

# The Captain of the Host of the LORD:

An Analysis of Joshua 5:13-15

By

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Joshua 5:13-15 records the appearance of a Person, who denominates himself the “captain of the host of the LORD,” (v. 14), and instructs Joshua about the defeat of Jericho (6:2-5). Close examination of the passage, with a comparison with the rest of Scripture, identifies him as the Son of God; and Joshua, study of the Pentateuch demonstrates, had revelation which enabled him to clearly identify him as the Divine Savior, Mediator, and King. The Captain appears after Israel has had the reproach of Egypt rolled away (Josh 5:9) through the circumcision of the wilderness generation (Josh 5:8), and subsequently kept the Passover (Josh 5:10). The transition to living from the supply of the land, rather than from manna, began the day after the Passover (Joshua 5:11-12). A new era for Israel had begun, and the possession of the promised land had commenced in earnest. At this point the Captain of the host of the LORD appears and gives instruction for the conquest of Jericho:

13 And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, there stood a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand: and Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, *Art* thou for us, or for our adversaries? 14 And he said, Nay; but *as* captain of the host of the LORD am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my lord unto his servant? 15 And the captain of the LORD’S host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest *is* holy. And Joshua did so. 1 Now Jericho was straitly shut up because of the children of Israel: none went out, and none came in. 2 And the LORD said unto Joshua, See, I have given into thine hand Jericho, and the king thereof, *and* the mighty men of valour. 3 And ye shall compass the city, all *ye* men of war, *and* go round about the city once. Thus shalt thou do six days. 4 And seven priests shall bear before the ark seven trumpets of rams’ horns: and the seventh day ye shall compass the city seven times, and the priests shall blow with the trumpets. 5 And it shall come to pass, that when they make a long *blast* with the ram’s horn, *and* when ye hear the sound of the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city shall fall down flat, and the

people shall ascend up every man straight before him. (Josh 5:13-6:5).

Joshua obeys the commands the Captain gives him, and sees Jehovah perform a great miracle in the defeat of Jericho, as he had promised. While Joshua did not discern the nature of the One with whom he spoke at the beginning of their meeting, by its conclusion Christ had demonstrated enough of his character to make it apparent to Joshua that he indeed saw his Savior; and when Joshua penned the book which bears his name by inspiration, he identifies the Captain as his divine Lord.

Joshua was by Jericho when he “lifted up his eyes and looked” and saw the Captain of the LORD’s host. The expression emphasizes his purposeful look; it is used when important things are seen, as the references in the Pentateuch to these words in the order found here demonstrates (cf. Gen 13:10, 14, 18:2, 22:4, 13, 24:63, 64, 31:10, 12, 33:1, 5, 37:25, 43:29, Num 24:2, De 3:27, De 4:19). The use of “behold” (הִנֵּה) then emphasizes what it was that Joshua saw, namely, that “there stood a man over against him.” The Hebrew for “stood... over against” (עָמַד לְנֶגְדְךָ) appears elsewhere as a phrase only in Daniel 8:15 (“stood before”), 10:13 (“withstood”) and 10:16 (“stood before”). In each of these cases the one the one that performed the action of the participle “stand” (עָמַד) was a powerful angelic being. Daniel “fell upon [his] face” before the one of whom this expression is employed in Dan 8:15, and similar prostration is also employed in the context of the references in Daniel 10— similarly, Joshua “fell on his face” in Jos 5:14. Furthermore, אֲדֹנָי (“my lord”)<sup>1</sup> is a title ascribed to the angel that “stood before” Daniel in Dan 10:16, and Joshua employs it of the One before whom he stood in Josh 5:14. In

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the software used to compose this essay does not have vowel points with its Hebrew font, which here are vital. The word is aleph-hateph-pathach-daleth-cholem-nun-chireq-yodh. This “lord,” with a lower case “l” in the KJV, represents (usually) a different word from “Lord,” with a capital “L.” (The former represents Strong’s #0113, and the latter #0116.) “My lord” has the same Hebrew consonants as “My Lord,” but the former has a Hebrew chireq-yodh at the end, while the latter ends with quamets-yodh. The latter title is one of Deity, while the former one of respect for superiors.

