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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

Yahweh and Mal'ak in the Early Traditions of Israel: A Study of the Underlying Traditions of Yahweh/Angel Theophany in Exodus 3.

J.O. Akao

INTRODUCTION

The Biblical narrative which reports the Mosaic/Divine encounter at the Burning Bush in Exodus chapter 3 has over the years posed problems for Old Testament scholars.¹ On the literary plane, it has been very difficult disentangling the various hypothetical documentary strands that make up the story,² while as a narrative it has been treated under various headings like: Cultic Aetiology, Myth, Fairy Tale or a Bush Burning but not Consumed, Knowing the Name of God Motif or the Possession of Miraculous Powers as the Mark of a Special Relationship with the Deity. From the philosophical point of view, because of the linguistic problems shrouding the verb form of the Tetragrammaton, the question has often been put whether there was a disclosure of a Name at all at the Burning Bush.

To compound the problem, the present state of the Corpus makes it difficult to say precisely who appeared to Moses, Yahweh or Angel (His Mal'ak), in Exodus 3:2,4. The quest for a solution to this last problem constitutes the thrust of this investigation which aims at unravelling the underlying Traditions behind the confusing involvement of Yahweh and Mal'ak in the Theophany.

This enquiry has been necessitated by the fact that any conscientious reader of the Old Testament, especially the Pentateuch, cannot but be confused as to what is the relationship between Yahweh and His Angel Mal'ak and also what designation lies behind the use of the word Angel or Mal'ak Yahweh. Did the Biblical author or compiler have at the back of his mind two distinct personalities or just two Names for the same personage? In this article we shall attempt a solution to this impasse in the understanding of "the early Traditions of Israel".

YAHWEH AND Mal'ak IN THE EARLY TRADITIONS OF ISRAEL.

In the projected early Traditions of Israel,³ the figure of the personage behind the word Angel or Mal'ak Yahweh is so elusive and perplexing that various interpretations have been advanced for its understanding. It could mean either a form of appearance of Yahweh in the nature of a double or "extended soul", or, on the other hand, a being enjoying a personal existence clearly differentiated from that of Yahweh. On some occasions, the Mal'ak could become a genuine representative of the Deity in its full capacity, playing a part comparable to that of a Divine, or one whose presence has the same impact as that of the Deity. In fact passages such as Genesis 16:7ff; 21:17ff; 22:11ff; 31:11ff; Exodus 3:2 and Judges 2:1ff which are unlike other passages containing the Mal'ak Yahweh stories show that it is an impossible task to differentiate between the Mal'ak and Yahweh Himself. This is because the one who speaks or acts, Yahweh or Mal'ak, is obviously one and the same person.⁴

But on other occasions, or even in the same passage, the Mal'ak is presented as nothing short of a human figure such as we have in Judges 13:16 and Genesis 18:8 where he could be told to eat food; or Genesis 32:25 where he wrestled like a man with Jacob and touched the hollow of his thigh; or Judges 6:21 and Numbers 22:31 where he is presented as possessing a staff or a drawn sword; or Genesis 28:12 where he requires a ladder to shuttle between earth and heaven; or Judges 6:11 where there is a long report on how he sits and discusses.

In view of this apparent ambiguity in the presentation of the Angel figure as man and at the same time as one whom men could see and then proclaim unequivocally that they have seen God, is it possible to go beyond the literary form to recover what concept the Old Testament writers had of the figure?

THE CONCEPT OF THE Mal'ak FIGURE

In discussing the concept of the Mal'ak we must first look briefly at the Name and what it connotes. The Old Testament Hebrew word used for Angel Mal'ak derives from the root L'K which has no extant occurrence in Hebrew,

while the Arabic cognate l'aaka means "to send with a commission".⁵ As an abstract noun, it could mean sending, mission or embassy from which the concrete notion "messenger" developed only very much later. Understood in its sense of messenger, the Hebrew word Mal'ak could be used for those who carry messages from one person to another and it is found in this sense in connection with the kings of the Old Testament. This very word Mal'ak used for human figures carrying messages from one king to another is also used for the being who carries messages from God to man.

It is remarkable that nowhere in the Massoretic Text is there any indication given that these two types of messengers differ and we also do not find any traces to that effect in the Septuagint which uses the word aggelos indiscriminately to render mal'ak, (cf. Priest mal'ak Mal 2:7; prophet mal'ak Haggai 1:13; King's wrath mal'ak Proverbs 16:14 etc.). So for the Massoretic Text, messenger of whatever gender or status is mal'ak.

