

Panel Theme: Theological Interpretation and the Embodiment of God

## Angels by Another Name How “Agency Metonymy” Precludes God’s Embodiment

David E. S. Stein

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 sense*<sup>1</sup>—that is, according to the accepted rules of human language.<sup>2</sup> Such rules include shared conventions that were used to encode and decode the text. They 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*.<sup>3</sup> By “principal” I mean a party whose interests the agent represents; by

---

I thank Kenneth Cherney, Mayer Gruber, Tamar Kamionkowski, Hanne Loeland Levinson, Vivie Mayer, Christo Van der Merwe, and Steven Runge for their helpful comments on prior drafts.

A companion article to this paper, “The Recognition of Angels: ‘Process Metonymy’ in Biblical Depictions of Messengers,” has been submitted to *Open Theology* (preview available [here](#)). The two pieces treat overlapping narrative conventions that affect theological interpretation.

<sup>1</sup> More precisely, I believe that *historians of religion* should restrict themselves to the text’s plain sense (with some consideration of literary overtones). For their part, *theologians* are welcome to depart from the plain sense but should make clear to themselves and others that they are doing so.

<sup>2</sup> To establish the “plain sense,” the relevant context is of many types, including *audience expectation* and *frame of reference*. The driving role of context is highlighted in the suggestion that rabbinic *pešat* (plain-sense) interpretation be glossed as “the direct, *contextual* mode of exegesis” (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).

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, reflecting a crucial conceptual distinction; see below, note 10.

<sup>3</sup> With regard to the embodiment of Israel’s God, scholars mostly differ over what *went without saying* in ancient Israel, or what Howard Schwartz called “a plausible cultural context in which to situate” the biblical text (“Does God Have a Body in Scripture?: The Problem of Metaphor and

“agent” I mean a party who is empowered to stand in for, or speak for, the principal.<sup>4</sup> This arrangement is known as *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 *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 *embodied God*.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately I will show that divine embodiment is *not* the plain sense, on the grounds that it 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.

---

Literal Language in Biblical Interpretation,” in *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.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I am *not* using the term “agent” in the senses that are most often encountered 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).

<sup>5</sup> Many recent scholars—especially historians of religion—have described one or more depictions of theophany in the Hebrew Bible as “embodiment,” including in human form. See, e.g., Dorothy Irvin, *Mytharion: The Comparison of Tales from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978); Edward L. Greenstein, “The God of Israel and the Gods of Canaan: How Different Were They?” in *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, ed. Ron Margolin, Division A [1997] (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1999), 47\*–58\*; James Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: The Free Press, 2003); Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); George W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005); Esther J. Hamori, 2008. *When Gods Were Men: The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature* (New York: Walter de Gruyter 2008); idem, “Divine Embodiment in the Hebrew Bible and Some Implications for Jewish and Christian Incarnational Theologies,” in *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. by S. Tamar Kamionkowski and Wonil Kim (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010), 161–83; Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Mark S. Smith, “The Three Bodies of God in the Hebrew Bible,” *JBL* 134/3 (2015), 471–88; idem, *Where the Gods Are: Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). These scholars resolve the divine references in biblical texts literally, without considering the possibility of metonymy.

**#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:<sup>6</sup>

וַתֵּהָרַר הָאִשָּׁה	The woman <sup>7</sup> became pregnant;
וַתִּשְׁלַח	she sent [word]
וַתִּגְדַּל לְדָוִד	and <b>she</b> informed <sup>8</sup> David—
וַתֹּאמֶר הִרָה אֲנִי:	<b>she</b> said, <sup>9</sup> “I’m pregnant!”

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 social mores—that Bathsheba’s presumed need for discretion surely argued against her making

---

<sup>6</sup> 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.)

<sup>7</sup> More precisely, “womanly-participant.” On this relational understanding of אִשָּׁה, see my article “The Noun אִשָּׁה (‘iś) in Biblical Hebrew: A Term of Affiliation,” *JHebS* 8, Article 1 (2008).

<sup>8</sup> This verse is rare in its use of more than two speech-related verbs to introduce direct speech (Cynthia L. Miller, “Introducing Direct Discourse in Biblical Hebrew Narrative,” in *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics*, ed. by Robert D. Bergen [Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994], 233n20). This verse’s plethora of verbs to introduce Bathsheba’s message indicates a marked construction (*ibid.*, 215), highlighting a message that is fraught with import. This particular verb (*wattaged*) also suggests that the sender is not seeking a dialogue or negotiation.

This third clause’s participants and thematic roles are identical to those in the previous clause, and their two verbs share an indirect object, showing that they refer to the same speech event (*ibid.*, 204–5). More precisely, they represent two salient steps within the larger messaging process. The acts of “sending” and “informing” cannot actually occur at the same instant. See further below, note 15.

<sup>9</sup> 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: Marking Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Bible* [New York: Brill, 1992], 128). I concur, for the messenger’s necessary existence is elided within a *process metonymy* (see note 15). 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 narrative less cohesive. As discussed below, typical human construal of language favors the simplest account that matches the expectation of informativeness.

a personal appearance.) Yet the last half of this verse *literally* states that Bathsheba herself “informed David” as she spoke the words rendered as “I’m pregnant.”<sup>10</sup> How, then, would the ancient audience have created a coherent picture of the narrative?<sup>11</sup>

The usual and reflexive way that people resolve such a dissonance is to treat our clause as an expression of *metonymy*.<sup>12</sup> The prototypical metonymic expression can be defined as *the mention of one entity in order to refer to another entity to which it is functionally related in a noteworthy way*.<sup>13</sup> Now, there are many types of metonymy. My

---

<sup>10</sup> 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).

On the many meanings of the term “literal,” see Mira Ariel, “The Demise of a Unique Concept of Literal Meaning,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 34/4 (2002), 361–402; idem, “Privileged Interactional Interpretations,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 34/8 (2002), 1003–44; Gary Alan Long, “Dead or Alive? Literal and God-Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62/2 (1994), 509–37; Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., “Literal Meaning and Psychological Theory,” *Cognitive Science* 8 (1984), 275–304.

<sup>11</sup> 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).

<sup>12</sup> Metonymy 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). On metonymy in the Hebrew Bible, 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); Kevin Chau, “Metaphor’s Forgotten Brother: A Survey of Metonymy in Biblical Hebrew Poetry,” *Journal for Semitics* 23/2 (2014), 633–52. One of Chau’s conclusions (p. 650) serves as the epigraph of the present article. On metonymic construal as a reflex, see Excursus 1, “The Cognitive Processing of Metonymy.”

<sup>13</sup> This definition is based most closely on those of Maria M. Piñango et al., “Metonymy as Referential Dependency: Psycholinguistic and Neurolinguistic Arguments for a Unified Linguistic Treatment,” *Cognitive Science* 41/S2 (2017), 353; and Jerry Hobbs, “Syntax and Metonymy,” in *The Language of Word Meaning*, ed. Pierrette Bouillon and Federica Busa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 290. The present paper deals only with the *prototypical, referentially focused* type of metonymic expression—specifically, with the use of referring

focus is on a special class that I have dubbed *agency metonymy*.<sup>14</sup> The distinguishing feature of expressions within this class is that the principal stands for the agent *in description*; and this works precisely because the agent stands for the principal in *actual practice*. This type of metonymy can make reference to *both* of those parties at the same time. Here is how that works in our example, in three steps:

1. The verb *wattišlah* (“she sent”) evokes cultural knowledge about the ubiquitous practice of messaging.<sup>15</sup> Messaging necessarily involves a messenger, who operates 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.

