

Research Notes

The Identity of Michael in Revelation 12: Created Angel or the Son of God?

The church observes St. Michael and All Angels Day on September 29. Michael is the angel mentioned in three canonical books (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9; and Rev 12:7-9) and in a wide range of extra-canonical literature (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic).¹ Michael shares the distinction with Gabriel of being one of the only two angels in the Scriptures who bear personal names. His exalted status among the angels is based upon the scriptural testimony in which he is called "one of the chief princes" (אֶתֶר הַסְּרָיִם הַרְאֲשֻׁנִים MT; εἰς τῶν ἀρχόντων τῶν πρώτων LXX; Dan 10:13) and even "the archangel" (ὁ ἀρχάγγελος; Jude 9). While the church honors Michael with the title of "saint," some interpreters have given him an even more exalted status than archangel and saint; namely, they have understood him to be the Son of God.² After all, Michael's name in Hebrew (מִיכָאֵל) means "Who is like God?"

Of the various biblical references to Michael, it is especially Revelation 12:7-9 that has led interpreters to this conclusion. This identification has been made by none other than Martin Luther,³ as well as several subsequent interpreters from our Lutheran circles, including George Stoekhardt,⁴ G.

¹ For a brief introduction to Michael in Jewish and Christian traditions, see Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte Des Antiken Judentums und Des Urchristentums* 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 126-131, and Michael Mach, "Michael," *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toom, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill 1995), 1065-1072.

² The early Christian evidence of this is thoroughly documented in Darrell D. Hannah, *Michael and Christ: Michael Traditions and Angel Christology in Early Christianity*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* II.109 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999). Hannah and others have noted evidence that there is some precedent for understanding Michael as divine in pre-Christian Jewish texts.

³ See the identification of Michael as Christ in a 1544 sermon of Luther's in Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993), vol. 49:570-587, esp. 578.

⁴ Stoekhardt states: "This Michael often appears in the Old Testament. That is the Angel which appears as the Protector of the people of God. He is the Angel of the Lord, the Christ. He takes up the battle against the dragon, and brings on a great war in the realm of the spirit world. And the outcome of this warfare shows that the devil and his angels cannot overcome Christ and His angels. . . . But now the devil has lost his chance to accuse them because he has lost his power to lead them into sin. And for this we must thank Michael, that heavenly Prince, Christ, who has fought for them to make them free." See George Stoekhardt, *Exegetical Lectures on the Revelation of St. John*, trans. H.W. Degner (an unpublished 1964 copyrighted ms. based upon the class notes taken by H.E. Meyer in German at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1898, later printed and sold by CTS Bookstore, Fort Wayne, IN), 47.

Gösswein,⁵ Ludwig Fuerbringer,⁶ Luther Poellet,⁷ John Strelan,⁸ and Stephen Wiest.⁹ Louis Brighton clearly states that Michael in Revelation 12 should *not* be identified as the Son of God as was done by some in the early centuries of Christianity, but he does not address the fact that some Lutheran exegetes have also made this identification.¹⁰ Siegbert Becker does mention that Lutherans have identified Michael as Christ here, but he also argues against this position before concluding, "It makes little difference whether one considers Michael to be a created angel or the 'Angel of the Lord,' who is the 'captain of the hosts of the Lord.'"¹¹ This subject, therefore, merits brief attention here. It will be demonstrated that Michael in Revelation 12:7-9 is definitely not the Son of God, but the created angel who functions as the leader

⁵ Gösswein asserts that Michael in Revelation 12 is "understood to be only Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Mary's Son, the Lord of hosts, the Prince of the army of the Lord and head of all principality and power"; see G. Gösswein, *Schriftgemässe und erbauliche Erklärung der Offenbarung St. Johannis* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1900), 186. This English translation is from G. Gösswein, *Scriptural and Edifying Explanation of the Revelation of St. John*, trans. Faculty and Students of Martin Luther Institute of Sacred Studies, Decatur, Indiana, 1999-2001 (no publisher or copyright given), 196.

