

can direct examiners in the direction of “the messenger/angel of the Lord” being the Logos or Word of John 1:1ff:

“Traditionally, Christian interpreters ascribed to the appearance of the angel a Christophany, the preincarnate divine Son of God. Exodus 23:20-20 implies that the angel who bears the divine Name has the power to forgive sin, a distinctive feature of deity. It is also striking that ‘the angel of the LORD’ (definite article) is not mentioned in the New Testament. The appellative ‘angel of the LORD’ may not be a technical reference for the divine Logos, but it is clear that the angel is deity in many Old Testament passages, including this Hagar incident.”¹⁸

Many holding to a high Christology of Yeshua the Messiah being uncreated as God, would indeed conclude that various scenes in the Tanach where the figure of “the messenger/angel of the Lord” appears, are pre-Incarnate manifestations of the Savior.

GENESIS 18:1-33

“Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw *them*, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, ‘My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant.’ And they said, ‘So do, as you have said.’ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead *it* and make bread cakes.’ Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave *it* to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed *it* before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate. Then they said to him, ‘Where is Sarah your wife?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ He said, ‘I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’ And the LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, “Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?” Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.’ Sarah denied *it* however, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid. And He said, ‘No, but you did laugh.’ Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off. The LORD said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him.’ And the LORD said, ‘The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.’ Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD. Abraham came near and said, ‘Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep *it* away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are *treated* alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?’ So the LORD said, ‘If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account.’ And Abraham replied, ‘Now behold, I have

¹⁸ Kenneth A. Matthews, *New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, Vol 1b (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 189.

ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am *but* dust and ashes. Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?' And He said, 'I will not destroy *it* if I find forty-five there.' He spoke to Him yet again and said, 'Suppose forty are found there?' And He said, 'I will not do *it* on account of the forty.' Then he said, 'Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?' And He said, 'I will not do *it* if I find thirty there.' And he said, 'Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?' And He said, 'I will not destroy *it* on account of the twenty.' Then he said, 'Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?' And He said, 'I will not destroy *it* on account of the ten.' As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed, and Abraham returned to his place."

The Genesis 18 scene of the Patriarch Abraham hosting what were for sure supernatural visitors, the announcement to the Matriarch Sarah that she would give birth to Isaac, and then the deliberations between Abraham and God over the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah—have significantly raised questions about how God can and cannot appear to mortals. The opening word of this narrative seems to be straightforward enough: "Now YHWH was seen [*v'yeira eilav* YHWH, וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה] by him by the oaks of Mamre" (Genesis 18:1a, Fox). It is further recorded, "Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground" (Genesis 18:2, NJPS). While it is first stated (Genesis 18:1a) that the LORD or YHWH appeared to Abraham, it is further specified that *sheloshah anashim* (שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים) or "three men" came to Abraham, to which he paid some high level of honor (Genesis 18:3).

Given the textual assertion which follows, in how it is seemingly witnessed that the LORD or YHWH was the One who appeared to Abraham, and who spoke to both him and his wife Sarah, it has been extremely important for Christological studies to use this scene to evaluate whether or not God can take on human form, interacting with others. Many Christians throughout the centuries have interpreted the three men who appeared to Abraham, as actually being the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. More generally, though, the significant principle to be considered is whether or not God can indeed take on human form, providing some future basis for the Incarnation of Yeshua the Messiah. It is more often concluded that of the three men which appear to Abraham, one of them is YHWH Himself, and the other two of them are the angels which would go on to appear to Lot in Sodom (Genesis 19:1).

Some Jewish interpreters, given the later record of two angels appearing to Lot in Sodom, have tended to conclude that all of the three figures appearing to Abraham were actually angels. This includes Richard Elliot Friedman, who draws the conclusion,

"Is [Abraham] meeting God, people, or angels? Several of the biblical stories involving angels contain confusions such as this, i.e., confusions between when it is the deity and when it is the angel who is speaking or doing something. But it is confusing only so long as we imagine angels as beings who are independent or separate from God. These texts indicate that angels are rather conceived of here as expressions of God's presence."¹⁹

Friedman goes on to offer some collaborating passages from the Tanach, to claim that given the greatness and vastness of God (i.e., Exodus 33:20; 1 Kings 8:27), there is no possible way that God could, apparently ever, manifest Himself to human beings in human form. So, any reference to the Lord or YHWH speaking to Abraham in a passage like Genesis 18, is to instead be viewed as Abraham speaking to angelic messengers who are to be identified as a representative of God and can thus be called "God." Yet, it cannot be avoided, at least, how one opinion witnessed in the Talmud is recorded as saying of this scene, "Said R. Hama bar Hanina, 'That day marked the

¹⁹ Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 63.

third day from Abraham's circumcision, the Holy One, blessed be he, had come to see how Abraham was doing" (b.*Bava Metzia* 69b).²⁰

