

THE DESTROYING ANGEL

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The particular term "destroying angel" (*malakh ha-mashhit*) occurs twice in the Bible, in II Samuel 24:16 and its parallel, I Chronicles 21:15. Other allusions to this "destroyer" (*mashhit*), can be found in Exodus 12:23 and Isaiah 54:16. The story of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem may also allude to a destroying angel (II Kgs. 19:35; Isa. 37:36; II Chron. 32:21), although the term used there is simply *malakh*. In the cultures of the ancient Near East, gods were believed to be responsible for death and destruction. The Bible, however, does not portray such a configuration. Instead, the destructive agents act according to God's instruction: they are His messengers and it is the Lord who initiates death and destruction. We will see that the Bible refers to the angelic forces of destruction in a way that negates the ideas of neighboring cultures.

DAVID AND THE DESTROYING ANGEL

The destroying angel is sent to afflict Israel with pestilence, in punishment for David's census (II Sam. 24:16). According to the account in the Book of Samuel, the destructive angel *was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite* (ibid.). The parallel account in Chronicles provides a more extensive description of what happened. David looks up and sees the angel of the Lord *standing between heaven and earth, with a drawn sword in his hand directed against Jerusalem* (I Chron. 21:16). This description of the angel draws on earlier biblical literature, the story of Joshua before the conquest of Jericho (Josh. 5:13) or the angel who appears to Balaam and his ass (Num. 22:23 and 31). The angel hovering between heaven and earth has antecedents in Ezekiel 8:3 and Zechariah 5:9.¹

The first part of II Samuel 24:16 may be understood to imply that the angel acts independently: *When the angel stretched out his hand against Jerusalem to destroy it*. In the parallel account in I Chronicles, however, it is clearly the Lord who takes action: *God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it* (v. 15). The angel can do nothing on its own initiative, but only act in accordance

with the will of God. Even in II Samuel, the second half of 24:16 declares that the Lord regretted His action and (as in I Chron. 21:15) told the angel to halt: *The Lord renounced further punishment and said to the angel who was destroying the people, 'Enough! Stay your hand!'*

The conclusion of the story in Chronicles includes details not found in the Book of Samuel. In this earlier account we read that after David paid Araunah in full for the threshing floor, he built an altar there on which he sacrificed burnt offerings. Only then did the Lord halt the plague. Chronicles states that the threshing floor belonged to Ornan the Jebusite and that David called upon the Lord when he made the burnt offerings. Fire then came down from heaven, a sign that the Lord had responded to David's prayer.² At that time, we are told, God also ordered the angel to return his sword to its sheath. What He said is not reported, but suggested by the angel's action – sheathing his sword (I Chron. 21:26-27). This closes the circle. Previously, David had seen the angel brandishing a sword against Jerusalem; now he saw the angel returning the sword to its scabbard. In any event, it is the Lord who brings the plague to an end by calling off his emissary, the angel of destruction.

THE PLAGUES OF EGYPT

The destroying angel seems to be alluded to in the Bible's description of the slaying of the firstborn, where he is called *ha-mashhit*: *for the Lord will pass over the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home* (Ex. 12:23). While it is stated explicitly that the Lord passed through Egypt to smite the firstborn (Ex. 12:12–13), and the text of the Passover *Haggadah* expounds this to mean, "I and not an angel," verse 23 attests that the Lord was accompanied by the destroying angel, whose nature is to strike down all whom he encounters, unless – as here – the Lord restrains him. This seems to be the intention of the *Mekhilta's* comment on verse 22, *None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning*: "This indicates that when the destroying angel is given permission to do harm, he does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked."³ The Psalmist's account of the plagues of Egypt (Ps. 78:49) indicates that the plagues were inflicted by *mishlahat malakhei ra'im* – *a band of deadly [lit. evil] angels*. The talmudic sages used the term *mishlahat* to describe a band of destructive creatures, specifically a wolf pack.⁴ Kraus believes that this "band of evil angels" does not refer to the

"destroying angel" (*mashhit*) associated with the last plague (Ex. 12:23), but to the demonic powers that the Lord dispatches with every affliction.

