV) King James Version
- (ASV) American Standard Version of 1901
- (NAS) New American Standard Version
- (NIV) New International Version
- (NWT) New World Translation

The above abbreviations (shown in parentheses) will be used when making reference to a specific translation. Note that the NWT is the translation of the religious group that these visitors were a part of, and which tends to mistranslate passages that have this "was God and was with God" emphasis. The other translations are "literal" translations that have a strong emphasis on accuracy, and a focus on translating "word for word," whenever possible.

At times, I will make a reference to the original Hebrew or Greek text of the Bible, but this is mainly to confirm what is said, when the NWT translates the passage differently from the other translations. If it weren't for the mistranslations, it wouldn't be necessary to look to the original languages, because what we are looking for can be clearly seen in a "normal" (accurate) translation!

INTRODUCTION - THE WORD "ANGEL"

How the word is used

The Hebrew word "malak" refers basically to one who is sent with a message, from one person to another. Thus, it is often translated into English as "ambassador" or "messenger." When referring specifically to a heavenly messenger sent from God, the term "angel" (borrowed from the Greek word "angelos") is used.

An examination of the word "angel" proves to be very interesting. For the most part, we find that the word "angel" falls into two categories of usage:

- 1) Angels in general - as we typically think of them.
- 2) One specific messenger, usually called "the angel of Jehovah (or of God)." Unlike the other beings which are called "angels," this being possesses characteristics that are unique to himself.

We will look at each of these categories, with just a brief examination of the first group.

A few "exceptions" in English translations

First, a few comments must be made in passing:

- 1) In two passages, the KJV uses the word "angel" as a translation of *different* Hebrew words. (See Psalms 8:5 and 68:17.)
- 2) In one instance, the KJV adds the word "angel" (in italics) for the sake of clarity. It is not in the original Hebrew text, but the angel of Jehovah is implied by the context. Other translations may use "he" or "Jehovah" (or "LORD"), for all of them fit contextually. (They all refer to the same individual, who is both the "angel of Jehovah" and "Jehovah.") See Judges 13:19.
- 3) In Ecclesiastes 5:6, some Bibles translate the Hebrew word as "angel," when it should probably be translated as "messenger."

A QUICK LOOK AT "ANGELS" IN GENERAL

Angels, as created beings

In this first group are verses which relate specifically to *created* heavenly beings. An examination of these verses shows us, among other things:

- 1) Angels, in general, appear to people in the form of a man, and are capable of doing works of power.
- 2) They always speak of "Jehovah" (or "God") as being a *different* individual.

- 3) In some references, men are compared to them, as being "like" an angel (1 Samuel 29:9; 2 Samuel 14:17, 20; 19:27).
- 4) They may be referred to as "*an* angel (of Jehovah/God)," but usually without the word "the" in front of the word "angel." (The exception occurs when the term refers to an angel that has been *previously* mentioned in the context - see 1 Kings 13:18; 19:5,7 for an example.)
- 5) Other passages refer to "angels" as a group (Genesis 19:1, 15; 28:12; 32:1; Job 4:18; Psalm 78:49; 91:11; 103:20; 104:4; 148:2).

A few passages not fully examined

There is one group of verses, referring to "an angel," that might belong to this first category. However, further study of parallel passages and references (including in the New Testament) suggests that some of them probably belong in the second category (below): Genesis 24:7, 40; Exodus 23:20, 23; 32:34; 33:2; Numbers 20:16; Daniel 3:28; 6:22; Zechariah 2:3; 4:1-5; 5:5-10; 6:4-5. This could include instances in which the "angel" is not identified in the passage, or in which the person who sees the angel does not initially know who it is.

A thorough analysis of the passages in question may make it obvious as to which category each reference belongs to. But for our purposes, we will not need to deal with them, for we have enough information in the passages already listed (below), to help us understand the issue which is at hand.

"THE ANGEL OF JEHOVAH" (OR "OF GOD")

Introduction

In this second group, the term "angel" is always used in the singular form, and (other than the possible exceptions just mentioned) is normally introduced with the word "the" - usually being called, "*the* angel (of Jehovah or God)." When we look at the verses in this category, and examine the grammatical relationship between the terms "the angel of Jehovah (or God)" and "Jehovah (or God)," we discover the following:

- 1) A number of these verses seem to make some type of *distinction* between the angel and Jehovah.
- 2) Other references specifically emphasize that the two are *identical*, with nothing in the context to suggest that one is merely a representative of the other. Sometimes the names are even used interchangeably.
- 3) Some references communicate *both* concepts simultaneously - implying that, in some manner, the angel of Jehovah both *is* Jehovah and *is with* Jehovah. (They show that he is distinct in some manner from Jehovah, while at the same time, identical to him!)
- 4) A few verses state no relationship between them: Psalm 34:7; 35:5-6.

Below is a more in-depth examination of the three main "themes":

Group 1 - Verses which seem to make a distinction between "the angel of Jehovah/God" and "Jehovah/God"

- 1) Genesis 21:17 - The angel of God tells Hagar that God has listened to the boy's voice.

