

Vayehi 5785

ויחי תשפ"ה

Angel or Avatar?

Dr. Benjamin D. Sommer, Professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages, JTS



When Jacob blesses his grandchildren Ephraim and Manasseh shortly before his death, he begins with these words:

The God before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, were steadfast,

The God who guided me from the beginning of my life until today, / The *malakh* who saved me from all misfortune— He should bless these lads. (Gen. 48.15b–16)

The second of these verses is often sung aloud in [a beautiful melody by Abie Rotenberg](#) when children have their aliyah on Simhat Torah and by some parents at bedtime each night. That melody has made these words familiar to many, but their meaning is not clear. Who, exactly, does Jacob call upon to bless the lads?

The four lines that begin Jacob's blessing form a single sentence. The first three lines consist of noun phrases ("the God before whom . . .," "the God who . . .," and "the *malakh* who . . ."), and the fourth finally provides a verb ("bless"), which, in Hebrew, contains its own pronoun ("he"). To whom does this pronoun refer? Two nouns precede the verb: "God" and then "*malakh*," which literally means "messenger, someone on a mission." Almost always, the *malakh* is a heavenly messenger—in other words, an [angel](#), a semidivine being on [a mission from God](#). So we might follow [most translations](#) by rendering this word in verse 16 as "angel" and regarding it as the subject of the verb "bless." But in that case, what is the noun "God" doing in the first two lines? (Grammatically, the verb is singular, so God and God's messenger cannot both serve as its subject.) And why does Jacob hope the angel will do the work of blessing the lads rather than God?

One attempt to answer this question appears in the commentary of Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi, 1160–1236). Radak explains that Jacob first mentions God, the ultimate source of redemption, in verse 15 and then proceeds to the angel who actually delivers God's blessing:

He [Jacob] said about himself that God had assisted him from the beginning of his life. Then he mentions the angel, because an action of God is carried out by intermediaries. The angels are messengers sent by God to His servants to guard them and to make them successful . . . Therefore he says, "The angel who saved me from all misfortune," meaning, "He sent him to me to redeem me from all misfortune and to bless me. So, too, he should bless these lads."

Another answer is found in the commentary of Ovadiah Seforno (c. 1475–1549): Jacob expresses the hope that the angel would bless his grandsons in the event that they were unworthy of receiving blessings directly from God. Like Radak, Seforno attempts to link the blessing to God while regarding the angel as the actual subject of the verb in line 4.

The commentary of Ramban (Moshe ben Nachman, 1194–c. 1270) moves in a completely different direction. His interpretation will seem surprising, perhaps even shocking, to some readers, but he does the best job of accounting for the grammar and poetic structure of our biblical passage. The first two lines in Jacob's statement parallel each other: they contain the same subject, "God," followed by a description of the personal relationship between God and Jacob's family. The third line continues the parallel structure: "The *malakh* who saved me" matches "The God who guided me." What we find here, then, are three parallel lines couched in a deliberately repetitive style common in biblical poetry. The repetition suggests that "God" in the first line, "God" in the second line, and "*malakh*" in the third line refer to the same individual. "God" and "*malakh*" are two terms for a single subject who blesses the lads in the fourth line. This parallelism seems to underlie Ramban's explanation of the term *malakh*:

"The *malakh* who saved me from all misfortune" refers to the one who answered Jacob at the time of his misfortune, saying to him, 'I am the God Bethel' (Gen. 31.13). Concerning Him it was said, "[I shall send a *malakh* in front of you to guard you on the

journey . . . Obey Him . . .] For My identity is within Him” (Exod. 23.20–21).

The first of the two verses Ramban quotes refers to an earlier passage in Genesis where God answered Jacob at a place called Bethel, which is both a geographic name and a divine name in ancient Hebrew and related languages (Gen. 28.10–19). In other words, the *malakh* Jacob mentions in our parashah is not a messenger of God. He *is* God! The same is true of the *malakh* in the passage from Exodus that Ramban cites. The reason the Israelites should obey the *malakh* there is because the *malakh* shares God’s identity or name.

