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Principal Angels

That angelic beings seem to have had a prominent place in the religious thought of postexilic Judaism hardly requires demonstration.¹ The many references to angels in the New Testament further demonstrate that belief in such beings was a well-accepted aspect of Jewish and early Christian religion.² Although the “heavenly hosts” are a part of Old Testament tradition too (e.g., Gen. 32:1–2; Josh. 5:14; and the numerous references to the “Lord of hosts”), the late postexilic period seems to have been characterized by a comparatively greater interest in specifying the ranks and duties of God’s angelic retinue and in assigning names to prominent members of it. Especially in the texts that describe the heavenly ascents of Old Testament heroes, we are informed about these matters.³

Accompanying the more explicitly organized view of the angelic hosts characteristic of the postexilic period, there is the tendency to postulate a chief angel set by God over the entire heavenly hierarchy. In spite of the variations in the name of this figure and the way he is described, it is clear that many ancient Jews were prepared to accept the idea that God might have a principal angelic servant, honored with a position far above all other angels, perhaps second only to God in heavenly rank and power. I suggest that this principal angel tradition should be viewed alongside the data discussed in the preceding chapters and that the interest in principal angels is further evidence of the concept of divine agency. As with personified divine attributes and exalted patriarchs, so with the principal angel, we see a particular figure described as God’s grand vizier or chief servant, distinguished from all other creatures and closely associated with God.

It may well be that the principal angel figure is the earliest form of

divine agency thought and that the descriptions of exalted patriarchs and personified divine attributes as God's chief agent were indebted to, and evolved from, the idea of a particular angel set above the heavenly hierarchy.⁴ The important matter for me is that all three forms of divine agency speculation, including interest in principal angels, were current in the Jewish tradition that was the religious background of the first Christians. If the initial accommodation of the exalted Jesus next to God began among Jewish Christians and was facilitated by the divine agency concept, then we need to examine the data illustrating the ancient Jewish interest in principal angels.

ANGELOLOGY AND CHRISTOLOGY IN PREVIOUS STUDIES

In his 1898 study of Jewish and Christian interest in the archangel Michael, W. Lueken argued that early Christians appropriated for Jesus aspects of the role and position of Michael in pre-Christian Judaism.⁵ But Lueken focused mainly on Michael and thus did not deal adequately with other indications of ancient Jewish interest in principal angels or with the other evidence concerning the divine agency tradition. Further, his work was flawed in method and results.⁶

In 1941 two studies appeared in which the relation of early Christology to Jewish angelology was a major concern. In *Christos Angelos*, J. Barbel dealt mainly with the patristic period of Christianity and the likening of Christ to an angel, or *the* angel of the Lord, in Justin Martyr and subsequent church fathers. His work is more valuable for the study of the christological controversies of later centuries, not of first-century Christianity.⁷

In the same year M. Werner presented his understanding of the development of Christian doctrine from the earliest church through the first several centuries.⁸ As a disciple of Albert Schweitzer, Werner was convinced that the key development in Christianity was "the transformation of the eschatological Primitive Christianity into the Hellenistic mystery-religion of Early Catholicism."⁹ For Werner, the Christology of the early church presented Jesus' resurrection as his transformation into a high-ranking angelic being. In sum, the original Christian interpretation of the exalted Jesus was through and through an "angelic christology."¹⁰

To his credit, Werner recognized that the reverence given to the exalted Christ began among Jewish Christians, far too early to be attributed to the oft-invoked direct influence of pagan cults via large numbers of converted Gentiles. He saw that the proper background was Jewish. In his

handling of this Jewish background and the New Testament evidence, however, he made several major mistakes that rendered his presentation intriguing but also irritating.¹¹ Almost immediately (1942), he was taken to task by W. Michaelis,¹² who emphatically refuted Werner's characterization of earliest Christology.

Thereafter the investigation of the relevance of Jewish angelology for understanding the development of early Christian doctrine shifted to other questions. In 1956 G. Kretschmar argued that the early Christian trinitarian doctrine was influenced by Jewish speculations concerning principal angels, but he dealt mainly with developments in the second and third centuries.¹³ Then in 1958 J. Daniélou portrayed "Jewish Christianity."¹⁴ Daniélou attempted to illustrate those early Christian theological images and conceptions that seemed to reflect more the Jewish background than the Greek philosophical traditions so influential in what became mainstream Christian theology of the early centuries. Thus his chapter on "The Trinity and Angelology" (pp. 117-46) is a valuable survey of instances where "angelomorphic" language is used in ancient Christian texts, but he does not engage the question of the origins of the conception of the exalted Christ.¹⁵

Thus the major question in previous scholarship was whether early Christians understood the exalted Christ to be an angel, with Werner arguing yes but nearly all other scholars taking the opposite position. Further, satisfied that Christ was not thought of as an angel, at least in the tradition reflected in the New Testament, most scholars tended to conclude that Jewish angelology was not very important for understanding the origin and nature of earliest Christian views of the risen Christ. Daniélou was content with cataloguing evidence from the second century and later of how Christians sometimes employed angelomorphic language to describe Christ. But this angelomorphic language was regarded basically as an interesting historical curiosity from early Christian times, more reflective of the religious vocabulary of these Jewish Christians than of their actual view of Christ.

In his study of the origins of christological belief, J. D. G. Dunn devotes a mere ten pages to the relevance of Jewish angelology, and his discussion fully illustrates the positions summarized in the preceding paragraph.¹⁶ Dunn repeatedly frames the question simply as whether the first Christians thought of Christ as an angel, answering firmly in the negative.¹⁷ Following the example of Michaelis and others since him, Dunn emphasizes the contrast between Christ and angels in passages such as Hebrews 1-2 as proof

that Jewish angelology was of little or no relevance for the origins of Christology. And again, Dunn allows Werner's thesis to control the whole discussion. Virtually the only question discussed is whether early Christians conceived of Christ as an angel. If they did not, then Jewish interest in angels is deemed of little importance.

