Panel Theme: Theological Interpretation and the Embodiment of God
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Angels by Another Name
How “Agency Metonymy” Precludes God’s Embodiment

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Accounting for metonymy can solve many of the interpretive problems with which scholars struggle.

—Kevin Chau

Theological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible properly begins by establishing the text’s plain sense1—that is, according to the accepted rules of human language.2 Such rules include shared conventions that were used to encode and decode the text. Conventions enabled the text’s composers to leave certain things unsaid, while enabling the text’s audience to reconstruct that unstated meaning from what was explicitly stated. Conventions are thus key to establishing the plain sense.

My remarks today focus on a particular narrative convention among ancient Hebrew speakers—namely, how to succinctly express an endeavor that involves both a principal and an agent. By “principal” I mean a party whose interests the agent represents; by

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A companion article, “Cognitive Factors as a Key to Plain-Sense Biblical Interpretation,” is being published in Open Theology 4 (2018) https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2018-0043. Each of these articles highlights a narrative convention that affects theological interpretation; the other article in addition discusses two terms that play an outsized role in the biblical depiction of divine interactions with human beings: the noun ʾîš, and the verb rāʾâ in the Niphal.

1 On the benefits of distinguishing the plain sense from other modes of interpretation, see the Discussion section of my “Cognitive Factors.”

2 To establish the “plain sense,” the relevant context is of many types, including audience expectation and frame of reference. (See my “Cognitive Factors.”)

A plain-sense reading is sometimes referred to as “literal” (especially as opposed to “metaphorical” or “allegorical”) construal; however, this paper uses the terms “plain sense” and “literal” in a contrasting fashion, to make a crucial conceptual distinction; see below, note 8.
“agent” I mean a party who is empowered to stand in for, or speak for, the principal.\(^3\) This arrangement is known as \textit{agency}.

Perhaps the four texts that I am presenting will inspire you to take a closer look at the narrative convention that I point to. I will spend much of my time on the first two texts, which each depict a \textit{non-deity} communicating with someone else. After articulating the convention that is in play, I will apply it to two passages that depict communication between the deity and a human character with an intermediary’s involvement. The last of those passages is typical of those that, according to many scholars, depict an \textit{embodied} God.\(^4\) Ultimately I will show that divine embodiment is \textit{not} the plain sense. Rather, such

\(^3\) In this paper, I am using the term “agent” differently than its most commonly encountered senses in the field of biblical studies—namely, to denote a self-motivated force or character (as in semantic analysis), or to denote a secondary character who advances the plot (as in narrative analysis).

\(^4\) With regard to the embodiment of Israel’s God, scholars mostly differ over what \textit{went without saying} in ancient Israel, or what Howard Schwartz has called “a plausible cultural context in which to situate” the biblical text (“Does God Have a Body in Scripture?: The Problem of Metaphor and Literal Language in Biblical Interpretation,” in \textit{Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible}, ed. S. Tamar Kamionkowski and Wonil Kim [Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010]). In this paper, I am treating an aspect of “cultural context” that Schwartz did not consider.

a construal overlooks the narrative convention in question—a convention that would have taken priority in the ancient audience’s interpretation. In short, although there is little overt theology in this paper, if you listen closely you may hear the creaking sounds of a theological edifice as it starts to crumble.

**#1. Bathsheba Speaks Through an Unmentioned Messenger (2 Samuel 11:5)**

In our first passage, the narrator describes the aftermath of King David’s adulterous affair with Bathsheba, shortly following her return home from his palace:

5 The text of this passage is stable for our purposes. (In verse 5, both a Qumran manuscript and the apparent Septuagint Vorlage merely transpose the two words of Bathsheba’s reported speech.)

6 According to Samuel Meier, this verb (an inflection of higgid, “to tell”) generally profiles the speaker’s arrival from a distance, followed by the conveyance in a deliberate and focused manner of a piece of information that the speaker believes is newsworthy (Speaking of Speaking: Marking Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Bible [New York: Brill, 1992], 183–185). In other words, Bathsheba is not seeking to dialogue or negotiate.

This verse is rare in its use of more than two speech-related verbs to introduce direct speech (Miller, “Introducing Direct Discourse in Biblical Hebrew Narrative,” Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics, edited by Robert D. Bergen [Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994], 233n20). The deployment of three verbs leading to Bathsheba’s message indicates a marked construction (ibid., 215)—highlighting a message that is fraught with import.

This clause’s participants and thematic roles are identical to those in the previous clause, and their two verbs share an indirect object. According to Cynthia Miller, such verbs refer to the same speech event (ibid., 204–5). In this case, though, that guideline is an oversimplification; rather, the paired verbs represent distinct yet salient steps within the larger messaging script. (Logically, the acts of “sending” and “informing” must take place in two different locations.)

7 Samuel Meier holds that the finite verb “identifies the words as belonging exclusively to the sender,” unlike the usual infinitive form in such situations (Speaking of Speaking, 128). I concur, for the messenger’s necessary existence is elided, as licensed by a cognitive script (see note 14).

Via recourse to agency metonymy, my reading keeps the focus on Bathsheba as protagonist—which yields the most cohesive and coherent narrative. In contrast, the alternative construal would be: “The woman became pregnant; she sent [a womanly messenger,] who informed David—she said [in her principal’s name], ‘I’m pregnant!’” This reading is less likely because it requires more processing effort—namely an additional assumption that specifies the messenger’s gender. Furthermore, this construal would bring the agent into the foreground—thus making the
This verse poses a challenge in terms of coherence, as the audience tracks the participant references: Its second clause tells us that Bathsheba transmitted a message at a distance. (Indeed, the text’s ancient audience would reliably imagine—based on their own social mores—that Bathsheba’s presumed need for discretion surely argued against her making a personal appearance.) Yet the two following clauses literally state that Bathsheba herself “informed David” as she spoke the words rendered as “I’m pregnant.”8 How, then, would the ancient audience have created a coherent picture of the narrative?9

The usual and reflexive way that people resolve such a dissonance is to treat our clause as an expression of metonymy.10 Prototypically, metonymy mentions one entity in narrative less cohesive. (As discussed below, typical human construal of language favors the simplest account that matches the expectation of informativeness.)

8 In this paper, “literal” means prototypically that the human referent of a grammatical subject is construed as personally acting as described by the governing verb; the reference is directly and solely to the specified individual. As a heuristic, I am contrasting literal construal with the metonymic construal that is described further below. On the boundary between literal and metonymic expression, see Jeannette Littlemore, Metonymy: Hidden Shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).


9 At issue is not the sense of the name (or other words) itself—that is, the semantics—but rather how words are used to communicate. This brings us into the realm of the linguistics discipline known as pragmatics, which (among other things) explores the difference between what is stated and what is communicated thereby. Arie Verhagen expresses the consensus view of linguists that “in actual utterances more is communicated than what is encoded in the conventional meanings of the signals used” (“Grammar and Cooperative Communication,” in Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics, ed. by E. Dąbrowska and D. Divjak [Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015], 233–34).

10 Metonymy as used in biblical Hebrew narrative has not been the subject of sustained study. No such work is cited by Tamar Sovran, “Metonymy and Synecdoche,” Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics 2:636 (Brill, 2013). Scholars occasionally point to metonyms in certain phrases, such as theologian John Sanders’ note that when God promises Abraham that his descendants will “possess the gate of their enemies” (Genesis 22:17), “gate” represents the enemy town in a PART-FOR-WHOLE metonym (Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think about Truth, Morality, and God [Fortress Press, 2016], 226). On metonymy in biblical poetry, see Travis Bott, “Praise and Metonymy in the Psalms,” in Oxford Handbook of the Psalms, ed. William P. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014);...
order to refer to another entity to which it is functionally related in a noteworthy way.\textsuperscript{11} Now, there are many types of metonymy.\textsuperscript{12} My focus is on a special class that I have dubbed \textit{agency metonymy}.\textsuperscript{13} The distinguishing feature of expressions within this class is that \textit{in depiction}, the principal stands for the agent; and this works precisely because the agent stands for the principal in \textit{actual practice}. This type of metonymy can make reference to \textit{both} of those parties at the same time. Here is how that works in our example, in three steps:

1. The verb \textit{wattišlah} (“she sent”) evokes cultural knowledge about the ubiquitous practice of messaging.\textsuperscript{14} Messaging necessarily involves a messenger, who oper-

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\textsuperscript{11} This definition is adapted from Maria M. Piñango et al., “Metonymy as Referential Dependency: Psycholinguistic and Neurolinguistic Arguments for a Unified Linguistic Treatment,” \textit{Cognitive Science} 41/S2 (2017), 353; and Jerry Hobbs, “Syntax and Metonymy,” in \textit{The Language of Word Meaning}, ed. Pierrette Bouillon and Federica Busa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 290. The present paper deals only with the \textit{prototypical, referentially focused} type of metonymic expression—specifically, with the use of referring expressions (usually proper nouns, but also pronouns and mere inflections) to identify indirect referents, which is sometimes called \textit{reference transfer}.


\textsuperscript{13} Agency metonymy distinctively brings into view \textit{both} the stated party and the implied party. As such it is a type of \textit{PART-FOR-WHOLE} metonymy: by referring to the principal alone, the whole agency relationship is evoked, which includes the agent whose action or speech is salient.

\textsuperscript{14} In other words, an additional (and prototypical) metonymic relationship is at work. This is not surprising, given that “a single instance of metonymy can involve more than one relationship” (Littlemore, \textit{Metonymy}, 25). This verse’s elliptical verb usages also invoke what cognitive linguists (and others) call a “script”; it relies upon a general knowledge of procedure—the many steps that are involved in messaging. So the narrator indicates a \textit{series} of actions merely by mentioning the most salient steps in the process—in this case, the dispatch and delivery. These parts
ates under a socially licensed agency arrangement that conditions the two complementary roles of principal and of agent. That arrangement notably allows Bathsheba to communicate discreetly.

2. This recognition of agency then makes the messenger salient in the audience’s mind. Even without having been mentioned, that agent is reliably drafted into the audience’s mental model of the narrative discourse.

3. That agent’s imagined presence in the king’s chambers, articulating Bathsheba’s words, then enables the text as stated to be meaningful and coherent.

Such a construal handily resolves the reference problem. Indeed, it treats that so-called problem as the very hallmark of metonymy.

Now we must ask: Why does the text express itself in such a laconic manner? Why resort to metonymy rather than spell everything out? There are several reasons, but today I will feature only one: to underscore that David is receiving this vital piece of intelligence from the most authoritative source.

Agency metonymy grew out of a fundamental ancient Near Eastern cultural concept, namely, that one party could act or speak on behalf of another party in ways that were of the process stand for the whole—here with respect to an entire familiar procedural script. See further my “Cognitive Factors.”


16 Other reasons for metonymy include: to keep the narrative spotlight on the principal—who, as the initiator of the depicted action, may be the more salient character (E. J. Revell refers to such considerations as “immediacy”; The Designation of the Individual: Expressive Usage in Biblical Hebrew [Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996], 22–23, 55–57); to make the narrative more cohesive (see Littlemore, Metonymy, 76–77); to build a frame through which we view that implied character—in this case, as Bathsheba’s agent—because in general, a speaker’s label for something frames how the audience regards it (see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980], 36; Littlemore, Metonymy, 99, 106; Revell, Designation of the Individual, 45); and to speed up the narrative pacing and add to its dramatic effect.
legally and morally binding. This basic concept then licensed a narrative convention that is evident throughout the Bible:

Any party may treat an agent’s authorized action or speech as if it were the principal’s. Hence our example text delays its disclosure of Bathsheba’s words to the king until it is recounting the moment that he hears them from her agent’s mouth. This shows that when our verse says that it was Bathsheba who “informed David,” what it means is: “her agent informed David on her behalf.”

