

*Ideas of Mediation
between God and Man
in the Apocrypha*

L. H. Brockington
M.A., B.D.

*Senior Lecturer in Aramaic and Syriac
in the University of Oxford*

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Mediation between God and man flows in two directions; man's access to God has been termed ascending mediation and God's access to men, making himself known to them, answering their prayers, controlling their lives, rewarding and punishing, and, in general, exercising his will and power over them, has been called descending mediation. It is this second direction of mediation that is my chief concern in this lecture.

There are some, of course, who, for various reasons, are able to speak of God's dealings with men, and of man's approach to God, as if they were the easiest and most natural things in life and as if they were beset by no problems. Saints may do so by virtue of their absorption in spiritual matters and fools may do so in their ignorance. There can be no doubt at all that converse and communion with God ought to come easily to right-minded men. God is living, he is ever present and he does not leave us in ignorance of his presence. But those who are daily aware of him live in a rare atmosphere; more common is the mood of uncertainty induced by the gulf that lies between God and man, a mood such as Job felt when he said:¹

He is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him,
that we should come to trial together.
Would that there were an umpire between us²
who might lay his hand upon us both.

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In the Old Testament we find a record of how men, well aware of God's mediation, were groping towards proper expression of their experience. They spoke of the spirit of God, his word, his angel, his wisdom; and the groping did not cease until God spoke to the world through his son.

¹ ix. 32f.

² R.S.V. mg.

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The following survey of the Apocryphal literature is intended to show how the men of the period during which it was written continued to feel after the right mode of expression and in doing so filled in some of the gap between the Old and New Testaments.

Though there is much diversity of approach in the Apocrypha, the books have one thing in common: not a single one of the fifteen books, or part-books, is without mention, even if only implied,³ of the practice of prayer. Through prayer man's access to God was free, unlimited and unrestrained. God was approachable by all men and the Apocrypha witnesses to the fact that men willingly availed themselves of this opportunity. There is no favour of persons. The prayer of the poor man, said ben Sira, goes from his lips to the ear of God.⁴ Even so, there is recognition in the Book of Tobit that though man's prayer may readily reach God, this was only through the good offices of a mediator, an angel of God. Raphael said, 'I brought a reminder of your prayer before the Holy One.... I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the saints and enter into the presence of the Holy One.'⁵ But it would do the author of Tobit scant justice to stop there. Nowhere in the Apocrypha is there anything as moving as the record that the prayers of Tobit and of his niece Sarah went to heaven together: 'The prayer of both was heard in the

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presence of the glory of the great God. And Raphael was sent to heal the two of them.'⁶ The mention of the sending of Raphael to heal them brings us immediately to that aspect of mediation that is my concern, that of God to man. Four conceptions will be considered: 1. Help from Heaven, without further definition as to how it was given; 2. Help from Heaven given through apparitions; 3. Angels; and 4. Wisdom.

I

I begin with a book that speaks of mediation in the simplest terms. I Maccabees gives a more or less straightforward account of the fight for freedom on which the Maccabean brothers were engaged. We know nothing more of its author than can be gleaned from his style and subject matter. Josephus apparently trusted him as a historian and followed his book closely (at least as far as xiii. 42). He wrote in a matter-of-fact way, as a man of the world, though at the same time as a devout member of the Jewish faith, perhaps even connected with the aristocratic priesthood and therefore a Sadducee. He takes religious duties as a matter of course. The proper thing to do before any major event or undertaking is to pray to God for a successful outcome, recognizing at the same time that God is supreme and is not to be made to change his mind at the wish of men:

³ It is implied in Bel and the Dragon where we are told that Daniel worshipped his own God (4) and later in the book he is made to say: 'Thou hast remembered me, O God, and hast not forsaken those that love thee' (38). Worship is not real without prayer.

⁴ Ecclus. xxi. 5.

⁵ xii. 12, 15.

⁶ iii. 16f. Even magical acts are not a substitute for prayer: the smoke from the burning heart and liver may drive the demon away, but Tobias and Sarah are bidden to pray, nevertheless (vi. 17, viii. 3f.).