I am urging the view that a proper investigation of the relevance of Jewish angelology for the origins of Christology demands that we frame the question differently and that we handle the evidence with greater sophistication. We need to ask, not merely whether the New Testament presents Christ as an angel, but whether Jewish angelology may have assisted early Jewish Christians in coming to terms theologically with the exalted Christ. It will not do to dismiss this question by pointing to New Testament passages in which Christ is contrasted with the angels (e.g., Hebrews 1–2; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Pet. 3:22). Such passages might in fact be taken as indirect evidence that early reflection on the exalted Christ was influenced by, and developed in opposition to, Jewish speculations concerning angels, perhaps especially certain chief angels and their status.

That Jewish speculations concerning chief angels may have been more important in the formation of early Christology than characteristically granted has been suggested by other scholars in recent years. In his study of the rabbinic condemnations of certain groups who held "two powers" heresies, A. F. Segal pointed to the importance of Jewish chief angel traditions and ventured this opinion:

The relationships between these traditions of angelic mediation and Christianity are significant enough to call for a more complete study of the problem as background for Christology than has yet been attempted.¹⁸

Repeatedly in recent years, C. C. Rowland has drawn attention to the importance of Jewish chief angel traditions for early Christology. For example, in *The Open Heaven*, Rowland devotes a long section to Jewish interest in exalted angels and chides previous studies of early Christology for failing to give sufficient importance to this material.¹⁹

In his study of the roots of the gnostic demiurge in Jewish and Samaritan tradition, J. E. Fossum also shows connections between Jewish chief angel speculation and christological passages in early Christian writers.²⁰ While I hold reservations about some of their conclusions, I fully support the convictions of these scholars that more attention should be paid to speculation about principal angels in ancient Judaism in the investigation of the origins of Christology. Here I will attempt to address this need.²¹

PRINCIPAL ANGELS IN ANCIENT JUDAISM

As previously indicated, I contend that interest in a principal angel is one important type of divine agency speculation in ancient Judaism. Here I intend to illustrate this interest by a consideration of various Jewish texts. The identification of this figure varies, as does the description of his duties. But what is common to all our references is the idea that there is a principal angel who has been placed by God in a position of unequalled power and honor, making the figure second only to God in rank. Indeed, in some texts this principal angel is described as participating in a unique way in the exercise of the authority and role of God (e.g., by bearing the divine name). We will show how ancient Jewish religion, with its characteristic monotheistic concern, was able to accommodate a second figure next to God, a chief angel, without any indication that this figure was necessarily a threat to the uniqueness of God.

Finally, we will address some major questions about the larger significance of these references to a principal angel. First, we will survey references to the principal angels in early Jewish texts that probably reflect the religious background of the first Christians.

As noted earlier, the idea of a principal angel with a unique relationship to God may have derived from the tradition of the "angel of the Lord" familiar especially in the Pentateuchal narratives (e.g., Gen. 16:7–14; 22:11–18; Exod. 14:19–20). It is certainly the case that the reference in Exod. 23:20–21 to a particular angel in whom the name of God dwelt was influential in later Jewish speculation. Since we are interested in the sort of principal angel figure featured in the later stages of ancient Jewish religion rather than in an earlier tradition, we emphasize texts that reflect later postexilic Judaism.

Principal Angels in Ezekiel and Daniel

A case can be made that passages from Ezekiel and Daniel, especially Ezekiel, were influential upon later principal angel speculation.²² Of particular importance are Ezek. 1:26–28; 8:2–4 and Dan. 7:9–14; 10:2–9.

In Ezek. 8:2–4, there is a figure whose appearance resembles the description given in Ezek. 1:26–28 of the "glory of the Lord." The figure is manlike in form, fiery in its lower half, its upper part gleaming like polished bronze. It is difficult to know whether we should understand the

figure in 8:2–4 as God or as a messenger of God, an angel.²³ If the latter is correct, then the question remains whether the resemblance of this angelic being to the appearance of God in 1:26–28 means that this being participates somehow in the nature of God or only that we have what W. Zimmerli terms “a cliché-like description of a heavenly being” used here for an angel and in 1:26–28 for God.²⁴ If the figure in Ezek. 8:2–4 is an angel, we know next to nothing about his status and role other than that he acts here as a messenger.²⁵

But if we cannot be sure about the exact nature of the being, there is reason to think that this passage, together with Ezek. 1:26–28, influenced the descriptions of heavenly beings in other ancient writings. One of the possible examples of this influence is the figure in Dan. 10:2–9.²⁶ Here also we have a vision of a heavenly figure of remarkable appearance—are we to take the figure as a particularly powerful angel or as an appearance of God? Note that the only direct correspondences between this figure and those of Ezek. 1:26–28 and 8:2–4 are that all are manlike in form and parts of their bodies gleam like bronze. Thus it is possible that Ezek. 1:26–28 and 8:2–4 provided some general resource for the writer of Daniel 10, but it does not seem that the latter writer was trying to make an exact comparison of his figure with the visions of Ezekiel.²⁷

Certainly the detailed description in Dan. 10:2–9 gives the impression that this figure is of some importance; he has often been identified as Gabriel, who first appears in Dan. 8:15–26 (cf. also 9:21). Whoever or whatever the figure is, one reason for the detailed and impressive description of its appearance may be that the vision in 10:2–9 introduces the last revelation given to “Daniel,” comprising chapters 10–12, which takes the reader up to the events of the very “end of days” (12:13). That is, the impressive appearance of the figure may have been intended to indicate the genuineness of the information the figure delivers. If, as seems likely, this figure is an angel, then we are apparently to be impressed with him, but we are given little information about his status in any heavenly hierarchy. Certainly, the description of the risen Christ in Rev. 1:12–20 resembles in some details the figure in Dan. 10:2–9.²⁸ But later Christian appropriation and adaptation of the language of Daniel 10 tells us little of how the writer of the latter passage intended the figure to be taken.