Daniel the angels that “stand before” are powerful beings; in Joshua 5:13ff. the Angel<sup>2</sup> of the LORD, the One with whom Joshua has to do, is also a powerful being. His strength is further revealed through the reference to the “sword drawn in his hand” (Josh 5:13e). The identical Hebrew phrase (וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלוּפָה בִּידוֹ) is found in Num 22:23, 31, and in 1 Ch 21:16, but nowhere else in the Bible; indeed, no other verses combine “sword” and the word “drawn” as a passive participle in the entirety of the Old Testament. The references in the book of Numbers, which Joshua would have had in his possession and been familiar with through his meditation upon the books of Moses day and night (Josh 1:8), record an earlier appearance of the angel of the LORD to fight for Israel; here the Angel fulfills the same role. The account with Balaam intimates the deity of the angel of the LORD, for he states “Go with the men: but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that thou shalt speak” (Num 22:35), which is very similar to the statement made by God in the same chapter (Num 22:20). Furthermore, the angel of the LORD states that he shall speak to Balaam and commands him to repeat his words, but Balaam says “the word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak.” (Num 22:38, cf. 23:3-5, 12, 16-17, 26, 24:4, 16). The sword in the hand of the figure before Joshua does not just show the power of the Captain to lay waste his enemies, as he will do as he fights for Israel (cf. Lev 26:7-8), but associates him with the angel of the Lord, who is intimated as divine in the account of Balaam and explicitly accounted so in other accounts of his appearance in the section of the Bible Joshua

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<sup>2</sup> The word “angel” (מַלְאָךְ) has the root idea of “messenger,” and is so translated in reference to non-spirit beings in Gen 32:3, 6, Num 20:14, 21:21, and many other places in Scripture. The fact that the מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה is called an “angel” does not automatically divorce him from the possibility of a place within the Godhead to the separate section of the modern systematic theology text entitled “Angelology.” Christ repeatedly emphasized that the Father had sent him (Jn 6:40, 8:18, 17:21, 23, etc.), was an “Apostle” or “sent one/messenger,” ἀποστολος, Heb 3:1, and apparently was explicitly termed an ἀγγελος θεου, an “angel of God,” in Gal 4:14.

had available to him, the Pentateuch.<sup>3</sup> The other account where the angel of the LORD has a drawn sword in 1 Ch 21 demonstrates the distinction among the Persons of the Godhead; while the angel of the LORD is divine, he is also distinct from the Father (1 Ch 21:17).

Joshua 5:14, which begins with the Captain's reply to Joshua's question, "Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?" (5:13i), provides further illumination of the character of the One before Joshua in his reply: "Nay; but as captain of the host of the LORD am I now come." The Captain does not take either of the two options proffered by Joshua— his "nay" states, in essence, "I am not for you or for your enemy, but you are under my orders and should be for me." Israel, when obedient, was for him, and when disobedient, took the place of an adversary— nevertheless, this reply, and the further instructions of the Captain in 6:2-5, indicate that his sword is drawn to exact vengeance upon Canaan to the benefit of Israel; he was for Israel, but not in the sense meant by Joshua in his question. This is further brought out with the use of כִּי, appropriately translated "but" here, yet with a basic idea of "that, for, when"<sup>4</sup>— one could say, "for as captain..." and so explain the "nay" further. The word "captain" (רֹשֵׁת) is common in the OT, appearing 421 times, translated most commonly "prince" (208 times, also KJV margin here) and secondly "captain" (130 times), followed by "chief" and "ruler" (33 times each). This "man" who appears before Joshua asserts his authority when he employs this designation. Nowhere else in the Bible does the phrase "captain/prince of the hosts of the LORD" appear, but the phrase "captain(s) of the host" appears in the Pentateuch in Gen 21:22, 32, 26:26, Num 31:14, 48, and De 20:9, and indicates, when found in the singular, the supreme military authority,

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<sup>3</sup> see pgs. 71-81, *The Angel of the Lord*, Laurence M. Vance, Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, 1994 for an examination of the deity of the angel of the Lord in the books of Moses.