But with the Vulgate, there appears a special word "Angelus" to differentiate or distinguish the messenger of God from other types of messenger. This distinction between Angel and Messenger in rendering the M.T. Mal'ak is not only arbitrary and finds no support in the Original Text, but also reflects the later highly developed theology of Angelology. We may illustrate this with some examples.

<u>TEXT</u>	<u>VULGATE</u>	<u>MT</u>	<u>LXX</u>
1 Kings 19:7 Angel of the Lord ..	<u>Angelus</u>	<u>Mal'ak</u>	<u>aggelos</u>
2 Kings 1:2 Ahaziah sent Messengers ...	<u>Nuntio</u>	<u>Mal'ak</u>	<u>aggelos</u>
2 Kings 1:3a Angel of the Lord said to Elijah ...	<u>Angelus</u>	<u>Mal'ak</u>	<u>aggelos</u>

2 Kings 1:3b Nuntiorum Mal'akim aggelōn
 Go up to meet the Regis
 messengers of the king
 ...

2 Kings 1:5 Nuntii Mal'akim hoi aggeloi
 The messengers returned
 to the
 king ...

2 Kings 1:15 Angelus Mal'ak aggelos
 Then the Angel of the Domini
 Lord said ...

2 Kings 19:14 Nuntiorum La Mal'ak aggelōn
 Hezekiah received the
 letter from the hand of
 the messengers and read
 it ...

From this table, to which many more additions could be made, it becomes evident that the Old Testament in its use of Mal'ak Yahweh, at least from the linguistic point of view, did not think of a figure or being in terms of our own ideas about angels, inherited from the Medieval Period. The concept or notion of Angel/Mal'ak as a Supernatural Being or Divine Being appears strange to Old Testament writers. It is therefore very doubtful whether the Old Testament writers thought there were Angels the way we think of them, ie. Heavenly Divine Beings. From the way Mal'ak Elohim or Mal'ak Yahweh is used, the Old Testament writers give us little or no reason to believe that they pictured this messenger as any other than a human being.⁶ Faint traces of this concept are still found even in passages where the Angel has been identified or equated with Yahweh. In such passages his distinction and messenger status is still retained. In 2 Samuel 24:16 he is distinct from Yahweh while in Gen. 22:16 he is found speaking in prophetic terminology and after delivering his message says: "ne'um YHWH" - "Thus says the Lord". And also in Genesis 16:7-14 where he acts side by side with Yahweh, his function is distinguished from that of Yahweh: it is the Mal'ak who speaks to Hagar and says to her, Yahweh has

heard the cries, but it is Yahweh Himself who opens her eyes or hears her prayers. From this subtle differentiation the following remark can be made: when the reference is to God in his Divine invisible capacity, the word Yahweh is used, but when Yahweh or God enters the perception of man, the Mal'ak is introduced. Thus the biblical writers want to say that Mal'ak Yahweh is the extended soul of Yahweh or his invisible executive when he intervenes in human affairs. In the early literature of the Old Testament, he personified Yahweh's assistance to Israel and only in rare cases is he found turning against them in punishment as in 2 Samuel 24:17. He is invariably presented as the Mediator of Yahweh's grace to Israel.

From this use, it seems that whenever this figure appeared, as the Biblical narratives have it, the stories originally probably referred quite naively to purely physical observable beings. It is such primitive pre-literary theophanies of Mal'ak, one would surmise, that the editors of the Pentateuch claimed for Yahweh and took the necessary steps to soften in the interests of Yahweh's strict transcendence in the light of what was later known of his mode of manifestation.

We may even note here that even in the course of harmonization of the primitive Mal'ak, an observable being's appearance, with the later Yahweh's literary theophany, care has been taken to guard against "sacrilegious" references to Yahweh in his status of Deity, which makes the editors reserve for Him in such theophanies activities which only befit the Deity. This somewhat subtle theological interpretation which is Biblically based is founded on the fact that in very many instances, the Angel is at once identified with God and differentiated from Him. In Gen. 31:13; Ex. 3:2,6 he identifies himself with Yahweh, and in Gen. 16:11; 22:12, 15 he speaks with the authority of Yahweh. But in Gen. 16:13; 48:15; Hos. 12:4,5 he is spoken of by others as Yahweh or God.

It is, however, remarkable that from the period of the Monarchy onwards, we cease to hear of this close relationship or confusing identity between Yahweh and the Mal'ak. A conceptual gulf had come to separate the one from

the other. And even in stories of the intervention of a divine emissary such as are to be found in the book of Kings, and in the post exilic writings, it is clearly a matter of a servant of Yahweh quite distinct from his master. The great prophets do not even mention him, which probably gives us room to assume that they took up the role and played the function exercised elsewhere by the Mal'akim. In one place we even find the title applied to one of the prophets (Hag. 1:3).