‘But as his will in Heaven may be, so he will do.’⁷ When Judas prayed to God before battle he did not pray for anything supernatural or miraculous, but that the people might win the victory. ‘So do thou hem in this army by the hand of thy people Israel ... strike them down with the sword of those

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who love thee, and let all who know thy name praise thee with hymns.’⁸ The implication here is that Israel, a lover of the Lord, is cared for by God directly, and needs no mediator.⁹ On the other hand, Israel is itself the means of mediating God’s vengeance on his enemies. There is a sense of utter dependence upon God. It is not, says Judas, ‘in the size of the army that victory in battle depends, but strength comes from Heaven’.¹⁰ In a letter of friendship to the Spartans Jonathan writes, ‘For we have the help which comes from Heaven for our aid, and we were delivered from our enemies.’¹¹ Later in the book Simon says to his sons Judas and John, ‘Take my place and my brother’s, and go out and fight for our nation, and may the help which comes from Heaven be with you.’¹²

The phrase ‘the help which comes from Heaven’ is significant in two respects: first, for the reverence it shows for the name of God, and second for the fact that God’s help to men is so simply spoken of. The author had clearly been brought up in an atmosphere of utter reverence for God as one who is aloof and far removed from earth’s traffic - a holy, pure and transcendent God. This barrier was maintained, or believed to be so, by the use of such circumlocutions. The author of I Maccabees nowhere speaks of God directly,¹³ but either speaks of Heaven, or of the law and the covenant,¹⁴ or uses the third person singular pronoun.¹⁵ It is in this setting that a need for a mediator is normally most keenly felt and that is why this almost naive manner of speaking of God’s help to men is noteworthy. I Maccabees stands alone in the Apocrypha in thus avoiding mention of God (either as Θεός or Κύριος). It is not alone, however, in

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the way in which it speaks of God’s contact with man without any clearly defined term of mediation. The same is true of Judith, I Esdras, the Prayer of Manasseh and Ecclesiasticus (with the exception of xlviii. 21¹⁶ and the Wisdom chapter, xxiv). The attitude of mind represented here

⁷ iii. 60.

⁸ iv. 31 ff.

⁹ Cf. Judith xi. 17: ‘I will pray to God and he will tell me when they have committed their sins.’

¹⁰ iii. 19.

¹¹ xii. 15.

¹² xvi. 3.

¹³ With the possible exception of iii. 18 where MSS. \aleph and V read του θεου του ουρανου.

¹⁴ ii. 27, 50.

¹⁵ ii. 61, iii. 22.

¹⁶ The Lord smote the camp of the Assyrians, and his angel wiped them out.’ This is directly dependent on 2 Kings xix. 35, and is therefore no true exception.

may be described as one which is convinced that God answers prayers in ways best known to himself but past men's finding out. It is the fact that matters and not the way of it. It is almost as if the author had taken the lesson of job to heart, namely, that man cannot expect to understand the ways of God. He must accept them and leave the rest to God's mercy and providence. After all, the author of I Maccabees was a historian, not a preacher or theologian.

II

I Maccabees spoke of the help that comes from heaven. In 2 Maccabees we find what might be regarded as a midrash on the idea of help from heaven. It is as if the question 'What does help from heaven mean?' were being answered. Although the author of 2 Maccabees claims to have found his material in Jason's history,¹⁷ it seems almost certain that one reason why he wrote his epitome of that history was in order to bring out how that help was given. It is like this: if man does the right thing by God, then God will do the right thing by man and will answer his call for help in a spectacular way. It is specifically a preacher's outlook. Preachers are not always troubled about exact sequence or details of events, and the author of 2 Maccabees was no exception. He was at pains to dwell on the wonder of heavenly intervention in Israel's affairs and was not so carefully concerned with the course

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of events and the part played by men in their unfolding. God's help is described as being mediated in a supernatural way by apparitions that appear for the most part in or from the sky. The apparitions were seen by the principal actors at critical moments.

When Heliodorus arrived at the temple treasury to confiscate the money, God caused 'so great a manifestation that all who had been so bold as to accompany him were astounded by the power of God, and became faint with terror. For there appeared to them a magnificently caparisoned horse, with a rider of frightening mien, and it rushed furiously at Heliodorus and struck at him with its front hoofs. Its rider was seen to have armour and weapons of gold. Two young men also appeared to him, remarkably strong, gloriously beautiful and splendidly dressed, who stood on each side of him and scourged him continuously, inflicting many blows on him.' He was overcome and had to be carried out, and 'the temple ... was filled with joy and gladness, now that the Almighty Lord had appeared'.¹⁸ An interesting sequel appears a little later. 'While the high priest was making the offering of atonement, the same young men appeared again to Heliodorus ... and they stood and said, "Be very grateful to Onias the high priest, since for his sake the Lord has granted you your life".'¹⁹

¹⁷ ii. 23.

¹⁸ iii. 24-28.

¹⁹ iii. 33.