⁶ Fuerbringer appears to follow Stoeckhard's interpretation in terse fashion: "That [Michael] is the angel of the Lord, like God in essence (essentia), Christ Himself." See L. Feurbringer, "The Revelation of St. John" (unpublished ms. of class notes taken by a student and mimeographed with Feurbringer's permission, but not corrected by Feurbringer), 28.

⁷ Poellet states: "Many Lutheran commentators understand the name here to refer to Jesus, the Champion of His church." See Luther Poellet, *Revelation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 159. Poellet's comment is virtually a quotation of a sentence in "Michael," *The Lutheran Cyclopedia*, ed. L. Fuerbringer, Th. Engelder, and P.E. Kretzmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1927), 469. Poellet cites this entry on 159 n. 18.

⁸ Strelan is aware that many do not make the identification between Michael and Christ but nevertheless states, "While we cannot speak with absolute certainty, the view taken in this commentary is that it is the Lord Jesus Christ himself who, under the name of Michael ('he who is like God'), refuted the accusations of the dragon, won the legal battle, and drew from God a sentence of 'Not guilty' for all believers in Christ"; see John G. Strelan, *Where Earth Meets Heaven: A Commentary on Revelation* (Adelaide, Australia: Open Book Publishers, 1994), 201.

⁹ One of his published sermons states that Michael "must be the Lord Christ, for the heavenly angels of Revelation 12 are said to be *his*" (emphasis original); see Stephen Wiest, "The Feast of Michaelmas," *Gottesdeinst* (Michaelmas 1997): 5. This sermon was early in Wiest's ministry and is influenced by his reading of Luther. Based upon some personal discussion with him after his doctoral work at Marquette and before his untimely death, I think that Wiest later stepped back a bit from the position on the identification of Michael as Christ that is expressed in this sermon.

¹⁰ Louis Brighton, *Revelation*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 320-322.

¹¹ Siegbert W. Becker, *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985), 187.

of God's good angels—which is also Michael's person and work in the book of Daniel—in bringing the effects of the victory of the Lamb over Satan and the other rebellious angels to the heavenly realm.¹²

It is very apparent that Luther and others who make the identification between Michael and Christ base their conclusion primarily upon the action of Michael and his good angels in throwing Satan and his evil angels from the heavenly realm in Revelation 12:7-9:

And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

The logic is that a created angel could not have accomplished such a feat; it would be created angel (Michael) going against created angel (Satan). Since this is seen as a divine action, the logical conclusion is that the person who carries this out must be divine. Hence, as the argument goes, Michael here must be Christ and not a created angel. Thus Satan (angel) is overcome by Michael (the Son of God).

This interpretation of Michael's identity is inadequate for three primary reasons. First, it does not give sufficient weight to the fact that Revelation is a text that repeatedly alludes to Daniel and is congruent with the content of Daniel. In spite of some scholarly attempts to identify the "one like a son of man" in Daniel 7:13 as Michael, there is a clear distinction between Michael and the "one like a son of man" figure in Daniel, as has again been demonstrated by Andrew Steinmann.¹³ This "divine man" figure, who appears again in Daniel 10-12 without being identified as "one like a son of man," is the Son of God in the Book of Daniel; he is not Michael. The seer John in Revelation, like the prophet Daniel, sees a clear distinction between the "one like a son of man" and Michael, and also identifies the Son of God with the former but not the latter.¹⁴

¹² Although I identify many appearances of an angel in the biblical narrative as the Son of God, and I identify several angelic figures in Revelation as Christ (cf. my *Angelomorphic Christology* as in n. 1 above), I do not identify Michael as the Son of God anywhere in the canonical texts. It is necessary to make a distinction between the angel in the Old Testament who shares the divine name YHWH and the angels who have personal names like Michael and Gabriel. The former is the Son of God, but not the latter. See Charles A. Gieschen, "The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology," *Vigiliae Christianae* 57 (2003) 115-157.

¹³ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Daniel*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008).

