Panel Theme: Theological Interpretation and the Embodiment of God

Angels by Another Name
How "Agency Metonymy" Precludes God's Embodiment

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> Accounting for metonymy can solve many of the
> interpretive problems with which scholars struggle.
>
> —*Kevin Chau*

Theological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible properly begins by establishing the text's *plain sense*—that is, according to the accepted rules of human language.[1] 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*.[2] By "principal" I mean a party whose interests the agent represents; by

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For the ten excursuses, go to http://purl.org/stein/sbl/angels-2. Also online is a companion article, "Cognitive Factors as a Key to Plain-Sense Biblical Interpretation: Resolving Cruxes in Gen 18:1–15 and 32:23–33," *Open Theology* 4 (2018): 545–89, doi:10.1515/opth-2018-0043.

[1] 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 *pəšaṭ* (plain-sense) interpretation be glossed as "the direct, *contextual* mode of exegesis"— see Edward Greenstein, "Medieval Bible Commentaries," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit, 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 9.

[2] 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 Literal Language in Biblical Interpretation," in *Bodies, Embodiment, and Theology of the Hebrew*

"agent" I mean a party who is empowered to stand in for, or speak for, the principal.[3] 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*.[4] 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.

Bible, ed. S. Tamar Kamionkowski and Wonil Kim [New York: Bloomsbury, 2010]). In this paper, I am treating an aspect of cultural context that Schwartz did not consider.

[3] I am using the term "agent" differently from its sense in semantic analysis ('a self-motivated force or character') and in narrative analysis ('a secondary character who advances the plot').

[4] 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: 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 (New York: Bloomsbury, 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 (2015), 471–88, doi:10.15699/jbl.1343.2015.2790; idem, *Where the Gods Are: Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Nevada Levi DeLapp, *Theophanic "Type-Scenes" in the Pentateuch: Visions of YHWH*, LHBOTS 660 (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 15–18, 23–25, 28, 35–36. These scholars resolve the divine references in biblical texts literally, without considering the possibility of metonymy.

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

In our first passage, the narrator describes the aftermath of King David's adulterous affair with Bathsheba, shortly following her return home from his palace:[5]

וַתַּהַר הָאִשָּׁה	The woman[6] became pregnant;
וַתִּשְׁלַח	she sent [word]
וַתַּגֵּד לְדָוִד	and <u>she</u> informed[7] David—
וַתֹּאמֶר הָרָה אָנֹכִי:	<u>she</u> said,[8] "I'm pregnant!"

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

[6] Whereas Bathsheba was likewise treated as the semantic agent in the previous clause yet referenced only via a verbal inflection, here the label הָאִשָּׁה 'the woman' indicates a distinct turn in the narrative. In Ancient Hebrew, the situational noun אִשָּׁה/אִישׁ is the default signal that a speaker or writer gives for re-situating a discourse-active participant; it prompts the audience to update its mental model of the depicted situation. See David E. S. Stein, "Relational Meanings of the Noun אִישׁ (*ʾîš*) in Biblical Hebrew," PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2020, https://scholar.sun .ac.za/handle/10019.1/107875; idem, in preparation.

[7] Such usage of more than two speech-related verbs to introduce direct speech is rare (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 fateful message. This verb וַתַּגֵּד further suggests that the sender is not seeking a dialogue or a 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 Stein, "Cognitive Factors," 548–49.

[8] 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 by convention (see Stein, "Cognitive Factors," 548–49). Via recourse to what I will call agency metonymy (below), my reading keeps the focus on Bathsheba as protagonist—which yields the most cohesive and coherent narrative. (Human construal of language favors the simplest account that matches the expectation of informativeness. See Stein, "Cognitive Factors," 551–52, and below, note 51.) An 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—

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 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."[9] How, then, would the ancient audience have formed a coherent picture of this narrative?[10]

The usual and reflexive way that people resolve such a dissonance is to treat our clause as an expression of *metonymy*.[11] The prototypical metonymic expression can be

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namely *an additional assumption* that specifies the messenger's gender. Furthermore, that construal would foreground the agent—thus making the narrative less cohesive.