- 2) Numbers 22:22-35 - Jehovah opens Balaam's eyes so he can see the angel of Jehovah, who is standing in the road. But note verses 35 and 38, which (by implication) may belong in the next group, below.
- 3) Judges 5:23 - The angel of Jehovah says to curse Meroz, a city that did not come to Jehovah's assistance.
- 4) 2 Kings 1:3, 15 - The angel of Jehovah tells Elijah what Jehovah has said.
- 5) 2 Kings 19:35; 2 Chronicles 32:21; and Isaiah 37:36 - Jehovah sends the angel of Jehovah to kill the Assyrians.
- 6) See also: Judges 2:14 and Zechariah 1:9-19. (Note: Some of the occurrences of the word "angel" in Zechariah 1 may refer to a *different* angel, rather than the angel of Jehovah.)

Group 2 - Verses which use both names interchangeably for the same being, or which identify the "two" as being the same person.

- 1) Genesis 31:11+ - The angel of God claims to be the God of Bethel. (Also Genesis 28:10-22 says that Jacob saw Jehovah.)
- 2) Genesis 48:15-16 - "God" and "angel" used in apposition (a noun or pronoun that follows another and explains it): "May *he* bless my boys." (In this passage, the Hebrew word, "to bless" is third person *singular*, even though it follows both words, "God" and "the angel.")
- 3) Exodus 3:2+ - Verse 2 says that the angel of Jehovah appeared to Moses; the rest of the chapter describes it as God/Jehovah who was speaking to him (especially v. 4).
- 4) Hosea 12:4 - Jacob contended with an angel. (Compare to Genesis 32:22-32, where he says it was God in human form.)
- 5) Zechariah 12:8 - "God" and "the angel of Jehovah" used in apposition.
- 6) See also: Exodus 14:19 (compare with 13:21).

Group 3 - Verses which treat them as identical ("they are the same individual") and distinct ("they are different")

- 1) Genesis 16:7+
 - DIFFERENT: The angel of Jehovah talks to Hagar and promises to multiply her seed, and tells her that Jehovah has heard her affliction.
 - IDENTICAL: In v. 13, the Scriptures say that it was Jehovah who had been speaking to her.
- 2) Judges 6:11-22
 - DIFFERENT: The angel of Jehovah appears to Gideon and tells him that Jehovah was with him and that he had not deserted Israel (v. 13).
 - IDENTICAL: Verse 14 says, "*And* Jehovah faced him [or looked directly at him]" and told him to "Go..." Nothing in the context suggests that two individuals were present with Gideon. In both instances, Gideon addressed him as *one* individual, calling him "lord," which means "master" or "sir." (At this point, Gideon does not know who the individual is.) The NWT mistranslates this passage, so as to give the impression that two persons are referred to. Yet there is nothing in the text to indicate this, as can be seen in most translations.

3) Zechariah 3:1-6

- Zechariah says that he sees Satan standing near the angel of Jehovah, yet he says that it was *Jehovah* who said, "May Jehovah rebuke you." The term "the angel of Jehovah" (in verse 1) parallels "Jehovah" (in verse 2). Later (verses 4-6), the passage goes back to describing the speaker as "the *angel* of Jehovah."
- Interestingly, the translators of the NWT seem to realize the significance of this, so they mistranslate verse 2, *adding* the word "angel," to make it look as though it is "the angel of Jehovah" who is saying "May Jehovah rebuke you." But the Old Testament Hebrew does not say that! It seems that the NWT authors use a *New Testament* passage (Jude 1:9) to "justify" this mistranslation, because the Jude passage has a similar quote, in which the archangel Michael says, "May the Lord rebuke you." They ignore the fact that the context in Jude is totally different, being in reference to a discussion about the body of Moses, not accusations against Zechariah!

4) See also: Genesis 22:11, 15+ (compare to v. 1-2); Judges 13:3-23; 2 Samuel 24:16-17 and 1 Chronicles 21:12-30 with 2 Chronicles 3:1 (which says it was Jehovah, who David saw).

Another verse to consider

Though not using the phrase "the angel of *Jehovah*," here is another verse that connects the name "Jehovah" with word "angel" and the idea of God being physically present. In Isaiah 63:8, the prophet is talking about *Jehovah*, and he says that Jehovah became Israel's Savior. In verse 9, he mentions that they were saved by "the *angel* of his presence" - the concept paralleling the name "Jehovah," in the previous verse. (Compare with Exodus 33:14-15. The word "angel" doesn't occur, but it makes reference to God's "presence" going along with the people.) The NWT poorly translates Isaiah 63:9, stating that it was God's "personal messenger" who saved them.

FINAL COMMENTS

This overview should be sufficient to show us that the concept described in John 1:1 is not unique to the New Testament alone. Though perhaps not as explicitly stated, it is present also in the Old Testament. But like all doctrinal concepts, the New Testament develops further the concepts that have already been stated (though sometimes only partially) in the Old Testament.