While a number of Jewish examiners, when encountering the possibility of the Lord God actually taking on human form, might feel constrained to dismiss it and argue for a level of Divine agency whereby created beings can somehow be actually labeled as "YHWH," we need to never be found placing any such limitations on our Eternal God. *If God chooses to make Himself be known to human beings in human form, He is surely free to do so.* Von Rad, a liberal Christian commentator who was notably committed to the JEDP documentary hypothesis, actually concluded from this text—in contrast to the view that the three men were angels—that the three men were all God acting in some form of unison:

"That the three men accepted the invitation together, if we were to think of the two as only a guard of honor to Yahweh, would be just as strange as their common question about Sarah (v. 9). One is therefore rather inclined to think that Yahweh appeared in all three. This interpretation would coincide with the fact that where the text mentions Yahweh himself it is singular (vs. 10, 13), for Yahweh is one in spite of this form of his appearing."²¹

It is to be noted how there is some controversy present with what Abraham says to his guests, as Genesis 18:3 appears in most Bibles with, "My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by." The Hebrew MT actually employs *Adonai* (אֲדֹנָי), a Divine title for YHWH, although most English versions have the improper "lord" (some notable exceptions which have the proper "Lord" include the NKJV, ESV, TLV), just as Sarah later notes Abraham to be *adoni* (אֲדֹנִי; Genesis 18:12). Obviously, the consonants *a-d-n-y* (אֲדֹנִי) can be designated as either *Adonai* or *adoni*, but the former would give testimony to God proper being present, and that Abraham recognized something unique and different about at least one of his guests.

Abraham sees that a meal is served to his guests (Genesis 18:4-8),²² and the aged Sarah is given the news that in a year's time she will give birth to a son (Genesis 18:9-11). Sarah's response to the news that she will give birth is laughter, as she finds the suggestion to be so impossible that it is humorous. The record leaves no ambiguity in how it is the LORD or YHWH who speaks directly to them:

"But YHWH said [*v'yomer YHWH, יהוה, וַיֹּאמֶר*] to Avraham: Now why does Sara laugh and say: Shall I really give birth, now that I am old? Is anything beyond YHWH [*ha'yippalei m'YHWH davar, הַיִּפְלֵא מִיְהוָה דְבָר, וְיִיבְרַח*]? At that set-time I will return to you, when time revives, and Sara will have a son" (Genesis 18:13-14, Fox).

Abraham escorts his three guests out (Genesis 18:16), and there is an internal monologue that takes place (Genesis 18:17-19), where the LORD or YHWH speaks of the significance of his progeny: "Now YHWH had said to himself... [*v'YHWH amar, וַיִּהְיֶה אָמַר*] " (Genesis 18:17a, Fox). Following this, the LORD or YHWH proceeds to have a discussion with Abraham about the condition of Sodom and Gomorrah: "So YHWH said [*v'yomer YHWH, יהוה, וַיֹּאמֶר*]: The outcry in Sedom and Amora—how great it is!" (Genesis 18:20, Fox).

At this point, two of the three men (cf. Genesis 19:1), seemingly leave and go to Sodom (Genesis 18:22a), but one of the men, for sure, stays behind to talk to Abraham: "but Avraham still stood in the presence of YHWH [*l'pnei YHWH, וַיִּשְׁתָּא וַיִּהְיֶה יְהוָה*]" (Genesis 18:22b, Fox). Abraham then pleads with the LORD or YHWH over the fate of Sodom, which He will not obliterate for the

²⁰ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

²¹ Von Rad, 204.

²² For an evaluation of Abraham seemingly serving meat and dairy items together, consult the analysis of Genesis 18:1-15 in the *Messianic Kosher Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

sake of ten righteous (Genesis 18:23-33). It is clear that rather than Abraham speaking to some supernatural messenger or angel here, that it is the Lord or YHWH with whom he is speaking: “YHWH said [v’yomer YHWH, יהוה יִיאָמֵר: If I find in Sedom...” (Genesis 18:26, Fox); “YHWH went [v’yeyilekh YHWH, יהוה וַיֵּלֶךְ], as soon as he had finished speaking to Avraham...” (Genesis 18:33, Fox). It is also witnessed in the Divine titles with which this being is addressed, that it is the formal *Adonai*, and not the informal *adoni*:

- “And Abraham replied, ‘Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord [l’dabeir el-Adonai, לְדַבֵּר אֶל־אֲדֹנָי], although I am *but* dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27).
- “Then he said, ‘Oh may the Lord not be angry [al-na yichar l’Adonai, לֹא יַחַר לְאֲדֹנָי אֵל], and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not do it if I find thirty there’” (Genesis 18:30).
- “And he said, ‘Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord [l’dabeir el-Adonai, לְדַבֵּר אֶל־אֲדֹנָי]; suppose twenty are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it on account of the twenty’” (Genesis 18:31).
- “Then he said, ‘Oh may the Lord not be angry [al-na yichar l’Adonai, לֹא יַחַר לְאֲדֹנָי אֵל], and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?’ And He said, ‘I will not destroy it on account of the ten’” (Genesis 18:32).