---

expressions (usually proper nouns, but also pronouns and mere inflections) to identify indirect referents, which is sometimes called *reference transfer*.

On the various types of metonymy, see Antonio Barcelona, “Reviewing the Properties and Prototype Structure of Metonymy,” in *Defining Metonymy in Cognitive Linguistics: Towards a Consensus View*, ed. Reka Benczes, Antonio Barcelona, and Francisco Jose Ruiz de Mendoza Ibanez (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011). An influential view is that of Geoffrey Nunberg, for whom metonymy is licensed by a linguistic mechanism that he calls *meaning transfer* (“The Pragmatics of Deferred Interpretation,” in *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004], 347; see the important modifications by Gregory L. Ward, “Equatives and Deferred Reference,” *Language* 80/2 [2004], 262–77).

<sup>14</sup> Agency metonymy brings into view both the stated party and the implied party. As such it is a type of 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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, *Metonymy*, 25). This verse’s elliptical verb usages also invoke what I call a “process metonymy”; it relies upon general knowledge of the procedural relationship between the many steps that are involved in messaging. So the narrator indicates a *series* of actions merely by mentioning the most salient steps in the process—in this case, the dispatch and delivery. These parts of the process stand for the whole—here with respect to an entire familiar procedural script. See further my article “Recognition of Angels.”

Now we must ask:<sup>16</sup> *Why* does the text express itself in such a laconic manner? Why resort to metonymy rather than spell everything out? There are several reasons: to keep the narrative spotlight on Bathsheba—who, as the initiator of the depicted action, is the more salient character;<sup>17</sup> to make the narrative more cohesive;<sup>18</sup> to define the frame through which we view that implied character—namely *as Bathsheba’s agent*;<sup>19</sup> to speed up the narrative pacing and add to its dramatic effect; and most of all to underscore that this vital piece of intelligence is coming 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 legally and morally binding.<sup>20</sup> This basic concept then licensed a narrative convention that is evident throughout the Bible:

Any party<sup>21</sup> may treat an *agent’s* authorized action or speech as if it were the *principal’s*.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> The construal of any text prompts the audience to account for not only *the content* conveyed by the discourse (explicitly or implicitly), but also *why* the speaker chose to convey this information (Jerry Hobbs, “Abduction in Natural Language Understanding,” in *Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward, 724–41 [Malden, MA: Blackwell Oxford, 2004:737].

<sup>17</sup> 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).

<sup>18</sup> On enhancing textual (narrative) cohesiveness, see Littlemore, *Metonymy*, 76–77.

<sup>19</sup> For the narrator’s purpose, this is the only relevant fact about the messenger. Hence the latter can remain unmentioned. I call this “framing without naming.” In general, a speaker’s *label* for something frames how the audience *regards* it. Thus the linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson explain that metonymy “serves the function of enhancing understanding.... [It] determines which aspect we are focusing on” (*Metaphors We Live By* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980], 36).

<sup>20</sup> Of course, agents (and those who dealt with them) were expected to observe certain protocols. In the Bible, agents were expected to be ready to perform their duties (e.g., Isaiah 6:8); to listen attentively to instructions (1 Sam 3:10); to proceed assiduously and reliably (Prov 10:26; 25:13); to report back timely and truthfully (2 Kgs 4:31 versus 5:25; 9:17–20); to refrain from misusing their delegated authority by lording it over others (1 Sam 2:12–17; 22–25); and to avoid self-dealing (Num 16:15; 1 Sam 12:3; 15:1–23).

<sup>21</sup> By “any party” I mean the narrator or any participating characters—human or divine—regardless of their role. See Excursus 2, “Diagram of Agency Metonymy Conventions”; Excursus 3, “Table of Agency Metonymy Conventions.”

<sup>22</sup> In its depictions of human activity, the Bible uses agency metonymy constantly. The classic example is *וַיִּבֶן שְׁלֹמֹה אֶת־הַבַּיִת* “Solomon built the temple” (1 Kgs 6:14; my translation). It was cited productively by one of the first rabbinic plain-sense commentators, Abraham Ibn Ezra

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 metonymy 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:<sup>23</sup>

... וַיִּשְׁלַח יִשְׂרָאֵל מַלְאָכִים . . . “Then **Israel** sent messengers. . . .”

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

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל “**Israel** said to him,  
נְעַבְרָה-נָא בְּאַרְצְךָ עַד-מְקוֹמִי ‘Allow us to cross through your country to **my** homeland.’ . . .”

(Judg 11:19; NJPS, 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?<sup>24</sup> Well, everyone also knows that 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.<sup>25</sup> Thus Moses becomes salient in

---

(Spain, 1089–1167 CE), in the “long version” of his commentary at Exodus 14:6, to explain the agency metonymy there. (In English, see H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch* [New York: Menorah Pub., 1988].) In this passage, the *principal’s* name (“Solomon”) is an agency metonym, for it refers also to the thousands of *agents* who did the actual construction. The king is named because he directed them toward the goal.

Additional examples of reference that require construal as an agency metonym (in light of the situational context) include: “Then the *slave* took ten of his master’s camels and went off” (Gen 24:10; cf. v. 32); “*David* attacked the Philistines and subdued them” (2 Sam 8:1); and “*King Solomon* offered as sacrifices 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep” during the Temple’s dedication period (2 Chr 7:5 // 1 Kgs 8:63). Many more such instances could be adduced.

<sup>23</sup> 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.)

<sup>24</sup> The singular finite speaking verb indicates that the sender is being profiled, rather than the messengers. This construal yields the most cohesive narrative with a minimum of assumptions (above, note 9).

<sup>25</sup> See Deut 2:26; cf. Num 21:21.

the audience's mind. Although what Jephthah *says* is that "Israel" is sending and speaking, what he *means* is more like "Our leader at the time, Moses, sent messengers with a message that he composed 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.

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 makes the nation's stated claim to its homeland more pointed and poignant,<sup>26</sup> but more is at stake than dramatic effect: it again underscores that Moses was speaking on his principal's behalf.

In short, Jephthah's references to the principal imply the agent's deeds—which in turn redound to the principal's credit. Remember, *principal* and *agent* are two sides of the same conceptual coin (which must be distinguished from their being seen as two faces of the same figure). Happily, such a construal handily resolves the references in Judges 11.<sup>27</sup>

Metonymy can be a highly compact and economical means of expression.<sup>28</sup> It arises from, and relies upon, the automatic associative function of human cognition.<sup>29</sup> An audience finds metonymic construal attractive because it enables the stated words to become more meaningful—and meet the basic expectation of informativeness.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore—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

---

<sup>26</sup> "Biblical writers prefer to avoid indirect speech.... Direct discourse... has the effect of bringing the speech-act into the foreground" (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 2011], 83–84).

<sup>27</sup> Such a construal also preserves narrative continuity, for "Israel" has been the thematic actor in Jephthah's discourse for several verses prior.

<sup>28</sup> In agency metonymy, referencing the principal points to a richer and more complex whole: the agency relationship, with its capability of action-at-a-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 *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, ed. Klaus-Uwe Panter and Günter Radden [Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999], 13).

<sup>29</sup> 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).

<sup>30</sup> 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.

agree 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 construe that the text about Bathsheba is alluding to the ancient (but otherwise unattested) practice of hiding oneself inside a giant cake and having it delivered to the palace, before popping out to proclaim one’s message in person. Or that Jephthah is recounting how the patriarch Jacob rose from the dead to advocate 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.<sup>31</sup>

\* \* \*

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.