The situation improves, however, with the angel Michael. He is mentioned first in Dan. 10:13–21 as “one of the chief princes” (v. 13). He is singled out for his loyalty to the divine purpose (v. 21). Later, in 12:1, he is called “the great prince who has charge of your people [Israel],” and we

are told that in the final time Michael will “arise,” apparently meaning that he will play a leading role in the final salvation of the elect.

Once again the information given is tantalizingly brief. Who are the other “great princes” alluded to in 10:13 and how many are there? What is Michael’s comparative standing among them? Exactly what will Michael’s assignment be when he arises in the last days? All these questions go without a direct answer in Daniel. We appear to have here a developing tradition of angel “princes,” some of whom seem to be opposed to God (10:13–14, 21), and Michael is already connected with the destiny of Israel, but beyond this we cannot be sure.²⁹

It is possible that the “one like a son of man” in Dan. 7:13–14 may also have been intended as a high angel, perhaps Michael, though this must be inferred and is a view not shared by all readers.³⁰ But whether this figure is to be taken as a heavenly being or as a figurative way of referring to the “saints of the most high” (cf. 7:27), in either case Dan. 7:9–14 presents us with the language of divine agency. We have here a description of a figure to whom is awarded “dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion” (7:14). Further, note that this figure is to enjoy this status by the will of God. This means that the figure is pictured as ruling on God’s behalf, functioning as God’s vizier or chief agent. For my purposes, I will not discuss further the nature of the figure in Dan. 7:13–14.³¹ I simply note that the description of this figure supplies us with evidence that ancient Jews of the time of Daniel were comfortable with picturing God as exalting some figure to the position of chief agent, with no threat to the uniqueness of God.

Thus in Ezekiel and Daniel we see indications of a developing interest in heavenly figures who are likened to God in varying ways. In Daniel especially there seems to be evidence of the divine agency idea, and Michael was possibly viewed as God’s chief agent or vizier.

Michael in Other Texts

In other ancient texts that reflect the Jewish background of the first century, we see further interest in particular angels, who are given names and special functions. For example, Gabriel and Michael appear with other important angels in *1 Enoch* (e.g., 9:1; 10:1, 9; 40:9–10). There is also the endearing story of the angel Raphael, who describes himself as one of “the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the saints and enter into the presence of the glory of the Holy One” (*Tob.* 12:15). Then

there are other references that single out a particular angel for special status above all others.

For example, Michael is featured in several references in what appears to be such a role. Thus in 2 *Enoch*, Michael is often called the *archistratig* (Slavonic for "chief officer") of God (22:6; 33:10; 71:28; 72:5).³² A similar title in Greek is given to Michael several times in recension A of the *Testament of Abraham* (e.g., 1:4; 2:2–12), in the Greek version of 3 *Baruch* (11:6), and probably in *Joseph and Asenath* (14:4–7). E. P. Sanders is right to think that the term derives from the title given in the Greek Old Testament to the figure in Josh. 5:13–15 who announces himself as "the captain of God's [heavenly] army."³³

In the War Scroll (*IQM*) of Qumran, the eschatological deliverance of the elect is to involve both the overthrow of the "kingdom of wickedness" and "eternal succour" for the redeemed "by the might of the princely Angel of the kingdom of Michael." At that time, God will "raise up the kingdom of Michael in the midst of the gods, and the realm of Israel in the midst of all flesh" (*IQM* 17:6–8).³⁴ This mention of Michael in connection with the eschatological deliverance is similar to the reference in Dan. 12:1–4 and should also be viewed in the light of *IQM* 13:10, where reference is made to "the Prince of Light," who is appointed by God to come to the aid of the elect in the last day and who may be taken as Michael.³⁵

In all these texts, Michael is singled out from all other servants of God and given a unique status in the heavenly hierarchy. In short, the evidence shows that Michael speculation was widely known in ancient Judaism and exhibits the divine agency concept in which a particular servant of God is seen as exalted to a position next to God.³⁶ I suggest that terming Michael God's "commander in chief" and connecting the triumph of the elect with the exaltation of Michael are examples of this.

Other Chief Angel References

There are yet other texts that refer to a particular angelic being in terms that exhibit the divine agency concept. Many scholars think that Michael is the figure referred to in some of these texts. For me, the identity of the figures is here secondary to the role and status assigned to them.

We begin with a figure found in the Qumran texts, Melchizedek.³⁷ This figure appears explicitly in a fragmentary text known as *11Q Melchizedek*, where he functions as the leader and defender of the elect of the last days.³⁸ The elect are described as the "men of the lot of Melchizedek," and we are told that he will "restore them and proclaim liberty to them,

relieving them [of the burden] of all their iniquities." This Melchizedek is to "exact the vengeance of El's [God's] judgments" and will protect and rescue the elect from "the hand of Belial" (2:4–25).³⁹ The parallel with the function of Michael in Dan. 12:1 and our other texts makes the widely held identification of Michael and Melchizedek a reasonable conclusion.

In the same passage, *11Q Melchizedek* (2:9–11) makes reference to Ps. 82:1–2, "God ('*elôhim*) has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment" (RSV), as a prediction of Melchizedek's eschatological activity. That is, in a passage where God is more often seen as the one referred to, the writer of *11Q Melchizedek* sees Melchizedek as the '*elôhim* who will arise. And Psalm 82 is only one of several passages to which the writer of *11Q Melchizedek* refers (e.g., Isa. 61:1–3; 49:8; Dan. 9:25) to give biblical support for what he says about the eschatological actions of this heavenly Melchizedek.

