

Christmas 2017 — Where Was Christ Before the Manger?

December 24, 2017

At Christmas we reflect on the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. We talk about Bethlehem. We remember the shepherds and the wise men. We tell the story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary and Zechariah. All of these are important stories to remember during the Christmas season.

This morning, I want to ponder a different Christmas question. Where was Jesus before the manger? Where was Christ before Christmas?

We have potential existence before conception. The Bible tells us Jesus had actual existence before his conception.

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. Micah 5:2

The Hebrews word for *from of old*, literally means from eternity past. The Bible tell us Jesus was around long before his birth in Bethlehem. He existed from eternity. Where was Jesus? What was he doing before his birth?

This morning, we will answer those questions. Rather than develop an answer to give you at the end of this message, I will propose an answer at the beginning. Then, like a lawyer in a courtroom, I will lay the evidence before you to support my claim. I will let you be the judge and jury to see if you agree with my conclusions. When all is said and done, I hope we will all find Christ before the manger.

Ready for the answer? In the Old Testament, when we have a reference to *the angel of the Lord*, it is a reference to Jesus interacting with people before

he was born in Bethlehem. I want you to understand this distinction, I am not talking about general references to *an angel of the Lord* in the Old Testament but to the specific references to *the angel of the Lord*.

To help you understand this claim, let me give you a small lesson in Hebrew. The word *angel* doesn't necessarily refer to a created spiritual being. Angel in Hebrew literally means messenger. A messenger could be a created spiritual being or God could be his own messenger to us.

I realize I made a huge assertion. Some of you are wondering if I can prove the claim that references to the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament actual refer to Jesus. Let me lay the evidence before you to see if you agree.

The angel of the Lord claims to be God in the Old Testament.

When we turn to the Old Testament and begin tracing our fingers through references to the angel of the Lord, we find the angel of the Lord doesn't claim to be an ordinary angel, but he claims to be God. One of the best examples of this is found in the account of Moses and the burning bush.

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. Exodus 3:1–2 (ESV)

As we continue reading, look at how the angel of the Lord identified himself to Moses.

Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Exodus 3:5–6 (ESV)

The angel of the Lord claimed to be God. It may sound like I am reading into things a bit but if we keep reading and get to verse 13, we don't just find the angel of the Lord calling himself God to Moses, but Moses then claimed the angel of the Lord is God.

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you.'" Exodus 3:13–14 (ESV)

The angel of the Lord identified himself with the name of God; "I am" is the Hebrew for Yahweh, the sacred name of God. It is hard to conceive of the angel of the Lord claiming to be deity in a stronger way.

This isn't the only incident where the angel of the Lord claimed to be God. As we continue combing through the Old Testament, we find more evidence of the angel of the Lord showing up and claiming to be God.

Another example is found in Genesis 22. In this chapter God instructed Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

He (God) said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." Genesis 22:2 (ESV)

Abraham followed God's plan. Abraham climbed Mt. Moriah, bound his son, and put him on the altar. Guess who showed up at the last minute to stop Isaac's death?

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Genesis 22:10–12 (ESV)

Put the pieces together. The angel of the Lord said, “Now I know you fear God because you have not withheld your only son from me.” The angel of the Lord equated himself with God.

The angel of the Lord has the attributes of deity.

The angel of the Lord not only calls himself God but he has attributes that are unique to God. Look with me at the story of Hagar, Sarah’s servant, when she was sent into the wilderness to die with her son, Ishmael.

And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “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.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. Genesis 21:17–19 (ESV)

The angel of God (the Lord) claimed he would do something only God could do. He would make Ishmael into a great nation. To do that involves *omnipotence* and *omniscience*. That means the angel of the Lord knows the future and has the power to change the future. No ordinary angel can do that. Only God knows the future and can control the future.

The evidence is stacking up. The angel of the Lord is God. But as we continue to sift through the evidence, we find the angel of the Lord is God but is distinct from God.

The angel of the Lord is God is distinct from God.

Zechariah 1:12 is a very interesting passage.

Then the angel of the Lord said, “O Lord of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?” Zechariah 1:12 (ESV)

Here we have the angel of the Lord interceding to another person called the Lord Almighty on behalf of the people of Jerusalem and the towns of Judah. We have one person who is God interceding to another person who is also called God on behalf of God's people. How are we to understand this? Does God have a split personality issue? No. This is the Trinity. This is the second person of the Trinity — God the Son (known as the angel of the Lord) — interceding to the first person of the Trinity — God the Father — for God's people.

Another passage where we see the angel of the Lord interceding to God on someone's behalf is Zechariah 3.

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?" Zechariah 3:1–2 (ESV)

In this passage, Zechariah witnessed the angel of the Lord defending Joshua, the high priest, against the accusations of Satan in the presence of God. In other words, Zechariah saw the angel of the Lord speaking to a separate person also called the Lord. How can we have two separate people called the Lord? Once again, the answer lies in the Trinity. God the Father and God the Son are equal but separate. God the Son is the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament.

