

# Theophanies

It's common knowledge that God appeared to a number of people throughout the Old Testament. For example, God spoke to Moses in the burning bush:

**Exodus 3:3-4:** “And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.”

God spoke to Israel from Mount Sinai:

**Exodus 19:18-19:** “And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice.”

God spoke to Elijah in a still small voice:

**I Kings 19:12-13:** “And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?”

God spoke to Job out of a whirlwind:

**Job 38:1-2:** "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?"

There are more examples, but you get the point. In this document I would like to talk about *theophanies* – specifically, cases where I believe the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to people in the Old Testament. While some of these appearances are well-known, there are others which might be overlooked. Sometimes the Bible is obvious about an appearance of God and sometimes it's not.

## ***God Visits Abraham***

About a year before Isaac was born, three men came and visited Abraham. The patriarch invited them in and fed them:

**Genesis 18:2-5:** "And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, And said, My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said."

Although this is a well-known story, there's something

going on here that's easy to overlook. Verse 2 tells us that “three men stood by him”. But who are these three men? Verse 1 gives us the answer:

**Genesis 18:1:** “And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day;”

Who appeared to Abraham? *The Lord*. These three men weren't ordinary men, and they're not angels either; God Himself came and paid Abraham a visit!

The rest of the passage confirms this. Whenever Abraham talks to the men we're told that *the Lord* responds to him. For example:

**Genesis 18:9-13:** “And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?”

The passage is very clear, but this is easy to miss. Verse 1 tells us that the Lord appeared to Abraham! The Lord then speaks to Abraham throughout the whole chapter and then leaves in verse 33. I believe that this is a theophany – a preincarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ. I also think this isn't the only time that He appeared.! Let's look at some more examples.

## ***The Angel of the Lord***

If you read through the Old Testament you'll occasionally come across a being known as the Angel of the Lord. This being has some rather unusual characteristics. For example, the Angel of the Lord accepts worship:

**Joshua 5:13-15:** “And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, there stood a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand: and Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, Art thou for us, or for our adversaries? And he said, Nay; but as captain of the host of the Lord am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my Lord unto his servant? And the captain of the Lord's host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And Joshua did so.”

One thing we know about God's angels is that they *never* accept worship. When the apostle John tried to worship an angel, the angel immediately rebuked him:

**Revelation 19:10:** “And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

The apostle John did the exact same thing that Joshua did, but in Revelation the angel rebuked him for it. That tells us the

Angel of the Lord isn't an ordinary angel, but is God Himself<sup>1</sup>!

One thing we need to keep in mind is that the word “angel” means *messenger*. Jesus spent a great deal of time relaying God's messages. In fact, He said this:

**John 12:49-50:** “For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak.”

Jesus didn't speak for Himself; instead He relayed the messages that His Father had given him. If the phrase “Angel of the Lord” seems strange then think of it as “Messenger of the Lord”. Jesus was certainly the messenger of the Lord!

I'm not trying to claim that every single angel who appears in the Old Testament is actually Jesus. There is indeed a separate race of angelic beings, and they do appear in the Old Testament. Instead I'm claiming that sometimes when the Bible speaks of “the angel of the Lord”, it's referring to the Lord Jesus Christ. (How can you tell the difference? By examining each case and paying attention to the clues.)

The Angel of the Lord makes quite a few appearances in the Old Testament. He was there when Hagar fled from Sarah:

**Genesis 16:7-12:** “And the angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur. And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence comest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. And the

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1 Just to be clear, I'm not saying that Jesus is an angel, like Gabriel or Michael. He most certainly is not. Jesus is God Himself, an uncreated and eternal being. The angels are beings that Jesus created.

angel of the Lord said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands. And the angel of the Lord said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Behold, thou art with child and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.”

Notice that the Angel of the Lord says that *he* will “multiply thy seed exceedingly”. He didn't say that God would do it; instead he said that *he* would do it *himself!* That's a rather startling, isn't it? But if the Angel of the Lord is actually Jesus then it makes perfect sense.

The Angel of the Lord later reminded Hagar of this promise:

**Genesis 21:17:-18** “And God heard the voice of the lad; 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 in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation.”

The Angel didn't say that God would make Ishmael “a great nation”; he said that *he* would do it. That's more evidence that the Angel of the Lord wasn't simply an angel.