But in the post-exilic period, belief in superhuman and celestial beings called Angels was beginning to develop. This concept of Angelology which probably had its inception in the exilic period,⁷ is found as an important feature in the Qumran Texts, Rabbinic Literature and the writings of the New Testament. Thus the later notion of Angel functioning as an intermediary is different from the Old Testament notion of Mal'ak who is both one with Yahweh and also distinct from him as his messenger. Thus in the Old Testament context between the apparent haphazard alternation of the two figures, Yahweh and Mal'ak, we think there seems to be a theological concern which is to designate the visible figure in the pre-literary theophany as messenger and going behind him to posit a transcendent literary figure, Yahweh, whom he represents with both of them functioning at one and the same time.

This speculative reshaping of older Traditions which is very common and striking in the Old Testament is an important literary theologisation. It enabled the Old Testament writers to build bridges connecting later Yahweh religion with the religion of the Fathers and also made it possible to speak of the presence of Yahweh in many places without calling in question his unity as well as his intervention amongst men without challenging his transcendence.

In all this, one point is clear: in spite of the efforts made to show that Yahweh is one with his Mal'ak, we do not hear of a single instance when Yahweh and another being legitimately lay claim to the worship of Israel. It was Yahweh and Yahweh alone! Thus where Mal'ak is identified with him, it is a subtle effort to raise to a

higher level an originally primitive or stark anthropomorphic theophany.

So our ultimate explanation of the ambiguity is no doubt to be sought in the advance of religious thought to a more theological apprehension of the Divine nature. Thus in all certainty the oldest conception of the theophany was a visible personal appearance of the Deity which later theologians, conscious of the danger posed by this bold anthropomorphism, took steps to reconcile with the belief in the invisibility of God who acts amongst men through the agency of the "Word" as in the Prophets, or through the Mal'ak as we have in the projected early Traditions.⁸

This theological tendency of interpreting the primitive and bold anthropomorphic theophanies in the light of later Yahweh faith in the context of his spiritual transcendence can be seen in a comparison of the two basic forms of the Pentateuchal theophanies -- by Yahweh and by an intermediary the Mal'ak. We would wish to maintain that it is elements from these two forms of theophanies that the writer of the "Divine Encounter" story of Exodus chapter 3 has welded together to constitute the content of the call of Moses.

THE TWO UNDERLYING TRADITIONS OF THE THEOPHANY IN EXODUS 3.

YAHWEH THEOPHANY

MAL'AK THEOPHANY

- | | | |
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| 1. | In Yahweh theophanies it is usual for the Deity to introduce Himself to the receiver of revelation. cf. Gen. 17:1; 26:23; 28:13; 25:11; Ex. 6:2 (Ex.3:6) | Never introduces Himself. |
|----|--|---------------------------|

2. Appearance is connected with a time of stress for the individual in the limited family circle according to the Biblical accounts and is invariably in a holy place. Appearance is connected with a time of stress for the wider community: Judges 6:1-6; 13:1; cf. Ex. 2:33.
3. Deliverance is effected in the immediate account following: Judges 7-8, 14-16; Ex. 5:1ff.
4. When he appears he states what he will do. He reveals his plans which he is about to execute: Gen. 17:2,6; 26:2ff; 28:14,15. cf. Ex. 3:8. When he appears he states what he would have the recipient of revelation do. He never says what he will do. Judges 6:13. cf. Ex. 3:10. Recipient is to be actively involved in the project.
5. His name is never asked since his first act is always to introduce himself. Name is always asked because he is a strange if not mysterious being to the recipient. In this context knowing the name is important and necessary.
6. Always refuses to disclose his name because it is sacred: Gen. 32:29e; Judges 13:17-18; cf. Ex. 3:14.
7. There is invariably a long divine speech with few or no interruptions by the recipient of revelation. Gen. 15,17. There is a discursive dialogue between Angel and recipient: Gen. 35; Judges 6:13 etc.