This text is further evidence that a heavenly figure referred to sometimes as Michael and other times as Melchizedek functioned in the thinking of the Qumran sect as God's chief agent or vizier. Further, this figure was so highly exalted and so closely identified with divine purposes that the community could see him referred to in quite exalted terms such as "*Elohim*" and in passages where one could more easily see God himself as the referent.⁴⁰ It may be that seeing Melchizedek as the one referred to in Ps. 82:1–2 arose from the identification of Melchizedek with Michael and reflects speculation on the meaning of Michael's name in Hebrew ("Who is like God [*El*]?"). Whatever the origin of such interpretation of the psalm, it is a remarkable development. Here it is sufficient to observe that the references to this Melchizedek in Qumran speculation are further support for the conclusion that the concept of divine agency involving a chief agent or vizier was a familiar part of ancient Jewish religious tradition.

Another example of principal angel interest in ancient Judaism may be detected in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.⁴¹ After stories of Abraham's conflict with his idolatrous father in Mesopotamia (chaps. 1–8), there follows a longer apocalyptic section, which describes God's self-revelation and his purposes (chaps. 9–32). After God speaks to Abraham from heaven (chap. 9), God commands a figure named Yahoel: "Through the mediation of my ineffable name, consecrate this man for me and strengthen him against his trembling" (10:3–4). This figure's name seems to be an allusion to, and a combination of, well-known Hebrew terms for God, *Yahweh* and *El*.⁴² Further, the angel then describes himself as empowered by God's "ineffable name in me" to exercise impressive

authority, including control over the "living creatures" who surround God's throne and also over "Leviathan" (10:8-17; and cf. 18:1-12). The angel concludes by saying that he is appointed by God to be "with you [Abraham] and with the generation which is predestined (to be born) from you" (10:17).

That he is indwelt by God's "name" seems to derive from Exod. 23:20-21, where God promises to send an angel to lead Israel to the place prepared for them, and warns the Israelites not to rebel against this angel, "for my name is in him." Given the enormous significance of the name of God in ancient Jewish tradition, the description of this Yahoel as indwelt by God's name suggests that this figure has been given exceptional status in God's hierarchy, perhaps superior to all but God himself.⁴³

Note also the description of this Yahoel in 11:1-4: His body is like sapphire, his face like chrysolite, "and the hair of his head like snow." He wears some sort of headdress (a priestly turban?), "its look that of a rainbow," and he is attired in purple garments, with a golden staff in his right hand. Some of these details remind us of the visions recounted in Ezekiel (1:26-28) and Daniel (7:9; 10:5-6), although there is no exact duplication of any of the biblical visions. Rather than identifying Yahoel directly as any of the figures in these biblical passages, the writer may have intended to draw a more general comparison between Yahoel and the biblical figures.

Two details of the description of Yahoel are important: His hair is "like snow" and he holds a golden staff (or scepter) in his right hand. The first detail recalls the description of God in Dan. 7:9 and may be an attempt to portray graphically Yahoel's status as second in command to God, which he holds by virtue of being indwelt by God's name. The golden staff, a detail not drawn from any biblical vision, also seems to signify Yahoel's divinely appointed authority.⁴⁴

The net effect of this description is to suggest that here we have yet another important example of divine agency speculation. If, as most scholars hold, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* reflects early Jewish tradition, then in Yahoel we have an additional principal angel seen by ancient Jews as God's vizier or chief agent.

There are still other examples of this divine agency conception. For example, in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* we encounter Eremiel (6:11-15), whose appearance is so glorious as to cause the seer to mistake him at first for God.⁴⁵ This angel's face shines "like the rays of the sun in its glory." He wears what looks like "a golden girdle . . . upon his breast" and his feet "were like bronze which is melted in a fire." These details

probably describe an awesome being and evoke a general comparison with the biblical visions of heavenly beings. As to this angel's status and role in heaven, we are told only that he is "over the abyss and Hades." It is therefore not clear that the writer saw Eremiel as God's chief angel, but the description of the angel's appearance and its effect upon the seer certainly suggest a being of great heavenly status.

Another example appears in *Joseph and Asenath*, a document that probably originated among Greek-speaking Jews sometime between 100 B.C.E. and 150 C.E.⁴⁶ After recounting the meeting of Joseph and Asenath, the Egyptian girl he eventually marries (chaps. 1-9), we read of Asenath's repentance of her pagan religion (chaps. 10-13). Then a heavenly being appears who brings assurance of her acceptance before God (chaps. 14-17). This being is manlike in form, but his face is "like lightning and his eyes like sunshine," with hair "like a flame of fire." His hands and feet shoot forth sparks and are "like iron shining forth from a fire" (14:9-10). He describes himself as "the chief of the house of the Lord and commander of the whole host of the Most High" (14:8). Like Joseph, this angel wears a robe and crown and carries a "royal staff" (14:9); apparently he holds a position in heaven like that of the biblical Joseph in Egypt, "second only to the supreme ruler."⁴⁷

When Asenath attempts to obtain the name of this angel "in order that I may praise and glorify you for ever" (15:11-12), he refuses to supply it. The angel does, however, indicate that his name is written in "the book of the Most High" and that it appears there "before all (the others)," because he is "chief of the house of the Most High." In the angel's refusal to cooperate with Asenath's desire to offer him cultic devotion, we probably have a reflection of the Jewish view that God alone is to receive such attention. But at the same time the treatment of the angel in this document is also another example of divine agency speculation in ancient Jewish monotheism. It may very well be that this figure is in fact Michael, as C. Burchard insists, but for our purposes the identity of the angel is less important than the status he holds.⁴⁸ Whatever the angel's name, his self-description makes it clear that he is the vizier or chief servant of God.

Summary. Various texts reflecting ancient Jewish tradition present a chief angel in the role of God's chief servant and describe this figure in remarkable ways. Perhaps most striking are the angel Yahoel, in whom the name of God dwells, and the heavenly Melchizedek who is identified as the Elohim of Psalm 82. This shows that ancient Judaism embraced the idea that God had a particular angel more exalted than all others, whose

authority and status made him second only to God and who bore some measure of divine glory.