#2. Jephthah Invokes Moses without Mentioning His Name (Judges 11:19)

Now let us look at an agency metonym in Judges 11. The speaker is Jephthah, a newly appointed leader who is in the midst of tense international negotiations. To support his claim, he is recounting long-distance negotiations that took place centuries earlier with the king of the Amorites, not long after the Israelites left Egypt. Let me quote Jephthah:

The text of this passage is stable for our purposes. (Where the Masoretic text has a plural verb, the Vulgate shows a singular form: “allow me to cross.” This does not alter the overall issue.)
Then Israel sent messengers. . . .

After naming that long-ago mission’s recipient, he then continues:

Israel said to him, ‘Allow us to cross through your country to my homeland.’ . . .

(Judg 11:19; CJPS, adapted)

Here the audience likewise faces a participant reference problem: everyone knows that the nation as a whole cannot literally send a message and speak on its own behalf; so who is actually taking this initiative? The answer, as everyone also knows, is that this is what leaders do—they represent the nation’s interests. And given its knowledge of history, the text’s audience recalls that Moses, who was Israel’s leader at that time, was renowned for conveying them safely to Canaan—which is the topic at hand. Thus Moses becomes salient in the audience’s mind. And so, although what Jephthah says is that “Israel” is sending and speaking, what he means is: “Our leader at the time, Moses, sent messengers with a message on our people’s behalf.” He refers to Moses in terms of the nation. The audience would regard Jephthah’s use of the name Yisra’el as germane in the context of international negotiations; surely the national interest is foremost in his mind.

Now—to consider our first two exemplars together—if our question is: “What was each verse’s plain sense as perceived by its ancient audience?” I think we would all agree

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21 The singular finite speaking verb indicates that the sender is being profiled, rather than the (plural) messengers. This construal yields the most cohesive narrative with a minimum of assumptions. For as discussed below, typical human construal of language favors the simplest account that matches the expectation of informativeness.


23 Furthermore, at the end of our verse, the first-person pronoun (“my homeland”) is also an agency metonym: it makes direct reference to “Israel,” with an implicit reference to Moses as the one who crafted the message. This metonym adds poignancy to the nation’s stated claim to its homeland, even though the same point could be made via narration (as Robert Alter has stated, “Biblical writers prefer to avoid indirect speech....Direct discourse . . . has the effect of bringing the speech-act into the foreground” [The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 83–84]). At the same time, more is at stake than dramatic effect: this second metonym continues to underscore that Moses was speaking on his principal’s behalf.

24 Happily, such a construal handily resolves the references in Judges 11. It also preserves narrative continuity, for “Israel” has been the thematic actor in Jephthah’s discourse during several prior verses.
that the audience would have readily defaulted to a *metonymic* construal of the references rather than a *literal* one.

Nonetheless, if we ask “Is a literal construal *conceivable*?” the answer is yes. Although it would be far-fetched, we could, for example, construe that Jephthah is claiming that the patriarch Jacob (also known as “Israel”) rose from the dead to advocate directly and personally on behalf of his descendants. In short, literal construal can produce vivid and memorable results, such as are featured in the interpretive genre known as midrash.

In contrast, in agency metonymy, references to the *principal* point to the *agent’s* actions on that principal’s behalf—which in turn redound to the principal’s credit. In other words, *principal* and *agent* are *not* two conflated faces of the same figure, like this:

Rather, they are two sides of the same conceptual coin, like this:

Agency metonymy is a highly compact and economical means of expression. It arises from, and relies upon, the automatic associative function of human cognition.  

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25 “Midrash” is a genre of rabbinic interpretation; it is the fruit of an *acontextual* mode of construal that “disregards the constrictions of the historical, literary, and linguistic conditions in which the text first came to us” (Edward Greenstein, “Medieval Bible Commentaries,” in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz [New York: Summit Books, 1984], 220). The main *modus operandi* of classical and esoteric Midrash for centuries produced compelling interpretations precisely by homing in on the text’s conventional metonymies and construing them *literally*. In particular, the *Zohar* (the centerpiece text of Jewish mysticism, composed mostly in the 13th century) revels in such construals of the text, which it uses to make mystical theological points. Daniel Matt regularly called this type of reading *hyperliteral*—that is, extravagantly more literal than the plain sense (*The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003–2016]). Its disarming straightforwardness creates its aesthetic and spiritual appeal.

26 In agency metonymy, referencing the principal actually points to a richer and more complex whole, namely, the overall *agency relationship*, with its leveraging capability of action-at-a-
audience finds metonymic construal attractive because it enables the stated words to become more meaningful—and meet the basic expectation of informativeness.\textsuperscript{28}

Turning our attention now to two depictions of deity, we will find that the speech and actions of Israel’s God are described using expressions that bear a family resemblance to what we have just found for human beings. I will start with a simple example; and then, out of the many biblical passages that scholars have recently cited as evidence of “divine embodiment,” I will treat the one that seems best suited for brief explication.

\textbf{#3. Two Angels and Lot Say the Same Thing in Different Words (Genesis 19:12–14)}

In Genesis 19, two agents of Israel’s God have arrived in Sodom; the narrator has designated them as \textit{mal ākîm} (literally, “messengers”). Here in vv. 12–13 they reveal their plans to Abraham’s nephew, Lot:\textsuperscript{29}

\begin{quote}
...וַיֶּלֶךְ אֵלָיו, אָנֹא אֲשֶׁר הִצְלְחָה אֶל הַמִּשְׁלָכִים הָאָחיֵי. Then the agents\textsuperscript{30} said to Lot,

...וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל הַמִּשְׁלָכִים. “...We are about to destroy this place. . . .

יְהוָה שָלֹחֲנֵנוּ לַכְּדָּר. Yahweh\textsuperscript{31} has sent \textit{us} to destroy it.”
\end{quote}

And in the next verse, we learn about Lot’s reaction:

\begin{quote}
...וַיָּאוֹת אֵלָיו. So Lot went out . . . and said,

...וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל הַמִּשְׁלָכִים. “Get up and get out of this place!

יְהוָה שָלֹחֲנֵנוּ לַכּוּר. Yahweh is about to destroy the city. . . .”
\end{quote}

distance. As linguists Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden have noted, “a metonymic expression is hardly ever completely equivalent in its pragmatic force to its ‘literal’ counterpart” (“Introduction,” in \textit{Metonymy in Language and Thought}, ed. Klaus-Uwe Panter and Günter Radden [Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999], 13).

The cognitive psychologist Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., explains: “Metonymy shapes the way we think and speak of ordinary events... Our ability to conceptualize of people, objects, and events in metonymic terms provides the basis for much of the way we reason and make inferences during text processing” (“Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy,” 62, 68).

For a tabulation of conceptually related agency conventions that would have been reliably accessed by the text’s ancient audience during interpretation of the biblical text, see Excursus 3.

This passage’s text is stable for our purposes. (In v. 12, the Samaritan version reads מְלָאךְו rather than מְלָאךְי; and in v. 13 it reads לֹשֵׁחתה rather than לֹשֵׁחתה.) The translation is mine.

On ‘\textit{ānāšîm} as “agents,” see my “Cognitive Factors,” especially Excursus 10 there.

To represent the tetragrammaton as the name of Israel’s God, this article employs the equivalents “Yahweh” in English, י amsterdam in Hebrew, and \textit{Yhwh} in transcription. The first is a standard academic reconstruction of its original pronunciation; the second is a standard Jewish substitution.
In this case, both the principal (called Yhwh) and the agents (called ʾānāšîm) are explicitly mentioned. Yet there is still a reference problem, namely, the dissonance in labeling between what God’s agents say versus what Lot says. They had told him that they, as agents sent by Yahweh, were about to destroy the area—but he promptly goes out and says that the party who will do this is Yahweh!

Lot must be saying this to highlight the authority behind his guests’ announced intentions. Without giving it a second thought, he would surely underscore that authority as he tries to persuade his family to evacuate. So our observed dissonance in labeling can be handily resolved by seeing it as the hallmark of metonymy on Lot’s part. By using the principal’s name only, Lot means: “Yahweh has authorized certain agents who are about to destroy the city!” This is the plain sense of Lot’s wording.32

32 Not long thereafter, a second biblical character matter-of-factly uses agency metonymy: “Jacob went on his way, and messengers of God encountered him. When he saw them, Jacob said, ‘This is God’s camp’” (Gen 32:2–3; CJPS). Jacob refers to the visible agents (labeled as messengers/angels) in terms of their principal, just as his uncle Lot had done. In neither case does such usage occasion comment by classic exegetes; and to my knowledge, none of them construe that either Lot or Jacob is claiming that their deity is literally present on the scene. See also 1 Sam 4:6–7.

33 On this rendering of the Niphal verb ינהר, see Excursus 9 in my “Cognitive Factors.”

34 Here the Septuagint continues to designate Gideon’s interlocutor as being the angel, but lectio difficilior praeferenda: the more challenging reading seems more likely. Overall in this passage, the tracking of participant references poses a challenge nonetheless, as discussed below.

35 Here, “turning toward” spatially expresses a shift in the conversation to the business at hand (cf. 2 Kgs 23:16; Eccles 2:12; Steve Runge and Joshua Westbury, eds., The Lexham Discourse Hebrew Bible: Glossary [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012], s.v. Introduction to Thematic Highlighting > Near Distinction). Thus it highlights the following utterance. (Contemporary listeners likewise will interpret such a gesture as adding emphasis to the speech that follows.)

36 The particle והלא functions here to express God’s commitment to Gideon’s selection, in the face of the latter’s evident skepticism. Given that this particle’s clause follows the task assignment...
16 *Yahweh* said to him, “I will be with you.…”

20 God’s messenger said to him,…

“Put [the food] on that rock….”

23 *Yahweh* said to him, “You are secure.…”

As Mark Smith noted in his paper earlier in this session, the audience of this text faces the following challenge in tracking participant references: *Who is actually speaking with Gideon?* The normal biblical conventions for dialogue and expectations of narrative continuity would lead us to expect that the *same* party continues to engage with the protagonist; but here the narrator’s labels keep changing: first “Yahweh’s messenger,” then “Yahweh” (twice), then back to “God’s messenger,” and finally “Yahweh” again.

This example is like our first two cases in that the principal is—on a literal reading—*active in the scene.*37 (It is in this respect that Gideon’s case typifies the passages said to involve “divine embodiment.”) So what happens if we construe this passage in light of the same narrative convention that I have identified based on our previous cases?

To quickly review, we have learned that in agency situations, by referring to the *principal* (which in this case is *Yahweh*) it is possible to also refer to the *agent* (which in this case is the angel). And we have learned that such agency metonymy has the effect of underscoring *the authority behind* an agent’s statements. When I apply those two lessons to this case, I find first that in its quotative frames, the narrator’s choice of labels for Gideon’s interlocutor corresponds to the distinctions in the *content* of his utterances, as follows.38

- In the two parts of the dialogue that are peripheral to the mission—that is, when the angel is merely striking up the conversation (v. 12), and discussing what to do with the


37 This example differs from those two cases, however, in that the agent is mentioned explicitly.

38 For a similar construal of this passage, see Mordecai Breuer, “*Biqqûr hammalʾākîm ᵃʾēsîl ’abrāhâm wâlōt,*” in *Pirkē Barēšît,* ed. Yosef Ofer, with Meir Munitz (Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 1998), 384–86. Breuer perceives agency metonymy (without using that term). Compared to Breuer, however, I read those metonyms as less specifically theological and more conditioned by broader linguistic conventions.
food (v. 20)—his designation as a messenger is straightforward: *malʾak Yhwh* or *malʾak ēlōhîm*. He is identified as serving in this role on behalf of his principal.\(^{39}\)

- In contrast, in reporting the pronouncements that directly involve the agent’s actual *mission of appointment* (vv. 14, 16, 23), the designation is *Yhwh*.