When Antiochus was in Egypt, that is, shortly before his attack on the temple, a vision of golden-clad horsemen was seen over the city and taken by the Jews to be a good omen.²⁰ Again, when Judas was deeply involved in battle with the Syrians 'there appeared to the enemy from heaven five resplendent men on horses with golden bridles'. They protected Judas and his men but 'showered arrows and thunderbolts upon the enemy'.²¹

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The author claimed to have found the record of these appearances in the five-volume history written by Jason of Cyrene.²² Since it is quite clear that the author of 2 Maccabees was himself interested in these records of visions, it may be claimed that there were at least two men in Israel, Jason and the author of 2 Maccabees, who believed firmly in God's power to influence men in this way. It was not the whim of one man only. Nor was it the product of a blind, unreflective faith in God's power. The manifestations were not made indiscriminately; they were withheld at such times as Israel's calamity was the result of her own sin. Antiochus Epiphanes was not restrained by any such vision when he desecrated the temple, for it was recognized that his action was not undeserved by the Jews who were deeply stained with sin and needed to be punished in some way.

The book is unique among the books of the Apocrypha in its representation of heavenly apparitions, and for this reason we need not dwell further on this idea beyond remarking that it served to strengthen popular belief that God comes to the aid of his people. This is explicit in xiv. I S where the Jews, hearing of Nicanor's approach, prayed 'to him who established his own people for ever and always upholds his own heritage by manifesting himself'.²³ In spite of his interest in such visions the author could also record this prayer from the lips of Judas Maccabeus: 'O Lord, thou didst send thy angel in the time of Hezekiah king of Judea, and he slew fully a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of Sennacherib. So now, O Sovereign of the heavens, send a good angel to carry terror and trembling before us.'²⁴ In other words, some of the visions he related could have been told in terms of angels, had he so chosen.

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Perhaps we may be grateful to him for choosing the more colourful way, even if it did not come to stay.

III

A warmer and more down-to-earth conception of the way in which God helps men is to be found in the representation of angels. This does but continue ideas already found in the Old Testament,

²⁰ v. 1-4.

²¹ x. 29f. For further references to apparitions or manifestations see xi. 8, xii. 22, xiii. 10, 17, xv. 27, 34.

²² ii. 21: 'and the appearances which came from heaven to those who strove zealously on behalf of Judaism'.

²³ We may compare the pictures of God as a warrior, Isa. lxiii. 1ff., Wisd. v. 16-20.

²⁴ xv. 22f.

although it takes them further. Angels carried God's messages,²⁵ or did his punishing work,²⁶ or protected his people.²⁷ Only at the end of the Old Testament period did angels acquire names, and in one book only, Daniel. Michael and Gabriel are named there: Michael was Israel's guardian angel, Israel's 'prince'.²⁸ In the Apocrypha the conception of angels is at its homeliest in Tobit (a book, if we may take a hint from Samuel Pepys, to be read in church to while away the tedium of a dull sermon²⁹). The simple faith of Tobit and his family is expressed in these words to his son Tobias: 'Go with this man; God who dwells in heaven will prosper your way and may his angel attend you. So they both went out and departed, and the young man's dog was with them.'³⁰ It was as natural to these simple-hearted souls to feel themselves to be accompanied by an angel as it was for the young man to have his dog with him.

Names for angels first appeared in Daniel. Other names appear in the Apocrypha. In Tobit the angel's name is Raphael (possibly meaning 'God has healed') who, in his own words, was 'one of the seven holy angels, which present the prayers of the saints, and go in before the glory of the Holy One'.³¹ In 2 Esdras Uriel is the agent of reve-

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lation to Ezra.³² Jeremiel (Remiel), one of the archangels, is also mentioned in that book.³³ In some books the angels are not named but they are said to appear and watch over men, or punish those who thwart God's people or God himself.³⁴ Judas Maccabeus prayed that God would send a good angel to strike terror into the enemy.³⁵

The belief in angels adds a vital element to the two conceptions so far reviewed, i.e. the matter-of-fact expectation of help from heaven and the colourful but restricted idea of heavenly apparitions. This new element is that God's mediation should be in terms congenial to men and understandable by them; in short, in human terms. No wonder that it has been described as 'essentially characteristic of the people's religion as opposed to that of the learned and cultured'.³⁶ But its inadequacy is self-evident as soon as more than one angel comes on the scene. While there was only one solitary angel figure, as in early Old Testament stories, a shadowy figure who could fade out completely when Yahweh himself took over, it could be regarded as mediation in a very real sense; but God cannot be properly mediated by more than one person. In

²⁵ Gen. xix.

²⁶ 2 Sam. xxiv. 16.

²⁷ Dan. xii. 1.

²⁸ Dan. viii. 16; x. 13, 21; xii. 1.

