

# THE HIDDEN MISSION OF BIBLICAL ANGELS

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"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread" wrote Alexander Pope. It is also the opening line in a popular tune many seniors may remember from their youth. The impression one gets from its lyric is that angels are superior to humans in intelligence and discretion. This perception about the superior power of angels is the popular religious legacy transmitted to us throughout the ages. It has led to fantasies of deeds performed by humanlike angels, such as in the popular American TV program "Touched by An Angel."

To test the validity of these popular perceptions, one naturally turns to their primary source in Scriptures, specifically in the Torah. In so doing, we find that not only is this perception open to question, but questions also arise as to what is meant by the term "angels" and the role of angels when in contact with humans. To help answer these questions, we shall proceed to analyze seriatim references to angels as they appear in the Torah.

Our first encounter with angels occurs when Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden: *He placed at the east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim [to prevent Adam and Eve's return] . . . to protect the way to the tree of life* (Gen. 3:24). The cherubim are not described, leading one to wonder whether they are physical beings, a literary metaphor, or mystical spiritual creatures. Later, in the instructions for the holy Ark, we are told: *Thou shalt make two cherubim of gold . . . at the two ends of the Ark cover. . . . And the cherubim shall spread out their wings on high screening the Ark cover with their wings with their faces one to the other* (Ex. 25:18-20). Their faces are not described,

After the expulsion from Eden, came another encounter: *The B'nai Elohim [translated as "the sons of God"] saw the daughters of men, that they were fair, and they took them wives, whomsoever they chose* (Gen. 6:2). Jewish Bible commentators pay scant attention to this pre-Abrahamic reference to

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angels, by contending that the *B'nai Elohim* are not angels at all, but the privileged aristocracy of that era. They interpret *Elohim* to mean "mighty," as it is sometimes used in Hebrew.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, in the afore-cited quotation, the *B'nai Elohim* are interpreted to mean that the privileged nobility crossed over the social barriers by consorting with the underclasses, thereby undermining the very fabric of an ordered society and its sexual mores. Christian theologians, on the other hand, developed an elaborate pantheon of angels stemming from these *B'nai Elohim*, referring to them as "Fallen Angels" headed by Satan who figures prominently in their belief system.<sup>2</sup> Judaism, however, recognized early on the dangers of these beliefs as being contrary to its strict adherence to the unity and sovereignty of the One God. The concept of rebellious/fallen angels consorting with humans is totally alien to traditional Jewish thinking.

The next encounter with angels is that of Abraham while he is sitting outside of his tent in Mamre:<sup>3</sup> *He lifted his eyes and looked, and behold three men stood over him* (Gen. 18:2). The three are referred to as *anashim* [men], yet later they are referred to as *malakhim* [messengers]: *And the two [remaining] angels came to Sodom at eventide* (19:1). Which is it? Are these men or supernatural beings?<sup>4</sup> Given that Jewish Bible commentators are much more comfortable discussing Abraham, the first patriarch of Israel, than pre-Abrahamic sources, they are more expansive in interpreting this encounter. They deduce that the three men/angelic visitors are God's messengers commissioned to perform three separate missions: Announcing the miraculous birth of Isaac, destroying the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and rescuing Lot, Abraham's nephew. The reason for having three separate angels rather than one performing three different missions is that, according to the Midrash, an angel cannot perform more than one specific task at a time.<sup>5</sup> They have no independent power to initiate missions on their own. Their only power is the "power of attorney" to fulfill their single Divine mission, after which they disappear. At this point in the Torah, angels have no names or separate identities. We are, however, left with an uneasy sense of ambiguity, whether angels are celestial incorporeal creatures or human beings serving as messengers in performing God's missions. Moreover, the Hebrew terminology used heretofore seems to reflect this ambiguity by referring to angels with

varying designations: *Cherubim*, *B'nai Elohim*, *anashim*, and *malakhim*. There is yet no uniform term for angels.

Following along sequentially with the Torah narrative of Abraham's life, we come upon the next appearance of an angel in a most unlikely setting. In contrast to the previous three dramatic angelic missions, which had profound future implications, the next encounter with an angel occurs in response to what seems to be a mundane family dispute between Sarah, Abraham's wife, and Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant who became Abraham's concubine. The dispute centers around Sarah's feeling demeaned by Hagar, who conceives while she herself remains barren. She retaliates by expelling Hagar into the wilderness, where an angel of God appears and tells her: *'Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment . . . Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering* (16:9, 11). This angelic appearance posits a new and more definitive designation than heretofore, as the Torah refers specifically to *malakh HaShem* [angel of God].