It is this sort of angel figure that is relevant for investigating the accommodation of the exalted Jesus in earliest Christianity. The principal angel figure in the texts mentioned here is not simply an angel. He functions in a way that sets him above all other angels. At least in some texts this figure seems to be something like God's vizier who acts for God and with full authority exercises the power of his name. That is, the principal angel figure in these texts holds a position next to God that resembles in interesting ways the status assigned to the risen Jesus in early Christian tradition. For me, then, the key question is not whether the exalted Jesus was seen by early Christians as an angel. Rather, the question is whether their understanding of the position given to him at his exaltation drew upon the sort of principal angel speculation described here. I propose the view that the principal angel speculation and other types of divine agency thinking I have surveyed provided the earliest Christians with a basic scheme for accommodating the resurrected Christ next to God without having to depart from their monotheistic tradition.

At the same time, it appears that early Christian devotion acquired a distinctive binitarian shape in comparison with known Jewish piety of the time. It also appears that the Christian inclusion of the exalted Jesus in their devotional life represented a distinctive mutation in ancient Jewish monotheistic tradition. Before turning to this matter, however, we must address the question of whether the interest in principal angels indicates that ancient Jewish religion had already experienced a significant mutation in its monotheistic tradition.

CHIEF ANGELS AND GOD

The texts already cited show that many ancient Jews were able to accommodate a principal angel who had close associations with God.⁴⁹ In view of the way this figure is described, we may wonder what was intended by the interest shown in such beings and whether this interest represented a significant change in the characteristic emphasis in ancient Judaism upon the uniqueness of God.

In my discussion (chap. 1) of claims that the worship of angels was a characteristic of ancient Judaism of the Greco-Roman period, I showed that such views are not well founded and that the evidence we have of ancient Jewish piety suggests strongly that it was monotheistic in nature, reserving worship for God alone. The notion that ancient Jewish piety experienced God as distant was discredited because pious Jews of the

Greco-Roman period thought of God as being concerned with them and as directly accessible to them through their prayers and devotion. Their interest in angels did not represent an erosion of monotheistic devotion. Instead, their interest in God's angelic retinue probably arose from a desire to portray God as powerful, capable, and in control of all things.

This Jewish attempt to think of and portray God's royal power was influenced by the available models of earthly royal power, the great imperial regimes of that time. Hence, God was described as effecting his will by means of a great body of heavenly servants, often portrayed as a highly organized hierarchy of various ranks, such as those of a great ruler. The intent was to give vivid expression to the conviction that God was the great ruler above all others and that nothing could legitimately avoid his dominion. Perhaps this is evidence that circumstances of the time seemed to challenge faith in God's care and control. But the interest in the angelic host was an attempt to counter such a challenge with a portrayal of God as the true king of all creation. The references to principal angels appear in texts that also show a lively commitment to monotheistic piety.

One example will suffice. Recall the texts in which Michael is featured—for example, *2 Enoch*, in which Michael is described as God's *archistratig* where the uniqueness of God remains unimpaired. We are told that the righteous are those "who walk without a defect before the face of the Lord, and *who worship him only*" (*2 Enoch* 9, emphasis mine).⁵⁰ At the summit of Enoch's ascent, he enters the tenth heaven and sees God himself "on his exceedingly high throne," far above all other powers, being worshiped ceaselessly by cherubim and seraphim (*2 Enoch* 20–21). This scene, in which worship is given to God alone, in all likelihood reflects the attitude and practice of the writer and his coreligionists. Note also 33:4–10, where God insists that he created all things, that nothing can oppose him, and that "there is no other God except myself." It is significant that Michael is described as God's chief servant here, but the commitment to the uniqueness of God is intact.

Similarly, in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (10:4–17; 11:1–3), there is no confusion of Yahoel with God. Instead, Yahoel prepares Abraham for God's self-manifestation, warning him of its powerful effect (16:1–4), and he leads Abraham in the worship of God when he does appear (17:1–21). Indeed, it is significant that upon God's appearance this mighty angel joins the ranks of other creatures and servants of God in offering worship to God, the only one who receives such devotion in the book. This description of Yahoel as indwelt by the divine name is a powerful indication of the status of this angel, especially in comparison with

the rest of the heavenly retinue, but the text shows no indication that the divine name "in" Yahoel conferred upon him divinity in the sense of entitling him to cultic devotion.⁵¹

Moreover, in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* (6:11–15), "the great angel, Eremiel," of such mighty appearance as to cause the seer to mistake him at first for God, warns the seer, "Take heed. Don't worship me. I am not the Lord Almighty" (6:15). Here, when it comes to the praxis of Jewish piety, the distinction between God and any of his mighty angels is clear. Such a warning as that given by Eremiel might suggest that the writer was, for whatever reason, aware of the possible abuse of chief angel speculation. While clearly accepting chief angel tradition, the author opposed any idea that such beings should figure in the devotional life of the pious.

The evidence in *Joseph and Asenath* bears mentioning again. This figure is clearly an example of the principal angel tradition; his attire and appearance (14:9–10) with his self-descriptions (14:8; 15:12) present him as second only to God. Yet the refusal of the angel to give his name to Asenath, who wishes to "praise and glorify" him, means that this figure is not to be confused with God or given the cultic veneration due to God alone. Further, the document elsewhere makes a strong contrast between the Hebrews, who worship the one true God only, and the Egyptians with their devotions to many gods. This contrast is especially emphatic in the two soliloquies of Asenath (11:3–14, 16–18) and in her prayer of repentance (chaps. 12–13), in which she repeatedly registers her rejection of her previous worship of any god other than the Lord (11:4, 16–17; 12:5–9, 12–13; 13:11). Given this also, it is clear that *Joseph and Asenath* is further evidence of the accommodation of a principal angel second in status to God alone, together with a vital commitment to the uniqueness of God.