<sup>4</sup> pg. 471, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, F. Brown, S. Driver, & C. Briggs, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999.

which, when “captain” is plural, indicates this same authority divided among a group. In Joshua 5 the Captain further emphasizes the greatness of his authority through the emphatic employment of the first person pronoun **אני**, which also receives an early placement in the Hebrew clause (In Heb. order, “No; but I, the captain of the host of the LORD, now I have come.”) The most comparable reference to the phrase of Joshua 5:14 appears in Daniel 8:11, where the “little horn (v. 9)...magnified himself even to the prince of the host (**שֶׁר-הַצְבָּא**).” The “prince of the host” in Daniel 8:11 is probably God himself, the “Prince of princes” (Dan 8:25, **שֶׁר-שָׂרִים**) whose worship Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted to end. It is possible that the “now” also expresses the divinity of the Captain: “I who formerly appeared as the Jehovah of the burning bush (Ex 3), and who was announced as the tutelary Angel of the traveling hosts (Ex 23:23), *now* appear in the different character of the Divine Defender of the covenant nation; and as my presence formerly made Sinai holy (Ex 19:20), so now doth it sanctify the spot upon which I tread.”<sup>5</sup> Apart from this, the appearance of the Captain at the commencement of the conquest of Canaan constitutes a fulfillment of the promise of Ex 23:20-23<sup>6</sup> for guidance and victory—the Angel’s manifestation to confirm this justifies the “now” of his “am I come” (or “I have come,” a Qal perfect).

Joshua would have understood the phrase “host of the LORD” to refer to the army of Israel; in addition to the use of the very similar phrase “the hosts of the LORD” in Ex 12:41, the overwhelming majority of the appearances of the word “host” (**צְבָא**) in the Pentateuch relate to

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<sup>5</sup> pg. 62, *Joshua and Judges*, George Bush, Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1981 (reprint of 1852 ed.)

<sup>6</sup> The Angel of Ex 23:20-23 has the attributes of deity, for he has power over the pardon of transgressions (cf. Lu 5:21). One could argue that Ex 33:1-3 evidences a disjunction between Jehovah and the angel, but the contrast could be between God being “before” (v. 2) them rather than “in the midst” of them (v. 3). Note also v. 14-16.

the chosen nation. Furthermore, Joshua had queried the allegiance of the Man with the Canaanite or Israelite forces, so his reply naturally deals with them. Nevertheless, the Captain was also head over all the forces which Jehovah had dominion of, including the heavens and the earth (termed a “host” in Gen 2:1), the stars (De 4:19, 17:3), and the ranks of the heavenly beings (1 Ki 22:19). All of these arrayed themselves on the side of Israel; the heavens dropped hailstones upon the Canaanites (Josh 10:11), the earth fought for Israel (Hab 3:3-19, cf. Jud 5:4, Ps 68:7-8, 1 Sam 14:15), as did the stars (Jud 5:20), the sun and the moon (Josh 10:13), the heavenly hosts (De 33:2), and other creatures (Ex 23:28, De 7:20, Jos 24:12). Jehovah, the God of all the earth, had all the resources of his creation, and the direct workings of his Omnipotent hand to supplement the strength of Israel’s armies (cf. 2 Ki 6:17) and give his people victory over cities such as Jericho in supernatural ways.

