

THE MAN WITH THE DRAWN SWORD

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Now it came about when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand, and Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us or for our adversaries?” (Joshua 5: 13).

I recently heard a speaker tell his congregation that this heavenly visitor, here described as **a man standing with his sword drawn in his hand**, was actually the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ.

When I **Googled**:- “Who was the man with the drawn sword whom Joshua saw?”, the top answer was, **it could have been a high- ranking angel, but more likely it was God Himself, perhaps even the Son of God making an appearance before his incarnation ... Interestingly enough, it does not say angel here, it says man. This Man is the Commander of the whole host of God, and He wields a "hereb" (sword).**)

Interesting speculations to say the least! After the service I asked if the speaker realised that this supernatural person who described himself as **Commander of the army of Yahweh** is actually given a name later in the Hebrew Scriptures?

He looked rather stunned and said he had not realised this. I suggested that he might like to read **Daniel chapters 9, 10 and 12:1**. I also pointed him to **Hebrews 9: 26-28**. But we are getting ahead of ourselves, so let's start at the beginning.

THREE APPEARANCES OF AN ANGEL WITH SWORD DRAWN IN THE OT.

There are three times in the Old Testament where an angel holding **the drawn sword** appears. At least this is so if we don't count the first time angelic beings wield a sword in **Genesis 3**. After the LORD God drove the man and the woman out of the Garden of Eden we recall how Yahweh **stationed the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned in every direction, to guard the way to the tree of life** (v. 24).

In this first reference to a sword in the Bible, we note it is described as **a flaming sword which turned in every direction** when the cherubim were **stationed ... to guard the way**. This would suggest the cherubim were executing God's sentence of judgement on the rebels who were not permitted to re-enter the garden.

Thus, in this first reference to sword-wielding angels we see mighty non-Deity beings introduced as the executors of Yahweh's power and will on earth. They later

appear in the tabernacle and the Temple as framing the Ark of the Covenant and as supporting the Throne of Yahweh, but without mention of any flaming sword(s).

So, this first reference to cherubim with a flaming sword sets the tone for the other three times where an angel appears with **a drawn sword**

BALAAM

First, we have the intriguing story of **Balaam** and his donkey (**Num 22**). Contrary to popular opinion, **Balaam** was not a good prophet who went bad or even a bad prophet who was trying to be good. He was not a prophet of Israel, for he **came out of Egypt (v. 11)**. He was some kind of international wizard up for hire. He was an 'expert' in divination by examining the entrails of animals, particularly their livers. Ironically it's the story of a blind seer (prophet) who saw less than a dumb animal!

Balaam learned the lesson that God's determination to bless Israel, could not be gainsaid. From our point of view the LORD God used a rather humorous way to teach us that God **opened Balaam's eyes** to see, but only after He had first **opened the donkey's mouth (Num. 22: 31-33)**!

When his donkey refused to go on the road, **Balaam** lost his cool and beat the animal with a stick. He blurted out, **"If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now!"**

The irony was that there was a sword very near to **Balaam** and it was being held by **an angel of the LORD**. The heavenly visitor explains that if it hadn't been for the actions of his donkey, then **Balaam** (to use a modern colloquialism) would have been a dead duck!

Struck by the seriousness of the situation, **Balaam bowed down his head and fell flat on his face (v. 31 KJV)**. Most English versions say as much. Some read that **Balaam "worshipped"** before the angel. In Old English this simply means he prostrated himself, that he showed reverence and due honour to his superior. There is no suggestion that **Balaam** thought he was worshipping one who was God and certainly not Jesus Christ either.

JOSHUA

So, what is it about the second time an angel's drawn sword occurs in the instance of **Joshua** which causes the widespread notion that **Joshua** bowed before God in the form of Jesus Christ? There must be some specific reason given in the text, surely?

Joshua boldly approached the man who was standing opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand and asked him, “Are you for us or for our adversaries?” (Josh 5: 13).

Joshua receives the curt reply, “No, but as Commander of the army of the LORD (Yahweh) I have now come.” At this point Joshua’s response is exactly the same as Balaam’s: He fell on his face to the earth and did obeisance. Joshua prostrated himself. (¹)

But here is the curious thing. When we come to examine the various English translations a great many of them read that Joshua “worshipped” the angel (e.g. KJV, NKJV, ESV, ASV, ERV, et al). Whereas only an odd one or two say Balaam “worshipped” the angel with the drawn sword, now we find most saying that Joshua “worshipped” the heavenly visitor. Is there any reason for this change in translation emphasis when it’s the same description given of Balaam’s response?

The answer will often come back, well yes, of course there is a good reason. Baalam was a pagan wizard. Joshua was the LORD God’s servant and was told to “Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy” — which reminds us of when the angel at the Burning Bush spoke to Moses also telling him to do the very same thing. Surely both Moses and Joshua were right to identify the angel on both occasions as God?