²⁹ Recorded in his diary for 1659-60, on Feb. 5th.

³⁰ v. 16.

³¹ xii. 15.

³² iv. 1, v. 20, x. 28.

³³ iv. 36.

³⁴ Jeremy 7, Song of the Three Young Men 26; Susanna 55, 59.

³⁵ 2 Macc. xv. 23; cf. also Bel and the Dragon 34, 36, 39.

³⁶ D. C. Simpson in Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, i, 197.

fact, God can only be mediated by God or by one who is as identifiable with him as makes no matter. When an angel becomes identifiable by a name of his own, Raphael, Gabriel, Michael and the rest, he becomes a servant of God and not a mediator.

IV

If belief in angels is properly characteristic only of the people's religion, what of the religion of the learned and

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cultured? For this we may look in the Book of Wisdom, commonly known as the Wisdom of Solomon. Its author was a philosopher of sorts who doubtless lived in Alexandria. He spoke Greek, perhaps with an un-Greek accent, and wrote in Greek.³⁷ He probably did his thinking in Greek although he had not shaken off all the idiom of his Hebrew upbringing. He could have read the scriptures in Hebrew but more probably read them in Greek, which would be a natural thing for an Alexandrian Jew to do. His approach to the experience of God's mediation was that of a thinker. In the course of his book, it is true, he does mention one or two of the older ways in which Israelites before him had spoken of God's mediation, but these are no more than passing references similar to the passing allusions he makes to Greek philosophical ideas. He mentions God's hand and arm,³⁸ his word³⁹ and his spirit.⁴⁰ The conception of the spirit of God was the most frequently used of these, but it was never fully developed in Israel and it remained for the Christian church to take it up into the formula of the Trinity as was demanded by New Testament usage. The author of Wisdom uses the idea of spirit only incidentally and makes it the handmaid of wisdom. Wisdom and spirit are virtually identified by him. This identification may be regarded as in a very real manner foreshadowing Christian thought in which the spirit is both God's and Christ's and through the spirit they exercise sovereignty on earth. The idea of spirit remained an abstract one that could not easily compel men's allegiance. The idea of the word was also abstract and the author of Wisdom clearly laid little store

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by it except as an ancient mode of thought. It was part of the tradition into which he had been born. It was in the figure of wisdom that the author made his contribution to Jewish thought, and, it may be said, to Christian thought too, albeit indirectly. It was a familiar idea by the time it was taken up by Pseudo-Solomon. Job had a chapter on it (xxviii), and Proverbs viii personifies wisdom. She, for it is a female figure, is not fully mediatorial in these books. She enables men to

³⁷ Either he or an unlettered scribe copying his book could not spell Greek - a spelling mistake is twice written. For further detail about this and other critical points see the present author's book *A Critical Introduction to the Apocrypha*, 1961.

³⁸ v. 16, xvi. 15 f.

³⁹ ix. 1, xvi. 12, xviii. 15.

⁴⁰ i. 7; cf. ix. 17, xii. 1.

acquire wisdom and to do the things that require true wisdom. Two things are important about the beginnings of the idea. First, that it was always in the very closest connection with God, we might almost say, an organic connection. Second, it was a personification. The importance of this second aspect is both positive and negative. Positive because, being personal, it made possible the conception of a peculiarly intimate relationship with men that could never be possible with abstract ideas like spirit and word. Negative because of the natural limitations inherent in its being feminine. (In both Hebrew and Greek the word for wisdom is feminine in gender.) After the Incarnation there could remain, for Christian believers, no question of returning to a conception of a personified divine wisdom. The masculine figure of the son of God was all in all.

Two Apocryphal books, apart from Wisdom, present the figure of divine wisdom. Baruch, in which there is embedded a poem on wisdom,⁴¹ and Ecclesiasticus, where a whole chapter⁴² is devoted to it. In both books the emphasis falls on the virtual identification of wisdom with the written law. Ben Sira pictures Wisdom going forth from the mouth of God and seeking a dwelling place on earth which she eventually found in Israel. There could be but one logical conclusion to this, a conclusion which ben Sira reaches towards the end of the chapter:

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All this⁴³ is the book of the covenant of the
Most High God,
The law which Moses commanded us.⁴⁴

This identification carries with it an inescapable implication, namely, that just as the law was external to God, having separate existence, final, complete and authoritative, so also must wisdom be regarded as somehow separate from God, and yet finally and authoritatively representing him.