Note also that the Qumran texts combine strong interest in a heavenly chief agent together with a firm commitment to God alone as the proper object of cultic devotion (e.g., in the references to Michael and Melchizedek). It is perhaps even more striking, therefore, that the texts from the Qumran sect, which segregated itself from mainstream Jewish life, give no indication that any of God's angels were to receive worship, even principal angel figures such as Michael/Melchizedek.

S. F. Noll has demonstrated the prominent place of angels in the Qumran sect and the notion that God grants to the elect a close fellowship with his holy angels.⁵² In this sense, the angels were the ideal to which the community aspired, and the principal angel, the leader of God's hosts, was therefore the heavenly leader of the Qumran sect as well. But there is

no hint that the principal angel of these texts was ever an object of cultic devotion, receiving worship with God. To be sure, the Qumran sect seems to have been interested in the worship conducted by the heavenly beings, as the so-called Angel Liturgy texts show.⁵³ But this interest did not involve the inclusion of any figure except God himself as the object of worship in the liturgical practices of the group.

In short, the exalted descriptions of the principal angel figure go hand in hand with a distinction between him and God. This distinction is most evident when we look for the object of cultic devotion in the texts. Ancient Jews seem to have been surprisingly bold in the descriptive language used for the principal angel, sometimes suggestive of a deification of this being. But in the devotional life of these same ancient Jews this being was apparently not a second object of cultic devotion alongside God.

Chief Angels and the Bifurcation of God

In some recent studies the ancient Jewish interest in the principal angel figure is taken as suggesting a kind of bifurcation of the divine or an embryonic binitarianism. There are, to be sure, significant variations in the way these studies represent the principal angel tradition, and binitarianism might not describe equally well the conclusions of them all. In varying ways, however, these studies focus on the principal angel tradition as indicating an important development in ancient Jewish monotheism. I agree that the tradition is important, but I want to register my differences of emphasis and disagreements with these studies concerning the nature and meaning of this tradition.

In chapter 1 I noted that Fossum argues for a connection between the gnostic doctrine of the demiurge and Jewish speculation about the role of angels as assistants to God in creation.⁵⁴ He appears to be correct in holding that Jewish speculation about God using angelic assistants in creation can be traced back to the pre-Christian period. Philo gives evidence of this (e.g., *Opf. Mun.* 72–75). Much more relevant to my agenda is Fossum's claim that a principal angel was often seen as the personification of the name (*Yahweh*) and glory of God.⁵⁵ As we noted earlier, the principal angel is sometimes described as being indwelt by the divine name (e.g., *Apoc. Abr.* 10:3–10). Further, one of the titles that Philo accords the Logos is "the name of God," and this figure is described as holding "the eldership among the angels, their ruler as it were" (*Conf. Ling.* 146). The Logos is thus presented in a role similar to the principal angel figures of

other texts, which suggests that Philo may have drawn upon principal angel speculations in his reflections about the Logos.⁵⁶ The ancient descriptions of the principal angel are impressive. But what does this exalted language signify?

Fossum takes the indwelling of the divine name in the principal angel as meaning that this figure shared in "the divine nature," or the divine "mode of being,"⁵⁷ but he never defines clearly what he means. He also describes ancient Jews as seeking to express "the distinction and yet intimate association between God and the second power,"⁵⁸ but here too he does not elaborate beyond emphasizing that the principal angel was associated with God in the work of creation. If, however, by "divine nature" one means the creative, ruling, judging sovereignty of God, then it would be more precise to say that the principal angel, as God's chief agent or vizier, is made a major participant in the "authority" or "rule" of God, or in the exercise of God's power, indeed second only to God in some instances.

As we have noted, the principal angel, however majestic his status in comparison to all other servants of God, and however closely he is associated with the exercise of God's will, remains essentially distinct from God. When one looks at the honorific descriptions of the principal angel figures or the references to their visual appearance, similarities with God are clear and no doubt intentional. But when one investigates the relationship of principal angels and God in the realm of religious devotion, a different light is cast on the subject. That is, however much the principal angel acted as agent for God in creation, supervision of the world, and eschatological judgment, there seems to have been a reluctance to make this figure an object of cultic devotion. Although Fossum refers to the Jewish desire to maintain a distinction between God and the principal angel, his reference to the latter figure as sharing the "divine nature" seems to me to suggest a more ontological connection between God and his chief angel than the evidence of ancient Jewish devotion justifies.⁵⁹

In C. C. Rowland's discussion of Jewish principal angel tradition, we have a view of the relationship between God and his chief agent that likewise seems to me to be open to question.⁶⁰ Beginning with the visions in Ezek. 1:26–28 and 8:2–4, and then in references to God's principal angel in later apocalyptic texts, Rowland sees a process in which the divine humanlike figure on the throne in Ezek. 1:26–28 becomes separated from the throne and functions as "the agent of the divine will."⁶¹ He describes the early stages of this process as a "gradual splitting in the way the divine

functions are described."⁶² Rowland sees Ezek. 8:2–4 as a crucial passage that reveals "the separation of the form of God from the divine throne-chariot to act as quasi-angelic mediator,"⁶³ and he finds further evidence of this development in the heavenly being of Dan. 10:5–9, which represents "the beginning of a hypostatic development."⁶⁴ For Rowland, the mature form of this bifurcation of divinity may be seen in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.⁶⁵

In the light of my discussion of these passages, Rowland's intriguing suggestions require a few more comments. First, whatever the figure is in Ezek. 8:2–4, it is doubtful that this passage can support the momentous development Rowland describes. We are not told that this figure has separated from the throne mentioned in 1:26–28, nor are we shown an empty throne. As a matter of fact, in Ezek. 8:4 the seer says that he saw "the glory of the God of Israel . . . like the vision that I saw in the plain," implying a scene identical to 1:26–28 and giving no indication of the sort of "separation" or "splitting" of God's *kābôd* ("glory") from the throne such as Rowland alleges. Nor does Ezek. 10:4, where the divine glory rises from over the cherubim to go to another part of the temple, serve as evidence of the development that Rowland describes,⁶⁶ for in 10:18–19 the *kābôd* returns to the cherubim and is pictured thereafter in 11:22 in the same position.⁶⁷

I also find serious problems with Rowland's interpretation of the Yahoel figure in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*⁶⁸ as well as with Fossum's.⁶⁹ Here I will respond to their views.