[9] 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 *metonymic* construal as described below. On the boundary between them, see Jeannette Littlemore, *Metonymy: Hidden Shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

On the many meanings of "literal," see Mira Ariel, "The Demise of a Unique Concept of Literal Meaning," *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002): 361–402, doi:10.1016/S0378-2166(01)00043-1; idem, "Privileged Interactional Interpretations," *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002): 1003–44, doi:10.1016/S0378-2166(01)00061-3; Gary Alan Long, "Dead or Alive? Literality and God-Metaphors in the Hebrew Bible," *JAAR* 62 (1994): 509–37; Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., "Literal Meaning and Psychological Theory," *Cognitive Science* 8 (1984): 275–304, https://onlinelibrary .wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1207/s15516709cog0803_4.

[10] 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. It is the consensus view of linguists that in actual utterances more is communicated than what the expressed words conventionally mean. See, e.g., George Yule, *Pragmatics*, Oxford Introductions to Language Study (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[11] As of this paper's delivery in 2017, metonymy in biblical Hebrew narrative had not received sustained study. No work on that topic is cited by Tamar Sovran, "Metonymy and Synecdoche," *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* 2:636 (Leiden: Brill, 2013). On metonymy in poetry, see Travis Bott, "Praise and Metonymy in the Psalms," in *Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Kevin Chau, "Metaphor's Forgotten Brother: A Survey of Metonymy in Biblical Hebrew Poetry," *Journal for Semitics* 23 (2014): 633–52, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC166262. One of Chau's conclusions (p.

defined as *the mention of one entity in order to refer to another entity to which it is functionally related in a noteworthy way*.[12] Now, there are many types of metonymy. My focus is on a special class that I have dubbed *agency metonymy* (hereinafter "AM").[13] 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 וַתִּשְׁלַח ('she sent') evokes cultural knowledge about the ubiquitous practice of messaging.[14] 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.

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650) serves as the epigraph of the present article. On metonymic construal as a reflex, see Excursus 1, "The Cognitive Processing of Metonymy."

[12] This definition is based on Maria M. Piñango et al., "Metonymy as Referential Dependency: Psycholinguistic and Neurolinguistic Arguments for a Unified Linguistic Treatment," *Cognitive Science* 41.S2 (2017): 353, doi:10.1111/cogs.12341; 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 expressions (usually proper nouns, but also pronouns and mere inflections) to identify indirect referents, which is sometimes called *reference transfer*.

On 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: Benjamins, 2011). An influential view is that of Geoffrey Nunberg, for whom metonymy is licensed by what 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; but see the important modifications by Gregory L. Ward, "Equatives and Deferred Reference," *Language* 80 [2004]: 262–77, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4489663).

[13] AM 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.

[14] In other words, an additional (and prototypical) metonymic relationship is at work. This is not surprising. As Littlemore has noted, "a single instance of metonymy can involve more than one relationship" (*Metonymy*, 25). This verse's terse wording also relies upon general knowledge of the procedure required for messaging. See further Stein, "Cognitive Factors," 548–49.

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

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

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

Now we must ask:[15] *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;[16] to make the narrative more cohesive;[17] to define the frame through which we view that implied character—namely *as Bathsheba's agent*;[18] 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.

AM in the Bible 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.[19] This basic concept then licensed the following narrative convention, which is evident throughout the biblical text:

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[15] 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 [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004], 724–41; here 737, doi:10 .1002/9780470756959.ch32).

[16] 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).

[17] On enhancing textual (narrative) cohesiveness, see Littlemore, *Metonymy*, 76–77.

[18] For the narrator's purpose, this is the only relevant fact about the messenger in question. Hence the latter can remain unmentioned. 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: University of Chicago Press, 1980], 36).

[19] 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).

Any party[20] may treat an *agent's* authorized action or speech

as if it were the *principal's*.[21]

Hence our example text pointedly *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 (Judg 11:19)

Now let us look at AM 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 re-counting 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:[22]

וַיִּשְׁלַ֧ח יִשְׂרָאֵל֙ מַלְאָכִ֔ים . . .   "Then Israel sent messengers. . . . "

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

וַיֹּ֤אמֶר לוֹ֙ יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל   "Israel said to him,

נַעְבְּרָה־נָּ֥א בְאַרְצְךָ֖ עַד־מְקוֹמִֽי: 'Allow us to cross through your country to my homeland.'…"

<div align="right">(Judg 11:19; NJPS, adapted)</div>

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

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[20] 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."

[21] In its depictions of human activity, the Bible uses AM constantly. The classic example is וַיִּ֥בֶן שְׁלֹמֹ֛ה אֶת־הַבַּ֖יִת "*Solomon* built the temple" (1 Kgs 6:14), where the *principal's* name is a metonym: it refers also to the thousands of *agents* who did the actual construction. The king is named because he *directed* them toward the goal. See the citation by Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1167 CE) in the "long version" of his commentary at Exodus 14:6, https://mg.alhatorah.org/Full/Shemot /14/6#e0n6. (The cited edition includes an annotated English translation.)