How far, then, have we travelled along the road that leads to hypostasis? I believe that Pseudo-Solomon has travelled all the way. Wisdom is no longer spoken of as if she were an attractive young lady; she is one such. She is, however, much more than that. She is the agent of God in the world. She was present when God created the world,⁴⁵ she knows and understands all things,⁴⁶ is more mobile than any motion,⁴⁷ a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty⁴⁸ and a spotless mirror of the working of God.⁴⁹ This is further than any writer had yet gone in describing the earthward aspect of God's power and activity. Other writers had used other ideas, but none had

⁴¹ iii. 9-iv. 4.

⁴² xxiv.

⁴³ i.e. all that has been said about Wisdom.

⁴⁴ xxiv. 23.

⁴⁵ ix. 9.

⁴⁶ ix. 11.

⁴⁷ vii. 24.

⁴⁸ vii. 25.

⁴⁹ vii. 26.

been so positively set out. It may well be that no one could have done in Hebrew thought and speech what Pseudo-Solomon was able to do in Greek. He drew, for example, upon the language of the Stoics such as they used in speaking of ‘the pure and subtle fire, identical with God, which penetrated all the kosmos and ordered everything with perfect wisdom’.⁵⁰ This is true of the twenty-one epithets for Wisdom in vii. 22f. He drew also from Platonic language as in the allusion to ‘formless matter’ at xi. 17, and to the body as a weight and clog to the soul in ix. 15. Greek readers, confronted by these words, might well conclude that Jewish ideas of God were not so alien or barbarous after all. But what of his Jewish readers?

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They would probably be flattered to find one of their own fundamental ideas so respectably dressed in philosophical language. They might even feel that it gained in meaning thereby, as indeed it did, for it caught up some of the undertones and overtones of the Greek words in which it was expressed. But they were not left only to glean crumbs from under the table. If they could not fully appreciate the philosophical language of chapter seven with its string of philosophical epithets, they could appreciate what the author said in the next chapter about the attractive young lady who was worth cultivating:

I loved her and sought her from my youth,
and I desired to take her for my bride,
and I became enamoured of her beauty.
.....
Therefore I determined to take her to live with me,
knowing that she would give me good counsel
and encouragement in cares and grief.
.....
When I .enter my house, I shall find rest with her,
for companionship with her has no bitterness,
and life with her has no pain, but gladness and joy.⁵¹

What Pseudo-Solomon says about wisdom and her functions takes into it everything that he could have said about the spirit of God, and in his prayer he says:

Who has learned thy counsel, unless thou hast given wisdom,
and sent thy holy Spirit from on high.⁵²

It is important to note that in language at least there is a fusion of Wisdom and Spirit in the Book of Wisdom. It had become inevitable that if a thinker began, with conscious intention, to use one conception only for God’s mediation of himself, that one conception would draw to itself the

⁵⁰ E. Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief* (1938), p. 185.

⁵¹ viii. 2, 9, 16.

⁵² ix. 17.

L.H. Brockington, *Ideas of Mediation between God and Man in the Apocrypha*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 6 March 1962. London: The Athlone Press, 1962. Pbk. pp.16.

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content of all other conceptions. Any mediatory figure that was to prove satisfying could brook no rival and had to be capable of being identified with God in virtually every respect. This is just the point at which the conception of Wisdom breaks down. It is feminine. This is not to deny that there is a very real place for things feminine in religious thought and devotion. There is no richer metaphor for the relationship of God with his people than the one beloved of the prophets, namely, that God is to Israel as a husband to a wife or a bridegroom to a bride. But it is not readily conceivable that the God whom men worship as He should be known upon earth through a person whom they speak of as she. In all other respects the idea of wisdom may be thought to be most fruitful and satisfying. It had been able to absorb into itself both the creative power of the word, the revelatory power of the spirit or the word, and the saving power of the hand, or arm, or angel or spirit. It could also absorb the iridescent splendour and mystery of God's glory, but it could not fully mediate God's person. This remained to be the glory of the Christian revelation. By a happy chance the Apocrypha, because of two Christian additions to the Second Book of Esdras, has been able to incorporate that towards which it was moving - the figure of the perfect mediator. These words stand in the second chapter of that book:

Then I asked an angel, Who are these my lord? He answered and said to me, These are they who have put off mortal clothing and have put on the immortal, and they have confessed the name of God: now they are being crowned and receive palms. Then I said to the angel, Who is that young man who places crowns on them and puts palms in their hands? He answered and said to me, He is the son of God whom they confessed in the world.⁵³

We find a synthesis of the ideas of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha in the words of the apostle Paul: Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.⁵⁴

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⁵³ 2 Esd. ii. 46f.

⁵⁴ 1 Cor. i. 24.