The Angel of the Lord also appeared when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac. In fact, the Angel of the Lord stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son:

**Genesis 22:11-12:** “And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.”

The Angel of the Lord said that Abraham had not withheld his son *from him*. He didn't say “from God”, which is what the angel should have said if he was just an angel! The Angel of the Lord acted like he was God.

The Angel of the Lord was at the burning bush with Moses:

**Exodus 3:2-5:** “And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.”

Just as the Angel of the Lord told Joshua that he was standing on holy ground, so we see the same thing happening to Moses. On top of that, verse 2 says that the Angel of the Lord was in the bush, and then verse 4 says that *God* called to him out of the bush. The Angel of the Lord was actually referred to as God!

The Angel of the Lord also rebuked Israel in the days of the judges. Pay close attention to the pronouns that were used:

**Judges 2:1-4:** “And an angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, I made you to go up out of Egypt, and have brought you unto the land which I sware unto your fathers; and I said, I will never break my covenant with you. And ye shall make no league with the inhabitants of this land; ye shall throw down their altars: but ye have not obeyed my voice: why have ye done this? Wherefore I also said, I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you. And it came to pass, when the angel of the Lord spake these words unto all the children of Israel, that the people lifted up their voice, and wept.”

Verse 1 does say “an angel”, but verse 4 clarifies that the words were said by *the* Angel of the Lord. Notice also what the angel actually said: *he* was the one who made them go out of Egypt and *he* was the one who made the covenant with their fathers. The Angel spoke as if he was God.

The Angel of the Lord also appeared to Gideon and did some very odd things:

**Judges 6:11-14:** “And there came an angel of the Lord, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abiezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, and said unto him, The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour. And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the



Lord bring us up from Egypt? but now the Lord hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites. And the Lord looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?"

Verse 11 just mentions "an angel", but verse 12 clarifies that this is the Angel of the Lord. When Gideon talked to him, verse 14 tells us that *the Lord* looked upon him and answered him. The Angel then accepted Gideon's offering and consumed the sacrifice:

**Judges 6:20-21:** "And the angel of God said unto him, Take the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and lay them upon this rock, and pour out the broth. And he did so. Then the angel of the Lord put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. Then the angel of the Lord departed out of his sight."

No angel would ever accept a sacrifice – but this Angel did! Once again, this Angel acted a lot like God.

The Angel of the Lord later accepted another offering, this time from Samson's parents. He was the one who told Samson's mother that she would have a son:

**Judges 13:3-5:** "And the angel of the Lord appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not: but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son. Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean

thing: For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head: for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.”

When the couple offered a sacrifice, the Angel of the Lord accepted it:

**Judges 13:17-20:** “And Manoah said unto the angel of the Lord, What is thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass we may do thee honour? And the angel of the Lord said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret? So Manoah took a kid with a meat offering, and offered it upon a rock unto the Lord: and the angel did wonderously; and Manoah and his wife looked on. For it came to pass, when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on it, and fell on their faces to the ground.”

It's interesting that the Angel of the Lord *refused to disclose his name*. This is a bit odd, because other angels were willing to disclose their names:

**Luke 1:19:** “And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings.”

This wasn't the last time that the Angel appeared. King David once took a census of Israel, and the Lord punished him for it. During that punishment the Angel of the Lord came to destroy

Jerusalem:

**2 Samuel 24:15-17:** “So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed: and there died of the people from Dan even to Beersheba seventy thousand men. And when the angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, It is enough: stay now thine hand. And the angel of the Lord was by the threshingplace of Araunah the Jebusite. And David spake unto the Lord when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said, Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house.”

As you can see, David actually saw the Angel. If the Angel was Jesus then there's an impressive list of Old Testament people who glimpsed Him! Hagar, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and Samson's parents all saw Him. That gives Jesus' conversation with the Jews a new meaning:

**John 8:56-59:** “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.”

Not only had Jesus seen Abraham, but all those centuries

ago, *Abraham had seen Jesus!* In fact, Abraham actually had a meal with Him.

That's not the last time the Angel of the Lord appears in the Old Testament. There are quite a few theophanies in the Bible! If you read the Old Testament carefully you may discover all sorts of unexpected and amazing things.