

Gabriel

From International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

Gabriel is a celestial being or personage who is mentioned by name only four times in Scripture. In Dnl. 8:16 he is described as “one having the appearance of a man,” who was directed by “a man’s voice” to make clear to Daniel the significance of the vision that he had just seen but could not comprehend. In discharging this function the being indicated that the vision had eschatological significance.

In Dnl. 9:21 he was spoken of as “the man Gabriel,” who appeared to Daniel while the latter was praying at the time of the evening sacrifice. On this occasion the stated purpose of his mission was to impart to Daniel “wisdom and understanding” because Daniel was “greatly beloved” of God.

These two incidents are the only mention of Gabriel in the OT, and neither of them accords him the status of an “angel,” or preferably, “messenger.” Since Gabriel clearly bears divine authority for his mission and message, however, it is legitimate to regard him as a “messenger” of God. Thus by implication he is a surrogate for God, since in the OT where God’s messengers appeared God Himself was present (cf. Ex. 3:2).

His supernatural capacities also included the power to revive Daniel from his trance (8:18) and to appear to him “in swift flight” (9:21) before interpreting the vision of the seventy weeks. While Daniel was terrified by Gabriel’s appearance on the first occasion, he was able to regard him as a “man” on the second. Whether or not Gabriel was the personage mentioned in 10:18 is unknown.

In the NT Gabriel was sent on a mission of annunciation on two occasions. In Lk. 1:11 he appeared to Zechariah the priest as an angel standing beside the altar of incense to announce the coming birth of a son. He subsequently revealed himself as one who stood in God’s presence, and furnished his name. In a later appearance to Mary he announced the impending conception and birth of Jesus (1:31), and on that occasion was described simply as “the angel Gabriel.” In contrast to the awe and fright that he inspired in Daniel, his function in NT an-

nunciations was to reassure and comfort the one to whom he appeared, as well as to proclaim a demonstration of the power of God among people.

Gabriel may have been included among those beings who stood in the presence of God in Rev. 8:2, but this is at best uncertain since none of the angels is named. It is significant that each of the four biblical appearances of Gabriel was connected in some way with the implementing of the promise concerning the Messiah.

Gabriel figured prominently in the pseudepigraphal literature of the intertestamental and later periods. His status was raised to that of an archangel in 1 and 2 Enoch, and his activities were defined in terms of current Jewish folklore. Thus in 12En 40:3 he was represented as one of the four presences that looked down from heaven upon mankind. He was venerated as supreme over all powers (40:9), and was included among the Lord’s glorious ones.

In 12En 9:1–11 he was one of the four angels who took to God’s presence the prayers of the martyrs as they appealed to God for an end to the lawlessness upon earth. In the narrative of 12En 24:1 Gabriel was described as one seated at the left hand of God in a position of supreme power. This function was indicated by the role he followed in avenging God by casting the wicked into the furnace (12En 54:6), which constitutes an interesting reflection on the book of Daniel. By this period Gabriel had become both intercessor and judge, thereby assuming functions that in the NT were accorded to Christ (cf. He. 7:25; Rom. 14:10).

The Jewish Targums elaborated on the role of Gabriel and attributed to his activities certain events that occurred in the earlier period of OT life. Thus he was credited with leading Joseph to his brothers (Gen. 37:15), participating with another archangel, Michael (cf. Dnl. 10:13, 21; 12:1), in the burial of Moses (cf. Dt. 34:6), and being sent by God to destroy the armies of Sennacherib (cf. 2 Ch. 32:21). In the cabalistic literature he participated in further exploits, along with Michael, Uriel, and Raphael.