### #3. Two Angels and Lot Say the Same Thing, Sort Of (Genesis 19:12–14)

In Genesis 19, two agents of Israel’s God have arrived in Sodom; the narrator has designated them as *mal’akim* (literally, “messengers”). Here in vv. 12–13 they reveal their plans to Abraham’s nephew, Lot:<sup>32</sup>

<p>וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים אֵל-לוֹט . . .          כִּי-מִשְׁחָתִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה . . .          וַיִּשְׁלַחְנוּ יְיָ לְשַׁחֲתָהּ:</p>	<p>Then the agents<sup>33</sup> said to Lot,          “. . . <b>We</b> are about to destroy this place. . . .          Yahweh has sent <b>us</b> to destroy it.”</p>
---	--

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

---

<sup>31</sup> “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” (Greenstein, “Medieval Bible Commentaries,” 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 appeal.

<sup>32</sup> This passage’s text is stable for our purposes. (In v. 12, the Samaritan version reads המלאכים rather than האנשים; and in v. 13 it reads להשחיתה rather than לשחיתה.) The translation is mine.

<sup>33</sup> On *’anašim* as “agents,” see Excursus 6 in my article “The Recognition of Angels.”

וַיֵּצֵא לוֹט . . . וַיֹּאמֶר      So Lot went out . . . and said,  
 קוּמוּ זָאוּ מִן־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה      “Get up and get out of this place!  
 . . . כִּי־מִשְׁחִית יְיָ אֶת־הָעִיר . . .”      **Yahweh** is about to destroy the city. . . .”

In this case, both the principal (called *Yhwh*) and the agents (called *'anašim*) 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 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: “Agents have been authorized by Yahweh to destroy the city!”

I assert that this is the plain sense of Lot's wording. (To my knowledge, no one has construed Lot's reference literally; if we were to do so, we might conclude that he meant to *equate* the angels with God, or somehow *conflate* their identities.)

#### #4. Gideon and an Angel[?] (Judges 6:11–24)

Now let's look at our last text, which recounts a long dialogue. For ease of presentation, I have excerpted the most salient clauses, mainly so as to reflect the turns in which the protagonist, Gideon, is being addressed by someone. In the course of this conversation, he is appointed to undertake a mission on behalf of Israel's deity.

... וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהֵי מְלָאֲכָי יְיָ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו... 12 **Yahweh's messenger** contacted<sup>34</sup> him and said to him...  
 ... וַיִּפֶן אֵלָיו יְיָ וַיֹּאמֶר... 14 **Yahweh**<sup>35</sup> turned<sup>36</sup> toward him and said, ...  
 ... הֲלֹא שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ : ... “I hereby dispatch you.”...

<sup>34</sup> On the rendering of this verb, see below, note 55 (end).

<sup>35</sup> 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, a participant reference tracking problem remains nonetheless, as discussed below.

<sup>36</sup> This verb does not otherwise introduce speech (except once where the two parties clearly were not already facing each other; 2 Sam 2:19–20). Given that *nearness* is typically used to indicate elements that are thematically central to the discourse (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), “turning toward” seems to spatially express a shift in the direction of the discourse toward the business at hand (cf. 2 Kgs 23:16; Eccles 2:12). Perhaps it also highlights the following utterance (see above, note 8).

... וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי יְיָ כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ... 16 **Yahweh** said to him, “I will be with you....”

... וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי מַלְאָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים... 20 **God’s messenger** said to him,...

... וַתִּנַּח אֶל-הַסֶּלַע הַלְזוֹ... “Put [the food] on that rock....”

... וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יְיָ שָׁלוֹם לָךְ... 23 **Yahweh** said to him, “You are secure....”

For this text’s audience, the challenge in tracking participant references is: who is actually speaking with Gideon? The normal biblical conventions for dialogue and expectations of narrative continuity 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.

Although this example differs from our first two cases in that the agent is mentioned explicitly, it is like those cases in that the principal is—on a literal reading—*active in the scene*. (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.<sup>37</sup>

- 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 food (v. 20)—his designation as a messenger is straightforward: *mal’ak Yhwh* or *mal’ak ’elohim*. He is identified as serving in this role on behalf of his principal.<sup>38</sup>
- In contrast, in reporting the pronouncements that directly involve the agent’s actual *mission of appointment* (vv. 14, 16, 23), the designation is *Yhwh*.

<sup>37</sup> For a similar construal, see Mordecai Breuer, “*Biqqur hammal’akim ’ešel ’avraham vālot*,” in *Pirke Bəreshit*, ed. Yosef Ofer, with Meir Munitz (Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 1998), 384–86. Breuer perceives agency metonymy (without using that term). Compared to Breuer, I read those usages as less specifically theological and more conditioned by broader linguistic conventions.

<sup>38</sup> 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.

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*."<sup>39</sup>

So if we construe the narrator's use of the name *Yhwh* as the hallmark of agency metonymy, the passage is easily seen as cohesive: we understand the narrator to be using metonymy to underscore that the messenger speaks on the principal's behalf precisely when God's authority matters most during the dialogue.<sup>40</sup>

If so, we would also perceive another agency metonymy 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 is conventional and serves multiple narrative purposes.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> 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.)

<sup>40</sup> The application to biblical Hebrew of cross-linguistically derived discourse and pragmatic considerations in participant reference suggests the following for our passage in Judges. (These results are consistent with the effects of agency metonymy as I have identified them.) 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 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.")

<sup>41</sup> 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 process metonymy (see above, note 15). Again, the messaging step in which the agent self-identifies (as speaking or acting on behalf of someone else) was such a familiar part of messenger protocol that it usually went without saying in depictions. Thus a first-person delivery would have occasioned no surprise to the text's ancient audience, for this too was messengers' normal real-life practice. Its deployment in a narrative is thus optional and serves pragmatic narrative interests. See Excursus 3, "Table of Agency Metonymy Conventions"; see further my article "The Recognition of Angels."

Granted, you and I would not speak in *these* ways when narrating dialogue or describing messaging in English or German or Modern Hebrew.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

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

Passage	Principal (directly referenced)	Agent (indirectly referenced)	Verb(s) <sup>44</sup>	Agency task	Means of reference	Agent’s discourse status	Reference tracking problem
2 Sam 11:5	Bathsheba	Her messenger	<i>wattaged watt’omer</i>	Inform	Verbs	Implied	<i>Physical remove:</i> who informs?
Judg 11:19	Israel	Moses (as leader)	<i>wayyišlah wayy’omer</i>	Negotiate	Name	Implied	<i>Personification:</i> who negotiates?
Gen 19:14	Yhwh	YAHWEH’s agents	<i>mašhit</i>	Destroy	Name	Active	<i>Divergent attributions:</i> who destroys?
Judg 6:14	Yhwh	YAHWEH’s messenger	<i>wayyipen wayy’omer</i>	Appoint	Name	Active	<i>Interlocutor shift:</i> who appoints?

As the right half of this table shows, agency metonymy can be applied to a wide range of delegated tasks; and its references can be expressed by the full range of grammatical means; to evoke agents of any discourse status; with its trigger as a wide variety of reference tracking challenges. Agency metonymy is a versatile device.

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

This audience is surely aware that 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

<sup>42</sup> See Excursus 4, “Metonymy across Languages.”

<sup>43</sup> 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.

<sup>44</sup> The verb’s semantics (“selection restrictions”) must allow for agency metonymy; see note 55.

problems<sup>45</sup>—as featured in his high-profile 2009 book *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*. 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*, then it must be *Yahweh* who is speaking.<sup>46</sup> He then made recourse to the ancient audience’s expectations with regard to a “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?<sup>47</sup> 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 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*.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> 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.) Instead, I have taken to heart E. J. Revell’s programmatic comment upon citing a passage that uses agency metonymy and yet scholars commonly emend its text (Judg 16:19). He objects to their doing so because “the use of a [grammatical] subject which represents the authority for an action, not the actor, is common enough in Hebrew.” He concludes, “It is thus a methodological requirement that the usage of the text be treated as self-consistent” (*Designation of the Individual*, 14).

