

The Angel of the Lord, a few thoughts by Revd. Mike Loader, Assistant Priest.

These strange times, that have so modified the routines and patterns of our lives, have meant that we have had to move to different ways of communicating with one another. Our regular weekly bible study has now become a 'zoom' exchange instead. Chris mentioned this in his August news so please feel free to join in with us using these details: Tuesday 2.30pm, ID 9546548392, password 828638.

Let me ask you a question, 'Was Jesus ever seen, or encountered, in the Old Testament'?

In order to answer that question, one of the topics that we have explored in our zoom bible studies is a phrase, 'the Angel of the Lord'. A phrase that occurs some 200 times in our Old Testament, so to what entity does it refer? Perhaps we can glean some idea by reading Genesis 16 and verses 6 to 14.

When 'the angel of the Lord' found Hagar, Sarai's maid fleeing into the wilderness, he made an interesting promise to her (verse 16), "I will so greatly multiply your descendents that they cannot be numbered for multitude". Surely only God alone could make such a significant promise to her. Then after her encounter she declares (verse 13), "So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "Thou art a God of seeing"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing El Shaddai"". Clearly in her response, Hagar regarded her encounter with 'the angel of the Lord', as a true encounter with God.

So was this, a 'Christophany'? That is, Jesus in temporary human form before his incarnation at Bethlehem. We know that angel in Hebrew is mal'ak, meaning a messenger-one who is sent, but was this angel just 'an angel from the Lord' or does the phrase 'the angel of the Lord' carry greater significance? Of the 214 times these phrases are used perhaps one third have been identified as 'Christophanies', so let us look at a few more for you to make up your own minds.

We read in Judges 6v11-16 of an encounter between 'the angel of the Lord' and Gideon, the sixth Judge of Israel, before the nation turned to wanting a king like all the nations around, and so God saying to Samuel. "they have not rejected you, they have rejected me", such sad words. When 'the angel of the Lord' speaks to Gideon he says in verse 14, "the LORD-Yahweh-turned to him and said,..." And in verse 16 we read, "the LORD-Yahweh- said to him, 'but I will be with you...'"

The identification here is that the 'angel of the Lord' was the LORD-Yahweh-God Himself, who was addressing Gideon. So is that conclusive enough?

Well, let us look at another encounter also recorded in Judges. We read in chapter 13v2-3 and 17-18, of the meeting between 'the angel of the Lord' and Manoah and his wife. When Manoah asks the name of this 'angel' he replies, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful". Two things strike us here. First it is as if the 'angel' expected Manoah to recognise just who he was, and second, in saying his name was 'Wonderful', what comes to your mind?

Maybe it is the description of our Lord Jesus used by Isaiah (9v6), from a scripture which we love to read before Christmas, “His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

This identification is then difficult to miss, ‘the angel of the Lord’ has the same name as Jesus.

If you are still not convinced here is a further, and very strange encounter, but I take care not to make an ass of myself. Can you guess it? Turn to the book of Numbers (22v21-31) and read the encounter between ‘the angel of the Lord’ and the pagan prophet Balaam. When ridding his ass, the ‘angel of the Lord’ bars its way, holding a drawn sword in his hand, and not surprisingly, the ass turns aside. But in verses 27&28, we read that, “Then the Lord opened the mouth of the ass” who went on to speak to Balaam. I guess in our lifetimes we have each heard many ‘asses’ speaking! And then in verse 31 we read that ‘the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam’ to see ‘the angel of the Lord with his drawn sword’.

So was it again, the LORD-Yahweh-as ‘the angel of the Lord’ speaking to the ass and to Balaam? Well, Balaam ‘bowed his head, and fell on his face’, a perfect act of worship in recognition of who this ‘angel of the Lord’ really was.

And is there any significance in mentioning that He was holding a drawn sword? I leave you to explore that one.

So it would seem that this term, ‘angel of the Lord’ stood as a title for his office and not of his nature, like an ordinary angel or messenger of God.

Perhaps some of you are also remembering the significant encounter between Abraham and the ‘angel of the Lord’ recorded in Genesis 22 verses 9 to 19, when Abraham was called by God to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. This is a very significant story in Judaism known as ‘the Akedah’, and points us clearly to our need to obey God and of His deliverance for us. It is also an early pointer to the cross and to our Salvation through our Lord Jesus.

In his encounter ‘the angel of the Lord’ says to Abraham (verses 10-12), “I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your only son from ME”. The identification again is that God was that angel. This is reinforced when a few lines later (verses 15-19) this angel says, “By myself I have sworn, says the Lord”, and goes on to make the promise of blessing through Isaac. Once more to my mind, a clear identification of ‘the angel of the Lord’ being God, being our Lord Jesus in a pre-incarnate revelation.

So what can we as Christians, as believers and disciples of our Lord Jesus take away from this identification of the ‘angel of the Lord’ with our Lord Jesus? Turn to psalm 34 and a verse I am sure we have all taken to give us encouragement. Verse 7 reads, “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.”

We always have the Lord Jesus with us, what a wonderful promise that He will deliver us. Take encouragement brothers and sisters, that even in these most unusual times, the Lord is there, He is forever with us.

Every blessing, and hope to meet some of you on line. Rev Mike