The thrust of Genesis 18:14, in the word, “Is anything too difficult for the LORD?” or “Is anything beyond YHWH?” (Fox)—given to Sarah when she laughed about having a child in her old age—should indicate to us that we should be careful in limiting God to anything here. Given the presence of the three men who appeared to Abraham (Genesis 18:3), can God manifest Himself in the form of three human people? *Yes*. Is there more to God than this? *Presumably yes*.

There will likely be some disagreement among those who believe that God proper Himself, legitimately appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18, about whether He appeared in the form of three men or whether He was just one of the three men. (The association with God and the number three, should be taken as sufficient, internal Biblical evidence, that in spite of some of the limitations of traditional Christian Trinitarianism, it is not a doctrine that is somehow “pagan.”) **For sure, one of the three men who appeared to Abraham was the LORD or YHWH.** Michael L. Brown offers some astute conclusions on this scene, in his book *The Real Kosher Jesus: Revealing the Mysteries of the Hidden Messiah*:

“...The Scripture tells us that the Lord appeared to Abraham, then it says that Abraham saw three men by his tent, then it identifies one of those three as the Lord, who holds a conversation with Abraham and Sarah. The Bible then says that Abraham walked with the men as they went on their way to Sodom, that the Lord then informed Abraham of his intentions to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, that the men (i.e., the other two men) continued on to Sodom while Abraham stayed and talked with the Lord, and that when they were done, the Lord left and Abraham went home, and that the two angels then arrived in Sodom. I’ll say it again: one of those three men was YHWH, the Lord.

“The awesome and exciting thing about this text is that it explicitly tells us that Abraham and Sarah talked with the Lord, that he appeared in human form to them, dusty feet and all (Gen. 18:4), and that he even sat down and ate their food. Yet all the while he remained God in heaven.

“An honest and straightforward reading of the text indicates clearly that God can come to earth in human form for a period of time if he so desires. And notice: I have not quoted the New Testament to support this but instead have simply looked at the Torah. Are we willing to receive what is written there?

“Did the Lord cease to be God in heaven? Certainly not. Did he cease to be a spirit? Obviously not. But did this infinite Spirit walk among us in fleshly form for a season? Absolutely

yes! And did he allow himself to be seen by various people at certain times, although not in his full glory? Without a doubt—if we believe the Jewish Scriptures.”²³

Regardless of any limitations anyone may place upon Him, our God can appear, and has appeared, in human form to people. An evangelical Christian resource like the *Archaeological Study Bible* has no problem with asserting that in a scene like Genesis 18, the Patriarch Abraham was not only likely encountering God Himself, but more particularly a pre-incarnate manifestation of Yeshua the Messiah:

“In the early days of humanity, before people had the written Word, before the incarnation and before the Holy Spirit had come to make his abode in human hearts, God sometimes appeared and talked with people. One of the loveliest and most instructive of the theophanies (visible appearances of God) is found in Genesis 18...There is good reason to believe that theophanies before the incarnation of Christ were visible manifestations of the pre-incarnate Son of God.”²⁴

GENESIS 21:17-21

“God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him. Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the skin with water and gave the lad a drink. God was with the lad, and he grew; and he lived in the wilderness and became an archer. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.’”

Previously in Genesis 16:7-13, the figure of “the messenger/angel of the LORD” or *malakh YHWH* assured Hagar that her son Ishmael would become a great nation (Genesis 16:10), and Hagar herself had identified the entity speaking to her as the LORD or God proper (Genesis 16:13). Further on, it is witnessed in the record of Genesis 21:9-16 that the Matriarch Sarah has Hagar and her son Ishmael expelled from the camp of Abraham, especially given how the child of promise was supposed to be Isaac (Genesis 16:12). Hagar leaves as far as the wilderness of Beersheba, and she prepares to leave her boy Ishmael in the bushes, as their water runs out (Genesis 16:15-16). Crying about what she must think is an inevitable death, God hears her cries. The text states how a *malakh Elohim* (מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים), “messenger/angel of God,” speaks to her: “But God heard the voice of the lad, God’s messenger [*malakh Elohim*] called to Hagar from heaven and said to her: What ails you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is” (Genesis 21:17, Fox).

On first glance, one might assume that this *malakh Elohim* or “messenger/angel of God,” is just a supernatural intermediary sent by God to communicate an encouraging word to Hagar. But the encouraging word is, “Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him” (Genesis 21:18, NJPS), *ki-l’goy gadol asimennu* (כִּי-לְגוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימֶנּוּ) employing the first person singular “I” for “God”: “for into-nation great I-will-make-him” (Kohlenberger).²⁵ If this *malakh Elohim* were just an ordinary, created angel, would it be appropriate for such a created being to provide first person, “I” assurance, for Ishmael’s progeny to be great? It would

²³ Michael L. Brown, *The Real Koshers Jesus: Revealing the Mysteries of the Hidden Messiah* (Lake Mary, FL: Front Line, 2012), 129.

²⁴ Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 29.

²⁵ John R. Kohlenberger III, trans., *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:49.