

Who is “the Angel of the Lord / God”?

When the Old Testament refers to “the angel of the Lord” or “the angel of God,” is it an appearance of God himself, a personal angelic messenger of God or the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ?

How did the Bible translate Biblical Hebrew into “the angel of the Lord / God”?

A. The Construct Relationship

This question takes one into the grammatical study of the Hebrew noun. During the process of translation, translators take into account how a noun is related to a sentence. In this simplified presentation of Hebrew grammar, a noun has three possible *cases*, which is a syntactical form that indicates the sense of its relationship to the sentence:

Nominative – a nominative noun is the **subject of a verb** (i.e. the *Father* loves Jesus).

Genitive – a genitive noun is the **object of a preposition** (i.e. the *angel* of the Lord).

Accusative – an accusative noun is one that is the **direct object of a verb** (i.e. the Father loves *Jesus*).

Biblical Hebrew indicates the genitive function of a noun by using a grammatical method called a *construct relationship*, which is formed by stringing 2-4 nouns together. In the study of “the angel of the Lord,” the first noun is the construct noun, which may or may not have its form altered (a noun’s meaning may be altered slightly by how it is stressed with a change in inflection, spelling, or pronunciation). The second noun is the absolute noun, because it never undergoes any type of form change.

How the construct noun is stressed affects how the relationship to the absolute noun is designated. There are four markers, used in various combinations, which connect the construct noun to the absolute noun. These markers are:

Conjunctive accent – There are 9 conjunctive accent marks that can be seen in the Masoretic text. These marks are found under a word that is connected to the following word.

Maqqef – This word means “binder,” and functions like an English hyphen. It joins two words of a word pair and forms a new word.

Reduction of a vowel – The construct noun is essentially shortened with the loss of a vowel. Biblical Hebrew does not have any vowels; however, the translation of the Bible is based on Masoretic texts, where the scribes of this tradition introduced a system of vowel marks to indicate how the text was to be read.

Specific construct form – this is reference to a certain spelling pattern for the construct noun.

The construct relationship of “the angel of the Lord / God,” is indicated by a combination of a vowel reduction and conjunctive accent. Thus, the Hebrew term for angel (mal’âk) is the construct noun and the Hebrew term for Lord (Y^ehōvâh) / God (’elohiym) is the absolute noun.

B. Determining the Definiteness of the Construct Noun

As a rule, the construct noun cannot have a prefixed article such as “a”, “an”, and “the.” In a construct relationship, the absolute noun defines whether the construct noun is indefinite (“a” or “an”) or definite (“the”), and a definite noun is indicated by one of three ways: 1) a prefixed definite article, 2) a pronominal suffix, or 3) by a proper name.

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Because the absolute noun, Lord (Y^ehōvâh) or God ('elohiym), is a proper name, it calls for the definite article “the”. In all 56 occurrences of the phrase “the angel of the Lord” or “the angel of God”, the nouns are in their proper construct relationship. This means that “*the* angel of the Lord / God” is not translated as “*an* angel of the Lord / God”.

Who is the angel of the Lord / God?

In the 56 occurrences of the phrase “the angel of the Lord / God”, several suggest that he is God in human form and other instances where he is distinctly different from God.

The following passages are instances where “the angel of the Lord / God” exhibited capabilities usually associated with God:

Made prophetic promises

The promise to multiply Hagar’s descendants (Gen 16:6-16, 21:17)

Accepted worship

The promise to Manoah’s wife of Samson (Judg 13:1-25)

Identified himself with God

Stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac and blessed him (Gen 22:11-18)

Appeared in Jacob’s dream (Gen 31:11-13)

Appeared to Moses (Ex 3:2-6)

Israel rebuked for not conquering the Promised Land (Judg 2:1-5)

The selection of Gideon (Judg 6:11-27)

Provides personal provision and protection for Believers

Provided food for Elijah (1 Ki 19:5-8)

Made divine appointments

Moses (Ex 3:2 – 4:28)

Samson (Judg 13:3-24)

Delivered the nation of Israel

Protection from the Egyptian pursuit (Ex 14:19)

Future protection of Jerusalem (Zech 12:8)

A prayer of protection (Ps 35:5-6)

Judged human beings

Ahaziah’s worship of Baal (2 Ki 1:2-15)

Judged nations

The Song of Deborah and Barak and the curse of Meroz (Judg 5:23)

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In these instances, “the angel of the Lord” is distinctly different from God:

Balaam’s disobedience of going to the leaders of Moab (Num 22:22-35)
David’s disobedience of a census (2 Sam 24:15-17, 1 Chron 21:15-18)
God’s answer of King Hezekiah’s prayer and judgment of King Sennacherib of Assyria (2 Ki 19:34-35)
David’s prayer (Ps 34:7)
Zechariah’s call to repentance (Zech 1:10-20)

When one surveys the New Testament, there is only one instance where an angel is identified with God (Acts 7:30-38), and it is not with the phrase of “angel of the Lord”. While the phrase “angel of the Lord” does appear twelve times in the New Testament, all refer to unfallen angelic messengers of God (Matt 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19; 28:2; Luke 1:11; 2:9; John 5:4; Acts 5:19; 8:26; 12:7, 23). The Hebrew “*the* angel of the Lord / God” is not seen in the Greek text with the appearance of Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament, “the angel of the Lord / God” spoke in the first person as though He were God, had the attributes of God, yet was distinct from God. In consideration of the triune nature of God, is He God the father, Son, or Holy Spirit?

Exodus 33:20 suggests that “the angel of the Lord / God” cannot be God the father since no man can see His face and live.

John 1:18 and 1 Timothy 6:16 further affirms that no one has seen God the Father.

Examples such as Judges 3:10, Isaiah 11:2, Luke 4:18 indicate that the Holy Spirit is not visible to human beings.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the only visible Person of the Trinity that human beings can see face to face and yet live.

“The angel of the Lord / God” share the similarity of being sent by God.

The patriarch Jacob makes the very first mention of the word *redeemed* and associates the term with *the angel* within the context of “redemption from all evil” (Gen 48:16).

Hosea 12:3-4 makes it clear that the patriarch Jacob associated the angel with God.

“The angel of the Lord / God” was never seen again after the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

For the above reasons, “the angel of the Lord / God” is understood to be the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. And in only this instance, “the angel of the Lord / God” is not seen as a created angel.

Reference:

1. Baze JM, The Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament – Part I in *Conservative Online* (www.conservativeonline.org/journals/01_03_journal/1997v1n3_id06.htm), volume 1, number 3 (1997).
2. Baze JM, The Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament – Part 2 in *Conservative Online* (www.conservativeonline.org/journals/02_04_journal/1998v2n4_id05.htm), volume 2, number 4 (1998).