Recall that "Yahoel" is a name constructed from two Hebrew terms used for God himself, *Yahweh* and *El*, and seems intended as a reflection of his special status as the angel indwelt by God's "ineffable name" (10:3–10). The latter detail, a probable allusion to Exod. 23:20–21, clearly sets the angel apart as given special, likely surpassing, authority in the administration of God's rule. This unique status is further indicated in the angel's description of his duties in 10:8–17. Yahoel is thus a very important example of the principal angel tradition and an excellent illustration of the concept of divine agency.

But Fossum and Rowland argue that Yahoel should be seen as much more than God's chief agent. Fossum suggests that the angel's name means that the figure is "a personification of the Divine Name."⁷⁰ This, however, appears to exceed the warrants of the text. Yahoel is not said to be the divine name but is indwelt by it, which is intended merely to explain the medium of his special power and authority in the heavenly

hierarchy.⁷¹ The writer is not speculating about evolution in the deity; he is only explaining the basis for Yahoel's special privileges and capabilities.

Fossum also tries to make a case for Yahoel as the "divine Glory," that is, the personification of the divine figure mentioned in Ezek. 1:26–28, a view supported by Rowland as well.⁷² The reasons offered for this view have to do with two things: the visual description of Yahoel in 11:1–4 and the description of the theophany in chaps. 17–19.

First we will deal with the description of Yahoel. There are indirect and direct allusions to visions of heavenly figures in Ezekiel and Daniel, but these should not be exaggerated. The only direct connections with biblical theophanies are the descriptions of Yahoel's hair as "like snow" (cf. the vision of the "ancient of days" [Dan. 7:9] whose hair was "like pure wool") and the reference to a rainbowlike head covering (see the rainbowlike effect in Ezek. 1:26–28). Careful comparison, however, will show that in other details the description of Yahoel in *Apocalypse of Abraham* 11 is only vaguely similar to the visions in Ezek. 1:26–28 and Dan. 7:9–10; 10:5–9. Indeed, as noted earlier, the probable familiarity of the writer with these biblical passages makes all the more interesting his failure to model the description of Yahoel more closely after the descriptions of God. The two direct similarities we notice in Yahoel's appearance show that the writer was capable of borrowing details when he wished, but even here the similarities with the biblical visions are not exact. That the writer did not appropriate more exactly the biblical imagery in his description of Yahoel is surely important and may well indicate that no full identification of Yahoel and God or his "glory" was intended.

Yahoel's white hair and his rainbowlike headdress may instead be intended to suggest a limited similarity between him and God, just enough to portray him as the divine vizier. Over against Rowland's suggestion that the description of Yahoel reflects the remnants of the idea that the divine *kābôd* became a personalized agent of God,⁷³ I suggest that we here have a creative attempt to portray the visual majesty accorded to the angel chosen by God as his chief agent.

As for the theophany scene in *Apocalypse of Abraham* 17–19, here again there is little justification for the idea that Yahoel represents some sort of separation of the divine figure from the throne. Both Rowland and Fossum make too much of the fact that in 18:1–5 there is no explicit description of a figure on the divine throne.⁷⁴ To take the absence of a description of a figure on the throne as "the lack of any figure on the throne" is simply a non sequitur.⁷⁵

The throne is not said to be empty. Granted, the author does not portray God in human form, and instead describes the divine manifestation as fire (17:1; 18:1–4, 13–14; 19:1). But it must be noted that in 16:3–4 Yahoel tells Abraham that "the Eternal One" will come toward them, and continues, "You will not look at him himself." If the seer could not look directly upon God, how could he be expected to give a description of him? Note that the author does not engage in anthropomorphic description of God such as in Ezek. 1:26–28 (a reluctance shown also by the author of Revelation 4), but this is hardly evidence of an empty divine throne. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* gives no physical description of God beyond the traditional theophanic image of fire, but the author refers to a voice coming from the divine fire above the throne (17:1; 18:1–3; 19:1), suggesting that the throne is occupied, although no description is given of the one speaking.

Further reason to reject the notion that the *Apocalypse of Abraham* reflects a supposed separation of the divine figure from the throne is suggested in 19:1–5. Here the voice from the throne tells Abraham to note that "on no single expanse is there any other but the one whom you have searched for or who has loved you." After looking about, Abraham says, "I saw no one else there." This emphasis upon the singularity of the deity seems difficult to reconcile with the claim that the author saw Yahoel as a second divine being, perhaps the embodiment of the divine "glory" or the divine figure removed from the throne.

This investigation of recent claims about a bifurcation of the deity in pre-Christian Jewish tradition leads me to the conclusion that such a view is not clearly supported by the data.⁷⁶ The principal angel figure is not the reflection of some sort of splitting off of the glory of God or the divine occupant of the throne pictured in Ezek. 1:26–28. Rather, this figure is one major type of divine agency tradition, in which one of God's servants is portrayed as given a unique status in the administration of God's rule. In this chapter I have demonstrated that ancient Jews were comfortable with the idea that God had created or elevated a particular figure (e.g., a heavenly being) to act as his chief agent or vizier.

