

Understanding the Deific Presence in Joshua 5:13-15

A Critical Engagement with the Septuagint's Erroneous Conclusion about the Identity of the Commander of the Lord's Army



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ABSTRACT: *Christians in both historical and contemporary contexts can have a tendency to deemphasize what they theologically do not understand and aggrandize what is theologically myopic to them. In Christian biblical and theological interpretation, the interpreter must choose to emphasize what the author, and in turn God, intended, rather than allowing a personal bias of ignorance or complacency to dictate any or all of their interpretative method. This paper looks at Joshua 5:13-15 in which this dynamic of under, over, and proper emphasis is exhibited through the three most dominant perspectives of thought on the central theological issue of the text. This central issue is the identity of the "Commander of the Lord's Army." The writers of the Septuagint erroneously believe and present the Commander as non-deific. They deemphasize the Commander's deific nature based off a fear that the passage may encourage angelic worship. Some modern scholars advocate for the Commander's deific status as they believe He is the pre incarnate Christ. This improvident perspective provides an overemphasis on Christocentric implications not intended by the text. Richard Hess aptly presents the Commander as the deific manifestation of the divine presence of God based off the appropriate contextual implications.*

KEYWORDS: *Joshua 5:13-15, Theophany, Christophany, Septuagint, Pre-incarnate Christ, Commander of the Lord's Army, Angel of the Lord.*

Introduction

Christians of all eras have had a tendency to discount what they perceive as theologically nugatory and overemphasize what they are theologically accustomed to. This incongruity in providing a properly balanced and informed perspective to their biblical exegesis or theological interpretation has at times impeded the advancement of Christian understanding. One such typification of this issue is the historical Septuagint and contemporary evangelical interpretive understanding of the deific status of the Commander of the Lord's army in Joshua 5:13-15.

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Thesis

The Septuagint's implied belief that the Commander of the Lord's army in Joshua 5:13-15 is a non-deific being is erroneous. Richard Hess, a contemporary Old Testament Scholar, alternatively and aptly supplies three baseline reasons for this commander being a manifestation of the divine presence of God. Hess highlights the Commander's acceptance of worship, exuding of God's holy presence, and indistinction from God. This essay will follow and expand upon Hess' reasoning that this Commander is a manifestation of God's divine presence. In showcasing the clearly deific presence of God, this article also seeks to provide a balanced understanding of this presence that does not permit Christological eisegesis.

Three Perspectives

In the exploration of the LXX's inaccurate identification of the Commander of the Lord's army, it is pertinent to know the three main perspectives that exist on the issue of who this Commander is. The first perspective is an angel with a special commission, the second is the preincarnate Christ, and the last is a descent of God Himself into visibility. The LXX erroneously aligns with the first view, the second perspective is a likely outcome of Christological overemphasis, and the third suitably aligns with scholars such as Hess' view.

Reasonings for a Non-Deific Commander

Maligned Intentions

A variety of sources proffer that the Commander of the Lord's army is simply an angelic messenger. Part of this belief arises from the LXX's attempt through their translative work at the suppression of Joshua's worship of this Commander. They were uncomfortable with the possible inference of angelic worship, and so purposely changed the text.² Thereafter it is appropriate to infer that they believed this commander was merely an angel who was unworthy of worship.³

Yaacov Zuelos notes that a variety of Targumic source material was maligned on account of a similar issue. Its creators inserted the word "angel" into texts where it did not actually appear in the original text and that is what happened in their rendition and discussion of Joshua 5:13-15.⁴ Yaacov shares further that the "Targumists used the addition as a literary device to solve textual problems, fill gaps in the storyline, and bypass theological issues, as well as a stratagem in anti-Christian polemics."⁵ The Targumist's, like the LXX's translators, had adverse reasoning for their typification of the Commander of the Lord's army as a non-deific angelic messenger.

Theological Rationale

² Jerome F. D. Creach, *Joshua: Interpretation: A Biblical commentary for teaching and preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Know Press, 2003), 61.

³ Alberto Soggin, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1972), 77-78.