After Sarah, at age 90, miraculously gives birth to Isaac, another crisis erupts between her and Hagar. This time it is over which son would inherit the legacy of Abraham; the older Ishmael by Hagar or the younger Isaac by Sarah. Abraham is conflicted, because he fathered the two sons and is in a quandary as to how to resolve this controversy. God intervenes and directs Abraham: *'In all that Sarah saith unto thee, harken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called'* (21:12). By God's taking sides in favor of Sarah, the stage is set for the appearance of an angel of God to defuse Hagar's emotional trauma, after she and her son, Ishmael are expelled into the wilderness.

*And the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven and said unto her: 'What aileth thee, Hagar? Fear not for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him by the hand; for I will make him a great nation.' And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the bottle with water and gave the lad to drink* (21:17-19).

This is clearly a Divine message relayed by a heavenly angel of God, for no human could foretell such an eventuality. The reassurance and empathy expressed by the angel enable Hagar to see the well which was presumably

there all along, though in her troubled state of mind she could not see it. In biblical language this sighting is referred to as "opening of eyes." Hagar could now find resolution for herself, rather than having the angel resolve the dispute for her by supernatural means. From these two episodes concerning the rivalry between Sarah and Hagar, it appears that the angel of God signals God's intervention to quell an intolerable emotional crisis with important implications for the future of God's Covenant with Abraham.

The last encounter of an angel with Abraham occurs at the Akedah [binding] of Isaac, where we again meet a *malakh Elohim*, an angel of the Lord. Whereas here, as with Hagar, the Hebrew term *malakh Elohim* is clearly a reference to a celestial angel of the Lord, we are still not given a description of what the angel looks like. In most minds, the image conjured up in this defining transformative moment in Abraham's life is of a winged child-like being, grabbing hold of Abraham's hand, preventing the sacrifice of Isaac.

This angelic image is depicted graphically by predominantly Christian artists but is not described in the text. The Torah apparently wishes to convey a veiled message about the complex mystical nature of God's angel. That is to say, its origin is celestial and purely spiritual, until that unique moment of revelation, when the celestial and human meet. The mystique of this revelation of bridging the purely spiritual with the physical is embodied in the Torah idiom by the appearance of God's angel. This event appears in the text to be a physical happening; therefore the angel is portrayed by artists as a corporeal winged being. However, the absence of any angelic description leads one to suspect that the Torah is alluding to revelation in a spiritual sense. This could mean that God is transmitting His will to Abraham through his God-given soul, possibly in the form of an angelic vision. It is the soul which is, after all, the connecting link between the Divine and human.

The repetition of Abraham's name when called by the angel – '*Abraham, Abraham*' (22:11) – bespeaks a dual dimension of revelation, spiritual and physical, represented mystically in the appearance of an angel. '*Behold, here I am . . .*' affirms not only Abraham's physical presence, but is an expression of his spiritual acquiescence to God's will, to proceed with the sacrifice of Isaac. The Torah's concern is not about describing the messenger [*malakh*] but about the angel's message being conveyed to Abraham. Hence, the angel is sometimes depicted as winged, meaning it is transient, and when its mis-

sion is completed it simply disappears. The implicit message also being conveyed to Abraham in such traumatic form is that the God of the Covenant, unlike the gods of the Canaanites, rejects human sacrifice.

One can now understand why the Torah, unlike the works of visual artists, does not describe the intensity of emotion that surrounds this soul-stirring high point in Abraham's life. The Torah, in its down-playing of pathos, hides Abraham's overwhelming feelings of grief, guilt, and conflict about the impending deed. He certainly knew what the sacrifice of Sarah's long-awaited only son would mean to her and to their future relationship, yet he is duty-bound to adhere to the Covenant he entered into with God. It is not that the Torah ignores this realm of human emotion, but chooses to express it not in words but mystically in the sudden appearance of an angel of God. This is the biblical way of depicting the most profound emotion and trauma, as an encounter between the celestial and human, between the spiritual and emotional, and between external and internal forces. This *malakh Elohim*, therefore, becomes the vehicle through which the Torah expresses the intensity of the complex emotions afflicting Abraham at the Akedah. Once the *malakh* appears, and Abraham perceives God's message, his vision becomes unblocked as stated:

*And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and behold behind him a ram was caught in the thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son (22:13).*

As with Hagar, whose psychological veil is lifted after the appearance of the angel of the Lord and she is then able to see the well, so Abraham is now able to see the ram and he proceeds to slaughter it in Isaac's stead. In both instances, the angels defuse the crisis, offer positive direction, leaving the final resolution up to the recipients of the message to perform. We see here a collaboration of the spiritual represented by the angel, and the physical on the part of the human being. The Torah seems to be showing that in resolving conflict, one cannot totally rely on spiritual intervention without active human participation.

This dramatic finale of the Akedah makes the subsequent whereabouts of the angel of God totally irrelevant. The mystery of what Abraham actually saw and heard at the Akedah becomes moot. Abraham received the message,

passed the greatest test of his life, earning for himself the right to become the first patriarch of Israel. *'For now I know that Thou are a God-fearing man, seeing Thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me'* (22:16).

A Hebrew proverb states that: *maaseh avot siman lebanim* [the deeds of the ancestors are an omen for their offspring].<sup>6</sup> This proverb would apply in the case of Abraham's grandson Jacob, who also overcame a life-threatening situation reminiscent of what happened to his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham at the Akedah. Just as we have seen the important role played by angels in helping them resolve conflict and internal turmoil, the same will be experienced by their offspring Jacob. It is now in Jacob's life that we come upon the next appearance of angels. It occurs when Jacob is fleeing for his life from the wrath of his twin brother Esau. He lies down to sleep in a field in Beth El and proceeds to dream of angels. *And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it . . .* (28: 12).

This ladder dream is powerful in its unconscious allusions, yet the weight of the emotional turmoil and guilt felt by Jacob that precipitated this dream is not expressed in the Torah. His conflicted and agitated feelings are, however, represented symbolically in his dream, where the "ups and downs" of the ascending and descending angels mirror the mixed messages given to him by his parents. In Jacob's subconscious, Rebekah, the anchor of his life, is identified with mother earth which supports the ladder. Isaac, the distant father figure, is identified with God on the top of the ladder whose love Jacob always sought unsuccessfully to reach. The angels of God operating through Jacob's subconscious become the Divine vehicle to describe all the deep-seated hidden conflicting emotions that otherwise do not find expression in the Torah's recounting of this traumatic turning point in his life.

After the ladder dream, Jacob arrives in Haran where he spends some 20 years living with his deceitful Uncle Laban. When he leaves hurriedly with his large family to return to his ancestral home, Jacob experiences two more encounters with angels. The first is given short shrift in the text: *And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And Jacob said when he saw them: 'This is God's camp.'* *And he called the name of that place Mahanaim* (32:2, 3). Why the sudden appearance of a band of angels, and their equally sudden disappearance? In accordance with our thesis, in this angelic

meeting, the Torah wishes to convey the depth of trepidation and internal conflict Jacob was undergoing in anticipation of his upcoming confrontation with his alienated brother Esau.

This angelic encounter is followed shortly thereafter by a mysterious confrontation at the ford of the river Jabbok: *And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until dawn (32:25)*. It is mysterious, because the stranger is identified as a man, yet Jacob suspects his true angelic identity, because he insists: *'I will not let thee go, unless thou bless me'* (32:27).<sup>7</sup> In the exchange that follows, Jacob receives the blessing of a name change to Israel *'because thou hast striven with God and with men, and hast prevailed'* (32:29). (So much for the superior power of angels.) This statement very clearly shows the dual spiritual and physical roles of God's angels. When Jacob asks the stranger's true identity, he receives an evasive answer: *'... wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?'* *And he blessed him there (32:30)*. This is a further indication that angels are defined by their mission, not by any personal identity.

Apparently the "man" was actually a human messenger dispatched by God to help Jacob overcome his natural fear of his more powerful brother, and to reinforce God's promise of protection made to him 20 years earlier in his fateful dream at Beth El.<sup>8</sup> In that dream too, the ascending and descending angels represent the vicissitudes and tormented state of Jacob's emotional life, after being forced by his mother Rebekah to leave home in order to escape from Esau.