The pattern of ancient imperial regimes, which influenced the development of the divine agency tradition, required that the figure holding the position of God's vizier should be described in majestic terms. It also apparently seemed fitting that, in view of this figure's close relationship to God, he should be portrayed as somewhat visually similar to his master. Nevertheless the idea that God might appoint some figure to a unique participation in his rule does not seem to have led to the conclusion that

this figure is truly "divine." This is apparent, as noted previously, when we investigate the characteristic devotional life of ancient Jews in the surviving evidence. Therefore we should avoid making too much out of the exalted descriptions of God's chief agent, even when he is referred to as being indwelt by the divine name.

SUMMARY

We have observed that interest in principal angels did not represent a weakening or significant modification of Jewish monotheistic faith and devotion. I have suggested that the references to a principal angel reflect one, perhaps the original, type of divine agency speculation. As with other types of divine agency speculation (see chaps. 2–3), interest in God's principal angel was characteristically accommodated by Jews with a lively commitment to the uniqueness of God.

Just as ancient Jews described God's supreme power and significance by employing the model of the imperial regimes of their time, so they no doubt found it appropriate to allow for the position of the grand vizier, the head of the imperial retinue, which is exactly the role of the principal angel. To be sure, there were already elements in the Israelite tradition that were useful in the development of this conception (e.g., the references to the angel indwelt by God's name [Exod. 23:20–21] and the "commander of the army of the Lord" [Josh. 5:13–15]). Thus, just as emphasis upon the heavenly hierarchy of angels was an attempt to portray the majesty of God and could be supported from Old Testament texts, the same was true of the interest in the principal angel.

But the chief angel was more than just an appropriate figure in the heavenly court with justification in earlier tradition. The religious meaning of the figure is indicated partly by the function he plays in various texts. Where the chief angel is Michael (e.g., *T. Abr.* 1:4–5; *Adam and Eve* 14:1–2), who is characteristically also the angel assigned to Israel, the point is that the greatest of God's heavenly servants is the one who has a special responsibility for Israel (cf. Dan. 12:1). In texts where the chief angel bears some other name, it still seems that this figure was intended as strong encouragement to the Jewish readers. Great power that he is, this angel characteristically delivers a revelation to some Old Testament worthy or guides him through the heavenly strata to a vision of the divine and, sometimes, to a heavenly exaltation. That is, God's chief servant, second only to God in heavenly authority, is ordered by God to act as the personal guide of a patriarchal figure, whose vision, ascent, and exalta-

tion assure and prefigure the hope of the elect. The references to Melchizedek (probably another title for Michael) in the Qumran texts describe God's chief agent acting as personal representative of God in bringing eschatological salvation to the elect.

That God is pictured as employing a chief agent to deliver his message, to guide the seer, or to bring eschatological deliverance indicates a more sophisticated view of God's operations than would be conveyed if God were portrayed as doing all these jobs himself. But if it seemed more appropriate for God, as king above all kings, to employ his retinue in the execution of his will, nevertheless it is significant that the one who appears is none less than God's chief agent or vizier, the highest-ranking member of the heavenly hierarchy. This was in all likelihood intended to give greater weight to the message or vision conveyed. Further, since the elect were probably expected to see in the seer's experience an indication of their own significance (see chap. 3), that God assigned the highest-ranking member of the heavenly court to communicate with the seer would have communicated powerfully the special status of the elect.

Principal angel speculation was thus probably an important aspect of the religious thought of many ancient Jews. Segal has shown from rabbinic evidence of the second century C.E. and later that principal angel speculation came to be viewed with great suspicion, primarily because of the interest taken in this sort of figure by those whom the rabbis deemed "heretics" (*minim*), prominent among whom were Christians and Gnostics.⁷⁷ But Segal also notes that both within and outside rabbinic groups belief in a principal angel was not in itself a problematic issue. Rather, the question was whether the religious significance assigned to the figure in certain groups would have been seen by the rabbis as "compromising monotheism."⁷⁸ After surveying the roles characteristically assigned to the principal angel in literature reflecting the beliefs of Jewish sects of the first century C.E. and earlier, he concludes that it is difficult to show that these traditions were "heretical." That is, there is little indication that in pre-Christian Judaism principal angels "were considered independent enough to provide definite targets for the 'two powers' polemic" of the early rabbinic tradition.⁷⁹

But the more fundamental idea that God has a "chief agent," whether principal angel, exalted patriarch, or some divine attribute described in personified language, was nevertheless an important development. In its various forms, this idea not only bore the religious meanings suggested in this chapter and in earlier ones but it also may have been influential in the

development of other religious ideas within Gnosticism and Christianity.

Having now surveyed the three basic types of divine agency tradition in ancient Judaism, we are in a position to deal with the question of whether this tradition may have assisted the first Christians in their attempt to understand the exaltation of Jesus to heavenly authority next to God.

5

The Early Christian Mutation

In the preceding chapters we have been concerned with describing the sort of resources in the Jewish tradition that were available to help the first Christians accommodate conceptually the exaltation of Jesus next to God. Here we shall first examine early Christian evidence indicating that the exalted Jesus was understood along the lines of the Jewish divine agency tradition. Then we will attempt to characterize the nature of the distinctive mutation in this divine agency tradition and in the Jewish monotheistic devotion characteristic of early Christianity.

JESUS AS GOD'S CHIEF AGENT

As indicated in the Introduction, the connection of early christological thought to the Jewish background is a much studied matter. Usually, however, scholars have investigated the background of particular examples of early Christology or specific components of the body of christological doctrine found in the New Testament. For example, W. A. Meeks illuminated the Jewish background of the use of Moses tradition in the Christology of the Gospel of John.¹ Or there is J. D. G. Dunn's discussion of the background of the early Christian doctrine of the preexistence of Christ.²

Our interest here, however, is the broader and more fundamental matter of the basic early Christian conviction that the crucified Jesus had been exalted to a position of heavenly glory. This basic conviction preceded and underlay all the titles given to Jesus in the early churches, all the christological emphases reflected in the various books of the New Testament, and all the doctrines such as the preexistence of Christ or his eschatological return (*parousia*). I contend that the formation of this ini-