In other words, the narrator’s labels for the interlocutor shift during the course of the dialogue, depending upon the topic under discussion. Sometimes the messenger is designated directly, and sometimes only indirectly. By saying that Yahweh spoke, the narrator means: “The angel spoke with Yahweh’s authority.”\(^{40}\)

And if we construe the narrator’s use of the name *Yhwh* as the hallmark of agency metonymy, the passage is easily seen as cohesive:\(^{41}\) we understand the narrator to be using metonymy to underscore that the messenger speaks on the principal’s behalf precisely when divine authority matters most during the dialogue.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{39}\) Likewise, *human* agents may be designated via a noun of agency plus a genitive that names their principal, as in Num 22:18; Jud 11:13; 1 Sam 19:20; 25:12, 42; 2 Sam 21:17; 1 Kgs 20:9.

\(^{40}\) Similarly, when the narrator says that when Yahweh “turned toward” Gideon (v. 14), it means that the angel did so on Yahweh’s behalf. (In v. 23, he continues to speak though now invisible.)

\(^{41}\) Similarly, we would also perceive another agency metonym in this passage, in verses 14 and 16: a messenger is pointedly depicted as speaking in the principal’s stead in the first person. As we saw with Jephthah’s depiction of Moses’ messaging, this, too, is conventional. The apparent suddenness with which an agent starts speaking on the principal’s behalf *in the first person* is an artifact of our unfamiliarity with ancient narrative convention, which relied upon intimate and widespread knowledge of the messaging process (see above, note 14). A first-person delivery would have occasioned no surprise to the text’s ancient audience, for this was messengers’ normal real-life practice. Its deployment in a narrative is thus optional and serves pragmatic narrative interests. Cynthia Miller has noted that when a message is introduced with the complementizer *lēʾmōr*, it may present the messenger as speaking from the sender’s perspective (“the pronouns index the principal of the speech event rather than its animator”; *Representation of Speech*, 379); however, the same convention applies to the finite verb, as here. See Excursus 3, “Table of Agency Metonymy Conventions”; see further my “Cognitive Factors.”

\(^{42}\) Reserving the use of a metonym for such a fateful moment is precisely what is predicted by relevance-based or communication-oriented linguistic theory. See above, n. 16.

Similarly, the application to biblical Hebrew of cross-linguistically derived discourse and pragmatic considerations in participant reference (in general, not specific to metonymic usage) suggests the following for our passage in Judges. The angel is activated into the discourse via a referring expression that establishes him as a subordinate of Yahweh (v. 11). When the narrator then substitutes another label for this default referring expression (*Yhwh*; vv. 14, 16, 23), it not only *signals the start of a new unit of discourse* but also marks this referent as the “center of attention.” In other words, it *highlights the angel’s following speech as particularly salient or*
Granted, you and I would not speak in exactly this way when narrating dialogue or describing messaging in English or German or Modern Hebrew. Nonetheless, a metonymic construal of this passage’s referential anomalies has three arguments in its favor:

- it is consistent with a large family of metonymic usages found throughout the Bible in agency situations;
- it shares the same basic conception (agency) that underlies all such expressions; and
- it enables the audience to readily construct a coherent narrative in its mind.

Summing up the experience from our four examples, here is what I have found:

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<td>Agency task</td>
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<td>Reference tracking problem</td>
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</table>

surprising (or both). Such marking would be especially strong with the label Yhwh, who is both a participant of abiding interest to the audience and the party to whom this angel was anchored. See Steven E. Runge, “Pragmatic Effects of Semantically Redundant Anchoring Expressions in Biblical Hebrew Narrative,” JNSL 32/2 (2006), 87–104. As Runge remarks elsewhere, “Generally speaking, the bigger the change or transition, the more marking it will receive” (Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010], s.v. “Frames of Reference.”)

43 See Excursus 4, “Metonymy across Languages.”

44 Actually, an audience will seek an interpretation that optimizes not only narrative cohesiveness generally but also coherence in a specific character’s presentation. Thus when a narrator continues to speak about a given character, the audience expects the representations of that character to remain coherent and consistent (Dale Patrick, The Rendering of God in the Old Testament. [Philadelphia: Augsburg/Fortress, 1981], 47, 60). This motivation provides an added incentive for construing agency metonymy, for it enables both God and the angel to maintain distinct and coherent representations within the audience’s mental map of the discourse.

45 In other languages, some verbs’ semantics (“selection restrictions”) do not allow agency metonymy—an English example is “appeared.” In theory, such exclusion is likewise possible in Biblical Hebrew. In this paper, I have tested the verb that most frequents the biblical passages in which many scholars perceive divine embodiment, namely נִשָּׁ֣מַח, literally “he said” (Gen 18:13, 20, 26, 28–32; 31:3; 32:27–30; Exod 3:5; Josh 6:2; Zech 3:2). The evidence that agency metonymy with this verb is conventional goes far beyond the three passages adduced in the body of this paper. With a human as principal, see the fifteen instances listed in rows 4 and 5 in Excursus 3, “Table of Agency Metonymy Conventions.” With God as subject, in the role of principal, see the communications via oracles in Gen 25:22–23; Judg 1:1–2; 20:18, 23, 27–28; 1 Sam 23:9–12; 2 Sam 2:1; and likewise with other verbs of speaking, Gen 16:13; 18:33; Exod 3:4, and Zech 1:13.
As the right half of this table shows, agency metonymy can be applied to a wide range of delegated tasks (Col. 5); and its references can be expressed by the full range of grammatical means of making reference (Col. 6), in order to evoke agents of any discourse status (Col. 7)—with its trigger as a wide variety of reference tracking challenges (Col. 8). In short, agency metonymy is a versatile device.

**Which Has Cognitive Priority: Agency Metonymy or Divine Embodiment?**

As Mark Smith has just now demonstrated in his paper, many modern and contemporary scholars have claimed that our passage from Judges depicts the embodiment of Israel’s deity in some fashion. Of those scholars, I will now single out Benjamin Sommer, because later in this session he will have the chance to defend his positions. His approach until now has been typical of recent scholarship in adopting a *theological* solution to the aforementioned reference problems— as featured in his high-profile 2009 book *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*; here are two such solutions.

**Judg 6:11–24 (Gideon Is Appointed Leader)**

“a small-scale manifestation of God or . . .

a being with whom Yhwh’s self overlaps.”

**Exod 3–4 (Moses Is Appointed Leader)**

“a humble and incomplete manifestation of Yhwh . . .

a small-scale manifestation of God.”

I assume that this audience is familiar with Sommer’s work, so I will note only that his solution to our participant reference problems was shaped by his initial commitment to construe the text’s references *literally*—in particular, that if the speaker is labeled *Yhwh,*

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46 Most modern interpreters conclude that the Bible repeatedly “confuses” or “blurs” or “conflates” Israel’s God with the agents whom this deity dispatches. Some scholars posit ancient theologically motivated textual emendations, even though they hardly resolve the reference problems. A few scholars instead proffer *nontheological* solutions, such as by attributing the anomalies to laconic literary style or textual corruption. (For a sample conjectural emendation, see the BHS apparatus to Hos 12:5–6.)

47 New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009; 42–43 and 41–42, respectively.
then it must be Yahweh who is speaking. He then made recourse to the ancient audience’s expectations with regard to “fluidity” in the conventional representation of deities.

I have now presented a competing explanation for the issues in tracking participant references that scholars like Sommer have rightfully noticed: I explain them as triggers of conventional metonymy. Is this explanation superior to the others? That question comes down to determining which construal would have occurred most reliably by default to the text’s ancient audience, as its plain sense.

I answer that question by recourse to the discipline known as psycholinguistics—that is, how the mind handles language. Here is what scientific experiments have shown: we audiences process utterances (such as texts) incrementally; from the very start, we generate a set of possible interpretations of what is intended—updating them as the next word is encountered—and then we winnow those calculated guesses as our encounter with the utterance proceeds. Consequently, our mind will adopt the first construal that enables it to arrive at a view of the text as cohesive and informative. We go with what seems to fit. But here is the key: our starting point is whatever is expected in that context. Because the conventional directs us toward the most likely outcome, it is favored over the unconventional.

To return to the biblical text’s ancient audience, I would not claim that agency was more important to the Israelites than theology was. But I would say that in depictions of agency situations, the conventions regarding agency would have been the most salient. I say this due to three considerations.

First, in ancient Israelite society, agency metonyms were conventionalized. Agency was deeply entrenched, given that it served as the basis for daily social, eco-

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48 See Excursus 5, “Critique of Sommer’s Methodology.”

49 The agency metonymy explanation is not new; see Excursus 6, “Agency Metonymy within the History of Biblical Interpretation.”

50 See Excursus 7, “The Mind’s Online Processing of Texts.”

51 By “conventionalized” I mean that it is based on a conceptual generalization that allows for the metonymic relation to hold independently of a metonym’s immediate context of use. (See Piñango et al., “Metonymy as Referential Dependency,” 23.) In this case, the generalization involved is agency—that is, the tight conceptual coherence between principals and the agents who represented them. Hence in agency contexts, the name of a principal in effect would refer to “the named party—and any agents thereof.” Conventionalization is a property that then renders that metonymic relation highly available in the mind whenever one of its metonymic expressions is parsed by the audience. (See Excursus 1, “The Cognitive Processing of Metonymy.”)
nomic, political, and religious transactions.\textsuperscript{52} This means that agency was highly accessible in the Israelite mind as a frame of reference.\textsuperscript{53} In the Bible’s depictions of human interaction, not only the narrators regularly express themselves via agency metonymy (as in the case of Bathsheba), but also the characters do (as in the cases of Jepthah and Lot). Evidently the audience was expected to understand this manner of expression at every turn—including in agency situations where Yahweh was depicted as the principal who designated human agents.\textsuperscript{54}

Second, I can find no grounds for the ancient audience to have believed that the non-human agents of their deity were so unlike human agents that agency metonymy would not apply. Surely the depiction of divine agents was modeled on tangible human agents; and the same terminology is employed. So in the absence of a strong signal that agency should not apply in the divine realm, it would naturally be extended to conceptions there.\textsuperscript{55}

The third consideration favoring metonymic construal is that in agency situations, it is automatic. Experiments have repeatedly shown that whenever the context clearly sup-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{52} See Excursus 8, “The Cognitive Entrenchment of Agency Considerations.”
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Agency metonymy is attested in the similar surrounding languages of Phoenician, Ammonite, and Moabite, as well as in Jewish Aramaic in Elephantine. This distribution suggests that agency metonymy was a widespread narrative convention. See, respectively: Yehimilk of Byblos inscription; ca. 940 BCE; Tell Sirân bronze bottle inscription, l. 1; ca. 600 BCE; Mesha stela; ca. 840 BCE; Ananiah’s deed to Yehoishema, 404 BCE. For the source texts, see Aaron Schade, \textit{A Syntactic and Literary Analysis of Ancient Northwest Semitic Inscriptions} (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 111–15; Ahituv, \textit{Echoes from the Past}, 363, 393–95; Edward Bleiberg, \textit{Jewish Life in Ancient Egypt: A Family Archive from the Nile Valley} (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2002), 34.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Agency metonymy was sometimes applied to human oracles (anonymous, in Gen 25:22–23; Phinehas, in Judg 20:27–28; Abiathar, in 1 Sam 23:9–12), as well as to at least two of Yahweh’s prophets: Moses and Isaiah (see below, note 60). Again, both the narrator and the characters employ these usages. In these cases, the theological notions of conflation-between-principal-and-agent, or of an avatar-manifestation, do not readily fit; indication is lacking that these human spokespersons become anything other than human.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Operational differences that ancient Near Eastern writers ascribed exclusively to divine messengers are insignificant for our purposes. See Excursus 9, “Divine Agents in the Light of Human Agents.”
\end{itemize}
ports conventionalized metonymies, their wording is mentally processed as quickly and easily as similar literal wording is. No extra time or effort is required.\textsuperscript{56}

Looking again at our Gideon story, we notice that it establishes an agency context from the start, via the label \textit{malʾak Yhwh}. For the audience, this activates the conceptual link between principal and agent, which then creates an \textit{expectation} of conventional metonymic expression. As we have seen, a metonymic construal then requires no additional assumptions and instantly renders the text highly informative. Therefore, as a matter of parsimony, it is surely the \textit{default} approach for arriving at the plain sense of this text.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{Conclusions}

Agency metonymy enables narrators and speakers to deploy a referential anomaly so as to mention only the principal yet refer to both the principal and the agent. The parties in those roles retain \textit{conceptually distinct} identities, even when this manner of expression momentarily superimposes them for purposes of narrative art and efficiency.\textsuperscript{58}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{56} See further Excursus 1, “The Cognitive Processing of Metonymy.” Arguably, in contrast, additional calculation is needed for a \textit{literal} construal of the referring expression \textit{Yhwh} in Judg 6:14, relative to a metonymic construal. Literal construal would have required the audience to revise its mental model of the discourse (which already contained a fairly standard messenger and Gideon), so as to account for the presence of a more complex angelic figure (avatar). That \textit{extra assumption of complexity} would have added to the processing time and effort. Given that a simpler (metonymic) reading seems to have been readily available, it seems difficult to justify why would the ancient audience have gone to such trouble to construe the text in the way that Sommer and so many other scholars have done.