In assessing these two dramatic angelic episodes, in his dream at Beth El and his struggle at the Jabbok, both precipitated major transforming changes in character in Jacob's life. It is in the appearance of angels that the Bible alludes to these hidden internal changes being made in the life of Jacob as was the case with his grandfather Abraham at the Akedah. At this point in the Torah, as stated earlier, angels have no names or identities other than serving as conduits for performing God's will, hence their varying physical descriptions reflect their irrelevance. They, however, symbolize the internal as well as external changes being experienced by the patriarchs of Israel, and, more importantly, that these changes are Divinely orchestrated. Understanding the mystery of these angelic revelations, that is, bridging the heavenly and the human, is no different from trying to understand the mystery of human exis-

tence, beginning with the first to the last breath of life when the soul departs. In the biblical idiom, it is a mystery that is best left to the realm of angels.

This thesis about the hidden role of angels in the lives of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob will be further demonstrated as we examine a similar transforming event in the life of Moses when he encounters Divinity at the burning bush. The Torah sets the stage for another appearance of a *malakh Ha-Shem* in a placid pastoral scene: *And Moses was keeping the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness and came to the mountain of God, unto Horeb* (Ex. 3:1). This scene harks back to Abraham, where God's chosen site for the Akedah was in the land of Moriah *on one of the mountains which I will tell thee* (Gen. 22:2).

Apparently the similarity in physical scenes serves as a backdrop for reaching spiritual heights represented by the mountains of Horeb [Sinai] and Moriah. The cauldron of emotions stirring in the breast of this Hebrew-Egyptian refugee prince, separated from his family at birth, now reduced to the role of a simple shepherd, is not dealt with in the biblical narrative. The hidden power of these feelings, however, will soon become evident as Moses approaches the holy ground of the burning bush: *And the angel of God appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush . . . and the bush was not consumed . . . and God called to him and said 'Moses, Moses' and he said 'Here am I.'* (Ex. 3:2-4)

The verbatim similarity in the repetition of Moses' name and his response to the call of the angel, compared with the angel's call to '*Abraham, Abraham*' and his response at the Akedah, tells us that similar conclusions can be drawn. We are dealing with that profound moment in time when the celestial spiritual penetrates into the human emotional. In the case of Moses, however, the angel of God speaks directly to him, neither in a dream nor through celestial-human beings as with Abraham and Jacob. This not only attests to the greatness of Moses, but demonstrates that the form the angel takes varies according to its mission. The presence here of fire (which was also present at the Akedah), represents figuratively the intensity of feeling that accompanied these traumatic events in the lives of Abraham and Moses.

The persistence of Moses' reluctance to accept God's call reflects the inner turmoil that this decision must have been causing him. The transformation of

character demanded of Moses by this call to leadership of an enslaved recalcitrant people; to contain a fiery temperament of one who slew an Egyptian taskmaster, and to sublimate it into serving the unending needs of an emerging nation, are all captured in the presence of a fiery angel. The intensity of this internal struggle, like Abraham's agonizing struggle at the Akedah, is inherent in the Torah idiom by the appearance of an angel. The transformation of character demanded of two of the leading founders of the people Israel, and symbolically initiated by His messengers, be they human or otherwise, are therefore represented as Divinely ordained. The celestial-human interfacing of these two realms, as with revelation itself, however, remains a mystery.

To round out the Torah picture of angelic appearances, the Book of Numbers records an episode where Balak, King of Moab, hires Balaam, a non-Hebrew soothsayer, to curse the Hebrews, hoping thereby to prevent their reaching the Promised Land. Balaam is conflicted over the munificent offer made by King Balak, which is in opposition to God's instructions to reject the offer. This quandary sets the stage for the next appearance of an angel: *And God's anger was kindled because he [Balaam] went; and the 'angel of the Lord' placed himself in the way as an adversary against him . . . and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field; and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way* (Num. 22:22, 23).

Whereas there are a number of theological issues involved in this episode, from the standpoint of our focus the appearance of the angel of the Lord is again a response to a major crisis involving Balaam's role in blocking the children of Israel from reaching their destination: *Then the Lord uncovered Balaam's eyes and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, his drawn sword in his hand; thereupon he bowed to the ground . . . The angel of the Lord said to Balaam, 'Go with the men. But you must say nothing except what I tell you'* (22:31-35).