Not at all! Notice how the text indicates that Joshua is not confused as to whom he was showing reverence to. Not for a moment does he think this high-ranking person was “God the pre-incarnate Son”. How do I say that with such confidence? Well, just see how Joshua addresses this “man”.

He asks, “What does my lord say to his servant?” Then the Commander of the LORD’S army said ...” Here is one of the many instances where the Hebrew Bible distinguishes between two lords. Joshua addresses the man as “l’adoni” — ‘my lord’. This word occurs 195 times in the OT and is never used to address Yahweh the Most High. It is a word for non-Deity and can refer to any human superior ... a husband, a king, an ambassador of a king, and occasionally may refer to an angel! (²)

¹ The Hebrew word means to bow down, to honour. The word in the Greek Septuagint προσκυνέω / *proskyneō* literally means to kiss the hand of a superior in order to show reverence. It’s used in a variety of contexts for showing respect to humans of superior rank and dignity (such as to a king, or even to the Jewish high priest), to heavenly messengers we call angels, to Messiah and to God Himself, and yes, even to demons. It does not mean “worship” in our modern sense.

² For a fuller treatment of ‘the two Lords’ see my article [1. LOST IN TRANSLATION \(Are Modern Bible Translations Misleading Millions?\)](#)

Next, notice how the 'man' describes himself as **the Commander of the LORD'S army**. This second 'LORD' is **Adonai**. It is used 420 times in the OT and always, and only, refers to the LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel.

So, whoever the august speaker is, he does not claim to be God!

ANGELS MAY APPEAR AS MEN

There is another reason why this supernatural figure was not the man Jesus Christ in a putative pre-incarnate appearance. I suggested to the speaker I referred to at the start of this article that he would profit from reading **Daniel** chapters **9, 10** and **12:1**.

There the Scriptures call the mighty angel **Gabriel**, "**the man Gabriel**" (9:21). Observe how Daniel says a couple of times that angels may **resemble a human being** and have a **human appearance** (10: 5,16,18).

Significantly, like Joshua before him, Daniel addresses this angel appearing as a man, "**O my lord** (NOT 'Adonai' but ' " adoni"). Although he was in great consternation and in much fear and trembling in the presence of this high-ranking angel, Daniel still had enough wits about him to know who was God and who was not God. In the midst of his trembling Daniel's theology was unitary monotheism!

THE COMMANDER OF YAHWEH'S ARMIES HAS A NAME!

I asked the afore-mentioned speaker if he knew that the man before whom Joshua knelt outside of Jericho was later named in the OT. This possibility had obviously never once entered his head for he was visibly surprised.

I pointed him to these chapters in Daniel. In them **Daniel** lifts the curtain behind the stage of international events. Behind Daniel's intercessory prayer for Israel we catch a glimpse of real spiritual warfare! A mighty cosmocrat called **the Prince of Persia** had thwarted Gabriel for three weeks from reaching Daniel with much needed instruction. But finally Gabriel had broken through with the help of Israel's guardian arch-angel, **Michael**.

Michael is described as **one of the chief princes** and as the angel who **stands firmly ... against these** [demonic powers such as the Prince of Persia] (10: 13, 20-21). Later in **Daniel 12: 1** he is described as **Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people**.

It's easy to see where the writer of the NT Apocalypse gets the picture that at the end of this present evil age when all hell breaks loose upon the tiny nation of Israel,

that there will be **war in heaven**, when **Michael and his angels wage war with the dragon ... (Rev. 12: 7)**.

So, it's a reasonable deduction that the man who identified himself to Joshua as **the Commander of the LORD'S army** was none other than **the archangel Michael** whose particular brief seems to be the care of the Jewish nation.

But if you are still not convinced the NT puts this speculation to bed (that Jesus appeared as "the angel of the LORD" in the OT times) then we turn to **Hebrews chapter one** where the Son of God is said NOT to be an angel, nor was he ever an angel. The rhetorical question is: **For to which of the angels did He ever say: "You are My Son ...? (Heb. 1: 7)**. The writer expects only one answer. We may categorically assert that the New Testament knows of no angel-Christology.

DAVID

The third story in the OT where an angel with a drawn sword appears concerns **King David** when he took the census of the fighting men in Israel and Judah. As the result of his pride, the LORD gave **David** a choice of punishments. He could see seven years of drought in the land, he could be at the mercy of his enemies for three months, or he could see a plague lasting three days from God strike his people. **"Let me fall into the merciful hands of Yahweh"** was his choice — **but do not let me fall into the hand of man**. Then the angel of death began his grisly mission. We eventually see him standing with his drawn sword over the threshing floor of Ornan (**1 Chron. 21: 16f**).

The only observation I will make here is that, to propose that this destroying angel was Christ in a pre-incarnate appearance is a reading into the text (eisegesis) and not a reading of what is actually written in the text (exegesis). The text could not be clearer that **God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it (v. 15)**. Here is an obedient angel! Here is an angel doing what he is told to do. God does not send Himself!