\textsuperscript{57} See Excursus 10, “The Priority of Metonymic Construal.”

\textsuperscript{58} In the ancient Near East, faithful messengers were often authorized to improvise and negotiate as needed, in order to achieve the desired outcome (Gen 24:4; 30:3–4; Jos 2:1; 9:11; 1 Sam 16:17; 2 Kgs 9:1–2; 18:17–35; Est 4:5). Thus there would be \textit{no effective difference} between Moses’ instructions to the Israelites on Yahweh’s behalf and those that came from Yahweh unmediated (which is what made Moses’ unauthorized denunciation in Num 20:10 so unforgivable). Consequently, Robert Polzin arguably misconstrues the import of Deuteronomy’s practice of often not differentiating between whether Yahweh or Moses is speaking: “The boundaries between God’s word and Moses’ interpretation have been deliberately blurred to illustrate the condition of all interpretation” (\textit{Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History} [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980], 205). According to my findings, Polzin’s claim of “blurring” overinterprets what is actually a standard narrative convention.
\end{flushleft}
This paper summarizes a more extensive research effort that includes another nineteen passages that involve Yahweh’s agents—both divine\(^{59}\) and human.\(^{60}\) As confirmed by that fuller analysis, the theological conclusions are:

- Agency metonymy served as the *currency* in which ancient Israelite discourse was regularly transacted—and this naturally would have included depictions of the nation’s deity. We would do well not to confuse agency metonymy as the medium of exchange with the religious messages that it was sometimes used to convey.\(^{61}\)

- Episodes involving God’s agents can be construed as theophanies (and as depictions of the embodiment of God) only by disregarding well-attested and well-entrenched *narrative conventions* for describing agency situations.\(^{62}\)

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\(^{60}\) My scope of analysis includes Yahweh’s *human* agents, to show that the same principles and usages apply as with angels. See Excursus 11, “Agency Metonymy in Other Passages Involving God’s Agents,” for a treatment of metonyms applied to the prophets Moses (Exod 3:7–12) and Isaiah (Isaiah 7:10). For an additional three metonyms applied to humans when they function as oracles, see above, n. 54.

\(^{61}\) On modern scholars’ misconstrual of agency metonymy, see further Excursus 4. If the agency motif and its narrative conventions are properly applied to Israel’s God as the principal, they have wide-ranging implications for biblical theology, including potential reinterpretation of the Christians’ New Testament (with Jesus in the role of God’s agent who is sometimes labeled via agency metonymy in terms of his principal)—implications that are beyond the scope of this paper.

\(^{62}\) Depictions of a divine body can still be found in those passages according to a midrashic construal. In and of itself, such construal is not a bad thing—although it may not be the most sound basis for writing a history of religion.


Since delivering this paper, I have learned of John Walton’s similar (albeit less comprehensive) discussion of many of the passages treated herein, in his *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 462–66. Countering the patristic claim that
• For the biblical scenes that involve God’s agents, the audience’s default plain-sense construal of any concomitant references to God would have been metonymic—not literal.63

Bibliography


63 As for the deity’s communications or deeds where no agents are explicitly indicated, in general such depictions are best construed as unspecified regarding the involvement of agents. This follows from the many biblical passages where human actions are similarly depicted without such specification, and yet agents’ involvement can be inferred from social norms.


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Excursus 1: The Cognitive Processing of Metonymy

Let me place the interpretation of agency metonyms within the larger framework of the cognitive processing of language. We construe utterances (or texts) with an expectation that they will be informative. And when we do so, we interpret according to what we were expecting. The linguist Yan Huang articulates the consensus among pragmaticists that human beings interpret according to “the most stereotypical and explanatory expectation given our knowledge about the world.”

Thus when an audience encounters a violation of the norms of communication, it assumes that exception to be meaningful—and then strives to make sense of it by ascribing unstated meaning to it.

Interpreting metonymy is a special case of that global approach. I follow the linguists and psychologists who consider metonymy to be “first and foremost a cognitive phenomenon.” An innate cognitive ability explains why an audience can infer an unstated referent automatically. And metonymy is relevant in biblical interpretation, because it en-
ables an audience to (in the words of a cognitive psychologist) “make meaningful sense of seemingly anomalous and disconnected statements in texts.” 66

When we encounter an agency metonym, its literal meaning is activated together with possible nonliteral meanings. 67 So an interpreting mind will reliably consider whether a biblical character’s name (or cognomen) is indeed referring to that character, even while considering its application also to the agency relationship.

Even so, whenever a speaker uses a referring expression, the audience must ascertain the intended reference apart from determining that word’s sense. Resolution of a reference is not limited to that referring term’s sense in isolation; it is always a function of context. The fixing of precisely who (or what) a name is referring to depends upon its context of use. 68 And if a name’s typical reference (the person) does not lead to a coherent and relevant result, its reference will be applied to a more salient aspect of what is conventionally associated with the bearer of that name. 69

When there is an existing frame of reference—what linguists variously call a cognitive frame or schema—the favored construal of a referring expression will be the one that is consistent with that frame. 70 In the case of an agency metonym, the salient frame or schema is that of agency: the representation of one party by another party, which can involve attendant standard procedures and protocols, as with messaging. 71 This kind of context provides a key to interpretation; it can evoke a term’s non-literal construal (as in agency metonymy). The linguist François Récanati explains how the process works: 72

A schema is activated by, or accessed through, an expression whose semantic value corresponds to an aspect of the schema. The schema thus activated in turn raises the activation level (the accessibility) or [sic—should be “of”] whatever possible semantic

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71 See my “Cognitive Factors.”

values for other constituents of the sentence happen to fit the schema. . . . All candidates or potential semantic values which fit the schema evoked by some of them mutually reinforce their accessibility and therefore increase the likelihood that they will be globally selected as part of the interpretation of the utterance. Coherent, schema-instantiating interpretations therefore tend to be selected and preferred.

Strictly speaking, agency metonymy is a matter of reference, not of word sense (semantics). Yet when the metonym is conventional, that distinction practically disappears. For the human interpretation of names apparently takes into account our world knowledge of the possibility (or even likelihood) of that named individual’s being represented by another party. This can be described as a presupposition of possible agency that is part of any name’s meaning in certain contexts of use. In effect, the audience construes the reference to an individual as if it includes that person’s (known or potential) agents as part of his or her penumbra.

Although I am not aware of studies on the cognitive processing of agency metonymy per se, it is a type of nonliteral utterance whose interpretation has been well studied: conventionalized metonymy. It appears that in a supporting context, all metonyms (conventionalized or not) are processed with the same computational cost (mental effort) and at the same speed as literal usages of that same term. In other words, an existing agency frame of reference makes an agency metonym’s use unsurprising—if not expected. Yet even outside of a supporting context, a conventionalized (familiar) metonym is the same as literal usage, in terms of both processing speed and cost. For example:

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73 On the role of presupposition in meaning shifts, see Löbner, Understanding Semantics, 94–102.

74 That is, the audience treats a conventional alternation (in our case, a metonym) as a semantic matter—and thus go looking for an alternate sense of the term that suits the present context of use—even though its application is pragmatically motivated. On this phenomenon, see Nunberg, “The Pragmatics of Deferred Interpretation,” 351–54.

“she read Dickens” (where Dickens refers to his written works)
VERSUS
“she met Dickens” (where Dickens refers literally to the author)

“he phoned the library” (where library refers to institutional staff)
VERSUS
“he passed the library” (where library refers literally to a building).

Those metonymic usages rely upon the audience to already know, respectively, that Dickens was a well-regarded author, and that library buildings contain staff people with telephones. So, too, agency metonymies in biblical texts surely relied upon the ancient audience to know that both kings and deities regularly dispatched messengers on errands.

Thus we have grounds to conclude that instances of agency metonymy are processed automatically and reliably. As the cognitive psychologist Raymond Gibbs notes, “inferring a [conventional] metonymic target does, as a rule, not pose any problem to the hearer because the conceptual relationship that holds between a given vehicle and its target is well-established.”


76 This type of metonymy is usually categorized as a model of reference in which “one part stands for another part” and thus replaces it in the mental discourse model (Littlemore, Metonymy, 22). However, it can also be understood as a “one part stands for the whole” conceptual metonymy, in which the “whole” is (in our examples) “the author—with his oeuvre” or “the institution—with its edifice.” To that extent, it is akin to agency metonymy, in which a reference to the principal in effect stands for “the principal—with any agents.”

77 “Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy,” 59.
Excursus 2: Diagram of Agency Metonymy Conventions

This diagram illustrates the conceptual coherence behind the dozens of instances of various agency conventions that the Hebrew Bible used to depict human activity (see Excursus 3). These conventions have been confirmed by their consistency with other ancient Near Eastern messaging protocols (see Excursus 4).

Although such conventions have been noticed by both premodern commentators and modern biblical scholars, my work seems to be the first to “connect the dots” by showing how these conventions are mutually supporting and must derive from a common conception. Furthermore, the lines of evidence are mutually reinforcing—and thus the overall result is robust.

Even so, the existence of some of these intrahuman conventions has been denied outright. Some scholars acknowledge them for humans—but deny that they have any bearing for interpreting the depiction of God’s apparently superhuman messengers. In most treatments of angels, these conventions are simply ignored. See further Excursus 8, “Divine Agents in the Light of Human Agents.”