⁴ Yaacov Zuelos, "The 'Angel Sent before the Lord' in Targum Joshua 5,14." *Biblica* 96 (2): 161-78. (2019), 161-162. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=420be646-22f0-3a58-ac5d-eea0aa0ea097>. Zuelos shares here that his study uncovered 42 instances where the Targumic sources inserted "angel" into their translation of a biblical story.

⁵ Zuelos, *Angel sent before the Lord*, 162.

Those like the Greek translators of the LXX that support the claim of a primarily angelic encounter have two notably theological reasons for their belief. The first is that the word in Joshua that is used in verse 14 to refer to the commander is simply the widely applied “lord” rather than the exclusive deific title “YHWH.”⁶ The second is the use of “worship” in verse 14 for Joshua’s response to the angel.⁷ One such as Woudstra suggests that this word “worship” by itself is not an indication of deity, as this type of worship can appropriately take place under the Old Covenant law for more than just God.⁸ These two reasonings can be used to suggest a lack of divinity in the Commander fall short in light of his clearly deific rendition in the passage, as will be discussed later.

Christological Overemphasis

In this distinction of the divine presence in Joshua 5:13-15 some commentators have overemphasized that this encounter may be or is a Christophany.⁹ The original audience of the story would not have differentiated sharply between God and the herald described in Joshua 5:15.¹⁰ In other words, there was no textually presented reason to make the trinitarian distinction between Father and Son here. Without that distinction the resultant claim to a Christophany is inappropriately applied. One also observes that the New Testament “certainly is not loath to identify Jesus Christ with Old Testament figures (as King and Messiah, as Priest, as the “Word” of God Incarnate).”¹¹ It is significant then that the New Testament never makes this link of identification with the figure described in Joshua 5:13-15.¹² In light of this, it is likely that Christ is only as present as is required equally of the other members of the Trinity for the circumstance to qualify as being the manifest attendance of God.

The Presence of God

Hess correctly shares three main points that give evidence to the Commander of the Lord’s army being a “manifestation of the divine presence, and therefore more than an angelic visitation.”¹³ The first is that Joshua worships a figure who accepts his worship.¹⁴ Harris points out that the implication from Joshua physically prostrating himself before this being is that this was worship intended for God.¹⁵ The other aspect is that this worship was accepted by the being. Revelation 19:10 and 22:8-9 shows that this worship would not have been accepted by another servant of God if it was not a manifestation of the divine presence of God Himself.

⁶ Nathan J. Chambers, “Reading Joshua with Augustine and Sommer: Two Frameworks for Interpreting Theophany Narratives.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43 (3): 273–83, (2019), 274. doi:10.1177/0309089218772571.

⁷ The NIV translates the word “worship” in this as “reverence” presumably to solve this issue of angel worship as well.

⁸ Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 105.

⁹ John A. Huffman Jr., *The Communicator’s Commentary: Joshua* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 105; Robert Smith Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Joshua*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Brentwood, TN: Holman Reference, 2023), 75, 92.

¹⁰ Creach, *Joshua*, 61.

¹¹ Howard Jr., *Joshua*, 160.

¹² Howard Jr., *Joshua*, 160.

¹³ Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 140.

¹⁴ Hess, *Joshua*, 140.

¹⁵ J. Gordon Harris, “Joshua,” in *New international Biblical Commentary: Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 43.

In Revelation John falls down to worship an angel in response to the revelatory insights he had shared with him. The angel's near appalled reaction in both cases is to emphatically say "Don't do that!" Patterson notes that the angel forbids this worship, as "God is the only appropriate object of worship" and that the angel himself is "also to worship God."¹⁶ These verses make it unmistakable that the worship of what is distinctly angelic is not acceptable. In turn this Commander of the Lord's army must in some way embody the deific presence of God for both Joshua and the Commander to appropriate the occurrence of deific worship.