<sup>46</sup> See Excursus 5, “Critique of Sommer’s Methodology.”

<sup>47</sup> The agency metonymy explanation is not new; see Excursus 6, “Agency Metonymy within the History of Biblical Interpretation.”

<sup>48</sup> Piñango et al., “Metonymy as Referential Dependency”; Petra B. Schumacher, “Content and Context in Incremental Processing: ‘the Ham Sandwich’ revisited,” *Philosophical Studies* 168

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 metonymies were *conventionalized*.<sup>49</sup> They were based upon a tight *conceptual coherence* between principals and the agents who represented them.<sup>50</sup> In agency contexts, the name of any principal in effect would refer to “the named party—and any agents thereof.” And that concept was deeply entrenched, given that it served as the basis for daily social, economic, political, and religious transactions.<sup>51</sup> This means that agency was highly *accessible* in the Israelite mind as a frame of reference. So it is little wonder that 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 Jephthah and Lot). Evidently the audience was expected to understand this manner of expression at every turn.<sup>52</sup>

---

(2014), 151–65; Hanna Weiland, Valentina Bambini, and Petra B. Schumacher, “The Role of Literal Meaning in Figurative Language Comprehension: Evidence from Masked Priming ERP,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8, Art. 583 (2014).

Actually, the same answer emerged already in the late 1960s from another line of research, namely *literary theory*. See Menahem Perry and Meir Sternberg, “The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process,” *Poetics Today* 7/2 (1986), 289–90, 278–79.

<sup>49</sup> By “conventionalized” I mean that it is based on a conceptual generalization (namely agency) that allows for the metonymic relation to hold *independently* of a metonym's immediate context of use (a definition borrowed from Piñango et al., “Metonymy as Referential Dependency,” 23). This property 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.”

<sup>50</sup> In contrast, the concept of fluidity-in-the-ancient-representation-of-deities by its very nature requires that any *particular* form of a deity's manifestation—particularly an unconventional one—is only weakly related to the conception of the deity proper.

<sup>51</sup> See Excursus 7, “The Cognitive Entrenchment of Agency Considerations.”

<sup>52</sup> Agency metonymy does not seem to appear in extant extrabiblical Hebrew texts, although it is attested in the very similar surrounding languages of Phoenician, Ammonite, and Moabite (respectively, Yehimilk of Byblos inscription; ca. 940 BCE; Tell Sīrān bronze bottle inscription, l. 1; ca. 600 BCE; Mesha stela; ca. 840 BCE). This distribution suggests that agency metonymy was not only a device in biblical literature but a widespread narrative convention. It was also used by Aramaic-speaking Jews in Elephantine (Ananiah's deed to Yehoishema, 404 BCE). For the source texts, see Aaron Schade, *A Syntactic and Literary Analysis of Ancient Northwest Semitic Inscriptions* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 111–15; Aḥituv, *Echoes from the Past*, 363,

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. Operational differences that ancient Near Eastern writers ascribed exclusively to *divine* messengers are insignificant for our purposes. So in the absence of a strong signal that the conventions of agency in intrahuman settings should not apply in the divine realm, they would naturally be extended to conceptions there.<sup>53</sup>

The third consideration favoring metonymic construal is that in agency situations, it is *automatic*. Experiments have repeatedly shown that whenever the context clearly supports conventionalized metonymies, their wording is mentally processed as quickly and easily as similar literal wording is. No extra time or effort is required.<sup>54</sup>

So looking again at our Gideon story, we notice that it establishes an agency context from the start. For the audience, this activates the conceptual link between principal and agent, which then creates an *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 *default* approach for arriving at the plain sense of this text.<sup>55</sup>

---

393–95; Edward Bleiberg, *Jewish Life in Ancient Egypt: A Family Archive from the Nile Valley* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2002), 34.

<sup>53</sup> See Excursus 8, “Divine Agents in the Light of Human Agents.”

<sup>54</sup> Arguably, on the other hand, additional calculation is needed for a *literal* construal of the referring expression *Yhwh* in Judg 6:14. For it requires the audience to revise its mental model of the discourse, so as to account for an apparently more complex angelic figure who is behaving unconventionally. Extra assumptions add to the processing time and effort. 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. See further Excursus 1, “The Cognitive Processing of Metonymy.”

<sup>55</sup> See Excursus 9, “The Priority of Metonymic Construal.” However, the default construal may not apply if the semantics of the relevant verb (its “selection restrictions”) do not allow for agency metonymy. That being said, two verbs that do allow agency metonymy happen to frequent the biblical passages in which scholars often perceive divine embodiment:

- אָמַר (literally “he said”): with *a human* as principal, see our first two examples, and rows 4 and 5 in Excursus 3, “Table of Agency Metonymy Conventions”; with *God* as principal, see Gen 25:22–23; Judg 1:1–2; 20:18, 23, 27–28; 1 Sam 23:9–12 (communication via oracles).
- אָפָּרַח (traditionally “he appeared,” but more accurately “he made contact”—that is, initiated and established communication): see 1 Sam 3:21, which manifestly equates that verb’s usage

## 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 *conceptually distinct* identities, even when this manner of expression momentarily superimposes them for purposes of narrative art and efficiency.<sup>56</sup>

This paper encapsulates a more extensive research effort that includes another fourteen passages that involve God’s agents.<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup>
- Episodes involving God’s agents can be construed as theophanies (and as depictions of

---

(wayyōsef Yhwh laḥērā’ōh) with the deity’s ongoing delivery of messages via Samuel—an agent who is called a “prophet” in the preceding verse; see further my memorandum “אֵלֹהִים in the Niphal.” <http://purl.org/stein/raah-1>

<sup>56</sup> Metonymy is arguably a factor in understanding God’s operation via *human* agents, not only *divine* ones. 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 was *no effective difference* between Moses’ instructions to the Israelites and those of God (which is what made Moses’ denunciation in Num 20:10 so unforgivable). Consequently, Robert Polzin arguably misconstrues the import of Deuteronomy’s practice of often not differentiating between whether God or Moses is speaking: “The boundaries between God’s word and Moses’ interpretation have been deliberately blurred to illustrate the condition of all interpretation” (*Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980], 205).