In response to the revelation of the character of the Man he saw, Joshua “fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, ‘What saith my lord unto his servant?’” (Jos 5:14d-g). The verb “worship” (שָׁחָה) refers to both the worship of God (Gen 24:26) and to prostration in reverence or respect before men (Gen 23:12) or angels (Gen 19:1). It almost always appears in the Hithpael; other stems occur only in Is 51:23, “bow down” (Qal) and Pr 12:25, “stoop” (Hiphil). While the verb is translated “worship” 99 times out of its 172 appearances, and “bow” or “bow down,” the next most frequent translations, only 31 and 18 times respectively, the word does not conclusively prove the deity of the Captain of the LORD’s host, nor that Joshua worshipped him as God at this time. Indeed, in v. 14, Joshua probably did not grasp the fact of the deity of the One before him, for he addressed him as “my lord” (אֲדֹנָי ending with chireq-yodh), not as “my Lord” (אֲדֹנָי ending with quames-yodh). This former word, employed by Joshua, simply does not represent an acknowledgment of the Deity, as the

latter word does.

The Captain's declaration in Josh 5:15 formed, in part, a revelation to Joshua that he stood before One who deserved the title "my Lord" and true worship, rather than the simple acknowledgment of superiority of "my lord" and submission (cf. the chireq-yodh אֲרִי of Jud 6:13 and the quamets-yodh אֲרִי of Jud 6:15). After v.15a restates the title of the Captain, so emphasizing his exalted rank, he commands, "Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy" (v. 15b-c). This statement clearly recalls the call of Moses in Exodus 3, where the "angel of the LORD" (3:2), who appeared to Moses, was called "LORD" and "God" (3:4, 6, 7, etc.). Jehovah in Ex 3:5 stated "put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest *is* holy ground," in the same context where he reveals more of the significance of his name as the "I AM" than was known before (3:13-15). God the Son is clearly the One who appeared in the burning bush (Ex 3:13-15+ Jn 8:58, cf. Mt 14:27 ("It is I" is εγω εμι) + v. 33, etc.). In Joshua 5:15, the Captain identifies himself with the One who spoke in Ex 3:5; consequently he is Jehovah God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and the Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, who before his incarnation as the angel of the LORD declared the Father, as he did also afterwards in the days of his *kenosis*. The Word<sup>7</sup> who was "with God" and "was God" (Jn 1:1), is the answer to the many appearances of the invisible God in the Old Testament, from Gen 3:8 forward. The communion among the Three of the Godhead appears from the "us" of Gen 1:26 onward— indeed, from the first three words of Scripture, where the

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<sup>7</sup> The reference to Christ as the *Logos* in John 1:1, in addition to illuminating fascinating parallels in Greek literature, recalls the employment of the word *Memra* in the Targums. These reveal Christ as the Word or Memra in passages such as Gen 3:8, 10, etc. for at least 79 manifestations in the Targum Onkelos, including "and by his Memra was the world made" in Deut 33:27, as in Jn 1:10b; 71 in the Jerusalem Targum, and 195 in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. See "Philo of Alexandria and Rabbinic Theology," Appendix 2 (pgs. 929-934) of *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, (updated ed., unabridged one vol.) Alfred Edersheim, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997.

singular verb אָבְרָא joins the plural אֱלֹהִים to manifest the Trinity in Unity of Jehovah from the beginning. “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” (Jn 1:18). The One who has always been the only way to the Father (Jn 14:6), discloses himself personally as the I AM of Exodus three to his justified saint, Joshua, in Jos 5:15, after Israel has publicly proclaimed the everlasting gospel (Rev 14:6, cf. Gal 3:8) through the faithful celebration of the Passover (cf. 1 Cor 5:7). Joshua had been blessed with views of his Savior in times past (cf. Ex 33:7-11, 24:13, 32:15-17), and the statement of Jos 5:15 doubtless led him to recognize the presence of his beloved, whose earlier self-disclosures in the Pentateuch he had eagerly read about and meditated upon.<sup>8</sup> This is apparent from the statement in Jos 6:2, where Joshua, when he penned these chapters of his inspired book, termed the words of the Captain what “the LORD said unto Joshua” (Jos 6:2).

