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Judges 6:22-23, NRSV.

²² Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the LORD; and Gideon said, "Help me, Lord GOD! For I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." ²³ But the LORD said to him, "Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die."

Was it a real angel?

Here Judges 6:11–24, which I have heavily edited:

¹¹ Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak at Ophrah as Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. ¹² The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said, "The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior." ¹³ Gideon answered him, "But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? The LORD has given us into the hand of Midian." ¹⁴ Then the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you." ¹⁵ He responded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." ¹⁶ The LORD said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them." ¹⁷ Then he said to him, "If now I have found favor with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. ¹⁸ Do not depart from here until I come and bring my present before you."

¹⁹ So Gideon went into his house and prepared a kid, and unleavened cakes; and brought them to him under the oak and presented them. ²⁰ The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock." And he did so. ²¹ Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes; and the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. ²² Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the LORD; and Gideon said, "Help me, Lord GOD! For I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." ²³ But the LORD said to him, "Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die." ²⁴ Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD. To this day it still stands at Ophrah.

In this passage, Gideon is being chosen by God to become a judge of Israel, and he would ultimately become the most famous of the judges. Remember that the judges were the charismatic tribal leaders who ruled before the kings of Israel like Saul and David. In this passage, Gideon is secretly beating out wheat in a wine press to hide the food from the Midianites, who have invaded Israel. An angel of the Lord – not God himself, it would seem – appears to Gideon and commissions him to deliver Israel from the Midianites. He tells Gideon that he will be a mighty warrior. But Gideon responds saying that his clan is the weakest and he himself is not a powerful man. He asks the angel to create a sign so that Gideon will know this angel really is speaking for God. Gideon makes some unleavened cakes and cooks a baby goat. The angel then miraculously makes the food burn, and then the angel vanishes. Gideon now accepts the commission of God. But there is an ancient Israelite belief based on a warning that God gives to Moses in the Book of Exodus that says: "*You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live*". But the angel says to him that he will be safe. So, Gideon builds an altar on that spot to God, and as of the day of the writing of the Book of Judges, the altar still stood.

There are over a hundred references to angels in the Old Testament and about 170 references in the New Testament. I chose this passage because it brings out a subtlety about angels that typically goes unnoticed when people read

the Bible. This subtlety is critical, though, to understanding just what an angel truly is in the Bible. I will get to this later. But first, just what are angels and why do they exist in Scripture? They are deeply rooted in ancient Israelite tradition. Both the Hebrew word and the Greek word that are used for angel in the Bible mean “messenger”. They are beings of Heaven and not Earth. They can, when it is useful, appear as humans. In Matthew and Luke, after Jesus is crucified, angels appear at his empty tomb looking like human men in brilliant clothing. They are there as messengers to deliver the news of Jesus conquering death and rising from his tomb. There is a hierarchy among angels, with Michael being described as an archangel and a leader of Heaven’s armies in Revelation, and Gabriel being described as an important angel in the Book of Daniel and Luke’s Gospel. However, despite our modern interpretation, they do not fly. Angels are Heavenly, but we do not worship them; rather, they worship God like we do. They are described in the Bible as being extremely numerous. While Prophets speak to humanity for God and speak to God for humanity, angels deliver messages from God to humans and deliver information about humans to God. They carry out tasks for God, even delivering punishments to humans, and they can carry on sustaining roles like guiding humans on dangerous journeys. They can protect people from demons and human adversaries. When Saderach,

Meshach, and Abednego, three very young men in the Book of Daniel are tossed in a furnace by Nebuchadnezzar, God sends an angel to protect them from the fire. Angels protect the entire nation of Israel during the Exodus on the journey through the desert. There are evil angels who have rejected God, and Satan is described not literally as an angel, but as masquerading as an angel. In Revelation, Satan is said to have angels fighting for him. In sum, angels are highly represented in the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures.

Before we talk about how angels serve us in a theological sense, their purpose in Scripture and in our minds, I'd like to talk about a person who inspired me to write this message. I'm not talking about this individual because he serves as a great model for some important theological concept; rather, talking to him caused me to develop a more mature notion of angels. He caused me to think deeply about angels and their place in our system of Christian beliefs. I am changing details of this person's story, as I always do, to protect his privacy. We'll call him Josh. Josh was not dying, but he had been badly injured in a motorcycle accident. He had had a helmet and protective gear on, and so he avoided a brain bleed and had only minimal road rash. The problem was that he had suffered significant orthopedic and internal injuries when a car turned in front of him and he wasn't able to come to a full stop in time. He hit the car at about forty miles

an hour, he told me. It's not necessary to describe his injuries, but like a lot of trauma patients, he was in the middle of a long series of corrective surgeries. When I entered his room, he had just been told that an operation on one leg was successful, and he would keep the leg – although he would have a minor disability for the rest of his life. He was surprisingly calm and upbeat as he told me that he had come to accept that he was going to have to give up his life-long passion: riding motorcycles. Josh was about 45 years-old and had been riding since he was a teenager. He and his wife had a two-car garage, one side for her car and the other for his six motorcycles. As we talked, he gave his patient-controlled pain pump a squeeze, giving him a controlled dose of medicine, then said that he and his wife were going to sell his motorcycles and buy him a car. He was looking forward to driving something “sporty”. I told him I was impressed with his attitude and his upbeat outlook. Then he said that the reason he was so positive was because an angel had come into his room early that morning, just before dawn and before his wife came to visit, and told him that God would bring him a life that was even happier than the one he had had before.