Many additional examples of reference that require construal as an agency metonym (in light of the situational context) could be adduced. They include cases where the principal is personally involved, such as: "*David* attacked the Philistines and subdued them" (2 Sam 8:1). This, too, is conventional metonymy, for construing that the label *David* refers also to his fighters yields a text that makes more immediate sense than construing that he accomplished this feat single-handedly.

[22] 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.)

is actually taking this initiative?[23] 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.[24] Thus Moses becomes salient in 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 יִשְׂרָאֵל 'Israel' 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,[25] 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.[26]

As many linguists have noted, metonymy can be a highly compact and economical means of expression.[27] It arises from, and relies upon, the automatic associative function

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[23] The finite speaking verb is singular, thus profiling the sender rather than the messengers. This construal yields the most cohesive narrative with a minimum of assumptions (cf. above, note 8).

[24] See Deut 2:26; cf. Num 21:21.

[25] Cf. Robert Alter's observation about the vividness of being direct: "Biblical writers prefer to avoid indirect speech.… Direct discourse … has the effect of bringing the speech-act into the foreground" (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. [New York: Basic Books, 2011], 83–84).

[26] Such a construal also preserves narrative continuity, for "Israel" has been the thematic actor in Jephthah's discourse for several verses prior.

[27] In AM, 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 Panther and Günter Radden [Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1999], 13).

of human cognition.[28] An audience finds metonymic construal attractive because it enables the stated words to become more meaningful—and meet the basic expectation of informativeness.[29]

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 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 conclude that Bathsheba has made recourse to the ancient (but otherwise unattested) practice of hiding oneself inside a large, ornate chest and having it delivered to the palace, then 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.[30]

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

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,

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[28] 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," in *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, ed. Günter Radden and Klaus-Uwe Panther, Human Cognitive Processing 4 [Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1999], 61–76; here 62, 68).

[29] 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.

[30] "Midrash" is classically 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). Countless compelling interpretations have been produced 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 biblical text, which it uses to make mystical theological points. In his notes, Daniel Matt calls 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.

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 (Gen 19:12–14)

In Genesis 19, two agents of Israel's God have arrived in Sodom; the narrator has designated them as מַלְאָכִים (literally, 'messengers'). Here in vv. 12–13 they reveal their plans to Abraham's nephew, Lot:[31]

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים אֶל־לוֹט . . .	Then the men[32] said to Lot,
כִּי־מַשְׁחִתִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה . . .	". . . We are about to destroy this place. . . .
וַיְשַׁלְּחֵנוּ יְיָ לְשַׁחֲתָהּ:	Yahweh[33] has sent us to destroy it."

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

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

In this case, both the principal (called *Yhwh*) and the agents (called אֲנָשִׁים) are explicitly mentioned. Yet there is still a reference problem, namely, the dissonance in labeling between *what God's agents said* 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.)

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[31] 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 לשחתה.)

[32] On the discourse significance of the label הָאֲנָשִׁים here, see above, note 6. This classic English rendering is faulty in that it obscures the fact that in Ancient Hebrew, the denotation of אֲנָשִׁים was not restricted to human beings. See Stein, "Relational Meanings," 100–102, 175.

[33] To represent the tetragrammaton as the name of Israel's God, this article respectfully employs the equivalents יְיָ in Hebrew (a standard Jewish substitution), "Yahweh" in translation (a standard academic reconstruction of the name's original pronunciation), and *Yhwh* in transcription.

#4. Gideon and an Angel[?] (Judg 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.

...וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו מַלְאַךְ יְיָ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו	12	Yahweh's messenger contacted[34] him and said to him…
...וַיִּפֶן אֵלָיו יְיָ וַיֹּאמֶר	14	Yahweh[35] turned[36] toward him and said,…
...הֲלֹא שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ:		"*I* indeed[37] dispatch you."…
...וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְיָ כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ	16	Yahweh said to him, "*I* will be with you.…"
...וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מַלְאַךְ הָאֱלֹהִים	20	God's messenger said to him,…
...וְהַנַּח אֶל־הַסֶּלַע הַלָּז		"Put [it] on that rock.…"
...וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יְיָ שָׁלוֹם לְךָ	23	Yahweh said to him, "Peace is yours.…"

For this text's audience, the challenge in tracking participant references is: who is actually speaking with Gideon? The normal biblical conventions for dialogue, based upon the

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[34] On the rendering of this verb, see below, note 58 (end).