It seems, then, that we must distinguish the "destroying angel," *ha-mashhit*, from the messengers of death who come to punish individuals only. By contrast, the Destroyer is sent by the Lord to kill multitudes through a plague. Unlike the deadly messengers, who bring both natural and premature death, the Destroyer inflicts only a premature, painful death. Still, this *mashhit* is controlled by God.⁶

THE MESOPOTAMIAN DEITIES

Meier relates that although the people of ancient Mesopotamia believed that almost any god could destroy entire communities, there were specific gods whose main function was to kill mortals.⁷ He cites the myth of Erra, who was motivated by an irrational lust to kill and destroy and who delighted in battle. In the end, he was only restrained by his companion, Ishum. He and Resheph came to be identified with Nergal, the god of war and sudden death, ruler of the underworld. In the *Epic of Atrahasis*, Enlil consults with the other gods and resolves to send plagues to destroy mankind. Namtar is meant to implement his decree. These gods, who treat the righteous and the wicked alike, must be stopped before they wreak utter destruction on the world. Erra, referring to his own action, says: "Like one who plunders a country, I do not distinguish just from unjust, I fell (them both)."⁸ Namtar halts the threatened catastrophe after human beings perform rituals to appease him.⁹

WRATH

Another implicit allusion to the destroying angel can be found in *For wrath [ketzef] has gone forth from the Lord: the plague has begun* (Num. 17:11 [RSV 16:46]). Milgrom sees this wrath or anger as an independent entity, similar to the Destroyer that acts on behalf of the Lord.¹⁰ There are indeed several references to it in the Bible. Thus (Num. 1:53), *The Levites, however, shall camp around the Tabernacle of the Pact, that the wrath [ketzef] may not strike the Israelite community*. Similarly, the mandate continues, *No outsider shall intrude upon you as you discharge the duties connected with the Shrine and the altar, that wrath [ketzef] may not again strike the Israelites* (Num. 18:5).¹¹ According to Rashi, this plague is spread by the Angel of Death, who

is also known as "the Anger before the Lord with the authority to kill."¹² In the Talmud, the Angel of Death (*malakh ha-mavet*) has assistants, one of whom is actually named Ketzef: "Rav Hisda said: 'They are: Fury, Anger and Wrath [*Ketzef*], Destroyer and Breaker and Annihilator'".¹³ Elsewhere, Ketzef is the name of an angel of destruction (*Targum Yerushalmi*, Numbers 17:11). He is also specifically noted as acting on behalf of God, not as an independent entity: *Wrath [ketzef] has gone forth from the Lord* (Num. 17:11).

The Sages regarded the Destroyer as an amoral force that could be overcome only through sacrificial blood, incense, or some other ritual. However, these rituals were directed to God, not to the Destroyer himself.¹⁴ In the ancient Near East, incense was burned for the gods to placate them and still their anger. Egyptian reliefs depict Canaanite priests standing on a high place¹⁵ and offering incense to Pharaoh, who is massacring the inhabitants of a city. In both of the biblical stories about the Destroyer (the Tenth Plague and the threshing floor of Araunah), the plague is halted by a ritual act (placing blood on the doorpost, building an altar, burning incense), but it is God, not His messenger, who responds.

SENNACHERIB

The destroying angel may also figure in the story of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem (II Kgs. 19:35; Isa. 37:36; II Chron. 32:21), where we read that the angel of the Lord struck the Assyrian camp by night, leaving 185,000 corpses at daybreak.¹⁶ The plague is also mentioned by Ben Sira: *He smote the camp of Assyria and destroyed them with a plague* (48:21). This is the Hebrew text of the Cairo Genizah, but the Septuagint and Vulgate attribute the destruction in the second part of the verse to "His angel." Josephus, too, mentions the plague,¹⁷ but refers elsewhere to the angel of the Lord.¹⁸ In the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch (II Bar. 63:6–8), Ramiel is the angel who "burned their bodies within." While attributing the slaying of the Assyrians to an angel, all of these texts show the angel acting on God's behalf.

POST-BIBLICAL SOURCES

Ultimately, the notion of an angel with autonomous responsibility for death, like the Canaanite deity Mot, is anathema to the staunch monotheism of the Israelite faith, which holds that God alone is responsible for both life

and death. Nevertheless, death is strongly personified in the Bible, a possible relic of the polytheistic creeds that influenced and are combated in biblical literature. The Lord delegates some of His power to angels, which are not independent entities acting on their own volition. Nowhere does the Bible refer to some enduring independent power whose entire rationale is death and destruction.