Excursus 3: Table of “Agency Metonymy” Conventions in the Human Domain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regarding Agents in General</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A narrator (or speaker) may refer to an agent’s action as if it were the principal’s action (e.g., using the principal’s name to refer to both parties at once).</td>
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### Regarding Messengers in Particular

| **4** | A narrator (or speaker) may call a messenger by the principal’s name while the mission is underway. |
|   | Num 20:19; Jud 11:19; 2 Sam 5:1; cf. 2 Chr 2:11 |
| *Note:* For parallel examples with a messenger using the principal’s name, see Gen 37:32; 38:25; 50:16–17; Exod 18:6; 1 Sam 16:19; 2 Sam 2:5; 10:5 (=1 Chr 19:5); 11:5; 12:27; 1 Kgs 20:10 |
| **5** | A narrator (or speaker) may refer to a messenger in terms of the principal (via an epithet, pronoun, or verbal inflection) while the mission is underway. |
|   | Gen 44:10 (cf. v. 17); Josh 2:14b, 18a; Jud 11:19; 1 Sam 16:19; 2 Sam. 12:27 |
| **6** | A principal’s message may be couched as if the principal were present at its delivery. |
|   | 2 Kgs 18:31 (cf. v. 17) |
| **7** | Messengers may address the message’s recipient as if the principal were speaking. |
|   | Gen 44:20; 44:7; 1 Sam 25:41 |
| **8** | Recipients condition their deferential manners (gestures and speech) upon the social rank of the principal—not that of the messenger. |
|   | Gen 43:20; 44:7; 1 Sam 25:41 |
| **9** | Recipients may respond to a message by addressing the messenger as a stand-in for the principal (i.e., as if speaking directly to the principal). |
|   | Gen 44:9; Jud 11:13; 1 Sam 25:41; 2 Sam 3:13; 1 Kgs 20:4; 2 Kgs 3:7 |
| **10** | A recipient’s treatment of a messenger is tantamount to treatment of the principal, in terms of showing respect or disrespect. |
|   | Gen 24:30–31; 1 Sam 25:10–17; 2 Sam 10:1–6 |

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## Excursus 4: Metonymy across Languages

What I claim to have been an automatic construal in the ancient Near East has long been overlooked by competent modern scholars. How can I account for this state of affairs?

The cognitive linguist Jean Littlemore has mused about how metonymies are missed. She observes that it is a matter of (not) knowing the rules of the game:

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The most common misinterpretations occur when a metonymically intended meaning is taken literally or metaphorically. . . . Misinterpretations are . . . more likely to occur in communication with people who have different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.  

Contemporary biblical scholars certainly have “different cultural and linguistic backgrounds” from the text’s composers. Thus it might be no surprise that some of us seem to have misinterpreted the ancient narrative conventions that do not happen to have precise correspondences in our native languages.

In the Hebrew Bible, agency metonymy was conventionalized in a much wider range of situations than is acceptable in English and other European languages. This state of affairs should be placed in a cross-linguistic context. Although metonomy is a universal cognitive phenomenon, particular metonymic conventions are known to be language-specific. For example, both in Chinese and in Hebrew—but not in English—it is conventional to refer to an elderly person (or old age) by the noun that literally refers to “gray hair.” That usage is a metonymy in which a distinctive part of the person is used to stand for the whole.

To give another example, the linguists Rita Brdar-Szabó and Mario Brdar surveyed the metonymic usages of the name of a given capital city in English, German, Croatian, and Hungarian (for example, “London opted not to participate in the negotiations”). They found that not all of the known types of referential metonym were available in all four languages. They attributed the cross-linguistic variance to “an intricate interplay of conceptual, grammatical and discourse-pragmatic factors.”

The relatively widespread application of agency metonymies in ancient Near Eastern societies was a function of both language and cultural differences. Can biblical scholars

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79 Metonymy, 2.
80 On cross-linguistic variations in metonymy, see the literature review and discussion in Littlemore, Metonymy, 162–69.
83 In the ancient Near East, someone who was dictating a message to a messenger would address the recipient (if of equal or lower social status) directly. A hypothetical example: “Tell him: ‘You must come home right away.’” As a matter of convention, the ancients treated the intermediary metonymically—as being tantamount to the recipient in that respect. That practice may seem odd
now accept that variance in usage for what it is—without judging those ancient usages to be deficient? This remains to be seen.

**Excursus 5: Critique of Sommer’s Methodology**

As mentioned when I discussed the fourth example passage in the body of my paper (Judg 6:11–24), Sommer resolved the text’s references to Yhwh via theological means:

“a small-scale manifestation of God or … a being with whom Yhwh’s self overlaps.”

Sommer apparently defaulted to a literal construal of participant references after rejecting only one alternative approach, namely “to see all anthropomorphic or mythopoeic language in scripture as necessarily and inevitably metaphorical.” In so doing, he referenced certain ruminations by Ithamar Gruenwald and by Michael Fishbane. Unfortunately, those authors were not addressing the phenomenon of metonymic reference. It is not clear whether his decision in favor of a literal construal of word senses included a separate consideration of their reference. In any case, Sommer seems to have built his interpretive edifice upon too narrow a base.

to us nowadays, given that when we transmit a message via a third party, we conventionally express it more obliquely: “Tell him that he must come home right away.” Metonymy is not licensed. However, when we transmit a message via voice mail, we do conventionally express it directly—despite the fact that we are nonetheless addressing our recipient via an intermediary. In that setting, we do license metonymy. In other words, the ancient practice of direct address in messaging was just as “natural” and “logical” as how we approach voice mail nowadays.

84 Even with regard to human–human interactions, the Bible’s unfamiliar agency conventions have struck some modern scholars as bizarre (e.g., Aubrey R. Johnson, *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* [1961], 4–5, 11, 28–30). Thus J. W. Rogerson observed in 1992 that “twenty years ago there was broad agreement in OT study [that] the intellectual life of the ancient Israelites was thought in many ways to resemble that of ‘primitives’: [hence] the personality of one person could merge into that of another so that, for example, a messenger was simply an extension of the personality of whoever had given him the message” (“Anthropology and the OT,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 1:259; emphasis added).

85 *The Bodies of God*, 42–43.

86 Ibid., 178n37.

Given that he was construing the references to God literally, Sommer then attended to the question of what would have conditioned the ancient audience’s interpretation. He speculated that the audience readily conceived of an apparent “bodily” conflation of a divine principal with his/her agent, due to a “fluidity” in ancient Near Eastern imaging of deities. Ironically, that was the same grounds I had previously used to argue that the ancient Israelite audience construed its deity as being disembodied (and beyond gender altogether).

On Sommer’s misconstrual of rabbinic plain-sense commentators, see Excursus 6.

Excursus 6: Agency Metonymy within the History of Biblical Interpretation

To situate my recognition of agency metonymy within the history of biblical interpretation, I will briefly note what some of the classical plain-sense rabbinic interpreters had to say about the last two examples that my paper treated, in Genesis 19 and Judges 6.

Although those commentators did not remark upon Lot’s wording per se, they did comment a few sentences later, where the narrator restates what Lot said. According to verse 24, “Yhwh” rained down fire and destroyed the city. This wording creates the same participant reference problem, given the agents’ prior report that they were going to do the deed. Samuel ben Meir (known as “Rashbam,” early 12th century) resolved the problem by remarking that in this instance the name Yhwh “refers to Gabriel” (alluding to a classical midrashic identification of one of the angels involved). Similarly but more

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88 To Sommer’s credit, by his recognition that the ancient frame of reference must be taken into account when interpreting the text, he at least avoided one of the fatal flaws of Esther Hamori’s argument (When Gods Were Men; “Divine Embodiment in the Hebrew Bible”). The latter indulged in the fallacy of literalism by discounting the audience’s frame of reference. In particular, her monograph identified in two passages of Genesis an unannounced “human theophany” (that is, divine embodiment) motif. Only an audience already familiar with such a convention would interpret in those terms. Yet according to Hamori’s own findings, this motif is unattested anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible or the ancient Near East. The absence of any evidence for such a convention leaves such a motif without support as a matter of the biblical text’s plain sense, quite apart from the widely attested convention of agency metonymy discussed in the present paper. This point was raised in my review of Hamori’s book.

89 David E. S. Stein, “On Beyond Gender: The Representation of God in the Torah and in Three Recent English Renditions,” Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues 15 (2008). (Sommer did not cite or engage that piece.) Further assessment of what the concept of “fluidity” justifies is beyond the scope of this paper.
categorically, David Kimḥi (“Radak,” late 12th century) cited agency metonymy, remarking: דְּמֵל פְּדָא בְּשָׁם אָבִיו (“the messenger is called by the name of his master”).

As for Judges 6, a construal according to agency metonymy matches the 12th-century interpretation of Abraham Ibn Ezra. (For ease in presentation, I am combining both versions of his commentary.) As he himself noted, his remarks on the similar situation with Moses at the burning bush\(^{90}\) can be applied also to this passage in Judges. Ibn Ezra’s explanation of the labeling in Exod 3:4 and 3:7 sheds light on Judg 6:14, 16, and 23, with regard to what the name Yhwh refers to:

4. The messenger is called by the honored name [namely, the tetragrammaton].

(So too with the messenger who presents to Gideon: “Yahweh said to him….,” [Judg 6:23])

7. The agent now articulates the wording of his principal.

while his explanation of the first-person wording in the recounting of the messages of Exod 3:6 and 3:7 applies also to Judg 6:14 and 16:

6. The agent now speaks as [if it were] the principal’s words.

7. These are the messenger’s words.

Benjamin Sommer displayed some awareness of the agency-related issues when discussing (and discounting) the remarks of Rashbam and Ibn Ezra:

The relationship among the conception [sic] of malʾakh in many of the passages I discuss is already noticed by Rashbam and ibn Ezra. They shy away from accepting the conclusion that Yhwh is the angel, instead claiming that in these passages, an especially important angel is called Yhwh, after the deity who sent him. (Similarly, when reporting the speech of a captain who is passing on an order of a general, a narrator might write, “The general ordered. . . .” even though the general is not present.)\(^{91}\)

In my view, however, those two commentators were not “shying away” from anything, but rather pointing out the agency metonymy. Unfortunately, Sommer relied upon the interpretation of Martin Lockshin, who considered the views of those medieval rabbis to

\(^{90}\) This episode is discussed below in Excursus 11.

\(^{91}\) The Bodies of God, 201, n25.
be inconsistent and awkward attempts at theological “harmonization.”"\textsuperscript{92} In these cases, an otherwise perceptive Lockshin missed the point of what they were saying, because he refused to accept the notion that proper nouns—especially God’s personal name—could ever sensibly refer to someone other than their bearer. Nonetheless, names often do so, not only in biblical Hebrew but also in English usage, via agency metonymy.

**Excursus 7: The Mind’s Online Processing of Texts**

Here I focus on what is called *online* processing—the way that human minds make sense of a text (including spoken utterances) in real time, given various cognitive constraints, such as a buffer of working memory with limited capacity. This is the kind of interpretive enterprise that is typical of witnessing the oral performance of a text.

As an utterance (text) is being taken in, the mind entertain all known and plausible interpretive possibilities along the way. While listening or reading, the audience is making guesses incrementally as to the utterance’s intended meaning—and updating those guess during the process. As the neuroscientist William Marslen-Wilson concluded in a classic study, “each word, as it is heard in the context of normal discourse, is immediately entered into the processing system at all levels of description, and is simultaneously analyzed at these levels in the light of whatever information is available at each level at that point in the processing of the sentence.”\textsuperscript{93} Another classic study by the cognitive scientists Marta Kutas and Steven Hillyard showed that sentence interpretation is a function of the audience’s expectation.\textsuperscript{94} The characterization of human language processing as incrementally updated and expectation-based (or prediction-based) is the consensus view in psycholinguistics.\textsuperscript{95}


\textsuperscript{93} “Sentence Perception as an Interactive Parallel Process,” *Science* 189 (1975), 226.


This matches the characterization that emerged already in the late 1960s from an entirely different line of research, namely *literary theory*. As Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg explained:96

Literature is a time-art, in which . . . things are presented sequentially. . . . The text often makes use of the reader’s tendency . . . to try at each stage to pattern the details already presented as logically and as completely as possible, and even to anticipate what is to come. . . . The reader [also] tends to “adjust” the fictive world [i.e., the world of the text], as far as possible, to . . . basic assumptions or general canons of probability derived from “everyday life” and prevalent cultural conventions . . . , since the hypothesis that is most conventional in terms of his culture also yields the simplest answers and linkages.