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|-----|---|--|
| 8. | He calls recipient of Revelation by Name: Gen. 22:1; 15:1. cf. 1 Sam.3 and Ex. 3:4 (also 1 Kings 19:9ff). | Does not address recipient by name except where he is made to speak from heaven in an official capacity as the Deity. Gen. 21:17; 22:11. Compare this with the passages where he is invariably called man in the text: Judges 6:11; 13:6,11. |
| 9. | Fire element accompanies his disclosure: Gen. 15:17. | Fire is connected with miraculous feats he performs. Judges 6:11; 13:29. |
| 10. | Makes promise to recipient which has connection with land or increase of posterity. Gen. 15:17-21; 28:13-14; 35:12-13 etc. cf. Ex. 3:8ff. | Does not. |
| 11. | Evidence is sought that what has been promised will come to pass or be fulfilled. A verbal promise is given as evidence or sign to confirm what has been said will be fulfilled. Never performs miracle as evidence or sign of the truth of what has been said. | Sign is usually sought by recipient to assure him that he has not met with just an ordinary man and that the contact has given him the recipient some supernatural powers. Miracle is usually performed. Judges 6:13 etc. |
| 12. | It is characteristic of him to allay recipient's fear or doubt with the words "I will be with you". | |

13. When interacting with man here on earth, emphasis is exclusively on audition rather than vision: Gen. 15:17 etc. Strong emphasis on vision and less on audition or word of the Mal'ak. There is concrete evidence that a being is seen. cf. Ex. 3:2; 3:6.

IMPLICATION OF THIS COMPARISON FOR THE YAHWEH/MAL'AK THEOPHANY IN EXODUS 3

One striking phenomenon that stands out clear in the above table is that while the Mal'ak theophanies look very anthropomorphic, Yahweh theophanies appear more theologically befitting the spiritual status of the Deity. This conception of Yahweh in his deity status reflects, in all probability, a much later stage in Israelite understanding of her God. If this view is espoused then it means that the tradition of Moses' encounter with a Divine Being which eventually led to the release of the Israelites from Egypt is here being corrected and reshaped in the light of a later understanding of the mode of intervention of the Israelite God in the cosmos. This the writer of our text has done by combining elements from both understandings of Divine theophany and couching them in a prophetic call pattern, with additions from the "Prophetic Legends" that are usually told about holy men.⁹ This concerns the mysterious episode relating to their birth, the point of transformation in their life when they acquired extraordinary powers (here the miracles Ex. 4:1ff) and the end of the holy man which is usually unlike the fate of the ordinary.

In thus presenting a literary theophany of Yahweh, it can be seen that in the author's finished work, the account of the Mal'ak theophany has not fitted completely into the new literary mould of Yahweh's theophany. This is evidenced in Ex. 3:13ff where the writer is at pains to render the non-revelation or simple refusal to give a name in a form that will make sense. This is why we have three possible suggestions of the author -- put in the mouth of Yahweh as answers or names but a theologisation of the meaning of Yahweh as Israel came to know him in practical religious experience. The author has seized on the opportunity to explain that the figure who appeared and spoke to Moses at

the burning bush is not one of the deluding spirits as might be supposed but the very God of the Hebrews, who himself declared to Moses the name by which he is to be called for ever. Therefore, the significance of the Name suggested is not an explanation which satisfies the modern philologists though eminently satisfying to the religious sense - the God who is in relation or He who is. To support our contention, it is evident that if this occasion were the true origin of the Name Yahweh, one would argue, it would have had an intelligible meaning in Hebrew, the remembrance of which would probably have been preserved by the Israelites. It is on the basis of this that one is inclined to conjecture that it must have been a much older name whose meaning the Israelites had already forgotten or did not even know, and to which they attempted later to give a meaning conformable to their own religious conceptions or experience.

Even the way the name is theologised immediately puts the narrative in a much later sociological context i.e. the period of the Exile, when the message of the statement would be both particularly relevant and also consonant with the teaching of Deutero-Isaiah.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

On the strength of the foregoing, one could say that it was during this time in the history of Israel when the Ark which for some time had symbolised the enthroned Yahweh in the Sabaoth "designation", was no more and the anthropomorphic characteristics which the Kabod theological designation of Yahweh connoted were on their way to oblivion, that a radical theological transformation took place in Israel - a move initiated by the pre-exilic inchoate Yahweh alone party and developed by the Deuteronomistic Theologians. And of course the destruction of the Temple contributed its quota in fuelling or provoking this transformation of Israelite theological understanding of Yahweh, his activities and mode of manifestation. It was probably at this time of Exile that the "Name Theology" was devised or developed by DTR as a means of resolving the cognitive dissonance which arose when the established tenets of the Zion-Sabaoth theology

were confronted with the harsh reality of exile. It was during this period of theological crisis that Yahweh became relocated in the heavens above and was only present here on earth amongst his people in His Name, a point which Mettinger has amply explained.¹¹ This, to my mind, is the reason why nowhere in the Scriptures is any appeal made at any crucial time to the revelation of Name at the Burning Bush. It goes without rebuttal that the name given should be seen as a definition by the author of what the Name Yahweh signifies rather than its revelation. This is because in the original tradition of the Mal'ak theophany which he used there is no provision for the revelation of Name.