But, before **David** offers up his sacrifice on Ornan's threshing floor, God's mercy has already halted the plague. The angel had been ordered from heaven to stand still and pause his destruction. It's at this moment that David sees the angel with his drawn sword (**2 Sam 24: 16**).

Ask yourself: *If this angel **who was striking down the people** with the destroying sword was Jesus Christ, then we have the intolerable contradiction that before he came to save the world, Jesus had already entered history to destroy!*

This theory that the angel of the LORD is an appearance of Christ reverses the plainly stated purpose of God in sending our Lord Jesus in the first place! It proposes that *before he came to give life, Jesus Christ had already brought death to the ones David called these sheep* (1 Chron. 21: 17)! It propounds that our Lord who announced that he *did not come to destroy mens' lives, but to save them* (Lk 9: 56) had forgotten his past history.

THREE COMINGS?

Back to the speaker I mentioned at the very beginning. I put another proposition forward for his consideration. I asked him how his interpretation that the man before Joshua as the pre-incarnate Christ, stacks up in light of **Hebrews 9: 26-28**.

The author of that epistle reveals that our Lord Jesus has **now, once at the end of the ages, appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself ... [and] to those who eagerly wait for him he will appear a second time**, apart from sin, for salvation.

The writer is in no doubt that the first and only time — **once** — our Lord Jesus appeared was during his days as the man Messiah. The writer is also adamant that *he has **not yet appeared the second time***. So, if we are going to insist that Christ appeared on various occasions to men in the Old Testament as “the angel of the LORD” then we make a liar out of the Hebrew writer who insists that Jesus has not yet appeared **a second time**!

This means that if we insist the man with the drawn sword who appeared to **Joshua** was ‘the pre-incarnate Christ’, then we are waiting for the **third coming of Christ**!

Under this scheme the writer of the Hebrews Epistle has gotten his mathematics seriously wrong — and so has the speaker who claimed that the commander of the LORD’s army was Jesus Christ.

LEARNING TO READ THE BIBLE WITH HEBREW EYES.

Look! If we are ever going to correctly interpret the message of the Bible, we must get it through our thick Western 21st Century skulls that it is a book from another culture from many generations ago. Which is to say, we must discipline ourselves to understand the Bible as its first intended audience would have. It’s a challenging assignment for sure, but not out of reach. And in this matter of doing obeisance to an angel we have this observation from **The Expositor’s Bible Commentary**;

The cultural gesture of falling down to the ground at the feet of a superior is well known from ancient Near Eastern texts (e.g. Ruth 2:10; 2 Sam 9:6; Amarna texts, Egyptian art, Assyrian reliefs) ... several Amarna letters from Rib-Haddi to the

king of Egypt (fourteenth century BC) include the following greeting: “I fall at the feet of my lord, my sun, seven times and seven times” (EA 74, 75, 76, 79, 81, etc.). (³)

HOLY GROUND

So why is the ground Joshua is standing on called **holy ground**? Because the man with the drawn sword is God Himself in the form of a “pre-incarnate Christ”?

Remember that Joshua is standing on the West side of the Jordan ... he has just put his foot in enemy territory, and a godless society is doomed to destruction. Jericho is in front of him. But remember also that God had already promised the Land to Israel. Indeed, God says He has already given it to Israel. *Fait accompli!*

Joshua is being reminded that, “**Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given to you ...**” (Josh. 1: 3). God, through His Commander-in-Chief, is reminding Joshua that the battle is not his, but the LORD’S. God has already gone before Him. God Almighty is with him everywhere he walks!

In the Bible, whatever is dedicated to God is called holy. **Holy ground** always indicates that Yahweh is present, and that a major event is about to unfold. **Holy ground** — acknowledged by the removal of one’s sandals — does not indicate that ‘the worshipper’ knew he was bowing directly before an angel as though he was the Almighty God Himself. Joshua certainly recognised that God’s agent, God’s angel, (*Heb.* = *messenger*) was communicating Yahweh’s word and instructions directly from God Himself. But he knew the difference between the ‘two Lords’!

The bottom line is simply to say that anytime somebody does obeisance and reveres another, we must not jump to the conclusion that they think they are worshipping that somebody as God.

This angel who appears as a man to Joshua was in all likelihood **Michael, the Prince of Israel**. At least there is Scriptural precedent for making this call. But whoever he was, the angel’s word was the LORD’S word. No confusion of identities ever arose to the Hebrew mind between angels and the Eternal One.

For all these reasons we conclude that all speculation about Jesus Christ appearing to Joshua (or any other OT person) as an angel should be forever buried under Jericho’s rubble never to rise again.

³ The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Rev. Ed.) Numbers-Ruth, Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland (General Editors) Zondervan, 2012. P 892