**Excursus 8: The Cognitive Entrenchment of Agency Considerations**

An indicator of the pervasiveness of agency metonymy in the ancient Near East is this statement from the victory prism of King Sennacherib of Assyria, with regard to King Hezekiah of Judah (cf. 2 Kgs 18:13–16): “In order to … do obeisance as a slave, *he sent his personal messenger*.97 Apparently that agent traveled on behalf of the Judahite king, in order to grovel at the emperor’s feet (or perhaps, given the possibility of dual metonymy, at the feet of the emperor’s agent!).

Agency metonymy accords with the thoroughly hierarchical ancient Near Eastern social order, wherein a subordinate can be tasked to represent the interests of a superior. (In the Bible, see, e.g., Mic 7:6; Ps 123:2; Prov 30:21–23.) It was rehearsed regularly in the linguistic conventions of deferential speech (such as characters’ designating themselves as “your servant” when speaking with a social superior) and the nonverbal conventions of bowing and prostration—which required the continual awareness and rehearsal of social status. These practices are known not only from the Bible but also from the Lachish Letters and other epigraphy.

Every Israelite was conceived of as either a master or a servant of someone else on an ongoing basis.98 Hence practically everyone viewed themselves as either a principal or an agent, on a regular basis. The entrenchment and salience of agency awareness goes even

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beyond John Greene’s sweeping conclusion about messengers, as having been “ubiquitous throughout this area [the ancient Near East]; they were an integral part of its warp and woof. They were there in all aspects of its social, political and religious life. They were there in all types of literature.”

**Excursus 9: Divine Agents in the Light of Human Agents**

*Ancient Near Eastern messenger deities behave like human messengers.*

The conventions for intrahuman agency transactions are consistent with the practices of deities as depicted in mythological texts in Egypt, Ugarit, and Mesopotamia. That is, such deities engage messengers who deliver messages to other deities; and in so doing, everyone follows the usual messaging protocols. Thus Samuel Meier concluded that messenger deities “all behave in a fashion similar to their human counterparts who function as messengers on earth for all humans, from royalty to commoners.”

*God’s messengers are not depicted as exempt from intrahuman messenger protocols.*

An observer might object that the world of deities differs from the world of messengers, such that human agency protocols do not apply. To that I would reply with the *principle of parsimony* as formulated (in a different context) by Michael Fishbane. Namely, “a … topic … known from a certain cultural sphere, like the ancient Near East, should be assumed to have that same literary effect or value … in all its various occurrences unless there is a marked reason for thinking otherwise.”

Only a few of the human agency commonplaces were obviously inconsistent with the basic characteristics of deities. Messenger activity in the divine realm does lack certain features found in the human realm—a distinction that derives from the presumption that deities are *immortal* and can *travel freely*. Hence no one would be attempting to rob or kill or kidnap them. As Meier observes: “The provision of escorts for human messengers was a common courtesy, if not a necessity, for safe or trouble-free communication. Passports and the circumvention of bureaucratic hurdles were persistent features of human communication. Provision for lodging and meals along an extended route was a necessity. None of these aspects of human communication reappears in depictions of divine communication.”

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100 “Angel of Yahweh,” *DDD*, 53.

101 *Biblical Myth*, 17. His principle applies Occam’s Razor to the task at hand.
messenger activity.” Such distinctions, however, have no bearing on the passages and interpretations discussed in this paper.

**God’s messengers do what intrahuman messengers do, despite the doubters.**

A couple of scholars have argued that angels are so unlike other messengers that they share only the label *malʾāk* in common. Consequently, there is no justification for assuming that depictions of divine messengers should be construed like the depictions of human ones. However, those claims of irreconcilable differences do not withstand scrutiny.

Alexander Rofē intentionally ignored all human-to-human agency conventions in his 1969 dissertation that treated biblical narratives about a *malʾak Yhwh*. He claimed to have considered human messaging conventions. Yet without any presentation or discussion of evidence, he asserted that certain patterns of angelic behavior “are not characteristic of the many places where messengers of flesh and blood are mentioned.” This assertion is contradicted by the fact that the patterns that he named are indeed amply attested—and therefore can be considered narrative conventions (see ##1, 5, and 7 in Excursus 3, which catalogues biblical depictions of intrahuman messaging behavior).

Similarly, Dorothy Irvin, in her 1970 dissertation, denied that *malʾākîm* in the Genesis accounts functioned as messengers per se. In her view, what those biblical figures are depicted as doing is simply not what messengers do. Conversely, those figures did not deliver any actual messages; rather, when they spoke, they were speaking only for themselves. On both counts, she argued, the angels cannot be considered “messengers” at all.

Irvin did not compare the *malʾākîm* of interest in the Genesis accounts to any human *malʾākîm* (only to messenger deities in ancient Near Eastern literature). My own comparison shows that regarding the ostensibly unique angelic roles that Irvin identified, the Bible attributes *all* of them also to non-deities—either to humans labeled as *malʾākîm*.

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102 “Angel I,” *DDD*, 46–47.

103 *Angels in the Bible: Israelite Belief in Angels as Evidenced by Biblical Traditions* [Hebrew], 2nd edn. (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2012), 16. This assessment then led Rofē to explain in theological and historical terms the apparent anomalies regarding the depiction of God’s divine agents (angels), while citing numerous 19th- and 20th-century scholars whose lead he was following.

104 Irvin, *Mytharion*, 20, 94, 99, 103. She studied the six “angel/messenger” stories in Genesis 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, and 28.

105 Namely, rescuing someone (2 Sam 3:14–16); testing someone (1 Sam 25:5–8, 14; 2 Kgs 9:17–21); and punishing someone (1 Sam 19:11; 2 Kgs 6:32; Prov 17:11; Eccl 5:5).
or to God’s human agents.\textsuperscript{106} Hence the notion that only deities do such things (and not their agents) does not withstand scrutiny.\textsuperscript{107}

As for Irvin’s claim that God’s \textit{malʾākîm} did not deliver any messages, this conclusion was the result of having overlooked agency metonymy. After having discounted the convention that the label \textit{malʾak X} means “messenger of party X,” and after construing all of the narratives’ participant references literally, it is little wonder that Irvin was unable to distinguish the agent from the principal.\textsuperscript{108}

Unfortunately, Samuel Meier, in his encyclopedia entries, cites Irvin when he states: “It must be underscored that the angel of YHWH in these perplexing biblical narratives does not behave like any other messenger known in the divine or human realm. Although the term ‘messenger’ is present, the narrative itself omits the indispensable features of messenger activity.”\textsuperscript{109} In particular, regarding Gideon’s interlocutor (Judg 6:11–23, discussed in the main paper), Meier finds it vexing that “the figure speaks but never claims to have been sent from Yahweh nor to be speaking words that another gave him.”\textsuperscript{110} In being puzzled by that state of affairs, Meier has overlooked the Bible’s reliance upon a well-known messaging script, which allowed such details to be taken for granted.\textsuperscript{111} In short, the characteristics that supposedly make the \textit{malʾak Yhwh} unique are matters of depiction rather than of innate nature; all of them can be explained as matters of narrative convention.

That being said, I am certainly not the first scholar to draw upon intrahuman messaging practices and depictions in order to understand the depiction of angels. Prior work includes the brief speculation of James F. Ross (1962), who in his study of prophecy

\begin{footnotes}
\item[106] Namely, predicting a child’s birth and fate (1 Kgs 13:2; 2 Kgs 4:16; Isa 7:14); rescuing (1 Kgs 17:20; 2 Kgs 4:32–35); testing (1 Kgs 13:11–26; Isa 6:8–10); and punishing (1 Sam 15:32–33).
\item[108] Irvin’s conclusion was also the result of overlooking Israelite society’s messaging script; see below, note 111.
\item[109] “Angel I,” 49.
\item[110] “Angel of Yahweh,” 55; he uses the term “vexing” on p. 53.
\item[111] On the messaging script and its implications for interpretation, see my “Cognitive Factors.” For my speculation on why the biblical composers depicted God’s messengers in a different manner than the messenger deities in other ancient Near Eastern accounts (such as with regard to commissioning and dispatching; cf. Irvin, p. 99), see Excursus 2 in that article.
\end{footnotes}
suggested that the general practice of ascribing the principal’s authority to a messenger “may . . . account for the occasional confusion between Yahweh and his malʾāḵ.”

Similarly, in a dictionary article on the term malʾāḵ, after observing that intrahuman messengers are functionally equivalent to their employer, R. Ficker (1979) applied that lesson to the angelic realm, finding a ready explanation for the ostensible “conflation” of deity and angels. He concluded: “The difficulty that Yahweh and his malʾāḵ are sometimes identified no longer exists when one considers that a malʾāḵ can generally be identified with his employer.”

John Walton (2001) likewise has discussed many of the passages treated herein. Countering the occasionally proffered claim that the “angel of the Lord” is really either the deity in general or Christ in particular, Walton likewise cites as a baseline the role of the messenger in the ancient world, as well as messaging protocols. He concludes: “When the angel is identified with the Lord by the narrator or himself, it is nothing more than an indication of the source and authority behind the message. . . . There is no warrant to . . . posit a more theologically sophisticated explanation.”


114 Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 462–66; here 465, 466. Walton, in turn, cited favorably the earlier treatment by William Graham MacDonald, “Christology and ‘The Angel of the Lord,’” in Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne (Eerdmans, 1975), 324–335. MacDonald attributed to Justin Martyr (mid-2nd century) the notion that certain angelophanies were actually Christophanies; and he traced that doctrine through Calvin and on into the twentieth century (325–328). MacDonald then refuted this idea partly by analogy to intrahuman messaging conventions—what he referred to as “the malak idiom” (331–332).
Excursus 10: The Priority of Metonymic Construal

Compared to metonymic construal of the references in our examples, a literal construal requires an additional assumption in order to yield a sensible interpretation. The extra assumption is that Yahweh and Yahweh’s agents behave unlike human principals and their agents. Whereas the latter merge their identities only functionally, the former are said to do so ontologically.

As I have argued, this extra assumption is unnecessary, because a coherent and informative construal is available merely by assuming conventional agency behaviors, and then by following a conventional metonymic means of construal. And an added assumption reduces the interpretation’s overall plausibility. For as the human mind strives to make (plain) sense of a text or utterance, it prefers the construal that is the most economical. Likewise, to the extent that a probability judgment is involved in deciding between the two construals, I contend that the metonymy construal would have been seen as more probable than the literal construal.

Furthermore, in order to be rigorous about how construal of communication works in practice, we should also take into account the audience’s assessment of potential alternative formulations. If a literal meaning had been intended for the anomalous participant references, the text’s composer(s) would have needed to signal that intent explicitly—for it would deviate from expectation, as a violation of both social and linguistic conventions. To overcome the audience’s interpretive preference for metonymic construal, more clues would have been needed, such as a hypothetical mention that God came down in the form of an angel. The fact that such clues were not provided thus further suggests that a literal construal was not intended. (Technically, my claim is an argument from silence. However, it is how part of how human beings naturally interpret someone’s utterance: we assess that utterance against potential alternative expressions that might be expected in that situation.)

115 See Excursus 1, “The Cognitive Processing of Metonymy.”

116 In effect, this decision rule is an application of Occam’s Razor. In the main portion of my paper, I adduced the psycholinguistics literature, where the principle has been confirmed in human experiments. Here, I am borrowing from the field of computational linguistics—also known as “artificial intelligence”—where the same notion has been modeled and field tested (Hobbs, “Abduction,” 732).