As with Hagar and Abraham so now with Balaam, the appearance of the angel of the Lord defuses the crisis and offers directions to him. With his eyes now wide open, Balaam proceeds to prophesy in flowery prose the future greatness of the children of Israel. The role of the angel of the Lord "to open the eyes" results in unblocking Balaam's selfish, short-sighted vision in

order to allow the fulfillment of God's plan for the Israelites to reach the Promised Land.

#### CONCLUSION

What emerges from our discussion of angels based on our chronological exploration of sources in the Torah runs counter to the popular modern conception of their superior role and power. When they first appear, they are sometimes described as men or as undescribed celestial beings. Presumably, the reason for this lack of description of angels is the Torah's desire to draw attention to the message rather than to the messenger. The description of the bearers of these messages is irrelevant and could even be distracting, because they are transitory figures. Their importance lies in the Divine message they are transmitting, not in their substance, as reflected in the Hebrew term *malakh* [messenger]. However, they have important symbolic value as follows:

Angels symbolize the mystery of revelation to help the reader visualize the unique mystical process of communication between heaven and earth, linking the Godly with the human.

Angels appear at times of crisis following the build-up of emotional conflict. Their mission is to defuse the torment by "opening the eyes," enabling the afflicted to see options for resolution. In so doing they represent empathic figures.

Angels' hidden mission is to set in motion important character changes in the psyche of the recipients.

Angelic revelations are not restricted to Hebrews, but are granted to foreigners as well, as long as they are instrumental in carrying out God's plan for the Chosen People. The specific form of angelic appearances varies according to their Divine missions. Their missions consist of specific tasks, which when completed and their *raison d'être* ceases, they disappear.

The narrative style of the Torah, which emphasizes events rather than feelings, is not to be interpreted as lack of concern with human emotions. In the biblical idiom this hidden realm is not described in words, but mystically in the appearance of angels. The angel provides an external imaging of internal emotional conflict. By virtue of psychological interpretation, with its emphasis upon exploring internal feelings, one is better able to penetrate into the

meaning of angelic revelations. In so doing one comes closer to unraveling the mystery of the hidden mission of God's angels.

#### EPILOGUE

This picture of Torah angels, beginning with Abraham and onward to Moses (circa 1700-1200 B.C.E) becomes a frame of reference by which one can gauge its later development. The evolution in the role of angels, whereby they are depicted as God's heavenly court, numbering in multitudes and arranged in hierarchies, possessed of names with various identities and missions, endowed with magical powers, serving as intermediaries in reaching the Deity, and even as objects of worship, can be traced to later historical periods and to foreign influences. This latter view of the greatly expanded role of angels which resonates today in popular folk culture needs to come to terms with the original Torah sources examined here which present quite a different picture. The Torah makes it abundantly clear that God's omnipotence is not shared with others, and that angels are restricted to serving as His messengers/means of relating to humans through the mystique of revelation.

#### NOTES

1. Cf. Psalm 29:1
2. See *Paradise Lost*, the epic poem written by English poet John Milton in 1669, which depicts many popular Christian beliefs regarding the power and role of angels.
3. According to the Talmud *Baba Metzia 86b*, this episode occurred on the third day of convalescence after Abraham's circumcision.
4. Part of the problem arises from the English translation of *malakhim* as "angels" instead of "messengers." That translation is based on the Greek *angelos*, which means messenger as in Hebrew. However, in popular English usage, the word "angel" has come to mean an otherworldly creature. Therefore in this verse, the two *malakhim* are really human messengers not celestial angels, corresponding to the three men as stated above in Genesis 18:2. This view is supported by the Malbim, premier Hebrew Bible grammarian, as well as other commentators. He contends that *malakh* in its root form means "messenger." For example: *And Israel sent malakhim [messengers] to Sihon the Amorite king* (Num. 21:21). It is only when *malakh* is attached to Hashem or to *Elohim* that the text refers to Godly creatures. This is not the case here.
5. Midrash *Bereshith Rabbah*; 50:2.
6. Midrash *Bereshith Rabbah*; 48:6.
7. The Midrash identifies the stranger as *saro shel Esav* [Esau's alter ego]. This means that Jacob's struggle was an internal one with his guilty conscience in relation to his treatment of his brother Esau. Hence this entire episode could be an external visualization of Jacob's unconscious internal struggle.
8. See Note 4 above.