The second point is that the holiness alluded to in Joshua 5:15 is attributed to the divine presence throughout the Bible.¹⁷ Recent commentators near unanimously share that this encounter is meant to act as a typification of Joshua as the new Moses. This comes from the close parallels of this verse to the report of the call of Moses to be the leader of the Israelites in Exodus 3 and the exact quotation of Exodus 3:5 in Joshua 5:15.¹⁸ The divine presence of God in the burning bush is clear, as God states that He, in the bush, is "I Am."¹⁹ This parallel is meant to elevate Joshua with a divine sanction of leadership parallel to that of His predecessor.²⁰ It would make little sense for Joshua to be sent a non-deific angelic messenger instead of also receiving an interaction with the divine presence of God. If one is to compare this scene from Joshua to other God-based commissioning scenes in the Bible such as Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1, one finds that "the demonstration of God's holiness precedes the charge given."²¹ In each case those commissioned encounter the holy presence of God.

The third point is that the narrative blends the figure of the Commander of the army of the Lord with God Himself.²² Hess wisely shares that the patriarchal narratives such as Genesis 18 and 22 are like Exodus 3:2-5 in that they evaporate the "distinctions between the messenger (angel) of the LORD and the LORD himself..."²³ This evaporation in the circumstance of Joshua 5 comes from the Hebrew word "שָׂרֵי־צְבָאָה" in verse 15 that the NIV translates as "commander." This word is potent with meaning, and has even led to this title being translated as "The prince of the host of Yahweh."²⁴ Butler notes that this word and title is likely meant to allude to the messenger of Yahweh who appears fifty-eight times in the Old Testament.²⁵ Butler goes on to note that "seeing the messenger can be equated with seeing God" on the basis of Judges 13:22.²⁶ For this reason it would be most appropriate to refer to the theophanic figure described here as "The Angel of the Lord."²⁷ This being described in Joshua

¹⁶ Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 39, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 345, 380.

¹⁷ Hess, *Joshua*, 140.

¹⁸ J. Maxwell Miller & Gene M. Tucker, *The Book of Joshua: The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible* (Cambridge, EN: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 49-50.

¹⁹ Exo. 3:14, NIV. God also gives further qualifiers to His specific presence and its divinity in verse 15. He even repeats the qualifiers in verse 16 and says to Moses to say that the divine God "appeared to me." This clearly alludes to a divine rather than exclusively angelic presence.

²⁰ Miller & Tucker, *The Book of Joshua*, 50.

²¹ Hess, *Joshua*, 140; Chambers, *Reading Joshua with Augustine and Sommer*, 274-275; Sarah Lebar Hall, *Conquering Character: The Characterization of Joshua in Joshua 1-11*, LHB/OTS 512 (2010), 79-90. Chamber's suggests Sarah Hall's compelling syntactical and literary argument for Joshua 6:2-5 being a continuation of Joshua 5:13-15. If her argument is accepted the passage more cleanly parallels God's other commissioning scenes and adds further weight to the blending of the Commander and God Himself, as Joshua 6:2 begins with "Then the Lord said to Joshua."

²² Hess, *Joshua*, 140.

²³ Hess, *Joshua*, 140.

²⁴ Trent C. Butler, *Joshua: Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 7* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 54, 61.

²⁵ Butler, *Joshua*, 61. Butler presents Judges 6:11 as an example of one of these appearances.

²⁶ Butler, *Joshua*, 61.

²⁷ Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, 105. Note that this is a uniquely deific Angelic Figure and not a simple non-deific angelic messenger.

5:13-15 is “a self-manifestation of Yahweh in a form that would communicate his immanence and direct concern to those to whom he ministered.”²⁸

Conclusion

The translators who made the LXX shy away from including Joshua’s worship of the Commander of the Lord’s army in Joshua 5:13-15 due to their personal belief in the non-deific status of this Being. Where the Greek translators falsely consigned the Commander to a non-deific status, the Christian interpreter should be slow to unsuitably assign an exclusively Christological status to this Angel of the Lord. In doing so they engage in Christological eisegesis. This essay has alternatively followed and expanded upon Hess’ perception that this Commander was the manifestation of the divine presence of God. This work has clarified that this entity accepted Joshua’s worship as only God can, exudes God’s holy presence, and is not understood as being distinct from God. In such a case, it is most appropriate to describe this deific entity as an Angel of the Lord.

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²⁸ Howard Jr., *Joshua*, 160; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 520. Grudem gives a similar description to Howard’s of the role of the Angel of the Lord. Grudem also offers a succinct yet insightful explanation of the role with a biblical scope beyond what can be offered in this brief essay.

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