<sup>57</sup> The biblical passages “involving God’s agents” in which theophany is perceived tend to fall within the group that Mark Smith refers to as depicting “the first, natural ‘human’ body of God” (“Three Bodies of God,” 484), as exemplified by Gen 18 and 32 (*ibid.*, 473–478; 484–85). However, my scope of analysis also includes God’s *human* agents, to show that the same principles and usages apply as with angels. See my memorandum “Implications of Metonymy for Other Passages Involving God’s Agents” for a treatment of Gen 16:7–13; 18; 21:17–18; 22:11–14; 31:3, 11–13; 32:25–33; Exod 3:1–10; 3:7–12; Num 22:31–38; 23:26; Josh 5:13–6:5; Judg 2:1–4; 13:2–23; Isaiah 7; and Zech 1:13; 3:2. <http://purl.org/stein/sbl/angels-2>

<sup>58</sup> On modern scholars’ misconstrual of agency metonymy, see further Excursus 4. If properly understood when applied to Israel’s God as the principal, the agency motif and its narrative conventions have wide-ranging implications for biblical theology, including the interpretation of the Christians’ New Testament—implications that are beyond the scope of this paper.

the embodiment of God) only by disregarding well-attested and well-entrenched narrative conventions for describing agency situations.<sup>59</sup>

- 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.<sup>60</sup>

## Bibliography

- Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. Revised edn. New York: Basic Books, 2011.
- Ariel, Mira. “Privileged Interactional Interpretations.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 34/8 (2002): 1003–44.
- . “The Demise of a Unique Concept of Literal Meaning.” *Journal of Pragmatics* 34/4 (2002): 361–402.
- Barcelona, Antonio. “Reviewing the Properties and Prototype Structure of Metonymy.” Pages 7–58 in *Defining Metonymy in Cognitive Linguistics: Towards a Consensus View*. Edited by Reka Benczes, Antonio Barcelona, and Francisco Jose Ruiz de Mendoza Ibanez. Vol. 28 of Human Cognitive Processing (HCP): Cognitive Foundations of Language Structure and Use. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011.
- Ben Meir, Samuel, and Martin I. Lockshin. *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir’s Commentary on Genesis: An Annotated Translation*. Jewish Studies, Vol. 5. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989.
- Bergen, Leon, Goodman, Noah, and Roger Levy. “That’s What She (Could Have) Said: How Alternative Utterances Affect Language Use.” *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society* 34 (2012): 120–25.
- Bleiberg, Edward. *Jewish Life in Ancient Egypt: A Family Archive from the Nile Valley*. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2002.
- Bott, Lewis, Rees, Alice, and Steven Frisson. “The Time Course of Familiar Metonymy.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 42/7 (2016): 1160–70.
- Bott, Travis. “Praise and Metonymy in the Psalms.” Pages 131–46 in *Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*. Edited by William P. Brown. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Brdar-Szabó, Rita, and Mario Brdar. “Referential Metonymy across Languages: What Can Cognitive Linguistics and Contrastive Linguistics Learn from Each Other?” *International Journal of English Studies* 3/2 (2003): 85–106.

---

<sup>59</sup> Depictions of a divine body can still be found in those passages according to midrashic construal. In and of itself, such construal is not a bad thing—although it may not be the best basis for writing a history of religion. See above, note 1.

<sup>60</sup> As for God’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.

- Breuer, Mordechai. "Biqqur hammal'akim 'ešel 'avraham v'lot." Pages 375–401 in vol. 2 of *Pirke Bəreshit*. Edited by Yosef Ofer, with Meir Munitz. Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 1998.
- Chau, Kevin. "Metaphor's Forgotten Brother: A Survey of Metonymy in Biblical Hebrew Poetry." *Journal for Semitics* 23/2 (2014): 633–52.
- Esler, Philip S. "The Role of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1–2:21: Understanding a Biblical Narrative in Its Ancient Context." Pages 15–36 in vol. 2 of *Kontexte der Schrift: Wolfgang Stegemann zum 60. Geburtstag*. Edited by Christian Strecker. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005.
- Fishbane, Michael. *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Frisson, Steven, and Martin J. Pickering. "The Processing of Metonymy: Evidence from Eye Movements." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 25/6 (1999): 1366–83.
- Gibbs, Raymond W., Jr. "Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy." Pages 61–76 in *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, ed. Günter Radden and Klaus-Uwe Panther. Vol. 4 of Human Cognitive Processing. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999.
- . "Literal Meaning and Psychological Theory." *Cognitive Science* 8 (1984): 275–304.
- Giora, Rachel. "Literal vs. Figurative Language: Different or Equal?" *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002): 487–506.
- . "On the Priority of Salient Meanings: Studies of Literal and Figurative Language." *Journal of Pragmatics* 31 (1999): 919–29.
- Goodman, Noah D., and Michael C. Frank. "Pragmatic Language Interpretation as Probabilistic Inference." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 20/11 (2016): 818–29.
- Greene, John T. *The Role of the Messenger and Message in the Ancient Near East*. Brown Judaic Studies 169. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.
- Greenstein, Edward L. "The God of Israel and the Gods of Canaan: How Different Were They?" Pages 47\*–58\* in Division A of *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Jerusalem, July 29–August 5, 1997*. Edited by Ron Margolin. Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1999.
- . "Medieval Bible Commentaries." Pages 213–59 in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*. Edited by Barry W. Holtz. New York: Summit Books, 1984.
- Gruenwald, Ithamar. "God the 'Stone/Rock': Myth, Idolatry, and Cultic Fetishism in Ancient Israel." *The Journal of Religion* 76/3 (1996): 428–49.
- Hamori, Esther J. "Divine Embodiment in the Hebrew Bible and Some Implications for Jewish and Christian Incarnational Theologies." Pages 161–83 in *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible*. Edited by S. Tamar Kamionkowski and Wonil Kim. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010.
- . *When Gods Were Men: The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature*. BZAW 384. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008.
- Hobbs, Jerry. "Abduction in Natural Language Understanding." Pages 724–41 in *Handbook of Pragmatics*. Edited by Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward. Malden, MA: Blackwell Oxford, 2004.

- . “Syntax and Metonymy.” Pages 290–311 in *The Language of Word Meaning*. Edited by Pierrette Bouillon and Federica Busa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Huang, Yan. “Neo-Gricean Pragmatic Theory of Conversational Implicature.” Pages 615–643 in *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Analysis*. Edited by Bernd Heine and Heiko Narrog, 2nd edn. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Ibn Ezra, Abraham ben Meïr, H. Norman Strickman, and Arthur M Silver. *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch*. New York: Menorah Pub., 1988.
- Irvin, Dorothy. *Mytharion: The Comparison of Tales from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East*. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978.
- Johnson, Aubrey R. *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*, 1961 (reprinted by Wipf and Stock, 2006).
- Kugel, James. *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible*. New York: The Free Press, 2003.
- Kutas, Marta, and Steven A. Hillyard. “Brain Potentials During Reading Reflect Word Expectancy and Semantic Association,” *Nature* 307/12 (1984): 161–63.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Littlemore, Jeannette. *Metonymy: Hidden Shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Long, Gary Alan. “Dead or Alive? Literality and God-Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62/2 (1994): 509–37.
- Marslen-Wilson, William D. “Sentence Perception as an Interactive Parallel Process.” *Science* 189/4198 (1975): 226–28.
- Matt, Daniel, transl. *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*. 9 vols. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003–2016.
- McElree, B., Frisson, S. and M. J. Pickering. “Deferred Interpretations: Why Starting Dickens is Taxing but Reading Dickens Isn’t.” *Cognitive Science* 30 (2006): 181–92.
- Meier, Samuel A. “Angel I,” and “Angel of Yahweh.” Pages 45–50; 53–59 in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. Edited by Van der Toorn, Karel, Becking, Bob, and Pieter Willem Van Der Horst, 2nd edn. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999.
- . *Speaking of Speaking: Marking Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Bible*. New York: Brill, 1992.
- Miller, C. L. *The Representation of Speech in Biblical Hebrew Narrative: A Linguistic Analysis*. Harvard Semitic Monographs 55. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996.
- . “Introducing Direct Discourse in Biblical Hebrew Narrative.” Pages 199–241 in *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics*. Edited by Robert D. Bergen. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994.
- Noble, Paul R. *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs*. Volume 16 of Biblical Interpretation Series. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995.
- Nunberg, Geoffrey. “The Pragmatics of Deferred Interpretation.” Pages 344–64 in *The Handbook of Pragmatics*. Edited by Laurence R. Horn and Gregory Ward. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004.