Consequently, the text’s composers had ample reason to conclude in advance that their audience would have construed their wording as a conventional agency metonymy by default. For some audience expectations can be considered reliable due to social conventions that are known to the biblical text’s composers. Presumably the composers account for that common ground when deciding how to depict the various aspects of a story—which ones to mention, which ones to highlight, which ones to only hint at, and which ones to let go without saying. And that is what justifies my conclusion as a contemporary interpreter.

Here I am interpreting in light of second-order (recursive) calculations, because doing so more closely approximates how human beings communicate than a strictly linear model of “it means what it says.” Rather, speakers choose what to say (and not say) based on their assumptions as to what their target audience will reliably take for granted, and upon the latter’s predictable expectations for the discourse. As Paul Noble has explained: “A text is an instantiation of some particular language-system, with reference to which the author made certain choices . . . in such a way as to express the desired meaning. It will therefore be through interpreting a text in relation to the milieu of its production that the most worthwhile meanings will be found in it.”

Ultimately, it is Occam’s Razor that commends our construing the words and actions of Yahweh’s angels in terms of agency metonymy. E. J. Revell made this methodological point upon citing a passage (Judg 16:19) that applies agency metonymy to a particular human principal (Delilah). Scholars commonly suggest conjectural emendations to alter the reference there. Revell objected to their doing so on the same grounds that I have objected to scholars’ resolving the references to angels via theologizing, namely, that agency metonymy is widespread—and thus clearly conventional. As Revell put it, “the use of a [grammatical] subject which represents the authority for an action, not the actor, is common enough in Hebrew.” He concluded, “It is thus a methodological requirement that the usage of the text be treated as self-consistent.”

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120 Designation of the Individual, 14; emphasis added.
Excursus 11: Agency Metonymy in Other Passages Involving God’s Agents

Whenever Yahweh in the Bible is depicted as operating via agents, the ancient audience had a ready-made cognitive frame for construing those depictions—namely, agency. That frame then evoked the applicable linguistic conventions. In at least the following cases that depict Yahweh’s communications with human beings, participant reference tracking is at issue. In such cases, the commonplaces of agency metonymy from the realm of human communication (Excursus 3) readily yield a coherent and meaningful result.

Genesis 16:7–13 (Hagar at the Well)

- In verse 10, this malʾāk is depicted as speaking for God in the first person, which is a conventional agency metonym (#7 in Excursus 3).
- In verse 13, following the exchange between Hagar and the angel, the narrator refers to Yhwh haddobër ʾēlehā (“the LORD who spoke to her”; NJPS). This is an agency metonym: a narrator may refer to an agent’s action as if it were the principal’s action (e.g., using the principal’s name to refer to the agent) (#1 in Excursus 3). This metonym underscores that the angel was speaking on God’s authority, as he made his fateful pronouncements.
- In the same verse, Hagar, after having encountered one of God’s agents, names the site El-roi, on account of its being where El (God) rōʾî “identified me” as suitable for the mission of bearing a child on her mistress’s behalf.121 (The remainder of her remark is obscure, so scholars often emend the text; but this main point is clear enough.) Her mention of El is likewise an agency metonym: a speaker may refer to an agent’s action as if it were the principal’s action (#5 in Excursus 3); here, Hagar uses the principal’s epithet to refer to the messenger. Her metonym expresses her confidence that her interlocutor had been speaking for the deity. She believes the message and proceeds to act accordingly.

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121 This construal of the verb is activated by Hagar’s task assignment, as conveyed by the angel: go back home and bear this child. Those instructions create an agency context that evokes the sense of rāʾā as “to identify [someone or something as suited for a certain task].” See Gen 22:14; 22:8; 41:33; Deut 12:13; 33:21; Judg 16:1; 1 Sam 14:52; 16:1; 16:17; 2 Kgs 10:3; Est 2:9; 1 Chr 17:17.
Genesis 18 (Abraham Receives Visitors)

• Verse 13: מִי לְאָדָם אֲלֵיךָ אָנָּנוּ?
This new designation of the speaker—as יְהוָה rather simply as one of the aforementioned visitors—is the hallmark of an agency metonym. It evokes the commonplace that a narrator (or speaker) may call a messenger by the principal’s name while the mission is underway (#4 in Excursus 3). By convention, the narrator is referring to the party who has already been speaking—namely, the chief agent—and designating him in terms of his principal, as “Yhwh.” Here, the metonym underscores for the audience the idea that when this messenger reiterates his prediction of a highly unlikely and fateful miracle, he is continuing to speak for his principal.

• Verse 17: מִי לְאָדָם אֲלֵיךָ אָנָּנוּ?
The syntax indicates a background circumstance. There is no time stamp. The reported utterance (vv. 17–19) was apparently part of God’s instruction to the chief agent upon dispatching him—that is, prior to the scene depicted in Genesis 18:1–16. It would now be recalled as germane, in order to explain what the chief agent says and does next, as he proceeds to converse with Abraham. If so, this clause would be the only instance in Genesis 18 where the name יְהוָה is not a metonym for one or more of God’s agents. (Otherwise, the remaining instances of the name יְהוָה in this chapter can be construed as agency metonyms, as in v. 13.)

• Verse 21: הִנֵּה נִרְאֶנָּה אָנָּנוּ?
The chief agent speaks, and in the first person announces an intent to “descend” into the valley to reach Sodom and Gomorrah. Actually, as we learn in the next verse, he is dispatching his two subordinates to do so (which is consistent with usage of the same verb in Exod 3:7), while he remains to converse with Abraham. In so doing, the messengers become agents with respect to the chief agent, even while he himself is subordinate to their principal, Yahweh. (That is, the hierarchy is nested.) Speaking now in his capacity as a principal, he is entitled to refer to his agents as if he were personally carrying out the task, by agency metonymy (#2 in Excursus 3).

• Verse 21: מִי לְאָדָם אֲלֵיךָ אָנָּנוּ?
This chief agent shifts into speaking in God’s name in the first person. This is conventional agency metonymy, since the principal’s identity is already known to the text’s audience and to Abraham (#7 in Excursus 3).

122 On the name יְהוָה in v. 1 and its relationship to the visitors who appear in v. 2, see my “Cognitive Factors.”
• **Verse 23:** וַיָּרָא הָאָדָם מִלְחָמָהּ לְהוֹרֵעַ וְלָאָב
Abraham addresses his interlocutor as if speaking with Yhwh directly. This manner of communicating is licensed by agency metonymy (#9 in Excursus 3).

• **Verse 33:** וְיָבֹא הָאָדָם מִלְחָמָהּ לְהוֹרֵעַ לְהוֹרֵעַ לְהוֹרֵעַ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ לְכֹלָהּ L
The chief agent leaves promptly, presumably in order to report back the findings to his principal (Yahweh). This step would be expected as part of the well-known messaging script, although as such it would normally go without saying.\(^{123}\) Here, the narrator’s spelling out the cessation of communication functions to underscore how extraordinary this dialogue has been. This device is akin to spelling out the advent of communication, which is occasionally done elsewhere for apparently the same reason.\(^{124}\)

The employment of a metonym seems to indicate that a vital part of this agent’s mission is to “bring back to Yahweh” the newly negotiated agreement. Although this particular metonym is arguably unconventional, it is not liable to misconstrual because it follows a series of conventional ones and occurs within the same agency context.

**Genesis 21:17–18 (Hagar in the wilderness of Beer-sheba)**

In verse 17, the narrator depicts Hagar as being addressed by a malʾāk ʾēlōhîm (“God’s messenger“). In verse 18, this malʾāk speaks for the deity in the first person, a conventional agency metonym (#7 in Excursus 3).

**Genesis 22:11–14 (Abraham on Mount Moriah)**

- In verse 12, this malʾāk is depicted as speaking for God in the first person, which is conventional agency metonymy (#7 in Excursus 3).
- In verse 14, the narrator invokes a saying: bəḥar Yhwh yērāʾeh (literally, “On Yahweh’s Mount, [Yahweh] makes contact“). Although this saying could be understood as metonymic (wherein the angel who had contacted Abraham [v. 11] is referenced inflec-

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\(^{123}\) As Meier has noted, “the messenger as a fact-finder, inspector or investigator is a widely attested phenomenon” (*Messenger*, 232). But even a messenger who simply announces a message (e.g., a herald) was expected to return to the principal and confirm that the mission had been accomplished: “the messenger’s task was finished when the messenger had returned safely back to the point of despatch” (ibid., 230–31). In the Bible it is normal for any messenger—whether sent by God or by a human principal—to no longer be mentioned after the message is delivered. Because that final (and anticlimactic) step is required by the messaging script, it can go without saying in normal circumstances. On the role of the messaging script in the depiction of messaging, see my “Cognitive Factors.”

\(^{124}\) See Excursus 9 in my “Cognitive Factors.”
tionally in terms of the principal who presumably had dispatched him to make that contact; #1 in Excursus 3), it would be more naturally construed in terms of the verb’s default meaning in a communication frame.125 In any case, the saying conveys that those who visit the (future) Temple can likewise expect an experience of contact with the divine.126

**Genesis 31:3, 11–13 (Jacob in Paddan-aram)**

- In verse 3, the narrator relates wayyōʾmer Yhwh ʾel yaʿaqōb (“Yahweh said to Jacob”). As becomes clear later in the passage (see below), this is an agency metonym: a narrator may refer to an agent’s action as if it were the principal’s action (#1 in Excursus 3). Such is the thrust of the 12th-century annotation by the commentator Radak (Rabbi David Kimḥi), ad loc.: "המלאך יקראuggle בנים anzeigen/activity einer master’s”). At this point, it goes without saying that a messenger is involved. This metonym underscores that the agent who is speaking is indeed doing so on the deity’s behalf.

- In verses 12–13, this malʾāk is depicted as speaking for Yahweh in the first person. This, too, is conventional agency metonymy (#7 in Excursus 3). The malʾāk states the deity’s name not because Jacob is not already aware of who the principal is, but rather in order to clarify which identity or aspect of the divine is meant to be recognized.127

- E. A. Speiser (Anchor Bible commentary) exemplifies the historical-critical approach to interpretation, which views verse 3 as coming from a different documentary source (“J”) than did verses 11–33 (“E”), on the basis of their differing labels for the deity.128

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125 On the default sense of this Niphal verb as “making contact,” see Excursus 9 in my “Cognitive Factors.”

126 Earlier in verse 14, after Abraham has sacrificed a ram instead of his son, he names the site Yhwh yirʿeh. This name alludes to his earlier statement to his son (v. 8), where the same verb applied to identifying a particular sacrificial animal to serve as an intermediary; but now it is also re-applied to God’s implicit choice of this site as an ongoing mediating place (the site of the future Temple in Jerusalem; 2 Chr 3:1). In this context, the name’s meaning is best understood as “Yahweh identifies.” For rāʾā in this sense, see above, n. 121.


128 The differing labels for the deity do not provide strong evidence of narrative discontinuity, given that their respective utterance contexts are distinct: in verse 3, the narrator is reporting to
Such a reading resolves the participant reference challenge by simply abandoning the attempt to construe this passage as a cohesive text. However, given the apparent fact that someone (a later redactor?) set up the text in this manner, the best way to achieve coherence is via metonymy.

• This instance of agency metonymy, which begins with the use of God’s name without any prior mention of the agent, is diagnostic: it shows that the text’s audience was expected to anticipate the possibility of agency metonymy whenever God is mentioned as communicating with a person.