Jesus saved Israel out of Egypt.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find the New Testament informing us that Jesus was active in the Old Testament. Jesus, as the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, saved Israel out of Egypt and led God's people to the Promised Land.

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. Jude 5 (ESV)

Jude said Jesus is the one who saved ancient Israel out of Egypt. It was also Jesus who judged the Israelites and destroyed them for their unbelief.

Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night. Exodus 14:19–20 (ESV)

Moses told us it was the angel of the Lord, the preincarnate Christ, who inhabited the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that led ancient Israel out of Egypt. Jesus was the cloud and the pillar. Jesus, as the angel of the Lord, is the one who led and protected Israel in the wilderness.

In addition, in Exodus we also see that it was the angel of the Lord that guarded and guided ancient Israel to bring them to the Promised Land.

Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice: do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. Exodus 23:20–21 (ESV)

Paul said Jesus was the one who not only led ancient Israel in the wilderness but sustained the Israelites in the desert.

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. 1 Corinthians 10:1–6 (ESV)

In this passage Paul referred to God providing Israel with manna, bread from heaven, and water from a rock. This rock appeared both at the beginning of

the Israelites' wanderings in the desert in Exodus 17:1-7 and near the end of their wanderings in Numbers 20:2-13. When Paul claimed the rock followed the Israelites that shows he was not talking about a physical rock that followed them rolling through the wilderness but he was describing Jesus as the rock that was present with them. In other words, Jesus went with them in the desert to supply their needs. Jesus supplied their water.

In addition, Paul said that when ancient Israel rebelled against the water and the manna Christ provided to sustain the Israelites in the desert, ancient Israel's rebellion was not simply against God in the generic but against Christ in the specific.

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. Numbers 21:4-6 (ESV)

We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, 1 Corinthians 10:9 (ESV)

What we see is Jesus is the angel of the Lord. Jesus is the one who took Israel out of Egypt. Jesus led the Israelites through the wilderness as a cloud and pillar of fire. Jesus is the one who provided the manna and the water they needed in the wilderness to survive.

The angel of the Lord functions like Christ.

We established that the angel of the Lord is God. While the angel of the Lord is God, he is distinct from God the Father. Let's put together some more pieces that show the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament functions like Jesus in the New Testament.

The angel of the Lord and Jesus both reveal God to man.

The Bible tells us that the Father's voice was heard from heaven and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism. It also tells us the Holy Spirit showed up as tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost. It was only Jesus who took on a visible bodily form.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14 (ESV)

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, Colossians 2:9 (ESV)

It seems reasonable to conclude that Christ is the regular visible manifestation of God not just in the New Testament but also in the Old Testament. The Bible appears to confirm that visible manifestations of God in both the Old and New Testaments are Christ. In the Old Testament the visible manifestations of God are Christ before his body. In the New Testament, the visible manifestations of God are Christ with his body. For example, Paul told us God the Father is invisible and lives in unapproachable light so no one has seen him.

...who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. 1 Timothy 6:16 (ESV)

No one has ever seen God [God the Father]; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. John 1:18 (ESV)

The Bible also tells us the Holy Spirit is invisible to the human eye.

...even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. John 14:17 (ESV)

The Holy Spirit is known to us because he lives within us and because of the effect he has on people. God the Father is not seeable. The Holy Spirit doesn't take on a physical form but shows his presence by dwelling in people and changing them.

This points to the Son of God being the visible manifestation of God as the angel of the Lord showing up as God in the Old Testament and Jesus showing up as God in the New Testament. Jesus, the son, has always had the job of making God visible to his people. That didn't change from one testament to the other. What changed is in the New Testament, Jesus took on a body so he was able to completely connect with us and constantly be visible to us.

The angel of the Lord and Jesus comfort and provide for God's people.

We find the angel of the Lord comforting Elijah after he was exhausted from his confrontation with Jezebel and the prophets of Baal. Elijah had post traumatic stress disorder after a tough day of work. He was so exhausted he sat under a broom tree and wanted to die. Look what happens in his brokenness and exhaustion.

The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." 1 Kings 19:7

The angel of the Lord comforted Elijah and provided the food he needed. Just like the angel of the Lord provided the Israelites with manna and water they needed in the desert, he provided what Elijah needed in his time of desperation.

In a similar way, we find Jesus acting as the comforter of and provider for God's people in the New Testament.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Matt 11:28

When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Matthew 14:14 (ESV)

In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away." And his disciples answered him, "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" And he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Mark 8:1–8 (ESV)

The angel of the Lord and Jesus judge people.

And David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces. 1 Chronicles 21:16 (ESV)

What happened? David numbered his army. God was angry with him because he was beginning to place his confidence in the size of his army rather than the God who was behind his army. As judgment, God sent a plague on the people that reduced the size of David's military. In this memorable scene, David saw the people of the city of Jerusalem about to be destroyed by the angel of the Lord. David begged God for the angel of the Lord to withhold judgment on the people of Israel and instead focus judgment on him and his family.