In the Book of Daniel, several chapters after the incident with the three boys and the furnace, the Prophet is standing near the Tigris River and has just spent three weeks fasting. He sees an angel who tells Daniel that his prayers will

be answered. He is going to hear a great prophecy about the future of his people.

Here is the passage.

⁴On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris), ⁵I looked up and saw a man clothed in linen, with a belt of gold from Uphaz around his waist. ⁶His body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude.

The River Tigris is named in Genesis, Chapter 2, as one of four rivers flowing out of the Garden of Eden. It is thus a heavy symbol of life. Daniel is standing there, at the river; he sees what appears to be a man dressed in linen. Linen symbolizes purity in the Hebrew Bible and is worn by priests; it also represents someone of a very high status. He is wearing a belt of gold, suggesting a power greater than wealth. Uphaz is a place that produces the most refined gold. His body is like beryl, which is a glowing gemstone. His face is lighting, his eyes flames, his arms and legs polished bronze, and when the angel speaks, his words are a roar. Josh's angel, the one that appeared in his hospital room, was not so grand. Josh described him simply as a tall guy who was largely transparent. This angel told Josh that while he would never ride a motorcycle again, he would find happiness and he and his wife would together come to a place of great joy. He would experience more pain, and he would have to be patient, but as the angel told him, often God uses bad things for beautiful purposes.

We talked about the story of Joseph in Genesis, where his brothers sell him into slavery, but where Joseph rises to be an important official in Egypt and is then able to rescue his family from famine. Joseph says this to his brothers:

²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.

Josh went on to tell me that his motorcycle riding had been a long-time source of conflict between him and his wife, with her constantly worrying about him and him defending his hobby as critical to his very identity. Now, because of his accident and the visit of an angel, he was looking at a much better future.

Let's look at the subtlety in the story of the angel that appeared to Gideon, the angel that informed him that he was going to be a great leader of Israel and that he would drive out the Midianite invaders. There are places in the vision where it's ambiguous as to whether Gideon was talking to an angel sent by God or directly to God himself. Consider this:

²² Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the LORD; and Gideon said, "Help me, Lord GOD! For I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." ²³ But the LORD said to him, "Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die."

Gideon says that he has seen an angel of the Lord face to face. But it's not the face of angels that is dangerous, according to ancient Scripture, it's that humans are not meant to directly see the face of God. Then we are told that God himself says to Gideon: *"Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die."*

Here is Paul writing in his letter to the believers in Galatia:

¹² Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. ¹³ You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; ¹⁴ though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

Notice Paul is telling the Galatians that a physical affliction (which is not described) caused a change in his travel plans, and that is why he ended up in Galatia. He thanks them for not scorning or despising him, but they welcomed him as if he were an angel of God – like Jesus Christ. So, here again, angels and God himself (in the form of Christ) are being jumbled together.

Consider this passage from Genesis. Three angels appear to Abraham, to tell him that his wife Sarah will bear a child after many years of trying. We read:

⁹ They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰ Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” ¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

Notice that the angels ask where Sarah is, and Abraham says she is in the tent.

The angels then turn to Sarah who has been listening at the entrance to the tent.

We are told that one of the angels speaks to her. The words are: “¹³ The LORD

said". Obviously, one of the three angels is in truth God. The point I am trying to make is that these are not typos where angels seem to be confused with God in various pieces of Scripture. It's not that God is concealing himself as an angel and then at some point it becomes obvious to the narrator that this angel is God. And it's not that all angels are in truth God, and that "angel" is just another word for "God". A lot of people have noted this ambiguity. Most of us read right through these passages and don't quite grasp what is happening.

This is what this seeming ambiguity as to whether a being is an angel or God means. Remember that in a literal, physical sense, in terms of the definition of being an angel in Scripture, angels are messengers who deliver news. That news comes from God. They also protect us, guide us, and sometimes talk to God about us. They are not prophets. Prophets are humans who speak for God on Earth; they are intermediaries between God and humans. Angels are not humans. But they are in truth literary devices. They were developed as a way for Israelites and then Jews to express the powerful presence of God in their lives, the willingness of God to do whatever is necessary to keep his promises to us. One on level, it's easy to conflate the sender of a message with the representative of that sender, and we could forgive the Bible writers for tangling things up. Indeed, in the ancient world, representatives of a king would often speak for that

king, even to the point of the words of the messenger being taken as the literal words of the king. On another level, it makes more sense for us to understand that this was done deliberately, so that we would understand that God truly is a physical force in our world. God isn't just some spiritual being who leaves us advice in Scripture and to whom we pray. God is an active presence on Earth. That is something we need to embrace. When we are navigating our earthly lives, we must see God as real, not a metaphysical thing. We don't say that God walks alongside of us simply for poetic reasons. It is very real.

Josh cycled back through the hospital again, some months later for another operation. I wondered if his confidence that an angel visited him would have softened. But no, he brightened at seeing me simply because I was the first person he had shared his angel story with. We talked about it again. I affirmed his vision. And Josh reinforced in me something extremely important about the true nature of angels.