The message of 6:2-5 continue the words of the Captain of 5:15, for Joshua 6:1 is clearly parenthetical. To maintain otherwise requires the episode of 5:13-15 to conclude with exceeding abruptness, and without any substantial message delivered by the Messenger/Angel of the LORD. In 5:14 Christ tells Joshua that he is the One who really leads the armies of Israel, the “host of the LORD.” In v. 15 he has Joshua perform an act of reverence suitable to the occasion and which anticipated the subsequent deliverance of a message— once Joshua got up from his face and left, he would put his shoes back on again. Joshua’s removal of his sandals presupposes the receipt of further instruction, not the conclusion of the theophany. Furthermore, in Exodus 3:5, to which Joshua 5:15 alludes, Jehovah called Moses to remove his sandals before he called Moses to perform the first stage of bringing Israel into the land, the deliverance from Egypt (Ex

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<sup>8</sup> The *Memra* passages of the previous footnote denominate many of these appearances of Christ. The Scripture index of *The Angel of the Lord*, Vance, pg. 117, supplies references which deal with him specifically as the angel of the Lord, with corresponding discussion within the book text.

3:7-10: “I am come down... to bring them up out of that land (Egypt) unto a good land (Canaan)). In Joshua 5:15-6:5 Jehovah appears to Moses’ successor to perform the second and concluding part of the salvation of Israel— having been brought up, they were now to actually possess the good land. Both Moses in Ex 3-4 and Joshua in Jos 5-6 saw Jehovah before they began their ministry in the deliverance of the land to Israel. Both of them went to the place where the Angel of the LORD was; Moses “turned aside” (Ex 3:3-4) and Joshua “went unto him” (Jos 5:13), and were told to remove their shoes immediately afterwards when they drew near to him (Ex 3:5, Jos 5:15). Both of them were given directions for the prosecution of their assigned task in the message delivered to them (Ex 3:7ff., Jos 6:2ff.), and were promised the victorious completion of their duties in bringing Israel to her land (Ex 3:12, 17, 20, Jos 6:5), despite obstacles which were unconquerable from a this-worldly standpoint (Ex 3:11, 19 Jos 6:1), through miraculous intervention (Ex 3:20, Jos 6:5). The beautiful parallels which the Lord has placed in His Word must be overlooked or ignored if the message of Jos 6:2-5 is taken from the mouth of the Captain of the hosts of the LORD; since, therefore, the message does come from his mouth, he is the true God, the LORD (6:2).

The disclosure of 5:13-15 is framed by identical Qal active participle עמד forms; in v. 13, the man, apparently a simple, normal individual, “stood,” as did Joshua, the leader of Israel’s army, who challenges him and commands him, as his perceived superior, to reveal his nature and purpose— in v. 15, the true Captain of the Jehovah’s host having disclosed himself, he remains standing, while Joshua is prostrate in worship and submission, and must remove his sandals because of the holiness and glory of the Person before whom he stood (v. 15). The Son of God’s glory is revealed in successive steps in Josh 5:13ff: at first he is simply a “man,” then a “man over against him... with a sword drawn,” and so a very powerful being; then the Captain of Jehovah’s armies, and so the true leader of Israel’s divisions and the Prince of God’s host,

superior to other angels, and so worthy of “worship” or reverence on Joshua’s part, as his “lord,”— and finally he is the One whose presence made the ground holy, Jehovah, the God of Israel, Lord of Canaan and the whole earth.

Joshua 5:13-6:5 records a marvelous disclosure of the Son of God. Joshua, who already knew of him from the Pentateuch as the Angel of Jehovah, and as Jehovah himself, a distinct Person within the ineffable unity of the Godhead, was given grace to view him in his character as the Captain of the host of the LORD, the God of the burning bush, and the Covenant-Keeper who would lead his people into the land he had promised their fathers. However, with all this revelation, and his further experiential knowledge of Christ as his own personal Savior from sin, Joshua did not have the overwhelming light of the completed Word of God and the countless other blessings of the New Covenant saint which brighten his dispensation over the foggier glass of pre-cross days. Despite the comparative moderation of his revelation, Joshua, by grace, accomplished great things for his God; much more, then, should each one within the earthly host of the LORD today be used effectively to do exploits for his Redeemer and King.

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