- Panther, Klaus-Uwe, and Günter Radden. "Introduction." Pages 1–14 in *Metonymy in Language and Thought*. Edited by Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden. Vol. 4 of Human Cognitive Processing. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999.
- Patrick, Dale. *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament: Overtures to Biblical Theology*. Philadelphia: Augsburg/Fortress, 1981.
- Perry, Menahem, and Meir Sternberg. "The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process." *Poetics Today* 7/2 (1986): 275–322.
- Piñango, Maria M., Muye Zhang, Emily Foster-Hanson, Michiro Negishi, Cheryl Lacadie, and R. Todd Constable. "Metonymy as Referential Dependency: Psycholinguistic and Neurolinguistic Arguments for a Unified Linguistic Treatment." *Cognitive Science* 41/S2 (2017): 351–78.
- Polzin, Robert. *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980.
- Revell, E. J. *The Designation of the Individual: Expressive Usage in Biblical Hebrew*. Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996.
- Rogerson, J. W. "Anthropology and the OT." Pages 258–62 in vol. 1 of *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Edited by David Noel Freedman et al. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Rofé, Alexander. *Angels in the Bible: Israelite Belief in Angels as Evidenced by Biblical Traditions* [Hebrew]. 2nd edn. Jerusalem: Carmel, 2012.
- Runge, Steven. "Pragmatic Effects of Semantically Redundant Anchoring Expressions in Biblical Hebrew Narrative," *JNSL* 32/2 (2006), 87–104.
- . *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010).
- Savran, George W. *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative*. New York: T & T Clark, 2005.
- Schade, Aaron. *A Syntactic and Literary Analysis of Ancient Northwest Semitic Inscriptions*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.
- Schloen, J. David. *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001.
- Schumacher, Petra B. "Content and Context in Incremental Processing: 'the Ham Sandwich' revisited." *Philosophical Studies* 168 (2014): 151–65.
- Schwartz, Howard. "Does God Have a Body in Scripture?: The Problem of Metaphor and Literal Language in Biblical Interpretation." Pages 201–37 in *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew Bible*. Edited by S. Tamar Kamionkowski and Wonil Kim. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010.
- Sommer, Benjamin. *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Smith, Mark S. "The Three Bodies of God in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134/3 (2015): 471–88.
- . *Where the Gods Are: Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World*. The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.
- Sovran, Tamar. "Metonymy and Synecdoche." *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* 2:636. Geoffrey Khan, General Editor. Boston: E. J. Brill, 2013.

- Stein, David E. S. “The Recognition of Angels: ‘Process Metonymy’ in Biblical Depictions of Messengers” (submitted to *Open Theology* for its special issue on Cognitive Linguistics and Theology). <http://purl.org/stein/met-1>
- . “ראה in the Niphal Stem (as in Gen 18:1): Allowing an Agency Metonymy” (Unpublished 2-page memo, 9 October 2017). <http://purl.org/stein/raah-1>
- . “Implications of Metonymy for Other Passages Involving God’s Agents” (Unpublished memo). <http://purl.org/stein/sbl/angels-2>
- . “The Iceberg Effect: The Previously Unrecognized Role of Conventional Figures of Speech and Other Commonplaces in Biblical Depictions of God’s Operation via Agents, and Their English Translation”; *Metaphor Theory and the Hebrew Bible* section, Society of Biblical Literature; Atlanta, November 24, 2015.
- . “Agency: Making Sense of Anomalous Usages of the Hebrew Noun שׂא”; *Biblical Lexicography* section, Society of Biblical Literature; Atlanta, November 23, 2015. Narrated slide show: <https://youtu.be/CmqkXn8Ij14>
- . Book review: “*When Gods Were Men*”: *The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature* by Esther J. Hamori; in *JHebS* 9 (2009). [http://jhsonline.org/reviews/reviews\\_new/review421.htm](http://jhsonline.org/reviews/reviews_new/review421.htm)
- . “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): 108–37. [Link to author’s reformatted version](#).
- . “The Noun שׂא (‘iš) in Biblical Hebrew: A Term of Affiliation,” *JHebS* 8, Article 1 (2008). <http://tinyurl.com/ish-2008>
- Verhagen, Arie. “Grammar and Cooperative Communication.” Pages 232–52 in *Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. Edited by E. Dąbrowska and D. Divjak. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015.
- Ward, Gregory L. “Equatives and Deferred Reference.” *Language* 80/2 (2004): 262–89.
- Weiland, Hanna, Valentina Bambini, and Petra B. Schumacher. “The Role of Literal Meaning in Figurative Language Comprehension: Evidence from Masked Priming ERP.” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8, Art. 583 (2014).
- Yule, George. *Pragmatics*. Oxford Introductions to Language Study. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Zhang, Weiwei, Dirk Speelman, and Dirk Geeraerts, “Cross-linguistic variation in metonymies for person: A Chinese-English contrastive study,” *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 13, no. 1 (2015): 220–56.

### Excursus 1: The Cognitive Processing of Metonymy

I follow the linguists and psychologists who consider metonymy to be “first and foremost a *cognitive* phenomenon.”<sup>61</sup> An innate cognitive ability explains why an audience can

---

<sup>61</sup> Littlemore, *Metonymy*, 8; similarly Barcelona, “Reviewing the Properties and Prototype Structure of Metonymy,” 7–58; Panther and Radden, “Introduction,” 9; Gibbs, “Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy.”

infer an unstated referent almost automatically. And it is relevant in biblical interpretation, because it enables an audience to “make meaningful sense of seemingly anomalous and disconnected statements in texts.”<sup>62</sup>

One might surmise that the construal of agency metonymy involves extra cognitive processing, relative to a straightforward (“literal”) construal. Isn’t a text’s literal meaning ascertained first, before other possible meanings are figured out? Mustn’t an interpreting mind start from the character’s name (or cognomen) as referring only to that character, before broadening its application to the agency relationship? The short answer is no, for several reasons.

As an utterance (text) is being taken in, the mind entertains 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 guesses 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.”<sup>63</sup> Another classic study by the cognitive scientists Marta Kutas and Steven Hillyard showed that sentence interpretation is a function of the audience’s expectation.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, keep in mind that agency metonymy is a matter of *reference*, not of word sense—that is, semantics. (Whenever a speaker uses a term to refer to someone, 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.) In particular, our interpretation of proper nouns apparently takes into account our world knowledge of the possibility (or even likelihood) of that named individual’s being represented by another party. That is, the audience construes references to an individual as if they include their (known or potential) agents as part of that individual’s penumbra.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Gibbs, *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>63</sup> “Sentence Perception as an Interactive Parallel Process,” *Science* 189 (1975), 226.

<sup>64</sup> “Brain Potentials During Reading Reflect Word Expectancy and Semantic Association,” *Nature* 307/12 (1984).

<sup>65</sup> In effect, we treat a *conventional* alternation (in our case, a metonym) as a semantic matter—and thus seek an alternate *sense* of the term that suits the context of use—even though its application is pragmatically motivated. See Nunberg, “Pragmatics of Deferred Interpretation,” 351–54.

