

Exodus 23:20-23

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The last section of the Book of the Covenant serves as its conclusion. Though it contains further emphasis on obedience, it concentrates on what the LORD promised to do on Israel's behalf. This is typical of Suzerainty treaties at the time. Specifically, the LORD promised an "angel" to guide them to the Promised Land and to defeat their enemies along the way if they would obey God's voice.

Verses 20 – 23 deal with the *angel* the LORD sent and what this *angel* was going to do. The section starts with *Behold* in order to bring special attention to what was said. The LORD promises to *send an angel before* Israel (v. 20). The identity of the *angel* has been much discussed. The Hebrew word translated *angel* is "mal'āk" and it means "messenger." About half the time the context of this word indicates that the "mal'āk" is a human, in which case translators choose to render the word as "messenger" or "ambassador." In this case, the "mal'āk" is certainly not a human, because of the promise that the angel ("mal'āk") would *guard you along the way and will bring you into the place which I have prepared*. No human could perform that feat.

Thus, this promised "mal'āk" is a spiritual being, like the angel Gabriel or Michael. Another possibility is that the "mal'āk" was the pre-incarnate Christ (Genesis 16:9 – 11; Exodus 14:19; Joshua 5:13 – 15). This could be supported by the statement in v. 21 that if Israel rebels against the "mal'āk", *he will not pardon your transgression*. It is unlikely that an ordinary *angel* could *pardon transgression*, but Jesus, the second person of the Trinity could. However, the immediate context is speaking of being obedient to the angel's *voice*; and *not* being *rebellious toward him*. So the statement could mean that the *angel* would not put up with rebellion, and would stop protecting them and leading them to the Promised Land if they disobeyed his *voice*.

The *angel* was sent *before* the people. Similar wording is used to describe John the Baptist in Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2 – 3, and Luke 7:27. The idea is to prepare the way.

The *angel* had two tasks. He was to both *guard Israel along the way and to bring them into the place which I have prepared*, the *place* being the Promised Land of Canaan. In other words, he (or He) would protect the Israelites on the way to Canaan and bring them safely into the land.

But the people had obligations to this angel. First, they were to be on their *guard before him and obey his voice* (v. 21), meaning they were to be very careful to heed the direction of the *angel*, and not let any outside influence lead them into disobeying the word of the LORD. They were also not to *be rebellious toward him*. Unfortunately, they were constantly in rebellion against their LORD (Exodus 32 – 34, often in Numbers). If, however, they were rebellious and disobedient, an ominous promise was given—the angel would *not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him*. This is likely a way to say: "This provision will not be waived." God is clear that if they don't obey, then they will not receive this blessing. Sadly, that is exactly what happened to this generation.

In vv. 22 – 23, the LORD promised victory if the Israelites obeyed the angel. The condition was for them to *truly obey his voice and do all that I say* (v. 22). The result would be that the almighty LORD would be on their side and *be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries*. If anyone opposes the Israelites on the way to Canaan, the LORD would fight for them and protect them. And when they reached the Promised Land, the LORD’s *angel will go before you and bring you in to the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them* (v. 23).

The angel would defeat the peoples currently living in the Promised Land and ensure victory for Israel. The second generation of Israel will experience this, as presented in the book of Joshua. In Joshua 5, someone who looks like a man appears to Joshua, stating that he is the captain of the LORD’s army, and that Joshua was to remove his sandals because the ground where they stood was holy (Joshua 5:13-15). This is extremely similar to when Moses first encountered God, who spoke to him through a burning bush, and commanded him to remove his sandals, for the ground was holy (Exodus 3:2-5). The angel of the LORD was present then, too, “the angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush.” So, it is possible that the captain of the LORD’s army who appeared to Joshua is the same angel of the LORD who God promised would defeat Israel’s enemies. Indeed, this captain of the LORD’s army appears just before Israel wins its first battle, conquering the city of Jericho by miraculous circumstances. God does indeed fight for Israel, but He will ask the people to engage and fight as well, and trust God to fight for them. Obedience and engagement is a necessary component of experiencing the covenant blessing.

Six nations occupying the land of Canaan were to be defeated by Israel’s Suzerain (Ruler) Yahweh. The *Amorites* appeared as a group that covered five major kingdoms in the Ancient Near East: Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon, according to Joshua 10:5. The *Hittites* may have been the descendants of Canaan through Heth according to Genesis 10:15. They lived around Hebron (Genesis 23:1-20). The *Perizzites* were a group of people who lived in unwalled suburbs both east and west of the Jordan. The mention of this group of people extends from the time of Abraham (Genesis 13:7) to the postexilic times (Ezra 9:1). The *Canaanites* lived “by the sea and by the side of the Jordan” (Numbers 13:29). The *Hivites* (or Horites) were the peoples of Shechem in the days of Jacob (Genesis 34:2). Later, during the conquest by Joshua, they constituted the population of Gibeon (Joshua 9:7). The *Jebusites* were the occupants of the region later associated with the tribe of Benjamin, especially the city of Jerusalem (Joshua 15:63). These six nations were to be defeated because they were not part of God’s covenant.

Biblical Text:

²⁰ **“Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.”**²¹ **Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him.**²² **But if you truly obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.**²³ **For My angel will go before you and bring you in to *the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them.***