From the above it can be seen that the author's concern was to use the received pre-literary tradition to answer the questions of his time. This made him adjust the tradition while at the same time endeavouring to make it seem reasonable in the context of the period he is dealing with. By so doing he constructs a tradition about the past as a means of articulating his own theological perspective.

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1. See B. S. Childs, Exodus (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1984); O. Eissfeldt, Die Komposition von Exodus 1-12, (KS 11; Tbingen, 1963); Martin Noth, Exodus Commentary, (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1962); H. Gressmann, Moses und seine Zeit, (FRLANT 18; Gttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1913); Bntsh, Exodus-Leviticus-Numeri, (HK; Gttingen, 1903); R.E.Clements, Exodus, (Cambridge Bible Commentary: Cambridge: At the University Press, 1972).
2. Because the exercise has led to unnecessary atomization of the text, people like U.Cassuto, Rendtorff (BZAW 147, especially p. 148), Jacob and Lacocque, to mention just a few have come to discredit the exercise. Even among those who favour the practice there is no agreement. For instance,

Hyatt and Noth recognise 3:1a, 2-4a, 5, 7-8, 16-18; 4:1-12 as J and 3:1c, 4b, 6, 9-15, 19-22; 4:13-18 as E. But F.V.Winnet claims that to J belongs 3:2-4a, 5, 7, 8, 16-18; 4:1-12 while E has 3:1, 4b, 6, 9-14, 21ff; 4:17 and EJE has 3:15, 19ff; 4:13-16 with 3:8b and 3:17b introduced later by the expansionist. In this essay rather than use the literary critical method we would prefer the traditio-historical one.

3. In this investigation, the phrase "Early Traditions of Israel", is used in two different senses according to the context in which it is used. In the first sense, which is found here, it means the traditions which are projected by the Biblical writer as early but which the present author does not consider to be chronologically historical. In the second sense it is used to differentiate between the pre-literary and literary forms of the traditions of Israel. In this context the early traditions of Israel would then refer to the pre-literary form of the tradition in contradistinction to the literary form.
4. cf. A.R.Johnson, who with copious references has demonstrated how Mal'ak could be one with Yahweh and also a representative of his 'd n, cf. The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God, (Cardiff: Univesity of Wales Press, 1961, 2nd edition).
5. See W. Baumgarten Schweiz Theol. Umschau 14 (1944), p. 98 who has drawn special attention to the fact that this underlying verb "L--K" is found only in Arabic, Ethiopic and Ugaritic.
6. cf. Dorothy Irvin, Mytharion: A Comparison of Tales from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East, (AOAT; Neukirchen, 1978) 90ff.
7. Although the true picture of the emergence cannot be mapped out with any degree of certainty, yet it could be conjectured that the doctrine arose as a result of either:
 - (i) the re-emergence of previously suppressed illegitimate demons,

or (ii) out of the conscious effort at transcendentalising Yahweh with the consequent need for mediatorial figures. Whichever may have been responsible, it is evident that at the time of Ezekiel and Zechariah, the belief was already beginning to gain ground. While by the time of Daniel Angels have already assumed names and become guardians of the Nation.

8. cf. Deut. 4:12, 15 correcting Ex. 24:10; and Ex 33:20 says Yahweh could not be seen even by Moses, yet in Ex. 33:11 Moses speaks with Yahweh face to face. In these references received Tradition which the people knew very well is being subjected to theological scrutiny and subtle emendation, correction or even contradiction for ideological reasons.
9. See N.Habel "Form and Significance of the Call Narrative", ZAW 77 (1965) 297-323. He developed the earlier observations of Zimmerli and was later followed by Kilian and Richter with some variations. See also John Akao's unpublished thesis, The Burning Bush: A Study of Form and Meaning in Exodus 3 and 4, (Glasgow, 1985) 115ff.
10. This, of course, corroborates J.P.Hyatt's dating of Ex. 3:14a in the 7th or 6th century B.C.E. For comparison with Deutero-Isaiah, see such passages as Is. 40:25; 41:4; 42:5; 43:11; 44:6 etc. and the use of the Exodus motif as a symbol for the restoration of Israel to the land of Canaan. Hyatt, "Was Yahweh originally a Creator Deity?" JBL 86 (1967) 375ff.
11. See his work The Dethronement of Sabaoth in the Schem and Kabod Theologies, (CWK GLEERUP) 1982.