Although I am not aware of studies on the cognitive processing of agency metonymy in particular, we can reason by analogy from studies on the interpretation of other nonliteral utterances, including conventionalized metonymies. And those that have been studied do *not* appear to be more computationally “costly” than literal usage. Psycholinguistic studies have shown that *familiar* noun metonymies do not take any longer for the mind to process.<sup>66</sup> For example:

“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.<sup>67</sup> 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 truly conventional metonymy are processed automatically and reliably. As the linguist Raymond Gibbs notes, “inferring a

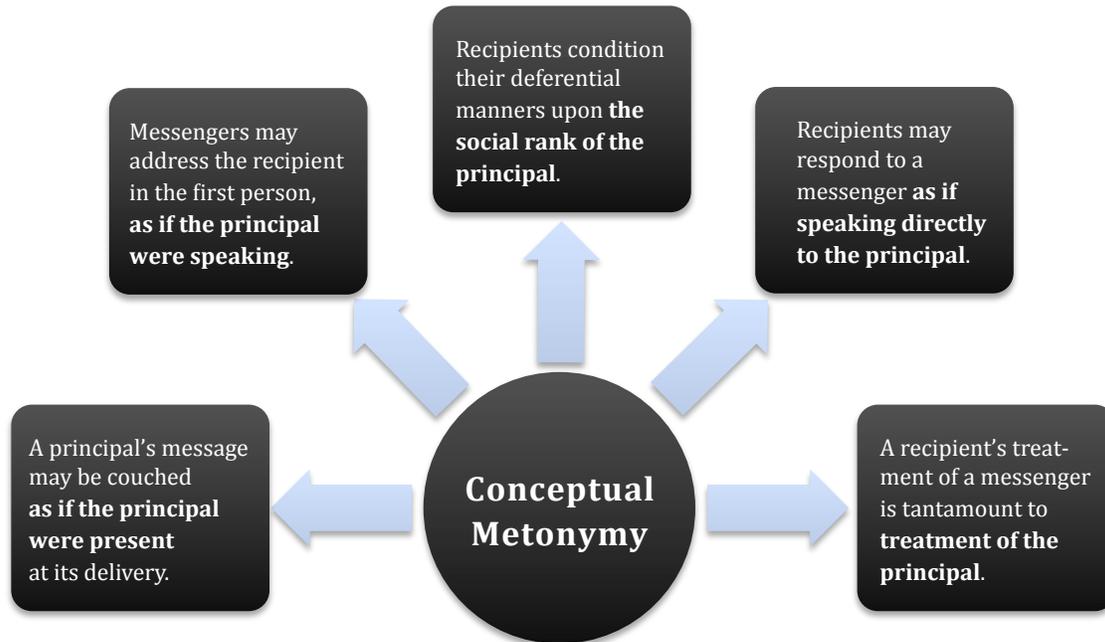
---

<sup>66</sup> Piñango et al., “Metonymy as Referential Dependency”; Bott et al., “The Time Course of Familiar Metonymy,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 42/7 (2016), 1160–70; Weiland et al., “The Role of Literal Meaning in Figurative Language Comprehension: Evidence from Masked Priming ERP,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 8 (2014), Art. 583; McElree et al., “Deferred Interpretations: Why Starting Dickens is Taxing but Reading Dickens Isn’t,” *Cognitive Science* 30 (2006), 181–92; Steven Frisson and Martin J. Pickering, “The Processing of Metonymy: Evidence from Eye Movements,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 25/6 (1999), 1366–83; cf. Rachel Giora, “Literal vs. Figurative Language: Different or Equal?” *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002), 487–506; idem, “On the Priority of Salient Meanings: Studies of Literal and Figurative Language,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 31 (1999), 919–29; Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., “Literal Meaning and Psychological Theory,” *Cognitive Science* 8 (1984), 275–304.

<sup>67</sup> 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.”

[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.”<sup>68</sup>

### 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. But mostly in treatments of angels these conventions are just ignored. See further Excursus 8, “Divine Agents in the Light of Human Agents.”

---

<sup>68</sup> “Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy,” 59.

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

#### Regarding Agents in General

1	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).	Gen 21:30; 42:24; Exod 14:6; Num 15:36; 21:21; 32:2; Jud 11:17, 19; 16:19; 20:12; 1 Sam 20:31; 23:5; 26:11–12; 1 Kgs 6:14; 2 Kgs 23:16; Zech 7:2; Ruth 4:17; 2 Chr 7:5
2	Principals can refer to an agent’s deed as if it were their own.	Gen 21:30 (cf. 26:15); 30:5–6; Exod 2:9; 2 Sam 12:28; 20:21; 1 Kgs 5:22–23; 20:34
3	Agents are typically identified by others in terms of their principal, and they typically self-identify in that way.	Gen 24:34; 1 Sam 25:40; Num 22:9–10; Josh 9:8–11

#### 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
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 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
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 44:10 (cf. v. 17); Josh 2:14b, 18a; Jud 11:19; 1 Sam 16:19; 2 Sam. 12:27
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

*Adapted and revised from an earlier paper.*<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup> David E. S. Stein, “The Iceberg Effect: The Previously Unrecognized Role of Conventional Figures of Speech and Other Commonplaces in Biblical Depictions of God’s Operation via Agents, and Their English Translation”; *Metaphor Theory and the Hebrew Bible* section, Society of Biblical Literature; Atlanta, November 24, 2015.

#### 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:

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.<sup>70</sup>

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.<sup>71</sup> Although metonymy 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.”<sup>72</sup> 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 metonymy were available in all four languages. They attributed the cross-linguistic variance to “an intricate interplay of conceptual, grammatical and discourse-pragmatic factors.”<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> *Metonymy*, 2.

<sup>71</sup> On cross-linguistic variations in metonymy, see the literature review and discussion in Littlemore, *Metonymy*, 162–69.

<sup>72</sup> The Hebrew metonym drafts the noun *seivah* (Prov 16:31; 20:29) to refer to old age (Gen 25:8; Judg 8:32; Ps 92:15; Ruth 4:15). For Chinese usage, see Weiwei Zhang, Dirk Speelman, and Dirk Geeraerts, “Cross-linguistic variation in metonymies for person: A Chinese-English contrastive study,” *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 13/1 (2015), 220–56.

<sup>73</sup> “Referential Metonymy across Languages: What Can Cognitive Linguistics and Contrastive Linguistics Learn from Each Other?” *International Journal of English Studies* 3/2 (2003), 102.

The relatively widespread application of agency metonymies in ancient Near Eastern societies was a function of both language and cultural differences.<sup>74</sup> Can biblical scholars now accept that variance in usage for what it is—without judging those ancient usages to be deficient?<sup>75</sup> This remains to be seen.

### Excursus 5: Critique of Sommer's Methodology

Regarding the last example passage that I treated (Judg 6:11–24), the gist of Sommer's interpretation was theological:

“a small-scale manifestation of God or ... a being with whom Yhwh's self overlaps.”<sup>76</sup>

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.”<sup>77</sup> In so doing, he referenced certain ruminations by Ithamar Gruenwald and by Michael Fishbane.<sup>78</sup> Unfortu-

---

<sup>74</sup> 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 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.

<sup>75</sup> 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).

<sup>76</sup> *The Bodies of God*, 42–43.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 178n37.

<sup>78</sup> Gruenwald, “God the ‘Stone/Rock’: Myth, Idolatry, and Cultic Fetishism in Ancient Israel,” *The Journal of Religion* 76/3 (1996); Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12–22, 72–74, 81–82.

nately, 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 reference. In any case, Sommer seems to have built his interpretive edifice upon too narrow a base.

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.<sup>79</sup> He speculated that the apparent "bodily" conflation of a divine principal with his/her agent was conceivable to them, 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 text's original audience would have construed its deity as being *disembodied* and *beyond gender altogether*.<sup>80</sup>

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 says basically the same thing that Lot says. Verse 24 states that "*Yhwh*" rained down fire and destroyed the city. This wording creates the same participant reference problem, given the agents' prior report that it was

---

<sup>79</sup> 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 could notice such a thing. 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. See further my book review.