[35] Here the Septuagint continues to designate Gideon's interlocutor as being the angel; but *lectio difficilior praeferenda*—the more challenging reading seems more likely. For as discussed below, a participant-reference tracking problem remains in this passage nonetheless.

[36] 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, 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). Thus it is a *paralinguistic act* that serves to open the communication (cf. Frank Polak, "Participant Tracking, Positioning, and the Pragmatics of Biblical Narrative," in *Advances in Biblical Hebrew Linguistics: Data, Methods, and Analyses*, ed. Adina Moshavi and Tania Notarius [LSAWS 12. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017], 164n24). As a narrative detail, perhaps it also highlights the following utterance (see above, note 7).

[37] The particle הלא expresses a commitment to Gideon's having been selected, despite his evident skepticism. Its normal presentative function ('behold') or even a possible performative function ('herewith,' NJPS) does not fit well, given that this clause *follows* the task assignment that presupposes Gideon's appointment as God's agent. Cf. Adina Moshavi, "Rhetorical Question or Assertion? The Pragmatics of הלא in Biblical Hebrew," *JANES* 32 (2011): 91–105, https://janes.scholasticahq.com/article/2516.pdf.

human cognitive preference for coherence and narrative continuity,[38] lead us to expect that the *same* party continues to engage with the protagonist. Yet here the narrator's labels keep changing: first "Yahweh's messenger," then "Yahweh" (twice), then back to "God's messenger," and finally "Yahweh" again.

This example differs from our first two cases in that the agent is mentioned explicitly. Nonetheless, it resembles those cases in that the principal is—on a literal reading—active in the scene. (In this respect, 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 what we have learned so far: (1) 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). (2) Such a linguistic expression (which I have called AM) 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.[39]

- 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: *malʾak Yhwh* or *malʾak ʾĕlōhîm*. He is identified as serving in this role on behalf of his principal.[40]

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

In other words, the narrator's choice of label for the interlocutor depends upon the topic under discussion. The messenger is designated either directly or only indirectly. By say-

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[38] Human construal of language favors the simplest account that matches the expectation of informativeness. See Stein, "Cognitive Factors," 551–52, and below, note 51.

[39] The divine name in the present passage was already construed in metonymic terms by at least two medieval rabbinic commentators: David Kimḥi (Radak, ca. 1200) at Josh 6:2, and Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides, ca. 1320) at Judg 6:14, https://mg.alhatorah.org/Full/Shofetim/6/14#e0n6. See also Mordecai Breuer, "ביקור המלאכים אצל אברהם ולוט," in פרקי בראשית, ed. Yosef Ofer, with Meir Munitz (Alon Shevut: Tevunot, 1998), 384–86. Unlike Breuer, I read the metonymic usages as motivated by linguistic conventions rather than by theology.

[40] Likewise, *human* agents can be designated via a noun of agency plus a genitive that names their principal, as in Num 22:18; Judg 11:13; 1 Sam 19:20; 25:12, 42; 2 Sam 21:17; 1 Kgs 20:9.

ing that Yahweh spoke, the narrator means: "The angel spoke *with Yahweh's authority*."[41]

Therefore, if we construe the narrator's use of the name *Yhwh* as the hallmark of AM, 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.[42]

If so, we would also perceive another AM 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.[43]

Granted, you and I would not speak in *these* ways when narrating dialogue or describing messaging in English or German or Modern Hebrew.[44] 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

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[41] Similarly, when the narrator said that when Yahweh "turned toward" Gideon (v. 14), it meant that the angel did so on Yahweh's behalf. (In v. 23, the newly invisible angel continues to speak.)

[42] For our passage in Judges, cross-linguistically derived discourse and pragmatic considerations in participant reference suggests the following analysis, which is consistent with the putative effects of AM. 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 participant's default referring expression (*Yhwh*; vv. 14, 16, 23), it not only *signals the start of a new unit of discourse* but also *highlights the angel's following speech as particularly salient or surprising (or both)*. Such marking would be given weight by the label *Yhwh*, who is both a participant of abiding interest and the party to whom this angel had been anchored. See Steven E. Runge, "Pragmatic Effects of Semantically Redundant Anchoring Expressions in Biblical Hebrew Narrative," *JNSL* 32.2 (2006), 87–104, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC101335. 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, 2010], s.v. "Frames of Reference.")