**Genesis 32:31 (Jacob at the Jabbok)**

• After his nighttime encounter with the agent, Jacob says: ḥāʾēʾī ’ēlōhîm pānîm ʾel pānîm (“I have seen [an] ʾēlōhîm face-to-face”). The ancient audience would readily construe such usage as a conventional metonym that designates the agent in terms of his principal (#1 in Excursus 3). Thereby, Jacob would be expressing his confidence that his interlocutor had been acting upon Yahweh’s instructions.\(^{129}\)

• Similar reference to God’s agents as ʾēlōhîm are found in Gen 19:29; Exod 21:6; 22:7–8, 27; 32:1, 23; Jud 13:21–22; 1 Sam 28:13; Hosea 12:4–5. These instances, too, can be explained as conventional metonyms (#1 in Excursus 3). Alternatively, all such cases could be construed as instances of an extended lexical sense of ʾēlōhîm as “intermediary”—a sense that presumably was originally derived from metonymies like these that eventually became entrenched.\(^{130}\)

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\(^{129}\) In this verse, Jacob also expresses a sense of risk to his life; however, that does not in itself indicate that he was referring literally to his deity. A similar concern that seeing an angel is likewise dangerous is articulated by Gideon in Jud 6:22 and by Manoah in Jud 13:21–22.

\(^{130}\) There is no sharp boundary between conventional metonyms and lexical meaning. Conventional metonyms are, in Kevin Chau’s words, “automatically understood and pedestrian idioms” (Chau, 636); Stephen Shead claims that when a nonliteral usage becomes conventionalized, it is “directly retrieved (along with its frame) from the mental lexicon” (Radical Frame Semantics and Biblical Hebrew: Exploring Lexical Semantics [Boston: Brill, 2011], 64; emphasis in original). See also above, note 74.
Exod 3:1–10 (Moses at the Burning Bush)

- In verse 2, the agent is straightforwardly identified as such—as being in relationship to the named principal: malʾak Yhwh. The governing verb is typically used to introduce communication; together this label and this verb provide a solid frame of reference for messaging activity, guiding subsequent interpretation in those terms—which sets up an expectation of agency metonymy as the narrative proceeds.

- In verse 4, either of two alternative construals involving agency metonymy would maintain narrative cohesiveness. For our present purposes, we need not decide between them. One option is to construe both the name Yhwh and the term ʾēlōhîm as referring to that same messenger, via agency metonyms (#4 and #5 in Excursus 3, respectively). The motive can be explained as dramatic impact, given the fateful nature of this encounter. Alternatively, we can construe the use of the tetragrammaton as referring as usual to the deity (who is not interacting here directly with Moses, having dispatched a messenger to do so), while ʾēlōhîm refers directly to the agent—given that term’s well-known secondary lexical sense as “an intermediary.”

- In verse 6, the angel is depicted as identifying his principal in the first person—an agency metonym (#7 in Excursus 3). The literary motive for such wording would be immediacy.

- In verse 7, the name Yhwh is an agency metonym (#4 in Excursus 3). It is deployed just as the commissioning proposal is being proffered—a proposal that radically alters the course of Moses’ life, and upon which the fate of Israel’s future depends. Such usage underscores the supreme source of this agent’s authority, as he proceeds to negotiate with Moses.

- As discussed above in Excursus 6, the same picture of metonymic usage emerges in the plain-sense construal by the classic commentator Ibn Ezra.

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131 This labeling is in accord with the designation of human agents; the narrator may designate such agents specifically via a noun of agency plus a genitive that names their principal, as in Num 22:18; Jud 11:13; 1 Sam 19:20; 25:12, 42; 2 Sam 21:17; 1 Kgs 20:9.

132 On this verb, with a treatment of this passage, see Excursus 9 in my “Cognitive Factors.”

133 See above, at Genesis 32:31.

134 Likewise, David Kimḥi (“Radak”) recognized the agency metonym here, repeating the same comment as at Gen 19:24 (see Excursus 6).
**Exod 3:7–12 (Who takes the Israelites out of Egypt?)**

- Many biblical passages claim variously that either Yahweh or Moses (sometimes with Aaron) took the Israelites out of Egypt. Occasionally, that action is attributed to both the principal (Yahweh) and to the agent (Moses) in the same passage.

- In Exod 3:7–9, Yahweh’s agent speaks in the first person on Yahweh’s behalf (see the previous entry) of having “come down to rescue” (wāʾērēd lōḥaṣṣīlō) the suffering nation of Israel and bring them up out of Egypt (lōḥaʾālōtō). But then immediately God assigns Moses as an agent (lōkā wāʾēšlāḥākā, v. 10)—and thus speaks of him as the one to actually carry it out (wōḥoṣēʾ et ʿammī . . . mimmīṣrāyīm, “take my people out of Egypt,” ibid.; bōḥōṣīʾākā ʿet hāʾām, v. 12). Thus even within the same utterance, it is possible to speak both of oneself and of one’s agent(s) as carrying out the same mission. The first-person formulation is an agency metonym (#2 in Excursus 3).

- Soon the narrator underscores that Yhwh had tasked Moses and Aaron with taking the Israelites out of Egypt: wayṣawwēm . . . lōḥōṣīʾ et bōnē yišrāʾēl (Exod 6:13). Likewise after the exodus, in situations where Moses’ continued involvement as God’s agent is at stake, both God and the Israelites acknowledge him as the agent who had carried out this mission (Exod 32:1, 7, 23; 33:1; Deut 9:12). However, this astonishing feat is normally attributed to Yahweh, not only in self-reference (e.g., Exod 3:17; 20:2; 29:46; Num 15:41), but also by Moses (Exod 32:11; Deut 6:12; 9:26) and by other characters (e.g., 1 Sam 12:6; 1 Kgs 8:51; Dan 9:15). The attributions of this deed to the deity are agency metonyms (##1–2 in Excursus 3).

- In other summaries of the event, both the principal and the agent are credited. These passages include: Num 20:16, where Moses explains to the king of Edom that Yahweh effected the liberation from Egypt via a malʾāk (“messenger”), which is evidently a self-reference; Gauld, 85; Josh 24:5–6, where Joshua quotes Yahweh as mentioning having “sent” Moses (as an agent) while liberating the Israelites from Egypt; and 1 Sam 12:6, 8, where Samuel speaks in similar terms.

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135 Less likely is Milgrom’s interpretation (JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers, ad loc.)—namely, that malʾāk here refers to the angel(s) mentioned in several passage in Exodus. For no angel is otherwise credited with having “brought out” the Israelites from Egypt, whereas Moses often is; furthermore in his doing so, Moses functioned as a malʾāk. On the various functions and authority of a malʾāk, see my “Cognitive Factors.”
Numbers 22:31–38; 23:26 (Balaam on the way to Balak)

- In verse 34, when Balaam says to the angel: ʾim-raʿ bɔ ʾenêkā (“If you still disapprove”; CJPS), he is addressing the messenger as a stand-in for the principal (i.e., “If You still disapprove”), which is an agency metonym (#9 in Excursus 3).
- In verse 35, the malʾāk speaks for Yahweh conventionally in the first person (ʾāser-ʾādabber ʾēlêkā, “[only] what I tell you to say,” echoing what God (ʾēlohim) had said in v. 20). This is an agency metonym, for it depicts a messenger as addressing the recipient as if the principal were speaking (#7 in Excursus 3).

Joshua 5:13–6:5 (Joshua at Jericho)

- In 5:14, a divine messenger self-identifies as God’s military envoy (šar šəbāʾ Yhwh; 5:14). He then prepares Joshua for a fateful message (v. 15) before instructing Joshua on military tactics (6:2–5), which this particular agent is uniquely qualified to explain.
- In 6:2, just as this divine messenger is about to disclose a procedure for the capture of Jericho, the narrator applies a timely agency metonym, referring to him as “Yahweh” (#5 in Excursus 3). This usage underscores that the agent continues to speak for his principal while passing along highly unusual and fateful instructions.
- The shift in the designation of Joshua’s interlocutor in 6:2—from the “šar šəbāʾ Yhwh” to “Yhwh”—is most often interpreted as marking the start of a new scene. However, that reading yields a fragmented and obscure text. It leaves the previous scene without a proper ending (which is construed as finishing precipitously after the angel tells Joshua to remove his sandals, and Joshua does so). Joshua’s express expectation of a message from the envoy (v. 14) is also left unaddressed.
- In contrast, a metonymic construal of the label in verse 2 yields a coherent and informative text. The circumstantial clause in verse 1 (beginning with a conjunctive vav, which implies continuity) links the preceding passage with the following one. Joshua promptly receives the message that he was obviously expecting. In addition, the evocation by verse 15 of a similar episode of Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3), which suggests that an important message is about to be conveyed, functions as expected. The episode then fits in naturally with the rest of the conquest narrative.

Judges 2:1–4 (Announcement at Bochim)

- In verse 1, the narrator relates that a malʾak Yhwh (“Yahweh’s messenger”) addressed a group. That messenger is then depicted as speaking for Yahweh conventionally in the first person. This is an agency metonym (#7 in Excursus 3).
Isaiah 7 (Isaiah and King Ahaz)

• In verse 3, *Yhwh* directs the prophet Isaiah to deliver a message to King Ahaz of Judah. The content of the initial message is spelled out in verses 4–9.

• In verse 10, the narrator designates this prophet as *Yhwh*, as he continues to speak with the king. That is an agency metonym (#4 in Excursus 3), underscoring that this agent continues to serve as God’s representative as he confronts the king.\(^{136}\) In addition, the sudden change in label signals the start of a new stage in the dialogue; it also highlights the next utterance as particularly salient or surprising (or both).\(^{137}\)

Zechariah 1:13; 3:2

• In Zechariah’s self-narrated visions, he encounters various divine agents of God. At certain points he designates them as *Yhwh*, via conventional agency metonymy (#4 in Excursus 3):

• In 1:13, Zechariah applies that label apparently to the same character previously designated both as ṣīš (“an agent”; vv. 8, 10)\(^{138}\) and as *malʾak Yhwh* (“Yahweh’s messenger”; v. 11). This figure, who is engaged in the deity’s service while poised on a horse “among the myrtles,” has already participated in a three-way conversation with the prophet (v. 11). The prophet’s agency metonym is employed at a key juncture in his depiction of the conversation—regarding his deity’s attitude toward “Jerusalem and the towns of Judah.” It underscores that the agent continues to speak for the principal as he starts to describe a fateful shift in that attitude.

• In chapter 3, the only speaker is a *malʾak Yhwh* (introduced in v. 1), whom the narrator designates in verse 2 as *Yhwh*. This is an agency metonym, and it is invoked at a key juncture—namely, as the angel confronts the Accuser, who apparently has prevailed.

\(^{136}\) Interpolating the arc of the participant references in vv. 3, 7, and 11–14 implies that Isaiah is likewise the referent in this verse, despite the intervening change in label in v. 10. As Joseph Blenkinsopp notes, “Since Yahweh speaks through the prophet there is no need to replace ‘Yahweh’ with ‘Isaiah’” (Anchor Bible, *Isaiah* 1–39, ad loc., p. 229). Similarly John D. W. Watts, who, noting that the Targum specifies Isaiah, remarks that “the unanimous testimony of MT and versions demands respect.” Word Biblical Commentary 24. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, p. 133. As Brevard Childs explains, “the reference directly to Yahweh as the subject functions to emphasize the divine authority of the offer that follows” (*Isaiah*, OTL 65, on vv. 10–17).

\(^{137}\) See above, note 42.

\(^{138}\) On ṣīš as the generic label for an agent, see my “Cognitive Factors,” especially its Excursus 10.
until this moment. (This construal of the label *Yhwh* explains the third-person references to *Yhwh* as this figure speaks.) It underscores that the agent speaks for the principal while defending the high priest Joshua.

- Radak (see above, s.v. Gen 31:3; and Excursus 6 regarding Gen 19) characterized the usage in 3:2 as an agency metonym: יְהוָֹה יָנָשָׁה בֶּן יָהַעַגָּר ("the messenger is called by his master’s name"; ad loc.)