These are not the only verses where *malakh* denotes God rather than an angel. The term refers to a small-scale manifestation of God’s presence elsewhere in the Torah¹, as well as in some passages from Nevi’im and Ketuvim. In these texts, the *malakh* is God, but not all of God—an approachable, user-friendly side of God. Narratives that use the term *malakh* this way, typically tell us that a *malakh* appeared to a human character.² As they describe the dialogue between them, however, they simply state, “God said” or “the LORD said,” not “the *malakh* said,” because all these terms refer to the same being. The word *malakh* used in this sense resembles the word *avatara* in Sanskrit: both designate a phenomenon that makes a transcendent, heavenly deity perceptible within our world. In the passages I’ve discussed, “avatar” would be a much better translation of *malakh* than “angel.”

Another name some Israelites used for this small-scale manifestation was “Bethel.” We already saw this term in Genesis 31.13, which Ramban quoted in his commentary to Genesis 48.16. This name also appears in Hosea 12.5:³

In the womb [Jacob] cheated his brother, / And as a grown man he wrestled with God. / He wrestled with a *malakh* and endured, / He cried and pleaded with Him, / It was Bethel who met him. / There He spoke with us—It was Yhwh, the God hosts! Yhwh is His name. (Hos. 12.4–6)

These verses present a series of identifications: First, the *malakh* with whom Jacob wrestled when he returned to Canaan (Gen.

32.25–33) is identical with Bethel, the deity who appeared to Jacob when he fled Canaan years earlier (Gen. 28.10–19; cf. 31.13). Second, Bethel (i.e., the *malakh*) is none other than Yhwh, the God of Israel.

These texts show that God does not always appear to humanity as the overwhelming and commanding Presence that displayed itself on Mount Sinai. God sometimes appears on a scale more easily accessible to human beings, as the *malakh* or Bethel. This form of God is less dangerous to humans than the full-fledged divine manifestation known from Sinai. This does not mean the *malakh* causes no fear at all. The Torah tells us that when Moses first saw the *malakh*, he found its tremendous mystery fascinating yet frightening (Exod. 3.2–6). Still, this user-friendly manifestation results from divine grace. The great biblical scholar Moshe Greenberg taught that what allows for dialogue between God and humanity is “God’s willingness to adjust himself to the capacities of men, to take into consideration and make concessions to human frailty.”⁴

The idea that God enters the cosmos in diverse forms and to varying degrees without compromising God’s oneness is not limited to the biblical concept of *malakh* as avatar. It reappears much later in Jewish mysticism, most famously in the kabbalistic doctrine of the *sefirot*, ten manifestations of God within the universe (as opposed to *ein sof*, the unknowable essence of God outside the universe). Descriptions of the *sefirot* seem to imply they enjoy a degree of individual existence. Yet they never attain the level of independent beings, and kabbalistic texts warn against praying to them as if they were distinct deities. Many modern Jews have regarded kabbalah as a revisionary transformation of biblical and rabbinic monotheism proposed by religious radicals from the medieval era. Jacob’s brief blessing to his grandsons demonstrates the opposite is the case: the understanding of God’s unity as encompassing what appears to us as multiplicity has deep roots in Jewish tradition that go back to the Bible itself. This week’s parashah helps show that kabbalistic thinkers were the most authentic sort of religious innovators: as much as they created something new, they restored something ancient.

¹ Notably, this is always in verses that we modern biblical scholars identify as coming from the [J and E strands of the Torah](#) according to [the Documentary Hypothesis](#).

² See, for example, Genesis 18–19, Exodus 3, and Judges 6.

³ Hosea 11.7–12.12, [which some communities chant](#) as haftarah for

Parashat Vayetzei, others for Vayishlah, is not employed by most Conservative synagogues.

⁴ See Greenberg’s *Understanding Exodus* [New York: JTS, 1969], 94; on the *malakh*, see also 70.