¹⁴ For example, the specific title from Daniel 7:13 is used in identifying Christ in Revelation 1:13 and 14:14, and his physical appearance is described in 1:13-16 with

A second problem with the identification of Michael as Christ is that the war in heaven scene is not interpreted with what immediately precedes: the messianic birth and snatching-up scene in Revelation 12:1–6. Although scenes in Revelation do not typically follow one after another in a neat chronological progression, there are certainly scenes in which there is such a progression. For example, the victory of the Lamb in Revelation 4–5 is celebrated as a reality that preceded and commences the three cycles of seven that follow, namely, the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls of wrath. The war in heaven describes what subsequently happens *in heaven* as a result of the prior birth and victory of the Messiah *on earth*. The result of Christ's work on earth is then brought to bear upon Satan by Michael and his fellow good angels in heaven. Because the Lamb has atoned for the sins of all humanity, Satan no longer has a basis for bringing accusations against any individual (Rev 12:10; cf. 1:5 and 5:9). Revelation 5 testifies that the Lamb has taken his place before the Father on the divine throne. First John testifies to the wonderful advocacy work that Christ carries out in this position: "If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous One; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1b–2). Paul also testifies of Christ interceding before the Father: "Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is also interceding for us" (Rom 8:34). Once Christ begins this advocacy before the Father, Satan is denied access to heaven and is thrown to earth.

A closely related third problem with the identification of Michael with Christ is that it does not give sufficient attention to the source of the victory confessed elsewhere in Revelation, including the words of praise in Revelation 12:10–12 that immediately follow the war in heaven scene:

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death. For this reason, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them."

This song of praise notes that the faithful martyrs conquered Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony" (12:11a). This is an obvious reference to Jesus as the unblemished sacrifice whose blood makes payment for all the sin of mankind. This Lamb Christology is the dominant portrait of Christ in Revelation, in spite of his several appearances as a glorious man.¹⁵ If the martyrs on earth conquer Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and

language that is often drawn from the description of the divine man in Daniel 10; see Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 246–252, and Steinmann, *Daniel*, 499.

¹⁵ I argue this fully in Charles A. Gieschen, "The Lamb (Not the Man) on the Divine Throne," *Israel's God and Rebecca's Children: Christology and Community in Early Judaism*

the word of their testimony," then how did Michael and the good angels conquer Satan and the evil angels in heaven? Not with brute force, but "by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony" (Rev 12:11). Like the martyrs, Michael and the good angels are created beings who fight in a war in which the victory has already been won by Christ. All the actions against Satan in Revelation—from throwing him to earth to throwing him into the lake of fire—are the result of the Lamb's sacrifice.

The source of victory in the war in heaven, then, is the blood of the Lamb that was shed on earth. The key battle in the war was not the confrontation of one angel, Michael, with another angel, Satan; it was the Lord Christ confronting Satan and all the forces of evil, and yet remaining obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Michael and his angels are not an independent militia; they are the army of the Lamb and are carrying out the victory that the Lamb won on earth by casting Satan out of heaven. Darrell Hannah, who has pored over the Michael-Christ identification more than any other scholar, also argues against any identification of Michael as Christ in Revelation.¹⁶ He concludes that all victories in Revelation, by angels or martyrs, are grounded in the victory of Christ as the slaughtered Lamb: "Michael's victory is not decisive in its own right, but dependent upon Christ's."¹⁷

One final thing. Although I disagree with Luther and others who have identified Michael as the Son of God, I agree with them that Old Testament appearances of the Angel of the Lord are theophanies of the Son of God. The avoidance of such a christological interpretation of the Old Testament has plagued biblical interpretation since Augustine, and especially since the Enlightenment.¹⁸ While I have argued that Michael is not the Son of God, there are many places in the Scriptures where the angel truly is the Son of God.

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and Christianity. Essays in Honor of Larry W. Hurtado and Alan F. Segal, ed. David B. Capes, April D. DeConick, Helen K. Bond, and Troy A. Miller (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 221-243.

¹⁶ Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 127-130.

¹⁷ Hannah, *Michael and Christ*, 129.

¹⁸ See further Charles A. Gieschen, "The Real Presence of the Son Before Christ: Revisiting an Old Approach to Old Testament Christology," *CTQ* 68 (2004): 105-126.