

The Hebrew Corner

Frequently we find in translations of the Tanach into English, that a single Hebrew word is translated into multiple renderings. Such is the case for the Hebrew word malach (מַלְאָךְ, mah-LAHCH), which may be translated as messenger or angel. In fact an entire book of the Tanach is named from the word malach, the book of Malachi, meaning “my messenger.” Malachi is presumed to have been written by a prophet of that name, although we have no details of his genealogy in the Tanach.

Often the word malach is used to refer to human messengers. Take for example, this passage (1 Samuel 6:19-21):

“And he smote the men of Bethshemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD, even he smote of the people fifty thousand and threescore and ten men: and the people lamented, because the LORD had smitten many of the people with a great slaughter. And the men of Bethshemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God? and to whom shall he go up from us? And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kirjathjearim, saying, The Philistines have brought again the ark of the LORD; come ye down, and fetch it up to you. ”

Here the the plural of the word malach, translated as messengers, is used to refer to people from Bethshemesh who were sent to bring a message concerning the ark of the covenant to the people of Kirjathjearim. This incident happened in the time of the judges, a time in which the people of Israel were not instructed in the Torah,

so it is clear that the people of Bethshemesh had no idea how to properly care for the ark. Reading on to 1 Samuel 7, it appears that the people of Kirjathjearim knew that the house of Abinadab had the instruction necessary to care for the ark, and that Eleazar, a son of Abinadab, needed to be sanctified prior to guarding the ark.

In some cases, malach represents a spiritual being, such as in this passage (Psalm 34:4-7):

“I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. They looked unto him, and were lightened: and their faces were not ashamed. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.”

Here malach is translated as angel, specifically a spirit sent to protect and deliver all those who trust in God for help in time of need, and hold him in high regard. Angels are messengers of God, sometimes visibly revealed to people, and sometimes not visible, but nonetheless work to carry out God's plan. In fact, a Hebrew word from the same root, m'lacha (מלאכה, muh-lah-CHAH), means occupation or work.

In one passage, we see both usages of malach (Genesis 32:1-3):

“And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's host: and he called the name of that place Mahanaim. And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother unto the land of Seir, the country of Edom.”

“Angels of God” is a translation of malkay elohim (מלאכי אלהים, mahl-

KAY eh-loh-heem), the spirits sent to meet Jacob. Closely following this, messengers, the translation of malachim (מלאכים, mahl-ah-CHEEM), the plural of malach, appears in the text. In this instance, people are selected from Jacob's camp to be emissaries to Esau's camp.

Jesus (Yeshua), in a chapter of Isaiah where he is portrayed as God's servant, is also referred to as a messenger (Isaiah 42:19):

“Who is blind, but my servant? or deaf, as my messenger that I sent? who is blind as he that is perfect, and blind as the LORD's servant? “

The form of malach used here, translated as “my messenger,” is malachi (מלאכי, mahl-ah-CHAI), the same as the name of the book of Malachi.

May you have a blessed Christmas, made possible by God's sending of a messenger, his son Jesus our Yeshua, the prince of peace.