<sup>80</sup> "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.

they who were going to do the deed. Samuel ben Meir (known as “Rashbam,” early 12th century) resolved the problem by remarking that in this instance *Yhwh* “refers to Gabriel” (alluding to a classical midrashic identification of one of the angels involved). Similarly but more categorically, David Kimḥi (“Radak,” late 12th century) cited agency metonymy, remarking: המלאך נקרא בשם אדוניו (“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 can be applied also to this passage in Judges. His 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 נִקְרָא יְיָ — נִקְרָא הַמַּלְאָךְ בְּשֵׁם הַנֹּכְבֵד.  
 וְכֵן הַמַּלְאָךְ שֶׁנִּרְאָה לְגִדְעוֹן, וְשֵׁם כְּתוּב נִיאָמַר לוֹ יְיָ.

4. The messenger is called by a name that carries weight [namely, the principal’s].

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

7 נִיאָמַר יְיָ — הַשְּׁלִיחַ יִדְבֵר בְּלִשׁוֹן שׁוֹלְחוֹ.

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 נִיאָמַר אֲנִכִּי — כִּי הַשְּׁלִיחַ יִדְבֵר כְּדַבְרֵי הַשּׁוֹלֵחַ.

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

7 רְאֵה רְאִיתִי — אֵלֶּה דַבְרֵי הַמַּלְאָךְ.

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 *mal’akh* 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.)<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> *The Bodies of God*, 201, n25.

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 be inconsistent and awkward attempts at theological “harmonization.”<sup>82</sup> 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.

### **Excursus 7: 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.*”<sup>83</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup> 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

---

<sup>82</sup> Samuel Ben Meir and Martin I. Lockshin, *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir’s Commentary on Genesis: An Annotated Translation* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), at Gen 18:1–2 and Exod 3:1–4.

<sup>83</sup> As quoted in John T. Greene, *The Role of the Messenger and Message in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 14; emphasis added.

<sup>84</sup> J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 70–71; Revell, *Designation of the Individual*, 36–40.

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.”<sup>85</sup>

### **Excursus 8: 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.”<sup>86</sup>

#### ***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.”<sup>87</sup>

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

---

<sup>85</sup> Greene, *Role of the Messenger and Message*, 40.

<sup>86</sup> “Angel of Yahweh,” *DDD*, 53.

<sup>87</sup> *Biblical Myth*, 17. His principle applies Occam’s Razor to the task at hand.

messenger activity.”<sup>88</sup> 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 *mal’ak* 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 Rofé intentionally ignored all human-to-human agency conventions in his 1969 dissertation that treated biblical narratives about a *mal’ak Yhwh*. He claimed to have considered human messaging conventions. Without any presentation or discussion of evidence, he claimed that certain patterns of angelic behavior “are not characteristic of the many places where messengers of flesh and blood are mentioned.”<sup>89</sup> Yet the patterns that he named are indeed amply attested—and therefore can be considered narrative conventions (see ##1, 5, and 7 in my table of depicting intrahuman messenger behavior in Excursus 3).

Similarly, Dorothy Irvin, in her 1970 dissertation, denied that *mal’akim* 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.<sup>90</sup>

Irvin did not compare the *mal’akim* of interest in the Genesis accounts to any human *mal’akim* (only to messenger deities in ancient Near Eastern literature). My own comparison shows that the Bible indeed attributes all of the angelic roles that she identified also to non-deities—either to humans labeled as *mal’akim*<sup>91</sup> or to God’s human agents.<sup>92</sup> Hence the notion that only *deities* do such things (and not their *agents*) is not supportable.

---

<sup>88</sup> “Angel I,” *DDD*, 46–47.

<sup>89</sup> *Angels in the Bible: Israelite Belief in Angels as Evidenced by Biblical Traditions* [Hebrew], 2nd edn. (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2012), 16. This assessment then led Rofé 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.

<sup>90</sup> Irvin, *Mytharion*, 20, 94, 99, 103. She studied the six “angel/messenger” stories in Genesis 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, and 28.

<sup>91</sup> 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).

As for Irvin's claim that God's *mal'akim* did not deliver any messages, this conclusion was the result of having overlooked agency metonymy. After discounting the convention that the label *mal'akh X* means "messenger of party X," and construing all of the narratives' participant references literally, it is little wonder that she was unable to distinguish the agent from the principal.<sup>93</sup>

Finally, 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."<sup>94</sup> For example, 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."<sup>95</sup> In being puzzled by that state of affairs, Meier has overlooked the Bible's frequent use of *process metonymy*, which I treat in the companion article to this one.<sup>96</sup> In short, the characteristics that ostensibly make the *mal'akh Yhwh* unique are matters of *depiction* rather than of *innate nature*; all of them can be explained as matters of conventional metonymy.

### Excursus 9: The Priority of Metonymic Construal

If a speaker says something that is implausible when construed literally, the audience will typically assume that the speaker means to convey more than is being said. Some unstated added meaning is inferred in order for the audience to maintain the basic assumption of communication: the speaker—in bothering to speak at all—is attempting to convey something other than nonsense.<sup>97</sup>

When we interpret an utterance (or text) in terms of its *informativeness*, we do so according to what we were expecting. The linguist Yan Huang articulates the consensus

---

<sup>92</sup> 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).

<sup>93</sup> Irvin's conclusion was also the result of overlooking process metonymy; see below, note 96.

<sup>94</sup> "Angel I," 49.

<sup>95</sup> "Angel of Yahweh," 55; he uses the term "vexing" on p. 53.

<sup>96</sup> "The Recognition of Angels." 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.

<sup>97</sup> George Yule, *Pragmatics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 35–46.

among pragmaticists that human beings interpret according to “the most stereotypical and explanatory expectation given our knowledge about the world.”<sup>98</sup> 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.

Compared to metonymic construal of the references in our examples, a literal construal requires *additional* assumptions in order to yield a sensible interpretation. However, added assumptions (even if they are more realistic than my fanciful suppositions that people were known to bake cakes so big that they could hide inside them, or that long-dead patriarchs could miraculously be revived) have the effect of reducing the overall plausibility. As the human mind strives to make (plain) sense of a text or utterance, it prefers the construal that is the most *economical*.<sup>99</sup> Likewise, to the extent that a probability judgment is involved in deciding between the two construals,<sup>100</sup> 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 *more 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

---

<sup>98</sup> “Neo-Gricean Pragmatic Theory of Conversational Implicature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Analysis*, ed. Bernd Heine and Heiko Narrog, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 623.

<sup>99</sup> 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—“artificial intelligence”—where the same notion has been modeled and field tested (Hobbs, “Abduction,” 732).

<sup>100</sup> As modeled by Noah D. Goodman and Michael C. Frank, “Pragmatic Language Interpretation as Probabilistic Inference,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 20.11 (2016), 818–29.

someone's utterance: we assess that utterance against potential alternative expressions that might be expected in that situation.<sup>101</sup>)

Consequently, the text's composers had ample reason to conclude in advance that their audience would have construed their wording as a conventional agency metonym by default. For some audience expectations can be considered reliable due to social conventions known to the biblical text's composers. Presumably the latter take that common ground into account when deciding how to handle 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 that 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."<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Leon Bergen, Noah Goodman, and Roger Levy, "That's What She (Could Have) Said: How Alternative Utterances Affect Language Use," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society* 34 (2012): 120.

<sup>102</sup> Paul R. Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 197; emphasis added. For a similar approach within biblical studies, see Philip S. Esler, "The Role of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1–2:21: Understanding a Biblical Narrative in Its Ancient Context," in *Kontexte der Schrift: Wolfgang Stegemann zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Christian Strecker (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005).