[43] If it seems strange that an agent speaks on the principal's behalf *in the first person*, that is due to our unfamiliarity with ancient narrative convention. To the text's ancient audience, a first-person delivery would have occasioned no surprise, for this was a messaging norm. Its optional depiction in a narrative served storytelling purposes. See Excursus 3.

[44] See Excursus 4, "Metonymy across Languages."

- it enables the audience to readily construe the text as both coherent and informative.[45]

Interim Summary

Table 1 {at end of file} sums up the findings from our four examples. As its latter portion documents, AM can be applied to a wide range of delegated tasks. Furthermore, its references can be expressed by the full range of grammatical means, to evoke agents of any discourse status—with its trigger being a wide variety of reference-tracking challenges. In short, AM is a versatile device.

Which Has Cognitive Priority: Agency Metonymy or Divine Embodiment?

Many modern and contemporary scholars have claimed that our passage from Judges depicts the embodiment of Israel's deity in some fashion.[46] Of those scholars, I will now single out Benjamin Sommer, because later in this session he will have the chance to defend his positions.[47] His approach until now has been typical of recent scholarship in adopting a *theological* solution to the aforementioned reference problems[48]—as featured

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[45] Actually, an audience will seek an interpretation that optimizes narrative cohesiveness along with the coherence in a specific character's depiction. Thus when a narrator continues to dwell upon a given character, the audience expects those representations to remain coherent and consistent (Dale Patrick, *The Rendering of God in the Old Testament* [Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1981], 47, 60). In the case of Judg 6, this motivation provides an added incentive for construing AM, for it enables both God and the angel to maintain distinct, coherent representations within the audience's mental model of the discourse.

[46] Most modern interpreters conclude that the Bible repeatedly "confuses" or "blurs" or "conflates" Israel's God with the agents whom this deity dispatches. See above, note 4.

[47] [Editors' note] As the formal respondent to this paper's presentation, Sommer stated the following in his prepared remarks: "Stein's well-argued paper offers the most serious challenge yet to my book *The Bodies of God*, specifically to the 'multiple bodies of God' idea in it. Given that Stein and I are both arguing on the basis of what we respectively believe to have been the conventions of that time, the question becomes *which of those conventions* would have prevailed when construing the biblical passages involving angels. This question warrants further study."

[48] Some scholars posit ancient theologically motivated scribal emendations, even though this ostensible solution does not resolve the reference problems that are the crux of the matter. A few scholars instead proffer *nontheological* solutions, such as by attributing the anomalies to textual corruption. But see E. J. Revell's grounds for objection—equivalent to what I call AM: "the use of a [grammatical] subject which represents the authority for an action, not the actor, is common enough in Hebrew." Revell concludes programmatically: "It is thus a methodological requirement that the usage of the text be treated as self-consistent" (*Designation of the Individual*, 14).

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.[49] 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?[50] 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*.[51]

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.

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[49] See Excursus 5, "Critique of Sommer's Methodology."

[50] The AM explanation is not new; see Excursus 6, "Agency Metonymy within the History of Biblical Interpretation."

[51] Piñango et al., "Metonymy as Referential Dependency"; Petra B. Schumacher, "Content and Context in Incremental Processing: 'the Ham Sandwich' revisited," *Philosophical Studies* 168 (2014), 151–65, doi:10.1007/s11098-013-0179-6; 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 (2014), doi:10.3389/fnhum.2014.00583; Stein, "Cognitive Factors," 551. For corroboration from computational linguistics, see Excursus 9; from the field of *literary theory*, see Menaham Perry and Meir Sternberg, "The King through Ironic Eyes: Biblical Narrative and the Literary Reading Process," *Poetics Today* 7 (1986), 289–90, 278–79.

First, in ancient Israelite society, agency metonymies were *conventionalized*.[52] They were based upon a tight *conceptual coherence* between principals and the agents who represented them.[53] 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.[54] 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 AM (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.[55]

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 AM 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.[56]

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[52] 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.

[53] 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, such as what Sommer asserts for Judg 6:14—is only weakly related to the conception of the deity proper.

[54] See Excursus 7, "The Cognitive Entrenchment of Agency Considerations."