Rabbinic texts do refer to the Angel of Death (*malakh ha-mavet*) and similar baneful forces. Because such a belief in the Angel of Death, demons, and destructive angels constitutes a form of dualism, the talmudic Sages placed strict limits on the power and activity of the Angel of Death and set Israel outside its domain: "When Israel stood at Mount Sinai . . . the Holy One, blessed be He, called the Angel of Death and said to him: Even though I made you a universal ruler over earthly creatures, you have nothing to do with this nation."¹⁹ After the affair of the Golden Calf, however, this exemption was revoked and Israel was once more handed over to his power. Nevertheless, it is God who decides whether to place Israel under or beyond the Angel of Death's control.²⁰

The Angel of Death receives his instructions from God. When permitted to take the souls of human beings, he does not distinguish between the good and the wicked. His function is to take men's souls. Only a chosen few of the nation's ancestors died by the Divine kiss and were not given over to this angel's control.²¹ He was created by God on the first day of Creation, operates under His authority, and performs His behest. Nevertheless, he is granted a degree of autonomy in his actions and choices,²² certain actions by human beings making him more likely to strike them.²³

CONCLUSION

The destroying angel is explicitly mentioned twice in the Bible (II Sam. 24:16; I Chron. 21:15). In addition, there are several other passages in the Bible and rabbinic literature that refer to destructive supernatural forces. The idea of the destroying angel as an independent force, acting of its own accord, is foreign to the Hebrew Bible, which emphasizes that God is in control of these destructive forces so as to negate polytheistic beliefs. The angel can do nothing on its own initiative and must only act in compliance with the will of God. It is He alone who deals death and gives life.

NOTES

1. Some modern scholars, including Fuss, Schmidt, and Rupprecht, believe that a non-Israelite deity stands behind the description of the angel. Schmidt suggests that it may be a plague deity like Resheph. However, the consistent identification of the Lord with plague and pestilence throughout the Bible makes this idea unnecessary. See W. Fuss, "II Samuel 24," *ZAW* 74 (1962) pp. 162–163; K. Rupprecht, "Der Tempel von Jerusalem. Gründung Salomons der jebusitische Erbe?," *BZAW* 144 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977) p. 10; Herbert Schmid, "Der Tempelbau Salomons in religionsgeschichtlicher Sicht," in A. Kuschke and E. Kutsch, eds., *Archäologie und Altes Testament. Festschrift für Kurt Galling* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1970) p.246.
2. Something similar happened at the dedication of the Sanctuary in Sinai: "Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat parts on the altar" (Lev. 9:24); and again at the dedication of Solomon's Temple: "When Solomon finished praying, fire descended from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the House" (II Chron. 7:1).
3. *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, Bo 11.
4. Mishnah, *Bava Metzia* 7:9.
5. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150 A Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) p. 129.
6. In Hebrews 11:28 the authors used the exact same Greek term for *mashhit* as the Septuagint did in Exodus 12:23. It is not clear, however, whether the New Testament reference is to the Lord or to an angel. On the other hand, in the Wisdom of Solomon (18:16), it is God personified as the Logos, described metaphorically as a stern warrior who leaps from the divine throne holding God's *unambiguous decree as a sharp sword*. Given that the Logos is the Lord or one of His aspects, the author of the Wisdom of Solomon evidently believed that for the Tenth Plague the Lord did not rely on an angel or messenger. According to Jubilees 49:2-4, the Egyptian firstborn died through the power of the demonic *Mastema*.
7. S. A. Meier, "Destroyer," in K. van der Toorn, B. Becking and P. W. van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) p. 241.
8. Stephanie Dalley, "Erra and Ishum (1.113)," in William W. Hallo, ed., *Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill 1997), vol.1, tablet V.10, p. 415.
9. W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *ATRA-HASĪS: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), I, viii: 407–412, p.407.
10. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) p. 142.
11. Cf. Proverbs 16:14.
12. TB *Shabbat* 89a
13. TB *Shabbat* 55a.
14. Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 142.
15. Othmar Keel, "Kanaanäische Sühneriten auf Ägyptischen Tempelreliefs," *Vetus Testamentum*, 25 (1975) p. 421, fig 5.
16. Trying to offer a rational explanation, some have suggested that the Assyrian host fell victim to plague. These explanations depend on a passage in Herodotus, who refers to Sennacherib as "king of the Arabians and Assyrians." His planned invasion of Egypt ground to a halt because

rodents overran the Assyrian camp: ". . . and one night a multitude of field mice swarmed over the Assyrian camp and devoured their quivers and their bows and the handles of their shields likewise, insomuch that they fled the next day unarmed and many fell" (*Historiae*, 2:141, ed. Godley).

17. Josephus, *Antiquities*, X:21.

18. Josephus, *Jewish War*, V:388.

19. *Leviticus Rabbah* 18:3.

20. *Exodus Rabbah* 32:7.

21. TB *Bava Batra* 17a.

22. TB *Hagigah* 4b–5a.

23. TB *Berakhot* 51a; TB *Bava Kamma* 60b.



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