I want us to notice it was the angel of the Lord executing judgment against God's people. Earlier we saw the angel of the Lord judged the very same

Israelites for unbelief after he saved them out of Egypt. The angel of the Lord judges people in the Old Testament.

Do we find Jesus acting as the judge in the New Testament?

For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son... John 5:22 (ESV)

And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he (Jesus) is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. Acts 10:42 (ESV)

The angel of the Lord disappears in the New Testament.

After seeing how busy the angel of the Lord was in the Old Testament, it is strange when we get to the New Testament that he completely disappears. Yes, there are references to angels in the New Testament but the angel of the Lord, who was worshiped as God, disappears.

But in the New Testament, Jesus plays the same role as the angel of the Lord played in the Old Testament. Do you think they are one and the same? Let me tell you what leaders in the early church that either lived only a few generations after the time of Christ thought about this.

The early church fathers believed the angel of the Lord was Christ before the manger.

The early church believed the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament was Christ before the manger. Irenaeus (AD 125-200) said in his book Against Heresies that Christ was often seen by Moses and that it was Christ who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. He also said Christ was the one interacting with Adam, Noah, Abraham and Jacob. Justin Martyr (AD 110-166) said that Christ was extremely active in the Old Testament. He said it was Jesus who spoke to

Moses in the burning bush. It was Jesus who spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Many other early church fathers also believed the angel of the Lord was Christ before the manger. The list is long. Let me give you a few. Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-220), Origin (AD 185-254), Theophilus of Antioch (died AD 181), Cyprian (AD 200-258), Hilary (AD 315-367), and Saint Basil (AD 330-379).

Probably the most famous quote of the early church fathers who believed the angel of the Lord was Jesus in the Old Testament comes from Tertullian (AD 160-220) in his book Against Praxeas.

It is the Son, therefore, who has been from the beginning administering judgment, throwing down the haughty tower, and dividing the tongues (the tower of babel), punishing the whole world by the violence of waters (Noah and the flood), raining upon Sodom and Gomorrah fire and brimstone, as the LORD from the LORD. For He is who was at all times came down to hold converse with men, from Adam on to the patriarchs and the prophets, in vision, in dream, in mirror, in dark saying. —Tertullian (AD 160-220) in Against Praxeas

Why did the angel of the Lord take on a body in Jesus?

The angel of the Lord couldn't save us unless he became one of us.

Jesus was always about the business of saving God's people. That began with Abraham in Genesis. It was also Jesus saving Israel by taking God's people out of Egypt. The problem is the ultimate enemy we face is not an evil oppressor like ancient Egypt or modern ISIS. Our ultimate enemy is sin which leads to death and separation from God. The only way for Jesus to save us from that enemy was to take on a body to defeat this enemy. As the Bible says, without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin. The angel of the Lord took on a body in Bethlehem so he could shed his precious blood to pay for our sin and

save us from our greatest enemy. That is why asking Jesus to forgive our sin and make us into new people is the only way to know God and be forgiven.

The angel of the Lord couldn't bless us with all of God's blessings unless he became one of us.

Have you ever wished to be an angel? If you were an angel, you could travel even faster than the speed of light anyplace you wanted to go. If you were an angel, you would have awesome strength, power, and glory. For all the benefits of being an angel, I am thankful I am not an angel. I would not trade places with any angel, no matter how mighty or powerful it is today. Jesus in his flesh and blood body rose from the dead. God the Father gave Jesus in his resurrected flesh-and-blood body the most highly exalted position in the universe. Jesus has a name that is above every name; at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

As Jesus' brothers and sisters, in eternity our identity will be to enjoy our identity as the most highly exalted and beings in the entire universe with Christ but under Christ. No angel — no matter how powerful, glorious and mighty — will every be close to the glory of Jesus. No angel will ever be close to the glory that will be ours for all eternity because we are Christ's adopted brothers and sisters. Right now, we are below the angels, but one day, through Jesus, we will be above all the angels. We will judge the angels. None of that could have happened if it wasn't for the angel of the Lord taking on flesh in Bethlehem.

There is continuity between the testaments.

This morning, I want you to see there is continuity between the Old and New Testaments. Jesus didn't show up for the first time in the manger. The first

chapter of the book of Hebrews and the first chapter of the Gospel of John tell us Jesus is the one who made the entire universe. Colossians 2:17 tells us Jesus stayed involved in the universe as he sustains the universe every day. Jesus was also involved saving God's people from the very beginning of the Old Testament as the angel of the Lord.

The angel of the Lord took on flesh to save us in a way he couldn't save people in the Old Testament. He could save God's people out of slavery in Egypt but he couldn't save us from slavery to Satan, sin, death and hell until he became one of us to die for us.

This Christmas, as we gather with our families and open presents under the tree, take the time in prayer to thank God for being born in Bethlehem to save us from sin, our greatest enemy. Not only did he save us, but Jesus took on flesh to make us the most blessed being in the universe through our faith in him and identity with him for all eternity.



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