[55] In extant extrabiblical Hebrew texts, AM is not evident. However, it is attested in the similar nearby languages of Phoenician, Ammonite, and Moabite (respectively, Yehimilk of Byblos inscription, ca. 940 BCE; Tell Sīrân bronze bottle inscription, l. 1, ca. 600 BCE; Mesha stela, ca. 840 BCE). This distribution suggests that AM was a widespread convention. For the source texts, see respectively Aaron Schade, *A Syntactic and Literary Analysis of Ancient Northwest Semitic Inscriptions* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2006), 111–15; Aḥituv, Shmuel, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, trans./ed. Anson F. Rainey (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 363, 393–95.

[56] See Excursus 8, "Divine Agents in the Light of Human Agents."

The third consideration favoring metonymic construal is that in agency situations, it is cognitively *immediate* and *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.[57]

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.[58]

Conclusions

Agency metonymy (AM) 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.

This paper encapsulates a more extensive research effort that includes another sixteen passages that involve God's agents.[59] As confirmed by that fuller analysis, the theological conclusions are:

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[57] In contrast, additional calculation is needed for a *literal* construal of the referring expression *Yhwh* in Judg 6:14. For such a construal requires the audience to revise its mental model of the discourse, so as to account for the presence of a more complex angelic figure who is behaving unconventionally. That extra assumption adds to the processing time and effort. Given that an easier reading was readily available, the ancient audience would not have construed the text as Sommer and other scholars have done. See Excursus 1.

[58] See Excursus 9, "The Priority of Metonymic Construal." However, the default construal may not apply unless the semantics of the relevant verb (its "selection restrictions" or "selectional preferences") allow AM. Two verbs that definitely allow AM recur in the biblical passages where scholars often perceive divine embodiment:

• וַיֹּאמֶר (literally 'he said'): for AM with a *human* principal, see our first two examples, and rows 4 and 5 in Excursus 3; 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).

• וַיֵּרָא (traditionally 'he appeared' but more accurately 'he made contact'—that is, initiated and established communication): see Stein, "Cognitive Factors," 554, 585–587.

[59] See Excursus 10, "Implications of Metonymy for Other Passages Involving God's Agents," for Gen 16:7–13; 18; 21:17–18; 22:11–14; 31:3, 11–13; 32:23–33; 35:9–13; Exod 3:1–10; 3:7–12;

- AM 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 AM as the medium of exchange with the religious messages that it was sometimes used to convey.[60]

- Episodes involving God's agents can be construed as theophanies (and as depictions of the embodiment of God) only by *disregarding* the well-attested and well-entrenched narrative conventions for describing agency situations.[61]

- 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.[62]

Excursuses

This article's ten excursuses, along with their own bibliography, are posted online at http://purl.org/stein/sbl/angels-2.

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Num 22:31–38 and 23:26; Josh 5:13–6:5; Judg 2:1–4; 13:2–23; Isaiah 7; Zech 1:13; 3:2. My analyses include human agents, to show that the same principles and usages apply as with angels.

[60] On modern scholars' misconstrual of AM, 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.

[61] Depictions of a divine body can still be discerned in those passages via midrashic construal. However, such construal may not be the best basis for writing a history of religion.

[62] 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.

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Table 1. Summary of the Four Sample Instances of Agency Metonymy

Consideration	2 Samuel 11:5	Judges 11:19	Genesis 19:14	Judges 6:14
Metonymy used by…	Narrator	Jephthah	Lot	Narrator
Principal	Bathsheba	Israel	Yahweh	Yahweh
Agent*	Her messenger	Moses (as leader)	Yahweh's agents	Yahweh's messenger
Verb(s)†	*wattagēd* *wattōʾmer*	*wayyišlaḥ* *wayyōʾmer*	*mašḥît*	*wayyīpen* *wayyōʾmer*
Agent's delegated task	Inform	Negotiate	Destroy	Appoint
Means of reference	Verb inflections	Proper noun	Proper noun	Proper noun
Agent's cognitive status in discourse‡	Inferentially accessible	Inferentially accessible	Inferentially accessible	Active
Reference tracking problem	*Physical remove:* who informs?	*Personification*: who negotiates?	*Divergent attributions*: who destroys?	*Interlocutor shift*: who appoints?

* These agents are referenced indirectly, by being labeled in terms of their principal.

† Verbs are tabulated because their semantics must allow for AM; see note 58.

‡ See Jean-Marc Heimerdinger, *Topic, Focus and Foreground in Ancient Hebrew Narratives*, JSOTSup 295 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 128–30.